



BEST

*enemies*

FOREVER

OLIVIA HAYLE

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BEST  
*enemies*  
FOREVER

OLIVIA HAYLE

*To ambitious women who are tired of being underestimated...  
and who are learning to ask for what they want.*

# Chapter 1

*Connie*

It's a perfect night—a martini in hand and plenty of interesting people to watch. That's one of the few things I like about Las Vegas. People gather here from every corner of the world. They do that back in New York, too, but people seem different here, somehow. Louder, brighter, and infinitely more entertaining.

The hotel I'm in, for all its five stars and luxury, still carries the faint scent of indoor smoke. I doubt the Strip will ever lose it entirely.

“Would you like another drink?” the bartender asks. He has a wide smile and a towel thrown over his shoulder, and is standing in front of shelves stocked to the brim with every liquor known to man.

*Handsome*, I think.

“Yes, thank you, that'd be lovely.”

He gets to work behind the counter, grabbing a bottle of gin. “Enjoying your time in Vegas?”

“It's been good,” I admit, and cross my legs over on the barstool to face him. “Just here for a convention.”

“Most people are.”

I nod. That much is true. The convention hadn't exactly dazzled with opportunities for sparkling conversation, but a representative of Contron had to be here, nonetheless. To schmooze, to smile, to shake hands, and to have those all-important meetings behind closed doors. And seeing how David Connovan is in his late seventies, Alec Connovan is the current CEO and far too busy, and Nate Connovan is in London, the job naturally fell to me.

Constance Connovan.

Yes, even my first name is a nod to the conglomerate my family started all those decades ago. Now the company turns over several hundreds of millions in revenue every year, and



its diversified investments span across industries and countries. Contron is branded deep into my identity, etched onto my bones.

“Here you go.” The bartender puts a fresh martini down and smiles again. It looks flirty, but so do most bartenders’ grins. “Let me know if you need anything else. I’m not that busy tonight.”

Right. Definitely flirty.

“I’ll bear that in mind,” I say and push my auburn hair over my shoulder. His eyes track the movement.

“Awesome,” he says with a widening smile. He disappears to the far end of the bar to serve another guest, and I turn my gaze back toward the busy casino. Apparently, Vegas is also hosting the National Marijuana Convention *and* the Awards Ceremony for Best in Jazz. This makes for some very interesting people-watching.

I should be getting to bed. It’s been a long evening already, with a three-course-meal with the heads of two other national broadcasting corporations. I have an early flight back to New York tomorrow and work waiting for me at Contron.

But the gin and tonic taste great, and there’s a couple of women sauntering across the casino floor in giant feather boas, so maybe I can stay just a little while longer.

Vegas is an experience, even from a barstool. Besides, flirting a bit more with the bartender can’t hurt. It’s been a year since my breakup, and I haven’t exactly been living the dream single life.

My gaze stops on a group of men in the distance. They’re in suits, and one of them has thick, dark hair and a strong profile. It’s a profile I’d recognize anywhere, even at a distance.

Of course Thompson Enterprises sent someone to this convention, too. Never mind that broadcasting is *our* thing, something Contron does well, a significant portion of our investment portfolio. Thompson’s holdings in broadcasting are minuscule and mainly located in the Midwest. They’ve been

trying to enter the market for years, but we've beaten them off at every turn.

I should have expected them to send someone... I just didn't think it would be Gabriel Thompson himself.

I turn to the side and pull my hair forward to hide my face. Shit.

Gabriel is only two years older than me, but he's much higher up in his family's company than I am at mine. I'm twenty-nine, but my two older brothers *still* consider me a child. It's infuriating. It's even more annoying when I know that Gabriel seems to have no such problems.

As the heir to the Thompson dynasty and the youngest daughter in the Connovan family, we'd both gone to the same exclusive preparatory school in Manhattan. I'd lost sight of him for a few wonderful years during my undergraduate studies, but we ended up attending the same Ivy League college once I got into law school.

We'd been in the same damn year, too. God only knows what he'd done during those years in between studying.

He'd been annoyingly smug and cocky all through school. Popular and good at sports, and maintained passable grades without putting in too much effort. Everyone has an awkward phase, except Gabriel, apparently.

I've never known a world where the Thompson name wasn't spoken without irritation around my family's dinner table. Our companies were started around the same time by leaders who were aggressive in their business practices, and with a long history of going after the same opportunities. Contron and Thompson Enterprises have been rivals ever since.

And since birth, Gabriel Thompson has been mine.

I take a long sip of my martini. It'll have to be my last, and I'll have to say goodbye to any flirting plans if I want to make it up to my room unscathed. The last thing I want on this trip is to be noticed by him.

But I only make it halfway through my drink before a hauntingly familiar voice speaks beside me.

“Well, isn’t this a surprise? Didn’t know you were in town.”

I retrieve an olive pick out of my martini and turn to look at him.

“What a shame,” I say, and put it into my mouth. Slowly, I pull the olive off. “Imagine how much fun we would’ve had together.”

His dark eyebrows lift at the heavy sarcasm in my voice. I know he’ll give it right back to me. He always does.

“Instead, I find you making out with an olive,” he says. His voice is deep and collected. Gabriel almost never gets annoyed, no matter what I do.

He’s the one who always manages to get a rise out of me.

I chew slowly, like I couldn’t care less. “Still a better kisser than you,” I say.

There’s a satisfying flash of surprise in his eyes. I never mention that night in college, five years ago. Usually, I do my best to not even think about it.

But here I am, doing just that, trying to get a rise out of him. I shouldn’t have had a third drink.

“Interesting,” he says. “You’re on the warpath tonight. Irritated, Connie? Didn’t close the deals you wanted?”

“Thank you for the concern, but my days here have been excellent.”

He gives a nod, eyes glittering, and pats the barstool next to mine. “I assume you’re not waiting for anyone.”

“You’d be wrong,” I say.

He takes a seat anyway, probably hearing my lie for what it is. “I didn’t see you at the convention.”

“I was busy talking to people off the main floor.”

He laces his fingers together on the bar counter. They're broad across the backs, and his suit jacket rides up to show the hint of a crisp white shirtsleeve. "Were you?" he asks. "Because I think I've met with every single supplier over the past three days."

"And you don't think I have?"

"Not one has mentioned Contron."

"Of course they wouldn't, not in a meeting with *you*." I turn to him, catching that annoyingly mocking gaze. "Broadcasting is ours."

He tuts. "This is a free country, Connie."

"Yes, which gives us the *freedom* to be the heavyweight in national broadcasting."

"You were always good at twisting logic for your own purposes."

"And you aren't?" I ask. "The mock trial, final year, in Donovan's class."

He grins. It's a flash of white teeth in a stubble-covered jaw. He's only gotten more handsome over the years. It's safe to say, the bastard will never hit that awkward phase. He doesn't have one.

"I won that case fair and square," he says.

My hands tighten around my drink and I toss the rest of it back.

"Painful?" he asks.

"It was a long time ago."

"You're the one who brought it up."

*Screw you* hovers on the tip of my tongue. It's there, close enough that I can taste it, but I know saying it means he gets the upper hand. It's what he wants.

I flag down the bartender instead. He returns, casting a not-so-subtle look at the man who's appeared beside me.

“Could I have another martini, please?” I ask and give him my biggest smile.

“A glass of bourbon, too. Neat,” Gabriel says.

“Feel free to take a long time with his order,” I say sweetly. “And just so you know, we’re not a couple.”

The bartender chuckles. If he’s confused, he’s excellent at hiding it. “All right, then, you two. A martini and bourbon coming up.”

The moment he’s gone, Gabriel smirks. “Very smooth.”

“Thank you,” I say. “I was at this bar first, and you won’t chase me away.”

“Who says I’ve been trying?”

I look at him out of the corner of my eye. He catches it and smiles, a mocking acknowledgment. “Maybe I have.”

“You always do.”

“Well, I’m clearly interrupting you trying to get it on with a Vegas bartender. Is this a high point, Connie?”

I force myself to count to three. “As if you haven’t slept with bartenders or dancers or far worse.”

He nods, but not in agreement. It’s more like he expected that response from me. My hand tightens around the glass in frustration. I shouldn’t let him get to me like this.

“So, you really are,” he says smoothly. “Interesting.”

The bartender puts down a bourbon in front of Gabriel, and he reaches for it, twisting the tumbler around. I look straight ahead. Count the bottles on the shelf. Is it childish? Perhaps. But damn it, I was enjoying my evening here first. He doesn’t get to run me off, not when I know he’ll chalk it up as a win.

“Arcwave’s presentation was awful,” he says.

“Terrible,” I agree. “Their company won’t last the year.”

“No, that much is obvious.”

“Thinking of making an offer?” I ask.

A corner of his mouth tips up. “You know I wouldn’t tell you if we were.”

“So that’s a yes.”

“It’s not a yes or a no.”

“Right,” I say. “Broadcasting is still ours.”

He nods, and it’s that mocking movement again because he’s not really agreeing with me. He’s saying *right, that’s what you think*. “And renewable energy is ours. So, what are you doing, investing in V Solar Tech?”

“It’s a free country,” I tell him. That deal closed only two weeks ago, and my brother had been careful to keep it quiet. He won’t like that Thompson Enterprises already knows about it.

Gabriel snorts. “You’re racing through that martini. Hoping to get rid of me?”

“I don’t care if you leave or stay,” I say. I push a hand through my hair. It’s tangled at the ends after a long day, and my lower back hurts from the hours in heels.

Going to bed would be lovely. But I’m a Connovan. I’d never admit defeat to the man beside me.

“You know, we haven’t had a proper conversation like this in a long time,” he says and takes a long sip of his bourbon. “I’ve missed your snark, princess.”

My eyes twitch. I hate that nickname, and he knows it.

But I make my mouth soften, my face settling into the most insincere smile I can muster. “And I’ve missed your arrogance,” I tell him. “You’re so good at... overcompensating.”

His smile turns sharp. “Lovely.”

“Thank you.”

“So, what’s the real reason you’re guzzling that drink? You couldn’t make Daddy proud with the business deal he wanted you to close here at the convention?”

I lock my eyes on a bottle of Malibu Rum up on the shelf to keep from glaring at him. “Maybe I’m celebrating,” I say. “And if you’re here annoying me rather than doing the same, I’d guess *you’re* the one who failed in your mission. Why did they send you to Vegas, Gabriel?”

His smile widens. “You know I can’t tell you.”

“Then you can’t imagine I’ll do the same.”

He tips his head to me. Something is burning in his eyes. Competition, arrogance, the desire to irritate me into snapping...

“Another drink?” he asks. His voice is mocking. He expects me to say no. To excuse myself, to throw a parting shot his way, and to slink back up to my room with my tail between my legs.

Surrender would be the best option. The safer option. But it’s the last one I was raised to ever accept.

I lift my drink to his. “I’d love to.”

My tone says everything but.

The bartender sets down a refill for us both and leaves a little bowl of nuts on a counter. I’m not sure if it’s a sign that he thinks I’ve been going through these drinks faster than he’d recommend, but I leave it untouched. So does Gabriel.

The tension is so tight it makes my shoulders ache. One misstep, and he’ll pounce. I know it. I’d never miss a chance to do the same.

“So,” he says, voice dropping. “Drinks alone, and then fucking the bartender. That would be your definition of a celebration?”

“Well, it definitely beats talking to you.” My voice is sickly sweet, and his jaw tenses in response. He doesn’t like it when I use that tone. Excellent.

“If you want me to leave, all you have to do is ask.”

I meet his gaze. “I would never.”

His mouth tips into a smile. “Of course. I wouldn’t expect anything less from you.”

My head is starting to feel fuzzy when I turn it his way. Just a bit, at the temples, and I know I should slow down. Judging by the flush of color that mars his high cheekbones, this bourbon isn’t his first drink of the evening, either. Wherever he’d been before this, he’d been drinking, too.

*Dangerous*, a voice inside me warns. Nothing I say is safe here. Everything can and will be used against me within the Thompson organization.

“I saw the piece on you in the *New York Globe*,” I say.

He turns to me fully. His suit jacket is undone and so is the top button of his crisp white shirt, showing a hint of chest hair. “I can’t wait to hear what you thought.”

“Very well produced,” I say. “Undoubtedly well-written, although, that’s more the journalist’s skill than yours.”

“Naturally,” he says. “So when’s your one-on-one interview coming out?”

“Very funny.”

He chuckles. “Have you been pestered by Goodrich from the National Association these days, too?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes.”

“That man has sent enough messages to my assistant that you could mistake him for a lover.”

“How did you get rid of him?” I ask.

“Well, I told him I’d get him an invite to one of the summer parties at Oak Hill.”

My eyes widen in surprise. Oak Hill is the Thompson family’s sprawling Connecticut estate. It’s been in the family for almost a century, and they’re well-known for hosting company retreats, family get-togethers, and investor meetings there.

“And he believed you actually would?” I ask.



Gabriel's mouth tips into a smile. "He did."

I chuckle, despite myself. My head feels light. "Well played."

"Is that an actual compliment?"

"Don't get used to it," I say and lift my glass up to his.

He looks down at it with dark eyes. "What are we toasting to?"

"To a lifelong rivalry," I say. "May you forever push me to be so much better than you."

He lifts his own glass. "To being rivals," he agrees, eyes on mine, "and to my inevitable victory."

## Chapter 2

*Connie*

I blink my eyes open. They feel glued shut, crusty, as if I'd fallen asleep without taking off my makeup. That hasn't happened in years.

I turn my head on the fluffy hotel pillow, and a headache immediately assaults me. It pounds at the inside of my skull like someone trying to break through a locked door.

Shit.

I lie perfectly still and run my hands over my face, stopping to massage my temples. God, I had too much to drink last night. I have a sinking suspicion that I'd known it when I was doing it, too, and still, I did not stop. That hadn't happened in years, either.

My body feels heavy with a hangover and lack of sleep. It's the kind of tiredness that makes your muscles sore and joints achy like you've worked out.

If only that had been the reason.

I sit up and look around the suite. It's bright, the curtains pushed back, illuminating the beige walls and plush carpeting.

But then my gaze snags on the door to the bathroom. It's to the right. My bathroom door had been to the left. Hadn't it? And I kept my suitcase on the walnut bench in the corner—

It's not there. The bench is empty.

I'm not in my suite.

"Shit," I murmur. This has to be his room. Gabriel's.

Memories flood back. Bantering at the hotel bar. Both of us drinking too much, and then I challenged him to a poker game. Disappearing into the casino with him by my side.

I peek down beneath the luxurious comforter. I'm wearing underwear. Bra and panties, but nothing else. My cocktail dress is gone.

Shit. Shit!

I didn't sleep with him. Surely I wasn't drunk enough to have done that and forgotten? No. I would never, not even the drunk me. And I've slept with him before... and even if it was only once, it's not something I could forget.

I lie in perfect silence for a solid minute, but I can't hear anything from the rest of the suite. Not a sound at all, and the other side of the bed is perfectly made.

So he isn't here.

I slip out of bed and find a large glass of water on the nightstand, along with a packet of aspirin. I look at it for a long moment. There's a sinking sensation in my stomach that has nothing to do with the hangover nausea. He must have left these here.

How will I ever live this down?

My phone is lying next to it, charging. Had I done that? Please, let it be me who'd done that, and not him. I won't be able to bear his smug, arrogant smile if he holds this over my head. *You sure can't handle your alcohol.*

What had we done, anyway? Drunk too much, yes. We'd spoken, and I remember the weighted sense of nerves, of anticipation, that always happens when I'm around him.

I have to be careful with my words, but I also want to win because all the interactions we've had over the last few years, brief as they were, have been fraught with competition.

I unlock my phone. A slew of panicked texts from my assistant show up. I've missed my flight.

Well, shit.

Nausea feels real and potent now. I can't believe I'd put myself in this position. Hatred rolls through me, and while most of it is aimed at myself, there's enough to direct at a particular man, too.

I find my cocktail dress thrown over the back of a couch and pull it on. It's wrinkly, and my feet protest when I stick them into my pumps.

A mirror tells me everything I need to know about the state of my makeup. I stop in the bathroom, conspicuously empty of any of *his* things, and scrub at the mascara beneath my eyes. I can't walk through the corridors to my room looking like this.

As I scrub, more memories file back.

Taking shots with him at the bar of the Bellagio. There had been some sort of bet, a competition, about who was best at poker. About who would win.

More drinks. A club, the pulsing music.

And then...

We couldn't. I would never.

Not in a million years.

But the memory is so clear in my mind, even through the hungover daze. Gabriel standing outside a Las Vegas chapel, his eyes burning and hair ruffled by the wind.

*"I dare you, princess."*

"Shit," I whisper again. We really had.

I married Gabriel Thompson in Las Vegas.

Of all the stupid, brainless, ill-considered ideas in my life, this one tops them all. It leaves the others in the dust. How could I have been so stupid?

*Alcohol*, I think. That's the only explanation, for both of us. Not only is this stupid, but it's also a liability, and we both know it. Maybe that's why he's not here. He could be meeting with a divorce attorney right now.

I stop scrubbing my face with cold water and meet my gaze in the mirror. I look as horrified as I feel.

Unless this was his plan.

Some nefarious Thompson strategy. But to what end? We don't have a prenup, and while I have a stake in Contron... so does he in Thompson Enterprises.

Whatever the reason, the only thing I know is that we need to undo it. Right now. Right away.

I dry my hands and wobble out of the giant marble bathroom. My purse is on the coffee table, right next to a crooked veil attached to a headband.

I leave the veil and grab my purse.

That's when I hear the telltale sound of a key card held against a hotel door. A click, and the door to the suite swings open.

Panic rises in my throat. Combined with the hangover, it's not a great cocktail, so I hold onto the back of the couch to steady my rolling stomach.

Gabriel walks in.

He's wearing a pair of slacks and a thin jacket, the collar of a shirt peeks out beneath it. In his hand is a suitcase.

He stops when he sees me. For a second, his face registers with surprise. But then it settles into the smug, superior expression I know and loathe.

"Connie," he says.

I cross my arms over my chest. "Gabriel."

"Good to see you've finally returned to the world of the living. How's the head?"

"We don't have time for this," I say. "What happened last night?"

He runs a hand through his hair. "Seems like we both had too much to drink."

"Too much is an entirely inadequate description," I say fiercely. "What the hell are we going to do about this?"

His mouth tips up into a sarcastic smile. "What, you don't want to live happily ever after?"

"Be serious."

"Ouch," he says and rubs his chest. "Don't worry. I have all the paperwork."

"The paperwork?"

"Our marriage certificate," he says calmly.

Too calmly. I feel like I'm caught in the middle of a storm of my own making, and my head is still killing me.

He leans against the wall and looks at me like he can see all of that and more written across my makeup-free face. And God, my hair. I didn't have time to put it up.

"This can't be happening," I say.

"Well, it is."

"We need to file for an annulment. Right away."

"Maybe," he says.

"Maybe?" The fears from earlier race through me. Had he planned this somehow?

"Yes, maybe," he repeats. He must have showered, because his dark hair still looks a bit damp. God. Had he showered in *here*? While I was asleep? "Annulments aren't so easy in Nevada."

"They have to be," I say. "How many people get married in this city, all the time? Remember Ross and Rachel?"

His eyebrows rise. "From the TV show?"

"No, from law school. Yes, the TV show!" I start to pace behind the couch, making a full turn before I stop. *Breathe. In and out.* I need to control myself.

Don't show any weakness.

But it's too late, and his mouth has already curved into that irritating half smile again.

"Stop looking like you're enjoying this," I say.

The traces of amusement on his face disappears. "Oh, I assure you I'm not," he says. "But I've had a few more hours awake to think this through than you."

"Thanks for waking me up, by the way."

"I'm not your lady-in-waiting, princess," he says, and the words feel harsher than anything else he's said.

I take a deep breath and glance back at the bed. "Thank God we didn't have sex. Where did—"

“I crashed on the couch.”

“Oh. Good.”

“Yeah.”

“So, you’ve already researched annulments, then?” I ask. “I’ll need a copy of that marriage certificate, and any other *paperwork* you say you have.”

“Don’t trust me?”

“Not for a second.”

“Clever girl,” he says and pushes off the wall. “I’ll have my assistant send you a copy of everything today.”

“No. I don’t want to involve more people than necessary in this tragedy.”

His eyes flare. “You don’t think I keep my people on a tight leash?”

“Maybe you do, maybe you don’t,” I say. “But I’m not willing to risk my reputation on your people-judging skills.”

“Fine,” he grinds out. “I’ll send them to you myself. Give me your contact info.”

I hand him one of my Contron business cards. It has gold foil laminated edges. He holds it between two fingers with a frown, as if it might bite him.

“A bit tacky.”

I ignore the barb. “We need to handle this quietly.”

“Are you saying you *don’t* want this plastered on the front page of every newspaper in New York?” he asks. “Of course we need to handle this quietly. If we still can.”

My eyes widen. “Of course we can. We *have* to.”

He tugs back the sleeve of his jacket and looks down at the thick watch on his wrist. “I have to be off, I have meetings in New York.”

“This isn’t over,” I say. “I’ll have my team draw up plans for an annulment. We should have this handled by the end of the week.”



He gives me a withering look. “Don’t involve more people than necessary, princess. I don’t trust your people-judging skills.”

“You were the one who dated that sorority sister,” I say. It’s a low blow, and perhaps it reveals just how interested I’d been in his dating state in college, but I’m too frazzled to think that through.

His eyes narrow. “And you dated a wet blanket for years. I think that reflects worse on your perception.”

“We’re not doing this.” I hold up my hands. “I’ll handle everything and send you a document where you just have to sign.”

“Right,” he says. “Sounds lovely. Are you my assistant now, as well as my wife?”

The word fills me with a dreadful sort of panic, and there’s no hiding the distaste on my face.

He chuckles darkly. “Yeah. I thought so. Talk soon, then.” He grips his suitcase and turns for the door, pausing with his hand on the handle. “Oh, and the room is paid for until 4 p.m. What’s mine is yours, and all that.”

With those parting words, he disappears down the corridor, taking the marriage certificate and my peace with it.

I sink onto the plush couch and bury my head in my hands. Of all the reckless ideas I’ve ever had, of every playground dare I’d given into and competition I’d strove to win, this has to be the worst.

My family can never find out. They’ll never forgive me if they do.

I don’t know if I can, either.

# Chapter 3

*Gabriel*

This day is the absolute worst. It's only noon, too, which gives it far too much time to get worse.

I stare down at Thompson's quarterly reports. They're good. Not as great as I'd have hoped, but given the state of the economy, they're decent enough.

My father won't be impressed. But he rarely is, and I learned a long time ago that doing things in hopes of impressing others is a lost cause.

So that's disappointing. But so is the info I've found out about Las Vegas annulments. I'd come to the office at 6 a.m.—an ungodly hour—because sleep was impossible. But the research I'd spent the morning doing has gotten me nowhere, and the calls to various experts even less.

I also spent the entire morning yesterday in Vegas trying to sort it out while Connie got her beauty sleep. Regrets weren't uncommon, a gleeful clerk had told me, but annulments were due to strict statutory requirements.

I click open my emails to find the reply I've been waiting for. I don't have high hopes, but the faint ones I had, die when I read through it. Annulments take time. They take effort. And they're just as public as marriage certificates are.

I rub a hand down the side of my face. Fuck. It had been bourbon talking that night, when I'd agreed to her offhand joke about a Vegas wedding. The rest is hazy, but I wish it was hazier still, so I could forget the happy laughter in her eyes as we walked into the little, neon-lit chapel.

She looked pretty under the lights.

Not that it matters. The only thing that does is getting out of this mess, but I'm quickly learning that options are limited if we want to avoid making it even messier.

There's a knock on my door, and a second later my assistant opens it. "Free for a debrief?" he asks.

I gesture for him to come in. Darryl is in his early twenties, with dark-brown hair and brown skin, and is sharp as a whip. Best assistant I've had so far.

He sits down in front of my desk and readjusts his designer glasses. "Like you asked, I've been contacting divorce lawyers. Quietly."

"Good."

"I haven't told anyone on whose behalf I'm reaching out. Francis Kilburn said he would be willing to meet with my anonymous boss when his schedule clears up. It might take a few weeks."

I rub my jaw. "A few weeks?"

"Yes," Darryl says. I get it. Francis is the best divorce lawyer in the city. For him to even entertain an anonymous client, Darryl must have laid it on pretty thick.

"All right. Annulments?"

"I'm getting the same results as you," he says. "Unfortunately."

I sigh. I'd gone to law school myself, and while I certainly didn't specialize in family law, I knew enough. We'd have to present a strong case... But worst of all, that case would be public.

It would also be embarrassing as hell.

"What else?"

Darryl taps his pen against his notebook. There's a speculative look in his eyes. "Should we be taking steps to protect your assets?"

I roll my shoulders, trying to loosen the tension that's keeping me strung taut. Of course, I should. If my family finds out about this—about me marrying a Connovan without an ironclad prenup—I'll never be able to show my face at Oak Hill again.

Ugly isn't a strong enough word for how bad this could turn out.

“Yes,” I say. “Set up a joint meeting with my lawyer and the accountant tomorrow.”

“Will do.” Darryl makes a few notes in his notebook but doesn’t take steps to leave. “You have a meeting at 2 p.m. with the new developers.”

I nod. “Cancel the car. I’d rather walk.” The fresh air might help with the lack-of-sleep-induced headache that refuses to budge.

“Done,” he says. “You have the charity dinner tonight, as well. Keep it or cancel it?”

“Keep it. I need to keep up appearances. I’d also like you to monitor the newspapers, including the ones in Nevada.” Marriage certificates are a matter of public record. I have a sneaky suspicion that there are people who spend their time scouring the ones in Nevada, looking for celebrity Vegas elopements they can plaster across the gossip sites. If we’re lucky, none of the tabloid journalists will recognize our names. We are only of interest to a small segment of readers, really, and probably ones who like reading business journals rather than tabloids.

“Done,” Darryl says again. He gets up from the chair, but pauses behind it, giving me a long once-over.

I must look like hell. The Vegas night, and no sleep in between. “What?”

“Nothing,” he says, but there’s an amused gleam in his eyes. “Just wondering if I should be congratulating you on being a married man.”

“Get out,” I say with no menace behind the words. Darryl’s smile widens and then he leaves my office, the heels of his loafers loud against the hardwood floors.

It’s just as bad as I expected, then. Both annulments and divorces carry risks of becoming public spectacles.

Not to mention, Connie was the one to suggest a Vegas marriage, late at night. Was there an angle here?

