

A LANCASTER AND CONSTANTINE ROMANCE



the
**Arranged
Marriage**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MONICA MURPHY

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THE RELUCTANT BRIDE

MONICA MURPHY

THE RELUCTANT BRIDE

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CHAPTER ONE

Perry

I ENTER THE boardroom at Halcyon right on time. Acting like I've got together, like nothing is bothering me.

My brother Winston—the oldest Constantine, the one who runs H our family business—sits at the head of the sleek black marble table. Our mother is in the chair to his right. Their heads are bent close as they speak in low tones.

The whispering won't fuck with my attitude. It's a Monday and I'm a little drag ass after a particularly spectacular weekend, but today I refuse to give him that satisfaction.

Despite the fact that Winny called the meeting at seven in the morning, the only time he could manage to fit us in, he said via a terse text.

Yes, even his texts are terse. Dry and demanding and with no emotion whatsoever. My brother used to hate me. Then switched to barely tolerating me once I started working for him. Now I'm pretty sure he likes me.

Maybe.

"There you are," our mother calls when she looks up and sees me. She immediately rises, waiting for my approach, and when I get close enough for a hug and I press a quick kiss to her cheek.

Caroline Constantine is a beautiful woman. She has aged gracefully. Dresses impeccably. Controls the family with what she believes is a firm fist.

No one listens to her. Definitely not Winston. He does whatever he wants, as well he should. He's running everything that has to do with the Constantines and he does it well—even better than our father.

None of my brothers or sisters listen to our mother either. Not even our younger siblings. They're rebellious and completely ignore her demands.

My youngest sister, Tinsley, is in a relationship with a *priest*, for Christ's sake.

The only one who listens, who does as she bids, who is constantly trying to earn her approval in any way possible is...

Me.

Fuck, it's easy to make her happy. She dotes on me. Says I remind her of my father, though no way can that be true.

That's Winston. He's the one who looks and acts like our long-dead father. I'm the more handsome and charming, younger version of my father. I know my shitthey wish they could all be.

But I humor Mother and let her believe that yes, I'm his spitting image, both looks and mannerisms, when in all actuality, I'm nothing like him. He was ruthless and business savvy and brave. Much like Winston is now. I peaked in high school. For some reason, Mother still indulges me every chance she gets, though I'm a grown-ass man. Maybe it was because our father's death was usually so hard and she has guilt over it? I was an angst-riddled teen who wanted to give up crying. My younger brother, Keaton, acted as if he was completely unaffected, much like Winston.

Good morning. I wish I had a harder heart like them.

Only a few years ago, I still acted the fool because that's what everyone expected of me. Why try to grow up when everyone believes you're still a fucking immature asshole?

So that's what I did. I partied. I spent money that I didn't earn. I fucked a lot of women. I bought stupid cars.

My mother. She still owns that orange Chevelle, though I garaged it recently. I know it's ridiculous in my custom Brioni suits, climbing out of that orange monstrosity every day in the Halcyon parking garage, earning stares from cowards. Earning mockery from my older brother who made fun of that car as an ironic chance he got.

I bought a far more respectable vehicle recently. A sleek black and red Lamborghini.

Good morning. "Good morning," I say as I take a step back from my mother's eyes. Can't linger too long or Winny will say something snide and rude.

He doesn't say a word beyond a nod of acknowledgement at my

His expression is stern, yet impassive. I never know what he's thinking. It's disconcerting. I've learned from that though, and do my damn Christ's-swear the same expression when I'm dealing with Halcyon business for

Or when I'm trying to get out of a sticky situation with a woman trying happens more often than I care to admit.

"Have a seat, darling," Mother says, indicating the chair on the other side of Winston. I do as she says, settling into the leather chair that's more comfortable than the one I sit in at my desk every damn day. "How was your weekend?"

I can't tell her it was full of debauchery that included too much drinking and too many women, but I avoid the paparazzi at the more popular clubs. I keep it under wraps. Instead I smile at her and say, "It was fine."

Winston snorts. I'm sure he knows what I was up to.

Wonder if he misses it.

If I had his hot wife to come home to every evening, I wouldn't mind a change in lifestyle at all.

"That's nice." Mother smiles, revealing straight white teeth that wouldn't blind me. Looks like someone just visited the dentist. "I hear you've started completely new projects at Halcyon."

I chance a look at Winston but he's not paying attention to us. He's tapping away on his phone. "I have." I try to tamp down my excitement before my brother calls me out for behaving like a hyperactive puppy. "You're handling all the angry calls that come into the office."

Mother frowns. "Angry calls?"

I nod. "We piss off a lot of people in this city. There's a lot of chaos and control going on. And not always of the—violent variety."

The knowing look on her face is obvious. She's just as ruthless as Winston. Swear to God that's where he got it from, not Dad.

Clearing his throat, Winston sits up straight, resting his arms on the table. "Enough with the pleasantries. Let's get down to business."

"Winston," Mother murmurs.

I frown at the both of them. "What exactly is this business discussion discussing this early in the morning anyway?"

Mother clears her throat as well, glancing over at Winston before turning her attention on me. "It has to do with...you."

I frown. "What about me?"

ng, and “Perry, darling. You’re not getting any younger.” Her expression is
dest toas if she’s discussing something that displeases her. “It’s time for
Win. settle down.”

n. That I snort. So does Winston.

“I’m only twenty-four,” I remind her. “Winston didn’t marry until
er sideforty.”

s more “Thirty-nine,” he corrects.

as your “Whatever,” I say to him, returning my attention to our mother. “
no one I want to settle down with anyway, so I can’t.”

alcohol “Ah, but you can.” Her smile is serene. “I’ve found someone f
clubs toPerry. And you’re going to absolutely adore her.”

Wait a minute.

Back the fuck up.

“You’ve found someone for me?” My frown deepens. “What exa
miss thatyou mean?”

The room is quiet. Not even my brother says anything, which
: nearlynormal.

ve been “Jesus, just cut to the chase. Put him out of his misery. I have a
take in—” Winston checks his watch. “—twenty minutes.”

oo busy “Winston, please.” Mother sighs, her hand fluttering around her f
itementif she’s...

y. “I’m Nervous?”

“If you don’t tell him, I will,” my brother growls, his gaze cu
mine, his lips parting as if he’s about to speak.

damage But she beats him to the punch.

“You’re going to marry her,” Mother says, her voice so quiet I
iless asdon’t hear her. “It’s already been decided.”

Say the fuck what?

p of the I can’t help it.

I start to laugh, because this is unbelievable.

“Great joke, really.” I glance at the both of them. Mother
; we’reanxious. Winston seems frustrated—and even sympathetic.

And he’s never sympathetic. Especially toward me.

ore she My laughter dies, and I sober up fast. “You’re serious.”

Mother nods at Winston who picks up a slim black folder I didn
notice and offers it to me. “All the details are in here,” he says.

is dour, I snatch the folder from his fingers and drop it on the table with you to slap, flipping it open to find a thick stack of papers full of legal jargon bunch of bullshit. I see my name.

I see the name of my...

he was Future fucking bride?

Charlotte Lancaster.

“Oh hell no.” I lift my head to find them already watching me. There’s Lancaster’s are fucking lunatics.”

There are a bunch of Lancasters all over this city, but if she’s the one for you, thinking of, I’m not too far off the mark. Blonde—they’re all blonde—they’re all that too. Sheltered.

Batshit crazy thanks to her overprotective father who won’t let her out of his sight.

Or maybe he keeps watch on her because she’s batshit crazy? I’m sure.

“They are one of the oldest, most established families in the city.”

Mother says, putting on her dignified airs. “The Lancasters are excellent call to wealthy, and very well connected.”

“They’re also a bunch of assholes,” I mutter.

The Lancaster men are notorious for their rude behavior. They just don’t give a shit—and they don’t have to. They’ve been running the world for hundreds of years.

Mother doesn’t acknowledge my statement, which I’m sure she knows is true. “It’s a power move, merging the two families.”

“Why do I have to be involved with this power move?”

“You’re all that I have left. Everyone else is taken. Your younger brother has his fiancée. Winston is married. There is no other male in this family who is single, and when Reginald Lancaster came to me with the idea, I couldn’t resist.” Mother smiles warmly, as if she hasn’t a care in the world. A woman who hasn’t asked me to completely change my life and marry some woman I don’t even know. “You’re going to marry her.”

“What does she even look like? How old is she?” I can’t even begin to contemplate this. And from the sharp glance Winnie just gave me, I’m pretty sure he feels the same way.

“There’s a photo of her in the back of the folder, behind the cover.” Winnie bites out. “She’s twenty. She has three brothers, and they’re

... a loudassholes.”

... n and a “Winston,” Mother chastises.

“What? You know it’s true. Even that youngest one who’s still in school. I hear Crew Lancaster is the biggest asshole of all. As bad as Winston says.

Everyone knows Whit Lancaster. He’s a complete dick who’s the oldest son of Augustus Lancaster’s children. And Augustus is the oldest son of the oldest Lancaster of many generations. They’re the elite branch of the family. Charlotte and her asshole brothers were born to Augustus Lancaster. Pretty younger brother. Reginald. Reggie. The heir and the spare analogy does apply to royalty. It also works for generationally wealthy families. I don’t want that heir and spare.

In our family, for instance, Winston is the heir. I’m not too far from it. I’m the spare.

Keaton is the bonus. “Country,” I shuffle through the papers—damn this contract is thick—until I find a photo. I pull it out and stare at it, trying to come up with some feeling I might have toward this Charlotte Lancaster person upon first meeting her.

Just flat. Nothing. I feel nothing.

The photo is from what I can only assume is a debutante ball where she’s wearing a ridiculous white dress that looks like an over-frosted wedding cake. Her smile is small. Reluctant. Her eyes are blue, crystal clear like a perfect spring sky. Her hair is blonde and done up in the most elaborate way that overwhelms her small features.

I prefer brunettes. Happy, sexy-as-fuck brunettes who know how to have a good time and laugh a lot. Redheads too. I don’t discriminate.

Well, I might discriminate against grumpy-looking blondes who wouldn’t smile if she pissed at the world.

“She looks like an angry virgin,” I finally say, my gaze still on the photo. “Perry,” Mother admonishes.

Winston smothers a laugh.

“Didn’t she refuse to dance with every guy who asked her the night of her debut?” I remember reading something about this. My mother and Winston share a look, but don’t answer me. “Yeah, pretty sure she even turned down her father. Bet that pissed him off.”

“None of that matters,” Mother says. “I’m sure she’s changed.”

Yeah, right.

I toss the photo onto the table, immediately banishing her face from my thoughts. “She’s not my type.”

“If she spreads her legs, she’s your type,” Winston says gruffly.

I’m both flattered and insulted by his statement. He knows I’m not of the pussy. I used to take any pussy I could get when I was younger, but I’m discriminating now.

I use restraint. I’m not out of control like I used to be.

I ignore what he says, focusing on Mother. “I don’t like boys they all especially ones I don’t know.”

“You’ll get to know her.”

“Between the gossip about her and that photo, I don’t want to.”

Her lips thin. “You don’t have a choice. The contract has already signed.”

What the fuck? A contract? “Not by me.”

“The deal isn’t between you and Charlotte. It’s between me and your seeing father,” she says, as if that’s that. I’m going to agree because I always

Caroline Constantine’s most dutiful son is about to marry a woman I doesn’t even know.

“I’m an adult,” I remind her. “You can’t just marry me off to a random woman. I won’t do it.”

“You will,” Mother says firmly.

“No.” I shake my head. “Excuse my language, Mother, but fuck. People don’t do this kind of shit. Not these days.”

“You’d be surprised,” she says cryptically, raising a single brow.

“Well, I’m not doing it.” I grab the photo and shove it back into my folder, slapping it shut before I push it across the table toward my

“Absolutely not. I refuse.”

“Perry. Darling. Please. Listen to me.” She ignores the rejected look in my gaze never wavering from mine. “I need you to do this. For me. For our family. This is a power merger of two very established families, the kind of merger which haven’t been seen in years. Fifty? Maybe even a hundred. When we come together, we’ll become a force to be reckoned with...”

“And we’ll be able to conquer the Morellis once and for all,” she finishes for her. “And anyone else who attempts to come for us.”

I turn on my brother, incensed. “You actually believe this is a good idea?”
He’s quiet for a moment, as if searching for the right words to respond. “I think it could be advantageous, yes.”

His answer feels like a betrayal. A slap in my face. Easy for them to say that when they’re the ones who don’t have to marry a woman who can get stranger.

“What if there’s a woman in my life already? What then? Am I supposed to tell her, ‘Sorry, babe, gotta marry someone else because Mommy said so?’ How’s that going to fly with my girlfriend?” I ask, making up this shit on the spot.

And Jesus, that sounds fucking awful. What will people think of my friends? Other women in my life? From my past? The rest of the family? They’ll think it’s just what I do. What I always do. Go along with whatever our mother says, no questions asked.

An aggravated sigh escapes Winston and he leans back in his chair. “Perry, you surprise me.”

“What do you mean?” I retort.

“First off, we know you don’t have a girlfriend, so you can fuck off with that theory,” he says, slowly shaking his head. “You’re impressing me with your flat-out refusal to go along with the idea, though. I figured you’d agree because you always say yes when it comes to Mother’s requests.”

Right now, I can’t bask in my brother’s approval. Even though it’s the best thing the world can offer me to have it. “Marrying someone I don’t know isn’t something I can readily agree with. Marriage will change the course of my entire life.”

“Only for a little while,” Mother says.

My gaze returns to hers. “What do you mean?”

“You’ll have to go through a very public engagement. A rather formal wedding. You’ll need to remain quiet and appear the devoted husband of a beautiful wife, but eventually, you may...stray. If necessary. It’s part of the contract.” She offers a delicate shrug.

“What the fuck? Are you serious?” I’m angry on my future wife’s behalf. Who the hell adds in an *it’s okay to cheat* clause into a marriage contract? The same asshole who barter his daughter off for an arranged marriage, that’s who.

“You can worry about all of that shit later,” Winston says, glancing

l idea?" watch yet again. "I have to go. Am I still needed here?"

use. "I "You may go, Winston," Mother says, as if he won't leave u
receives her approval.

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I steel myself, prepared for a barrage of convincing words. I kno
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watch yet again. “I have to go. Am I still needed here?”

“You may go, Winston,” Mother says, as if he won’t leave until he receives her approval.

He’s already striding away before she can get the words out, the door closing on a soft snick, leaving us alone.

I steel myself, prepared for a barrage of convincing words. I know how this works, and she does too.

She firmly believes she’ll get me to agree to this, but for once...

Pretty sure Mama Constantine is wrong.



CHAPTER TWO

Charlotte

I'M SITTING IN my favorite chair, reading a book with my cat in my lap. My bedroom door bangs open, startling me so badly I drop the book.

“We need to talk.”

The booming sound of my father’s voice makes Doja jump off the bed with an irritated meow.

“What do we need to talk about?” I barely make eye contact with my father. Reginald Lancaster is intimidating. Angry. Lately almost all the time. He’s rarely home, thank God, and when he is, my mother makes his presence scarce.

Not that I can blame her. I do the same thing. And really, she’s not home, so it’s nothing different. Usually, it’s just me and the cat wandering around the monstrosity that is my family’s townhome in Manhattan.

Oh, and Doja the cat. Can’t forget her.

“I’ve found someone for you.” He shuts the door and moves further into my bedroom, his gaze scanning over every little thing, though I don’t actually see anything.

He doesn’t know me. He never really has. I’m the forgotten or overlooked only daughter when all he wanted was a houseful of sons. Big, strong sons. Sons for the Lancasters to carry on the family name. The legacy. A baby girl is not what he needs. Only good for one thing—making babies.

And even there I fail in his eyes. None of my babies will be Lancasters.

“What do you mean, you’ve found someone for me?” I ask, bracing myself.

“Your future husband.” He settles into my desk chair, turning it facing me. He’s getting older. There’s plenty of gray at his temples and fanning from his eyes and bracketing his mouth, but he’s still handsome and dignified. He lures everyone in with his charm, but I know the truth.

Deep down, he’s cruel. Cold. Hard on my brothers, especially the youngest, the family, Crew. When I was young, our father ignored me. As I grew, he treated me with indifference.

Until I became rebellious. That last year in high school consisted of testing my limits on a regular basis, taunting the devil, so to speak, and eventually broke him, and felt his wrath.

More times than I care to admit.

When he’s currently assessing me with those cold blue eyes we all inherit. The Lancaster gaze, my mother calls it. She has brown eyes, which are genetically dominant, but not when it comes to the Lancasters.

Wait a minute. Did he actually say—

“My future husband?” I squeak.

Irritation flits across his features. “Your tone, Charlotte. Please. At the time, you’re engaged to be married.”

I sit up, suddenly struggling to breathe. I’ve been very comfortable in my existence, despite how boring it truly is. I don’t cause my family any problems rarely—not anymore.

Once upon a time, I did though. And that’s the reason I’m being kept in a cage.

Now I leave the troublemaking up to my brothers and cousins, who cause enough havoc to last twenty lifetimes. I stay at home most nights, rather than going out watching movies—old ones usually. At one point, I read a lot of books about witchcraft and even considered becoming a witch who sought revenge on others. Doja could be my familiar and I would go around casting spells on the unsuspecting men who did their women wrong.

This still sounds like a good idea, if I’m ever out amongst the living again. It’s been a year since I came home from Paris, hurt and humiliated. I went there to study architecture at one of the most prestigious universities in the world and learn from the experts. My father was dismissive, believing I was wrong, so I went to France for an extended shopping excursion, though I proved wrong with that idea.

I’m not my mother.

so he's No, instead I fell under the spell of my history of architecture ins
nd linesA charming Irish man with dark eyes and hair, who was older and wo
dsome.had the most obvious crush on him—all of us did. But I was the one he
in the empty classroom. That kiss turned into a whirlwind affair tha
baby ofalmost the entire semester.

t older, Until his girlfriend showed up for a surprise visit—during class. Sh
into the room and ran up to him, smothering him in kisses. Leav
l of mecompletely devastated.

peak. I Ruined.

Like the hurt, immature girl I was, I promptly dropped out
university and came home, proving my father right. He always
herited.wouldn't amount to anything.

ich are I proved him right.

The pain Seamus put me through has mostly faded but somet
returns, like a dull, throbbing ache deep in my chest. Reminding m
have a heart.

nd yes, And that it's still wounded.

It's an angry pain though. One that makes me clench my fists and
e in mycould punch something. *He* was my rebellion, and for those three
troublemonthly, we had a thrilling, passionate affair.

Until he broke my heart when I found out I was the mistress.

ept in a The asshole.

The sadness is mostly gone, as is the hurt. The revenge though?
o createlives inside of me, like a tiny little flame, flickering and sputtering bu
ding orcompletely out. I seek it against one specific man, though I have no id
ooks onto find him. I've searched social media, the staff pages at the univers
nge forhave come up mostly empty. Seamus McTiernan doesn't have mu
ells onsocial imprint.

“Charlotte!” My father's booming voice pulls me from my thought
ig onceyou hear what I said?”

liated. I I sit up straighter, stuffing the irritation down. “Yes, I did.” I cl
sities inthroat. “Who exactly am I marrying?”

eving I Father turns to face me, his expression impassive. As if he's talkin
ed himsomething as mundane as the weather, when he's really about to tell
name of the man who will change my life forever.

“Perry Constantine.”

tractor. I frown, the name on repeat in my mind.

worldly. I Perry Constantine.

he kissed I have no idea who he is.

it lasted "I don't know him."

He makes a dismissive noise. "You don't know many people. I burst surprised."

ing me When you're wounded, you retreat. And that's exactly what I did too long. So long, I got comfortable.

Too comfortable.

of the "I don't want to get married. I'm too young." Expressing my f
said Inormally wouldn't matter to this man, but maybe...

Just maybe he has an ounce of compassion buried deep inside of h
he'll realize this is something I don't want. He'll actually listen to r
imes itgrant my wishes.

e I still A girl can dream.

"How old are you again?" he asks gruffly, his upper lip lifting
faintest sneer as he once again looks around my room. At my belongin

l wish I All of my many belongings.

blissful I'm a collector. Some might say I'm a bit of a hoarder, but I love l
baubles and books and photos and pretty, shiny things. Nothi
expensive, though I can afford to purchase whatever I want.

I prefer old things. Previously owned and lovingly used. An old l
' It stillthat belonged to a heartbroken woman. A necklace with a heart lc
it nevercrumbling pressed flower kept inside. A long-forgotten photo of a
lea howwith smiles on their faces and their arms around each other. As
ity, andactually enjoy spending time together.

ch of a In other words, the complete opposite of my family.

"Twenty," I tell him, faintly hurt that he doesn't know.

is. "Did That he doesn't care to know.

"Plenty old to become a wife. You need to clean out this room an
ear myHis gaze returns to mine, cold and unwavering. "Getting married and
out is the perfect excuse to do so."

g about I stare at him, at a loss for words. He's giving me no choice, but w
me thehe ever? Reminding myself I need to sound like a rational human, I re
deep, cleansing breath, hoping he'll respond to logic. "I don't even kn
man."

“Doesn’t matter. What’s done is done.” His voice is firm.

“This is my life—”

“No,” he interrupts, shaking his head. “It’s *our* lives. You’re a Lancaster and as my only daughter, you will do as I say. The last time you tried I’m not something for yourself, you bungled it up completely and came home humiliated.”

for far The reminder isn’t necessary.

“I don’t trust you to not mess it up again. You need to be told what I’ve Guided through your life. This marriage will do you good. Keep your feelings she explains.

He treats me like an idiot. He actually believes I’m one too. That I’m stupid to make my own decisions without his guidance. I suppose I need that to him with all of the horrible choices I made in Paris.

No way can I just readily agree to marrying someone I don’t even know though. This is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.

in the “But—”

gs. “Don’t go against me, girl. You know how I feel about that.”

The ferociousness in his tone has me clamming up, dropping my head to the floor. I grip my hands together, trying to contain the sudden shaking too “Where is Mother?”

“In the kitchen. Don’t think you can convince her that you should do this. She’s in agreement with me.” He rests his hands on his hips, the jacket, a his gray wool pinstriped suit absolutely perfect. I couldn’t begin to tell what he does for a living. The Lancaster money is generational. The only way if they Augustus Lancaster made enough to support his family for almost a hundred years.

“I just—want to talk to her,” I say, feeling defensive. “If I’m going to be married. We’ll need to plan.”

His smile is faint, though it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Being agreeable.” for once. I appreciate that.”

The words are like a slap. A painful reminder that once upon a time too long ago, I wasn’t that agreeable. I fought against him, rebelled in the worst way possible, only to be left devastated and broken.

I came home and swore I’d be stronger. I had new rules to follow.

Never trust anyone.

Don’t give away your heart.

Men suck—avoid them at all costs.

I've lived by those self-made rules ever since.

uncaster, “I don't think you're giving me much choice,” I say with an edge of defiance in my tone.

home The smile fades, his gaze growing stormy. “You're right, the engagement party is in a week. I'll send your mother up and you shopping for proper attire.”

it to do. I glance down at myself. I'm wearing all black—my favorite color. “I'm going to wear something demure and pastel colored for the engagement party that I never asked for, that's happening in a week, but I'm too busy for another thing coming.” “Okay,” I say simply.

proved “Yes, sir,” he snaps.

I lift my gaze to his, glaring at him. “Yes, sir.”

I know, I make it sound like *fuck you*. I hope he can tell.

Unfortunately, I don't think he could. He turns on his heel and storms out of my room, slamming the door behind him.

Doja jumps on my lap the moment he's gone, purring and rubbing her head against my hand, seeking affection. I give it to her absently, my mind racing as I pick up my phone and go straight to a new browser.

And type in the name Perry Constantine.

And hitting the images tab, all sorts of photos fill my screen. All of them of men who look only a few years older than me, which is confusing.

Perry is such an old-fashioned name. I was half afraid he'd be some original geezer around my father's age in search of a fresh young wife. I remember my father's first two wives, who were in their late thirties, which at the time seemed like a forbidden territory.

Clearly I had some daddy issues I was dealing with.

Instead, Perry Constantine is young. Tall. Broad shoulders and a friendly smile. He has dark hair with vivid blue eyes and straight teeth. I know this because he has a history of dating women my age. In every single photo—most of them with a different woman—Perry is always beautiful, always dressed impeccably, if a little too sexily. He's always grinning as if he's won the lottery and I'm sure in that particular moment he felt that way.

Just wait until he meets me. His future wife. I'm a little ball of joy.

Insert sarcasm here.

I get so lost in scrolling through the endless photos of Perry Constantine

I lose track of time, startling when there's a soft knock on my door, followed by, "May I come in?"

edge of My mother.

"Yes," I call and the door swings open.

t. The Doja jumps off my lap and crawls under my bed, a low growl emanating from her throat. She really doesn't like my mother, and I can't figure out why.

r. If he Louisa Lancaster cuts an elegant figure no matter where she's at, it's all about what she's doing. For instance, she's currently in her "spending the day at home" outfit, which is a cream-colored cashmere crewneck sweater and matching cashmere pants. A thin gold chain dangles from her neck and she flutters her hands, the giant diamonds on her fingers flashing and twinkling in the light.

"Are you excited?" she asks, clasping her hands together and holding them under her chin as she studies me.

rms out "About my impending marriage I only just found out about, to a complete stranger?" I roll my eyes. "Absolutely thrilled."

against Mother drops her hands, disappointment etched all over her face. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know it's not quite what you envisioned for your future, but your father is giving us no choice. The deal is done. He thought that was the best way for you to find someone after the other...failed attempts."

a man Failed *attempts*? I can only think of the one. Did they really believe I would go to Paris and find my future husband? That's hard to believe.

me old Instead, I met a darkly handsome charmer who sweet-talked me right into the arms of my panties after only a couple of months of what I believed to be hard-core flirting and endless conversations about Parisian architecture.

God, what a mess I made.

And we can't forget my debutante ball. My father believed that the golden young men of Manhattan had to offer would be lining up to date me upon my debut. After that disastrous night, not a one of them came calling.

by his Is that even a thing?

y. He's My negative vibe that evening didn't help my chances. I didn't want to go there, and I made it painfully obvious. I didn't want to go through the spectacle, knowing I would undoubtedly fail. That no one would be interested in me. I was only going through the motions to make my parents happy, besides, it was expected of me because I'm a Lancaster.

tantine, What they've discovered is I'm the most boring Lancaster to ever exist.

ollowed The last year has been peaceful. Quiet. No one has asked me anything, and I love it. I fend for myself. I spend time with the servants and enjoy their company. I've read enough books to fuel my rather active imagination. I've dabbled in writing. Mostly poetry.

anating I like my solitary existence. I don't need something like a future *outheusband* to mess that up.

Once my father makes up his mind, he won't budge. He believes in honor or whatmy only recourse, and he won't let me back out of it. And if it's me that goes home" somehow, and we don't go through with the marriage, it'll end up being a patching fault.

ters her It always is.

light. And I'll pay the price.

tucking I always do.

"We need to pick out a dress for you to wear to your engagement ceremony. Mother says, pointing at me when I open my mouth. I slam my lips shut.

"And nothing black. You want to look like a radiant bride-to-be. I'm a depressed goth girl."

In my future, I can't believe my mother just called me a goth girl. "Perfect. I can wear black to the wedding, then." I smile serenely, knowing she's going to tell me to shut up, but attempting to shoot my shot anyway.

I believe I The expression of horror on my mother's face is comical. "Absolutely not. You can't wear black to your *wedding*, Charlotte. That's downright unbecoming."

armless Knew she'd say that. "The whole idea of this wedding is unbecoming. You ask me. I don't even know him."

"You'll get to know him," Mother says, like what's happening to me is the finest perfectly normal.

pon my "At our engagement party?" I actually scoff, which I can tell irritates her.

Everything I do seems to irritate her. "When is the wedding date anyway?"

"Sometime in late October, though it's not one hundred percent confirmed yet," she answers.

entire My favorite month, ruined thanks to getting married to a total stranger. "Great. That's less than six weeks away."

py, and Why the rush? And who is this guy? Why would he so readily agree to marry me, sight unseen?

exist. None of this makes sense.

to do “Darling, this is a good thing. A solid marriage you can count on and someone to have children with. You know, your fiancé is rather attractive and fervent. The gleam in my mother’s eye fills me with unease.

Everyone knows Louisa Lancaster hasn’t been faithful to her husband, which I suppose is fine because he’s not faithful to her either. They present a united front, and for the most part, I do believe they’re united. Their relationship is friendly. There’s no obvious animosity, but their relationship lost all spark long ago. Maybe it never had any spark to begin with. They continue to live their lives as if each have their affairs on the side, but nothing too blatant or obvious.

Yet somehow everyone knows my father’s penchant for women with bright red—overly fake—hair and my mother’s desire for a younger man. She keeps getting older, yet they stay the same age.

Around twenty. Twenty-five tops. Once they creep closer to thirty, they’re over.

My eyes shut. And that’s gross.

“He is,” I say simply, wondering at the unfamiliar possessive feeling I’m experiencing toward him. Not that he belongs to me, but he is my husband.

Meaning he’s off-limits to my mother.

“You must prepare for this engagement party, Charlotte. There’s no time to waste considering it’s happening in a week. Next Saturday evening so...be having it here at the house. Something small and tasteful. Oh and I’m scheduled to take your engagement announcement photos Wednesday afternoon at one o’clock in the park.”

“What? I’m taking *photos* with him? There’s going to be an engagement announcement?” I jump to my feet and start pacing. I would never do that in front of my father, but my mother? I don’t care.

She watches me pace, wringing her hands together. “Of course, they’ll be. It’s what’s done—what’s always been done. You’re our only daughter and you’re about to get married, so we want to show you off.”

It takes everything inside of me not to laugh. That’s not the point at all, and she knows it. I know it too. This isn’t them being excited for my only daughter’s impending nuptials.

This is my father flexing to his business associates—and enemies—because he is uniting with this Constantine family and they’ll supposedly be a force to be reckoned with. For all I know, the Constantines want to

unt on merger as well. I'm sure they do. Our family is richer than God.
active." And that's all this is to them. To everyone. A business merger
families coming together. Straight out of the Middle Ages.

usband, "Does he even want to marry me?" I'm sure most everyone
out on a parents' circles knows my reputation. There is no one lining up, eager
They're me out.

ll spark Not that I care. Any guy I'd like, my father would probably shut
tinue to He hates everything I'm interested in.

Sometimes I think he even hates me.

en with "Of course he does," she says quickly.

er man. Too quickly.

Is he being forced into this arrangement too?

erty, it's "I should at least meet him first before we take our relationship pu
say, coming to a stop in front of her. "Is this how you married Daddy
you strangers brought together as part of a business merger?"

ing I'm Her gaze is full of sadness and my heart catches at the expression
7 future face that's there and gone in an instant. "Do you want the truth? Or
want me to lie and tell the story the public knows about our relationshi

Chills wash over me, settling in my stomach. I don't want to know
no time it. I choose to remain silent.

3. We'll Her smile is small. "That's what I thought. Now get dressed. Pl
you're I'm going to take you shopping."

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merger as well. I'm sure they do. Our family is richer than God.

And that's all this is to them. To everyone. A business merger of two families coming together. Straight out of the Middle Ages.

"Does he even want to marry me?" I'm sure most everyone in my parents' circles knows my reputation. There is no one lining up, eager to take me out.

Not that I care. Any guy I'd like, my father would probably shut down. He hates everything I'm interested in.

Sometimes I think he even hates me.

"Of course he does," she says quickly.

Too quickly.

Is he being forced into this arrangement too?

"I should at least meet him first before we take our relationship public," I say, coming to a stop in front of her. "Is this how you married Daddy? Were you strangers brought together as part of a business merger?"

Her gaze is full of sadness and my heart catches at the expression on her face that's there and gone in an instant. "Do you want the truth? Or do you want me to lie and tell the story the public knows about our relationship?"

Chills wash over me, settling in my stomach. I don't want to know any of it. I choose to remain silent.

Her smile is small. "That's what I thought. Now get dressed. Properly. I'm going to take you shopping."



CHAPTER THREE

Perry

THEY WOULDN'T LET us meet for the first time alone.

No surprise. I'm sure they figured we'd concoct a plot together on overthrow this sham of an engagement, and they're probably right. I love to come up with something to get me out of this, but not be the one to make the move. I'd rather my future wife throw a tantrum and call me a liar, leaving me to walk away guilt-free.

If I could be so lucky.

Every once in a while, it hits me—I'm engaged. I'll be married to a woman I don't even know.

A woman I don't want to know.

My mother would kill me if she knew I was trying to come up with a way to end this. Hell, Winston probably wouldn't like it either. Seems he was just as bad as Mother does, though her intentions are different from my brother's.

If I have to go through with this, I'm only doing it for my family. They mean everything to me. My brothers, my sisters, my mother. My lord, my father. I never thought I'd have to sacrifice my own choices for someone like this. A fake relationship—a fake wedding.

A fake life.

While everyone else in my family gets to marry for love. Tall as I am, it's so unfair.

It's the story of my life lately. I suppose I had to pay sometime. I've been the untouchable son for so long, I figured I'd always carry on the role. I'm the one our mother always indulges. Always approves of. The one who

away with a bunch of shit day in and day out, who can spend all of his money but it's no problem, because I'll always get more.

Lately I've proven to Winston I can work for Halcyon and do a good job. I've stepped up. I want more, and I'm doing my damndest to prove to my brother I can be trusted. He can rely on me.

That's important to me. I've always looked up to Winston, even when he acted like I was a complete nuisance.

Mother texted me a few minutes ago that she's arrived and I walk through the lobby of my apartment building, making my way outside to spot the town car sitting at the curb with its engine running. I open the door and climb inside, my mother's surprised gaze meeting mine once I've closed the door.

how to "Oh, Perry." The disappointment in her voice is clear and I slump into the seat across from her. "What in the world are you wearing?"

one to I glance down at myself. "What's wrong with it?"

l it off, "You look like a young..." She waves her hand, for once at a loss for words. "Mafia don about to meet his subjects. Do you expect them to kiss you before you and kiss your rings?"

d, to a Damn, that sounds dope as hell. Though I can tell by the look on her face she doesn't approve.

I hold my hands out, splaying my fingers. "Too many rings?"

ways to "Far too many." She tries to grab for one of my fingers and I pull away just in time. "And please, button up your shirt. You're so—exposed. I can see your tattoos."

They even more. She really, really hates the tattoos, which I think makes me love them more.

ig-dead But I keep that to myself. She's aggravated enough.

nething I slip off a couple of heavy silver rings from each hand and stuff them into my pants pocket before I reach for the front of my white shirt, doing up a couple of buttons but not all of them. I was going for a look about something tonight and she's killing my vibe. "This is the new look no one's wearing. I'm just trying to stay on trend."

een the "By looking like a hooligan." She makes a harumphing noise but I catch a sparkle in her gaze.

can get I think she liked it that I called her ma. I'm the only one of her children who would ever dare say it.

money “That’s the trend I’m going for. Hooligan hotness.” I shake my hair out, and my eyes, which catches her attention.

good job. “You need a haircut before your photo session,” she says.

to my “What photo session?” I frown, pushing my hair away from my face. Irritation. I should probably cut it but...

when he I don’t want to. Again, I’m going for a look. One I like, that makes me stand out. Everyone else in this family is clean cut and proper—at least I stride outside. I may not be rebellious in my actions, but I can be with my look where I

where I “Your engagement photos,” she says with the faintest bit of irritation. “You’re taking them in Central Park Wednesday afternoon.”

closed I start laughing. It’s either that or scream while I’m punching someone and my mother wouldn’t appreciate that. “Unbelievable. I don’t even get into my this chick.”

“She’s a lovely girl,” she says.

“You know her?” I raise a brow.

loss for “No, but I’ve been told she’s quite lovely. Easy to talk to. Beautiful. Things you can work with.”

Now it’s my turn to be irritated. What is she implying, that I should be grateful for the opportunity to marry some rich snot who’s probably seen a dick before in her life?

I’m still standing by my angry virgin comment.

ill back “Doesn’t really matter to you, since you’re not the one who has to see her,” I say grumpily.

“It most certainly does matter to me, since I’ll be dealing with this for the rest of my life. She’s to become your wife, Perry, which is an important role. To carry on the Constantine name. She’s the only one of proper lineage to do so,” Mother sniffs.

ff them “Come on, you like Ash.”

slowly “I tolerate her.”

certain “And Iris.” My brother Keaton’s fiancée. “She’s cool.”

w, Ma. “Her father is a teacher.” She shivers, as if she’s completely disgusted by the thought. “So common.”

see the “Not like we’re royalty.”

“We will be once you marry a Lancaster.” Her smile is downright smug. “The prestige that comes with that family name is impeccable. Untouchable. You’ll be a part of American royalty, Perry. That’s so important. You

er out of down in history as a member of the Lancaster family.”

I turn away from her without a word, staring out the window as the city pass us by. We’re going in to Manhattan for dinner close to Lancaster headquarters. I looked up photos of this townhouse they have in uptown. It’s fucking huge.

“Your first son, perhaps you can give him the name of Lancaster. The name on the Lancaster Constantine has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?” Mother asks.

No. I think that sounds fucking ridiculous. Again, I don’t answer her. After I found out the name of my fiancée, I looked up Charlotte Lancaster on the web because who wouldn’t? You google any of us Constantines, something, you’ll find out something. Most of the time it’s completely inaccurate information or a flat-out lie, but there we are. Recent photos. Article about our various businesses. Features on Winston in financial or business magazines. Write-ups on Keaton from his glory days playing rugby.

Photos of me at parties. Coming out of a club with a woman on my arm. Hell, there were even recent photos of me and Tinsley together, and a jackass who wrote the article about us said I was dating her.

Bet that jackass got fired when they realized she was my sister.

Charlotte Lancaster, though? There’s not much about her, especially lately. A few family photos with her included, though she’s a kid in most of them. A teen with a mouth full of metal in another. A bunch of photos from the infamous debutante ball, where she’s scowling and looks so pissed. I’m surprised she didn’t melt the camera she glared at.

Girl has a major chip on her shoulder, that’s for sure.

She slipped off the radar completely about a year ago, and no one has any idea why. Sex scandal maybe?

Ha, I wish.

“Her dating record is nonexistent, which is a good thing,” she continues.

“That you know of,” I mutter. Money like the Lancaster family likes to hide all of her indiscretions. No one would be the wiser if she has some skeleton in her closet. Bribes work well in shutting others up.

I’d have no clue. None of us would.

“Perry, you’re so negative about this entire situation, which is very uncharacteristic of you.” She pastes on an encouraging smile. “You’re about to meet your fiancée. You should be excited.”

My mother is delusional. What the hell do I have to be excited about I watch being forced into a marriage I don't want.

If this was any of my other siblings, they would've already told me to live in my own home. I'm the stupid one who agreed. Who acted like I didn't have a choice when we always have one.

Even me.

"This isn't a conventional arrangement that I can be excited about marrying a complete stranger," I tell her, letting the irritation show in my voice. My entire demeanor. The more we talk about it, the more it becomes and becomes. I welcome the anger that suddenly floods my veins and I clench my fists together so tightly, my rings cut into my flesh.

"Do it for me," Mother says, her voice soft. "For the family. For a business. And for your future. If the deal goes through that your brother is working the Constantine legacy will live on. Forever."

"I thought that was already guaranteed," I mutter, resting my fists on my knees. I wish I could hit something.

Anything. Just to get my frustration out.

Not a normal feeling for me. I'm the easygoing Constantine. The special one who knows how to have a good time—publicly. Feels like everyone most of in my family has a stick up their ass most days.

I can feel that stick now, trying to lodge itself permanently in my ass, due to my new and very unwanted circumstance.

"Nothing in life is guaranteed. We constantly have to fight for ourselves." She hesitates for only a moment. "Never forget that."

How can I, when she's constantly throwing shit like this in my face

Mother

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My mother is delusional. What the hell do I have to be excited about? I'm being forced into a marriage I don't want.

If this was any of my other siblings, they would've already told her hell no. I'm the stupid one who agreed. Who acted like I didn't have a choice, when we always have one.

Even me.

"This isn't a conventional arrangement that I can be excited about. I'm marrying a complete stranger," I tell her, letting the irritation show in my voice. My entire demeanor. The more we talk about it, the more incensed I become. I welcome the anger that suddenly floods my veins and I clench my fists together so tightly, my rings cut into my flesh.

"Do it for me," Mother says, her voice soft. "For the family. For all of us. And for your future. If the deal goes through that your brother is working on, the Constantine legacy will live on. Forever."

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I can feel that stick now, trying to lodge itself permanently in my ass. All due to my new and very unwanted circumstance.

"Nothing in life is guaranteed. We constantly have to fight for what's ours." She hesitates for only a moment. "Never forget that."

How can I, when she's constantly throwing shit like this in my face?



CHAPTER FOUR

Charlotte

I CAN'T STOP staring at the front door of the restaurant, mentally willing Constantine to appear so we can get this evening over with.

But he still hasn't shown up. It's now twenty minutes past our meeting time, and I'm getting antsy—to the point that I can't stop squirming in my seat.

“Charlotte,” Mother whisper hisses, irritation written all over her face. She even grabs hold of my arm, like I'm a five-year-old child having a tantrum. “Stop fidgeting!”

I go as still as possible, holding my breath until my lungs ache. When Mother releases me, I exhale all at once, reaching for the glass of ice water, wishing it were wine.

So close to twenty-one, I can almost taste it, but not yet. Besides, I know my mother wants me sober tonight. Not that I'm ever drunk around her, but she wants me to have my wits about me, as she says.

Some old-fashioned cliché saying no one uses but her.

It's all part of my penance for what happened in Paris. Once I came home broken hearted and a complete disgrace, my parents—specifically my mother—kept me under lock and key. Never to be seen again.

The shame he must feel in regards to me is painful. How could a man have a months-long romance with an Irish nobody when I was nineteen both ways? That much? Who cares?

He does, that's who.

The restaurant door swings open and Caroline Constantine glides through the restaurant, her gaze sweeping the room before her attention is caught

the hostess greeting them.

Caroline is accompanied by *him*.

Perry.

Perry Constantine.

I keep thinking of his name. Muddling it over. Turning it round and because soon, this man will become my husband. Soon, my name Charlotte Constantine, and while that has a certain ring to it that I do particularly offensive, I still don't know this guy, and for all I know, he be a complete creep.

Though he doesn't look particularly creepy at the moment.

He has a scowl on his pretty face, his lips formed in a delectable perry blue eyes hooded, hiding secrets, I'm sure. His dark-blond hair is a slightly wavy mess and he's wearing a white button-down shirt with agreed pants, and a belt with a heavy silver buckle that I can't help but sirming. Fairly typical, if not downright boring attire for a man about to go to restaurant.

er face. But damn if he hasn't put it all together in this messy, sexy way. T public fits him perfectly, as if it were custom made, and he has a few too buttons undone, revealing at least three silver chains around his neck, hen she more. Rings glint on his fingers, silver and heavy.

shing it Hmm. This is where it's painful for me to admit that I'm intri figured he'd be some stiff suit and dress accordingly. Boring rich guy, 'm sure the rest of them.

her, but "Charlotte." Mother slaps her butter knife across my knuckles, me yelp and snatch my hand off the table. "Stop staring. It's rude."

"What's rude is you abusing me in the middle of this restaurant." e home her a look, hating how small she always makes me feel. Inconsequent y father least important member of the family and I should never forget surprised they're paying so much attention to me and putting togeth a stupid wedding for me in the first place. I always thought they'd want me t ner him with some no name and disappear forever. "And I can stare at my husband for as long as I want. Shouldn't I appear to be the dotting fianc

The exasperated sigh that leaves my mother almost makes me si s inside should've asked your father to meet them with us. Then you would ight by up."

"I'm glad you didn't," I mutter. "He's played a big enough part

façade.”

“You’re to make the best of it,” she whispers harshly, her tone softening when we both realize they’re drawing close. “Oh, Caroline. How lovely to finally meet you!”

I leap to my feet alongside my mother, trying to ignore the jittery feeling that will be plaguing me when I realize Perry is standing right there. Right in front of me.

Directly in front of me.

My throat is so dry it’s difficult for me to swallow and I try to catch his gaze. Hopefully communicate with him silently that I’m just as much in this as I’m sure he is.

But he just glares down at the floor, reminding me of a sulking toddler. “Perry.” His mother slaps him in the chest, causing him to jolt and glare at his blackhead. “This is Louisa Lancaster.”

“A pleasure,” my mother practically purrs as she offers her hand to Perry, making me inwardly wince.

Perry shakes her hand, almost immediately releasing it the moment their palms connect. “Nice to meet you.”

“And this is my daughter, Charlotte,” Mother says as she turns to me, giving me a maybeme, an encouraging smile on her face, her gaze pleading for me to behave.

I nod once at Caroline, taking her hand when she extends her arm towards me. In that direction. “Hello.” I barely look her in the eye, suddenly intimidated.

“Lovely,” Caroline murmurs, loud enough for me to hear her. I’m sure that was on purpose, though I don’t understand why. “You’ll do. You’re making just fine.”

Ignoring her strange comment, I focus all of my attention on Perry. I send my head to find him already watching me. Anger blazes from those blue eyes, his hands in his pockets, his stance casual.

Deceiving.

He’s mad. Furious even. Looks like someone wants this marriage to end about as much as I do.

“Perry,” I say to him, taking a step forward and rising up on tiptoe. “Can I brush my lips against your cheek?” It’s faintly scratchy, as if he could feel it. “Ibothered to shave, and holy hell, the man smells divine. “It’s so good to see you, my beloved.”

I take a step back, a little wobbly on my feet thanks to the extra height in these high heels I’m wearing. I watch him carefully, waiting for my signal.

comment to hit. He knew I was faking, right? By calling him beloved?
suddenly He must.

It's so "Finally, we meet." He smiles, revealing a fine set of straight white
That smile changes his entire mood, and he looks like the happy-go-lucky
nervespartier I saw when I googled him a few nights ago. "It's been far too long
of us. Wait a second—he's going along with my façade?"

"Forever," I say, a squeal leaving me when he sweeps me into his
hisholding me extremely close. I stiffen for a moment at the intimacy of
a pawnembrace. My hands are on his very firm chest, as if I'm about to pull
away and my lower body is pressed far too close to his.

I wrench myself out of his embrace, glaring at him as I wipe my
lift his palms on the hot-pink skirt of my over-the-top, frothy-like-a-pastry dress.

His eyes are full of appreciation as they drift down, taking me in. I
to him, my features as if his blatant staring doesn't affect me whatsoever. That's
normal mode of operation. Pretend everything is well and good, even when
nt their it's not.

When I finally dare look into Perry's eyes again, I see that they
look at blazing with emotion. Not as much anger anymore, though.

ave. No, now I see interest there. Intrigue. Curiosity.

1 in my I feel the same about him.

I will never let him see it though.

'm sure "Let's sit," Mother announces.

ou'll do We both settle back into our chairs as Caroline and Perry sit across
us. His legs are so long and our table is so narrow that his knees bump
, lifting mine once.

intense Then again, sending a shockwave rippling through me.

Just from his knee touching mine.

"Sorry," he says clearly, one side of his mouth quirked up the side of
ige just bit.

"Sorry for what, dear?" his mother asks, turning to look at him with
oe so adoring gaze. I wonder if he's her favorite.

ldn't be I wonder what that feels like.

to meet "I keep bumping into my fiancée," he says, waving at me with
elegant fingers. I wish I could grab his hand and study those rings. That's
dinarily interesting. "Under the table."

arcastic Caroline turns her gaze upon me. "You'll have to excuse my s

doesn't mean to be so clumsy."

"He already apologized," I say, wondering why she said that. Do the teeth think it's her job to speak for him? He's a grown man.

o-lucky Weird.

ng." The mothers chat while I study the menu, sneaking glances at Perr few seconds. I can sense him doing the same, though every time I glance at his arms, his blond head is bent, his long eyelashes making me the tiniest bit jealous of the way he scans the open menu in front of him. At one point I'm openly staring at him and he lifts his head, his arresting blue eyes meeting mine and I just stare at him for a moment.

sweaty "Have you eaten here before?" he asks, lifting a brow.

ess. I don't like men who can lift a brow like that. Men who are hard on school and know it, men who exude confidence, radiate arrogance. They catch my attention.

n when No man can. Not really.

"No," I finally answer. "Can't say that I have."

're still "Me either." He slaps his menu shut. "Been engaged before?"

"Can't say that I've done that either," I answer him, my voice light. This is a completely normal conversation. "How about you?"

"I haven't even been in a serious relationship," he retorts, leaning back in his chair in a rather insolent way.

ugh. He's too attractive. Too comfortable in his own skin, which makes me feel completely aggravated.

np into "Same." I carefully close my menu, resting my linked hands on top of it.

"We need to figure out a way to talk. Communicate without..."

I tilt my head in the mothers' direction.

He nods once, his expression impassive. "Open communication with me is the lightest." "

"Definitely." I hesitate for only a moment. "I get the sense that you're not particularly agreeable with this—situation."

"I don't necessarily agree with it, no."

My shoulders practically sag with relief. "Me either. It's the very thing I want to do. I'm too young."

ey're... "So am I." His gaze narrows. "I don't even know you."

"I don't know you either. I won't settle for marrying a stranger."

son. He "They say the contract has already been signed." He leans forward.

he's about to offer a delicious secret. "And it's ironclad."

oes she That wasn't delicious. In fact, that was downright unappealing, v
just shared. "We're involved in this contract, yet we didn't sign anything

"Oh, that's coming," Perry says with all that self-assuredness c
y everyoverconfident man would display. "I've seen the documents. We'll
nce up, sign all kinds of things, including an NDA."

alous as Of course, there's an NDA. Can't worry about us blabbing all the
aring at secrets to the media.

ist gape "What if I refuse?" I raise my brows.

He shifts forward again, resting his forearms on the table, his face
closer and closer, until I can smell him again. It should be criminal, t
ndsomeas good as this man does. "They won't let you refuse. You're stuck with

an't be "Then what's the point of communicating without—" I incline m
toward the meddling mothers again. "—them being involved if we're
to get ourselves out of this?"

"Fair point," he says with a nod. "Perhaps we could fix things to
our favor?"

it. Like "How?" I don't see how any of this could work in my favor. I'm s
an impossible situation. Engagement photo sessions and parti
back in weddings? That sounds...

Awful.

1 I find "Darlings," my mother says, causing both of us to snap to at
"We've been discussing the idea of finding you a new home. A place
op of it, your own."

Here's where I can't lie—I like the idea of getting away from my
once and for all. Though I will miss Jasper, the family butler who I've
ill help quite close to over the years.

I suppose as long as I have Doja and all of my things, I'll be
I're not wherever I end up.

Hmm. Maybe.

An idea forms, and I glance over at Perry. Maybe I can use him
ery last marriage as a way to get out from under my father's control once and
He won't care what I'm doing once my name changes to Constantine
probably forget I even exist.

"Here in Manhattan?" Perry asks, sounding hopeful.

d, as if "No. You need a family home once you're married," his mothe

“Somewhere in Bishop’s Landing. I have a few properties in mind what hetwo of you. With plenty of bedrooms for you to fill with children.”
ng?”

She smiles. And it’s weird, how easily she talks of us having kids only anwe don’t even know each other. I have no idea if we’re sexually com have toand if I’m being real right now, I don’t want to see if we are either.

I’m not interested. Despite how delicious he smells.
family “Ma,” Perry starts but his mother shushes him, her intense stare a him and no one else. I almost feel sorry for him.

“There’s no need to discuss it. We’ll find you a house,” she says fi coming Anger blazes from Perry’s very being but his mother doesn’t even o smellThe idea of living in Bishop’s Landing doesn’t appeal to my future hus th me.” Doesn’t particularly appeal to me either.

Fingers circle around my wrist and I freeze up, my gaze shooting y head unablefuture husband to find him already watching me. The mothers are involved in another conversation about what sort of house we should work ininto, so they’re not paying attention.

“Let me go,” I practically hiss, trying to pull out of his hold.
stuck in “We can’t let them go through with this.” His fingers spring awa es andmy wrist, and I jerk my hand back into my lap, rubbing the spot w touched me. “Pushing us into this marriage. We need to find a way out

“I agree.” What am I saying? I don’t agree.
tention. Not at all.
e to call This is my chance out. Why wouldn’t I want to marry this guy?
He’s the escape I’ve been looking for.

parents
e grown

happy

and our
for all.
e. He’ll

er says.

“Somewhere in Bishop’s Landing. I have a few properties in mind for the two of you. With plenty of bedrooms for you to fill with children.”

She smiles. And it’s weird, how easily she talks of us having kids, when we don’t even know each other. I have no idea if we’re sexually compatible, and if I’m being real right now, I don’t want to see if we are either.

I’m not interested. Despite how delicious he smells.

“Ma,” Perry starts but his mother shushes him, her intense stare aimed at him and no one else. I almost feel sorry for him.

“There’s no need to discuss it. We’ll find you a house,” she says firmly.

Anger blazes from Perry’s very being but his mother doesn’t even notice. The idea of living in Bishop’s Landing doesn’t appeal to my future husband.

Doesn’t particularly appeal to me either.

Fingers circle around my wrist and I freeze up, my gaze shooting to my future husband to find him already watching me. The mothers are already involved in another conversation about what sort of house we should move into, so they’re not paying attention.

“Let me go,” I practically hiss, trying to pull out of his hold.

“We can’t let them go through with this.” His fingers spring away from my wrist, and I jerk my hand back into my lap, rubbing the spot where he touched me. “Pushing us into this marriage. We need to find a way out.”

“I agree.” What am I saying? I don’t agree.

Not at all.

This is my chance out. Why wouldn’t I want to marry this guy?

He’s the escape I’ve been looking for.



CHAPTER FIVE

Perry

DIDN'T THINK I'D feel this way, but I have to admit...

My fiancée is a hot little piece.

I still stand by my angry virgin assessment, but she's sexy as fuck in a hot-pink dress that somehow covers her up yet shows her body off to the side. The dress has a freaking turtleneck for Christ's sake, and billowy long sleeves. There's no cleavage on display. Not even a bare shoulder or elbow, since the sleeves end right at her wrists in a sexy little flounce.

It's that damn skirt that does me in. Extra short and with a flirty hem, it shows off plenty of leg.

And Charlotte Lancaster has really nice legs.

Too bad we're stuck sitting at this table and I can't really see her. I acted like there wasn't enough room for me beneath the table earlier, but that was a lie. I was bumping into her on purpose so I could try and cop a feel on her bare knee or some shit. Like I'm a middle schooler trying to get the hottest girl in class.

Not sure if she likes me, though. She greeted me like I was her long-lost lover, yet just now freaked out when I touched her. Those icy eyes when they met mine were full of fear.

All because I touched her freaking *wrist*.

Maybe she's not interested. Which is too damn bad, because she's definitely gorgeous. She just reeks of money and class, with the elegant structure and her perfectly put-together appearance. Large diamond earrings, glitter in each ear, bright enough to blind. Her hair color is classic ice-cream blonde—rich-girl-from-Manhattan blonde—a variety of golden shades, each c

blended so perfectly, no one would ever question if it's real or not.

I'd guess it's fake. No one could have that many shades of golden blonde in their hair. Not even ultra-rich heiresses who never have to work a day in their lives.

She seems all right. Not put off by my appearance and willing to work with me. Giving off very us-versus-them vibes when it comes to the money.

"I'm glad you agree," I finally tell Charlotte, my voice low as I lean over the table so I can get closer to her. Don't need the mamas hearing our conversation ruin everything. "We need to figure out what our next move is."

"We do." She nods, her expression cool. Unreadable. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"What did you do to piss off your family?"

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"There must be some reason they're forcing you into an arranged marriage. What is it? Are you the family disgrace? Did you used to have a drug problem? Enjoy spending all of mommy and daddy's money and a little out of control? Oh, maybe you have a gambling problem?" Her expression ruffled lift up in challenge.

I sit up straighter, slightly offended by her assessment of me. "I've never done any of those things."

"I've heard about your reputation though." Her smile is not kind but that like to party."

Fucking paparazzi. They make me look like a sleazy asshole most of the time. "Not so much anymore."

"You just got smarter. You're not so obvious and they can't find you anymore." I blink at her, shocked that she figured me out. "It doesn't matter what was my past."

"Your mother didn't approve of you going out with a different guy every night? Is that why you're being forced into marriage?"

From the look on her face, I can tell she's genuinely curious. But I can't tell her the truth. I know why I'm the one who's being asked to do the dirty work why my family is so confident that I will.

I do everything Mother says. I always have. It's why I'm her favorite of them. Everyone else blows her off. She had plans for every single one of her siblings at one point or another, and they all did whatever the hell she wanted.

wanted.

old and She fully expects I'll deliver. I always do.

work a For once, I don't want to.

o workthrough my teeth. "My mother couldn't give a shit about what I'm doing," I say

oms. "Uh-huh." Charlotte doesn't believe me.

an over Of course she doesn't.

plot to The mothers start asking her about her color preferences, engaging conversation and leaving me to think about...everything.

you a I don't want to get married to this woman.

Not at all.

I also don't want to piss my mother off. Something I never do. For should grow some balls and stand up to her.

Tell her no.

ranged I'm finally feeling confident in life. At Halcyon. And this situation have come along and fuck everything up.

id got a This summer was one of the best I've ever had. I was in the Halcyon browser every weekend sharing a house with friends and coworkers from Halcyon

It makes Winston crazy, that I "fraternize with the help," but damn haven't made friends there. I want to hang out with them. I want to belong.

Something I've rarely felt like I do. I don't necessarily belong with you family. I'm the odd one out, always have been. My friend groups were small and tight knit throughout my school years, and most of those guys went off to college and never came back.

I don't like to acknowledge it but I feel...lonely. Then I tell myself "over it and end up at a club, dancing and drinking with nameless, flirtatious women, flirting with them. Sometimes I even go home with one of the

Not lately though. And I guess not for a long time, thanks to my woman engagement.

I remember what Mother told me. How I could go about my business. I can't eventually, as long as I was discreet. Just the idea of cheating with a beautiful woman fills me with disgust.

Not that I want to marry her, but damn. Is that really the situation I'm going to end up in? Trapped in a loveless marriage, seeking affection from another woman? Keeping a mistress for the rest of my life? All they

That sounds fucked up.

“I think we should stay in the city once we’re married,” my mother suggests to my mother, her voice raising so I can hear her. “Perry w Halcyon, correct?”

My gaze goes from my mother to Charlotte, back to Mother again. Looks like she did a little research on me.

“He does,” Mother says haltingly.

“We could stay in my apartment,” I suggest, earning a hard stare from her in mother.

“I don’t think so,” she says, her voice clipped. “It’s far too small two of you. That’s why you need a house.”

Huh. Maybe she is right. We’d get in each other’s way, and I’m dependent on going to need some space if I have to live with a stranger.

“It would probably be more convenient if he stayed here, then, do you think?” Charlotte turns to her mother. “We could move into the apartment Grant used to keep...”

Grant. The oldest brother. One of the assholes.

Louisa Lancaster grimaces. “But it’s so old and drafty.”

“Father had it redone, remember? And I don’t mind old and drafty stuff. You know this,” Charlotte tells her.

She loves old stuff? I wonder if she’s a collector. Or worse...

A hoarder.

A shimmer of disgust washes over me. I like my things new and expensive, with one exception.

Cars. Oh I like them shiny and expensive, but I prefer them on the street to get side. Like my Chevelle.

“Charlotte, you can’t bring all of your—*things* with you when you move in with your husband.” Her mom shoots me a look, and I smile at her to be polite. Her gaze turns heavy lidded and flirtatious, just like the time she briefly glance down at my lap, vaguely disgusted.

What the hell was that all about?

“If he’s to accept me, he should accept all of me.” I glance up to find Charlotte is now looking directly at me. “Right, future husband?”

“Of course, future wife.” I can play along with this game. “What are we talking about that I need to accept?”

“Perry,” my own mother admonishes, but I ignore her.

“Books and...oh, I don’t know. Knickknacks. Photos. Little glass

fiancée and vases. Candlesticks. Statues. *Busts*.” Charlotte shrugs. My gaze dorks at her tits. She has a decent bust all right. “I’m a bit of a collector.”

“So am I.” I lean forward, suddenly eager to talk about my car collection when I realize my mother is sitting right next to me and she really doesn’t know anything about it. I clear my throat and settle back in my chair. “I mean...I want to be. Someday.”

“A collector of what exactly?” Charlotte asks, seeming genuinely curious.

“Classic cars,” I answer. “Those souped-up sports cars from the 60s and 70s are for the most part so—dope. I’ve got a 1969 classic Chevelle that’s orange and badass.”

“Perry.” Mother’s sharp voice silences all of us, including the server who has just approached our table. He slinks away to the table next to us, not saying a word. “No one wants to hear about your so-called car collection right now.”

“I do,” Charlotte says.

Everyone’s head swivels in her direction, including mine. I’m surprised by her show of support when we don’t even know each other.

She offers me a sly smile in return, her attention returning to my mother. I love her blue eyes going wide. Hmm.

Little Miss Innocent is putting on a show.

“That’s—wonderful,” my mother says stiffly as she sits up straight. She doesn’t like to be called out or proven wrong. Not that Charlotte probably doesn’t, either. More like she’s agreeing with me when Mother is disagreeing with everyone agreeing with her. “Sounds like you two do have something in common, then.”

“I suppose so,” Charlotte says, gazing at me once more. “I guess you move shouldn’t be surprising, then, that we could potentially work out. I’m not; trying really, you’re not my type. I’m usually attracted to dark-haired men.”

“Charlotte,” her mother whisper hisses.

My mother full-on gasps.

I just smile at her, ignoring the oddly possessive feeling I’m experiencing at the thought of Charlotte with another guy. Specifically, a dark-haired guy.

“From the online research I’ve done, you have no type.”

“Perry,” Mother admonishes.

I don’t say anything else. Neither does Charlotte. The server, having returned to the table, a giant smile plastered on his face as he asks for our food and drink order. I make my request, unable to stop thinking about Charlotte.

drops to with someone else.

Maybe my angry virgin isn't a virgin after all. And she's being do
lectionsweet, when I know she doesn't give a shit about me, or our imp
doesn't marriage.

ir once What's her motive here?

I'm going to do everything I can to figure it out before the night is
curious.

eighties

◇ ◇ ◇

s—”

er who WE'RE LEAVING THE restaurant after the excruciatingly long and painf
s, never we just suffered through. Our mothers discovered they have many c
lection friends and acquaintances, though they aren't particularly f
themselves.

Or at least, they weren't.

irprised Throughout dinner they laughed and talked and compared notes
drank enough martinis between the two of them to be shit-faced dru
mother, somehow, neither of them are. They're both composed and la
repeatedly, sharing phone numbers and promising to get together
especially now that they're going to be family.

ter. She It sets me on edge, their easy familiarity. And that's the key word
ved her It's no big deal for these two to be friendly. To become actual frie
used to share joy over the fact that their children are getting married to eac
hing in soon.

guess it But it's such a fucking farce, I don't know how they can keep a
Though face while talking about it. And trust, those two were talking ab
wedding plans all damn night. Charlotte hardly got a word in wh
contemplated color themes and reception locations. Caterer
photographers. It's going to be a giant performance and I'm expecte
like the loyal groom, eager to see his beautiful bride walk down the ais

ieencing Give me a fucking break.

ed man. I somehow get Charlotte alone while we wait outside of the restau
our respective cars to arrive, the mothers too busy gossiping to pay
attention. I take my chances and pull Charlotte aside, ignoring the v
fingers tingle when I clasped her arm. Or the way my heart thumps u
s us by when I stare at her legs too long.

for our Fuck me, she's sexy in that too-short dress.
e being

I let go of her immediately, not wanting to send any mixed signals.
wright “We gotta figure out a way to get out of this,” I tell her, not wast
endingtime. “I don’t want to marry you. Pretty sure you don’t want to ma
either.”

“Truthfully? I’m starting to think it won’t be such a bad thing, livi
over. you and pretending to be your wife. At least I won’t have to deal with
longer.” Charlotte tilts her head in her mother’s direction. “Or my fath

I quickly glance over my shoulder to see they’re both chattering
oblivious to us making deals and plans behind their backs. “You’d ma
ul meal to get away from your parents?”

ommon That seems extreme.

friendly “I don’t have the best relationship with my father. He completely c
my life,” she explains, her gaze flitting away from mine.

There’s more to it than what she’s saying, but I’m not going to pre
s. They now.

ink, yet “You could go to college,” I suggest.

ughing She shakes her head. “I tried that. It didn’t work out.”

r soon, “Take a trip around the world? See all the sights? Gain some c
Find a job, become a working woman?” Anything’s better than
—easy, married to a stranger.

ids. To “After what happened, my father won’t let me out of his sight.”

h other “He’s letting you marry me,” I point out.

“That’s...different. He’s just passing his control of me over to yo
straight gaze meets mine briefly before she looks away again.

out the That sounds all kinds of fucked up. Something’s not right in the La
en they house. “So you actually want to marry me.”

s and She shrugs, keeping her head averted. “Would it be such a chore?”

d to act It would be a big-ass mess. I’ve changed my life enough to s
le. mother’s wants and needs. Why should I let her pick out my future w.

Of course I want her approval.

rant for But I don’t want her organizing my entire damn life.

us any “This won’t work,” I say, not giving her anything to argue with. ‘
vay my need to figure out another option to get away from your father. That’s
revently me.”

I feel like a dick the moment the words leave my mouth, and it’s r
to not look her directly in the eyes. My gaze drops, lingering on her s

legs.

ing any Nope. They're not enough to tempt me to marry her.

rry me "I don't think you understand just how powerful my family

Lancaster always gets what they want. You don't have a choice in the
ng withwhen it comes to us getting married, especially if I want it too."

her any She makes her statement with a steely determination that comes
er." nowhere. Looks like she has more of a backbone than I thought.

; away, "Are you for real right now?" My gaze returns to her face, not
arry meanger that's rolling off of her in palpable waves. The girl is pissed.

I really don't care. Her family problems aren't going to become my

She launches into some speech about the Lancasters and how
ontrolscrosses them but I'm not listening. Too busy checking out her legs ye

How long and smooth they are, with the tiniest hint of shine to her ski
ss. Notthey're covered in lotion.

My fingers literally itch to touch them. Just once. Just to see if the
smooth as they look.

Her voice drifts and her mood shifts, just like that. "Hey. Eyes u
ulture?asshole."

getting My gaze snaps back to hers. She looks furious, those clear blue
hers blazing at me as if I'm the most offensive man on this planet. "I
just call me an asshole?"

She lifts her chin, her lips formed in an almost delectable pout.
u." HerYou don't need to gawk at me like some sort of pervert."

"I'm the pervert who you want to be your husband," I remind h
incastervoice going firm.

"Right, and I thought this wasn't going to work," she taunts.

I hate it when people throw my words back in my face.

suit my "What's your problem?" I slip my hands into my pockets, pre
ife too?myself from grabbing for her again. That I'm even tempted after she
me an asshole and a pervert is...

Disconcerting.

"You'll A brittle laugh escapes her. "You are. You're my problem."

; not on Great. Now she suddenly hates me. All because I stared at her sex;
second too long.

ny turn What gives?

xy-ass Deciding I'm not holding back, I give her a taste of her own medic

“And you’re a prude. Who cares if I was staring at your legs? At wasn’t looking at your tits,” I tell her.

“My tits?” Her brows shoot straight up and I tell myself to back do
But damn, it was kind of hot, hearing that richly cultured voice
say the word *tits*.

“Yeah.” I edge closer, giving her no choice but to step back. She c
very far, considering the restaurant building is directly behind her. “Y
ing theIt’s perfectly appropriate for us to talk like this, considering we’re e
Though I do have a confession to make.”

“What is it?” she asks warily.

“I’m not a tit man.”

“You’re not?” Her voice is the barest whisper, and I get this
in. Likemental image of her lying in my bed naked, whispering to me. Beggin
touch her.

My dick stirs. It always chooses inappropriate moments to act up
to fucking God.

“No. I’m more of a leg man.” I take a step forward, so close to l
hem of her skirt brushes against my legs. I press my hand on the bri
eyes ofbehind her, resting it beside her head, caging her in. “And you’ve g
Did youlegs, future wife.”

The nickname slips from my lips as if I have no control over it. Be
“I did.don’t want this woman to become my wife.

No fucking way.

Her expression darkens. “I take it back. I definitely don’t want to
you.”

“Aw, really?” I rest my other hand against my chest. “I’m devastat

“You’re also definitely an asshole.” She tries to shove past me, but
ventingbudge. She even reaches out and presses her hands against—of all p
e calledmy stomach.

Her fingers sear right through the thin fabric of my shirt, mak
muscles contract beneath her touch. Despite her haughty attitude and
quirky interests, my body is attracted to her.

Mentally though? I’m thinking it’s a no.

“I’m the asshole who you need to work with right now if you wan
away from your parents,” I remind her, my voice lowering. “You pla
ine. I’ll play nice.”

at least I She removes her hands from my stomach. “And if I don’t, then
You’ll call off the wedding and I’ll become the biggest disappointment
in town. My father all over again?”

of hers What is she talking about? And how bad can this guy be, the
willing to make such a drastic change in her life to get away from him?
I can’t go “I’m not marrying you just to help you get away from your father.
Your tits are not my problem,” I say, realizing that I do indeed, sound like an asshole
engaged. I sort of don’t care. All the earlier niceties between us have been to
the wayside. I’m letting my real self shine through.

Fuck it.

“Maybe you won’t have to marry me. Or we could annul it quite
sudden don’t know. Just—if we can figure out a way to get me out of the
game before the wedding, then I can make my escape. I’ll run away from you
and him.” She actually smiles. “That’s not a bad idea, is it?”

“What are you suggesting? We live together before the wedding?”

“Maybe.” She shrugs.

“No way.” I shake my head. I like my freedom. I don’t need some
stuck-up woman living with me, asking me where I’m going or what I’m doing.

Forget it.

“It’ll be temporary,” she says. “Just for a little while. Nothing will
change because I change.”

“We’ll have to move. *Everything* will change. For me and for you.”

“Our location is the only thing that we’ll be switching up,” she says
in a light voice. Like this is no big deal.

“We’ll need separate bedrooms,” I tell her. “Separate everything.
I’m interested in you like that.”

Lies. All lies. I’d fuck her all night long if she’d let me.

But then I’d have to look into her eyes the next day. And the next
day after that. So...

Nah.

Can’t do it.

“I’m not interested in you like that either,” she says, her voice low
and downright threatening. By the look on her face, I’d guess my *not interested*
comment insulted her. Good. That’ll keep her away from me. “If we
actually get married, it would be a complete disaster.”

“Hell yes,” I agree.

1 what? “We’re not compatible.”

it to my It takes everything I’ve got not to blatantly check her out. I can’t be compatible with her. That’s not the issue.

it she’s “Our mothers would eventually want children,” she continues. “Your particular will want little baby Constantines to carry on the family name.”

You’re “According to you, you’ll run away from me and that won’t happen.” I remind her.

passed to “It probably will though,” she whispers, fear filling her eyes. “We don’t have a choice.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,” I say, removing my hand quickly. I lean in from the wall to skim my fingers along her jawline. She flinches away from my housewife touch, and I drop my hand. “It might not be so bad.”

you, not Why am I saying this? It would be awful. Marrying a stranger is not something I would consider a good time.

“It will be terrible,” she says, an obvious shiver stealing over her. The idea of me touching her is disgusting. Why? What happened to her to make her so fearful? “I can’t imagine.”

“You really think it’ll be that bad?” All those angry little virgin thoughts return to the forefront of my brain, screaming at me that’s exactly what I’m really dealing with. I decide to handle her with a different approach. “It’s not about the baby. I can be gentle.”

” I say. Her frown is so deep I’m afraid it’s going to give her permanent wrinkles. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’ve got you all figured out.” I smile at her, dropping my voice. “I’m not a doctor. You don’t have to be scared.”

She laughs, but it sounds nervous. “You think I’m scared of you?”

“Maybe you’re just scared of men in general.” For some unknown reason, the next day I want to touch her so damn bad. Just to reassure her, I tell myself, “I know deep down she is a crock of shit.”

But from the fierce look on her face, I’m afraid she’ll just slap me, making another attempt, and I don’t want to risk it.

ow and I keep my hands to myself.

interested “You do realize I grew up with three brothers.” She crosses her arms in front of her, which only plumps up those tits we were just talking about. “And every one of them is an asshole. Even my baby brother.”

“I’ve heard,” I say dryly. “I’m guessing they aren’t very overprotective.”

you, then? Because if they were, they'd be here tonight, ready to defecate and besister and pummel my face in."

Something flickers in her gaze when she looks away from me for a moment. Her lips tremble and she rubs them together, a little sniff sounding before she returns her gaze to mine. Her demeanor has completely shifted, all tight and closed off, "I seemingly draining out of her. "No man scares me, Perry Constantine, not even you. And before you start with all those ridiculous promises again, I might have you know that I'm not some scared little virgin, no matter what you believe."

My hand It's my turn to blink at her in confusion. "What do you mean?"

My from "I mean what I say. I've had sex with other men. You're nothing special."

The smirk on her face is almost evil. Just like that, and all the fight has come back into her with a vengeance. "I wasn't saving myself for marriage, I don't get to take my virginity, you perv."

Her. Like She's either a fantastic bluffer or she's telling the truth. "For some reason, you can't stop calling me a pervert. I think you like it."

"I don't. And I don't like *you* either. Now get away from me." She slaps my chest this time, so hard I do take a stumbling step backwards. She glances at her advantage and slips away from me, heading for her mother who is waiting in the car. I manage to climb into the back seat of a sleek black town car.

"Great chatting with you, babe," I call after Charlotte, my gaze directed at her ass. The little flounce of her hot-pink skirt. Those long, smoky legs teetering on the sky-high heels.

Damn, I love it when a woman wears heels. Stilettos. Sandals. Whatever you name it. Sexy-ass shoes that showcase equally sexy-ass legs.

Reason Figures the woman I'm being forced to marry has the best set of legs I've ever seen on a woman.

Despite everything—her attitude, her anger, my own anger—I still want to touch them. See if they're as smooth and soft as they look.

And if all goes as they planned, I guess I'll have every right to touch them when Charlotte Lancaster becomes my wife.

arms in
about.

ctive of

you, then? Because if they were, they'd be here tonight, ready to defend their sister and pummel my face in."

Something flickers in her gaze when she looks away from me for a beat. Her lips tremble and she rubs them together, a little sniff sounding before she returns her gaze to mine. Her demeanor has completely shifted, all the fight seemingly draining out of her. "No man scares me, Perry Constantine. Not even you. And before you start with all those ridiculous promises again, I'll have you know that I'm not some scared little virgin, no matter what you believe."

It's my turn to blink at her in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. I've had sex with other men. You're nothing special." The smirk on her face is almost evil. Just like that, and all the fight has come back into her with a vengeance. "I wasn't saving myself for marriage, so you don't get to take my virginity, you perv."

She's either a fantastic bluffer or she's telling the truth. "For some reason, you can't stop calling me a pervert. I think you like it."

"I don't. And I don't like *you* either. Now get away from me." She shoves at my chest this time, so hard I do take a stumbling step backwards. She gains her advantage and slips away from me, heading for her mother who is about to climb into the back seat of a sleek black town car.

"Great chatting with you, babe," I call after Charlotte, my gaze dropping to her ass. The little flounce of her hot-pink skirt. Those long, smooth legs teetering on the sky-high heels.

Damn, I love it when a woman wears heels. Stilettos. Sandals. Whatever, you name it. Sexy-ass shoes that showcase equally sexy-ass legs are my thing.

Figures the woman I'm being forced to marry has the best set I've ever seen on a woman.

Despite everything—her attitude, her anger, my own anger—I still want to touch them. See if they're as smooth and soft as they look.

And if all goes as they planned, I guess I'll have every right to do so when Charlotte Lancaster becomes my wife.



CHAPTER SIX

Charlotte

I'M STANDING NEXT to a bench in Central Park, allowing my mother to brush my hair yet again when I spot him.

My supposed future husband making his way toward us with his hands in his pockets, as if he hadn't a care in the world.

He's late. What else is new? He'll probably be late to our wedding.

Which he can't be. I need him right now—more than he knows. If I have to move out of my house before the wedding, then I'm going to do everything I can to make sure it happens so I can get out of the house and away from the man who's supposed to love and protect me.

My father.

He's awful. Mean. He treats me like a possession rather than a person and he's bartering my life in order to gain some unknown advantage that he most likely never be privy to.

I know Perry has zero desire to marry me, and I can't blame him. How can I somehow convince him to go along with my plan so I can eventually be free of my father?

This could work. I'd pay Perry if I had to. I'd do anything to get away from my father.

Anything.

"Finally, he shows up," my mother mutters, her fingers twisting through one of my curls. I pull away before she ruins it completely, making her look at me. "I'm just trying to fix it."

"It's fine," the photographer yells from where she stands, her camera clutched in her hands. The woman is tiny, with an oversized

shirt on, white jeans, and her dyed black hair cut in a severe bob. thick-rimmed glasses frame her eyes, making them appear bigger than they actually are. “She looks beautiful.”

I duck my head, my cheeks growing warm at the compliment, sorry I don’t hear often since I don’t spend a lot of time with people, beyond the people who work in our home. I certainly feel beautiful in my powder-blue dress. And confident.

Maybe it’s because of the skirt.

The day after our dinner with Perry and his mother, I voluntarily went shopping by myself—something I rarely do—and bought the dress without seeking my mother’s approval first. Another thing I rarely do.

I knew from the moment I spotted the dress hanging on the rack that it was perfect. I didn’t even bother trying it on.

When I arrived home later and showed the pale blue dress to her, she told me she didn’t like it. Maybe it was the way she scrunched up her nose or how she pursed her lips.

“It’s rather...short,” she said, worry lacing her tone.

Her response left me satisfied that I made the right choice. I wanted to show her that was the entire point, but she’d disapprove, so I kept my mouth shut.

After Perry made that remark about my legs after dinner, I knew I wanted to show them off for him again. And this dress shows them off to perfection.

The neckline also dips low, offering a glimpse of my cleavage, but I wasn’t much. But I’m definitely showing more skin than the first time.

Why I want to show off for him like this, I don’t really want to explain. But if I had to, at the moment, because I implied to him that I didn’t like the way he called my breasts out.

The way he called my breasts *tits*. And that shitty little smirk on his face after he said it, knowing that he irritated me. Like he got off on it.

How his gaze kept sliding down to my legs instead of looking into my eyes.

As I mulled over those little moments later that night in bed, under the covers, I came to a realization.

I rather liked the way he called my breasts tits.

And proclaimed himself a leg man.

How he teased me, yet also got a little growly, especially when I was calling him names.

Black, I don't know what possessed me to behave that way. To be s
an they Maybe because he actually listened to me. Even when he made me ar
was still paying attention, and that's something I don't get too often.

nething Attention.

id those I'm a sad little creature, right? But it's true. My parents neglected i
e dress. two older brothers don't give me a moment's consideration and m
brother, Crew, was my very best friend until he turned thirte
transformed into a true Lancaster male seemingly overnight.

ly went Meaning he became a complete jerk who acted as if he ruled the
withoutand everyone should do as he bids.

Like father, like all of his sons, I suppose.

κ that it This is why I became so introverted. Why I preferred books over
Books don't let you down—especially romances. You get that endi
I couldwant, even if it's hard won.

se. And “Darling, quit fussing with your skirt,” Mother chastises, pulling n
my thoughts. I glance over at her, releasing the hem of my dress and
little twirl, the pleated skirt flaring out, showing off my thighs.

d to tell Feeling like a little girl, I can't help but laugh. When was the las
th shut. let myself go and actually had fun? I can't remember. Not that anythin
had tothis moment is fun. When you're about to have your photo taken with
ion. you barely know for engagement photos, you have to realize that y
, whichhas taken a drastic turn.

e I met May as well have fun when I can.

xamine “Oh, keep doing that!” the photographer shouts as she brings the
:heckedto her face and starts snapping away.

Despite my mother going on about my hair and my skirt, despi
his facephotographer constantly directing me to turn left or turn right as she t
light through her camera, I slowly stop spinning to watch my future h
nto myas he saunters over to where we're waiting for him. His stride is cas
confident, and he smiles at the people he walks past. Almost as if h
able toevery single one of them, which I find odd.

I trust no one. Not even him. It's a Lancaster trait, one my father i
in all of us when we were young, and I wish I hadn't let my guard d
Paris. That was a painful lesson I deeply regret. The one time I bel
startedcould trust someone, yet he still lied to me.

They all lie. Men. To cover their tracks, to gain something they v

o bold.doesn't matter what they're doing, as long as their lips are moving, igry, helying.

Impatience races through me as it takes Perry what feels like an o to draw near. He is in no hurry as he makes his way toward us, w me. Myreally quite rude considering he's almost thirty minutes late.

y baby If there's one thing my family hates, it's lateness. But I think Moth en anddazzled by his good looks, she'll let his tardiness slide.

"Perry!" Mother suddenly calls, enthusiastically waving at him e worldteenaged girl in the audience at a Harry Styles concert. "We're over he

"Pretty sure he knows where we're at," I tell her through clenche pasting on a smile as the photographer takes more photos of me.

people. And he's dressed impeccably in charcoal gray trousers and another ng youthose fitted white button-down shirts.

At least the buttons are done up respectably this time. No chains i re fromNo rings on his fingers either.

doing a Wait a minute.

The ring.

t time I I glance down at my bare hands, shock coursing through me g aboutrealize we've forgotten one of the most essential props in our m i a mancharade.

our life And I need this charade to work. To be convincing.

To get away from my old life so I can embark on a new one.

Damn it, I don't have an engagement ring. What's the point of us cameraphotos if I'm not wearing a fat diamond on my ring finger?

I tear away from my mother and start running toward Perry, am pite thehow fast I am despite the needle-thin four-inch heels on my feet. U ests thepropels me forward, knowing we don't have much time. Feelin; usbandeverything will fall apart if we can't correct this one tiny yet large issu ual, yet Perry's gaze connects with mine, and a huge grin spreads across h e trustsHe holds his arms out. "Future wife!"

I roll my eyes, coming to a stop directly in front of him. Can he nstilledserious about anything? It's as if his entire life is a mockery. "We f low n invery important detail."

ieved I "Well, hello to you, too."

I glare at him, not saying a word. He's not a mind reader, I reali want. Itbut I wish he could understand me without having to explain myself.

they're His smile fades the longer I say nothing and his brows draw close.
exactly did we forget?"

eternity "The ring. A ring. Any ring." I quickly glance over my shoulder
which is both the photographer and my mother watching us. The photographer
name is Susan—even picks her camera back up and starts taking
her is so photos. Of us.

Oh God. I'm tense and stressed and I don't want her taking photos
like a moment. This conversation. My skin grows tight. Itchy. I feel as if
re." burst from the unwanted attention.

and teeth, I turn to face Perry once more, my nerves making me sweat.
taking photos of us right now."

one of "These aren't official," he says with a frown, his gaze lifting to
Susan. He scowls at her, his jaw tightening, yet she keeps snapping
in sight. "It's no big deal."

To him. Despite not wanting to participate in this photo session, v
a performance to make. And we need to be convincing. Or at least I do

I want him to believe I want this. Maybe he'll get swept up
when I moment. Maybe he'll be halfway convinced that I want to be with him
marriage are simple creatures when it comes to sex, right? I flash a little leg
renders Perry stupid.

What I need is to get over my wariness when it comes to men to
me and somehow convince Perry that I want him.

is taking That's going to be a challenge.

"We're supposed to look like a happy couple who are in
azed at remember?" I allow him to pick up my hands because that looks real
urgency Something a loving couple would do?

g as if He's clutching them tight, and his hands are large, with long fing
e. interlace with mine. Despite how warm his hands are, I'm still filled v
his face. sudden urge to pull away.

It's just—automatic whenever someone puts their hands on me.
not believe it when people touch me.

forgot a I never really have.

"Your hands are like ice," he murmurs, giving them a sque
distressed noise leaves me, but it's as if he doesn't even notice. "An
ze this, worry. I've already got you."

"What do you mean?" Unable to take it, I pull my hands out

“What attempted to wipe them on my dress but I restrain myself.

“The ring issue. Took care of it.” He lifts his hand in greeting, smiling to find my mother. “Mrs. Lancaster, hello.”

er—her “Darling, call me Louisa. Please.”

g more I turn to find my mother is beaming at us—at Perry—clutching her in front of her chest, seemingly lovesick over his attention.

s of this I follow after him as he heads toward her, withholding the urge to I could eyes. She’s turned into his number one fangirl already. So annoying.

But then again, she’s the support I need as well, so I should tolerate her behavior.

“I was just telling Charlotte I finally got her ring back from the jeweler since I had to get it cleaned,” he says, the lie falling surprisingly easily away from his perfect lips.

Wariness fills me. Typical. I wonder how often he lies. And to whom we have “Oh. Of course. Since it’s a Constantine family heirloom,” Mother is going along with his story. “We have plenty of those in the Lancaster vault in the basement. Hmm. These two are good.

n. Men Too good.

g and it Perry reaches into the right front pocket of his trousers and pulls out a small black velvet box. My startled gaze meets his and he sends me a searching look, one that says, *you thought I was lying, didn’t you?*

Yes. I figured he was. I assumed he’d make up an excuse about the ring still being cleaned.

1 love, Instead, he’s clutching a ring box, his gaze sincere as he studies me, right? could appear romantic if you didn’t know the truth. Handsome man in the middle of Central Park, a gentle September breeze blowing through his golden locks as he watches me with affection in his gaze.

with the More like amusement. This entire situation seems like one big game to him, while my entire world is crumbling.

I don’t Why does he act like this? Does he have nothing better to do?

You want me to marry someone, Mother? Will do!

I can literally imagine him saying exactly that. Maybe even saluting me. Amother since he’s such a good little soldier.

d don’t He’s probably a mama’s boy. Maybe he’s a people pleaser in general. Though that seems to go against the Constantine way, from what I’ve read of his, my research on the family.

I don't understand him.

staring at "For you," he says, his voice low and sexy, that earnest gaze locking mine, and for the briefest moment, I fall under his spell.

I'm breathless when he slowly pops open the box, a giant diamond ring nestled inside. He tugs the ring out, the sun glinting off the stone and blinding me as he reaches for my hand and slips the ring on my finger. It's far too loose, the heavy diamond falling downward to rest against the back of my finger, and I snag my hand from his, clutching my fingers together so the ring doesn't fall off.

"It's too big," he says, stating the obvious.

Reality comes crashing down around me, reminding me that yes, this is all a farce and it would do me some good to keep my wits about me and not get caught up in the phoniness of it all.

"We can get it resized," I tell him, clutching my hand tighter. "Beautiful."

"You didn't even look at it." He actually sounds offended.

Glancing down, I twist the band so the perfectly cut round diamond sits atop my finger, studying it. It is truly stunning. As large as my knuckles, it has enough sparkle to blind everyone in this park. "It really is beautiful," I say again, keeping my gaze on my hand. "Who did it belong to? Someone in your family?"

"No one else. It belongs to you." I lift my head to catch the devil's grin on his face. "I went to a jeweler and asked for the oldest-looking ring I could find. They had so it would look like an antique. That was my brother's idea." I try to fight the disappointment that wants to take over me, but I can't. "Thank you for your notice."

Of course he does. He's far more observant than I care for him to be. His brother chose the ring, not him. And it's not an antique, a ring that has been in the family for generations. What did I expect? What was I romanticizing this moment when it's nothing but a business transaction?

"What?" he asks when I still haven't said anything. "You don't like it?" "It's not that I don't like it. I would actually prefer something more general. Antiques. Particularly jewelry."

"What? Really? I thought every future bride wants a new diamond ring on her finger so she can show it off," he says, looking confused.

“I...don’t have anyone to show it off to,” I confess with a shrug. I nod with my head, feeling stupid.

I should’ve never said that to him. Showing any bit of vulnerability to Perry is a mistake. One that could cost me. As in, I’m giving him something he can use against me later.

The friendless, hopeless Lancaster. His future bride. The woman who had everything taken away from her. I tried to be my own person, and I failed miserably. I can’t be on my own. My father has told me that time and time again.

I’m not a catch. No one wants me.

I’m pathetic.

“Charlotte! Perry! Please come over here! The light is starting to flash and Susan wants to get the session started,” my mother calls.

Lifting my head once more, our gazes meet. Catch.

“It’s your turn,” Perry says. “You ready?” Perry asks me.

I lift my chin, full of false bravado. “Yes.”

“Let’s do this.”

and sits
kneeling and
beautiful,” I
before?

his smile
new ring
,

but he

me.

saying that’s

“I am I

right?

see it?”

“old,” I

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“Let’s do this.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

Perry

I DON'T UNDERSTAND this woman I'm supposed to marry.

I treat her nice and she's hostile in return. I give her a giant-ass diamond that wasn't cheap, and she hates it. Would rather have an old diamond belonged to someone else versus a new one that's just for her.

Weird.

I'm sure if I went to Winston with my Charlotte-related complain laugh in my face. Keaton would make an insulting remark that would even sharper than usual since he's younger than me. The both of them are smugly content in relationships they chose, versus one that's been upon them.

Like me.

Charlotte Lancaster is a prickly little thing. What woman doesn't want a flawless diamond?

The woman I'm going to marry, that's who.

I try to talk to her about it and she goes silent on me. And while she's hot as fuck yet again in that light-blue dress with the too-short skirt, she *not* want me to touch her.

Why not? What's the problem? Is she a man hater? Did she have bad experience with a guy in the past? Is she just uptight? There are so many reasons, almost too many to fathom.

I'm not about to ask her. Especially not right now.

Every time I do as the photographer instructs while we're standing on the bridge in the middle of Central Park, I feel Charlotte stiffen. Her entire demeanor shifts the moment I lay my hands on her, as if I physically

repulse her.

And I'm supposed to touch her. We're a so-called happily married couple. We need to look the part for these photos, though why I'm bothered I don't even know. I should've never shown up in the first place. The closer I get sucked into this, the harder it's going to be to get out of it.

"You're just so stiff," the photographer announces after about ten minutes of endless poses, sounding exasperated.

Charlotte glances over at me with an accusing gaze and I murmur, "I'm talking about you."

"You're saying I'm the stiff one?" she asks Susan, sounding confused.

"Yes, my dear. You need to loosen up. This is the man you're going to marry, and not to be offensive, but he's an absolute doll. You want to look happy in your photos, not like you're being led to the gallows," Susan and that sassy photographer explains.

The nervous laughter that escapes Louisa Lancaster doesn't help. I turn to God, Charlotte stiffens even more.

"Hey." I snag her hand, ignoring the way she's trying to pull out of my hold while I lead her over to the side of the bridge and away from the rest of them. "Look, you gotta pretend you like me. At least for the next ten minutes. We wrap up this shit show of a photography session. Or else our announcement is going to be of you looking like this." I offer her a forced smile as an example.

Her eyes darken and her lips thin. "I don't look that bad."

"Oh yeah. You do," I say firmly. "Trust me."

"I shouldn't trust you at all," she mutters, shaking her head. "You're the one who looks like this entire situation is one big joke, when this is my life we're talking about here."

"I'm playing along with it, okay? Isn't that what you want? My dad wants to get you out of your house and away from your father?" I keep my voice low though deep down I'm furious. I give her what she wants and she complies. I try to lighten the moment and she complains.

I can't please her. The very least she can be is grateful I'm not bothering her. She hangs on to this entire mockery of a situation in her face.

Charlotte says nothing. Just sinks her teeth into her lower lip and physically her head, gazing out at the water. The sun shines upon her face just casting her in a golden glow, and in this exact moment, she looks peaceful.

relaxed.

engaged Perfectly beautiful.

thuring, “Okay, that’s it!” Susan shouts as she once again starts snapping at

leeper I “Don’t move,” I tell Charlotte, my voice low. Calm. Like I’m talking to a
wild animal who’s about to dart away. “Or you’ll ruin everything.”

twenty “Don’t tell me what to do,” she mutters, her lips barely moving.

Impressive.

“She’s “As your future husband, I have every right to tell you what to do
whenever I want.” I have never felt this way about someone before
sed. life, but I have to admit...

going to I get off on the idea of bossing this woman around. Especially since she
to lookso damn resistant.

san the “Oh please. You wish,” she says irritably, her gaze still on the
“You’re rude.”

. Swear I’m only mildly offended by her comment.

“No one else thinks so. I’m the nicest Constantine there is.”

t of my Her gaze briefly flits to mine, those blue eyes extra icy. “Then the
n them,your family must be dreadful.”

s while “You don’t know the half of it,” I readily agree.

official “I don’t want to know.” She looks away as if she’s done with
ake-assconversation, but I know she’s not.

“Yet you’re stuck with us,” I say, enjoying the banter. “We’re
awful. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of us before.”

“I don’t get out much.” Her voice is droll, her gaze meeting mine
act likemore.

g about “Clearly.”

One side of her mouth kicks up and Susan practically moans in
help to “Beautiful! Keep looking at him like that!”

ce low, “I thought you were some brainless heiress whose only job is to
explains.daddy’s money.” My voice is light, but there’s an edge to my words
purposely trying to rile her up.

lowing “From what I’ve read about you, I’m thinking that’s more your job
returns snottily, her cheeks flushed.

l averts Anger suffuses me, and I do my best to tamp it down, but damn,
st right,sore point for me. How the fuck did she know? I guess a simple
erfectlysearch would reveal that yes, only a few years ago, I was out partyin;

night. Drunk off my ass as I stumbled out of yet another club with yet
hot brunette on my arm. A woman who looks and acts nothing like
way. woman I'm with right now.

ing to a Charlotte is the complete opposite of what I'm normally attracted
while her legs are sexy as fuck and her plump mouth looks ripe for
sucking, I don't really appreciate what that sexy mouth has to say.

"Are you calling me brainless?" I ask, my voice tight. My irrita
t to do clear, yet she continues on, oblivious.

e in my "You're the one who said it, not me." She offers a tiny shrug,
leaving her when I grasp her arm, pulling her close. Wide blue eyes
e she's mine. "Let me go."

"No." I glance up, noting the near orgasmic look on the photogr
e water face, her finger working the shutter like a madwoman. "You talk
game, so let's keep it up. You don't know me."

"You d-don't know me either." I feel the tremble beneath my gr
normally, I would let a woman go if I scared her.

e rest of Though I don't scare women. Ever. I'm the nice guy—I wasn't I
Charlotte when I said I was the nicest Constantine. I've never had to be
or ruthless, not really. I leave that up to Winston. Or my mother. I've
with the had to fight for a damn thing in my life. Doors open for me. Oppor
come knocking. I seek nothing.

e pretty They all seek me.

But damn it, I'm still pissed over what she said.

ie once "Not that I should have to explain myself to you, but I knew how
a good time when I was younger. I might've partied too hard, but that
long time ago. I was a different person then. I'm working for the
ecstasy.com company now."

Fuck, clearly it's a sore point, my past reckless behavior.

o spend "It wasn't that long ago that you were partying so hard," she says
ds. I'm as hell.

Shit. She's right, but come on.

ob," she "And you're so perfect while I'm a complete mess? Not too sur
that." I lean in close, my mouth at her ear, my hand coming to rest
that's abridge rail, caging her in. I'm sure to anyone else the pose seems intim
Google if I'm about to whisper something sweet and endearing. "At least I'm
g every scared little virgin who hides away from everyone."

another She rears back, fury flaming in her eyes. “I already told you I’m
like this virgin.”

“I don’t believe you.”

to. And “It’s the truth.”

or dick “Really,” I deadpan.

“Yes.”

ation is “Give me names, then.”

Her brows shoot up. “Names?”

a gasp I nod, not wanting to hear any names at all. The last thing I want
as meet about are her past sexual experiences. It’s none of my business.

“Well.” She hesitates, those big eyes locking with mine. She looks
apher’s damn serious. “There was one guy.”

a good I remain cool, keeping my expression neutral. “What about him?”

Really? I was only teasing her about a list.

ip, and “I got in a little bit of trouble—with him,” she admits.

“What kind of trouble?”

ying to Maybe I don’t want to know. Maybe I’ll get jealous, which is ridic

re mean “It was a torrid, brief affair. A few months in Paris. The most ro
e nevercity in the world, with an older man who taught me...so many t
tunities Charlotte smiles at me and I think Susan just had an orgasm from ca
the look on her face.

“What was his name?” My neutral façade is gone. Anger simmers
veins, making my blood run hot. I’m not the one with a Constantine
to have but for some damn reason, I don’t like the thought of her with anyone

it was a “Should I even tell you? Hmm, I don’t know.” She taps her index
family against pursed lips. They’re pink and plumped and covered in the
glossy sheen.

“Drop your finger, Charlotte!” Susan yells.

, snotty Charlotte does as she’s told, making my brows lift. Wonder if she
be told what to do in private situations. “I can’t wait for this to be over

“No changing the subject, future wife. I want to know.” I take
e about forward, settling my hand on her hip, my touch light yet possessive
on the trying to keep it real for the photos. For once, she doesn’t pull away. F
ate. As is warm, I can feel it, despite the layers of her dress. “What’s the de
n not at this guy you got in trouble with?”

“It’s really none of your business.”

n not a Why is that snotty tone of hers such a turn-on?

 “As your future husband, I would say it is.”

 “You’re not the boss of me.”

I chuckle. “You sound like you’re five.”

 “I’m not.”

 “Oh trust me.” My gaze falls down the length of her body, lingers on her gaping neckline. Those tits I kept talking about the last time we were together aren’t on blatant display, but I see just enough of a curve to be intrigued. “I know.”

 She literally stomps her foot, now acting like she’s five. “That looks so disgusting.”

 “Keep talking, princess. I know you’re just trying to avoid answering my question.” I tug her into me, my hand sliding to her lower back. She presses into my side, obliterating all thought for a minute. She feels good. “Fine. Don’t tell me his name. I don’t care about him. I’ll tell you mine. I know about your list instead, and then I’ll tell you mine.”

ulous. “I don’t care about your list,” she retorts.

romantic “I think you might.” I’m getting actual pleasure out of this, giving her things.” shit. “Tell me. What were their names? All of those men you’ve fucked and captured.”

pturing “Such language.” Charlotte gently rests her hands on my chest, her hands deceiving. She might appear to be staring up at me with longing, but she’s really trying to shove me away.

temper, I refuse to budge. And she doesn’t drop her hands either. Of course, she else. Susan is documenting this very moment. She’ll end up with thousands of fingerphotos by the end of the session. “You like it.”

faintest “No, I don’t. This conversation is—tacky.”

 “I call it getting to know each other.” I smile.

 “I call it you being too nosy.” Charlotte shoves with all of her might. I like to take a simple step back, my hand springing away from her back. Susan says, “.” a disappointed sound. I glance up to catch Louisa watching us with fear. a stepgaze.

ve. Just She can tell something’s up. Mother’s intuition in full effect.

her skin “Okay, I can tell you guys are winding down,” Susan says and approaches us. “Let’s take a few close-up photos of the ring and then today.”

 “Ah, the ring doesn’t quite fit—” Charlotte starts but I speak over her

“Sounds like a plan.” My smile is cordial and Susan beams at return. “How do you want us to pose?”

“Why don’t you rest your hand on the bridge rail and your blushing to-be can rest her hand on top of yours,” Susan suggests.

I do as Susan says, waiting for Charlotte to play her part. She’s rearing onto stand close to me, even when I offer her that same smile that would have been beautifully on the photographer only moments before.

My future wife isn’t falling for it.

“I don’t bite,” I tell her with a chuckle. “Only when you ask.”

Susan flat-out laughs. Louisa titters.

Charlotte glares.

That’s the push she needed, because next thing I know she’s sitting beside me, her hand settling on top of mine, her fingers still icy cold.

“Grab her hand, but don’t grip it too tightly. Yes, just like that,” I say as I lightly clasp Charlotte’s fingers. “Charlotte, slip your index out of his hold. Bend your middle finger just so...”

“I’ll show him my middle finger,” Charlotte mutters, so low only I hear her.

I nearly smile at that remark.

“Yes, yes. Just like that. Incredibly romantic. Really shows off that she’s yet also connects the two of you.” Susan brings the camera up and snapping. “Don’t move. Oh wait, yes. Oh my God, Perry, keep stroke fingers. So sweet! Okay, a few more...and...we’re done.”

Charlotte jerks her hand out of mine, rubbing her fingers absently glares at me. “We’re through?” She glances over at Susan.

“Yes, I’ll send over a digital file first thing in the morning. You cover the portfolio and let me know which ones you want,” Susan explains.

“Can you forward them to me?” I ask Charlotte.

“My mother will be the one getting them.” She waves a hand at Louisa.

“I would love to send them to you. Would your mother care for forward them to her as well?” Louisa seems hopeful. For some reason she tells me she wants to befriend my mother.

Caroline Constantine really has no friends. She has acquaintances call it know better than to ever cross her. Enemies—plenty of those.

Members who tolerate her. I think she might even take the occasion to tell her who we never hear a peep from, thank Christ.

me in “If you send them to me, I’ll make sure she sees them.”
“Wonderful.” Louisa beams, turning her attention to her daughter.
g bride-you ready to go?”
“Please,” Charlotte says almost desperately.
reluctant I stifle the chuckle behind my fist. “See you this weekend, future wife.”
rked so She turns to glare at me. “What’s this weekend?”
“Our engagement party.” When I see the shock wash over her face,
let the chuckle free. “You forgot.”
“Charlotte,” Louisa chides. “I’ve been planning all week.”
She turns to her mother, her shoulders tense. “You haven’t asked
help.”
standing “I don’t really need it, dear. Do you know how many parties I’ve had
in my lifetime?” Louisa’s gaze meets mine. “Saturday night. I’ll send
’ Susanthe pertinent information.”
c finger “Is there a theme?”
“Just bring your handsome self,” Louisa chirps.
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“Can’t wait.” I wink at Louisa, who appears ready to faint. “See you
Saturday.”
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“Is there a theme?”

“Just bring your handsome self,” Louisa chirps.

Charlotte rolls her eyes.

“Can’t wait.” I wink at Louisa, who appears ready to faint. “See you Saturday.”

I leave them where they’re standing, whistling loudly. That wasn’t so bad. Better than I thought it would be.

Maybe this fake marriage racket won’t be so bad after all.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Charlotte

PERRY CONSTANTINE IS like a drug.

A dangerous one. The kind that sneaks up on you.

He's fun and easygoing and easy to talk to. Charming and charming and incredibly handsome. He's intoxicating, luring you in and breaking your defenses until the next thing you know, you're on a high and you feel like you're ever coming down.

At one point, I was having fun at the photography session. I envision Perry and I together even. It wouldn't be so bad, I kept myself as we bickered. He'd smile, trying to soften me and it worked.

Well enough that I almost admitted my affair with Seamus to him that it's much to admit, but it was enough to leave me destroyed and my parents to never trust me alone.

Those months in Paris ruined everything, and it was all my fault for so trusting. I don't like talking about it. I never talk about it.

Until Perry.

Coming that close to sharing my biggest secret rattled me. I don't trust him. I can't trust him. How could I share something so damaging to my reputation, with Perry of all people?

Because you like him. You do.

I shove that shitty voice to the back of my mind, telling it to shut up.

I don't like him. I don't like anyone. Just me and my cat and my dog. That's all that matters to me. Nothing else.

Not Perry. Not my parents. Not even my brothers. They don't care.

me, why should I care about them?

Why should I care about anyone?

Once I return home, I take a long, hot shower, scrubbing the makeup from my face, washing the curls and hair product out of my hair. I put on my comfiest sweats and pace the bedroom, feeling antsy. Too worked stressed over my unfamiliar and unwanted emotions.

Maybe I should get drunk.

After drinking two whiskey sours and doing a shot of the finest Jasper could find in the house, I march into my father's home office knocking. He glances up, seemingly startled by my entry but I don't stop me. I stride right up to his massive desk, bracing my hands on the edge of it as I stare him down.

"I want out of this."

He frowns. "Out of what?"

My father is not a stupid man. More like he's the smartest man I've ever known and that's saying a lot, because every Lancaster man I've encountered is fiercely intelligent.

Almost to the point of it being a flaw. They think they're above everything and in most cases, they are.

They're also stubborn. Magnetic. Charming. Cunning. Ruthless.

"My engagement."

He leans back in his chair, contemplating me with narrowed eyes that match mine. I remain in place, gripping the desk tighter and hoping he doesn't notice the faint trembles coursing through me. Praying I don't throw up all the alcohol I hastily consumed.

Maybe this was a bad idea, barging into my father's office and demanding. I don't do this sort of thing. I never have. Maybe that could work to my advantage.

For once, perhaps he'll notice me. Listen to me.

And give me what I want.

"This engagement between you and that Constantine boy is important," he starts, and I realize I'm in for a lecture.

With a sigh I push myself off of his desk and settle into one of the overstuffed chairs, flopping onto it like a sullen child. I'm halfway there when I throw a fit, but that would only prompt him to throw me out.

And I don't throw fits. That's not the Lancaster way.

"Why is it so important? What does it matter by me marrying
up offDaddy?" I'm bringing out the big guns by calling him that, a t
on my endearment I never use.

up, too He's never been a sweet, loving daddy. More like a stern, elusive
who doesn't care about his children.

Especially me.

tequila "I don't like him," I continue when my father hasn't answered me
withoutrude. He says the most awful things, and I don't even know him. Th
't let itthe dark ages. Arranged marriages aren't a thing."

he edge "You'd be surprised," he offers.

And that's it.

That's all he has to say about the matter.

Crossing my arms in front of me, I glare at him, wondering wher
ve everthis fierceness is coming from. I don't talk back or sass my father. Ma
re everthe alcohol coursing through my veins, firing me up. "I won't do it."

"You won't do what, exactly?"

everyone, "Marry Perry Constantine." I pause. "I hate him."

"Oh, I very much doubt that."

"I do."

"You haven't known him long enough to hate him." He leans forw
chair creaking with the movement. "Charlotte, I'm sure this isn't w
s. Eyeshad in mind for your future, but it's what's best for both families."

ping he This explanation feels like a complete lie.

it puke "How does this benefit us? We're Lancasters. I've never even h
the Constantine family until I was told I have to marry into it," I retort.

making "Then you've been living under a rock your entire life beca
work toConstantines are one of the most powerful families in the state, if no
entire country. Winston Constantine took over the family business a
father died and built it into a billion-dollar company. They are a forc
reckoned with," he explains.

is very "And what does that have to do with us?"

He leans back once more, contemplating me, his hands steepled
nearbyof his face, his elbows resting on the arms of his chair. "You w
rpted tounderstand."

"I'm not a baby."

He just looks at me.

ing him, “I’m not!”

erm of Okay, I sound like a baby. I need to take back control
conversation.

e father “What do Perry and I have to do with this family merger any
doesn’t make any sense.”

“He’s the only unattached son from that particular branch of the
“. “He’sThe most important branch, I might add.” He tips his head forward. “
his isn’tmy only daughter, I believe you two would make an excellent match.”

“He’s a jerk.”

“I don’t want to break your heart, but most men are.”

“I already know that.”

We share a look, and I see it in his eyes when he realizes wh
e all ofreferring to.

ybe it’s Or more like who.

My secret shame. My one illicit moment when I said fuck you
familial restraints and did what I wanted in Paris. When I was nine
thought the world was mine for the taking.

Father is right. Most men are jerks.

I’m sure Perry is no exception.

ard, his “You’ll eventually warm up to him,” Father says, dropping his
hat youhands so they rest on his chest.

“I don’t want to.”

Annoyance flickers in his gaze and he sits up so quickly, I gasp
eard ofdon’t have a choice in the matter. What’s done is done. He’ll b
husband in a month. I say you take this time to become better adjusted

use the “He doesn’t want to marry me either,” I offer, sitting up straight
t in theeager to bolt.

fter his This conversation didn’t go at all like I planned. Though how I th
e to becould make this work in my favor, I’m not sure.

“Oh really? Is he planning on getting out of it?” My father’s lau
downright sinister. “I’d like to see him try.”

in front I rise to my feet. “You underestimate me, Father. And you undere
ouldn’tPerry, too. We don’t plan on being pawns in your game.”

He jumps to his feet as well, so fast that he’s suddenly in front of
fingers curling around my elbow and holding me in place. “N

underestimate *me*, little girl. Don't even think you're smarter than Caroline Constantine. The contract is signed. The deal is complete. I will put you under lock and key until your wedding day. Understood? I'm shaking. His fingers are pressed so firmly into my skin, I'm he'll leave bruises. I know his threat is true. My father doesn't b family. threaten lightly. He doesn't need to. "You've already kept me under l 'And askey for years. What difference will it make?"

"Don't test me, and you won't find out," he says with the faintest s We study each other for a moment, fear making my pulse throbt head, my ears, drowning out all other sound. His expression is restrained violence. One I recognize. When his fingers squeeze even ti hat I'mchoke out, "The engagement party."

He pauses, a frown on his face. "What?"

"My dress." I glance down at where his fingers are like a band to mywrapped around my arm. "It's short sleeved." He lets me go, shoving me so hard I almost trip on the chair behi "Get out."

I run out of his office without a backward glance, too scared to him. I don't stop moving until I'm in my room, the door shut and linkedtight, the only light coming from the salt rock lamp I keep on my desk.

Collapsing on my bed, I stare up at the ceiling, closing my eyes feel Doja rub her furry head against my cheek, her unmistakab). "Youbringing me instant comfort. I grab hold of her and cuddle her e yourdropping a kiss on top of her head, fighting tears.

to it." The interaction with my father once again reminds me that I am be as well, outside of this house. I'd rather marry a man I don't know than remain

How bad can the Constantines be?

ought I



ghter is

"YOUR MOTHER REQUESTS your presence in her study."

stimate Jasper brought me my coffee and this announcement, given on I've taken a couple sips under his watchful eye. It's far too early me, his morning to start my day this way, especially after my interaction w o, you father last night—and the fact that I have a throbbing headache.

me. Or “You waited on purpose,” I tell him, settling the mug on my nights
You’re “She’s rather eager for you to make an appearance.” He pauses, w
matter, me. Jasper is at least sixty-five, with a head full of white hair
?” aristocratic flair. He’s been a butler for my family since I can reme
I afraid don’t know life without Jasper.

oast or “Why?” I wake up on the wrong side of the bed every morning, a
ock and one is no exception. I’m feeling particularly cross. Doesn’t help that
too much alcohol and got into a physical altercation with my father.

near. “The photos are in,” he says.

o in my “The—*oh*.” I nod, reaching over for my mug so I can take
barely fortifying sip. How fake that photo session had felt yesterday. I still c
ghter, I over it. The things Perry said to me, the way he made me feel, like
trust him with my life. He teased me constantly, but it wasn’t so bad, v
I am a contradiction. I don’t know how to feel about the man.

of steel “I don’t know if I want to see them,” I finally say, referring to the p
I haven’t flat-out told Jasper I’m marrying a man against my wil
ind me. don’t act like I’m excited about my upcoming nuptials either. He’s c
enough that he would never say a word, but he’s also smart enough t
look at that something is up.

locked “Your mother exclaimed over many of them, so I’m assuming the
are well received,” he says.

when I “Great. Perry and I must’ve pulled it off, then,” I mumble, no
le purrbothering to hide that the entire thing is fake.

close, “The two of you make a beautiful couple,” Jasper says, as diplom
ever.

etter off “You saw the photos?”

here. “Your mother showed me a few.” Jasper hesitates only for a mom
head dropping to watch Doja wind her way around his legs. She lov
Always has. “He’s quite handsome.”

“My fiancé?” I raise a brow, my lips never leaving the rim of my c
could mainline coffee in the morning, I probably would.

Jasper nods.

ly after “I suppose.” I think of Perry. With the easy smiles and vulgar
in the He’d probably get along with my brothers, though none of them smile
with my They’re all too cunning, contemplating their next victim.

Would they want to hurt Perry in defense of me? I can’t ima

stand. Maybe Crew. I'm the closest to him. My other brothers Finn and
attaching they're older than us and never gave the two of us much thought. On
and an were sent off to Lancaster Prep—the school in Long Island that's been
member. If family for generations—they forgot all about us. Now they run a suc
real estate firm here in city, the both of them complete workaholics.

and this “Your young man has a bit of an edge,” Jasper allows.

I drank My young man. That's hilarious.

“An edge?” I would love to know what Jasper means by that.
exactly are you referring to?”

another “He seems rather...rebellious. At least he appears to be. Might
an't get second son in him. Like your own father,” Jasper observes as he
I could makes his way to my bedroom door. “Make sure you go see your
was it? miss. She's excited to show you the photos.”

“Will do,” I tell him cheerily, smiling big until my bedroom door c
photos. My smile fades the moment Jasper's gone and I contemplate v
ll, but I said. How Perry is a second son—like my father.

discreet If Perry is anything like my father, I will steal away in the middle
o know night, under darkness where no one will catch me.

Once I've consumed enough coffee to feel human, I brush my te
photos hair. Get dressed. Don't bother with makeup or anything like that be
plan on going nowhere. And once I'm properly groomed—or g
ot even enough for my mother's exacting standards—I make my way to her
where I find her sitting at her delicate white desk, her gaze stuck
natic a massive computer screen in front of her.

“There you are,” she says, never taking her eyes off the monitor
until you see these photos!”

ent, his I slowly walk over to her, stopping just behind her desk chair. S
es him. the photographer's webpage, a gallery of thumbnail photos of us
screen. “Want to start at the beginning?” she asks excitedly.

up. If I “Sure.”

Mother clicks through them, one after the other. The very first pho
of me confronting Perry about the ring. How worried I was, though yo
mouth. see that, since my back is to the camera. I study the way Perry's loc
e much. me, his lips quirked up into a half smile, handsome as ever in the
white dress shirt and gray trousers.

gine it. How he can make a few simple articles of clothing so attrac

Grant, downright maddening.

When she starts clicking through the photos where Susan pointed out the stiff I was, I can see it. I couldn't yesterday, but I definitely do now.

I look terrible. Rigid. Uncomfortable. The smile on my face is more of a grimace. It's awful.

Embarrassing.

Perry appears completely unfazed. He's a terrific actor. Or at least he has some modeling experience, because he's totally at ease.

"Here are my favorite photos," Mother says.

My stomach drops the longer I stare at those photos, remembering the moment. When he said such crude and awful things to me. When I saw a few insults in his direction as well. We weren't kind to each other during those few minutes, despite me nearly blabbing my biggest secret.

Yet somehow, we appear connected. Comfortable. Natural even.

"Don't you two look like a real couple?" Mother's voice is full of amazement. "We'll choose one of these photos to appear in the pages of the magazine."

A groan leaves me. "Who looks at the newspaper anymore?"

"Plenty of people," Mother says indignantly. "All of your business associates and friends. Our family. I'll submit the photo announcement to a few of those society pages as well. I'm sure they'll study it."

"If our wedding ends up in one of those *New York Bride* magazines, whatever they're called, I'm going to be pissed," I threaten, not taking my eyes off Perry. "Waitcares."

Mother laughs, proving my point. "Darling, you're so sensitive. It's how it works. We have to spread the word. Thank God these photos went out so well. Witnessing the two of you together trying to interact while I shoot, well...I was worried."

Her words send a streak of fear through me. We're supposed to be apart, and I've been fighting it pretty much every step of the way, but you don't should be trying my best to get out of here and away from my mother's clutches.

What if Perry convinces his family that he doesn't want to be with me after all and breaks the contract? Will I be to blame?

If we fall apart, will this all be on my head?

While I gnaw my lower lip raw with worry, Mother keeps scrolling through the endless photos until she's finally in the clutch-hands of the session. I study each of them, trying for indifference, but more of a swarm me of the way his fingers felt on mine. How loosely he held me how gentle his touch was.

Nothing like what I was used to from the males in my family.
he has Specifically, my father.

How easily those long fingers curled around mine, as if we'd held hands forever.

ing the Ridiculous.

slung a But also...comforting.

during I can't stop looking at that showy diamond on my finger. The moment I came home from Central Park, I dropped the ring into the jewelry box in my closet and forgot all about it. It's meaningless.

full of A prop.

per for Just like my life.

Mother clicks into the gallery of photos and selects one, the image of my father on her screen. "This is the one I want to use for the announcement. What do you think?"

os and I'm about to tell her I don't care but I get caught up in the way Perry looks at me. The expression on his face, his lips curved into a half-smile.

His attention is all for me and no one else, and that's something I'm not used to.

hat she Maybe that was my problem yesterday. I'm not comfortable with Perry's that puppy-dog energy Perry exudes focused on me. Even if it's false. This is warmth in his eyes in that photo makes my skin grow warm.

turned He doesn't think I'm a prop.

at the Perry Constantine looks at me as if I might be someone special.

look at
when I
father's

with me

While I gnaw my lower lip raw with worry, Mother keeps clicking through the endless photos until she's finally in the clutched-hands segment of the session. I study each of them, trying for indifference, but memories swarm me of the way his fingers felt on mine. How loosely he held my hand, how gentle his touch was.

Nothing like what I was used to from the males in my family.

Specifically, my father.

How easily those long fingers curled around mine, as if we'd held hands forever.

Ridiculous.

But also...comforting.

I can't stop looking at that showy diamond on my finger. The moment I came home from Central Park, I dropped the ring into the jewelry box I keep in my closet and forgot all about it. It's meaningless.

A prop.

Just like my life.

Mother clicks into the gallery of photos and selects one, the image huge on her screen. "This is the one I want to use for the announcement. What do you think?"

I'm about to tell her I don't care but I get caught up in the way Perry's watching me. The expression on his face, his lips curved into a half smile. His attention is all for me and no one else, and that's something I'm not used to.

Maybe that was my problem yesterday. I'm not comfortable with all of that puppy-dog energy Perry exudes focused on me. Even if it's fake, the warmth in his eyes in that photo makes my skin grow warm.

He doesn't think I'm a prop.

Perry Constantine looks at me as if I might be someone special.



CHAPTER NINE

Perry

SLOWLY BUT SURELY the family trickled into Bishop's Landing, here over the weekend to celebrate my and my blushing bride's engagement party. Constantines are everywhere, many of them staying at our family home in Bishop's Landing. Mother called me home Thursday night, saying I shouldn't stay in the city one more minute. I needed to be home with my brothers preparing for my impending engagement party, and do my part in contributing to the upcoming wedding day.

What a fucking joke.

I have no clue what she's referring to in regards to the wedding. Is this just women's stuff?

Not that I would ever say that out loud. All the women in my family would come for me, teeth bared.

Mother did make an appointment for my brothers and me at our favorite suit shop in Bishop's Landing to get fitted for our tuxedos for the ceremony. The morning before my engagement party, my brothers and I went together over to the shop, both Keaton and Winston grumbling the whole time.

Bunch of grouches. Winston was pissed he wasn't in the office. I was pissed in general.

Me? I'm the one who should be the most pissed of all, being forced to marry an uptight little supposed nonvirgin who recoils every time I touch her. Our marriage ought to be a lot of fun.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

"Why didn't she schedule this appointment on a Saturday?" Winston

once we've all climbed out of his car. He wouldn't let me drive.

Figures.

"She wants us home," I say.

"It's the last place I want to be," Keaton adds, glowering at us.

"I canceled meetings," Winston goes on as we head toward the
"Important ones."

"Blame Mom, not me," I remind him. "And I'm not the one who
to get married. You guys forced it on me."

"We didn't force you to do shit," Winston snaps.

I keep my mouth shut, not in the mood to fight over this. The morning
owner, Benny, sees us enter his store, he calls out to us, a giant smile
for the face.

party. "Three Constantines in my store, what an honor!" he says, his
come in entirely on Winston. "How are you, son?"

ying I Winston grits his teeth, most likely hating how Benny just called his
family. No other man was able to do that besides our father. "We're wonderi
part in we have to be fitted for new suits when all three of us already own tuxi

"I don't," Keaton pipes up, earning a stare from the both of us. He
his broad shoulders. "What, I don't. I never wear 'em."

in't that "Not even to a school dance?" That's how I got my first tux.

And we definitely don't rent them. We don't need to. We go to
family events amongst society to warrant owning one.

"Nope. And I'm not sucking up to rich assholes at charity events like
father's guys, so I've never needed one." Keaton grins.

for the Benny completely ignores Keaton. "Your mother wanted the three
I rode to match. She's excited for the wedding. She wants her sons to look
entire best."

"You do realize he's the groom." Winston jerks his thumb
Keaton direction, since Benny has been making eyes at Winston only since
walked in.

forced to "My apologies." Benny nods and bows toward me. "Are we ready
rich her, sized? Shall the groom go first?"

"Definitely." Winston shoves me toward Benny. Keaton laughs.

I glare at them, annoyed.

on says Benny first opens up a catalog to show me the tuxedos Mother wants
to wear, and yeah, it's dope as hell, I can't deny it. The moment I

sample suit on, I feel like a fucking pimp, strutting out of the dressin with my head held high, silently approving of the fit, despite how l sleeves are on me.

“What do you think?” I hold my arms out for my brothers, s e shop.proud.

Winston’s expression barely changes as he murmurs, “Nice.”
wanted He returns his attention to his phone.

“Looks good,” Keaton agrees with a nod.

I saunter to the dais in front of the three-way mirror, standing on t ent theas Benny brings out his measuring tape and gets to work. Winston’s e on his bent as he taps away at his phone. Keaton gets a phone call and walk to take it.

s focus “Mother sent me a few of your engagement photos,” Winston say still glued on his phone.

im son. I frown at my reflection in the mirror. “Why would she send t ng whyyou?”

edos.” “For my approval.” He lifts his head, his gaze meeting mine. “I ke : shrugson every Constantine as best I can. And I am in charge of this deal.”

Love how my future has turned into a business deal.

“Did they meet your approval?” I snap, wincing when Benny acc enoughsticks my wrist with a pin.

“They’ll do.” He hesitates for only a moment, his focus on his phoi like youmore. “Your bride-to-be is stunning.”

“She’s—something else. A little bitchy if you ask me.” Benny sti : of youagain, and I wonder if he did it on purpose for me calling her that. “Ov

ok their “Sorry, sir.” He doesn’t sound very sorry at all, but at least : decency to keep his head bowed.

in my “Not easy and always agreeable like you?” Winston asks.

nce we “Yeah, no. You’d probably love her. She’s mean. Thinks I’m ridic I don’t know if I would go so far as to call her *mean*, but sh y to getparticularly pleasant either.

“She’s a Lancaster. They’re either mean spirited or crazy.” V shakes his head. “Do you two at least get along?”

“I would hope so, since they’re getting married,” Benny mu ants ushimself, but loud enough for me to hear him.

put the Winston is annoyed by his commentary. Minus the sticking-me-wi

g roompart, I find it amusing.

ong the “I guess,” I say with a shrug, causing Benny to grumble with annoyance as a pin falls to the floor with a gentle ping. He swoops down to pick it up, handing “We have nothing in common.”

“Do you need to?”

“I mean, we’ll want to talk to each other.”

“Really? Well, I suppose not everyone gets what I have with my wife. His expression turns thoughtful, the lucky son of a bitch. “Considering the situation, I would think your new wife is useful for looking beautiful and being an arm in public and welcoming your dick into her mouth or pussy whenever you want to fuck her.” Winston casts Benny an evil glare, just daring to say something.

rs, gaze The wise man keeps his mouth shut.

“I don’t want to fuck her,” I say, though the words feel like a lie.

hem to I just can’t imagine fucking her.

Yeah, no. That feels like a lie, too.

rep tabs I can imagine it. But I don’t see her being particularly agreeable like my women sweet in bed. I’m not some sick, twisted fuck like my brother.

vidently I’ve heard the stories. Witnessed enough interaction between V and Ash to know they’re up to some kinky shit.

ne once I can’t imagine doing one kinky thing with Charlotte. Not a one.

“Please. You want to fuck every pretty female you see.”

icks me “Fuck off.” I scowl at my reflection in the mirror. “I’m not attracted to her.”

has the “Not at all?” I glance over at Winston to see him shaking his head. “You’ll need to be eventually.”

“Why?”

ulous.” “She’s your wife. And the two of you will eventually have to deal with Caroline a grandmother,” Winston reminds me.

Benny chooses this moment to speak.

Winston “How is your mother? She’s doing well, no?”

“Yes,” Winston bites out. “She is.”

atters to I’m quiet while Benny finishes taking my measurements, my mind filled with images of a...

ith-pins Naked Charlotte?

An eager-to-touch-me-and-kiss-me Charlotte?

loyance Yeah. I don't see it. She's hot, I can't deny it. Those legs. The tits s
k it up.hiding. All that long blonde hair I want to wrap around my fist and
firm tug.

She'd probably slap my face if I tried that.

"Look, you're going to have to put on the performance of yo
r wife."tomorrow night. Mother expressed concern over the engagement po
ng yourSaid your fiancée looked, and I quote, 'wooden.'" He pauses. "An
on yourright. Your bride-to-be looked scared to death in some of those photc
enevershe'd burn if you touched her."

him to "What do you expect?" I ask incredulously. "We don't even kno
other. Plus, she gets all weird when I put my hands on her. I think :
secrets."

I remember what she almost told me yesterday. About the one g
the torrid affair. I want more details.

Yet I also don't want to know either.

. And I Benny looks from me to Winston, and back to me again, yet he
y oldersay a word.

"You need to get to know her. Get her comfortable with you.
Winstonwedding, I want her gazing at you like she can't wait to wrap her lips
your dick again."

Benny makes a harumphing sound.

"You're going to sign an NDA." Winston points at Benny, who
icted toeyed with shock. "Not a word of what we've said can leave this place."

"You have my utmost confidence," Benny says solemnly. "I v
s head.reveal a thing."

"Right. You're still signing one." Winston's gaze finds mine.
expect to see the two of you acting lovey-dovey or whatever the fuck
o makeparty tomorrow night. I want to see you all over her. You understand n

Why the hell does it matter so much to him? Who are we putti
performance on for? No way am I asking Winston now, in front o
innocent Benny.

I stand up straighter, clicking my heels together and offering him
l full ofsalute. "Yes, sir."

Winston gives me the finger.

I give him the finger back.

Fuck.

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Fuck.



CHAPTER TEN

Charlotte

“MISS CHARLOTTE.”

I turn to find Jasper in the open doorway of my bedroom, a concerned expression on his face. From downstairs I can hear the distinct sound of a party already in full swing. The dull roar of multiple conversations hangs in the air all at once. Tinkling piano music. Glasses clinking. The booming voice of my father as he greets his guests. It’s a typical elegant Lancaster affair, and every Constantine known to man is in attendance, including of course my groom-to-be, I’m not down there yet.

I’m too nervous to face everyone.

“Yes, Jasper?” I put on a bright face. As if nothing is bothering me.

As if I’m not hiding out in my room, hoping people forget I’m not supposed to be there.

“Your mother requests that you come downstairs immediately,” my mother announces.

I take a deep, fortifying breath. “Has my father noticed I’m not down there yet?”

“I don’t believe so, but as your mother put it, your time is running out,” he says, his brows knitting together. “I suppose you can make a grand entrance.”

“That was my plan all along,” I lie.

We share a look. He knows I’m full of crap.

“You look quite beautiful in that dress.” He tips his head toward me.

I glance down at myself. The dress is white, with lace sleeves and a V neckline that shows plenty of skin yet somehow not too much. The

short—of course it is—and constructed of tiers of lace. Very feminine unlike me.

But everything that's happening to me is unusual, so it goes along with my new theme.

"Thank you." I smooth my hands down the skirt, feeling itchy. "Go?"

"I think you shall. Do you have your ring on? Your mother wanted to check."

I hold out my hand, the newly sized ring on my finger where it belongs. The weight of the stone is heavy, a constant reminder that Perry Constantine will eventually own me. I'm just shuttled from one man to another, with no choice in the matter.

noticed It's maddening.

But anything is better than living with my father, so I'll go along with the opening and quietly count on Perry to get me out of this house once and for all.

Realizing I can't stall the moment any longer, I follow Jasper out of my bedroom, making my way down the hall until I stop at the top of the staircase, the There are so many people mingling in my parents' townhouse. I see many dark-blond heads of my brothers and a few of my cousins. I see unrecognizable blond heads as well, which I can only assume are Constantines.

And then I see him. My very own Constantine.

Perry.

He's clad as usual in a white dress shirt and black trousers, but tonight he has on a black jacket and tie to finish the look. His hair is tamed. That's his one act of defiance. That hint of an edge as Jasper calls it. Sign out," son rebellion.

I find it intriguing.

Lifting my chin, I paste on a smile and slowly make my way down the stairs, keeping my spine rigid, praying I don't fall. The stilettos I have are impossibly tall and thin, and I clutch the railing for support so I don't tumble the rest of the way down.

Once people begin to notice me, their conversations slowly go silent. The sound of laughter dies. Even the woman behind the piano pauses playing, allowing me my grand entrance, just as Jasper said.

ine and Perry notices my descent, his gaze tracking my every mo-
handsome face dreadfully serious. He pushes his way through the
ing withstopping at the foot of the stairs to wait, his gaze never straying from m-
eyes seem to eat me up from head to toe, lingering on particular place
'Shall I as my chest. My hips.

My legs.

d me to Of course.

When his appreciative gaze finally meets mine, I feel as if I've b-
relongs.on fire. My entire body flushes with heat, from the root of my hair to m-
stantinepink-painted toenails. My breath stalled in my lungs, I pause on the
with nostep, at equal height with him. His full lips curve into the faintest sm-
blue gaze intense.

"You're late," he says, his voice stern.

with it Sexy.

I can't help but roll my eyes. Something about this man emboldens
t of myhad to make my entrance."

airway. "I was concerned. Thought you might bail out."

pot the I frown, noting the worry lines around his eyes. Maybe he did
e manywould actually not show up and humiliate him.

ne are Maybe he's worried that everyone in his family is depending on hi-
through with this. Perhaps we even share the same concerns.

My smile is docile, the obedient-daughter one I pull out for
occasions. Maybe I should rename this smile the obedient wife. "Well
is time,am."

ere are "You look beautiful." He dips his head, his mouth pressing agai-
nder ifcheek in a chaste kiss. My face warms from where his lips touched, m-
second-body trembling when he shifts that dangerous mouth to my ear and w-

"We're going to have to put on a real show tonight. Are you prepared?"

I'm about to give my answer when he touches me, resting his han-
own thecenter of my back, his warm fingers brushing against my bare skin. I
e on area breath, pressing my lips together to hold it.

trip and "Well?" he asks, his mouth still at my ear. He's so close, my head
his scent wrapping all around us, intoxicating me like a drug.

nt. The It should be outlawed to smell as delicious as Perry Constantine do

in her "Yes," I breathe, able to draw air into my lungs once more w-
finally pulls away, his gaze finding mine. His lips are curved, but his

ve, his still intense.

crowd, Dark.

me. His “Good.” He pulls me closer, angling me so we’re facing the room
as, such side. A united front. “My future wife, everyone.”

There is actual applause and cheering. Someone whistles so loud I
yet still keeping that smile on my face. I can feel Perry’s gaze on my I
I turn to him. I can tell what he wants and my heart thumps wildly
been set chest, threatening to break free.

ny pale He leans in, whispering, “Get that terrified look off your face.”

bottom Somehow my face cooperates. Or at least, it feels like it does. I v
mile, his features to relax, my lips parting when he settles his mouth on mine.

The connection feels far too brief, yet I know his lips linger.
Making it look real between us.

It certainly feels real.

s me. “I His tongue lightly touches mine, a teasing brush before he pull
almost as quickly as he dived in, yet I’m paralyzed. All I can do is blir
him, my lips tingling.

think I It’s all his fault.

The kiss. The slip of his tongue against mine.

m to go All of it.

“I’m going to have to do that again tonight,” he says, the botl
special focused on each other and not the partygoers who are still shoutir
l, here I congratulate.

I nod. “Yes.”

inst my “You’re going to have to pretend you like it,” he demands, his
y entiredrawing together. “As if you actually like me.”

hispers, “I’m supposed to be in love with you.” My voice is light, much l
” head.

d at the It’s spinning. Thank God he’s holding on to me.

suck in “Right.” He removes his arm from my waist and grabs my hand, t
me off that last step. “Let’s do this.”

swims, We make the rounds as a united couple. He never leaves my side
smile and murmur our thank-yous for the well-wishes from co
es. strangers. I barely recognize any of the people we’re talking to, figurin
hen he of them to be from the Constantine side, but from the way Perry t
gaze is them, I get the sense he doesn’t know who they are either.

A tall, imposing man with a scowl on his face and features that resemble Perry's approaches us, a beautiful woman on his arm. She looks beside by about my age, or even a few years older, and she gazes up at this looking man as if the sun rises and sets on his golden head.

"Wince, "This is my oldest brother," Perry says to me when they stop in the hallway. "Winston, this is Charlotte."

"I hate him on sight. This is the man who pushed for this arrangement to happen. "Charmed."

I somehow make the word sound more like asshole.

Winston bursts out laughing, as does the woman with him. "You're kidding me, right?" he tells Perry before turning his blue-eyed gaze on me. "Watch your mouth. The more vulgar you are, the more I might like you."

"Stop it, Win," the woman tells him with a laugh before turning her attention on me. Her expression is friendly, which makes me wary. "It's so nice to meet you."

I shake her hand. "Nice to meet you, too."

"Congratulations." Ash's smile is wide as she removes her arm from Winston's and goes to Perry, giving him a long hug. "I can't believe you're getting married."

Something dark sparks within me, making me sort of hate Ash on the spot. I don't like how familiar Perry is with her. Or how familiar she is with my fiancé.

Glancing down, I blink rapidly, my head spinning. Oh God, am I... Jealous?

No. Impossible. I don't care about this man. I barely know him.

"I'm going to introduce you to the rest of my family," Perry says once he's released his hold on Ash. She watches him fondly, and I take my jealousy down, telling myself they're just good friends. She's like a sister to him.

That's it.

"Good luck," Winston drawls as he grabs Ash's hand and leads her away. She glances over her shoulder, waving at us and I glare at her in return.

I forget all about my jealousy over Ash as Perry introduces me to the rest of the Constantines. His other brother, his sisters, a few cousins. They talk to me perfectly polite but I get the sense they know what's really going on.

And I'm sure they don't approve.

strongly There's a woman watching us, her hair dark as midnight, her
looks togolden brown. She's wearing a slinky deep-purple dress that accentua
angry-curves, and the moment we make eye contact, she approaches us, he
broad as she greets Perry, pulling him in for a long hug.

front of I watch, dumbfounded. Who is this woman? And why is she so f
with my future husband?

ment to "Congratulations on your engagement," she says as she pulls awa
Perry, turning her attention to me. "You finally nabbed him."

Huh? "Um, yeah. Thanks?"

e in for "Charlotte, this is Lindy. We used to—"

it. The "Date," Lindy finishes for him, flashing a brilliant smile. "For
moment in time. Until he unceremoniously dumped me and I neve
ing herfrom him again."

m Ash. Unease slithers down my spine, icy cold. Her words are achingl
Perry appears uncomfortable. I suppose I don't blame him. "It wa
bad as all that. You felt the same way."

n from "That's what you tell yourself." Lindy laughs, like it's no big dea
you'rePerry did to her. "But that was a long time ago, and I found someo
Someone who actually sticks around."

n sight, Her words fill me with rising alarm. Red flags everywhere, droppin
is withher lips.

. "Congratulations again." Lindy pulls me in for a hug, whispering,
luck."

Just before she turns and walks away, getting swallowed up by the

Her words stick with me as we make our way through our guests, t
s to meof us smiling and nodding so much my face is starting to hurt.

mp my Everything Lindy said about Perry reminds me of my own experi
sister toParis, making me uneasy.

What am I really getting myself into with Perry? Will he ditch me

Probably. I should prepare myself for it. I'm getting quite u
r away.rejection, which is the most pitiful thing ever.

. When it's finally Perry's turn to meet my family, I throw him str
a longthe wolves.

y're all AKA my brothers.

I find all three of them standing near one of the makeshift bars set
for the party, each of them clutching a drink in their hand, even Crew

eyes barely eighteen. They are a sight to see, three handsome Lancaster men in dark suits, all of them watching the mingling guests as if they're each smiling sitting on a throne, lazy and bored. The disdain in my oldest brother's eyes when he sees us approach tells me he knows what a farce this is.

So why are we going through with it again?

"Grant." I shift away from Perry's arm to offer my cheek for my brother to kiss, which he dutifully does before pulling me in for a brief hug. "I'm glad you're here."

"I wouldn't miss this for the world." His narrowed gaze finds Perry and he practically snarls. "You're actually marrying this dipshit?"

Perry's friendly expression disappears in an instant, replaced by a brief scowl. "What the fuck, bro?"

"Let's get some things straight." Finn takes a step toward Perry, getting closer to his face. From far away, it could almost appear friendly, but I can't deny the tension radiating between them. There's nothing remotely friendly about the conversation. "We're not your bros, and we never will be, despite the fact that you're marrying our sister."

I clear my throat. "Finn, back off. Perry, this is Grant. My eldest brother."

"That's Finn." I nod toward him and he bares his teeth at us in an attempt to smile. "And this is Crew."

Perry indicates all of them with a flick of his chin but otherwise says nothing. "Goodsay a word, not that I can blame him."

"You hurt her, you make her cry *once*, you answer to us." Grant's words drip with hostility. "You got that?"

Oh good Lord. These three barely acknowledge my existence and yet they're going all alpha male on Perry. The only one who I think I have some influence in means it is Crew, and that's only because we were so close growing up.

But my fiancé's expression is stoic as he says, "Not that it's any of your damn business what goes on between me and my fiancée, but I'd like to appreciate the concern."

Grant actually laughs, the sound rusty because he doesn't do it that often. "All Lancaster men lack a sense of humor. 'We have zero concern for you, asshole.'"

"Grant, seriously. Leave him alone," I snap.

"Hey." Crew steps toward us, his expression a little more open than Perry's, who's still glaring at Finn's, which is odd. "Aren't you that one dude who used to street

men in I'm startled. "What?"

h kings Perry's cheeks turn ruddy and he nods. "Yeah. Used to. Don't
Grant's anymore."

"Mad respect." Crew holds his hand out to him and they perform
those bro handshakes that looks completely made up. "An honor to
brother you."

"I'm so "Back at you." Perry flicks his chin at him. "What's your name again?"

"Crew. I'm a senior at Lancaster Prep. You're a legend with my
Perry and I've heard the stories about you racing through the streets of B
Landing. Didn't you win a couple of races here too in midtown? He
with whips around to glare at Finn, who just smacked him in the back of the
"Knock that shit off."

sting in "Quit slobbering all over that asshole's dick," Finn practically
feel the him, turning his fiery gaze on Perry.

out this "We'll talk later. When you're alone," Perry tells Crew before he
the fact me away from them.

Way too many things are running through my mind as we make our
brother through the crowd, and all of them have to do with my fiancé. "I
npt at about my brothers."

"They're—interesting," he says, shaking his head. "Overprotective
doesn't you?"

"They just hate the world and everyone in it," I admit.

s voice "Nice. Sounds like my family."

"Wait until you meet my father." I glance down at my arm, thankful
nd now lace sleeves of my dress hit at my elbow and hide the bruises he left
halfway nights ago. They're purple and yellow and absolutely hideous. I had
). dress I wanted to wear, but it was sleeveless and my bruises would've
of you on complete display.

sure. I "If he's anything like your brothers, I'm terrified. Though Crew
cool." Perry plucks two glasses of champagne off a passing waiter's
t much hands one to me. "Drink up."

or you, I take a sip. Then another, my gaze on Perry as he drains the glass,
it on a nearby table. "What was Crew talking about anyway?"

Perry rubs the back of his neck, distinctly uncomfortable. "What
n Grant referring to?"

race?" Oh, he knows. "You used to street race?"

He drops his arm to his side. "I did."

't do it "Wow." I don't quite know what to say. "Were you any good at it?"

one of "One of the best," he admits.

o meet "Did you love it?"

ain?" "There is nothing else like it in the world. The rush I get from my
myself..." His voice drifts and his expression is downright dreamy, as
friends. lost in his memories, all of them good.

ishop's "But you don't do it anymore."

y!" He He shakes his head, his gaze finding mine. "I quit."

ie head. "Why?"

"Got too risky. I almost wrecked. Nearly got arrested once. Now tl
spits at story." He grins and I want to hear it. Every single detail.

I part my lips, ready to ask but he keeps talking.

e steers "Eventually I had to get serious and grow up. Go to work every c
quit fucking around."

our way Hmm. Someone gave Perry a speech.

n sorry I bet it was his mother.

Speaking of...

tive of "I haven't seen your mother yet." I glance around the room, look
her elegant blonde head.

"She's here. Just making the rounds, like us." His gaze meets mine
seem to be holding up well."

ckful the "So do you." I sip from my glass yet again.

t a few "I should probably kiss you again. While we're having an i
another conversation. Just the two of us." He raises that single brow.

ve been Ugh. It's kind of sexy, that move.

"Fine. Just get it over with." I quickly glance around the room or
seemed time with a smile plastered on my face, but it feels forced, so I let
ray and When I return my attention to him, I see that he's watching me with a
expression on his face.

setting "Get it over with?" He sounds vaguely insulted. "Was it that mu
hardship, being kissed by me earlier?"

are you "It wasn't much of a kiss at all, if I'm being truthful."

"Really."

"Yes. Really."

Without warning he hauls me into his arms, until I'm pressed
against him you couldn't slip a piece of paper between us. His fingers
beneath my chin, tilting my head back so my lips are perfectly aligned
with his.

"Here's a kiss for you, then," he murmurs.

Just before his lips crash down on mine.

This kiss is nothing like the first one, which only consisted of
spark. A flash of heat before it was gone.

No, this kiss is all fire and tongue and hunger. His hand slips down
he's touching my ass and his fingers tighten around my chin, keeping
place as he devours my mouth with his. All I can do is cling helplessly
here's ahim, my hand finding his chest, his wildly beating heart beneath my palm.

He breaks the kiss, taking a step back, his chest rising and falling
was that?"

I can't find my words. All I can do is nod.

The look on his face is smug. "That's what I thought. Shall we
more of our guests? Thank them for coming?"

How he can act so smooth and unaffected after that kiss is mind boggling.
And irritating.

"Yes," I finally rasp, clearing my throat. I can still feel his hand
on my ass. His lips fused with mine. The way he slid his tongue into my mouth.

"Let's go." He grabs hold of the crook of my elbow, the very one
my father gripped a few days ago and a whimper falls from my lips. His
immediately spring away from my arm, his brows lowered in concern.
intimate "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I say too quickly.

He just stares at me, his gaze full of disbelief.

"I, um, hurt myself." I wave my other hand at my arm.

His expression is thunderous. "What happened?"

I don't want to tell him the truth. "It's nothing."

We stare at each other for a beat, and I see the dawning realization
in his eyes. He knows I'm lying.

"I think it's something." Without warning he reaches for my arm.
His fingers gentle as he pushes up the lace.

It all happens so fast.

I jerk my arm away, the lace falling back into place, but it's too late.

so tightmoment I see the darkness enter his gaze, his entire expression going
ers curlknow he's seen it.

ed with "Charlotte." His voice is extra deep. "Those bruises are *fingerprint*
I say nothing. Can only stare at him, my entire being trembling.

"Who did this to you?"

A shuddery breath leaves me. "I can't tell you."

a little "Why the fuck not?"

I swallow hard. "It's none of your business."

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“Who did this to you?”

A shuddery breath leaves me. “I can't tell you.”

“Why the fuck not?”

I swallow hard. “It's none of your business.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Perry

WHAT THE FUCK did she just say? It's none of my business?

If we're really going through with this, I'm about to become her husband. Everything she does, everything that happens to her, is going to be my business. I have every right to know who did this to her.

"Was it one of your asshole brothers? Grant? Or maybe it was one of those arrogant dicks—specifically the middle one—were something else. But those dudes—and when Finn tried playing the tough-guy game with Jesus. Good thing I've been in training my whole life for moments like those. Winston would decimate them with just a look.

"No." She shakes her head, her gaze dropping from mine. She can't look me in the eyes right now. Is she ashamed? What the fuck happened to her? She shouldn't feel shame. Hell no. Some prick put his hands on her. She shouldn't feel shame. Hell no. Some prick put his hands on her, fucking *hurt* her. "I just—I can't tell you."

"Charlotte." Her startled gaze goes to mine and I see the fear swirl in her eyes, which makes me feel like a bigger asshole. Like one of her brothers. Swear to God if one of them hurt her...

What? What would I do? Why would I care?

I care because if this marriage actually happens, she'll eventually live with me and I'm a Constantine. We take care of what's ours.

And for some reason, she feels like mine. My responsibility. See the bruises on her arm caused something unfamiliar to rise within me. Something I've never really felt before in my life.

Protectiveness. Possessiveness.

"What?" She visibly swallows, her voice shaky.

“Tell me later, okay?” I keep my voice soft so as not to scare her.

Which is really fucked up, if you ask me.

She nods, her gaze dropping from mine, her cheeks tinged pink. I could, I’d pull her back into my arms—because fuck me, that kiss I shared was hot—but she might freak out.

And I think I’ve already freaked her out enough.

Even though I reluctantly accepted her answer, I’m still mad. Heat suffuses every inch of my body, leaving me tense and ready to pour a glance around the glittering room full of mostly strangers who are celebrating me.

Us.

Someone who’s most likely in the room did this to her. I can guarantee my husband. And when I find out who it is?

They need to watch the fuck out.

I may not be thrilled to go through a fake wedding with this woman, Finn. “damned if I’m going to let someone abuse my fiancée. She may be a bitch sometimes, but she’s *my* pain in the ass.

And no one can touch her.

Not a single soul.

“Just—give me a minute, okay?” she asks, her voice soft, her head bent. Downright submissive.

“Sure,” I tell her, wishing I could give her comfort.

Knowing I’m not the one who’s capable of it. Not right now.

She remains quiet and so do I, giving her the chance to gather her thoughts. I keep my gaze on her, unable to look away, drinking in her subtle beauty—the slope of her nose, the arch of her cheekbones, the slight jut of her chin—gives her a hint of fierceness. Another server walks by and she grabs a champagne glass from his tray, bringing it to her mouth, her pink gloss resting on the rim before she takes a sip.

I wipe the corner of my mouth, bringing my finger away to stare at

Pink sparkly gloss.

Remnants of her on my lips.

I’m going to have to kiss her again here eventually. We have to make it look real. That’s what Winston told me. Mother too. They got me alone one night and gave me a speech about how important it is that we look like an actual couple who are in love. Our relationship has to appear as

possible.

But for who?

1k. If I That's the million fucking dollar question.

we just Reaching out, I rest my hand on Charlotte's back, purposely keep touch light. I might be doing this for appearance's sake, but I also reassure her that I really do have her back.

Anger She takes a subtle step forward, my hand having no choice but to force as I press my lips together, irritated she won't let me comfort her.

here to She won't let me in.

"Let's get this over with," she finally mutters, setting her glass down to my empty one. I could've consumed three more in quick succession. I need to keep my wits about me.

If I get too drunk, I might end up doing or saying something stupid.
Can't risk it.

man, but We move about the room once more, heading deeper into the main townhouse where the Lancasters live. We come from wealth, but not like

They come from old money and it shows. From the fine art that hangs on their walls that looks like something straight out of a museum to the clean lines of the furniture that I know wasn't manufactured but hand made by a still renowned designer. Hell, the glasses they're serving all the liquor are straight out of some old English duke's estate and are probably hundreds of years old.

Not that I've ever consumed alcohol out of a fancy glass at an old duke's estate, but if I ever did, this is how I'd imagine the glasses to look like.

ity. The I spot my mother nearby, in deep conversation with a man about twice her age or even older who looks vaguely familiar.

a fresh "There's my mother," I tell Charlotte, and when she glances in my direction, her entire body goes stiff. "Who's she with?"

"My father," Charlotte says, her voice faint.

it. No wonder he looks familiar. His dickhead sons resemble him.

I shouldn't call Crew a dickhead. He seemed all right. Can't believe I didn't recognize me. I haven't raced in over a year, not after I almost wrecked my car that scared the shit out of myself one Saturday night. I'd been high as fuck and I was last thinking I was untouchable.

like an Until that moment.

real as Haven't raced since. That's when I garaged the Chevelle. Yes, I still

a sportscar and like to go fast as I drive through the city, but I don't death wish like I used to.

Not anymore.

ing my We walk over to where my mother and her father are standing, and want to don't even notice our approach until we're practically upon them, they so involved in their conversation. Mother catches sight of us first, fall and smile playing upon her lips when she sees us.

"Reggie, our children are here," she says, her gaze going to Charlotte. "Don't you look lovely tonight, Charlotte?"

vn next "Thank you." Charlotte smiles, a little yelp leaving her when my n, but I pulls my fiancée into her arms and gives her a tight hug. "You look nice.

My mother always looks nice. She's an impeccable dresser with a sense of style and all the money to pay for her designer clothes. I'd think I inherited my own sense of style from her.

opulent I'm always on top of the trends.

ke this. "Oh, you're too gracious, darling. You're the star of the show tonight. That dress. You look like a sweet little cream puff." Mother glances at Reginald, who's watching us, Charlotte in particular. "Have you made by a son?"

in look This is fucking crazy, that I haven't even met this man yet, and I'm ready to marry his only daughter. "A pleasure to meet you, sir," I say, offering my hand.

English Reginald Lancaster shakes it, his icy blue gaze cold. Assessing. "Nice to meet you, Perry. Sorry I couldn't attend the family dinner. I was out of the country."

"Always gallivanting about, aren't you, Reggie?" Mother laughs, in her from her champagne glass.

"It was for business," he says through gritted teeth, reaching for Charlotte. "You look beautiful tonight, Charlotte."

She lets go of my hand and allows her father to hug her, but I give her a quick kiss on the cheek in return. "Thank you."

ked and Guess she's not a daddy's girl.

ick and A couple I don't recognize start talking to my mother, distracting me. I watch Charlotte with her father, noting the way Reginald doesn't fully go. He keeps my fiancée by his side, his arm around her waist as he joins in his own conversation with my mother. That arm around Charlotte's waist feels like a claim.

have a he's trying to send a message to me—his touch is like a claim. Remind
that she still belongs to him. I also can't help but notice the way his
bite into her waist, he's holding her so tightly.

nd they My gaze goes to Charlotte, noting the misery there.

're still Unease slithers down my spine.

a small “Char,” I murmur and she glances up, seemingly startled by n
nickname for her. “My aunt Blanche is right over there, and I know
Charlotte, dying to meet you.”

I gesture to the other side of the room.

mother The smile of relief on her face is instantaneous. “I would love t
e too.” your aunt. Excuse us, will you?” she murmurs to her father.

a great He barely releases Charlotte and she has to practically wrench her
like toof his grip. My mother is oblivious. The territorial expression on her
face speaks volumes.

Reginald Lancaster views his daughter as a product. An asset.

tonight. I slip my arm around her waist to lay claim on my future wife ar
over ather away from our parents, my touch far gentler than his. My steps ar
net mynot giving Charlotte a chance to slow down until we're tucked away i
alcove not far from the kitchen.

n about “What is wrong with you?” she asks as she pulls out of my grip ar
to him, to face me. “And where's your aunt Blanche?”

“I don't have an aunt Blanche.” I try to take her hand to pull her in
Finally, but she yanks her hand away from mine. Instead, I slip my hands i
t of the pockets, irritation with this ridiculous woman making my blood run hc
me what the hell is going on.”

sipping Charlotte frowns. “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

Pretty sure she's playing my ass. “With your father, Charlotte. I
ing forlike how he touched you just now.”

About a thousand emotions flicker in her gaze before she schools
barely utter calmness. An expert poker player she would never make. “It's n
you think.”

When someone makes a remark like that, it is absolutely one h
g her. I percent what you think. My tone drops about ten octaves when I ask
let her the one who gave you those bruises?”

oins the She starts to shake her head. “Absolutely no—”

ls as if “Tell me the truth,” I interrupt, my voice sharp.

ling me We stare at each other in silence, neither of us wanting to give
fingers don't know exactly what clue indicated to me that her father might be
toward her. Maybe I'm running on pure instinct. I remember how she
after our first family dinner how being married to me might not be too

She's in search of an escape—and using me for it. Being in a str
ny newhouse would be far better than in her own?

w she's Maybe it would.

"It's truly nothing," she says, lifting her chin. Daring me to co
her.

to meet I'm quiet, my mind going one hundred miles a minute, trying to c
with a solution for her problem. She can deny it all she wants but
self outbelieve her.

father's She's lying.

She wants protection? I'll give it to her. I know it's none of my bu
I should be scheming how to get out of this entire situation, not s
nd steermyself in deeper. But...

e brisk, I feel sorry for her. No man should hurt a woman. Physic
n a tinyemotionally. I feel responsible for her in a sense.

Damn it, she's growing on me.

nd turns "Tomorrow, you're moving in with me," I demand.

"What?" Charlotte gapes at me, her pink lips falling open. "I ca
closer, with you. We're not even married yet."

nto my "What does it matter?"

it. "Tell Her expression turns haughty. "I can't risk another scandal."

Another one?

What the hell is she talking about? Her secret passionate affair v
I didn't nameless dude? Give me a break.

"No one has to know. We'll keep it quiet." I shrug.

s it into "People might find out."

ot what "Like who?"

She remains quiet. Meaning, she doesn't have an answer.

undred "I want you with me." My voice is low. I want her to know how s
, "Is heam. "At all times."

"Why?"

"Because." Fuck, that sounds lame, but what do I tell her? The trut
That I think her father is abusing her, so I want her out of that

first. I Merely suspecting he hurt her fills me with a murderous rage I've abusive experienced before. I might fucking kill him once I find out the truth.

told me Yeah. She's not living with that monster anymore if I can help bad. wonder she freaks out when I touch her and doesn't trust me.

anger's Her glare intensifies. "I've spent my entire life living with one con man who's dictated my every move since I was born, only to find about to marry a man who's determined to treat me the same exact way ntradict That's a fucking insult if I ever heard one. "I don't want to cont —"

ome up "Bullshit." It's her turn to interrupt me, and by the fury I see bla I don't her eyes, I must've chosen a touchy subject. "God, I'm so sick and men always telling me what to do."

I stand up straighter, wondering why the hell I'm having to def business. decision when I'm only trying to give her a chance to escape what is c shoving toxic situation. "I'm doing it for your own protection."

She shakes her head, her upper lip curled in seeming disgust. ally or Like I can't make a decision for myself. I'm the helpless little gi always need a big strong man to take care of me."

"Considering I'm pretty sure your father gave you those bruises. toward her arm. "I'm guessing he doesn't do too good of a job taking n't live you."

She goes quiet, so much pain in her eyes I feel bad for saying it. T may be a piece of shit, but he's still her father.

"You shouldn't insult him." Her defense of him is weak, and she it.

with the "Charlotte, he hurt you. You have the bruises to prove it." Damn needs to see reason.

I need to get her away from him.

"You'll make sure no one will find out we're living together?" sh her voice small.

"I will do my best," I say firmly.

erious I I'm getting her out of that house. Even if we have to live in my ap until we're married, I don't care. I can deal with her in such close quar

"Okay." She nods once, her teeth sinking into her lower lip.

h? And then she does the oddest thing.

house. Charlotte lunges for me, wrapping me up in a tight hug. Her scent

neversenses, filling my head and I automatically slip my arms around her holding her close. Noting how we're a perfect fit.

it. No How good she feels.

How delicious she smells.

trolling "Thank you," she whispers against my chest.

myself I touch her hair, trying to fight the surge of protectiveness for this y." that fills me, but it's no use.

rol you Guess I'm a sucker for a damsel in distress.

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senses, filling my head and I automatically slip my arms around her waist, holding her close. Noting how we're a perfect fit.

How good she feels.

How delicious she smells.

“Thank you,” she whispers against my chest.

I touch her hair, trying to fight the surge of protectiveness for this woman that fills me, but it's no use.

Guess I'm a sucker for a damsel in distress.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Charlotte

MY FUTURE HUSBAND went through with his threat. First thing in the morning Mother stops by my room to inform me I'll be moving out the end of the day.

The end. Of. The.

Day.

"I can't pack all of my things in that short amount of time," I think, glancing around my cluttered room, trying to stuff down the panic that is within me.

"Just pack the necessary items for now and you can get the rest later," Mother suggests. "Besides, we've already made the arrangements. Your husband will be moving into the apartment Grant used to keep. The one with the lovely terrace."

She focuses on the oddest things, I swear to God. Who cares about the terrace? You'd think she'd be upset her only daughter is about to marry earlier than expected with a man.

A man who'll eventually be my husband, but still.

Doesn't she care that I'm leaving? Isn't she worried about me? It doesn't matter to her anymore? Am I only a nuisance?

I decide to put her to the test.

"Great." I leap to my feet and start pacing the room as I'm worried when Mother drops a bomb on me, which is often. "I don't want to marry."

"You don't really have a choice," she murmurs. "He will be your husband in a matter of weeks. He wants you living with him. He called you the first thing this morning and made it happen."

“He only wants me living with him so he can control me,” I say though I don’t know if that’s true. From what I’ve seen, Perry doesn’t seem like the controlling type.

Well.

He was sort of controlling at the engagement party. Very demanding. But that was out of anger. He wants to protect me, not control me.

At least, that’s what I think.

Hope.

Mother shrugs. Doesn’t offer a reply.

Meaning she believes he wants to control me too—and doesn’t seem to be trying to stop me from leaving.

Monday Proving my point.

by the way A frustrated growl leaves me as I stomp around my room. I spot her under my bed, watching me with her all-seeing golden eyes and I sweep sympathy on her feline face.

I turn to face my mother. “What about my cat?”

tell her, “What about him?”

what rises “Her,” I stress.

er,” she says. “You can leave her here. She’ll be fine. Jasper will be fine. Or one of the maids.”

id your “I don’t want to leave her here. I want to take her with me.” My place is stubborn and sulky, but I don’t care. Besides, no one would take care of a cat. They’d totally neglect her. She’d probably run away and eventually end up on the mean streets of New York City. “Doja’s mine.”

ove out “You’re being ridiculous, Charlotte.” She moves to sit on the edge of the bed, watching me as I pace about. “What you really need to do is learn to work a man, my dear. Be agreeable. Downright submissive even when they’re content, they won’t feel the need to watch your every move.”

Or do I Spoken like a woman with experience. I stop my pacing, curling my fingers in front of me. “Is that what you do with my father? Act the submissive most of the time and let him feel like he’s the man?”

ive.” “I wouldn’t quite put it like that, but something close.” She plops down on an empty spot beside her. “Come sit with me, darling. You’re giving me a headache.”

I drop my arms at my side and resume my pacing. “You act like it’s not this is a big deal, when it’s huge. Do you not care that I’m moving?”

pit out, forever? Won't you miss me?"

't seem That's what I long to hear. For my mother to hug me and tell loves me. That she'll miss me when I go, and life won't be the same here without me.

ing too. "Of course I'll miss you," she says automatically, sounding like a "But it's what's expected. You're getting married, darling. Aren't you thrilled?"

I'm scared and nervous and I need her comfort right now, but all I focus on is how happy I should be.

bother It's obvious I'm not happy at all, but she's either oblivious or she wants to know what's really bothering me.

More likely the latter part.

ot Doja "Perry is a fine young man. He already seems besotted with you, but I see smiles and I look away from her, rolling my eyes as I keep pacing.

We're faking it, and she knows it. Why does she act like this is a deal between Perry and me?

"From all the society pages showcasing your engagement party, you look like you're helplessly in love," she continues.

ill feed I come to a stop once more, glaring at her. "What are you talking about? You haven't googled yourself? You should."

tone is Dread settles into my stomach like the heaviest stone. "There are a lot of people from the party? How?"

lly live I don't recall seeing a photographer there.

"Someone leaked them. One of the guests I assume. There were a few characters in attendance I had no idea who they were." She turns her finger against her lips, momentarily lost in thought. "They're quite flattering. You look lovely. And we were able to move up the engagement announcement to this weekend, thanks to the leak. The society editor is very upset that it happened. She wanted an exclusive, but unfortunately weren't able to give it to her. I've already promised she'd be the first to write about the birth announcement."

ats the My jaw drops open. "Birth announcement? Mother, I'm not having a baby with that man."

none of with him." "Charlotte, please. He'll be your husband. Of course, you're having a baby with him."

ing out "No." I shake my head. "This is a fake marriage, remember?"

“Yes, I remember.” Her voice is droll. “You’ll get to know him. You will settle into a—comfortable existence.”

That sounds like pure misery.

“I’m not attracted to him.”

That’s a lie. He’s attractive. Every time he touched me, kissed me, I loosened up. I even enjoyed it.

The man can kiss. And he has a way of looking at me, talking to me that no one matters. His attention is always one hundred percent for me.

And no one else.

“Darling, he’s a virile, handsome young man with broad shoulders and a pleasant smile. You’ll end up attracted to him. Just let him take the lead. He’ll know what to do.”

Oh my God, she sounds just like Perry when he thought I was a robot, and he told me he’d be gentle.

Please. Maybe I don’t want gentle.

“Maybe he’s not attracted to me. Maybe he’ll never take the lead and you two die lonely and heartbroken.” Okay, I’m being a complete drama queen. What if?

What if Perry is just a really great actor and he doesn’t care about me? The moment we’re married he’ll take off and live his own life, leaving me alone? What then?

What will happen to me?

The unknown. It’s terrifying to contemplate.

“He’s attracted to you. I see it in his eyes, the way he looks at you.” Mother says.

I refuse to get my hopes up, though what she just said does light a fire deep inside of me.

“He’s been with a lot of other women,” I say, dropping my head slightly and gazing at the floor. “I’m nothing special. He’ll want to find someone else who he usually does.”

“Perhaps he behaved that way a few years ago, but now he’s in a respectable position at Halcyon and is hardly seen on the gossip pages anymore. He’s grown up. We all go through a—difficult stage, especially when we’re young.” Her gaze is pointed when she levels it at me.

“Remember yours?”

We always have to circle back to the moment when I had an affair

you two woman in Paris. “That was a long time ago.”

She didn’t even pick up on my “nothing special” remark. Not that I was looking for pity or sympathy...

More like I want my mother to talk me up. Remind me that I’m a strong woman, a woman who can handle any situation. That she’ll miss me and she loves me and she always has my back.

me, as if “A year.”

Instead, she reminds me of my faults and makes me feel like shit.

I let out a growl, making Doja meow in warning from her spot on the bed. “I’m not happy about any of this.”

she lead. “I know.”

“I’m taking Doja with me.”

a virgin “That’s fine. I’m sure your fiancé won’t mind.”

“And I will eventually take every single item out of this room that belongs to me.” I tap my chest.

and I’ll “Of course.”

mean, but “And I want—I want Jasper to come with me, too.”

Mother’s lips form a perfect circle and she rests her hand against my chest. “You want to take Jasper? He’s not a pet you can take with you. He’s a stupid cat. He’s an actual human being.”

Like she notices—or cares. “He’s very dear to me.”

“He should be. He’s been with our family for years.”

“Jasper will take care of me. Watch over me as I adjust to my new life with you,” I’m sure he could even instruct me on how to be a proper wife to Peri and what my duties will be around the house.” Oh, I’m really talking about a spark game when I don’t even mean a word of it.

“Please, darling. Whatever Jasper can do for you, another servant can do for me. She contemplates me, slowly shaking her head. “We don’t have to do anything else like as wives beyond provide beautiful, well-behaved children and look good next to our husband’s arm when we’re at parties.”

holds a If my mother could only hear herself. She’s setting back the family’s movement about fifty years, and I don’t even think she cares.

especially Well, I do.

on me. “When you describe it like that, don’t you feel like you have no purpose in life? Don’t you want to do more?”

it with a “More beyond shopping whenever I want, redecorating or remodeling

one of the houses and going to lunch with all of my friends? I think that I'm doing plenty." The look on her face is downright arrogant. "I've done my duty to your father and the Lancaster legacy. I've been a loyal wife."

Notice how she doesn't use the word faithful. I guess there's a difference between strong and weak. "I've raised four beautiful children and I've survived a scandal. She schools her expression, giving off serious royal family vibes. Stiff lips and all that. "What I want to do with my life now is my business, not anybody else's."

"Chill out, Mother. I'm not judging you. I just—I don't want what you have. I want a loving marriage and a man who cares about me and looks good on his arm. I want a happy family and children who love me and a husband who's eager to see me at the end of his workday." I plop my lips together, hating that I just admitted all of that. I told Perry it would be all so bad, escaping this house, and I meant it. Getting away from my parents, specifically my father—is what I want more than anything.

But right now, with reality hitting me square in the face, I'm... Scared.

"At this particular moment, I don't think you have a choice." She looks at me like I'm about to cry, wrinkling her nose. "You should pack your things, and you don't have much time."

She exits my room just as Jasper appears with a giant suitcase. He walks into my room, his expression, his entire mood somber as he watches my new life. "Where do you want this, miss?"

"On my bed, please." I plop down on the edge of the mattress, next to a good portion of my beloved Jasper as he brings the suitcase to my bed and carefully places it in the middle. "I don't want to leave."

"No one wants you to leave, but we understand you have a lot to do. It's not much fulfillment." He backs away from my bed, hovering by the doorway as if he's about to jump on to make his escape. "Do you need anything else?"

"I need you to come with me," I blurt.

Jasper frowns. "Come with you where?"

"To the apartment where I'll be living with my new husband." I look at his face, hating how that sounds. "If I have to leave, I at least want you with me."

His brows shoot up. "I don't know how your parents will feel about it." "My father won't care. My mother might put up a fight but she'll let me do what I want." I stare at him for a beat, wishing I could get away from her.

that's feelings. He's got that neutral, I-don't-feel-or-think-anything
one my completely down. To the point it's admirable. "I need you there, Ja
would be so reassuring to see a familiar face day in and day out,
erence. adjust to my new life."

or two." Doja Cat chooses that moment to slip out from underneath the b
if uperrub her body against Jasper's ankles. He bends down, his knees cracki
ess and scratches under Doja's chin. I can hear her purring from where I sit.

"Are you bringing Doja with you?" Jasper asks once he rises to
hat you height.

beyond "Of course." I make a ticking noise and Doja runs toward me,
ove me onto the bed and walking right onto my lap. "Hopefully the new h
ress my isn't allergic to cats."

ldn't be "Might I say I don't think you care if he is or not?" Jasper lifts his
rents—in question.

"You're right." I scratch the top of Doja's head, smiling to my
don't."

glances
darling.

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th me."
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uge his

feelings. He's got that neutral, I-don't-feel-or-think-anything mode completely down. To the point it's admirable. "I need you there, Jasper. It would be so reassuring to see a familiar face day in and day out, while I adjust to my new life."

Doja Cat chooses that moment to slip out from underneath the bed and rub her body against Jasper's ankles. He bends down, his knees cracking, and scratches under Doja's chin. I can hear her purring from where I sit.

"Are you bringing Doja with you?" Jasper asks once he rises to his full height.

"Of course." I make a ticking noise and Doja runs toward me, leaping onto the bed and walking right onto my lap. "Hopefully the new husband isn't allergic to cats."

"Might I say I don't think you care if he is or not?" Jasper lifts his brows in question.

"You're right." I scratch the top of Doja's head, smiling to myself. "I don't."



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Perry

“**Y**OU’RE MOVING INTO one of the Lancaster properties?” Mom’s shriek is pitched so high it nearly pierces my skull. “Who allowed this to happen?”

“Me. I allowed it to happen.” I jab a thumb at my chest as I move out of my bedroom at the Constantine compound, tossing clothes into my suitcase. There’s not much I want to take from my childhood bedroom beyond my personal belongings. Most of my stuff I use and wear on the daily in the apartment I stay in during the week.

“I thought you and Charlotte would move here first.” She sneers, her expression neutral, but I can see the flicker of emotion in her gaze.

She’s upset. She doesn’t like me making a single move without her approval first.

I love my mother, and I know I’m the favored child, but fuck that. I don’t want to live under her thumb forever, and deep down, she knows it, too.

And what’s my future wife supposed to think if we moved in with my mother in the Constantine compound? Yes, it’s large, and we’d have our own quarters, but knowing Charlotte, she’d be upset. It’s bad enough she wants us to move in with me—but us living together before we’re married with my mother acting as chaperone?

Charlotte might freak the fuck out.

Besides, we’re living in a modern world—despite the fact that this is an arranged marriage—and I don’t see any issue of us shacking up together before we make it legal.

Not like I’m going to touch her, or fuck her brains out.

I think of the kisses we shared at the engagement party. The

electricity I felt when our lips first connected. The little breathy sound she made. The taste of her mouth. Her tongue.

Yeah.

Maybe.

She acts like she hates me, but I don't think she does. Not anymore. The first time she'd stiffen up every time I so much as looked at her, but not now. Why.

Her father is an asshole. He abuses her for Christ's sake. Of course she's going to freak every time a strange dude—me—tries to touch her.

But at our engagement party, she melted under my touch every time I put my hands on her, and she responded to my kisses too. Charlotte wasn't the same girl. Her voice it.

pen?" I think she liked it. I think she likes me.

She's been all about me about the house. For some weird reason, I want to earn her trust. That girl has been under her father's controlling ways for far too long, and she deserves to get out of that suitcase.

She deserves to be free.

s at the "I want to stay in the city, so I'm closer to work," I finally said, turning to face my mother. The sadness that is now clinging to her face is palpable, and I wonder if she's putting it on. A big show for me to face and give in.

out her I'm not giving in. Not on this point.

Winston and I jumped on a call yesterday with Reginald Landon. I can't tell myself. We told him in no uncertain terms that we wanted Charlotte to move out of the house. He agreed. Didn't even hesitate. Like he didn't care what happened to his daughter ended up, as long as she wasn't his problem anymore.

our own What a prick.

he has to He even offered up one of their empty penthouses on the Upper East Side, which Winston agreed to without consulting with me first.

Not that I minded. Sounds like this giant penthouse is going to be a lot better than where I've been staying when I'm in the city. Charlotte and I need all the space we can get.

together "I just hate the thought of never seeing you here anymore. You'll be too busy to come out and visit." Mother stands a little taller, lifting her chin. "We'll need to start looking for a house here for you two."

jolt of "Right now? We've got a lot going on with the wedding plans. I don't know." I open the top drawer of my dresser and spot a small baggie of

nds she must've left behind God knows when.

I immediately shut it. Don't need her seeing that.

"Oh, my darling, it thrills me so to hear you talk about your wedding," she says, lifting my head to find her gazing at me with tears in her eyes. "I can't believe you're getting married."

"This is ridiculous. The only reason I'm getting married is because my mother is basically forcing me to. And now she's feeling sentimental?"

"Yeah, me either," I mutter as I pull open the next drawer to find a drawer full of socks stuffed inside. How many socks does a man need? Apparently a lot.

I shove the drawer shut and go to my walk-in closet.

"Perry!" Mother snaps, making me pause at the closet entrance. "I can't hear a word I just said?"

"Well, yeah." I turn to face her. "I can't think about any of it. I can't think about anything else but moving out of here. Then I need to go to work. I can't show up late. Win isn't going to be happy with me."

She waves her hand, dismissing my worry. "He'll understand."

"About as well as she does, which is not very well at all."

"Right. Sure, he will. After dealing with his bad mood all day, I feel bad thanks to his obvious disgust with me for being late, I'll be putting on a good face everywhere since I'm pretty decent at schmoozing people on the phone. I'll be convincing them it's never as bad as they think it is. Then I have to go home to my new home—my new apartment, something I didn't even get to see before I moved out, so who knows if I'll even like it. And then I get to spend the rest of the evening with my fiancée. Who still treats me like the enemy." I blow a sharp breath at the end of my mini-speech, frustrated with my mother and my family.

My fiancée.

"I don't want you to move out. Can't you give it some reconsideration?" Her tone is pleading.

"No, the decision has already been made. I can't live with you anymore. I'm a grown-ass man who's about to get married."

She takes a step toward me, going into soothing-mother mode. "It's not fair, I know, Per Bear."

Holy shit, she hasn't called me that in years. I can't believe she's still using the big guns with the affectionate nickname from my childhood.

"Let's get through the wedding first, and then you and Charlotte can

with my real estate agent. Meanwhile, I'll have her gather up some properties that are newly listed, and I'll look them over for you. If I find the thing." I home before the ceremony, I might just make an offer. You know I would be believeable to resist."

My mother doesn't listen to a damn word I say. "No. I don't want to see she'schoosing my house, or buying one without me seeing it first. I don't want to live in Bishop's Landing. Like I just told you, I'd rather be in a bunchcity."

It's a lot. "But—"

The explosion comes out of nowhere.

Did you "Stop trying to control every single move I make!"

Well, the explosion came out of *me*.

I don't think I'm done with this.

It's done—and Done with my mother controlling me.

Done with living under her thumb.

Done with trying to make her happy all the damn time.

It's someone else's turn.

One damn day I need to take care of me.

It's out fires And my wife.

One and She doesn't say a word as I finish gathering my things, which I do home. doing blindly. I just grab a bunch of shirts and pants off the hangers to pickcloset and bring them to the suitcase, dumping them inside. Then I sit of mylid shut and do up the zipper, not even bothering to fold anything. I walk out turn to face her, I'm breathing heavily, my blood hot, my hands clenched. Work.fists.

"I'm leaving," I bite out.

Mother nods, remaining quiet.

What's the question?" I grab my suitcase and head for the door, appreciating that she steps to the side as I walk past her.

Forever.

✧ ✧ ✧

It's a lot,

pulling I MAKE IT to Halcyon headquarters a little over an hour late. The moment on the executive floor I head for Winston's office, ignoring his secretary she rises to her feet.

When I meet "Wait a minute, Mr. Constantine. Your brother is on the phone."

properties protests.

perfect “I can’t wait,” I tell her as I push open the door and barrel into his room not beslamming the door behind me.

The look on my big brother’s face would slay me dead if it could. I quickly covers the phone he’s holding to his face and mouths, “What the fuck don’t even want?”

In the Ignoring him, I settle myself into one of the chairs that faces him, pulling out my phone and checking my text messages. I have a few business associates. One from the reception caterer with a request for a deposit.

I forward that one to Mother without an accompanying text explaining myself. She’ll get it.

There’s another message from a phone number I don’t recognize. I scroll through the text thread, my head starting to pound when I see what the first text

Unknown number: Hear you’re marrying the Lancaster slut.

I frown, staring at the words, reading them over and over.
What the fuck?

end up *Me: Who the hell is this?*

is in my *Unknown number: Good luck with that one. She’s hard to control and a bit of a screamer. Nothing a fat dick in her mouth won’t fix.*

When I I see red. I’m so fucking mad my hands are shaking.

Without thought I hit the number and listen to it ring. It goes straight to voicemail, the automated voice telling me the person isn’t available.

Damn it.

at least “Who the fuck do you think you are, barging into my office like this unannounced?” Winston barks the moment he’s off the phone.

I glance up at him, ready to give as much ragey energy as he’s giving me currently, thanks to those shitty texts I just received.

ent I’m “I’m your fucking brother, that’s who. And I can barge into your office whenever the fuck I want. You do the same shit to me,” I bark back.

etary as Winston leans back in his chair, his brows up, the faintest smile on his face. I think he might be impressed. “What crawled up your ass?” she

morning?"

office, "Mother," I spit out. I don't bother bringing up the texts from
unknown number.

uld. He I need to look more into that.

do you Winston grimaces. "There's a visual I'd rather not imagine."

"I'm not being literal. Jesus." I lean back in my chair as well, m
is desk, his position. "I moved out this morning. That's why I was late. And s
w from nagging my ass the entire time, saying she's going to buy Charlotte a
for her place in Bishop's Landing."

"Mommy's buying you and the missus a home in the same neigh
laining so she can keep you nearby at all times?" He's trying to get under m
and it's working.

I open "Fuck that," I mutter, shaking my head.

t says. Damn, my mood is foul.

"Really? I figured you'd want to bring your bride back to B
Landing to live close to Mother," he says, sounding surprised.

"No way." I shake my head, tired of feeling frustrated all the dam
No one listens to me. No one lets me make one fucking move
managing it for me. I can't do shit by myself, and I'm over it. "I don
her managing my life anymore. I agreed to marry Charlotte Lancaster
family but that's the last sacrifice I'm going to make. I need to be n
mer.

And I mean every word of that. If this is what I have to do to fir
free of everyone in my life controlling me, then let's go.

aight to I'm starting to realize I have more in common with Charlotte
originally thought.

Winston contemplates me before he finally says, "I love this new
ke that you, Perry. Very forceful."

"I learned from a master." I tip my head toward him.

ring me He rests his hand lightly against his chest before dropping it. "A
giving me credit where it's due? I'm honored. Still doesn't give you th
r office to just enter my office like you own it. I was on an important call."

"With who?"

on his "Our sister. Tinsley was asking about you and Charlotte."

ss this "It wasn't an important call," I retort.

"Tinsley wanted the gossip." He shrugs. "It was important to her."

“What did you tell her? That I’m being forced? That I don’t
om theCharlotte at all? That I’m a fucking puppet who does whatever this
wants?” I leap to my feet and start pacing the length of Winston’s
Which says a lot, because his office is gigantic.

“I told her the truth, yes. But I didn’t call you a puppet.” He
irroringstraighter, smoothing his tie. “We appreciate what you’re doing, Perry
she wasif you feel like you’re being used.”

nd me a “I am being used. And I’m fucking sick and tired of it.” I run
through my hair and approach the floor-to-ceiling windows that overl
orhoodcity. “Why am I marrying Charlotte Lancaster anyway, huh? Tell
y skin,deserve to know the real reason, too. Don’t give me a bunch of bullshi

Winston is quiet.

Too quiet.

“Mother won’t tell me. I need you to be real with me, Winny.” I
ishop’s“Please.”

“The alliance with the Lancaster family is necessary to bols
in time.strength against the Morellis,” he says with a ragged sigh.

without So the same old song with a slightly different beat. Got it.

l’t want Why does it feel like my brother is holding something back, though
for the “Plus, Mother is thrilled that someone is finally doing what she
ny ownhe continues. “You’re her favorite child. Her favorite son.”

I turn to glare at him. “No, I think you hold that title, since you
ally bemost like her. I’m just the one who was always the easiest to manipula

My brother is quiet for a moment and I know I’ve hit the nail
than Imother fuckin’ head.

“You’re angry,” he finally says.

side to I don’t even hesitate with my answer. “Fuck yeah I am.”

He exhales loudly, leaning back in his chair once more. “I’d love
up this chat and bash our mother’s life choices, but I have a call in le
Are youfive.”

he right I glance at my watch and see it’s almost nine thirty. “Sorry I was la
“You’re forgiven.”

“Sorry I barged in to your office.” Pains me to apologize since
only gossiping with our baby sister.

“You’re forgiven for that as well. Look.” He steeples his fingers to
contemplating me. “We need a happy Perry in this office. The good-ti

to know who can convince anyone that everything is going to be all right. I for
family you some emails earlier. I need you to make a few calls, smooth a few
office feathers. And this afternoon, I need you to get with your team and do
some research.”

sits up “On what?”

y. Even “The Lancaster business holdings. Where each one is based out of
runs what, all of it. I want every filthy detail.”

a hand “What if none of it is filthy?” I don’t know much about the Lan
ook the but I haven’t heard anything about dirty dealings when it comes to them

l me. I “Oh there’s some filth somewhere, I guarantee it.” Winston barks
t.” teeth in a feral smile. “Tamp down that anger for now and put it to good
after lunch. I know you’ll find something.”

“Will do.” I start for his office door, hesitating before I pull it open
pause. Win.”

“Yeah?”

ter our “Thanks for listening to me. No one else really ever does.”

I leave his office before my brother can even answer.

is?

wants,”

is’re the

te.”

on the

to keep

less than

ite.”

he was

together,

me guy

who can convince anyone that everything is going to be all right. I forwarded you some emails earlier. I need you to make a few calls, smooth a few ruffled feathers. And this afternoon, I need you to get with your team and conduct some research.”

“On what?”

“The Lancaster business holdings. Where each one is based out of, who runs what, all of it. I want every filthy detail.”

“What if none of it is filthy?” I don’t know much about the Lancasters, but I haven’t heard anything about dirty dealings when it comes to them.

“Oh there’s some filth somewhere, I guarantee it.” Winston bares his teeth in a feral smile. “Tamp down that anger for now and put it to good use after lunch. I know you’ll find something.”

“Will do.” I start for his office door, hesitating before I pull it open. “Hey, Win.”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for listening to me. No one else really ever does.”

I leave his office before my brother can even answer.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Charlotte

“DOJA! WHERE IN the world are you?”

I’m wandering the rooms of my new penthouse, marveling at the view, at the enormous windows everywhere.

The moment Jasper and I arrived, I opened the door on the pet carrier. Doja shot out like a bullet, scurrying away. There is so much furniture to hide under, I don’t know if I’ll be able to find her.

“Shall I open a can of tuna for her?” Jasper asks me as I walk around the apartment, completely distressed.

“No, not yet. The little snot shouldn’t be rewarded for running away from me. I’ll tell him, thinking of myself.”

When I went to Paris, I thought of it as a reward, even though I was still in high school. I wanted to learn, to do something on my own, to be my own person, instead of that one Lancaster girl. For a short period of time, I did whatever I wanted and it was exhilarating. I met a man who was my art instructor, and knowing he was interested in me was thrilling. I was smart and dumb and completely infatuated. In love with life and everything that came with it. That first taste of freedom was delicious, and I went a little crazy with it.

Maybe that’s Doja’s problem. She’s gone wild when presented with too many options.

Hopefully she doesn’t pee on anything.

Sigh.

At least this is my family’s place, and not a Constantine apartment. It feels even weirder about spending time here, and I already feel weird about

Thankfully Perry isn't living with me at my parents' place, and we're living with his mother in Bishop's Landing.

I've never really spent much time there. Did a little research though and figured out that the Constantine family battles for so-called ownership of Bishop's Landing with the Morelli family.

Another family I've never even heard of.

Clearly, I do live under a rock.

Giving up on Doja, I take a peek inside of each room, wrinkling my nose at one of the bathrooms when I spot its hideous floral wallpaper—definitely not my taste, though it's the only thing I don't like in an otherwise beautiful spot. There are two bedrooms that are equal in size, each with an en-suite bathroom and I choose the one with the better view, though all of the apartments have a terrific view of the city spread out as far as the eye can see.

"Is this the bedroom you're choosing, miss?" Jasper asks, appearing in the doorway.

for her "Yes, it is." I smooth my hand over the luxurious comforter. "I think I will do."

about the "A fine choice, if I must say. Your brother has impeccable taste. I remember he was the one who had the entire apartment redesigned."

way," I "It is beautiful," I agree as I gaze about the room. Everything is clean and white, the furniture a rich brown wood, the bed a four poster but not too ornate. The black metal frame gives it a sleek line, offset by the sumptuous white downy comforter and thick faux fur throw blanket draped across the end of the bed. I did My feet sink into the thick rug beneath them and I stare at a piece of contemporary art hanging on the wall, the colors a cool mix of browns and the faintest touch of young of blue. "I barely remember him living here."

ng that "Grant was only here for a year before he moved," Jasper explains. I wonder how he remembers everything about the family. He's got a better memory than our own parents and we're supposed to be the most precious things in their lives. "And most of the time while he was here, the apartment was in the middle of renovation."

"He didn't even get to enjoy it when it was finished, huh?" My head drops to Jasper's feet just in time to spot Doja walking behind him in the hallway. "Doja! There you are!"

enough. Jasper turns and grabs hold of the cat before she can bolt from his grasp. He brings her to his chest and she lays her head on it momentarily. "Y

...re notmiss.”

“From the way she’s rubbing on you, I’d guess she’s become y
gh, andwell,” I say, amusement in my voice.

ship of The only amusement I’ve felt in a while. This entire day has
struggle. I’ve been an emotional wreck at being forced to move out
childhood home, but I tell myself this is for the best. Being away fr
family isn’t a bad thing.

ry nose It’s necessary, especially since I’m getting married.

efinitely “Would you like something to drink? A snack perhaps?” Jasper ask

autiful “I’m not hungry.” I shake my head. “Though I wouldn’t mind a
n suitetequila.”

rooms The disapproving look on his face is obvious. “Might I remind
you’re only twenty.”

ring in If I’d told my mother or father I wanted a shot of tequila, they w
have batted an eyelash. My mother probably would’ve poured one for
ink thisherself. “I drink alcohol sometimes, Jasper. And you know it.”

He’s the one who helped me find liquor the night I tried to confr
taste. Ifather.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, especially on an empty stomach.”

I blow out a harsh breath. “Fine, you’re right.”

“I’ll prepare you a snack. Something light.” He drops the cat o
s whitefloor and shuts the door before she can make her escape. I notice how
he bed.before I could tell him no.

He’s a tricky guy, that Jasper.

I start putting away my things, starting with my toiletries in the bat
which is stunning. White tile everywhere, with thick white towels h
s. I lovefrom the racks and a giant marble countertop. Mother must’ve
memoryhousekeepers over first thing because everything is sparkling clean.

The shower is massive, with floor-to-ceiling glass walls ar
s undershowerheads. As if I might share it with someone else.

My cheeks go hot at the thought because the first person I i
ly gazesharing the shower with is Perry. What does he look like naked? He’s
i in thebroad shouldered and lean. I’m sure he looks decent without a s
clothing on. Does he have six-pack abs? Hair on his chest? Thick
hands.What is the size of his co—

our cat, “Future wife!”

Speak of the devil.

I exit the bathroom, frowning at him. Perry is standing in the center of the bedroom, clad in a perfectly cut navy-blue suit with...

Doja in his arms.

That little traitor.

“Cute cat.” He chucks her under the chin and I don’t think I’ve ever heard her purr so loud. “Yours?”

“Yes,” I bite out, glaring at her. She sends me a look with those eyes, pleased with herself and her newfound friend.

“What’s her name?”

“Doja.”

“As in Doja Cat, that chick who sings? I like some of her songs, but they’re so funny on TikTok.” He keeps scratching my Doja. Even sweet-talk wouldn’t little. “You’re pretty, huh? And so soft.”

It should melt my heart to see him be so gentle with my cat, but it annoys me. “You’re on TikTok?”

It’s the only thing I can think to say.

“Sure. I don’t post anything, but I watch stuff.”

“Like what?” I can’t imagine him on TikTok. I see a lot of posts about witchcraft, romance books, and travel. Oh and food. And cats. Taylor Swift, the Doja Cat of course, and damn it, Perry is right.

She’s very funny when she posts.

“Music mostly. Oh and car stuff.” His expression turns sheepish as he drops Doja onto my bed. “I like cars.”

“Right. You even used to race them.”

“Only on the side. Nothing official.” He shrugs, like it’s no big deal. “I sent that up.”

“Uh-huh.” My smile is tight. It’s weird, having him here. The two of us together, alone in an apartment. “Well, welcome home.”

He glances around the room. “It’s pretty nice, huh?”

“Yes.” The sun is already starting to set and the sun bathes Perry’s tall and golden-pinkish light, which only emphasizes his exceptional bone structure. Those sharp cheekbones, the firm jawline and the aristocratic slope of his nose. His face is made up of sharp, almost exaggerated angles but it’s softened by that mouth.

His lips are full and downright sinful.

I'm not tempted to kiss them though. Not even close.

r of my *Liar.*
I shove that nasty little voice into the darkest corners of my brain.
"Did you snag the biggest bedroom first?"
"Would you be mad if I did?"

r heard "Not really. It's your family's apartment. I'm just the guest." He shrugs.
"I wouldn't call you a guest. Aren't we living here for a while?"

golden "Well...yeah. But I figured eventually we'd end up somewhere else."
"I overheard my mother say that they were gifting us the apartment as a
wedding present." I press my lips together, feeling silly even talking
about the wedding.

s. She's "Really?" He glances around the room, his gaze settling on
s her magnificent view of the city. "Pretty nice gift."
"I suppose." Personally?

it only I think we deserve everything they give us for what we're sacrificing
"the family."
"So we're really doing this, huh?" he asks, and I know exactly what he's
referring to.

s about Getting married.

r Swift. "I think so," I answer, not sure what I should say. "Is that what you
want?"
"Is that what *you* want?"

and he I'm quiet for a moment, wondering how I should explain myself.
I decide to tell him the truth.
"Anything is better than living with my father," I admit. "No matter what the
deal. "He'll do, he's never going to be happy with me. I'm a disappointment in his
eyes."

o of us "That's hella unfair," he murmurs and I can't help it.
I smile at his response.
"How's that going, by the way? The wedding planning, I mean. My mother's
face inshoves his hands in his pockets, watching me carefully.

structure. "My mother has taken over most of it," I admit, wondering if he'll
be of his that's weird. Really, it's just easier. She loves to plan a party, and since
s offset marrying a man I barely know, I don't have the enthusiasm or drive to
together my wedding.
"Your mother run your life?"

I bristle under his tone. “No, I just have no desire to plan something no say in in the first place. Does your mother run your life?”

It’s Perry’s turn to bristle—I said that on purpose. I knew I’d reaction. “Not anymore.”

Oh. I’m shocked by his brutal honesty. “What do you mean?”

“She didn’t want me moving into this apartment. She wanted you to into her house—with me.” He grimaces.

That sounds awful.

“I knew you wouldn’t want to move into the compound. It kind of to him there,” he admits. “It would probably remind you of home.”

I should be honest with him and thank him for getting me out of the house. Even though I panicked for a bit and worried how it might be with him, I’m slowly realizing anything is better than feeling like a pin in your own home, constantly reminded of your past mistakes.

“I, um, want to thank you.”

He studies me, those deep-blue eyes locking with mine. “For what?”

“For helping me get away from—him.” I don’t need to clarify who referring to.

His gaze softens and he takes a step toward me. “I’m glad I could get you out of there. Though you were pretty mad Saturday night when I told you I was you out of there.”

“You were so bossy.”

He rubs the back of his neck. “I don’t usually act like that. I thought Constantine in me came out.”

I hated it at the time, but now I see his reaction for what it was.

Anger—on my behalf. He just wanted to protect me. And no one would protect me, not even my brothers.

“I appreciate you watching out for me. No one ever really does admit.”

He watches me quietly and after only a few seconds I want to look beneath his gaze. I’m not used to someone taking care of me. Looking at people thinks as if they’re trying to figure me out. No one ever sticks around long enough for me to try.

“Not even that one guy?”

I frown. “What guy?”

“Your mystery guy. The one you had the so-called torrid affair with.”

ing I had brows shoot up.

I forgot I admitted that to him. How could I be so stupid?

I get a “It was nothing.”

“Uh-huh.”

Why does he sound like he doesn’t believe me?

o move “A couple of months of my life. That’s it. Too brief to even think

That’s not necessarily true. Seamus was all I could think about. He cost me
my life those last couple of months in Paris. Being with Seamus was e

of sucks The first man I’ve ever really been with—he treated me with such c
much passion. We explored Paris together and he showed me the sigl

of my took long walks along the Seine, and he kissed me in the rain. We had
, living his office at the university. Right on top of his desk. He’d send me

prisoners smiles in the middle of his lectures, and I’d feel special. Singled out.

He wasn’t with any of those other girls. He chose me.

It was straight out of a romance novel. Forbidden love. The old
?” teaching me everything he knew, treating me with such care.

who I’m I thought I was in love.

Until the morning I was in his class, starry eyed as usual w
ld help. lectured, shock coursing through me when a woman entered the clas

getting walked right up to him and kissed him on the mouth. He announced s
his girlfriend, a helpless expression on his face when his gaze met m

that moment, everything inside of me just...

ink the Died.

We never spoke again. Within twenty-four hours, I dropped out of

Packed my things and returned home with my tail between my
vants to confessed everything to my mother, crying in her arms while she

console me. She promptly told my father, and he gave me a lecture
that,” I choosing wisely and not giving it up to the first man who showed int

me. He made me feel so young and innocent and so unbelievably dumb
squirm I’ve been the family shame ever since.

g at me And now here’s this man, acting like he might want to be my pr
enough though I don’t quite trust his motives. I hated how he made me feel S

night when he spotted the bruises on my arm, the shame that washed c
when he asked if my father did that. I almost fainted on the spot.

It’s a well-guarded secret, those few moments when my father ha
h?” Histoo far with his anger and hurt me. It’s something I’ve never talke

with anyone.

Ever.

It's only happened a handful of times, but when he does get angry at me, it always leaves a lasting effect. If not a physical mark, he definitely messes me up mentally.

about.” Meaning I'm pretty screwed up when it comes to men. Doesn't help that your parents force you into an arranged marriage...

exciting. Perry's expression hardens, his gaze stormy. “So you never think about him.”

hts. We I slowly shake my head. “Not really.”

l sex in “But you always bring him up.”

e secret He's all I have to compare Perry to, not that I want to admit that. “Nothing.”

“If it was nothing, then why won't you tell me this guy's name?”

ler man My spine stiffens. “It's really none of your business. And why should it matter to you anyway?”

“If we're going to be married, I should know about your past involvements.” He hesitates for only a moment. “Don't you want to tell me about me? And my past?”

she was “Not really, considering it's all over the internet,” I remind him.

ine. In An irritated sound escapes him as he rubs at the back of his neck. “Have you ever tried to contact you?”

I frown. “Who?”

school. “Your French lover.”

legs. I “He was Irish,” I correct, my voice soft.

tried to Perry's expression tightens. “I hate this guy.”

e about “That makes two of us.”

erest in His expression is thunderous as he watches me. He almost looks jealous?

“You've got shitty men in your life.”

otector, “My brothers aren't so bad.”

aturday “I don't see them helping you out.”

ver me “They have their own lives to lead. Their own reasons to escape their parents,” I say. “I don't hold that against them.”

as gone “I do. I think they're assholes,” he spits out.

d about “They're not so bad once you get to know them,” I say gently.

Perry believes I'm not so bad once he gets to know me too? "Sometimes I can act like an asshole."

Why with "When?" he asks incredulously.

Definitely "At the engagement party, when you spotted the bruises." What are you doing? It's like I want to get a rise out of him. And from the angle of the party when he's glaring in his gaze, I'm fairly certain it's working.

"Like I told you, I was trying to protect you."

What about "Well, now you've got me. The two of us living in sin all alone in this gorgeous penthouse apartment." I throw my arms out wide, indicating the entire place. "You're benefiting yet again."

"I'm not benefiting from anything." His voice is flat, his gaze going to the window.

I stare at his golden profile, trying to ignore the way my heart starts to race the longer I look at him.

Does it He's almost too pretty to be real.

"What do you mean, you're not benefiting?"

What's past— "All that talk of sin doesn't mean shit, since you won't let me touch you." His gaze finds mine once more and I go completely still at the flicker of flame I see in his blue depths.

My mouth drops open and I ignore Doja when she makes her way over. She has her hand on my hip and winds her slinky body around my calves. "I assumed you didn't want to touch me."

It was all for show, right? He doesn't like me, not really. Most men don't. "You know what happens when you assume."

We're both quiet, but I can feel something grow between us, until I feel all of the oxygen out of the room, making it difficult for me to breathe.

Awareness.

What does it look like... Of each other.

Dare I even think it's mixed with a hint of...

Attraction?

No.

Yes?

What's the answer? Definitely.

He's handsome, I can't deny it. When we touch, sparks fly. What if we kiss?

Maybe I want to continue kissing him.

nes you In private.

Without an audience.

I'm not his type though. And I saw his type at the engagement
at an I thanks to Lindy. He likes them dark haired and voluptuous. Women
er I seedress sexily and are confident in their every move.

Meaning the complete opposite of me.

"I'm curious," he finally says.

in this "About what?"

ing the "You."

We're both quiet again, my mind going nonstop.

g to the He's probably just playing me.

"There's nothing to be curious about." I lift my chin, hoping
starts to stronger than I feel. "According to you, I'm a scared little virgin."

"Yet according to you, you're an experienced woman who doesn't
—or want it to be—gentle," he throws back at me.

My entire body prickles with awareness at his words. The way he
h you." don't need it gentle.

ckering Is he referring to what I think he is?

"Are you talking about..."

toward "Sex?" He walks further into my bedroom, drawing closer to me
i't want enough that I can smell him, his cologne lingering in the air, along with
own unique scent. I subtly breathe him in, my head starting to spin.

i don't. He smells really good.

Too good.

it steals I glance down at his hands, noticing the rings. He only has a couple
one hand, and I'm curious.

How many rings does he own? And how does he decide which
wear?

"Yeah." I swallow hard. "That."

"Can't say the word?" He's even closer now. To the point that
standing directly in front of me and Doja is rubbing around his legs.
the shitty little traitor. "Are you one of those who can only spell it out
of say it? S-E-X?"

hen we "Of course not."

He smiles, his expression sly. "I bet you only ever do it in the dark
I almost say I don't ever really do it at all, but I keep my mouth shut."

I think of Seamus. The only time I've been with a man romantical
I can't lie—it had been magical. He was so tender and sweet. So inc
it partycareful. He knew I was cautious, unsure and he didn't push. He made
en whowas satisfied, always asking me if I liked it, where did I want him to
me. He was considerate in bed. An unselfish lover.

It hurt, his betrayal. It meant everything he did and said was meani
I was meaningless to him.

I wonder what Perry is like in bed. Maybe he's a quick lay. What
thank you, ma'am or whatever that old saying is. Two-pump chump?

There are so many ways to describe it. I bet that's Perry. All the
he's been with are probably just thrilled with the fact that they're wi
I lookToo dazzled by his good looks and his easygoing charm to worry to
about their own needs.

It need Pleasing him is enough to them.

"You don't know me," I say, hating how shaky my voice is. "Or
e said Ilike."

"I'm supposed to find out though, right?" He takes a couple c
forward, reaching for me, his fingers settling for the briefest moment
cheek before his hand falls away. My face tingles where he touch
: Closecausing a ripple effect throughout my entire body and settling right b
with hismy legs. "After all, in a few weeks, I'll be your husband."

I stare up at him, a familiar scent hitting my nose. "You've
drinking."

His smile is far too big. "So smart, wife."

uple on Irritated, I push at his chest, but he doesn't stumble or even take
backward. He's firmly in place, which makes me wonder if this is so
ones tooof metaphor for my future.

As in, this man isn't going anywhere.

And I'm going to have to learn how to make the best of it.

at he's

Again,
instead

."

it.

I think of Seamus. The only time I've been with a man romantically, and I can't lie—it had been magical. He was so tender and sweet. So incredibly careful. He knew I was cautious, unsure and he didn't push. He made sure I was satisfied, always asking me if I liked it, where did I want him to touch me. He was considerate in bed. An unselfish lover.

It hurt, his betrayal. It meant everything he did and said was meaningless. I was meaningless to him.

I wonder what Perry is like in bed. Maybe he's a quick lay. Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am or whatever that old saying is. Two-pump chump?

There are so many ways to describe it. I bet that's Perry. All the women he's been with are probably just thrilled with the fact that they're with *him*. Too dazzled by his good looks and his easygoing charm to worry too much about their own needs.

Pleasing him is enough to them.

"You don't know me," I say, hating how shaky my voice is. "Or what I like."

"I'm supposed to find out though, right?" He takes a couple of steps forward, reaching for me, his fingers settling for the briefest moment on my cheek before his hand falls away. My face tingles where he touched me, causing a ripple effect throughout my entire body and settling right between my legs. "After all, in a few weeks, I'll be your husband."

I stare up at him, a familiar scent hitting my nose. "You've been drinking."

His smile is far too big. "So smart, wife."

Irritated, I push at his chest, but he doesn't stumble or even take a step backward. He's firmly in place, which makes me wonder if this is some sort of metaphor for my future.

As in, this man isn't going anywhere.

And I'm going to have to learn how to make the best of it.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Perry

I'M IN A mood.

Arguing with Charlotte feels like foreplay. Or maybe I'm just. Doesn't help that I'm drunk. I stayed after hours with Winston, and shared a few glasses of whiskey before I came home.

I might've guzzled down two or three.

Three. Though that last one was more like half a glass. Winston drove away from me about twenty minutes before I left, telling me I need to sober up. I was too far gone for that, and he knew it, so he walked me to his own personal car and told the driver to take me straight to my place. AKA my new home with ol' wifey-to-be here.

The beautiful woman who is currently glaring holes into my head.

She's so damn confusing. Sending mixed messages all the time. One minute she hates me, the next she's thanking me for saving her. I know I'm unhappy. I know her father treats her like garbage, and for some reason knowing all of that makes me feel protective towards her.

I shouldn't give a shit. She's nothing to me. Just a fake future with the way she's staring at me right now, her expression all wide-eyed vulnerability, it does something to me.

Twists up my insides.

Makes my heart beat harder.

Makes my dick hard too.

"Are you drunk?"

I wince, scratching the side of my head. Damn her voice is loud.

She's cute though, clad in the plain black T-shirt and high-waisted

a simple yet stylish outfit. Mom jeans is what Tins calls them. Charlotte's blonde hair is in a high ponytail and I'm half tempted to give it a solid wrap those silky strands around my fist.

So that's exactly what I do.

"Ow!" Charlotte whips around, backing toward that wall of windows behind her. "What the hell, Perry?"

"Pretty sure that's the first time you ever called me by my name." I take a step toward her, my steps careful. Slow. She backs up for every forward take until she has nowhere to go, her butt bumping against the window. Her blue eyes wide and unblinking.

"Go away," she says, yet somehow it sounds more like "come closer to me."

Or maybe that's my drunk ass misinterpreting it. Like a complete dick, I crowd her, bracing my hands on the ground on either side of her head, staring her down. She glares up at me, her mouth working, those blue eyes now blazing with unmistakable anger.

Well, what do you know—my wife-to-be is beautiful when she's angry. She looks ready to pummel me. At the very least, slap my face. I probably deserve it. I act all protective and shit a few nights ago and now I'm just being predatory, her around like I want to intimidate her.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Fuck. I am horny. That's my problem. I'm horny for the pretty girl wearing my diamond on her finger—and I checked, she's got her wedding engagement ring on. Possessiveness fills me, the ring like a claiming. A reason, everyone that she belongs to me.

Whether I want her or not.

Right now, I'm thinking I might want her.

Huh. Blaming the alcohol for this.

I lean in, brushing my face against her hair, taking a deep sniff.

Damn. She smells...

Delicious.

"What are you doing?" Her voice trembles, the soft sound of it sending shivers through me.

Like making my dick hard.

"Getting to know you," I whisper, nuzzling the side of her head with my cheek. "What are you wearing?"

Charlotte's "Um...clothes?"

and yank, A chuckle escapes me. "I mean your perfume."

"Oh."

When she's quiet for too long, I dip my head, my mouth right at her windowsmy lips brushing it when I speak. "You didn't answer me."

Charlotte hesitates before murmuring, "I'm not wearing any perfume."

' I stalk She just naturally smells this delicious.

1 step I I'm completely fucked.

ow, her "Perry..."

"I like it when you say my name." I shift, pressing my face against her" toneck and inhaling sharply.

She's trembling. Her skin is so soft. Fragrant. I press my lips against her throat, trying to ignore the electricity that crackles when my mouth makes contact with her skin, but damn.

her jaw Damn.

I breathe her in, high as a motherfucker on her smell. The feeling's mad. We've been playing this *we're in love* game for days, weeks, and I think I'm probably finally getting to me.

pushing As in, I want her. I want to know what she looks like naked. I want to know what she'll do when I suck her nipple into my mouth. The sound she makes when I fuck her with my fingers.

woman The look on her face when I enter her for the first time. When I meet her at that come.

It tells Yeah, I want to know all of that. Every single bit of it.

Her hands settle on my chest and I press into her palms, crowding her even more. Ignoring the warning bells going off in my head, I continue kissing her neck, unable to stop.

I should probably stop.

Pulling away slightly, I take her in, trying to gauge her mood. She watches me with a dazed look in her eyes.

"What are you doing?" Her voice is a scratchy whisper.

not doing "Didn't you already ask me that?" Quick as lightning, I slip my hands around her waist, pulling her into me. She gasps, her fingers curling around the lapels of my jacket. "Fuck, you feel good."

with my Even better than I imagined.

"You're drunk."

“You said that already, too.” I’m about to lean in and sniff her neck when she somehow wrenches herself completely out of my arms, halfway across the room in a matter of seconds.

Disappointment floods me and I shake it off. She doesn’t feel the same. She treats me like I might give her a terrible disease and she wants nothing to do with me.”

Fuck.

“I won’t let you seduce me while you’re intoxicated.” She wraps herself around herself as if she’s trying to ward me off.

“Who said anything about *letting* me seduce you?” I raise my brow. Her disgusted glare is hot on my skin. “Never going to happen.”

I start toward her. “You really think you have a choice in the matter?” Charlotte frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Me seducing you. As if you have a choice.” I keep walking while she remains frozen in place.

“I won’t succumb so easily to your charms.” Her tone is snotty. Her expression arrogant.

Damn, this woman.

Her resistance is arousing, but she needs to know her place.

A scowl forms on my face—I can actually feel it.

Shit. I’m thinking like my brother.

I stop within a few feet from my fiancée, my smile slow as I confront her. “You almost did just now.”

Without waiting for her reply, I stroll out of her bedroom, whistling a carefree tune, pleased with myself.

Pleased even more with her reaction.

◇ ◇ ◇

And she

CHARLOTTE DOESN’T COME out of her bedroom for at least an hour. Just enough time for me to unpack my stuff in the equally large bedroom across the hall from hers and take a quick shower. I’m headed to the kitchen to figure out what to eat when I run into an older gentleman wearing a black suit, Dorian Gray in his arms.

I stop short. “Hey.”

The man actually bows. “Good evening, Mr. Constantine.”

k again I frown. "Good evening, uh..."
darting "Jasper," he supplies for me.
"Right." I nod. He nods in return.

e same. Doja meows.
hing to "And you are...?" I incline my head.
"The Lancaster family butler. I've accompanied Miss Charlotte h
hope to be of service to you as well." He gently drops Doja onto the fl
er arms she rubs her head against my shin, purring. "I see Doja likes you."
I bend down and give her a quick scratch. "She's cute."
s. "She doesn't like too many people. Only Miss Charlotte."
Huh. "And you."
r?" "Yes, and me." He pauses. "Do you need anything, sir? Perhaps a c
Might as well take advantage of his question. The last thing I ne
ile shedrink. I need to sober up. Get my head on straight. "Got anything to
this place?"

ty. Her "Not yet, unfortunately." Jasper frowns.
"It's cool. I'll order takeout." I glance over my shoulder at Cha
closed bedroom door. "Do you know what she likes?"
"She's not picky."
"I'm thinking sushi. How does she feel about that?"
"Fairly open to it. Not a big fan of raw tuna though."
emplate I nod. "Noted."
"I'll leave you to it, then. Could you let Miss Charlotte know I'm
ling thefor the evening?" Jasper asks me.
"Sure." I glance around the massive apartment before I return my
the butler. "Where do you go for the night?"
I grew up with servants, so I'm used to this kind of treatment for tl
part. Though I didn't have one waiting on me whenever I needed him,
housekeepers, cooks, and maids.

enough "I'll be staying here in the servants' quarters." He smiles, his exp
the hall kind. I can tell Jasper is a good dude. And I get the sense he's here to
ure out over Charlotte and protect her.
Doja Cat Wait a minute.
From...me?
Hmm.
"Good to know. Thanks."

Once Jasper disappears, I settle onto the couch facing the window, gazing out at the sparkling lights of the city. The hot shower sobered me a little bit, so I have a clearer head.

Helps that I jerked off in the shower. To the memories of Charlotte's scent. Her soft skin. The throbbing pulse at the base of her throat and the shaky inhalation I heard when I kissed her neck.

Nothing much happened, yet there was a definite shift between us in that brief moment.

How is she going to react when I see her next? Is she going to think that moment doesn't exist?

Knowing Charlotte, probably.

I'm scanning a menu from a local sushi restaurant on my phone when I hear her bedroom door open. Doja meows and Charlotte murmurs something to eat into her, her voice soft and low.

The sweet sound goes straight to my dick.

Considering I'm wearing black joggers, a hard-on will be noticeable. I readjust myself, thinking nonsexual thoughts.

Like about weddings and my family and my freaking mother.

Yeah. That'll make a dick wither in no time.

I feel her presence before I actually see her and she comes around the couch so she's facing me, Doja in her arms. "Oh."

That's all she says.

Is she surprised to see me? Did she think I was going to leave?

Hell no, not after that interesting little interaction we had.

I'm staying. Besides, this apartment is dope as fuck and relatively quiet. Halcyon. Why would I leave?

Deciding to pretend I didn't kiss her neck, I ask, "You hungry?"

She nods, cuddling Doja close.

"You like sushi?"

"Yes. No sashimi though. Or raw tuna."

"I'm going to order a couple of rolls. Want to choose?" I hold my hand out toward her.

"You go ahead. I'm not that hungry."

I pretend to read the menu, my gaze on her the entire time as she looks about the living room, finally settling into the couch across from me, her hair in her lap. She looks so small sitting on the overstuffed couch, her hair

windows, damp around her face, clad in a cream-colored sweatshirt with me up as sweatpants.

She just took a shower too. Did she touch herself while thinking of Charlotte's Huh.

and that Probably not.

I bet she thinks about me though. I know I think about her. What is in that doing. How it's all going to work out—or will it? I think she's cute. sit on the couch, petting her cat, pretending she doesn't notice me staring.

pretend She has to feel it, right? Feel me?

Her gaze flickers to mine, a quick acknowledgement just before she starts sweet-talking the cat. Doja purrs, rubbing her head against Charlotte when I and I realize quick that I'm jealous over a fucking cat.

nothing A cat who accepts me a lot more readily than her owner.

Determination sets in and I can feel myself tumbling deeper. I'm more involved. Winston used to tell me I care too much what other people think of me, and he's right. It matters, what this woman thinks. About Us.

I'm going to break through Charlotte's walls.

Even if it fucking kills me.

and the

close to

7 phone

moves

Doja in

hanging

damp around her face, clad in a cream-colored sweatshirt with matching sweatpants.

She just took a shower too. Did she touch herself while thinking of me?

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Probably not.

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Us.

I'm going to break through Charlotte's walls.

Even if it fucking kills me.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Charlotte

I'M ENTERING A wedding dress shop in Soho with my mother on a October morning, the chic woman who greeted us at the door pra salivating over her.

Louisa Lancaster is well known. My entire family is—with the ex of me.

“Her gown is almost ready. We’re prepping it now in one of the c rooms,” the woman says with an enthusiastic smile, never looking once.

And I’m the freaking bride.

There’s not much I planned for my wedding, but I at least had a sa gown. After giving up on the black-dress idea—*Charlotte, v Lancasters. You cannot get married wearing black. I won’t allow it—* through one magazine fat with images, found the style I preferred, ze on it enough to find three gowns I liked, went in and tried them on an my decision.

All in about forty-eight hours’ time.

Mother was impressed, but what did she expect? This isn’t the dre I imagined as a child. Plus, I didn’t want to overwhelm myself with to options. I cut to the chase, so to speak.

“Would you care for a glass of champagne?” the employee as delicate brows raised in question. She’s elegantly turned out in a slee dress that emphasizes her slender curves, and my mother is also dresse one of her designer dresses.

She came to pick me up at the apartment, took one look at my jea

T-shirt self, and sent me back inside, with her accompanying me. She rummaged through my closet, murmuring her displeasure at the options, until she found a simple black shirt dress that I brought with me from home on her whim. I paired it with black booties, some gold jewelry, threw my hair into what Mother called an artfully messy bun and off we went to the shop.

Don't really understand why I had to get all dressed up only to take it off to put on the wedding gown, but whatever. This is how it's done. Mother always said when one of us—usually me—protested having to go somewhere or do something.

"I would love a glass, thank you." I'm jittery. Nervous.

What if this gown looks terrible on me? It's too late to change my mind. And the dress cost an absolute fortune, though Mother already reassured me money is no object, and if I hate this dress, we can find another.

Our money can work miracles.

Within minutes Mother and I each have a glass of champagne. I'm drinking, though I'm draining mine at a rapid rate.

"Charlotte, please. Slow down," Mother chastises.

I finish it off and make an "ahh" sound just to irritate her, which she notices. "Hopefully they'll bring me another."

"Darling, you can't be drunk while trying on your dress."

"Just a nice little buzz, then." I ignore her sour look and settle onto one of the deep-green velvet couches, surprised by how comfortable it actually is. "Do you have your dress yet?"

The distressed expression on her face is all the answer I need. "No, it hasn't arrived. I'm so worried I won't get it in time."

Weeks have gone by since the engagement party. Since the night I moved into an apartment together and we had our little—interactions.

We haven't really spoken too much since, and when we do, the conversation is stilted. He's not home much, and I suppose he's working, though I don't ask him what he's doing. I spend a lot of time reading. Jasper. Doja. Or I'm reading.

Meaning life hasn't changed for me too much. Just living in this location, there's a diamond ring on my finger and I'm dealing with the upcoming marriage.