She could've had help from her family to come up with it. That big brother of hers, Alec Connovan, might be behind it all. From what I've heard, the new CEO of Contron is a ruthlessly calculating man.

Part of me doesn't believe Connie is capable of that. The other part knows just how foolish that thought is.

I leave the office shortly after. There's work to be done, but I need the spring air and the long walk Uptown to my meeting. The elevator ride down feels stifling, and I move briskly through the lobby. I emerge out into the afternoon sunlight and the buzz of New York, surrounded by the sounds of a metropolis at work.

A yellow taxi blares its horn to beat the light, a tourist with a sprawling map stops in the middle of the sidewalk, and a woman in a pantsuit talks loudly on her phone.

I love all of it.

I shove my hands in my pockets and start walking, but I only make it a few feet before someone comes darting toward me from a hot dog cart. It's a woman, her auburn hair half-hidden beneath a Yankees cap. She's wearing sneakers and a coat that looks too warm for the spring weather.

"Gabriel," she says.

I look at her for a long moment. "Connie?"

"Shh!"

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"We need to talk," she says and gestures for us to keep moving.

"Have you been waiting outside my office?"

"Maybe. That's not important right now."

Despite the mess we're in, amusement tugs at me. "You could have just called. I didn't give you my business card because I expected you to frame it. Use it."

"It only had your email and what I assume is your assistant's phone number on it," she retorts and pulls the cap

even further down over her face. “I’m not contacting Thompson Enterprises about this. It’s too sensitive.”

“You should have worn a trench coat,” I say, “and held a large newspaper in front of your face.”

“Please,” she says. “That’s amateur hour.”

“You disguise yourself a lot, do you?” I ask, looking at the lack of makeup on her pale skin. She doesn’t look like the polished, sophisticated version of Connie I’ve seen over the years.

She ignores me. “Come on. Let’s walk faster, I want to get out of the business area.”

“That’s about... seventeen more blocks.”

“Away from your office, then.” She looks at me from the corner of her eye. A tendril of auburn hair has gotten caught beneath the brim of her cap, forming a small loop. “I need a copy of the marriage certificate.”

“I haven’t had time to send it to you, yet.”

“It’s been more than twenty-four hours since we spoke yesterday. In Vegas.”

Yes, and they had been some of the most stressful of my life. I don’t say that, though. I smile at her instead. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you’re trying to get rid of me.”

She rolls her eyes. “Be serious.”

“I’ll email it to you this afternoon.”

“Good,” she says, brisk competence in her tone. It’s at odds with the frustration in her eyes. “But I’ve been reading up on annulments—”

“Me, too.”

“And I spoke to a specialist in Nevada this morning—”

“So did I.”

“Terrific,” she says, her voice acidic. “So, you know the same things I do.”

“Depends. What do you know?”

We pause at a red light and the rapid passing of traffic. She turns to me fully, crossing her arms over her chest. The giant coat obscures her form entirely from view. It's good, I think. She's more dangerous in dresses.

"I know," she says, "that annulments aren't as easy as they seem. We need to provide proof that the marriage is voidable, and should never have occurred in the first place."

"Yes. We're not blood relatives. Neither of us is a minor." I glance down at her, raising an eyebrow. "And I take it you aren't already married?"

"Of course I'm not."

"Well, I had to make sure," I say. "Maybe you pull this kind of Vegas stunt often."

Her eyes narrow, filled with the irritation I love to evoke. She prides herself on being in control. I'd seen it time and time again, in school, in college, at events. She wants to do things *right*. She's the classic good girl.

Only she's a good girl with teeth, and I've always loved getting her to bite.

"I never would have done something so utterly brainless," she says, "if you hadn't suggested it."

The light turns green and we continue walking down Fifth Avenue, side by side. Me in a suit and her in a disguise that makes her more conspicuous, dressed for winter on one of spring's hottest days.

"Suggested it?" I ask. "You were the one who wanted to get married."

"Stop it."

"It's the truth."

There's a beat of stunned silence beside me. "Yeah, I made the joke first," she admits. "I didn't think you'd remember that."

Irritation flares in my chest. "I remember everything."



It's a total bluff, of course. I don't remember making it back from the dive bar to the hotel after our wedding. I don't remember passing out on the couch. But I sure as hell remember waking up at the crack of dawn, my mouth dry as if stuffed with cotton, and my mind in a panic.

She'd been asleep on the bed, curled up on her side. Her face had been perfectly relaxed. Little freckles dotting her nose.

I'd counted them four times over, using the exercise as an attempt to calm my breathing before throwing myself into a cold shower.

"Then you remember that *you* were the one who had a list of arguments why marriage would be a great idea," she says. Her voice is heated now.

Yeah, and *I'd* hoped she wouldn't remember that. "Well, our annulment options are slim," I say harshly.

"We have fraud left." The glare she shoots me is full of mistrust.

It's such a genuine emotion that I know immediately she hadn't planned this marriage. It's not some sort of Connovan play.

I release the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. "Yes, but fraud is near impossible to prove."

"Near impossible isn't the same as impossible."

"If you try to claim our marriage is invalid because I lied and misled you into it," I say, my voice hardening, "I will fight you on every count. It will become public."

Her breathing hitches. "Fine. Not fraud then."

"Not fraud."

"That only leaves us with one option," she says. "Annulment on the grounds of 'want of understanding.'"

"Yes. Not a great one, either."

Her voice turns thoughtful. "I don't know. I've been reading precedents all morning. It's been known to happen."

“We would have to prove that we were incapacitated. If anything, we should have done an alcohol breathalyzer test before going to bed that night if we wanted to have a shot at using that as a defense.”

“We were drunk. Surely there were people who saw us,” she says. She holds out a hand and starts counting. “Cameras in the Bellagio lobby. Cameras at the dive bar. Cameras outside the chapel. The bartender working that night. We could mount a solid case. Send a few of our people to Vegas and ask them to dig around.”

“Right,” I say. “But I thought you wanted to keep this quiet.”

“I do,” she hisses. “Of course, I do. But do you have a better idea?”

I give her a crooked smile. “’Til death do us part, princess?”

“God, you are so infuriating.”

“Maybe,” I say. “But you’ll need me if you want to pull this off. You want me to sign on that little dotted line, don’t you?”

She pauses in the middle of a busy New York sidewalk. If anything, that shows just how unsettled she is. Her eyes stare daggers at me. “You’re not going to do this.”

“What am I doing?” I ask.

She points a finger my way. “Extortion. Is that why you went through with this? To have something over me?”

I brush a speck of nonexistent lint off my shoulder. “You’re paranoid. You should speak to someone about that.”

“I just know how Thompson Enterprises operates,” she says. “How *you* operate.”

“Yes, you’re right. You’re the fourth business rival I’ve secretly married and extorted. This year, at least.”

“Gabriel,” she says my name like it’s a curse.

I nod. “That’s me.”

“Be serious,” she says again, and pulls me along into walking. The top of her head reaches just below my chin. It’s the perfect height difference, really. Perfect in so many ways. Perfect for so many... things.

Twenty-one freckles. That’s how many I counted.

“I am,” I tell her. “We can make a case for incapacitation. We’d need to make it a strong one, but I’m sure we’ll be able to. Present it together in front of a Nevada judge. But,” I say, grabbing her elbow to pull her closer to me, “do you really think that will remain a secret?”

“It has to,” she says fiercely.

“If you’re willing to try bribing an elected official...”

“It has to,” she repeats, and tugs at her elbow. I let it go. “This *can’t* get out. It just can’t.”

“I know,” I say bitterly. “Trust me.”

“I’ll start working on an annulment case, then. We’ll review it together when it’s ready.”

“Good.”

“Great.”

Her cheeks look flushed from the walk, and no doubt from the heat of that ridiculous coat.

Mistrust shines in her eyes.

I look back at her with the most neutral face I can manage. Riling her up, even now, is like second nature. It’s easier than ever when I know she thinks I’ve done this to coerce her.

“Keep it quiet,” she warns me.

“I will if you’ll do the same.”

“I’ll take this to my grave if I can.” She takes a step toward the curb, raising her arm to hail a cab. “I’ll contact you again when the annulment case is done.”

It rankles me, that she thinks she’s going to handle this on her own. Like I hadn’t been researching options for the past twenty-four hours.

“I look forward to seeing your work,” I say sarcastically, shoving my hands in my pockets. “Anything less than an A will be an automatic fail.”

As if this is one of our old law school assignments.

A cab slows to a crawl, and Connie opens the door. She gives me one last scathing glare. “Goodbye, Thompson.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Enjoy our honeymoon, princess.”

She ducks into the cab, not sparing me an answer or a second glance. The cab speeds away, and I keep walking, knowing I’m going to be far too early for my meeting.

But it feels like I’m far too late for everything else.

# Chapter 4

*Connie*

I sit ramrod straight at my desk. It's glass, and the shiny surface reflects the spring sunshine beaming through my office window. But the nice weather does nothing to lift the mood of the man pacing in front of me.

Alec's temper wafts off him like heat from a torch.

My oldest brother has been the CEO of Contron for the past few years. He answers to the board, and the board answers to our father, and none of them tolerate failure.

I clear my throat. "Thompson Enterprises are big in solar. They could have gotten the information from any one of their subsidiaries. Employees in the same sector talk."

Alec stops in front of my desk. There are tired lines around his eyes and tenseness that makes him look older than his just-turned-forty.

"Everyone at V Solar Tech signed an NDA."

"Then someone broke it," I say calmly. "Have John or someone else on the legal team investigate."

Alec nods and runs a hand along his jaw. "Of course. But the damage is already done. Thompson will try to thwart any investments we make in the renewable sector now."

"They were bound to find out at some point," I say.

My brother gives me a scathing glare which tells me that argument will never win any favors. It's nothing I'm not used to. He's never been the cheerful sort, but since his wife died, any levity in him had disappeared. He lives for Contron and his two children, and absolutely nothing else.

I don't wither under his glare. I've learned not to.

"Fine," he says finally. "Did he say anything else? Gabriel?"

I look down at the sleeves of my silk shirt and adjust them carefully, painstakingly, to avoid my brother's eyes. "Nothing

important, although he mentioned that one of the broadcasters had tried to poach him, too.”

“*Too?*”

“Yes. I agreed that he’d also been breathing down my neck. It was harmless enough.”

“Harmless,” Alec repeats coldly. Then, he sighs, a frustrated sound. “Well. Let me know if you remember anything else.”

I nod. “Will do. I’m working on the joint project with Hunt Industries right now, and will have that on your desk by Monday.”

Alec’s gaze is blank. “Good,” he says, and my heart sinks. He doesn’t even remember giving me the task a few weeks ago.

“I’ve also scheduled a meeting with our preliminary philanthropy board on Tuesday. I have a shortlist of candidates to interview for the CFO position. Do you want to review them?”

He turns toward the closed door of my office. “Not necessary.”

“Okay,” I say. My voice sounds calm, in command. It tells nothing of the irritation I feel inside.

Alec leaves my office without another word. Not a goodbye, not a good luck, not a *do you want to have lunch*. Not that I’d expected any of those things, especially after all these years.

I wait until he’s well and truly gone, back across the floor to his mammoth of an office, before I rest my head on my hands.

*Deep breaths, Connie. In and out.*

The panic slowly settles.

I had to tell him about my conversation with Gabriel. The fact that Thompson knew about our investment in solar was a key piece of intel. But the thought of what he, not to mention

my father, would say if they knew what Gabriel and I did after that very conversation...

I can't even think about it.

I've worked so hard to be here, at Contron. Years of straight A's. Law school and sleepless nights. An internship in our legal department, where my supervisor had special instructions from my father to go harder on me than anyone else.

All to finally be here, in my current position at Contron. I want to be a resource for the family. Someone who can help, instead of someone who needs protection.

Or someone who screws up.

Marrying Gabriel has jeopardized everything.

There's a knock on the door, and Zahra opens up. She has her laptop under an arm and her hair in a short, black bob.

Her eyes are apprehensive. "How did it go?"

I sigh. "Come on in."

My assistant is a force. We'd had a rough month when I'd first started in this position. She didn't want a boss who got a job because of nepotism, and I didn't want an assistant who gossiped about me at the water cooler.

We'd come to a tentative truce at a conference in our second month of working together. Her tights had ripped, and I'd given her a spare pair that I always carry in my bag. Then my phone's battery died, and she let me use her cell. After that, we shared a glass of wine, buried the tension between us, and been a team ever since.

Zahra closes the door behind her and comes to lean against my desk. "You told Mr. Connovan?"

"Half of it," I say. "Only the conversation."

"Good." She opens her laptop and turns it around, showing the shared documents we've been working on. She's been calling the hotels and places we stayed at and inquiring about camera footage. So far, not a single place has been willing to



give us any. “I looked at your personal bank accounts, and I’ve gathered receipts for how much you had to drink.”

“That’s genius,” I say. “We need Gabriel’s receipts to complete the evidence, but we could definitely use that in our filing.”

She nods, and scrolls down to where she’s put together a timeline of events. We’d worked on it together, but she had jazzed it up. “Present this, too.”

I take a deep breath, staring at the documents to be included with our annulment request. Everything is riding on this.

Everything.

It’s been four days since I spoke to Gabriel outside his office. Four days of sleepless nights, tossing and turning. They have to grant us an annulment. It’ll set my record clean, and no one will be the wiser. Especially no one with the last name of Connovan.

“I’ll look it over,” I say. “But I’ll need input from Gabriel before I can submit. Did we get the marriage certificate?”

“Yes,” she says. “He sent it to your private email late last night.”

I shake my head. “Great. He’s a procrastinator, just like he was in school.”

And yet, somehow, he’d always ended up on top. Even when he failed a pop quiz or submitted the shortest essay, he found ways to get himself out of it. Beyond infuriating.

Zahra nods, the picture of calm competence. She handled all of this remarkably well this week, as if her boss regularly got married to a business rival.

“Thank you,” I say.

She looks up. “Of course. It’s my job.”

“No, your job is advancing Contron. This is…”

She smiles. “I’m helping *you* get back to your task of advancing Contron. Besides, you don’t think this is more fun

than reading through three hundred pages of legal packet Hunt Industries sent?”

I chuckle. “Yeah, I get that.”

“Will you contact him?”

“Yes. Right away. Hopefully, we can submit the annulment forms tomorrow,” I say.

Zahra and I move on to discussing the philanthropic foundation Contron is starting. It had been my idea, one I’d been pushing for years. Contron has been around for decades, but we don’t have a charitable foundation. It’s a shame.

And the argument that had finally convinced my brother to allocate funds for preliminary planning? That Thompson Enterprises have had an outreach program for over twenty years. Competition gets things done, at least.

My anxiety rises again after lunch. It grows until it’s a swarm of bees in my stomach, a thick knot in my throat. I have to get this marriage annulled. I have to.

Eight months ago, I’d been in charge of negotiating and signing a multimillion-dollar deal for Contron. It had been the first deal my brother had put me in charge of. I’d flown to Chicago with a group of lawyers and assistants, and when the week ended, we flew back.

Without a signed deal.

The disappointment in Alec’s and Dad’s eyes had been heavy enough to drag me down for weeks. It had worsened when the head of the company we’d been trying to buy issued a statement to the press.

*We deeply regret that the much-anticipated deal with Contron fell through, and that it was due to the unprepared and intransigent nature of our Connovan counterpart. This could have been a great stride into the future of national broadcasting.*

What that nasty little PR statement neglected to mention, of course, was that their CEO had tried to feel me up in a conference room, and I rejected him.

Of course, I hadn't told my family that detail either.

They'd been overprotective since I was born. Alec is eleven years older than me, Nate is eight. I was my mother's youngest child, and she died a few short years later. I have no memories of her.

*Don't run, Connie.*

*Connie, that's hot. Don't touch.*

*Take the car and driver, Connie. Don't walk.*

*Who's going to be there, Connie? How late?*

*Connie, be careful.*

*Be careful.*

If they knew about what really happened in Chicago, I doubt I'll ever be put in charge of a solo deal again. I hated it. Hated him, hated lying, and most of all, I hated that this thing with Gabriel might make my family's overprotective net close completely around me.

*You can't be trusted, Connie.*

I leave the office earlier than I should. The air in New York isn't fresh, but breathing in the familiar fumes of exhaust and street vendors and the faint spring breeze is better than the stifling atmosphere of my office.

I try to walk off my anxiety. It helps, even if it only keeps it at bay. I head toward the Winslow Building where I have my apartment and shoot off a text to Isabel. She's one of my neighbors and has become one of my best friends over the years we've lived in the same high-rise.

Drinks on the rooftop this afternoon?

She responds before I've made it more than a few blocks.

Tough day? And yes.

Tough week.

And then, before I lose my nerve, I shoot a text to Gabriel. He'd given me his private phone number earlier in the week, but I have yet to use it.

I added it to my contacts as "Plumber," just in case anyone saw it.

Annulment papers are ready, just need some info from you. When can you meet?

I'm almost back at my apartment when my phone buzzes. *Plumber*: My stomach drops, and the anxiety that had already been like a disturbed hornet's nest within me ratchets up.

I'm working on my own filing. We should meet, yes.

I told you I would take care of it.

This is too big to entrust to someone else. Surely you know that since that's what you're doing.

Frustration seems to lessen my anxiety.

We should file jointly. Better chance.

I agree. Are your documents ready?

Yes. Are yours?

Yes. Let's meet. At Salt? Tonight?

No. It needs to be somewhere no one will see us. Central Park, tomorrow morning. Do you know where the statue of Balto is?

The sled dog?

Yes. Wait there at 8 a.m.

Will you come disguised again?

Of course, and so should you.

With that, I shove the phone in my pocket and hasten up my steps. I need a glass of cold white wine under the sunlight on the patio with a friend.

And tomorrow, I need an annulment.

# Chapter 5

*Gabriel*

The track feels hard on my knees today in a way it rarely does. The morning air is still cool, but it feels oppressively hot against my sweaty skin. And beside me, Evan pants louder than he usually does.

We don't go running often anymore. Life has gotten busy, between his company and mine, and he's rarely in New York these days. We do another lap around the Pond together. Central Park belongs to the runners and dog walkers at this time of the day, and nearly all the benches are empty. Not a single café or coffee stand has opened yet.

"Something's up," he says, easily keeping up with my strides. "You gonna tell me, or just stew in it?"

I wait half a lap to reply.

"Stew," I say.

He chuckles. "All right. Have it your way."

We run in silence for another long minute, and then I blow out a frustrated breath. "Fine. I might have fucked up."

"Significantly?"

"You know I don't do anything half-assed."

"Shit. Can it be undone?"

"Trying to figure that out today. Could work, but there's a slight risk that having it be undone would make it... well-known."

"Ah," he says. "Can you live with the consequences?"

I let out a low, huffed laugh. Stay secretly married to Connie? Indefinitely?

She'd claw my eyes out if I ever suggested that as an option.

"No," I say.

“Well, I’d put a contingency plan in place, in case the mistake gets out to the public... and then try to get it undone. Whatever it is.”

We turn into the grassy area beside the pond, back toward the Upper East Side. “Right. Thanks.”

He chuckles again. “I don’t think you needed my advice for that, though. You’re not usually this cryptic.”

“If it was only my mistake, I’d share.”

“Interesting,” he says. “All right. I’ll be keeping an eye on the newspapers, then?”

I shake my head. “If it gets to them, I’ve failed.”

We reach the main exit to the Upper East Side. Evan is staying at a hotel in the area. He lives in California now, being in the entertainment business and all, it’s the place to be. Even if the only thing it has that the East Coast lacks is consistently great weather.

It’s the only thing I’ll give him.

“Thanks for this, man.”

“Anytime,” he says. “Same time tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sounds good. And hey, I saw the new show you guys dropped last month. The Secret Keeper?”

Evan nods. “What’d you think?”

“It was excellent. How’d you get that cast? They have like eight Oscars between them.”

He grins. “A little persuasion and a lot of elbow grease.”

“Well, please hurry up with season two,” I say. Evan is the founder and CEO of a streaming company that’s now valued in the billions. Plural.

“Perfection takes time,” he says and jogs backward. “Good luck undoing your fuckup!”

“Thanks!” I call back.

“And if you can’t, just consider it a plot twist!” he yells with a wide grin before turning around and disappearing from



view.

Plot twist my ass.

I run back down to where the dog statue is. It had taken me a quick glance at the map to remember where the damn thing was.

I'm three minutes late when I arrive. I take off my cap and push my hair back before putting the hat back on. If the woman wanted me in disguise, she's got me sweaty, annoyed, and in shorts.

I lean against the statue, cross my arms over my chest, and wait.

A dog walker passes by, holding three leashes in each hand. A bulldog stops by my feet and gives me a tentative sniff hello before being tugged and steered forward.

I roll my neck, annoyance rising. This whole damn week needs to be done and over with.

Then I see her.

She's standing underneath a grove of trees, a couple of feet off the path. At least, it has to be her. She's in a pair of black workout tights that hug her curvy legs, and a sweatshirt with an old print from our university. On her head is a different cap. I make out the faded Yankees logo. No heels, blazers, or dresses in sight.

Interesting.

I push off the statue and walk toward her. "This is your version of a disguise?"

"Yes," she says and motions me even further into the wooded area. "Come on, let's get off the path."

"You might be a serial killer."

"Not serial," she says and rolls her eyes. Her auburn hair is up in a ponytail and pulled through the back of the cap. I can't remember when I last saw her like this. It had to be years ago...

“You look like you did the first year of college,” I say, walking beside her on the fresh grass. “Planning on pulling an all-nighter in the library?”

She glances at me sharply out of the corner of her eye, like she always does when I mention college. Not that I’ve ever mentioned the night we once shared. It’s the single off-limits topic in all of our teasing.

“I’ll probably have to,” she says and pulls out a binder from her bag. “I’ve brought the case I’ve prepared.”

“*All* of that is for our annulment?”

“I’ve covered every possible base.”

I shake my head, frowning. “That’s not the right approach. It shows too much premeditation.”

Her eyes flash beneath the cap’s visor. “What do you mean?”

“This,” I say and tap against the two-inch thick binder, “doesn’t read like you’re the kind of person who might get drunk and marry someone in Vegas. This reads like someone realizing they forgot to sign a prenup and panicked.”

A blush spreads across her fair cheeks. “Right. What do you suggest, then?”

“Our only angle is on grounds of extreme intoxication. It’s not flattering,” I say, and annoyance makes my jaw tense, “but it’s the only one we’ve got. Unless you want to do the whole ‘til death do us part thing.”

Connie shakes her head. “So what evidence do you think we should submit?”

“Minimal,” I say. “We each write a personal letter, one page long, explaining to the judge that we were impaired. Say you don’t remember, lie, I don’t care. But make it personable and convincing. I’m willing to bet the judges get too many of these a week, and they all bleed together.”

She digs her teeth into her bottom lip for a moment, thinking. “Right. And if we drown the judge in paperwork, odds are they’ll deny us on principle. Or spite.”

“Yes,” I say. I’m warm and too sweaty, and being around her—both of us like *this* and in normal clothing—feels odd. Unsettling somehow.

I grab the hem of my T-shirt and pull it up to wipe my face. Connie’s eyes drop to my abs and then quickly away again.

Interesting. For as much as she hates me, she finds me attractive, too. I give her a crooked grin. “Like what you see?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She leans against a trunk of a tree and pulls open the giant binder. “I’ve compiled some good things here, though. I think shortening some of these and adding them to our personal letters might work.”

“How are you a teacher’s pet, even outside of school?”

“How are you annoying the teacher, even outside of school?” she responds tartly, holding up a document. “Like this one. Exhibit A.”

I take the document from her. It has an itemized list of all the drinks and shots we consumed during the night, along with her bank statements and receipts.

“If you added yours,” she notes, “it might be stronger.”

“This makes us look like alcoholics,” I say.

“But it helps the incapacitated angle. Look at the next sheet.”

I flip the page and run my eyes down the play-by-play of our evening, complete with estimated time stamps. Jesus.

She peers over my arm. “Look at the next page.”

I grit my teeth. I’m not done with this one yet. She’s used a tiny fucking font, and my dyslexia hates that. It mainly hates letters, of course, but the smaller the font the harder it is to make the damn things out. I’ve worked very hard to structure my life around *not* reading tiny little documents. My assistant does that.

“You know, if you want to play up the drunk-off-our-minds angle, being able to remember every drink undermines your

argument.” I flip the page back and hand her the binder. ““At 2:47 a.m. we had burgers and shared animal style fries at In-N-Out,”” I quote. “Princess, surely you’re a better lawyer than this.”

Her eyes lock on mine. They’re green. I don’t know if I’ve really noticed that before, but standing beneath a canopy of trees, it’s shockingly apparent.

They’re also furious.

“I graduated at the top of our class,” she says. “I’m a fucking *fantastic* lawyer, and I’ve spent an entire week working on this annulment case. How long did it take you to come up with this letter idea? It’s just another example of you coasting.”

I tip my mouth into an arrogant smile, the one I know she hates. “Work smarter, not harder.”

“God, I can’t wait until this annulment is approved.” She shakes her head and takes a step back. “Then, we can go back to hating one another from afar and *very* occasionally up close.”

“Oh, come on. Annoying you is too much fun. I’ll never stop.”

“Yes, and don’t I know it.”

I pull my phone out of my back pocket. “I’ve written my letter already.”

“You were that sure of your idea, were you?”

I nod at her giant binder. “You were *that* sure of yours?”

She frowns and holds out her hand. “Fine. Let me read it.”

I give her my phone and keep a close eye on the movement of her fingers. I wouldn’t put it past her to sneak into my emails for some Friday morning corporate espionage, but she does nothing but scroll down.

“Okay,” she says finally. “I get it.”

I grin. “It’s a killer letter.”

Her lips purse. “It has merit, yes.”

“It’s personable, appealing, honest, and it won’t take the judge more than five minutes to read through,” I say. “And it’s not boring.”

“God help us if that’s the new standard for legal documents.”

“It’s not, but it never hurts.” I take my phone back and slide it back into my pocket. “Work the human side.”

“Why do I get a feeling,” she says, “that you’re actually enjoying this?”

I’m not. The only good part of this is getting so much time to annoy her. But I just give her another one of those smiles. “You’re the one who got us into this mess. I’m just being a good Samaritan and helping us get out of it.”

“Me!” she says. “Fine, maybe a Vegas wedding was my stupid joke, but you insisted. You were definitely the one who wanted it. You dared me, outside of the chapel!”

I hold up my hands. “You still suggested it in the first place.”

“You listed off reasons why it was a good idea.”

“I was drunk too,” I say. “So? Will you work on your letter?”

“Yes, but I want to keep the list of drinks we had.”

“You need to make it less perfect, though,” I say, “or no one will believe you were incapacitated.”

“We’ll just include receipts. Send me yours?”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“Good,” she says and nods again. “Great. All right. If you do that before lunch, I can submit this by early afternoon.”

I roll my neck again. The tension headache has been lying in wait all week, like a vise around my skull, and I feel it creeping up. “Great. Then, I see if I can sign it.”

“Very funny.”

“Not sure I’m joking.”

“You won’t *sign* our annulment forms? What, do you want something for it?” There’s plain distrust on her face. Distrust I know I’ve put there, but not just me. It’s everything my last name connotes.

“Maybe I just want to hear you ask me to,” I say.

I’m a bastard for doing this when she’s so frazzled. But once those papers are in, and once they’re approved, that’s it. Done. Over.

And I can’t find it in myself to let go of it just yet.

“I would never,” she says.

I tap my chin. “Fine. Then, admit that I’m a better lawyer.”

She scoffs. “I’m not a liar.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Tell me that Thompson Enterprises is a better company than Contron.”

“Okay, now you’re just being ridiculous. Come on. What do you *actually* want?”

I lean in closer. “Call me your husband, princess. Just once.”

For the first time today, she seems at a complete loss of words. My smile widens as I wait for her to find her footing.

“I hate you,” she finally says. But then, she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “You need this annulment, too, so you’re just goading me. You’ll sign regardless.”

“Maybe. But is that a risk you’re willing to take?”

“I’m already taking one,” she says. “This annulment could be leaked to the media, and you know it. Our marriage is already public information. If someone is monitoring granted annulments also...”

“I know,” I say, and that’s a sobering thought. Keeping it secret might not work much longer. And if that happens...

I can’t think that far. Because being married to me would ruin her. It would decimate me, too, but I’d recover. From

what I've heard, her family is still testing her, though.

She tips her head back, only inches between us. Freckles paint her nose and cheeks. Twenty-one in total.

"Fine," she says, her voice sarcastically sweet. "You're my husband."

A shiver of arousal runs down my spine, and fuck, but that turns me on. It shouldn't. But it does. Her. Here. Standing in those curve-hugging leggings, ponytail in her hair, and fierceness in her eyes.

"Happy?" she asks.

"Hardly. But I'll sign."

She draws a ragged breath, and then she nods like we've concluded something. "Good. I'll get started on this."

"I'll send you my receipts."

She takes a few steps away, her face still flushed. "I *will* call and harass you if you don't have them to me in time."

I grin. "Now I want to procrastinate."

She shakes her head in annoyed goodbye and turns to leave. I watch the shape of her calves, thighs, the round ass wrapped tight by those damn leggings, and the auburn ponytail bouncing down her back.

*Fuck*, I think again and run a hand over my face. My attraction to this woman has been simmering for so many years, I've learned how to manage it.

But with those three little words, she'd set it on fire.

I'll sign the papers. But I'll never forget how she sounded.

*You're my husband.*

# Chapter 6



Connie

I read through my letter one final time.

It's not bad. It doesn't have Gabriel's dramatic phrasing or blunt expressions—in his, he'd explicitly used the words “drunk out of my mind”—but it's heartfelt.

It's annoying not to use all the arguments I'd spent a week formulating. It was even more grating to admit to Gabriel that his idea was better than mine. It had been law school all over again. He'd arrive late to class, sans the required assignment, and be asked a difficult question by the professor as punishment.

And he'd answer it perfectly in his strong, clear voice, charming everyone in the lecture hall.

He spoke in just the same way this morning. *Call me your husband.* Irritation blooms beneath my skin at the memory. Insufferable man.

I put together all the documents and start filling out the final form. He'd signed it already, and all I need now is to submit the whole thing. And then I'll be free.

My chest feels lighter with each box I check and each word I type. The end of the tunnel, the lessening of the storm. I can get out of this without my family finding out.

I hum a tune as I work. It's a sunny day. I'd gotten in a great workout this morning. I'm a hairsbreadth away from undoing the greatest mistake I've ever made.

And I have a date tonight.

I'd forgotten I'd scheduled it more than a week ago, before the Vegas debacle. He's a friend of Isabel's, and we're meeting for drinks this evening. He might not be the one, but I need to get back out there.

Control is slowly seeping back into me after a week when it felt like I had none. Now that we have a clear plan and have agreed on the goal, I'm back on steady ground.

My phone lights up with a call. *Plumber.*

Shit.

I ignore it. I'm *so close* to submitting the annulment request, only a few more i's to dot and t's to cross. Whatever he wants can wait.

But then Zahra knocks on my door, and it's sharper than usual.

"Come in!"

She shuts the door firmly behind her. "Please tell me you haven't submitted the annulment form, yet."

Slowly, I pull my hands back from the keyboard. "Why?"

"You haven't?"

"No, not yet. What's happened?"

She rests her hands on the back of the chair in front of my desk and takes a deep breath. "The *New York Globe* just called. They're running your Vegas elopement as a full-page story on page twelve."

Beneath me, the world trembles.

"You're not serious."

"Afraid I am," she says. "I don't know how they got wind of it."

"Can we kill it?"

"I asked. They said this was merely a courtesy call, and asked if you wanted to comment."

"I don't."

Zahra nods. "I told them no comment."

Something in me snaps. It's like a rubber band that's been stretched taut all week, and the pressure suddenly gets too much. It ricochets through me with stinging pain.

I focus on breathing. "Did you get a copy of the story?"

"I asked for one. They're going to send it later today," she says with a frown. "They weren't very courteous."

“No, I imagine not, if they were page twelve editors.” I rest my head on my hands and keep drawing a steady breath. The *New York Globe* is a respected, century-old newspaper... and their tradition of printing gossip on page twelve is just as old. It’s New York-specific, very cliquey, and it’s read by almost everyone.

Most definitely the people in my life.

My phone starts to ring again. I glance down and see the word *Plumber* again. He must have gotten a similar call from the *Globe*.

“I should take this,” I tell Zahra. My voice sounds like it’s coming from very far away. I’m underwater. In outer space. And I can’t quite find my bearings.

She nods. “Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.”

“Thanks,” I say.

If only I knew what that was.

I pick up the phone and watch as Zahra closes my office door behind her.

“Hello.”

“Have they called you, too?” Gabriel’s voice is harsh. There’s none of the arrogant teasing from earlier this morning.

“Yes. They just spoke with my assistant.”

“What did you say?”

“No comment, of course.” But then I frown. “What did you say?”

There’s a beat of silence on the other end.

“Thompson?” I ask. “What did you say?”

“I said thank you on our behalf for congratulating us.”

“*What?*”

“Think,” he says, his voice fierce. “This will be public tomorrow. Everyone will know. Have you submitted the annulment forms yet?”

“I was just—”

“Have you?”

“No, I haven’t. Not yet.”

“Good,” he says. “Wait.”

“Wait?” But then, I breathe out a frustrated sigh, the possibilities whirling in front of me. Of course. “Shit. The way this would look if I’d sent in the papers...”

“Yes,” he says. “Exactly.”

“We need to talk. Privately. About what we’re going to do.”

“Does your family know yet?”

“Of course not,” I hiss. “Do you think I told them as soon as I got the call?”

“Do you think the *Globe* will inform them directly? Do they have an inside source, a journalist they sell stories to? Anyone who might leak information?”

“Even if I knew, I wouldn’t tell you.” But the truth is I don’t know. It’s not out of the realm of possibility. Someone could be calling Alec or my father right now, this very moment, asking for a comment.

And then the cat would be out of the bag.

“Fine. But this could leak before the story goes public tomorrow. We need to have our story straight,” he says.

I stand on wobbly legs and close down my laptop. I tuck the phone against my shoulder and pack my bag with slow, methodical movements. “I’m leaving the office.”

“Good,” he says. “I’ve already left mine.”

“What happens in Vegas is supposed to stay there,” I say. My voice sounds thin, and I hate that almost as much as I hate this situation.

Weakness. In front of a Thompson.

He chuckles. “Not when you’re named Thompson and Connovan, it doesn’t.”

“How do you think the *Globe* found out?” I pull on my thin spring coat. Suspicion takes hold of me. “You don’t think someone in your camp tipped them off?”

“You mean, did I or my six-figure-a-year assistant do it? No, we didn’t, Connie. But you must have had help compiling that textbook of a binder. You don’t think—”

“My assistant would *never*.”

“Your questions could have tipped someone off. Asking for receipts? Contacting bartenders?”

“We were careful,” I say sharply and open the door to my office. “It might have been someone who watches the... lists.”

Zahra sees me walk by. I motion to my phone and then mouth *I’ll call you later*. She nods and makes a locking motion at her lips. I nod back. *If anyone calls, deflect.*

“It had to be,” Gabriel says on the other line. “Marriage licenses are public knowledge, after all.”

I walk through the open office landscape of Contron, past the employees and colleagues and people hard at work. A few give me cursory glances, but most keep their heads down and focused on the projects at hand.

Great people work here. People who have slowly warmed up to me in my current position, who I rely on, who work with me during conferences, and on legal questions and marketing strategies. With whom I can exchange small talk in the staff kitchen or banter in the hallway.

And tomorrow, they’ll all see me as a traitor.

Panic rises in my throat. It feels like there’s a claw tightening around my neck, cutting off the air.

I feel like crying.

“—so I don’t think that will be successful.”

“What?” I ask. I leave behind the floor of people whose respect I will inevitably lose and head to the elevator.

Gabriel sighs. “Trying to kill the story. Were you even listening?”

“I was too busy plotting to murder you in your sleep,” I say, “for dragging me into this.”

An elderly gentleman steps out of the elevator and gives me a long, curious glance. He must have heard.

I give him a bright, only *slightly* unhinged smile.

“Well, you might get your chance,” Gabriel says.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Just that we have very few options left. We need to thoroughly discuss this.”

“Tonight?”

“Sure,” he says. The hardness of his tone softens, just a tad. “Looking forward to your disguise this time. Do you own wigs?”

“I have something tonight. Let’s meet at... do you know Nona?”

“I do,” he says. The Midtown bar is popular enough that it requires a reservation just for drinks. They’re overpriced, but the music is good, and the clientele is better still. It’s where I’m meeting up with Isabel’s guy friend.

“Good. Let’s meet at the diner across from it, then. Eight p.m.?”

There’s another brief pause. “A diner? You surprise me, princess.”

“I’ll be the one in the purple wig.” I hang up the phone, heart pounding in my chest. My world will come crashing down around me tomorrow morning. With each word the *Globe* prints, my reputation will diminish.

I’ll have to face the firing squad. Three Connovans, and the entire combined regard of a company I’ve spent my entire life yearning to one day serve... and maybe run.

I work at home for a few hours, jumping every time my phone rings. It’s never my dad or my brothers. Never another journalist.

When it's finally time, I grab a taxi and have it drop me a block away from Nona. The heels I chose aren't comfortable to walk in, but it's a pain I'm more than used to. It distracts from the roiling nausea turning up my insides.

I'm wearing sunglasses while it's dark outside. It's idiotic, but if there's one place I can get away with it, it's New York City. My auburn hair is tucked into the high collar of my blazer. As disguises go, it's not my best.

But it seems like it won't be necessary at all in less than twelve hours.

I duck into the little Italian diner across from the fancy Nona.

Gabriel is seated on one of the retro chairs, his long legs stretched out in front of him and arms crossed over his chest. His dark hair is a tousled mess, like he's run his hand through it repeatedly while waiting.

He looks like a storm cloud.

There's a glass on the table in front of him and a half-eaten sandwich. He must have ordered.

His eyes land on me. They widen and then drop down, taking in my cocktail dress, bare legs, and heels.

"That's quite the disguise," he says.

I push the sunglasses up on my head. Sure, I'm wearing more makeup than I had that morning. Mascara and lipgloss, and cream blush that gives me a hint of a tan, even though I have none.

I sit down opposite him. "Let's talk," I say. "We have one night left until everyone knows."

His hand rests on the vinyl-covered table, and his fingers tap gently against the surface. "We do."

"As far as I see it, only one choice remains," I say. My voice is perfectly calm. I'd thought this through the entire afternoon. It had taken hours before I could admit it. But logically, it's the only way out of this mess.

He raises an eyebrow. There's a calculating glint in his eye, one that tells me he's already come to the same conclusion. "Do we?"

"Yes," I say. "We have to pretend this marriage is real."



# Chapter 7

*Gabriel*

“Stay married,” I say, my eyes narrowing. It’s the same conclusion I’d arrived at in those stressful hours since the editor at the *Globe* called me.

But I never thought I’d hear her say it.

I stare at her in silence. She gazes back at me, her green eyes surrounded by impossibly long lashes. Her lips look kissable, too, and whatever she’s done with her hair and outfit... it’s working.

It’s the worst fucking disguise in the world, though.

“Yes.” She takes a deep breath and lays out her argument like the lawyer she is. “Being married to one another isn’t a good look. For either of us.”

“Definitely not.”

“But I think the alternative is far, far worse.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You mean if we admit publicly and to our families, that we got married because we were drunk and on a dare?”

She frowns. “Yes. Besides, this will give us ample time to work through a favorable divorce.”

“Favorable, Connovan?”

“It’s not like you haven’t thought about it,” she says. “Negotiations will have to be long. I’m not giving up a single inch of ground on my assets.”

“You’re crazy if you think I’d give up any of mine,” I say. We both have stakes in our families’ companies, and that can’t be on the table.

“Of course,” she says, smiling. It’s not a happy thing. “So, we’ll have to negotiate.”

“Annulment is out, then.” I tap my fingers against the table and watch a copper strand of her hair beneath the neon lights.

“It’d be even more of a scandal than the Connovan and Thompson marriage.”

“It would make everyone question our judgment,” she says. “I don’t know about you, but it might make things harder for me... business-wise.”

There’s a thread of vulnerability laced through those words, even if her face is all stoic. I remember the headlines from almost a year ago. *The youngest Connovan costs the company a multimillion-dollar deal.*

“Afraid your dad won’t trust you any longer?” I ask dryly, because the alternative is to offer compassion, and I can’t.

We can’t go there.

Her eyes turn venomous. “Afraid your father and aunt will send you back down to the tenth floor where you started? I doubt they’ll be happy you married me.”

I run a hand along my jaw. *Interesting.* She knows our office layout. The tenth floor is the junior floor. It’s also the receptionist’s office and the janitor’s home base. I’d worked both jobs during a summer holiday in high school because my father believed in starting at the bottom.

“You really are a pain in the ass,” I say.

“And you really are an asshole.”

“Which means we have our biggest obstacle right here. How the hell will you tolerate me as a husband, princess?”

“As bad as you are,” she says sweetly, “the alternative is worse. Marginally, but still.”

“Charming.”

“We’ll have to sell it. To our families, to the world at large, to our companies. We’ll play the newly married couple while you and I negotiate a divorce behind the scenes.” She holds up a hand, pointing an accusatory finger straight at me. “And when an appropriate amount of time has passed, like a year, we will divorce.”

“Of course,” I say. “So you can go off and marry Mr. Good Enough and have 2.5 children.”

“Yes,” she says tartly. “And you can continue doing... whatever it is you do. Marry a trophy wife, perhaps. Someone who’ll never complain.”

I hide a smile at that. Marrying a woman who never complains sounds boring as hell. “We’ll have to sell quite the story to our families.”

“Yes, but I’ve thought about it.” She takes a deep breath and looks over at me with barely concealed distaste. It’s as sharp, and it is lovely. Riling her up had been the only form of interaction we’ve had for years. I’ll be getting a prime seat for doing even more of it.

And she’ll hate that.

“We’ll have to say we’ve been secretly dating,” she says.

“Secretly dating,” I repeat.

“I was thinking eight months. Have you been dating publicly during that time?”

“No,” I say. “Have you?”

She shakes her head.

“Okay. Then it works,” I say. “We kept it private because of the sensitive nature of our... family backgrounds.”

“Yes.”

“But then we found ourselves in Vegas,” I say, and cross my arms over my chest. “Nobody’s going to believe we planned an elopement. You know that, right?”

She blows out a frustrated breath. “I think we can make it seem *somewhat* premeditated. We were caught up in the moment, yes, but we always saw the Vegas conference as our chance to... come out.”

“Of the closet?” I ask.

“Well, kinda, yeah.”

“You know, to pull this off, we’re going to have to meet each other’s families. Go to events together. You’ll have to be on my arm, princess.”

Her lips flatten. “Maybe you’ll have to be on mine.”

“I can be arm candy if you need me to be,” I say with a drawl. “You’ve seen me in a tux.”

“God, I can’t believe I’ll have to pretend to have feelings for you.”

“You already do.”

“You wish.”

I hold up a finger. “Annoyance,” I say, and then lift another. “Anger.”

“Check, and check,” she says.

I raise a third finger. “Attraction.”

“Again—you wish.”

“No,” I say. “*You* wish it wasn’t true.”

She rolls her eyes again, but it’s more flustered this time. A blush sneaks up her cheeks. “Try to focus. The article drops tomorrow morning. I’ll explain it... us, to my family. You’ll do the same to yours?”

I nod my head.

“Right,” she says and takes a deep breath. “Then, we’ll need to... well. Pretend to be a couple.”

She says it so matter-of-factly that it makes me grin. “Right. And is that something you have a lot of experience with, princess?”

“No,” she says and flutters her eyelashes at me. “But I do have experience being in a relationship. That makes one of us, at least.”

“You think that hurts me?”

She ignores my comment. “We’ll need to be seen together. My family will want to meet you soon. I suppose your family will feel the same?”

“Probably,” I say, and cross my arms over my chest again. It’s near impossible to imagine her meeting my parents, my uncle, my cousin. A Connovan in the Thompsons’ house.

“Good.” She looks like she’s trying to convince herself that she’ll ace an exam she hasn’t studied for. “Okay. There’s a gala I’m attending soon. You probably know it. It’s for the—”

“Your father is being honored.”

Her eyebrows lift half an inch. “Yes.”

“We keep track,” I say. Beneath the table, I stretch out my legs. My thigh bumps against hers.

“So do we,” she says.

“I know. Want to tell me who your spy is?”

“I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours.”

I grin. That’s dead in the water and she knows it, too. There might be a lot of history between us, but there’s not a shred of trust. The only thing I can count on is her instinct for self-preservation. As long as both of ours align, we’re good. But the second they no longer do...

“I’ll send you the gala details.”

I scratch the scruff along my jaw. “Good. I’ll have some things that I need you for, too. Dinners with business partners, that sort of thing.”

“Good.” She pushes back her chair, ready to leave. Conversation over. She glances down at her slim watch.

“Leaving so soon?”

“We can discuss the rest over the phone.”

“Can we?” I ask. “What will we tell people when they wonder why we’re not living together?”

“Say we’re planning to.” She pulls a small mirror out of her bag and opens it, inspecting her makeup. Her lips look flawless, but she still dabs at them like there’s something to improve upon. “We can say we’ve been alternating weeks.

Living at mine, living at yours, because we haven't found an apartment we like yet."

I nod slowly. "We can work that angle. Real estate in New York is an investment, after all. Scouring takes time."

"Exactly." She closes the little compact with an audible *snap* and drops it into her bag. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

"You have somewhere to be?" I nod toward her outfit. The structured dress beneath her blazer enhances every single one of her curves.

"I do," she says. "My last date for a while, it seems."

My hand tightens around the edge of the table. "You're going on a date right now?"

She gives me a condescending smile. "It was planned before our... well. Little indiscretion in Vegas."

"And you're going to Nona?"

"They make the best drinks."

I stand up. In heels, she's only a few inches shorter than me, but I use that to my advantage. Irritation flares through me like fire through my veins. "And here I thought you were intelligent."

"I am. I'm getting my last hurrah in."

I nod out the window, to Nona. "Half of the people in there will read the *Globe* tomorrow. They'll see a picture of you and of me. You think it won't raise eyebrows that you were seen on a date the night before we start selling our relationship to the public?"

A hot flush creeps up her cheeks. "I doubt anyone will recognize me."

"You're dead wrong on that one," I say. "Your disguise tonight leaves a bit to be desired."

Because it makes her too damn desirable.

"Well, I'm not going to cancel. It's not like I'm planning on making out with the guy."

“I should hope not,” I say. “If you’re my wife, you can’t run around town being photographed at candlelit tables.”

She puts a hand on my chest, her eyes flaring. “I’m *not* your wife.”

“The world will think differently tomorrow,” I say, “and the law already does. You can’t go on dates with men if you want to sell this illusion, princess.”

She meets my gaze with a hard one of her own. All of her irritation is clear in the green of her eyes, but she doesn’t have a retort. She might hate what I’m saying, but it makes sense.

Maybe she hates that the most.

“Are you saying,” she says, articulating her words carefully, “that you plan on being celibate during our entire sham of a marriage?”

“Oh, the marriage is very real. That’s why we’re in this mess.”

She grits her teeth. “Answer me, Thompson.”

My eyes want to stray downward to the sensual curves of her body. The words on my tongue are ones I know I can never take back. *Celibacy doesn’t have to be an option for either of us.*

“I’m planning for the week ahead,” I say instead. “It’ll be hard enough for us to get through.”

“So, we’ll be celibate, then. No dating until we have this conversation again.” Her voice is hard now.

I nod. “Sure.”

“Good,” she says, “because if *you’re* seen around town after tomorrow with a woman hanging off your arm, that won’t look good for me. And I can make this marriage very difficult for you.”

I step in closer. “Then you’ll just have to be the woman hanging off my arm, princess.”

Her lips part in surprise. It’s brief, and then her face tightens in irritation. “Just stick to your part of the bargain, and



I'll stick to mine," she says. "If you'll excuse me, I have a date to cancel."

She turns on her stiletto heel and heads toward the front door.

"Tell him you've gotten married," I say. "He'll know tomorrow regardless!"

All of New York will... including both of our families. They'll be a far bigger problem for both of us than the public's curiosity.

They're the ones with teeth.

# Chapter 8

Connie

That night, I sleep in fractured and restless stretches of time. Each time I wake up, I reach for my phone to refresh the *Globe's* app to see if the story has broken, yet. And each time it hasn't.

When I finally get up for the day, awoken by the sharp ring of my alarm, it's to five missed calls. They're all from my brother Nate in London.

I open the *Globe* app again with shaking fingers. It's right there, under breaking news. And with the morning circulation of the paper, it's also in print.

Even knowing it would be there, nausea rolls through me at the sight.

But I still drag myself out of bed. I splash cold water on my face and look in the mirror. My skin feels puffy, my auburn hair is a mess. But the worst part—my eyes. They look bone-tired, filled with the kind of exhaustion that predicts slow thinking and mistakes yet to be made.

And I have to be my sharpest today.

I get dressed and do my makeup, monitoring my phone the entire time. Alec doesn't contact me. I know he's up—he's always up early with his kids—and already knows. Of course, he does.

He's holding off.

Nate isn't. He calls a sixth time while I'm drinking my morning coffee, and I finally answer him.

"Hello," I say. "Nice to hear from you."

My older brother sighs on the other end. "Not the time to play cute."

"No? I think it's exactly the right time."

"What the hell have you done?" he asks. Behind him, I hear the loud noise of a car honking and people speaking.

“Are you out walking?” I stir my spoon in my coffee. “This conversation should be private.”

“I’m heading back to my hotel. Now talk. What kind of trouble are you in?”

“No trouble,” I say. My voice doesn’t tremble at all. Good. This is like a dress rehearsal before I have to face Alec and Dad. “I’m sorry I kept the relationship from you, but we wanted to keep it private before it was... settled.”

“Bullshit,” Nate says. He’s never been as driven or as shrewd as Alec, but his emotional intelligence is significantly higher.

Maybe this will be the tougher sell.

I hear a door shut on the other end. “You’ve hated Gabriel Thompson your entire life,” Nate says. “I remember you complaining about him getting grades he didn’t deserve, cheating on tests. You didn’t dislike him just because he is a Thompson. You disliked him for him. How did he rope you into this?”

“He didn’t rope me into anything,” I say. “We’ve been dating quietly for months. This won’t affect the businesses, either of ours, of course.”

“You’re lying through your fucking teeth, Con,” he says. “Maybe that’ll work on Dad, and *maybe* on Alec. But I can hear it in your voice. You’ve rehearsed this.”

I focus on taking a deep breath. “Maybe I’m stretching the truth a little.”

He curses again. “I’m going to kill that Thompson son of a bitch and leave—”

“No, no, this is as much my mistake as his. As much as I hate to admit that.”

Nate’s quiet for a moment. “Can you get out of it?”

“I’ve already contacted the best divorce lawyer in town.”

“Good,” he says. “So, what’s this ‘we’re in love’ shit? Saving face?”

I set my coffee cup down with more force than I intended to. “Of course I’m trying to save face,” I hiss. “Can you imagine what would happen if we didn’t sell this? It’s a big enough scandal as it is, but to have people realize it was a drunken mistake...”

Nate sighs. “What were you thinking, Connie? I still believe he took advantage of you. You wouldn’t do anything you don’t want to.”

“I wish I could say that he did,” I mutter. Maybe he had. If he had planned it somehow or had an idea in the back of his mind... but, it had been my suggestion. And there’s a tiny, forbidden memory of standing in that chapel and being pronounced husband and wife, and Gabriel grinning at me, that I remember had felt... good. Great, even.

“But listen, Nate. I have to sell this as being a real relationship. I can’t have people think that I would—that I just—it would ruin me. You know it would. Dad would never let me work again!”

“He still might not,” Nate grumbles. But then, he releases a big sigh. “All right. Fine. I’ll help you lie.”

“You will?”

“Yes. Alec has been calling me for an hour straight, but I’ve been dodging his calls until I spoke with you.”

“You have?”

“Yes.”

My brothers are only three years apart. They were brought up on the company ethos, and Nate is now busy spearheading the firm’s expansion in Europe, reporting directly to Alec. While they’re very different people, they’re close.

As close as Alec lets anyone get these days.

“Thank you,” I whisper. For Nate to have my corner in this... “And I promise this doesn’t mean I’m not a great lawyer or an asset to the company.”

“I know it doesn’t,” Nate says.

The words make my throat tight. It's not what Dad and Alec would say, and probably not any of our employees. Nate has always been more on my side, more understanding, more laid-back.

"Thank you," I say again. I feel on the verge of tears, and it's not even seven thirty.

"All right. So, I'll answer Alec's call as soon as we hang up. What do I tell him?"