Lately I can't sleep though. My mind is too full, thinking about

ie went many things.

ie finally Like that one night when Perry came home drunk and talked
ie on seducing me. How mad I'd been—only because I could imagine him
hair up exactly that. Seducing me.

ie dress I would've given in. Just out of curiosity, I tell myself.

Or maybe not. Maybe it's something more.

ke it all I feel like I have a connection with him, and it goes beyond the f
ne, my we're being forced into this. Though lately I don't feel forced at all.

g to go It's almost as if I want to marry him.

Which can't be true. Yes, we've gotten closer but after that one
he's been distant. Working, he claims. Always working. Is this what I
y mind look forward to after we're married?

ired me I can't believe we're actually going through with it.

The only time I do go out and do anything is for wedding stuff.
and I went to a bakery last week to taste a variety of cake flavors. We
in our the florist a few days ago to finalize the flower choices for the ceremo
reception—and it's going to be so beautiful. There are lots of meetin
Mother to go over color choices, plates and silverware, finalizing the n
it does. It's endless, all the wedding planning. I resented her at first for
over and now I'm grateful she did it. I'd have no idea what I was
without her by my side.

o one of "You'll get your dress," I reassure her. "It'll show up in time."

ally is. "I appreciate your faith." Her eyes lighting up when a gentle t
rings in the air, indicating someone opened the front door. "Oh, I'm
"It still you made it!"

I glance over my shoulder to see Caroline Constantine standing
it Perry young blonde woman around my age standing next to her.

ion. I recognize her in an instant.

do, the Tinsley. Perry's younger sister. We spoke briefly at the engagemen
always but that was it. I was pulled in about twenty different directions tha
ne with and I wish I could've spoken to her more. Just like Perry confessed he
he'd spoken to my younger brother more as well.

a new Guess we'll have the rest of our lives to establish both o
with my relationships.

The two women approach us as we rise to our feet, the both of t
far too dresses, making me glad Mother forced me to change into one. Caroli

me in for a stiff hug and an air kiss.

I about “You look lovely, dear. I swear you’re positively glowing,” she m
n doingas she withdraws from me.

I’m about to respond when Tinsley pulls me in for an enthusiastic I

“Charlotte! I can’t wait to see your dress. And get to know you

When my mom asked if I’d like to accompany her today, I couldn’
act thatPerry’s told me so much about you,” she gushes as she pulls away, he
still on my shoulders.

“He has?” He actually talks about me to his family?

e night, My skin grows warm. I hope he says nice things.

have to “Well.” Her expression turns contrite and she lets me go. “Not
Winston’s mentioned a few things though.”

“Oh.” I hate the disappointment that fills me. I shouldn’t care wha
Mothersays about me to his family, or to anyone else.

went to But I do.

ony and “Where’s the dress?” Tinsley beams as she glances around the sho
gs withtaking it all in. “This place is huge. And so many pretty things.”

nenu. “I’m about to try it on. They’re just prepping a dressing room for
takingspot one of the employees coming out, and when her gaze catches mi
s doingwaves. “I think it’s ready.”

“It is,” says the woman. “Are you ready, Miss Lancaster?”

I square my shoulders. “Sure.”

tingling Mother steps forward. “I’ll come with you.”

so glad “No.” I shake my head, ignoring the disappointment on her face.
it to be a surprise.”

there, a “I love surprises,” Tinsley says, and I can tell she’s trying to e
tension between my mother and me.

And I appreciate it.

nt party I walk through the bridal showroom, taking in the décor. The larg
t night,is light and airy, low green velvet couches scattered throughout, go
wishedfixtures bathing the interior in a gentle glow. There are displays of
accessories everywhere. Shoes and bags—so many tiny white clutche
f thosejewelry.

It’s a lot. If I allowed myself, I could become caught up in the exc
hem inas if I were an actual blushing bride.

re pulls I need to keep reminding myself I’m not.

Once I'm in the dressing room, it's a process to get me in the gown by the time I'm being escorted back out into the showroom to show everyone waiting for me, my mother's audible gasp is so loud it echoes through the building.

My mother's gasp is so loud it echoes through the building. She rests her hands against her chest, as if she can't believe what she's seeing.

As I stop in front of the three-way mirror, I suck in a breath.

I can't believe what I'm seeing either.

It's a dramatic ballgown that's off the shoulder, with a sweet neckline and corset style, constructed of white silk and lace with applied flowers. The skirt is huge and poufy. The train is long and trimmed with more applied flowers, and both the skirt and train sparkle when the lights hit it.

It's completely over the top. I look like an old-fashioned wedding topper, but I don't care.

I feel like a queen.

"Doesn't she look beautiful?" the employee asks, her voice full of admiration. "Downright reverent. The gown is absolutely gorgeous."

"So is the bride-to-be," Caroline announces as she rises to her feet and comes to stand beside me, our gazes meeting in the mirror. "Perkins will swallow his tongue when he sees you walk down that aisle."

"I don't know about that," I start but Caroline shakes her head, smiling at me.

"He will." She presses her cold fingers into the center of my back, and I stand up straighter. "He knows."

He knows...what?

"That he's a very lucky man," Caroline finishes. "Having a beautiful daughter like you."

My heart shrivels at her words. She sounds exactly like my mother, who would only care about my looks. How I'll appear. What my family's perception of my status will do for theirs.

This entire moment is a complete façade. Fake as can be.

I glance over at my mother to see her eyes are full of unshed tears. And seeing her look like that as she stares at me makes tears fill my eyes as well. "Don't cry," I croak, trying to blink.

"Oh, Charlotte." She comes to me, edging Caroline out of the way.

And can stare at me in the mirror, our heads bent close together as she carefully slips her arms around my waist. “You look like a fairy princess. It’s just so beautiful, so unbelievable.”

“Why?” I wipe underneath my eyes, grateful I didn’t wear mascara.
Her hand “I just didn’t expect you to choose a dress like this.”

“Like what?” I grab hold of the skirt, giving it a slight shake. “So poufy?”

Tinsley laughs. “I love the big-and-poufy look. It fits you.”
My mother takes a step back, glancing over at Tinsley. “Doesn’t this is the girl who wanted to wear black to her wedding.”

Tinsley laughs even harder. “Now that would’ve been a sight to see if it were the light of us Constantines would’ve praised her for keeping within the theme.”

“What theme are you talking about?” I ask my future sister-in-law.

Her smile is small. “We all have black souls, don’t you know?”

Caroline lightly smacks her in the arm. “Speak for yourself.”

“Oh please. You have the darkest soul of us all.” Tinsley’s voice is hushed.
as if she’s teasing, but I don’t know.

She might be right.

The seamstress appears and gets right to work, walking in a circle as she scrutinizes me in my gown. She fluffs out the train, examining the hem’s construction. Pushes it to the side so she can come up behind me, her hands gathering any loose fabric at my ribs and tucking it back tighter around my back.

“It could be taken in a little here,” the older woman says to my mother.

Not to me. As if I don’t have anything to do with this, which is particularly true of my wife’s course. I haven’t had much choice in this situation.

“Anywhere else?” Mother asks, her gaze shooting to mine. “Check the hem. How does it feel? Is it loose anywhere? Or too tight?”

“It’s perfect,” I answer automatically, my gaze returning to my reflection in the mirror. I stare at myself for a while, taking in the shimmering fabric, the delicate flowers, the frothy white lace. Mother is right. I look straight—real of a fairy tale. “I love it.”

“You look stunning,” Mother says, her smile gentle. “Let’s take a little at the waist as the seamstress suggests.”

“Okay.” I smile, my gaze sliding to Tinsley. For some reason, I w

are fully approval. Caroline will offer it automatically because I'm doing what she wants. My mother is overcome with emotion at seeing me in a wedding dress, so she's a sure thing too.

1. Tinsley is the lone Constantine female close to my age. I view her as a potential ally. And I'm suddenly filled with the need for her to live big and despite everything.

Like the truth.

"Charlotte, that dress is gorgeous. Perry is going to lose his mind over it? Yet see you walking down that aisle," she says, a mischievous smile on her face.

As if she knows what's really going on and is just playing along.

see. All Maybe she does know the truth. Though I don't think it really matters if she does or not.

Seems that the Constantines are good at keeping secrets.

And so are the Lancasters.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Perry

I ENTER THE apartment just past six o'clock, greeted by utter silence open the door. Usually I can hear Charlotte talking Jasper's ear off attempts to teach her how to cook. Not that he cooks for us, but he do the basic skills down according to Charlotte, and he's patient with he explains the process.

Should I find it endearing she's becoming domesticated, or worried? Not sure what to think about it.

I move deeper into the apartment, loosening my tie, wondering what hell Charlotte and Jasper are when I see a strange man standing by the windows, overlooking the cityscape.

Going completely still, I watch him, wondering why he didn't react when he heard me open the door. The man is dressed in an impeccable suit that looks more expensive than mine, and I'm wearing Tom Ford.

The man glances over his shoulder, his gaze drilling into mine and I realize when I realize who it is. Reginald Lancaster.

Charlotte's asshole father.

"Well, hello. Welcome to my home," I say, trying to keep the room lit.

This man brings with him darkness everywhere he goes, and my mood is already dark enough.

"You mean *my* home? The one I was kind enough to gift to your daughter?" Reginald turns to face me fully, his brows lifted in question.

Why does he have to be such a dick all the time? Like all the Lancaster men?

I don't get it.

"I appreciate the gift," I say, which is a lie.

This apartment is a form of control over me and Charlotte. It may look like a gift, but it comes with a price.

Such as her father dropping in unannounced. Even letting him stay when no one else is here.

But us living here gets her out of his house and that's all the fun part of it.

"You should appreciate it. This penthouse is worth millions. A piece of property that we've held on to for far too long. I should've sold it on the market the minute my son abandoned it, but my wife wouldn't let me. He shakes the glass in his hand that I didn't notice before, the ice cubes clinking within. "Care for a drink?"

"Shouldn't I be the one offering?"

"Humor me, son. Let me play host for a moment."

"Where's Jasper?"

"I sent him off on an errand." He smiles. "You aren't scared of him, are you?"

I hate when people act like this. Smug. Above it all. "No. You don't scare me."

"Good," he grunts. "You like scotch?"

"I do."

"Care for a glass?"

"Sure." Easy, agreeable Perry Constantine kicks in, just as he always does. "That sounds great."

I follow him to the bar cart that's loaded with a variety of drinks, watching as he refills his glass with an aged scotch and pours me a drink before handing it over.

"To marriage." Reginald raises his glass and I do the same, clinking them together.

"To marriage," I echo, taking a giant swallow, savoring the burn as it slides down my throat.

I'm hoping if I drink enough of it, it'll wash away the unease in my chest. I don't like that this man just suddenly showed up uninvited. And let himself inside my home—though I guess technically, the apartment belongs to him.

“You’re probably wondering why I popped in unannounced,” I say conversationally.

I nod, taking another sip.

“I was in the neighborhood,” he continues, his gaze steady on me. He brings the glass to his lips and takes a drink. “Thought I’d stop by and give you a little piece of advice to my future son-in-law.”

The hairs on the back of my neck rise at his ominous tone and I acknowledge what he says. “Do you know where Charlotte is?”

He seems confused by my subject change. “You don’t?”

I slowly shake my head. “I don’t keep tabs on her. I work all day and she let me.” “Sure she knows how to entertain herself.”

Reginald laughs. “That’s where you’re wrong. The way women entertain themselves is going to spa treatments or shopping. In plain English, they like to spend all of our fucking money.”

He laughs and I join him, though mine rings hollow. From what I know, Charlotte isn’t interested in shopping or going to the spa.

But I don’t know her that well, and he certainly should.

“She comes with a trust fund, you know,” he says, like no big deal.

“Don’t we all?” I’m trying to make a joke but his face is stone-cold.

“From what I understand, you’re bringing nothing to this marriage with your name. I’m the one doing all the heavy lifting.”

I don’t bother correcting him. It’s really Charlotte and I who are the brunt of the work—like getting married.

“The Lancaster name opens doors,” Reginald continues. “Doc

Constantines don’t even get to see, let alone test the handle to see if the alcohol is locked.”

He guffaws at his own joke, but I don’t bother laughing this time.

Now he’s just being insulting to my family, though he’s not necessarily being them either.

The Lancasters can open doors we can’t. They go back generations as it are practically American pioneers. Right up there with the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts. It’s the kind of old money Mother salivates over, and if she were one of them.

Well, she’s about to become connected with them in a matter of weeks. “Is that why she wants me marrying Charlotte? For status alone?”

“Your brother is a sharp son of a bitch,” Reginald says once his

he says dies and he takes another drink. "I like him."

"Winston is smart," I agree, wondering where he's going with this.

"You anything like him?" Reginald squints at me, as if he's really seeing me for the first time. "I did some research. A few internet searches offer a photos of you partying with pretty women."

"That was a long time ago, sir." I stand up straighter, smoothing my shirt. I don't touch my ruffled tie. "I don't go out like that anymore, now that I'm engaged."

"Bah." He waves a hand, dismissing my words. "Do what you want. I'll make it legal. If she's anything like her mother, Charlotte won't care. Just tell her to go to Chanel, or have one of those boozy lunches with her like to friends like her mother's always doing."

From what I can tell, Charlotte doesn't have any friends. Not really.

"And that reminds me of another little tidbit of advice I need to give you. Charlotte is a girl who needs to be...tamed. She's always acted out since she was a little girl. Even went through an extreme rebellious stage when she graduated high school," he explains.

I'm intrigued. A rebellious Charlotte? Would love to see her in action. I sober up. "Don't we all act up at that age?"

"Us males, of course. We're expected to. Refined young ladies from prominent families such as ours? Not so much. She had an—incident involving her a year ago. Thank God it happened out of the country, so not many people know about it."

"Okay." I draw the word out, curiosity filling me, though I don't want to ask this man for anything. Don't know why, but I can feel it in my gut. I shouldn't trust him.

"I don't know what she's told you about her sexual history, but my mother, a very lying mother turns a blind eye to it, so I'm assuming you believe she's a virgin."

It feels really fucking weird for me to be talking about my future with her. My sexual status with her father. "I don't think that's any of my business."

Reginald chuckles into his glass before he tips his head back and drinks. "Wishing" Kids these days. Your expectations are completely different from mine.

When I married my wife, I fully expected her to be a virgin. Until she wasn't. Belonging only to me. Yet all these years later, my nephew chased a girl, the daughter of one of the biggest whores in New York City, and eventually made the woman his wife. Hell, my oldest son is involved with a woman

wasn't promised to him. Didn't matter what I had to say on the matter. I didn't care. And from what I can see, your family is much the same."

seeing I'm over this conversation. "And your point is?"

pull up He can hear the hostility in my tone, I'm sure. "My point is that if you're the only disciplined Constantine of the bunch. While my daughter is the most undisciplined young lady I've ever had to witness. Trust that I have your hands full with this one."

From what I can tell, Charlotte is quiet and reserved and not much of a handful at all.

protest. But I don't bother arguing with him.

with her "I'm sure we'll figure everything out as we go," I say, unsure of my reply to any of the shit he's throwing.

7. "Just one more word of advice." He tilts his head toward me. "Sometimes, a woman can get a little squirrely. She might need a little discipline. And my Charlotte? She's fine with it. Responds quite well after I'm being completely truthful."

Confirmation hits me like a punch in the face and for a moment I can't breathe.

My gut instinct was right. Her father is the one who put those bruises from her arm. How many times has he done that over the years? A couple in Paris times? A handful? Multiple incidents even?

people Thank Christ I got her out of that house when I did.

"I'm not a big fan of disciplining anyone, especially the woman who wants to become my wife," I bite out, wishing I had more scotch in my glass.

my gut I Wishing more I could hurl the glass at his smug face.

Reginald goes still, his gaze trained on me. "You look angry, son."

but her I don't even bother holding back anymore. "Maybe that's because you're a cunt." "I'm not saying you have to take my advice." He grabs the bottle of his wife's scotch and splashes more into his glass, indicating with a wave of the hand that

I might want more. I shake my head, not wanting to take anything from him. "I'm not saying you have to take my advice." He grabs the bottle of his wife's scotch and splashes more into his glass, indicating with a wave of the hand that he might want more. I shake my head, not wanting to take anything from him. "Just thought I'd be helpful."

1 mine. "Appreciate your concern." My voice is tight, as are the muscles in my entire body. I'm so fucking tense, I could probably snap in half with a touch.

eventually He flicks his wrist, swirling the brown liquid in the glass, watching it for a moment, his expression contemplative. I'd give anything to kick

ter, he out of my apartment, but the apartment isn't mine.

It's his.

And the woman I'm about to marry?

It seems She's still his as well.

ghter is But only for a short amount of time. We're counting down the da
t you'll she's legally a Constantine, and then I can get her away from this m
out from under his damn thumb.

ch of a "Don't let her get too out of control, son. It's not a good look
Lancaster name," he finally says, like a threat.

"I'm not your son."

how to His gaze lifts to mine once more, those icy blue Lancaster eyes f
me where I stand. "Right. And your father is long dead, correct?"

rd me. I don't talk about my father. Whenever he's brought up, even in
bit of—conversation such as this, it cuts deep. Reminds me of the pain

to it if through when we first lost him. When I was an angst-filled teenag
cried and cried, pissed that life was so unfair and that my father was go

's like I I'm no longer that sad, depressed teenager who let his emotion
everywhere, but I'm still pissed about it. And this asshole doesn
ises on matters whatsoever.

uple of "Yes, sir. He is." I decide to give him an ounce of respect, hopin
get the hint and leave. I'm tired. I want to shed this suit and take a s

wash off the filth of the day and the words from this man who h
who will concern for his daughter. Who only uses her as a pawn to gain what he

"Such a shame." He drains the glass yet again and sets it on the l
before he turns to face me. "He was a shit businessman anyway. Your

has done a far better job of growing Halcyon into what it is today."
I am." I press my lips together, not wanting to speak my mind and piss th

ottle of off.

ottle if But it's as if I can't help myself. The words come anyway.

om this "Don't insult my father."

"Touchy subject?" The fucker seems amused.

s in my "He's dead. And anyone who's dead deserves some respect, esp
ith onemy father." I don't look away. I even contemplate taking him. I'm y

Taller. Stronger. I could do it. "And I'd appreciate it if you didn't in
g it turnman who raised me."

his ass He's quiet as he takes a step toward me. Then another. Un

practically in my face, though I'm taller by a few inches. "You think better than me because you're younger and full of so much come woman has to do is breathe on you and you're squirting in your shorts? what, you're not. I'm the one who's pulling all the strings here, despite what your brother might've told you."

ian and For someone supposedly so refined, he talks crudely.

"Really." My voice is flat. I'm not in the mood to challenge him.

for the His gaze grows icier, I swear. "Don't underestimate me. It won't e if you do."

That was definitely a threat.

reezing We stare at each other, neither of us saying a word. Hell, I'm n sure he's breathing.

simple "I'd advise you to do the same in regards to me," I finally say, m I went quiet.

er who His cheeks flush red. He didn't like my response.

one. Tough shit.

ns spill "I gave her to you," he says through clenched teeth. "I can take he it's help too."

"I dare you to try." I smile, as if I'm confident Charlotte would st ng he'll me despite everything.

shower, Though I'm guessing I'm less of a threat than her own damn as zero which is sad.

o wants. The staredown continues between us until, finally, he's the first bar cart give. Reginald tears his gaze from mine with a grunt and turns awa brother me, striding toward the front door.

"Watch your back, Constantine," he calls, his voice rough. "It is n is man nothing for me to keep her in line."

"She's not yours any longer to keep in line," I remind him, my smug as hell. "Whether you like it or not, she belongs to me."

The door slams, and I wonder if he heard what I said.

I fucking hope like hell he did.

pecially I grab the bottle of scotch and pour it into my glass until it's pra ounger. sloshing over the top. I drain it in a few swallows, then pour myself sult the one, the liquor's heat sliding through my veins, making me warm.

Not soothing my anger one damn bit.

til he's I settle onto the couch and brood over the situation, at one poi

you're reconsidering calling my brother so I can tell him what just happened. Well, all would probably want to kick Reginald Lancaster's ass.

? Guess I know I sure as hell want to.

te what My brother would tell me that would be the wrong thing to do. I don't have enough self-control to know that's true. I may be an impulsive dick, but I does everything his mama wants him to, but I can control my urges no matter how strongly they consume me.

nd well And the need to plow my fist into Reginald Lancaster's arrogant face is pretty fucking strong.

There's a soft meow and then Doja Cat jumps onto the couch, joining the group. She pads right over to me, settling on my lap, her golden eyes watching me expectantly. I give her a scratch beneath the chin and it's as if a switch flipped. All I can hear is her loud purring.

Charlotte loves this cat. Hell, even Jasper does, though I can't say I doesn't want anyone to know it. I've caught him more than once talking her in the kitchen in the early morning, just before I take off for work. He always goes quiet when I catch him, but I don't say anything.

Neither does he.

ay with I've gotten used to Jasper being around all the time. And Doja. At first, I didn't give a shit about that cat since we didn't really grow up with pets. I was a kid. But Doja forced herself on me. Rubbing herself against my leg. Jumping up on me when I sit on the couch. Following me everywhere, staring at me with those fathomless golden eyes.

ly from What can I say? She's cute.

I wonder if Jasper watches over Charlotte, too. Maybe that's why he'll take care of her, like a package deal. Did he protect her from her father? Those bruises I saw, seems like he didn't do a very good job.

y voice And is he living with us because he's going to protect her from me? The thought kills me. I may be a Constantine, and we're known to be ruthless and unlikable. Even downright cruel and unyielding, but like my father always said...

ctically I'm the nicest one of the bunch.

another Just don't push me.

The door suddenly swings open and in walks a smiling Charlotte with her blonde hair piled on top of her head and wearing what looks like a giant t-shirt that she's calling a dress. It's too short—naturally—and it shows

Vinston those sexy-as-hell legs.

I stare at her, my dick twitching. Fuck, this girl. She's growing on me.

No. It's more than that. She's already grown on me. I want to protect her.

Even if from her shit family. I want to stand by her and give her the strength she needs. I enjoy arguing with her. Causing that fire to flash in her eyes. No matter when we banter. I like how I feel when I'm with her, as if I have purpose. Not just Perry Constantine, the fuckup.

It's ugly. I'm Perry Constantine, the second son who works at Halcyon and is married to a beautiful woman. A man who's got it all.

I want to make my family proud.

I want to make my new wife proud too.

Fuck, I'm ridiculous, but it's all true.

I've been avoiding her because I didn't want to face how she makes me feel, but here I am, bathing in my feelings. Realizing all at once that I'm sweet-just attracted to her, I can actually envision a future with her.

A future that could be pretty damn great if she was on board.

I'm not in love with her—I'm not that delusional. But I could give a damn care about her. Eventually fall in love with her.

Right?

The cat hops off my lap and runs to greet her owner with a well-earned meow.

“Doja! Such a pretty kitty.” Charlotte's eyes are sparkling as she gazes over at me, and she does a double take, pausing in the foyer.

“Oh. You're home.” She states the obvious.

“I am.” I clutch the glass I'm still holding extra tight. “Where were you?” She rarely goes anywhere, especially at night.

“I, uh, had a fitting for my wedding dress today,” she answers.

“This late?”

“A few hours ago.” She lifts one shoulder, acting way too mysterious. “As if she has something to hide?”

“How did it go?”

“How did what go?” She frowns.

“The fitting.” Is she purposely playing dumb? Do I intimidate her badly that she can't think straight?

We need to get over this awkwardness between us, and I haven't figured out how to do it without blowing off with the situation by ignoring her. We're about to put on the biggest show of our lives.

our lives, and if we continue to have lame-ass conversations such as t
me. and constantly avoid each other, we're never going to be able to pul
tect her We are two people with a common problem, and we need to be i
I know Support each other.

er eyes It's the only way we'll be able to survive this.

ose. I'm "Oh yes. The fitting was successful. I can't give you too many
since the groom shouldn't know anything about the dress," she sa
will be expression coy. "That's what your mother told me."

"My mother was there?"

Charlotte nods. "And your sister."

"Tins?"

"Yes." Her entire expression softens. "I adore her. I hope she fe
kes me same way about me. I think she does."

I'm not At least someone from my family likes her. Not a single soul fr
family likes me—well, maybe her mother, but not in a way that I'd c
appropriate. Oh and her youngest brother, Crew. He was cool to me,
grow to didn't really get a chance to talk. "That's nice."

"We had a wonderful time. We went to a late lunch afterward."

"All four of you?"

coming "Yes! I might've drunk a little too much." Her smile is small. Ever
sneaky.

glances "You're only twenty," I remind her.

"I'm almost twenty-one. They didn't even card me." Another one c
shoulder lifts. A halfhearted little shrug, as if she can't be bothered t
: you?" conversation with me anymore.

"Sounds like a nice little party," I say sarcastically, telling myself
the fuck down.

I should be glad she bonded with my sister and mother.

ous. "I really like your sister," she says.

"You're close in age to her."

"I know. She said you're her favorite brother." She offers that tid
whisper, as if she's sharing a secret.

her so "She's my favorite, too." I pause. "Don't tell my brothers. The
they are."

helped Charlotte laughs, the sound curling through me like smoke,
show of everywhere. She doesn't do that often enough. "I should go take a show

his one My mind is immediately filled with images of a naked Charlotte s
l it off.under a hot spray of water. Soaping up her body. Running her hands c
n sync.lush curves.

My dick twitches again, the traitor.

“Is Jasper here?” she asks, knocking me from my dirty thoughts.

details I shake my head. “I think he already retired for the evening.”

ys, her Or her father offed the poor dude. I wouldn’t doubt he’d pull sor
like that.

Should I tell Charlotte her father stopped by and said such awfu
about her?

Nah. Why ruin her good mood?

æls the “Oh. Well, then. Good night.”

“Good night,” I say as she walks past me, her scent lingering like a

om her I remain on the couch, stewing over what her father said to r
onsidercrudeness.

but we His cruelty.

That asshole had a lot of nerve, coming over here and b
threatening me.

He really thinks he can take Charlotte away from me?

i a little Guess he hasn’t truly gone head-to-head with a Constantine, then, l

of those
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y think

settling
wer.”

My mind is immediately filled with images of a naked Charlotte standing under a hot spray of water. Soaping up her body. Running her hands over her lush curves.

My dick twitches again, the traitor.

“Is Jasper here?” she asks, knocking me from my dirty thoughts.

I shake my head. “I think he already retired for the evening.”

Or her father offed the poor dude. I wouldn’t doubt he’d pull something like that.

Should I tell Charlotte her father stopped by and said such awful things about her?

Nah. Why ruin her good mood?

“Oh. Well, then. Good night.”

“Good night,” I say as she walks past me, her scent lingering like a tease.

I remain on the couch, stewing over what her father said to me. His crudeness.

His cruelty.

That asshole had a lot of nerve, coming over here and basically threatening me.

He really thinks he can take Charlotte away from me?

Guess he hasn’t truly gone head-to-head with a Constantine, then, has he?



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Charlotte

I ARRIVE AT the hotel by myself, climbing out of the car Mother sent, making sure to thank and tip the driver as he assists me. I stop on the sidewalk, staring at the towering hotel before me, the flags that hang from the entry rippling and snapping with the wind.

Our wedding rehearsal is to start soon. I left the apartment early to make sure I'd arrive on time. Traffic is horrific this time of day, and I didn't want to be late. Especially since my lone arrival is a show of trust on my parent's part. Mother admitted as much when I spoke to her yesterday.

Your father wants me to accompany you because he's afraid you'll go away, but I trust you, Charlotte. Don't disappoint me.

I'm facing my fate. And I don't plan on disappointing my mother.

Holding my head up high, I enter the hotel lobby, greeted with the sounds of a tinkling piano and water trickling from a fountain. A gentleman in a black suit with silver hair nods at me, his mouth forming a faint smile.

I nod at him in return, my gaze searching, hoping to find a familiar face.

Perry informed me via text he would meet us at the hotel coming from the office, and I wish he was already here. Despite our tenuous connection, in these situations where we're pretending to be the happy couple, he always grounds me.

It's scary, having to go this alone and play the excited bride-to-be.

I make my way to the ballroom where our reception will be held tomorrow. Caroline Constantine put up a big fight, wanting the wedding held at her home in Bishop's Landing, but my parents put their foot

This is a Lancaster wedding, and my father wasn't about to have my wedding happen in Constantine territory.

Despite the fact that he's literally giving me away to them, I suppose I do have a few standards.

Once I find the ballroom, I'm instantly greeted by the wedding planner my mother hired after we became engaged.

"Charlotte, my God you're positively glowing!" Miranda says, her expression comically wide as she grabs my hands and gives them a quick squeeze. "Getting married is *such* a good look for you."

I don't bother telling her I went to a spa a few days ago and had my skin scrubbed and was scrubbed to within an inch of my life. I've been waxed and plucked all over, too, like I'm a freaking chicken.

But I do have to agree with her that my skin has never looked better. That wild-eyed flushed expression probably has more to do with nerves than anything else.

"Thank you." I smile.

She scans my attire, approval glowing in her eyes. "That dress is a masterpiece. You look as sweet as a wedding cake."

I've worn more dresses these last six weeks since becoming engaged. I have in the last year, I swear. Tonight's mini dress is nude in color with fabric covered with tiny pink appliqued flowers and trimmed with pink tulle with a wide band wrapped around just beneath my breasts. The dress is constructed of tiered tulle, drenched with more pink appliqued petals and has long, sheer sleeves. Nude patent leather stilettos with tiny straps around my ankles complete the look, and I grip the pale pink clutch Mother gave me tightly in my right hand.

My makeup is perfection, my hair pulled into a sleek, low ponytail with straight diamonds from the Lancaster vault glitter in my ears, and my engagement ring is heavy on my finger, reminding me of what's about to take place.

"Thank you," I repeat as I glance around the room. There are tables and chairs already set up for tomorrow's reception, and quite a few employees are buzzing around, still working. "Looks like things are being held together."

"Yes, they've been hard at work all afternoon, and will continue to work through tomorrow," Miranda says, turning to watch them. "I know you're going to be so pleased with how everything turns out. I'm so excited."

wedding “Me too,” I say faintly, not sounding excited at all. There’s so much to be done, and a tremendous amount of money being spent on this wedding.

pose he “Let’s go outside to the gardens where the ceremony is being held.”
Miranda frowns, though her face doesn’t move at all. She must use a wedding planner. “Where’s your fiancé?”

er eyes “He’s meeting us here. He should arrive soon,” I answer.

queeze. “Text him. Find out where he’s at.”

phone out and send my beloved a quick text.

a facial

plucked *Me: Are you almost here?*

er. And He answers immediately, thank God.

es than *Perry: Who is this?*

We’ve never really texted before, even though we shared our numbers with each other. I should’ve expected this response. I bet he didn’t give his name with my number.

ed than Turning so my back is to Miranda and she can’t see our messages, I hurriedly type out a reply.

rk lace,

skirt is *Me: It’s your fiancée. I’m at the hotel. Miranda the wedding planner is eager to get things started.*

, as are *Perry: Oh.*

around

gave me That’s all he says. *Oh.*

l. Giant I could throttle him.

gement *Perry: I’m on my way. Traffic is shit.*

3.

les and Irritated, I tap out my reply.

v hotel

coming *Me: How long until you arrive?*

Perry: IDK. 30 min?

to work

you’re Taking a deep breath, I exhale loudly before I turn to face Miranda more. “My fiancé is going to be late. Traffic is unexpectedly busy.”

o much “Oh dear. I wish he would’ve left sooner.” Miranda taps her index
wedding. against her pursed lips. “Let’s go ahead and go to the gardens. I’ll ma
; held.” everyone in the ceremony will be routed out there. Where’s your r
Botox. honor?”

“She’ll be here soon.” We realized at my dress fitting that I ne
least one person to stand up for me during the ceremony. Since I h
sisters and I’m not particularly close to anyone, Tinsley said she’d
ull mymaid of honor.

Winston is Perry’s best man, and his brother Keaton is a groomsman
ceremony itself is on the smaller side. We have a small party and only
a select few to keep it intimate, is how my mother described it.

More exclusive, is what Caroline said.

It was just easier, keeping it small. The less people in attendance,
questions are asked. And those who are going to the ceremony aren’t
many questions at all. From what I understand, they all had to sign a
umbers in order to attend.

put my The reception is an entirely different thing. Both families have inv
many people, I’m surprised it’s not being held in two ballrooms. Last
sages, I approximately five hundred have RSVP’d. And more will most
randomly show up.

Unbelievable.

ings
Miranda walks with me to the gardens, and when we enter the
where I’m to be married tomorrow, I suck in a quick breath.

It’s beautiful. Green, lush grass surrounded by thick green bushes
with tiny white blooms. A sturdy wooden arbor wrapped with gauzy
fabric. The delicate white chairs are already set up, the aisle down the
of them leading to the spot where we’ll be married.

“Flowers will cover the entire arbor,” Miranda explains, gesturin
her hands where the flowers will go. “And each seat by the aisle will
swag of flowers next to it as well. Ah, and the colors. Such rich, fall hu

Sometimes I think Miranda talks like she’s reading a caption online

“It’s going to be absolutely stunning,” she continues, caught up
own vision. “And the flowers at the reception as well—oh that’s my f
part.”

la once “What is?”

“The flowers. So many of them. Your mother threw out the bud

My fingers said cost didn't matter. So I went for it." Miranda clutches her like sure together. "I hope you'll be pleased."

Maid of "I'm sure I will."

Family members begin to show up, but no Perry yet. Caroline ended at with Tinsley, and my maid of honor wraps me up in a big hug.

Mave no "You look gorgeous," she says.

be my "So do you," I tell her as I withdraw from her embrace. "I love dress."

an. The It's emerald-green silk and dips low in the front. Elegant yet sexy.

invited "Mother said it was a good choice. The color of money." She laughs and shakes her head. "It's all she thinks about."

All my father thinks about, too.

the less My parents appear right after a herd of Constantines, and soon the asking is overflowing with people standing in small clusters, talking and nodding at themselves. Tinsley introduces me to her husband, Magnus, who appears a bit older than her.

invited so Hmm. Reminds me of my past.

I heard, But he's madly in love with her, I can tell, and witnessing the way he most likely watches her while she speaks to me makes my heart twist with an unfamiliar emotion.

I'm fairly certain it's envy.

the space "Text him again, please," Miranda requests when we're thirty minutes past start time and Perry still hasn't shown. "If we don't get started by dotted we'll have to use one of your brothers as a stand-in."

my white Please, no. They'll gloat and give me endless grief, calling my favorite a center no-show and he most likely ditched me.

That particular fear is like a knot in my stomach, tightening within a minute that passes and Perry still isn't here.

I have a "Winston arrives with his wife by his side and I go to them, forgetting about my earlier resentment toward this man."

he. "Have you spoken to Perry?" Oh, I hate how small my voice is, and how terrified I sound.

favorite Winston frowns. "He's not here?"

I shake my head, my throat too dry to speak.

"He left the office a few minutes before I did." His brows draw together and as he studies me. "Where is he?"

hands "I don't know." I feel helpless. At a loss.
Where could he be?
Winston whips his phone out of his pocket. "I'll call him."
arrives I can hear the phone ring. I swear the nearby conversations immediately grow quieter, as if they can hear the ringing too. Do they sense the radiating from me? My heart threatens to pop right out of my chest at the moment you are an audience to this.
The automated voice starts talking and Winston ends the conversation with an expression grim. "He didn't answer."
I sighs and My heart sinks at the familiar, horrible feeling. Why does this happen to me? What do I keep doing wrong?
Rejected by yet another man. The list keeps growing. My father and garden brothers.
I mongst Seamus never telling me about his girlfriend. Once she popped up and appears a barrier between us. He never really spoke to me again. And I ran away because he could get the chance. Sometimes I look back at that time of my life and wonder if it actually happened. Did he actually exist?
I wonder way he Or did I conjure him up in my imagination?
I wonder familiar Maybe I did. Maybe this situation with Perry is nothing but a dream or a nightmare.
Winston's wife, Ash, reaches out, rubbing my arm reassuringly.
I wonder minutes show up."
I wonder d soon, I offer her a weak smile, helplessly glancing toward the garden entrance, fully expecting Perry to be standing there with that easygoing smile and fiancé's face. Acting like it's no big deal that he's late.
But no matter how hard I wish for it...
I wonder h every He's not there.

Nothing all

and how

together

“I don’t know.” I feel helpless. At a loss.

Where could he be?

Winston whips his phone out of his pocket. “I’ll call him.”

I can hear the phone ring. I swear the nearby conversations immediately grow quieter, as if they can hear the ringing too. Do they sense the tension radiating from me? My heart threatens to pop right out of my chest at having an audience to this.

The automated voice starts talking and Winston ends the call, his expression grim. “He didn’t answer.”

My heart sinks at the familiar, horrible feeling. Why does this always happen to me? What do I keep doing wrong?

Rejected by yet another man. The list keeps growing. My father. My brothers.

Seamus never telling me about his girlfriend. Once she popped up, it was over between us. He never really spoke to me again. And I ran away before he could get the chance. Sometimes I look back at that time of my life and wonder if it actually happened. Did he actually exist?

Or did I conjure him up in my imagination?

Maybe I did. Maybe this situation with Perry is nothing but a dream too.

Or a nightmare.

Winston’s wife, Ash, reaches out, rubbing my arm reassuringly. “He’ll show up.”

I offer her a weak smile, helplessly glancing toward the garden entrance, fully expecting Perry to be standing there with that easygoing smile on his face. Acting like it’s no big deal that he’s late.

But no matter how hard I wish for it...

He’s not there.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Perry

LIKE AN ASSHOLE I left the office late, Winston yelling after me, practically ran out of there toward the elevators, giving him the finger and slung insults at me. Once I was outside, I jumped into the car waiting at the curb, wishing like hell I could swing by the apartment first and into something different.

Didn't have time though.

When I got the text from the unfamiliar number, for a second I didn't know who it was. Bad move on my part—I think my response sent Charlotte off.

It wasn't a lie though. Traffic is absolute shit, backed up for miles. I left on time, I probably still would've gotten caught up in this. I decide to send Charlotte a quick text.

Me: Still in traffic. Will get there as soon as I can.

But she doesn't respond.

At one point my driver takes a little detour to get us there faster, but I swear to fucking God it actually took us longer. The driver is cursing under his breath and punching the steering wheel.

By the time I get to the hotel, I'm leaping out of the car, racing into the lobby with my gaze on my phone. Looking up exactly where I'm supposed to meet everyone when like a dumbass, I run straight into someone, knocking myself on my ass with the impact.

"Sorry, bro," I tell him as I take a step back, frowning when the man turns to face me.

Huh. He's familiar, though I can't place him.

And he's watching me as if I look familiar to him, too.

"It's all right," he says with an accent, one I don't immediately recognize. "This might seem rude, but your face...it's familiar. Have we met before?"

"I was just thinking the same thing," I tell him, squinting, trying to place him. Dark hair, dark eyes. Tall and broad. A little older.

Okay, yeah, he's definitely older. I can tell from the crinkles at the corners of his eyes, and the faint graying at his temples.

I can't place him, and I don't have time to figure it out.

"Sorry I ran into you," I tell him as I start to head for the elevators on the other side of the lobby.

He says nothing as I leave him where he stands, and I realize quickly that I'm going to have to find another way out. The garden is on the ground level, so I wander through the maze of hallways in search of the area where we're supposed to get married tomorrow.

Seriously. What the hell. I'm getting married? Still hard for me to wrap my head around it.

Once I finally enter the garden, I'm so late they're already in the middle of what looks like a ceremony run-through, with someone else standing in for me as the groom.

Charlotte's oldest brother, Grant.

Fucking great.

That asshole is the one who spots me first, glowering at me with a dark shadow in his eyes. Charlotte sees me next, unmistakable relief on her face when our gazes connect.

"Perry! Finally! Everyone, the groom is here!" Mother cries, and everybody goes into swift motion. A woman with bright red hair comes running to me and grabs my arm, tugging on it as she glares at me.

"Hurry! You need to get into position!"

"And who are you?" I ask as she half walks, half drags me over to the arbor where Charlotte and her dickish brother are standing.

"I'm Miranda. Your wedding planner."

Turns out Miranda is a bossy bitch, pushing me around and complaining about my lateness and how I've screwed up the entire evening's schedule. Ignoring her, I walk up to Grant, his expression barely restrained fury. He watches my approach.

“Thanks for helping out,” I tell him, my tone flippant.

I could give a shit about what this guy thinks about me. He’s a prick. “You’re lucky you showed,” he murmurs, his tone dark. Menacing? “You hadn’t, I would’ve hunted you down and strung you up by your neck in the middle of Times Square.”

A shudder moves through me at the thought.

“Hey, it’s not my fault I was late. I texted Charlotte and let her know the traffic was awful.” Not sure why I bother trying to explain myself to him. He’s not listening to me. In fact, he walks away mid-conversation, leaving me standing there talking to no one.

Jesus.

Miranda has already hustled Charlotte away, and I watch as they walk over to Reginald Lancaster. The wedding planner arranges them so they stand side by side, their arms hooked together and my mood dims when Reginald obviously snaps at Miranda.

The wedding planner is completely unruffled by his outburst—I’ve seen her deal with people exploding on her every day. But I note that Charlotte’s face pales. She doesn’t like it when her father yells.

I don’t either.

Those Lancasters—they’re a fun bunch.

Winston makes his way over to where I’m standing, stopping directly in front of me. “You didn’t get my calls?”

I pull my phone out, checking it quickly before I hold it out to him. He can’t read the screen. “I don’t have any missed calls from you. Not from anyone.”

“That’s odd.” Winston scowls. “Your fiancée was very worried about you.”

“Please,” I scoff, shoving my phone in my pocket. “She’d probably be glad if I didn’t show. Then she wouldn’t have to go through with this.”

I’m joking.

Sort of.

“I don’t know about that.” Winston glances around, his voice low. “She was visibly upset when you didn’t make an appearance at the rehearsal. The wedding planner forced her to start the rehearsal without you. Charlotte believed you might’ve run out on her.”

Really?

I remember her telling me about that one guy, and I immediately f
k. shit. Did she actually think I'd leave her the night before our wedding
ing. "If be a dick sometimes, but I'm not that much of a dick.

balls in My almost-bride has abandonment issues, I know this. Her father
worst. Her brothers aren't much better. The guys she's been with—
really doubt there have been many—all seem like a bunch of assholes.

r know Well, only the one. He did a number on her.

is guy. The bar is already set pretty low, but I know I can be a better man
leaving I am the better man. Despite how our situation started out, I want to be
for her. Protect her. Take care of her. Make jokes when she's sad so I
a smile on her face, knowing I'm the one responsible for that.

y walk The one responsible for Charlotte's happiness.

they're Yeah. I want that.

inishes We get into position, me standing under the arbor by myself, the wedding
planner making her demands, coordinating everyone as music starts
'm sure from a small speaker set on a chair. Charlotte's brothers escort their
re way down the aisle, showing her to her chair before they settle in beside

Winston follows after them with our mother, helping her to her seat
side of the aisle and then takes his position next to me as my best man
Keaton is next, Tinsley on his arm, the both of them smiling as they
ectly in like this is the most fun they've had in a while.

Sometimes it feels like everyone thinks this is a big joke, and man
n so he them, it is.

ot from But this is my life. Everything is going to change after this moment
be married. I'll have a wife. It might be in name only, but she'll be
d about obligation—one I'm realizing I don't mind. It's my job to take care
and make sure she's safe. From everyone.

ably be Including her family.

' The music fades into another song and the few people sitting in the
rise to their feet as if on cue. I stand taller, clutching my hands behind
back, my gaze finding Charlotte as her father leads her to the start
wering aisle.

nd that I didn't really look at her before when I first arrived, but I drink
I think know. That dress...what the hell is she wearing? It looks fucking see-through
with some strategically placed pink petals covering the majority of
heels are high and the skirt is short—what a surprise—and despite the

feel like see in her eyes, she looks...

? I may Stunning.

Blowing out a breath, I brace myself as they make their approach.

r is the “Walk slower!” the wedding planner screeches, making me wince.

—and I Making Winston utter a couple of choice curse words under his breath.

They slow their pace, Charlotte ducking her head for a moment, to herself.

for her. I smile, too.

be there She lifts her head, her blue eyes meeting mine and it’s as if even
can put else falls away. The music, the wedding planner, my snickering brother,

scowling father.

They all disappear.

It’s just me and my bride.

wedding The music stops, and the silence is deafening. Everyone is watching

to play “Okay, Mr. Lancaster, tomorrow the music will still be playing

motherhand over Charlotte to Perry,” the wedding planner instructs.

de her. “The minister doesn’t ask who’s giving this woman in

on our matrimony?” Reginald huffs, irritated.

st man. “Oh, these last few years, we’ve taken that bit out. Too antiquated

join us, Miranda smiles, and I can tell she’s nervous.

Reginald Lancaster has a way of setting people on edge.

aybe to “Daddy,” Charlotte urges. “We need to practice you handing me

Perry.”

ent. I’ll I really fucking hate how she calls him daddy. Like it’s a terrible

me my endearment, when he treats her like garbage.

of her, “Do not tell me what to do, young lady.” His voice is sharp

reprimands her. And just a little too loud.

Prime example of the treating-her-like-garbage assessment.

e chairs I take a step forward, clasp Charlotte’s arm and gently steer

ind my away from her father as I send him the dirtiest look I can muster. He glares

of them in return, and I wonder if I will ever get along with this man.

Probably not.

to her in Charlotte doesn’t say a word during the exchange, hooking her

through through mine as we turn to stand in front of the bogus minister—Aunt

it. The wedding planner—and she starts the ceremony.

worry I “Will you have personally written vows for each other?” she asks

the vows begin. “Now is the perfect time to rehearse them, of course have them written. I know some people wait until the last minute.”

“No.” Charlotte shakes her head. “We, um, didn’t do that.”

“Just the standard vows will be fine,” I tell Miranda.

death. I listen to the wedding planner as she talks of honor and love, smiling and health. They’re powerful words, punching me right in the gut. I wonder how I’m going to be able to go through with this tomorrow. I actually look like I mean it.

everything “There will also be a ring ceremony, but the minister will instruct her, her both on what to do and you just repeat everything he says, so it’s fairly simple. The wedding planner hesitates, her gaze shifting to me. “Are you wearing a wedding ring?”

I glance over at Charlotte, who nods. “Yes.”

g us. “And you have another wedding ring for your wife? Or shall she take the engagement ring and you’ll slip that on her finger during the ceremony?”

“I have another ring for her,” I answer. A thin diamond band that a friend wedded does come from the Constantine vault, it used to belong to my mother.

“Perfect. Charlotte, make sure you wear your engagement ring on your right hand tomorrow so your groom can slip the wedding band on you easily,” Miranda instructs before she turns to face everyone. She claps her hands twice, getting their attention. “Let’s run through this again!”

over to Before Charlotte can leave, I snag her arm, keeping her by my side. “How many times are we going to have to go through this?”

erm of “I’m not sure, but we’re almost finished—we have to be. The dinner is supposed to start soon.” She bites her lower lip, watching me with those beautiful blue eyes. “I’m so glad you showed up.”

The relief in her voice is obvious. “You actually believed I wouldn’t show up?”

“I didn’t know what to believe. You were so late, and when you stopped answering my texts or your brother’s calls, I became worried. I know you’re not happy, but you haven’t been...happy with this situation since it started.”

God, I feel like absolute shit for not actually talking to her during the drive. I did try and text, but she was probably busy. I hate that I tortured her when that was never my intention. She has enough to worry about.

KA the “You haven’t been happy either,” I remind her as I stare into her beautiful blue eyes, wanting to see her reaction.

before Those pretty blue eyes go a little wider. “I thought we’d come to a decision about this.”

, if you understand.”

“What do you mean?”

“That we were going through with it—and we were okay.” She does those nonchalant shrugs again, and damn, I hate those. “But it’s not easy. Maybe I was wrong.”

“You weren’t.” I give her arm a squeeze, wanting to reassure her and be protective over this woman. She needs someone on her side. I feel like I have no one who’s team Charlotte, and I’m willing to do that for her. “I’ll be there for you.”

The emotion shining in her eyes as she looks at me is a struggle for her to hold back. She just looks so damn grateful, and I’ve barely given her anything.

“Okay. I’m in this too.”

“It’s all going to work out.” I have no idea if I’m speaking the truth, but it feels like the right thing to say.

She nods, glancing over at Miranda. “We need to do another run-through. I should go to my father.”

I tug her in closer, lowering my voice so no one can hear me. “Don’t let him talk to you like that.”

Charlotte shakes her head. “It was nothing. He’s just...lil’ shit sometimes.”

I’m tired of her making excuses for his shitty behavior just because of his father. That’s no excuse.

“He will never speak to you like that again once you become my wife. My voice firm. She stares at me, her lips parted. “What? I won’t let anyone else touch you. If he so much as lays one finger on you, I’ll break it. I’ll break every bone of them if I have to.”

“But I’m his daughter,” she reminds me.

“And you’ll be my wife. You’ll belong to me.” I pull her to me, show my other arm around her waist, my mouth at her temple as I whisper, “Don’t care if he’s your father. No one hurts what’s mine. Do you understand?”

She keeps her head bent for a moment, her shoulders rising as she exhales deeply. Finally she looks up at me, her eyes shining with gratitude.

“Thank you,” she breathes before she stretches up and gently presses her mouth to my cheek.

Fire lights where her lips touch my skin, scorching me everywhere. I turn my head, my lips finding hers, making her gasp. I swallow the

kissing her like I mean it, and when her lips part, allowing my tongue
it's on.

oes one My hand shifts, dropping to the curve of her ass, those little pink
's fine. rubbing against my palm and my dick does that thing it always does
get too close to Charlotte—it twitches with awareness.

r. I feel She moans into my mouth, her tongue meeting mine and I quickly
like she the kiss, desperate to get myself back under control.

“I'm in The feel of her, her scent, her warmth, it's just...
It's good.

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kissing her like I mean it, and when her lips part, allowing my tongue entry, it's on.

My hand shifts, dropping to the curve of her ass, those little pink flowers rubbing against my palm and my dick does that thing it always does when I get too close to Charlotte—it twitches with awareness.

She moans into my mouth, her tongue meeting mine and I quickly break the kiss, desperate to get myself back under control.

The feel of her, her scent, her warmth, it's just...

It's good.

So. Fucking. Good.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Charlotte

“I HAVE A surprise planned for you.”

I glance over at my future husband who’s already watching me, his steady and dare I say lust-filled. Who knew a wedding rehearsal could get him on?

Though I suppose it’s not just the rehearsal. The attraction between us has been growing since we first met. And the fact that we’re actually married tomorrow, and while I still stand by my reasoning that this is normal—not even close—it almost feels like a free pass.

We can do whatever we want with each other. We’re going to be n... No one can stop us.

I can stop myself. I can push him away, and he can do the same. But why would I? I’m attracted to him. I can’t deny it. And from the way he seems so protective of me, I think he’s drawn to me as well.

I like his protectiveness. Even his possessive ways. They’re so different than my father’s, who acts like he owns me yet doesn’t want to deal with me.

Perry acts like I belong to him, and he wants nothing else but me.

Big, giant difference.

“What is it?” I finally ask.

His smile is secretive. Sexy. “If I told you, then it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

We’re seated next to each other at a table in a private room of the restaurant, the rehearsal dinner winding down. I’m exhausted and I look over everything happening tomorrow, and only a few seconds ago, I believed my evening plans consisted of me going to the hotel room my mother reserved for me, taking a long, hot shower and falling into bed.

But my fiancé now has me intrigued.

“And when do I get to see this surprise?” I keep my voice purposeful as if what he’s saying is no big deal, but deep down, I’m excited. No one thinks of me or wants to give me something. I fade into the background like my favorite wallpaper. You always claim it’s pretty, but that’s all you say about it.

That’s me. I’m pretty, expensive wallpaper.

“After dinner.”

I watch him, how he’s sprawled in his chair, his legs spread wide like a way men sit. His suit jacket is long gone and the tie is loose around his neck. The sleeves of his button-down rolled up to his elbows, exposing his forearms.

My almost-husband has nice forearms. Thick with muscle and capable, strong hands. I swear I see the hint of a...tattoo?

Wait. It’s definitely more than a hint.

That’s an actual tattoo on the inside of his right arm.

I reach for his hand, flipping his arm over so I can examine the tattoo getting more closely. It’s an image of three swords crossed and I trace it, glancing at him to find he’s already watching me. “What does this represent?”

His gaze never strays from mine. “Me and my brothers.”

“I love that.” I do. I’ve never been one to find tattoos particularly interesting.

They’re just...there. Most of the time with no meaning. People choose to mark their bodies forever with images or words they think are cool, then they end up regretting their choices years later.

I’ve flirted with the idea of getting a tattoo in the past, but couldn’t come up with something important enough to me to mark permanently on my body. “How many tattoos do you have?”

Perry drops his head, watching me trace his tattoo with my index finger.

He doesn’t pull away or tell me to stop, so I don’t. It’s like I can’t. His skin is so warm. “A few.”

He’s purposely vague, which makes me even more curious. “I have an idea.”

His gaze returns to mine. “You haven’t seen me without a shirt on, have you?”

No, but I’d like to.

“What’s up with the rings?” I grab his hand, studying the thick silver ring on his finger. The top is a blank circle, reminding me of a signet ring. There’s no emblem on Perry’s.

“You don’t like them?”

My even, “I never said that.” We stare at each other, his hand still clutched in mine, his warm thumb streaking across my own, making me shiver. “I just didn’t say why you wear so many of them.”

“I like them. No other male in my family wears jewelry like I do. I don’t wear as many when I’m at work. Winston used to give me slingshots, but I only wear one on each hand,” he admits. “He always would say I look like a hood.”

“Are you one?” He frowns at my question and I drop his hand, immediately missing his skin on mine. “A hood.”

He slowly shakes his head. Runs a ringed hand through his hair, making it look even messier than it was before. What is it about men with messy hair and knowing blue eyes? Kissable lips and rings on their fingers?

I think of the few times he’s kissed me, his hands on me.

I want them all over me.

Maybe it’s the wine. I’ve drunk a lot. So has Perry.

How he touched me earlier at the rehearsal, when he pulled me in and said those things about my father, his hand on my waist, my back to his, his touch possessive, as if he was claiming me as his and wanted everything sexy. I know it.

From the moment this engagement started, I didn’t like how I was treated around like an object used in someone’s game. As if I didn’t have a mind of my own. No say in what would happen to me next.

Perry touches me as if he owns me, and I’m suddenly okay with it. I actually want more of it.

I make no sense.

My father is heading toward us and Perry immediately sits up, his skin scooting his seat closer to mine and slinging his arm around the back of the chair, his hand lightly resting on my shoulder. I try to relax into his touch, but it doesn’t make it seem as if we do this sort of thing all the time, and at the last moment, Perry settles his arm around my shoulders, holding me to him.

It’s as if I melt into him and he can sense it. I know he can. It’s in the way his fingers squeeze my shoulder, his thigh suddenly pressed against mine. The entire position is intimate.

As if we’re lovers.

“You two seem cozy,” my father observes.

Perry's expression doesn't waver. "Shouldn't we be? We are
n mine, married tomorrow."

wonder They're both quiet, involved in some weird staredown and I wonder
animosity crackling between them. I noticed it earlier when w
Though rehearsing the ceremony, but now...

nit, so I It seems to have grown worse as the night progressed.

k like a "We're about to leave, Charlotte," my father tells me, con
ignoring Perry. "Your mother told me to wish you both good night."

s hand, I automatically rise to my feet, Perry's arm falling from my should
reach for my father and give him a brief hug. It's stiff and awkward an
aking it myself out of it as quickly as possible, happy to return to my fianc
air and slips his arm around my shoulders once more.

"You'll be staying at the hotel tonight?"

I nod.

"And you'll be staying at the apartment?" My father turns to
Perry.

n close "Yes, sir. Can't see the bride first thing in the morning on our w
utt. His day, right? It's bad luck, according to my mother."

yone to "And it's not bad luck to be living in sin together before you're m

He shakes his head and starts to walk away. "I will never understand
passed people."

life or We watch him go, the both of us quiet for a moment.

"He doesn't like me," Perry murmurs.

ith it. I "You don't like him either."

He glances toward me, his gaze sharp. "You can tell?"

"Everyone can tell."

straight, Perry returns his gaze to my father, watching as he speaks to my
c of my his mouth formed into a snarl. I'm sure he's chewing her out for sor
s touch, she didn't do. "He's unkind to you."

second, That is the nicest way to put it. "He's unkind to women in general."

"So he's a misogynistic asshole?" Perry's brows shoot up.

he way "I suppose." I shrug. "He doesn't like me either."

t mine. His expression darkens. "Why the hell not?"

"I wasn't born with a penis."

"Thank God," Perry mutters.

I smile, secretly pleased. "I don't want to talk about him anymore."

getting “Me either. Let’s change the subject.” His smile is slow. Seductive
look beautiful tonight.”

er at the Now I’m even more pleased.

e were “Even though at first, I have to admit. I didn’t like your dress
continues.

“What?” I glance down at myself. This dress was nothing special
pletely hanger, but when I slipped it on...

I knew Perry would approve. And while we’re bashing my father
as being sexist, I’m also setting the feminist movement back a bit for
and I pull look beautiful for my fiancé.

é, who Is that really so wrong though, to want his approval? To want
really see me and think I’m beautiful? Even if he’s lying, I’ll take it.

Does that make me pitiful? Perhaps. But right now, I don’t really care.

“It’s too naked.” His gaze starts at my shoulders, sliding down as he
glare at me in, my skin growing warm when his eyes linger on particular spot
body. “I thought everyone could see through it.”

wedding “But it’s not see-through,” I protest, my voice weak. My heart racing.

“I know. I wish it was. Only for me though.” His wicked smile
married.” with temptation.

l young The temptation to touch him again.

Lean into him and inhale his delicious scent.

Maybe even beg him to kiss me...

“I think I’m going to give you your surprise now.” His deep voice
into my thoughts and I drop my carefully constructed façade that I’ve
so hard these last few weeks to keep up and smile at him.

Like...really smile at him. Let my happiness show versus hiding it
mother, time.

nothing “What is it?”

” Perry reaches for his jacket, which hangs on the back of his chair.
digs his hand into the inside pocket, pulling out a very small white box
topped with a tiny, black bow.

“For you.” He holds out the box for me to take, and I grab it with
fingers, settling it onto the table and popping off the lid.

’ A pair of earrings are nestled inside, and oh, they look old. I touch
finger over one, marveling at the intricate setting, all the words of prayer
them stuck in my throat.

e. “You “They belonged to my great-grandmother on my father’s side,” explains. “I found them when I was going through our family’s jewelry couple of weeks ago.”

ss,” he I lift my gaze to his. “Your mother found them?”

He shakes his head. “I asked her if I could go through the jewelry, but she was the one who came across them. Not her.”

“Oh.” I can’t stop staring at them. They’re so beautiful. Such an intricate design, and so unique. So special because they belonged to someone connected to my future husband. “Are they art deco? They look like”

“I’m not sure. I just know they’re old, and you mentioned that your mother told things. When I gave you the ring and you seemed disappointed?”

He didn’t want to disappoint me. That’s the meaning behind the earrings. He wanted to make me happy. Put a smile on my face. He asked me to take them. He listened to me and is giving me something he knew I would want.

My heart swells, threatening to burst out of my chest.

“I love them.” Without thought I reach for him, slipping my arms around his neck and pressing my mouth to his in the briefest kiss. I pull away, my face still in his as I murmur, “Thank you.”

His hand comes up, his long fingers circling around the base of my ponytail, keeping me in place. “You like them, then?”

“So much.”

His voice lowers, his gaze stuck on my mouth. “I want you to wear them tomorrow when I marry you.”

It’s the way he says it. As if he actually *wants* to marry me.

“I’ll wear them.”

He lifts a brow. “Promise?”

“Yes.” I try to nod, but his grip on my hair is too firm.

“Good.” His fingers loosen, bracing against the back of my head, and kisses me again, sparks flying the moment our lips touch. The simple kiss is full of so much promise, my breasts grow tight and a tingling sensation starts between my legs.

“Why did you do that?” I ask once he pulls away from me.

“Kiss you?” When I nod, he continues, “Because I wanted to.”

A family member approaches us, pulling Perry away from me and immediately into conversation. Their voices grow distant as I become thoughtful, imagining myself walking down the aisle toward this man

” Perryfairy-princess gown, the veil shielding my face, wearing the earrings I
welry ame.

Without thought I take off one earring, then the other, settling them
table. Then I grab my new earrings and carefully slip them on, m
but I’m drooping slightly from the weight of them. I drop the earrings I or
wore into the now empty box and slip the lid back on, shoving the ti
ntricate into my pink clutch.

re else. I pick up my phone from where I left it on the table and open the c
ook it.” flipping the lens so I can see myself. I turn to the left, then the right, ac
rou like the earrings. The way the tiny diamonds sparkle in the light.

They’re stunning. I can’t believe they’re mine.

d these I can feel him watching me and I quickly look over at him to fi
actually actually not watching me at all, still in conversation with his sister’s h
and it seems almost...tense.

As if they don’t like each other.

around I suppose that’s normal, though Perry seems to get along with ever
l away He slips his arm around me yet again, his hand sliding over to brie
at my nape, fingers tracing down along the sliver of my back exposed
of my dress. Down, then up. Slowly. Again and again. I flush at that see
innocent touch, my entire body growing hot and I dip my head,
closing my eyes.

ar them What would it be like, to have Perry actually touch me? His
everywhere. His mouth...everywhere.

I would come completely undone. I know I would.

From the beginning, I told myself I didn’t like him. I would nev
him. But if he continues to listen to me, to give me gifts, to touch me
is at this very moment...

d as he I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to resist.

gesture
nsation

ne and
e lost in
in my

fairy-princess gown, the veil shielding my face, wearing the earrings he gave me.

Without thought I take off one earring, then the other, settling them on the table. Then I grab my new earrings and carefully slip them on, my lobes drooping slightly from the weight of them. I drop the earrings I originally wore into the now empty box and slip the lid back on, shoving the tiny box into my pink clutch.

I pick up my phone from where I left it on the table and open the camera, flipping the lens so I can see myself. I turn to the left, then the right, admiring the earrings. The way the tiny diamonds sparkle in the light.

They're stunning. I can't believe they're mine.

I can feel him watching me and I quickly look over at him to find he's actually not watching me at all, still in conversation with his sister's husband, and it seems almost...tense.

As if they don't like each other.

I suppose that's normal, though Perry seems to get along with everybody.

He slips his arm around me yet again, his hand sliding over to briefly rest at my nape, fingers tracing down along the sliver of my back exposed by the dress. Down, then up. Slowly. Again and again. I flush at that seemingly innocent touch, my entire body growing hot and I dip my head, briefly closing my eyes.

What would it be like, to have Perry actually touch me? His hands everywhere. His mouth...everywhere.

I would come completely undone. I know I would.

From the beginning, I told myself I didn't like him. I would never like him. But if he continues to listen to me, to give me gifts, to touch me like he is at this very moment...

I don't know how much longer I'll be able to resist.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Perry

I'M IN A hell of a predicament, one I didn't believe I'd be in so quickly

I really want to fuck my future wife.

Dying to fuck her actually.

Giving her those earrings, watching her reaction was like a gift to She was so damn happy, practically wiggling in her seat when she popped the lid off the box and saw what was inside.

Wait until she sees the matching necklace. I've arranged to have it delivered to her hotel room tomorrow morning while she gets ready. Now, I regret my plan. I'd rather see her face when she opens the box. . . pure joy sparkling in her eyes, aimed right at me...

Been sitting here with a semi ever since.

I scrub a hand across my tense jaw, listening to Lucian Morelli rant about how much he hates my brother. The fact that he's even at my wedding rehearsal dinner tonight is outrageous enough—but this is what I do when your sister falls for our family's mortal enemy.

You end up somehow inviting said mortal enemy to your most important family affairs.

The fact that he's also complaining about my brother doesn't matter. And I'm pretty much fucked on listening to him.

"Been great talking to you, Lucian, but I've got to go," I tell his future wife here wants to show me her hotel room."

Charlotte actually leans over, her breasts brushing against my arm and she smiles politely at my brother-in-law, playing along with my lie. "I don't mean to take him from you, but..."

“By all means, go,” Lucian urges gruffly, his dark eyes sparkling with amusement. “A little pre-wedding sex always calms the nerves.”

I don’t bother acknowledging Lucian’s sex statement and neither does Charlotte. Instead, we do our best to make our escape, stopping to talk to a few people who remain in the private room, including my mother.

“Already leaving?” she asks.

I nod, settling my hand at the small of Charlotte’s back. “We have to go to bed. We have a big day tomorrow.”

The words bed and Charlotte conjure up all sorts of images in my mind. Every single one of them including raw, dirty fucking.

Probably shouldn’t want to defile my almost-wife, but damn, fucking irresistible tonight.

“Indeed you do,” Mother murmurs, her gaze tracking my movement. As if she knows I’m up to no good. “Good night, you go to bed. Pleasant dreams.”

She hugs me and Charlotte and then, finally, we’re out of there.

“You don’t like your brother-in-law, do you,” she says to me once we’re completely out of the restaurant and walking in the corridor toward the lobby.

All that “I don’t like anyone with the last name Morelli, or anyone related to them,” I mutter, shaking my head.

“Bad blood between your families?”

“The worst.”

“He was familiar to me.”

Irritation fills me. “Who? Lucian?”

She nods. “I don’t think I’ve met him before, but maybe I have? I’m sure. He definitely reminds me of someone.”

“There are Morellis crawling all over this city. I’m sure you’ve met at least one or two.”

Charlotte actually giggles, and I wonder how much wine she’s had. “The she’s too drunk, there’s no way I’m making a move on her tonight. I want to remember it. And I’m not about to take advantage of a drunk woman.”

“Are you drunk?”

I don’t “No. Maybe a little buzzed,” she admits, biting her lower lip.

I look away from her. The lip-biting thing is sexy as fuck, and I think she realizes it. “Why did you giggle, then?”

ing with “The way you said it. Morellis. As if they’re your mortal enemies,” she admits.

er does I need to get over myself. I’m on edge. Stressed out over the work to the stressed about the responsibilities that come with marriage.

The future Mrs. Constantine is walking by my side with my ring finger and my great-grandmother’s earrings in her ears, yet I have trouble to get what she looks like naked, or what her pussy tastes like. What sound she make when she comes?

y brain. Have no fucking clue.

Going to rectify that tonight, if she’ll let me. Maybe that’ll ease some. She’s my stress.

“The Morellis are our mortal enemies.” I shake my head, shake every thought of Morellis out of it. “I don’t want to talk about them. I’d rather you two show me your hotel room.”

She comes to a stop in the middle of the corridor, giving me no chance to do the same. “I thought you just said that to get out of your conversation we’re originally I did. “I won’t stay too long.”

Or I’ll stay all night. Whatever she’s in the mood for.

“I haven’t even seen the room,” she admits. “I had my stuff sent up and a key was given to me by Miranda when I arrived.”

“Where’s your wedding dress?”

“In one of the bedrooms. There are three,” she admits. “All of them are already there. Your mother’s, your sister’s. My mother’s as well. Getting ready together tomorrow.”

That sounds like my worst nightmare. “Then take me up. Show me the room.”

Charlotte contemplates me, her tongue darting out to touch the corner of my mouth. A groan almost leaves me at seeing it. Fuck, this is not what I want.

Everything she does tonight is like pure sexual torture. “You really want to see the hotel room?”

No, I want to see what you look like beneath that wet dream of a dream. “You’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all,” she continues.

But I haven’t seen you. And I’m dying to.

Dying.

I don’t To.

I don’t say any of those words out loud. Instead, I nod, taking her

as,” she and steering her toward the bank of elevators that are nearby. “What fl
you on?”

edding. “The top one.”

Of course. Nothing less for a Lancaster.

on her “Let’s check out the view, then.”

no idea We enter the empty elevator car and I push the PH button, settling
ds does lean against the wall. Charlotte stands right next to me, her head tilted
watch the numbers light up as we climb higher.

I blatantly study her profile, not caring if she catches me. The
ome of lines of her face. Her pink, glossy lips. Her thick, dark eyelashes. S
creamy skin.

king all I wonder if she’s that smooth and creamy everywhere.

her you The elevator comes to a stop and the doors slide open, Charlotte
first. I follow after her, my gaze stuck on her ass and the way it
oice but beneath the skirt as she walks. Fuck, those sexy legs of hers, the nude
ation.” on her feet.

My brain comes up with a fantasy. Charlotte sprawled across th
bed, naked save for the shoes and the earrings. Hard nipples begging
up there mouth. Soaked pussy dying for my fingers...

She stops at the only door on the floor, waving the key over the
device but it flashes red. She glances over her shoulder at me with a
dresses “It won’t open.”

. We’re “Here.” I approach, completely crowding her, my front pressed
her back as I reach around her and snag the key from her fingers. “I’ll
ne your I whisper close to her ear.

She goes completely still, her head slightly bent, her warmth seepi
rner of me as I wave the key slowly across the tiny black screen. Two gree
woman. flash, accompanied by the click of the lock sliding back. She reaches
want to handle, pushing the door open and I follow her inside.

The moment the door clicks shut we’re shrouded in darkness. I c
ress. her accelerated breathing, inhale her deliciously floral scent and I ope
pure instinct.

Next thing I know I’ve got her pushed against the wall, my body
to hers, pinning her in place.

“You said you wanted to see the view,” she whispers shakily.

r elbow I almost laugh. She’s adorable. “I don’t give a damn about the view

door are She tilts her head back, her lips in perfect alignment with mine. “V
you want to do, then?”

“I figured you had a case of pre-wedding nerves.” I touch her
tracing the point with my thumb. Drift the back of my fingers down
length of her throat. In the dim light let in from the cracked open curtain
back to witness her briefly close her eyes, her tongue sneaking out to wet her lips.
back to Fuck. I shouldn’t do this. She’s beautiful and she’s sweet and so
damn vulnerable. I shouldn’t play with her heart or give in to my urge
elegant because it’s been a couple of months since I had sex and all I can think
smooth, is getting Charlotte naked.

But it’s more than that. No one counts on me for shit, and this
looks at me as if I could be her savior. She needs me. I want to be the
exiting her.

moves I want to be her knight in shining armor.

stiletto “Are you nervous about tomorrow?” she asks me.

I bring her face back into focus. “No.”

the hotel “Oh. I am,” she admits. “What if I trip?”

for my “You won’t.”

“What if...you don’t show?”

locking The worry in her voice just about kills me. I refuse to disappoint
frown. woman. Everyone else does.

But not me.

against “I’ll be there.” I cup her chin once more, forcing her gaze to meet
I do it,” promise.”

Her eyes are wide and unblinking. “What if someone figures us out?”

ing into “Figures what out?”

in lights “That our relationship isn’t real.” Her voice is strained with worry.

for the “We need to make it look real between us.”

“I try.” She shakes her head. “Sometimes, it still feels awkward to

an hear “What will make it easier for you?” I rest my hand on her hip, gently
rate on squeeze. “Maybe we need more practice.”

“What kind of practice?”

pressed “Me touching you.” I skim my hand up, from her hip to her waist
rib cage, stopping there. “You touching me. Go on, try it.”

v.” She slips her hand beneath my suit jacket to settle it on my ribs.
fingertips burning through the thin fabric of my shirt. “You’re warm.”

What do “So are you.” I let go of her chin to curl my hand around the side neck. “You’re wearing the earrings I gave you.”

er chin, She nods, reaching up to touch one, her fingers skimming the e own thelove them.”

rtains, I My earlier thoughts return and I decide to be truthful. “You know ips. want to see?”

he’s so Charlotte shakes her head slowly. “What?”

ges just “You wearing those earrings I gave you.” I lean in close, my mou k aboutat her ear. “And nothing else.”

I pull away slightly as a shuddery breath escapes her and she sv womanhard, her gaze never leaving mine. She’s always so agreeable, a here forpeople to tell her what to do.

But just how obedient is she?

“You know what I want to see?” she asks.

My brows draw together and I brace my hand on the wall next head. “What?”

“All of your tattoos.” She grabs hold of my tie, tugging on it and my head, my mouth landing on hers as if it was the most natural thing world, kissing her.

int this Devouring her.

I remove my hand from the wall to grip the back of her head, my curling around her low ponytail, holding her in place as I drink from h nine. “I search her sweet mouth with my tongue, stroking it against hers, and agonized sound ripples through the air.

t?” It’s me. I’m the one who’s groaning. Just from the taste of her li fingers curled into my tie, tugging on it. As if she wants more of what can give her.

This is probably a mistake, but fuck it. My entire life has consisted me.” being guided by my family, telling me what to do. Hell, the only reason giving a marrying Charlotte is because of them.

But they’re not controlling this night. This moment.

For once, I’m going to do what I want. Like when I raced cars and t to herrisk. Putting myself—and others—in danger. One wrong move and it’s

That’s what this feels like with Charlotte. Out of control. Reckless. bs, herit.

I want her.

I press closer, my hips nudging hers, her body flattening against the wall behind her. I return my hand on her hip, squeezing her there, crushing delicate pink petals beneath my grip.

“Perry.” The sound of my name falling from her lips does something to me. Urges me on, filling me with borderline desperation. I remove my hand from the back of her head and grab her behind her thighs, lifting her. Her long, sexy legs automatically wrap around my hips, the skirt of her dress riding up, exposing her slender thighs.

I want to touch. To look. I don’t know where to start first. Removing my hand from her mouth, I back away a little, glancing down. The way her ass is pressed against the front of my trousers, her legs loosely linked around my hips, her sharp heels brushing against my ass.

Fuck, it’s too much. Not enough.

“Let’s go look at the view,” I tell her, my voice gruff, my tone shifting to her chaotic.

She frowns, disappointment etched all over her pretty face. “But…”

“Come on.” I ease her to her feet and grab her hand, walking her to the wall of windows that overlook the city.

She follows diligently, her breathing erratic, and we stop in the corner of the windows, staring out at the twinkling lights of Manhattan spread out before us.

“There it is,” she murmurs. “Beautiful, right?”

I gaze at her, drinking her in. The gloss is completely gone from her lips, and there’s high color in her cheeks. My hands in her hair have messed up her hair completely, and she’s fucking stunning. “Yes. Definitely.”

She catches me staring and I don’t look away. Fuck it. That’s my intention tonight.

Fuck everything. I’m doing what I want.

And what I want—who I want—is Charlotte.

I let go of her hand and walk over to the right side of the window, pulling on the cord so the curtains slide all the way back, giving us an even better view. The Lancasters have owned a piece of this city for generations. Constantines want their piece too.

Our merger is important. Life changing. It hasn’t hit me before, but this wedding is going to change things. Our lives, for one.

Forever.

he wall “Charlotte.” I turn to look at her and she stands a little taller, straightening those her shoulders. “Come here.”

She approaches me slowly, her heels clicking on the marble floor, breathing still shaky as she makes her way to me. I grab her hand and pull her closer to the window, stopping right next to it. “Put your hands on the glass.”

A frown crosses her face at my command but she follows it, reaching to rest her palms on the glass, turning to me as if she needs to be told what to do next.

“Face forward.” I watch as she does as she’s told, tugging on my shirt with my fingers, heat rolling beneath my skin, making me want to take off my jacket.

So I do—tearing it off and dropping it onto the floor. The buttons on my wrists were undone from earlier at dinner and I roll my sleeves back, movements hurried.

” Anxious.

Still Charlotte doesn’t move from the window, her hands braced against the glass.

I approach her slowly, an animal hunting his prey, her perfume lingering in the air, combined with her unmistakable unique scent. I stop just behind her, my hands resting on her shoulders, noting the slight tremble beneath my palms.

“You’re nervous.” My mouth is at her ear, her hair tickling my face. She gives a jerky nod. “What are we doing, Perry?”

“What do you want me to do to you?” I bring my hands together beneath her nape before I slide them down, spanning wide to run the length of her curves, smashing all of those delicate pink petals on her dress. “You should take this off.”

“No.” She shakes her head and I go still, fighting the disappointment that threatens to take over me.

Damn it, she wants me to stop. And I’ll stop. I don’t push women. The fucking me, and I know one thing.

I’m sure as hell not going to force my wife.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Charlotte

PERRY'S BIG, WARM hands rest on my hips, his fingers gathering the fabric subtly, cool air hitting the back of my thighs. My heart is beating so fast I barely catch my breath and I know he's waiting for me to explain my actions.

"You want me to stop?" he asks, his hands never moving from my hips.

I shake my head, noting the exhale of relief that escapes him. "If you take the dress off, I'll basically be...naked."

"Isn't that the goal?" His voice is tinged with amusement, and I can't help but smile.

"Not in front of the windows. Someone could see me," I murmur.

"Ahh." He steps closer, his hot body pressed against mine, and I can feel his erection nudge my ass. He's so hard.

A tiny thrill moves through me at the realization. He's hard for me. Perry Constantine wants me.

His fingers keep working on my dress, gathering the fabric at my waist, lifting it up, up, up. Until I feel air brush my butt cheeks, which are exposed thanks to the nude thong I'm wearing. My hands are still on the glass, dropping one, wanting to reach back and touch him. Wanting to turn and face him so I can rub myself all over him.

Would he let me?

"Keep your hands on the window," he says, his deep voice settling between my legs, making me throb. I return my hand to where it was, focusing myself for what he might do, knowing he'll most likely draw it out.

It's torture, and he knows it.

I think he likes it too.

He slips his hands beneath the bunched fabric, his fingers tracing the waistband of my thong, making me jolt. I drop my head, my eyes closed, a whimper escaping me when he slips a finger beneath the thin strap at my ankles, barely grazing my skin.

“Let’s take these off,” he whispers, his hands back on my hips, pushing. The fabric slides down, falling to my thighs until it gets stuck. He bends forward ever so slightly, giving them a gentle shove and they fall to my knees, hesitating for only a moment until they’re at my feet, crumpled on top of my shoes.

I’m about to step out of them when his fingers press into my thighs, making me go still.

“Leave them there. Spread your legs.”

I do as he asks, stepping my feet out wider. My panties slide up my thighs with movement, banding around my ankles, making a vulgar yet sexy display. I look like I’m trapped by my nude thong, my ass on display for my fiancé’s eyes. My legs are trembling with anticipation.

He hasn’t done anything to me yet and I’m so wet, the inside of my thighs is coated. I just want him to touch me.

I’m desperate for it.

Perry’s hands fall from my body when he takes a few backward steps. My skirt dropping back into place, covering me. I’m standing there with my hands on the glass and my legs still spread, my sheer panties still bunched between my ankles. I can feel his gaze on me, heavy and hot, and I smile a little, wishing he’d come closer to me.

“Jesus, look at you.” His deep, appreciative voice curls through my ears, making me warm. “You’re hot as fuck.”

“You haven’t even touched me.” Frustration has me feeling bold. I glance over my shoulder to find he’s watching me, his expression dark and hungry.

Hungry.

“I thought we were looking at the view.” His gaze is on me, not the view. “You want me to touch you?”

I nod.

“Are you wet?”

Shock courses through my blood, his words making me wetter. He has never asked me that question before.

“Well?” he urges when I haven’t answered him.

ing the “Yes,” I whisper.
losed, a “Touch yourself and show me.”
my hip, What?
I’ve never done that before either. Not for someone else.
gently My sexual experience is extremely limited. He might not get all
k there. firsts, but he’s definitely getting plenty.
y fall to He slowly approaches me again, so close I could touch him if I wa
pled on But I keep my hands on the glass, just as he said.
“Are you shy, Charlotte?”
y flesh, My gaze meets his, noting the storminess in his blue eyes. I decid
honest with him. “Yes.”
“Do you want me to touch you? See if you’re wet?”
vith the Relief floods me and I nod. “Please.”
splay. I His smile is wicked. “Since you asked so nicely.”
icé, my He surrounds me from behind, his arms coming around me, one h
against my lower belly while the other slips beneath my skirt. His mou
/ thighs my throat, breathing heavily against me as he slides his fingers o
mound, pausing there.
“You’re bare.”
eps, the A secret smile plays upon my lips. “I went to a spa yesterday and
vith my full wax treatment.”
retched He curses under his breath.
quirm a “Are you sore?” His fingers slip down, teasing between my lower l
I furiously shake my head, wanting more.
gh me, He slides those fingers deeper, sinking them into me, barely brush
clit. A choked sound leaves me when he removes his hand, fru
d and I coursing through my veins, making me want to stomp my foot in prote
.. “Very wet.” He holds his two fingers up in front of my face, my
glistening on his fingertips. “Want to taste?”
the city All the breath leaves my body and I lean back into him, nodding.
His fingers come to my mouth slowly, and a sigh leaves me when
them between my parted lips. I lick them, tasting myself, and he sink
further into my mouth, until I’m sucking on them, rubbing my ass aga
No one erection, not even aware of what I’m doing.
I’m just running on pure instinct right now.
He growls near my ear and then he’s picking me up, lifting me r

the ground as he slings my body over his shoulder as if I weigh nothing. The world is upside down for a moment, my head spinning, and when he dumps me unceremoniously onto the massive king-sized bed, I fall onto the mattress, rolling over onto my back and propping myself up on my elbows so I can see out of my watch him.

Perry climbs onto the foot of the bed, his hands making quick work of the garter belt and removing it from around my ankles, tossing it over his shoulder. The garter belt lands on the floor. I spread my legs, giving him room to crawl between them, the skirt of my dress pushed up around my ankles, leaving me completely exposed.

He glances down, his eyes hot as he studies the juncture between my legs. I'm half tempted to cover myself. I've never been waxed so completely in my life. There isn't a single hair down there and I feel incredibly exposed.

But the gleam of appreciation in Perry's eyes reassures me and he flatly approves.

When his mouth finds mine, I sigh, my arms coming around his neck, his hands never my fingers toying with his too-long hair. He pushes his hips against me, the fabric of his pants rubbing against my bare skin. The friction is delicious. Unbearable.

I don't want him to stop.

We kiss for long, languid minutes, the kiss turning sloppier and sensuous. Until we're thrusting against each other rhythmically, the front of my pants nudging against my clit, making me moan. Our mouths are wet, tongues and teeth and sighs and moans and then his fingers are in between my thighs, stroking me there, brushing against my clit. Circling it.

"Oh God," I choke out when he increases his speed.

And then he's gone, climbing completely off the bed as he reaches for the front of his shirt, quickly undoing the buttons. I watch in muted, frustrated fascination, my entire body throbbing with the need for release, my legs going wide when I note the tattoos scattered all over his skin.

There are words etched in the center of his chest and I squint in the darkness, wishing I could read what it says.

But I get distracted by the bulge of his biceps muscles when he shrugs his shirt off completely, and I forget all about the tattoo.

All I can do is stare at him.

"Are there more?" When he lifts his head to study me, I can't

ng. My “Tattoos.”

dumps His smile is slow. Devilish. This is a completely different Perry than the waitress, one I’m used to. This version is bold. Serious—and hot. Demand on me I can’t think I wouldn’t like that sort of thing. I never thought Perry would be bossy, or that I would find it sexy.

k of my But I like it. I love it.

ilder so I don’t want him to stop.

up the “I have a few more,” he says mysteriously, his hands going for my hips, buckle. He makes quick work of it, undoing it with a few flicks of his fingers, and when his pants drop to the floor, I stare at him blatantly, my gaze fixed on his erection thrusting forward, stretching the black cotton of his boxers completely. A little shiver of fear moves through me.

posed. He’s big. Thick.

that he There’s a tattoo peeking just above the waistband of his boxers. Another one on his left thigh. I can’t tell what any of them are, but I like them. I want to see them up close.

ne, the I want to explore them with my lips and tongue.

us. “Take off your dress,” he demands and I shake my head, earning a long stare for my answer. “Why the fuck not?”

loppier. “I need your help,” I admit, biting my lower lip. “With the zipper.” I roll over onto my stomach to show him.

t of his A groan leaves him and he rejoins me on the bed, his hands skimming my back, all the way down, sparks shooting where his palms connect with my skin. He pulls me into position so I’m on my knees, his hands on the inside of my thighs, ducking his head, his mouth landing right on my sensitive flesh.

A squeal leaves me and I push back against his face, slowly dying as he licks me, exploring every inch of me. My heavy breaths ring through the room as he readjusts himself so he’s lying on his back and I’m essentially gazing at his face.

It’s the most scandalous thing I’ve ever done in my life and it turns out to be the good, I can’t even worry about it. I grind myself against his mouth, latching on to my clit and sucking, his hands on my ass, spreading me. I grip the comforter in my fists, staring blindly at the wall, my entire body tensing as he licks and sucks, driving me closer and closer to the edge.

When he slips a finger inside of me, I explode with a cry, my entire body continuing to wracked with shivers, the orgasm rippling through me, leaving me breathless.

Unable to speak. Unable to do anything but just lie there and take it.
han the He doesn't let up. Only when the trembling begins to subside
ding. I breathing calms does he shift away, sliding up behind me to drop a
d be some nape before he undoes the tiny snap at the base of my neck and sli
zipper down, the fabric parting, revealing I'm not wearing a bra.

"Let's take this off," he murmurs, like no big thing. As if he did
give me the most monumental orgasm of my life.

the belt I lie there helplessly and let him finish undressing me. Once the
wrists, gone, he rolls me over onto my back and I stare up at him, wearing c
zeroed shoes and the earrings, just as he requested.

s boxer "You're beautiful," he murmurs before he ducks his head, his m
mine.

I kiss him back with everything I've got, completely blissed out.
Another little sleepy.

. I want "Future wife," he murmurs, his mouth tickling my skin as he kis
neck. "Don't pass out on me now."

A giggle escapes me and then his lips return to mine, his tongue
; a hard slow, languid tour of my mouth. I drown in his kiss, my hand curling
his nape, my fingers tangling in the dark-blond curls there. I slide m
' hand down the front of his chest, breaking away from his seeking li
can study the words tattooed there.

ning up *Break my heart.*

y flesh. I frown, glancing up at him. "Why do you have that tattooed c
e of my chest?"

l. "I got it a couple years ago, when I was younger and stupid," he
g insidetrying to kiss me again, but I dodge him.

through Perry growls in frustration, the sound making me tingle everywher
entially "Did someone break your heart?" I press hard against his flesh, the
beat of his heart a comfort against my palm.

feels so I hate the idea of him being with someone else. That a woman c
his lips broken his heart and he still longs for her. That would hurt.

e wider. More than I'd want to admit.

re body He slowly shakes his head. "I put those words there to remind mys
I have one. In case I ever forget. I am a Constantine, after all."

re body My own heart pangs at the sadness in his words and I reach f
athless. resting my hand on his cheek.

“You have a big heart, Perry,” I whisper. “Don’t let anyone convince me otherwise.”

He devours me, as if my words turn him on and everything becomes a blur. We’re tangled up in each other, my hands slipped beneath his briefs and resting on his ass as he thrusts against me again and again. I can’t just no point in pretending we’re not going to take this too far. We’ve done it.

We’re past the point of no return.

As if I have no shame, I’m begging him, the word *please* falling from my lips again and again. He kisses me everywhere. My neck. My collarbone. The valley in between them. When he draws my head into his mouth, I arch off the bed as he nibbles and sucks on the skin. Even a piece of flesh, clutching him close, never wanting him to stop.

It all feels too good to be true.

We get his boxer briefs off and his erection nudges against me, he gets inside. I spread my legs wider in encouragement and he grabs hold of the base of his cock, dragging the head through my folds, back and forth.

My eyes roll into the back of my head as a ragged moan leaves my mouth. “God, Perry. Please.”

“Please what?” he asks between pants, on his knees between my legs with his cock in hand as he delivers his exquisite torture.

I don’t even hesitate in asking for what I need.

“I want you inside of me.”

He repositions himself, his face above mine, his fingers still around the base of his cock when he slips it inside. I gasp at the sensation as he fills me, inch by excruciating inch until he’s buried deep, as deep as I can go.

We’re both still, our bodies adjusting to each other, the thunderous sound of my racing heartbeat filling my ears. When he still hasn’t moved, I could’ve sworn I would’ve seen his eyes open to find him watching me, his gaze intense, his expression serious. As serious as I’ve ever seen him.

He begins to move, the slow drag of his cock withdrawing from my body, making me arch against him, whimpering in pleasure. He slides back with the same, dragging pace, driving me out of my mind with lust.

Nothing has ever felt so good. Nothing.
Nothing.

nce you “Fuck you’re so tight,” he murmurs, dipping his head to de
punishing kiss to my lips as he increases his pace.

omes a I take it all, losing myself to the sensation of him filling me ag
s boxeragain. We rock into each other, the base of his cock nudging against
There isthat familiar feeling starting to build. The bed rocks, grunts leaving hi
alreadyevery thrust and I hook my legs around his waist, clinging to him.

“Aw fuck.” He pulls out of me at the last second and I watch i
fascination as he wraps his fingers around his cock, stroking himse
rom myhe’s coming all over me, onto my lower stomach, his come dripping
ne. Theme, down into my pussy.

r nipple I should be disgusted, right? That he just came on me like some
ensitiveanimal? But he’s staring at me as he tries to control his breathing, h
covered in a sheen of sweat, his other hand coming up to push his hai
his eyes.

ager to He’s the hottest thing alive. I can’t stop staring at him.

d of the “Charlotte.” He swallows hard, his gaze lifting to mine. “That was
shit.”

ie. “Oh Wait a minute. Was it so good for him, he can barely speak?

A squeal leaves me when he reaches out and drags his fingers thro
thighs, semen on my stomach, gently rubbing it into my skin. “Perry—”

“I came all over you,” he murmurs, his fingers slipping lower, c
me between my thighs. His touch just firm enough to make my blood
made a mess.”

und the “I don’t mind,” I say breathlessly.

slowly “Hmmm.” That rumbling sound settles right between my thighs,
he canme tingle. “I marked you.” His voice deepens. “You’re mine now.”

My heart flutters and I press my lips together, trying to contain th
roar ofthat wants to break free.

ack my But it’s no use. I’m beaming. Sweating. And when he wraps him
rious. around me, his hand on my lower belly, his chin resting on top of my
sigh with contentment.

ly body I could fall in love with this man.

κ inside And that’s the last thing I should do.

liver a

ain and
my clit,
m with

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Charlotte

“**C**HARLOTTE. WAKE UP.”

I crack my eyes open to find Perry standing over the bed, fully dressed in last night’s clothes minus the jacket and tie. I immediately sit up in bed with the blankets falling to my lap, exposing my nakedness and his gaze drops to my chest.

Reminding me of the first time we met, when he kept staring at my breasts and called my breasts tits just to shock me.

We’ve definitely come a long way in a short amount of time.

“Where are you going?” I grab his hand, tugging on it. “Come back to bed.”

“I need to go.”

“Why?” My body aches in the most delicious way, thanks to all the sex Perry and I just had.

“You need your rest. We have a big day and it’s all going to start in a couple of hours,” he explains, sounding completely logical.

But I’m feeling totally illogical and I tug harder on his hand, wanting to go back in bed with me. “Please don’t go.”

“I’ll see you later. At the wedding.” He leans in and kisses me, his lips brushing mine far too briefly. “And we can do this again, you know. Tonight.”

“Tonight.” My heart squeezes. “We’ll be married then.”

“You’ll be exhausted.”

“So will you.”

“Could still fuck you though.” He grins.

“Rude.” I scowl.

“You like it.” He kisses me again. “Go back to bed.”

“Why?”

“You’re a distraction.”

“My tits?”

His eyes darken and he reaches for me, cupping my breast, his playing with my nipple. “Yeah. Your tits are a complete distraction wife. Now get under the covers.”

I let him tuck me into bed. He pulls the covers to my chin and p kiss to my forehead. I close my eyes, my lids heavy, and I realize may right.

Maybe I should catch up on some sleep. My day will be longer t essed in since there’s so much prep to do for my big day, while all he has t oed, the shower, shave, and get dressed.

s to my I’m half asleep by the time he slips out of the hotel room, and on gone, I’m wide awake. My thoughts are too consumed with what ha ny legs between us, reliving every single moment. How controlling he was beginning—and how much I liked it. The way he touched me. Kiss How I sat on his face—my God. Every bit of it was amazing. Perfect.

back to And this man is going to be my husband.

I almost squeal out loud, I’m so happy.

It’s around nine when I give up and crawl out of bed, slipping on a the sex black joggers and a matching sweatshirt, not bothering with panties an

I’m experiencing this weird combination of exhausted and exhilarate for you know only coffee can fix. I consider calling for room service, but it too long.

ing him I want the coffee now.

After I throw my hair into a quick ponytail, I exit the hotel room, tongue in my pocket, the earrings Perry gave me still in my ears. I touch one a know, the elevator to the ground floor, a secret smile playing upon my lips.

My future husband got exactly what he wanted. Me wearing noth the earrings last night. And I got what I wanted too—I saw every one tattoos.

Next time, I’m going to linger over them. Give them a full examin

I exit the elevator and make my way over to the small coffee sho tucked near the front entrance of the hotel. The line isn’t too terribly lo

I make my order before going to the pickup counter where I wait
drink while checking my phone.

“Charlotte?”

I glance up when I hear my name, frowning at the man standing
of me. He’s tall. Dark haired and dark eyed, reminding me of Lucian
thumbBut it’s not Lucian.

, future Not even close.

Realization dawns and I’m frozen as all the memories come rushin
resses a The man smiles. “Don’t tell me you forgot who I am.”

be he’s His accent is stronger than I remember. There’s more gray at his t
though it just makes him look more distinguished. His handsome
han hisachingly familiar, and my heart squeezes the longer I stare at him.

o do is Until the anger washes over me, a reminder of how much this m
me.

ce he’s “I haven’t forgot,” I bite out, every muscle in my body coiling
ppenedI’m in fight-or-flight mode. I want to run.

s in the I want to hit him.

sed me. I want to scream.

“I can’t believe I’ve run into you after all this time.” He shakes hi
a faint smile on his lips, as if this is such a fun coincidence. God, I
him. “How are you?”

pair of “Fine.”

d a bra. “Why are you at this hotel? I thought you lived in New York.”

d that I “I do.”

’ll take “Charlotte.” His voice softens, as does his expression. “Come on.
me. You’re not still—mad, are you?”

“That you started a relationship with me when you had a girlfri
the keyentire time we were together? No. I’m not mad. Not at all.” The baris
is I ridemy name and I go to the counter to pick up my drink, offering a
thank-you to her before I turn to face the man who has haunted my
ing butfor far too long with a scowl. “Your timing is impeccable.”

e of his “Why do you say that?”

“I’m getting married. Today.”

ation. His gaze drops to my hand, no doubt spotting the giant diamond
p that’sfinger. “I heard about that.”

ong and What in the world? “How? I haven’t spoken to you in over

for my Seamus. Yet you heard about me getting married? How can I do anything that comes out of your mouth? All you ever did was lie to me. My entire relationship was based on a lie. You're not worth my time. I have more important things to take care of today."

Morelli. "Come on, Charlotte. Was I that easy to forget? I don't think so." He grabs my arm, pulling me to him, his voice low. "You returned to the States and hid away in your family's apartment, never to be seen or heard from again."

"That's not true."

Morelli. "Oh right. Let's not forget your debutante ball, where you stood with your face as downright feral the entire evening, snarling at anyone who came too close to you." He says.

Morelli. "How would he know that? A few society pages mentioned that you were in Paris but he was in Paris while I was here. Or maybe he returned to Ireland and I have no clue what happened to him after I left."

Why would he care what I was doing?

He lied to me. He loved someone else.

Not me.

Morelli. "You missed me," he says with a smug smile. "That's why you hid away from the world."

"Because you hurt me, you asshole," I bite out. "I was only nineteen and you broke my heart."

"You were in love with me."

"You wish." I try to jerk out of his hold but he tightens his grip.

Morelli. "You were. You've never dated anyone again. And now suddenly you're getting married?"

Morelli. "Unease slips through me at his words and I glare at him."

Morelli. "Have you been keeping tabs on me?" I try my best not to let my face show, keeping my expression impassive, my stance casual. When all I want to do is bolt.

He finally lets go of my arm and I rub it absently, wishing he'd never touched me.

I can literally still smell Perry on my skin. I hate that Seamus just touched me on my hands on me, even if it didn't mean anything.

"What can I say? You left an impression on me. And it's always safe to keep track of a Lancaster." He grins, the bastard.

believe I take a step back, needing the distance. “You’re nothing but a stall
ne. Our He chuckles. “No, I am someone who recognizes an asset when I s
’ve gotI just didn’t realize someone else had a plan and moved in faster than
acquire said asset.”

so.” He “What are you talking about?” He’s talking in circles and my tire
e Statesdoesn’t get it.

d from “As if you don’t know. Your impending wedding to a Constantine
know a setup when I see one.”

All the blood in my body seems to drain into my feet, leaving me
lookedlightheaded. God, how did he know? “You don’t know what you’re
close,” about.”

“I’m not stupid.” His expression shifts, morphing into the charming
ry fact, remember who swept me off my feet. “You should give me another
. I haveCharlotte. I know you believe I betrayed you, but I didn’t know how
you about my girlfriend—who I broke up with after you left, just
know.”

I shake my head, hating how easily he gave up on her as well,
makes no sense. “You lied to me.”

d away “And I’m sorry.”

“You told me I was the only one.” He did. He promised me that, but
en. You’re referring to the other girls in class. The ones who stared at him
hungrily as I did. “I felt special. Like you chose me over everyone else

“I did. I still do.” He pauses. “Choose you.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want you. Not anymore.”

you’re Not ever.

“It’s only been a year,” he reminds me. “We weren’t together long
was intense. Special. No one makes me feel like you do, Charlotte.”

my fear His deep, lyrical voice sounds so sincere, but I know better now.

I want “I’m not that same, stupid girl any longer. I won’t be fooled
again.” His words, that pleading look on his face don’t matter. “Forget
d neverme, Seamus. I’m getting married today.”

“What if I told you that your fiancé isn’t what he seems? That he
had hisfrom a family who will stop at nothing to destroy whoever gets in the
Do you want to be a part of something like that?”

smart to His words don’t surprise me at all. I know the Constantines are r
not that Perry ever acts that way—toward me, at least. Winston? (

ker.” Definitely. Their mother?

see one. Caroline Constantine probably sends people to their death on a
n me tobasis.

But I wouldn’t put my father past doing something like that either.
d brainbrothers. They’re all terrible.

“My family is no better,” I admit, which is the truth.

rtine? I “You’re used to that kind of treatment, then.” He says it as a sta
not a question.

ing me “I am. And I’m perfectly okay with it.”

talking “Really?” He lifts a brow, reminding me of Perry.

No. I shouldn’t think that. This man is nothing like my Perry.

g man I “You’d fit in with my family perfectly.” His smile is slow, his da
chance,sparkling with an unfamiliar emotion.

7 to tell I take another step back. “I’m not interested.”

so you “You should be.” He takes a step forward, looming over me like
cloud. “Don’t you know who I am?”

, which “No, remember? You never told me.”

His chuckle is deep. Edged with meanness. He grabs hold of r
again, making me gasp as he hauls me into him. “I’m related to the M
at I wasCharlotte. On the mother’s side.”

just as Oh God.

.” “But your last name isn’t Morelli,” I whisper. “It’s McTiernan.”

No wonder Lucian reminded me of someone. He reminded
Seamus.

The man I met in Paris when I was nineteen and so incredibly ir
g, but itand completely sheltered. I was looking for someone to rebel with an
the bill perfectly. So much older than me. Darkly handsome. I fell fo
line this man told me. He seduced me in class. After class. In his off
by youflirted with an effortless charm I found captivating. He got me into
t aboutquickly, and I willingly gave up my virginity to him. Like a complete i

We snuck around, and he kept me like his dirty little secret. He
comesallowed me to post photos of us together on social media. Always
ir way?would put his job at the university at risk.

Now I realize he didn’t want his girlfriend to find out.

uthless, “Tell your fiancé he’s got something I want.” He lets me gc
Oh yes.stumble, nearly dropping my coffee. “And I’m going to come collect s

His tone is ominous, despite the dazzling smile on his face and I regular what he's referring to.

Me.

Or my Seamus McTiernan still wants me.

Not going to happen.

I don't even realize I throw the coffee at him until it's too late. I tement, smacks him square in the chest, the lid popping off and spilling hot li over the front of his button-down shirt. He yelps in surprise, his exp enraged as he shouts and curses. Women in the coffee shop scream, by his reaction, but I don't stick around to witness it.

I run. Straight for the elevators, slapping the up button over ar rk eyes again, glancing back to see if he's following me.

So far, so good.

The elevator takes forever and I yank my phone out of my pocket a dark to find Perry's name with trembling fingers. When I finally do, I hit button, a breath of relief escaping me when the elevator doors open stream of people exit the car.

ny arm I jump in, the ringing in my ears making me agitated. I hit the PH lorellis, and then smack the "close door" button repeatedly, shouting, "Sorry! the doors slide closed on a woman just as she's about to enter.

Perry finally answers, his voice warm. "Hey, beautiful."

Any other day those words would send a thrill through me. But n me of "I need your help."

"What's wrong?"

imature "I can't—I can't explain it right now. I need you to come back d he fi hotel. Right away."

r every "Why, Charlotte? Tell me."

ice. He "There's someone here I know. Someone from my past."

his bed "What? Who? Fuck, Charlotte. You're scaring me. Are you okay?"

diot. "I'm fine."

e never "Who are you talking about?"

said it I hesitate, not wanting to go into the details. Not wanting to re terrible time of my life when I'm about to get married.

Oh God. I'm going to get married and what if Seamus shows up) and I wedding?

oon." "Charlotte, what the fuck is going on!"

realize "I'm sorry! It's...it's him. From Paris."

"Wait a minute, the guy you had an affair with?"

Oh he makes it sound so sordid, which it was. The shame I feel o
is almost overwhelming. "He's related to the Morellis."

The line goes silent and I'm scared I lost him. "Perry? Are you the
The cup "I'm here," he bites out, going quiet again for a moment before h
quid all "He's a Morelli?"

pression "His name is Seamus. Seamus McTiernan."

startled More silence. I can't believe I still have him on the line, even wh
in the elevator. I clutch the phone tighter. "Perry."

nd over "Where did you see him?"

"In the coffee shop in the hotel," I admit.

"Go to your room and don't leave until I get there, do you understa

, trying "Yes. I understand," I whisper.

the call "I'll be there in fifteen. Stay in your room, Charlotte. Don't ans
n and adoor to anyone but me."

Before I can respond, he ends the call. I sag against the elevato
I buttonclosing my eyes. Everything's going to be all right.

" when Perry's going to save me.

He has to.

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) at our

“I’m sorry! It’s...it’s him. From Paris.”

“Wait a minute, the guy you had an affair with?”

Oh he makes it sound so sordid, which it was. The shame I feel over this is almost overwhelming. “He’s related to the Morellis.”

The line goes silent and I’m scared I lost him. “Perry? Are you there?”

“I’m here,” he bites out, going quiet again for a moment before he asks, “He’s a Morelli?”

“His name is Seamus. Seamus McTiernan.”

More silence. I can’t believe I still have him on the line, even while I’m in the elevator. I clutch the phone tighter. “Perry.”

“Where did you see him?”

“In the coffee shop in the hotel,” I admit.

“Go to your room and don’t leave until I get there, do you understand?”

“Yes. I understand,” I whisper.

“I’ll be there in fifteen. Stay in your room, Charlotte. Don’t answer the door to anyone but me.”

Before I can respond, he ends the call. I sag against the elevator wall, closing my eyes. Everything’s going to be all right.

Perry’s going to save me.

He has to.

THE RUTHLESS GROOM

MONICA MURPHY

THE RUTHLESS GROOM

MONICA MURPHY



CHAPTER ONE

Charlotte

THE MOMENT I enter the suite, I'm turning the deadbolt on the door, the air breathing harsh in the otherwise silent hotel room. I glance over at the messy sheets and rumpled pillows and memories of last night come one after another.

Perry's mouth all over my body. Between my legs. The look on his face when he first entered me.

A shiver steals over me and I tell myself to focus.

After I wash my hands of the sticky coffee leftover from me tossing Seamus, I pace the hotel room, constantly checking my phone, tempted to call Perry and ask him if he's closer. The smug look on Seamus's face haunts me and I open my browser on my phone, entering two words and start searching.

Constantine Morelli.

A bunch of articles appear, mostly about various business deals. They have been archrivals for years from what I can tell, and the two families have fought each other with a burning passion.

I knew this. From the very start I could tell there was tension between them whenever a Morelli showed up or was mentioned. Yet I also know that various Morellis are attending our wedding in a few short hours.

The Constantines are the type who keep their friends close and their enemies closer.

Are there McTiernans in attendance as well? It's a last name that's never been mentioned once since this entire situation started. I would've recognized it. It's hard to forget the name of the man who took your virginity and

you the entire time you were together.

Anger suffusing me, I close out that tab and enter another two words into the browser, hitting search.

Seamus McTiernan.

I haven't done a Google search on him in months. First, because I blame myself after being in such a dark depression over our disastrous relationship. Second, the last six weeks or so, I've been a little busy preparing for a wedding and getting to know my future husband.

As I scroll, I realize there still aren't many things written about Seamus. A couple of images of the Morelli and McTiernan clan gathered together with him standing in the background, his face almost nondescript, though the image is so blurry. His name listed at the various institutions he's worked at in the past, though his image never accompanies those mentions. There are no mentions of him at all.

His online presence is weak and that immediately makes me suspicious. Is that on purpose? What is Seamus hiding? I wonder if he's still with his girlfriend. They'd been together a long time, I could tell. She treated him with a familiarity that comes with many years of being a couple.

Yet, in the coffee shop, he spoke of me as if he's always kept tabs on me.

That's...

Creepy.

There's a rapid-fire knock on the heavy door that startles me and makes me gasp. I run to the door, throwing it open at the same exact moment.

I remember Perry's warning that I should open it for no one else but Perry. And it's not Perry standing in front of me.

It's my mother.

"Darling!" She pushes past me and rushes inside the suite while I'm there, there gaping at her, sagging against the door. Incredibly grateful that it's my mother. She turns to face me, her gaze drifting over me, her expression dismayed. "Looks like you spilled something."

I glance down, noticing the light brown splattered pattern of coffee on my sweatshirt.

"You should've already showered by now, Charlotte. There's a mess you've noticed. prep involved today," she continues.

"I just woke up," I lie as I slowly close the door, watching as she moves around the room, her nose faintly wrinkled.

“It’s so dark in here.” She marches over to the windows and yanks the curtains, the bright sunny morning light making me wince. “There’s much better.”

“You’re here early,” I say weakly, wishing I had that coffee in hand. I’m going to need plenty of caffeine to get through this.

“I realized ten o’clock wasn’t early enough to start this very important day. I called everyone last night and changed the time to nine,” she explains.

“You didn’t call me.” I scroll through my past notifications, realizing I should have. Seamus, oops, she did actually call. And I ignored it. Looks like she left a voicemail, too.

Which I also ignored—probably because I was having sex with the almost-husband.

I can’t help but smile. For once, I don’t feel nervous or unsettled thinking about Perry. It actually seems...right that we’re doing this.

married.

My stomach swarms with butterflies as the importance of today dawns on me. I’m getting married.

Married.

By tonight, I’ll be known as Charlotte Constantine. This is a big deal. Huge.

My smile fades. I hate that Seamus had to show up and taint the moment. I hate worse that Perry is speeding back toward the hotel, most likely momentsick about me.

Opening up my text messages, I send him a quick one.

Everything’s okay. My mother is with me. I’ll tell you what happened later.

I stand there’s another knock on the door and I rush to answer it, but I wasn’t through the peephole this time around.

“It’s the porter with my luggage,” Mother announces just as I confirm that she’s right. “The makeup artists and stylists are right behind me. They’ll be here any minute. Caroline and Tinsley will be here soon too.”

I open the door for the hotel employee who offers me a sheepish smile. He brings in the loaded bellman cart into the room. It’s going to turn out here in a matter of minutes and I can definitely guarantee I won’t have a chance to talk to Perry if he shows up—which he probably will. I w

as openable to explain everything that happened and I hate that.

. That's I hate it.

"Go take a shower," Mother demands once the porter leaves the room and after with his more than generous tip. "You need to get ready. But don't wash your hair! It'll be easier to work with if it's a little bit dirty."

important "I washed it yesterday," I say, in a daze as I walk over to my suitcase and open it to dig out the special bra and panty set I purchased just for this occasion—my wedding night. Sheer white fabric and lace that cost a small fortune yet consists of basically nothing.

"And put on a robe when you're finished with your shower. Lot of lotion with my You don't want any dry patches on your skin. If you'd like, I can come into the bathroom when you're ready and help you lotion your back when I suggests.

Getting Ugh no. That's the last thing I want. "It's okay. I can do it."

There's another knock on the door and the back of my neck prickles as I falls into an unawareness.

I don't know why, but I can sense that's my future husband.

"I should get that," I start but Mother puts a hand on my arm, signaling me to wait.

"I'll take care of it. You need to jump in the shower. Now," she says, steering me toward the bathroom.

worried Reluctantly I enter the bathroom but don't quite close the door. I can hear the steady murmur of conversation between the two makeup artists. Someone's phone is ringing—it might be mine, I'm not sure. I'm standing toward the open crack of the door, wishing I could see if it's Perry who's knocking, and when I hear his deep, reassuring voice, I'm about to go in.

looking "Oh no," Mother says and I can hear the displeasure in her tone. "You are the very last person who can come into this room."

visually "I need to talk to Charlotte," he says calmly, though I can practically feel the tension radiating off of him, filling the entire suite with his tense energy.

mile as "Just for a moment."

chaotic "The groom is not allowed to see the bride before the ceremony," Mother chastises.

't get a "Ma'am, that sort of thinking has been thrown out in recent years. It's not be so many photographers like to take the wedding photos before the ceremony."

ceremony,” one of the makeup artists says.

The room goes silent. Even Perry isn't talking.

I press my lips together to keep from laughing. I'm sure my mother *sh* *yournot* appreciate that remark.

“Let me in,” Perry demands, surprising me. Something heavy *ase* *and* against the door and my mother yelps. I wonder if he's trying to pu *n*ight's her. She's pretty strong when she wants to be. “I need to know that Cl *fortune* is all right.”

My heart squeezes. He's worried about me.

“You cannot come in. And she's fine,” Mother says, and I can te *me* into struggling. Most likely with the door. “See you in a few hours.”

The door slams, making me jump and I quickly close the bathroom *sagging* against it.

My stomach is in knots and I wish more than anything I could go t *es* with and reassure him that I really am all right. There's so much I need to t

still. About Seamus, and how he was the one I was with in Paris. *It*

really does mean nothing to me. Seeing him in the coffee shop left me *topping* unsettled.

Even fearful.

But none of those old feelings bubbled up. Not at all. I wasn't inter *didn't* want to throw myself at Seamus and beg him to take me ba *an* hear over it.

Over him.

I'll be okay. I have Perry in my corner. He's about to beco *r* who's husband and he cares about me. Last night only proves that. What we *to* him. was...

Magical.

What started out as horribly fake is turning into something real.

And I can't wait to walk down the aisle toward my husband.

illy feel
e vibes.

y! You

s, since
ore the

ceremony,” one of the makeup artists says.

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The door slams, making me jump and I quickly close the bathroom door, sagging against it.

My stomach is in knots and I wish more than anything I could go to Perry and reassure him that I really am all right. There's so much I need to tell him still. About Seamus, and how he was the one I was with in Paris. That he really does mean nothing to me. Seeing him in the coffee shop left me feeling unsettled.

Even fearful.

But none of those old feelings bubbled up. Not at all. I wasn't interested. I didn't want to throw myself at Seamus and beg him to take me back. I'm over it.

Over him.

I'll be okay. I have Perry in my corner. He's about to become my husband and he cares about me. Last night only proves that. What we shared was...

Magical.

What started out as horribly fake is turning into something real.

And I can't wait to walk down the aisle toward my husband.



CHAPTER TWO

Perry

I ALMOST LOST my shit the moment Louisa Lancaster slammed the door in my face, but I restrained myself. She's my almost-mother-in-law and I don't want to act like a dick toward her on my wedding day.

But damn it, I want to talk to Charlotte.

Now.

She sounded so frantic, so damn scared when she called me. She put me into a full-force panic and I raced back to the hotel to be with her. What I wanted to do was hold her and tell her it was going to be okay. That's what I

Yet I couldn't get past the barrier that was her domineering mother.

What the fuck kind of weakling am I?

Checking my phone, I see I have a text from Charlotte and I send her a quick response.

Call me as soon as you get this.

I can't get over how terrified she sounded on the phone. I'm breathing hard and with her voice shaking. What did this asshole do to her? Say to her? Who is he? I don't necessarily recognize the name, but I know McTiernans are part of the Morelli family. And I don't keep tabs on them like my brother does. He knows every single one of them by sight, even the insignificant ones.

Like the McTiernans.

They've just become more significant to me, that's for damn sure.

By the time I'm in my car and headed back to the apartment I don't own so I can get ready for a wedding that originally wasn't of my choice.

I'm on the phone with my brother, digging for information.

"What do you think of Seamus McTiernan?" I ask the moment V answers.

He's quiet for a moment, as if he has to dip into the dark recesses of his deviant mind to come up with an answer.

"I don't."

That's it. That's his final answer.

"I've never even heard of this asshole," I mutter, hitting the horn when someone cuts in front of me in traffic.

"He's a quiet member of the family. From Ireland originally, though I've heard, he was living in Paris and teaching." Winston snorts. "In other words, he's a commoner, doing God knows what and molding impressionable minds."

He says it with a sneer in his voice, and I almost want to laugh. A teacher who works what Winston regards as a basic job is beneath him.

"He was a professor at some college," Winston continues. "That's all I don't believe he works there anymore."

The lightbulb moment hits me so swiftly, I swerve my steering wheel to the right, the car veering into the next lane and nearly hitting the SUV behind me. The driver honks and gives me the finger as I speed away, it's a filling me.

Consuming me.

Seamus doing God knows what while in Paris? I could tell V exactly what.

Frantic. That fucker was *doing* my fiancée.

to her? Paris. Charlotte. Her mystery dark-haired lover.

ough I Is related to the fucking Morellis.

is close Related to Leo Morelli, the man who punched me in the face last winter at the Constantine compound. I'm supposed to put it all behind me, but that my cousin Haley married him, but I will never fully trust a Morellis.

hem by "Why are you asking about him? What does he matter?" Winston is bored, but I'd guess he's also curious. He once loved nothing more than to trash-talk Morellis and plot their demise. That was before he was domesticated.

i't even I fully planned on telling Winston what I know, but I change my voice, losing,

don't have enough details yet. I'm assuming who Seamus is to Charlotte
Winston I don't have all the facts. And I need them.

I need to talk to her first.

of his "No reason," I say, my voice casual. Like it's normal for me to be
an obscure relation to the Morellis. "I hear he's back in town."

"He is," Winston says.

Irritation sparks. "And how do you know this?"

when "I know everything that happens when it comes to the Morellis
McTiernans. I keep tabs on them at all times—you know this. Pretend
I'll show up to your wedding reception. A bunch of them will be the
words, brother explains.

young If my brother knows everything about the Morellis and McTiernans
didn't he know about my almost-wife's involvement with one of them?

Anyone "Did you know about Charlotte and a certain Morelli?
Like a Specifically Seamus McTiernan? Did they have a relationship or a
whatever the fuck?" I ask him outright.

ough I He hesitates, and in that one single pause, I realize the asshole did
"Fucker," I mutter before he can say anything.

heel to "Look, I only just found out about it, but what was the point in telling
next to before the ceremony?"

ritation "You didn't tell me because you knew I'd be mad and I might w
on this shit show of a wedding," I accuse. "He's the one, right? The one
was involved with?"

Winston A ragged exhale leaves my brother. "Yes. They were—involved.
short lived, she was humiliated, because he was engaged to another woman.
She ran home. The end."

"The end? That's it? How long have you been sitting on this?"

"It doesn't matter."

fucking "It does! I don't like being lied to, Winny. Even if it's supposedly
us now own benefit." I'm quiet as I drive. Silently fuming.

i. "Are you mad?" he finally asks.

sounds "Hell yes, I am! She fucked a Morelli!"

than to "Technically, he's a McTiernan."

became "Morelli, McDickface, it's all the same." I blow out a harsh
"Something happened between the two of them this morning."

mind. I "Wait a minute. Between Charlotte and McTiernan? I need c

tte, but Winston demands.

I launch into the story, explaining to him what Charlotte told me, wasn't much. Even though I originally told myself I wasn't going to bring up brother any of the details until I had more of them, it all comes pouring me anyway.

"Do you think she put that together?"

Hearing him say it out loud makes anger flare in my blood. "I know."

"You trust her?"

"I thought I did."

"You should ask her about it."

"Not like I can bring him up in casual conversation during our wedding reception," I mutter. "I'm still pissed you kept this from me."

"You'll get over it." Winston says it with such assuredness, because he knows it's true.

Damn it.

"And why the hell will a bunch of Morellis and McTiernans be getting married at the wedding reception again?" At the light, I whip my car to the right, turning my car screeching on the pavement, the back end of my car squirrely.

"We're putting on a show, little brother. Uniting with the Lancaster talk outfitting power move and you know it. You wedding and bedding a Lancaster shemakes you a king." Winston actually sounds proud, the power-motherfucker.

"Start calling me king, then," I demand, my grip on the steering wheel tight, my fingers start to cramp up.

"Ha, you wish. I'm the king of this family. You're just the second son." He ends the call before I can say anything else, the music listening to before I got on the phone now flooding the interior of my car. I turn up the volume, letting the angry guitar and heavy bass beat through my veins.

I should be feeling on top of the world. I'm about to marry a woman who is fine as fuck and a nice piece of ass in bed. I sound like a callous even in my own thoughts, but damn. That's exactly what Charlotte is. She's also sweet and sexy and gives me those looks—the shy glance that says so much without her uttering a word. With the big blue eyes and full lips, mouth and tempting body. I gave into my earlier resistance because

every right to. She's about to become my wife.

, which Mine.

tell my And no one else's.

g out of Now I feel as if the rug has been ripped out from under my feet. The mention of a Morelli relative terrorizing her at the hotel and knowing that particular Morelli offshoot was in Paris. Just as she was.

I don't It all adds up, and Winston just confirmed it. She fucked that guy, now he's sniffing around her, for what? Looking for another chance? I can't believe for a minute it was a coincidental meeting in a hotel coffee shop the morning of our wedding. I bet he followed her. Made sure she saw him so they could what? Engage in casual conversation? Make nice with each other at the wedding and ask banal questions like, "What have you been up to?"

Please. That doesn't track.

because he Did she flirt with him, or did she tell that asshole to leave her alone after getting married? Did her heart pang at first sight of him, remembering the time they shared in her past? Is she not over him? I always got that sense that maybe I'm wrong. Pretty sure he did a number on her and it messed up her head. She's distrustful of men.

Of me.

because he is a And now he's back and possibly trying to earn a spot in her heart after being abandoned in the first place.

and hungry I punch the steering wheel and curse under my breath, full-blown anger coursing through my blood, heating it up, making me hot. I pull into the parking garage of our apartment building, reminding myself I need to get the fuck down, but it's no use.

and sorry-ass I'm pissed.

because I was By the time I'm entering our apartment, I'm motivated by rage. I'm not bothering to try and hide it. Doja Cat takes one look at me and speeds into Charlotte's room.

Smart kitty. Not that I'd hurt Doja but I'd want to avoid me too.

and who Jasper makes his appearance, regal in his black suit, his hands behind his back, his expression somber as usual. The guy gives nothing away.

"Mr. Constantine. Congratulations on your wedding day," he greets me.

because I feel that The sour feeling in my stomach reminds me that I'm not thrilled about any of it. "Jasper, I need a drink."

I have Jasper's expression never wavers. "Anything in particular, sir?"

Damn, I love this guy. It doesn't matter if it's not even ten in the n
—Jasper's going to hook me up with an alcoholic beverage, no qu
asked. "Some of that good scotch Lancaster left behind, I think."

t at the "Very fine choice, sir." Jasper dips his head before he makes his
ng thatthe bar. Within a minute he's standing in front of me once more, h
over the drink, which I accept with a gratefully muttered thanks.

guy and I drain the glass of every last drop of golden liquid. It burns going
I don'tsettling in my stomach like fire and I hiss a breath in between my
hop theJasper takes the glass without asking and pours me another.

him so Double this time.

h other I knock that one back too.

"Sir, I suggest you slow down." Jasper snatches the empty glass fr
fingers, right as my phone rings. I automatically answer it, not checki
e, she'swas calling.

ig what Big mistake.

ise, but "Where are you?" It's my mother. Her voice is sharp and hushe
with hershe doesn't want anyone to know she's on the phone with me. "Winst
he spoke to you almost thirty minutes ago yet you're still not here!"

Oh fuck. I was supposed to go to the compound to get ready
that hewedding with my brothers. My tuxedo and everything else that goe
with it are already there, waiting for me. "I'm on my way."

n anger "Hurry," she snaps before she ends the call.

nto the Damn. The dragon lady has arrived, and she's breathing her fire :
to calmme.

"I need to go, Jasper," I announce as I rise from the couch, so quic
head swims and I nearly stumble.

and not "Already leaving for the wedding? Don't you need to get ready
ls awayJasper asks, his tone even.

"I don't have time." I make my way to the door. I don't bother telli
where I'm getting ready. He can figure it out, I'm sure. "I need to go."

uind his "Are you capable of driving, sir? After those two drinks?" Jasper
brow.

s. I wave a hand. "I'll be fine."

by this. "I'm assuming you haven't eaten anything today yet?"

"That would be correct." I snap my fingers and point at him. "Do
me any shit, Jasper. It's my wedding day."

morning He ignores my statement, his expression bland. I can never get a questionsthis guy. “And where is Miss Charlotte?”

“At the hotel. Getting ready with her mother.” I think of my boy way to wife, naked in that hotel bed, wearing only the earrings I gave her. My standingpangs and I shove the feeling aside.

My heart isn’t involved in this. Not at all.

g down, “And you’re going...where?”

y teeth. “Home. To Bishop’s Landing.”

Jasper frowns, taking a step backwards as I stride past him, heading the door. “I thought the wedding was—”

“I’m getting ready with my family first. My brothers. A nice moment for us at the compound before we head over to the ceremony’s being held. After that, there’s going to be a reception for like, over five hundred motherfuckers, where we can run faces into the fact that the Lancasters and the Constantines are now

1. As if Maybe those Morellis will get the hint and finally back off. What do you think, Jasper? Do you know anything about your favorite Lancaster

Morelli? Oh wait, he’s not a direct Morelli. His last name is McTiernan for the I make a face, imagining what the fucker must look like. What he means alongmean to Charlotte. How she might never be able to forget him.

My chest aches and I rub at it absently, mentally telling myself to get it.

all over Jasper’s frown deepens. “I can’t say that I do, no.”

“That’s too bad. I’m looking for information.” I glance down, realizing I still have the glass clutched in my hand and I bring it to my mouth, drinking the last of it. “About Charlotte and her first—love.”

“First?” I choke on the last word. Did she love him?

Maybe I don’t want to know.

ing him “Sir.” I glance over to find Jasper watching me with concern in his eyes. “You do realize our Miss Charlotte has had her heart broken by every other man she’s ever loved.”

A thread of misery courses through me at the implication of his statement.

“It would be a shame if you broke her heart too,” he finishes, closing his lips together. Almost as if he’s said too much, which he sort of has.

Don’t give His words make me feel like shit, when they shouldn’t. I’m the one who was betrayed here. Someone’s keeping secrets, and it’s not me.

read on "I don't plan on breaking her heart," I say firmly.
And I mean it. Our hearts aren't involved in this marriage endeavor.
beautiful "If you say so, sir." Jasper inclines his head in my direction, but I can
ly heart He doesn't believe me.
That pisses me off even more.
"Well, I've gotta go, Jasper old chap." I walk up to him, slapping
the shoulder. "I have a wedding to attend. Mine."
"I'll call Mrs. Constantine and let her know you're on your way."
ling for "There's no need. She knows I'm coming." I shake my head and drop
glass on a nearby table, not giving a shit when I hear it fall on its side and
e little onto the floor.
ie hotel I'm out the door before Jasper can do or say a damn thing. By the time
a giant I'm in the parking garage, climbing into my car, I realize I've been checked out
ib their the entire time.
united. It's either I laugh or fall into a complete rage. I don't know what's
do you I pull out of the garage, the tires squealing when I turn onto the street.
r and adon't like being made a fool of. I've endured that sort of treatment from my
n." family for most of my life, and while it's complete bullshit and I hate it, I
e might also tolerate it because it's my family. My brother. My mother.
I'm not going to tolerate my future wife making me look like a fool.
get over fool.
And I sure as hell am not going to let a Morelli get away with it either.

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And I mean it. Our hearts aren’t involved in this marriage endeavor.

“If you say so, sir.” Jasper inclines his head in my direction, but I can tell. He doesn’t believe me.

That pisses me off even more.

“Well, I’ve gotta go, Jasper old chap.” I walk up to him, slapping him on the shoulder. “I have a wedding to attend. Mine.”

“I’ll call Mrs. Constantine and let her know you’re on your way.”

“There’s no need. She knows I’m coming.” I shake my head and drop the glass on a nearby table, not giving a shit when I hear it fall on its side and roll onto the floor.

I’m out the door before Jasper can do or say a damn thing. By the time I’m in the parking garage, climbing into my car, I realize I’ve been chuckling the entire time.

It’s either I laugh or fall into a complete rage. I don’t know what’s worse.

I pull out of the garage, the tires squealing when I turn onto the street. I don’t like being made a fool of. I’ve endured that sort of treatment from my family for most of my life, and while it’s complete bullshit and I hate it, I also tolerate it because it’s my family. My brother. My mother.

I’m not going to tolerate my future wife making me look like a damn fool.

And I sure as hell am not going to let a Morelli get away with it either.



CHAPTER THREE

Charlotte

“DON’T MOVE!”

I go completely still as one of the stylists Mother hired for the day behind me and fluffs my train, making sure it’s spread completely out on the floor. I turn my head in tiny increments, glancing over my shoulder to check the silk and lace, sucking in a breath when I see it.

The train is absolutely beautiful, trimmed in such intricate lace. The dress is gorgeous too. I feel like a queen, which was what I wanted, and now I’m completely made up, trussed up and clutching a giant bouquet of various flowers, including bloodred- and cream-colored roses, I’m a little in shock the moment is finally here.

“Oh my goodness, darling. You’re a vision.”

I glance up to find my mother watching me, her eyes filled with tears as she clutches her hands just below her chin. “Don’t make me cry,” I whisper, not wanting to ruin the makeup that took the artist almost two hours to do.

When I looked in the mirror after he was through, I almost didn’t recognize myself. Pretty sure Perry won’t recognize me either. I look like a different person. I feel like one too.

This entire day so far has been completely surreal.

We’re waiting for the ceremony to start. I’m hidden away in a tent made just for brides-to-be and her wedding party to stay in. I can hear the delicate strains of music playing in the gardens, coming from the quartet Mother hired to perform. The low murmurs of conversation. Everyone is waiting for my arrival and my stomach cramps with nerves.

I’m suddenly petrified.

“Don’t cry, Charlotte.” Mother dashes her fingers under her eyes, when Tinsley approaches her and gives her a comforting side hug, as been a part of our family her entire life.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she,” Tinsley says as she presses her head against my mother’s, the both of them watching me. “The dress is absolutely gorgeous, Charlotte. Perry is going to be so pleased when he sees you.”

I don’t say anything. Just offer her a small smile as my answer. My hands are shaking as I clutch the bouquet, the heady scent of roses drifting through the air, filling my senses.

Everyone is ready for the wedding ceremony, including me.

So what are we waiting for? The groom?

Oh God.

My knees squats What if...what if Perry bailed? On our wedding day? What if he didn’t show up? No note, no call, just poof.

My hands shudder to Gone.

Was it because he couldn’t talk to me? He could be making horrible assumptions over what happened. Maybe I’m too much trouble. Too much drama. Too much...

My hands made of Me.

My hands little in “Hmm.”

My head snaps up at the sound Caroline makes when she stops talking beside her daughter, her gaze narrowing as she studies me with that ashen gaze. I start to sweat the longer she looks at me, and I wonder what she can see.

Wonder more if she’s disappointed in her choice of bride for her precious son. Or maybe she knows he’s already left me, and she’s the one who didn’t tell me the wedding has been called off.

My hands shake like a Nausea hits me, my stomach swimming. Oh God.

I think I’m going to faint.

“You’re stunning,” she finally proclaims and my shoulders sag with my room at her approval, which is ridiculous.

Only a few moments ago, I believed myself to be a queen, but now I’m string wrong. I’m nothing but a mere princess. A mere lady in waiting. People comes to Caroline Constantine.

“It’s almost time,” the wedding planner announces as she waves her hands toward the door. “Everyone needs to get into their places! Now!”

I forget all about my worry over Perry abandoning me at the altar.

smiling all fall into line and exit the room to wait at the entrance to the garden. If she's everyone is ahead of me getting into line with me at the back. My father approaches, his expression stern, yet still handsome in his tuxedo.

close to "You look lovely," he offers gruffly as he stands beside me.

solutely "Thank you." I keep my head bent, trying to fight the emotion that threatens to overtake. I don't know why I feel the sudden need to cry. This is an important moment in my life. A day I'll never forget, for a hundred sorts of reasons.

And for whatever odd reason, I still want my father's approval. His words, even though deep down, I know it's a complete waste of my time.

"I want you to know..." My father's voice drifts and my gaze jerks in that direction, watching as he seems to struggle with what to say next. I wrap my arm around his, my lips falling open, ready to ask if he's all right. He finally speaks once more. "I recognize you're making a sacrifice with your life. For the family."

in his own I'm quiet, sensing he needs to say more.

so much More like I *need* him to say more. To acknowledge me and what I'm doing for him.

For the Lancasters.

"And while I don't necessarily approve of Perry Constantine as your stand-in husband, I assume he won't treat you badly. He seems to have—respecting you," he continues.

he sees. His gaze finds mine and I watch him, still not speaking. The wedding planner is releasing people out into the garden. Caroline Constantine is going escorted out on the arm of Winston and taken to her seat in the front before he goes to stand beside Perry as his best man.

I hope Perry is out there. They wouldn't start this without the bride and groom being present, would they?

with relief Grant leads Mother out next, Finn and Crew following behind them. Keaton and Tinsley remain, standing directly in front of us and the moment I was clamp down, making me tremble.

when it The moment is finally here. I'm about to walk out there and pledge my love and loyalty to Perry in front of family and strangers. I'm going to give him my vows to him, clutch his hands in mine and promise myself to him for the rest of my life.

"Just—watch out, Charlotte. The Constantines are a ruthless bunch, but as we know Perry seems the softest of them all, but he is still a Constantine."

gardens.won't want to cross him."

father He's the one who wanted this arranged marriage. So why is he v
me?

A case of conscience? Too late for that.

on that "Let's go," Miranda the wedding planner murmurs to us, and I
y, but ITinsley and Keaton are already gone, halfway down the aisle and hea
, for allthe arbor to the strains of the delicate music playing.

Once they're in place, the music stops, and heads swivel in our di
s love. I steel my spine, my father's words on repeat in my brain as I take
crowd of people. The aisle covered in deep red rose petals. The arbor
s in hiswe're to be married is laden with greenery and roses as well and I k
tightengaze focused on that arbor, as if I can't dare to look at the people s
when hebeneath it.

th your Such as my future husband.

"Are you ready?" my father asks me.

Taking a deep breath, I nod. "Yes."

hat I'm We start forward, the music launching into the wedding marc
guests rise to their feet, their expressions curious and my father squee
arm in his, holding me steady as he leads me to my future.

as your To my husband.

ject for My feet crush the delicate petals beneath, the pointed heels of m
piercing them. I hear a few indrawn gasps. Whispers and soft exclai
weddingover the beauty of my dress. It sparkles and shines, the train dragging
rtine isme cutting through all those petals. I'm clutching my bouquet tightl
ont rowcan still see the way the flowers tremble.

Much like my hands.

groom I allow my gaze to find Perry's and he's watching me, his eyes l
blue and fathomless. His hands are clutched behind his back, his
n. Onlyrigid, his strong form filling the tuxedo beautifully. I remember hi
nervesearlier this morning, in my bed at the hotel. Naked and war
affectionate.

dge my He looks nothing like that man now. Instead, he's cold. His expi
) repeatblank.

orever. My steps falter and my father clutches me tighter, sending me a
unch. Ilook. I smile in response, not wanting him to know how rattled I am,
ie. Youcan sense it.

I'm sure he can.

We stop directly in front of the pastor performing the ceremony. My father lifts my veil and folds it away from my face, as he was told yesterday to press a kiss to my cheek before he offers me to Perry. My feet realize steps forward, offering his arm to me and I pull away from my father's hand. The gesture symbolic as I go to stand beside Perry.

He's quiet. He doesn't even smile in my direction and disappointment crashes through me, though I lift my chin, pretending I'm composed in the unaffected. We turn our heads to the pastor, who smiles kindly at us as he launches into his practiced speech. Something I've heard a hundred times already on TV shows and in movies. At other weddings I've attended standing past.

The words are familiar, but bring with them a gravity that I didn't realize before. Maybe because they weren't said directly to me. I nod my head for a moment, absorbing his words, readjusting my arm that's draped around Perry's. Unexpectedly, his hand settles on top of mine, his fingers warm and reassuring and I glance up to find him watching me.

There's a question in his gaze, one I don't know the answer to, but I'm not sure what he's trying to communicate with me. Instead, all I can do is smile, and he does the same for me before he returns his attention to the pastor.

As do I, squaring my shoulders. The shaking stops. My heart rate behind returns to normal as we each repeat the vows to the other as they instruct. I hand my bouquet to Tinsley so I can slip the wedding ring onto Perry's finger. He then slips a band onto mine, one that is covered in diamonds all the way around. An eternity ring.

It's stunning. Unexpected. I'm wearing the necklace he had sent me in the suite earlier this morning, along with the matching earrings he gave me from last night. I am dripping in diamonds given to me by my husband, and I know this started out as a fake wedding, I can't hide the very real feelings that are currently swarming within me.

This is an actual marriage—real and binding and true. A claim on my part. Perry's part. I am a Constantine now, I think as I study the ring on my finger. How it sparkles in the waning sunlight. That golden glow bathes Perry's face perfectly, gilding his cheekbones and adding an unusual light to his eyes. Eyes that are now trained on me as I hear the pastor say, "You may now

your bride.”

ny. My Perry’s hands wrap around mine and he tugs me close, his mouth
d to domine in a far too brief kiss. More like a peck. I blink up at him, startled
/ fiancélack of emotion I see on his face and I part my lips, ready to wh
ner, thequestion to him when the pastor announces, “Ladies and gentlemen, I
Mrs. Perry Constantine.”

intment My husband steers me so we’re both facing the applauding
pletelyThere’s not much enthusiastic cheering. It’s more like polite clappi
beforethat’s all right. I can’t expect much more for a relationship that w
d timesrecently created.

d in the The string quartet begins to play once more and Perry leads me do
aisle, a smile pasted onto his handsome face as he seemingly acknow
’ve noteveryone in attendance.

dip my I study everyone as we walk past, smashing the rose petals into
woundbits with our shoes. The smiles on their faces as they watch us
strongFamiliar family members make up some of the audience and I smile a
in acknowledgement at my cousins. My aunts and uncles. Ple
becauseLancasters turned out for this event, and I recognize a few Consta
an do isfaces as well.

to the As we near the end of the aisle, I spot the wedding planner waiting
an anxious expression on her face. Once we’re close enough, she
slowlytalking.

pastor “Photos, you two! We need lots of lots of photos and we m
ng ontostarted,” Miranda says firmly as she steers us back into the small room
in largeI waited for the ceremony only minutes before. “Let the crowd trickle
then we’ll start the session.”

over to She shoves us into the room and shuts the door in my face before
ave meeven utter a word. Leaving me all alone with my groom.

while I My husband.

feelings Slowly I turn to face him, my train getting twisted around my leg
checking his phone—actually checking his phone rather than looking
ing onand telling me I’m the most beautiful creature he’s ever seen, which I
finger.really love to hear right about now.

y’s face “What are you doing? I ask, my voice soft. My emotions turbulent.

is eyes. “Taking care of business,” he answers.

ow kiss He doesn’t even look up from his phone. Not once.

A flicker of annoyance makes my eye twitch.

finding “It’s our wedding day,” I remind him, letting my irritation show.

l by the “And this marriage is part of business, am I right?” His gaze lifts t
isper aas if daring me to deny his statement.

Mr. and I stare back at him, my throat going dry. At a complete loss over
say.

crowd. “I have a question for you.” He returns his attention to his phor
ng, butmore, not waiting for my reply. “Was this meeting between y
as onlyMcTiernan earlier—planned?”

I gape at him, shock coursing through my blood, chilling me to th
own the“*What?* Of course it wasn’t.”

vledges “Really.” His stormy gaze meets mine and I can see the doubt th
doesn’t believe me.

colorful Will he ever?

go by.

nd nod

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antines’

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g at me

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A flicker of annoyance makes my eye twitch.

“It’s our wedding day,” I remind him, letting my irritation show.

“And this marriage is part of business, am I right?” His gaze lifts to mine, as if daring me to deny his statement.

I stare back at him, my throat going dry. At a complete loss over what to say.

“I have a question for you.” He returns his attention to his phone once more, not waiting for my reply. “Was this meeting between you and McTiernan earlier—planned?”

I gape at him, shock coursing through my blood, chilling me to the bone. “*What?* Of course it wasn’t.”

“Really.” His stormy gaze meets mine and I can see the doubt there. He doesn’t believe me.

Will he ever?



CHAPTER FOUR

Perry

IT IS ABSOLUTE torture, continuously posing next to Charlotte, putting my smiling face for the photographer, Susan. The same woman who took our engagement photos, and she's just as enthusiastic as the last time we were with her. She's directing the entire wedding party and our families to get here, move there, smile wider, smile brighter, look up, look down. Readjusting our positions, our poses.

It's endless.

None of it seems to bother my bride. Charlotte is absolutely serene and quiet and doing exactly what she's asked to do, no complaints, no obvious nerves showing, which is the complete opposite of her behavior when we had our engagement photos taken only what...a month ago, a few weeks?

It's astounding, the transformation.

Charlotte's posture is perfect, her skin glowing and her smile is as bright as I think I've ever seen it. As if she's happy to be doing this. Happy to finally be married to me.

While I'm over here stewing in my own shit, still confused by the sudden appearance from her supposed first lover. A man who is not-so-distantly related to the goddamn Morellis.

I can't believe he's the man she was with in Paris. The one who broke her heart and treated her like discarded trash. I wish I could ask him a few questions, but it's not like I can bring it up in the middle of the photo session documenting our marriage, for Christ's sake.

The timing of his appearance is suspicious though.

After I asked if their earlier run-in was planned, we didn't bring again. I suppose I could've asked more questions, but I was afraid I'd be angry. So we remained in that little room while Miranda the dictator/wedding planner shoved us into the room while our wedding guests cleared out. We were alone, the two of us eyeing each other warily after I was such a shit to her.

After our silent stare down, Charlotte finally asked one single question. "Can you help me with my train?"

I, of course, assisted her with it, all the while thinking of her with a man. Kissing him. Touching him. Pressing her naked body against his. Letting him slide inside of her snug—

"Perry! Take that scowl off your face!" Susan snaps.

Realizing that I am indeed scowling, I relax my features as best I can. I look down at my smile as if I haven't a care in the world while I continue to stand next to the radiant bride.

There is no denying she is absolutely beautiful today. Gorgeous. Her nerves were affecting her earlier, when she walked down the aisle with her father, who didn't look pleased.

But when does he ever look pleased?

Charlotte's expression reminded me of someone who was being choked out, not their death, and for a moment I forgot all about the asshole who should be focusing on making Charlotte feel reassured. I touched her hand. I held her down.

And now I'm the one who's ragged with nerves. Exhausted and need a drink.

Seriously, I'm looking forward to getting fucked up at the reception. Slowly, one by one, our wedding party is set free. Until it's just my bride posing for photos as Susan directs us.

"Kiss her, Perry," she demands and Charlotte turns toward me, instantly parted and ready, her expression expectant.

The kiss I deliver is simple. But the spark between us ignites, just like before, and unable to help myself, I kiss her again.

And again.

"Oh, that's good," Susan encourages, her shutter going off at a steady pace. "You two are adorable."

I pull away before I lose my head, noting the dazed expression on Charlotte's face. She blinks, a faint smile curling her lips. "I thought

him up were mad at me.”

get too “I’m not mad,” is my immediate response, though it’s a lie.

wedding I’m definitely angry. Not at her. Not completely. More like I’m
were all the situation. At being duped. At having someone show up unexpect
her. Someone older and potentially more powerful than I am.

tion. As in, he may have more power over Charlotte. She chose him a
while I was assigned to her.

another Big difference.

at his. Realizing quick that Susan will never stop photographing us, I find
a stop to it. “We need to greet our reception guests.”

The disappointment on Susan’s face is clear, but she lets us go, which
can and damn good thing because we’re paying her, for God’s sake.

to my Charlotte’s hand, we leave the gardens and head down the corridor
the ballroom where our wedding reception is taking place. My stomach

is. The hurried, Charlotte’s two for my every one, and by the time we’re stop
with her front of the closed double doors where the party is happening, Char
out of breath, her breasts rising and falling with her every inhale and ex

I notice this, of course. Every piece of her intrigues me, and I think
; led to—yet again—naked and flushed and eager for me to be inside of her
wed up hoped for a repeat performance tonight. I may not have been on board
Calmed of this marriage stuff at first, but now that we’re here, I deserve
advantage of the perks to being married.

eding a As in, having sex with this very sexy, desirable woman.

Again.

n. “Do I look all right?” she asks as she turns toward me.

me and She looks fucking perfect.

“You look fine,” I tell her instead, and I see the vague disappointment
her lips her gaze.

Damn it, I don’t want to lay it on too thick. What if she’s
t as it’s considering the many ways she could possibly escape our marriage?
me?

And what if she’s lying? This could all be a big show for my benefit
a rapid and our families. She acts like an innocent, virginal bride but we know
truth. She claims she wants to get away from her father, and I know
sion on asshole, but is she a willing participant in this game her family is
ght you with mine?

I suppose I could be nicer. Lay on the charm and encourage her to want to be with me instead of acting cold and indifferent. It's our wedding day, for Christ's sake. What the fuck is wrong with me?

Since when do I give in so easily?

I'm a Constantine, damn it. Enough with the pity party.

After all, A shaky exhale leaves her and she waves her hands, as if her palms are sweaty. "Okay. Let's do this."

She's about to reach for the door handle but I grab hold of her arm, pulling her to me before I viciously kiss her. Claim her. Remind her that she's mine, the one she was with last night. I'm the one whose diamonds she's wearing. I'm the one who gave her that ring on her finger.

Taking We break away from each other at the same time, the both of us breathing heavily. Reaching out, she brushes her finger against the corner of my lips. "My lipstick," she murmurs, showing me her fingertip that's colored with a soft pink hue.

Charlotte is "Marked me," I whisper, smiling at her. "Let's go, wife."

Exhale. Pleasure suffuses her face and I reach past her, opening the door. A man in a suit standing guard, and the moment he spots us, he looks at her. I'd microphone he was clutching in his hand and switches it on.

For all "Ladies and gentlemen, our special guests have finally arrived! Welcome to take Mrs. Perry Constantine!"

There is cheering and laughter and glasses being raised in our honor. Our guests spot us. I can feel the love and warmth buzzing in this room. It's all for me. For Charlotte.

For us.

I also notice the familiar faces mixed among the strangers. Family, friends, and business associates. It feels like everyone from the firm's offices is here. All of my siblings and their significant others. The already Lancasters there as well, I recognize them thanks to their icy stares and escape expressions.

"Ready to do this?" I ask her.

Benefit— Her smile is soft, as is the glow in her eyes. "Yes. Let's go greet the guests."

He's an
playing



hat sheIT WAS EXHAUSTING, talking to everyone who's at the wedding reception. Finally we get a break and are sitting at our table, surrounded by our wedding party, which is actually quite small. My brothers and their women accompany them, as well as Charlotte's brothers. Grant actually has a girlfriend who would tolerate that asshole—and she seems quite taken with him. My arms aren't snuggled close together at the table, just on the other side of Charlotte.

My wife has already had two full glasses of champagne and no one at the waist, dinner, but I'm not going to tell her what to do.

hat I'm Hell, I'm a few drinks in myself. I need to withstand the barrage of questions that have been thrown at us since we walked into the gorgeously decorated ballroom. The Lancasters spared no expense. There are flowers everywhere—fucking every available open spot you see is covered with any lips. The room is heady with their rich scent.

with the There are lights strung everywhere, dripping from the ceiling with ropes. Candles and candelabra scattered all over the tables, their gentle light flickering. The food is rich, the alcohol is flowing and the chandeliers there's a twinkle and shine down upon us. Like we're living a goddamn fairy tale.

ifts the I'm enjoying it, I can't lie, but I'm also waiting for the pretense to end to speak. There are Morellis here, beyond the ones involved with our father. Mr. and Mrs. directly. I recognize their faces. Their dark hair and black, soulless eyes.

Their arrogant airs and fake smiles. I'm on guard, waiting for a party member or when a relative of theirs to show his face. To reveal himself to me and my bride. I know—and I know who he is. But so far, there is no sign of Seamus McTiernan anywhere.

“You look ready to cut a bitch,” Winston says as he pulls his chair closer to mine. I'm guessing he's in the mood for conversation. “And I'm not talking about your beautiful bride, either.”

Malcyon “No, I definitely don't want to cut her,” I agree, my gaze sweeping over the room as I clutch my drink glass with my fingertips.

id regal “Looking for someone in particular?” Winston lifts his brows in question.

“Don't say his name out loud.” I send him a death look, quickly glancing over at Charlotte to make sure she didn't hear us. She's too engaged in our conversation with Grant's saintly girlfriend to notice us.

“Is he here?” I ask my brother. “Because if he is, I'd like to personally escort him the fuck out.”

Winston chuckles. “Look at you, getting all territorial over a woman you barely know.”

on, and “I know her well enough,” I tell him. “And she’s my wife now. Wedding touches what’s mine.”

company “I haven’t seen him,” my brother says, glancing around the room—whose expression impassive. “There are plenty of Morellis here though. As they couple of McTiernans.”

“I’ll rip his face off if he shows up and even tries to talk to my wife. I don’t much practically snarl before bringing my glass to my lips and draining the rest of it.

rage of “He might make an appearance.” Winston sounds amused. As if he’s surprised to see me get violent on my wedding day. “I wouldn’t put it past him.”

flowers “He’s a ballsy son of a bitch, then,” I mutter, wishing I had another bouquet. “Just like the rest of the Morelli clan.” Winston’s lips tip up in a small smile. “You and the wifey good?”

in long “Wifey?” I raise a brow, sending a quick glance in Charlotte’s direction before I return my attention to my brother. “We’re all right.”

s above “You seemed pissed at the altar.”

le. “Felt a little tense. Not gonna lie.” My expression turns grim. I don’t want to fall, so I literally feel it transform. “Didn’t help, what happened earlier this morning?”

family “Hey. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. About your wife’s eyes. McTiernan,” Winston says, genuine sympathy in his gaze.

rticular I shrug a shoulder, trying to act like it’s no big deal, but I’m still

le. And surprised my brother would apologize. That’s not like him. “Whatever. I’m still stuck on the fact that he magically appeared. His timing was perfect. Just...too close to our wedding. She sees him literally the morning of the wedding. How coincidental is that?”

ing the “I’ll do a little digging,” Winston says, his expression turning thoughtful. “See what I can come up with in regards to this Seamus asshole. Look into his professional and personal life.”

estion. “I’d appreciate it.” Relief hits me. As does the realization that I’m being very grateful for my brother and his shady-ass skillset right now. “I’ll report back to me as soon as you know?”

“Aren’t you going on a honeymoon?”

sonally I shake my head. “We didn’t plan anything.”

“Oh. Right.” Winston smothers the smile that’s trying to appear on his face. “Okay. That’s unfortunate.”

Huh. I think he’s hiding something, but I’m not questioning it.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Charlotte

I'M DRUNK.

Drunk at my own wedding reception. Basking in the love and attention that's being thrust upon me. Our guests' words of congratulations fill me with a fizzy happiness that reminds me of the bubbles in my champagne. Their admiring tone when they compliment my dress, my hair, my face makes me smile uncontrollably. I'm happy.

Legitimately happy for what feels like the first time in a while.

Or maybe it's all the alcohol I'm consuming. Nonstop champagne. I stop drinking it. I tried to eat earlier but my stomach cramped, and I'm nervous. The vibe my husband is giving off is...

Unsettling.

He's not happy and I don't know exactly why. He's also acting off, and I wonder what I did to make him angry. We haven't been able to talk about my seeing Seamus this morning, and I'm sure that has something to do with his shift in mood.

I try not to let it bother me.

After the speeches were given—one by my mother who started crying in the middle of it and made me cry, and the other from Winston who said some wonderful and sometimes vulgar things about his brother—I move from table to table, trying to speak with everyone I know. I visited with my cousins. Whit was there with his fiancée, Summer, and they're in blissful love. He keeps a hand on her at all times, as if he never wants to let her go. I wonder what that's like, experiencing a love like that. Having a

enraptured with you, he doesn't ever want you out of his sight.

I chat with Whit's sisters Sylvie and Carolina. They're both blonde with similar features and the Lancaster icy blue eyes, the both of them blonde like me. We could all pass as sisters, we look so much alike.

But I'm nothing like them. Not really. Sylvie is manic, her pupil her mannerisms unusual. She used to be obsessed with death, which me when I was younger. Carolina is more reserved and doesn't say I've always felt as if we have more in common than any of my other c
"Hey."

I turn to find my younger brother, Crew, standing in front handsome in his tux and looking so grown up. He just turned eighte last month and there's always this undercurrent of tension running t attention him, just beneath his skin. As if he's pissed at the world and wants to ne with of his anger out on it.

e glass. Which I suppose I can't blame him. It seems to be a toxic trait lowers, Lancaster men—their anger. They all have it. Every generation. My and uncles, they're all mad as hell. Whit used to be a nightmare eventually his wife calmed him down some. Grant was terrible, the . I can't seems a tad sweeter now thanks to his girlfriend, Alyssa.

felt too Only a tad though.

"Hi." I smile and practically throw myself at Crew, closing my e pressing my cheek to the lapel of his jacket when he gives me a li closed squeeze. We are not an affectionate family either, but Crew and I wei e to talk when we were younger. I considered him my best friend at one point, ig to do I never knew exactly how he felt about me.

Which is fine. He grew distant as he got older, but I understood w father isn't one to encourage close relationships among his childr ying in probably didn't want Crew to get soft by spending too much time with ho said Ridiculous and awful, but true. And us Lancasters—especially the d from—are expected to do what their fathers say, no questions asked.

with my "You seem happy, Charlotte," he says once we pull away from fully in other. "Is that Perry dude treating you okay?"

to stop "That Perry dude is my husband, and yes, he's treating me just smile, swaying toward my brother and he slings his arm arou man so shoulders, tucking me close to his side. "The ceremony was beautiful you think?"

“It was nice. And this is quite the party.” He glances down beautiful, affection filling his gaze. “I’m really happy for you, but just...be a brightokay?”

I frown. “Be careful of what?”

As large, “Your husband. Your new in-laws. All of it. You don’t know the scaredreally,” he reminds me. “And while they might seem like they’re great much.welcome you into the family, you need to keep your guard up. Don’t cousins. them.”

He’s right. I know he is. But that’s the last thing I want to hear of me,wedding day. “I’ll be fine.”

Even only “I hope so.” His smile is almost pained. “You lead too much with throughheart, when you should be protecting it at all costs. It’s your best and take allquality. Look what happened the last time you surrendered your heart someone. It got stomped on.”

Among I blink at him, hating the reminder. Hating worse that it came from fatherone brother I trust more than the others, though maybe he’s the one e, untilwho’ll be completely honest with me. “I’m not in love with him, Crew though he “Yet you married him.”

“Because I was bartered off to him.” I lower my voice. “I didn’t choice.”

Yes and “Right, so don’t look at him with stars in your eyes or whatever the ngeringHe scowls, seemingly irritated he would even say such a thing. “Keep e closewalls up. Don’t let him—them—hurt you.”

Though I part my lips, automatically ready to defend the Constantines who interrupted.

Hey. Our “Hey, everyone! It’s time for Perry and Charlotte to have their first en. Heas a married couple!” the DJ suddenly announces.

Me. I pull away from Crew, grateful for the distraction. “I need to go.”

He males “You’re throwing yourself completely into this wedding bullshit you?” The gleam in his eyes tells me he’s not impressed.

From each He probably thinks I’m an idiot.

Well, what am I supposed to do? At least I’m out from under my fine.” I control once and for all.

And my “Yes.” I lift my chin. “I am.”

I, don’t I turn away from Crew before he can say anything else and pick skirts, hurrying toward the dance floor. I spot Perry standing by the DJ

at me, his gaze alighting on mine when he spots me, a flickering of irritation, careful eyes.

I'm sure he's over the wedding bullshit as Crew called it, too. What's bad.

Not We have a part to play, and our roles aren't over yet.

I stop directly in front of Perry, and without a word, he sweeps me into his arms, just as the song begins to play. It's something slow and terribly romantic and I could easily find myself falling into the moment on my own. Believing it with every fiber of my being.

But something holds me back. Crew's words are on repeat in my head, reminding me I shouldn't trust Perry or the Constantines in general.

The only person I can count on is myself.

We're quiet as we move about the dance floor and I turn my face toward Susan's flash momentarily blinds me. Perry tightens his grip around my waist, his movements surprisingly smooth. Impressive. The man can do anything.

Of course, I don't know him that well, so everything I discover starts like a surprise.

"Are you having fun?" he asks when we're about a third into the set.

"The reception is beautiful, yes," I tell him, keeping my head bent.

"Charlotte." His voice is firm, causing me to glance up at him. "I'm not afraid to look at me?"

I slowly shake my head. "No."

My voice is shaky. I don't know why I'm suddenly filled with fear when I've never given me a reason to be scared before.

"Good." His expression is smug. "I need you to explain something to me."

"What?" I ask weakly.

"Who Seamus McTiernan is to you." Perry spins me in a quick circle, not shocking me. "You never really said."

"Oh." I swallow hard, wishing I didn't have to talk about Seamus having my first dance with my husband.

"That's all you have to say about him? *Oh?*" He catches my gaze and I see it now. The turbulence in the blue depths of his eyes. "Would you rather not tell me?"

I press my lips together, wishing I could tell him yes. It would be so much easier if I never had to explain myself. Never had to admit that Seamus

n in hismy instructor. My crush. My first real relationship with a man.

“It’s that bad, isn’t it,” Perry continues, his voice a low, deep rumble, too. “Whatever he did to you. Whoever he was to you. It’s so bad, you don’t want to say it out loud.”

“It was before you,” I start and he laughs.

me into Actually laughs.

old and “Whatever happened before me, during me, after me, it doesn’t matter. Right, Char? Since this is nothing but a charade?” He spins me around, his movements smooth and elegant and throwing me completely off. My brain, angry, yet you’d never know it to look at him. “Did you ask him to come here? To interrupt your wedding? To put a stop to it?”

Icy tendrils of dread slither down my spine and I slow my steps, gaze fixed on him. This angry yet controlled man who is my husband. Oh he’s furious. I can see the emotion flicker in his gaze. The tension radiates through the room. My body and another realization hits me.

ill feels He’s not just angry. Maybe he’s also...

Jealous?

ong. “I didn’t reach out to him,” I admit, needing him to know the truth. “I haven’t talked to him since I was in Paris. Before he—”

Are you “Broke your heart?” Perry finishes for me. “Funny how the man you thought was madly in love with shows up on our wedding day.”

“Are you implying I had something to do with it? Is that why you’re so cold toward me all day?”

“What did you expect, Charlotte? How am I supposed to act? I’m not making a damn fool of me.”

“I’m no—”

He cuts me off. “Besides, none of this is real anyway. Remember?”

circle, I come to a complete stop. So does Perry.

As does the song.

s while “The father-daughter dance is next! Reggie Lancaster, come on and dance with your beautiful daughter!”

with his I wince at the DJ’s announcement, gasping when Perry lets go. How could you if he can’t wait to get rid of me. I watch in disbelief as he takes a couple of steps backward, his gaze still on mine, his lips tight with fury.

o much Almost as if he wants to be disappointed in me. Like he expects me to witness his traitorous act.

My father appears, handsome in his tuxedo, holding his arms out to me. I go to him, letting him embrace me as another slow song starts. He isn't quite as smooth a dancer as Perry, saying all the right things, just loud enough for our guests sitting close to the dance floor to hear. Like how proud I am of me. How beautiful I look and how wonderful the reception has been. I nod on the proper performance of a loving, proud father.

I nod and offer my simple replies, my gaze snagging on Perry, watching us carefully, as if he'll launch into action and separate us if necessary. He's so sure. He hates my father, and while I'm worried over Perry's earlier accusations, I know no matter what, he'll protect me.

Knowing that gives me an inkling of faith. Just about the only faith I have left right now.

I nod. "I have a question."

My father glances down at me, his brows furrowed. "What is it?"

"Did you invite..." My voice drifts and I swallow hard. "McTiernan?"

He actually snorts, shaking his head. "Why in the world would I care? I despise that man. He helped ruin your reputation."

"It's just—" I clamp my lips shut, not about to admit to my father that you fell for Seamus this morning. He'd surely go into a rage, and probably blame me for it.

My gaze finds Perry's yet again and he flicks his chin at me. A question if I'm all right. I offer a quick smile before my gaze slides from Perry to your husband to another man behind him, his face in shadow. The breadth of his shoulders, the way he holds himself is familiar and I stiffen in my seat. My arms, all the air clogging my throat when the man shifts out of the shadow to reveal himself.

Seamus.

At my wedding reception.

Standing just behind my husband.

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I nod and offer my simple replies, my gaze snagging on Perry, who's watching us carefully, as if he'll launch into action and separate us if need be. He hates my father, and while I'm worried over Perry's earlier accusations, I know no matter what, he'll protect me.

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"It's just—" I clamp my lips shut, not about to admit to my father I saw Seamus this morning. He'd surely go into a rage, and probably blame me for it.

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Seamus.

At my wedding reception.

Standing just behind my husband.



CHAPTER SIX

Perry

I DON'T TEAR my eyes off of Charlotte dancing with her father, noting how uncomfortable she seems, and how perfectly natural he acts. Smiling at her as he steers her across the dance floor, his lips moving. Probably saying nice things about his daughter that he doesn't really mean.

It's all about appearances for the Lancasters, which I get.

It's the same for the Constantines as well.

My wife and I are the culmination of that thought process, and how fucking painful, how they put us through this charade, all for the good of others. A fake marriage, a fake life. I wanted more.

I deserve more. Charlotte does too. And maybe we can have it...

If I so much as see Reggie Lancaster's fingers barely squeeze her hand, I'm on him. I don't care who sees me take down my father-in-law at this damn wedding reception. He has no right to intimidate or hurt her, especially now.

She's mine, whether he likes it or not.

The father-daughter dance seems to go smoothly, the façade maintained until near the end of the song, when Charlotte's eyes go wide and she loses her steps. Our gazes had just locked, but now she's staring beyond me.

At someone else.

I glance over my shoulder in the direction she's looking, spotting the man I ran into in the hotel lobby yesterday afternoon before the rehearsal.

The man who I thought looked familiar.

The man who's currently staring at my bride as if she's a tasty morsel he can't wait to get his mouth on.

“Hey.” I turn to face him, letting my blatant hostility show. “Do you?”

His expression is downright amused as he contemplates me. “You groom.”

I stand up taller. “You didn’t answer me. Are you an invited guest?”

There’s a hush that comes over the guests sitting at the tables near me. I don’t give a shit.

“She’s a good one, your bride. Watch out for her.” His accent is Irish but touched with something else. “Before someone else possible her up.”

His comment reminds me of the random texts I received from an unknown number—what was it, a week ago? I sort of forgot about them until now.

Could Seamus have been the one to send them to me?

I take a step forward, my focus now one hundred percent on him, assuming I know who he is, but I don’t want him to realize it. Not yet. The hell says that to a groom on his wedding day?”

“A man who’s been—intimate with said groom’s bride, that’s who I’m talking about.” A smirk appears and I see red.

Seamus.

I don’t even think. I just react, lunging for him and plowing my fist into his smug, shitty mouth, not holding back. I put all of my strength into it and it knocks him back so hard he stumbles, landing on the floor and gasps and horrified shrieks that fill the ballroom.

The music switches off. I hear my father-in-law shout, “What the hell is going on here?”

Seamus touches the side of his mouth lightly as I stand over him with clenched fists, his dark gaze on mine, burning with intensity. “Nice hook you got there.”

“Get the fuck out of here,” I demand. “Now.”

“I’m a guest of the bride’s—” he starts and I bellow in murderous intent ready to kick the shit out of him when I feel an arm band around my waist strong as steel.

“He’s not worth it,” Winston mutters in my ear as he holds me back from the taunting fucker. “Let security take care of him.”

Out of nowhere two burly bald dudes appear, dressed in matching

I know suits and with sunglasses covering their eyes, despite the party being in
They each grab hold of Seamus's upper arms and jerk him into a strange
position.

I glare at him, Winston still holding me back, noting the trickle of
sweat at the corner of Seamus's mouth. My knuckles throb from the intensity
of the punch, but I wish I'd done more noticeable damage. It would've given me
great satisfaction, to see him hurt. Suffering.

"Escort him out, please," Winston snaps at the bodyguards and they
obediently snags Seamus, shaking his head as the two men turn him around, supporting
him like a sack of potatoes as they lead him toward the exit.

"Did she tell you about me? Did she?" Seamus calls out, still chuckling
as the bodyguards drag him away.

I don't answer him. Neither does Winston. Within seconds, the
asshole who was Seamus McTiernan is gone, and Winston is loosening his
grip on me. I shake off his hands, glancing around at everyone watching in
astonishment. "Whoshocked expressions on their faces. The entire room is silent, enthralled
by our little performance, and I can literally feel Charlotte's gaze boring into
me." The back of my head. I'm sure she's...what?

Disappointed? I made a fucking scene at our wedding reception, but
what else was I supposed to do?
I slip into a daze. Maybe she was glad to see that asshole show up. Maybe she planned
that hit of this and hoped he'd make a public spectacle to make me look like
a long-time asshole.

Fuck, I can barely stand the idea of that. Earlier today I was so
hell-bent on focused on the woman I spent time with last night. She was all I could
think about. The woman I took to bed, who I fucked. Thoroughly. God, she
was so vulnerable and so damn sexy I blew my wad way too quickly, like a
right novice.

I'd fully planned on having a wild night of sex with my bride last
evening, where I could linger over her delectable body. I would've taken
my time with her. Make her come again and again until she was begging for
middle, begging for me.

We deserve a night like that. After everything we've put up with at
work from through over the last six weeks. We're compatible. Last night more
proved that.

But then this morning had to happen and threw everything off. The

doors. In her voice when she called me still sends a spike of ice-cold fear spreading through my gut just thinking about it.

This dick actually showing up on my goddamn wedding day of blood-complicated matters considerably. And that's an understatement.

"Jesus," I hear Winston mutter before he signals to the DJ. The music starts back up, a fast number to get everyone onto the dance floor, works.

Seamus "Well, that was certainly unexpected," Reggie Lancaster muttering as he walks off, abandoning Charlotte completely.

Typical.

My gaze finds hers and she watches me, her teeth sinking into her lip, those clear blue eyes now shrouded with worry. Without hesitation she starts, startled when I get close enough that she grabs my hand, the one I grip on Seamus in the mouth with, and she does the craziest fuckin' thing.

She brings my hand up to her mouth and presses a gentle kiss against my throbbing knuckles. Then another one. And yet another one, her hands cradling mine, her gaze never straying from me.

The apology is there in her eyes and I refuse to start an argument with her in the middle of our wedding reception. I pull her into my arms, my head, kissing her soundly, pleased to hear the hoots and hollers from all wedding guests as they voice their approval.

"Guess it's not a real party until there's a fight, am I right?" asks the crowd. The crowd cheers in answer as they spill onto the dance floor.

I take Charlotte's hand and lead her off. Away from the crowds, I'd think find a dark spot in the farthest corner of the ballroom, away from everyone and everything else. It's just the two of us tucked away where no one would see. The music is loud and I press her against the wall, my face nuzzling against her neck as I whisper in her ear.

"That was him, wasn't it?" I pause, letting my words sink in. "The one who broke your heart."

She's hesitant for a moment before she slowly nods, her hair brushing against my cheek. "I wanted to explain everything but didn't know when. Especially now. During the reception. And the wedding. It was never the appropriate time."

Valid point. When is there ever an appropriate time to bring up your former lover making an appearance on your wedding day?

reading “You knew he’d be here.” It’s a statement, not a question be
believe she knew all along he’d show his face here.

ay has I do.

God, the scent of her is doing something to me. Making my dick h
e musicone. I need to focus, but having her so close, despite the many layers
, whichdress and how she’s trussed up in some corset thing that looks impos
take off, I can feel her curvy body. The heat of her. Her soft hair. H
s as hemouth and dewy skin and those damn Constantine diamonds glittering
ears, around her neck.

She’s gorgeous. And she’s legally all mine.

r lower “No, of course not,” she breathes, her warm breath wafting acr
I go toface. “I had no idea he would show up. None.”

socked “You saw him before though.” My voice is tight, tense with
“Yesterday. Here.”

to my When I saw him yesterday in the lobby—had he just left Charlott
s gentlythey spoke before the wedding rehearsal? I remember the smug expres
his face. As if he knew a secret.

vith my “No...”

and dip “Tell me, Charlotte.” My hands are firm when they land on her
of ourgiving her a gentle shake as I slowly pull away from her so I can look i
eyes. “He was in the hotel lobby when I arrived late for the rehearsa
ie DJ. into him.”

And all along I’m sure that prick knew exactly who I was, while I
, until Iidiot who had no clue.

everyone I feel stupid.

can see Worse? I feel played.

ng hers She frowns, her delicate brows drawing together. “You saw
yesterday?”

he man I hate the way she says his name. The easy familiarity of it.

“Yes,” I bite out. “He was here, lurking around. Probably wait
rushingme.”

w how, *After meeting with you?*

ver the The unspoken words hang between us.

Nothing about yesterday’s interaction with him in the lobby
ip youraccidental. Not now, when I know the truth.

A soft exhale escapes her and she closes her eyes, her plump lips

cause I “I don’t know what he’s doing. Or why he’s here.”

“You so sure about that?”

My sharp tone causes her eyes to flash open and she glares. “What, for don’t believe me?”

“No, I don’t.” The words fall from my lips without hesitation, and in that hot moment, I regret them.

She glares at me. Beautiful and devastated after her husband tells her she doesn’t believe her on their wedding day.

Great way to kick off the marriage.

“And here I thought you were different.” Her voice is flat, devoid of emotion.

I frown. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Remaining quiet, her eyes narrow and she reaches out, her hands press on my chest and giving me a worthy shove.

Worthy enough that I take a couple of steps backwards, allowing her to escape.

I watch her go, irritation flaring in my blood. In my mind. This woman

I want to trust her.

But I don’t know if I can.

Her waist,
into her
arm. I ran

was the

Seamus

ing for

y feels

parted.

“I don’t know what he’s doing. Or why he’s here.”

“You so sure about that?”

My sharp tone causes her eyes to flash open and she glares. “What, you don’t believe me?”

“No, I don’t.” The words fall from my lips without hesitation, and for one hot moment, I regret them.

She glares at me. Beautiful and devastated after her husband tells her he doesn’t believe her on their wedding day.

Great way to kick off the marriage.

“And here I thought you were different.” Her voice is flat, devoid of any emotion.

I frown. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Remaining quiet, her eyes narrow and she reaches out, her hands planting on my chest and giving me a worthy shove.

Worthy enough that I take a couple of steps backwards, allowing her to escape.

I watch her go, irritation flaring in my blood. In my mind. This woman...

I want to trust her.

But I don’t know if I can.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Charlotte

I'M EXHAUSTED.

A wedding is absolutely draining. All the planning and anticipation, the stress, the worry and nervousness and excitement. I've been running on empty all day long, and now that I'm standing in the elevator with Seamus while we ride up to the penthouse suite, where we'll be spending our honeymoon night together as husband and wife, I feel like I could fall asleep standing up.

I press my head against the mirrored wall, closing my eyes. The weight of the gown is heavy, like the mental weight I'm currently dealing with. A reflection of Seamus stands just in front of me, and when I open my eyes, I can see his face in the reflection of the mirror. The tightness around his mouth. The strain in the corner of his eyes.

He's stressed. Mad. All because of me.

"I didn't know he would show up." I don't need to clarify who I'm talking about. Perry knows who I'm talking about.

My husband's gaze meets mine in the mirrored walls. "You keep telling me that, yet I still don't believe you."

Breathing deeply, I close my eyes once more, giving up. Why should I believe me? It doesn't look good, Seamus attending our reception. I know he doesn't. Perry and I barely know each other, though I thought we were learning to trust each other...

"Doesn't stop me from wanting to fuck you on our wedding night, though," Perry continues.

My eyes pop open to find him still watching me in the mirror's reflection. I see hunger in his gaze now, and my traitorous body responds, my

humming and my skin tingling as it remembers how good it was betw
last night.

“You going to stop me?” He lifts his brows in challenge.

Ugh, he’s too handsome when he looks at me like that. He got ric
bow tie sometime during the reception and the first couple of button
shirt are undone, exposing the smooth column of his throat. I rem
kissing him there. How warm his skin is. The groan that sounded lov
throat—

“Are you?” he asks, interrupting my thoughts.

A ding sounds and the doors slide open, me hurrying out of the e
without a word. Perry follows silently alongside me, magically prod
key card from the pocket of his tuxedo jacket. I don’t know where he g

ion and I don’t bother asking either.

ning on Within seconds the door is open and we’re entering the suite, the
h Perrythe door shutting loud in the otherwise hushed silence.

our first Pressing my hand to the wall, I kick off my shoes, a soft exhale c
ing up. escaping. They were killing me. I’m not used to being in heels for that
wedding Perry walks past me, still silent, coming to a sudden stop with a m

. Perrycurse. I go to him, stopping right beside him when I see what he’s stari
e in the The king-sized bed is covered in deep red rose petals. Formed
at theshape of a heart.

He turns to me, his expression grim. “Did you request this?”

I slowly shake my head. “Of course not.”

o he is. His scowl deepens. “Right. Not an ounce of romance is involved
marriage.”

saying The silence in the room is deafening and I take a deep breath, tr
find the strength to be honest with him.

ould he “Why are you being so cruel?” I whisper, hating how weak I s
know itshould be stronger. While some of this is my fault—yes, I was involv
e wereSeamus—but I never asked him to come to the wedding. I have no

over that man. After everything that happened in Paris, I assumed I’
g nightsee his face again.

Perry blows out a harsh breath and without thought I reach
lection.diamond necklace I’m wearing, my fingers tracing over the stor
y bloodnotices, his gaze darkening and he lifts it to mine. “That asshole show
to our reception looked really fucking bad, Charlotte.”

veen us His words are like a knife. Multiple stab wounds to my stupidly heart. “Trust me. I know—”

He interrupts me, his voice flat. “No, I don’t think you do. I’m staid of the think you wanted him there.”

s of his “I already told you—”

number “I don’t care what you say. Actions speak louder than words.” v in his eyes blaze with anger. “If you wanted to be with him, why didn’t y me? We would’ve never had to go through that stupid ceremony if yo been truthful with me in the first place.”

levator “I don’t want to be with him!” The words blast out of me, so ucing a Perry flinches.

got it. He watches me, that wary expression on his handsome face. doesn’t say a word.

click of I look away from him, staring at that stupid rose-petal heart on t swallowing down the sudden swamp of emotion that threatens to tal of relief me. “I suppose I can’t change your mind.”

long. “Tonight, you sure as hell can’t.” I return my attention to him to fi uttered undoing a few buttons on his shirt. “That’s not how I expected the eve ng at. go.”

l in the “Me either,” I admit with a whisper.

“Think it’ll hit the gossip rags?” When I frown, he continue knocking out your former lover. I’m sure someone caught a photo of it

I wince at his choice of words, trying to fight the worry that threate l in this father won’t be pleased if that comes out. I’m sure he’ll blame m happening too. “I don’t know. I hope not.”

ying to “Same. My family will *not* be pleased.” He strides toward me, mak suck in a surprised breath when he reaches over, his body brushing ound. I mine when he plucks something off the bed.

ed with An envelope with the words *Mr. and Mrs. Perry Constantine* control across it.

d never Without asking he tears into it, frowning as he reads what’s writter thick, cream-colored card. “Oh fuck me.”

for the “What is it?” I take the offered card from him to see that it’s des ies. He our gift from his brother, Winston.

ving up An all-expenses-paid trip to Mexico for five days. We don’t l worry about packing our bags and preparing anything. It’s all been tak

tender of for us by Winston. Our honeymoon that we never thought to plan. I even a little itinerary where it states we leave tomorrow morning.

It sounds like a dream. A chance to get away from everything. To get to know my husband and spend more time with him alone.

"I'm not going," Perry announces, crushing my already shattered heart.

"Perry." I turn toward him, attempting to reach for him but he's already just away from me, shedding his jacket and dropping it onto a nearby chair. I don't understand why you're so angry with me.

"I already told you why. This isn't how I imagined my wedding day to be." He undoes the cufflinks at his wrists and my entire body goes warm. But he's not. My husband is slowly undressing in front of me while also totally focused on me, and like the sick, love-starved girl I am, that hot ribbon of desire unfurls deep within my body. Making me yearn.

For him.

"He *broke* my heart. I haven't seen him since I left Paris and then he showed up over a year ago. Why would I want him here on our wedding day? I was shocked, seeing him this morning. When he approached me in the shop, he—he threatened me, Perry."

He frowns, the displeasure on his face obvious. "Threatened you?"

I think of what Seamus told me. How my fiancé isn't what he seems. How he comes from a family that will destroy whatever and whoever they need to in order to get what they want.

I said so to Seamus and I still feel it now—there is comfort in knowing that Perry's family is so very similar to mine. And while it might not be right, it's all I know and those sorts of things don't scare me.

Even though they probably should.

"Charlotte." Perry's stern voice pulls me from my thoughts.

written exactly did he threaten you?"

"He—he said you have something he wants," I admit. "And that he'll be on the way to collecting soon."

"Referring to you, I assume?" Perry raises a brow.

Just like Seamus did.

I nod, dropping my gaze so I can study my hands, which are completely twisted together. "He scared me, and I think that was his goal. He was so carelessly frightened and worried about his next move. Why, I'm not sure. When

There's Paris—things were left unsaid. It's not like we had an actual breakup conversation. Maybe—maybe he just wants to talk to me.”

ne and “You're not that naïve, Charlotte. I know you don't believe he should have said anything. All out of nowhere on our wedding day hoping you two can just talk, says.

heart. He's right. But what could Seamus want from me now, after all this time? He's missed his chance. If he really wanted to break up our marriage, he had plenty of opportunity leading up to this moment. When the engagement was announced weeks ago. Why didn't he come running to me that day to break it off?

day to Perry's deep voice seeps into my brain, interrupting my thoughts.

m. “Would you have run away with him if he asked you to this morning?”

furiously “No.” I shake my head. Not at all.

arousal “What about at the beginning? When this entire fraud first started?”

I hesitate, my mind flooded with thoughts. Memories.

“And there's my answer,” he says quietly.

that was My gaze goes to his, noting the displeasure on his face, and I look away so quickly. I don't bother denying it, because he's right.

coffee I might've listened to Seamus then. I might've—oh this pains me to think about it—run away with him if he asked. I didn't know Perry at all. The affair was a way out for me. To get away from my father once and for all. How? The marriage was a way out for me. To get away from my father once and for all. It didn't matter if I loved the man I was marrying or not.

er they If Seamus had shown up that early in the game, I would've gone with him. I know I would've.

in that. But now?

t might I wouldn't.

I can't.

A ragged exhale leaves Perry but he doesn't say anything else, and I finally dare to look up at him, I find that he's moved even closer to me. The anger gone from his expression.

ie plans Now he just looks as tired as I feel.

“You need help out of that dress?” he asks, and not in a sexy way.

Which is fine. I don't expect him to want to have sex with me tonight, after everything that happened at the reception.

pletely I nod my answer.

ted me “Turn around,” he commands gently and I do as he says, sucking in a deep breath when he begins to undo the many buttons that line the length of my dress.

or even my spine. The fabric parts as he continues to work, his warm fingers brush against my back and I try to suppress the shiver that wants to steal control from me but it's no use.

"Perry And he feels it. He pauses for a moment and I go completely wondering what he's going to do next.

of this My husband doesn't disappoint. He draws his finger along my shoulder blades, his touch so light, I can almost pretend he's not touching me at all.

When? But he is, and that gives me...so much hope.

Too much.

"Fuck, Charlotte." He sounds pained. Tortured. The last button is and then he's pushing the gown off of me, until it falls in a heap around my feet, the frothy skirt tall enough to reach my knees. "Look at you."

I'm wearing the white lacy strapless bra and matching panties. Really, it's a thong. My entire ass is bared and he's currently staring at it. I can feel his eyes on me, heavy and hot. I want him to see me like this. Like his wife now.

I want him to treat me like one. As if I'm his.

And no one else's.

"Help me out of the dress, Perry," I say with a confidence I don't actually feel. He grabs hold of my upper arm, stabilizing me as I try to step over the pile of fabric that is my wedding gown, but I nearly fall over.

He catches me before I do. Wraps his arms around my waist from behind and completely lifts me up, making me squeal. He kicks the dress out of the way before he deposits me back onto the floor. I'm about to turn and thank him but he doesn't give me the chance, moving far too quickly. His hands find my waist once more and then he's pushing me, sending me toppling onto the bed, where I land on my stomach in the middle of the rose petals.

I try to turn around yet again but he's on me, pressing my body into the mattress, the scent of roses surrounding me, the petals sticking to my skin. I turn my face to the side, my cheek resting on the bed, and I close my eyes. Not when I feel his big, hot body wrap all around me, holding me in place.

"I shouldn't do this," he mutters and I wonder if he's talking to himself. "I shouldn't."

I don't speak, afraid I'll say the wrong thing. Worried I'll snap him out of whatever spell he's currently under that has him wrecked over me.

rushing Wrecked in the best possible way.

ver me A soft moan leaves me when he begins to kiss my back, his lips following the ridges of my spine. I arch upwards with my hips, my ass nudging against his front and I can feel his erection.

 He's already hard for me, and that sends a heady thrill spiraling.

7 spine, "Damn it." He sounds angry but the emotion doesn't scare me. His lips believe his mouth is soft yet firm, and everything inside of me tighter with anticipation.

 What will he do next?

 When he pulls away, the crash of disappointment is almost my undoing. My muscles tighten and I brace myself for more cruel words of rejection. He's so angry, so frustrated with me and everything that happened between us, though I had nothing to do with it, he still blames me, and I suppose—well, right in wanting to do so.

at it. I None of this would've ever happened if I hadn't had an affair with him. I'm his instructor in Paris. If I hadn't had my stupid dreams of being an architect studying European architectural history. I'd only wanted to stretch my legs and try something different. Something for myself.

 Instead, I practically ruined my life and fell for the wrong person, the only one actually known who Seamus was related to back then, and who I'd be out with now...

 I would've never done it.

behind The realization smacks me in the chest, making my heart ache. I wish I could go back to the time I met Perry. Despite everything we've been through, despite how our relationship started in the first place, I want him to give me a chance. I want us to give each other a chance.

ng onto I think we could be good together. Does he see that? Or is he too stubborn with me to realize it?

into the The sound of rustling fabric tells me Perry is shedding his shirt against my skin. I'm so tempted to watch. To lust over his chest and abs. But I refuse to let my eyes follow him, afraid he might stop.

 And that is the last thing I want.

ie or to The thump of shoes being kicked off sounds next. The clank of a belt buckle. His accelerated breaths. The whir of a zipper being undone. I lie on my back among the rose petals, breathing heavily, my skin prickling with awareness. His eyes are on me. I can feel them.

Slowly I lift up my knees, keeping my head on the mattress, my ass floating in the air. I stretch my arms out so they're above my head, crushing the fabric against my body. I grip a few in my palms, turning my wrists so my hands are toward me, releasing the petals so they rain down upon me.

"Fuck," Perry groans and the triumph that races through my blood has me laughing. With joy.

With victory.

He rests his hand on my right ass cheek, his fingers splayed, teasing the edge of my thong where it curves over the very top of my ass. I arch my back, palm, seeking more but he doesn't give it to me.

"I suppose I can fuck you on our wedding night, right, wife?" He says. Even his fingers beneath the lacy strand that runs between my ass cheeks, tugging at the fabric tightens around my pussy, my now throbbing clit, and I close my eyes, wishing he'd do it again.

"Yes," I whisper and thank God he does it again. Pulling on the lace of the fabric so it cuts against my delicate skin, making me hiss in pleasure.

His hands are on my hips, fingers curling around the lace as he pulls them down, revealing everything. He stops when the fabric is paired to the tops of my thighs, binding me so I can't move before he slips two fingers inside of me without warning.

I cry out, bucking against his hand, and when he removes his fingers I want to whimper.

"Fucking soaked," he says, sounding pleased as he jams them back into me. "You actually like it when I'm mad at you?"

"No," I moan. I hate it when he's mad at me. I don't like it when he's angry with me, but there is something about fierce, arrogant Perry just...doing it for me.

He's the complete opposite of how he behaved last night. When he looks sweet yet sexy and completely overcomes me. That had been the most exciting.

Tonight's version of my husband is even more so. He continues fucking me with his fingers, slipping them in and out of my pussy at a steady pace. I start to move with him, straining towards my orgasm that's already on the horizon. I can almost reach it. I'm getting closer...

ss up in Perry removes his fingers from my body completely and then his
: petals, coming around my throat, lifting me up before he shoves his fingers i
angled mouth.

“Suck,” he demands and I do so, tasting myself as I lick my
l nearly around his fingers and suck with all my might.

What am I doing? What is he doing? He’s suddenly cold and cr
my body lights up like a Christmas tree, wanting more. Aching for hir
sing theme.

into his “Get up.” His hand returns to my neck and he lightly tugs, until
my knees with him pressed directly behind me. The heat of his skin se
lips his mine, though he’s still wearing his boxers. His cotton-covered cock
ng. The against my ass and a whimper escapes me when his fingers tighten
y eyes, my throat, just enough to make my breath catch. “I’m so fucking pi
you, Charlotte.”

cy strip I swallow hard, about to say something but he places his other ha
ain. In my mouth, silencing me.

“Don’t bother defending yourself. I know you want me to believe y
slowly nothing to do with him showing up.”

around He rubs his fingers against my lips, mashing them, his index
fingers slipping into my mouth and touching my front teeth. I lick the tip
finger and he growls into my ear. “Look at you, all the rose petals s
hem, I your skin.”

I glance down at myself, realizing that he’s right. I’m covered wit
κ inside though they’re also falling off, one by one. He removes his hand fr
neck, sliding it down, brushing away the petals. He cups one breast, t
anyone other, pinching my nipples, his hold almost brutal and yet I whimper a
r that is He’s not treating me like a delicate doll, and oh God, I like it.

His hand drifts across my trembling stomach, then lower. Teas
he was before he reaches forward and scoops up a handful of rose petals off th
rilling. And then promptly smashes them against my pussy.

Their silky softness contrasts with the rough way he’s touching m
tilt my head back, leaning against his shoulder as I moan into his
t of my He’s still clutching my lower face, his other hand rubbing, crushing th
orgasm into my sticky wet folds, and when he circles my clit, my entire body
ser and to shake.

Blindly I reach behind, my arm going around his nape as I sl

hand is fingers into his soft hair. I cling to him, my hips moving as his fingers
into my and circle, playing with my clit, driving me out of my mind. Ur
coming, so hard I can barely breathe as the shivers consume me compl
tongue He whispers filthy things in my ear as I come. How fucking wet I
how good I feel. Slick and hot. Asking me if I like it when he fucks r
uel and his fingers. How he's going to fill me with his cock and make me c
n to fillover again.

This new, angry side to Perry is hot. Addicting. I can only whim
I'm on moan, my skin coated with sweat from the intensity of my orgasm.
ars into my head toward his and he kisses me, a savage taking of my mo
pressestongue thrusting, his fingers still pressed against my pussy.
around "I own this," he whispers against my lips, his fingers clamping
issed at making me tremble. "You're mine now, wife. And if I have to fu
asshole out of your thoughts over and over again until you don
nd overremember his name, then I will." His fingers slide inside of me, I
there. "Watch me."

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fingers into his soft hair. I cling to him, my hips moving as his fingers rub and circle, playing with my clit, driving me out of my mind. Until I'm coming, so hard I can barely breathe as the shivers consume me completely.

He whispers filthy things in my ear as I come. How fucking wet I am and how good I feel. Slick and hot. Asking me if I like it when he fucks me with his fingers. How he's going to fill me with his cock and make me come all over again.

This new, angry side to Perry is hot. Addicting. I can only whimper and moan, my skin coated with sweat from the intensity of my orgasm. I angle my head toward his and he kisses me, a savage taking of my mouth, his tongue thrusting, his fingers still pressed against my pussy.

"I own this," he whispers against my lips, his fingers clamping tighter, making me tremble. "You're mine now, wife. And if I have to fuck that asshole out of your thoughts over and over again until you don't even remember his name, then I will." His fingers slide inside of me, holding there. "Watch me."



CHAPTER EIGHT

Perry

ONCE CHARLOTTE HAS come down from her orgasm, and I've come myself as much as possible, I flip her over on the bed so she's facing me. Her skin is flushed and damp, a few rose petals sticking here and there as in the middle of them. The heart shape is long gone, the heady scene flowers filling my head. So strongly I swear I can taste it.

Can still taste her too. Salty and musky sweet.

I reach for her panties and tug them all the way off, my eyes narrow when she slides her legs open, revealing herself completely to me. Perfect, glistening and so damn pretty. I reach for her, trailing my fingers all inside of her damp thigh, noting the way she shivers at my touch.

This isn't fake. My wife wants me, and that fills me with a satisfaction that shouldn't feel so damn good, yet it does. Our situation is unusual. Fucking crazy if we're being real right now.

But in this moment, I wouldn't have it any other way. She understands where she fits into my life. Just like I know where I fit into hers.

I meant what I said, though. I will fuck that McTiernan asshole right out of her thoughts. Her memories. Her everything.

Like her heart.

He can't have it, especially if I can't either.

Running my hands down her smooth legs, I clamp my fingers around her ankles and spread her even wider. As wide as she can go. She watches with a hint of fear in her eyes, though she must know I'd stop if she were scared.

Meaning I don't think she's afraid at all. She seems to like it. How

I'm being. It's not my usual style, but damn. When I undressed her this foreign, possessive urge took over me, filling me with the need to have her who she belongs to.

Me.

I never want her to forget it.

I climb onto the mattress and rain kisses all over her thighs, her pussy calling to me. I lick at her clit. Swirl my tongue across it. Arch. Draw it between my lips and suck on it. Hard.

She lifts her hips, seeking more of my attention and I let go, moving away. Abandoning her completely so I can get rid of my boxer briefs and put on a condom.

I'm fucking her. I told myself I wouldn't, but it's my right. My name. Her husband. It's our wedding night and this is expected. I'm fucking her making her mine.

Charlotte rises up on her elbows, her gaze zeroed in on my hands at the base of my cock and roll the condom on, her eyes flaring with anticipation. She's greedy for it.

Greedy for me.

"You want it?"

Her gaze finds mine, those blue eyes extra big as she nods.

"Say it." I get back onto the bed and she closes her legs, giving me a certain to climb on top of her, until my knees are on either side of her hips and chests are pressed together, my face in hers. "Tell me you want it."

"I want you."

"Tell me exactly what you want."

"I want your—cock." Her cheeks turn pink when she says the word which is fucking adorable.

"Tell me you want me to fuck you."

She doesn't even hesitate. "I want you to fuck me."

I rise up, gripping the base of my dick and dragging the head through her soaked folds. "Say my name, baby."

"Perry." She closes her eyes when I nudge my cock against her clit.

"Open your eyes," I demand and they fly open. "I want you to tell me exactly who's fucking you tonight."

Her lips fall open as I ram myself inside, not being gentle about it. She can take me though. She's so damn wet and loose for me, but that's

earlier, still snug. All that wet heat envelops my dick with a stranglehold, making me pause so I can take a few deep, controlling breaths.

Being inside of her feels like fucking heaven. If I let go now, I'd be too fast, and this time I'm prolonging it.

This time, I want to have a marathon fucking session with my wife. I fuck her hard and steadily, spearing in and out of her welcomingly. The juicy sounds of her pussy filling the room. Her gaze stays on me, and I'm glad for it. She needs to know who she belongs to now. And she can never forget it either.

She wraps those long legs around my hips, anchoring herself to me. I drop my head to her chest, fucking her in earnest. Our bodies stick together thanks to all the sweat, and the rose petals are still everywhere too.

An idea forms and I pull out of her completely. A protesting sound escapes her and I flip her over onto her stomach, pleased to see so many dauntless. I grip rose petals yet again clinging to her skin.

"Get on your hands and knees," I command her and she does without protest, rising up and wagging that perfect petal-covered ass in my direction.

I slide into her from behind, filling her to the hilt, making her cry out. She goes completely still, adjusting to me buried inside of her, her hips sending me a little bit deeper.

Until I'm as deep as I can get.

"Oh God," she chokes out. "It feels—you feel so much fuller like this." I start moving. In and out. Again and again. My gaze focused on her as my cock slides into her pussy, then out.

Fuck.

She's so damn noisy as I fuck her and my brain goes blank. The tension at the base of my spine starts, settling into my balls, and I increase my grunting with every thrust. Pumping in and out of her faster and faster until her my entire body goes still and then the shudders start.

The shakes.

"Fuck. Charlotte." Her name falls from my lips the exact moment my orgasm slams into me, rendering me stupid. Her inner walls clench me, intensifying the already strong orgasm shaking throughout my body and then she is over her as it subsides, the both of us collapsing onto the bed, me fitting around her.

ing me Our ragged breathing is loud and I swear to fucking God my
going to pop out of my chest. She's shivering in my arms, my co
ll come embedded inside of her and she snuggles closer, her ass pressed r
against me.

. My cock surges back to life, just like that.
g body, I brush her ruined hair to the side, pressing my mouth against her
ine as I "Did you come?"

w. She nods. "A little one."

I feel as if my life has been completely transformed with one orga
ie and she calls hers a little one.

ogether Then I remember I already made her come once and then I don't
bad.

l leaves My hands roam upward, cupping and kneading her tits, my
mn red curling around her stiffened nipples. The need to maul her is fucking
and I don't know where it's coming from. "We should do that again."

at I ask "I hope you brought more condoms."

s in my "I brought an entire fucking box." Our overnight bags were deliv
the suite sometime during the wedding, thank Christ. I didn't have to t
out. She one fucking thing the entire day. Sounds like much of the same is g
hifting, happen during our honeymoon.

I frown, thinking of it. Do I really want to be away in Mexico w
bride or would I rather be home doing a deep dive on a certain
his." relative and figuring out ways to get him out of my wife's life permane

he way She reaches behind her, tugging pins out of her hair and tossin
onto the floor, making me chuckle. "You've ruined me."

"Good." I kiss her shoulder. "You needed to be ruined."

ingling A sigh leaves her. "I should take a shower."

y pace, "I'll join you."

er until She's silent for a moment, contemplating what I said, I'm sure. "H
you have sex with someone like that if you don't even trust them?"

I shrug. "You just make it so damn easy, Charlotte. Why shouldn'
ent theyou? You're my wife now. It's your job to please me."

ie tight, She goes quiet, and for a second, I regret saying that.

ld I fall But damn it, it's the truth. I'm mad, but my anger doesn't dil
curling attraction for her. In the moment, it only seemed to amplify my fee
wanted her.

heart is I still want her.
ck still Any way I can get her.
ight up “You’re right,” she finally says, turning to look at me, those blue
hers eating me up. “I guess I’m so starved for affection I’ll take what
get from you. Even if you hate me.”
r nape. I say nothing. Just crawl out of bed and head for the bathroom, find
on the lights to find the shower stall is massive, with two showerheads
marble bench that’s the perfect height for my bride to sit on and suck
ism andcock while the hot spray of water drips down her smooth skin.

Perfect.

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I still want her.

Any way I can get her.

“You’re right,” she finally says, turning to look at me, those blue eyes of hers eating me up. “I guess I’m so starved for affection I’ll take what I can get from you. Even if you hate me.”

I say nothing. Just crawl out of bed and head for the bathroom, flicking on the lights to find the shower stall is massive, with two showerheads and a marble bench that’s the perfect height for my bride to sit on and suck my cock while the hot spray of water drips down her smooth skin.

Perfect.



CHAPTER NINE

Charlotte

THE MOMENT WE exit the private plane Winston arranged to take to Mexico, I breathe a sigh of relief.

The air is warm and smells of the sea. The wind whips my hair into complete disarray and I wish I would've put it in a ponytail.

But I can't complain. We're away from New York and Bishop's Lullaby. Away from our families and the threat of Seamus. The wedding and planning that came with it is finally over, and I'm glad.

So glad.

I know all of this is temporary, but I need the escape. I need to relax and forget about my troubles at least for a little while. I know there will be waiting for me when we return home, but for now?

I want to banish them from my thoughts and enjoy my honeymoon. But if my husband is acting standoffish this morning. Since we woke up and he hasn't said much. I blame it on him being tired. Yesterday was exhausting both mentally and physically. Or maybe he's still wound up over not showing up at the reception. I know if the tables were turned, I would be too.

Somehow, I need to convince my husband that he can trust me. That where a nice, relaxing, hopefully sex-filled honeymoon comes into play.

There's a car waiting for us that Perry's brother arranged and escorted to it immediately, the cool air-conditioning wrapping all around us as we settle onto the soft leather seats. We wait in the idling car until the luggage is loaded into the trunk and I cast a quick glance at my husband.

He's not paying attention to me in the least. Too busy tapping at his phone, his brows lowered in seeming concentration. Or anger.

I can't really tell.

Deciding I can play this game, I pull my phone out of my bag to check if I have any messages. There's only one.

From my new sister-in-law.

Tinsley: Hope you have fun in Mexico! Winston asked me to pick out clothes for your trip. I hope you like them.

After the message is a string of winking-faced emojis, which tells me that the majority of the clothes she chose for me are probably sexy.

Before last night, I would've been nervous at the prospect. But now

Now I know Perry is aroused by me. I may as well flaunt it if I've got the chance, right?

Yes. Right.

I send Tinsley a quick text.

Me: Thank you so much for doing that! I can't wait to see what you chose.

I then send her a string of heart emojis.

It means so much to me, how kind she is. How open and accepting she is. That right now.

Desperately.

"Who are you texting?"

I glance up to find Perry watching me, his gaze wary despite his nonchalant tone. He's trying to play it cool, but I can tell he's suspicious.

"Your sister," I tell him, stashing my phone into my bag. "Tinsley."

He doesn't reply, but the relief on his face is evident and he avoids my head, gazing out the window.

We don't say anything else during the car ride, and when we finally arrive at the resort's driveway, I'm dying for actual conversation. Though I know I'm not to be the one who starts it.

Instead, I focus on the beautiful resort. The lush green lawn and the tall trees swaying with the breeze. The shimmering ocean just beyond the sprawling buildings.

By the time we're climbing out of the car and entering the open-air lobby to check in, I'm gawking like a girl who's never been here before, captivated by the nature that surrounds us. I'm such a city girl, I'm not used to this.

I wander the lobby while Perry takes care of matters at the front desk. I spy a nearby restaurant featuring an outdoor patio with ocean view. There's a giant pool in the near distance, the lounge chairs surrounded by vacationers sunning themselves. I wonder if Tinsley packed any swimsuits.

rip. I I'm sure she did. I'd guess they're all skimpy too.

me that "We have a private villa," Perry announces to me once he's finished checking in. "Winston went all out."

v... Excitement ripples down my spine but I keep a straight face. "Sounds—nice."

e got it, "I'm sure it is. Come on."

Once we arrive where we're staying, I'm taken aback at the extravagance. The villa is huge, with four bedrooms, three bathrooms, and a gourmet kitchen I will never, ever touch. The living room is massive, with giant couches covered in brightly printed pillows. There is vibrant art on the walls. Two of the bedrooms match in size with sumptuous linens on the beds. Both of them have an outdoor shower.

I'll be taking a shower outdoors!

. I need I can't get over it.

Tile floors and cool air and crisp linens on the bed. Sunken couches and vibrant art on the walls. A big-screen TV I plan on never watching once.

ite the We have our own private backyard and could probably fit two hundred people back here. There's a small infinity pool that's for our use and another one for the resort's private beach. There's also a path that leads from the backyard to the ocean.

us. "It's like we've entered our own dream world."

erts his "I'm going to take this bedroom," Perry tells me as he pauses in front of the open doorway. "You can have that one."

lly pull He nods toward the equally large bedroom across the hall from his. My dreams come crashing down around me, just like that.

I refuse Standing taller, I clear my throat and make my approach, taking my luggage with me. I don't bother protesting. "Okay."

ie palm I walk past him into my bedroom, settling the suitcase on the stand and unzipping it open, curious to see what awaits me inside. I've never had a shopping trip for me like this before, and as I dig through the clothing that lies

nd the I'm pleased to see I like all of it. Tinsley chose a variety of sundresses

it desk, shirts, and shorts. Tank tops. Panties and a couple of bras in the right sizes to die many two-piece swimsuits I could never wear them all. They are color coordinating it just as I predicted—skimpy.

ked me There's a toiletries bag full of the essentials, mostly items I've wanted before or always wanted to try. There's another small bag full of bra and cosmetics. There's a curling iron and a brush and comb and shampoo and finished conditioner. She thought of everything.

There's also a note from Tinsley, written in swirling script.

. "That

agance.

orgeous

it white

e walls.

ed, and

I hope I covered all of the bases and you have everything you need. When my brother told me what he wanted to do for you guys, I said it was impossible. Yet here I am, making it possible for him. Really love you. I hope you have a wonderful time with Perry. Happy honeymoon!

Love, your new sister,

Tins

I sniff, blinking away the tears as I finish her note. She's so thoughtful. I've never had a sister before. I like the idea of Tinsley and I become closer.

I need as many allies as I can get in the Constantine family.

hes and

e.

undred

no one

and the

Giddy with excitement I choose one of the bikinis from the many provided for me and dart off into the bathroom, shedding my clothes leaving them on the floor before I put on the hot-pink string bikini that fits perfectly.

Thank God I had that wax treatment at the spa before the wedding. I wouldn't have been able to get away with wearing this prior to that spa treatment.

front of After I pull my hair into a high ponytail, I check myself out in the mirror wondering what Perry will think of this bikini. And me.

Does he even think about me? Last night more than proved that—

Well, it proved that he's definitely attracted to me. But since we woke

ny new morning, he's been indifferent. As if I don't really matter.

That hurts.

nd and Lifting my chin, I reach for the small bottle of lotion the hotel provided

anyone and lather it on, making sure every bit of skin exposed is silky smooth

within, Meaning I went completely through one of those tiny bottles. The

ses, T-scent lingers in the air, and I smile at my reflection before I finish

size. Sobathroom.

ful and Only to run directly into my husband, who for some reason is
bedroom.

re used Shirtless.

nd-new Only wearing a pair of black and gray swim trunks.

oo and Looking far too delicious to ignore.

“Sorry.” He grabs hold of my arms to steady me, keeping me
“Didn’t mean to run into you.”

eed. “What are you doing in here?” I hate how breathless I sound and
my throat, forcing myself to act as nonchalant as possible.

id it Like it’s no big deal that my sexy husband is pressed against
for we’re on a honeymoon that is supposedly in name only.
on!

Please. All I can think about is the next time I can get him naked again.

“I came looking for you,” he says, his voice low as he takes a single
away from me, still holding on to my arms. “I’m going out to the
Wanted to ask if you’d join me.”

ightful. I refuse to let what he said fill me with hope. His seeking me out
coming nothing. “I had the same idea.”

His gaze lingers on all the exposed bits of me—which are a lot
that.”

Tinsley “Is there any sunscreen around?” I ask, meeting his gaze.

ies and “Probably.” He releases me and heads out of the bedroom. “L
hat fits look.”

lding. I I follow after him, taking in the tattoo that’s in the center of his left
sprawling oak tree with intricate branches and a strong, solid trunk.
a visit. question slips from my lips before I can stop it.

mirror, “What’s the tattoo represent?”

He glances over his shoulder at me. “Family.”

maybe. That’s all he says, but it’s enough. I’ve come to realize family
up this important to him. He loves his mother and younger sister. Respe
admires his oldest brother. He even has a tattoo that represents him
brothers with the three swords. He’s a loyal man, and not just because
rovides tattoos. Those are meaningless without actions.

smooth. His actions tell me he loves his family very much, and I take comfort
tropical that. He’s not a bad person. He cares. He loves. Freely.

lee the What would it be like, to be loved by Perry Constantine? To know

he's loyal to you no matter what.

in my If I'm lucky, maybe I'll know someday.

"Here's the sunscreen."

I realize I've followed Perry into the kitchen and he's found a couple cans of spray sunscreen on the kitchen counter, close to the sliding glass door that leads out to the pool. He grabs one and heads outside and I go with me close, shutting the sliding glass door before I turn to face him.

"Want me to spray you?" he pops the lid off the sunscreen and I clear right at me.

"I can do it myself."

me and "Thought I'd offer." He shrugs and hands it over, which I apply I everywhere I can reach, except my back.

gain. Can't really reach that.

gle step "Here." He takes the can from me. "Turn around."

e pool. I do as he says, shivering when the cold spray hits my skin. He covers my shoulders and back. My lower back, just above my butt. My thighs and meanscalves. Even my ass cheeks.

"Don't want you to get burned." He steps closer, stopping directly in front of me. "I seem to be before he hands me the can. "Will you spray me?"

I grab the sunscreen and turn to face him, frowning. "You can't spray yourself?"

let's go "I'd rather you did it." He smiles. "Please?"

How can I resist?

jack. A I spray him everywhere, marveling at how handsome he is when he turns his head back and closes his eyes, holding his arms straight out. He's muscular yet lean. Broad but not too bulky. Covered in tats with six-pack abs and trim hips. Muscular thighs and legs that are covered in light brown tattoos but not *too* covered.

is very Everything about my husband is just right.

cts and "Turn around," I tell him and he does so without complaint, hanging his head as I spray his shoulders and back. Dip down to spray the back of his legs. By the time I'm finished, there's a light cloud of sunscreen surrounding us and I'm coughing, which makes him chuckle.

nfort in My heart leaps at the sound and I tell myself to stop it.

I set the can onto a nearby glass table before I return my attention to Perry. "You're done."

He turns to face me once more. "You hungry?"

I shrug. My appetite has shrunk lately, thanks to the stress wedding.

"We can call for room service if you want. They'll bring us drinks and poolside snacks," Perry says.

"What kind of poolside snacks?" My stomach growls as it's worried when I talk about food.

"Whatever you want. Chips and salsa. Guacamole. A cheeseburger looking at the menu a few minutes ago. They've got a lot."

"I'll think about it." I wander over to one of the lounge chairs and liberally onto the plush cushion, arranging myself just so before I slip on the sunglasses that I always keep in my bag. I can feel Perry's gaze on me. I close my eyes, wondering what he's thinking.

Then I hear a loud splash, water droplets hitting my skin and making me squawk. When I open my eyes, I find Perry treading water in the middle of the pool, watching me carefully.

"Aren't you going to swim?"

"I wanted to get some sun first."

"You put on sunscreen."

"I'll still get some color on my skin if I sit out here. This sun is intense," I tell him, vaguely annoyed.

"I thought you'd swim with me." His expression is pure hurt, little which doesn't go along at all with the rough man who fucked me last night.

Is he for real right now?

"I didn't think you'd want to do anything with me," I retort.

He tilts his head to the side, ignoring my comment. "Where'd you have your hair, bikini anyway? Tinsley?"

I nod, lifting my knees so my feet are propped on the cushion.

"I like it."

That's all he says before he dives underneath the water but it's enough to make my skin buzz and my heart trip over itself.

He likes it.

But will he ever like me?

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CHAPTER TEN

Perry

I SWAM. I ate. I sat out on one of those loungers like Charlotte and fell asleep. Only to wake up almost two hours later to the setting sun and scorched skin. Charlotte only laughed at me. I think she likes to see me in pain.

Guess I can't blame her, with the way I treated her this morning. I got on the plane over here. I was in a mood. Sullen. Grumpy. Tempted to text Winston and ask him if he's found anything out about Seamus McFuckface yet, but I restrained myself.

The guy doesn't work that fast and it's a Sunday. Winston probably won't launch into his investigation until first thing Monday morning, which means I need to chill.

But damn it, I want to know what's up with that guy. Why did he show up at my reception? Does he actually want Charlotte?

Tough shit, he can't have her.

Memories of last night pop into my brain as I take a cool shower. I can't help but revel in them for a moment. The sounds Charlotte made when I fucked her with my fingers. How responsive she is, even when I'm mean. And I'm not really mean.

I used to be the good time guy. Both in person and private. I was always easygoing, even in bed. Especially in bed.

First night with Charlotte and I lose all control. Second night? I act like a complete macho dick, and wouldn't you know, my little wifey gets off on it. Who fucking knew?

I made a reservation at one of the restaurants in the resort and I'm spending my time getting ready since we're still an hour away from having to show up.

think about shaving but worry what that razor will feel like on my skin, so I take a pass. Instead, I try to get my hair to cooperate before I put on a pair of black trousers and a white dress shirt. My usual outfit of a silver chain around my neck and a bunch of rings, not giving what anyone might think about me. Not even Charlotte.

She never said she minded the rings. And I'm wearing my wedding too, so that should please her, right?

By the time I'm leaving my bedroom in search of her, I'm anxious. Starving. I need food and alcohol, stat.

I find Charlotte sitting outside on her phone, the gentle breeze causing her hair to fly across her face. She keeps batting it away, her gaze on her phone, never noticing that I came outside and now I feel like a stalker.

But damn, she's pretty in the strapless black dress she's wearing. A pinkish golden sunburn on complete display. She's got a thin gold necklace around her neck and thin gold hoops in her ears, my ring twinkling on her ring finger. Her nose is red from the sun and her lips are painted a pretty color. She glances up at the same time I shove my hands into my pockets, she does a double take when she sees me standing there.

"I didn't hear you come outside." She sets her phone on the table in front of her.

"Everything all right?" I flick my chin at her phone, the screen showing black before I can catch what she was doing on it.

Charlotte's brows draw together. "Yes."

"Who were you texting?" I sound like a jealous prick, but I can't help it and I don't want her texting anyone. Not a single soul.

Especially not that dickbag.

"I was scrolling Instagram. I looked up the hashtag for this resort and was checking out the photos." Her smile is faint, and I refuse to react to it.

"You almost ready?" I ask, my voice rough.

She nods and checks her phone yet again. "We still have about five minutes."

"They might seat us early. Plus, I'm starving." I flick my head. "Let's go. We can always sit in the bar and wait for our table. Have a drink."

"I'm not twenty-one yet," she reminds me, her voice soft.

I keep forgetting she's younger than me. She doesn't act like it sometimes she does.

burned Never in bed though.

slip on “No one will card you,” I reassure her. “And I’ll order drinks for us.

choice. I “Okay.” She pushes her chair back and rises to her feet before she
; a fuckher way over to me. I realize she’s not wearing a dress at all but a s
black jumpsuit thing that’s all one piece.

ng ring And she looks hot as hell.

I run a hand over my mouth to smother whatever I was about to
jumpy. her, unable to tear my gaze away from her chest. The top clings to
perfectly, giving me a nice view of her cleavage. The sides and back
sing her jumpsuit has cutouts, exposing even more skin and I’m fairly certain n
screen, isn’t wearing a bra.

Fuck me.

ng, her “You ready to go, then?” she asks once she stops directly in front of

ecklace “Yeah. Let’s do it.”

her left “Let me grab my purse.” She enters the house while I remain outst
ty coral gaze locked on her, watching until she disappears into the bedroom.

rets and I shake my head, scrubbing my hand over my face. Across the back
neck.

in front This woman is going to completely undo me before this little hone
is through.

1 going I know it.

◇ ◇ ◇

elp it. I

THE RESTAURANT IS open air and has a spectacular view of the ocean, v
now mostly shrouded in darkness thanks to the late hour. We ended up
ind was in the bar for only twenty minutes before we were shown to our tabl
notice the longer Charlotte sips on that giant pina colada she was desp
order, the more relaxed she becomes.

twenty “I love it here,” she announces once she’s slurped the last of her dr

et’s go. “Have you been to Mexico before?” I dunk a tortilla chip into a l
guac before I shove it into my mouth.

She shakes her head. “I’ve been to the Caribbean. Hawaii. Bu
Mexico.”

t. Well, “I’m surprised. Figured you Lancasters travel all over the world.”

“Oh we do. Or we used to, when I was much younger. All Lancas

to Lancaster Prep, so we end up spending most of our time there during school,” she explains.

I’ve heard of Lancaster Prep. A very expensive, elite boarding school where the children of the best of the best—and the richest of the rich—

“All your brothers went there?”

“Yes, and Crew’s there now. He’s a senior. All of my cousins attend. It’s a Lancaster family tradition.”

“Your family has lots of traditions?”

“Oh definitely. Many of them are downright archaic.” She smiles.
“Like this arranged marriage thing.”

I can’t help the chuckle that slips out. “My mother tried to get single one of my brothers and sisters to marry someone of her choosing.

“Every single one?”

I nod.

“And did she succeed?”

I slowly shake my head. “Only with me so far.”

We’re both quiet for a moment, letting that sink in.

“Can I admit something to you?” she asks me once the server drops off a fresh pina colada.

I watch as she takes a generous sip. “Go for it.”

“I was jealous of Ash.” She leans back in her chair while I absorb she just said.

“Why?”

“I thought she was too—clingy towards you.”

I gape at her. “What?”

“She hung all over you the night of our engagement party.” A frown forms on her face. “I didn’t like it.”

Wait a minute.

“Charlotte, are you telling me you were jealous of her because of my ink.

“I wasn’t jealous of her relationship with Winston if that’s what you originally thinking.” She takes another sip from her drink and my gaze on her pursed lips. “I thought maybe there was something going on between you two.”

I want to laugh, but I don’t. When I first met Ash, I thought she was on my side. I liked that. But I’m not attracted to her. She belongs to Winston. He’d have my ass if I even looked at Ash wrong.

ng high Besides, he's my brother and I would never do him dirty like that.
"There's nothing going on between me and Ash," I say, my voice
school "There never has been. She's with Winston. She's his wife."

-attend. "I know." She nods. Sighs. "I'm silly. I just—she's beautiful."
"She is," I agree.

nded or Pain flickers in Charlotte's eyes. "And sophisticated. She fits in
Constantine family perfectly."

I bark out a laugh. "It wasn't always like that. Trust me. My mother
faintly her."

"Really?" She sounds surprised.

t every "Definitely." My gaze tracks her every little movement. How she
g." wild strand of blonde hair behind her ear. How there's another strand
her upper lip thanks to the gloss she's wearing. She tugs the stray hair
her index finger lingering at the corner of her mouth and heat surges in
me.

I'm filled with the sudden urge to kiss her.

"Does your mother hate me?" she asks.

ops her I slowly shake my head when her gaze finds mine. "Sometimes
she likes you better than me."

She laughs. "I doubt that. She dotes on you. I think you're her favorite."

tb what "Only because I kiss her ass," I mutter.

"No. It's more than that, and you don't have to act like a tough
front of me like you do everyone else. It's okay to admit you love
mother and that you're close to her." Her smile is small, her eyes
sadness. "I'm not close to either of my parents. They don't seem
a scowl much for me."

My heart breaks for this girl. Woman.

My wife.

ne?" "Who are you close to in your family? Any of them?"

ou were "Mainly Crew. We're close in age and our brothers are a lot older than
e settle so we spent most of our growing-up years together. My mother tries,
between not like her at all. I don't want to shop or gossip, and those are her

favorite things to do." She looks away, her lips parted, her expression
was hot, thoughtful. "As we got older, Crew and I grew more distant. He's a
er. She male, after all. He can't be too soft and spend so much time with his sister."

The Lancasters are the worst, I swear to God.

“It’s why Seamus knew he could take advantage of me,” she continues quietly. Shock courses through me at hearing his name—mixed with an amount of anger. “How did he take advantage of you?”