I take a deep breath and launch into the cover story, giving Nate enough fake details that he can convincingly pretend he knew all along. It might be the only thing that'll help me convince Alec.

Fifteen minutes after Nate and I hang up, I receive a text from my father. It sends a bolt of fear through me.

Come to the house right away. We need to talk.  
Do not bring Thompson.

Over the winding roads, the taxi takes me Uptown, to where my father's penthouse apartment is. It's the same one I lived in as a child. The decor is still what my mother had so lovingly arranged, and her section of the closet still holds most of her garments.

Dad spends most of his time elsewhere. In the Montana cabin, at the beach house in Florida, or up in Maine on the sailing boat. Properties he'd acquired over the years, just like his collection of expensive watches and art. I think he's still trying to learn how to actually enjoy leisure time.

He still rules the family and the Contron board with an iron fist. Now he just does it from a lounge chair.

I ride up the familiar elevator to the hallway of the family apartment. Since I moved out at eighteen, it's become more of a museum than a home. The Persian rug covers the hardwood floors, wainscoting on the white walls. I pass the dining room with the ten-seater mahogany table that rarely holds more than four people and the old grandfather clock in the hallway that ticks loudly in the otherwise silent penthouse.

Dad's housekeeper gives me a tentative smile and tells me they're in the sitting room. From the look in her eyes, she knows I'm heading to a firing squad.

I push my shoulders back and walk calmly into the sitting room. It's a large space, adorned with ornate furniture in dark blue fabrics. Large bookcases line the back, with fine porcelain figures that my mother had once collected set upon them. Dad is sitting in the leather-backed armchair. Alec is standing by the mantle of the fireplace, his back ramrod straight. Lauren Hammer, the COO of Contron, sits in one of the fronting chairs. Her eyes are arctic.

So they've involved people outside the family, then.

They see this as a company matter.

"Hello," I say and head straight for Dad. His gray hair is swept back, and his eyes are dark and inscrutable.

I bend to kiss his cheek hello. He lets me, but he doesn't say anything.

I nod hello to Alec and sink down on the couch across from Lauren. The room feels smaller than it ever has before. The tension fills it to the brim, crowding me.

Alec reaches for a newspaper and flips to a page before tossing it onto the coffee table. It lands with page twelve on full display.

Half the spread is a collage of images of me and Gabriel. None of us together, with the exception of clippings from a school yearbook. Wow.

They'd been thorough.

The headline is in large, black letters. It screams in the quietness of the room.

***Scions of rival companies get married in a surprise Vegas ceremony.***

"Whenever you're ready," Dad says.

I knot my hands together in my lap and think back to my days of doing debate club in high school. Speak slowly, speak

clearly, and always anticipate counter-arguments.

“I’m sorry you found out this way,” I say. “It’s not the way we wanted to tell you.”

“Page 12 news is slightly unorthodox,” Alec says. His voice is ice-cold. “But, I suppose congratulations are in order.”

“Thank you.” I look around the room and take another deep breath, the coming words are really hard to say. “I know how you feel about him, about the Thompsons. It was why I never wanted to say anything when Gabriel and I started... well. When we started dating, almost a year ago.”

My dad’s eyes are a burning weight on me. I give him an apologetic shrug. “I promise that I made him work for it. There was so much distrust there, between us both, but we realized we also have a lot in common. And—” I say, holding up a finger, “I’ll *always* put the company first.”

“Will you?” Lauren asks sharply. Her brown hair is streaked through with gray, and the red pantsuit she’s in contrasts against the paleness of her skin. She’s been with the company for as long as I can remember. I’ve always thought she was badass. Her sharp mind and no-hold-barred delivery have stung many opponents.

I just never thought I’d be on the receiving end.

“Yes. I’ve been careful, and so has he. The companies don’t come into it.”

“You might think that,” Alec says, and there’s an attempt at gentleness in his voice that hurts more than his anger, “but you have to consider the idea that he’s playing you.”

Dad nods.

Anger flashes through me, hot and steady.

“You two raised me,” I say. “I live and breathe Contron. Do you think I’d let myself be deceived, by a Thompson of all people? I don’t answer business calls around him. I don’t keep work papers at my apartment. It’s like compartments in a ship. Airtight.”



Dad's hands tighten around the armrests of his chair, and he looks up at Alec. Something passes between them, and I wonder what they've discussed in the hours before this.

"Well," Dad finally says. "I have no choice but to believe you."

My heart is pounding. "Thank you."

"But I want to meet him. Bring him to Sunday night dinner."

I nod and try for a smile. "I'd be happy to."

Dad's eyes narrow in thought. There's only calculation on his face, and I know that *not* bringing Gabriel isn't an option.

No pressure.

Alec pushes off the mantelpiece. Judging from the tension in his shoulders, he's not satisfied, but it seems he'll save his questions for Sunday.

Or later, when Dad isn't a witness.

"Nate says you told him months ago," Alec says.

"Yes. I wanted to see what he thought. We ran through all kinds of contingencies, I promise. My private life won't put the company in jeopardy. Ever."

Alec doesn't look like he believes that, and neither does Lauren. Oddly enough, her eyes feel the heaviest. Perhaps, it's because I know the rest of our hundreds of employees might feel the same.

*Spoiled heiress. Nepotism baby. Sharing our secrets and ruining our hard work.* Or worse, they'll see it as entertainment. I'll be gossiped about and laughed at until I am never taken seriously again.

"I'll escort you out," Alec says and starts walking toward the elevator. "There's work to do."

I give Dad another kiss on the cheek and follow the tall shape of my brother. The elevator doors close behind us. If the tension was high in the ample space of the penthouse, it's nothing compared to this.

I feel like I'm suffocating.

"Vegas?" Alec asks. "Really?"

I try to look sheepish. It's not hard. "We knew a big New York wedding would attract a lot of attention. That didn't feel right."

He doesn't nod, doesn't frown, doesn't give any indication whether he buys that or not. He just stares at me in disapproval.

But then he sighs. There are dark circles under his eyes. "If you were in real trouble, you know you could come to me. Right?"

I look up at my big brother. Between his own grief, caring for his small children, and the all-nighters he regularly puts in at Contron, I haven't heard him laugh in years.

I know I could come to him. He would help me fix it, pulling strings and leveraging his connections. But then he'd never stop seeing me as the little sister he needs to save.

"I know," I say. "But I'm not in any trouble, I promise."

His eyes search mine for a long moment. Finally he nods, the elevator doors open, and life moves on.

I've survived one firing squad. But if I'm going to make it through this marriage until the divorce, I suspect I'll have to face many more.

# Chapter 9

*Gabriel*

I've been flooded with calls since the news broke.

The first thing I did was read the article itself. The *New York Globe* had appeared in my mailbox, and I read it while drinking coffee after my morning run, the way I always did.

Only this time it wasn't Thompson Enterprises that got an honorable mention. It was me, and Connie, our faces printed beside one another on the matte paper of the *Globe*.

And at the end of the article, rife with speculation about how our respective families might take it, one little comment by Mr. Gabriel Thompson. *Thank you for congratulating us. We're very happy.*

I down the rest of the coffee, ignoring the burn in my throat. It's nothing compared to the day I'll have to face.

And what a day it is.

My phone rings nonstop throughout the morning, and lunch, and early afternoon. It's business partners, former bosses, friends, and acquaintances. All want to say a quick congrats and then ask the inevitable, carefully phrased question. *I don't mean to pry, but...*

It's as exhausting as it is endless. I wonder how Connie's holding up.

I'd called my father and aunt before they called me. Dad had laughed, and not in a particularly humorous way. *You're either a genius, son, or you're a fucking idiot.*

Right. Because I could only ever be one of those two, and fluctuating between them had been the story of my life.

The family meeting takes place in the Thompson Building. My aunt Sharon is the acting CEO and my father Richard is the COO, and between them, they run the Thompson Enterprises. My cousin Jacob and I are the only other family members in senior positions. I scout new investments and work with the legal team, and he handles negotiation prep.

I've been vying for positions with him my entire life.

My father and my aunt sit side by side on the low couch in the COO's executive office. She's scrolling on an iPad; he's reading the *New York Globe*. Behind them, my cousin paces.

I close the door behind me and shove my hands in my pockets.

"Well," I say. "Surprise."

Dad looks up from his reading of the article. "Interesting tactic," he says. "Marrying a Connovan."

The suggestion derails me for a moment. It's not the angle I was going to use. Sure, it'd be hard to sell my family on the *it-was-a-forbidden-love* angle, but it struck me as an easier one to maintain.

This?

I don't know about this.

Jacob stops his pacing. "You have a plan, right? An end goal?"

"Gabriel, sweetheart," my aunt says and lowers her iPad. Her eyes are steel on mine. "Please tell me this wasn't an impulsive decision?"

"No, it wasn't."

Her eyes narrow. "Good," she says. "Because there are too many things at stake for this to throw it all off."

"I know what I'm doing."

Dad unfurls the newspaper. "So when did you set this little plan in motion?"

"We started dating eight months ago, give or take."

"And getting married in Vegas?"

"Her idea," I say with a shrug. It's not technically untrue. "But I liked it. Avoided having a giant, New York thing."

"What information have you gotten out of her?" My aunt asks.

My jaw goes rigid, and I have to force myself to sound nonchalant. “Not much so far. We rarely discuss business.”

My aunt nods slowly. “She must have been very distrustful in the beginning.”

“She was,” I say.

She still very much is.

Jacob shoots me a glare from behind the couch. It’s equal parts annoyed and impressed. He must think I’m doing this to advance in the ranks. That marrying Connie had been a ploy, a sort of risky gamble.

My father closes the newspaper with an audible crinkle. Then he slowly balls it up into a tight wad and tosses it in the direction of his desk. “Well,” he says. “I don’t know if this is the stupidest thing you’ve ever done or the smartest. It’s definitely the riskiest.”

I nod. There are no words for that.

Except my father has a final few. “Just don’t fuck it up,” he says. “If company intel gets leaked to Connovans, I’ll know it’s you who’s been talking in bed.”

I make myself chuckle. “I know how to keep quiet.”

“You better,” my aunt says. She rises off the couch and heads toward the door. But she stops, right next to me. Shoulder to shoulder. “She’s very pretty, isn’t she? Constance Connovan?”

“Yes,” I say.

There’s no point deflecting the obvious.

“Hmm.” She smiles, and keeps walking. She’s always been shrewder than my father.

I spend the rest of the day fending off phone calls and conversations with coworkers. At one point, Darryl shut down three separate inquiries from venues that called to ask if Connie and I were looking for a place to host a wedding party.

I make it back to my apartment in Midtown. Clean lines, stark minimalism. It’s always been calming to me, but today, it

grates.

It's just me against the fucking world, and I hate the feeling. I pace my living room, crossing to the window and staring out at the spring afternoon. I should've brought more work home with me.

I need something to keep me busy.

The sharp sound from the intercom jars me. It's a delivery guy, half-hidden behind the huge floral arrangement. There's a card attached to it. I sign for it, and the guy leaves.

It's from Evan.

His card has *Congratulations* printed in gold across the front, and beneath is a single scribbled line. *I'm guessing you didn't manage to undo your little problem?*

Asshole. I leave the flowers on the kitchen island, alongside the others that had arrived earlier, all still wrapped in copious amounts of cellophane.

I pour myself a drink and resume the noble art of pacing. I'll wear out my floorboards at this rate.

My phone rings again. I'm tempted to ignore it, but intuition has me glancing at the screen.

It's Connie.

"Yes?"

"My family knows."

"Yeah, I imagine the entire world knows," I say. Her voice sounds frazzled.

"They want to meet you."

"Oh?"

"Yes. On Sunday. So, you and I need to meet and practice."

"Practice?" I ask dryly. "Being married?"

"Yes. A simple question will have it all come tumbling down. Where did you and I meet? When did it start? What do we usually do together?"

“No one is going to ask those questions.”

“You don’t know my family,” she says.

“I take it today’s family meeting didn’t go well?”

She pauses, and then her voice drops. “Honestly, better than I expected. But yeah, not great. How was yours?”

“I handled it.”

“Good. So, are you free now?”

I frown out at the view of New York, of buildings in the distance and angular shapes rising toward the sky. “Why?”

“I’m heading to a jeweler, and I want you to meet me there.”

“Oh. Rings.”

“Yes. Hadn’t even crossed your mind, had it?” she asks, in the tone of a student disappointed with her assigned partner on a group project.

“I had considered giving you my family ring, actually,” I say. It’s a lie, because she’s right, and I hadn’t thought of the rings at all. But I want to throw her off.

And I don’t want to prove her right.

“Well, don’t do that,” she says, sounding slightly appalled. “We’ll go buy new rings and call it a day.”

I chuckle. “You sound overjoyed.”

“I’m practical,” she says. “Can you come to the jewelers? If not, just send me your ring size, and I’ll buy you a simple gold band.”

“You think I know my ring size?”

“Aren’t all men obsessed with... measuring things?”

I drop my voice an octave. “Only those who are insecure.”

“Fine. Come with me, then.”

I grab my coat from the back of a chair and ignore the flowers on the kitchen island. I’ll give them to my



housekeeper when she comes tomorrow. “Text me the address.”

Twenty minutes later, my taxi pulls up outside one of the finest jewelers in New York City. The logo on the building is familiar. I’ve bought a fair number of little blue boxes there over the years for my mother and aunt, and once, in a misguided dating attempt.

I find Connie in the ring section. Her auburn hair is swept up in an updo. It looks severe and sleek from the back, but then she turns, and I see strands framing her face.

The trench coat she’s wearing is tied tight at the waist, highlighting the curviness of her figure. I weave through the counters toward her as if she’s a magnet. I feel energized with every step, like I’m approaching a live wire.

Handle with caution.

She catches sight of me. “Finally,” she says.

The word should skewer me. Instead it makes me smile. “Been waiting for me, princess?”

Her eyes drip with sarcasm, but it’s the person behind the counter who replies. “Ah, this is your partner!”

“Sure is,” I say and come to stand next to Connie. “Have you two figured out a way to drain my bank account yet?”

The attendant chuckles and pushes a velvet-lined tray across the counter. “We have a few great options. Your wife has excellent taste.”

“I don’t know about that,” Connie says dryly. “I married him, didn’t I?”

The attendant laughs again. I knock my shoulder against Connie’s. “Yes, and you were so eager you insisted on eloping.”

“Isn’t that romantic?” the attendant asks.

“Very.” Connie picks up one of the wedding bands. It’s smooth, gold, and thin. “This is mine. We’re looking for a matching one for you.”

“Excellent,” I say. There’s a peculiar feeling in my chest. Like I’m an actor in a play I didn’t audition for.

Getting married wasn’t something I planned or hoped for. It was a distant possibility; something that happened to other people, not to me. And I suppose it still is, even now that I’m ostensibly married.

But the rings make it tangible.

“What engagement rings have you picked out?” I ask Connie. She runs her finger along a row of three. They’re simple diamonds, princess cut, on a single platinum band.

“Any which one will do,” she murmurs. The attendant is busy picking out a selection of wedding bands for me, and I use the opportunity to turn to Connie directly.

“None of them feel like you.”

“Feel like me?” she asks. “Of course, not. I’m not going to buy my dream engagement ring for a marriage that isn’t real.”

It bothers me, that statement. Shouldn’t. But it does.

I give her an arrogant smile to hide it. “Whatever ring you get is a direct representation of how much I value you.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Wow. Materialistic much?”

“That’s the way the world will view it,” I say. “Do you think they’d buy it if a Thompson got a Connovan *that*?” My finger hovers accusingly over the smallest of the three engagement rings. It’s a tiny rock.

“Fine,” she hisses. “You choose, then. Not like I’m going to wear it for long.”

“Fine,” I mutter back.

That’s all we have time for before the attendant returns. I try on wedding bands until I find a simple one that fits, and then I go hunting for the worst, most gaudy, audacious engagement ring I can find for Connie.

I stop by a giant yellow stone set on a band of smaller, glittery diamonds. Connie is by my elbow and hisses *never!* when I stop to look at it. I keep browsing. The attendant tells

us how romantic it is that I want to be so involved, and I give her my widest smile.

“Anything for my princess.”

She swoons. Connie fumes.

My eyes catch on a ring with a large rectangular emerald. It's on a thin band, surrounded by small diamonds, and the color matches her eyes. There's something timeless about it. It's a classic.

Like Constance.

The price tag is enormous, too, which doesn't hurt. Anything to help sell the illusion.

“That's the one.”

The attendant ooh's and aah's, describing the origin of the stones and their certification and carats, while beside me, Connie is perfectly silent and still, her hand extended as the attendant slides the ring onto her finger. It rests there next to the wedding band, two single pieces of gold jewelry against her pale skin.

“Well?” I ask.

Connie looks up at me for the first time since I chose the ring. There's a vulnerability in her eyes that lasts only a second before it's gone, hardening into the battle fury I'm familiar with.

“It'll do,” she says.

“Good.”

“Great.”

I pay for our rings, and Connie insists on keeping all the receipts.

“So, about practicing,” she says. Her left hand is in the pocket of her coat, and I wonder if she's feeling the weight of the rings as surely as I am. My thumb rests against the unfamiliar metal on my ring finger.

“Right. I have a suggestion about that,” I say. “I’ll help you on Sunday. But I need you on Saturday evening.”

Connie frowns. “For what?”

“I’m opening the new art gallery on Thirty-Sixth Street.”

She laughs before realizing I’m not. “Wait, you’re serious?”

“Yes. The company is sponsoring it,” I say. “The press will be there. It’ll be good for us to be seen in public after page twelve.”

“Okay.” Connie pushes a stray tendril of hair back behind her ear and looks at her watch. “We can do that. Anyone from your family supposed to be there?”

“No,” I say. The company is sponsoring the gallery opening to get the Thompson name in the exhibition, and a Thompson needs to be there to cut the ribbon and make semi-pleasant small talk with the artist in question.

That’s it.

“Right, that’s good,” she says.

“Scared of them?”

She rolls her eyes. “No, but meeting a nest of Thompson vipers will require *slightly* more prep work than just buying a pair of rings.”

“We’re vipers?” I ask. “What does that make your family?”

“You can tell me after Sunday,” she says. “Send me the details for tomorrow.”

She heads to the taxi stand. Her body sways with each movement on her low-heeled feet, and I’m too damned aware of it for my own good.

“I will,” I say. “Don’t forget to wear your rings.”

“Don’t forget to wear yours!” she calls back and ducks into a cab.

I fist my left hand and feel the foreign edge of the ring  
digging into my palm.

Not fucking likely.

# Chapter 10

Connie

My apartment is thick with a floral scent. It hangs in every room. I found it pleasant at first, but now it feels cloying, and I've thrown open the window in the living room to air some of it out.

Isabel is admiring a bouquet of white lilies and green leaves and runs a hand along a palm frond. "You have a *fortune* in florals here."

"Yes, and they'll all be dead in a week."

She looks over at me. "You're cheerful."

"No, I'm feeling very zen. Isn't that what yoga is all about?" I ask. She's the one who got me into yoga, and now we go every weekend together. She's miles more flexible than me, of course, but it's still fun. Plus, we always reward ourselves with smoothies on the way home.

"Yes," she says. "Or just to feel calm, which I have a feeling you need more than ever right now. Can I see the rings again?"

I stretch out my hand. "Voilà."

"Insane," she says and takes my hand in hers. "Just absolutely insane. Who are you and what have you done with my best friend?"

I sigh. "God, I have no idea."

"First, the Vegas wedding, and now, deciding to stick with it..." She lets go of my hand and hops onto the chair at my kitchen counter with the grace of the ballerina she is. "So, what flowers can I bring over to my apartment?"

"Any, really. Please take at least three, okay?"

"Nice! I'm pretty sure I have exactly three vases in total." Her hands graze over one filled with beautifully bright peonies, and she tugs at the card. "Oh. This one is from your brother."

“Nate?”

“No, Alec.”

I frown. “Really? What does it say?”

“Nothing. Just his signature.”

That makes me relax. Sent by his assistant, then. “Okay. Good.”

“It means you’ve convinced him, right?” Isabel says.

She’s been one of my closest friends for years now. Meeting her in the hallway of the Winslow Building shortly after moving in had been a total coincidence. We couldn’t be more different, but we bonded over afternoons drinking rosé on a rooftop terrace and our love of fashion.

She’s a few years younger than me, a professional ballet dancer, and my complete opposite... and I’m so grateful to have her in my life. With her, I get to be an impulsive, relaxed version of myself, one who makes mistakes. She’s never once judged me for them.

“You never know with Alec,” I say. “It’s not like he’s ever really convinced by anything or anyone. God, tomorrow evening’s family dinner will be excruciating.”

Isabel hums in solidarity, her brown eyes thoughtful. I’ve told her nearly everything about my family, and she’s even met my brothers on occasions. “Think Gabriel will play his part?”

“He better.”

“He’s played along so far.”

“Yes, well, it’s been like two days.”

She chuckles. “True. Just remember that you can’t trust him. Not really.”

“Yeah. God, that’s the worst part. I have to be so damn careful with my words around him.”

“Do you still think he orchestrated all of this to... I don’t know, entrap you? To get something from you in a divorce?”



I tap my fingers against the marble countertop. “I’m not sure. It’s... well, it’s possible.”

“He’s such a bastard if that’s his plan.”

“Yes, well, that’s true already.”

She pushes off the chair. “What are you wearing tonight to the gallery opening?”

“A cocktail dress or something. Why?”

“Because,” she says, walking backward toward my bedroom, “you need to wow him.”

“I do?”

“Yes. Men are simple creatures,” she says and flips her long hair back in an exaggerated gesture. “You can make him want you.”

I chuckle. “And that’s something I want?”

“Well, it’ll give you leverage.”

“Power always helps,” I say.

“I knew you’d like it. Come on, let’s pick out an outfit that’ll make him lose his mind.”

An hour later, I’m alone in my apartment and looking in the mirror. Isabel was right. The deep black of the cocktail dress and the structured boning clings to my body like a second skin. I look... decadent. My hips look even wider with the tight cinching at my waist.

It had taken me years to love my body. Fad diets in college, two years of working with a personal trainer, and one crazy, ill-advised, never to be repeated week where I drank only juice. The only thing that worked was learning to love myself. This is my body. It has a shape it wants to be in, and fighting *against* it won’t do either of us any favors.

Now I embrace it. Embrace me. My personal trainer and I remain on a twice-a-week basis, but we focus on strength and health now, and not numbers.

My living room is still filled with too many bouquets. They've been delivered throughout the day, the concierge downstairs drowning in them behind his desk when I got home.

They all have cards with some variation of *congratulations* and *let's catch up soon!* from people I went to school and college with. Some are from business acquaintances or the first law firm I did my internship at. The deliveries must have been addressed to the offices at Contron, who then re-directed them here.

Some are from people I haven't spoken to in years.

I pull on a linen blazer and head downstairs. The final touch is one I'll add in the cab on my way to the gallery where I'm meeting Gabriel.

The rings.

I take them out of my clutch and look at them. So innocent and beautiful in the palm of my hand.

The golden wedding band and the engagement ring.

The one he'd chosen.

I'd expected him to pick the gaudiest, largest diamond. Something that reflects his own ego, or the ugliest ring he could find just to annoy me.

But he hadn't.

I slide the rings on one at a time and stretch out my hand. Long fingers, pale pink nail polish, and a stunning engagement ring.

It's close to what I would have picked for myself. What I *will* pick when I get married for real. This one is a stunning green color and traditional in a way that almost feels modern now, a step above the common solitaire diamonds.

I hate him just a little bit for getting it so right.

The taxi drops me off outside the Uptown location. The building is gray, and its large windows are well lit. Beautifully dressed people mill outside. There's an impressive set of steps

leading up to the oak doors where two large statues stand guard on either side. They're abstract in shape, and I can't tell if it's in the form of some ancient animal or a modern rendition of the beast from *Beauty and the Beast*.

And above the door, etched into the stone facade of the building itself, is gold lettering.

The Thompson Gallery.

The sign brings me up short. I thought the company was sponsoring an exhibition. It's commonly done and not particularly costly for the firm, but adds some positive publicity.

This is far bigger than that.

A red carpet runs down the steps and onto the street below. The air is summer-warm, even if it's only late spring.

"Good," someone says behind me. "You're already here."

I turn to see Gabriel closing the door of his car. He's wearing a blue suit without a tie, and as he walks toward me, he undoes the button in his suit jacket with his left hand.

I catch the glint of his wedding band.

"I'm an obedient wife." My voice drips with sarcasm. "You didn't tell me your company has sponsored the entire gallery itself."

"Didn't I?"

"No, you didn't. You're here to open the entire gallery. Not just the exhibition. Right?"

"Ah, maybe I am. That rings a bell."

"You knew this would be a big press event."

I look up at him, and he looks back down at me, challenge in his eyes. Always the challenge, the same one that had gotten me into this mess back in Vegas. *And what are you going to do about it?*

Not back down, at least. Never back down.

And never show weakness around a Thompson.

“Won’t be a problem,” he says. “I’ll introduce you to some people.”

We enter past the nondescript statues and into the bright space of a curated gallery. Artwork surrounds us, hung at even distances with a clear design to attract the visitors’ attention. Dark hardwood floors contrast against the stark white walls. It’s a beautiful space.

We stop by the coat check, and I hand the attendant my blazer. I shake out my hair afterward, running my fingers over it to get the frizz out.

Gabriel watches me do it. His hands are in his pockets, his eyes inscrutable.

Flush creeps up my chest. The idea of seducing Gabriel had been a fun notion with Isabel earlier, but standing here in front of him, I wonder if I’m capable of it.

He’s like fire.

I touched him once in college, and learned that it can never happen again. Even if it’s a lesson I have to remind myself of.

Gabriel’s gaze flashes to mine and then wanders over my body in a slow, deliberate assessment.

“Eyes up here, Thompson.”

“Can’t a man admire his wife?” He gives the clerk behind us a practiced smile. Right. We’re in public now, and we need to sell this.

We walk shoulder to shoulder away from the coat check. His voice is low, but I hear it all the same. “You dressed to impress,” he mutters. “I’d say that I approve if I didn’t think you’d elbow me for it.”

I slide my arm through his and feel his muscles tense beneath my fingers. When I look up at him with a beatific smile on my face, his expression turns carefully neutral.

“I’m just playing my part,” I say warmly. “I’ll be the best, most convincing wife ever. I’ll fawn. I’ll simper. I’ll adore.”

“And that comes with a price, I’m guessing?”

“You’ll do the same tomorrow, in front of my family.”

His strides lengthen, and he steers us toward a waiter with a tray of drinks.

“Somehow,” he says, “I don’t think fawning over you will be the right strategy to win over your father and brothers.”

“Probably not. But I have to say, I don’t think winning them over will ever be possible.”

We take a glass of champagne each and I let my lips settle into a soft smile. I’ll have to remember to keep it there for the rest of the night.

“So what can I expect tomorrow, then?” he asks. “An inquisition?”

“Something like that,” I say, still smiling as I look around the gallery and the meandering guests. “Only bloodier.”

“Sounds fun,” Gabriel says. “You said we needed to prepare.”

A couple passes by us. I don’t recognize them, but from the speculative and curious gazes they cast us, they definitely recognize us.

Gabriel gives them a pleasant nod. “So, let’s prepare,” he tells me.

“All right. When is my birthday?”

He looks down at me. “What?”

“February seventh. What did we do on my birthday?”

“They’re not going to ask this.”

“You don’t know my brother,” I say. If there’s someone who loves cross-examination, it’s Alec.

And he learned it from Dad.

“Fine,” Gabriel says. “I flew you to Paris for the weekend.”

“As if you’d do that,” I protest, “and anyway, I met Dad in Connecticut that weekend for dinner. So, they’d both know it was a lie. This is why we need to practice.”

He gives a quiet but full-body sigh beside me, like I'm torturing him with the subject. "Fine," he says. "What did we do on your birthday, princess?"

God, I hate that damn nickname. It's not like he isn't a golden prince in his own right.

"You booked a private cruise along the Hudson. Dinner, music, candlelight."

"Jesus. All right. When's my birthday?"

"Tell me."

"November twelfth," he says. "Were we a couple then?"

"Yes, we've been dating for eight months. That is really important, honestly, Gabriel, if we're—"

"I'm just messing with you." He pulls me into an alcove in front of a giant abstract painting. The enormous canvas is covered in green, with dark swirls creating a marbling effect. "For my birthday, you came with me to see a hockey game."

"Hockey?" I ask. "What—"

"Yes. The New York Rangers versus the New Jersey Devils. You know I like going to the games, but that I hadn't done it in a while. Afterward, we got truffle burgers and then," he says, lowering his head to my ear, "we had sex on the kitchen counter in my apartment."

Heat floods my cheeks. "That's an unnecessary detail," I protest. "We're not going to tell my family that."

"No, maybe not," he says darkly. "But we'll know."

He's trying to rile me up again. It's tit for tat. The way it's always been, and because I can't help myself, because it's the competitive nature that led us down the aisle, I look up at him.

I make my eyes soft and seductive, and part my lips. "And did I give you a birthday blow job, too?"

Gabriel's eyes flare. He didn't expect me to play along. For a long few moments, he says nothing at all.

“You’re right,” I say with a casual shrug. “Maybe that’s best kept between us.”

His mouth opens, but whatever he’s about to say dies on his tongue. We’re interrupted by a middle-aged woman with a long braid and horn-rimmed glasses, and beside her, a woman my age with brown skin and curly hair.

“Good evening, Mr. Thompson. We’re so glad to have you here,” the older woman says and extends a hand. She has a soft accent. Italian, perhaps?

“Thank you, Marcella. The place is beautiful.”

Her face visibly relaxes. “Yes, we think so, too. I sent over the collections to your team a few weeks ago for approval. Now that you see the pieces in person, what do you think?”

He looks around the room. “It looks great. All of it.”

Jesus, Gabriel.

I smile at Marcella and tug Gabriel closer to me. “It’s wonderful, what you’ve put together. We were just admiring this piece—the green abstract here. It’s so expressive, isn’t it?”

The young woman beside Marcella lights up with a smile. “That’s one of mine. It’s called Envy. I paint abstracts based on the deadly sins and the heavenly virtues.

“Really? That’s incredible. You know, looking at this abstract, Envy makes perfect sense.”

Marcella turns her smile on me. “You must be Mr. Thompson’s wife. We were so happy when we saw the news, congratulations to you both.”

“Thank you,” I say, leaning into Gabriel.

We talk to them for a few minutes. Gabriel knows nothing about art, which is painfully clear to all of us, and I do my best to smooth over the bumps.

The Thompson Gallery might be a vanity project for his family’s company, but there’s no need for the artists involved to know that.

Marcella welcomes everyone with a speech and then asks Gabriel to join her. He takes the mic from her and looks out over the gathered guests, looking every inch the businessman he is. His suit is too tailored, and his hair too crisp to fit in with the brocade of artists and fashionistas in this room. By contrast, someone is wearing a beautiful red caftan beside me, and Marcella has on a bright silk blouse.

But then, he does magic. It's the thing he always did in school, from preparatory all the way through law school. I've seen it across the school yard and at events.

He aces the test without having studied.

It's there in the charm, the confident smile on his face, the steady tenor of his voice. No one in the room can look away. He's already made his audience laugh twice before he finishes the speech. "So, I just want to commend the dedication and hard work of Marcella and her team, and the countless artists whose talents are exhibited here tonight. This gallery is about to become my wife's new favorite place to shop." He looks over at me, a glint in his eyes.

And so does the rest of the crowd.

I laugh and shrug while Gabriel hands the microphone back and returns to my side amid the sound of applause.

So, I'm the art-collecting wife, am I?

I open my mouth to say just that when a photographer interrupts us.

"May I?" he asks. Gabriel and I pose side by side in front of a painting, his arm wraps around my waist.

The contact feels warm, even through the fabric of my dress and his suit jacket. I'm aware of every connection point as the camera in front of us clicks.

"So?" he murmurs beside me. "Which painting do you want me to buy?"

I lean against him and give the photographer a bright smile. "Wrath," I say.

It feels far safer than Lust.



# Chapter 11

*Connie*

Nerves make it hard to stand still on the sidewalk, waiting for Gabriel to pick me up. I hadn't been able to eat lunch at all because of the faint undercurrent of nausea from my anxiety. That should make me hungry for dinner, but I can't fathom how I'm supposed to swallow a single bite.

Dad booked a private booth at Salt. Not him, of course—Lillian had likely done it. My father's assistant has been with him for the past twelve years. I know I have her to thank for gifts that are delivered on my birthdays.

A private booth, for a private conversation. One that we couldn't have at the penthouse, apparently.

They want to meet a Thompson on neutral ground.

A black SUV pulls into a smooth stop on my tree-lined street. Gabriel steps out, dressed in a black suit, no tie. He hasn't shaved since yesterday, it seems, the stubble thick along his jaw. It annoys me how handsome he is.

"Princess," he says and holds open the door. "Your carriage awaits."

I step past him and slide into the plush interior of the car. It had been his idea for us to arrive together at the restaurant. It made a begrudging amount of sense.

He gets in after me, and the driver flips the turn signal and pulls out onto the street. It's a big car, but the backseat still feels cramped. It smells like leather and aftershave, and it's far too good. I lower the window a few inches and take a deep breath. The New York air isn't fresh, but it's familiar, and won't cloud my head.

"So," Gabriel says. His voice is cool and controlled beside me, as if he couldn't be less concerned about what we're about to do. "Give me the final rundown."

"My father will be there, and one of my brothers."

"That's it?"

“That’s the only family I have,” I say dryly. “There might be employees there, too, but I’m not certain. If so, it’ll be Dad’s assistant or someone from Contron’s executive team.”

His eyebrows rise. “They’d involve others?”

“They might,” I admit, “or it’ll just be the four of us. Depends on how... hard they’re planning to go.”

Gabriel’s lip quirks at that, like he looks forward to it.

It makes me frown. “You’re going to play your part. Right?”

The quirk turns into a half smile. “Ah, I love your distrustful side.”

“Will you?”

“Yes, I’ll play along. We both have too much to lose if... well.” He glances at the driver and then back again. “I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“Good.”

“Your brother. This would be Alec, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Right, and he’s much older than you.”

“Eleven years.”

Gabriel runs a hand along his jaw. “Right. Will he be the hardest to convince, or your dad?”

“Honestly?” I say. “I have no idea. Both, probably.”

For the first time, Gabriel looks a bit unnerved. Frustration flashes through his eyes. “Right. Charm offensive it is.”

“They’ll see through that.”

Gabriel’s smile tips into a full-blown thing. His thick hair is pushed back, but there’s a single strand that hangs forward, over his forehead. Nobody should look that good. It’s criminal.

“Princess,” he says. “There’s no one I couldn’t charm.”

“Me,” I say. This really is a small car, and too warm, and I should lower the window another inch.

His smile widens. “Let’s test that theory.”

“I’m not the one you need to charm tonight.”

“No?” he asks. “I think charming *you* is the key to convincing them.”

“You don’t know anything about them.”

“I know more than you might expect,” he says. “You’re the youngest of three children. There’s a what, ten-year gap to your middle brother?”

“Eight,” I mutter.

“Right. So you’re the baby of the family, and the only girl. Your mother died when you were small, and your father never remarried. You’ve been the protected one your entire life. Those two men in there, they’re going to see me as an enemy from the moment I walk in.”

“They already do,” I say. “Even before we got married.”

He nods slowly. “Yes, but now I’m the devil. I didn’t keep our fight to the battlefield. No, I raided their tower and stole the princess. I didn’t ride in on a big white horse. There will be a price to pay for that.”

I know I should look away, but I can’t. Not when he looks at me like I’m the next assignment he needs to ace.

“I’m not a princess,” I say, “and I was definitely not stolen.”

His lips curl. “You and I know that, but I promise you the men in your family won’t agree.”

This conversation is slipping away from me. It’s turned into something else, followed a path I should never have taken. I can feel the time running out, too. This car trip won’t last forever.

“They’ll play nice,” I say, both to him and for myself. I’m not sure either of us is particularly convinced.

“They think I’m using you. Right?”

“The suggestion was raised,” I say. “Did your family ask the same?”

“It was brought up,” he says.

I nod. Not surprised. “You’ll have to play the role of a man in love, then.”

“A man in love,” he repeats. The last word sounds decadent and almost indulgent in the cramped space.

“Yes,” I say. “Think you can fake that experience?”

His eyes narrow. “I’ll try.”

“Please do.”

“But you’ll have to feign it, too, you know.”

“I know my part,” I say.

He reaches out and takes a curl of my hair between two fingers. I hold still as he tucks it behind my ear. His fingers brush my neck for the briefest of seconds before he pulls his hand back.

I release the breath I’d been holding.

“Yes,” he says dryly. “You were very natural.”

Shit.

“I will be with an audience,” I say and shift closer until our thighs touch. I *have* to be. The entire plan hinges on it. “Will you?”

“Of course.”

I put my hand on his thigh. He tenses and then shoots me an irritated look. “I wasn’t prepared.”

But I pull it back with triumph. “Neither was I.”

He shakes his head, but there’s a hint of a genuine smile in his expression. It’s always a competition between us, even now, when we’re facing yet another firing squad.

Some things never change.

The car pulls to a stop outside of Salt, and the tension breaks. Gabriel gets out first and holds the door open for me. I

step onto the sidewalk before the familiar storefront. Salt has an all-black facade, with bone-white lettering in a sans serif font.

Gabriel holds out his hand my way with a taunting smile. “Showtime, princess.”

I give him mine.

Our hands slot together like two hands usually do, fingers around fingers, palm against palm. His skin is warm and dry, and it’s nothing, really. Just two body parts.

But for an electric current shooting through me at the contact.

The hostess tells us that the rest of our party has already arrived. She walks us through the dimly lit and busy restaurant to the private booths in the back.

I hear the quiet, firm voices of my brother and father ahead.

Gabriel leans in close, pulling our hands front and center. “Chuckle.”

“What?”

“Smile, at least.” His voice is warm against my ear. I have a split second to understand what he’s getting at and force my lips to soften into a facsimile of happiness.

*I’m a woman in love.*

Dad and Alec are sitting across the table from one another. There’s already a bottle of wine on the table, and I’m betting it’s only half-full.

Alec’s eyes narrow when they see us, but Dad’s do not. He gives us the world’s sharpest smile instead.

“Here they are,” he says and stands. I give him a kiss on the cheek and nod to Alec.

“Hi,” I tell them both. “This is Gabriel. Gabriel, this is my father, David Connovan, and my brother Alec.”

They shake hands. Each movement is slow, and their faces are neutral. They all look like they're in the middle of particularly dicey negotiations, and I'd know, because I've seen them all do it.

"Thank you for the invitation," Gabriel says. His voice is composed and courteous, but it's also at ease. "Connie's told me about the Sunday night dinners before."

Alec pushes a menu across the table at Gabriel. "We do it occasionally."

"Great tradition," he says and opens his menu like there isn't a cold war raging across the table. I know he can feel it, but this is what he's good at. Handling uncertainty.

I reach for the wine bottle with a smile. "What did you get, Dad?"

"A cab," he replies. His eyes are on Gabriel. "So. Why Vegas?"

Okay, then. No small talk.

Gabriel glances at me. There's a playful glint in his eyes. "Well, I know it wasn't ideal. Especially not as I hadn't met Connie's family, and she hadn't met mine. But after nearly a year of dating... it felt right."

"We thought it was romantic," I say and smile wide. My brother gives me a look that's just a little too searching. Okay. Maybe less smiley.

"Romantic," Dad repeats as if the word is foreign to him. His hair is brushed back, so like Alec's, but completely gray. "From what I've heard, you're fairly clever. Graduated law school the same year as my daughter."

"I did, yes."

"So you know exactly why my sons and I are concerned about this marriage and about you."

"Dad," I say. "I told you, we've never spoken about the businesses. It doesn't factor into our relationship. We don't—"

Dad holds up a hand to stop me. Irritation flares in my chest at the gesture, and because it's happening in front of Gabriel, too. I was part of making this mistake, too.

But I fall silent.

"I want to hear from him," Dad says. "In your own words. Why did you date my daughter? Why did you decide to marry her in Vegas, without either of your families present?"

Gabriel closes his menu. We haven't even ordered yet, and the inquisition has already begun. Beside me, Alec is tense, his elbows resting on the table. His attention is riveted on Gabriel with an intensity that borders on aggression.

Gabriel looks from my father to me. "Well," he says. "You know that Connie and I went to school together, although not in the same grade. And as you mentioned, we later attended the same law school."

"Yes," Alec says. "But you weren't friends."

"No, not exactly," Gabriel says. "She was set on being the valedictorian and best anyone who stood in her way. We were competitive, let's just say that. She was an impressive opponent, so naturally, I had a crush on her. Not that I ever let her know."

That makes me chuckle. Imagine, having Gabriel Thompson here, forced to compliment me in front of my family. Not in my wildest dreams did I picture this would ever happen.

The glint in his eyes tells me he knows exactly why I'm laughing.

"In the years since," he continues, "I've seen her occasionally at events. Not surprisingly, we've also been following your company's movements, just as you follow ours."

Dad makes an acknowledging *harrumph*. Beside me, Alec crosses his arms over his chest.

"She's extraordinary. I've always seen that. And eight months ago, we had a conversation again... a real, genuine



one, where we weren't a Thompson and a Connovan. We were just people. I knew right then that she was the one for me."

I put my hand on his, where it rests on the table. His eyebrows lift a fraction of an inch, and I give him a sweet smile. "It took me a bit longer," I say, "but when I saw how good we are together, I was all in."

He nods. "And I wasn't about to let her go. That's why Vegas happened," he says, and this time he looks at my brother. "When you've met the love of your life, why wait? I don't want to waste a single moment with her."

Alec's eyes narrow at the words. Shit, Gabriel really went there. My brother's wife died five years ago, and I'm absolutely positive Gabriel knows that. He's using the emotional card.

The waitress comes by with a bread basket of a variety of freshly baked artisan rolls. She takes our orders, forcing an uneasy détente on the warring parties.

It doesn't last long.

After she leaves, my father reaches for a roll. He breaks it apart in three aggressive tugs. "I won't be uncouth about it," he says calmly, "but you know you won't get a dime personally or to benefit your company. Not from a divorce and not through marriage. Connie's inheritance is up to me."

My breath catches in my throat.

"I know," Gabriel says. "You have no reason to trust me. That'll have to come with time. But I hope you'll trust my self-interest. I want to protect my company, and I know Connie wants to protect hers. We've reached an understanding on that."

"It'll never factor into our relationship," I say.

"Your relationship," Alec says. His voice holds more irritation than Dad's did. "The two of you are *married*. 'Til death do you part. Moving in, kids, the whole thing. A marriage. And you did it behind both of your families' backs, out of state, in Las Vegas."

He says *Las Vegas* like it's the dirtiest of places.

Shame creeps up beneath my silk blouse, darkening my pale skin. But I hold my head up high. "We were always planning on having these conversations. The wedding might have been impulsive, but the marriage wasn't."

I'm such a liar.

Dad points at me across the table. "Connie is the best of us," he says. "If she says she wants you, she wants you. But I don't think I need to say what'll happen if I learn that you've been... well, let's put it this way—less than honorable in your intentions."

Gabriel nods. "I understand."

*Connie is the best of us.* Dad says that, but I know he means it in a different way. She's protected, she's coddled, she's the one we dote on. Not the one we trust to make important decisions.

"Good," Dad says. He shoots Alec a look, and I read it clearly. *Stand down.* Alec's jaw tenses, but he doesn't say another word. He might control the family company now, but Dad still knows when to flex his muscles.

Gabriel gives me a brief smile before turning back to my brother and father. "Look at it this way," he says. "Who could understand a Connovan but a Thompson?"

Alec shakes his head in disbelief.

But my father smiles. "Interesting," he says.

"There's not a man in this city that could be her equal but me," Gabriel says. Then he looks back at me with a crooked smile. "Not that I'm good enough for you. No man ever would be. But I'll do my best, princess."

My cheeks heat up. He's using that nickname in front of my family? But weirdly enough, neither my dad nor my brother bat an eye. Maybe because they see me that way, too?

Alec sighs and reaches for a sourdough roll of his own. "I want it noted that I don't like you," he says, "and I like my little sister a great deal."

“Noted,” Gabriel says. “I get it.”

“Good,” he says. “So when are you two moving in together?”

Oh boy.

At least it’s not a hostile question. Gabriel and I cobble together a response about how hard it is to find good real estate in New York that appeals to us both *and* is an investment, and I know the last argument will appeal to Alec, especially.

My nerves settle enough for me to eat half of the dish in front of me. In usual Salt perfection, the European cuisine is prepared at a Michelin level of excellence and my rack of lamb is objectively delicious, but I can barely taste the flavors.

Dinner is only just over when Alec excuses himself with a glance at his watch. He has two little kids at home, and he guards his evenings and weekends like a hawk. Dad walks him out and returns a few minutes later to tell us he’s already settled the bill.

He extends a hand to Gabriel. “It was good to meet you,” he says.

Then he turns his eyes on me, and there’s a clear warning written in them. Dad and Alec may have gone through this, and they might buy our story, but it doesn’t mean that they trust him. Not for a second.

I nod back. *I know.*

He disappears, walking out of Salt.

As soon as I know we’re safe, I drop my head on my hands and take a deep breath. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Gabriel as he reaches for the last loaf in that damn bread basket. He hasn’t had any problems with his appetite tonight.

“Well,” he says. “I think that went as well as we might have hoped.”

I look up at him, a wild smile spreading across my face. It’s adrenaline leaving my body. “You had a crush on me in law school?”

His gaze turns withering, and he doesn't bother answering.

I chuckle and reach for the second bottle of wine. It's still half-full and I pour myself a glass. "Who knew? Certainly not me. Poor, pining little Thompson prince."

Gabriel leans back in his seat. "Is this the way to repay someone who just did you a favor? Mockery."

I lift my glass high. "What else would you expect from me? It's *us*. This is what we do."

"Yes," he says with a smile. "This is what we do."

"That line about how only a Thompson can understand a Connovan? Bold."

"I knew it would work."

"So sure of yourself." I lift the wine to my lips and drain half the glass in one go. "You know, it's not like they bought all of it."

"They still don't trust me, of course." He waves that away like it doesn't matter. In the flickering light of the candle, his face is cast in shadows. It makes him look older. Stranger. "But they bought the relationship part."

*Yes, I think. And they still think I'm a fool.*

The words nearly slip out, but that would require more trust than I have in him. I take another long sip instead.

Gabriel watches me do it. His eyes are calculating and dark, and I slowly lower the glass back to the table. I can't forget who I'm sitting with. He's not my confidant.

No, he might be my husband, but he's not my friend.

"Thank you," I say, "for playing your part."

He tilts his head. "Thank you for doing the same yesterday."

"Anything to sell the lie."

He lifts his own wine glass. In the flickering glow of the candlelight, his eyes look almost amber. "Anything and everything."

I raise my glass. “Anything and everything.”

Because there’s no limit I won’t cross and no lie I won’t tell to keep my family and my company from knowing the truth.

But what’s worse? There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to avoid backing down from one of Gabriel’s taunts, and that just might be my undoing.

# Chapter 12

*Gabriel*

It's a warm spring day and I feel uncomfortably hot in my gray suit. The heavy stare from my aunt doesn't help.

We've been standing outside the residential building on Eighty-Third Street for almost fifteen minutes, waiting for Connie to arrive. The realtor waiting with us is so upbeat, it's practically a crime. No one should be so artificially cheery, not even someone itching for a sale.

My aunt and I are answering emails on our phones, and I shoot off another text to Connie.

Where the hell are you?

There's no reply.

I'd called her last night with a favor of my own. While her family might be placated, mine is a different story. My father and my aunt aren't convinced that I have this under control. Dad half expects me to fail, but that's his opinion of me even on a good day, and this doesn't seem any different. He'll reserve final judgment until he sees whether this blows up in my face or not.

It's my aunt Sharon who suspects something. What, I'm not sure yet. Probably that I won't be able to play this to our advantage. *Legally tied to a Connovan, and you couldn't get half the company in the divorce?*

But I have a suspicion it's that and something much, much worse. She *wants* me to fail. If I do, her son has a better shot at advancing within the company. After all, if I fuck this up, the odds of me being allowed to continue working at Thompson Enterprises are nonexistent.

"Will your wife be here soon?" Sharon asks it without looking up from her phone. Despite being two years older than my father, they behave more like twins. Together, they've ruled Thompson Enterprises for nearly two decades.

“Yes,” I say. “Traffic, you know.”

Sharon scoffs. For an inveterate New York planner like her, traffic is a constant. You adjust and you plan, and you don’t use it as an excuse.

I look out at the street. I don’t work to impress my aunt or my dad anymore. I don’t do *this*, waiting on street corners for Constance fucking Connovan to show up and do me a favor.

But here we are.

My aunt had been the one who roped me into this. *I have an amazing realtor, and he can squeeze the two of you in tomorrow*, she’d said with a smile too sharp to be real. *I heard you’re looking to move in together?*

Yes, well, that had been the official line.

I’d thanked her and told her we’d look into it, but her smile turned razor-thin. *I’d like to come, too*, she’d said, and I knew it wasn’t a suggestion. She wants to scrutinize Connie.

*And me.*

My frustration has nearly reached a boiling point when a yellow cab finally pulls up to the curb. Taxis. She should have a reputable driver service on speed dial.

Connie steps out of the cab, putting one legging-clad leg after the other. Fuck. She’s in yoga pants that mold to her legs. She’s thrown a light trench coat over it, and I don’t know whether I’m glad or devastated that it hides her ass from view. Her hair is long and loose over her shoulders, and on her face is a pair of oversized designer sunglasses.

I watch in silence as she walks toward us. She’s glowing with a beaming smile I’ve never seen, at least not around me, and shifts a takeout cup from one hand to the other.

“Hi! I’m so sorry I’m late.” She stands on her tiptoes and kisses my cheek. Her lips are there and gone again in an instant, leaving only warmth behind and the faint scent of her perfume. “I got caught in traffic after my yoga class.”

“That’s okay,” I say. My voice sounds robotic, and I clear my throat, hoping it’ll help clear my head.



“Constance,” my aunt says with the interest of a hunter who’s just spotted prey.

“That’s me.” Connie extends a hand, the wide smile still on her face. “Gabe has told me so much about you. Thank you for setting up this appointment for us, I couldn’t be more excited. And you must be Daniel?”

*Gabe?*

The realtor takes the lead and ushers us into the building. Connie walks in front of me, chatting with my aunt about the *weather*, of all things. Her hair looks glossy and her voice is unusually bright. It’s another version of her I’ve never seen.

I like it more than I should. Her, relaxed and happy.

“I’m sorry we haven’t met before,” my aunt says. “From what I’ve understood you two have been a couple for quite some time.”

“Almost a year,” Connie says warmly. “I know we moved quickly with the wedding and everything, but it felt right. I am sorry I didn’t get to know his family before, though. We would have loved to have you and the entire family at the wedding.”

Jesus.

But my aunt listens to every word with rapt attention, and I can’t help but speak up. “Yes. You could have been a flower girl, aunt.”

Her eyes shift to mine with familiar exasperation. “And your father the ring bearer, I suppose?”

“Don’t mention it to him,” I say. “I don’t want him to feel even worse about missing out.”

Sharon huffs out a half laugh at my sarcasm. It’s one of the few ways we’ve connected over the years. That, and making ruthless business deals.

The realtor unlocks the door to the first apartment we’re viewing. He welcomes us into a giant furnished living room that has two couches and floor-to-ceiling windows. A large archway opens up to a beautiful kitchen, with an enormous

kitchen island. There's a wooden bowl on it filled with more lemons than one household could ever consume.

He rattles off numbers. Five bedrooms, four baths, recently renovated steam sauna, home office, and more. Connie nods at everything, and I find myself looking at her more than I do at our surroundings.

What happened to the woman strung tight with nerves the other night? In front of her brother and father, she had been taut enough to snap. Now, she seems like she is relishing playing her part.

Must be her family.

The realtor mentions the existing nursery.

"Oh!" Connie says and reaches for my hand. She threads our fingers together like we do it all the time. "Did you hear that?"

Her hand in mine is surprising, but not enough that I break character. "I did. You like that?"

"Yes," she says with a shy smile. It's so unlike the Connie I'm used to that it throws me even further off my game. Fuck. I need to get in whatever zone she's in.

Across from me, I see my aunt's eyes zero in on Connie and my interwoven hands.

Next, the realtor walks us through the kitchen, highlighting everything from the stainless-steel appliances to the wine cooler and giant kitchen island. He doesn't mention the obscene amount of lemons, though, so I have to.

"Honey," I say, grabbing one of them. "Seems like the apartment comes with a lifetime supply of lemons. We can finally put that old lemonade recipe of yours to good use."