Her gaze finds mine, those blue eyes full of unfamiliar emotion. “I want to talk about it on our honeymoon, but...you have to believe me. I didn’t want him at our wedding. There’s no way I would’ve wanted him near me, after what he’s done. And I didn’t invite him either. Isn’t that the whole point of a family who’s big on keeping their archrivals close at hand?”

Winston told me exactly that. He even said McLoser could show me I don’t know why I’m so focused on the fact that Charlotte invited that asshole. Our server arrives with our meals, interrupting our conversation, stuck to eat in comfortable silence, commenting on how delicious the food is. I’m away, think Charlotte should slow down on the pina colodas, but she ignores me and orders another one, hiccupping in the middle of her request, which makes me laugh.

My wife is well on her way to being drunk. I think about what she said, the earnestness in her gaze, and I realize I think I believe her. She didn’t invite him. Still think she’s keeping plenty of secrets though. “I like your rings,” she tells me after we’re done eating. She’s working on her drink and I’m long done with mine.

I glance down at my hands. “You do?” Nodding, she extends her hand. “Can I look at them?” I offer her my right hand first and she holds it between her own and tucks it to her head, her mouth so close she could kiss my still slightly tanned knuckles. She pulls away slightly to really examine the rings, running her finger over one. Then another.

I shouldn’t like it when she touches me, but I do. I don’t want her to worm her way into my heart. I still don’t have one hundred percent trust in her intentions. That Seamus guy showing up ruined everything, but it also taught me a lesson. One I shouldn’t forget.

Never let my guard down. I did that with Charlotte way too soon and it cost me a damn good friend.

Making an ass out of myself at my own damn wedding reception. Socking my new wife’s ex-lover in the face. I’m shocked as hell I haven’t heard from Mom yet, or from Charlotte’s parents.

ues. I'm sure their response is coming.

a fair "Let me see your other hand," Charlotte demands, pulling me from my thoughts.

'I don't I offer her my left hand and she immediately traces the band around my ring finger. It's platinum. Simple. No stones or design. Exactly what he would've wanted in a wedding ring, not that she ever consulted me about it. She got it.

Where she got it, I have no idea. It was brand new, nary a scratch on it. I believed wearing it would feel like a shackle around my neck, but so it is. Good.

and we "Do you like your wedding ring?" she asks, her gaze meeting mine across the table, my hand still clutched in between both of hers.

ores me "Yeah. It goes well with the rest of my collection," I say flippantly.

Her smile is slow. Sexy as fuck. "That's why I chose it."

"You picked it out?"

re... "Of course." She lets go of my hand and leans back in her chair, indignant. "Did you choose my wedding ring?"

"Maybe." I decide to fuck with her.

e's still She scowls, taking the bait. "Maybe?"

I shrug a shoulder. "I was getting busier and busier at work right up to the wedding. I didn't have a lot of time."

The hurt is back, lingering in her eyes, and I immediately feel like a jackass. "Your mother chose it, then?"

attered A ragged sigh leaves me and I scrub a hand across my chin, wishing I hadn't thanks to my sunburn. "You want the truth?"

She nods.

her to "I went with her and picked it out."

r or her Her smile is back. She looks very pleased with herself. "Good."

taught For someone who originally protested this entire marriage scene, she now seems totally into it. "You like it?"

nd look Her gaze drops to her left hand. "I love it."

"I'm glad." The server drops off the check and I add a generous tip. I add the meal to our room. "Ready to get out of here?"

haven't She nods, rising to her feet. "Let's go."

I follow her as we exit the restaurant, noting the appreciative glances from the other patrons.

receives from male diners. I glare at every one of them, making it clear
from my don't approve and she doesn't even realize what's going on.

How much she affects me.

and my How possessive she makes me feel.

what I How I can't wait to get back to our private villa so I can fuck her
before couch.

Or the kitchen counter.

on it. I Maybe we could go outside and I can fuck her on a lounge chair.

far, so I'm up for any of it.

All of it.

across

almost

chair,

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receives from male diners. I glare at every one of them, making it clear that I don't approve and she doesn't even realize what's going on.

How much she affects me.

How possessive she makes me feel.

How I can't wait to get back to our private villa so I can fuck her on the couch.

Or the kitchen counter.

Maybe we could go outside and I can fuck her on a lounge chair.

I'm up for any of it.

All of it.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Charlotte

I WAKE UP slowly, my head throbbing in time with my heartbeat. I try to open my eyes but my lids feel as if they're weighed down with concrete blocks. It pains me to make the attempt.

So I remain lying there, the fan on above me cooling my heated skin.

I don't remember actually going to bed. Or falling asleep. The last thing I recall is entering the villa with Perry. I threw myself at him, almost stumbling, and he grabbed hold of me, his touch firm as he murmured, "You're my wife."

I frown, then immediately try to relax my forehead. Even that hurts. Oh God, I think I'm hungover.

There's a soft knock coming from somewhere and then I hear the door open. Almost immediately I can smell my husband, his cologne mixed with his distinct, delicious scent, yet I don't move. It's like I can't.

"You're awake?" He's whispering, which is such a relief.

"Yes," I croak, my throat dry. Like I swallowed ten cotton balls and they're all clogged in my throat.

"I brought you something to drink." He speaks in what I assume is a normal tone as he enters the room and I roll over on my side, clamping my hand over my exposed ear.

"Please stop yelling," I request weakly.

He chuckles and I hear the thunk of heavy glass being set on the nightstand. "I'm not."

I crack a single eye open but I don't see him anywhere. "What do you want to bring me?"

“A glass of water and a bottle of ibuprofen.” I hear the snap of a the rattle of pills. Even that sounds too loud. “You should take four.”

“I don’t know if I can swallow them down,” I admit.

“Charlotte.” He lowers his voice. “Sit up.”

I do as he says, keeping my eyes tightly closed. My head swims, afraid if I see what’s actually going on, I might throw up.

“Open your eyes.”

Slowly I crack open my lids, wincing for a moment before I there’s no glare in the room. No bright sunlight or lamp on. It’s dim and the fan is whirring overhead.

“Look at me.”

I do as he says, slowly turning my head in the direction of his voice and there he is, standing beside my bed looking as casual as I think I’ve ever seen him in a T-shirt and pair of shorts, his hair mussed, his skin not as red as it was last night.

Ugh. Last night...

“Hold your hand out,” he tells me and I do as he says, watching him dump four ibuprofen into my palm. “Take a drink of water first.”

Like a child being told what to do, I glance over at the nightstand, grab the glass of water, drinking half of it in big gulps. The water is cooling and soothing on my dry throat and I drop the pills onto my tongue before I can swallow them down.

“Finish the water,” he says and I do so, draining every last drop until he takes the glass in his offered hand.

I glance down at myself, frowning. “I’m wearing the same clothes as last night.”

“Do you even remember last night?”

“We went to dinner.”

“Yeah.”

“I drank three pina coladas.”

“Four,” he corrects.

“Okay. Four. We left the restaurant.” I frown, thinking. It hurts. “Back here. I think I tripped?”

“I caught you.”

“Uh-huh. And I was laughing.” A lot. Too much.

“You wouldn’t stop. Then you kept asking me the same question over and over.”

lid and over. That's when I knew you were plastered. I eventually walked y
your bedroom and you collapsed on the bed. You fell asleep within n
and you were snoring." He smiles and lifts the empty glass up as if in
"I'll get you more water."

and I'm Humiliation burns at his words and I shove it aside, telling mys
fine.

I'm fine.

realize I watch him leave before I look down at myself again, my hair
id quiet forward. I brush it out of my eyes and glance toward the dresser. Th
mirror that hangs above it. My reflection in said mirror.

I stare at my face in horror, a whimper escaping me.

ce until Oh God. I look terrible.

er seen My hair is a disaster, the elastic band dangling around a few strand
ed as it weakest ponytail ever. There is so much makeup under my eyes I loo
raccoon. My eyes are bloodshot and my skin is blotchy and I swear
my boobs are about to slip out of the top of this jumpsuit thing I'm we

g as he And I'm suddenly consumed with the need to pee.

I hop out of bed and rush into the bathroom, slamming the door sc
nd and wince. After I take care of business, I grab a clean washcloth and run i
ool and the water in the sink before I scrub at my face, removing all of the e
efore I and mascara that settled beneath my eyes. I grab a brush and smooth
hair as best as I can. Tug the top of my jumpsuit up so my chest
til I set covered.

Okay. Now I'm a little more presentable.

es from Still got the headache though.

Taking a deep breath, I open the door and walk back into the bedro
same time Perry reenters the room, a full glass of water clutched in hi
He gives it to me and I murmur thank you before I take a few sips ar
on top of the dresser.

"You look better," he says, his gaze scanning me up and down.

"I should shower." The second the words leave me, I remem
"Came shower we took together on our wedding night. How I sat on that
bench and gave him a blow job until he couldn't take it anymore. He
up holding me against the wall while he fucked me until we we
coming, our moans echoing in the bathroom.

ver and The moment was hot. Seared into my memory forever.

ou into “Finish your water first.” His deep voice pulls me from my thought
minutes, I take another sip like the docile wife I am. “I have a question.”
a toast. “What is it?”

self it’s “What did I keep asking you last night?” I’m curious.
He smiles. “You sure you want to hear it?”
I nod, fighting the unease. “Definitely.”

“You wanted to know.” He takes a step closer, drawing his fingers
falling the top of the dresser. “If I thought.” He stops directly in front of
the giant body heat ratcheting up my temperature level. “You were sexy.”
My mouth drops open. “I did not.”

“Yes, you did.”
I sort of want to die. Why do I always turn into a fool for him? Why
is I in these damn insecure? I blame my parental issues for that one. Clearly I
look like a held enough as a child. “That’s kind of pathetic.”

to God “I thought it was cute.” He bops the tip of my nose with his index
finger. “Take a shower and let’s go to brunch.”
“What time is it?”

How hard I “Nine thirty.”
sit under I’m gaping at him again. “It’s that early? Really? Why didn’t you
eyeliner sleep in?”

out my “I got bored.” He shrugs before he heads out of my bedroom. “Hu
is fully I’m starving.”

I turn and watch him go, stumped when he shuts the door behind
Like, what just happened? Why was he being so sweet and taking care
The man is a contradiction, though I’m sure he could feel the same wa
rom theme. I send him mixed messages on a daily basis.

is hand. Looks like he does the same to me.
I take a shower and wash my hair. Slip on a white string bikini and
delicate flower-print dress on over it. I pull my damp hair into a bun on
my head and slip on the hoops I wore last night, then apply a little
ber the mascara on my lashes and slick a rosy-pink lip balm on my lips.

marble There. I’m done.
ended I slip on a pair of leather slide sandals and walk out into the living
re both to find it empty. As is the kitchen.

As is the rest of the house.
It’s only when I return to the living room do I hear a splash from

ts. and realize Perry is in the pool.

Heading outside, I stop at the edge of the pool and watch him across the length of it. He pops his head out of the water and slicks his hair back with his hands, his gaze finding mine.

“I got bored again,” he says in answer to my unspoken question.

I can only shake my head.

s across “And I ordered room service instead. It should be here any second.

me, his “I got dressed up for nothing.” I wave a hand at my outfit.

“I think you look nice.” His smile is vaguely naughty.

That look in his eyes dark.

“Gee thanks.” I kick off my slides. Reach for the hem of my dress by am I whip it off and over my head, letting it fall onto the lounge chair I wasn’t next to. I stand there for just a moment, letting Perry get a good, long look at me in this bikini that’s made of scraps before I’m diving into the water. Perry is swimming toward me.

Until my head is out of the water and I’m treading in front of him, breathing a little heavily as droplets coast down my face, dripping from my chin.

let me “Nice swimsuit.”

He can’t even see it at the moment. “It’s not a swimsuit.”

worry up. “What is it, then?”

“A bikini,” I correct him.

and him. “Not made of much.”

of me? I glance down to see my nipples poking against the thin white fabric. Maybe he can see more than I realized.

I return my gaze to his. “I know.”

He reaches out and drifts his thumb against the very nipple I was looking at. “Water too cold?”

on top of “It’s perfect.”

a bit of He shifts closer, the water swirling around us. I scoot backward, until I’m against the wall of the pool, my back pressed to the slick tile, my feet touching the bottom. Perry is standing in front of me, above me, his hands running down his bare chest, little paths snaking across his skin.

I want to lick the water. Lap at his skin with my tongue. Hear him take a breath.

outside Without a word he rests his hand on my hip, his fingertips slipping

beneath the string of my bikini bottoms. Despite the cool water, I can
n swimheat of his touch, branding my skin. Making my breaths come faster.
his hair I'm trembling.

My eyes fall shut when he shifts even closer, his body pressed to
his heat seeping into me. He drifts his fingers down the front of my c
between my breasts, so lightly I could almost believe he's not touchin
” all.

“I should hate you,” he murmurs, his casually cruel words lashing
heart.

“Why?” I croak, hating how sad I sound.

I don't want him to hate me—and I don't want to hate him either.
standingstuck together. We should be allies, not enemies.

look at Here we go again with the mixed messages.

ter and “I still don't trust you. Your ex showing up at our reception? Th
fucked up.” He slips his fingers into the front of my bikini top, slidin
of him,up and down along my breast. “Winston believes you had somethin
om mywith him being there.”

I open my eyes. “I already told you I didn't ask Seamus to come to
—”

Perry clamps his hand over my mouth, silencing me. “Don't
name.”

I stare up at him, fear making my heart pound faster.

“I never want to hear you say his fucking name again, do you hear
fabric.When I nod, he slowly removes his hand. “My brother has launched
investigation into that asshole.”

“How do you know?”

was just “I spoke to him earlier on the phone.” He glares at me. “You thin
just going to ignore what happened at our wedding? I'm not about
played.”

ntil I'm Plotting my demise without my knowledge during our honeymoon
t firmlywonderful.

, water “I'm not trying to play you.” Whatever that means. “And I
understand the need to investigate...him.”

hiss in What am I saying? I know Seamus didn't show up out of the blue
say hi. He wants to cause trouble.

ing just But why?

feel the Perry blows out an aggravated breath. “Because he’s related
Morellis.” His fingers find my nipple and he pulls and tugs, making
in pain, yet he doesn’t let up. “Morellis like to fuck with Constantines.
o mine, “I have nothing to do with this.”

hest, in “You have everything to do with this.” He grips my hip tightly, hi
g me at fierce. “Don’t act all innocent with me, Charlotte. Like you don’t kno
the real world works. You’re not some sheltered little girl who w
g at my under lock and key all your life. You ran away to Paris and fucke
professor. There’s nothing innocent about that.”

Anger fills me and I try to jerk out of his hold but he won’t let me g
. We’re “Truth hurts, right? Think of how I felt when I saw that asshole
behind me at my own wedding reception,” Perry tosses at me.

“You don’t even care!” I try to shove at him but it’s like attempt
at was move a steel wall. Impossible. “You don’t care about me, or the
ig them wedding, or the fact that I’m your wife. Stop trying to act all cas
g to do happy-go-lucky on our supposed honeymoon. You’re merely tolerating
you can use me for sex.”

o our re “You like it though.” His voice is calm. Cold. “You like it when
you. Don’t bother denying it.”

say his Oh God, I wish I could.

“Let’s test how much you hate it. Hate me.” His hand dives into th
of my bikini bottoms, his fingers searching me. I’m wet, and it’s not ju
ar me?” the damn pool. “Yep. You hate my guts.”

d a full His sarcastic tone makes me growl and I lunge for him, curling my
around the back of his neck and tugging as hard as I can on his hair, to
cause him pain. Anything to get him to stop touching me. Saying su
k I wash things to me. “Let. Me. Go!”

to get “No.” He shoves two fingers inside of me, making me moan I
weak woman that I am. In agony. In defeat. “Oh yeah. You really can
n. How me now.”

My hands fall to his shoulders and I cling to him, closing my ey
I don’t don’t have to see the smug expression on his stupidly handsome face.
even know why we’re arguing, but of course it leads to this.

just to It always leads to this.

A gasp escapes me when he removes his fingers from within m
and grabs hold of my waist, lifting me up. My legs automaticall

to the around his hips, anchoring myself to him.
me hiss “Look at me,” he demands and I slowly open my eyes to find his
” mine, his expression completely closed off, yet his eyes are full of tu
emotion. “Don’t ever forget who you belong to. You’re a Constantine
is voice I say nothing. There’s no point in arguing because it’s true.
ow how Constantine now.
as kept Whether I like it or not.
ed your “If I ever find out that piece of shit tried to talk to you, I’m killin
He leans in, his mouth at my temple, kissing me tenderly. “I don’t c
go. starts a full-scale war, I’ll tear him apart, and enjoy every second of it t
lurking I’m trembling so hard my teeth start to chatter.
“Did you see they’re talking about our wedding on the gossip site
oting to voice is so casual, yet also edged with fury.
stupid “N-no.” I shake my head.
ual and “Tinsley sent me a few links earlier. She wanted to warn me.” He
g me so head, his mouth brushing against mine as he speaks. “Not that I care. I
asshole who shouldn’t have been there, sniffing around his ex.”
I I fuck “I—”
He rests his fingers against my lips, silencing me. “Don’t tell me h
feel about him, or me or anyone else. I don’t want to know.”
re front We stare at each other, our chests brushing with every accelerated
ist from my core throbbing, my entire body aching.
Despite everything he just said, the threats he made, and how s
y hands feel, there is one thing that still remains clear.
ying to I want him. And he knows it.
ch rude I think he wants me too.
He pushes his fingers in between my lips and I let him, our gaze
like the straying. I pull them in further, licking his fingertips with my tongue
’t stand eyelids grow heavy as he watches me suck his fingers like they’re his c
“Did you ever suck his cock?” he asks me.
res so I I pause, not wanting to answer him. He doesn’t want to hear the tru
I don’t But my pause is answer enough because he rips his fingers from
and kisses me, his mouth rough, his tongue like a weapon as it lash
mine. I moan low in my throat, letting him do whatever he wants
y body knowing in the end I’ll get what I want.
y wrap Him. Buried deep inside of me.

His hands are everywhere, tugging at my bikini, reaching behind my face inundo the tie before he's shoving the top out of the way. He squeezes my breast, his fingers working my nipple as he continues to kiss me and now." into his palm, craving more.

I am a When he ends the kiss, I whimper, but he ignores me, wrapping his fingers around my nipple. A soft *oh* leaves me and I grip the back of his head, his fingers entwined with his wet hair as I hold him to me.

g him." He sucks hard, his tongue lashing at my flesh before he pulls away, teasing my nipple with soft flickers of his tongue.

too." "This is what I wanted to do to you last night," he growls against my chest. "You were so fucking drunk, there was no way I was going to do this to you?" Hisyou."

"I wouldn't have stopped you," I admit.

He pauses, his gaze finding mine. "I wanted you to remember."

tilts his Perry continues lavishing his attention on my breasts. Until my bikini top is long gone, floating away on the water. I grip him to me, squeezing around his hips, the unmistakable ridge of his erection pressed against my center and I shift my hips in an attempt to rub against him.

ow you I slide my hand in between us, my fingers finding the front of his trunks and the tie at the center. With fumbling fingers, I undo it, and my breath, trunks loosen around his waist and I'm sliding my hand down the front of him, finding his hard cock. I wrap my fingers around his shaft, squeezing firmly and he pulls away from my chest. He thrusts his face in my neck, shoves his hand into my hair, holding me in place, his cock throbbing against my palm.

"Know what to do with it?" He thrusts his hips forward, surging in and I never grip.

and his "I think I can figure it out." I begin to stroke him. Up and down, not too slow, my thumb circling around the tip over and over.

Without warning he finds my mouth, kissing me. Devouring me. While he nudges aside my bikini bottoms, bats my hand away from my lips and shoves his way inside of me before going completely still. Holding me with him for a long, quiet moment. The only thing I can focus on is his thrusting to me, cock buried deep inside of my body.

Despite everything. The cruelty and the threats and the hatred and the frustration, this is the confirmation I needed. He still wants me.

l me to And I want him too.

zes my “Perry.” His name falls from my lips in a heated whisper and he sv
l I leanit, his tongue thrusting in time with the rhythm of his cock. He fu
 soundly in the pool, completely out of control, his movements slop
his lipsfrantic, and oh God, it feels so good.

ad, my Too good.

 It all happens so fast. The water is splashing around us because
s away,shifting bodies, and I’m moaning. Clutching him close. Squeezing m
walls until it feels like I’ve got him locked deep.

inst my He curses, pulling away from my lips to press his face agai
o touchshoulder. I wrap my arms around him, circling my hips, seeing stars v
 hits a certain spot. He hits it again.

 And again.

 Until I’m clutched up and coming, panting in his ear, tugging on
kini topas wave after wave slams into me. He’s breathing hard, his entire boc
ny legsstiff just before an agonized groan leave him, a clue that he just came.

inst my The other clue being when I feel him spill inside of me.

 Without a condom.

s swim *Oh no.*

ntil the I shove him away from me with all the strength I can muster, gla
front ofhim in dismay, my breathing harsh, my heart racing. He watches me,
ing himhis hand beneath the water I’m sure to cradle his precious, just-came
e as heof-me cock.

against “I felt you come.” My tone is accusatory.

 He frowns, looking confused.

into my “You didn’t use a condom.”

 “Aw, fuck.” He grips the back of his neck with both hands be
ice andsmacks the water with them. “*Fuck.*”

 I’m throbbing between my legs, my pussy extra sensitive and
All thefeels as if it’s on fire. Like I could come all over again if I just brus
his dickfingers against it.

g me to The doorbell rings, indicating room service is here.

robbing We stare at each other from across the water, the both of us still br
 heavily, the water dripping across Perry’s handsome, angry face.

ed and “I fucked up,” he mutters as he climbs out of the water completely
 “I’m sorry.”

I watch him go, my gaze on his nude body. How comfortable he is in the shallow front of me without a stitch of clothing on.

He looks at me. “Are you going to answer the door like that?” I ask incredulously.

“Yes,” he snaps, grabbing a towel from a nearby lounge chair and wrapping it around his waist before he heads inside the house to answer the door.

I duck under the water and swim beneath the surface, like I’m mocking him. I don’t want him to see me. Normally I would feel that way.

But he’s seen everything, touched everything. He fucked me extra hard. He came inside of me in the most careless way possible. I don’t want babies from him. Not now.

Maybe not even ever.

his hair
hasly gone

aring at
diving
-inside-

fore he

my clit
hed my

eathing

naked.

I watch him go, my gaze on his nude body. How comfortable he is in front of me without a stitch of clothing on.

“Are you going to answer the door like that?” I ask incredulously.

“Yes,” he snaps, grabbing a towel from a nearby lounge and wrapping it around his waist before he heads inside the house to answer the door.

I duck under the water and swim beneath the surface, like I’m modest and don’t want him to see me. Normally I would feel that way.

But he’s seen everything, touched everything. Fucked me extra hard and came inside of me in the most careless way possible. I don’t want babies with him. Not now.

Maybe not even ever.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Perry

WE EAT OUR breakfast quietly at the massive dining table, me sitting head while Charlotte sits to my right. I'm shoveling it in as fast as I can can't get enough while she merely picks at her food. Swirling it around plate with her fork, a sad expression on her pretty face.

She's wearing a hotel robe that completely engulfs her and I still have towel on, naked beneath it. No reason to get dressed up for this meal right?

I still can't believe how angry I got. How I threatened her a McFuckhole dickwad. Who the hell do I think I am? Winston?

We do come from the same family. I guess it shouldn't surprise me I'd make threats like that—and mean them.

Because I do mean it. That Morelli offshoot gets near my wife and bash his face in. I don't even want him looking at her.

When I asked her if she gave him a blow job and she didn't say anything I was fucking infuriated.

But I also walked right into that one. Don't ask questions you don't want to hear the answer to, and that's exactly what I did. To make things better, I fucked her in the pool.

Without a condom.

What the hell was I thinking? What am I doing, putting everyt risk? We only just got married and now the potential is there that brought a baby into the mix? I'm too damn young.

So is she.

I barely know her.

This isn't a real marriage. The last thing we need to do is have a kid.
That's just all kinds of fucked up.

Watching her drag her eggs back and forth across the plate is driving me insane and I can't take it anymore.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I yell.

She jumps, her fork falling with a clatter onto the plate as she glances at me. "You don't have to yell."

I soften my tone. "You're not eating."

"I'm not hungry."

"Still hungover?"

"A little. The headache's gone though," she admits, keeping her head down at the bent. Like she can't look at me.

I guess I fucked it right out of her.

"You should eat," I demand and she does as I say, shoveling up the cold eggs and shoving them into her mouth.

The tension is thick, and I wonder if she's scared of me. She still looks in my direction, and I suppose I deserve that. Her fear. Her resistance.

Wiping my mouth with the cloth napkin, I toss it on my empty plate and stand, leaving the table without another word. I drop my towel in the entryway, not really giving a fuck as I make my way to my bedroom and my phone, where I see I have a text from my brother.

and I'll *Winston: Call me as soon as you get this.*

I throw on a fresh pair of swim trunks and do as he asks.

"What's up?" is how I greet him when he says hello. "Find anything yet?"

"A few details. We're still working on it." His voice is clipped, and it's even already taking too much of his time and I blow out an exasperated breath.

I am sick of everyone's shit today.

"Give me what you've got, then."

"All right. McTiernan arrived in New York City last Friday morning. We've flown in from Dublin and landed at JFK. Booked one of the cheapest rooms at the hotel where you were married."

I glance at my reflection in the mirror, wishing I could plow through it. "He didn't fly in from Paris?"

d. “He’s been back in Ireland for a while now. Not sure how long yet details are still being hammered out.”

literally “What else?”

“He checked out of the hotel Sunday morning and is now staying at Bishop’s Landing.”

lares at Meaning he’s also in Constantine territory. “Think he’s a threat?”

“I don’t know, but we can’t assume he’s not. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Morellis will use him to try and talk to Charlotte and get information about us from her. The war between the Morellis and Constantines is close to some of us. With Lucian and Elaine. With Haley and Leo. But it’s fiercer for others.” Winston pauses, and I know he’s thinking about our relationship. Haley’s daughter. Squishy and loud but tolerable enough. And half-blood is Morelli. Finding love has created a tenuous peace between the families. For now. “His ticket was one way.”

“Fucking great,” I practically growl. “So he’ll be lingering around here. I won’t talk to my wife indefinitely. If he’s smart, he’ll stay the fuck away from her.”

ate and “You don’t sound pleased.”

in the “I want him to back the fuck off.”

nd grab “Why the hell do you care?”

I say nothing for a moment, unable to put into words what Constantine means to me. Not that she actually means something.

As in, not that I love her, or care for her even. I’m attracted to her. We have chemistry. I like her sometimes.

ing out And sometimes, I don’t. I don’t like her at all. I don’t like that she dragged a Morelli into our lives and fucked everything up. Specifically, I don’t like that she dragged Seamus into our lives. He’s a wild card. Dangerous to everything we’ve built. He’s dangerous if he’s working for the Morellis. And ironically he’s even more dangerous if he’s not.

Because then he’d be out of our reach.

orning. Winston blows out a harsh breath. “Look, I get it. She’s your wife and you want to protect her. There’s something in the Constantine blood that turns us into raving lunatics when it comes to certain women.”

my fist “I want to rip his head off his neck with my bare hands,” I mutter.

Winston actually chuckles, the dick. “These women of ours, they exploit our vulnerability. They make us do dumb shit. Impulsive, stupid shit.”

. Those I remember what he went through with Ash and the Morellis and goddamn stepbrothers of hers. It was a nightmare, and he defended her right to the bitter end.

ying in And he wasn't even married to her at the time.

Now he's got his own squishy, loud brat. My nephew Lane is named after our father.

rised if "Let him know that, then," Winston suggests. "We can arrange a meeting when you get back. I think you two should meet."

over for I'm worried if I come face to face with that prick, I'll do something from regret—and end up in jail. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

' cousin "What else do you suggest? Listen, confronting him is the best way of her your intent across. Let him know he needs to back the fuck off. Impending when you might do if he gets too close."

I consider Winston's words, imagining a meeting with McPerv and trying what I might say to him. How he might react. What I'll have to do if he says anything from me any shit, which he probably will. It could destroy the tenuous peace between our families. And the tenuous peace in my new marriage. "I don't know."

"Think about it. It's the right move," Winston says with confidence.

"I'll figure it out when we get back home."

Charlotte "I wouldn't wait too long if I were you." Winston pauses, changing the subject. "Enjoying your honeymoon?"

ier. We "It's been all right."

"The way you say it makes me think you're not getting any pussy."

hat she Irritation blooms in my chest. "Don't talk about my wife like that."

ically I Now my dickish brother is full-on laughing. "That tells me you're not getting any pussy. Have fun, little brother."

for the He ends the call before I can say anything else.

I drop my phone on the dresser and thrust both hands in my hair, gripping the back of my head as I glare at my reflection. I'm not handling this well now. My conflicting emotions are all over the place and I can't get them under control. The woman is driving me out of my mind.

I like her. I don't.

I hate her. I don't.

ey're a I laugh with her. I want to wrap my hand around her throat.

I want to crush her.

d those I want to fuck her.

r honor I just...

I want her.

Dropping my arms, I slip on a brand-new pair of Gucci slides that had afterpacked in my luggage and head back outside to the pool, stopping short.

I see that my wife had the same idea. She's stretched out on a lounge chair with her feet meeting skin gleaming in the sun, giant sunglasses covering her eyes.

And that's the only thing she's wearing.

Realizing I'd Shock courses through me as I continue to stare, taking in her body I was fucking not even a half hour ago. Her entire body is on camera to get displayed and I don't know where to look first. She's got one knee barely what foot flat on the cushion. Her long legs and pretty feet with the pale pink painted toenails. Her breasts and the rosy-pink nipples. The flat curve of her stomach.

She gives I scrub my hand along my jaw back and forth, telling myself to stay peacedown. I can't do anything.

'I don't "I can feel you staring," she calls, her lips barely moving. Hell, her body doesn't even move.

She says I drop my hand and rest both of them on my hips. "Pretty sure that's what you want."

Realizing the "Actually, I wanted no tan lines."

"You put sunscreen on."

"No. Suntan oil."

' You'll burn."

' I'll risk it."

getting "You'll give yourself skin cancer."

"Again." She pauses, her lips curving into the slightest smile. "I'll take it."

ripping A ragged sigh escapes me. "I don't understand you at all."

is well. "Who were you on the phone with?"

and under Something prickles over me, making me uneasy.

How'd she know I was on the phone?

"I could hear you talking," she says, as if she could hear my question. "Something about ripping someone's head off."

"I was talking to Winston."

She reaches for her sunglasses and pushes them into her hair, her

eyes meeting mine. “About me and—”

“Don’t say his name,” I interrupt.

“Right.” Her smirk is annoying as fuck. She tugs the glasses back at her eyes and tilts her face toward the sun, the movement making her right whensway gently. “Nothing like a jealous husband to make your marriage longer, herto a healthy start.”

I curl my hands into fists. If that McAsshole was here right now I wouldn’t have a chance. “I’m not jealous.”

conscious She lowers her leg and now I can see her bare pussy. “Sure you’re complete This woman is unbelievable.

ent, her Like I have zero control, I go to her, settling myself on the edge of a pink-lounger, reaching out to rest my hand on her knee. Her skin is hot from the sun. Smooth as silk. “Why would I be jealous when I could have this any time I wanted?”

to calm Charlotte lifts her glasses again, her gaze narrowed as she confronts me. “You really think that?”

er body My fingers drift upward, from her knee to the inside of her thigh. I feel the heat from her cunt and I itch to stroke her there. “I know I can’t do this whatelse would you sit outside like this? You’re trying to bait me.”

She slaps my hand away from her thigh. “No tan lines, remember?”

“Oh. Right.” I nod, her sassy attitude a complete turn-on.

She’s so full of shit.

I readjust myself on the lounger, pushing in between her legs so I have no choice but to spread them so wide her feet dangle over the sides.

Now she’s on complete display. Pink, glistening flesh that’s just begging for my mouth.

I’ll risk “So if I wanted to go down on you right now, you’d stop me?”

Her hand drops to her chest, her fingers drifting across the top of her breasts. I wish I could see her eyes. “Maybe.”

“Uh-huh.” I grab hold of her waist and tug her downward, bringing her closer to my mouth. She gasps, her nipples beading right in front of me. For the briefest moment, I wonder what the hell I’m doing.

mental And why.

Fuck it. I’m running on pure instinct. If I want to eat this pussy, I’m going to.

er blue After all, she is my wife.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Charlotte

PERRY PULLS ME in closer, my legs spread wide open, showing everything I've got. I guess I asked for this, lying out naked by the pool. What did I expect?

This, I think to myself as he strokes my hips. Exactly this.

He seems calmer. A little more contained than how he was earlier. He was ferocious and territorial and ridiculous. I know I shouldn't think this, but all that ragey intensity was kind of hot.

"Relax," he murmurs, his hands stroking downward, along my side and down.

He keeps gently stroking me and I can feel myself melting into the cushion. The warm breeze wafts over my hot skin, making everything feel better. My legs ache and I lift my arms up, draping my wrists across the top of the lounge chair.

Keeping his grip on my hips, he leans in and brushes his mouth over my stomach, just above my navel. Everything inside of me clenches up at that first touch of his lips on my skin and I wait, all the air stuck in my lungs, for him to shift lower.

He doesn't disappoint.

His mouth drifts down, just above my pussy, kissing and licking and nibbling. I squeal when he bites down hard enough to hurt and he sends me a look, his blue eyes blazing.

I tilt my hips up, giving him better access. The throbbing between my legs is incessant, filling my blood. My head spins. Until all I can think about is having his mouth on me.

Devouring me.

I don't know why he's doing this, but I don't complain. Maybe he's trying to apologize to me for being so horrible? Maybe he can't resist me. I know it feels as if I can't resist him.

"Lift up," he murmurs and I do as he asks without hesitation. He has his hands beneath my ass, his fingers teasing my crack as he drops a kiss right on top of my pussy.

Right before he parts me with his fingers and licks at my clit with his tongue.

I arch into his mouth, wanting to feel it everywhere, gripping the edge of the lounge chair as I watch him search me thoroughly with his very tongue. The glasses are still on my face, allowing me to witness what he's doing to me without him being able to see my eyes and I kind of like it.

Oh God, I also really like what he's doing to me.

He's putting his whole face into it. Nuzzling me with his nose. His tongue working me completely over. His big hands kneading my breasts like splitting me wide open. I start to move with him, my gaze zeroed in on his tongue circling my clit. Flicking it. He glances up, as if he can feel my needs. Upon him and he never looks away as he continues to lick me. Putting on his own personal show.

His murmur of approval against my flesh has my skin humming with pleasure. I drop my hand on top of his head, keeping it there with me. He dips his head, his eyes falling closed as he searches me thoroughly, no part of my pussy untouched by his magical tongue.

He doesn't let up for long, delicious minutes. His speed languid at first, until he slowly but surely ratchets it up, his tongue working my throat. He slips one finger inside my pussy, and then another, pumping them in and out.

I'm slowly but surely losing all control. Whimpering. Tossing my head back and forth. Closing my eyes. Opening them. Staring at the birds above, the palm trees gently swaying, the sound of the ocean in the distance. If I could, I'd stay out here naked with my husband all day long. As long as he kept doing this to me, I'd never want to put clothes on again.

A moan leaves me when he draws my clit between his lips and mashes it. Hard. I'm mashing my pussy against his face, not even caring what I look like or how I look and I cry out in frustration when he pulls away from me.

“Flip over,” he demands, the lower half of his face glistening with his juices.

I frown at him, so out of breath I can barely speak. “Wh-what?”

“Roll over.” He grabs my hips and helps me along.

I do as he says, glancing around, unsure of what he’s going to do. I prop myself on my elbows, yelping when he jerks my legs apart. He rubs my ass cheeks with both hands, his touch rough, his hands slipping forward until they meet.

He spreads my ass cheeks apart and I can feel his gaze on me. Embarrassment makes my cheeks burn and I glance over my shoulder to watch him bend down and lick my asshole.

“Oh!” The touch shocks. Sends a jolt of electricity straight through my body.

He does it again. Gentler this time. Searching. Exploring every inch of my body. When he moans against my flesh, I swear I can literally feel my ass dripping onto the cushion.

He’s enjoying this. Something that’s so taboo, so filthy.

No one has ever done this to me before.

He continues licking me. Teasing me with his tongue until I’m thrusting back against his face, the impending orgasm roaring right back at me. Growing. Building into something big.

Bigger than I’ve ever experienced.

He shoves his fingers inside of my pussy and fucks me with the steady back and forth that has me rocking. His mouth still on my neck, his tongue licking my hole, God, it’s too much.

It starts low in my belly and spreads outwards, until my entire body is on edge, just dangling by a string.

“Come for me, baby,” he murmurs against me and that’s all it takes. I’m coming, the shudders racking my body, his name falling from my lips. I’m vibrating, my heart racing so hard I swear I’m going to black out for a moment there, I think I actually do.

All the while he never lets up, his mouth busy on my flesh, his fingers pushing so deep inside of my body I swear he touches my womb.

Finally I come back to myself, the sound of the palm fronds fluttering in the wind. The heat from the sun soaking into my skin. My husband pressed against the back of my thigh as he rubs against it, his fingers

with my drifting across the ridged skin of my asshole.

A shiver moves through me when he tests me there, with his fingertip.

I don't know if I can take any more. Despite the delicious tingling next to me when he touches me like that.

My pussy throbs. My chest hurts. I slump against the lounge chair until parted, the sunglasses falling off my face and onto the ground with a

"Oh my God."

"Dirty girl," he murmurs against my right ass cheek, right before he kisses it. "I own you there."

I don't protest. He's right.

He does own me there.

And I'm sure he'll try to claim me in other ways there as well.

part of
myself

✧ ✧ ✧

OUR RAUNCHY MOMENT in the sun left me golden. Guess the suntan oil was
I think to myself as I step out of the outdoor shower and check my reflection
in the steamy glass.

There are no tan lines to be found.

I lather myself up in body lotion, smoothing it everywhere I can reach.

Until my newly golden skin is gleaming in the light. I grab one of the
Tinsley packed for me and slip it on, not bothering with panties or a bra.

There's something so liberating about being here. In Mexico, in the
with my husband. My entire body feels lit from within, and not just from the

sun.

No, Perry has something to do with it. The way he seems to work
with his hands and mouth and dick. Oh and his eyes. The way he watches

makes me feel powerful.

As if I could do anything.

That's a foreign experience for me. My entire life I've never
powerful. My father controlled my every move. My older brothers snatched

me if I did something wrong. I went to a strict private school my younger
years and was sent away to Lancaster Prep as a freshman. Where

students tended to go wild and get into trouble, I stayed the course and
my head down.

is now

Meaning I was the complete opposite of the typical Lancaster.

ust his I thought running away to Paris was my one shot at freedom but it into me letting another man control me.

les that Seamus.

With his lyrical accent and steely gaze. He moved with ease around my lips classroom, and spoke with such passion about the architectural his clatter. Paris. I was enraptured. Crushing hard. And he knew it.

He took advantage of me, and I let him. I was totally swept up before he pretty words and suggestive glances. To the point that I basically myself at him in his cramped office at the university, sending his office chair backwards with a loud creak when I kissed him.

He kissed me back. That was the first sign something significant going to happen between us. I was giddy. Obsessed.

I realize now he took advantage of a lonely, inexperienced girl basically a child starved for affection, and somehow, he knew it. Sense

And gave me everything I thought I wanted.

worked, He controlled me and I didn't protest—I was used to it. Turned a reflection his dirty little secret and I never minded. There was something thrilling sneaking around, reaching for each other in dark places, where no one see. He'd slap my hand away if he thought I was getting too close in reach, and that hurt.

dresses He'd flirt with other women in class and that hurt too.

a. Yet he always had an explanation. A reason. I accepted those reasons is villa, gullible and completely infatuated.

rom the At one point, I thought it was love.

ship me It all came crashing down that one afternoon in class. When he was in the middle of the lecture and a beautiful woman burst into the room, a giant shes me on her face. Her dark hair flowed in flawless waves down her back. Her dark eyes burned bright when they landed on him.

Her accent matched his. She threw her arms around his neck and over felt him soundly on the lips, making almost every single female in his class pped at gasp with horror.

ounger Including me.

lots of She was his girlfriend. His fiancée. The woman he was going to and kept Meaning I was nothing.

Just a casual affair.

I never spoke to him again. I went back to my flat and cried into a turned pillow. I didn't go to class for a week, ignoring the emails from my instructors and the calls and texts from my newly made friends. One day, my instructors eventually called my father, concerned for my welfare since I was such a good student.

My father demanded I come home and so I did. A shell of myself. Completely devastated.

I eventually healed, and just when Seamus felt like a distant memory, I'd have no need to wonder about him ever again, he had to show his face. And almost ruin everything.

"Hey." Perry knocks on the door three times, startling me. "You're not ready?"

We're going out to dinner, my husband and I.

"Almost," I call, reaching for the brush on the counter and running it through my damp hair. "Give me a few minutes."

He growls with frustration and walks away.

I glare at the door as if he can see my annoyance, hating the uneasiness about slipping over me. Sometimes it feels like he wants me and hates me, all at once, and I don't understand him.

At all.

After slicking my hair into a low ponytail, I contemplate putting on makeup but decide against it, only applying a pale pink lip balm before kissing my lips together and exit the bathroom. I slip on a pair of gold sandals and make my way out to the living room, where I find Perry clutching a cigarette in his hand as he stands at the window, staring out at the lit pool.

"I'm ready," I announce.

He turns, his hot gaze raking over me and I feel my nipples harden beneath my dress.

I wonder if he can tell. I wonder if he knows how much he affects me with just a look. A touch. I think of what he did to me earlier on that night in the classroom and my cheeks burn.

Not with shame. With desire. I want him to do it again. I want to do it much more with my husband. Everything we possibly can.

"Nice dress," he says, not moving from his spot.

"Thank you." It's a pale blue and dotted with tiny red flowers. So feminine with a flowing short skirt. If I twirl around in a circle, he mi

nto mythat I'm not wearing any panties.

om my He looks nice too, clad in a pair of khakis and a white button-down
e of mythe sleeves rolled up and showing off his forearms. That hint of a tattoo
e I was Sexy.

No rings or chains around his neck tonight though. His hair is tan
face clean shaven and he has the same golden tinge to his skin that I do

The Mexico sun is good for us. We're glowing.

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He looks nice too, clad in a pair of khakis and a white button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled up and showing off his forearms. That hint of a tattoo.

Sexy.

No rings or chains around his neck tonight though. His hair is tamed, his face clean shaven and he has the same golden tinge to his skin that I do.

The Mexico sun is good for us. We're glowing.

Or maybe it's from all the sex we're having.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Perry

WE'RE PLAYING A game, the wife and I. Throughout dinner she's sending me hot looks, as if she's imagining me naked. Or even better, reliving the moment we shared on the lounge earlier, when I licked her and made her come extra hard.

I called her a dirty girl and I meant it. She seemed to get off on that more than anything else, which pleased me.

It's the only spot I feel like I own on her body and I'm going to claim it before the honeymoon is over. That is guaran-fucking-teed.

I send her hot looks too, enthralled with that sheen to her skin. Her skin seems to glow in the dim light of the restaurant. Her soft smiles and softer laughter when I tell her something she deems funny, as if we share an inside joke.

Which I suppose we do. The joke's on everyone who thought we'd hate this arrangement made between us. I'm still not one hundred percent down, but I've adapted.

That's one way to put it.

She's more careful with her alcohol tonight, merely sipping on a margarita throughout the meal rather than gulping down one after the other. There's a difference to her, a confidence I don't think I've ever seen in her and damn it, it's fucking attractive.

I'm starting to realize I find everything my wife does is attractive.

"How's your lobster?" she asks me at one point, causing me to look down at my mostly full plate. "You're not eating very much."

"I've got things on my mind," I admit.

Her plate is almost empty. “Trouble in paradise?”

“Ha ha.” I down the straight tequila I requested earlier, the alcohol as it courses through my veins. Now I’m the one who wants to get drunk not so drunk I don’t know what the fuck is going on.

I want the buzz when I fuck her later, because I’m going to.

Fuck her.

“Can I ask you a question?”

I shrug a shoulder. “You don’t need my permission.”

Her eyes blaze and I can tell she’s pleased with my comment. This I don’t get her sometimes. “Why were you talking to Winston earlier?”

My entire body grows tense. “Business.”

She keeps That’s all I say.

When she’s A sigh leaves her. “That’s what you all say.”

her ass “When you say all, who exactly are you referring to?” I ask. “A better not say that dick’s name.”

it faster “I’m not referring to him.” She shakes her head. “I’m talking about father. My older brothers. *Business* is always the answer when they to fully want to tell you what’s really going on.”

Busted.

How she “I thought we were different, Perry. We’re both young and just could even our lives. I’d hoped we could start off together,” she continues.

There are “You sound delusional.”

Her eyes narrow. “And you’re rude. Can’t you see I’m trying to connect with you right now? I know you don’t want to talk about—*him*, but percent created a huge wall between us, and I wish you would just listen to me

I first arrived in Paris, I was a young, sheltered girl who ended up being at advantage of by a much older, more sophisticated man. He recognized my frothy me—my vulnerability. I had a crush, and he saw his opportunity.”

My stomach churns. I do not want to hear this.

before, Yet I need to.

“You said you didn’t want to talk about him during our honeymoon remind her.

glance She rolls her eyes. “When he’s the ghost haunting our every move have to confront it, don’t you think?”

I make a harumphing noise, sounding like an old man.

“When you were talking to Winston earlier, you said you wanted

someone's head off. Don't bother denying it," she says quickly when I warm my lips, ready to protest. "I heard you, and you never answered me back. But asked earlier. Whose head do you want to rip off?"

"Winston's," I automatically say.

She studies me, her expression impassive. "I don't believe you."

Damn it.

Can I trust her with the truth?

"It's none of your concern," I lie, and damn it, my response girl. Infuriates her.

"Are you going to keep secrets from me, Perry?" she throws at me.

"Are you going to keep secrets from *me*, Charlotte?" I throw back.

"I'm trying to open up, but it seems like you don't want to hear it."

We glare at each other, the air crackling between us. I can't hand you everything to her yet. What if she's actually talking to that McAssthat if she tells him everything I told her and he'll end up with the advantage out my I can't let her in on the family business information. Not yet. Maybe don't ever. Most Halcyon information is confidential. If it fell into the hands, it could cost plenty.

Maybe even everything.

starting "As a Lancaster, I'm bringing a lot of financial security to your business," she says, sounding haughty as fuck. "I have every right to what's happening. What decisions are being made. Especially if any be real family's money is being used in those business decisions."

but he's "We're not using your family's money to fund our business deal. Whensnap.

g taken She grabs her glass and drains it, slamming it down onto the table that in hand. "Then why did you marry me?"

"For the name. For the connections. For the reach. Your family has around for generations. Hundreds of years. The Lancaster influence unmatched." That's how Winston explained it to me. We don't need soon," I want their money.

Not yet, anyway.

ove, we We need their name to open doors and introduce us to even players. Larger corporations. Halcyon will eventually be on a global level likes that no one else has ever seen.

d to rip Certainly not any goddamn Morellis.

n I part "We're nothing but a business merger." Her voice is flat.
when I It feels like she's testing me. As if she's looking for me to confi
we're something else. Something more.

Are we?

No. Not really. The sex is just a bonus. She's reading too much into
Just like a woman would.

"You knew this from the start," I murmur, leaning back in my
se only Needing the distance. Anger blasts off her in a wave of heat, making
sweat. And I'm not in the mood.

I'd rather sweat tonight in other ways.

"You feel nothing for me."

"I like fucking you."

reveal She flinches. "You're an asshole."

? What "Charlotte." I lean forward once more, resting my forearms on the
ge? "You're a Lancaster. I've done the research. You come from a long
ybe not truthless assholes."

wrong "I'm a woman. The Lancaster women are different. We feel too r
make up for the men's lack of emotion. I don't have sex with y
because it feels good. And it feels really, really good, what you do to n

family "Even earlier?" I raise a brow. I was cruel the first round. And cr
o know second.

r of my "I should say no. I should say I found it offensive and almost bo
assault."

ings," I What the fuck?

"But that would be a lie," she continues. "I enjoyed every second c
le extra am counting the minutes until we can do it again."

My cock surges to life at her confession.

as been "This is me being honest with you, Perry. I don't want to lie to you
ence is don't want you to lie to me either." She's quiet for a moment. Assessir

essarily My wife is smart. She's using our sexual connection to get m
truthful with her.

But I'm just as smart.

bigger "You're a hot fuck, wife. I can't lie about that." I wipe the smile
evel the face with my hand, being purposely callous.

The hurt in her gaze is unmistakable. She stares at me, her eyes
and she suddenly leaps to her feet, tossing her napkin on top of her pla

“Fuck you,” she mutters before she walks away.

Leaving me alone at the table.

“Damn it,” I whisper as I stand, about to chase after her but I’m stopped by the server who wants me to sign for our bill. I do as he requests, in time enough that I give him a lesser tip for holding me up before I’m out of the restaurant and chasing after my wife.

She’s far ahead of me, running in those gold heels, her skirt flapping in the breeze and I swear to God was that her bare ass I just saw?

The skirt flips up again, and yep, there are her naked golden cheeks.

Picking up the pace, I run after her, drawing closer. I call her name but she doesn’t acknowledge me.

Charlotte just keeps running.

Only when she’s stuck at the villa trying to open the front door with the key card that I catch her. I pin her to the door with my body, my front line against her back and she hangs her head, trying to nudge me away with a so friendly push of her ass.

It doesn’t work. All it does is remind me that she’s naked beneath my dress and my cock stands at attention.

“I hate you,” she says, still facing the door. Like she can’t bear to see me. “Stop trying to win me over with sex. I’m not interested.”

I run my hand over her hip, my fingers carefully gathering up the fabric, until just the bottom of her ass cheeks are exposed. I slip my hand beneath the hem, skimming my fingers over her smooth skin, dipping between her legs.

She’s wet. Hot.

“Not interested,” I say as I slowly begin to stroke her. “Right.”

“I hate you.” Her voice trembles and she hangs her head.

“I hate you too, babe.” I press my cock against her so she can feel how much I can’t stand her. “Now are we going inside, or do I have to fuck you on the doorstep?”

Charlotte blows out an aggravated breath, pressing her forehead against the door. “Fuck me out here, then. I dare you.”

For whatever weird reason, it’s exactly what I want to hear. Without hesitation, I’ve got my cock out in seconds, her skirt is pushed up and my glasses sliding inside of her, groaning low when I feel all that creamy heat wrapped tightly around me. She whimpers, arching her back and sending me

and I glance around, making sure no one is out here.

We're fairly isolated but I can see a few other villas in the near distance. The pathways are lit, and an employee or, hell, even a guest could go anywhere at any moment. We're not completely alone out here.

Maybe that's half the thrill.

I grab hold of her hips and start fucking her, my gaze zeroed in on the spot where my cock visibly slides in and out of her pussy. Damn it, that's

Can't get enough of it. Her legs are spread wide and she's bent almost double. Her face still pressed against the door, her moans growing louder and louder. I move faster, already close. This woman makes me come too quick

I don't like it. It's as if I get inside her and I lose all control.

Like now.

"Don't you dare come inside me," she says when I stiffen, her voice pressed accusatory. "You're not wearing a condom."

Smart catch. Always observant, my Charlotte.

I thrust harder, a groan leaving me when I feel her clench those walls around my shaft, as if she's trying to squeeze the orgasm out of my cock. It fucking works because the next thing I know, I'm pulling out and looking at coming all over her ass, coating her skin with my semen.

She's breathing hard, her body still bent, her eyes meeting mine. She softglares at me over her shoulder. She's furious. She's beautiful.

She needs to come.

I run my fingers through my semen and smear it against her skin, finding her clit and rubbing it. She whirls around to face me and I circle her other hand around her, lifting her up, her legs coming around my waist.

Her cunt is so wet I can hear it when I rub her clit with my come fingers. She never looks away from me as I stroke her faster. Hard breaths seem to lock up in her throat, her body trembling, her eyes going hazy. Until she tilts her head back, a soft cry falling from her lips with orgasm hits.

She's shaking. I grip her closer, my fingers still busy on her clit. She's hot when she comes. Her body undulates against mine, her breasts poking against the fabric of her dress and I pin her against the door with my body, reaching for the neckline and tugging it down so I can draw a breath into my mouth.

"Oh God," she gasps, her hand coming around the back of my head

holds me to her. "Don't stop."

istance. I don't. I keep sucking and licking her nipple, stroking her pussy walking must hurt, but she never tells me to quit. In fact, she comes again. A one this time, and hearing her cry out, feeling her body react to my at has my cock hard as a fucking rock to the point that I'm in pain.

on the "We're going inside," I growl against her lips when her breath it's hot, eventually slowed. "And I'm going to fuck you again."

in half, "Okay."

ouder. "Even if you hate me."

kly and "I do." She swallows. "Hate you."

"Enough to suck my cock?"

"Only if you lick me again like you did earlier."

r voice "You mean your asshole?"

She nods.

"Say it," I whisper against her still trembling lips. "Say what you w e innerto do to you, Charlotte."

of my "I want you to fuck me, Perry," she whispers, her lips parting whe of her, land on hers, her tongue darting out. I suck it, letting it go so s continue. "I want you to lick my asshole."

as she "Filthy fucking wife," I murmur, smiling. "Maybe I'll fuck you little asshole too."

She devours me when I say that, and I let her.

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holds me to her. “Don’t stop.”

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“We’re going inside,” I growl against her lips when her breathing has eventually slowed. “And I’m going to fuck you again.”

“Okay.”

“Even if you hate me.”

“I do.” She swallows. “Hate you.”

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“Only if you lick me again like you did earlier.”

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“Filthy fucking wife,” I murmur, smiling. “Maybe I’ll fuck your sweet little asshole too.”

She devours me when I say that, and I let her.

Who knew hate sex could feel so fucking good?



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Charlotte

I ROLL OVER onto my stomach, clutching my pillow in my arms, n tightly closed against the streaming sunlight. The spot next to me is e I'm back in my own bed, alone and exhausted. My muscles ache. I everywhere.

All thanks to my husband and the marathon sex session we had las This morning. Only a couple of hours ago.

There was no actual anal sex involved yet—but he did just everything else he could to my poor, tender ass. To the point he k couldn't push me any further.

He used his fingers. His lips. His tongue. He penetrated me and m cry out, my body clenching tight around his finger, scared to allow hi further. Until he eventually gave up, though not without a fight.

And not without making me come either. God, it feels so good w touches me like that. It also feels incredibly taboo, but he's convinc it's really not.

The man is very, *very* convincing.

At one point he told me he was addicted to my pussy and I tend to him. He can't leave the damn thing alone.

I feel the same way about him.

We are already on day three of this five-day honeymoon and I'm sad that it's going by so quickly. Soon we'll have to return home. I reality and more secrets and lies. I tried to get him to open up with me truthful last night at dinner, but it was pointless. He clammed up, mak furious.

He's not going to tell me anything about his business or whatever he and Winston were talking about on the phone yesterday. I get the suspicion he was talking about me. And Seamus.

That's whose head he wants to rip off. My ex-lover's. I should find it ridiculous and territorial, but deep down, that's not how I feel at all.

I like it. I want him to feel protective of me. And not because of business dealings or whatever. I want him to protect me because he cares.

Because I'm valuable to him—as a person, not a commodity.

I don't know if that's a pipe dream, but I can't help wanting it.

Eventually I drag my tired ass out of bed and take a quick shower. I'm wearing a new bikini—this one hot pink with bottoms so skimpy most of my eyeshangs out—and head for the kitchen, where I can smell coffee brewing. The room is empty—I'll need as much caffeine as possible to get through this day.

I'm hurt... When I enter the airy kitchen, I realize my husband isn't there. I make myself a cup and add a little creamer, going to the massive window about this time of night. I sink that overlooks the backyard, and that's where I spot him.

Clad only in tropical-print swim trunks, pacing back and forth, his hand is clutched to his ear. He's talking animatedly, gesturing with his free hand. His voice rising and falling. As if he's angry. I can hear the muffled sound of the conversation, but I can't quite make out what he's saying.

I made me Fortifying myself with a few sips of coffee, I set my cup on the table and go to the slider, opening the door so his voice comes through loud and clear.

When he says, "...the plane will be available tomorrow, then? Good. We need to get going on this." His gaze lifts, meeting mine and his entire demeanor shifts, just like that. He looks away from me, growling into the phone, "I gotta go. I'll see you later." A pause. "Right."

I don't believe Disappointment leaves my heart heavy. I already know he's going home because we're leaving tomorrow. Only one more day with him in paradise.

Only one more day left that I have to convince him he can trust me with a little of his business secrets. His personal secrets.

Back to His everything.

and he "Hey," he greets me once he ends the call. "You sleep well?"

ing me "For all of two hours," I answer, trying my best not to ask what the phone conversation was about. "How about you?"

"Didn't really sleep at all," he admits.

r it was “Oh? Why’s that?”

reaking “Too much on my mind.” His gaze roams over me, lingering
favorite spots. “Nice suit.”

ind that “You like?” I pull the sliding glass door shut behind me and
approach him, but I can barely make the walk.

usiness The pool deck is too hot and I don’t have shoes on.

Yelping, I go back to the shallow end of the pool and hop into the
water, sighing with relief. Annoyed with myself that I can’t make a sex
toward my husband without burning the soles of my feet.

Throw Perry just laughs at me, and at least he seems cheery. Not all st
my assserious like he was on the phone.

}. “Who were you talking to?” I ask, gasping when he jumps into the
end, making such a splash, my face is immediately covered with
I pourdroplets. I’m sure he didn’t hear me.

ove the Or he’s going to pretend he didn’t.

He pops up in the shallow end, directly in front of me, a faint smile
s phoneface as he grips my hips, toying with the straps of my bikini bottoms
and, his fingers. I’m still on the top step, so I hover above him. “Let’s go ex
s of histoday, wife.”

“What do you want to explore?” I settle my hands on his shoulders
countersqueezing him. Loving how broad he is. How solid.

oud and And how easygoing he’s acting right now. As if we’re a perfectly
married couple having fun on their honeymoon.

o get on What a crock of shit.

ust like “Around the resort. They have a few things going on. There’s a trail
I’ll callcould hike.”

I scowl. “I’m from the city. I don’t hike.”

g to tell He laughs. “Learn how to surf?”

“In one day?” I raise a brow. “I doubt I could manage it.”

ne with “It would be fun to watch you fall repeatedly in the water.”

“You’re mean,” I murmur, running my hand through the damp hair
curling at his nape. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

Perry is quiet for a moment before he lets loose a ragged sigh. “What
at thatto return home tomorrow.”

“Why?” I want him to tell me the truth. Not some vague bullshit about

“Something’s—come up. I’ll explain it later.” He tugs on my hair

pulling toward him so we're treading water together, our legs tangling on his just have fun today. Before we go back to hating each other."

I'm such a liar when I tell him I hate him. It's more that I hate what I'm start to doing. What he's saying. I don't actually hate *him*.

No, something worse is happening.

I'm actually starting to care about him.

he cool
y walk

Far too much.

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ern and

IN THE END, we indulge each other for the afternoon. I sit out on the beach to soak up the sun while he learns how to surf with last-minute lessons. I take a deep course, great at it. He gets up on the board almost immediately, and I watch a couple of waves that I can't help but find completely terrifying. The instructor keeps hooting and hollering, encouraging Perry to do more stuff.

He sits on his stomach with his hands exploring himself. All while I sit there and chew on my thumbnail, nervous he might fall.

Watching Perry out in the water is giving me a glimpse to another world. It's him that I knew existed, but never actually witnessed before. He's a cocky daredevil. Spontaneous and not afraid of anything. Like, every single time the instructor asks him to do, he does it. No questions asked.

normal "Be careful!" I shriek at one point, when he's so far out on the water. It's just a little blip on a surfboard, a giant wave coming at him. I'm positive I couldn't hear me.

trail we It didn't matter—I needed to yell just to get out some of my paranoia. My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest and panic clawed at my insides. I didn't want anything bad to happen to him.

And I can't analyze why I care so damn much.

By the time he's finished with his lesson, I'm a mess, barely keeping my composure. I've got my arms wrapped around my bent legs and I'm shaking despite the heat as Perry makes his way over to me. His smile is wide and his muscular body is still dripping wet and oh God he is so incredibly sexy.

I'm also mad at him for putting his life at risk like that. I don't know how my heart can take much more of that.

answer. "Wasn't that amazing?" He grins, looking pleased with himself.
y hips,

“Let’s “You caught on fast.” My voice is tight.

He doesn’t even notice, plopping down on the ground next to me, I
that he’s automatically covered in sand. “It was such a rush out there. I fuckin’
it.”

I’m glad someone loved it. I could barely stand watching him.

“You’re turning pink,” he observes, his fingers skimming my skin
making me tremble. “Soon you’ll be as bright as the suit you’re wearing.
you don’t watch it.”

I scowl at him. “I used sunscreen.”

“You might need more.” He turns away from me and props his hands
each and the sand behind him, tilting his head back and closing his eyes. I stare
He is of marveling yet again at how handsome he is. How loose and relaxed he
rides a right now. The surfing might’ve led to a near heart attack for me, but it
g. The to have completely calmed him down. “I feel good. This trip has
daring nice.”

A mild way to put it.

ght hurt “Yes,” I murmur, sliding my fingers in the sand right next to him. I
could touch him freely. Drift my fingers across his thigh. Tuck a single
side of beneath the loose waistband of his swim trunks. Would he mind? Or
omplete he think it weird?

e thing I decide not to test it.

ter he’s response from me. “I’ve had a—good time.”

itive he “Me too.” He angles his head toward me, his lips curved. “I’ve le
lot.”

ic. My “Same.”

l at my He chuckles. “What the hell are we doing, Charlotte?”

“I don’t know,” I admit, loving how real we’re being in this moment.

“Let’s not overanalyze it. Our day is almost over.”

ing my “We leave tomorrow at ten,” he says, his voice soft.

ivering My heart pangs. Less than twenty-four hours until we have to go
and his “That’s so soon.”

/. “Too soon.” He doesn’t hesitate when he reaches for me, tangling
know if fingers in my hair and tucking a few loose strands behind my ear. “I like
like this. Half-naked and watching me show off.”

“Perry.”

“What?” He caresses my cheek, his touch featherlight. “I can’t touch his skin without wanting to touch me, wife.”

“Us Lancasters aren’t very touchy people,” I admit. “We never have been.”

“Oh yeah?” He leans in so his mouth is level with my ear. “Well, I’ve been touching me a lot lately.”

Sometimes he makes it so easy.

“You don’t mind?”

He pulls away frowning. “Why would I mind? I like it.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I like the way you look at me too.” His gaze locks with mine as if he’s putting a show on for you out there, and it seemed like you were eating it up.

I burst out laughing. “You scared the crap out of me.”

He frowns. “I did? Really?”

Nodding, I give in to my urges and slip my finger into the side of his swim trunks, tugging on the waistband. “You’re reckless.”

“I get so into it I don’t even think about anything else. I used to do that when I’d race cars,” he admits.

“I want to hear about that sometime,” I tell him, meaning every word. “Maybe you could tell me about it tonight. Over dinner.”

“You really want to know?”

I nod. I want to know everything about him, not that I could ever expect that out loud.

“I should show you the Chevelle,” he continues, his gaze turning behind him as if he’s thinking about his car and how much he adores it, which is cute. “I love that fuckin’ thing. I miss it.”

“When we get back home, you should take me for a ride,” I suggest.

“Everyone hates that car,” he says immediately, on the defensive. “It’s a bright orange. The muffler is loud. Winston thinks it’s stupid.”

“I don’t think it’s stupid.” My voice is soft. I’m trying to tell him that, but I’m saying out loud that I don’t think anything he does is stupid.

Well...mostly.

“You haven’t even seen her yet.”

“Anything that you enjoy, I want to like too,” I admit.

“Aw. Aren’t you sweet.” His smile is soft, and when he leans

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Perry

I MADE A mistake. I should've never told Winston I wanted to come early after he shared more details the investigative team told him Seamus McDicklick, and that I was considering meeting up with the too.

Why do I care what that guy is doing back at home when I've got my wants with me in Mexico? And damn, do I have her. Every which way

After spending hours with her last night into this morning exploring a little bit of her sexy body and trying my damndest to get inside her t— that's hopefully going to happen tonight—I was exhausted. I should have fallen into a deep sleep and woken up around noon.

But I couldn't sleep. I couldn't stop thinking about Charlotte. And my lover. All the things they must've done together. All those firsts he stole from me.

I hate him so damn much. He haunts my fucking nightmares. And they're not necessarily bad dreams.

They're always bad for him. Last night, I dreamed about meeting up with Seamus at Halcyon. He wouldn't stop taunting me, eventually doing something so incredibly stupid I end up smashing his face in with my fist, then called security to escort him out of my office while he glares at me with one eye swollen shut thanks to the beating he took.

I've beat his ass in a variety of ways every night since I got married.

It's easier to not sleep at all, so I didn't. Instead, I sent a string of text to my brother demanding to know what's going on and played fucking Crush on my phone until I finally heard back from him.

The information wasn't much, but it was enough to spur me on back home and back to business. I want that asshole out of my Charlotte's life for good. I don't need him lurking around and trying to get to me. To us.

To our family.

Still can't get over the Morellis thinking they could interfere with my marriage and get Charlotte to talk, giving up any secrets she might know.

Do they really think I'm that stupid? That I'd give up confidential Halcyon information to my new bride?

Shit, maybe they do.

And that enrages me even more.

Then again, maybe it's not the Morellis acting as a whole. They're already split into factions. Lucian runs Morelli Holdings now, not his asshole brother.

And word is that Vincent never accepted his brother's inheritance. I'm part of some kind of power struggle, and McTiernan is a soldier in the war.

Spending time with her on the beach this afternoon was the distraction I needed. Though I realized after my surf lesson that I really shouldn't have been out there on the water. I can admit sometimes I'm a little too reckless. It's why I stopped racing. It's why I garaged the Challenger.

Something about that car makes me feel invincible, when I'm not.

I need to remember that.

Being on the surfboard gave me the same feeling. I took to it like a fish. I didn't bother telling Charlotte I had lessons on another family vacation in Mexico long, long ago, when my father was still alive—and swimming there, riding those waves, I felt like a goddamn superhero. Such an adrenaline rush.

Almost as good as sex with my wife.

After coming back from the beach, we each took a nap in our respective beds before we got ready to have dinner with a view of the sunset. I decided to dress up a little extra since it's our last night and we're eating at the most expensive restaurant at the resort.

I'm going all out. Hopefully Charlotte is too. Seeing her come out in a different dress, bikini, whatever she's wearing each day has always been a worthwhile surprise. One I've enjoyed immensely.

Hell, I've enjoyed this entire trip. We've come to an unspoken agreement.

I still don't fully trust her, and I'm sure she feels the same about me. Sometimes I don't like how she makes me feel either.

I'd guess she also feels the same.

We're forgetting all about that today, though. Tonight. We're just going with the flow and enjoying each other. Reality will catch up with us when we return home, and we can also resume our obvious distrust with each other. Too.

Can't wait.

I decide to layer on the rings and the chains. Leave a couple of buttons undone on my cream-colored shirt. My hair is looking good. I have a nice tan thanks to all the time I've spent in the sun. And despite the fact they've slept last night, I still manage to look rested.

I'm waiting for Charlotte in the living room, checking my inbox while Maybefinally walks in, an unsure expression on her face.

"I'm overdressed," she says.

I take in her dress. It's a deep, rosy pink. With flimsy straps and a slit in the front that shows off her tanned skin—and her tits. The skirt is short and made of three layers of thin fabric and all I can see is her legs and her ass. I'm a fool and I immediately want to know if she's got panties on underneath.

My guess is no.

"You're not overdressed," I reassure her as I rise from the couch and walk to where she's standing. I stop directly in front of her, resting a hand on her quick—waist, my gaze eating her up. "You're fucking beautiful."

Her smile is small. Pleased. "Thank you. You look nice too."

"Ready to go?" I ask.

She nods. "Let's do it."

This woman is speaking my language.

I hope to be doing it with her all night long.

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the most

THE MEN IN the restaurant can't stop staring at my wife and I can't stop staring at them. I had no idea her in that dress would cause such an uproar. I've underestimated Charlotte.

She's stunning, and they all know it.

I didn't even realize until I was sitting across from her at the table that

out me. was wearing the earrings I gave her as a wedding present. She tucked them behind her ear, the diamonds twinkling in the light and a surge of unfamiliar emotion made my chest tight.

It's going to be this woman belongs to me. I keep repeating the thought in my brain when we went out loud, specifically to her, and I know I sound like some sort of cliché. Another who beats his chest with his fists, but fuck.

She brings out a primitive side to me I didn't know I had. And I'm thinking about it because it keeps hitting me over and over again, with a force of its own.

I've got to do something. What we've done.

I got married. To a woman I didn't know, but I'm starting to actually like her. Yes, before the wedding I had those protective urges surge up that demanded we move in together, but that was different. I just wanted to get her away from her father. I'm the type of guy who wants to protect his family.

I've run to the rescue of my little sister countless times. I help out wherever I can. I like feeling useful.

Considering I'm the second son and the obviously favored child of my mother, I never felt particularly useful growing up. I was just the next in line. Another Constantine among many.

Winston eventually gave me my shot at Halcyon and I proved to him that I could be an asset to the company. I agreed to marry a stranger to help her family—and Charlotte. She needed to get out of her situation and I was the only person in my mind being the one to assist.

Even if it costs me my relationship freedom. Hell, before we got married she mentioned more than once she'd run away, and eventually, I'd have to divorce her. Or we could even have it annulled. Her leaving would be covered by all sorts of clauses in the contract and her father would probably have to pay my mother an outrageous amount of money, but would it really matter beyond the humiliation? Not like the payment would hurt him.

The man is worth billions.

At least Charlotte would be free.

But as I stare at her while she scoops up ceviche with a giant tortilla, showing it into her mouth and humming her approval, I don't know if I should let her to run away from me anymore.

I want to keep her.

Exhaling, I reach for my drink and slam it down, needing the alcohol to help me think.

her hair clear my head. I'm thinking like a crazy man. I can't *keep* her. She's familiar something I can own, not really. Charlotte is a human being with thoughts and feelings and opinions who can exert her free will in any way she wants. I can't win and may get all territorial with her, but in the end, I will never make a move against something she doesn't want to do.

Like stay with me.

I keep saying that. If she hates me that much, if she feels the need to flee that strongly, I can't expect her to stay. I can't expect her to stay where I've put her.

I'm not a dick.

"You're so quiet tonight," she observes.

I like to be quiet. I glance up to find her watching me, her blue eyes wide and unblinking. She's made a promise to God her hair is blonder and her eyes are brighter against her skin. That pink dress fits her to perfection and my gaze drops to her breasts. The tops of her tits. I want to touch her there. Kiss her there.

where I am. "Are you tired?" she asks when I still haven't said anything.

"A little," I admit.

I don't want to be like her. The disappointment is clear on her pretty face. She's not wearing any makeup, which I prefer. She was beautiful at our wedding, but I like her natural. With her guard down and her face clean. Her lips are pink and soft. I think that's the only cosmetics she has on.

help the "You'll probably want to go to bed early," she says.

I didn't realize. I stare at her. She must be out of her mind.

"Probably not."

married, I could see the smile curve her lips and she grabs another tortilla chip, dunking it in the ceviche before she pops it into her mouth. "Tell me about cars," she says after she's swallowed.

pay my attention. Unease filters through me and I shift in my seat. No one else cares about cars. I raced in secret, never telling my mother or siblings. I was found out by accident after I quit, and he was furious. Claimed I had a million-dollar life insurance policy on my head and our enemies could find out and kill me.

la chip, I couldn't help but think hey, at least they could've gotten a cool story out of my death, but I decided that wouldn't be the best thing to say to my brother at the time.

"What do you want to know?"

ohol to "How you started street racing. That's so—random." She wrinkles

ie's notnose, looking adorable. "Though after watching you surf earlier, I'm re
oughtsthat you enjoy participating in...reckless activities."

wants. I "Aw, do you disapprove, wife?" I'm teasing her.

her do "I don't disapprove, it was just scary, watching you out there. You
have a lot of experience surfing yet you approached those waves as if
been doing it your entire life," she says.

, I'll let "I wasn't that good." I really wasn't. I think I made her panic, is al
"The surfing doesn't matter. Tell me about the cars. And racing."

I lean back in my chair, contemplating how much I want to tell I
hard to part with your secrets when you've held them so close for so lo
linking. "It began a few years ago. Even before I got the Chevelle. I was h
goldenout with these guys I went to high school with and they would go wa
r chest.giant group of illegal street racers. They'd announce the location wh
races would happen via social media and all in code. Always in the mi
the night, when the streets were mostly empty and the cops woul
around," I explain.

g much "So you started out watching."

ike her "And knew immediately I wanted to race," I tell her. "I got to kno
l glossyof the guys, and eventually, they let me join them. First race I particip
I won."

"Of course you did."

I laugh. "It was such a fucking rush, I knew I had to keep doing it
did—kept winning, too. I bought the Chevelle, and fuck that baby
g it intodamn well racing. There is nothing better than racing with a five-spe
he saysthat engine? V-8, baby." I'm getting excited like I usually do when
about my precious orange baby.

s about "Sounds like you were having fun," she says.

Vinston "It was fun. But it was dangerous too." Real dangerous. But I didr
I had alIt was like I had a death wish. Who did I need to live for? Speed, that
ould'veThat's all I sought. I threw my all into work during the day and ra
night. I had the Chevelle modified. I went on YouTube and studied the
mill forwas racing. I'd lose as much as I won and that frustrated me.

other at I wanted to win.

All the time.

"What made you stop?" Her voice is soft, and when I meet her gaz
des herthe interest there. And the worry.

realizing This woman gets it. I can just tell. Her worry doesn't even bother me. It makes me feel as if she cares.

"It was a Saturday night. And I was going to be in a big race against Ernie. I didn't complete psycho." And I mean that. Ernie Portello is a known street racer you've who flat-out does not give a fuck. He's had so many near misses and accidents, it's a miracle he's still alive.

l. He's still racing too, while I quit like a coward.

"Does he have legit mental problems? Or are you just saying that to her. It's sasks.

ng. "I'm pretty sure the guy is undiagnosed. He has to have something wrong with him. No one behaves like he does." I shake my head, remembering the races I watched with Ernie always the winner.

ere the I wanted to beat him. No one else could. I planned on being the first in the middle of the race.

dn't be I nod, tracing the rim of my glass. I need another drink. "Yeah. Wasn't the final race of the night, and we switched locations at the last moment because the police were coming. Someone ratted us out."

w some I found out later it was an inside job. One of Ernie's men called in, we'd have to move.

"Had you raced at the new location before?"

"Nope." I shake my head. "He already had the advantage."

.. And I "Someone made that happen," she states, her voice flat, her gaze did so "They did that on purpose to trip you up."

eed and "You're a smart one, wifey." I tap my temple, smiling faintly. 'n I talktime, I didn't give a shit. I was ready to get it on and pissed that the race was postponed in the first place. We always have a team when we do the races. I know? Your guys that watch out for you, makes sure the car is good. I don't care, you're good. Every dude on my team told me not to do it. I ignored them.

was it. Charlotte rests her elbow on the table and props her chin on her hand, looking at me seemingly enraptured. "What happened next?"

e guys I I blow out a low breath before I launch into retelling the scariest moment of my life. "At first it was easy. I jumped ahead almost immediately. I remember thinking he was holding back, but I blew the thought off my mind. I was such a cocky son of a bitch that I actually believed I had it in the bag."

re, I see I'm quiet for a moment and I can feel the nerves radiating from Charlotte even across the table. And the race already happened. Here I sit, alive.

r me. Itthe tale.

Yet she's still anxious for me.

gainst a "There was an unexpected hairpin turn. It was sharp. To the right
et racerup on me so quickly, I took it too fast and spun the fuck out. He pull
l actualme and won. He was going slower because he knew that turn was ther
didn't. He knew he couldn't take me on a straightaway. I was fuckin
Charlotte. So good. Until that race. It messed with my confidence. I g
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"Were you hurt?"

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ng pastwas. How my life flashed before my eyes when I lost complete contro
car. Like an idiot, I worried first for the Chevelle.

st. Then I worried for me.

"How about the car?"

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"I swung the back end into a pole. A streetlight." Once that hap
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wanted to get busted by the police. I couldn't blame them for scatterin
cockroaches, but damn.

I had to deal with the repercussions that night all alone. I couldn
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anything, I didn't want any of them to give me a lecture and tell me
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remember.

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e to tell

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Yet she's still anxious for me.

"There was an unexpected hairpin turn. It was sharp. To the right. Came up on me so quickly, I took it too fast and spun the fuck out. He pulled past me and won. He was going slower because he knew that turn was there and I didn't. He knew he couldn't take me on a straightaway. I was fucking good, Charlotte. So good. Until that race. It messed with my confidence. I gave up after that."

"Were you hurt?"

"Just—scared." It was hard to admit that. How terrifying that moment was. How my life flashed before my eyes when I lost complete control of the car. Like an idiot, I worried first for the Chevelle.

Then I worried for me.

"How about the car?"

"It had some minor body damage."

She frowns. "How come?"

"I swung the back end into a pole. A streetlight." Once that happened, and after Ernie won the race, everyone bailed. Even my own team. No one wanted to get busted by the police. I couldn't blame them for scattering like cockroaches, but damn.

I had to deal with the repercussions that night all alone. I couldn't even call my family. I didn't want to freak them out or worry about me. More than anything, I didn't want any of them to give me a lecture and tell me what to do.

"Was the damage bad?"

"Fixable." The server appears with our dinner and I make conversation with the guy, needing the distraction.

I don't like thinking about that night, and what happened.

It reminds me that I'm mortal. And that's the last thing I want to remember.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Charlotte

PERRY WAS QUIET for the rest of our dinner. Not necessarily in a bad but rather pensive. In his head. He didn't eat much but drank plenty. Seeing him like this made me lose my appetite too.

My husband isn't feeling so great. I can see it in his eyes, and the strain around his mouth. The tightness of his jaw. Telling that story about racing days put him in a foul mood and that is the last thing I want last night here.

But there's no getting him out of it. I try to joke. I try to flirt miserably at both things, and eventually, I give up. I may think I know but I don't. Not fully. We still have a long way to go before I can be confident around this man.

On the walk back to our villa, I contemplate the many ways I possibly seduce him. Something I've never really done before, but I'm willing to put myself out on a limb for my husband. So far, everything seems to like. Even when he's furious with me, he still wants me, in a kind of hot.

Twisted and a little sick, but still hot.

He's not mad at me tonight though. He's lost in his memories and maybe even a little bit down. I refuse to be one of those women who ask *what's wrong?* That gets you nowhere. I've witnessed that enough from my parents, when my mother would repeatedly ask my father that question until he finally blew.

No, thank you.

Someone needs cheering up though.

I reach for Perry's hand, interlocking our fingers and he doesn't let go. I sway our locked hands so our arms swing and he glances over at me. His brows lowered. "You okay? A little drunk maybe?"

I shake my head, deciding to be truthful. "Trying to cheer you up."

"I'm in a shit mood, huh." He squeezes my hand.

I squeeze back. "A little."

"I don't like thinking about that night."

I appreciate his honesty, and I feel bad too.

"I probably shouldn't have asked."

"No, I don't mind that. I just—I don't talk about it much because it brings me down. I was stupid. I let my ego get in the way and almost cost my job and my mood, life." He shakes his head, his gaze finding mine. "I've made some mistakes and mistakes are hard to live with."

"You'll keep making them too," I remind him.

He chuckles. "Nothing like keeping it real, huh?"

"I'm just being honest." I shrug.

Perry's quiet again, and so am I too. I enjoy the walk. The salty scent of the ocean mixed with the sweet smell of the tropical flowers growing near the beach. In the near distance I hear laughter. Someone having a good time, enjoying their vacation while I'm slowly but surely filling with impending doom.

Our trip is almost over and we're back to reality. To secrets and lies. I can feel Seamus lurking around. The distrust from my husband and his family and the lack of support from mine.

What will I do when we go home? Camp out in that apartment my husband gave us and hang out with Jasper and Doja? Is that all I'll ever amount to? I do. Would Perry mind if I tried to go to college or would he think I'll do something which is wrong? Would he have an affair with another professor?

The idea of that hurts. More than I care to admit.

"Maybe I am wiped," Perry finally says as we draw closer to the villa. My hopes for an adventurous night with Perry come crashing around me. "You didn't get much sleep last night."

"I got none. Plus, I still need to pack before we leave in the morning."

"I do too," I admit.

We slowly walk up the front steps, our hands still linked until Perry reaches for the key card in his pants pocket. He unlocks the door and we enter the villa, turning toward each other when the door shuts.

"Thank you for sharing that story with me," I say, wanting him to know I'm listening.

et go. How much it meant to me, even though hearing the details made me
me, his hurt.

“Thanks for listening. I’ve never told anyone what happened there
before,” he confesses.

I’m shocked. “No one?”

He shakes his head.

“Not even your mother?”

“Oh hell no, I could never tell her. She’d flip the fuck out.” He
and then it’s gone. Scrubbed away by the hand he runs over his mouth
it brings gonna crash out in my room.”

Disappointment fills me and I try to push it aside.

“Okay.” I follow him until we separate at the mouth of the hallway
bedroom is on one end and mine is on the other. “Good night.”

He yanks me in for a quick hug, pressing his lips to my forehead
he lets me go. “Night, wife. Sleep tight.”

“You too.” I offer him a little smile and scurry down the hall and
nearby. In room, shutting the door with a quiet click, leaning against it.

I slowly bang the back of my head on the door, annoyed at myself
didn’t I suggest we spend the night together? Even if all we did was
silly and would be a good way for us to get closer.

And that’s what this honeymoon did. It brought us closer. I understand
him more now, and I hope he understands me. Though I blabbed all
parents’ problems to him before we got married, so maybe he was begin-
ning to understand me even then.

Yet he still went through with it. He married me.

Does he think I’m going to end things like I told him I would
beginning of our bogus engagement? I meant what I said then. I can’t
stand the thought of marrying a stranger and having to live with him
; down when I spent a little time with Perry, I realized he wouldn’t be so bad
than living under the tyrannical rule of my father.

Though almost anyone is better than living with Reginald Lancaster
Perry hasn’t brought my leaving up, but I hope he’s not counting
on Perry doing that. I’m starting to think I don’t want to.

No, I know I don’t want to leave him. I like him. I care about him. I
eventually end up loving him?

The possibility is there.

y heart Do I believe he could fall in love with me?

I don't know, but the way he's acted toward me today leads me to
at night anything is possible.

Anything.

Remaining in my dress and heels, I start to pack, quietly lamenting
the outfits and bikinis I didn't get to wear on this trip. I wonder if I
return the unworn stuff when we get home.

smiles, My gut is telling me no.

h. "I'm I've just finished up with my packing and am about to take a
shower when there's a knock on the door. It swings open before I
come in, and Perry is standing in the doorway, wearing a pair of black
ay. His briefs and nothing else.

"Hey."

I before I turn away from the suitcase on my bed to face him. "Hey. Eve
okay?"

into my It takes all I've got to keep my focus on his face and not let my gaze
to his boxers. Or his chest. Or whatever other naked part he's got on display.

lf. Why "I have a question."

sleep, it I frown. "What is it?"

He flicks his chin at me. "Whatcha got on under that dress?"

erstand Hope lights up within me, and that familiar throb starts up between
l of my thighs. "That's your question?"

ning to "It's a valid one." He leans against the doorjamb, crossing his arms
front of his chest. "I realized I didn't want to spend the last night of
honeymoon without you, wife."

I at the My heart pangs and I mentally tell it to calm down. "You're not
couldn't anymore?"

im, but "Want me to be real with you?" I nod. "I'm exhausted."

. Better "Oh."

"But come on." He tilts his head. "Sleep with me."

er. "Is that all you want?"

; on me He stiffens, like I'm going to deny him. "Why do you ask?"

Could I him. "Because." I approach him slowly, until I'm standing directly in front
him. "In answer to your original question, I have nothing on under that
dress."

I brush past him before he can respond, heading down the hall toward

bedroom. He follows after me, picking up his steps, crowding me who believe to his bedroom door. I can feel him, hot and solid behind me and he for the zipper at the back of my dress, slowly sliding it down.

“You need to get dressed for bed,” he murmurs.

ng over “You mean undressed?”

have to He chuckles. “Want to wear one of my T-shirts?”

I would love to, but only if he’s worn it first. So it’ll smell like him can’t admit that out loud, and besides, it would ruin the naked effect a quickgoing for.

can say “I don’t think so.”

k boxer The zipper completely undone, he slides his hands inside the dr fingers brushing against my sides. “We’re taking this off?”

“You’re taking it off.” I tilt my head down when his hands sweep my shoulders, pushing the thin straps down my arms, until the entire falls to my feet. I kick it away, then slip out of my shoes. Undressed drop completely naked and he’s only in his boxer briefs and didn’t display. something about sleeping together and that’s it?

Stretching my arms above my head, I let loose an exaggerated yawn make my way toward his bed. “I’m so tired.”

He doesn’t say a word. Just watches me like I’ve lost my mind, even maybe I have. My gaze drops to the front of his boxer briefs and I notice a cock. He doesn’t have a full-blown erection, but it’s getting there.

arms in Once I’m under the covers and my head is resting on a pile of pillows of our spot next to me. “Aren’t you coming to bed?”

My question spurs him into action. He’s turning off lights and closing curtains, finally slipping beneath the covers, though he keeps his distance.

We’re quiet. I can hear the sound of the ocean pounding the shore over-present breeze softly rattling the palm trees.

“I’m going to miss this place,” I admit.

“Yeah?”

“It’s been peaceful.”

“Not at first.”

front of “That was more your fault than the location,” I remind him.

ler this “True.” At least he doesn’t deny it.

I glance over at him, taking in the outline of his face. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

en I get “You should be thanking my brother.”

reaches “I don’t think you want me to thank him like I want to thank you lightly.

Perry literally growls, grabbing hold of my arm and pulling me to I have no choice but to let him wrap me up in his strong arms. As never going to let me go. He readjusts us so my back is to his front, n. But Inudging his cock and he rests his chin on my shoulder, his mouth so t I wasmy ear his lips tickle me when he speaks.

“I don’t hate you anymore, wife.”

I bend my head, shivering when he kisses my neck. “Are you ess, hisabout that?”

His hands begin to wander, touching all of his favorite spots on m p up toMy breasts. My hips. My stomach. When he rests his hand on my p e dresspart my legs, allowing him entry, desperate for his fingers to wor til I’mmagic.

he say “I’m positive,” he whispers as he begins to slowly stroke me.

myself I wouldn’t do this. That I was too tired. But I can’t resist you.”

wn and When he rolls me over onto my back, I realize I can’t resist him eit

He kisses me, and the foreign emotions rising within me are ter , whichYet I chase after them anyway, seeking the high that only Perry can gi tice his

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you for

“You should be thanking my brother.”

“I don’t think you want me to thank him like I want to thank you,” I say lightly.

Perry literally growls, grabbing hold of my arm and pulling me to him so I have no choice but to let him wrap me up in his strong arms. As if he’s never going to let me go. He readjusts us so my back is to his front, my ass nudging his cock and he rests his chin on my shoulder, his mouth so close to my ear his lips tickle me when he speaks.

“I don’t hate you anymore, wife.”

I bend my head, shivering when he kisses my neck. “Are you so sure about that?”

His hands begin to wander, touching all of his favorite spots on my body. My breasts. My hips. My stomach. When he rests his hand on my pussy, I part my legs, allowing him entry, desperate for his fingers to work their magic.

“I’m positive,” he whispers as he begins to slowly stroke me. “I told myself I wouldn’t do this. That I was too tired. But I can’t resist you.”

When he rolls me over onto my back, I realize I can’t resist him either.

He kisses me, and the foreign emotions rising within me are terrifying. Yet I chase after them anyway, seeking the high that only Perry can give me.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Perry

WINSTON CALLS ME into his office within ten minutes of my arrival at Halcyon. The moment I walk in, he's gesturing for me to close the door and do so, falling into one of the chairs that's in front of his massive desk.

"How was the honeymoon?" he asks.

"Good." I don't need to go into detail. It's none of his damn business anyway, what happened between me and Charlotte.

"Just good? That's all you have to say?"

"You want me to tell you everything we did?" I raise my brows.

He seems amused. "If you're willing to do so. Go for it."

Irritation makes my blood hot. I'm still regretting we came home so early, and I have no one to blame but myself.

"I'm not," I snap. "What did you want to talk about?"

Winston chuckles. "So sensitive."

I stare at him, annoyed.

"Let's talk about Seamus McTiernan." Winston reaches into his desk drawer and drops a thin file folder on top of his desk. "I have information for you to read when you get a chance."

I stare at the folder, almost not wanting to open it. "We're going to school, huh? They can't send us the updates via email or text?"

"I put a guy on his tail that used to work for Dad." Winston's expression flashes with pain for the briefest moment. "He's got one of the best in the business."

"Nose?"

"He can sniff out any detail, no matter what. He might like to h

secretary type out his reports—who’s his girlfriend, by the way, claims he can trust her like no one else to keep her mouth shut—but every mode possible when on the hunt for his subject. The guy even how to use TikTok. And he’s seventy,” Winston says.

“It’s the twenty-first century. I thought we were a little more sophisticated than this,” I say.

“We have access to the best technology money can buy. This is better.” My brother’s firm tone is more like a taunt for me to argue with him. I don’t bother.

Leaning forward, I snatch the folder off of Winston’s desk and open it. A black-and-white photo of Seamus McAsshole greets me, and I rival at when I recognize the building he’s standing in front of.

“Where the Lancasters reside,” Winston says for me. “He met with them.”

Alarm races through me and I brace myself for the answer. I almost always want to know. “Which one?”

“Not sure yet. Wasn’t Grant. He was in his office—he’s a workaholic. The youngest brother is away at boarding school. Louisa lives at her residence. So was Reggie.”

I stare at the photo, wishing I could scratch Seamus’s face out. “I’ve seen a day about Finn?”

“Can’t figure out where he is yet. He’s mysterious, that one. Slippery. Don’t think he was the one who met with Seamus though,” Winston says. “Pretty sure it was her dear old dad.”

Anger rises and I do my best to tamp it down as I read through the folder. The investigator gives a nearly hour-by-hour glimpse into this asshole’s life for the last four days that we’ve been gone.

“He’s been busy,” I observe.

“I know. Meeting with various Morellis. A Lancaster. Surprised he could fit a meeting with a Constantine into his itinerary,” Winston muses.

“What Constantine do you think he’d actually want to meet with?” I ask. “I’ll have a stern talk with *any* family member who spoke to this piece of shit.”

“The only one I can imagine him wanting to meet with is your wife,” Winston says. The anger blooms and I don’t hold back. “He can go fuck himself. There’s no way in hell I’ll let him near her.”

“You can’t always protect her,” Winston reminds me. “You’re a

and heard she's at home and she'll eventually grow bored. She might even embrace the idea of reuniting with an old flame."

knows I slap the folder shut and drop it onto his desk with a plop. "Why trying to fuck with my head?"

sticated "I'm not fucking with your head. I'm stating facts. And I'm hoping agree with me when I say we can't trust her. Not yet."

guy is The anger is automatically replaced with dread. "I don't trust her." h him. I'm a liar. I started to. The first part of the honeymoon, I was still at the fact that her lover made a surprise appearance at our goddamn flip it wedding. But as time went on and I spent more time with her, I realize I scowl actually *like* her. I'm definitely attracted to her. All that fucking in Mexican sun does something to a person.

one of She told me how that asshole took advantage of her in Paris, and I her with a story I've told no one else.

st don't And that was a huge step for me. I don't like talking about my racing days. Back then I did some things I regret.

olic like I wish I wouldn't have shut her down when she was trying to open me. I was too selfish, too in my head to want to hear what she had when I should've remained quiet and listened.

"What Maybe she'll tell me again—and hopefully confess more.

"Good," Winston says, his expression grim. "For all we know every too. Daddy up to meet with her ex and they're plotting to run away together on says. Daddy's permission."

That would never happen, is what I want to say. Her father is her nightmare. She wouldn't want to work with him.

le's life "They don't get along," is all I say in response. "Charlotte and father."

"Uh-huh. She might get along with him for the sake of getting a divorce she didn't want," Winston points out.

"What else did this report say?" I ask, needing to change the subject. "I'd Winston goes along with it, thank God. "He's not left the mansion for the last thirty-six hours. People are constantly coming and out of that place, and Myron is still looking into who everyone is."

himself. "Myron? That's our investigator's name?" I shake my head. "He sounds old."

at work "He's a good guy. Gruff. Doesn't put up with anyone's shit. Even

entertain Winston cracks a smile.

“You really think that McAsshole dude is plotting to somehow are you Charlotte?” I can’t stop thinking about the possibility. How he might get close to her. Talk to her. What if she’s receptive? What if he says you’ll right things? She chose that asshole first. I was merely assigned to her.

What if I lose her for good?

“You need to prepare for the possibility that it could happen. I’d recommend beefing up the security at your apartment.”

“It’s a Lancaster apartment,” I remind him. “Daddy still has a key.”

Winston frowns. “That’s not good.”

“I know.”

“Change the locks. It’s your and Charlotte’s apartment now, right?”

“I don’t have a deed or anything like that.”

“Get one. Ask Charlotte to talk to her father.”

I won’t make her do that. She’s frightened of him.

“If her father still has a key, he could give it to Seamus,” I say, mulling up to whirl with all of the possibilities. All of the awful, shitty, that-better-to-say-never-happen possibilities.

Jesus.

“Like I said, beef up the security. Talk to your wife. Let her know she’s going on. Don’t leave her in the dark. She deserves to know her father with threat.”

Says the guy who didn’t tell the love of his life jack shit until it was almost too late.

“Learn from my mistakes,” Winston continues, making me immediately regret my thoughts. “She’s not your enemy, Perry. She’s an ally, even if you don’t necessarily trust her. Make her feel as if she’s on team Constantine. She’ll do whatever you ask her to do.”

“She is a Constantine now, making her an automatic member of the team,” I remind him.

Morelli “Not even a week ago she was a Lancaster. Remind her that she should go to her new allegiance. To you.” Winston jabs a thumb at his chest. “To us.”

I slouch in my chair, my mind crowded with too many things. All I have to do with Charlotte and that jerk and the Morellis and her father.

Her father, a traitor to his own daughter—and to the family mine.” married her into. When he knew what he was getting into, making th

with our mother. He was supposed to be team Constantine as well.

“I need to warn her.” I start to get up but Winston speaks, halting me.
“Don’t—scare her, little brother. Just make her aware that things are always what they seem. Maybe you shouldn’t mention the meeting I had with one of her family members yet.”

“Why the hell not?”

“She might confront her father. Maybe her mother. For all we know, Louisa could be behind this.”

I shake my head. “Doubtful. She only cares about shopping and going to lunch.”

“Don’t write her off like her husband does. She’s been married a piece of shit for almost thirty years and she’s still smiling. Hell, she’s practically the queen of the Lancasters and he’s only a second son,” Winston reminds me.

I hate that I have that in common with my father-in-law—that we’re both second sons in an important family. It’s infuriating.

I don’t want anything in common with him. I’d prefer to act like he doesn’t even exist.

“Text your wife,” Winston continues. “Check in with her throughout the day. Keep tabs on her.”

“I never do that sort of thing.” I grimace just thinking of it. I’m not a micromanaging control freak like my brother.

“Well, you’re going to do it now. You need to know what your little brother is up to at all times. I’m assuming McTiernan used to have major sway over her. Who’s to say he still doesn’t?” Winston raises a brow, contemplating the situation.
While I sit and steam, wondering what the fuck kind of influence McDickface could still have on my wife. Not after she’s been with me for a while.
keep thinking.

But I might be wrong. Hell, she might still be in love with him.

I caught her texting someone a few times. Not entirely sure I believe her. She told me when I asked her about it either.

Was it him?

Just the thought of her texting that piece of shit she might still care for. It feels like a steel spike was rammed in my heart—and makes me want to punch the fucker.
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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Charlotte

“MY KITTY MISSED me, didn’t she?” I’m scratching Doja under her chin, smiling as she rubs her head against my hand. She’s purring so loud I can hear Jasper in the kitchen while I’m in the living room.

Doja’s golden gaze meets mine and she squints her eyes before meowing.

I’m guessing that was her answer.

Perry went back to work this morning and I miss him. I didn’t work before he left like a good wife should, but our situation isn’t normal, so I give myself some slack. Besides, I was exhausted from the entire trip and I needed to catch up to me. I feel bad about Perry having to go into work, but he has to. At least, that’s what he told me last night, before we went to bed.

In separate rooms.

No sex to be had.

I missed him. I missed his touch and his scent and the commanding way he kisses me. I missed his heartbeat and his damp-with-sweat skin against my mouth at my ear, muttering filthy words.

A sigh leaves me and I squirm, making Doja meow as she hops onto my lap.

Fickle girl.

“Would you like me to make you lunch?” Jasper asks as he sticks his head into the living room.

I smile at him. I missed Jasper. Not because he does stuff for me or that he always wants to make me meals—which is not a normal job requirement for a butler, by the way. No, I missed him because the man listens to me.

offers sage advice. He even drops a sarcastic comment here and there I always appreciate.

I would love to talk to him about my marriage woes and ask if he what Perry might want in a wife, but I can't. Not yet. It still feels so and new. And I don't want to break Perry's trust.

Knowing that he told me about the car racing when no one else th close to in his life does, made me feel special. As if he were giving me gift. A gift of his past.

I probably should've shared a story with him as well, but what The up-and-down relationship with my father? How my mother neglig most of the time? The age difference between my older brothers and er chin, how disconnected I feel to them sometimes. How much I miss Crev 'm sure he's away at Lancaster Prep, though I don't think he feels the san 1. about me?

ore she My family is not one to discuss emotions. It's almost as if we dor them. There weren't a lot of "love yous" shared by my parents grow Not a lot of encouragement either. Plenty of "You're a Lancaster. You /ake up it" type comments, but that was it.

so I cut No wonder I have issues. I cling to Perry's attention and soak it up think it might abandon me at any moment.

wanted "Miss?" Jasper urges and I realize he's waiting for an answer.

Grabbing my phone, I check the time. "It's only ten thirty. I ate br not even an hour ago."

"It wasn't much. You might grow hungry and want an early ng way Jasper clasps his hands behind his back and studies me. "I must s and his honeymoon left you with a lovely glow, miss." He frowns. "I p shouldn't call you that, now that you're a married woman."

off my My Jasper is so proper. "Call me by my name."

He makes a face. "I couldn't. That's too—familiar."

"Jasper." I roll my eyes. "We've known each other a long time. les into it's okay if you call me Charlotte."

"Mrs. Constantine is what I should call you."

me or This immediately makes me think of Caroline. "And now I sound i ent for mother-in-law, when that is the last thing I want."

me. He Jasper chuckles and my phone buzzes at the same time, indicating text. I check who it's from.

, which

Unknown number: I miss you.

knows
private

My heart drops, and for a second, I think it might be my husband
said that.

that he's
a little

I wish.

Me: Who is this?

about?

Unknown number: Think about it, a runsearch.

affects me
me and
while
the way

My entire body goes cold at the endearment. I remember looking
after he said it to me, and the literal meaning is secret love, which
sense considering he didn't want anyone to know about us.

it's have
ing up.

God, I was clueless. Young and naïve and just so stupid. I should
known then that it was a red flag.

Me: Stop texting me.

can do

*Unknown number: I don't see how you can barely know a man yet marry him in a matter
weeks.*

like he

Me: You don't know me anymore. I don't think you ever really did.

breakfast

*Unknown number: I know you better than anyone. Especially that kid you consider
husband.*

lunch.”

Me: He IS my husband and he's not a kid.

say your
probably

Unknown number: Compared to me he is.

That's true. Seamus is in his thirties. He probably has a solid ten years
Perry.

I think

What was I doing, falling for Seamus's lies when I was in Pennsylvania
starved for affection I gave it up to the first man who showed me attention
much older man with a prestigious position and a beautiful girlfriend
wanted to be his wife.

like my

I was a complete idiot.

I got a

“I'm going to prepare you a nice salad,” Jasper says, making me
up from my phone. “I'll put it in the refrigerator when I'm done and you
eat it whenever you're ready. Just let me know.”

I frown at him. “Are you bored, Jasper? Not much to do around here, is it?”

“No, I’m not bored.” He shakes his head, but I can tell he’s frowning. “Would you care to see what I’ve trained Doja to do?”

Whatever distraction he can give me to forget about Seamus, I’ll take it. “Please. I would love to.”

“You won’t get mad?”

“Why would I get mad?”

Doja follows Jasper everywhere he goes. He’s like her second father. Plus, he feeds her more often than I do, which is always a draw for her. Her love and loyalty are led by her stomach. “She is your cat.”

“And she’s yours too. She adores you. Look at her.” My phone buzzes over and over with texts from Seamus but I ignore him. To give in gives me exactly what he wants.

My attention.

“Very well, then. I’ll show you.” Jasper disappears, Doja trotting after him and I pick up my phone with dread, checking my messages. They’re all from Seamus, though most of them are.

Unknown number: You can’t ignore me forever. We should get together soon. I would love to catch up.

Unknown number: Don’t you ever think of me? Remember the good times we shared? There were plenty. Not everything was bad between us, Charlotte. Once upon a time, I do think I loved me.

I didn’t know what love was—I still don’t. It was a silly infatuation that bloomed into a full-blown affair that cost me the rest of my semester in college. Only because I ran away like a child, but at the time, I still was one.

ris? So
ition. A
nd who

Me: There’s nothing for us to catch up on. I don’t want to see you, Seamus. Please leave me alone.

Unknown number: Tell me you love him and I will.

I don’t bother answering him. I block his number instead, then check my phone for another text.

One from my husband.

ere for *Perry: I have a surprise for you.*

fibbing. My stomach flutters with excitement at that one simple sentence.
If I don't watch it, I could completely and totally fall for this man
need it. don't mind the idea of it one bit.

Me: What is it?

Perry: If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise.

owner. *Me: Then why are you even bringing it up?*

er. Her *Perry: Because I need your cooperation. I want you to be ready for me at seven o'clock
buzzes pick you up in front of the building.*

ves him Seven is so far away. An eternity. I don't know how I'll wait that long

Me: How should I dress?

ing after *Perry: What do you mean?*
y're not

Me: Oh come on, my fashionable husband. What sort of outfit should I wear? Casual? Dressy?

ve to *Perry: Panties or no panties?*

My entire body flushes hot.

here *Me: Yes, all of that. These are important details I need to know before you pick me up.*
k you

Perry: Dress casual. Panties optional.

ion that I'm full-blown giddy now. All texts from Seamus completely pushed
n Paris. of my mind.

?. *Me: I'm intrigued.*

e me *Perry: You should be, wife.*

I like it when he calls me wife.

And I'm definitely not wearing panties for this so-called casual excursion
eck myI have no idea where he might be taking me, but I know I'll enjoy the ride

. And I

k. I'll

ong.

assy?

hed out

ursion.

ide.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Perry

THE MOMENT I'M in the driver's seat of the Chevelle, I exhale on a total relief.

It feels like coming home.

Which is some corny-ass shit, I'm not gonna lie. But damn, it's long time since I've been behind the wheel of my orange baby, and fucking good.

Like I'm on top of the world.

I shove the key in the ignition and crank it, pleased that it eases with a low rumble. I found a mobile car mechanic who met me at the shop and tinkered around under the hood, making sure it was at full capacity. The battery needed a jump thanks to it sitting for so long, otherwise he declared it ready to use.

"That is one fine-looking vehicle," he told me just before he left, but I'm appreciative as he stared at my precious Chevelle. "You could come with a pretty penny for it if you decided to ever sell it."

"Never," I said vehemently. "This is my most prized possession."

Leaning forward, I run my hand along the smooth dashboard. Fiddling with the knobs on the radio until classic rock blares from the speakers. It's just what I need, fitting, to listen to a little Led Zeppelin while driving this baby uptown to my apartment.

Led Zeppelin was one of my father's favorite bands. Didn't quite match the suit-and-tie, boardroom behavior my father always lived by, but that's what I loved about him. He wasn't just one thing; he was multi-faceted.

I hope people consider me in the same light.

Ignoring the fear that's suddenly coursing through my blood, I vehicle in reverse and back it out of the parking spot, the wheels squeak wasn't even going that fast.

Okay. I'm lying. I always go fast in this baby.

As I drive to our apartment, I get a few honks of appreciation. No day you see a classic set of wheels driving in the middle of Manhattan family all hate this damn car, and at one point, after the accident, I did

But how could I hate this beauty? She gives me nothing but pleasure, and once I get my wife in the passenger seat and take her on a ride, forget it.

It's going to feel so damn good seeing Charlotte sitting next to me, sighing and smiling and laughing as I drive too fast on the city streets, I just fucking explode with happiness.

My mind goes back to what Winston told me earlier. I've already been a plan into action. Security was called and we'll have a couple of extra cops patrolling the building or standing watch by our door in a day or two.

I'll call a locksmith and he'll be out tomorrow to change out the locks. Had him extra to get him there in less than twenty-four hours but my priority starts with my wife's safety. My mind is worth it.

That and my wife's safety. The most important thing of all. You're running your own damn father would agree and do his best to try and protect her, but fucker. He could give two shits about his own daughter.

Anger grips me and I curl my fingers around the steering wheel as I stare at his gaze. I'm white-knuckling it, telling myself I can't let what Winston revealed to me slip on any night. I've had this planned since the flight home yesterday. I knew

I told Charlotte about my near-death experience in the Chevelle that I wanted to take her for a ride in the car. I don't want to scare her—and I know I'll be feeling my daredevil side most definitely scares her—but I want to show her that I seemed like this part of me. How I used to race, and I was damn good at it.

That's something I don't want to involve myself in anymore. I'm perfectly willing to drive this baby around the city and have a good time. I could grab some dinner. Maybe drive up to Bishop's Landing and I can tell her where I grew up. Then head back home, get naked and fuck each other's brains out.

Yeah. That sounds like the perfect night.

The moment I pull up in front of the building, I'm grabbing my

put the about to text Charlotte when the building door opens and she's there, I'm calling. I'm straight for the car, her mouth dropping open in shock. I'd roll down the passenger window to say something to her but it's got a crank handle so I just wait for her to open the door.