She looks at me before smiling. It feels more genuine than earlier. "We're good at that, aren't we?"

"The best."

She makes a show of opening cabinets and pulling out drawers, chatting to Daniel the entire way through. I lean

against the kitchen island and watch her perform.

She *almost* sells it. This performance, of her as the doe-eyed newlywed who can't wait to move in with her husband, if it wasn't for the amusement dancing in her eyes. That's all her, and it's for the joke that this is.

My aunt lingers beside me. "Thanks for setting this up," I tell her. "Seems like this place is a hit with the wife."

"Seems like it," Sharon says. Her voice is impossible to read.

Across the island, Connie looks over at me with a smile. "Well, I don't cook, but I think it'll be a great spot for you. What do you think, honey?"

"It's a great kitchen," I say.

But Sharon has scented blood. "For my nephew to cook in?"

"Oh, yes," Connie says warmly. "On one of our first dates, he made me his signature dish, and I think that's what finally won me over."

"Did he," my aunt says and looks at me. "You cook?"

"Sometimes." It's hard to suppress the desire to murder Connie where she stands, smiling widely in my direction. *Thanks.*

"What's your signature dish?"

"Pasta," I say.

"It's delicious, really," my wife says. "Can we see the upstairs again?"

Sharon chats with Connie as we walk through the giant master suite. And it's there, in the middle of the closets, that my aunt ups the ante.

Well, you should definitely come up to Oak Hill in a few weeks. We're having a big family reunion," she tells Connie.

My jaw tenses. Connie at Oak Hill? She'd meet everyone, the entire Thompson clan. There's no place with more

potential pitfalls and traps.

“Really?” Connie says, eyes shining. “I would love to. Gabe and I have talked about it, but you know, with me being a Connovan and all...”

“Oh, I’m sure that won’t be a problem at all,” Sharon says in a voice that convinces no one in the room. Her sharp eyes drift to mine. “Gabe here will take care of you.”

I put my hand on Connie’s back. “Then, we’d love to.”

It’s ten more agonizing minutes of meticulous apartment inspection before my aunt excuses herself to answer a ringing cell phone. “I’ll be in the home gym,” she says and disappears with clipped steps.

Connie releases my arm. “Thank you so much,” she tells Daniel. “Can we have a few minutes alone?”

“Absolutely! I’ll be over in the home office if you need me. Just shout.”

“Thank you.”

He leaves, and the second Connie and I are alone in the living room, her serene mask drops. *There, I think. That’s the woman I know.*

“I cook? A *signature* dish?” I ask.

“It was the smallest amount of payback I could extract.”

“Payback? For what?”

“You texted me about this *last night*. I need more warning than that.”

“Really? Did this interrupt your little yoga and coffee schedule?”

She rolls her eyes. “I had to reschedule a meeting at work. This?” she says, looking down at her outfit. “I changed in my office before heading over here. I had the taxi idle around the corner to make sure I’d be late.”

“You did *what?*”

“Think,” Connie says. “What would your family most want to see? The spoiled heiress or the businesswoman who might have ulterior motives?”

Reluctant respect pulses through me. All part of a carefully thought-out act, then. The coffee, the sunglasses, the kiss on the cheek.

“I get it.”

“You said my family wanted to see an adoring husband. Well, trust me when I say your family wants to see me smitten.” She pushes her hair over a shoulder, annoyance in her eyes. “Under absolutely no circumstances are we buying this place, by the way.”

That makes me smile. “But you were such a big fan of his and hers closets.”

“I’m a big fan of his and hers apartments.”

“Good,” I say. “I don’t share my pasta with just anyone.”

“It would probably be sprinkled with poison, anyway, if you cooked it for me.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “We need a game plan.”

“Yes. Like you not calling me *Gabe*.”

Her eyes glitter. “You don’t like that nickname?”

“No, princess, I don’t.”

“Well, at least we have something in common.”

“Oak Hill,” I say. “I can get you out of it.”

“You don’t think I can handle your family compound?”

“Being surrounded by twenty-five Thompsons for an entire weekend?” I ask, and lean in closer. “No. I don’t.”

Her gaze turns defiant. “My father is being honored with a Lifetime in Business award next weekend. It’s a gala with two hundred of his closest associates. Think you can handle being my date for that?”

“Constance,” I say. “You’ve seen me in a tux. Of course, I can handle it.”

She blinks up at me with those long sweeps of her eyelashes. It's her fake smitten gaze. "Gabriel," she says. "You've seen me crush opponents in mock court at law school. Of course, I can handle your relatives."

"Good," I say.

"Great," she says. Then, her eyes drift to the right before returning to mine. "Your aunt is watching us."

"Is she?"

"Yes." Connie's body softens, curves toward mine. The act is back on. "I'm not sure she buys this. Us."

I put my hand beneath her chin and tilt her head back. Her eyes widen with the movement, her lips parting.

"Anything and everything?" I ask. Her mouth is inches from mine, and the cheek beneath my thumb is rosy. Her nod is tiny, just a brief push against my hand.

I close the distance between us.

It's been years since I kissed Constance Connovan last. That had been a drunken night in law school, right before the summer break. Those kisses were stolen and heated and rushed, both of us finding pleasure in the forbidden.

This is different.

It's slow. It's tense.

I kiss her because we have an audience, and because she showed up in fucking yoga leggings. And because she's the one who had drunkenly suggested we get married two weeks ago as a joke.

I kiss her because I've wanted to for years.

We're only connected at the lips, but I feel painfully aware of her body inches from mine. My free hand fists against my side with the need to reach out and feel her. To tug her against me.

I brush my lips against hers once, twice, before I finally lift my head. The rosiness in her cheeks is a full-blown blush now, warming her pale skin to match the color of her hair.

“Good,” she whispers.

“Great,” I murmur. But in my head, I’m thinking something entirely different.

Fuck.

# Chapter 13



Connie

I'm late, and I hate being late. It's not something I am often, and every time it happens, stress becomes a palpable thing in my veins.

Through my headphones, I listen to my assistant Zahra give me a rundown of everything that's been planned for the evening. A change in guest lists that had been remedied, a late-minute speaker cancellation, and a mishap with my father's chauffeur.

"His assistant is handling that," she says, "but it means they'll arrive ten minutes late to the gala."

"Good," I say. "Did you manage to get a hold of Grant? He's coming, and he's good at speaking on a moment's notice."

"Yes, I passed on your suggestion to your brother's assistant, and Grant accepted. We're all set on speakers now. Good call."

"Thanks," I say. Putting out fires is one of my key tasks at Contron. Not *officially*, of course. My formal title is Manager of Business Development, which means I work with a team to develop Contron's new investments. In reality, work never stops when your last name is Connovan. And if things go sideways, Dad expects answers, and he's always tougher on employees who happen to be his kids.

"And not to stress you, but Gabriel will arrive outside your building in about five minutes."

"Awesome, thank you. See you in a few."

We hang up, and I quickly pull the silk tie out of my hair. The loose, blow-dried waves fall around my bare shoulders and over the neckline of the silver gown. It's form-fitting, the boning doing God's work for my curves, and falls to the floor in a soft drape of glimmering fabric. I pack my clutch in two minutes and have just enough time to apply my lipstick.

Tonight is big for both the family and the company. The gala has been in the works for months. Alec and I had been the ones to convince Dad to accept the award—he didn't want to initially. But it hadn't taken him long to come around to the idea of an event that honored him, and through him, also Contron.

Besides, David Connovan is a legend in this city. Among businessmen and investors alike, not to mention national broadcasters and media corporations. There will be two hundred people here tonight, and they all will want to kiss his ass.

But with Alec, Nate, and I? They're going to try to talk business, deepen relationships, and pitch ideas. We're a way to get to Dad, and they'll exploit that to the max.

I walk in high heels down to the elevator when my phone pings again. It's Zahra.

Blake Greene is a last-minute addition to the guest list, just so you're aware.

Damn. My ex coming isn't entirely unusual, even if it's surprising. We were together for four years before I ended things last year. He works for a firm that's technically owned by Contron. They must have sent a representative.

Zahra fires off another text, businesslike as always.

Do you want me to talk to the door people? We can bar him if you want.

I text back that it's fine before sliding my phone back into my clutch.

A black car pulls up outside my building, looking very much like the one that dropped Gabriel off outside the art gallery.

And... it's him.

Damn him, but he does look good in a tux. He wears it like it's made for him, like he wears them every day, like it's nothing special. And somehow, that casual disdain matched

with the sharpness of his eyes, and the messiness of his hair makes him more attractive.

“Hello, wife,” he says. His gaze drops down to my dress. It’s brief, but I catch the glance, and it sets off my nerves. His wanting me is good. That was the plan.

But the kiss from last week had changed things.

I walk past him and into the car. He gets in, the door closes, and we’re once again locked in a small space together. It doesn’t feel large enough for both of us and the baggage we carry.

It had just been a kiss. A necessary step in this ruse, a performance, a part of the deal. It was something I’d prepared myself for, and accepted. It shouldn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. But the electricity his lips sent down my body has been branded into my memory.

I can’t like him. I’ve always known that. I’m not allowed to like him, not to mention *trust* him.

Somehow I’m now back where I’d been those months in college, forcing myself to ignore the way my body lights up when he’s around, or how fun it is to argue with him.

“My aunt asked me if we’d signed on the apartment,” he says.

“Oh? What’d you tell her?”

“That I didn’t think it was a good investment, and that you’re devastated.”

My gaze slides over to his. “I’m devastated, am I?”

“Yes. You put on a very convincing performance, you know. You looked inside every single cupboard. Of course, you’re devastated. That was your dream apartment.”

That makes me smile. “Your aunt got closer to exploding with every second I lingered.”

“You wasted her time beautifully,” he says and sounds entirely pleased with it.

“Well, if she’s going to ambush us with a test...” I say with a shrug. “So, about tonight.”

Gabriel’s eyes turn taunting. “Are you going to give me the *please behave* speech?”

I’d been about to, but the last thing I want to give him is a sense of being right. “No. I was going to tell you my other brother will be there, too. He’s flown in from London.”

“Nate?”

“Yes.”

“All right,” Gabriel says. “And...?”

I could tell him Nate knows our marriage is a sham, the result of far too much alcohol, more than a decade of taunting animosity, and the Vegas atmosphere.

But looking at the self-satisfaction in his gaze, I think it’ll be more fun not to.

“And behave,” I say. “Every single eye in that room will be watching us, watching you, and hoping for some form of scandal. The Connovan girl marrying a Thompson? This has been fodder for people for weeks.”

“Oh, I’m aware,” he says, his voice hard. “We’ve been spoken about over water coolers and dinner tables across the city.”

“Enjoying your fifteen minutes of fame?”

His eyes slide to mine. They’re dark in the dim lighting of the car, his light-brown eyes look darker than usual. “Immensely.”

A shiver runs down my back again.

*Dangerous*, I think. Gabriel Thompson has always been dangerous. I just never thought it would be in this way.

“Cynthia Schultz has been calling my office,” I say.

“She’s been calling mine, too,” Gabriel says. “She won’t stop until we give her the joint interview.”

“Well, she’ll have to,” I say. She works for Business Digest, a magazine read by everyone who’s anyone, and wants access to us. Explaining the relationship, the marriage... its effects on our respective conglomerates.

“We might need to give her something else,” Gabriel says. His eyes are locked on mine for a long moment before they slide back out to look at the traffic.

I’d been thinking the same thing. It sends another shiver of heat through me. We’re too similar. It’s dangerous... because it reminds me why, against all the odds, I like him.

The car drops us off by the stone steps of the storied Winter Hotel. It’s hosting the gala in one of its giant ballrooms, and the hotel is partly restricted to protect the privacy of its guests.

Gabriel holds out his arm. I look at it for a second too long before sliding mine through it. Of all the performances we’ve done so far, this one is the biggest for me.

Everyone here will have read the article in the *Globe*. Everyone will be watching us. Not just how we behave, but how my father and brothers interact with *me* in turn.

*What about the Connovan girl? Has she been tricked? Is she still trusted by the family?*

We walk into the Winter Hotel to the swirl of people in ballgowns and tuxedos, music, and small talk. We’re only halfway through to our table when Alec interrupts us. He comes striding across the room in a tux that looks more like armor on him.

His jaw is tense.

*Damn*, I think, making sure my mouth is curved into a pleasant, relaxed smile. *You need to learn how to act. Everyone’s watching.*

Alec gives Gabriel the curtest of nods before turning to me. “There are protestors outside.”

“We didn’t see any.”

“Well, they’re there. It’s a small group.”

I suppress a sigh. “About the Harrison investment?”

“Yes.”

The deal was one my father had brokered over a decade ago. It was a minor investment in a veritable ocean of them, and as soon as the dangerous chemical was exposed, he’d pulled out of it. Liquidated the company that had seemed like a promising start-up, and paid out all requisite compensations. But the legacy of it had followed him throughout his career and, occasionally, popped up at places like this.

It’s easy to see the headlines. *Dirty businessman honored with a lifetime achievement award.*

“Send the PR team out,” I say.

“They’re already on it. But we need to keep it quiet.”

“Have the Winter staff handle it,” Gabriel suggests.

Alec’s gaze turns to Gabriel. It’s arctic. “They’re not on private property. They’re on the sidewalk.”

Gabriel shrugs. “Yes, but the staff can go out with pitchers of lemonade, maybe some sandwiches. Give the protestors your statement alongside it—whatever the official version is.”

I nod slowly. It makes a devilish sort of sense. “Yes. We could even send out someone from the executive team and ask the protestors for feedback. Mention our newly started foundation, and ask what they’d like to see done to redress those affected by the Harrison deal.”

“Kill them with kindness,” Alec says.

“It’s worked for us in the past,” Gabriel says. “People want an enemy, and they want to feel angry. As soon as you take that away from them, they’ll quickly lose interest. I’ve found that very few people care enough to do the actual work.”

That makes me chuckle. It’s cynical, but it rings true. I’ve seen that myself before.

“I’ll get Nate on it,” Alec says. His voice is begrudgingly accepting, and I know it’s not because of the suggestion. It’s because it came from Gabriel.

But Gabriel just nods and puts his hand on my lower back. “Sounds good.”

“Let me know if you need anything,” I tell Alec.

“Is Dad—”

“He’s schmoozing with Stint and Farrier. Good call with bringing Grant on board as a speaker, by the way.”

“No worries,” I say.

Alec nods goodbye before taking off. He walks like a man at war. He has for years now, and I don’t know how to tell him that there’s peace.

For him, Contron will always be under siege.

Gabriel and I find our seats. It’s at one of the two tables of honor, right by the stage. Across from me sits Nate, while Dad and Alec are at the table next to us. Divided up between the two tables are some of Contron’s biggest assets and other business leaders whose good graces we always want to be in.

And all of them are curious.

Throughout dinner, Gabriel and I are forced to recount our how-we-met story not once, but twice. Nate, the bastard, watches both of us with eyes that speak of jet lag and amusement.

“Tell me,” he asks Gabriel, “what’s your favorite thing about my sister?”

I want to roll my eyes. He knows everything, and he’s milking it for his own entertainment.

Gabriel leans back in his chair and drapes a hand along the back of mine. His fingers brush against my bare left shoulder, and I know he’s aware of the entire table watching us. “Her intelligence,” he says. “She was brilliant in law school, and she’s only gotten more so since.”

I look up at him like the adoring wife I’m meant to be.

“I love that,” Nate says. His voice is calm, just slightly teasing. “And Con? What’s your favorite thing about your new husband?”

I look across the table at my brother. My expression is still carefully controlled, but I'm sure he sees the warning flashing in my eyes because his smile widens.

The best lies aren't lies at all. They're half truths.

"He's funny," I say and lean my shoulder onto Gabriel's. "He also challenges me, in the best of ways. I'm a better person today because of him."

Nate's smile broadens. "To Connie and Gabriel," he says and lifts his glass high. The rest of the table follows suit.

Beside me, Gabriel leans in closer. His voice is caustic. "I make you a better person, huh?"

I elbow him in return.

After the three-course meal, the band stops playing, and a smooth jazz melody fills the place instead. A man takes the stage, and a hushed silence falls over the room. He introduces my father with a long list of accomplishments while the Contron logo appears like a rising sun on the giant screen behind him.

Dad walks up. He waves once, a strong salute to the crowd, before taking the mic. His speech is concise and pointed, and at the very end, he thanks his three children.

"My lieutenants," he says with a sweep of his arm. "Everything I've done is for you."

Across the table, my eyes meet Nate's. I see the same sentiment reflected in his. *Yeah, right.*

"Alec, my oldest and my right-hand man. Nate, my boldest, one who leads our expansion overseas." Dad looks down at me directly from the stage. The room feels eerily quiet except for the drumming in my ear. "And Connie, my youngest, who gives me gray hair."

The room erupts in delighted laughter. Dad leans back, smiling at the crowd.

A fierce blush climbs up my chest, and I'm aware of looking around, of smiling, of chuckling along, but I can't hear anything over the shame engulfing me.



A hand squeezes my shoulder. It's warm and slightly rough, and it helps me return slowly to my own body. I have no one to blame but myself. I'd stood in that chapel in Vegas, drunk on alcohol and high on adrenaline, and responded to Gabriel's taunts. *You wouldn't dare.*

And now we have to live with the consequences.

Gabriel leans in. His lips brush against my ear, and my eyes drift closed at contact.

"That," he mutters, "was an asshole thing to say."

I take a deep breath. He's not wrong. I reach for my glass of wine and force myself to take a single, graceful sip instead of downing it. People are watching.

They always are.

After dinner, the tables are cleared away, and the band starts playing in earnest. Gabriel chats with a group of people he's done business with in the past, and I talk with both Nate and Alec. The protestors have been placated. Apparently, more than half of them had left shortly after receiving sandwiches.

I'm walking back across the room when someone stops me. "Connie," my ex-boyfriend says.

"Oh. Hi, Blake."

He holds out a hand. "Care for a dance?"

I look at it for a second before accepting, and we swing out onto the dance floor. This is a conversation I knew I'd have to have at some point. Might as well get it over with.

"Congratulations on getting married," Blake says.

I look back at him for a moment before I laugh. At this point, it feels like the only right answer.

# Chapter 14

*Gabriel*

My hand tightens around my glass of bourbon. Too tight, really, but I need an outlet for the irritation inside that's reached a boiling point.

"So, you've been dating for a year?" The woman across from me asks with barely concealed curiosity. The men on either side of her keep their eyes trained on me, waiting for an answer. It's the fifth conversation I've had so far that's followed the exact same path. Connie had been right, as she so often is.

People are curious.

"Eight months," I say. "But when you know, you know."

All three of them nod at that, but I'm not sure a single one of them buys it. The Thompson and Connovan union is unique enough to warrant much more speculation than that.

"Well, she's definitely the most interesting Connovan," one of the men says.

"Yes, the Chicago deal was somewhat of a bombshell when it fell through, wasn't it?" the woman asks.

"Sure was," he says and looks at me curiously. "You don't know anything, do you? About what she—that is, what happened with the deal?"

My smile feels painfully polite. Right, the deal. She'd mentioned it, and I'd known about it when it happened. The one hundred and twenty-million-dollar acquisition she'd run point on for Contron that fell through, and the very public statement the CEO of the other firm had made afterward.

"No," I say. "But knowing Constance, I wouldn't attribute the fault to her."

"Of course not, no. That's true," one of them says. His quick backpedaling would be impressive if it wasn't so annoying. "Naturally."

“You’re a loyal husband,” the woman says.

*Someone has to be*, I think and throw back the last of the drink. This whole fucking night has been one long tortuous experience in how much people are interested in Connie and me. Her father’s comment during the speech might have been mildly amusing at a family dinner.

But in a room of over two hundred people who Connie will most definitely have to do business with in the future?

It was infuriating.

I search the crowd for her. It doesn’t take me long to spot her on the dance floor. Her silver dress moves with her every step, a glimmering waterfall around her body. It hugs her hips and leaves her shoulders and arms bare. Her auburn hair is a sharp contrast against her pale skin.

And then, I realize who she’s dancing with.

My teeth grind together. Blake Greene, her ex-boyfriend of far too many years. I hadn’t known he’d be here.

Had she?

“—but I’m sure you have a system for that.”

I look back at the group of people I’m speaking with. They’re all looking at me expectantly. “Sorry?”

“Any conflicts of interest?” the woman asks. I think her name is Stacey, or maybe Sally. “The rivalry between Thompson Enterprises and Contron is legendary. Just curious how you two manage that little detail.”

“Sienna,” one of the men says and nudges her side.

She chuckles and waves a well-manicured hand. “Sorry, but it’s undoubtedly interesting.”

My gaze slides back to Connie on the dance floor. Blake has his hand on her lower back, his other curved over hers. The irritation I’ve been feeling for the last hour turns to ash, tasting bitter on my tongue. He’s familiar with her body all right. For years he could touch her like that whenever he wanted.

Dress or no dress.

“It makes for a very dynamic marriage,” I tell the group. “Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

I leave the curious guests behind and head to the bar. While weaving through the crowd, I keep an eye on Connie and Blake. They’re still dancing. They’re talking, too, while they swirl to the music.

I order another scotch and lean against the bar to watch them more closely.

Connie laughs at something Blake says. It lights up her face, and even from this distance, I see how relaxed she is in his company.

I drain half of my scotch while watching them dance. Connie’s too beautiful for him. He has light-brown hair and a weak chin, and, maybe, he looks approachable and friendly. Some women like that, and she obviously had, but he was never good enough for her.

In this room of people dressed to the nines in finery, she still stands out.

Maybe it’s the way the dress hugs her curvy figure or the soft waves of her hair falling around her.

Maybe it’s just her and the magnetism she’s always exuded.

If we’re supposed to sell this relationship, this *marriage*, Connie dancing to two songs with her ex won’t help. She’d been the one to tell me people would be watching us.

I drain the last of my glass and set it down on the bar. *Well, let them watch this.*

I cross the dance floor to where they’re swaying softly, still talking to one another. Blake smiles at what Connie says, his eyes shining, and something dark twists in my chest.

I cut in.

They come to a stop, and two pairs of eyes turn to me. But I’m only looking at Blake.

“Mind if I take over?”

Irritation flashes in his eyes, but he’s too well-mannered to do anything but take a step back. “Of course. Congrats on the marriage.”

“Thank you.” I turn my back to him and reach for Connie. She steps into my arms easily, but she’s rigid beneath my touch.

“Relax,” I mutter and start leading us.

“What was that about?” she asks.

“You danced with your ex for two straight songs.”

She blinks like she hadn’t realized it was that long. Jealousy feels like a dark thing pulsing through my veins.

“Oh,” she says. But then she frowns. “We were just catching up.”

“I could see that.”

“I hadn’t told him about the marriage.”

“Did you have to inform him?” I ask.

Her hand tightens around mine. “Well, we did live together for years. Perhaps a heads-up would’ve been nice.”

“You don’t owe him anything,” I grind out.

“Of course, I don’t. But there’s something called common courtesy, and, I think, at least having a conversation with him at an event where we’re both attending guests isn’t too much to ask.” She frowns up at me, the furrow back between her eyebrows.

I turn us around a slow-moving couple and look away from the searching stare she gives me.

She leans in closer, her body curving toward mine. “Are you jealous, Thompson?”

I meet her eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You are, aren’t you?” she asks, and there’s a thread of satisfaction in her voice.

I give her a scathing look. “Everyone is watching us. Photographers are here. *You’re* the one who told me that appearances matter.”

“Oh, they certainly do,” she says. “So, you cut into my dance with Blake to make a point to the crowd?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm,” she says and looks over her shoulder. “So, you wouldn’t mind if I had a long conversation with him somewhere, in private, then? Because you’re not jealous.”

I press against her lower back, forcing her closer to me. The last person I want to keep talking about is Blake fucking Greene.

“You’re *my* wife,” I tell her. “If Blake wanted to have long, intimate conversations with you, he should have proposed when he had the chance.”

A smile dances on her lips. “He did,” she says. “But I said no.”

I close my eyes, and dark pleasure races down my spine. She’d said yes to me, even if it was at 3 a.m. in Vegas. Against all odds, and as much as she might regret it. She’d said yes.

“And why is that?” I ask. “He always seemed like a good guy. The type to hold doors for you and let you boss him around, and never once match your fire.”

Her eyes flash. “You really are jealous.”

“Am I?” I ask. “Of the relationship I just described? Hardly.”

“You don’t know anything,” she says. “Not about me, not really. And definitely not about him.”

I lower my head. “Then, tell me the real reason you turned down his proposal, princess.”

Her breathing speeds up. I feel her chest rise and fall where it’s pressed against mine. We’re barely moving anymore. Protests are born and die in her eyes, and I see the frustration mounting.

Because she knows I'm right.

"Fine," she says. "I will, if you admit you're jealous."

"Negotiating with me?"

"A truth for a truth," she says.

I speak the words against the soft shell of her ear. Her perfume washes over me, something floral and warm, and womanly. It makes it hard to think. "Fine," I say. "I am jealous."

Her hand grips mine, and then I feel her nails, digging into my flesh with pinpoint sharpness. "The reason I ended things with Blake?" she says. "I was bored."

I smile. "That's right."

The band changes its pace, the deep beat shifting into something more upbeat. Around us, couples take a step apart, changing their tempo. But my arms stay locked around Connie.

Her green eyes look unusually large beneath the lights of the ballroom. For a long second, we just look at one another.

The ice beneath us feels very thin.

She slips her hand out of mine and takes a step back. "I need a drink," she says. "Join me?"

I nod. She smiles, the tiniest of movements, and turns to the bar. I follow her through the throngs of people, my eyes glued to the curves of her hips as they move with every step.

A good, strong drink. That's what I need.

But when Connie looks over her shoulder at me, and I see the familiar challenge in her eyes, I know a drink won't be enough to quell the fire inside me.

It'll only stoke the flames.



# Chapter 15

*Connie*

Gabriel leans against the bar beside me. His shoulder brushes mine, my leg close to his, as we look out over the crowd of people. It's starting to thin, with people retiring for the evening.

His admission feels like a victory. He's jealous.

Him, Gabriel Thompson, who is never bothered by anything. Who could have any woman he wants. This is good. This is great, even.

He is attracted to me.

Isabel's plan is working. Beneath my silver dress, my heart is beating fast. *How to use it, though...*

I don't know how, yet. But if there's one thing I was taught from birth, it's that it always pays to have the upper hand. Even if you don't know the when or the why, it's a safeguard. An insurance policy.

My father keeps a private detective on retainer as a testament to that very fact.

"So, why did you start dating him in the first place?" Gabriel asks. His voice is derisive and hard. *I don't care*, it says, which means the exact opposite.

I smile against my glass of wine. "You mean... five years ago?"

"Yeah. Final year of law school."

He remembers, then. We'd all returned to our Ivy League college after a summer away, during which I'd interned at Contron's legal department and done my best to forget the night before the summer break that I'd spent with Gabriel.

Dating Blake had been a part of that plan.

I wet my lips. "Well, he was intelligent and funny. Kind. He was easy to make plans with and fun to spend time with."

Gabriel's eyes narrow. "Since when was *easy* something you enjoy?"

That rankles. Life has been many things, but never easy. My mother's early death, Dad's emotional collapse, schools that required nothing but straight A's, and two brothers to prove myself against. If Blake was easy and safe, and *boring*, it was because I couldn't handle one more challenge in my life.

At least I'd told myself that.

"I could ask the same about you," I tell him. "Aren't easy flirtations the only thing you've had for over a decade? How long is your list of conquests now?"

He chuckles. "Now you're jealous, princess?"

"I couldn't be less so."

"Of course not," he says. "Because you'd never be one of my conquests... now would you?"

The words hang in the air between us, sarcastic and sharp, and I feel the stab of the memory we've never brought up.

The night in college.

His warm skin against mine, the rough comforter beneath my back, and my fingers digging into his shoulders. It had been quick and fierce, and we had never spoken about it again.

"Who conquered who, really?" I ask. It's a lame response, but the allusion to what had once happened between us has thrown me off-kilter.

He leans in closer. "Your nail marks took a week to fade."

Oh.

For so long I haven't let myself think of that memory. I'd tried to wipe it, to suppress it. He's a Thompson. At the time, Contron and Thompson Enterprises had been in the middle of a three-year-long litigation process, and we'd carried the torch of hatred like two soldiers rooted in opposing trenches.

Sleeping with him felt like the ultimate betrayal of my family.

“Speechless, princess?” His voice is low. “That’s a first.”

I open my mouth to respond. What, I don’t know, but I’m saved by the strong strides approaching us.

It’s Dad.

His eyes shift from Gabriel to me, standing there side by side, before his gaze settles on mine. “I heard about some protestors.”

“Yes. We took care of them a few hours ago.”

“They should never have been here in the first place.”

“I agree,” I say smoothly. “As they weren’t on private property, we couldn’t handle it as quickly as we would have liked.”

He nods, and it’s as close to *good* as he ever comes.

“Have you seen Alec?” I ask. “It’s been a while since I saw him.”

“He left,” Dad says. “The kids, you know.”

Yes, I do know. Alec works long hours. It’s all he ever does, but as soon as he isn’t, he tries to be at home.

“Nate?” I ask.

“He’s around here somewhere. He’s flying back to London around noon tomorrow.”

I nod. He’s here for less than forty-eight hours, but we have breakfast scheduled for tomorrow morning, so I’ll get some time with him.

Dad looks from me to Gabriel again. This time, his eyes linger on my husband. There’s a sheen to them that speaks of alcohol. He’s not a drunk, though, my father. That would mean losing control, and he’s spent seventy-five years making sure that never happens.

But it does make his words sharper.

“Congratulations,” Gabriel tells my father. “On the award, and on the night. It’s been a well-organized event.”

Dad nods. “Yes. Have you enjoyed yourself?”

“I have, yes.”

“Good, good. Tell your dad and aunt I said hello, will you?” There’s obvious relish in his voice. A message from David Connovan won’t be appreciated, and he knows that. “They must be thrilled about your marriage.”

I clear my throat. “His aunt is actually helping us find an apartment.”

“Is she? Interesting.”

“I’ll tell them you said hello,” Gabriel says. He’s using that voice again, the one that’s charming and confident. Like he’s the most unbothered person ever. “Oh, and gray hair becomes you.”

Dad’s eyes widen. “Excuse me?”

“Your hair, sir,” Gabriel says. The menace in his voice is nearly impossible to detect, but I hear it. “It looks good gray.”

It’s rare to stun my father into silence, but that’s what he is right now. Stunned. His eyes slide from Gabriel’s to mine. The glint in them is asking me to agree with him. *Is he serious? You married this man?*

I smile. “It’s true. You should really be thanking me, Dad.”

His eyes narrow for a fraction of a second before he laughs.

“Interesting,” he says again and leans in to kiss me on the cheek. “Go home, honey. Lillian and her assistant will wrap things up here.”

“All right, then I think I will. Congrats again, Dad.”

Gabriel and I make it halfway to the coat check before I start laughing. It catches him by surprise, and I see him watching me out of the corner of his eye, which only makes me laugh harder.

I can’t believe he’d just said that to my dad.

I don’t stop chuckling until we exit to the sidewalk outside the Winter Hotel. The air is cooler than inside the crowded hotel, and it’s refreshing against my flushed skin.

Adrenaline and relief and alcohol have left me in a strange mood. Half-giddy, half-sad. Thank God this night is over, and we pulled it off.

Gabriel's driver pulls up, and we get into the car. We head to the Winslow Building in silence, and I relish it, leaning my head back against the headrest.

Who would have thought Gabriel Thompson would be the one to stand up to my father?

I turn my head toward him. He's looking out the window, his strong profile pensive. It's rare that I see him like this. No smirk, and no anger. Just thoughtfulness.

"Hey," I say.

He turns to look at me. "Princess?"

"You know, I hate it when you call me that."

His lip tips up just slightly. "Yes," he says softly. "I know."

"I forgot to tell you something earlier. I think your cousin sent me a wedding present."

The smile wipes clean off his face. "He did what?"

"It arrived a few days ago."

"What is it?"

"I'm not entirely sure. It seems like a bunch of knives."

Gabriel's gaze turns angry. "It's *what?*"

"Something for the home, at least, with a card on it."

The car turns onto my street. It's lined with familiar trees, and at the end, the Winslow Building I've called home for years now.

"I want to see it," he says.

Gabriel Thompson in my apartment. Before tonight, I wouldn't have believed it. But after the words he whispered in my ear...

*I am jealous.*

I still don't trust him. He might very well be planning a way to screw me over through this process, and by extension, Contron. It might all be a ploy. A trick. Our divorce arbitration will be long and messy, and painstaking.

This is my chance to sink my hooks a little deeper before I need to use them to tug. Lord knows men do crazy things when they want a woman.

*It's also a chance for me to spend more time with him.*

Gabriel leans forward to his driver. "I'll be following Connie upstairs," he says.

The driver nods. "Standby?"

"Yes, thank you."

We walk into my building, the stone floors in the lobby and the dark walnut elevator doors appearing just as they always have. Everything is the same, except the company beside me.

In the elevator, I glance over at Gabriel. He looks tense. "I take it, you're not close with your cousin, then?"

"Close enough," he says. "That's the problem."

The elevator doors open, and I walk through the unchanged hallway. My pulse picks up when I turn the lock in my door. Since Blake moved out over a year ago, my apartment has been my sanctuary.

Gabriel is a dark shadow behind me. He follows me into my living room, quiet and tall, and even silent, I feel him assessing the space.

"So, this is where you live," he says.

I point toward the side table. "His gift is over there."

Gabriel heads there right away. He towers over the small gift basket, still wrapped in cellophane. It had been one among many I'd received, along with all those flower bouquets. More than one person ever should.

I kick off my high heels. Blessed relief floods through my feet, alongside a throb of pain. It never gets easier. I pick up

my shoes and lean against my couch, watching Gabriel.

He's looking at the card on his cousin's gift, reading the three lines for far longer than it should take.

I head to my kitchen. "So? Is it a threat?"

He turns to me. "Yes. But not to you."

"Then who is he threatening?" I pour myself a glass of cold, white wine. "Want some?"

His eyes drop to my bare feet, and something within them shutters. Like he's hiding a feeling and boarding it up where I won't be able to see it.

"Yes," he says. "And he's letting me know, by way of telling you, that he's keeping an eye on us. *On me.*"

"That sounds ominous," I say and pour him a glass of wine.

He takes it from me. "Well, he has a flair for the dramatic."

"Does it run in the family?"

He gives me a withering glare and sits down on one of my armchairs. "He and my aunt, they don't buy this marriage."

That makes me frown. I sit down across from him, pulling my legs up and making sure the silver skirt of my dress covers enough. "Why not? Will they be a problem?"

He stretches his long legs out. "Most likely."

"Shit. I thought they'd be happy. Don't they think you married me for some nefarious plot you've yet to reveal?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Yes. Did I tell you that?"

"I know the Thompson family well enough. I've studied you guys for years."

"You have? That's... interesting."

"As if you don't do the same," I say, lifting my glass to my lips. "So, why is he a problem?"

Gabriel looks at me for a long time. I stare back at him, sitting here in my apartment. Close, and yet nowhere near



trustworthy. They say to keep your enemies close, but we married our own.

“My dad and aunt have worked as partners for twenty years,” he says. “They inherited Thompson Enterprises from their father, and they’ve run it ever since.”

I nod, tracing the rim of my wineglass with my finger. I know all of this. Contron had started in entertainment and broadcasting; Thompson Enterprises began in energy and production. Now the conglomerates are both large enough that our spheres of influence regularly compete.

“My other two cousins aren’t interested in running the business. That leaves me and my cousin Jacob.”

Oh. “There’s a battle for succession?”

“Who has a flair for the dramatic now?”

I roll my eyes. “Come on. You don’t have to use euphemisms around me.”

“Yes,” he says simply. “It’s either me or Jacob. He’ll be more than happy to use this to argue that I’m not fit for the position. To use it as leverage somehow.”

That makes me frown. A fight for leadership isn’t something we’ve had to deal with. My dad was an only child, and he had been grooming Alec for the position since my brother was old enough to read and write. Nate was never interested in wearing the crown.

We’re many things, my family, but we’re not a house divided.

“What does your dad think?”

Gabriel’s mouth tips up in a smile that’s completely humorless. “He wants the company to be in the best person’s hands... whoever they might belong to.”

My lips part. *Oh*. It takes me by surprise, the admission. Gabriel has been the golden boy for as long as I can remember. Popular, played sports, good in school even when he didn’t make an effort. To think his father might not see that...

Interesting, and surprising. Perhaps even confusing.

“Well,” I say softly. “I’ve never even been in the running myself.”

Gabriel’s eyebrow rises. “It’s always been Alec?”

I nod. “He’s the best one for the job, too. As much as I enjoy being in charge, truth is, I think I like being a lieutenant more.”

The man opposite me, the one I’ve been taught my whole life to distrust, nods like he understands. Because he might be the only person in the entire city who actually does.

“I get that.” He leans his head back against the back of the armchair. Lazily, he reaches up and undoes his bow tie. “Did you live here with Greene?”

I roll my eyes again. “That’s what you’re thinking about right now?”

“I can think about many things at the same time.”

“Yes, I did. But I redecorated after he left.” I pull my knee up and rest my chin on it. “Think your cousin will cause any problems, or just keep an eye on things?”

He runs a hand through his thick hair. “I’ll have to make sure he doesn’t. You should meet him.”

“I can do that. Play the part.”

His eyes darken. “Like you did with my aunt?”

“Yes. Wasn’t I perfect?” I blink my eyes rapidly again and soften my lips in a sweet smile. “The adoring, simpering wife.”

“Cute as that is, he might see through it.”

“Your aunt didn’t.”

He makes a rumbling *humph* and sets his wine glass down on my coffee table. “There’s an opportunity coming up in a few days.”

“Tell me about it,” I say.

“I host a poker night every few months. It’s with a group of friends. Some catering, cigars... Guests often bring partners.”

“At your apartment?” I ask.

Somehow, I’ve never pictured how he might live. How Gabriel exists outside of the space I’ve put him in, the space we’ve always existed in. We only see one another in neutral, public places.

Except now he’s here. In my private one.

“Yes,” he says. He braces his arm against the back of the armchair. “My cousin will be there.”

“Do you usually invite him?”

“Yes. Keep your enemies close, and all that,” he says and tilts his head in my direction.

I chuckle. “Does that include marrying them?”

“If you’re going to do something, princess, do it properly.” But then, his smile fades. “You don’t have to come, of course. But it’s a great opportunity—”

“I’ll be there,” I say.

“Good. I’ll send you the address.”

“And I should probably be there a bit earlier.”

“You should?”

His confusion makes me smile. “Well, how would it look if I show up when the party is already in full swing? Or if someone asks me where the bathroom is and I don’t know the layout of your apartment?”

He blinks at me. “Yeah. That’s actually very true.”

“The devil is in the details.”

“Maybe. But it’s also in the chemistry, and for all of our problems, we have plenty of that.” His eyes stay on mine for a long moment. “You realize we’re going to have to keep this up for months, if not a year, before we can divorce with our reputations intact.”

The words fill me with equal measures of dread and forbidden pleasure. *A whole year.* This marriage was a mistake. It'll require more work than any project I've ever done. And yet...

"I know," I say. "Too scared to go through with it?"

His lips tip up into the smile I know so well. "Bring it on, princess."

# Chapter 16

*Connie*

I knock on the anonymous, black door that bears the number 2A. It's on the penthouse floor of a mid-rise in Midtown, in a sleek building very different from the historical Winslow I call home.

It takes Gabriel a long time to open the door, but when he does, it's with still-damp hair and wearing a half-buttoned black shirt.

"Hello." He leans against the opened door. His eyes dip down to my clothes... and they stay there.

*Success.* I'm in a silk midi skirt that hugs my hips, but the real asset is up top. The blouse I'm wearing is made out of see-through black lace and has a plunging V-shaped neckline that does wonders for my cleavage. Along with my low ponytail, I look *almost* professional.

Like I could be heading to a conference if it wasn't for the hint of skin through the lace and the plunging neckline.

"Well," Gabriel says. Surely, I can't be imagining the rasp in his voice. "Come on in, then, princess."

I walk past him into the sparsely decorated entryway. It's a cold kind of decor, and one that speaks of an interior designer with an unlimited budget but very austere taste.

"I dressed as a villain tonight," I say, making sure my ponytail swishes with every step.

"That you did," he mutters.

I take in the greige walls and hardwood flooring, turning the corner into an open floor plan layout. The combined living room and kitchen space is massive. The floor-to-ceiling windows showcase the city skyline, with lights that glitter to their own unheard melody.

The room itself must have been transformed, because I can't imagine he lives like this every day. Two large poker tables have been situated in the center and couches pushed to

the side. A bartender is setting up shop on the kitchen island, while behind him, in a kitchen that boasts black cabinets and state-of-the-art appliances, a chef is working with his back to us.

“A *small* poker night, huh?”

Gabriel chuckles. “I never used the word small.”

“Go big or go home, I suppose.” I run my hand along the felt-covered table. “Who will be here tonight?”

“Friends, and their friends. My cousin.”

“Thank you for being so descriptive.” I look at him over my shoulder. “You have to give me more than that.”

“A few friends from law school will be here. You’ll recognize them.”

I pause. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. They’ll be hard to convince, I suppose, but that’s good. Who else?”

“Childhood friends. Some from St. Regis, by the way,” he says. So he hangs out with people from prep school, too.

“Everyone will know us both?”

“Not sure if they’ll remember you, princess. You were two years behind us at St. Regis.”

“I’m aware.”

He smirks. “Don’t worry. I’ve always remembered you.”

“I’m aware of that, too,” I say dryly. I head toward the spiral staircase that curves alongside the large windows, leading up to a second story. “Care to give me a tour?”

He follows me at a leisurely pace. His shirt is still unbuttoned halfway, revealing a tan, muscled chest and a smattering of dark hair. I make a point of not looking at it. At him. It’s hard enough to maintain control around him.

His place has hints of personality, but most of it seems expressionless. Two spare guest rooms, a home office, large

bathroom with a sauna. I pause outside a room that has to be his bedroom.

A king-size bed with gray sheets, framed by two large abstract paintings that dominate the space. An open closet reveals perfectly pressed shirts and pants hung in a long row. Beneath them are neatly folded sweaters in varying colors of gray, beige, and blue. I linger a moment too long on the threshold.

He notices.

“Interested in my bedroom, Constance?”

I lean against the wall and meet his gaze. He hasn't shaved, and across his jaw is stubble that's grown long enough to be soft.

“Well,” I say, my voice calmer than I feel, “I have spent a lot of time in there. Should make myself familiar.”

His lips tip into a half smile. “Go right ahead.”

Damn. I turn to look back at the bedroom and a sleek wood dresser inside. There are a few framed photographs on it.

Gabriel braces a hand beside me on the doorframe. The scent of his shampoo and something else, something like a faint sandalwood cologne, washes over me. “Which side of the bed is yours?”

“The left side,” I murmur.

“Good choice.” He starts to do up the remaining buttons of his shirt, one by one. “That's my side, too.”

I look back at him. It's dangerous, being this close. I know I can't trust him, not ever, but there's a part of me that wants to ignore that. And that's a part of myself I need to suppress.

*He wants me more than I want him,* I tell myself. He was jealous the other night. I can use that.

I can use this.

“And are you keeping your wife satisfied?”



His eyes widen before amusement flickers through them. “You tell me,” he says. “Happy with our sex life, princess?”

My lips part. Every time I think I have the upper hand, he returns with a question I have no way of answering. And I see in his eyes that he knows it.

But I won't give him the victory.

So, I lean in close, until I'm only inches away from his lips. “If only you'd last a little longer. *Gabe*.”

His mouth thins. “If only you'd—”

The sharp sound of a doorbell rings out. It reaches us, even upstairs, and cuts through the tension.

I take a step back. “Guests are here.”

Gabriel shoots me a look, and I spot frustration in his eyes. It's rare, seeing that, and I revel in it. He heads back down the stairs, doing up his shirt as he goes, and I follow at a slower pace.

It takes a long time for my heartbeat to slow.

Over the next hour, I'm introduced to a flurry of guests. They're all civil, cordial, and interested to meet me. None of them seem surprised that I'm here. The news has spread fast through our circles. I'm sure our marriage has provided gossip for days.

The apartment fills up fast, but even with the thirty or forty guests, it doesn't feel crowded. Hors d'oeuvres are served out of the kitchen, large trays placed around the room in a way that doesn't feel intrusive.

It's a catered event, but it's still casual. That much is clear from people's conversations, too.

I drink beer while leaning against the wall and listening to the discussion happening around me. I'm with a group I'm semi-familiar with. Todd went to law school with Gabriel and me, and Emma to St. Regis. The rest are new to me, but they're friendly and smiling.

They're very curious about me, too.

“Gabriel really kept it a secret,” Todd says. “I can’t believe it. How did you manage to keep it hidden for that long?”

“Sneaking around was pretty fun in the beginning, but I’m glad we’re done with that now,” I say and take a swig of my beer. It’s a rare drink for me, but this is the kind of place for it. I want to play the down-to-earth, adoring wife Gabriel’s friends would want for him.

“I’ll bet,” Emma says. “Has he taken you out on the boat, yet?”

My smile stays in place, my body relaxed, even as my mind spins. What boat?

“Not yet,” I say, “but we want to go now, during the summer.”

A few heads nod. “I don’t know why he insists on keeping that thing when it leaks all the time,” Todd says. “Anyway, wear waterproof shoes when he takes you out, that’s all I’m saying.”

My confusion builds. He takes a leaky boat out on the Hudson? The East River?

“Actually, have you been up to Oak Hill at all?” Todd asks. “If you were keeping it a secret?”

*Ah. Bingo!*

I grin. “No, but we’re going next weekend. I can’t wait to meet everyone in his family.”

“Pack those shoes,” Todd says.

So, some of these people have been to Oak Hill, too. Has he used it as a summer retreat on occasion, then? I thought the Thompsons mainly use it like a version of Camp David, for the signing of accords and deepening of ties.

The conversation drifts to a trip they all took to Aspen, years ago. I listen politely, and then with more and more curiosity as they describe an impromptu ski race down a slope. Gabriel had been so insistent on winning that he’d accidentally plowed snow over an entire group of beginners, knocking several of them to the ground.

He hadn't stopped, either, because winning was too important, but afterward? He'd bought them round after round at the ski bar later as an apology.

"And he won, too, the bastard," Todd says.

"He's awful when he's set on winning," one of the other guys says. He looks at me with a smile. "That's why I'm here, where the drinks and snacks are, and not at the poker tables."

I look over at the tables. Gabriel is sitting at the biggest one, along with five or six other guys.

Including his cousin Jacob.

He arrived not too long ago, and I watched out of the corner of my eye as he was dealt into the game. With a short crop of dark-blond hair and gray eyes, he looks relatively harmless. But that's never a good indicator in business. I've seen the kindest-looking people renege on deals and break NDAs.

He's the one person here who really needs to buy into the idea of our marriage.

"If you'll excuse me..." I put down my beer and walk around the food-laden counter toward the poker players.

Gabriel is sitting with his back to me. One of his arms is braced on the table, his other hand resting atop his cards. He looks competent and wolfish, intent to win. My hand curls inwards, my fingers brushing against the band of my emerald engagement ring.

Jacob looks up. His gaze lands on me, and then he smiles. "Constance," he says. "How nice of you to join us."

I put a hand on the back of Gabriel's chair and lean against it lazily. "How's it going?"

"Awful," one of the men at the table mutters. Judging by his lack of cards, he's folded.

"Great," the sole woman player says. Her black hair is in a thick braid, and judging from a few annoyed glances her way, she's the one who's winning.

“Your man is losing all his chips,” one of the men says loudly. He’s got flushed cheeks, and an empty tumbler in front of him. “Maybe he just needs a good luck charm.”

“Yes, that’s it,” another chimes in. “Come on, join us. There’s a free spot on his lap.”

A few people around the table chuckle. Jacob’s not one of them, but I feel his eyes resting on me. Watching. Assessing.

Beneath my hand, the chair moves. Gabriel pushes back from the table and looks up at me. A dark lock of hair has fallen over his brow, and there’s high color along his cheekbones from liquor and adrenaline.

His lips curve into the arrogant smirk I’m very much used to.

“Princess?” He pats his knee.

I can see it in his eyes that he doesn’t think I’ll do it. Not here, in front of all these people. But I’m not the good girl he went to school with anymore. I’m a Connovan, and I’ve been taught to fight for victory, too.

So, I give him a sweet smile and sit down on his lap.

# Chapter 17

*Connie*

Gabriel's body is tense beneath mine. His thighs are lightly spread beneath me, a comfortable enough seat, but the chest I lean back against feels like a rock wall.

He releases a breath, and his body slowly relaxes. "Came to give me some good luck, princess?"

I look across the poker table and then at his hand, resting beside me. He's white-knuckling the playing cards. "Seems like you need it."

"I'm already a lucky man," he says and reaches around me with his other arm. It cages me in, trapping me in his embrace.

The rest of the players are focusing on their cards or their drinks, but a few throw curious glances our way. I wonder if his friends believed the news when they heard about our marriage. Had they called him, asking *what the fuck were you thinking?* Had he confided in them about us faking the whole thing?

Across the table, his cousin looks at us for a long second before glancing down at his cards. He hides it well, but there's a trace of surprise there. Seeing Gabriel and I together like this has startled him somewhat.

I relax fully against Gabriel's chest. It takes effort. He's unfamiliar and large beneath me, a body I have so little familiarity with.

If someone had told me a year ago that I'd be sitting on his lap, posing as his wife, because I *am his wife*, I would have laughed them out of the room. But here I am.

Gabriel flips up his cards to look at them, his chin brushing by my ear. I catch sight of them, too. He has the makings of a straight, but if he doesn't get the cards he needs, he'll have nothing at all.

I turn my head to the right and my lips brush against the edge of his jaw. I wonder if this takes effort for him, too. If

having me in his lap is difficult. “You can hedge by discarding the four,” I murmur against his ear.

He doesn’t react for a moment, but then he gives an infinitesimal nod.

“You play poker, too, Connie?”

“Two older brothers.” I look down at where his arms cage me in, one hand on the cards and the other on the edge of the table. He’s rolled up the sleeves of his black button-down, and his forearms look strong in this light—broad and tan, and corded with muscle.

He hasn’t made a move to touch me.

If we’re to sell this to his cousin...

I shift on his lap, turning my legs to the side so I can more easily look at him. He goes tense again, relaxing only when I’ve stopped wriggling. I hook my arm around his neck, and my hand lands on his opposite shoulder.

I let my fingers play with the collar of this button-down.

“Connie,” he murmurs, his focus on his cards.

“You know, we should play poker sometime,” I whisper.

He makes a low humming sound. “Just you and me?”

“Yes.” I lean closer and smile like I’m saying something salacious. “Maybe we can negotiate our divorce that way.”

He chuckles. The sound reverberates through his chest and into me. “I can think of more fun things to wager.”

I walk my fingers up to his hair. It’s thick and dark and slightly curly here at his nape. I slide my fingers into the strands like I’ve done it countless times before. As if we sit like this all the time.

My heart is beating fast. Public displays of affection were never really my thing, and touching Gabriel like this... I feel buzzed on the game, on the performance, on the beer I’ve been drinking.

High on taunting him like this.

He checked me out when I arrived today. I'd seen it, and I'm pretty sure I'm not mistaken. And he'd been jealous the other day. That means something.

What, I'm not sure I'm ready to face.

He wraps an arm around me, curving it along my waist. It's warm through the sheer fabric of my blouse. "You're putting on quite a show," he murmurs.

I rest my head against his shoulder and glance over at his cousin. Jacob looks down at his cards, but he glances up at us every few seconds, like we're a car crash he can't look away from. His Thompson cousin with a Connovan wife. I can't imagine the conversations he's had about it. With his mother, with his siblings, with other employees of Thompson Enterprises.

Dark delight sends a shiver down my spine.

"We have quite the audience," I murmur. I scratch my fingers against Gabriel's scalp and watch as goosebumps appear on his neck. Against my stomach, his arm tightens. But he doesn't say anything.

I look over his shoulder at the rest of the party guests. Most people aren't paying us any attention. A large group has started playing some sort of a game around the buffet table, though what it is, I can't tell.

But as I look around, a few people are glancing at us curiously. Todd. Emma. Someone named Evan I'd only met briefly. I give them all a polite smile. My fingers tighten in Gabriel's hair, curling around the thick tendrils.

He shoots me a look. *What?*

I release the death grip and give him an apologetic smile. He rolls his eyes and looks back at his cards. More people have folded now, and it's only Jacob and Gabriel left. I lean my head back and watch the battle wage on.