At every Within seconds she does exactly that, ducking her head so she can't see me. "Perry!"

I grin. I can't help it. "What do you think?"

"It's..." She bursts out laughing as she stands up straight and stares at me like I'm a joyprecious baby. "It's super orange."

"That's my favorite part." Not really. The engine is what makes me hard.

Not that my car actually makes my dick hard...

"It's beautiful." She ducks her head back inside and I want to put her in the beautiful one. I don't think I've ever seen her look so pretty. Her eyes are sparkling and her hair is down and perfectly straight. She has a flower-print dress with a denim jacket over it, and while I figured she'd be in jeans and a sweater, this casual look works for me too.

"Get in," I demand and she does as I ask, settling her sweet self into the passenger seat, her gaze roaming the interior, as if she doesn't know what to look at first. "What do you think?"

"It's really nice. It looks brand new."

"She's in pristine condition." I smooth my hand over the dashboard. Like I get off on stroking this car. Seriously, I'm nuts.

"What year?"

"1969, baby." I grin at her when she slams her door shut. "Wine and dine me, sixty-nine me."

Charlotte wrinkles her nose. "No one has ever done that to me."

"Wined you and dined you?"

"Sixty-nined me." Her cheeks turn pink.

My mind immediately goes to Charlotte on top of me, her pussy right in my face, her mouth wrapped around my dick. "We're going to have to try that sometime."

"Have you ever done that before? Oh my God, don't answer that question. I don't want to know." She shakes her head vehemently.

We never talk about my previous sexual experiences because they weren't that memorable. As in, I never had a lasting relationship before.

reading couple of casual hookups with the same person. “Want me to be real with you right now?”

le, so I “Probably not.”

I ignore her answer. “I’ve never done it.”

n study She’s quiet for a moment, her head slowly swiveling in my direction. She can stare at me. “Really?”

I nod. “Seemed like a lot of work.” And rather intimate.

s at my Wouldn’t mind being rather intimate with my wife, though.

“Still not interested, then?”

ny dick “Didn’t have it on the agenda tonight, but things can change.” I step out of the car into first gear and leave my foot on the clutch. “Ready to go?”

“Where are you taking me?”

tell her “On the ride of your life,” I answer without hesitation.

ty. Her Her smile is huge and the sound of her laughter...

as on a Fuck. It just does something to me.

d show “Let’s go,” she says eagerly.

I glance in the side mirror, the road clearing just in time for me to step on the clutch and pull onto the street, the tires loud, the engine louder.

where to But they’ve got nothing on the sound of my wife’s laugh.

I go fast and take corners faster, making her squeal in delight. In

She can’t stop laughing and I figure it’s some sort of nervous thing because her expression is equal parts joy and terror.

Eventually I slow down, feeling bad that I’m frightening her. She starts to relax, her body melting into the seat.

re, dine “You hungry?”

“Kind of.” She blows out a shaky breath. “You’re a little scary.”

“I was actually taking it easy compared to how I used to drive this

I can feel her staring at me like I’m a complete stranger. “That was it easy? I can’t imagine what you must’ve been like when you were racing

and ass “An absolute terror.” I say it proudly.

to have Her laughter is back, and it’s real this time. “There is so much more to you than I even know.”

er that “You have no idea, wife. We’ve barely scratched the surface.” I turn

over at her to see she’s smiling, staring out the passenger side window. She’s looking very pleased with herself. I reach over, pushing up the hem of her skirt so I can rest my hand on her bare knee. “You take my ‘panties off

with your rule to heart?"

She keeps her gaze on the window. "Maybe you should look and see if I can't get a better view of you." I slide my fingers up the inside of her slender thigh, silently marveling at her soft skin. She parts her legs slightly, giving me better access and more friction so enough I'm encountering nothing but bare, creamy heat.

"No panties," she murmurs, her hot gaze meeting mine as I lightly stroke her.

"Is that why you wore a dress?" I brush her clit with my thumb.

She bites her lower lip, nodding. "You like?"

Is it wrong that it makes my dick hard that I'm fingering my wife's favorite car? Probably not.

"I fucking love," I answer, steering the car with one hand to the right so I can eventually park along the curb. I haven't been paying attention to where we're at. Just driving aimlessly around Manhattan and I realize we're in a quiet residential neighborhood. Reluctantly I remove my hand from the wheel and downshift. "Think anyone would give a shit if I got you off in the driveway and ease up their brownstone?"

Charlotte glances over at the row of homes I'm currently parking in front of. I put the car into park. "Spread your legs wider, baby."

She does as I ask without hesitation, knowing I'll deliver. My hand goes back under her dress and I slide two fingers into her tight channel. I'm thrusting, nice and slow, my gaze trained on her the entire time. The various emotions I see streaking across her face. The way she opens and closes her mouth when I stroke her extra hard. The little gasps. The whimpers. Her eyelids fluttering as she struggles to keep them open.

Unable to stand it any longer, I lean over and kiss her. Consumed by the thought of her. I thrust my tongue into her mouth and do a thorough sweep before I twist and take my tongue around hers, her whimpers coming faster now. Her hips moving. "My hand and she's so wet, my fingers slick through her noisily, the only sound our accelerated breaths."

"Perry," she whispers against my lips, her entire body growing more sensitive. "I missed you."

"I missed you too," I tell her, shoving three fingers inside her, my thumb pressing against her clit at the same time, rubbing it in small, tight circles.

"Oh God," she chokes out, her inner walls clenching around my fingers. "Oh God, just before she starts to shake. *Perrrrrrrrry.*"

I kiss her hard to shut her up. I don't need her yelling my name." disturbing the neighborhood, though that would be kind of hot.

That's my wife. She's sexy as fuck and so damn responsive. I'd soon mean to take it this far this fast tonight, but damn it, I *do* plan on fucking in this car sometime. Preferably after we eat dinner.

I'm fucking starving.

She moans into my mouth and it's the sexiest sound. I ease my fingers until eventually I pull my fingers out of her completely, breaking the push my fingers into her mouth. She sucks them eagerly, her hot tongue in my mouth, my dick surging against the fly of my jeans I changed into before I left the office.

I did not want to drive this car in a suit. Talk about a mismatch.

"What are you doing to me?" she asks when I withdraw my fingers from her mouth.

I study her. Her eyes are glazed and her cheeks are flushed and her lips are swollen. She looks wiped out. In a daze.

All thanks to me.

"I'd like to know what the fuck you're doing to me." I lean in and kiss on her lips, lingering there. And I'm not talking just sexually either.

What exactly is going on between us? This isn't like the business I first started with, that's for damn sure. What is she doing when I'm around? If she's playing my ass, I'm going to feel like the biggest fucker there. I don't think I could survive the humiliation.

My family alone will make me feel like a giant loser. I don't need the world chiming in with their opinions about my marriage to Catherine Lancaster.

"I used to read witchcraft books," she tells me, a new tidbit she's shared before. "Maybe I cast a spell on you."

"I think it worked." I kiss her again before she can tell me more. "I like you, wife."

"I know I like you," she admits, biting her lower lip. I must give her a questioning look because she continues on. "What? I do."

"You're loyal to me? To the Constantines?" I lift a brow, waiting for her answer. Hating how heavy my chest suddenly feels.

"What else do I need to do." She leans in closer to me, her tongue practically in mine. "To prove that I would never want to hurt you?"

me and I stare into her blue eyes, pleased by her words, and the meaning
them. “I don’t want to hurt you either.”

I didn’t Her smile is faint. “Good. We’re on the same page, then.”

ing her “Let’s go to a diner for dinner.” My stomach hurts, I’m so hungri
she doesn’t even bat an eyelash at my change of subject.

“What? And eat greasy hamburgers and French fries coated in sal
speed, brows lift.

kiss to Nodding, I kiss her again. Like I can’t get enough. “Sounds
tonguedelicious.”

efore I “Okay,” she whispers.

“And after we eat, I’ll take you somewhere with a nice view and fu
nice and slow in the back seat of the car?”

n clean “I’d rather fuck you in the front seat, with it pushed all the way bac
suggests softly.

her lips I smile.

“Deal.”

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“Let’s go to a diner for dinner.” My stomach hurts, I’m so hungry. And she doesn’t even bat an eyelash at my change of subject.

“What? And eat greasy hamburgers and French fries coated in salt?” Her brows lift.

Nodding, I kiss her again. Like I can’t get enough. “Sounds fucking delicious.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

“And after we eat, I’ll take you somewhere with a nice view and fuck you nice and slow in the back seat of the car?”

“I’d rather fuck you in the front seat, with it pushed all the way back,” she suggests softly.

I smile.

“Deal.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Charlotte

IT FEELS LIKE Perry and I are on a real date, which is kind of funny because it means we've been doing this relationship thing completely backwards since the beginning that I mind.

Well, I did mind, but I learned how to work with it and now I actually like Perry.

I especially like Perry when he drives fast, with that easy confidence behind the wheel, despite how much it scared me. He looked so relaxed, his body slouched, one hand on the wheel, the wind blowing through his hair after he rolled the window down.

And I really like it when he reaches over and slips his fingers between my thighs. That was all sorts of hot. I didn't mean to come so fast but I was lying when I told him I missed him.

That I was horny for him.

All damn day.

We're at a diner I found thanks to me searching on Google. It has good reviews and it looked crowded when we pulled into the parking lot—across the street signs. The moment we got seated, we both ordered cheeseburgers and milkshakes plus two milkshakes. I got strawberry and he got chocolate.

"What made you get the Chevelle out?" I ask him after our milkshakes are delivered and we're spooning up ice cream and shoveling it into our mouths like a couple of little kids.

"Telling you about racing made me miss her." He licks his spoon clean, the sight of his tongue doing things to me. Twisting me up inside.

Making me want him.

“She’s a her, huh?”

He nods, dunking his spoon back into his milkshake and swirled around. They served the milkshakes to us in those old-fashioned glasses, the spoon handles skinny and long so they can reach the bottom. “Never actually named her though.”

“You should,” I suggest, trying to slow down from eating too much cream. I still have a cheeseburger and fries to enjoy. “What girl names do you like?”

“Charlotte.” He grins, a thin line of chocolate sitting on his upper lip. “That name is cute.”

“Too formal.” I tap my upper lip. “You’ve got—”
cause it “Thanks.” He grabs a napkin and cleans his face. “You don’t like it, do you?”

I shake my head. “I always wanted an ‘ee’ name.”
actually He frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Rylie. Kylie. Mylie. Kaylee. Hailey. All my friends in school had names like that. Even my cousin Sylvie. And here I was with a total clunker named, his name. Charlotte.” I make a face and shake my head, giving in and shove a big scoop of strawberry ice cream into my mouth.

“I like Charlotte,” he says and I’m sure he’s just saying that to make me feel better, though I don’t say that out loud. “I have an ‘ee’ name as you know it. And I hate it.”

“You want me to be truthful with you?”

He nods, his expression turning serious. “Always.”

“When I first saw your name, I thought you were an old man.”

id good He leans back against the bright red booth seat, shaking his head. “Well, good worst. Who the hell else do you know my age named Perry?”

and fries “It makes you stand out.”

“It sucks.”

“Why were you named Perry? Do you know?”

into our “Old family name, I guess. That’s what I’ve been told at least.” He dips his spoon in the ice cream, pulling it out to lick it again.

on, the He needs to stop doing that. He’s making me squirm.

“Why were you named Charlotte?” he asks me when I still have nothing.

“Old family name,” I repeat with a faint smile. “There are a couple of other names, but I like Charlotte.”

Charlotte Lancasters out there that predate me.”

“You talk to your parents lately?” he asks, seemingly out of the blue. I study him, wondering what he’s getting at. But his expression is completely neutral and he keeps licking at his spoon which is a distraction.

“No. Not really.”

“What do you mean, not really?” His voice is casual, but there is a sharp gleam in his eye for a moment.

Now it’s gone.

“My mother called earlier today to make sure I made it back okay. She said I did. Then I had to go because Jasper was showing me what he had to do.”

Perry frowns. “What did he teach her?”

“How to fetch! It’s the cutest thing. He balls up a piece of paper and throws it, and she goes and gets it and brings it back to him! I tried it with her but she kept bringing the paper ball to Jasper instead.”

I laugh just thinking about it. We played fetch with her for at least an hour, maybe longer.

“Sounds fun.” He smiles, tilting his head back when the server sets our table and sets our plates in front of us.

“Here you go, kids,” the older woman says, snapping her gum. “You want anything else? More water? Maybe a Coca-Cola?”

“I’ll take more water,” I say as Perry leans over for the ketchup. He plucks the bottle from where it sits, cracking open the lid and dumping it onto his plate.

“I’m good,” Perry tells her.

“Be right back.” She smiles at us before she takes off.

“This place feels straight out of a movie,” I tell him when she’s gone. The place is all kitschy red and white diner décor with Coca-Cola signs everywhere, mixed with a couple of cool neon signs. There are rows of vintage posters pinned up on the top of the walls and the floors are black and white in a checkerboard pattern.

“It’s cool, right?” Perry picks up his burger and takes a giant bite, groaning as he starts to chew. “This is fucking delicious.”

I grab my burger with both hands—it’s huge—and bite into it, moaning with pleasure as soon as it hits my taste buds. “Oh, this is so good.”

“Right?” He keeps taking bites, like he can’t stop.

“How was work?” I ask after I set my burger down and grab the ketchup. I’m adding some to my plate before I drag a couple of fries through it. The portion is crispy, hot, and delicious.

“Long day.”

That’s all he offers.

“How’s your brother?”

“Grumpy.” He takes another bite.

Again, that’s all he says.

Why is he not telling me much? I don’t even know what he did at Halcyon. Something about customer care? No, that doesn’t sound quite right.

Winston is the grumpy CEO who makes demands and Perry is the one who sweeps in afterward and sweetens the deal with his endearing personality and charm.

My husband, the sweetheart.

Though he can be ferocious. Moody and gray. Mean and restless.

“Are you grumpy too?” I ask after a few minutes of silence while we wait for our drinks.

He lifts his gaze to mine. “I’m not grumpy. I just—don’t want to talk about work. It’s boring.”

“You don’t like your job?”

“I love it.” His smile feels downright false. “I’d just rather focus on other things. Like how Jasper supposedly trained your cat to fetch.”

“There’s no supposedly about it. He totally trained her. I’ll have to show you when we get home, though she’ll probably be snoozing.”

“Catch it on video and send it to me,” he suggests, his phone held out right on cue. He checks it, frowning slightly before he shoves his phone into his jeans pocket. “You having fun?”

His question catches me off guard and I smile at him, touched that he’s even asked. “Yes. This is the best date I’ve ever been on.”

“You must not have dated much.”

“Not at all.”

His gaze is assessing. “You don’t even want to know what I’m thinking about right now.”

I know what he’s thinking about, because I’m thinking about him. Why is Seamus always going to pop up between us like this?

God, I hope not.

etchup,
They're



WE EXIT THE diner to discover it started raining and I yank my denim over my head, running to the car, following after Perry, who unlocks it and opens it for me so I can slip inside. The moment he's in the driver he revs the engine and zooms off, his face full of intense concentration drives the wet city streets. I try not to let myself get too caught up in him it's no use.

I'm completely caught up in him. The sexy way he drives, the expertise on his handsome face, the way he stays focused, though I'm sure he finds me watching him.

It's like I can't stop watching him.

"Where are we going?" I ask at one point and he just shakes his head, lips curved into a closed-mouth smile.

"You'll see."

He eventually pulls into a parking garage at Battery Park, driving to talk we're all the way on the top level. He pulls the car into a spot facing water, putting it into gear and cutting the engine. We sit in silence a moment, the ticking of the cooling engine the only sound and finally I take it anymore.

I steal a glance at him to find he's already watching me, all that in show he had driving now focused entirely on me. I lean back a little bit, suck a breath and he slowly shakes his head.

"Don't look scared, wife."

"Can we see the water from here?" I turn my attention to the window sitting up a little bit in my seat, but I can't see beyond the concrete hallway that he in front of us.

"You really want to check out the views right now? Or the back seat."

My skin tingles at the promise in his voice. "I thought we were going to do it in the front seat."

"It'll be tight."

My gaze returns to his. "I like it tight," I whisper.

He's on me in seconds, his hands in my hair, his mouth finding mine. The kiss is sloppy and dirty, his tongue thrusting, low groans sounding in his chest. As if he can't get enough of me.

I feel the same. The exact same.

He undoes my seat belt and I go to him, climbing on top of his butt nudging the steering wheel and honking the horn. I startle and laugh, as does he, his hands curling around my face and pulling me down another kiss.

Oh God, this feels too real right now. To real and too *right*. I love as he's touching me. His hands slide from my face to my neck. Down my chest, but to curl around my breasts. He squeezes and kneads them, my nipples hard beneath his palms and I thrust my chest into his hands, needing more.

"Think we'll get caught?" I whisper to him when his hands drop to my thighs, gathering up the fabric of my skirt.

"Isn't that half the fun?" He smirks, yanking the fabric up before his hands dive beneath. "Rise up."

I do as he says, a jolt running through me when his seeking fingers find my wet pussy. He strokes and teases. Circles and presses until I'm a mess, my back pressed against the solid weight of the steering wheel. I don't care.

"You sure you don't want the back seat?" he asks yet again. I hurriedly shake my head, reaching for the front of his jeans. I unbutton, curling my fingers around his cotton-covered cock and he suckles my hand.

Always ready for me.

Somehow we fumble with our clothing and his jeans and boxer briefs end up bunched around his calves and my denim jacket ends up on the floorboard. I've got my dress gathered up in one hand as I carefully shield myself onto his thick cock, taking him in inch by inch.

By the time he's filling me completely, we're both moaning, our bodies finding each other's in a savage kiss.

"We move as one, the interior of the car growing muggy from our skin. Our ragged breaths. The rain increases in tempo, matching our pulse. My clit throbs every time I thrust down. He didn't put on a condom. He doesn't even care.

I want to feel him come inside me. Mark me.

Claim me as his.

"Charlotte," he whispers, his hands coming to my face again, his fingers streaking across my cheeks. I open my eyes to find him watching me, his chest heaving, parted, his chest rising and falling rapidly. He's so deeply embedded in

lap, my me it's as if we're fused together.

start to Like we belong to each other.

own for He doesn't say anything else. Just my name. I bend my head, press forehead to his, staring into his eyes as I work my hips, riding him how desperate to consume him. I close my eyes when he kisses me, his my frontnipping, tongue licking.

reading It's so good between us. Too good. Natural and perfect and delicious. I never want him to stop fucking me.

to my Ever.

Perry rests his hands on my hips, rendering me still as he thrusts. More thrusts, his cock filling me again and again until a keening cry sounds. I clutch him to me, the orgasm washing over me with an intensity that renders me breathless. Boneless.

roaning "Jesus," he mutters, his mouth on my neck as he groans into my shoulder. It hurts. Shoulders tense beneath my grip and then he's coming too. His semen enters me like a hot blast and I clench all around him, trying to keep it inside.

and I Like...what? I want something to take so I can get pregnant? I don't know how to do theseo.

urges in But would it be so bad, having Perry's baby? He'd be a blond-blue-eyed little charmer. Adorable as can be. I'm sure our mothers would be positively thrilled. They didn't expect us to even get along, let alone be able to procreate and have babies.

on the I run my hands through Perry's hair, making it wilder than it already is. Lower. He's got his face buried against the front of my neck, his hot breath blowing across my skin, making me shiver. He's still inside of me but I can feel his mouth softening.

"We should go," I whisper.

heated "Don't go." His arms tighten around me, locking me in place and having a moment.

n and I "What do you mean?"

He slowly tilts his head back, his heavy gaze finding mine. "I fucking love you. You're the best. You're the girl in the front seat of my favorite car. Best night ever."

I laugh.

fingers I kiss him.

his lips I can't even begin to describe what I'm feeling for this man right now. Inside of

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Perry

“**I** HAD A thought,” I say as I stroll into Winston’s office, my hands in my pockets, my mood disgustingly cheerful.

Meaning it’s even disgusting to me, how damn cheerful I am.

Winston holds up a finger, his phone glued to his ear as he listens to whatever he’s being told. “Right,” he says when the person on the other end finishes speaking. “And I’m telling you I don’t give a fuck. Find out what’s going on. Now.”

He ends the call and slams his phone onto his desk, immediately covering the screen to make sure he didn’t crack it, which sort of ruins the violent effect he was going for.

But whatever. It’s not bugging me. This is what happens when you have sex in your car and then take your wife home and fuck her in your bed. You didn’t get a good night’s sleep but it doesn’t matter. I’m sated. Satisfied.

While my big brother is tense and grouchy as fuck. Great.

“I had a couple of text messages come through right before the wedding. We don’t know who they came from, but they were rude as hell. They were from Charlotte,” I tell him.

Winston rolls his eyes. “A couple of rude texts about your new wife? You’re only just now telling me about them? When they happened weeks ago?”

“I forgot about them. I’ve been a little busy.” I shrug. I didn’t necessarily think they were a threat, but now...

I don’t know. They make me uneasy.

“Let me see them.” Winston flicks his fingers at me in a grabby

and I bring them up on my phone before I hand it over. He snatches the phone from me and reads them, his brows lowered.

“The number is blocked,” Winston says.

No shit, is how I want to answer him but I restrain myself.

“I know.”

Winston squints, reading them again. “It says ‘nothing a fat dick mouth won’t fix.’ You think it’s from her ex?”

“Maybe. I didn’t think anything of it when I got them. Then I was up in wedding shit and forgot.” As I lay in bed last night with my wife up all around me, naked and warm and with her hair in my face, I remembered them.

And I didn’t like them. At all. Now that I know McAsswipe is unfucking good, I’m starting to wonder if he’s the one who sent them to me.

That’s so obvious though. Not very Morelli of him at all—they’re sneaking a lot sneakier.

Most of the time.

“You should’ve told me about these a long time ago.” Winston snatches the phone over my shoulder and I take it from him. “I’m having Myron look in your phone records. The incoming and outgoing calls, all of them. That whole entire issue, will it?”

“Why would it be?” I raise my brows.

“In case you’ve got any secrets you don’t want getting out.” His tone is casual, though the look on his face is anything but.

“If you’re trying to imply I’m up to no good and doing something you want you to know, you have nothing to worry about,” I say dryly. “I’m not hiding any secrets.”

“Good.” Winston seems pleased. “I always have to mention it. I want to know if you’re seeing another woman right now.”

“I am definitely not seeing another woman.” I hold up my left hand, flashing him the ring my wife gave me. “I’m married.”

“That doesn’t mean shit and you know it, Perry. Especially between two,” Winston mutters.

“You cheating on Ash?” I throw at him.

He seems taken aback. Just before he switches to furiously angry. “The fuck? How dare you—”

“See, it sucks, saying that kind of shit. Of course you wouldn’t care.”

hes theher. I wouldn't cheat on Charlotte," I say, flopping into the chair t
across from Winston's desk. I feel like we're on a repeat of yesterday.

"Your marriage isn't based on—love." Winston spits out the las
like he has a difficult time saying it.

"I care about her though." I think of her climbing on top of me las
c in herThe way she slid onto my dick, riding me in the driver's seat of the Cl
Hot as fuck. Every fantasy come to life, right there in that moment.

caught "You're just excited because you're getting free pussy every
tuckedwithout having to ask for it," Winston mutters.

face, I "Don't talk about my wife like that," I snap.

His gaze dances as he contemplates me, swiveling in his desk cha
p to noso defensive. Even more than you were yesterday."

me. I rise to my feet, irritated. "Look into those text messages. Se
e a hellMyron comes up with."

"Will do, little brother. I'll keep you posted. Oh, and I'll run a se
your wife's phone records too. Brace yourself though."

1 hands I pause at his office door, glancing over my shoulder. "Why?"

to your "Might find out something you don't want to know."

on't be I leave his office, marching toward my own and throwing myself i
desk chair, staring unseeingly at my dark computer screen. I ha
unsettled my brother's words make me feel. He still doesn't trust Cl
tone isand I get why. He doesn't know her. Doesn't have to deal with her da
see her smiling face and sparkling blue eyes. The way she says m
I don'twhen I'm buried inside her to the hilt, making her come.

ave no Yeah, he doesn't know. He doesn't have a fucking clue.

I grab my phone and send her a quick text to check on her.

I don't

Me: What are you doing?

t hand, She doesn't immediately respond and that fills me with alarm.
she's busy. In the shower. Chatting with Jasper—those two are clos
en you like her second dad or something. She mentioned she might try and
little brother this afternoon and I told her she should invite him to ou
for the weekend. I want to get to know him.

"What The happiness on her face when I made that suggestion is l
describe. How could a woman who looks like that at me be up to no
heat on

hat sits Sneaking around on me on the side?

Nope. I don't believe it. She's loyal to me. She said so herself last
t word, That woman is mine.

My phone buzzes and I immediately check it.

it night.

hevelle.

*Charlotte: Training Doja. I threw the ball and she brought it back to me instead of Ja.
This is major.*

y night

I smile. I wonder if that's what she wants to do with the rest of he
Train her cat? Hang out with her friend the butler? That doesn't sou
much. Does she have dreams and aspirations? And am I the piece-
ir. "Oh not-interested husband who never asked her about them?

I should. Tonight, at dinner I'm going to question her. Drive her
e what her mind with my curiosity. All I want is for her to be happy. Fulfilled

arch on

Me: You take a video of it so I can see?

Charlotte: I forgot! I will next time she does it. I'll give my phone to Jasper.

Me: Thanks for the warning. I'll hold off sending the dick pic I was planning for now.

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ir place

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) good?

I send her a string of eggplant emojis as a substitute.

She goes quiet and I set my phone on my desk, chuckling to mys
turn to face the window, staring at the city spread out before me. I
heard from my mother yet, which is odd. I'm surprised she hasn't reac
to me since we returned home, eager to have dinner with my blushin
so she can show us all the housing options she found in Bishop's Lanc
us.

I don't want to move there. I'm over it. I want to stay right where v
and enjoy our time in the city. We can live in Bishop's Landing late
we have a kid or two and we're not wanting to raise them in the big cit

Damn, I sound whipped as fuck. And I don't even mind.

Another text comes through and I see it's a video from Charlotte
the cat doing exactly as she described. Charlotte throws the balled-up p
paper and the cat bolts off like a shot, grabbing the ball in her te
trotting back over to where Charlotte waits, dropping the ball onto her

Charlotte squeals, grabbing the cat and giving her a big squeeze
meowing and trying to scramble out of her arms.

I receive a text from my wife too.

night.

Charlotte: OMG I'm so glad you didn't send a dick pic when Jasper was filming. Talk a embarrassing.

Me: Your cat is tricky.

sper!

Charlotte: Isn't she great? I think I'm going to put her in movies. Cats are so hard to train

er days. I don't bother arguing with her. I'm sure the majority of them are
and like train, but what the hell do I know about cats?

-of-shit,

Me: You still want that dick pic?

: out of

Charlotte: I never said I wanted it.

.

Me: But do you?

Charlotte: Perry.

I check to make sure my office door is shut before I'm undoing
and unzipping my pants, my cock out in seconds. It's semi-hard and I
a couple of strokes, thinking of Charlotte kneeling before me in the
her lips wrapped around just the tip.

self as I

We need to recreate that fantasy, stat.

Haven't

When I'm erect enough for my satisfaction, I grab my phone and

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are you

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with a

hard-on?"

photo, then ponder if I should send it or not.

Fuck it.

I hit send and wait. She doesn't disappoint.

My phone rings within seconds.

"Perry," is all she says when I answer the phone and the scandalous
of her voice is enough to make me burst out laughing. "I can't believe
sent that!"

"Did Jasper see?"

"No!" she shrieks. "But he was in the room with me."

I chuckle. "Then you're safe."

"Doja saw."

"Was she impressed?"

"She's a cat. Nothing impresses her." Charlotte lowers her voice.
are you doing in your office with a hard-on?"

“Thinking about my wife.” My voice is low too, my heart thudding against my chest. It’s true. That’s all it takes.

bout I think of her and I’m instantly aroused.
She’s quiet for a moment. “You’re naughty.”
“Tell me you’re not turned on.”

! “I can’t tell you that because it would be a lie.”
I am smug as fuck. “That’s what I thought.”

easy to “You should come home early tonight.”
“Why? You got something special planned for dinner?”
Ah the little woman, fixing me a home-cooked meal. That’s fantasy I don’t think is ever going to actually happen, but a man can dream.
“Yeah, I do.” Her voice drops to the softest whisper. “Me.”

I sit up straight, tucking my dick back into my underwear, wincing awkward as fuck considering I still have a boner. “I’ll leave now.”

She laughs. “Give me some time first! Leave in an hour and we’ll deal.”

my belt “Will do.”

[give it I end the call and lean back in my chair, not caring if my zipper is undone and I’ve got a delirious grin plastered on my face. Anyone who walks in, even my mother, and I wouldn’t give a single fuck. I am feeling good.

I take a For once, everything seems to be going right. Smoothly.
Almost feels too good to be true.

us tone
ve you

“What

“Thinking about my wife.” My voice is low too, my heart thudding hard against my chest. It’s true. That’s all it takes.

I think of her and I’m instantly aroused.

She’s quiet for a moment. “You’re naughty.”

“Tell me you’re not turned on.”

“I can’t tell you that because it would be a lie.”

I am smug as fuck. “That’s what I thought.”

“You should come home early tonight.”

“Why? You got something special planned for dinner?”

Ah the little woman, fixing me a home-cooked meal. That’s a total fantasy I don’t think is ever going to actually happen, but a man can dream.

“Yeah, I do.” Her voice drops to the softest whisper. “Me.”

I sit up straight, tucking my dick back into my underwear, which is awkward as fuck considering I still have a boner. “I’ll leave now.”

She laughs. “Give me some time first! Leave in an hour and we have a deal.”

“Will do.”

I end the call and lean back in my chair, not caring if my zipper is still undone and I’ve got a delirious grin plastered on my face. Anyone could walk in, even my mother, and I wouldn’t give a single fuck. I am feeling too good.

For once, everything seems to be going right. Smoothly.

Almost feels too good to be true.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Charlotte

“**M**ISS.” I GLANCE up from the book I’m reading on my phone to find a man standing in front of me, a concerned expression on his face. “Someone wants to speak with you.”

I frown, glancing at the time on my phone. It’s almost three. No one is supposed to speak to me here ever. “Who is it?”

“He—wouldn’t say. I was informed that he’s an old friend and you should understand when I told you he was from Paris.”

I leap off the couch, my phone falling from my lap to the floor. “Who is he? You didn’t let him into the apartment, did you?”

Jasper shakes his head. “I told him I needed to speak with you first.”

“And how exactly did you speak with him?” Panic grips me around my throat and I glance around the cavernous living room. The only other thing I see is my cat.

“The man working the security desk called and wanted me to relay a message. What would you like me to tell him?”

Curiosity eats at me and I rest my hands on my hips, contemplating my options. I could ignore Seamus and he’ll keep coming around, making a nuisance of himself. Or I could go down to the lobby in front of all the other people—including security—in the middle of the afternoon and tell him I’m not interested.

Ever.

I’m a married woman. And I care about my husband. I’m Perry’s wife and he’s the only one who matters in my life.

I’m certainly not going to cheat on him with Seamus.

I look at that relationship now for what it was. A crush that turned something real, only for it to be built on nothing but lies. I was devastated, but I got over it.

Yes. I am completely over it.

“I’ll go down and meet with him,” I announce.

Jasper frowns. Doja meows in seeming protest—her timing is impeccable. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“There will be all sorts of people down there, right? Doormen, security and that one woman who sits at the front counter sometimes Jasper.

He tilts his head to the side, imagining the scene, I assume. “I’ll just suppose.”

“And it’ll only be a few minutes. What I have to say to him won’t be long. You’ll know where I’m at.”

“Should I go down with you?”

I shake my head. I won’t be able to act like a badass bitch in front of Jasper. He’ll make me feel self-conscious. “It’s not necessary.”

The look of doubt on the man’s face is obvious. “I don’t like the idea of you being down there by yourself with this man.”

“I’ll be all right. It’s just—an old flame who’s back in town,” I admit.

Jasper’s graying eyebrows shoot so high I swear they hit his hair and then recede. “Miss—”

“It’s okay,” I say, interrupting him. I’m sure he knows who I’m referring to. He’s known me forever. What other old flame could I possibly have ruined the man who ruined me supposedly forever in Paris.

Well, I’m not ruined anymore. I can stand on my own two feet again. I found a man who’s much more caring and thoughtful than *he* could ever be.

“I’ll be fine,” I continue, even as he stares at me, his gaze full of concern. I lift my chin, going for an abundance of confidence. Most likely I’m once again miserably. “Truly it will take only a couple minutes of my time. Call me downstairs. Have them keep an eye on me while I’m there.”

“I will,” Jasper says firmly, sounding bossy as hell. “I’d prefer to accompany you downstairs. I’m sure Mr. Constantine would prefer it to my wife’s.”

Oh shit. Is he going to rat me out to Perry?

No. I can’t have that. But this conversation needs to happen. I need Seamus to back off once and for all. And though I might regret going

ed into there and talking to him—God knows what he might say—I know this
stated, I right thing for me to do. For myself.

And my marriage.

“Please don’t mention this meeting to Perry, Jasper. I’ll tell
everything tonight when he comes home.” After we’ve had plenty of
always he’s relaxed and more open minded. “He’ll just worry if you tell him
now.”

en and Jasper makes a harumphing noise. He is not pleased. “I don’t like
,” I tell idea.”

“I’ll be gone for ten minutes. Tops.” I start to head for the door. “Go
Well, I security desk. Let him know I’m coming down. Then he can tell Seamus
I glance down at myself, wondering if I should change. I’m in one
I don’t take favorite matching sweatsuits—all black, like my soul—that’s what I
tell Jasper, and he would always chuckle. I was fully planning on hopping
the shower before Seamus showed up and getting glammed up for my
front off for his dinner, which will be me. And some sort of takeout. That is still
agenda.

idea of And I definitely don’t need to get glammed up for this man. God,
he would just leave me—us—alone.

nit. “I’ll be back in a few!” I call as I undo the locks and open the door
airline—for the elevator, hitting the down button and waiting for only a minute
before the doors slide open. I walk inside, turning to face them when
referring the apartment door swing open and the sound of Jasper’s voice.

re? The “Charlotte! You forgot your phone!”

The doors shut before I can stop them and I’m immediately filled
and I’ve regret. The elevator is hurtling me down to the bottom floor
er be. I contemplate hitting our floor’s button again the moment it stops and
doubt. I right back up here. Seamus can wait a few extra minutes.

failing It would be safer if I had my phone on me.

security But the moment the ding sounds and the doors slide open, I realize
lobby is bustling with activity and there’s no need for me to have my
refer to This interaction is going to be quick and hopefully painless.

oo.” Besides, there are so many witnesses.

I approach the security desk, about to ask one of the suited gentlemen
d to tell where my visitor is when I hear his deep voice coming from directly
g down me.

s is the “Charlotte.”

Slowly I turn to face him, and this time around, I really take him in. The coffee shop on my wedding day, I’d been so shocked I really hadn’t seen him. It was more like a haze had dropped over my eyes, making it difficult to see.

Or maybe I just didn’t want to see him. Having Seamus in front of me after all that time without seeing him at all was too painful for me to take.

Now I study him, noting the extra silver at his temples. His ink-black hair and eyebrows and the matching dark scruff on his jaw. Turbulent eyes meet mine and I see regret there.

So much regret.

Well, too damn bad.

He was a handsome man then, and he still is. That hasn’t changed any of my feelings for him.

I lift my chin, glaring at him. “Seamus.”

His smile is small. Hopeful. “I’m so glad you agreed to meet with me, I wish I had—”

His familiar Irish brogue touched with a hint of Parisian makes me pause. I headbang, but for only a second.

No. Not even a second. More like a blip, because the longer I look at him, the more I hear his voice, see the way he’s behaving, the angrier I get.

“I’m only talking to you because you’re so damn persistent,” I tell him, letting my anger fly. “I want you to leave me alone. I’m married. I have no interest in hearing what you have to say, or how much you regret how you’ve ended between us. I don’t care about any of it. Or you.”

His gaze flickers with annoyance. “You really think I regret how we’ve ended?”

Him picking up on that one particular sentence only makes me angrier. I don’t care if you do or don’t regret it. I’m asking you politely to leave me alone. Do you understand?”

I’m about to turn and head back for the elevators when his cold stare stops me.

“You know he’s using you.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I frown at him. “No more than you’re using me.”

“Suppose you’re used to that sort of treatment, then. Such a pathetic girl you are.” His smile is not pleasant. It’s dark and almost menacing. “Constantines are utter trash.”

I turn to face him fully once more. “Don’t insult my family.”

Seamus laughs but there’s no humor in the sound. “They’re not of my family. I don’t see them rallying around you and taking you in to deal with Constantine. You’re still holed up in this apartment, bought by Lachlan’s money. They have no plans on making you a true Constantine, Chucky-black. You’ll be running back to your parents’ place within six months’ time. I can guarantee it.”

I do my best not to flinch at his words, keeping myself in place. “That’s not true.”

“And how do you know that?”

I consider what I’m about to say and go for it. “Because my husband came inside me without a condom on just last night. And a few days ago, on our honeymoon. We want to have a baby.”

That last part is a lie, but it sounds good. And it delivers just the result I’m looking for.

Seamus is furious.

“You’re a fool,” he mutters, taking a step forward. “Getting pregnant at this age, his baby will ruin everything.”

I glare at him. “We’re married. We want to eventually start a family. That’s the whole point.”

He releases a shaky breath and I can practically feel the anger vibrating through the air. He has nothing to say, yet he doesn’t say anything.

“This all feels really familiar,” I say, thinking of the last time we argued. “I’ve heard you say this to me before. He said basically the same thing to me then. “Leave me alone. If you try to contact me again, I’m going to file a restraining order.””

I turn on my heel, about to march back toward the bank of elevators. He grabs hold of the crook of my elbow, something cold and steely against my rib cage. I suck in a sharp breath, glancing around the room. No one is paying attention to us. Not even the men behind the security desk.

“Make one wrong move and I’ll shoot you. I don’t care if I still crave the taste of your lips,” he mutters close to my ear. “I will end you.”

I give a jerky nod, keeping my head bent. The gun pressed against my side makes me feel faint. I need to cooperate. “What do you want from me?”

ic little “I want you to leave with me without making a fuss.” He presses
g. “The closer, and I whimper. “Now.”

Slowly he turns us both so we’re facing the double doors th
outside. I walk beside him, trying to implore people as I walk past the
ot youra look. A pained smile.

nto the But they either smile in response and look away, or they don’t m
incastercontact with me at all.

arlotte. Once we’re outside, the cold late October wind hits us and I shi
time. Ireadjusts his hold on the gun, pressing it harder against my ribs and i
my heart made its way into my throat. I can’t swallow. I can barely bre
“That’s I told Jasper not to tell Perry, though I’m sure he will when I don’
quick enough. And I left my phone in the apartment. They can’t eve
me.

usband I fell right into this man’s hands, and he didn’t have to do a dam
go, too.but show up.

“Get in the car,” Seamus orders, shoving me toward the sleek black
reactioncar that sits by the curb. I open the door, glancing over my shoulder
and he’s so close, I’m almost afraid he’s going to do something crazy I
Kiss me.

nt with “Get in,” he growls, his gaze on my mouth.

Like a scared little mouse, I leap into the passenger seat, jumpin
family.he slams the door. He rounds the front of the car quickly, not giv
enough time to escape, and then he’s starting the engine and we’re
ibratingaway, much like Perry and I did only last night.

“Where are you taking me?” I ask, my voice quiet. Eerily calm.

ran into “You’ll see,” he says, his gaze on the road. “Hand over your phone
lone. If “I didn’t bring it with me.”

He jerks his head in my direction, his gaze sharp. “I don’t belie
s whenHand it over.”

jabbed “I left it in my apartment, I swear.”

om, but He comes to a stop at a red light, and the next thing I know, his ha
desk. all over me, patting me down, searching for my phone. I try to fend h
ave thebatting at his hands, trying to make a scene in case I catch the attentio
people in the stopped cars around us.

inst my Seamus slaps my face quick as lightning, effectively stopping m
me?” out, resting my palm against my cheek as I stare at him in horror.

the gun “Keep it up and I’ll do worse than that to you,” he warns, his voice
“Who are you?” I whisper shakily, shock coursing through my
at leadleaving me ice cold.
m with His smile is pure evil. “The man you should’ve married.”

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“Keep it up and I’ll do worse than that to you,” he warns, his voice stern.

“Who are you?” I whisper shakily, shock coursing through my veins, leaving me ice cold.

His smile is pure evil. “The man you should’ve married.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Perry

A LAST-MINUTE MEETING is scheduled at three thirty and I send Cha a quick text, letting her know I'll be a little late for my "dinner."

No response.

I sit in the meeting that lasts longer than an hour, bored out of my mind and unable to check my phone thanks to my grumpy-ass brother who glares at me every time I so much as reach for it in my pocket. It's like if he suffers, I do too and so I sit there and listen to the chief financial officer drone on about budgets and bullshit. Eventually my mind drifts and I daydream about my wife.

Can't get over the moment in the parking garage last night. Or how I fingered her right before we went into the diner. But it was more than just sex—fun, sitting with her in the diner and eating milkshakes and laughing with her. Teasing her, the entire moment lighthearted. Until it got a little heavy.

I liked both aspects of the evening. Sex with my wife is getting better. We're understanding each other. Enjoying each other's company. Learning what the other likes.

I'm not used to this sort of thing. Back in the day, I'd have sex with a woman, maybe a couple of times, normally only once, and then move on to the next one.

No way would I ever admit it to anyone, but I'm digging this more than I thought I would.

The moment the meeting is finished, I'm leaping from my chair, rushing to hustle my ass out of there and get to my wife when Winston stops me.

“Talk to me a minute,” he demands, striding toward his office.

Pissed, I follow him in there, slamming the door shut behind me. “

He turns, narrowing his eyes. “What’s got you all twisted up?”

“I need to get home.”

Winston grins. “Wifey waiting for you on the dining room table na

Now there’s an image.

“I hope to fuck so,” I mutter.

“I’ll make this quick, then. Myron is looking into the texts. Said
from a burner phone. One of those prepaid things you get at a drug
whatever.”

“Could’ve already told you that.”

lotte a “Yeah, well, it’s a specific brand that’s only sold at a specific
store.”

“Which one?”

ny skull When he gives me the name, I make a dismissive noise. “We’ll
glares figure out who purchased it.”

e has to “Myron could. He’s a miracle worker. Let’s give him a chance.”

r drone I shove my hands in my pockets, my fingers curling around my ph
ydream that all you wanted to tell me?”

Winston nods. “I’ll let you know what he finds out.”

when I “Cool. Hey, I appreciate you helping me with this.” I feel like a
that. It for acting shitty.

burgers “Of course.”

hot and I pull my phone out of my pocket to see I have a text from...

An unknown number.

tter and “What the fuck?” I mutter as I open my phone with face recognit
bodies. go into my text messages. What I see makes my heart drop into my
balls.

with one Makes me want to rip someone’s fucking heart out.

e on to It’s a photo of Charlotte, her hands and feet bound with rope, a p
duct tape around her mouth. Her eyes are wide and pleading and she’s
rogamy her favorite black matching sweatsuit. She told me when she wears
feels like she’s Doja’s mother, since the cat is all black too.

eady to My wife is weird. Adorable. Sexy.

And currently being held captive by this motherfucker who sent
image along with a threatening text.

What?” *Unknown number: I’ve got what I’ve always wanted. Want it back? Wait for my message. And whatever you do, don’t get the police involved.*

ked?” “He’s got her.” I thrust the phone in Winston’s face, panic through my veins. “That motherfucker *stole* her from me.”

Winston blinks at the image I show him, his gaze slowly lifting to the screen. “Shit,” he spits out. “That McTiernan asshole? Is he working with Morellis?”

store or “Of course.” I start texting, my fingers shaking with a mixture of fear and fury.

c chain *Me: You better not touch a single hair on her head or there will be hell to pay, you fucking asshole.*

I never “We should call the police,” Winston suggests.

I shake my head. “He said not to involve the authorities.”

one. “Is that thing he’s got,” Winston says. “And what’s he going to do? He won’t hurt her. She’s the most valuable thing he’s got,” Winston says.

That’s the problem. She’s the most valuable thing in the world. The Chevelle isn’t my most prized possession.

jackass My wife is.

Another photo comes through, this one with a gun pointed at Charlotte’s forehead, her eyes squeezed tightly shut, tears streaking down her cheeks.

“Oh God.” The agonized sound is ripped from my chest and I clutch my hand over my face, waiting for more.

ion and He doesn’t disappoint.

fucking *Unknown number: I’m watching you. You call the cops, I’ll end her. I promise. Don’t call with me. Wait for my instructions.*

piece of *Me: Tell me what you want.*

is got on *Unknown number: Not now. Later.*

it, she *Me: When?*

Unknown number: When I’m ready.

me the I lift my head to stare at my brother. “We have to find her.”

next Winston goes to his desk and picks up the phone, hitting a nun speed dial. "On it."

zipping "And when I find who took her." I pause for only a second, my spinning completely out of control. "I'm going to kill him."

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Winston goes to his desk and picks up the phone, hitting a number on speed dial. "On it."

"And when I find who took her." I pause for only a second, my world spinning completely out of control. "I'm going to kill him."

THE RECKLESS UNION

MONICA MURPHY

THE RECKLESS UNION

MONICA MURPHY



CHAPTER ONE

Charlotte

I STARTLE AWAKE with a gasp, my eyelids heavy with fatigue when I crack them open to find I'm in an empty room. Taking in my surroundings, I note the cheap white blinds covering the single window, the bent ones in the waning sunlight from outside. I shift, tingles prickling along my neck. My feet. My lower half has fallen asleep, my butt killing me thanks to the hardwood floor I'm sitting on. Grimacing, I try to stretch my feet but the tightness around my ankles cuts into my skin.

At least the tape isn't covering my mouth anymore, I think as I take a deep breath. I swear Seamus did that only for the photos he took for my phone. The minute he was finished, he tore the tape off my face with a gleeful expression, his eyes dancing when I yelped in pain.

The asshole.

I have no idea who he could've sent those photos to. My family and friends wouldn't care. Not really. My brothers? They're both still working deals and conquering New York City, I doubt they'd notice. My messages with photos. And Crew is at school, forgotten at Lancaster. My Mom forgets to check her phone most of the time and my father's text messages pile up to an ungodly amount.

If he sent them to Perry, I know my husband would save me. My mother might not care, but Perry... he does.

Or maybe Seamus didn't send those photos to anyone. Maybe he'll show them later. Or he took them for his own personal pleasure. I don't know. Worse, I don't understand him, or know what makes him tick.

Does he plan on keeping me forever?

A shiver steals through me at the thought.

If he sent those photos to my husband, Perry will kill him when he finds us. He hates Seamus with every fiber of his being, as well he should, you know what?

I do, too.

Without warning, the door swings open and in walks Seamus. Large, dark hair, tall and imposing and so, so dark. Like an ominous cloud, filling the room. He stands over me, his hands on his hips, his scowl aimed right at me. It slowly softens, until his lips are curved into the faintest smile.

“Don’t you look pretty all tied up.” That familiar Irish brogue washes over me and I’m immediately infuriated.

“My husband is going to kill you when he sees those photos you took of me,” I spit out at him.

I think of Perry and his smiling face. That look in his eyes he gets when he lets me rest my legs before he kisses me. Will I ever see it again? Feel his lips on mine? Feel his hands on my back? Is that the laughter?

Seamus chuckles, like I amuse him. “Kill me? Please. He’s going to kill me. One look at the security footage from your building and think you let me take a name. Willingly. He’s not looking for you. He thinks you’re cooperating on his name—and trying to trick him with those photos.”

No. Perry would know I’d never leave with Seamus without a fight. Would he?

I think of the footage the cameras might’ve caught. How I’m viewed? Myself through the lobby, turning to face Seamus. Did I look like I wanted to do anything busy with him? I willingly sought him out. He held a gun to my side, but did he actually see it?

What if they didn’t?

“Why did you take those photos of me then?”

“Collateral.” His expression turns smug. “I might need to use them on your family.”

God, I hate this man. Everything that happened between us feels like it happened a lifetime ago. Seeing Seamus the morning of my wedding had been a shock to the system. Completely unexpected and downright surreal. How could he suddenly appear in front of me on my wedding day? What are the chances?

I’m realizing there’s no such thing as chance encounters.

“So you didn’t send them to Perry?”

“Oh, but I did.” He kneels in front of me, his grin almost feral. “He finds come to your rescue yet though, has he? Guess he doesn’t care about you. And much as you thought.”

Seamus rises to his full height, his gaze never straying from mine. I fight the panic that wants to sweep over me. Those photos, the film of me, more than my being with Seamus—none of that will matter to Perry. He’ll show up to rescue me. It’s in his blood—always wanting to help, to rescue everyone, even me. His family, and I’m a part of that now. I’m his wife. He’ll stand by me, no matter what.

washes *Even if it looks like you ran away with your former lover?*

Swallowing hard, I try to push past the worry that’s making me doubt myself. Doubt Perry.

Doubt everyone.

It’s right. “I’ll be back.” Seamus leaves the room before I can say anything. I hear his slamming the door behind him and I fall back against the wall, stifling the panic that wants to escape.

to take Has Seamus gone mad? Seriously, what he’s doing isn’t normal. I’m left with I’m worried for his mental state, which means I’m also worried about myself. My safety. How is this going to end? I doubt he’s going to let me go easily.

It. Frustrated, I squirm around, knocking my ankles together in the hope that my feet will wake up. The prickling sensation is excruciating, and it doesn’t help. I’m walking that my head still feels heavy. I wonder if Seamus drugged me or talked to something. I don’t even remember.

anyone Knowing him and how he’s been acting, he probably did.

The room grows darker as the sun sets and soon enough, it’s night. My eyes adjust to the darkness and I press the back of my head against the wall, gazing up at the ceiling and the light fixture above me. At least I’ll be safe later.” my hands in front of my body and not behind me, though maybe that’s like a stupid move. I could undo the rope when I’m positioned this way...

a total My chest tightens and I realize I might have to face the truth. I. How Seamus is right. It doesn’t look like Perry’s coming to save me.

are the I’m going to have to save myself.

This is how Seamus finds me when he reenters the room. I don’t know how long I’ve been at it, or how many ways I’ve contorted my arms and fingers as I try to undo the complicated knots. Sweat dots my forehead.

It hasn't and the skin at my wrists chafe thanks to the rough rope material.

"You as... "What the hell are you doing?" he asks, his accented voice calm. I know no big deal he has his ex-lover tied up and locked away in a room God knows where.

"Kidnapping," I don't look at him, forcing the wave of anger that floods me down. I don't want to say something stupid and piss him off. I do straighten my back and look beyond him in thought, trying for nonchalance.

"Come on, no... *No, you didn't catch me trying to undo the rope. Why do you ask?*

"I'm thirsty," is what I say to him instead, which is the truth.

"I'll bring you something to eat and drink later."

"I doubt... "When?"

"Later," he repeats, his voice firm. He shuts the door behind him and leans against it, contemplating me, crossing his arms in front of his chest. No other way he studies me makes me want to squirm but I keep myself still. The cry remains quiet for so long I start to wonder if he's going to say anything until finally, eight words slip from his lips. His tone low and menacing.

"About... "What am I going to do with you?"

"Come on, go... Terror filters through my blood, making me tense. There must be some sort of motive behind his snatching me out of the lobby at our building. I guess I assume he has a plan. Who kidnaps someone without a plan?"

"I don't help... Maybe he does."

"I'm with... I remain quiet until the silence becomes unbearable and I can't take it any longer."

"What exactly do you mean?" I finally ask.

"Right time... Seamus pushes away from the door and heads in my direction, crossing his feet and leaning down in front of me, his gaze level with mine. "Are you mad at me?"

"He tied... I blink at him, shocked by his question. Does he actually think I am mad at him for abducting me?"

"Or are you angry? You look angry. You were always extra pretty. Maybe you were mad, Charlotte," he continues, his voice low. God, I hate hearing him say my name in that accent I used to find so charming. "Did you know that? Not that you were ever that mad at me when we were together. I don't know the end, when you found out..."

"I know, hands... His voice trails and the pain at that memory pierces my heart, reminding me how much his betrayal hurt me."

“Why did you do that?” I ask, my voice small. I sound pitiful, and like it’s the approval in his gaze. He wants to talk about our past, while that’s all I know something I want to do.

But maybe it’s the smart thing. I could convince him I want to let him know so I can win him, and maybe that would lower his guard.

“Do what? Lie to you? Keep my girlfriend a secret?”

I glance down, wishing I could conjure up some tears. Men always do for them, and I know for a fact Seamus does. I think he enjoyed seeing the broken little girl. “It hurt so badly, Seamus. And how I found out—

“I didn’t want you to find out that way,” he rushes to say, his hand on my knee. Unable to control myself, I flinch and he notices.

Of course he does.

His hand tightens on my knee and I glance over at him, my eyes stinging with tears. “You hurt me.”

His expression tightens, his gaze flat. As if he has no emotion. Almost trying to keep them contained. “You ran away before I could fully explain—

He’s right. I did run away. And I never went back. I couldn’t face the humiliation and besides...

My father wouldn’t let me.

“What could you say to explain yourself?” I ask. “It’s obvious what you did to me. To us.”

“I wasn’t in love with her,” he admits. “Not anymore. Not after we had it any more. I fell in love with—”

“Don’t say that,” I interrupt, not wanting to hear any declarations of love.

He doesn’t mean it. He’s trying to convince me he’s a good guy, who’s not touching here tied up. The irony isn’t lost on me. “You don’t mean it.”

“You don’t know what I mean, or how I feel. You never gave me a chance to explain any of it. How sweet you were. How I fell under your spell—

You were so naïve, so innocent. You soaked up every word I said to you when I loved it. Those big blue eyes following me as I spoke in front of the crowd hearing As if you couldn’t get enough of me,” he says, his gaze distant, as if he’s reliving it in his memories.

I stroked his ego. That’s why he supposedly fell for me, but it doesn’t sound like love now. I didn’t know much about him beyond that he was from Ireland and passionate about classic European architecture. Oh, and he was older and seemed so wise and worldly. I was just as he described me.

and I see innocent little girl who'd grown up sheltered her entire life. Given the last opportunity to get out into the world, and I did the most impulsive, stupid thing ever...

be with Had an affair with my professor.

I think of Perry and how he initially irritated me. His easygoing was an annoyance—until he won me over, slowly but surely. The months we spent together, I discovered his protective nature, his intuitiveness giving me a sense of safety. The spark I feel when he looks at me, touches me, kisses me...

and going That feels more like love.

“You still seem angry,” he observes, pulling me from my thoughts.

My gaze finds his once more and I give up all pretense. “I don't want to be living in the past. There's no point.”

“Miss your husband?” He lifts his brows.

Or he's I say nothing. Can only look away, trying to ease the tension in my chest. “To admit any feelings for Perry to this man would be stupid. It's a mistake the error.

I need to keep everything I feel to myself.

“He's not who I would choose for you, Charlotte, if I had any say in that matter,” Seamus says. “He doesn't seem your type.”

I can't help but glare at him. I feel defensive when it comes to Perry, and “You don't know him.”

“Neither do you. You only just married the man. He's basically a stranger. Why does he care where you are, or who you're with? He's only here because he thinks you want to be with me.”

“He knows exactly how I feel about you,” I lie. “And how much I love you.”

It's spell. “Right.” Seamus laughs. “Keep telling yourself that.”

you, and “We've grown close in a short amount of time.” I lift my chin, daring to contradict what I'm saying.

he's lost “Please. Your relationship is based on nothing but sex,” Seamus continues.

doesn't “You know nothing about my relationship with my husband,” I say, as if from the defensive. How would he know? He doesn't have spies everywhere. Definitely not in Mexico.

me—an “I know enough that you went for a joyride with him in his stupid

when the car and he fucked you in a parking garage.” His smile grows, though his eyes are dark.

I blink at him, hating that he knows about that moment. It was between Perry and me. Intimate.

By nature Well. Not so much anymore.

More time “He’s just using you. Like every other man in your life.” Reaching when it drifts his fingers across my hair. I flinch and duck, desperate to get away from his touch and he drops his hand. “Your father. Your brother’s husband and his brother. You’re just a pawn in their games. They do what they want about you.”

I’m about to protest but he keeps talking.

Don’t like “Not like I do.” He grabs my chin, forcing me to look at him. “Charlotte?”

Terror twists my stomach and I stare into those fathomless dark eyes. They see everything.

A huge They see nothing.

I swallow hard and it’s painful, my throat is so dry. “What about—” Seamus frowns, his fingers dropping from my face. “Who?”

My in the “Your girlfriend.”

He rises back up, looming over me. “I already told you. We ended a long time ago. I lost my job after what happened, you know.”

I blink up at him. “What are you talking about?”

“You returned to the States and your father got me fired.” His words fall into a straight line. “My girlfriend left me soon after. Everything I ever built in my life, destroyed by a few passionate months with a girl I can’t even remember. Your father took everything away from me, Charlotte. My career. My relationship. My life. I returned home a broken man. Ashamed. What happened made me feel like a leech on the side of a giant, even though you were eighteen and you knew better.”

Victim blaming. Nice. I was young, and he did take advantage of me. Seamus “Next thing I know, I hear you’re getting married to a goddamn Constantine and I knew I had to steal you away from him. Just to spite the hell out of your family’s plans,” he says, glancing over at me. “So I did what I had to do. Now here we are. Together again.”

His gaze seems to caress my face and I stiffen my body to contain the classic shiver that wants to take over.

his gaze It's clear he's completely deranged. I don't bother saying a word because I don't think he's really paying attention to me in the moment.

special He appears too caught up in his memories. Again.

"Your father thought he could end my career, and initially, I believed he did. But he was wrong. He didn't realize who I am, or how important I am to my family, my friends, my hometown. My country. I went back feeling like a disgraced failure, but eventually they all lifted me up. I'm a professor at University College Dublin. Your now. Did you know that, Charlotte?"

I don't care I shake my head, remaining mute.

"It's true. I thought I wanted something different, but in the end, I found success in my home country and I'm quite all right with that. Paris felt like a dream. Right, a long time ago. My time with you, a dream."

More like a nightmare, but I don't bother correcting him.

My eyes. "Now I want my true love by my side when I return home." He looks at me from his full height and heads for the door. I watch him go, my stomach churning, my appetite disappearing at his words. "I know you probably believe your actions are rash, but when a man knows what he wants, he goes after it. I've come after you, because you belong to me, whether your father likes it or not. No one looks at me the way you do, Charlotte. No one else has ever believed in me so strongly—until you."

"Seamus." I clear my throat when he jerks his gaze to mine. "I'm not going to someone else—"

mouth "That won't stop me. You were forced to marry him," he interrupts with a flat voice. "We'll get it annulled."

girl who What? I don't want my marriage annulled.

everything "But—"

returned "You're not going back to him!" The roar of his words makes me stagger against the wall and we stare at each other, Seamus's dark eyes so cold and intense. The coldest stare I've ever seen.

me. "I'll bring you your dinner in a bit. Allow you a break. If you try to do anything stupid, I will *end* you, Charlotte. I don't care how much I love you. I won't tolerate insolent behavior."

id. And He's gone before I can say anything, the slamming door a relief. I sag against the wall, tears suddenly streaming down my face. When I wipe at them with my bound hands, I scratch my cheek with the back of my hand. Of course I do.

nything Closing my eyes, I press my forehead into the wall, my thoughts
with images of Perry. He needs to find me, but does he actually care?
we've grown closer, but I also frustrate him. Maybe he'll realize life i
ved hewithout the little wifey around. I'm a pain in his ass. A burden he dic
I am tofor—and now I've become an even bigger problem than he ever ba
ce, butfor.

in Cork Seamus is also a Morelli. The Constantine family's biggest ener
might be easier for Perry and the rest of his family to leave me with
because they don't want to deal with the Morellis. I wouldn't be su
I foundI'm sure my own father feels the same way. Everyone does.

els like And the idea of that...

Devastates me.

Tears streaming down my face, I realize there isn't a single person
rises tolife I can think of who would drop everything and come save me.

irdling, Looks like I need to figure out how to save myself.

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Closing my eyes, I press my forehead into the wall, my thoughts flooded with images of Perry. He needs to find me, but does he actually care? I know we've grown closer, but I also frustrate him. Maybe he'll realize life is easier without the little wifey around. I'm a pain in his ass. A burden he didn't ask for—and now I've become an even bigger problem than he ever bargained for.

Seamus is also a Morelli. The Constantine family's biggest enemies. It might be easier for Perry and the rest of his family to leave me with Seamus because they don't want to deal with the Morellis. I wouldn't be surprised. I'm sure my own father feels the same way. Everyone does.

And the idea of that...

Devastates me.

Tears streaming down my face, I realize there isn't a single person in my life I can think of who would drop everything and come save me.

Looks like I need to figure out how to save myself.



CHAPTER TWO

Perry

“YOU NEED TO quit pacing.”

The complaint from my little brother Keaton only makes me pace
“Helps me think.”

“You’re making my head spin,” he protests.

I come to a stop. “That’s great. Really feel bad for you. Hate th
head is spinning when my wife has been *kidnapped* by a *madman*.”

Keaton blinks up at me, shock etched into his features. He’s a
looking kid. We share a few of the same features but he’s stockier
muscular. All those years on a rugby field will do that to you.

“Sorry, man,” he mutters, appearing contrite.

I give him a quick nod, not saying anything. My baby bro may be
than me, but I’m so enraged right now, I know I could take him.
unchecked, I could probably do serious damage.

All while pretending he’s Seamus McFuckit.

God, I could kill him. Worse, that’s my attitude right now. Fuck
wanna come for me? Come for me, not my wife. The moment I find hi
and after I find Charlotte and know she’s safe—I’m killing him.

No one can stop me. It’s happening. I will destroy that threat once
all.

“Hey, calm down.” This is from Winston, who puts himself in my
I have no choice but to finally stop pacing.

We’re at the Constantine Compound. Winston called for all
Constantine men to meet here and strategize our next move when it co
Charlotte.

Yeah, that's what we're doing. Strategizing Charlotte's kidnapping. Winston's treating it like a business meeting while all I care about is my wife.

Is she hurt?

Is she safe?

Is she scared?

I can't stand the thoughts racing through my brain. There are worse. Darker ones.

Is she thrilled to be back with that asshole?

Has she been secretly in love with him all along?

Maybe it wasn't a kidnapping at all. Maybe she left me for... him.

I curl my hands into fists, ready to punch something.

go faster. Winston is my first target, but he'll punch back, so I don't even try

"I can't calm down," I tell him, my voice tight, my jaw aching. "I don't know where she is."

at your "I thought you didn't give a shit about her," Keaton says from where he's perched on the edge of the couch.

is good- "Keaton," Mother snaps. "Don't say that to your brother. This is his problem. More than he's worried about."

All three of us swivel our heads in her direction. She's just entered the sitting room, looking regal with her head held high and her expression completely unreadable. Typical. The woman rarely shows emotion. I've learned a thing or two from her.

"Sorry," Keaton mutters again, barely looking at me.

"It's fine." I guess I can't blame him for thinking that way. This is my marriage in name only, and everyone in my family knew it. Of course I'm an asshole—think I didn't really care about Charlotte. It's only been a few months since we even met.

and for But she crawled under my skin at a rapid pace. Burrowed herself inside me, somewhere in the vicinity of my heart, and the damn thing vibrates like it's going to beat out of my chest every time I think about what she could be right now. And if she's okay. I hate the idea of her suffering.

of the I hate the idea of her being happy to get away from me even worse. It comes to "Let's stop with the bullshit conversation and focus on what's actually happening," Winston says, his stern voice bringing everything into focus. "Myron is on the case."

fucking The elderly investigator who does everything old school. How in thinkgeezer going to help us? “Oh come on, Winny. You really think he’s gonna track my wife down? We need to be out there looking for her instead of being holed up in here and waiting for that dick to send me another ominous message with those fucking photos again. Or maybe he’ll send new ones.”

Those photos of Charlotte tore at my heart and filled me with fear. “What if that asshole does something to her? Hurts her?”

I can barely stand the thought.

“Photos that could’ve been staged.” Winston holds up his hand to stop me from parting my lips, ready to argue. “Hear me out. It’s a possibility.”

“No way,” I say vehemently.

“It’s possible. She didn’t take her phone with her when she went out with McTiernan. She told Jasper not to say anything to you about it. I don’t say that yourself. You don’t really know her, Perry. And you don’t know much about her relationship with this guy either. Maybe she’s still with him.” Winston’s brows shoot up, the look on his face practically begging me to argue with him.

My wife I hate the sudden doubt that creeps in. What if he’s right? Those photos could be fake. The two of them could be laughing about me at that moment...

My expression No. Fuck that. She couldn’t be so cruel.

I could “She would never do that to me,” I say with conviction. “I don’t feel that way. And why the hell aren’t we busting down the Morellis’ door demanding to know where she’s at?”

“None of his family is involved,” Winston says, sounding calm. “It’s frustratingly logical. McTiernan is a lone wolf. The distant family is since from another country.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Mom retorts, coming to stand behind me. “If deep down Winston, her gaze leveled on me. “They could do anything to harm the family. Letting the crazy cousin kidnap your wife makes complete sense.”

“I don’t know.” Winston’s voice is full of doubt. “This doesn’t have the Morelli signature to it.”

“What the hell do you mean?” I ask, needing an explanation. I need someone to actually make sense of this entire situation, because right now, it’s all out of focus in my mind.

I just want my wife back. Safe and protected in my arms, in our

is that With Jasper watching over her when I'm not around and Doja cuddling going to her lap.

of being Jasper. The poor old man was beside himself when I called. He says something was up and was about to reach out to me when I spoke to her. "I told me the entire story of a male visitor coming to see her in the lobby. What she went down there to speak with him and asked Jasper not to mention me.

Winston's right. That point was like a dagger to my heart. One I can't live without when I go of.

Would she have kept it a secret if she hadn't left with him? Is he just holding her hostage or is it all staged, like Winston said? I hate to meet her thoughts. That I doubt her.

it—you I open up my text messages yet again and look at the photos I wish I didn't know. The terror in Charlotte's eyes. The agony. She looks so damn scared. Her mouth is taped up. Hell, the fucker held a gun to her head and she's crying. It could be fake. I could be left to look like a fool, and I'd have no one to blame but myself. Oh, and my brother and mother for making me make those photos in the first place.

is very Jesus.

"We have to do something about this." I shove my phone in my pocket and thrust both of my hands in my hair, pulling it away from my face. I can't just stand here and wait for something to happen. We need to find a way out. "I've called Bryant," Mother says, her voice calm.

"What?" I drop my hands. "What did you say to him? Ask him completely, happens to know where my wife is?"

relative "Essentially." She shrugs. "He denied knowing anything about Charlotte. But I can sense when he's lying. I believe he's involved."

next to "I don't know—"

from our "Winston." He shuts up when she interrupts him. "They're involved in this case."

"Are we really going to waste time arguing who's involved in this case? We actually going to do something about it?" Keaton asks from where he's still sitting on the couch. "Let's go find your wife, Bro."

feeding If I could hug my little brother for his sudden mood change, I so would. "I'm going to call her brothers."

Winston makes a face. "I don't know—"

at home. "Grant Lancaster is very powerful." Mom nods. "I think that's all."

d up on idea.”

“I don’t have his number.” I dial our apartment house phone and he knew answers on the first ring, sounding distraught. “I need Grant’s number. He number.”

y. How “Have you found her?” Jasper asks, sounding anxious.

on it to The old man is terrified. He loves Charlotte and feels guilty over what happened, though I don’t blame him for it. How could I? He’s watching her can’t let her practically her entire life.

“No, not yet,” I bite out, hating the dread that consumes me. The more time that passes, the harder it will be to locate her. Every minute that ticks these is precious. “But I’m hoping Grant can help.”

“I’m sure he will. He and Charlotte aren’t particularly close, but he has sent many resources,” Jasper says. “Do you have a pen?”

ed. Her “Write this number down for me,” I command Keaton, who opens a notepad. “Give it to me, J.”

one to Jasper rattles off the number and I repeat it to Keaton, who gives me a thumbs-up when he’s done. “Thanks. I’ll call you if I need anything else.”

“Of course, sir. Please do keep me posted. I’m worried.” He hesitates. I swear he swallowed back a sob. “I feel responsible.”

pocket “It’s not your fault,” I reassure him yet again. “She was going to tell me her face. “Whether you tried to stop her or not. She’s stubborn.”

d her.” “That she is, sir. You know, you could call her younger brother and ask for Crew. He’s very close to Charlotte.”

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“Yes. But perhaps he could give some insight.”

Charlotte. I doubt that. The poor kid is in high school. What’s he going to do about Charlotte? And why worry him? I don’t want to bring her parents into this either. Her mom will freak and dear old Dad won’t give a shit. I’ll have to deal with the ruthless Lancasters. The ones who know how to be quiet and get the job done, or are ones who can get the job done.

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Like her older brothers.



CHAPTER THREE

Charlotte

SOMEHOW I FALL asleep again, slumped against the wall, my hands and still bound. When I wake up, my mouth is dry and my stomach cramps hungry.

Oh, and I need to pee.

I realize there's someone in the darkened room, moving around. He slaps the wall, hitting the light switch and a dull golden light fills the room, making me wince.

Seamus is standing in front of me, his mouth turned down in a seeming disappointment.

"You look terrible."

I glare up at him, struggling to sit up. Not that he helps me. Why should he? "What do you expect? You kidnapped me and dragged me out of the lobby with a gun jabbed into my side."

I don't even mention that he's got me tied up like he's holding me for ransom—

Wait a minute.

"Did you ask my family for money? Are you holding me for ransom? Would my father even pay the ransom to get me back?"

Probably not.

"That would be a waste of my breath." He slowly shakes his head. "Don't try and make this look like I'm holding you against your will. You're here of your own accord."

I frown, trying to make sense of his words. His logic. Is he delusional? Does he really think I left with him because I wanted to? And now I'm

in an empty room tied up because this is how I want to spend my even

Has it really only been a few hours since I was last in my apartment watching Doja play fetch? Feels like days ago. Weeks.

Maybe it really was only last night when Perry took me out to Chevelle and we ate dinner at the diner after he fingered me to orgasm afterward, when we sat on top of the parking garage, the rain falling on us wrapped up in each other in the front seat.

Now all of it has been tainted thanks to Seamus spying on us. That asshole.

When I don't say anything he shakes his head and reaches for my fingers coming around my arm. I jerk out of his hold, rolling away from my ankles groaning when the rope rubs against my ankles.

"You're being foolish," he chastises. "Let me help you stand. I'll help you to feed you."

I glance over my shoulder at him, trying to ignore the hope lighting up inside of me. Despite everything, I'm hungry. And I need food to keep my strength. "You are?"

Seamus nods. "As long as you cooperate, yes."

I let him grab hold of my arm again and pull me up to my feet, trying my best not to recoil from his touch. Having him so close is unsettling, and in a good way. His familiar scent, the way he stands, the sound of his breath should All of the memories come flooding back, one after another. I used to be completely enamored with this man. I believed he could do no wrong. He smiled at me, and it felt like sunlight. Warm and pure and giving me life.

Such a stupid girl I was. I wanted to believe so badly that he cared for me, I was blind to all the signs.

The signs that he was just using me.

He bends down as if he's kneeling at my feet, his fingers undoing complicated knots with frustrating ease. This could be my moment to make my escape. I could kick him in his stupid smug face, send him flying backwards and I would run. I would run fast and far.

He glances up at me, his dark gaze a warning, as if he can read my thoughts.

"Do something stupid and I'll tie you up even tighter."

I offer a nod as my answer and he pulls the rope off my ankles, with utter relief. The skin where the rope rubbed stings, and when I rotate

ing? foot, then the other, they both ache from being bound for so long.
artment, “Can you walk?” he asks once he’s standing at my side once more.

Nodding, I kept my head bent, not wanting to look at him.

in his “I’m going to take you to the kitchen,” he says, his fingers curling
m. And my upper arm, gripping me tightly. “I’ll untie your hands when you’re
outside, chair so you can eat.”

Awareness at his words makes my skin tingle but I try my best
he sick react outwardly. Instead, I say nothing.

He’s quiet for a moment, and I can feel the tension rippling through
me, his “Don’t do anything you might regret.”

om him, I nod again, my head still averted. Without warning he grabs hold
chin with his other hand, forcing me to look at him. “Do you understand

a going “Yes,” I whisper, when I realize my nods aren’t a good enough
for him.

ting up “Good,” he whispers back, a faint smile curling his lips.

o up my It’s hard to wrap my head around how attractive he is, and how capti-
I was by him. Because I can’t deny it. Seamus McTiernan is a
handsome man. No wonder I fell for him.

ring my But I’m not attracted to him any longer. Not at all. My heart...

d not in Belongs to another.

athing. “You’ve changed,” he tells me nonchalantly as we walk down a
d to behold. My gaze is everywhere, taking in my surroundings. It looks like I
ng. His small apartment. A two-bedroom, two-bathroom unit, from what I’ve
fe. far. There’s a small living room with a black leather couch and a big
d about TV. Beyond that is a very small dining area with a small square table and
steel gray folding chairs. And then there’s the kitchen. It’s narrow, the
cabinets a dark golden oak. Everything appears dated. Coming from
ing the time, and there’s a musty scent lingering in the air.

where I As if the apartment has sat unused and locked up for a long time.

a flying “Where are we?” I ask, knowing he won’t say.

Seamus chuckles. “If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

ead my I’ve heard that saying before, but I never actually believed the
saying it, meant it.

Definitely believe Seamus though.

which is I decide to change the subject.

ate one “What do you mean, I’ve changed?”

“You used to be so—agreeable.” He smiles, and I remember how sweet he looked when he did that.

Now all I can think is how sinister his expression is.

“I’ve made you some soup,” he says before I can say anything else. He steers me into the kitchen, where I see the small pot on the stove, liquid within. “Chicken noodle.”

The scent wafting from the open pot has my stomach growling. “Good.”

“It should be ready.” His gaze finds mine. “Can I let you go and trust you won’t run away from me?”

I’m conscious of the door being so close to where we’re standing. “I wonder what happened to that gun he had with him earlier. “I won’t, answer “But I do need to use the bathroom.”

“Wait until after you eat.”

The fact that he’s feeding me soup actually has me needing to go worse. The thought of consuming all that liquid maybe, on my darkly burdened bladder?

“I really need to go now,” I tell him, pushing past the humiliation of talking about bodily functions.

Thank God I’m not on my period. Talk about a mess.

He studies me for a moment. “I want to trust you won’t do anything. I lift my hands out toward him. “I can’t use the bathroom without washing my hands.”

“I could assist you.”

Absolutely not. “I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

His expression darkens. “I really don’t care what you think.”

Swallowing hard, I go quiet, pressing my thighs together. There is no way I can eat soup right now. If he doesn’t let me go to the bathroom soon, I’m going to pee my pants.

A ragged exhale leaves him and he shakes his head. “Fine. I’ll untie you.”

Relief floods me and I watch as he unravels the rope from my wrists. In that moment it drops to the floor, I’m shaking my hands out. Rotating my wrists and stretching my fingers.

Yet again he grabs hold of my arm and practically drags me over to the bathroom.

“I’ll be at the door the entire time,” he tells me as he shoves me in.

hinking tiny room. "Hurry up."

My gaze meets his in the mirror's reflection. "Aren't you going the door?"

lse. He He slowly shakes his head. "No."

golden Asshole.

With a sigh I go to the toilet, relieved when he turns his back to me. 'Smells I'm about to pull down my sweats. Once I've handled my business, my hands, glancing in the mirror to examine my face. There are little dust that of black beneath my eyes thanks to me crying off most of my mascara but otherwise, I look fine. Hair is a little mussed.

g, and I Huh. You'd never know I'm currently being held against my will.

"I say. The moment the water shuts off, Seamus is in the bathroom, cr me. "Let's go."

He doesn't bother waiting for me to answer him. Instead, he grabs go even my arm, squeezing so tight it hurts, and leads me toward the sma already where I'm going to eat my meal. He shoves me into the folding chair a step away to glare at me.

ition of "Do not move from this spot." He thrusts his finger in my face.

I stare at him, trying my best to keep my expression impassive. "I v

He keeps watching me and I return his glare, satisfied when he's g." to look away first. He turns and goes to the kitchen, turning the bu out you and grabbing a bowl from the cabinet. I watch him, my brain going a miles a second as I try to figure out how to get out of this.

Away from him.

And back to my husband.

He pours me a glass of water. Grabs a box of saltine crackers. C no way random drawer and selects a spoon out of it. An idea forms, and my s on, I'm bounces with nerves as my gaze goes to the front door.

There are no complicated locks on it from what I can tell. Just a de e you." and the simple lock in the doorknob. I'm really not that far from th sts. The either. I could sprint to it in seconds, but I have to count on dis 7 wrists Seamus long enough that he won't lunge after me.

I have to surprise him.

r to the Hurt him.

He's taller and broader, but I'm younger and maybe even faster? into the remember him being into exercise or watching what he ate. While we

Paris together, he would eat whatever he wanted, patting his stomach to shut every meal and rambling on how he'd eventually need to stop eating sex with me. That I gave him a healthy appetite with all the sex we were having. Ugh. Not like we did it that much but maybe for him, it was a lot.

"Here you go," Seamus says, pulling me from my thoughts. I glance just as I find him standing beside me, leaning down to set the steaming bowl. I wash onto the table and directly in front of me. "Let me get you your special flakescrackers."

Earlier He walks away before I can say anything and I stare at the golden within the bowl. The wispy tendrils of steam wafting upward, warm face. It's hot.

Now I'm really hot.

He returns in seconds, settling the spoon beside my bowl. Dropping the hold of crackers on the table. "I'll get your water."

At the table Frowning, I watch him walk back into the tiny kitchen yet, taking marveling at his lack of efficiency. A woman would've been capable of bringing everything at once to the table. It's as if the man can't multitask.

But that's okay. His stalling is allowing me to formulate my plan. "I won't." work up the nerve to execute it. If it goes wrong, there will be hell to pay. The one goes right...

When I'm off I'll be free.

Million Taking a deep, shuddering breath, I reach for the bowl, my hand curving around it lightly. This is it, I tell myself. My heart is in my mouth making it hard for me to breathe and my fingers are trembling.

I need to get a grip. Calm down. Remain steady.

Opens a Methodical.

tomach "Here you go. Hurry up and eat."

Seamus sets the water down on the table.

Head bolt I swallow hard, glancing up at him.

At the door Just before my hands curve around the smooth ceramic and I find the entire bowl of soup at his face.

I don't
were in

Paris together, he would eat whatever he wanted, patting his stomach after every meal and rambling on how he'd eventually need to stop eating so much with me. That I gave him a healthy appetite with all the sex we were having.

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“Here you go,” Seamus says, pulling me from my thoughts. I glance up to find him standing beside me, leaning down to set the steaming bowl of soup onto the table and directly in front of me. “Let me get you your spoon and crackers.”

He walks away before I can say anything and I stare at the golden liquid within the bowl. The wispy tendrils of steam wafting upward, warming my face. It's hot.

Really hot.

He returns in seconds, settling the spoon beside my bowl. Dropping the crackers on the table. “I'll get your water.”

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“Here you go. Hurry up and eat.”

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I swallow hard, glancing up at him.

Just before my hands curve around the smooth ceramic and I fling the entire bowl of soup at his face.



CHAPTER FOUR

Perry

“**Y**OU’RE A WORTHLESS husband with shit for brains,” Grant Lancaster out at me, his anger obvious thanks to the tone of his voice and the scowl on his face.

I glare at him, counting down before I actually respond. This means business and whatever I say to him could set him off further.

Which right back at him because I’m on edge and about to lose it to this dick who just so happens to be my wife’s oldest brother. My brother-in-law.

Welcome to the Lancaster family. Just love this bunch.

“Accusing this guy of being a terrible husband isn’t going to solve the problem,” Finn Lancaster says, his gaze quickly shifting to mine, a look of apology there, which is surprising.

Both of them treated me like absolute shit at our engagement party, at least Grant is staying consistent. I can sense, though, that I might have more to say to Finn.

And I need an ally right now on the Lancaster side.

Desperately.

“I agree,” I say, hoping Finn can sense my gratitude. “You can in all you want later. After we’ve got Charlotte back.”

After I’ve got Charlotte back, is what I want to say. But I’m trying to get their help and trust, so I can’t make it all about me and what I want.

But the ache in my chest hasn’t eased. It’s only intensified the longer I’m without her, and not knowing if she’s all right. Is she safe? What if she’s hurt? What if that asshole did something to her?

I can't fathom the thought.

Worse, what if she's laughing with him right now? Thrilled that away from me and is now back in his arms? What if it's all a ruse to get from me and our arrangement?

No. I don't believe it. Before he abducted her, things were good between us. And getting better.

Those same thoughts keep running through my head though, interspersed as time goes on. It's tearing me up inside, but I gotta keep my shit together for Charlotte.

Yet those darker thoughts won't fully leave my mind either. They could've planned this with McAsshat just about kills me. I absently rub my chest, trying to rid myself of the pain, but it's no use.

It's still there, a throbbing beat in my blood. My heart. My head. A constant reminder that I don't know where my wife is and there's a asshole that she won't come back—

Fuck. I can't even fully think it.

Grant sneers at me, his expression shifting when Winston walks in the room. We're all at Winston's place currently, where we asked to meet the Lancaster brothers and break the news to them about Charlotte's abduction. Upon discovery, they immediately agreed their parents shouldn't be involved in fixing the—

not yet. "If it goes much longer and we still don't hear from her, we'll notify my father," Grant says, scowling at all of us though his gaze returns to mine. I can see the blame there, and I want to tell him I blame myself just as much as he blames me, but I won't give him satisfaction. "I have resources, and plenty of them. They'll be discreet. Our father has even more resources. He might be able to find her easier than you can."

Finn makes a scoffing noise. "Give me a break. You'll find her." "I think I already might have," Winston announces.

All heads swivel in my brother's direction and I speak up first. "What are you talking about?"

The expression on his face is nothing short of smug. "Myron told me she's located Seamus McTiernan. He's just discovered he recently left an apartment in Bishop's Landing."

"Get the fuck out of here," is my immediate response. "That's

crawling with Constantines.”

she got “And Morellis,” Winston reminds me. “I told you he was staying at awaymansion when he first arrived.”

“Why didn’t he just continue staying there?” Finn asks.

between “Difficult to bring the woman you just abducted to your cousin’s don’t you think? I don’t care how big his fucking mansion is. He would be trying to explain her presence eventually,” Winston retorts.

rather. I rise to my feet, eager to put a plan into action. “Let’s go then. Let her.”

that she “Easy brother,” Winston says, his voice gentling. “We can’t just approach this guy, balls to the wall. We have to strategize.”

His word of the day, I swear to fucking God. “Fuck strategizing. Just do it. Let’s get her back.”

chance My phone dings and I check it to see it’s a text from the head of security at our building. Attached is a video.

The security footage from earlier this afternoon in the lobby.

into the My heart starts to race as I open up the video, waiting for it to meet the “They just sent over security footage from our building.”

luction. They all surround me, Winston on one side and Grant on the other, involved trying to crowd his way in. We all stare at the footage, but not at what’s happening so far.

have to No Charlotte in sight.

she keeps I slide my finger across the arrow, making the video speed up and get it. I finally spot her familiar blonde head, I let it run at normal speed, my breath gathering in my throat as I watch her walk past the security camera. But she’s fucking stunning, even in her black sweat suit and my eager gaze follows her every movement as she turns around. The quick flicker of surprise on her expression before it smooths out and she smiles at Seamus McKidnap.

“She knew she was meeting him?” Grant asks.

I nod. “According to Jasper, security called and said he was asked to speak with her.”

“I don’t like that.”

believes This comes from Winston and when I glance over at him, noting his features tighten, his lips thinning into a straight line.

I know why he said it. I get it. I felt the same way.

own is Right now, watching this video, we’re going to find out exactly how

went down.

at their They speak for a few minutes, Charlotte's expression fierce through the entire conversation, which is reassuring. I want to believe she died away with him, but I still don't know.

house, Seamus steps closer to her, pulling something out of his pocket that looks suspiciously like a gun. He presses it against her side and all the color drains out of her face—even in black and white film, I can tell.

it's find She's scared.

And I can't help it. I'm relieved. Despite Winston's suspicions, Charlotte's approach didn't go with him willingly. Deep down I knew, but still.

It's hard not to feel conflicted, especially considering how long our relationship has started.

"That's a gun," Grant says, stating the obvious. "He walked her out of the security there with a gun at her side and no one even fucking noticed."

That he did, the bastard. If I could strangle him, I would. If that man were standing in front of me, I would probably kill him with my bare hands. I'm so loaded that angry. She's mine.

Charlotte *Constantine* belongs to me.

er, Finn Seamus steers her around and escorts her out of the lobby, the two of them walking side by side, leaving through the double doors. One moment they're there and the next...

They're gone. Never to be seen again.

when I The video stops and a ragged exhale leaves me.

all the "I say we call the police," Grant suggests once the video is finished. My desk is fucking crazy. We don't know where she's at, or what his mental state is. He tracks what if he's—hurt her? Or plans on it? Have we heard from him? Has she made any demands yet? Asked for money?"

er. "All I received were the photos. That's it," I remind Grant. "Maybe we should call the—"

king to "No. No cops should be involved. Then the media will find out and the kidnapping will be everywhere. All over gossip sites, the news—will be at risk. And this isn't about money," Winston interrupts, scrubbing his hand along his jaw. "It's personal."

"Give me a break that this is some personal beef made up between two warring families. I don't fucking believe it." Out of nowhere Grant shows up on my shoulder, sending me stumbling back. "You versus the Morellis"

mobsters or whatever the fuck. That is some silly shit and somehow throughout stupid ass got my sister involved. She's not a pawn to be used in you don't run. There's more to this than you're telling us."

"Tell that to your father," I shout, marching right up to him and that looks my face in his. "He's the one who's been using her as a pawn ever since our entire plan was launched. He forced her to marry me."

"And who the fuck forced you to marry her?" he throws back at me. I snap my lips shut, glaring. No one forced me. I did it of my own damn will. I might've been against it at first, but eventually I got over it. Getting my future bride helped. My attraction toward her helped as well. Not that I can admit any of that out loud, in front of her brother. He doesn't want to hear it.

Grant's nostrils flare as he stares at me, his expression pure intimidation. I'm sure he's sent many a man scurrying away with their tails tucked between their legs with that look, but fuck it. I'm not scared. I'm not going down. He thinks he's got something to lose here? I do too.

"I don't think it has anything to do with Constantines versus Moreau. Everything to do with her being the one who got away from him," Finn says, sounding logical as fuck.

We all turn to glare at him, Grant speaking first.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Finn shoves his hands into his pants' pockets. "They had a torrid affair in Paris, right?"

I hate hearing the words but damn it—state is. "Yes," I bite out.

"And then she found out he was a lying bastard who had a girlfriend. Charlotte was devastated and ran home a disgraced mess. Never to see him again. We know she was distraught. After she came back, she was the same. She was always quiet, but she completely withdrew into her room. Maybe he was upset too. I've done a little investigating on this guy. He disappeared off the face of the earth after the incident with Charlotte happened."

I noticed that too, when I tried to dig up information on him. "He went back to Ireland. Where the girlfriend lived. His time in Paris was supposed to be permanent, from what I could tell."

"Father had him fired," Grant admits. "He moved to Paris and to

with your job on a permanent basis, trust me. He was fired and sent back to Ireland for his fight. My girlfriend dumped him soon after. I'm sure he views all the Lancaster ones who destroyed his life."

Trusting "What the hell? Who the fuck is this guy? And why did your father fire him?" I feel like I'm completely in the dark. "Did Charlotte know this?"

He shrugs. "Not sure. And our father had him fired because he wanted to protect Charlotte's reputation. He might not think—much of our sister, but he wouldn't ever allow someone to tarnish her image without punishment."

Unbelievable. No wonder the guy is unhinged. To McKidnappers. They look like the one who ruined his life completely, even if she's not responsible.

"Well damn. I had no idea." Finn shrugs, sweeping his arm around the room. "Want my opinion? Y'all need to focus. We put all our heads together, we're definitely going to find her."

So easy for him to say.

"Finn, you have no idea what you're talking about," Grant says, dismissive. Damn, he gives me serious Winston vibes. "We should call the police. I know a few detectives, have some connections. I could talk to them. Make sure they'd be discreet."

"No way," Winston says.

"Not yet," I agree, glancing over at Winston. "Myron send your address?"

Winston nods.

I stand up taller, eager to get moving and make this happen. "Let's go." "What the hell? Are you planning to storm Bishop's Landing?" I ask incredulously.

"Well... yeah." Of course. My wife is in danger. I have to find her. And beg for her forgiveness after treating her so terribly. I didn't treat her like that when I should've, and that's on me.

Finn's gaze finds mine. "I'm down."

A weary sigh leaves Grant and he slowly shakes his head. "Finn went to go."

Grant never

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CHAPTER FIVE

Charlotte

SEAMUS SCREAMS THE moment the soup hits his face and I bolt past him, a cheap folding chair falling backwards with a clatter. The bowl lands on the floor with a loud thump, not even cracking and I kick it aside as I move away toward the door.

It feels like everything is happening in slow motion. The soup flying through the air, shooting out of the chair. The door that looked so close only a few seconds before now seems far away. As if I'll never get close enough to it in time.

"You fucking bitch!" he howls, as I dodge past him. He covers his face with his hands, that's dripping with soup with his hands, as if he's trying to wipe it away. "Jesus Christ!"

My hands tremble as I quickly undo the locks. I've got the door open in a few seconds, slipping out of the apartment and running down the narrow hallway. The other closed doors with numbers on them. It looks like your typical apartment building, the interior sparse and gloomy, though it doesn't necessarily look as old as I originally thought. Just extremely bland.

And cold. So, so cold.

I spot a door at the end of the hall with a sign indicating it's the stairs and I push my way through it, running down the stairs so fast I almost slip over my own feet. My breaths are coming in ragged spurts to the point where I'm panting. My head throbs in time with my heart rate and I shake my head, trying to clear it.

I'm thirsty. Confused. Scared. Adrenaline pumps through my veins, spurring me on and when I reach the ground floor, there's a door that leads outside. I push through it, into the cooling fall night but I don't slow down.

There's no choice. I have to keep running.

I move through the parking lot and I spot the car Seamus drove in the spots. I keep running, grateful I wore my sweats today. Talk about movement. To anyone else I look like a woman out for a jog on a perfect autumn evening.

Not a woman on a desperate run for her life.

Slowing down only a little, I dare to glance over my shoulder, realizing no one is there. No Seamus chasing after me. Gaining on me.

Maybe the soup burned his stupid handsome face. It was pretty dark. Or maybe it got into his eyes and he's having a hard time seeing. Looking at it was enough of a distraction to completely stall him which totally works in my favor.

On the way home, this doesn't mean I'm in the clear yet though. I can't stop running. I make my slow down. So I don't. I keep going and going, until I'm in a more populated area, though everywhere I look is unfamiliar. There's a café that is closed. A couple of clothing shops that are closed as well. A deli is on the other side of the street, and a convenience store on the other and when I walk through the convenience store's glass door, and I don't know why, this uneasy feeling slips down my spine. The man standing behind the counter, working the register catches my gaze, flashing me a leering smile.

I go with the deli instead.

Open in the moment I walk in, I'm greeted with the scent of warm, fresh bread filling the air. A bell rings as the door slams shut and eight seconds later a piece of metal plays somewhere on hidden speakers. There's a glass case with various meats. An old-fashioned looking cash register sits on the counter. There are small tables and chairs filling the dining space, but no one sitting at them.

It's well there doesn't seem to be anyone around at all.

My last trip I dart out of the way of the front glass door and stand next to a rack full of a variety of chips, trying to take deep, cleansing breaths. My heart rate slowly settles back down to normal and I start pacing back and forth, waiting for someone to appear.

My veins, "Oh."

It leads I turn at the sound of the deep gravelly voice, fear wrapping around my throat and choking me into silence.

There's a short, older man standing behind the counter, his thick

shooting up when he spots me. “I didn’t hear you come in. Are you v
one of to place an order, honey?”

not easy “Um.” My stomach chooses that moment to growl, but I have no
pleasant No phone. No nothing. “I was wondering if I could—borrow your ph
a moment?”

He studies me, his dark brown eyes contemplating me carefully, as
evident not sure what to think. I must look a mess. I’m frazzled and I run a
hand through my hair, smoothing it away from my face.

damn hot. “Don’t you have one of those fancy smartphones?” He waves a
looks like me.

works in “I—I lost it.” I smile but it feels false so I let it fade. “Please, sir. I
make an important call. It’s an emergency.”

ning or He makes a harrumphing noise. “I don’t give this sort of thing a
pulated free, young lady. You kids are always coming in here and trying
appears advantage of an old man. I don’t like it.”

on one The man is about to turn away and return to the back of the deli
glance make a desperate sound. A cross between a yelp and a moan. He
but angling at me over his shoulder and I hold up my left hand, showing
counter giant diamond on my finger.

“Can I give you this as collateral? I just need to make one pho
mister. Maybe two, if I can’t get ahold of them. That’s it. That’s all I
baking If he’ll let me hide out in here, I’ll do that too. It feels safe. Wa
ies hair inviting. I don’t want to go back outside. To be out there all alone lea
full of completely vulnerable.

ter and His eyes widen as I pull the diamond ring off my finger and hol
tting in toward him, my hand shaking. Slowly he turns to face me once a
frown marring his weathered face. “I don’t want your ring, young lady

“Just—take it. Hold onto it while I make the call. Please, let me u
display phone. Please.” I’m begging, but I don’t even care. I need that damn pl
ly heart

A sigh leaves him and he shakes his head. “Come on back he
d forth, phone is hanging on the wall.” He waves at a very old looking phon
push through the swinging half-door, offering my ring to him onc
when I pause in front of the phone.

und my “Take this,” I tell him, my stomach growling again.

Loudly.

cross brows The man frowns. “You’re hungry.”

wanting “I need to make a call first.”

“I’ll feed you. Make you a sandwich.” He seems glad to have some money to do as he starts bustling about. “What sort of meat you want?”

one for “Turkey?” My stomach cramps so hard it hurts and I shove my wedding ring back on my finger. “Swiss cheese?”

if he’s He nods, pulling the glass door back and reaching into the display case. “I’ll make you a nice sandwich. You make your call. And I’m glad you have that ring back on your finger. I don’t need it.”

hand at Relief makes my tense shoulders ease and I grab the phone, staring at the numbers for a moment, the dial tone droning in my ear.

need to Smartphones are amazing. Every little thing you could ever need is so much at your fingertips. But being so reliant on them means you can’t even remember anyone’s number. Like my husband’s.

to take Frustration rippling through me, I dial the first number that comes to mind. One of the very few I have memorized.

when I My brother Finn’s number.

pauses, He of course lets it go to voicemail because with my current luck it just the way things work out. I’m watching the deli owner make a sandwich, piling it high with turkey meat, swiss cheese and lettuce, onions and I settle the phone back into its cradle, the hunger hitting me hard. I swear I sway on my feet for a moment.

rm and “You didn’t get through?” He glances over his shoulder, his bushy eyebrows drawing together in concern. “You don’t look so good.”

“I’ll try again in a minute.” I offer him a faint smile, blinking hard to clear my vision goes blurry.

gain, a Right before it goes black.

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hone.

re. The “OH LOOK! SHE’S awake!”

e and I An unfamiliar female voice keeps shouting and it makes me not wake up at all. Instead, I keep my eyes tightly closed, withholding thoughts that wants to escape when someone jostles my body, searing pain coursing across the back of my head.

I’m on the floor, and I think I might’ve passed out? The deli is warm, and I’m still inside—the unmistakable scent of baking bread.

lingers in the air—and I recognize the male voice speaking as who I a
nothing is the owner.

“Don’t move her, Martha. She took a hard fall.” His tone is chastis
redding the woman just makes a tsking noise at him in return.

“We can’t let her lay on the floor forever, Arthur. Customers will
y case soon!”

you put I’m guessing Martha is his wife. And the fact that she’s more cor
over customers seeing me passed out on the floor versus my actua
g at the being is telling.

I don’t think she’s thrilled to find me like this.

s pretty I carefully crack open my eyes to find two faces hovered above n
u don’t deli owner’s—Arthur. And a woman with dyed black hair and highly
matching black eyebrows drawn above her eyes. She leans back wl
s to my gazes meet, giving me breathing room.

“You okay, hon?” Her voice is gentle, and maybe I judged l
harshly.

s, that’s It actually wouldn’t be good for business, to have a strange
e me sprawled across the floor while people tried to order their sandwiches.

ice and When I realize they’re waiting for my answer, I shrug one should
; me so head hurts.”

“You hit the floor pretty hard,” Arthur says. “You want help sitting
/ brows I nod and he takes my hand, his weathered fingers curling around
he gently tugs me into the sitting position. I move slowly, reaching bef
d when to touch at my head, rubbing the spot where I feel a bump. “How long
been out?”

“Only a couple of minutes, tops,” Martha says, her gaze go
Arthur’s. “Tell her what you did.”

My gaze switches between the both of them, curious. “What did
Arthur?”

He smiles at me. “Martha walked in right when you dropped and
want to to the phone and hit the redial button.”

e groan “Multiple times,” Martha adds.

rossing “And the man you tried to call answered.”

Relief floods me and I almost slump back onto the floor again. “W
was so you tell him?”

ad still “That I had a pretty blonde woman in a black sweat outfit passed

ssumedmy deli floor.” His smile is small. “He cursed up a storm.”

“He’s my brother,” I admit, thinking that sounds just like Finn. T
ing and curse when they’re mad. Happy. Whatever. “His number is the only
could remember.”

be here “He said they would be here right away, once I gave them my ac
Arthur says.

cerned *They.* I wonder if he’s with Perry. Does my husband even care that
al well-missing? He was supposed to come home early so I could make him ‘c
and instead I’m in a deli in Bishop’s Landing and oh my God...

“Have you ever seen a dark-haired man with an Irish accent c
ne. Thehere?” I ask Arthur.

arched, “No, not that I can recall.” He sends a look to his wife, and I’m
en our must think I’m out of it for asking that. “Come on. Let’s get you c
feet.”

her too They stand on either side of me and haul me up to my feet a
moment I don’t need them holding me upright, Martha takes off tow
woman back.

“Getting you some aspirin, young lady! For that knockin’ your
er. “Mytook!” She pushes her way through the door that separates the deli fr
actual kitchen, disappearing from view.

g up?” “Did my brother say when he would be here?” I ask Arthur, hatin
mine asanxious I suddenly feel. My gaze keeps drifting toward the deli er
mind meworried that Seamus could walk in at any moment. He could easily o
g have IArthur. And if he came with his gun, forget it.

“He said he was on his way.” Arthur takes a step closer, hi
oing to lowering. “Are you okay? Is someone trying to—harm you?”

I stare into his kind brown eyes, so grateful I chose the deli o
you do, convenience store across the street. “Can I hide out in the back u
brother shows up?”

I went “Of course you can.” I love that Arthur doesn’t ask me any questio
automatically says yes. “And you can eat your sandwich back there to

I’m so overwhelmed with gratitude I wrap him up in a bear hug, s
him. “Thank you,” I say, my voice muffled against his shoulder. “For
that did me.”

He gives me a tentative pat on the back. “Come on. Let’s get y
out on sandwich.”

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CHAPTER SIX

Perry

FINN'S PHONE KEEPS ringing.

And he keeps ignoring it, which annoys the hell out of me.

All of us really.

We got hung up at Winston's because Myron called right before we supposed to leave, filling my brother in with all sorts of details. Which me still pacing, my brain coming up with all sorts of ideas as to Charlotte could be. I don't know why we're not already in a car and for Bishop's Landing.

We're wasting time. We need to get the fuck out of here.

Now.

For once in my life, I actually want to be in Bishop's Landing. I be on the streets, searching for her. For him. If I find him, he's dead.

It's that simple.

And that complicated too.

"Answer your goddamn phone," Grant demands after about the fifth time in a row, testy as usual.

At least I know the dude doesn't have a personal vendetta against me. He's that rude to everyone in his life, even his brother.

"It's just some random number I don't recognize," Finn dismissively, not even glancing at his ringing phone.

"You should check," I say. They both swivel their heads in my direction in time with the last ring filling the air. "Considering the circumstances, we should take all of our calls, random numbers or not.

"He has a point," Grant says, his tone reluctant.

I raise my brows, glancing over at Winston who has just entered the room, his expression grim. The moment he's about to open his mouth to say something, his phone rings again. Irritated, he glances at the screen and says, "Myron again. Be right back," he says, exiting the room.

Finn makes a face at my suggestion and as if on cue, his phone rings again. He answers it immediately. "What."

I can hear a man's deep voice speaking and everything inside my head grows tight. Tighter. I start pacing the room, drawing closer and closer to Finn, but I can't hear exactly what the man is saying.

"What is she wearing?" Finn lifts his gaze to mine and I see it. The man who he's talking about.

Charlotte.

"Yeah. Okay. No, I appreciate you letting us know. I'm glad she's safe. Thank you for calling. We're on our way." Finn ends the call, but I can't hear what he's saying. "That was Arthur Patroli. I think he has Charlotte."

"Who the hell is Arthur Patroli?" I demand. "And why does he have her where?"

"I don't know. His explanation was kind of garbled. Said something about owning a deli in downtown Bishop's Landing and she walked into a restaurant. Said she tried to call my number right before she fainted."

I'm bolting for the door with no plan. I just know I need to go now. "Let's go get her."

"We'll follow you in a separate car," Grant says, heading straight for the door. "Better to make a big presence when we arrive."

"Good call." Can't believe I just agreed with Grant Lancaster.

But I can't ponder on that. My wife has fainted in a deli somewhere in Bishop's Landing and I'm going to her. She needs me.

Winston chooses that moment to appear, a frown on his face. "What the fuck are you guys going now?"

"A man just called me and said a beautiful blonde woman wearing sunglasses walked into his deli and asked to use his phone before she fainted." Finn explains.

"Why did he call you?" My brother's frown deepens.

"My number is the one she dialed. Maybe she has it memorized. I don't know. She doesn't have her phone on her." Finn shrugs.

"She left it at our apartment," I remind them.

red the “Not like he’d let her have her phone,” Winston adds.
and say “We’re going to the deli to get her,” I tell my brother. “She’s in B
n. “It’s Landing.”

“Makes sense,” Winston murmurs with a nod. “Since that’s where
rings in “They’re taking their own car.” I wave a hand toward Cha
brothers. “You want to ride with me?”

of me “I’ll stay here. Keep in touch with Myron. Let Mother know what’
loser toon. She keeps texting me. You know she’ll say the Morellis are in
with Charlotte being in Bishop’s Landing.”

I know “Maybe she’s right.” I shrug, not really caring anymore.

“I don’t think she is. But we can discuss that another time.” Wi
gaze meets mine and he inclines his head. “Go get your girl. And if
he’s all gives me any information in regards to Seamus’s location, I’ll let you l

his gaze “Thanks, Winny. For all of your help.” Anticipation buzzes thro
veins. I need to get out of here. I’m too eager to get to my wife and j
ave my into my arms. And never let her go.

Never let her out of my damn sight again.

nothing I trust no one. Not even her brothers. The only way I’ll feel Cha
into his safe is if she’s with me.

“You okay to drive?” Grant asks me as we take the elevator
to her parking garage. “I hear you can be—reckless behind the wheel.”

Grimacing, I avert my head so he can’t see my expression. Gr
for me, probably did a little investigation into my background and learned
street racing days. “That was a long time ago.”

“Just don’t do anything stupid,” Grant mutters.

here in I turn on him, hating how he talks to me like I’m a little kid. Remi
of how Winston used to treat me—like I was a complete idiot who
ere are barely function, which back then, was sort of the truth.

“You’ve got that oldest brother, complete asshole thing down pa
g black you?” I taunt.

ainted,” Finn makes an *ooooh* noise when Grant turns on me, his expressi
as ice. “What the hell did you just say to me?”

“You keep telling me what to do like you control me, when you
d guess know how to drive. And I know how to treat Charlotte. She’s my wi
right now, her safety is the most important thing to me. So don’t v
won’t drive recklessly, or do anything stupid. Not when my wife is in

Understood?”

Bishop’s Grant doesn’t look away, and neither do I. The elevator comes to the doors sliding open revealing the parking garage and still neither of us moves. Finn shoves into Grant first, causing him to look away from me. Charlotte can’t help the triumph slipping through me.

“You guys are ridiculous,” Finn mutters as we split off in the parking garage. “See ya at the deli,” he calls to me. “Already sent you the address involved, My phone buzzes in my pocket, right on cue.

I say nothing. Just jog toward my Chevelle and hop into the driver’s seat. As pleased the engine starts with a satisfying roar. I’m guessing Grant chose a Mercedes. Something sleek and expensive and with a powerful engine. Myron sure he drives fast and takes corners with a quick flick of his wrist. “I know.” I do that too, but with my powerful V8 and loud muffler—and I don’t forget the flashy orange paint. I not only want everyone to see me, I want them to hear me coming too.

Can’t sneak up in the Chevelle, oh no. And that’s okay. I want my friends to know I’m coming to her rescue. I want her to hear my engine and know I’m here. Hell, I’d love it if the sound of my car pulling up to the curb made her pussy wet.

As long as that pussy gets wet for no one else but me, we’re good.

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eat. He
of my

THE DRIVE TO Bishop’s Landing takes way too damn long and I pulled out of the Lancasters in Grant’s BMW—damn it I was close with my friends long ago, when we were still in the city.

God knows where they’re at now.

By the time I’m cruising the familiar streets, rain has started to fall. Within minutes, I’m pulling up to the curb in front of the deli, putting the car into park and shutting off the ignition, sitting there with my thoughts on a moment while I listen to the engine tick.

She might not be happy to see me, and I’m trying to prepare myself for the worst. I cool with it. Which is fine, I get it. We’re not that close.

Though I thought we were getting closer...

Taking a deep breath, I climb out of the car and lock the door. Run my fingers through my hair and tell myself not to appear too anxious.

Then I sprint toward the entrance and bust through the door as if a stop, no control over myself.

My gaze is everywhere, sweeping the interior of the small, dark room, and there's music playing—pretty sure it's Frank Sinatra—and there's a group of older couples sitting at a table near the back, chatting while clutching parking-eaten sandwiches in their hands. I search for the familiar blonde head I've seen making my heart race when I don't spot her.

"Are you looking for someone?"

I turn to find a short, older man with a paunch and the thickest eyebrows I've ever seen standing behind the register, an inquisitive expression on his weathered face.

"I'm looking for my wife." I take a step toward the counter, then I can't grab the old man by the front of his shirt and give him a shake. Derp. I want to know where Charlotte is.

But I don't. I have more restraint than that, and from what I understand, this guy helped my wife and I'm forever grateful for that. Thank God he's not here yet. He's so unpredictable I'm afraid he'd knock this poor cade her out before he could even give us any solid answers.

The man's gaze turns skeptical. "What's your name?"

"Perry."

His gaze narrows. "That's not her brother's name."

"Like I just said, I'm not her brother." I grip the edge of the counter, fighting the frustration rippling through me. "I'm her goddamn husband."

The old man throws his head back and laughs while I stand there fuming. "Ah, to be young again. Full of so much emotion all the time. Follow me."

She's back here." He waves a hand.

I follow him through a swinging door and into the back of the dining room, my entire body becoming electrified. I know it's because I'm close to Charlotte. This is what happens to me every time we're in the same room, sharing the same air.

"Here she is," the man says once we round a corner, a small table in view. An older woman with pitch black hair is sitting next to my beautiful wife. "Charlotte, you have a visitor."

Charlotte lifts her head, her blue eyes meeting mine and she starts to smile at me...

And then hesitates.

I have Holy shit. Why did she just do that? Is she mad at me? Pissed
showed up now? What if she actually wanted to be with—

rk deli. “I didn’t think you’d actually come for me,” she whispers, h
pair ofwelling with unshed tears.

ig half- Her words, her sad voice, carve my heart into tiny pieces. My tl
, worryfrom only a moment ago disintegrate.

“I will always come for you,” I tell her fiercely, like a promise.

She’s on her feet in moments, throwing herself at me, her arms v
ebrowsaround my middle. She presses her face against my chest, her v
on hismuffled I can’t understand what she’s saying and I reach for her. Cupp

face with both of my hands, I tilt her head back so I can stare into her e
pted to Eyes that are nearly overflowing with tears.

nand to As I watch her, I realize I’m at a complete loss for words, which
happens.

erstand, Ever.

d Grant Instead of saying something stupid or obvious, I go on pure insti
ld manlower my head, brushing her trembling lips with mine. The kiss is s
sweet, and I try to silently communicate with her as I kiss her over a
again.

I missed you.

You scared me.

ounter, *You belong to me.*

d.” She breaks away from me first, resting her hands on my chest, th
iming. falling down her cheeks. I gently brush them away with my thumbs t
ow me.haul her in close, curling one hand around the back of her head as I h
to me. I close my eyes for a moment, trying to contain the swirl of er
leli, myrising inside of me.

arlotte. This girl... she’s become my everything. I can’t lose her again.

ing the I can’t.

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Holy shit. Why did she just do that? Is she mad at me? Pissed I only showed up now? What if she actually wanted to be with—

“I didn’t think you’d actually come for me,” she whispers, her eyes welling with unshed tears.

Her words, her sad voice, carve my heart into tiny pieces. My thoughts from only a moment ago disintegrate.

“I will always come for you,” I tell her fiercely, like a promise.

She’s on her feet in moments, throwing herself at me, her arms winding around my middle. She presses her face against my chest, her voice so muffled I can’t understand what she’s saying and I reach for her. Cupping her face with both of my hands, I tilt her head back so I can stare into her eyes.

Eyes that are nearly overflowing with tears.

As I watch her, I realize I’m at a complete loss for words, which never happens.

Ever.

Instead of saying something stupid or obvious, I go on pure instinct and lower my head, brushing her trembling lips with mine. The kiss is soft and sweet, and I try to silently communicate with her as I kiss her over and over again.

I missed you.

You scared me.

You belong to me.

She breaks away from me first, resting her hands on my chest, the tears falling down her cheeks. I gently brush them away with my thumbs before I haul her in close, curling one hand around the back of her head as I hold her to me. I close my eyes for a moment, trying to contain the swirl of emotions rising inside of me.

This girl... she’s become my everything. I can’t lose her again.

I can’t.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Charlotte

THE WORRY ON my husband's face when he first spotted me was immediately replaced with relief and I felt the same.

Exactly the same.

I knew when Arthur mentioned that my brother said "they" would soon that the possibility Finn would be with Perry was high. At least I was hoping that would be the case. And for whatever reason my husband showed up first, my brothers nowhere in sight, which is probably not the best thing.

It allows me this quiet moment with Perry first. My utter and complete relief at seeing him. Feeling his strong arms come around me, the weight of his body pressed to mine. His warm, soft lips finding mine. The utter relief I felt in his kiss. Since escaping Seamus, I never truly felt safe until Perry appeared and now I know everything's going to be all right.

Though he hasn't really said anything to me yet, which is odd. Perry is a talker.

Silence isn't his thing.

"We'll leave you two alone," Arthur says.

I lift my head to watch him and Martha exit the back room, and I'm grateful for the privacy. Maybe that's why Perry hasn't spoken yet. My husband wanted to keep whatever he has to say between us and no one else.

Once Arthur and Martha are gone though, my husband still remains. I press my head against his chest once more, sniffing as I concentrate on the rapid pounding of his heart beneath my ear. I'm hyperaware of his hair, his body. His fingers in my hair. His other hand resting on my hip. He's still

me carefully, as if I'm fragile. Made of glass. I tighten my arms around middle, wishing I could burrow myself into his body and never let go.

A ragged exhale leaves him and I wait for the words, but still they don't come. Why won't he talk to me? I need his reassurance. His care, possibly his...love.

Can he give that to me freely? Will he ever?

Suddenly all hell breaks loose.

"What the hell? Charlotte!"

We spring away from each other as my older brothers push their way into the back room, their matching expressions full of a mixture of rage and concern when they spot me. They both shove past Perry, Grant wrapping me immediately in a bear hug first, followed immediately by Finn.

I let them embrace me, in absolute shock. I think this is the most affection my brothers have shown me ever in my life.

"What happened to you? How did you get away from him? Did you call the cops just now? Please tell me you didn't call the cops." This is actually Grant, who's standing directly in front of me with his hands on his hips and a good snarl on his face.

"Leave her alone," Perry snaps as he grabs my hand and pulls me to his side. He slips his arm around my waist and holds me close. "She's solid enough. When she's ready to talk, she'll talk."

Grant's expression darkens. "We don't have time to waste. We need to find this asshole, and she can lead us back to him."

"Why does it matter if she called the cops or not?" asks Finn, and Perry is confused. "I know Winston doesn't want us to, but shouldn't we get on this and let them handle it?"

"No," Grant and Perry both answer at the same time.

I rest my hand on my husband's chest, surprised he'd be in agreement with Grant. "Why not?"

"We'll handle this on our own," Perry bites out and despite everything that just happened to me, the traumatic afternoon and evening I've had, someone I used to think I loved, a chill still races down my spine at the tone in my husband's voice.

Handling this on our own could mean a myriad of things, and not a good one, I'm holding them good.

"It might be better to get the police involved," I tell him, my voice

and his “We should call them.”

His voice is flat. “No.”

Why don't you? Frustration ripples through my blood. He won't even listen to me. Even I'm the one who was kidnapped.

He's just like all the men in my life. Treating me like a useless tool. Demanding I do this or that. Never allowing me to have a choice.

“Let's get her home,” Finn suggests, changing the subject.

Grant shakes his head, his gaze finding mine. “Let's try and figure out where that asshole is. Can you tell us what happened?”

Relief. Taking a deep breath, I give them a brief description of my escape. How I took advantage of the situation and flung soup in Seamus's face, then ran out of the apartment and kept running until I arrived at the deli.

“Holy hell, Charlotte, really? You did all that?” I turn to look at Finn, noting the admiration in his expression. He reaches out, his fingers stroking my cheek. “You're so strong.”

“I didn't think anyone was looking for me,” I admit.

His hand drops, the anguish on his face obvious and I immediately regret being terrible for saying such a terrible thing, but...

It's the truth.

“You think you could identify the apartment building you left?” Perry asks me.

“I can try.”

“Maybe we shouldn't push her right—” Perry starts but Grant quiets him with a look.

“It's now or never and you know it.” My brother's voice is low and ominous.

Perry nods, glancing down at me. “Do you want to go look?”

“Not in your car,” Grant says, shaking his head. “That monstrosity is too loud.”

I almost want to laugh because my brother is right. I know Perry likes to lead with Chevelle, but it is pretty loud.

“We can all go in the BMW,” Finn suggests, ever the peacemaker. He loves being a hard-ass most of the time, but I've noticed he tries to be a good one of Grant up.

Much like Perry does for Winston.

I'm surprised he isn't here. Glad for it though—all of that *alpha male*

in charge attitude is bad enough with the three men currently surrounding me. Winston would send it completely over the top.

ne, and “Come on.” Perry removes his arm from me but immediately takes my hand. “Let’s go.”

ss doll. Within minutes we’re in Grant’s car, me sitting in the passenger seat. My brother drives slowly along the path I took. When he comes to a particular building with a parking lot next to it, I ask him to stop, staring out in silence. My skin grows colder the longer I look at it, and I release a long breath.

. How I “That’s it.” I point at the building. “That’s where I was.”

ran out “Charlotte, damn girl. You ran like, a few miles,” Finn observes from the back seat. “At least five.”

t Perry, I would’ve run twenty if I had to. I was desperate to get away from the reeking Perry leans forward, until he’s in between the two front seats, his gaze on my face. “Should we go inside? Look for his apartment? You know, Charlotte.”

ely feel Grant literally growls, gripping the steering wheel.

“I—I don’t remember his apartment number,” I admit, which surprises Grant. Recalling I saw his vehicle when I left, I scan the parking lot, but there’s mostly empty. “I don’t even think he’s there. His car was in the parking lot when I ran out, and now it’s gone.”

“What was he driving?”

ets him “I think it was a Porsche. Definitely a small sports car. Black. Two-seater.”

id dark. Grant nods, his jaw tight as he watches the parking lot. “We could stay here and wait for him to return.”

“If he’s smart, he won’t return. Not tonight,” Perry points out.

y is too “I just want to go home,” I admit, my voice small.

Grant glances over at me. “You want to go back to Mom and Dad’s house?” That sounds so downright... quaint, him calling our parents “Mom and Dad.” And it’s interesting that he assumes that’s what I consider home.

ker. He “No.” I shake my head, glancing over at Perry, who’s terribly close. His soft face is practically in mine and I can see the stubble lining his jaw. Exhaustion is in his gaze. “I want to go back to our apartment.”

Perry nods once. “Let’s go back to the deli and I’ll take her home.”

an, I’m “This is bullshit.” Grant slams his hand against the steering wheel.

oundingmaking me jump. “Why would we leave now when we’re so close really just want him to get away with this shit, Constantine?”

kes my “Fuck you,” Perry mutters. “The moment I see that McAssho know I’ll kill him. And I’d rather take care of my traumatized wife seat as versus spending the rest of my life in jail for murder.”

es to a My heart soars because I’m a complete idiot, but really. Hearing ing at it husband admit he wants to kill the man who kidnapped you is actual a shaky of hot.

“Valid point,” Finn says, making Grant mumble a string of curse before he shifts the car into drive and pulls back onto the road from the screeching tires.

Men. They’re ridiculous.
him. We return to the deli and I go with Perry in his car. The drive back s warm apartment is mostly silent. I’m not in the mood to talk and neither is I can say can tell. Though maybe it’s more that he doesn’t know what to say, wanting to say anything at all.

I get it. I do. What just happened to me, I can barely wrap my is true around it. It’s almost as if it didn’t happen at all. The moment with Se ie lot is the lobby was just a dream.

king lot More like a nightmare.
“Are you hungry?” he asks as we get closer to our apartment buildi I shake my head. “I had a sandwich at the deli.” I sit up str A two-realizing something. “I never said goodbye or thank you to Arth Martha.”

sit here “Who?”
“The people who saved me.” My tone is solemn and I swallow do burst of anxiety that flares. “We should go back.”

s?” “You can call and thank them tomorrow,” Perry suggests.
om and “No. I need to tell them now. Turn around, Perry.”
“It’s late,” he says, his voice firm. “Tomorrow.”

“No!” I burst into tears, my entire body shaking. “Arthur saved r se. His What if Seamus had found me after I ran away? What would he have w. Theme then?”

“Charlotte...”
“He’s completely unstable, you know.” I nod again and again whe wheel, glances over at me, trying to emphasize my point. “I don’t care w

e? You brothers say. We should call the police. They should be involved. We know what he might do to me. Or to you.”

le, you “Once they become involved, he’ll be charged and most likely re tonight His family will find the best criminal lawyers in the state—because the them all on retainer—and he’ll get a slap on the wrist. They’ll send ing your back to Ireland or wherever the hell he’s from. The end. That’s it.” He ly kind frustrated, and it hurts, knowing that what he says is most likely the tru

A sob rises in my throat and I cover my face with my hands, e words noisily. I can barely handle the thought of what would’ve happo id with Seamus caught me before I got to the deli. He would’ve been so t especially after I flung burning hot soup in his stupid face. The man cl cares about me and wants me back, but he also said he wouldn’t hes k to ourend me if I did something to make him angry.

Perry, I And I believed him. I still do.

versus “Babe.” I drop my hands from my face and whip my head in direction, surprised he’d call me that. His expression is one of pure y head “Please don’t cry. You’re breaking my heart right now.”

amus in I think of his tattoo. How he believed no one could break his heart he admitted to me he wasn’t interested in love or any of the trappir comes with it. Back then, I felt the same way.

ing. The same exact way.

aighter, But I don’t anymore. Not at all.

ur and Thanks to my husband.

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ny life.
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n Perry
hat my

brothers say. We should call the police. They should be involved. We don't know what he might do to me. Or to you."

"Once they become involved, he'll be charged and most likely released. His family will find the best criminal lawyers in the state—because they have them all on retainer—and he'll get a slap on the wrist. They'll send his ass back to Ireland or wherever the hell he's from. The end. That's it." He sounds frustrated, and it hurts, knowing that what he says is most likely the truth.

A sob rises in my throat and I cover my face with my hands, crying noisily. I can barely handle the thought of what would've happened if Seamus caught me before I got to the deli. He would've been so furious, especially after I flung burning hot soup in his stupid face. The man claims he cares about me and wants me back, but he also said he wouldn't hesitate to end me if I did something to make him angry.

And I believed him. I still do.

"Babe." I drop my hands from my face and whip my head in Perry's direction, surprised he'd call me that. His expression is one of pure agony. "Please don't cry. You're breaking my heart right now."

I think of his tattoo. How he believed no one could break his heart. When he admitted to me he wasn't interested in love or any of the trappings that comes with it. Back then, I felt the same way.

The same exact way.

But I don't anymore. Not at all.

Thanks to my husband.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Perry

ALL I WANT to do is take care of Charlotte, but I don't know how.

Instead, I wait for her cues, watching her carefully as we walk through the lobby, her gaze zipping everywhere, as if she fully expects that jacked-up guy to jump out of a dark corner and snatch her from me. Thanks to the late hour, the lobby is quiet and empty. Only a single security guard is on shift, who nods at the both of us as we walk past the desk he sits behind, completely oblivious to the chaos from earlier.

Lucky guy.

The ride in the elevator is quiet. Charlotte's face is tear-streaked, her eyes are red and her cheeks blotchy and I'm tempted to yank her into my arms, hold her close and whisper words of comfort to her, but I don't because I don't know exactly what I would say.

I'm at a complete loss, which is unlike me. I have something to say in every situation, but apparently, not this one.

We exit the elevator in silence and I unlock the apartment door. Doja comes running, a streak of furry black-headed straight for her own room. Charlotte bends down to scoop the cat into her arms and hold her close.

"I missed you so much, Doja. I did," Charlotte coos. Doja's purring is so loud she reminds me of the Chevelle's engine.

"Oh, Miss Charlotte. You're home."

We both glance up to find Jasper standing in the middle of the room, his hand resting on his chest, over his heart. Looking ready to keel over in utter relief. They lock eyes and Charlotte bursts into tears, scurrying toward him so he can hug both her and Doja close, offering comfort in mu

words and fatherly squeezes.

I watch them, still at a loss, envious of the easy relationship they have which is ridiculous on my part. He's her butler and familiar to her, but also more than that. He's the parental figure she never really got from her actual father growing up. Jasper is the one man she could count on. The one who took care of her from a young age. Who watched over her and made sure she was always safe.

I bet he hates that she ran off to Paris and had such a disastrous experience with that McFucker. He might even hate that dude as much as I do. Jasper and I, we have a lot in common.

We always want the best for Charlotte.

"Shall I draw a bath for you?" Jasper asks her at one point, minutes after they've finally withdrawn from each other and she's still cuddling with me. I shake my head at him.

"I'll take care of her tonight. You go get some rest," I tell him.

Jasper sends me an appreciative look. "Thank you, sir, for finding her. I was completely worried. And guilt-ridden."

"Oh Jasper." Charlotte wraps him up in another hug, holding him close with Doja wedged between them before she releases him. "Don't feel guilty. I was the dumb one who went down to meet Seamus without my phone."

I visibly flinch at her saying his name out loud and it's as if she realizes what a second too late, her guilty glance flitting to mine before she looks away.

"And without me," Jasper reminds her.

That old softy would've tipped right over the moment McFucker grabbed Charlotte but I just smile and humor him. I don't want him to feel guilty. It's not his fault Charlotte was abducted, even though he was there and himself.

I take a lot of that blame too. I should've come home early. Why should I think Jasper could protect her? He's done a pretty solid job so far, but he's never dealt with a serious threat before.

And that asshole who used and abused her and fucking abducted her. A living serious damn threat.

The moment Jasper leaves the room, Charlotte turns to face me, her face a mix of relief and a frown on her pretty face. "He feels guilty."

"He's felt guilty since the moment he called me and told me you were gone," I admit.

Her frown deepens. “He was the first one to tell you what happened. I don’t want to share, but he’s still at the office.” I grimace just remembering those photos, tamping down the fury that wants to rise.

“I’m not going to turn into a raging dick. Not in front of Charlotte, and I’m sure she needs to be taken care of. And I need to be calm for her. She’ll get through enough.”

“Oh right.” Her gaze goes distant for a moment, as if she’s remembering the moment and I wish I could wipe her brain of the memory. “The photos. You know they were just for show.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“He kept me tied up in an empty room, but the tape over my mouth was really only for those photos. I had no idea who he was sending the photos to. He figured you and maybe my parents.”

Ignoring what she said about being tied up in an empty room, I ask her. “Your parents don’t know.”

“About what happened to me?”

I slowly shake my head.

“Oh.” She drops her gaze, her attention just for Doja, who suddenly squirms in her arms. She lets the cat go, and Doja darts off, hiding under the coffee table. “They probably wouldn’t have cared anyway.”

Her softly spoken words grip my heart in a stranglehold. It kills me because she believes her family doesn’t care about her. And maybe she’s right. I remember how quickly Finn and Grant went into action when they found out their sister had been abducted. If they didn’t care, they wouldn’t have done anything.

They do care. I’m sure her mother does too. We didn’t tell her because we didn’t want to worry her.

“Did you really think I wasn’t going to look for you? That I wouldn’t move heaven and earth to find you?”

She shrugs one shoulder, her head still bent. “I didn’t know what to do. Our relationship hasn’t always been... stable.”

I’m incredulous—but not. She’s right. Our relationship has been unstable from the start, and I didn’t help matters when I didn’t trust her.

Well, I trust her now, and I need to make all of my wrongs right. I’ll ask for her forgiveness.

d?” I just need Charlotte.

n I was “We made that call, Charlotte, your brothers and I, not to te
g downparents. We were trying to keep everything quiet. The less people tha
the better. And none of us wanted to get the police involved either,
at least.concerned Grant,” I explain.

’s been And I definitely don’t want her feeling unloved. What happened
has nothing to do with her parents.

nbering “I still think the police should be involved. They should know a de
photos.man is on the loose,” she says. “He’s dangerous, Perry.”

I’m not worried about that asshole. Not at the moment. All I ca
about is this woman. My wife.

ith was “Your brothers and I will take care of it. And Winston. Hell, I sho
m to. Ihim. Let him know I got you home and you’re safe.”

“Oh. Okay. I’ll go take a bath while you call him.” She starts
admit,bedroom and I stop her, my fingers curling around her arm, careful
my touch gentle, a thought occurring to me.

Did that asshole hurt her? Mark her? *Bruise* her? If there is o
scratch on her, I’m going to kill him. I’ll tear him apart with my bare h
y starts “I’ll start your bath for you,” I offer, my voice low.

g under She visibly swallows. “Okay. I’d like that.”

I go into her bathroom and start the water, letting it run until
ne howbefore I push the plug in and the tub starts to fill. My wife likes he
s right,steaming hot. Her skin is always flushed red when she gets out of the
en theysometimes, she soaks in there for so long, I worry she’s fallen asleep.

ouldn’t Sitting on the tub’s ledge, I add some fragrant bath oil and w
bubble when the streaming water hits it. I’m feeling contemplative. Tl
because the day ended like it has.

So damn thankful.

ouldn’t She enters the bathroom a few minutes later, clad in a pale pir
cloth robe, her feet bare and her blonde hair piled on top of her he
o think.messy bun. She smiles when our gazes catch, and she waves a hand
the filling tub.

instable “I can take over from here,” she offers, but I don’t say anything a
don’t move a muscle. I’m suddenly tense and she can sense it. “
. I needwrong?”

I swallow hard, my throat thick with emotion. “Did he hurt you?”

Charlotte frowns, reaching for the cloth belt of her robe. “What the hell do you mean?”

I knew, “*Him*. That—motherfucker.” It’s difficult to say his name out loud, which acknowledges his existence. “Did. He. *Hurt*. You?” I nod toward her.

“Take it off.”

I look to her. Her fingers curl around the ends of the belt. “Perry—”

I interrupt her. “Do it, Charlotte. I need to see you.”

She arranges herself. Lifting her chin, she undoes the belt, pushing the robe away and revealing her naked body. My gaze roams, not sure where to settle first. Drinking in that pale, creamy skin. So far, so good. She’s unmarked.

She shrugs the robe off so it falls to the floor and that’s when I see the old calluses. Three of them on her upper right arm, in the shape of fingers.

He gripped her. Forced her out of the lobby maybe. Or when he dragged her into his shitty apartment. Because come on, it can’t be that great to keep an apartment he held her captive in.

Know what else isn’t great? The fact that this asshole hurt me. He tiny bruised her. He’s going to pay.

And it won’t be pretty.

“Come here,” I demand and she glides toward the tub, stopping in front of me. “He marked you.”

It’s hot. Blinking at me in surprise, she glances down at her body. “Where?”

I rise to my feet, towering over her, my fingers drifting across her arm and arm where those fucking bruises are. “Here.”

She tilts her head toward her arm, watching me trace each bruise, trying to watch it rising within me about to burst through. I swallow it down, my control of my anger hanging on by a thread. When I press a little harder, she hisses in pain, breath, and it kills me that I hurt her. “I’m going to kill him.”

Her head lifts, her eyes wide with fear. “Don’t say that. Please. Like I said earlier, we need to let the authorities handle this.”

I nod. “Nothing will happen to him if they get involved, Charlotte.” I shake my head in a way that says I’m not listening. “Don’t bother arguing with me because you know it’s true.”

She rests her hands on my shoulders, her fingers squeezing, easing the tension there. “What’s so tense?”

“No shit,” I mutter, then immediately shake my head. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to snap at you.”

do you I'm sorry for a lot of other things. I feel like I let this woman down
hate that. I hate myself for not being there for her enough.

oud. To She's mine to protect. Mine to watch over and care about. I need
er robe. over my issues and focus on her. Fuck everything else.

Charlotte runs her hands down the front of my chest, and my
automatically responds, my skin growing warm. My muscles getting tight
don't want to talk about him anymore."

vealing I watch her, overwhelmed with emotion for this woman. How she's
ing in all to ease my anger when she's the one who was abducted by a crazed a

Reaching out, I rest my hands on her hips, caressing her silky-smooth
it. The "You're right. I don't want to talk about him either. It's a waste of breath

Where She nods, her gaze on my chest. "I'm so glad I'm home."
ged her My heart expands at her calling our place home. "I'm glad you're
eat, the too. I missed you. Worried about you." I lean in close, pressing my lips
temple, breathing her in. Savoring the feeling of her in my arms. She
y wife. closer, resting her head on my chest for the briefest moment before she
away.

Her smile is small and she reaches for the loosened tie still around
directly neck. I never did change out of my suit. "Take a bath with me."

I frown, glancing over at the mostly full tub. "We won't both fit."
" "Yes, we will." Her gaze is imploring. Nothing but big blue eyes
r upper me up, working her magic on me. "Please. I need you, Perry."

How can I resist her when she says she needs me?
he fury I can't.

l on my Within seconds, I've shed my clothes and she's ordering me to step
es in at the bath first. I lean against the back of the tub, spreading my legs to
accommodate her and then she's joining me, nestling her naked body
e I said against mine, her back to my front, her ass nudging against my cock, vulva
already at half-mast.

ake my Yeah. Can't think about doing anything like that tonight. She's excited
either, and traumatized and the last thing she'll want is to have sex with
husband, even though I am her knight in shining armor.

g some Though maybe I'm not. Maybe I let her down and she's disappointed
didn't find her right away...

I didn't Charlotte reaches forward and turns off the water, a steady drip
falling from the faucet as she leans back into me, her wiggling ass

n, and I things to me that I try not to focus on.

“See? We fit.” Her tone is smug, with a hint of tiredness as she leans to get her weight against me. “I knew we would.”

I press my legs inward so I’m completely surrounding her. My only bodycaptive who can’t escape from my grip. “You scared the hell out of me. Right. “I wife.”

I angle my head, just in time to witness her eyes falling shut, as she struggles to leave her. “I’m sorry. I was stupid.”

Asshole. Definitely wouldn’t call her stupid. Just—careless. Not that I would say it out loud.

“Don’t apologize. Though you should’ve had your phone.” My voice is firm.

Another sigh leaves her. “I know.”

“You also should’ve let Jasper accompany you to the lobby.”

Her eyes open and she tilts her head back, her gaze meeting mine. “I know that too. But let’s be real—Jasper isn’t much of a threat.”

“He might’ve been enough to deter that sleazebag from trying to mess with you.” I squeeze her tighter, careful not to hit the spot where her breasts are. “I can’t lose you like that again, wife.”

The admission leaves me feeling vulnerable and I swallow down my anger, eating of the words I want to say to her.

Like how much she means to me. More than anyone else in the world. We’re quiet, the only sound is the sloshing water as our bodies move. I’m getting hotter thanks to the steam wafting upwards from the hot tub. I rest my cheek against her soft hair, closing my eyes.

“Why?”

Her softly spoken question has my eyes cracking open. “Why what?”

“Why can’t you lose me?”

Carefully I lift my head away from her and run my fingers through her hair, letting the strands fall onto her shoulders, the ends trailing in the hot water. “It killed me, knowing you were with him.”

“Why?”

Damn it, she’s going to make me say it, isn’t she?

“Because I care about you, Charlotte.”

She faces straight ahead, her back still to me, bending her knees and wrapping her arms around them. “Nothing about our relationship is

Perry. There is no reason for you to care about me or worry when I've slowly abducted by my former—lover.”

I slip my arms around her waist and pull her into me, the water splashing little my mouth at her ear when I murmur, “Don’t call him that.”

of me, “It’s true. Calling him my ex-boyfriend sounds so... wrong. We’ve never together, not like that.”

oft sigh I cup her breasts, running my thumbs over her hardening nipples. I thought for a while maybe you went with him—willingly.”

d say it She slowly shakes her head. “I would never do that.”

I’m quiet for a moment, considering what she said—and how quickly she said it. “Why?”

“Because I said vows to you and promised to be a faithful wife. I’ve done a lot of things, but I’m not a liar, Perry. We’re married. I won’t leave you for someone else. I—I care about you, too.” She hesitates and I swear I can see her sadness. “I hate that he had me first.”

“But I’ll keep you forever.” The words fall from my mouth and I realize I’ve made a mistake off thought and for a split second, I regret them.

bruises Then again, I don’t. I mean what I say. I will keep her forever. No asshole can’t have her back, despite his trying. He’ll never try again. I’ll give him the rest.

I’ll chop off his hands and his dick if I have to.

world. “You don’t mean it,” Charlotte says, her voice so soft, I almost don’t believe her. “You’ll get tired of me, just like everyone else.”

the water My wife is having a serious pity party tonight but I can’t blame her. She’s been through some shit. Shit I should’ve protected her from. I failed. I fucked up.

“?” And that kills me.

“I won’t get tired of you.” I nuzzle the side of her head, my mouth pressed against her ear. “Who else tolerates the Chevelle like you do?”

the warm I run my lips down the length of her neck, noting the hitch in her breath when I hit a particular spot. The way she melts against me, tilting her head to the side to give me better access.

“How many girls have you fucked in the Chevelle?” she asks, her voice low and intimate. Nowhere.

eyes and Everything within me stills, my mouth still pressed upon her neck. Normal. Slowly, carefully, I push her hair out of the way, pressing my face

ve been against the back of her head and taking a deep breath. “You really know?”

lashing, Her body stiffens and she leans her head down, as if she’s trying away from me. “Maybe?”

weren’t I rub her nipple with my thumb, wishing I could put my mouth Taste her warm, wet skin. “The answer might blow your mind.”

ples. “I She nudges against me, as if she’s trying to buck me off of her. “rude.”

I clamp my arms around her middle so she can’t slip away from me. I’m not sure she’s zero, Charlotte. I haven’t fucked anyone else in the Chevelle. Until you

My wife freezes, turning her head so she can meet my gaze. “I’m a lot serious?”

you for “Why would I lie to you?” I drop a kiss on her lips, not wanting to feel She responds, leaning into me and I break away first, trying to keep my

“There’s something here. Between us. You feel it too.”

without Charlotte blinks at my honest response. “Do you want to know I thought about when I was tied up in that room?”

r. That My skin feels like it could burst into flames at her mentioning being alone in an empty room, waiting for that McFuckface to come back and do whatever he wanted to her. She must’ve been so damn scared. “Why do you ask, my throat scratchy. “Doja?”

n’t hear Her eyes fill with tears and a soft laugh leaves her. “You. If I were going to see you again. Feel your arms around me. See you smile. Her. She’s slaughter.”

d her. I My chest aches at her confession. “I’m never letting you out of my arms again.”

She turns so she’s facing forward once more, pressing up against me. I’m not sure she’s zero again and I can sense the tension ease out of her once again. I rest my

just below her breasts, my fingers stroking her silky smooth skin. My breath won’t work, Perry. You have to go to work. Live your life.”

head to “You’ll come with me to Halcyon.”

“And what would I do there? Bring Doja? We could become the mascots,” she suggests.

“No.” I shake my head. “Doja stays home with Jasper. You come to work with me. Or I could work from home. Winston will accuse me of jacking off all day, but fuck it. I’m not leaving you alone.”

want to Charlotte drifts her fingers across my forearms, her long nails making skin tingle. “I love how protective you are.”

g to get Doesn’t feel like I was protective enough, but I’m going to make sure Nothing will happen to this woman again. Not with me by her side.

on her. “I protect what’s mine.” I slide my hand down her belly, uncupping her pussy, noting the heat emanating from her. The wetness ‘You’re I’m not talking from the bath water either. “You belong to me. This pussy fucking mine. Do you understand?”

ie. “It’s She’s trembling, and I feel like an asshole. Did I scare her with the 1.” the-top possessiveness? The woman makes me feel like this. Like beating ‘You’re chest and smashing that other jerk’s face in, all while grabbing Charlotte the hair and grunting, “Mine.”

o push. If I ever told her that, she’d probably kick me in the dick. A y head, probably deserve it.

She’s quiet for so long I have to say something.

what I “Charlotte—”

“I understand,” she says, interrupting me. She lifts her hips, causing my hand to sink deeper. Until my fingers are pushing between her folds, an unspoken agreement urges me on and I stroke her. Softly at first.

“What?” I Carefully.

“I was so scared,” she whispers as she throws her head back onto my shoulder, exposing her elegant neck. “I thought no one was going to hurt you.”

“You saved me,” I remind her, dipping my head so I can press my lips to her throat, her pulse throbbing beneath my lips. “You’re your own wife.”

She angles her head so her gaze meets mine, her eyes wide and serious. “No one ever believes in me. Or thinks I’m capable of taking care of myself. Until you.”

“You’re the strongest woman I know.” I kiss her, my lips lingering on hers.

“Even stronger than your mother?” She smiles and I pull away slightly. I can look at her.

I’ve barely thought about my mother since Charlotte and I got married. It’s kind of off-putting that’s a freaking first. We used to talk on the phone a couple times a week. I’d accompany her to lunch or dinner, and I’d always return

ing my compound for the weekend.

Well, mostly.

p for it. Now it's as if I've forgotten all about her, and while that makes
like a shit son, I can't focus on that right now. Not when I have my
til I'm wife wrapped up in my arms while sharing a bath with her.

ss. And "I stand by my original statement," I say solemnly.

oussy is Charlotte's eyes sparkle with unshed tears. "I don't feel very stro
now, when all I want is for you to take care of me."

ie over- "Strong women need to be taken care of too." I reach toward the
ting my the tub, where various bottles of shampoo, conditioner and bodyw
lotte by "Want me to wash your hair?"

"You'd do that for me?" She sounds shocked.

And I'd I would do anything for her. Just to make her feel safe. Just to
smile. But I can't say that.

Not yet.

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compound for the weekend.

Well, mostly.

Now it's as if I've forgotten all about her, and while that makes me feel like a shit son, I can't focus on that right now. Not when I have my naked wife wrapped up in my arms while sharing a bath with her.

"I stand by my original statement," I say solemnly.

Charlotte's eyes sparkle with unshed tears. "I don't feel very strong right now, when all I want is for you to take care of me."

"Strong women need to be taken care of too." I reach toward the edge of the tub, where various bottles of shampoo, conditioner and bodywash sit. "Want me to wash your hair?"

"You'd do that for me?" She sounds shocked.

I would do anything for her. Just to make her feel safe. Just to see her smile. But I can't say that.

Not yet.



CHAPTER NINE

Charlotte

AFTER I DOUSE my hair with water until it's completely soaked, Perry to shampoo it, his fingers massaging my scalp. I tilt my head back and my eyes, the tension melting from my body as he keeps rubbing, the suds frothing up. His hands slip around my head, his thumbs sliding down the back of my neck, pressing deep, rotating circles and I can't help it.

A moan leaves me.

"Sexy little wife," he murmurs. "Likes having her head massaged."

"Maybe you should wash my hair all the time," I suggest, keep my eyes closed. His touch is making my entire body tingle, which I expect, considering what I've gone through the last few hours.

But facing something awful also reminds you how good your life is and how you should hold it close.

He grabs the cup I found earlier and starts to rinse the shampoo out of my hair. "We could probably work out a deal if that means we take a shower together every night."

I like the idea of that—far too much. Perry and I naked in my big bed—or his, since they basically match. Our hands wandering over each other's bodies. Touching, stroking, driving each other out of our minds.

The low throb between my legs intensifies.

I'm still thinking about what he admitted to me earlier—how I'm the only one he's been with in the Chevelle. That surprised me. From what I've heard, Perry had a reputation with the ladies. But maybe none of them were good enough to take in the Chevelle.

Until me.

It's probably silly to put so much importance on that little fact, but help it. That car means a lot to him. Like it's his precious baby.

Perhaps I mean a lot to him too.

Keeping my head back and my eyes tightly closed, I sit still as he continuously pours water over my head, getting all the shampoo out. I need to condition it too," I tell him.

I can tell he's checking out the various bottles before finding the matching conditioner. "So demanding, wife."

"I think you like it."

"I like everything about you."

The promise in his voice almost convinces me he's telling the truth. Why do I find it so hard to accept compliments? To believe that someone would actually care for me for who I am? Seamus did a number on me.

Shampoo My father did too. Even my mother.

When the I am a product of my environment, and in my environment growing up was neglected. For too long, I've let that define me. Being with Perry, marrying him—has changed that. I no longer want to be known as a pathetic little rich girl who stays holed up in her bedroom day and night, scared to live her life.

I didn't Life is meant to be lived. Perry has shown me that. Even Seamus I know not that I would admit that particular fact to my husband. Fighting for Perry is, and taking risks is not something I would've ever imagined happening.

I've done both in the short span of a few hours. Now that I'm hot and safe, naked in a bathtub with my husband, I feel...

Shower Alive.

Energized.

Shower Perry conditions just the ends, as I requested, before rinsing my hair. I enjoy the warm water spilling over my hair. Down my back. His touch is comforting. Arousing. I'm tired, yet I want more from Perry.

He only Everything he's willing to give me, I'll take. Greedily.

He's seen, "Ready to get out?" he says once he's finished.

Special Opening my eyes, I turn my head so our gazes can meet, and I take a breath. His hair is damp. I study his various tattoos, the one just above his shoulder. Without warning I turn, the water splashing as I readjust myself so I'm in front of him, bending my knees and straddling his lap. His expression

I can't be surprised, but I can tell he likes me like this.

His rising erection is more than a hint that he approves.

I run my hands across his smooth broad shoulders and he tilts his head back, his eyes heavy as he watches me. "What are you doing?"

"Thanking you." Leaning down, I kiss him, my tongue finding his lips. One stroke, I pull away, smiling down at him. "For taking care of me." Perry slowly shakes his head. "What else am I supposed to do? I take care of my wife. I take care of what's mine. I told you this."

"I like knowing I'm yours," I whisper, tilting my hips forward, letting my pussy brush against his lower stomach. His eyes widen the slightest bit. "Why do you make contact. Even though it should make me mad?"

He reaches around me, his fingers tangling in my wet hair, tugging on the ends. "What should make you mad?"

"How possessive you are. Goes against every feminist thought I've ever had." I kiss him again, licking deep and he responds in kind, his tongue tangling with mine, a low murmur of approval sounding in his throat. I press against him, wanting him to know what I really want and he tightens his grip on my hair, his other hand wandering. Searching. Making me shiver everywhere he touches.

"You can be a feminist and still like me claiming you." He tugs on my hair, making me gasp and when he puts his mouth on my throat, he nips at me. I hiss out a breath. "You own me just as much as I own you, you know that." A thrill zips through my blood at his words, making my core pulsate. I wrap my arms around his shoulders, clutching him to me as I devour his mouth.

The kiss turns carnal in an instant, the water sloshing around us. We kiss and kiss, my jaw aching, my entire body on edge. I reach between us and grab hold of his cock, he groans.

"You've been through a lot," he says in protest as I guide him. "You sure you want to—"

I cut him off with my lips, sinking onto his erect cock at the same time, sliding down his shaft easily since I'm so wet. Until he's fully inside me, thick and pulsing, filling me completely.

The utter rightness I'm experiencing at having him buried inside me is overwhelming and all I can do is clutch him for a moment. My face is pressed against his neck, breathing in his familiar, delectable scent. I run my fingers across his back.

back, readjusting my lower body, sending him somehow even further now we're both moaning.

is head "Fuck, Charlotte," he chokes out when I begin to move. "You damn good."

s. After I don't respond. I'm too caught up in the slow drag of his cock with as I ride him. How the head nudges a spot deep within me that has me You're stars. It's too much. With Perry, it's always too much, and I get swept

Every time I come down, my clit brushes against the base of his cock, making my God, that feels good too. Amazing. The water is splashing with my it when bounce, falling over the edge of the tub and I don't even care.

A growl leaves him and he grabs hold of my waist, pinning me in place; gently he moves his hips, pushing inside of me again and again until I cry out, thighs tightening as the orgasm washes over me out of nowhere. I close my eyes and hold him close, whimpering with his every thrust, until he's tongue too.

I grind Without a condom.

his hold God, we're so stupid. But I sort of don't care. Would it be a shiver of hardship, having Perry's baby?

No. It would not.

hard on I can't even believe I just thought that.

his teeth We cling to each other as we both come down from our orgasms. The water growing cooler, until I'm shivering in Perry's arms. He brushes my hair away from my face, slipping his fingers beneath my chin to tip my head back so I have to look him in the eyes.

What I see there takes my breath away. So much emotion swirling in his blue depths, along with a hint of anger. Anger that's not aimed at me, but fire for that.

"No one is ever taking you away from me again. Do you hear me?" His voice is deep, reaching right into my heart and wrapping its tendrils around me like he's never going to let it go.

At the time, My nod is slow, and I close my eyes when he touches the corner of my lips with his fingers. "I don't want to leave you, Perry."

"Damn straight." His voice is full of so much satisfaction, I can't help but deep is I start to laugh.

he in his
across his



ner and AFTER PERRY HELPS me out of the bath and dries me off with a thick towel, he leads me to the bedroom, pulling back the covers and ready feel some in when I stop him, my gaze imploring as I study him.

“Will you sleep with me?”

thin me Nodding, he waves at the bed. “Get in.”

seeing I do as he says, my limbs slow, my mind sleepy. He pulls the duvet away, my chin, brushing my hair back from my face as he studies me, not s and ohthing.

y every Within seconds he’s in bed too. Reaching for me. I go easily i arms, our legs tangling, my hand finding his chest so I can feel the place asthrum of his heart beneath my palm.

out, my “We’ll talk about what happened tomorrow,” he says after a few r ose myof silence. “When you feel better.”

coming “I already feel better.”

“After you get some sleep,” he amends.

Closing my eyes, I rest my head against his warm, solid chest. such asleep peacefully like this every night. Why do we keep separate be again? I’m going to talk to him about that. Wouldn’t it be nice, sharin with my husband all the time?

I think so.

ms, the “I don’t want to sleep,” I tell him, though I don’t mean it. I would hes myfall asleep. “Take care of me, Perry.”

ly head His fingers are in my hair, smoothing it back, and I nuzzle closer sighing.

g in the “What do you need, wife?”

I know “You,” I whisper. “Just... show me you care.”

Show me that I matter. That you missed me. That you want no c e?” Hisbut me.

ound it, He proceeds to do exactly that, pushing me so I’m lying on my b: hands wandering everywhere, his mouth following. He kisses me acr r of mychest, my breasts. His mouth wrapping around my nipples, sucking. I My skin grows hot and I kick the duvet away, the cool air washing o elp it. making me shiver.

Allowing me to watch.

I thrust my fingers into his hair, guiding him downward as he dr mouth across my stomach. Drops a single kiss on one hip bone. Tl

is warmer. Driving me out of my mind so that I'm restless. Aching. Wanting to tuck in a particular spot.

He teases me. His warm, damp lips press into my inner thighs, tickling the sensitive skin, making me giggle. The giggle turns into a moan when his mouth finds the very heart of me, his tongue searching, lips sucking. As his wet fingertip slips inside of me, thrusting deep and I arch into his mouth, saying *amore*.

Wanting it all.

After everything I've gone through today, I'm sure he thinks I want steady. But I do. I need him so badly. Reminding me that he wants me.

That we're in this together.

Letting go of his hair, I reach for him, and as if he knows, he brushes mine, our fingers interlocking. He clutches my hand as he feeds me, his tongue and lips destroying me as every heavy second passes and when I'm about to come, he pulls away.

Frustration ripples just beneath my skin and I lie there, panting.

"Tell me no one else makes you feel like this," he demands.

I crack my eyes open to find him watching me. His lips are shining on the lower half of his face and I realize he's coated with my juices.

That's really hot.

"Charlotte." His fingers tighten around mine. "Tell me."

"No one else makes me feel like this," I say automatically.

The look of pure satisfaction on his face is one I've never seen before and it's hot too. I can't deny it. "No one else can make you come like this."

I shake my head frantically, about to crawl out of my skin with need. "No one makes me come like you do, Perry."

He dips his head, his tongue sneaking out for a lick and I watch him, breathless as he slowly circles my clit with the tip of his tongue. "I realize now, I think you ran away with him."

"What? N-no." I'm still shaking my head, moaning when he lets go of my hand and spreads my legs open even wider, his touch rough, though never me, take it. "I would never do that."

"I know that now." He lifts completely away from me, sliding his body so his face is in mine. "I trust you, Charlotte."

My heart swells and I reach for his face, my fingers sliding down his cheeks before I lift my head, brushing his mouth with mine. I can't

ing himmyself and I lick at his lips, wanting him to know it doesn't both

Whatever we do, I enjoy. He has to know this. "I love that you trust
ticklingwhisper against his lips. "Can I trust you?"

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A singleagainst my mouth, just before he nips at my lower lip. "That asshole i
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myself and I lick at his lips, wanting him to know it doesn't bother me. Whatever we do, I enjoy. He has to know this. "I love that you trust me," I whisper against his lips. "Can I trust you?"

"I'd burn down the whole fucking world to keep you safe," he murmurs against my mouth, just before he nips at my lower lip. "That asshole is going to pay."

Something niggles at me with his statement. Perry wanting to destroy Seamus is more about him, and not so much about me.

I want to forget this entire ordeal ever happened.

"Don't talk about him." I kiss Perry again, tugging on his body so he's sprawled on top of me. I want him inside of me. I want to forget.

I just want to feel.

Him.

And nothing else.



CHAPTER TEN

Perry

I LEAVE CHARLOTTE sleeping peacefully in bed the next morning, closing the door. Nearly jumping out of my skin when I spot Jasper lying at the end of the hall, Doja winding her sleek black body around his shoulder.

Thank Christ I slipped on a pair of boxer briefs before I left the room. Jasper doesn't have to see me naked.

"Good morning, Mr. Constantine. How is Miss Charlotte doing? Does she need anything? Is she hungry? Should I make breakfast for both of you?" he asks me, wringing his hands together.

Slowly I shake my head as I walk toward him, rubbing the back of my neck. We were up half the night fucking, and I'm exhausted. No way am I going into work today. Besides, I can't leave her alone. Hell no. What if McTitface shows up? He's unhinged. I have no idea what he might do—*not* that I'd let him get close to her like that ever again. "She's sleeping. I think she needs as much rest as possible."

"Of course, sir. I think that's an excellent idea." Jasper nods, glances down at Doja, as do I. She meows at us, squinting her golden eyes. "The cat is acting nervous."

"Maybe she misses Charlotte." I think every one of us standing in the hallway missed her.

"I'm sure she does. Well, she can greet her once Miss Charlotte wakes up." Jasper flits his gaze to me. "And perhaps you should get dressed. Are you going into work?"

"No way," is my automatic response. "I'm staying home with her today."

The look of approval on Jasper's face can't be denied. "Very good. Would you care for some breakfast?"

"I'll eat with my wife." I glance over my shoulder at her closed bedroom door and the urge to check on her is overwhelming, even though I woke her only minutes ago. "Take it easy this morning, J. I'll let you know when we're ready to eat."

"Of course." He nods and bends down, scooping Doja into his arms. "Would you care to take the cat to her?"

"Yeah. Actually, I will." I pluck Doja from his arms and cuddle her. She's pleased when she starts purring. I was never a cat person until Doja. She's a bit kind of snotty, but when she's in an affectionate mood, I like it.

I sneak back into Charlotte's room, carefully shutting the door behind me. Doja squirms in my arms and jumps out of them onto the bed when I'm closer. The cat marches right up to her owner, meowing softly before she rubs her head against the side of Charlotte's face.

Reminding me of a freaking princess in a fairy tale, my wife asks me to do it slowly. Probably due to all the head butts and constant purring from her, Charlotte's eyes flutter open and she smiles when she sees Doja in her arms.

A little squeal leaves her and she hauls Doja close, giving her a smack on the top of her head. A giggle escapes her when Doja meows again, and she rubs her cheek against my arm.

"I didn't mean for her to wake you up," I say.

Charlotte's gaze finds mine, her cheeks turning the faintest shade of pink. "Oh. It's okay." She rubs underneath Doja's chin, her attention focused on her cat, instead of me.

"As if I might what... make her uncomfortable?"

"Well, fuck that."

I approach the bed, throw back the covers and crawl back underneath them, pulling the duvet over me before I slide in behind my wife, sling my arm around her middle, splaying my fingers across her bare stomach. "Do you sleep well?"

She nods, her back to me, her head slightly bent. "Did you stay awake with me?"

"I did." Doja crawls over Charlotte, seeking my attention. I give it to her, of course, petting her silky fur. "Does that bother you?"

"Not at all." She leans into me, her lush body fitting perfectly

od, sir.mine. “I don’t want to get out of bed yet.”

“Then don’t.” I kiss the side of her neck, breathing her in. I love her bedroomsmell. Can’t get enough of it. My hands begin to explore, streak across her thighs as with fingers over her hips and she nudges against me.

When somewhere a phone rings and I realize it’s mine.

“Should you get that?” Charlotte asks after the third ring.

“I don’t want to get out of bed,” I tell her, repeating her own words to her.

Her ass rubs against my front, rousing my dick. “Stay with me there.” She’s The phone stops ringing, only to start back up again.

I cup her breasts, noting her hard nipples. Her tits are a perfect hand-me-can’t get enough of them. “Bet it’s my brother.”

“Or one of mine,” she adds.

Don’t want to talk to any of those assholes this morning, or even about them. I’d rather not discuss what happened yesterday just when I prefer to act like it never happened.

Though I can’t avoid it. Something needs to be done, and soon.

I’d just rather savor my wife a little while longer before we both stop kissing reality once again.

I’m essentially mauling my responsive wife, Doja is frustrated and sitting on the foot of the bed when there’s a light knock on the door.

Blowing out an exasperated breath, I call out, “What is it, Jasper?”

“Sir, you have a call.” He pauses for only a second. “From solely Lancaster.”

“I win,” Charlotte whispers. “Told you it was my brother.”

“Which one?” I ask as I slide my hand down her stomach, heading toward promised land.

“Reginald, sir. Miss Charlotte’s father.”

My hand pauses in its journey and we both go still, Charlotte gripping her shoulder to stare at me with wide, slightly terrified eyes.

“Tell him I’ll call him back,” I say, my gaze never straying from my all nightwife’s.

“He said it was urgent.” Another hesitation. “He would like to speak to her, you now, sir. I already tried to tell him you were busy.”

“Damn it,” I mutter, letting go of Charlotte and sliding out of bed. I glance next to glance around the bedroom, realizing I’ve got nothing in here to

“Give me a minute,” I yell to Jasper. “Tell him I’ll be right there.”

“Very well, sir.”

Charlotte sits up, the duvet bunched at her waist, her upper half display, which is the wrong call because damn, all I want to do is slide into bed and suck on her nipples for fifteen minutes straight. Until gasping and so wet, it takes nothing for me to slide inside of her and fade back to oblivion.

Yeah. Not going to happen right now, thanks to her fucking father.

“What do you think my father wants?” she asks.

If one of her brothers told him about the abduction, I’m going to be thankful. Ishit. Why cause trouble when she’s home and safe?

Can’t say that to Charlotte, though.

“I don’t know. To give me shit?” I run a hand through my hair, not thinking, resting both hands on my hips. “I need to throw some clothes on.”

She frowns. “Why?”

“Really don’t want to take a call with your father in my briefs, hard-on.” I glance down at myself, noting the semi I’m still sporting.

She covers her mouth, muffling her laughter. At least she seems to despite what happened yesterday. My girl seems to bounce back quick with us.

My gaze goes to her arm and the bruises there. They look worse in the morning light, which infuriates the shit out of me. I get close enough to his asshole, and there’s going to be hell to pay.

“He’d make it deflate, trust me,” she says, and now it’s my turn to chuckle.

I leave her room and go into mine, grabbing a pair of sweats and slipping into them before I pull on a T-shirt. The moment I’m in the living room, Jasper is heading for me, a cordless landline phone in his hands, a concerned expression on his face as he hands it over.

“Good morning, Mr. Lancaster,” I say automatically.

“What the fuck is going on, Constantine? I just received a text message from my daughter with a photo of my daughter bound and her mouth covered in tape. Someone *kidnapped* her, and you didn’t think to tell me about it? What the hell is she?”

This is how Reggie greets me, his booming voice making me wince. At least he’s upset about it. I know Charlotte figured he wouldn’t care.

“When did you receive the photos, sir?” Fury ripples through me.

often do you check your damn phone?” According to Grant, not very r

“Why does that matter? Tell me what’s going on. Now!”

on full “Charlotte is fine. She’s safe. She’s with me right now,” I try to r
ip backhim, but he speaks right over me.

il she’s “What the hell kind of sick trick is this then? What’s going on? An
uck herlie to me, son.” His voice is firm. As if I’m an idiot and would lie to th
I’m not freaking stupid.

“Are you available to meet sometime today? It’s probably bet
explain everything in person,” I say.

ose my “Only if Charlotte is with you. I want to see her. Make sure sl
right.” His voice is gruff, and for a minute I’m tempted to yell at his a
like he’s screaming at me. Call him out for his bogus behavior.

before Where was he before, when she needed him? From what she’s tol
don’t think this man has shown up for his daughter the entirety of h
And when he does, he berates her, makes her feel like absolute shit a
with ahurts her. Mentally and physically.

Just like McAbductor. Funny, how those bruises he gave her are
; happyidentical to the ones her goddamn father gave her right befo
ly. engagement party.

e in the “You suddenly care now, huh?” The words leave me before I c
to thatthem, and once they’re out there, I don’t give a shit.

Fuck it. He needs to know how I feel. There’s nothing he can
turn tochange the fact that I’m now his son-in-law. Does he really think
make my life miserable? I’ve dealt with shit my entire life. Fucked-up
slippingdynamics don’t scare me. I come from one. I’m used to it.

; room, “What did you just say to me?” Reggie asks incredulously. I’m g
solemnnot many people call this man out for his shit. Someone has to do it.

Guess it’s me.

“You heard me.” I grip the phone tight, my heart pounding. I wan
messagehim, *come for me, bro*, but I keep my mouth shut.

oe. Has He’s quiet for so long I figured he hung up the phone. But then I l
iere theragged breathing, and I can tell he’s pissed.

Good. So am I.

nce. At “How dare you say that to me. You just waltz into her life unexp
and act like you know my daughter. Who the hell do you think you are

. “How “Her husband,” I say firmly. “And you’re the one who arranged fo

nuch. ‘waltz’ into her life in the first place, so that’s on you.”

He’s speechless. Blustering. It should give me satisfaction that I s
easure the old man, but it doesn’t. All I feel is angry. Defensive.

Sad for my wife, that this asshole is her dad.

id don’t “You’re coming to my office now,” he finally says, once he’s fo
is man. voice. “And you’re bringing my daughter with you.”

“Fuck off,” I say, before I drop the phone back into the receiver,
ter if I to find Jasper standing there with a shocked expression on his face, his
formed into a little O.

he’s all “You heard that?”

ass, just Jasper nods. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“If he calls back, tell him we’re not interested in talking to him.” I
d me, I walk away, pausing when I hear Jasper say my name. I glance o
er life. shoulder to find him watching me. “Yes?”

nd even His lips curve into a small smile. “Thank you for protectin
Charlotte, sir. And for bringing her home.”

almost “I didn’t protect her well enough, J,” I tell him, remorse socking m
re our gut, as usual.

His smile fades. “I didn’t either, sir. But she’s still here with us.”

an stop “That she is.” I head for her bedroom, murmuring to myself, “T
is.”

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r me to

‘waltz’ into her life in the first place, so that’s on you.”

He’s speechless. Blustering. It should give me satisfaction that I stumped the old man, but it doesn’t. All I feel is angry. Defensive.

Sad for my wife, that this asshole is her dad.

“You’re coming to my office now,” he finally says, once he’s found his voice. “And you’re bringing my daughter with you.”

“Fuck off,” I say, before I drop the phone back into the receiver, turning to find Jasper standing there with a shocked expression on his face, his mouth formed into a little O.

“You heard that?”

Jasper nods. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“If he calls back, tell him we’re not interested in talking to him.” I start to walk away, pausing when I hear Jasper say my name. I glance over my shoulder to find him watching me. “Yes?”

His lips curve into a small smile. “Thank you for protecting Miss Charlotte, sir. And for bringing her home.”

“I didn’t protect her well enough, J,” I tell him, remorse socking me in the gut, as usual.

His smile fades. “I didn’t either, sir. But she’s still here with us.”

“That she is.” I head for her bedroom, murmuring to myself, “That she is.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Charlotte

THE DREAM IS recurring, happening almost nightly now. I'm running on the sidewalk, the deli up ahead and I know Arthur and Martha are waiting for me. Ready to rescue me yet again. My chest aches from breathing so hard and when I spot Arthur standing in the open doorway of his apartment, he waves his hand at him, trying to call out his name.

But nothing comes out. I have no voice. And when I feel hands grip the back of my hair, yanking me backwards, I stumble to the ground, Seamus clapping on top of me. Straddling me, thrusting his face in mine.

"Little bitch," he mutters, his dark eyes blazing with anger. "This is how you can get away from me?"

Struggling, I part my lips, a silent scream leaving me and that's how I always wake up.

Actually screaming.

It's been two weeks since the incident, as I like to call it, and I'm having daily nightmares. It's awful, but Perry is always right there with me. He pulls me into his arms every single time I wake up, holding me close and whispering words of reassurance.

You're safe. You're okay. You're with me. I've got you.

I always cling to him, the tears falling, my entire body wracked with shivers. The fear I feel every time I wake up from this dream is...

Devastating.

Since it happened, Perry is overprotective to the point of being smothering, but I don't mind. I want him by my side. Watching over me. Checking in on me. He's currently working from home, something

brother reluctantly allowed him to do. Jasper hovers all the time and always trying to get me to eat but I'm never hungry.

I don't know what's wrong with me. Perry says I'm traumatized by being abducted and that it's expected. While I know he's right, I also know it's more than that. Physically, I don't feel well. I'm tired. Emotionally drained. I want to sleep all the time, and the thought of eating makes me want to vomit. And when I do run to the bathroom to throw up, nothing comes out because I'm not eating.

It's a horrible cycle.

I woke up this morning to an empty bed. Perry has converted his bedroom—where we share mine now—into his temporary office and I can hear him talking along on the phone from across the hall, even though my door is shut. I lie in bed, listening inside, and listen to him, appreciating the sound of his deep, sexy voice, hearing him breathing and putting on the charm for someone they're trying to make a deal with. I don't know how they do it, but I can almost understand what they do at Halcyon, but Winston calls Perry a *cleaner*. Meaning he cleans up all the messes by making promises and holding smooth voice of his, convincing them to agree that it wasn't so bad and that they're definitely not backing out of the deal.

His skills are impressive. I should know. He convinces me to do a lot of things on a nightly basis, trying to wear me out with lots of sex that eventually leads to me falling into blissful, dreamless sleep.

when I At first.

The nightmares don't stop though, no matter how hard I try to make them disappear.

having I'm lying there, about to reach over to the nightstand so I can get the phone, when a wave of nausea hits me so strongly, I stumble out of bed and almost falling to the floor. I make it to the connecting bathroom just in time, throwing up nothing but bile.

Once I'm finished, I collapse onto the cool marble floor, pressed with my heated face against it and closing my eyes. I think the trauma over everything that has happened has made me sick. I'm so tired of feeling like this. Sick all the time. Sick because of Seamus and what he did to me. Sick that my father has basically been almost completely out of his life—and convinced my mother to do the same. Sick because of Perry and Jasper and my brothers, who have really come through for me. Sick because, since the incident, I don't have the support of my parents at all. Ever since I talked to my father that one day, we haven't heard from them since.

is well, I never really did have their support, so I don't know why heartbroken over it. Maybe because it all feels so final? It's ridiculous from think like this. I have money thanks to my trust fund. I have security so think to my marriage with Perry, and it's not like I'm not in contact with tionally members. All three of my brothers love and support me. They've really want through since everything that happened, though Crew was always there for me.

"Charlotte? Where are you?"

My eyes flash open when I hear Perry call my name and I scramble on the floor, smoothing my hair away from my face before I flush the toilet. "Give me a minute," I call, thankful that I closed the bathroom door before he came in here earlier. At least my husband didn't find me sprawled across the floor like I'd passed out.

I don't know why I've been keeping the nausea a secret from Perry, and I don't know why, maybe because he'd force me to see a doctor, and I'm not ready to talk in that what's going on with me to a stranger yet. The last time I went to a doctor and no, was to my pediatrician. It's been a while since I've sought medical help.

I hurriedly wash my hands and gargle mouthwash before I enter the bathroom, smiling at my husband, who immediately frowns.

Before I say, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." My smile is so wide, the corners of my mouth tremble and relax. "Why?"

"You look like you've been crying." He waves a hand at my face. I realize my eyes must be blood shot thanks to vomiting earlier. I always grab my little when I throw up. It's awful.

of bed, "I haven't been," I reassure him.

in time, His intense gaze sweeps over me, and the disbelief is there, written over his face. He takes a step closer, reaching for my hand, enclosing my own. "Your fingers are like ice."

everything "I just washed my hands."

ck over "Did you fall back asleep?" His voice lowers and he pulls me even closer. "Did you have another bad dream?"

While I say, "No." I shake my head, letting him pull me into his arms. It's the first time since where I feel the safest and if I had my choice, I would spend every second in Perry's arms, whiling the hours away.

But that's not actually living a normal life. He has things to do. A

I'm so go to every day. And I need something too. I want to go back to school to be entertaining the idea for a while, even before we were married, but thanks after everything that happened, I'm terrified to go onto campus alone. Without protection. Without Perry by my side.

I'm being ridiculous.

"You're shaking, baby." He tucks me into his chest and I lie breathing in his scent, absorbing his warmth. He's firm and strong and all mine and I've become this burden of a woman.

No. Not a woman. I feel like a scared little girl, and I hate it. It's a matter that I took charge of my own fate and threw burning hot spit behind Seamus's face before I made my escape. Perry always tells me I'm a rawled badass for doing that, and I want to believe him.

I do.

But it's like my mind won't let me. My parents' abandonment hurt so much about damn much on top of it all. I'd think I'd be used to it by now. This doctor, it's thing has gone on my entire life, but no.

It still hurts. I do what they want. I get married to the man the father—chose for me, and he's still not satisfied.

Nothing I do is right. I'm a failure.

I am.

The tears flow freely, soaking the front of Perry's button up shirt. I'm sure he can feel them, but he doesn't say anything. Just holds me close and I keep his mouth pressed to my forehead, offering up all that comfort I've cry a good at delivering.

"I need to get over this," I finally say after a few minutes of feeling for myself.

"It's only been a few weeks," he reminds me, which feels like it's been a long time for me to wallow in my misery already. "Give yourself some credit."

"I'm tired of feeling scared all the time. Or feeling sorry for myself. Get over it." I pull away slightly so I can look him in the eyes. His gaze is closer, concern, and I wonder if he ever regrets marrying me. He definitely signs up for this. "I want to be stronger."

"You already are strong. I've told you before you're the strongest I've ever seen you on any day I know," he reassures me.

Pretty lies, all of the words he says. Delivered with a smooth tone and a kind smile. He knows how to sweet talk people. He does it for a living.

ol. I've certain that's what he's doing to me right now.

out now "I should take a shower."

"Didn't you just take one last night?" His brows lower.

"I feel gross." I shrug one shoulder.

"You hungry? Want to eat something?" He's as bad as Jasper, there, trying to feed me. I'm surprised they haven't taught Doja how to bring and he's of crackers to me yet.

"No." I shake my head, offering him a weak smile. "I'll take a shower first. Then I'll try and eat."

He tightens his grip on me when I try to make my escape. "Such a worrying me, Charlotte. You never eat."

"I'm not very hungry," I admit, my voice small.

"You've lost weight. You look thinner," he says.

Perry doesn't mean this as a compliment either. His voice is laced with a sort of concern.

"I haven't had much of an appetite lately," I admit.

He presses his lips together, and I can tell he wants to say something but decides against it. Is he disappointed in me? Does he regret marrying me? With my behavior lately, I wouldn't be surprised. "Take your shower. I'll make a call in five, but it's a short one. Then we can eat together."

Code for him watching me while I eat to make sure I consume something. I'm sure of it. "Sure. Okay."

I withdraw from him but he grabs my hand, pulling me back into a gentle kiss. I may be depressed, but the sex between us is still good, though a little excessive. Not that I'm complaining but wow, we do it a lot. I know it could feel like this with someone. So all-consuming and leaving me's been feeling needy and restless.

"I hate seeing you sad," he whispers against my lips before he kisses me. I'm again. "Did you ever look into seeing a therapist?"

I shake my head. "I don't know if I'm ready to tell anyone else. It didn't happen to me yet."

He says nothing to that, changing the subject. "Maybe we should go to the woman of town this weekend. Just the two of us."

I rest my hand on his chest, dragging my index finger down, across the buttons of his shirt. "Isn't it Thanksgiving Thursday?"

Fairly. "Oh wait. You're right. My mother has called me multiple times, to

get me to confirm we'll be there for the holiday.”

“Why haven't you told her yes? Not like my parents want me over. I heard, they're spending the holiday in St. Barts, according to Finn.

“Charlotte...” His voice drifts and I slowly withdraw from him, always walking backward toward the bathroom.

g a bag “What? It's true. Go take your call. You're going to be late.”

brightly at him before I shut myself away in the bathroom, leaning shower against the door and closing my eyes, taking a deep breath.

I can't wallow in my misery any longer. Things need to return to normal. You're Perry should be back in the office. I should figure out my next step in life. Go to college maybe?

I'm not sure, but I do know one thing.

I hate myself for acting so weak. I need to be stronger for Perry.

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“Charlotte...” His voice drifts and I slowly withdraw from his hold, walking backward toward the bathroom.

“What? It's true. Go take your call. You're going to be late.” I smile brightly at him before I shut myself away in the bathroom, leaning heavily against the door and closing my eyes, taking a deep breath.

I can't wallow in my misery any longer. Things need to return to normal. Perry should be back in the office. I should figure out my next step with my life. Go to college maybe?

I'm not sure, but I do know one thing.

I hate myself for acting so weak. I need to be stronger for Perry.

For myself.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Perry

THE MONDAY AFTER Thanksgiving and I'm back in the office. In person I didn't want to go, but Charlotte basically forced me. I then conspired with Winston on Thanksgiving, because I caught their intense conversation at one point, their heads bent together, their serious as Winston explained something to her in low tones. I tried to talk to them but of course, my wife noticed me and called me out.

She never would tell me what she talked about with Winston, but the one thing I knew, I had the entire family on my ass about how I needed to get back to work and not stay holed up in the apartment forever.

"You can't be on a year-long honeymoon," Keaton had said, and he was just giving me a hard time, but he also knows what happened to Charlotte.

And how we kept it quiet.

Not many people know that Seamus abducted her, and of course her father never mentioned it because talk about bad press. Lancasters had a similar sort of thing. Turns out, so do Constantines.

Such a bunch of shit.

I played nice and agreed with everyone that I should return to the office. Charlotte beamed like a proud wife, though I'm thinking she just wanted to get out of her hair. I'm like a watchdog, always chasing after her, making sure she's eating right and sleeping well and that she's not too sad. She won't talk about what happened to her, not anymore, and I swear she's keeping her feelings bottled up inside and it's eating at her.

It's the only part of her that's eating, considering how thin she is.

watched her at Thanksgiving. She picked at her plate, moving food and not really eating any of it. No one else caught on, but I did. I saw it

When it comes to Charlotte, I notice every little thing.

I tried to talk to her about it later that night, but she shut me out by shoving her hand down the front of my jeans and next thing I knew, she was pulling my dick out and her lips wrapped around it. I'm not going to argue with my wife willingly gives me a blow job. I forget everything when she's touching me, and she knows it.

I dump all my stuff at my desk before I storm into Winston's office, noting the way he leans back in his chair, resting his loosely clenched fist on his chest as he contemplates me.

"Been waiting for you to come barreling in here," he drawls as I sink through the door.

I fall into the chair across from his desk, glaring at him. "I don't barter

"Hate to say it, but you just did." He's quiet for a moment and spies on me, stewing in my thoughts before he finally asks, "What's your problem?"

"Something's wrong with my wife, and I don't know how to fix it.

"What's going on between you two? Seemed perfectly lovey-dovey last Thursday." Winston makes a face. He's not into public displays of affection, though Ash has turned him around on that subject.

I knew somewhat.

"Our sex life is good. I know she doesn't hate me. She just becomes numb all the time. As if she feels nothing. She won't eat. She's having nightmares." I pause, scrubbing my hand across my jaw. "I suggested therapy, but she said she doesn't trust anyone enough to share her feelings with."

"I suppose I don't blame her," Winston says, not helping my case whatsoever. "It's hard to open up."

"I think I'm the only Constantine who has no problems expressing my feelings," I mutter. "All the rest of you are ridiculous."

"I'm not too sure about that. Does Charlotte know how you feel?" Winston raises a brow.

I hesitate with my answer. I haven't told her so much in words, but she'll tell. Don't I show her how much I care?

"I'm guessing that's a no," he says wryly. "You can't expect her to know how you feel. Women get all twisted up, trying to figure us out. You

aroundtell her.”

t. “She twists me up too, you know,” I mutter.

Am I in love with her? I don’t know. I’ve never been in love
up bywoman before. I definitely care about her. Feel possessive about her.
she hadthat reminds me of a certain McDickhead...

hen my “Heard anything about you know who?” I ask, changing the su
ouchingdon’t want to talk about my feelings for Charlotte. I have a hard enou
trying to process them on my own. I don’t want to examine them w
office,hard-ass brother.

d hands “Not a single thing. I still follow up with Myron once a week.
complete sight of him right after it happened,” Winston reminds me,
lam theI need it. “He up and disappeared. I wonder if he went back to Ireland.
thinks he’s there, but nothing has popped up. No credit card recei
irrel.” plane tickets, no visuals on random surveillance video. And he’s
o am I,Bishop’s Landing. He would’ve been spotted by now.”

” “Maybe my wife scared him off. She probably fucked him up w
” threw soup at face,” I suggest, still marveling she even did that.

vey last Charlotte is more kick-ass than she realizes.

fection, “Maybe.” I can hear the amusement in my brother’s voice, which
help my mood.

“And if he dares to show his face around here, he needs to be prep
ts so...me to kill him,” I mutter, staring off into the distance.

having An aggravated sigh leaves my brother and I angle my head
she godirection, our gazes locking. “What?”

er story “You’re being irrational with the murderous comments. You ca
him. I don’t care if you want to, you can’t.” Winston sits up straight,
7 causehis arms on top of his desk. “I’ve had a few ugly—run-ins in the past.
seen how well those worked out.”

ing his “You left evidence,” I say, thinking of the triplets and how close h
to offing them. “Those fuckers should’ve died that night.”

d about “And then there would’ve been hell to pay. I’d end up in jail. P
don’t care how excellent our lawyers are, or the lack of eviden
ut can’tprosecution would’ve come up with, I probably would’ve gone dow
levels his thunderous gaze upon me. “You’re more reckless than me a
o knowknow it. Marriage has not settled you down. If anything, it’s only fi
have toup.”

I should be insulted, but I'm not. I feel the same way. Thinking of putting their hands on my wife sends rage blazing through my blood, and I've never been the type to get angry about anything. I guess that's my BC. In fact, before Charlotte.

"Charlotte says my rage is more about me than what happened to the subject. I admit. When she said that to me, I immediately felt terrible.

It hasn't stopped my anger though. Not a damn bit.

"She's probably right," Winston says.

Great. That doesn't make me feel any better.

He lost clenches my hands into fists, I lightly bang them on the chair. "You can't stop me if I find him and you're not around."

Myron "You probably won't find him." Winston says it with so much confidence, but I'm immediately filled with resentment. Makes me want to prove him wrong. "He's a ghost. It's as if he didn't even exist. I'm guessing he went through some sort of identity transformation."

When she "Like what, Witness Protection?"

"More like Morelli protection," Winston says, making me roll my eyes.

Fucking Morellis. "Ash mentioned something to me. Something that I didn't observe."

I frown at his quick subject change. "About what?"

He's asked for "About Charlotte."

Now it's my turn to sit up straighter, hating the way my stomach clenches in his at the serious expression on my brother's face. "What did Ash say about my wife?"

"She chatted with Charlotte quite a bit on Thanksgiving. I like to think they're becoming closer."

You've I wave a hand, indicating he needs to keep talking. "Go on."

"I guess Charlotte told her that she hasn't been feeling well. Even when she came home, despite getting plenty of rest. Loss of appetite. She even mentioned throwing up a few times." The pointed look he sends me is almost polite. "As in, I feel pinned in place. "Ever consider your wife could be... pregnant?"

I blink at him, trying to digest the word. *Pregnant?*

"Charlotte?"

"No way..." I snap my lips shut, thinking of the few times we've been in danger without protection.

Okay, the many times. I'm a careless asshole who can't control my emotions.

anyone around the woman he married. So sue me.

and I've Meaning, it's definitely possible.

era. "It's none of my damn business, but do you wear a condom? She o
sort of birth control?" Winston asks.

her," I "Yeah." I nod, not wanting to admit that sometimes I get caught up
moment and slip right inside of her welcoming body. There is nothing
than fucking my woman with nothing between us. Just skin on skin.

"It's not always foolproof," he says.

"No, it's not." I imagine her pregnant. Her belly swelling with m
r arms. Her face turning round, her cheeks rosy as she waddles all over the
blaming me for her condition, but always good-naturedly. She wou
finality beautiful pregnant woman. I can envision it now...

wrong. I have no idea what it's like to be pregnant, nor have I spent mu
hrough with pregnant ladies, but I've watched movies. I've seen what happens
Holy. Shit.

"You should talk to her once in a while instead of fucking her
y eyes. time. See if she could be," Winston suggests, his tone dry.

hat she I slowly shake my head, trying to comprehend the seriousness of th
joy bubbling inside of me.

A baby. A pretty little blonde baby girl who looks just like her ma
is devilish like her daddy.

churns *Shit.*

out my We're young, we've only been together a couple of months, tops,
can handle it. Right? And we definitely don't have the most conve
ke that marriage going on, but our mothers would be happy as shit. I
Charlotte's mom isn't talking to her currently.

I scowl. The Lancasters drive me out of my ever lovin' mind some
tremely "Well damn. You actually look excited by the possibility that
oned—going to be a daddy," Winston says, his voice full of disbelief.

arizing. My gaze cuts to his. "Would it be so bad, having a baby?"

nant?" Winston shudders, as if what I just said he found completely dist
"Trust me. You're not ready. You don't even like children."

"I'd like them if they're mine," I point out.

had sex He scowls. "Having a child isn't easy. Especially when they're
They're so damn needy, too squirmy and they cry all the time. An
himself they're not crying, they're eating. And when they're not eating,

shitting themselves. No thanks.”

I burst out laughing. “That’s only for a short amount of time. You can come in and somecuddle them and wrap them up in blankets. Make them wear silly hats and pat their backs and make them burp. Might be fun.”

“Or they spit up on you and ruin your fifteen-thousand-dollar jacket,” Winston mutters, glancing down at himself and brushing a piece of lint from his lapel.

I’m sure he speaks from experience.

“Mom will be thrilled.”

“What? That her golden child is giving her a golden grandchild? She might revert and shit her pants with joy,” Winston says.

I send him a look. “That’s disgusting.”

He shrugs. “Wouldn’t be surprised. Anyway, I think you need to have a nice little chat with wifey. That could be the reason for her mood swings and the lack of appetite.”

That reminds me of what he said earlier. “I didn’t even know she was throwing up. She never told me.”

She hid that from me, and I don’t like it.

“Ash mentioned when Charlotte made that confession, she immediately contacted like she regretted it. I’m sure she knew Ash would tell me, and I’ll tell you.”

“But why wouldn’t she tell me?”

“Maybe she didn’t want you to worry, and that’s why she didn’t reveal her intentions. You have been acting extremely protective of her since—the incident. Even if Winston points out.

What the actual fuck? Winston makes it sound so casual. Like she did it every time when she went to the supermarket.

“Of course I’ve been overprotective of her.” I rise to my feet, ready to bolt. “That asshole *kidnapped* my wife and God knows what he planned to do to her. I’m sure he wasn’t going to just let her go and hope we would forget about it.”

I’m headed for Winston’s office door, ready to leave when he calls.

“Perry, come on—”

“No.” I whirl on him, jabbing my index finger in his direction. “You can’t tell me not to be upset. You can tell me not to do stuff that’ll hurt the company’s image if the press got wind of it, but give me a break, don’t forget y-

your fucking mind when those triplets threatened Ash. When the N
a get todid. When anyone did. Hell, you were ready to bust my face in wh
ts. You thought I was flirting with her, and I'm your fucking brother. I feel th
exact way about Charlotte that you feel about Ash. The same way. K
r suit," that he touched a single hair on her head, that he grabbed her tight
r visible that he bruised her—" A ragged breath leaves me and I shake my head
fucked. You know this."

Winston's expression is solemn as he watches me. "You're right
fucked."

d? She The tension slips from my body at his admission. I'm glad he agre
me. I was starting to go a little crazy, dealing with my emotions v
comes to Charlotte.

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ngs and I gape at him. "What the hell?"

"You don't feel that way about a woman unless you're in love wit
he was know, I know, it's hard to wrap your brain around," he says when I
protest. "I'm not one to express my feelings of love." Winston sneers
sure he hates admitting he has any emotion that's not related to ar
mediately don't feel anything most of the time—with the exception of Ash. I th
I would might be dealing with the same... issues."

"I'm not in love with her," I say automatically, turning on my h
making my escape from my brother's office.

mention "Liar!" he calls after me.

cident," But I ignore him.

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your fucking mind when those triplets threatened Ash. When the Morellis did. When anyone did. Hell, you were ready to bust my face in when you thought I was flirting with her, and I'm your fucking brother. I feel the same exact way about Charlotte that you feel about Ash. The same way. Knowing that he touched a single hair on her head, that he grabbed her tight enough that he bruised her—" A ragged breath leaves me and I shake my head. "He's fucked. You know this."

Winston's expression is solemn as he watches me. "You're right. He is fucked."

The tension slips from my body at his admission. I'm glad he agrees with me. I was starting to go a little crazy, dealing with my emotions when it comes to Charlotte.

"Have you told your wife you're in love with her yet?"

I gape at him. "What the hell?"

"You don't feel that way about a woman unless you're in love with her. I know, I know, it's hard to wrap your brain around," he says when I start to protest. "I'm not one to express my feelings of love." Winston sneers. Pretty sure he hates admitting he has any emotion that's not related to anger. "I don't feel anything most of the time—with the exception of Ash. I think you might be dealing with the same... issues."

"I'm not in love with her," I say automatically, turning on my heel and making my escape from my brother's office.

"Liar!" he calls after me.

But I ignore him.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Charlotte

IT WAS DIFFICULT, convincing my husband to return to the office when necessary. Perry is not made to work from home.

And Perry is also a hovering, overattentive husband who sort of goes a little crazy after a while.

The moment he left for work earlier, I remained in bed for most of the morning, doing a little research on my phone. With Perry now gone, I'm going to concentrate on myself and look into taking some college courses online. It's still hard for me to leave the apartment for any length of time. I get too worked up, too anxious.

I thought about looking into architecture again, but looking over the requirements, all I could think of was Seamus, so that won't work.

I've decided to look into interior design courses instead.

Once I've sent an email to a counselor asking to schedule an appointment, I finally request Jasper to bring me a late breakfast, which he gladly delivers to me on a tray.

The man was ecstatic I actually requested something to eat, which didn't happen in a while. I only wanted bland wheat toast—almost burnt but crisp and with light butter—and sliced strawberries. That's all my stomach could take. He tried to convince me to have some Greek yogurt but I was thinking of the creamy substance made me want to hurl.

Hard pass on that.

After I finally climbed out of bed, I took a shower. Sat out on the balcony and absorbed the late fall afternoon sun. The weather keeps tricking us. Sunny. Sunny. Rain. Soon enough it will be winter and nothing but

gray skies and snow, so I have to take advantage where I can.

“I must say, you look lovely this afternoon, Miss Charlotte,” announces when he joins me on the terrace, delivering a cup of tea.

I tip my head back and stare up at the blue sky, noting the dots of white clouds. “It’s the sunshine. It’s adding color back into my skin.”

“I think someone is feeling a little freer than usual.”

Glancing over at him, I squint my eyes. “Are you onto me, Jasper?”

“I know you’ve grown to care for your husband. I approve of him. But he’s been so terribly—worried about you as of late,” Jasper is diplomatic as always.

“He worries too much,” I say, leaning my head back once again, but closing my eyes. “He needed to go back to the office.”

Yet, I miss him. I can’t wait to tell him I looked into college courses. He’ll be proud of me. Maybe I should try and look into getting a therapist too. I shouldn’t hold on to all of this trauma. It’s not helping me get out of the house all day. I need someone to talk to about it, and that can’t be Perry all the time.

My entire life froze after I escaped from Seamus, and I hate that it shouldn’t be like this. I just got married—yes, to a man I don’t even know, but that’s beside the point—I should be in wedding bliss. Going to college, having fun with my husband. Making new friends.

I frown. There’s a problem. I don’t have any friends. Not really. I mean, the ones I had in school are busy going to college. I’m the first one in my class to get married, and while a few of them were at my wedding, for the most part I don’t stay in contact with anyone besides through social media.

I can think of one person I’d enjoy spending more time with though.

Grabbing my phone from the side table by my chair, I bring up my messages and scroll until I find her name.

Tinsley. My new sister-in-law.

Me: Hi! We should try and get together for lunch this week, if you have time.

We talked about it at Thanksgiving. Ash was there too, but she was in the hospital so she wouldn’t be able to make it until the weekend.

Right now, I want to pick Tinsley’s brain. Try to find out more about her husband. What was he like when he was younger? A teenager? I bet he was just as charming. Maybe a little more reckless. I’m sure he was a lot

He still is.

Jasper Unless he's mad. Then he's just ferocious. And sexy.

Ugh. So damn sexy...

f fluffy My phone dings and I check it.

Tinsley: Hey! I would love to. My week is pretty busy, but maybe next Monday? What do you think?

as well. *Me: That sounds great.*

ays, as *Tinsley: We could Christmas shop after! Unless you don't like shopping.*

ain and I don't always enjoy shopping while my mother would take gold i
an Olympic sport, but I would shop with Tinsley.

ourses. *Me: I don't mind shopping and I do need to Christmas shop.*

erapist What would I even get Perry? I have no idea. Tinsley might
ver it— though...

e it. It *Tinsley: Yay! It'll be fun! I'll text you as we get closer, or you can text me. Whoever rea
I know, out and out first. 😊*

Most of *Me: Sounds good. Looking forward to it.*

e of the *Tinsley: Me too!*
for the

edia. With a smile on my face, I set my phone onto the table next to m
h... then grab my cup of tea and take a sip. For the first time since eve
my text happened with Seamus, I feel calm.

Happy.

orks at “The tea is delicious,” I say to Jasper, who's taken over the
hovering. He doesn't hang as close as my husband, and he's using c
up around the terrace as an excuse, but I know what he's doing. “Tha
for bringing it out to me.”

out my answers, his back to me.

he was I frown. How did he know my stomach was upset? I've tried to ke
of fun. quiet. It's obvious to both of the men in this household that I'm not
nearly as much, and I've kept the vomiting, almost, daily part to myself

Yet here's Jasper, yet again on to me.

"You know, you shouldn't call me Miss Charlotte anymore, sir married now, Jasper," I tell him.

He turns to face me, his expression one of pure horror. I'm sure he realize his faux pas until now. "You're correct—Mrs. Constantine."

you I grimace. "That's so formal."

"That's how I should address you. Or ma'am." He stands up clutching his hands behind his back.

"I'm only twenty. You can't call me ma'am," I say irritably, another sip of tea.

f it was "It's what's proper."

"Well, proper can suck it." I laugh at Jasper's wide eyes. "You've me since I was a child. I barely remember life without you in it. Can just call me Charlotte?"

t know "It's too informal, too intimate..."

"I consider you a family member, Jasper. Call me Charlotte," firmly.

ches He studies me for a moment before he nods once, his expression s "Very well, Charlotte. I must say, you're rather—feisty this afternoon.

"I'm feeling better," I tell him, and I mean it.

I'm feeling better than ever. It was nice to get that off my chest Jasper calling me Miss Charlotte. I need to be honest with my husband well.

y chair, There are a few things I need to tell him. Starting tonight. Over dinner
rything Grabbing my phone yet again, I send Perry a quick text.

Me: Let's go out to dinner tonight.

role of He responds almost immediately.
leaning

ink you *Perry: You sure you're okay to go out?*

ch," he A sigh leaves me. This man.

step that *Me: I need to be around people. Around YOU. Out of this apartment.*

t eating It takes him a few minutes to respond and I start to grow antsy. I do
f.

cup. Idly scroll through social media. Nearly jump out of my skin with
once I'm phone dings.

didn't *Perry: I'll pick you up in the Chevelle at 7.*

Relief floods me at his response.

taller, *Me: Perfect. Where are you taking me?*

taking *Perry: It's a surprise.*

Me: How should I dress?

known *Perry: Wear something short and sexy.*

n't you A smile curls my lips. He's sounding like my old husband right now.
And I like it.

' I say ✧ ✧ ✧

somber. I SPENT THE rest of the afternoon getting ready for my date with Perry.
" a dress in my closet that I purchased during our engagement that
wore. It's a deep, vivid pink, almost fuchsia with a tie fabric belt at
sleeves. It covers me almost entirely, except my legs.

about And Perry is a leg man.

and as I curl my hair and apply my makeup carefully. Spritz myself
ner. favorite perfume then immediately regret it. What if I'm wearing too
What if I'm making a big deal out of nothing?

I shove all of my insecure feelings into the darkest corners of my
need to stop doubting myself all the time, but old habits are hard to
The majority of my life, I've thought this way and it's gotten me nowhere.

I'm sick of it. Before Seamus forced me out of the lobby with
jabbed into my side, I was gaining more confidence. Feeling assured
position as Perry's wife. I lost that.

Tonight, I'm ready to reclaim that version of myself.

A little before seven, I receive a text from my husband.

rain my *Perry: Meet me downstairs. I'm parked at the curb, right in front of the building. Have Jac
go with you.*

hen my I want to protest, but don't. He's justified in still being worried ab
safety. I'm worried too.

Me: Will do!

"Jasper," I call as I exit my bedroom. "Can you accompany me c
the lobby?"

Jasper appears out of nowhere, as he's wont to do. "Where are you
Oh, that's right. Dinner with Mr. Constantine, correct?"

Nodding, I grab my small purse and shove my phone inside. "He
ready to pick me up."

"Let's go then."

W. We ride down in the elevator together, making small talk, th
wonder if Jasper can tell I'm nervous. More like I'm excited. Ready
out and do something normal, like put on a pretty dress and go out to
with my handsome husband.

I found empty lobby of our building, smiling and nodding at the security guard
I never behind the desk as I walk by. Jasper's hurried steps sound behind m
nd long think yet again how much of a non-threat my sweet, older butler is. If
were to magically appear, he could knock Jasper over with a poke
finger.

in my Glancing around the lobby, I look for a sneaky dark-haired I
much? lurking in the shadows, but I don't spot any.

Thank goodness.

brain. I The moment I'm outside, I regret not wearing a coat since the
) break. chilly. But that would cover up the goodness that is my dress, and I
ere. see Perry's initial reaction when he first spots me. Giddy, I run the l
a gun steps to the waiting Chevelle, throwing open the passenger side do
l in my bending down so I can meet Perry's gaze.

"Thanks, Jasper!" my husband yells, his gaze on me and nothing e
eyes practically smolder as he takes me in, annoyance flitting across h
which has me frowning in confusion. "Get in. Now."

isper I scramble into my seat, slamming the heavy door before I turn to
him. "What's wrong?"

"You were bent over and probably showing the entire night shi

out my ass,” he mutters irritably. “That skirt is too damn short.”

Glancing down at my exposed legs, I swallow hard, trying to fight off the disappointment that wants to consume me. “You don’t like my dress?”

“I like it too damn much. That’s the problem. Look at you.” His hand slips under my chin and he turns my head so I have to face him. “Sexy as a wife. I don’t want anyone seeing that pretty ass of yours.”

This sort of talk shouldn’t make me feel all warm and gooey inside, but it does. Oh God, it really does.

“That ass belongs to me,” he continues, dipping his head to deliver a quick, tongue-filled kiss before he’s pulling away from me, one hand on the steering wheel, the other on the gear shift. “Get your seat belt on. I’m going for a ride.”

I do as he says, scrambling to pull my seat belt on, my heart pounding with excitement.

It’s going to be a good night.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Perry

THERE GOES MY wife, killing me yet again with one of those dresses that appears proper at first glance, yet is anything but. Covered everywhere are those damn legs of hers. I can't stop looking at them as I drive, completely distracted by how smooth and shiny they look. Did she put something on them? Baby oil or some shit? They're so damn long and she keeps pulling them. Like she's restless.

I'll give her restless. If she doesn't watch it, I'm going to pull over to a random parking garage like last time we were in the Chevelle and find a way to be senseless. Make us late for our dinner reservation, not that I give a shit. The last thing I have on my mind right now is food.

But damn, should I watch it, considering she might be pregnant with a baby? I don't want to hurt her or our future kid. And how do I even bring it up? Over dinner, after they serve us our drinks but before we get our seats?

Hey, baby, word on the street is you're pregnant. Is it true?

That is the wrong way to approach it. I'm not stupid.

What if she plans on telling me about the pregnancy tonight? Not at dinner. Pretty dress. Long, sexy legs as a distraction and then bam. She's gonna have a baby.

Doesn't seem like a bad way to tell me.

Maybe she's nervous—too scared to tell me, which I don't want her to be. But I get it. This is a big moment. Something that will change our lives forever. Something I never expected this early in the game.

I know things have been a little off between us, but we need to get back on track. I was reluctant earlier when she suggested we should go

dinner tonight, but I realized pretty quickly my wife needs to get back to the land of the living. And I need to support her in her endeavor.

So here I am, driving through the city streets, headed for a restaurant Winston recommended that costs more than some people's monthly rent for two meals, but I don't give a fuck. My wife deserves whatever she wants. I want to be the one to put a smile on her face tonight. And not through sex either.

It goes beyond that for me.

For us.

By the time we're finally at the restaurant, I've got my secret thoughts under control and I'm tossing my car keys at the valet, who catches them as he takes in my orange Chevelle, the slick paint gleaming in the parking lot under the lights. Another valet opens the car door for my wife and when he completely drops to her legs as she steps out of the car, I almost lose it.

“Hey,” I snap at him, his gaze jumping to mine, full of guilt. “I’m moving here, buddy.”

“Perry,” Charlotte admonishes as I make my way toward her and tuck my arm around her, steering her toward the restaurant entrance. “Stop scaring everyone. I know you weren’t doing anything wrong.”

“Staring at your legs is wrong in my book,” I mutter, nudging the valet standing nearby out of my way so I can hold the door open for my wife. She walks inside and I follow after her. “It’s obvious we’re together.”

“I don’t think he was checking me out,” she says airily, though I can see the way her eyes dance.

Pretty sure she’s having fun with this. Torturing me.

“Uh-huh.” Tamping my jealousy down, I smile at the hostess, a petite little gorgeous redhead with dark brown eyes that skim over me appreciatively. “We’re reserved. Reservation for two at seven-thirty. Constantine.”

“Oh yes. Here you are.” She glances up from the computer screen she’s been scanning, barely looking at my wife. The hostess’s attention is all for now on me. “I’ll be right back. I’ll escort you to your table. Follow me.”

Charlotte grabs my hand as we enter the restaurant, the two of us walking side by side, following the hostess as she leads us to our table. “She’s just checking you out.”

“No. Really?” It’s my turn to tease her and she knows it. “See? I know how I felt outside with the valet.”

“There’s nothing wrong with looking,” she says with a careless smile, leaning her shoulder against mine.

“Right. Anyone touches you, babe, and I’m going caveman on the next salary watch me.” I yank her closer, whispering in her ear, “Don’t forget what you want to belong to.”

“Trust me, I don’t. You won’t let me,” she says, sounding breathless. “Damn straight.”

I glance around the restaurant, not surprised at all to see some of them sitting at the tables watching my wife walk by with interest flaring in their sexualeyes. I glare at every single one of them, pleased to find each one of these eyes away first. By the time we’re seated and the hostess leaves us with the menu underneath, I’m satisfied that not a single dude is staring in our table’s direction. Good. They need to back the fuck off.

My wife is completely oblivious, cracking open her menu to study the offerings within. “There aren’t any prices on anything,” she observes.

“This place costs a fortune.” I try not to sweat at the lack of prices. The type of shit used to not matter to me. When I was younger, I spent my family’s money carelessly, not giving a damn how much anything cost.

Always secure that whatever I wanted would be covered by the Conner family dick fortune.

Such douchey behavior. No wonder Winston couldn’t stand me.

I’ve changed. I appreciate the value of a dollar, and while I’m still spending with our family’s money, at least I’m earning my own now—and doing a decent job of it, too. And don’t get me started on the Lancaster woman. I won’t even touch Charlotte’s money. She can keep that to herself. I’m not who’s amooch, despite what her father might think of me.

“What made you want to come here?” she asks.

I glance up just in time to catch her sink her teeth into her lower lip. She just contemplates the menu.

“I’ll tell you. My entire body reacts, specifically my dick.”

“Winston recommended the place.” I shift in my seat, regretting my walking choices.

I probably should’ve pulled into a random parking garage and fucked like I did that one night. Having her ride me in my favorite ride. That’s extremely fond memory. One I like to think about almost daily.

“Figures,” she says with a small smile, her gaze returning to the menu.

shrug of A brilliant idea hits me and I decide to test it out. “You going to drink?”

mm. Just She glances up, our gazes meeting, her brows drawn together. “Who you old enough yet.”

“So? No one is going to card you in this place.” I shrug, waiting.

ss. If she refuses, she’s pregnant. If she says yes, then maybe she’s not. Or she doesn’t know she’s having a baby...

he men Shit, I don’t know what to think.

in their “Maybe a glass of wine then.” She pauses. “Are you going to drink looking I shake my head in answer. If I could, I’d get sloshed because damn with our pressure of the last few weeks is seeping out of my body, leaving me r ction. drown my lingering troubles in alcohol.

But I’m driving, so I have to be responsible.

udy the Our server shows up and I order a bottle of wine for the both of server doesn’t bother asking if we’re of age or for our IDs and I s es. This Charlotte once he’s gone, feeling smug.

ent our “See, you can drink up tonight.” I pause, hoping I’m not too obvi g cost. you want.”

stantine “I don’t know. I’ll probably just get sleepy. Wine makes me tired rather focus on tonight and enjoy it as much as possible. Spend evening with my handsome husband.” She smiles at me and it’s like a l secure aimed straight at my heart.

doing a I even rub my chest because damn. She looks so sweet and beautiful health. Her hair shines beneath the restaurant’s gentle lights, and I can smell her. I can not a floral scent that makes me want to strip her slowly. See if she smells good everywhere.

“You’re staring, Perry,” she says after a few seconds of silence.

o as she I shake myself from my Charlotte-induced stupor, reaching across table to drift my fingers across the top of her hand. “What are we doing? Her frown is back, her lips pursed. “What do you mean?”

ing my “The two of us. In this marriage. This relationship. It’s feeling real. She ducks her head, smiling down at her lap for a moment, and I knew what was going on in that pretty head of hers.

e is an “Does it feel real to you?” I ask when she still hasn’t said anything

The server shows up at that precise moment with our wine, pouring of us a glass and I tamp down my irritation. I keep my gaze on Charl

order a entire time the server is talking, trying to silently communicate with her. I don't mean what I said. Our marriage feels real. Too real sometimes. Do I'm not overwhelming, to the point that my feelings for her make my chest ache and my head hurt. I can't stop thinking about her. Worrying about her. Wondering what she's doing. What she's thinking. How she's feeling.

t. Does she care about me like I care about her? Or is this all one-sided?

I don't think it is, but damn. I don't know. I'm an idiot when it comes to this shit. Relationships. I've avoided them like the plague ever since I became aware of the opposite sex and I'm completely inexperienced. The unsure. I wish I had half of Winston's confidence. That motherfucker ready to go into a room as if he owns it. Hell, so does my baby brother. And when I had moments of confidence when it comes to my marriage, they're fleeting.

us. The Well, fuck it. It's time to put everything on the line and see if wife will love me the same way I feel about her.

The moment the server is gone after I order the six-course meal. I look at Charlotte. "If both of us, I grab my wineglass and lift it up in a toast, ignoring the fact that I'm still waiting for her answer. "To marriage. To wedded bliss. To us."

red. I'd She lifts her glass, her eyes wide, her lush lips parted as I hold mine out toward hers. She taps her glass to mine, the light tinging sound it makes a zinger at first contact making me smile. "To us," she murmurs before she takes the tiniest sip.

ful. Her Hmm.

A light, Winston didn't lie—the food is delicious. We're first served a bowl of soup, followed by a truffle salad with a lemony vinaigrette. The next course is caviar on thin squares of toast, which Charlotte doesn't want to eat.

"The smell makes me want to gag," she murmurs, pushing her head toward mine, which I gladly take.

g?" Hmm again.

The entrées start next. Yellowfin tuna with avocado and ginger dressing, wife." Norwegian king crab and rice. A steamed black sea bass, which Charlotte wishes I seem to like the best so far. By the time the beef tenderloin course is served, she's leaning back in her chair, shaking her head. "I'm stuffed."

I take a bite, the beef melting in my mouth. Damn, that's good. "I'll have each still dessert," I remind her after I swallow.

Charlotte the Charlotte shakes her head. "I don't know if I can manage it."

er that I “Oh come on. You’ve done pretty well so far.”
wnright She smiles, resting her hand over her flat belly and all the air sticks
the andthroat, thinking this is it. The moment where she tells me she’s going
nderinga baby. My gaze flits to her wineglass, which is still mostly full and
untouched the entirety of the meal. I’ve only had one glass myself, s
ed? mostly to water thanks to me driving, meaning that very expensive b
omes towine I bought has mostly gone to waste.

e I first Worth it to watch Charlotte eat and smile though.

ed and “We keep eating like this, I’ll gain weight,” she says.

r struts “You could stand to gain a few pounds,” I say, hating how he
ile I’vefades. “You haven’t been eating much lately.”

always And she’s lost weight. It’s obvious. Not that I care what she
because the woman is sexy as fuck, but to see her go through this the l
ey feelsweeks has been...

Concerning.

for the “I know.” Her tone is solemn. “I haven’t been feeling that well.”

act that That’s it. That’s all she says. Nothing else about impending ba
.” pregnancy or morning sickness or whatever else is associated with
y glasspregnant. I’m dying for some confirmation here, but I’m also star
: makeswonder if she’s not aware of the fact that she could be pregnant.

ikes the “You seem to be feeling better tonight,” I tell her, my voice low, n
sweeping over her. “That dress...”

“I bought it after we got engaged and never had a chance to wear
chilledadmits.

course “I like it.” My gaze lingers on her chest, wondering what she’s
under there. A lacy bra? Something sheer? Maybe nothing at all? I
er platearen’t that big, though they’re a perfect handful. “A lot.”

Her cheeks turn the faintest pink. “Sometimes I wonder if I sho
wearing a plastic bag if you’d still compliment me.”

ressing. “I would,” I say without hesitation. “Wearing a bag, a box, a
harlottesweats, nothing at all. You’re gorgeous, wife.”

arrives, “You’re not so bad yourself, husband.” Her smile is faint and she
for her wineglass, bringing it to her mouth and taking a normal sip.

There’s Or maybe it wasn’t so normal. Maybe it was small...

Huh. That wasn’t much confirmation. I don’t think she believe
pregnant. Or she doesn’t know. Or she flat out isn’t.

The disappointment that hits me is almost laughable. I should be ready in my Am I ready for a kid with a woman I just married? Hell no. We're young to have Charlotte just so thankfully reminded me, she's not even old enough to have sex legally yet.

sticking We're not ready for babies. Fuck that.

middle of "I have a question," I say after our server leaves with some discarded plates, promising dessert is coming next.

"What is it?" Charlotte asks.

"I've been wondering all night..." My voice drifts and she tilts her head, smiling and frowning.

"Wondering what?"

I weigh in. I remain silent for a moment, letting the suspense build before I ask, "What do you have on underneath that dress?"

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I'm being
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The disappointment that hits me is almost laughable. I should be relieved. Am I ready for a kid with a woman I just married? Hell no. We're young. As Charlotte just so thankfully reminded me, she's not even old enough to drink legally yet.

We're not ready for babies. Fuck that.

"I have a question," I say after our server leaves with some of our discarded plates, promising dessert is coming next.

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"Wondering what?"

I remain silent for a moment, letting the suspense build before I finally ask, "What do you have on underneath that dress?"



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Charlotte

OH THIS MAN. He is so flirtatious. Charming. Sexy.

And all mine.

I never did answer his earlier question. If our relationship felt real. It seemed too scary, too overwhelming to answer him at the time.

So I didn't.

This question though? I'll definitely answer, and tease him much like teasing me.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I reach for my wineglass again, for all about my earlier complaint that wine makes me sleepy. It usually does. There's a buzz in the air, and a matching buzz just beneath my skin making me ultra-aware of my husband. The tension growing between us.

I think he feels it too.

"I would," he says, his deep voice settling in between my legs, making me throb. "Like to know."

"Maybe we should skip dessert," I suggest.

"But I hear it's the best part of the meal."

He smiles and it's devastating to see. Devastating in the best way.

"I'm sure it's amazing but..." I let my voice drift, smiling in return, squirming in my seat.

"Are you offering yourself up as dessert?" He lifts a brow.

Yes, I think. Yes, I will.

"Is that what you want?"

"I'll take you however I can get you, wife. Breakfast. Lunch. Dessert. Whenever you'll have me," he says.

Ookay. I need more wine. Blindly I reach for my glass, taking a gulp, the alcohol warm as I feel it course through my blood. “Don’t you want to pay?”

“I’ve got cash.” He starts to reach for his wallet when the server is setting our dessert plates in front of us. “Can you bring us the check, please?” Perry asks the server, his darkened gaze never leaving mine.

The man bows. “Of course, sir. I’ll be right back.”

“Guess we’re stuck eating dessert,” I tell Perry when the server sets my gaze on my plate. There’s a beautifully cut strawberry sitting on top of a cream-colored, dainty cake, all of it lightly drizzled with what looks like caramel sauce. I grab my spoon and cut a slice, slipping it into my mouth, moaning with pleasure when the flavor bursts on my tongue. “Oh, that’s good.”

“Yeah?”

I glance up at the hoarse sound of his voice, finding him watching me intently. I cut into the dessert with my spoon and offer it to him, even though he has his own dish sitting in front of him.

I want to feed him.

He grabs hold of my hand, pulling it closer. His touch gentle as he guides my fingers around my wrist, guiding the spoon to his mouth. His gaze strays from mine as he wraps his lips around the spoon, a low, rumbling sound sounding from deep in his chest.

Oh. Pretty sure my thong is damp just from the look in his eyes and the sound he just made.

“Delicious,” he agrees once he leans back in his chair, his lips curving into a devious smile. “Not as good as you, though.”

“Perry...” I start, my voice dying when something catches my eye.

A man.

Standing on the other side of the room, near the entrance, as if waiting for a table. I swear it’s *him*.

Seamus.

My heart falls. My head grows light.

“Charlotte.” Perry’s firm voice pulls my attention back to him, my heart beating rapidly. “Are you all right?”

I can’t tell him. I won’t. It’ll ruin the entire night, and that’s the last thing I want. I smile at him, though it feels forced so I let it drop. “I’m fine.”

another do you ask?"

You need I slide my spoon through the dessert, my hand shaking and I take a breath, trying to calm my suddenly frazzled nerves.

appears, "You turned as white as a ghost." He glances over his shoulder. "Please?" trying to see what I just saw. How does he know? Does he understand that well? "Did you see something?" he asks once he's facing me again.

"No, not at all." I shake my head, marveling at how calm I sound. I leave, proud of myself. "My stomach kind of turned. That's all."

top of a "Not enjoying the dessert?" His gaze is sharp and he doesn't wait for an answer. "Be honest, Charlotte."

truth and I ignore the last comment. "The dessert is amazing." I take another sip but it feels like I'm eating sawdust so I choke it down, then take a drink from my water glass.

My gaze returns to the spot where I thought I saw Seamus walking. The server shows up with the check and Perry pays it, but no one is there. I think of that dark and mysterious man with Seamus's black hair and soul. It was just a figment of my overactive imagination. He's long gone.

A sigh leaves through me and I drop my silverware. "I thought I saw him." Perry circles him.

He never "What?" He glances over his shoulder before returning his attention to the humming. "He's not there, babe. He wouldn't dare follow us and show up at this restaurant out of nowhere. He's long gone. I've already told you this."

Yes. The Perry has reassured me more than once that he wouldn't stick around and I believe him.

led in a I do.

I refuse to let that man ruin my evening. He's not even here. He jumps up in my brain every once in a while, reminding me of what he did. What he could've done to me.

if he's And I hate it. I hate him.

With every fiber of my being.

"Ready to go?" Perry asks as he puts his wallet away.

"Please," I say, noting how desperate I sound, but I don't care.

My heart I want out of here.

Perry guides me through the crowded restaurant, his hand at my waist, his touch burning through the silky fabric of my dress. I'm hyper-aware of his closeness. The way he moves, his scent, his warmth. There's

hallway near the front entrance that I assume leads to the restroom
a deep grab hold of Perry's hand, pulling him toward the women's room.

"Where are we going?" he asks, sounding confused.

"Follow me," I say assuredly, not quite sure of what I'm doing
and me knowing that I need him.

I want to feel him touch me. Hold me. His mouth on mine. His hand
in my hair. His hands beneath my dress. My hands slipping into the front
boxer briefs. I'm filled with the sudden, downright frantic need to have
for my inside of me. Fucking me. Reminding me who I belong to.

Him.

Thankfully, the bathroom is empty and I tug him into the larger
one from the end of the row, farthest from the door. The moment we're locked

Perry is on me, his hands resting on my hips, his mouth finding mine
then then to his kiss, parting my lips, moaning when his tongue strokes mine.
No matter how tall, we haven't really slowed down on the sex part of our relationship, but
I'm just starting to feel the same. Always in a bed. Perry always careful, as if
made of glass and he doesn't want to break me. I want something new.

Exciting.

A little bit dangerous.

All I can hear is the sound of our lips connecting. Our heavy bodies
in the clothes rustling, his hands gathering the fabric of my skirt higher.

still. Until his palms are on my bare ass, kneading my skin, fingers
and here the thin fabric nestled between my butt cheeks.

He breaks the kiss first, his mouth sliding down the length of my
his teeth nibbling, making me hiss. When he licks me just behind my
first pop shiver steals through me, and I whimper.

"You want me to fuck you in this bathroom?" he whispers, his
skimming up and down my ass. "Is that why you dragged me in here?"

"I just wanted to feel you," I admit. "That's all."

"I feel you," he murmurs, his mouth drifting across my jaw, up
hovering above my own. "I feel you all over me, wife. You live in me
when we're not together."

My heart trips over itself at his words. Why does he have to go
and lower something as romantic as that?

There are so many things that I want to do and say to this man, and
a short list collect in my mind, one on top of the other. Overwhelming me to the

s and I that I can't speak. All I can do is show him how I feel.

I clasp his face in my hands, bringing it close to mine, staring at him in that moment. His classically handsome features. The lush mouth and cheekbones, yet, but cheekbones. The square jaw shadowed with the faintest stubble that I feel beneath my palms. He leans into me, his lips barely brushing mine, and my entire body tingles at that initial contact.

Oh, I could drown in him. Does he realize this? Does he underestimate his power he has over me?

"I don't want to fuck you in a bathroom stall," he murmurs again, his mouth, just before he tugs on my lower lip with his teeth. "Let's get out of the stall a there."

"Kiss me first," I demand, sliding my hands into his hair. "Please."

He does as I request, deepening the kiss within seconds of our lips making contact. Tongues tangling, hands wandering, low moans sound from the both of us. Someone enters the bathroom but I don't even care if I'm too caught up in the taste of my husband. The feel of him. His hair pressed to mine. His growing erection nudging against my stomach. He presses me. It's as if he always wants me.

I feel the same exact way.

The moment we hear another person walk into the bathroom and the valet higher stall, Perry goes into action. Grabbing my hand, we leave our stall, his hands teasingly sneaking out of the bathroom and exiting the restaurant without a backward glance. He approaches the valet, handing him his ticket and the guy takes my neck, in search of my husband's car.

We wait on the sidewalk, the wind even chillier than before and he wraps his arm around my shoulders, pulling me in close to him. I wrap my fingers around his front, absorbing his warmth, tucking my head into his chest, savoring the feel of him.

"You're cold." He kisses the top of my head. "Should've worn a coat until it's cold." "And ruin the effect of my dress? Totally worth it to freeze a little, even glance up at him, smiling.

He presses his mouth to my forehead and I close my eyes for a moment, and I savor this moment. The sweetness of it. How it feels so... right between us.

I don't want to forget this.

Ever.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Perry

MY DEMANDING WIFE requests I take us back to the same parking where we had sex in the front seat of the Chevelle. The last night that felt normal between us. Before McAssdick had to come along and ruin everything.

The garage is mostly empty and I drive until we're on the very edge of town, the wind knocking against the car once I park it, which says a lot since this thing is a steel beast. In tandem we undo our seat belts and I glance at Charlotte to find her leaning against the seat, her eyes closed, her head back, exposing the elegant line of her throat. Large, thin gold hoop earrings from her ears, the only jewelry she has on besides the diamond on her finger.

I think about other jewels I could give her. More diamonds? Maybe. She likes other stones. Emeralds? Sapphires? Rubies? Whatever she wants, I'll make it happen.

"You're staring at me," she says, her eyes still closed.

"How do you know?" I reach for her, tugging on the cloth belt at the top of her dress, untying it slowly.

"I can feel your eyes on me." She smiles. "It's a fake belt."

"Damn." I finish untying it anyway. "How do I get you out of this?"

"You want to strip me? I thought you could just flip my skirt up and see my ass." I pause, waiting for her to continue, but she doesn't. "And...?"

Her eyes crack open. "You know."

Leaning in until my face is in hers, I ask, "You know what, explain to me why you want to hear you say it, Charlotte. Tell me what you want."

"You," she whispers, those big blue eyes meeting mine.

“What do you want me to do to you?” I let my hand drift do middle of her, breezing right between her legs. There and gone in s until my fingers are flirting with the hem of her dress, brushing the her bare thighs.

“Touch me.”

My fingers pause in their exploration. “Where?”

A needy sound leaves her and I smile like the dick I am. But da fun making my wife squirm.

“You know where,” she says, mild annoyance in her tone.

“Tell me.” I slide my fingers beneath the skirt of her dress. “Show

“Exactly where you’re going,” she says, dropping her head to wa garage When I brush the front of her panties, a soft hiss leaves her. “Yes. The t things I keep my touch featherlight, exerting just enough pressure so that nd ruin feel me and want more. Back and forth I stroke the dampening sheer

The heat of her radiates, tempting me to slip a single finger inside her p level, just how wet she is, but I keep myself restrained.

“You like that?” I ask, my gaze locked on her pretty face.

Her eyes find mine, hazy and full of desire. “Yes.”

“Is it enough?”

She shakes her head.

“You want more?”

Charlotte nods. “Yes.” She sinks her teeth into her lower l expression coy. I don’t even think she means to look like that. It just naturally to her and fuck, it drives me out of my mind.

I press a little harder, causing her eyelids to flicker and her lips to he front run my finger up and down, watching her, noting the way her accelerates. She spreads her legs wider, the scent of her pussy mingli her perfume and I breathe deep, savoring the smell.

“So pretty, wife,” I murmur, shoving her skirt up with my free ha d...” can really see her. Her panties are a nude color, completely sheer and Unable to resist, I slip a finger beneath the fabric, encountering noth creamy wet heat.

actly? I A groan leaves her and she arches into my hand, seeking more. I g her, rubbing her clit. Searching her folds. Sliding a single finger ins welcoming body. Then another. Slowly fucking her, my thumb r against her clit, the slick sounds filling the close confines of my car.

own the “Perry,” she bites out when I add another finger, stretching her. seconds, her. Her hips move in time with my thrusting fingers, her clit swelling tops of continue rubbing it and I’m tempted to toss her into the back seat of and eat that pretty little pussy until she comes against my lips.

So I do.

When I withdraw my hand she moans in frustration, then yelps mn, it’s grab her as if she weighs nothing and toss her onto the back seat. I sco after her, readjusting her body so she’s sprawled across the back seat reach for her hips, shoving the skirt back up and yanking off her pair me.” frantically, I feel the fabric rip beneath my grip.

touch me. “Oh God,” she gasps as I pull them from her legs, tossing the re.” panties over my shoulder. “You ripped them.”

she can “I’ll buy you another pair,” I promise, my gaze zeroing in on her fabric. her legs falling open so she’s on complete display. It’s plump and gli and testand my mouth literally waters to taste her.

Bending over her, I drop a kiss on her lower belly, noting how h trembles beneath my lips. I move lower, her hand coming to rest on top head just as I press my mouth to her wet, hot flesh. Her sweetness co lips, my tongue and I lick her eagerly, my tongue everywhere as she v beneath me, as if she’s trying to get away.

I clamp my hands on her hips, keeping her still as I eat at her fle ip, her I’m starving. I devour her, my lips and tongue everywhere, touching comes part of her. Both of her hands are in my hair now, holding me close grinds her cunt against my face and I suck on her clit, fluttering my tou part. I the pulsing nub of flesh. Trying to drive her out of her mind.

breath It works. She’s coming in an instant, my name falling from her lip: ng with cries out. I don’t let up on her, concentrating all of my efforts on her c eventually she’s trying to shove me away, as if she can’t take it anymo

and so I Removing myself from her, I lean back against the door, watching soaked. she tries to compose herself. She’s fucking beautiful, lying there with l ing but sprawled and her dress bunched at her waist. Her head thrown back the seat, her eyes closed, her hair a mess.

ive it to I’m half tempted to take a photo with my phone, but she’d probat ide her my ass.

udging Reaching into my pocket, I whip my phone out anyway and open camera, taking a quick photo.

Filling Then another one.

ng as I “Perry.” Her eyes blaze open, her brows lowered. “Did you just t
the carpicture?”

Nodding, I pull up the last photo I took and stare at it for a mome
show it to her. “Look at you.”

when I She grabs the phone, studying the image, her lips pressed togeth
ramblecheeks still flushed from the orgasm I just gave her. “Oh.”

it and I “Oh what?” I maneuver myself so I’m sitting next to her, the bot
ties sonow staring at my phone. “You’re beautiful.”

Her gaze lifts to mine. “Is that how you see me?”

ruined “As my beautiful wife? Yes. Everything about you is beautiful. Ins
out.” I kiss her cheek. She turns to face me fully and I steal a kiss fr
pussy,lips and she doesn’t let me leave. She keeps kissing me, her tongue lic
steningmy lips, circling around my tongue, until she finally pulls away, her
large as she stares at me.

er skin “I can taste myself,” she whispers. “Is that what it’s like? Going d
p of myme?”

oats my “Better,” I whisper back, a choked sound leaving me when her har
wigglesmy dick, her fingers stroking over the fabric of my trousers. “You’re
delicious.”

esh like Her smile is small just before she attacks me and at one point I h
g everyphone fall to the floorboard with a solid thud, but I don’t care. I
as sheenraptured with this woman who is making quick work of my zipp
ague onhand diving inside, fingers curling around my cock as she starts to s
move away from her so I can lean against the door once more and stre
s as shelegs out and she follows me, shoving at my pants and my boxer brie
lit untilthey’re bunched around my knees and she’s bent over me, her mouth s
re. to the head of my dick it’s as if I can already feel those hot, lush lips
g her asaround me, sucking me deep.

her legs “Maybe I should take photos of you,” she suggests, her gaze flic
againstto mine.

“Go for it,” I tell her, amazed at how normal I sound. Like I’m nc
oly kickto have my cock sucked by the most beautiful woman in the world. “
start a scrapbook.”

up the “A sex scrapbook?” She lifts a brow. “I don’t think we’ll be p
these photos out anytime soon, Perry.”

“Maybe just a private file in the cloud then,” I say, sucking in a breath when I feel her breath waft across the head. Fuck, I could probably come from her breathing. What kind of weak asshole am I?

“You’re dirty, husband,” she murmurs, her gaze fixated on my cock.

I grip the base, practically shoving it in her face. “Suck it, wife.”

She does as I request, her lips enveloping just the head, her tongue licking the flared ridge as she lifts her gaze to mine. I watch her, all the air rushing into my lungs as I take in the visual of my wife sliding her mouth down the length of me, taking as much of me as she can. Her mouth is like a vacuum, her cheeks hollowing as she sucks, her tongue licking.

“Fuck,” I groan, unable to look away as she slides those lips down my cock, her hand shoving mine away so she can grip the base herself. She keeps sucking and strokes, her gaze finally falling away from mine so she can concentrate on her task at hand but I can’t look away.

I’m too lost watching her. I’m enjoying the fuck out of this, and she’s enjoying herself too. I can tell, by the way she puts herself into it. Her hand squeezing, her lips and tongue working, soft moans and finds from her. Humming noises when I’m deep in her mouth that vibrate through my dick.

I’m going to come.

“Baby,” I murmur in warning but it’s as if she doesn’t hear me. She’s too going, too into it to stop and I give her one last warning. “I’m gonna come.”

She nods her encouragement, increasing her pace and within seconds she’s blasting into her mouth and she swallows down the initial spurt, pulling my mouth off of me as her fingers continue to squeeze and stroke. A trickle of semen leaves me, sliding down the length of my cock, coated so close to her fingers and it doesn’t make her pause in her actions. She keeps going until she finally releases a shuddering exhale, indicating that I’m fucking spent.

Spent as fuck.

Whatever.

Charlotte removes her hand from my cock and brings her fingers to her mouth, giving them a tentative lick before I grab her wrist. Bring her finger to my mouth so I can suck her index finger between my lips.

“Is that what it’s like?” I ask when I pull her finger from my mouth, repeating her earlier words to me. “Sucking me off?”

Her eyes sparkle and she nods, shoving her fingers back into my mouth.

so I can give them another lick. "It's even better."
I pull her to me and she removes her fingers from my lips at
second, my mouth crashing down on hers. I kiss her thoroughly, pulling
when I feel my cock start to come back to life. "We should go home."
She frowns. "You don't want to have sex?"
"What do you call what we just did?" I ask.
"Um, third base?"
I laugh. Kiss her again before I gently shove her away and reach c
fuckingyank my pants and boxer briefs back up. "I don't know if you've ever
get to third base before."
"We've hung out on third base before," she says dryly as she t
lf. Shedress back into place.
"Not like that, wife. Let's go home. Where I can fuck you proper
bed."
She makes a face. "We always fuck on a bed."
My entire body goes hot at her saying the word fuck in that culture
fallingof hers. "Where else do you suggest we fuck then?"
"I don't know. The kitchen counter? The couch? The hallwa
shower?"
I note all of her suggestions for later. I will fuck her in every single
e keepsthose places if that's what she wants. "Jasper will lose his shit if he ev
ome." out."
"What he doesn't know won't hurt him," she says before she craw
ing herinto the passenger side seat. Glancing over her shoulder, she studies
Anothereyes dancing. "Come on. Let's go home so you can fuck me agai
ing herrefrigerator."
Chuckling, I open the back door and get out of the car like a c
person before I climb back in, settling behind the steering wheel. "
like a plan to me."

s to her
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so I can give them another lick. “It’s even better.”

I pull her to me and she removes her fingers from my lips at the last second, my mouth crashing down on hers. I kiss her thoroughly, pulling away when I feel my cock start to come back to life. “We should go home.”

She frowns. “You don’t want to have sex?”

“What do you call what we just did?” I ask.

“Um, third base?”

I laugh. Kiss her again before I gently shove her away and reach down to yank my pants and boxer briefs back up. “I don’t know if you’ve ever let me get to third base before.”

“We’ve hung out on third base before,” she says dryly as she tugs her dress back into place.

“Not like that, wife. Let’s go home. Where I can fuck you properly on a bed.”

She makes a face. “We always fuck on a bed.”

My entire body goes hot at her saying the word fuck in that cultured voice of hers. “Where else do you suggest we fuck then?”

“I don’t know. The kitchen counter? The couch? The hallway? The shower?”

I note all of her suggestions for later. I will fuck her in every single one of those places if that’s what she wants. “Jasper will lose his shit if he ever finds out.”

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” she says before she crawls over into the passenger side seat. Glancing over her shoulder, she studies me, her eyes dancing. “Come on. Let’s go home so you can fuck me against the refrigerator.”

Chuckling, I open the back door and get out of the car like a civilized person before I climb back in, settling behind the steering wheel. “Sounds like a plan to me.”



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Charlotte

THINGS BETWEEN US finally shifted back to the way they were before I was abducted me. In fact, it's better than ever for my husband and I. Our date was like a breakthrough moment for our relationship.

It's not like I've forgotten what happened—how could I? But I can't stress over it all the time. I'm safe and secure in our apartment, with my husband by my side. Jasper is always there. We have extra security in place. If Seamus tried to get to me again, he'd have an extremely difficult challenge ahead of him.

Thank God.

This entire past week with Perry has felt like a dream. He'd come home early from work and take me to dinner. Or we would order in and spend the entire night in bed. Watching movies on my laptop or getting lost in each other.

Mostly getting lost in each other.

The man has magic hands. A talented mouth. Sweet yet dirty words that set me on fire and make me want him to the point of complete agony. My body aches when he's so close and my heart aches when he's too far.

Sometimes, I feel like what Perry and I have is almost too good to be true. We're too happy, which means something awful is going to happen. I know that good comes to my life for long. I've experienced heartache far too many times in my young life, and I should've known it couldn't be like this forever.

Or could it? I'm still not sure.

The weekend was perfection because we spent it together. Monday morning dawned bright and cold, a winter chill in the air, freezing everything

covering the city in a sparkling white frost. I watch Perry get ready for
from my spot in bed, the covers tucked around me since I'm naked.

"You should stay home," I say, forgetting all about my wanting
of my hair only a week ago. "It's too cold outside to go to work."

He's standing in front of the dresser, staring at his reflection in the
as he fixes his tie. "It's definitely not too cold."

"I think it is." When he glances over at me, I mock pout. "What?
want you to leave."

Forgetting all about his tie, he strides toward the bed, pushing his
mine. "Be honest. You just want to use my body all day."

Smiling, I grab hold of his tie and yank on it so he collapses on top
Seamus "You're so smart. You've got me all figured out."

dinner His mouth is hungry when it meets mine and I respond in kind,
my hands down his back, untucking his perfectly pressed button up sl
alized Ruining his look in a matter of seconds. He doesn't seem to care.

with my Thank God.

1 place. At one point he shoves the blankets away from me and I'm lying
challenge beneath his fully clothed body. I wind my legs around his hips, I
myself against his hardening erection. "You're making a mess of r
murmurs against my lips.

e home "Sorry." I don't mean my apology at all. I'm greedy and selfish
end the comes to this man. I want him all the time. He's become all I think
in each Everything I could ever want.

He lifts his head away from mine, his gaze serious. "You feelin
this morning?"

rds that I've had a couple mornings of nausea, but I get over it fast
ny. My exhaustion is mostly gone. Somewhat. Maybe because now I sleep
night, secure while wrapped up in my husband's arms.

be true. "I'm fine." I touch his face. Streak my fingers down his smooth
Nothing Reach for the front of his shirt so I can loosen his tie. "I think you're g
nuch in be late to work."

He studies me, his gaze lingering on my face before it sweeps the
of my body slowly. But he doesn't say a single word.

Monday Nervous laughter leaves me. "What?"

ng and His hand finds my stomach and he rests it there for a brief moment
before he kisses me thoroughly. Leaving me breathless as he m

or work against my lips, “Do you think you’re pregnant?”

I go completely still, now actually out of breath. I shove at his shoulder until he has no choice but to meet my gaze and I notice the hopeful expression on his face.

the mirror As if he’s not objecting to the possibility of me being pregnant.

“Well?” he asks when I still haven’t said anything.

I don’t “I-I don’t know.” I swallow hard, my voice shaky. “I haven’t thought about it.”

face in “I have,” he says without hesitation, his gaze skimming over me. “You haven’t been feeling well. I hear you’ve thrown up a few times.”

of me. I frown, wondering where he heard that.

And then I remember I told Ash at Thanksgiving. Who probably proceeded to tell Winston and Winston told Perry. Meaning he’s been holding onto this for a while now, and never mentioned it to me.

Hmm. My husband can keep a secret when he wants.

“I just figured it was due to stress because of what happened,” I tell him, my fingers working the buttons on his shirt, slowly undoing them, rubbing all that smooth skin beneath. The tattoos. The heavy silver necklace he wears around his neck, despite no one being able to see it. My rebellious husband, I think as I trace my finger along the chain.

when it “You should probably take a test,” he says, delivering the sweetest kiss ever upon my lips. I immediately want another one. “What if you are?”

“I’m sure I’m not,” I say automatically, frowning as I think of the times we’ve had sex, especially recently, with no condom. I should probably go on birth control. I keep meaning to, but maybe...

st. The Huh.

good at Maybe it’s not necessary?

A flare of panic rises up inside of me and I suck in a breath, the air hitting my cheek, getting Perry’s attention.

going to “What?” He strokes the side of my face, his voice low and comforting. “What’s wrong?”

length “Having a baby, that’s...” Terrifying. Exciting. Nerve-wracking. Wonderful.

All of the emotions swirl within me and a wave of nausea hits, so I close my eyes as I try to will it away.

murmurs “You’re just a baby yourself,” he murmurs. “But I think you’ll

terrific mother.”

oulders A smile curls my lips despite the war currently occurring deep within me. “Oh, and you’re so much older and wiser than me.”

“I’ve got a few years on you.” He kisses me before I can argue and I lose myself in the minty fresh taste of him. The kiss is long and filled, making me forget my troubles and that wave of nausea that threatened me only moments before.

He reaches between us, undoing his belt. I help him along, my face. erection is in my hands and I’m guiding him inside of me. He’s fully fucking me hard, murmuring all sorts of sexy things in my ear that make my pussy clench around him tightly, the orgasm already hovering just a short distance.

“Don’t forget,” he says as I cling to his broad shoulders helplessly. “This pussy belongs to.”

“You,” I answer, squeezing my thighs around his hips, sending him deeper.

Perry presses his forehead to mine, sliding almost all the way out of my body before he pushes back inside. A shuddery moan leaves me as he fucks me deep and I keep my eyes closed, though I can feel his gaze on me.

Always watching.

“Open your eyes.” When I do, I see the unmistakable glimmer in his gaze and my heart soars. “Feels so good fucking you. Take it so well, baby.”

A swell of emotion fills me and I lift my head, my lips seeking his compliments, his approval, just does something to me. I had no idea I would turn into this kind of woman who got off on hearing her husband call her a *good girl* as he fucks her.

But I have. My entire body tenses in wait for those exact words from his lips and I think he knows it.

That’s why he holds back. Saves it until I really deserve it.

I clench my inner walls around his shaft, squeezing him inside of me. Awful. he smiles, an achy groan sounding from deep in his chest. “Trying to get out of me?”

Nodding, I do it again, my hands finding his ass and pressing against it, pushing him as deep as I can get him.

“Such a good girl,” he whispers, making me tremble. “Always tak

well.”

him me. I do. I take it from him every single time and it always feels so
had no idea it could be like this.

further Perry comes first, and I don’t even mind. My own orgasm hits n
tongue-small yet powerful, leaving me shuddering beneath him, softly moanin
eatenedpushes inside of me again and again. Hard and harder, until I feel that

semen fill me and he falls on top of me, careful not to exert his full we
ntil his “Fuck, Charlotte,” he murmurs, kissing my neck. These are some
clothed,favorite moments with my husband. After we have sex, when he’s s
ikes myvulnerable and our bodies are still connected. “You feel so damn good
: in themake it impossible for me to leave.”

“Then don’t,” I say, kissing him.

7, “who He cuddles with me for only a few minutes before he reluctantly
away, sliding off the bed and heading for the connecting bathroom.
ng himhim turn on the water. The shuffle of clothing as he puts himse
together and eventually, he returns to the mirror, studying himself. “I
t of myprobably change.”

strokes A sigh leaves me when I notice the wet spot on the front of his p
guess I did mess you up.”

He glances over his shoulder, grinning at me. “You did. But
leasuremind.”

ou. You I wish I could capture this moment. The way he’s looking at me. F
heavy with emotion. Love? Perhaps.

is. His I think I’m falling in love with him.

I would No, wait.

murmur, There’s no thinking involved. I just know.

I’m in love with him. I’m in love with my husband.

to fall Remaining in bed while he hurriedly changes his clothes, I eagerly
his goodbye kiss. “Get a pregnancy test,” he tells me. “Have one de
You can take it tonight after I get home. Or you can take it before I ge
me andWhenever you want.”

o pull it Oh God, that’s right. He thinks I’m pregnant. Well...

Frowning, I try to think back to the last time I had my period and
g hard,remember.

Oops.

es it so “Have a good day,” he murmurs after he kisses me, his deep voice

me from my thoughts. “You have plans?”
good. I “Lunch with your sister,” I tell him, distracted by the possibility th
most definitely pregnant. “And maybe some shopping afterward.”
ie next, “Have fun,” he says, pulling away so he can smile down at me. “T
ig as heI said hi.”
blast of “I will.” I smile at him, wondering if I’m smiling at the father
ight. future child. “Bye.”

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. About

I STOP AT a nearby drugstore and pick up a pregnancy test, stashing i
bag before I climb into the hired car I use whenever I have to go som
ly pulls and head for the restaurant where I’m meeting Tinsley at. My thoug
. I hear preoccupied with visions of sweet cherub babies and me getting fat
lf back cuddling our newborn child with blonde hair and big blue eyes. I don’
should why, but I can only envision him with a baby girl. A sweet little cooin;
who stares at her daddy as if he’s the best thing she’s ever seen.

ants. “I I feel you girl, I mentally say to my imaginary baby. I feel the sar
about him.

I don’t By the time I’m entering the busy restaurant, I’m a bundle of
nerves, grateful when Tinsley spots me first and practically runs tow
lis gaze wrapping me up in a big hug and squeezing me close.

“You look so good,” she tells me as she withdraws, grabbing hold
hands and shaking them lightly. “I swear, you’re glowing!”

That only confirms my earlier suspicions of being pregnant. P
women *glow*.

Of course, so do women who just had passionate sex with their h
and made him late to work, so there is that to consider.

We’re seated immediately and we both order strawberry lemonade
check over the menu, making small talk. I’m not that hungry and de
t home. have a fall-themed salad with grilled chicken, dried cranberries
balsamic dressing while Tinsley orders a cheeseburger with fries.

I don’t “You made me feel a little guilty with your choice, but screw it,” s
after the server takes our order and menus. “I’m in the mood for sor
bad for me.”

pulling “Nothing wrong with that,” I reassure her, momentarily regrett

choices.

at I am A cheeseburger and fries sounds delicious. And if I'm pregnant does it matter if I eat something like that every once in a while?

ell Tins Really, why does it matter at all? We should all be able to indulge and there, whenever we want.

of my Tinsley smiles, leaning across the table. "How's married life with brother, hmm?"

This is where it gets tricky. I don't want to share too intimate details. I view her as a friend, but come on. Perry is her brother. I don't want something bad—not that I have anything bad to say at the moment—might report back to him. And if I say something too, ahem, raucous anywhere won't want to hear it.

ghts are Because he is her brother. The last thing I want to know are sexual details. Perry involving any of my brothers.

't know Gross.

g infant "It's good," I say, remaining neutral. "We're getting along well."

Understatement of the year.

ne way "I'm so glad," she says, looking pleased, even by my simple remark. "Perry is a great guy. You two seem happy together."

excited We do? I was quiet at Thanksgiving. Even a little distant. No hard me, meant to be. I was still dealing with my recent trauma, and not feeling great either. "We've gotten used to each other pretty quickly."

l of my That's not a lie. As time goes on, we do get along better and better. I'm used to having him in my life. Perry is fun. Sweet. Easy to talk to. regnant Really good at the sex thing.

Really good.

usband Actually, I can't imagine him not being a part of my life.

And I don't want to either.

s as we I watch as Tinsley checks her phone, her expression changing. I decide to read whatever text message or notification she was just sent. She looks and a gaze to mine, her eyes full of apology. "I think a guest is going to drop our lunch."

he says I frown, my mind awl with the guest possibilities. "Who?"

nothing "My mother."

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Charlotte

MINUTES AFTER TINSLEY'S announcement, Caroline Constantine enters the restaurant, and like magic, things happen. People stare at her as if she were a celebrity while the employees surround her. Someone takes her coat, and the hostess leads her to our table. The server is waiting for her, eager to take her drink order. By the time the three of us are left alone at our table, I'm just watching my mother-in-law in wonder.

I forgot how much influence she has. The Constantine family is a formidable bunch, and their matriarch is the most formidable of them, with Winston a very close second. Most people tremble in their presence, unsure of how they're going to react or what they might say.

Not me. I'm a Lancaster. In status, our family is higher on the ladder. All of that generational, old money wealth is hard to rise above. In our intimate circles, Lancasters conquer all. Constantines are new money.

But Caroline Constantine is a bit of a legend, and at this particular restaurant, they know it.

"Such a fuss," Tinsley says to her mother, shaking her head.

Caroline leans over to drop a kiss on my cheek and give me a one-sided hug before she settles into the booth seat next to her daughter. "I know I don't ask for that kind of treatment."

"Please. You love it," Tinsley teases, glancing over at me. "She'll love it. It's too much, but if they completely ignored her, she'd be angry."

"That is not true," Caroline admonishes, then immediately adds, "Actually, it is true."

All I can do is smile. My mother-in-law loves attention, while I p

hide in the shadows. I always have, even when I was a kid. Out of the us, I was the quiet one. The one who didn't want to be noticed. I prefer that way.

Until I didn't. And then attention only got me in trouble.

Not anymore though. I bask in Perry's adoration.

"Did you already order?" Caroline asks once she's settled, reaching for Tinsley's glass of water and taking a quick sip.

"Yes," Tinsley answers. "But I know the waiter will rush back with your order, so hold tight."

Caroline contemplates me, her gaze assessing as it roves over my face before dropping. As if she's trying to examine me with her eyes. "You're doing better than you did at Thanksgiving."

she's a Tinsley jabs Caroline in the side with her elbow. "Mother! Stop at. The mean."

make her "What? It's the truth. I was worried for you, Charlotte. You were pale, I'm glad you're practically glowing." Her tone is full of approval.

There's that glowing word again. I totally agree. I feel like I'm glowing. And at Thanksgiving, I did look pale and thin. Caroline isn't trying to hurt me. She's just stating facts.

presence, "After what happened..." I let my voice drift and both Tinsley and Caroline give me sympathetic looks.

social "Perry is very patient," Caroline says. "I'm sure he took good care of you during your time of need."

"He did," I say.

particular "Most likely to the point of hovering a bit too much," she continues. I can't help but smile. "He was... overbearing sometimes."

"The Constantine men can be."

unarmed The server arrives and takes Caroline's order before leaving us alone. "You again."

"Tell me, darling. I'm curious." Caroline leans back against the sofa, her lips curled into a small smile. "How long were you involved with that McTiernan?"

laughs. I go quiet. So does Tinsley. I don't want to talk about my ex-lover, my mother-in-law, but I'm sure Caroline isn't going to give me much choice in avoiding the conversation.

"Not very long," I finally say.

four of “Mother,” Tinsley says in warning, sending me a sympathetic look
erred it “What exactly does that mean? A couple of days? Weeks? M
Caroline’s brows shoot up as she waits for my reply.

I’m going to have to choose my words carefully. I don’t want to
wrong thing, or give too much information. This is a topic my husband
ing for don’t discuss often. And when we do, he doesn’t want to hear the
details.

to take “A few months, if that,” I answer. “He was my professor. I was p
study abroad program in Paris. He taught a class on the history of
ny face architecture—specifically Parisian architecture.”

ou look “Oh, do you want to be an architect?” Tinsley asks, most likely to
change the subject.

o being “I still don’t know what I want to be. I definitely didn’t know
either.” I shrug, faintly embarrassed. I was raised not to worry about
so pale future or a career. I’d make someone a great wife and mother so
l.

That’s all I amounted to with my family—specifically my father. He
lowing. understand why I wanted to study French architecture and at the time,
g to be really know why either.

I was just looking for something—anything—that piqued my interest

ey and “You’re still young,” Caroline says. “You don’t need to decide yet
ack.” “I’ve considered going to college. Applying to NYU or Columbia

of you I’m not sure yet.” My goals sound so high, even to me. Could I get in?
no idea. My grades were good in school, but I couldn’t wait to graduate
if I got into a college, would I enjoy it?

s. I’m not sure.

“You should,” Tinsley says. “Maybe you could figure out what you
to be then.”

ne once “I don’t know about that.” The doubt in Caroline’s voice is obvious
thought we’d already figured out what you’re going to do with your
eat, her “What you’re going to be.” She pauses for only a moment. “You
Seamus Constantine now, and with that comes responsibilities. It’s practically
time job.”

er with “Doing what?” I ask, seriously confused.

ch of a “We’re a part of society, and we need to make appearances. Not
your husband’s arm, but on your own as well. You should get involved
various charities. Sponsor some luncheons. Support Perry and Halcy

the things he believes in,” Caroline explains. “Plus, there’s the future months?”—such as becoming a mother to my grandchildren.”

“Mom.” Tinsley rolls her eyes. “Not every life decision someone says therevolves around you.”

“Well, plenty of them do, and when it comes to Charlotte’s dirty choices, they affect me. Eventually.” Caroline’s penetrating gaze makes me feel like she can see inside of my brain, and I don’t like it. Not a part of a “Nothing happened between you two when you ran off with Seamus? French very handsome man. Persuasive, I’ve heard. Quite charming.”

Tinsley’s face turns so red I’m afraid she’s going to stroke out. I’m trying to internally scream, but hopefully Caroline doesn’t notice. I keep my composure, my voice calm when I answer.

“He was rather... persuasive when I first met him,” I admit. “But I’m not out of my firmly in my past. I’ve changed. He doesn’t hold me enthralled like I used to.”

Caroline’s smile is serene. “Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

Her line of questioning makes me think she wanted to trap me into admitting I still have a thing for Seamus.

“And I suppose babies are on the horizon.” I take a deep breath, and I don’t want to speak for Perry over something we haven’t thought

maybe discussed, but I also want to appease his mother. “Not sure when though? I have

“You’re both still young. You have time. And you were once even married.” Caroline inclines her head toward me. “I’ve noticed he’s

taken with you already, which is surprising.” I try not to be offended by her remark, but her words still sting. “What do you want surprising?”

“He was so resistant to marrying you at first, when he’s usually so cooperative. He always does what I ask.”

A soft moan leaves Tinsley and I glance over at her in time to see her shaking her head, her expression pained.

I don’t think she approves of her mother’s line of questioning.

“You were asking him to change the course of his life forever,” she says. “I’m not surprised he was resistant. I was too. I didn’t want to do it only on him.”

“What changed your mind, hmmm? I’m curious.”

Telling her the truth could be potentially damaging. I wanted to

to think my house. Get away from my father once and for all. Perry was willing to help me. He showed kindness when everyone else treated me as if my feelings didn't matter.

And that touched me. Despite not being interested and telling me getting married was a bad move, I did it anyway, and now I don't have any regrets.

One bit. Not a one.

'He's a "Perry did," I say, which is the truth. "He grew on me."

I can tell Caroline is pleased with my answer. "He's a good boy, maybe he might be "He loves you."

Keep my "And he's grown to care for you," she returns. "I didn't have much to do in your union, I must admit."

But he's I'm not surprised, but I don't say that out loud.

He used "The two of you have proven me wrong, and I like that." She narrows her eyes, watching me carefully. "If I was a betting woman I would say you're pregnant, from that rosy glow I see on your cheeks, but I don't want to see you into out of turn."

Tinsley bursts out laughing. "When do you ever care if you're spilling your lunch out of turn? You open your mouth and say the wrong thing all of the time roughly

ugh." "I do not," Caroline says, sounding offended.

ly just "You do." Tinsley glances over at me. "Help me out here, Charlotte." "No way." I shake my head, smiling. "I'm not getting involved in this argument."

"She's a smart girl," Caroline says. "And if you want to remain loyal to my son, Charlotte, take heed of these words: remain loyal to my son, and you won't have any problems. When Perry loves, he loves hard. I don't want to see you usually hurt him."

Wait a second. Is she threatening me? Does she know something I don't see her "I take my marriage vows very seriously," I tell her, my gaze leaving Caroline's. "I plan on being a loyal wife to your son for the rest of my days, as long as he'll have me."

I point Her smile is small, her blue eyes, so like Perry's, sparkling with pleasure. "Perfect. I'm glad we understand then."

"We do," I say firmly.

The server arrives at our table with our lunches and the sultry atmosphere has changed, but I can't help but think of what Caroline said about Perry.

lling to when he loves, he loves hard.

if my And I want that. I want to be loved and cherished by Perry. I want
 belong to him, and to his family. I can be a Constantine.

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when he loves, he loves hard.

And I want that. I want to be loved and cherished by Perry. I want to belong to him, and to his family. I can be a Constantine.

Just watch me.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Perry

I'M ON THE phone, my gaze stuck on the clock and wishing I could hell out of here when my brother bursts into my office without knock immediately starts talking.

“We found him,” Winston announces, his expression grim.

I sit up, covering the phone to glare at him. “I’m on the phone.”

“Get the fuck off. Now. We found *him*,” he repeats. “Seamus McT Myron tracked him down.”

“Wait a minute.” I hold up my index finger, returning my attention financial investor I’ve currently got on the phone. “Hey, something ca Can I call you back? Okay, thanks. Yes. Sounds good.”

I hang up the phone, devoting my full attention to Winston, currently pacing in front of my desk. “Start at the beginning. Myron McDicklick?”

Winston pauses, rearing his head back at my insult. “Huh. Creat give you that. Yes, he found *McDicklick*, as you call him. You’ll believe where that motherfucker’s at.”

“Manhattan,” I toss out there because come on. That makes th sense. Why run away when you can hide in plain sight? Isn’t that how saying goes? Or something like that?

“Close.” He pauses for effect. “Brooklyn.”

I actually hate that I was right. Knowing he’s been so close the enti makes my blood boil. I clench my hands into fists, wishing the asshole my office as we speak so I could sock him in his stupid face.

“I assume Myron is tailing him and we know where he’s at thi

moment.” I reach for my phone, about to text my wife but I reconsider
No need to freak her out.

Not yet.

“Yeah.” The irritated look on my brother’s face is obvious. “And where the problem comes in.”

Frowning, I lift my gaze to Winston’s. “What do you mean, problem?”

“One of Myron’s guys was following him—and then lost him. He was in, he seemed to be heading straight for our building.”

“What the hell? Why? To confront us? *Me?*” I shake my head, gaze toward the window, out at the city spread before us. “Please. I wish I could show his face.”

“What, so you could destroy it?” He shakes his head. Rubs his eyes. “Truthfully, I wouldn’t mind a go at him either.”

My brother may treat me like shit sometimes and we argue on occasion but he’s always, without a doubt, got my back.

“Exactly.” I turn to face Winston once more. “I hate that son of a bitch. Manhattan. And that your old man detective’s employee is so inept he lost his ass. What the fuck is up with that?”

“I told Myron to fire the son of a bitch, but he said he could not. He explained to me that the guy who lost him is his son.” Winston’s expression is grim.

Shit. That family tie is hard to break.

I should know. Every time I’ve screwed up and given my brother a chance to fire me, he never does. Though I haven’t done something I’m proud of in a long time.

“He needs to hire someone else then,” I mutter, reaching for my phone. I’m ready once again to warn Charlotte, but maybe I should tell it to her instead. She doesn’t need to be sitting at home stressing about this. “I’ll leave. Go home to Charlotte and tell her that asshole is trying to come here.”

I need to protect her. Watch over her and never let her out of my sight. “She’s not home,” Winston says nonchalantly.

I push away from my desk and stand, grabbing my phone and shove it into my pocket, irritated at Winston’s response. “And how the hell do you know where my wife is?”

“She’s with our sister, that’s how I know. And our mother,” V

it. mutters, shaking his head. "I've got security on all three of them. They had lunch, and now they're shopping. With two guards following their every step."

and that's Charlotte did mention she was going shopping with my sister today. Like the ass I am, I completely forgot. "Mom is with them too?"

"Mom?" Winston nods. "She crashed their party. Called me when she was here. At the restaurant."

"How did she—" I clamp my lips shut, not bothering to finish the pending question. I'd rather not know how she figured out Tins and Charlotte's whereabouts together. "You sent security to follow them then?"

"Fuck yes, I did. The moment I got off the phone with Myron and his chin, told me about McTiernan, I called them in. You'd do it for Ash if you had something out before I did," Winston says with a shrug.

"Of course, True. He's right. But he always finds out stuff first. I never do."

"Thanks for watching out for her," I say gruffly, meaning my own mother. "I don't trust that asshole."

that he "Neither do I. He might do just about anything to get close to her."

Winston says grimly. "Maybe even hurt our mother or sister."

"I don't. He I clench my hands into fists. "I hate him."

expression "I know." Winston pauses. "Don't tell her about this."

"Don't tell who? My wife?" I don't want to keep secrets from her. I'd be pissed if she found out, and I want us to be open with each other. "Not to other people, Winny. She deserves to know."

like that "Sometimes what we don't know can protect us. Why scare her?"

"Maybe now is when we call in the authorities," I suggest.

phone, "And let them turn this into a complete fiasco? Give McTiernan a chance to face so he goes into hiding? I don't think so." Winston shakes his head.

should I think of all the murderous plans I had for Seamus McTiernan—around the first time in a while that I've thought of his entire name without turning it into a derogatory insult—and I don't know what I would want to do if I caught him. "If I caught him myself, I might want to kill him," I say.

"I wouldn't blame you if you did." Winston shrugs.

moving it I gape at him, shocked he's going along with me. "You were the one who said I couldn't murder anyone. You didn't want to see me end up in jail."

"Still don't want to see that, but is it really necessary to bring the cops in? Winston? They will only make things messy. And you seem a little more nervous."

they had control when it comes to this asshole. You'll show restraint. At first."

At first. Until we take him somewhere more private, more remote.

And then I'll shoot the fucker right between the eyes. Or bash his
head with a club. Maybe I should stab him in the chest, right where his
heart should be? Choke him out?

The possibilities are truly endless, and every single one of them a
good idea. I'm anxious to take him out once and for all.

Looking forward to having the chance.

Though that's not what Charlotte wants. I hate that Winston asked
me to tell her about McTiernan. She deserves to know what's happening.

"You should go. Be at the apartment when your wife gets
home. Winston encourages, his voice pulling me from my thoughts.

"Yeah, I'm out of here." I'm about to pass my brother by as I
walk out of the office when I pause right in front of him, giving in to my impulses.

I hug my brother.

"Thank you, Winny," I tell him. "For watching out for my girl."

He slaps me on the back then pushes me away. "I'm putting a
security watch at your building. I don't trust that motherfucker."

I grin at him, pleased that he would do that for us. "Me either. They
dare that ass to try and walk into my house. I'll fuck him up."

"In front of your wife and the overprotective butler? I'd love to see
you do that." "I have to try."

Shit. He's kind of got me there.

◇ ◇ ◇

BY THE TIME I'm entering the apartment, relief smacks me square in the
back of my head—when I spot my wife sitting on the floor, petting Doja who's sitting in
her lap.

"You're a good girl, right? Such a good, pretty girl," Charlotte
is saying, rubbing the cat under her chin. Doja is purring so loud I can hear it
from the kitchen. It's a nice sound.

And a nice sight. One I'd love coming home to every night—my
wife safe and secure, spending time with her cat.

Leaning against the wall, I cross my arms and study them, wondering
how she can sense I'm in the room with her. I always seem to feel her presence
underneath the surface.

when she shares the same space with me.

Can she feel me?

head in “Why aren’t you saying anything?” she finally asks, her back to me
is heart There’s my answer. She does sense me.

“I like watching you with Doja.”

appeals. Charlotte glances over her shoulder, frowning. “What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean?” I push away from the wall and approach her
do you ask?”

me not “You look upset.” She turns, keeping her focus on the cat. “You s
. too.”

home,” My wife is too perceptive. “Rough day. Found out a few things.”

“Like what?”

exit the I decide to join her on the floor, sitting across from her with I
between us. The cat rubs her face against my knee and I scratch the top
head. “Hard to explain.”

“Really?” Her gaze finds mine, skepticism in her tone. “I’m a
n extraperson, Perry. I can understand plenty of things.”

I want to tell her so damn bad. Fuck Winston’s warning. He mig
rough I things from Ash, but I refuse to keep anything from Charlotte.

“I never said you weren’t smart.” I’m startled when Doja walks o
see you lap and curls up, her eyes falling closed. Funny how I used to think
cats. “The private detective found him. He’s here. First spotted in Br
Was making his way to the Halcyon building when they lost him.”

I don’t need to explain who *he* is. As my wife just said, she’s sma
understands plenty of things.

“They lost him?” Charlotte sounds as disgusted as I feel. “Did V
ie chest fire them?”

front of I chuckle. “Guess it was the detective’s son who lost him. Hard
your family.”

croons, “True that,” she says with a sigh. She finally lifts her gaze to min
the low get lost in her pretty blue eyes for a moment. “I spent the afternoon wi
mother and sister.”

autiful That snaps me back to reality. “I heard.”

She frowns. “How did you hear?”

ering if “Winston put security on all three of you the moment he found c
resence were together.”

“Oh.”

“There will be extra security tailing you from now on until the end of the year,” I say, my voice firm. I don’t want her to argue with me. It’s going to happen whether she likes it or not. “We’ve got two guys at the front right now. Both are around six-foot-five and weigh two-fifty.”

Her lips curl into the smallest smile. “Wow. I’m impressed.”

“Why?” “This isn’t a laughing matter, Charlotte.” Her smile fades. “He’s going to stop trying to get to you. Something needs to be done.”

“What exactly are you suggesting should be done?” she asks carefully.

I avert my head, wishing I could tell her the truth. That I want to slap this motherfucker with my bare hands.

Actually, she knows that’s my truth. I just hate bringing it up in front of Doja. She’ll inherit all the time.

“Perry.” I turn to look at her when she says my name. “What exactly do you think should be done about Seamus?”

“Don’t say his name,” I bite out. It enrages me, the sound of her saying that asshole’s name. I want him banished from her memories. I want to keep him gone.

For good.

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part. She

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e, and I
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“Oh.”

“There will be extra security tailing you from now on until they find him,” I say, my voice firm. I don’t want her to argue with me. It’s going to happen whether she likes it or not. “We’ve got two guys at the front door right now. Both are around six-foot-five and weigh two-fifty.”

Her lips curl into the smallest smile. “Wow. I’m impressed.”

“This isn’t a laughing matter, Charlotte.” Her smile fades. “He’s not going to stop trying to get to you. Something needs to be done.”

“What exactly are you suggesting should be done?” she asks carefully.

I avert my head, wishing I could tell her the truth. That I want to strangle this motherfucker with my bare hands.

Actually, she knows that’s my truth. I just hate bringing it up in front of her all the time.

“Perry.” I turn to look at her when she says my name. “What exactly do you think should be done about Seamus?”

“Don’t say his name,” I bite out. It enrages me, the sound of her voice saying that asshole’s name. I want him banished from her memories. I want him gone.

For good.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Charlotte

I'M NERVOUS, AND have been since I took that test earlier. Perry's mood isn't helping matters either. I want to work up the nerve to tell him about it, but he seems too angry to hear me.

He has every right to be angry, though. He hates Seamus and knows that the fact that he was in the vicinity of Halcyon earlier has set Perry off.

It also sets me off too. He's back. Maybe he never really left, which is hard to contemplate. I feel more secure, knowing that extra security has been put in place, but still.

It's nerve-wracking, the thought of Seamus lurking around. Watch him. What if Perry tries to hurt him—or something worse? What if Seamus tries to hurt Perry?

What if Perry tries to kill him?

I can't stand the thought of him being arrested, not when there's so much at stake on the line. I can't lose him. I need him now more than ever.

A shiver moves through me and I try to tamp it down, but Perry notices. He always notices.

"Hey, come here." He removes Doja from his lap, who yowls in protest before running away, and he pulls me into his arms, holding me in his arms instead.

I curl up into him, my head pressed against his chest, his steady heartbeat calming my anxiousness. I grip his shoulder and turn my face more into his shirt, breathing in his scent. Sitting like this, absorbing his strength, getting so much comfort, I feel overwhelmed.

Close to crying.

A tear slips out, sliding down my cheek. Uh-oh.

Guess I actually am crying.

“Hey.” Perry slips his finger beneath my chin, tipping my face. I have no choice but to look at him. “Why are you crying? Don’t worry, I won’t let that fucker get close to you ever again. He’ll have to kill me first.”

Oh the tears really start streaming down my cheeks now. Why do I have to go and say something like that?

“Charlotte, come on. Don’t cry.” He sounds in agony as he pulls me. My head is pressed against his shoulder. I turn so I can brush a kiss to his neck. “Your tears fucking kill me, baby.”

Him using the word baby for some reason makes everything ten times worse, and I can’t help it...

I start sobbing.

He holds me for a while and lets me cry, my tears soaking the front of his dress shirt, but he doesn’t seem to mind. I cling to him, my mind awash with all the things. Having lunch with his mother was tough. Shopping with her was even tougher. She’d throw out a sly not-quite-an-insult here and there. Passive-aggressive behavior has never been something I enjoy—what she does—and Caroline Constantine is an expert at it.

I begged off shopping less than two hours after we started. On the way home, Tinsley sent me an apologetic text, saying we needed to get together another time, just the two of us. I responded quickly, agreeing with her. I don’t know.

Pretty sure I’ll stick to online shopping only for Christmas. My excursion was just exhausting.

Perry rubs my back, his touch gentle. Comforting. My sobbing subsides, until I’m sitting there sniffing, pulling away slightly so I can wipe my tears away with my fingers.

“I know it’s upsetting to hear he’s still around, looking for you, but I’m here, and I’ll always be here, Charlotte. I’m going to protect you no matter what. You’re the most important thing in my life. I’ve told you this before, but it needs to be said again. I protect what I love. No matter what.”

Lifting my head, our gazes meet, and I say the first thing that comes into my mind.

“I’m pregnant.” *And I’m terrified you’re going to do something stupid.*

you run into Seamus.

But I don't say that last sentence. Now is not the time.

up so I He blinks, his lips parting as if he's going to say something but
wife. I comes out. He just stares at me, as if he can't quite believe what I just
first." "Did you hear me?"

did he Slowly he nods, his arm tightening around me as he swallows hard
you sure?"

re in so "I took a test right when I came home."

s to his "And it took you this long to say something?"

"You had a few things to say first." A sigh leaves me and I to
n times cheek, the stubble lining it prickling my palm. "We're going to have
Perry. We're going to be parents."

We stare at each other for a long, quiet moment, absorbing what
it of his said.

irl with "Are you upset over it?" he asks carefully, his gaze searching.
with her why you were crying so hard just now?"

l there. Am I upset? I don't know. More like I'm just... overwhelmed. A
o does? happened these last few months, and it's happened so quickly. En
Married. Angry sex. Passionate sex. A baby on the way.

he ride From the outside I'm guessing we look like the picture-perfect
ogether and there are things I'm happy about with my marriage to Perry. He
er, but I Funny. Sexy. Sweet. But nothing about our relationship is normal.

I didn't even know this guy six months ago. Now he's my husband.
s. That the father of our future baby.

"There's been so much that's happened," I finally say. "Too
starts to be... exhausting."

an wipe He tucks me closer, his mouth at my forehead as he murmurs, "I
take care of you."

"Perry "You always take care of me, Perry," I whisper, closing my
oing to "Everyone does. I can take care of myself too, you know."

life and "I know you can." He grabs hold of my shoulders, pulling away so
s mine. stare into my eyes. His expression is deadly serious. Probably the

intense I've ever seen him. He's giving me serious Winston vibes right
omes to which is a little eerie, not going to lie. "I've told you this before that

you're so fucking strong, Charlotte. And you're going to be a fucking
tupid if mother. I know you will. You're smart and compassionate and pro

Our baby is going to be so damn lucky to have you as a mom.”

The tears turn back on, just like that. His sweet words mean so much to me. “Just—promise me you won’t do anything stupid,” I tell him in a low voice. “Please, Perry. If you find Seamus, don’t let your anger get the best of you. Call the police. I can’t lose you. Not now, with a baby on the way.”

He hesitates, and I shake my head, trying to fight off the disappointment. I need to know I matter. I need to know he’ll do anything to protect our baby. Even if that means he has to let Seamus slip through his fingers. “I don’t know if I can promise that,” he finally says.

A ragged sigh leaves me and I pull away to glare at him. “You’re being selfish.”

“I’m being protective,” he corrects, annoying me further. “He deserves to live, not after what he did to you.”

“You’re willing to throw everything we’ve built aside to destroy him just to feed your ego. That’s it. This isn’t about me, or the baby.” My voice rises. “It was about me, about us, you’d do what I’d ask.”

“Come on, Charlotte. You have to know I’ve fallen in—”

I press my fingers against his lips to prevent him from saying it. “I need to know what you’re going to say. Make sure you really mean it, and that’s kind of important. Not like my parents. They love me out of obligation. Because I’m their daughter. And they only approve of me when I’m the proper reflection of them. I don’t need that kind of love in my life—I have enough of it. I want real, everlasting love, Perry. I want you to forget about yourself and focus on my needs, and think about me. Just me. And our child. I want to matter to you like you matter to me.”

He stares at me, anger flickering in his gaze. The truth hurts, and I’m not trying to make him mad, I need him to see what I want.

I need him to see how I feel. I will set aside all of my fears and assumptions to prove my love for him. I’m willing to put him first.

Is he willing to do the same for me?

A male someone clears his throat and we both turn our heads to look at him now, Jasper standing behind the couch, an uncomfortable expression on his face. He clutches his hands behind his back. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I want to know if there’s anything you might need before I retire for the evening.”

“We’re good, J,” my husband answers for the both of us. “Should

know there's a couple of security guards at the door right now. The
ch. there for a while, I'm thinking."

between "Very well, sir. Have a nice evening." Jasper bows before he turns
er blindheel and exits the room, Doja getting up and following after him.

way. I "He's a good dude, your Jasper," Perry says, glancing down at me
anger that was in his gaze earlier gone. "You okay?"

ntment. I nod, closing my eyes when he kisses my forehead yet again,
me andlingering. I suppose we're going to pretend I never said all that only
ers. minutes before. "Are *you* okay? I just gave you some major, life-ch
news."

e being When he pulls away, I notice the corner of his mouth lifts up in
smile. "I already had my suspicions."

doesn't Right. He definitely did. "This morning... how did you know?"

"After you told Ash you weren't feeling great at Thanksgiving
im and expressed her concerns for you to Winston, and they wondered if yo
ises. "If be pregnant. Winston asked me if it was a possibility," he explains.

Oh great. My health has become the family gossip. "And what c
tell him?"

"Think "I said the possibility was there. We've been careless with birth c
t you're he reminds me.

n their We definitely have. In Mexico, I got mad over it. Eventually, I
tion offorgot, too caught up in my need for this man.

I want That's how I always feel about him. Too caught up. Making me f
id you everything. But him. And me. Together.

to you, I like that about him. About us.

"Our mothers will be happy," I say.

d while "Did you tell my mom? When you were with her this afternoon?"

I slowly shake my head. "No. I didn't even officially know I was
ars and hour ago. Even if I did, I wouldn't tell her first. I'd want you to know
this is our baby."

to find His smile is slow, the glow in his eyes intensifying. "You're pregn
face as "Yeah." My smile matches his. "I am."

nted to going to be a father!"

;" I laugh at his excitement. "Are you happy?"

let you He basically dumps me off of his lap and stands up, then bends c

ey'll begrab me, holding me in his arms as he starts for the hallway that lead
bedroom.

s on his We've given up on all pretenses of having separate rooms. He s
mine almost all of the time now. Only going into his when he
, all the something out of the closet or dresser.

"What are you doing?" I loop my arms around his neck, clinging
his lips Though I'm not worried he's going to drop me. He has a firm hold.

y a few "Taking you to bed and stripping you naked," he murmurs, bendin
anging to drop a kiss on my smiling lips. "We should have sex. To comme
this moment."

a faint I laugh, trying to ignore the niggling worry in the back of my brai
we've already forgotten something major.

Like the fact that Seamus is still out there. Still lurking aroun
ng, shehoping to get at me. Or even at my husband.

u could Or our child.

And Perry still believes he has to take care of him his way, and da
lid you consequences.

Now that I'm pregnant, I have even more to lose. If that means I
ontrol," remain a hermit in our apartment until Seamus is found, then so be it.
what it takes to keep our baby safe.

sort of But what about Perry? He'll still have to go to work. Seamus was
for Halcyon before they lost him. What did he have planned?

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grab me, holding me in his arms as he starts for the hallway that leads to the bedroom.

We've given up on all pretenses of having separate rooms. He stays in mine almost all of the time now. Only going into his when he needs something out of the closet or dresser.

"What are you doing?" I loop my arms around his neck, clinging tightly. Though I'm not worried he's going to drop me. He has a firm hold.

"Taking you to bed and stripping you naked," he murmurs, bending down to drop a kiss on my smiling lips. "We should have sex. To commemorate this moment."

I laugh, trying to ignore the niggling worry in the back of my brain. That we've already forgotten something major.

Like the fact that Seamus is still out there. Still lurking around. Still hoping to get at me. Or even at my husband.

Or our child.

And Perry still believes he has to take care of him his way, and damn the consequences.

Now that I'm pregnant, I have even more to lose. If that means I need to remain a hermit in our apartment until Seamus is found, then so be it. I'll do what it takes to keep our baby safe.

But what about Perry? He'll still have to go to work. Seamus was headed for Halcyon before they lost him. What did he have planned?

What did he want to do?



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Perry

I KEEP MY baby news to myself, wanting to savor it for a few days with my wife before we let the whole world know. It's kind of exciting, having a secret that only Charlotte and I share.

And I'm not keeping it a secret because I'm ashamed of the fact that we're having a baby, or that I want to keep it from my family for some other reason. That's not the case. People are going to be happy. My mother is going to be beside herself at the news of another grandchild. My siblings, and specifically my brothers—are going to think I've lost my damn mind that I'm this excited about being a dad at such a young age.

I think of my own father, and how I wish he was still alive so he could see me now. Not like my old man ever considered me a major fuck-up. My parents put their all into Winston and blew me off as the second son with no responsibilities. I fell into that role perfectly. The good time guy who doesn't have any worries, even as a kid.

It's a shame my father never got to see me grow up into the man I am now. Working at the business he started, side by side with my older brother who respects me. I worked damn hard to gain that respect too. I earned it.

I've earned a lot of things. Instead of just going through life with my parents, I was thrust into a marriage that I first believed I didn't want.

Turns out I didn't mind that either.

Didn't mind. Two words that don't even come close to describing my feelings for Charlotte. That woman belongs to me. With me. She makes me feel territorial. Possessive. I look at her and immediately want to touch her. We're in a room together with other people and I want to put my hands on her.

her, making my claim. Letting everyone know that she belongs to me.

I'm in love with her. I have to be, and I tried to tell her, but she wouldn't let me that night, when she announced her pregnancy. She said some things—things that made me angry, but I've turned her words over and over in my mind ever since she said them, and I've come to realize she's right.

I hate McPrickface with everything I've got, but I can't let my wife destroy what I've got with Charlotte. When he's found—and he will be—let the authorities take care of him.

No matter how badly I want to finish him off.

We haven't discussed that conversation again, but I'm going to talk to her about how I really feel about her soon. Maybe even later tonight.

It's a Saturday night and we're getting ready for the annual holiday party at Halcyon. All employees and family are invited.

Winston even invited Charlotte's family and the majority of the staff is coming, save for her youngest brother who's still in school.

Her parents are showing up, which is major. Something I warned her about a few days ago, after Winston's assistant let me know they were coming—RSVP'd. I'm not about to let her come upon her parents at the party that I'm unprepared. I'm not that cruel.

I'm standing in front of the mirror in my rarely-used bedroom, buttoning up my light gray dress shirt when my wife strides into the room.

"I have a tie for you to wear. It matches my dress," she announces with her head toward me.

My gaze snags on her in the mirror and I swear to God, my heart stops. She's absolutely stunning in a red strapless dress. It molds to her body perfectly, showing off her smooth skin and of course, the skirt is short. I stop looking at her legs.

"What the hell are you wearing?" I practically growl.

She stands next to me at the dresser, checking herself out in the mirror with her eyes wide and full of mock innocence. "You don't like it?"

I realize the fabric is covered entirely with red sequins, and they catch the light with her every movement. Even when she's breathing, they twinkle like a million stars. Her tits look barely restrained, as if they'll pop out at any moment. I turn to face her, really taking her in.

"I love it," I admit gruffly. "That dress should be illegal."

"I'm too exposed, aren't I?" She faces the mirror, her bottom lip

between her teeth as she contemplates the dress. “I don’t normally wouldn’t strapless, but I was feeling daring. Maybe it’s too much.”

It’s definitely too much, but I don’t say that, because she’s insecure and overwants my wife to feel strong.

Beautiful.

“It’s not too much.” I move to stand behind her, watching as she ties the tie she was holding on top of the dresser. I rest my hands on her silky-shoulders, caressing her there. She tilts her head to the side, watching me touch her. “You look fucking gorgeous.”

“Is it too sexy?” The question is laden with worry.

“So fucking sexy,” I say, letting my approval shine. I lean in, brushing her golden hair to the side so I can press my lips against her neck. Hell, proud to walk into the party tonight with you by my side.”

Her smile is faint as I wrap my arm around her middle, and she sets her hand over mine. “I figured this could be my last hurrah before I get fancy wifebaby.”

“You’ll never be fat.” I lift away from her neck to kiss her temple, careful not to mess with her hair. “You’ll be full of my baby.”

Those possessive feelings wash over me, the same ones that always come when I’m with my wife. Can’t wait to see her belly grow with our child going to be proud as hell, walking around with her on my arm, knowing she’s the one who did that to her.

“Such a caveman,” she murmurs, studying our reflection. “You’ll tie on and we’ll match perfectly.”

“We match pretty well already.” I can’t wait to show her off tonight. I can’t tell our employees, our business associates, our families. Celebrating our anniversary and the holiday season. It’s the one party Winston goes all out for and spares no expense.

Helps that it’s our mother’s favorite party as well and she pushes V to spend *all* the money to ensure it’s a lavish affair.

Charlotte eventually pulls out of my embrace and reaches for my hand, turning to face me. “Want me to put it on?” She raises her brows.

“Please.”

I like it when my wife makes a fuss over me. She loops the tie around my neck, tucking it under my collar and tugging so the ends are even before she starts to put it together. I lift my chin, giving her room as I smile down

go for When she's finished, she steps away, looking pleased with the results.

"You look good."

re and I "So do you."

I'm filled with the sudden urge to bail on the party. Keep her at where she's safe. She's laid low the last couple of weeks because the McStalker and lucky for him, he hasn't come back around. Yet again, she's gone off the grid like a ghost. I don't know who's protecting that asshole, but it's working. We've not had a single sighting since the time Myron spotted him near the Halcyon building and promptly lost his ass.

Wait, I lied. We know who's protecting him—the Morellis. I was rushing into the Morelli mansion last week and demand to know where "I'll be but Winston wouldn't let me.

More like he talked me out of it, but the plan still lingers in my brain, trying to turn it into reality.

Then I look at my sweet, pretty wife who's goddamn radiant to me. I might add, and I realize I don't want to do anything to put her—us—a careful hand on her safe.

I need to stay safe too. For Charlotte.

"Are we ready to go?" she asks, her sweet voice knocking me from my thoughts.

"Yeah." I snag her hand, pulling her in for a quick kiss. "Let's do this."

out that

◇ ◇ ◇

ght. To THE PARTY IS in full swing by the time we enter the ballroom of this year, where we hold the annual party. There's a woman sitting behind a piano and he's playing Christmas music, the gentle tinkling pleasant amidst the dull roar of the chatting crowd. New York's wealthiest elite are in this room. If a bomb went off right now, many of the titans of Wall Street, real estate investors and various politicians would be erased from the planet.

I smile at a local senator and pause when he asks to meet my wife. I introduce him to Charlotte, hating the way the asshole leers at her, and I pull her away from him as quickly as I can.

"You don't like him?" Charlotte asks as we move through the crowd.

I pluck a glass of champagne from a passing server's tray, take a healthy sip. "He was staring at your tits."

She glances down at herself, tugging on the front of her dress to cover them. “I should’ve worn something else.”

“No. You look stunning.” I rest my hand at the small of her back, t home, her toward some coworkers who are currently clustered together. “Cause of jealous fuck who doesn’t want anyone looking at you so that’s on me.” in, he’s Her smile is giant as I introduce her to my employees—most of ole, but consider my friends. They’re all friendly and not a one of them start’s inept wife’s chest so they all passed the test.

Lucky fuckers.

nted to It goes on like this for hours. Lots of smiling and introductions and he’s at, of hand shaking. We eat some food—a few appetizers that make me for something more substantial. We speak to my mother, who v ain, just Charlotte with an extra sharp gleam in her eye.

“You two seem well,” she says to me at one point, while I’m sh night, I stuffed mushroom into my mouth. “Your wife is glowing with vitality. t risk. I I almost choke on my food, grimacing as I force it down before from my champagne glass. “She’s looking extra beautiful tonight,” I agreement.

om my Her shrewd gaze meets mine. “She’s not drinking.”

My mother is too smart for her own damn good. “She’s not twe his.” yet.”

“That hasn’t stopped her before.” She studies me for a mome saying a word and out of habit, I start to squirm. “There’s something not telling me.”

ie hotel “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I say, keeping my exp no on a neutral.

ong the The silence between us grows and I almost want Charlotte to con s room, me, but she’s too busy talking to my sisters. Besides, Mom would t l estate appraising gaze on my wife and get our little secret out of her. I can’t r

“I’ll wait for the announcement at Christmas,” Mother finally d wife. I leaning in to brush a quick kiss to my cheek. “Congratulations, darling

nd steer I watch her walk away, exhaling loudly before I take yet another b of my champagne.

rd. Probably should slow down, but fuck it. Haven’t gotten this dru aking a while and we’re at a private party. I won’t get shit-faced, but I can le Have a little fun.

try and “So is it true?”

I turn to find Ash standing in front of me, wearing a sleek black leading with her hair up. She has completely transformed into the perfect, I’m the Constantine wife, and it’s a good look for her.

’ “Is what true?”

them I “That you’re going to be a daddy.” Her eyes fill with a devilish e at my and I almost choke on my champagne.

“Shh.” I glance around the room, but no one is paying any attentio

“Who told you that?”

I plenty “I told Winston that at Thanksgiving, and I know he mentioned it hungry Has it been confirmed yet?” She lifts a delicate brow, waiting for my a

atches What is with these Constantine women? They know everything.

It’s fucking scary.

oving a “Yeah. Okay. It’s true. But we haven’t told anyone yet, so keep it

” I point at her. “You can’t even tell Winston.”

I drink Ash’s mouth pops open. “What? I tell him everything.”

rasp in “Not this. You’re keeping it a secret. Until Christmas. Then we’ our reveal.” Before she can protest, I take off, moving through the stopping to chat with various people I know, which is a lot. Winston nty-one making a speech soon, and I’ll have to go up there with him, along w mother.

ent, not This is the first time I’ll have to make a speech as well and I’m , you’re nervous. Should probably lay off the champagne now. I discard the h glass on a table and catch Winston’s eye, who waves me over.

ression “Speech is happening in ten minutes,” he tells me once I’m standi to him. “Are you ready?”

ne save I salute him, something I haven’t done in a while, and blame it urn her alcohol. “Yes, sir.”

isk it. He glares at me. “This isn’t a joke. You’re representing the compa e declares, our family. Maybe you’re not ready to make this speech.”

.” I stand up taller, getting pissed. “I’m more than ready. And I’ve ig swig practicing the damn speech I wrote for weeks. I could probably recite i sleep.”

nk in a The approval on Winston’s face is immediate. “Okay then. G t loose. know. Meet me on the right side of the stage in ten minutes.”

“Got it.” I nod, then make my way to the men’s room.

I need to take a piss.

After I handle my business and wash my hands, I'm about to leave the elegant bathroom and go in search of more of those appetizers when the door opens.

And in walks Seamus McFuckinAsshole.

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I need to take a piss.

After I handle my business and wash my hands, I'm about to leave the bathroom and go in search of more of those appetizers when the door swings open.

And in walks Seamus McFuckinAsshole.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Charlotte

“**C**HARLOTTE, YOU LOOK beautiful. Married life must be treating you Grant greets me, pressing a polite kiss to my cheek as I murmur that before he turns to the beautiful, dark-haired woman standing by his side. “Alyssa, this is my sister, Charlotte.”

Alyssa sticks her hand out for me to shake, a pleasant smile on her face. “It’s a pleasure. Grant speaks so highly of you.”

“He does?” I laugh when my brother scowls. “It’s nice to meet Alyssa. Are you two...”

I wave a hand between them, causing Alyssa to send a questioning look in my oldest brother’s direction.

“Fucking? Yes,” Grant mutters.

Alyssa slaps him in the chest, glaring at him before she returns her attention to me. “Excuse his rude behavior. And yes. We’re—together.”

Well, well, well. My brother has sworn since I was like... ten years old I would never settle down with a woman. Our parent’s marriage discouraged all of us from seeking long-term relationships.

But here’s Grant, settling in with a woman. A woman who’s not afraid to say her mind either, which I like. Probably what he needs too.

“Congratulations,” I tell Alyssa with a laugh. “He’s a difficult one to settle down.”

She laughs as well, the sound pleasant. “I can’t argue with that.”

Ooh, I like her.

Grant aims his nearly permanent scowl in my direction. “Stop trying to lure her to your side. She’s mine.”

“I’m not trying to steal your girlfriend, Grant.” His forehead creases at my use of the word girlfriend. Oh, this is fun. “I’m just trying to be with her.”

“She knows what I’m about.” He slips his arm around her shoulder, pulling her close to him. A very public claiming, which I find interesting. Reminds me of my husband. “And she hasn’t run away yet.”

“Takes a lot more to make me run away.” Alyssa glances around the crowded room before her gaze returns to mine. “This is a wonderful party. Thank you for inviting us.”

“Oh, you’re welcome. I’m glad you could make it. It’s my first time attending as well,” I admit. “My husband and I were only just married. I’ll be there, I well,”

“I heard. Congratulations,” Alyssa offers with a warm smile. “Thank you.” I glance over at Grant, who’s nodding his greeting at me as he passes by. I’m sure there are plenty of people here tonight, but I miss my family.

“Where’s Finn?”

“Somewhere around. I saw him a few minutes ago. Crew couldn’t find him. He’s stuck at school. Studying for finals,” Grant explains. “He’ll be here for Christmas though.”

My heart pangs at hearing his name. I can’t wait to see my baby brother, but I miss him terribly.

“Saw our parents when we first arrived.” Grant actually mock shoves me. “Got away from them as quickly as possible.”

I’m surprised by my brother’s honesty, especially in front of his girlfriend. We don’t ever really talk about our parents, and how they feel about that number on all of us.

“I haven’t spoken to them in quite a while,” I admit. “Not since.” My voice drifts and my gaze cuts to Alyssa.

“She knows,” Grant says quietly. “I told her. You can trust her. Nothing anything Charlotte. Alyssa won’t say a word.”

“Besides, I signed an NDA.” Alyssa’s expression is somber and I can see her in shock.

Grant practically growls. “My God, woman. She’s teasing you, Charlotte. I would never have her do that.”

Nervous laughter escapes me and Alyssa reaches out, grabbing one of my hands.

“I’m sorry. The conversation was feeling so serious, but th

seases at probably inappropriate. Please forgive me,” Alyssa says somberly.

honest “It was actually funny—and it wouldn’t surprise me in the least if I had his previous girlfriends sign an NDA before actually becoming involved with them. Sounds like something he would do,” I tease.

resting. “It’s not right, that they haven’t spoken to you,” Grant says, steering the conversation back to the original topic. “And it’s not your fault, what the man did to you.”

I party. “Ah, but it is. Don’t you see? I got involved with him in the first year and came back from Paris an absolute disgrace.” I slowly shake my head. “They blame me for getting abducted. What that could’ve done to the name if it ever gets out.”

“That’s just terrible,” Alyssa says, shaking her head. “How is it possible that a man that you were abducted?”

knows. “Since you’re not a member of our family, you shall never know what it’s like, being a Lancaster. Having the bloodline,” a familiar male voice says from behind me.

at home I briefly close my eyes, bracing myself. It’s my father. When I open my eyes, I see Grant glaring at him, clenching his jaw, his mouth thinner than a straight line.

Turning, I smile at my father, who doesn’t react. My mother is sitting right next to him, her arm curled through his. A united front always in public—when they actually go out in public together, which is a new occasion.

My did a “Charlotte. I’m not sure if red is your color,” Mother says, her eyes on me as she takes me in, her upper lip faintly curling.

..” My I fight the crashing disappointment from her words and can only manage to paste on a polite smile.

er with “Jesus Christ, would it kill you to offer up a compliment to the girl once in a while?” Grant says, his voice full of disgust.

stare at Alyssa doesn’t chastise him for saying it either.

“Where’s your husband?” Father asks me, his voice gruff. “Want to tell Charlotte him for the invite.”

I glance around the room, searching for his familiar dark blond hair, but he’s nowhere to be found. “I’m not sure. Probably talking to someone else, the perfect host.”

at was “Isn’t this more his brother’s business?” Mother asks.

“Perry has taken on a bigger role at Halcyon,” I say, feeling de-
f Grant Love how she writes both of us off. “And he’ll most likely get a prom-
involved the beginning of the year.”

No one says anything until Grant finally opens his mouth.

ring the “Good for him.”

hat that My parents just stare blankly at me.

Funny how enthusiastic my mother was before. Pushing and encour-
t place, me to marry Perry. Excited over the dress fittings and the planning. I
y head, the entire wedding together for me while I walked around in a daze,
family shock over marrying a complete stranger. She wept at our wedding. I

I was making the right choice and was a beautiful bride.

ur fault The moment the most recent incident happened with Seamus, my
expressed his disgust and she sided with him. That was it. Case closed.

hat it’s And now here I stand with my parents, the both of them watching
ce says if I’m a stranger. I should be used to this, but it still hurts.

Tremendously.

pen my “Ah, look. It’s a cluster of Lancasters.”

d into a Caroline approaches, pulling each of my parents into a hug. Even
who goes reluctantly before he introduces her to Alyssa. We all mak-
tanding talk, my parents saying more to my mother-in-law than they bothered
for the to me and I can’t help but stand there, clutching my glass of water so t
a rare feel like it might shatter at any moment.

Where is Perry? I could really use his support.

es wide “What are you drinking?” Caroline asks me.

“Water.” I take a sip, my throat suddenly dry. What does it matte-
ly nod, I’m drinking?

“Hmm.” Her smile is knowing, as if she’s in on my secret,
d every remember what she said to me when we went shopping a few weeks ago
your parents know?”

“Know what?” my father asks flatly.

o thank Caroline smirks before she announces, “I’m fairly certain Char-
pregnant.”

ead, but My mother gasps. Grant’s mouth hangs open. Alyssa’s face is
d. Being sympathy—I’m sure at Caroline putting me on blast—and my father’s
worst thing of all.

“Huh. Are we sure your son is the father?”

defensive. My cheeks are so hot, they feel as if they could catch fire. Swallowing all the insults I want to spew, I whisper, "Excuse me."

Before I dash away from them, my vision blurry with tears.

How dare he say such a thing? Why would he think it's not Perry's fault?
I cannot believe he said that.

I just... I can't.

But then again, I can.

He probably suspects I went back to Seamus of my own free will. Though I suppose if he doesn't know the full story, and is looking at me from the outside, I can almost see how he'd assume such a thing.

Doesn't he know me though? Understand how I operate? My father is incredibly painful that he would think such a terrible thing about his daughter. He has no faith in me. I'm nothing but a stupid girl who gets me into trouble everywhere she turns.

That's what he thinks, at least. But no more. I am not that girl, a married woman with a husband who supports me and a baby on the way. I am confident in my position as Perry's wife and mother of his future child.

I wish my parents could see that. And believe in me.

I find a quiet corner behind a towering Christmas tree twinkling with white lights and take a deep breath, trying to compose myself. I would love one of those glasses of champagne they're passing around like candy now, but I can't drink any alcohol. I don't want to hurt the baby.

Perry's baby.

That I even have to clarify that in my own thoughts is mortifying.

Blinking, I carefully dab at my eyes with my fingertips so I don't ruin my makeup. Releasing another shuddering breath, I try to calm my racing heart and rest my hand on my chest and swallowing hard. If Perry were here, he'd know what to do, what to say to calm me down. He'd probably want to see my father and defend me in an argument, so for missing out on that, I feel like he's not here. We don't need to cause any family drama at the holiday party.

But I need him.

Desperately.

"Excuse me." Winston's voice suddenly comes over the speaker, and everyone's head swivels in the direction of the tiny stage, where Winston is currently standing next to the piano, a spotlight shone upon his golden hair gleaming in the light. He's scowling out at the audience, his

allowing searching as he scans the room and I wonder who he's looking for.

When I spot Caroline joining her son on stage, I realize my husband standing next to him, which was the original plan for tonight. Both his child? were going to make a speech, while their mother looked on proudly has been practicing his speech for weeks.

I glance around, hoping to find him but he's nowhere in sight.

And that's not like him.

, which He wouldn't ditch Winston. This night—this speech was imposing at it him.

Winston's gaze finds mine and he sends me a questioning look. I can't shrug at him in return, my head swiveling left, then right.

is only Still no Perry.

o finds "I was hoping my brother would join us, but it looks as if he's preoccupied. Most likely making a business deal in the bathroom," Winston says to tepid laughter.

ay. I'm Huh. Maybe that is where he's at. He did drink an abundance of champagne earlier this evening.

Pushing my way through the crowd, I head for the restrooms, in search of my husband. If I get to him in time, I'm sure he'll be able to make his kill for and no one would be the wiser that he almost missed it.

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searching as he scans the room and I wonder who he's looking for.

When I spot Caroline joining her son on stage, I realize my husband isn't standing next to him, which was the original plan for tonight. Both brothers were going to make a speech, while their mother looked on proudly. Perry has been practicing his speech for weeks.

I glance around, hoping to find him but he's nowhere in sight.

And that's not like him.

He wouldn't ditch Winston. This night—this speech was important to him.

Winston's gaze finds mine and he sends me a questioning look. I can only shrug at him in return, my head swiveling left, then right.

Still no Perry.

"I was hoping my brother would join us, but it looks as if he's preoccupied. Most likely making a business deal in the bathroom," Winston says to tepid laughter.

Huh. Maybe that is where he's at. He did drink an abundance of champagne earlier this evening.

Pushing my way through the crowd, I head for the restrooms, in search of my husband. If I get to him in time, I'm sure he'll be able to make his speech and no one would be the wiser that he almost missed it.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Perry

NORMALLY I'D RELISH finding myself in this situation. Ready to head out, only for my archnemesis, my biggest enemy to stroll into the bar like no big shit. As if he belongs here. I'd sling an endless string of insults at him and sock him square in the fucking jaw, sending him to the ground. His head would bounce off the cold tile floor and I'd jump on top of him, get in front of his shirt and slam the back of his head into the floor again.

And again.

I'd take great pleasure in bringing this asshole pain. I'd probably even take greater pleasure in ending his life, knowing he'd never be a problem for our lives again.

None of that happens though. Not when the guy I hate more than anyone else in the entire fucking world is standing in front of me with a gun cocked in his right hand, that very hand twitching nervously, his finger resting on the trigger.

Fuck me.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I ask, my voice calm yet edged with steel.

Seamus grins and it's downright maniacal, I swear. Straight out of a horror movie. "I was invited."

"Bullshit."

"Watch your mouth." He rubs the outside of his thigh with the back of his hand, the gun and I promise myself right then that my eyes can never leave him. Constantines are so damn stupid, with all of your extra security you put in place. Yet all a person has to do is say, 'I'm here for the Halcyon part

they let any old loser in.”

I remain quiet while Seamus laughs, the sound grating and I c
lunging for him. Knocking the gun out of his hand. Would I be fast e
I’m younger. Probably quicker too. But all it would take is his finger
the trigger and he could get me.

Can’t risk it. I’m about to be a father. I need to stay alive for my
sake.

And my wife’s.

We both remain quiet until I can’t take it anymore. I feel like I’m g
crawl out of my skin.

“What do you want?” I bite out.

id back “Your wife. She belonged to me first, you know.” His gaze turns
throomas I assume his memories of the time he spent with Charlotte hit him.
sults at ignore his use of the words, she belonged to me first.

nd. His Well she belongs to me now, asshole.

grab the “You were merely assigned her,” he continues. “While she chose n

How the hell does he know this? That our marriage wasn’t real a

Who told him? A Morelli? Hell, did Charlotte tell him?

ly take No way. She wouldn’t do that.

blem in “Your relationship is meaningless.” His dark gaze alights on i
focus returning. “She may have married you, but she doesn’t actual
anyoneabout you. It’s in name only.”

latched I consider telling him it’s changed, but I can’t let on that she
; on the something to me. That would be a mistake.

“She willingly left with me that day, you know,” he continues, hi
cruel when he aims it at me.

ed with I make a dismissive noise. “Bullshit. You *terrify* her, you ps
asshole. She would never leave with you willingly.”

ut of a He blinks at me, appearing confused. What, is he shocked I would
her? I’m not like her family, who have such little faith in Charlotte.
her, better than anyone else.

arrel of Better than him, that’s for damn sure.

t. “You “You just don’t like losing,” I toss out at him.

put into His face turns red, his eyes blazing with fury. “You’re damn right
ty,’ andlike losing. I love that girl. We were ripped apart by her father. He *de*
me. I lost my job. My career. I went home to nothing and had to sta

er away That's a new factoid. "What do you mean, you've written him?"

"I begged for his forgiveness. I told him I loved his daughter with
u don'tcell in my body. That I wanted to make things right between us." A de
ither. edge fills Seamus's voice, and his eyes are shiny. Almost as if he mig
s to thecrying. "But he didn't respond. I tried to write to Charlotte too, but the
were all returned."

family. Who writes letters? Why didn't he just try and call her from a
way ofphone?

"Her father kept me from her, and then gave her away to someon
ust twoSomeone who doesn't even know her. You." His fingers tighten arou
gun and he raises his arm, aiming it straight at me. "First, I need to
in hereyou. And then I'll take out her father. Only then can Charlotte ar
together."

I don't even think. It's as if every rational thought I've ever had
' me as I jump toward him, my hands out, knocking the gun from his
drops to the floor with a heavy clank, skidding across the tile and
falls to his knees, scrambling to retrieve it.

want to I drop on top of him, pinning him beneath me, my hands everywh
try to grab hold of his wrists. He struggles beneath me, his feet grappl
upper torso bucking in a desperate attempt to hurl me off of him.

e? Why Fuck that.

Pressing my knees to the floor, I rise up, straddling him, my fist
doesn'this jaw. A groan leaves him when I make contact and I do it again.

Then again.

ow if I Until it's all I can do. I'm hitting him repeatedly, blood streamir
: father.his mouth. His nose. His eyes begin to swell. He's pleading with me to

And still I hit him.

fingers Every blow is for the fear he caused my wife. What he did to her,
rking." never redeem himself for. She may never recover from the trauma he
I couldthrough, but I will do my best to make sure she never feels unsafe
nuch aswill protect her from evil.

lestroys Especially the evil this man perpetrates.

"What the fuck? Perry!"

uits, his The door swings open, but I don't look up. I'm too intent on des
one elsethis motherfucker. All the fight has left him. He doesn't move. He's n
me." groaning anymore, and I know if I don't stop now, I'm going to kill hi

Hesitating, I think of Charlotte, and what she's said to me. How
h everytake any risks when it comes to Seamus. I need to be there for her.

esperate And our child.

ght start Hands grab at the back of my suit jacket, slipping under my
e lettersbefore yanking me off of Seamus McFuckedup. I roar my disap
struggling to get out of their grip when I realize it's Finn Lancaster
burnerpulled me off of him.

"Calm down, bro," he says as he pushes me away from Seamus. So
ne else.run straight into the wall with a thud. "Fuck, you messed him up."

und the I lean against the wall, breathing hard, my vision blurry and stain
destroyred. "I want to kill him."

nd I be "Clearly." Finn kicks at Seamus's shins, making the man groan in

"But you don't want to go down for murder."

l leaves "I don't care what I go down for," I mutter, though I don't mean
grip. Itof it.

Seamus Not really.

If I'm in jail, then I can't see my baby be born. I can't watch m
ere as Igrow. I can't make more babies with my wife, and create a life with he
ing, hisworth living.

That's the only reason I don't return to Seamus and finish the job.

The only one.

finding Finn flies into action, locking the bathroom door before he pulls
phone and calls someone. From his low murmurs, I figure out he's tal
Grant, and I watch him as I try and calm my racing heart. My poundin;

ig from "He's coming right now," Finn says once he ends the call. "He's g
o stop. Winston first."

Swallowing hard, I check the time on my phone, remembering the
he canI was supposed to give. I bet my brother is pissed at me.

put her I kind of don't give a shit, considering I had another problem to ta
again. Iof.

Within minutes there's a rapid knock on the door, the unmistakabl
of both Grant and Winston's deep voices coming from the other sid
lets them in, the both of them stopping short in front of the crumpled v
troyinga man lying on the floor.

ot even Winston's gaze finds mine first. "What the hell happened?"

m. I wave a hand at Seamus. "He said you invited him."

I can't For once in my life, I think I completely shocked my big brother speechless.

"Is this the asshole who kidnapped my sister?" Grant asks, his voice dripping with contempt. His expression, menacing. His teeth are clenched so tight, I'm surprised he can speak.

er who "Yes," I bite out.

Grant marches over to Seamus, standing above him for a moment with his hands on his hips as he studies him for a moment. He glances at each of them before he leans over and spits on him.

ed with Right on his face.

Seamus groans, rolling over on his side and Grant nudges him with his foot, a sneer on his face.

Satisfaction curls through my blood and I realize in that moment that I'm a word.

Grant Lancaster.
A lot.

"What do you want to do with him?" Winston makes a disgusted face as he contemplates Seamus.

I study Seamus as well, curled into a crumpled little ball on the floor.

"We should do what my wife has wanted from the very beginning."

Winston's gaze. "Call the cops."

"Is this why you didn't show up for the speech?" Winston asks me. Nodding, I wipe the back of my hand across my mouth, surprised to find blood streaking across my skin. He must've got in a few hits. I didn't realize. "Sorry about that."

"You were taking care of business," Winston says. "That's understandable."

I can hear the respect in my brother's voice and damn, that means a lot. It's something I've sought for pretty much my entire life. My brother's respect and admiration. I wanted to be just like him growing up, and though I know we're two completely different people, I've learned something tonight.

le. Finn We're both Constantines to our very core.

vaste of

For once in my life, I think I completely shocked my big brother. He's speechless.

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A lot.

"What do you want to do with him?" Winston makes a disgusted face as he contemplates Seamus.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Charlotte

I'M IN A constant state of worry as I move through the crowded r search of my husband. I never did make it to the bathrooms. I was stop one person. Then another. Until it felt rude, that I was trying to leav Winston was giving his speech. And I'm not a rude person.

So I stayed and listened to it, silently fuming over my husband's a He's a grown man. He knew when he was supposed to give his spec dare he not show up and support his brother?

The worry hit me once Winston was finished. It truly isn't like I just disappear during an important part of the evening. His brother business mean more to him than most anything else. He would be here Something is wrong.

Where could he have gone?

Determined, I finally manage to leave the ballroom to go in search husband when Finn miraculously appears, a serious expression on his he reaches for me. He grabs hold of my shoulders, stopping me.

"I need to find Perry," I say, trying to jerk out of his hold. I ha worried I sound.

"I know where he's at."

I blink up at him. "What? Take me to him."

"I don't know—"

"Take me to my husband," I interrupt. "I mean it, Finn. I need to s Now."

A ragged exhale leaves him and then he leads me to a short c where the bathrooms are, and when I spot my husband leaning aga

wall with Winston standing in front of him, I swear my knees but with gratitude.

“Perry!” The relief that sweeps through me is almost overwhelming as he lifts his head, his beloved blue eyes meeting mine.

I pull out of Finn’s grip and run toward my husband, nearly knocking him over when I throw myself at him. He wraps his arms around my waist and holds me close while I rain kisses all over his face, pulling away with a wince.

“You’re hurt.” I study his face, noting the bruise blooming on the side of his jaw. The cut on his lower lip. He looks like he’s been in a fight. “What happened to you?”

Winston says, “Your husband had a little altercation just now,” as he approaches. “Don’t worry. The police have been called.”

“Who did you fight with?” I ask Perry.

His expression is grim as he admits, “Seamus.”

My lips part, but no sound comes out. Seamus was here? At the house? How did he fight with my husband?

“He had a gun,” Perry continues. “He wanted to kill me. And my father.”

“What?” The word is a breathless gasp and before I can say anything else,

Perry pulls me back into him, my face pressed against his chest. I try to process what he just said, barely listening to what the men are talking about.

The cops and Seamus and the gun and how terrible the security was. How easily he got into the party. How he wanted to kill my father for ruining my father’s life. How he tried to get in contact with me right after I left Paris, but my father prevented him from doing so.

Seamus sounds as if he was deranged.

“You hurt him?” I ask when our brothers enter the bathroom, leaving me alone. They won’t let Perry go in with them, which I’m okay with.

I need him to stay here with me.

Perry nods, gently brushing the hair away from my face. I notice his bruised and ravaged knuckles and wonder what Seamus must look like. “I was going to kill me. He had a gun. I knew I had to fight for my life. It was either him or me.”

“Oh, Perry.” The tears start to fall, which is something I’ve noticed I cry far too easily lately. I blame my chaotic hormones. “I’m so sorry.”

ickle in He frowns. “Why are you apologizing?”

“It’s all my fault.” My voice catches on a sob and I turn into a blubber when mess. “The only reason he wanted to kill you is because of me. I’ve brought nothing but trouble into your life since I walked into it.”

ing him “That’s not true.” He grasps either side of my face, his touch firm and tilts my head back, forcing me to stare into his eyes. “You brought me much more than that. You brought me light. You brought me laughter. You brought me sexual frustration and lust and so much more. You showed me what it’s like to connect with a woman at the deepest level. You brought me Jasper and Doja—”

A watery laugh leaves me. “—and you brought me love, Charlotte. You brought me a baby. *Our* baby.” I gape at him, overwhelmed by his sweet words. The earnest expression on his battered face, his raw and broken hands cradling my cheeks as if they were his entire world. Maybe I am. “What are you saying?” I whisper.

“I’m saying that I’m in love with you, wife.” He leans in, pressing his forehead to mine, his gaze never straying. “I love you.”

Oh. I’m shaking. Overwhelmed by my feelings for this man who has grown to mean so much to me in such a short amount of time.

“I love you too,” I admit, my voice soft, my heart swelling. “So much.” His smile is faint, his eyes glowing as he dips his head, his mouth brushing mine in the sweetest, softest kiss. “I would do anything for you, Constantine. Anything to protect you. To prove to you that you’re safe. How do you know that?”

“I do. I do. I love you, Perry.” He kisses me, swallowing my words but my emotions. Until we feel so completely entwined, I don’t know where he begins.

I’ve never felt so connected to a person before. Just as I’m his, I belong to him.

And he belongs to me. With me.

“Hey lovebirds.” That sardonic tone can only belong to my brother-in-law, Grant. “Hate to break up your meaningful moment, but the cops have arrived. And shit is about to get chaotic.”

Grant isn’t lying. Within seconds, there are police everywhere, not just a great job of being discreet even though Winston asked them not to come to the party, which is still carrying on in the nearby ballroom. But anyone who spilled out of the room can see the police swarming the vicinity. Two

pull Perry away from me to question him and Finn stands with me, going into his protective older brother mode, which I appreciate.

brought I don't want to talk to anyone. I don't even want them to see me.

Paramedics arrive on the scene a few minutes later, heading straight into the bathroom so they can assess the damage. I turn to Finn the moment they appear, concern filling me.

er. You "Do you think Perry will get in trouble?" If he's arrested, I don't know what I'll do.

ight me Finn slowly shakes his head. "He was defending himself. It wasn't my fault...McTiernan was a known threat. Perry had to do what he could to fight back." life. The man brought a gun to a fist fight. He had the advantage from the start. Your husband did what he had to do."

s if I'm I nod, my gaze stuck on the bathroom door. Police are in there too.

God knows what they're seeing, or what they're saying. Is Seamus coming forward enough to tell them what happened? Is he making up lies to make Perry look like the bad guy?

who has Such a terrifying night, and I'm worried over everything that happened, yet I still can't believe what Perry said to me—but then again, I can't. I've grown so close in only a few months, and I'm still in awe of the fact that he loves me.

Charlotte I love him too. So much. No other man understands me like my husband. He believes in me, and I believe in him too.

Our marriage may have started out as a lie, but it's turned into something real and beautiful.

When I end "Hey." Grant approaches, his stride brisk. "Get her out of here. I'm about to escort Seamus out of the bathroom."

Perry is "Is he able to walk on his own?" I ask, not out of concern for Seamus but for my husband.

The worse off Seamus is, the worse the police might be questioning my brother, Perry.

ive just "Barely," Grant admits. "They're putting him on a stretcher. The paramedics are taking him to a hospital to have him thoroughly checked out. He might be admitted for the evening so they can keep watch on him, and the moment he's deemed healthy enough to be discharged, they're arresting him. He'll be under police watch while in the hospital."

of them Thank God. He deserves to be arrested and thrown in jail for what he did.

ing into done. “Okay.” I nod. “What they really need to do is send him to Ireland.”

“Seamus might have to do time here first. Then they’ll send him back to Ireland. Maybe they’ll deport him and wash their hands of him. I don’t know, but he says, his voice serious. “He would’ve taken you, you know. His plan is to eliminate everyone who kept him from you. Your husband and our friends know we were blocking his way.”

A shudder moves through me and I rest a hand over my stomach protectively. “I think he’s mentally ill. I hope he gets help.”

I mean what I say. I want him to heal—far, far away, in Ireland. From there the relationship wasn’t even that meaningful. Based on a crush that turned into a quick affair before I found out what he did to me. He still works, but he has no responsibility for that. He ruined everything.

I truly believe Seamus McTiernan just wants what he can’t have.

“Hey.” I turn to find my husband standing behind me and I go back to work. Everything inside of me going calm when he wraps his arms around me. “Come with me. I don’t want McAsshole to see you. We’ve faced.”

Perry pulls me into an empty conference room, the door quietly closing behind us, shrouding us in darkness. He reaches for me once more and I go back to work, clinging tightly, never wanting to let him go.

“What did the police say?” I ask, afraid of his answer.

“They just questioned me about what happened and I told them the truth. The gun was right there, lying on the floor. They bagged it for evidence. They’re looking for a suspect. A shiver moves through me at the mention of a gun. “What would’ve shot you?”

“Oh trust me, wife. I thought about that. I decided to take the risk anyway.” I glance up at him, barely able to see his handsome face in the darkness because of the dark room, but I can still make out his eyes. And how they gleam at me. “You took a risk too, that day you hurled soup in his face. He paid off. So did mine.”

“I love you, Perry.” I do. So much. How lucky am I to have this life? But they life? Wanting to be with me, take care of me, protect me.

“I love you, Charlotte.” He kisses me, his warm lips and seeking making me melt. “You’re the most important thing in my life. You’re what he’s baby.”

back to He rests his hand on my stomach, caressing me there and I can't help
I start to cry yet again.

ack. Or "Aw, wife. Not the tears." He sounds in complete misery and I laugh
" Grant While still crying.

was to "I'm sorry," I murmur, shaking my head. God, I'm a blubbering mess
r fathercan't help it. My hormones are out of whack."

almost"I got you."
I know he does.

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He rests his hand on my stomach, caressing me there and I can't help it.
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"Aw, wife. Not the tears." He sounds in complete misery and I laugh.
While still crying.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, shaking my head. God, I'm a blubbering mess. "I
can't help it. My hormones are out of whack."

"That's okay, baby." He rubs his hand up and down my back in comfort.
"I got you."

I know he does.

That's what I'm counting on.



EPILOGUE

Perry

I LEAN AGAINST the doorjamb, slipping my hands in my pockets as she winds her way around my legs, meowing at me in warning. She's overprotective of this room—and who it belongs to. She even hissed at Charlotte's father when he tried to enter earlier.

Luckily enough, I witnessed the moment and thought it was pretty hilarious, though I did my best not to laugh out loud. Jasper struggled, though he kept his expression neutral the entire time.

I saw the joy dancing in his gaze, though. Pretty sure he doesn't work at the Lancaster residence.

Charlotte sits in a rocking chair in our baby's nursery, cradling our son against her breast. He eats noisily, his rosebud lips tugging on her nipple. Really greedy little thing, waving his little hand in the air in almost triumphant feasts. My wife reaches out, tracing his tiny fist with her index finger, her gaze thoughtful.

"You're staring," she says, though she's not even looking at me. I've mentioned that before a time or two, since we first were forced together. I wonder if I'll ever get over how entranced I am by my wife.

Probably not.

And I'm okay with that too.

"Can't help it. You're beautiful."

She finally glances in my direction, disbelief in her eyes. "Please. I've stayed up half the night and have dark circles beneath my eyes to prove it. I have a stain up on my shirt. My hair is a mess. I can't remember the last time I took a shower, which is gross, but my memory is also fuzzy so for all I know..."

showered a few hours ago? I'm not sure. Oh, plus I'm sleep-deprived and starving. Like all the time."

My wife rambles when she's tired, and it's adorable.

Charlotte glances down at the baby she's cradling, her hand smoothing over the downy softness that is our son's head. "He's sweet though, right?"

"He's as sweet as you." I push away from the doorframe and full the nursery, my gaze on my son. "Finish feeding him and I'll take over."

"What, really? You will?" Her gaze meets mine, her blue eyes wide and sounds so hopeful. Looks it too.

We had some of her family over earlier, allowing them a glimpse of our son. Her parents came, as well as her brothers and their significant others. DojaWell, not Finn. He's out of the country currently, doing God knows what; rather I don't bother asking. He's the wild card of this particular Las Vegas bunch.

I tolerated her parents. Their lack of love for their only daughter from my damn me, and the only reason they're coming around is to see the baby. I as well, deserve to be in our son's life? My wife says yes, because everyone gets a second chance, according to her.

I don't miss Whatever. I think her parents are on their fiftieth chance but remind my wife of that little fact.

For son to "Definitely." Nodding, I go to the chair and kneel in front of it, resting my wife's hand out of the way so I can smooth my own hand over my hair as he golden hair. "You deserve a break, wife."

My wife, her "You've been working hard too," she reminds me, and I can hear the faint tinge her voice.

She's No. She's Nope. She can't feel guilty for taking my offered help. She needs to rest, and she's not in this parenting thing alone. I'm not like her father who ignores kids. And we're not like her parents either, hiring a nanny to take care of our son.

Charlotte wanted to be hands-on with him. She told me that from the start and I agreed with her. I know it's hard and I was right there with her through it. I'm up six weeks before I had to go back to work. Taking care of a demanding baby every spit day in and day out is a slog. Overwhelming.

I took a But my wife is up to the task. I'll be right there with her, standing by her side, helping out where I can.

"And you pushed a baby out of your body only a couple of months ago."

and I'mIt's the least I can do." I watch my son's mouth tug and pull on my nipple and I shake my head. He's ferocious. A Constantine through, with Lancaster blood flowing through him too.

oothing He's going to be someone to contend with someday. I can already t
ght?" Charlotte smiles down at me, her gaze soft. Like she can't belie

ly enterhere, offering my help. Offering my love. "What did I do to deserve yo
:" "You didn't like me at first," I remind her. I like to think back o

de. Sheearly days, when we didn't like each other, yet the attraction was stil
Frustrating us both. We've come a long way. "At all."

e of our "I didn't trust you." Her eyes narrow. "You didn't trust me either."

others. "True. And now look at us." I stroke my son's head and he pull
at. from his mother's breast, his big blue eyes staring up at me. I smile
ncasterand I swear to God, he smiles back.

Or maybe it's just gas. I'm not sure. But I'm taking it as a sign t
ustratesson knows what's up. That I'm his dad.

Do they My chest swells with pride. Still wild to think we made this little
shouldbeing, Charlotte and I.

Once Reed has finished feeding, Charlotte starts to burp him
I don'tinterrupt the process, taking him from her along with a burp rag, v
drape over my shoulder.

udging Can't have him messing up the ten-thousand-dollar suit, you know
y son's I walk him around the bedroom, patting his back, his little body w
against mine, his head bobbing.

he guilt "You really don't mind?" Charlotte asks when she stands, stretch
arms above her head. Her body has bounced back pretty quickl
o knowpregnancy, but she's also gained some curves that I can't help but adm
ores theappreciate.

e of our Seeing her like this, even when she's feeling low and out of sorts,
lusting after her. When do I not want her? I miss having sex with m
he startbut I have to be patient. Considerate. Her body has just performed a r
he firstand while her labor experience was relatively easy, it still did a nun
g infanther body and even her mental state.

But considering everything, she's doing well. She's open with m
; by herher feelings, and I'm there for her every chance I get.

We make a good team, my wife and I.

hs ago. "I don't mind." Reed chooses that moment to burp—really loudl

my wife's the both of us laugh. Doja runs into the bedroom, meowing, her mouth wide and narrowing as she studies me. Deeming me not a threat, she turns and trots back to the doorway of the bedroom, resuming her spot guarding the door, I assume. "I can tell. You smile down at our son, who seems pleased that he just burped. Probably because I'm better after that. Poor little dude can sometimes get full of gas. "I can't do it?"

"Okay." The relieved smile on Charlotte's face makes it worth it. I smile back at her. "I'll be there. I made this offer. And when she walks over to me to press a kiss on my cheek and murmur, "Thank you," my heart pangs.

It's never felt so full.

I think of everything we've been through, and how we made it despite the odds stacked against us. McJailbird got deported back to Ireland because there's a no contact order in place, so I'm feeling pretty confident he won't be able to come near my wife again.

If he even tries, he won't survive. I guarantee it.

Charlotte has made wary peace with her parents, though they're not the same as which is fine with the both of us. Her brothers spend a lot more time with me but I like them. I've come around.

The Lancasters are still feral wolves, but I can deal with them. They're not like us Constantines.

Life is good. I have no complaints. How can I? I'm married to a beautiful woman I love with my entire soul and we have a son. Work is going well.

I'm VP of Operations at Halcyon and while it's a lot of stress, I can handle it. I'm an integral part of the family business. No longer the careless fucker I used to be, that's for damn sure.

I'm a husband and a dad, for Christ's sake. I had to step up.

The moment she's gone, I tuck my son into my hands and hold him in front of me. His eyes are wide and unblinking as he stares up at me. My wife can't help but smile at him.

"What's up little man? How's life? You liking it out here in this cruel world?"

He yawns his answer.

"It's not cold and cruel here though. You got a mama who loves you and your daddy does too. Doja the cat will protect you with her life, and she'll rip out the eyes of anyone who's a threat." I bring him close to my face and whisper in his ear, "Like your Grandfather Lancaster."

er gaze A fussy little noise leaves him, making me chuckle.
rots out “And then there’s Jasper, who’ll attend to your every need. G
See?” I Caroline always wants to hold you. She’s greedy, like you are. You
ly feels Winston doesn’t seem to particularly care for you, but don’t be of
handle You’re too little still. Just wait. He’ll come around.”

Charlotte peeks her head around the doorframe, a smile on her fac
t to me our gazes meet. “What are you telling our son?”

s to my “You spying on me?” I meet her gaze, raising a brow.

“You started talking to him before I even fully left the nursery. I
stick around and hear what you said.” She reenters the room, and h
spite all says it all.

nd and She loves seeing me with our son. Just like I love seeing her with h
ll never “I was just giving him the scoop. Letting him know he’s loved. B
us.” I smile down at him.

“You want to hear something funny?” When I nod, she continues,
it close, I was pregnant, I could only imagine you with a girl. I was surprised w
with her, found out we were having a boy. I thought for sure it would be a daugh

“I’d like a daughter. One that looks just like you.” I smile. “We’ll
ey’re atry again. Eventually.”

“A long time from now,” she adds.

autiful “Not too long though. I want them to be close. That way they’ll ta
ig well, of each other.” I glance down at our son before I return my gaze to my
ndle it. “I love you, Perry,” she whispers, and when I return my gaze to
ck-up I see that her eyes are welling with tears. “You’re the best dad. T
husband. Despite what your brother says.”

A chuckle leaves me as I think of Winston griping about me.
him in thoughts of my brother fade the longer I watch my wife.

e and I Damn. Those tears are such a killer. But I know she’s not sad
overwhelmed.

ie cold, Overwhelmingly happy.

“I love you too, baby.” I turn my attention to her, cradling my so
to my chest as I circle my other arm around my wife’s shoulders and t
ou. And into my side. “You don’t even know how much.”

scratch “Oh trust me,” she says on a sigh, her smile all for me. “I know.”
so I can



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And you can read Winston Constantine's right now...

Money can buy anything. And anyone. As the head of the Constantine family, I'm used to people bowing to my will. Cruel, rigid, unyielding—I'm all those things. When I discover a woman who doesn't wither under my gaze but instead smiles right back at me, I'm intrigued.

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wonderful humor too. I fell into it like a dream...a dream I didn't want to wake up from.”

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...wife.

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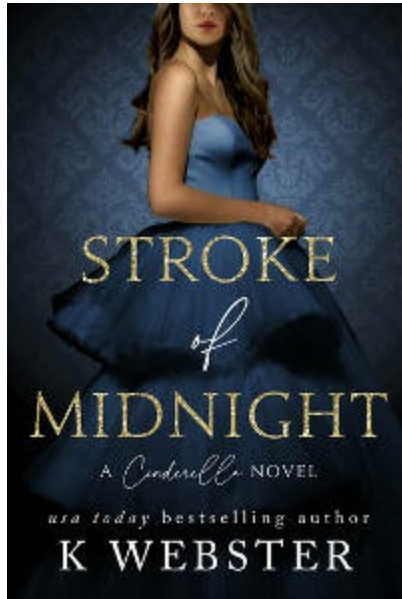
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...uck her

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ABOUT MIDNIGHT DYNASTY

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The new girl doesn't belong here.

So why can't I stop thinking about her?

I'm Keaton Constantine. My duty is family. At least, it was until I started unbuttoning the good girl and realizing there's more than duty.

[READ WICKED IDOL >](#)

“A forbidden romance full of angst and delicious desire. Wicked Idol is unputdownable and so scorching hot it will melt your kindle. You're not going to want to leave Pembroke Prep.”

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And Caroline Constantine has a resident fixer...

Outside a glittering party, I saw a man in the dark. I didn't know that he was an assassin. A hit man. A mercenary. Ronan radiated dangerous beauty. Mercy and mystery.

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“This book grabbed me by the throat and dragged me into a dark alley...and I loved every minute of it!”

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As Father Magnus Falke, I suppress my cr
As the headteacher of a Catholic boarding
I'm never tempted by a student. Until her..

I became a priest to control my impulse
Then I meet Tinsley Constantine.

[READ LESSONS IN SIN >](#)

“Pam Godwin has penned a sinfully beaut
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Monica Murphy is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of the One Week Girlfriend series, the Billionaire Bachelors and The series. Her books have been translated in almost a dozen languages and sold over one million copies worldwide. She is both a traditionally published author and an independently published author. She writes new adult, adult and contemporary romance. She is also USA Today bestselling romance author Karen Erickson.

She is a wife and a mother of three who lives with her family in California on fourteen acres in the middle of nowhere, along with the dog and too many cats. A self-confessed workaholic, when she's not writing she's reading or hanging out with her husband and kids. She's a firm believer in happy endings, though she will admit to putting her characters through many angst-filled moments before they finally get that hard won HEA.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Monica Murphy is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of the One Week Girlfriend series, the Billionaire Bachelors and The Rules series. Her books have been translated in almost a dozen languages and has sold over one million copies worldwide. She is both a traditionally published author and an independently published author. She writes new adult, young adult and contemporary romance. She is also USA Today bestselling romance author Karen Erickson.

She is a wife and a mother of three who lives with her family in central California on fourteen acres in the middle of nowhere, along with their one dog and too many cats. A self-confessed workaholic, when she's not writing, she's reading or hanging out with her husband and kids. She's a firm believer in happy endings, though she will admit to putting her characters through many angst-filled moments before they finally get that hard won HEA.

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