There's a tumbler by Gabriel's cards. Scotch, bourbon, whiskey, I don't know, but I reach for it and take a long sip. It feels like fire as it burns down my throat.



“Thirsty, princess?” Gabriel murmurs. He’s just picked up an eight, and with that, he’s nearly got a straight. Only one card left.

“Parched,” I say.

His belt buckle digs into my hip, and I shift on his lap, re-adjusting.

“Connie,” he mutters. His arm strains around my waist, and as I move, I feel his thumb brush against the underside of my breast.

It’s an accident, but it sends heat through me. “What?”

“Stop squirming.”

That’s when I feel it. *Him*. He’s hard beneath me.

My hand pauses in his hair. I didn’t expect... wow. Gabriel has gone still, too, and the moment feels tense enough to shatter with a single word.

Victory is a dark and dangerous thing in my stomach. He wants me. He might hate that he does, and he might mistrust me, but his body can’t lie. Gabriel Thompson is attracted to me. It sends a shockwave of delight through me.

I relax against him and press my weight down, right along his length. A thrill races through me at the contact.

“Ignore it,” he mutters. His eyes are firmly focused on the game, but even so, I can tell he’s very, very aware of me and every move I make.

I brush my lips against his neck. He smells like sandalwood and shampoo, and clean, warm skin. “Ignore what?” I whisper back. “That you want me?”

“Connie...” My name is a warning on his lips. His face is carefully neutral, but the arm around my waist is anything but. It’s a coil of steel.

“Yes?” I ask.

All the times he’s taunted me over the years. From afar or up close, over drinks at events, and even once or twice across

a business table. The occasions have been rare and *yet*, every single time, he's found a way to slide beneath my skin.

*Sorry in advance, princess, but we're going to win the contract. I heard that Daddy is finally letting you work for the firm. Welcome to the big leagues.*

Time and time again.

But this time, I'm the one beneath *his* skin.

I shift on his lap again, making sure to roll my hips. A hissed breath escapes his clenched teeth.

"Whoops," I whisper and kiss his neck again.

The people around us—his cousin across the table, the ones watching us, and the ones who don't care... It's for them. It's a performance.

But it's also for me.

Because Gabriel Thompson wants me.

This may be the only weakness of his I'll ever discover. And if I'm liking this, too, if the feeling of his skin beneath my lips sends fire through me, then I'll revel in the feeling as long as I can.

He plays his hand. It's only him and his cousin left now. A few of the other players have folded and left, disappeared out onto the terrace shrouded in a haze of cigar smoke, or retreated to the couches with drinks in hand.

Gabriel lays down his cards and turns, his mouth at my ear. His voice is hard. "If I didn't know better, princess, I'd think you're trying to seduce me."

"I'm just putting on a show."

"Are you?" His hand on my hip splays, his fingers curving, capturing more of me in his grip. "And the outfit you're in, too? Is that just for the performance?"

"Of course," I murmur. "I'm the adoring wife."

Beneath me, he's a steel rod. Has he grown harder during this conversation? An ache pounds through my body at the

proximity. It's been a long time for me.

And the one night we shared in college had been dark. It had been late. I have memories, heated ones I've thought about more than I should. What he looked like. What his cock felt like.

But here it is, under me, only a few layers of fabric away.

"Adoring?" he mutters. "More like torturing."

I make my voice sweet. "I'm training you to last longer."

He turns to look at me, his eyes burning. "Taunt me like that, princess, and I'll have to prove it to you."

I can feel the heavy weight of his eyes. *I hope his cousin's watching*, I think and close the distance between us.

Gabriel's lips freeze in surprise for the shortest of breaths, but then he kisses me with bruising intensity. The arm around me tugs me closer to his chest. He tastes like scotch and him, and he's warm, so warm, against me and beneath me.

Someone calls out his name across the table. Gabriel lifts his head, and I blink, dazed at the sudden influx of light and people.

*You're in control*, I tell myself. My body's response is perfectly natural. To feel the length and thickness of him and *not* react would have been strange. It doesn't have to mean anything... even if I'm liking the rendition a bit too much.

"It's your turn," Jacob says. His voice is calm, but there's a testiness in it.

Gabriel chuckles. "Sorry," he says. "We're still in the honeymoon phase, you know." He turns his cards over. With the river, he has a straight. There are some impressed sighs around the table and one audible whistle.

"Go on," he tells his cousin.

Jacob looks from me to Gabriel and then back down at his cards. He flips them over.

Fuck.

He has a straight, too, only it's royal. The faces of the jack, queen, and king look almost mocking against the green felt of the poker table.

"Sorry," Jacob says. "You should have paid better attention."

Gabriel chuckles. He's the picture of ease, but I can hear the annoyance threaded through the sound. "I've been lucky enough today."

Jacob pushes back from the table. He gives us one final speculative glance before reaching into his suit pocket for a cigar. "Better luck next time, cousin."

"Likewise," Gabriel says. "Little cuz."

Jacob's eyes flash for a moment, but then he smiles. "It was nice to meet you, Constance," he tells me in goodbye. I watch him disappear in the direction of the balcony.

"Think we fooled him?" I whisper.

Gabriel shuffles his cards with practiced familiarity. "We surprised him, at the least."

"He looked almost disgusted at the start."

"Yes," he says, but he sounds pleased.

My hand on his shoulder tightens, fingers digging in like claws. "I learned something *very* interesting, too."

His eyes slide to mine. They're open and fiery, and it makes my stomach tighten. "Fine. I want you," he says. "But can you honestly tell me you've never thought of that night in law school? Replayed it in your head in the years since?"

My breath escapes me with a soft exhale. Of all the things I thought he'd say...

"Yes," he murmurs, "you have. I can see it in your eyes. In the years since, whenever we've met, you've felt it, too... just how good sex between us could be. I can promise you, princess, it would be so much better now than it was back then."

I struggle to find a firm ground in this conversation. “Because you’ve been practicing so much?” It’s meant to be scathing, but it comes out breathless.

He raises an eyebrow. “Jealous, Connie?”

“No.”

“Of course you are.” He leans in until there’s only an inch between us. “The first time I fucked you, we were both drunk. When we got married, we were both drunk. But trust me when I say, Connie, that the next time I fuck you, you’ll be sober and screaming my name.”

Heat races through me, and beneath me, I feel his erection pulse. My insides clench at the words.

I lean in closer, my lips a fraction from his. “In your dreams, Thompson.”

He glances down at my plunging neckline, where a dark flush has spread across my pale skin, and my chest rises and falls in rapid succession with my quick breathing.

He smiles crookedly. “You can lie to yourself, but you can’t lie to me.”

I need to get away. I need to escape his arms, his body, his words. This game is too dangerous.

“You’ve been a good girl all your life. Sleeping with me was the worst thing you ever did, wasn’t it?”

“You flatter yourself,” I say.

“Connie,” he says. “Be bad again.”

I lean in close, letting my lips brush the shell of his ear. Pressed against him, I feel Gabriel hold his breath. Waiting for what I have to say.

“Marrying you was bad enough,” I whisper.

When I push off him, he lets me go. I weave through the groups of partiers and head toward the guest bathroom. I need a closed door, some cold water, and a chance to breathe.

Sparring with Gabriel is never easy. Even when I win, I come out feeling wounded. And tonight, he might have shown his cards. He wants me.

But it's what I've learned in turn that makes me feel like I've lost.

Because I want him, too.

# Chapter 18

*Gabriel*

I'm working through the small number of emails my assistant hasn't filtered out. It's never my favorite part of the day. I save each response as a draft for Darryl to read through and double-check before he sends it off.

Meetings are so much better. Give me a meeting—a conference, a presentation, a strategy session—any day of the week.

Focusing on the words on the screen is even harder when my mind wants to wander. It often does, finding any excuse to resist focusing, but it's been given more fodder over the last two days.

That damn poker game.

I hadn't thought she'd *actually* do it. Sit down on my lap when taunted. Hell, if I thought she'd do it, I wouldn't have encouraged the damn thing.

But I should have known better.

Constance Connovan never backs down from a challenge.

And now I have a new memory to abuse. Connie in my arms, Connie on my lap. The curves of her body pressed onto me, melting into me, and my hands on her hips. The sweet fullness of her ass and the view of her tits in that top. From my vantage point, looking down had been very, very difficult to avoid.

Of course, I'd gotten fucking hard.

Wriggling around like she had, shifting positions, her floral scent in my nose and her soft hair against my neck. If she wanted to use that against me, fine. But I'd use the same against her. Because as much as she denies it, I'm sure she wants me, too.

And I want to hear her admit it.



One by one, the emails on my screen are submitted. I write my responses more sloppily than usual, but it's fine. My mind is on Connie.

As my wife, she'd stayed the entire party. It would have raised eyebrows if she'd bowed out halfway through and *left*, rather than spend the night in the apartment she ostensibly visits all the time.

Evan had left at 2:30 a.m. He'd been last after I'd cleared out the remaining stragglers from the terrace. They'd blown through most of my fine Cuban cigars, and I'd arranged rides for all of them.

Then I went hunting.

Connie disappeared an hour prior. I heard her say her goodbyes. *Retiring for the night, sorry, I'm just so tired. Please stay. Make yourselves at home.*

The door to one of the upstairs guest bedrooms was ajar. I'd knocked once but heard nothing, so I pushed it open.

And there she was.

She'd laid down on the queen-size bed, probably to wait out the last of the guests before she could leave. She'd still been in her heels, fully dressed, and her phone was lying by her hand.

I'd stepped closer, looking at her soft tresses of hair. Her face was relaxed in sleep, and there was a slight smudging of mascara under her eye. I looked at that smudge for longer than I should've.

As long as I've known her, Connie has never shown me anything but strength and perfection. It's her armor, of course. A projection. But that little smudge hinted at the softness.

I'd pulled a blanket up around her and put her phone to charge on the nightstand. Then, I closed the door and retreated to my bedroom.

Sleep had been very, very difficult. My body was too keyed up, too excited, adrenaline running through my veins. I

decided to take a shower to get the smell of smoke and alcohol off me, but it had done little to cool me down.

I'd been hard again, thinking about her body in my arms, and then about her in my apartment at that moment. Her taunting words and her expressive eyes told me more than she intended when I'd prodded her about the night we spent together in college.

She remembered, all right.

I'd had to fist my cock in the shower at three-in-the-fucking-morning and stroke it until some of the need drained away, along with the heat pulsing up my spine, just to be able to lie down.

Only, the bed reminded me of her, too. She'd stood in my doorway and looked at it as if she wondered what lying in it would be like.

So an hour of tossing later, I had to jerk off a second time, annoyance and despair tasting like ash on my tongue. I gripped myself hard and fucked my hand, remembering just how good she felt the night we slept together.

Only then had I been able to fall asleep, even if it was just for a few restless hours. And when I awoke?

She was gone.

The coverlet in the guest bedroom was immaculate, the door wide open as if no one had ever been there. I got irrationally angry over that. Had she taken a rideshare or a taxi in the early hours of the morning? Or was it in the middle of the night?

Shit like that is dangerous.

Not that I have the right to be angry. Not over what she does, or who she sees, or if she dances the night away with an ex. Not over anything.

There's a knock on my office door and Darryl steps inside. "Have a moment?"

"Sure." I roll my neck, trying to get out the kinks.

The meeting with my father this morning had been trying. *Why am I the only one in the family who hasn't met your new wife?*

*You will*, I reminded him, *at Oak Hill this weekend.*

I can't wait.

Darryl sits down on the chair in front of my desk. "Mr. Ellis got back to us. The divorce lawyer you asked me to call a week ago?"

"Right."

"He has time on his schedule in a few weeks. Want to meet him?"

I let my fingers tap on the table. He's one of the best in the city. There will be a divorce, of that Connie has been very clear. Of course, there will be. And when that happens, representing myself won't be the best choice.

"Gabriel?" Darryl asks. "I can postpone it, too."

I shake my head. "No, book the meeting. What else?"

He goes through the rest of the week—cancellations, meetings, and a rescheduling of the Boston conference. After he leaves, I rub my temples.

Jacob had been in here yesterday. He'd walked around my office, talked about work rather than what was really on his mind.

*Spit it out*, I'd finally had to say. He'd shot me an annoyed glance, but he'd done just that.

*If you're playing her, you're doing it very well. She seemed... in love at the poker night.*

My hand tightened around a pen I held, but I'd remained casual otherwise. *I told you I had it under control.*

His eyes narrowed. *Good. Because if this becomes a liability for the company in any way...*

*I know the stakes*, I'd said. *It's not my first time playing.*

He'd left, closing the door behind him, and I looked at it for a long time. Once, we'd been close. Never best friends—we're too different for that. But close in ways that cousins of a similar age are. We'd played board games and argued over the remote, and when our parents had been in long meetings, it had just been he and I, confined to an empty conference room with muffins and a Game Boy to share.

Those days are long gone. Power and ambition came between us, slicing our friendship off at the root, and the memories are barely more than a faded recollection now.

I leave the office for a meeting uptown. Being away from Thompson Enterprises headquarters always feels like a relief. The air is easier to breathe when not faced with quarterly reports and emails.

My phone rings on the way to the meeting place. A glance at the screen, and I know exactly what it'll be about.

“Hello, wife.”

We haven't spoken in the days since the poker game. Not since that conversation on my lap.

“You're out of your mind,” she says.

“Really? You're going to have to be more specific.”

“The bouquet you sent to my *office* is too big for a single vase, but the note? What if someone had read it?”

I chuckle. “Tell me it wouldn't have sold the lie if someone did.”

“Yes, but...” she says. “Fine.”

That makes me grin. The note attached to the flowers I'd sent was designed to get just this response.

*Thanks for sitting on my lap the other night, princess. I'll pick you up for the drive to Oak Hill on Friday at 3 p.m.*

“I'm an attentive husband,” I say. “Is that not what you want? For everyone to believe we're deeply, madly in love?”

“Yes. It would've just been a tad embarrassing, that's all.” Her voice is brisk. It's one I recognize. She's business Connie.

Straight A's Connie.

"You played your part well. My cousin seems to have bought it."

"Oh, that's good."

I lower my voice. "But you might have played it too well. Because I bought it, too."

There's complete silence on the other end. I wish I could see her face. She's always been so expressive, try as she has to hide it. The blushes, the flashing eyes, the lowered brows. She's a delicious instrument to play, a sparring partner like none other.

"Then you should make sure to get a refund," she finally says. "I'll be ready for Oak Hill on Friday."

"You'll have to perform the whole weekend," I say. "But considering how convincing you were the other night, that shouldn't be a problem."

"I'm prepared for that," she says. There's a brief pause, and then her voice turns teasing. "Are you?"

"I don't know, princess," I say honestly. "I don't know."

# Chapter 19

*Connie*

It's a beautiful day with the sun high in the sky, wisps of clouds playing idly on the wind, and the sounds of summer. Birds sing, insects chirp, and the greenery everywhere has exploded with the late May heat.

Oak Hill is a paradise. It might be treacherous to like it, but there's no denying it. It's a beautiful place.

The main house is a magnificent New England mansion with a wraparound porch. It's three stories tall, with a balcony on the second floor that overlooks the back lawn. The front door is flanked by giant pots of hydrangeas, while the rest of the exterior flaunts a light-blue wooden facade and white shutters. It's been lovingly maintained and lived in.

It's a testament to the three generations of Thompsons who have lived at Oak Hill.

The lawn is the kind of vivid green only possible at the very beginning of summer when the grass is fresh. It slopes gently down toward a thicket of giant oaks. Behind them is a glittering blue lake, and between the tree trunks, I can make out a boathouse and a dock. It's a summer oasis.

"You coming?" Gabriel asks.

He stands with our bags— one in each hand—next to our parked car. His suit has been traded for a pair of navy chinos and a linen button-down, the sleeves hastily rolled up.

He looks relaxed and at home.

"Yes, let's go." My loafers sink into the green grass, and I feel painfully overdressed. I'll have to change out of my office attire as soon as I can.

Gabriel spent the car ride to Oak Hill teaching me his dizzying family tree. There are more Thompsons currently alive than there have ever been Connovans. Aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, nephews, nieces, second cousins removed.

And presiding over them all is Grandma Edith. Or as Gabriel has put it, *she rules us all*.

He smiled as he said it, but in a way that made it clear it was more truth than a joke.

We walk up the porch steps and meet his family. I shake hands and smile, all while enduring the very curious looks from the Thompsons involved.

A Connovan at the Thompson stronghold is unheard of. I doubt I'll ever be back after this. The family get-togethers are only a few times a year, after all.

Gabriel keeps his hand on the small of my back as we make the rounds. He stops to wave at a group of kids running down to the lake with nets in hand. They look like summer personified, with dirty knees and ruffled hair. One of them tries to run with an ice cream in hand. I wonder how that's going to end.

Seeing them makes me think of my niece and nephew... Alec's kids. The Connovans are a close family, and we're a small one, but we don't do things like this.

I can't remember a time we did.

"Connie," Gabriel says. "This is my father, Richard Thompson."

I turn to the man reclined on a deck chair. He's wearing a plain black cap and sunglasses, which he slowly removes. He's clean-shaven, probably in his late fifties, and has shrewd eyes.

He looks like an older version of his son.

"The famous Constance," he says. He gets out of the chair and gives me a long appraising look. "Welcome to Oak Hill."

"Thank you." I extend a hand and give him my biggest smile. "It's amazing to finally be here. Gabriel has told me so much about it."

"Has he?" Richard's eyes slide to Gabriel. "We've put you up in the Green Room."

Gabriel nods. "Good."



“Pete is out getting supplies for the barbecue. You’ll help later?”

“Yeah, of course. Happy to.”

Richard nods and turns back to me. “So, Connie, is it? That’s your nickname?”

“Yes, please. I prefer it.”

He puts a hand on my elbow. “If you’re going to be a Thompson, it’s only right you get a tour. This house was bought by my grandfather, toward the end of his life. He spent nearly a decade renovating it.”

Gabriel shoots me a look that’s equal parts annoyed and amused, and I have to bite my lip not to smile. Clearly he’s not thrilled about the prospect. I bet he’s heard all of it time and time again.

Richard is polite the entire tour. He points out little oddities about the house, like the crack above the mantelpiece from a lightning strike in 1928. They’ve never repaired it, he explains, because it’s a welcome reminder of the dangers of hubris.

“And after that, we Thompsons became a very modest bunch,” Gabriel says dryly. “Never prone to wild ambitions again.”

That makes me laugh, but Richard only gives a sigh. “Always the jokester, my son. Come on. Let me show you to your room.”

Gabriel fetches our bags, and we walk up the wide, wooden staircase to the second floor. The walls have beautiful wainscoting and are adorned with black and white photographs, framed in passe-partout.

“The hall of fame,” Gabriel mutters

I stop by a photograph of young Gabriel. I remember this version of him. He’s probably in his midteens here, the way he’d been at St. Regis, two grades ahead of me. He’d been the best lacrosse player at the school.

In the image, he's surrounded by his teammates, and he's holding up a giant trophy. His smile is wide and true. He's happy here. Actually, really happy.

"Where's this from?"

Gabriel opens his mouth, but it's his father who answers. "My son was a very gifted athlete back in the day."

"Yes, he was. I remember from school."

"Of course, it never went much further after that," Richard says. He pushes open the door to a guest bedroom. The wallpaper is indeed green, a soft, moss color that contrasts the white wainscoting and the dark wooden floors.

And in the center of the room is a neatly made queen-size bed.

One bed.

"Make yourselves at home," he says. "I'll be downstairs. And Connie?"

I turn away from the bed and its implications. "Yes?"

"Welcome to the family," he says. "Just keep the corporate espionage to a minimum this weekend, okay?"

He says it with a straight face, but it has to be a joke. I smile wide. "I'll try, I promise."

Richard's hard stare breaks, and he chuckles at his own wisecrack. He heads down the hall, leaving Gabriel and me alone in our room.

Gabriel sets our bags down with a thud. "Ignore him."

"He was joking. Right?"

"Mostly."

I close the door behind us and lean against it. Of course, we're sharing a bed. Based on the looseness in Gabriel's shoulders as he digs through his bag, he isn't surprised. Or if he is, he keeps the emotion close to the vest.

I can perform in front of others. I can play my part. The poker game had been *fun*, until the very end when the realness

of it had made my heart freeze in my chest.

But this won't be in front of an audience. It'll just be me and him, his tall body stretched out under the same comforter as mine.

Gabriel digs out his sunglasses and stands again. The room feels small with him and I in it and the door closed. The bed takes up too much space.

He looks at me and gives a slow smile, as if he can read what's on my face. He's always been annoyingly good at that. "Panicking over the bed, princess?"

"Of course, not."

"Of course, not," he repeats. "Because you would never have impure thoughts about your husband."

I roll my eyes. "Well, I can be professional."

"Oh, I know you can be. It's all you've ever been." He leans in closer. "Let loose for once."

I push past him and reach for my bag. I need to find a sundress and sandals to change out of my black office attire. "I know how to let loose."

"Prove it," he says.

The confident drawl of his voice has never failed to annoy me. Get under my skin, taunt me. He's used it to great effect over the years.

I hate that it still works.

I hate that I want his approval, his attention. The poker game had changed things. Feeling him hard, having his desire confirmed, was supposed to give *me* leverage. Instead, it's left me permanently off-kilter.

My hands finally brush over the blue cotton fabric of my sundress. I pull it out and turn around to face him. He's leaning against the opposite wall, eyes on me.

There's a challenge in them.

“You want me to prove it? Fine.” I reach behind me for the zipper of the dress.

His eyes widen in surprise. It’s the most delicious feeling, seeing that. Catching him off guard.

I tug my arms out of the sleeves and, right there, in the golden light streaming in through the windows, I push it down to my waist. Beneath the delicate purple lace of my bra and my flushed skin my heart is pounding.

“Connie...” he says. But his eyes are on me. On my body. There’s naked desire there, as prominent as his erection had been last weekend.

I shimmy the dress off my hips and kick it off, standing there in nothing but my underwear. A part of me is terrified. So much of me on display for him. And it’s *him*. Gabriel Thompson.

But the larger part of me feels only triumph. His eyes are hot on my legs, my hips, my breasts. They pause at the lacy edge of my panties.

My skin feels on fire.

“Hopefully, I didn’t leave you in too much pain the other night.” I reach for the summer dress and step into it slowly, pulling it up over my body. I slide my arms into each strap. “Because I’ve heard it can hurt, you know. When a man goes...” I look down at his groin and smile. “Unfulfilled.”

Gabriel stands very still. His hands work at his sides, clenching and unclenching. “I wasn’t unfulfilled.”

*What?* Had he snuck off with someone else at the party? Surely, he wouldn’t. I’d been there the whole time, the bastard.

I reach for the zipper of the sundress, but I can’t reach it. He sees and crosses the distance between us. Reluctantly, I turn and hold motionless for him. Jealousy burns in my stomach. Not that I have a right to, but... No, I do. We haven’t revisited the whole celibacy conversation.

The bastard.

He tugs my zipper up, his finger brushing my bare skin the entire time. Then, he leans in until his voice brushes my ear. “After the poker night, I had to jerk off twice just to go to sleep,” he murmurs. “And I was thinking about you the entire time.”

My mouth falls open. The image of him sprawled out on the bed I’d seen just hours earlier... with his hand in a tight fist around his erection. Would his face be tense, his eyes closed? Would he groan?

“That’s right,” he says. “Does it feel good, knowing I want you?”

“Yes,” I breathe. The confession escapes me on an exhale, like the truth I can’t keep contained any longer. He runs his hands up my bare arms. Shivers follow in their wake.

“Tell me you want me, too,” he says.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I can’t. Because if I do, everything collapses. The careful distance, the necessary distrust, the inevitable dissolution of this sham of a marriage.

Wanting him will make it all so much harder. It will make it hurt when this ends.

“I don’t,” I whisper.

His hands disappear from my arms, and he takes a step back. There’s a disappointed tone to his voice. “You’re lying, Connie.”

I turn to face him. “Isn’t that what we are? A lie?”

His eyes are unreadable on mine, narrowed and focused. I meet them with my own. I don’t know what he sees in them, but whatever it is finally makes him sigh. “I’ll be downstairs.”

The door shuts behind him with finality. I press a hand to my beating heart. Every time I try to raise the stakes, and every time I rise to his taunting, he throws it back at me just as hard.

One of these days I’ll cave.

# Chapter 20

*Connie*

I head downstairs a while later, past rows of doors that presumably lead to other guest rooms. One is open and I peer inside, only to find it's a study. Bookshelves line the walls, and on an armchair lies a striped cat, curled up and sleeping, its tail twitching ever so slightly in its slumber.

The Thompson family might have its own form of dysfunction, just as we do. Families that run companies together usually do. But they have this, at least. A place steeped in tradition, community, and familial ties, even if it comes with expectations.

My heart is still racing because of what happened in the bedroom. It feels like I'm tiptoeing a tightrope, trying to navigate the great lie Gabriel and I are attempting to live. One wrong move, and I might fall.

I walk down the worn wooden stairs and past a giant country-style kitchen. Conversations drift out of the open door, and I hear the clunking of ice into glasses. This seems like the kind of place where someone makes homemade lemonade. It's so idyllic, it's almost painful.

Gabriel isn't on the porch. But his aunt Sharon is, sitting next to an older woman with silver hair pulled back into a bun. She's holding a legal pad and reading it over with a serious expression.

Could this be Grandma Edith?

"This will do," she says. Her voice is dry, rustling like leaves in the fall, but there's no mistaking the authority in it. "But swap out Eve and Jeremy."

Sharon takes back the legal pad. "I'll get them set up." She makes to rise but pauses when she sees me. "Ah. Gabriel's Connovan wife is here."

Grandma Thompson turns to look at me. Beneath the silver cap of hair shine a pair of intense dark eyes. "Constance," she says. "Good. I've been waiting for you."

“Hello, Mrs. Thompson.”

She chuckles softly. “I’m Grandma Edith, girl. I haven’t been a missus in over twenty-two years.”

Sharon moves past me, disappearing down the steps with her legal pad in hand. Grandma Edith gestures at the vacated chair beside her. “Have a seat.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I tell Gabriel’s grandmother and sit down next to her.

She nods like this is self-evident. “So, you’re the girl that’s sent my entire family into a tizzy.”

My eyebrows rise. “I suppose I am, yes. Are people talking?”

“Talking?” she asks and laughs again. It’s brief and perfunctory. “Girl, they’ve been chatting about nothing else since the newspaper article came out. Some want my grandson excommunicated, you see.”

My hand curves around the armchair’s handle. “Oh. I hope that doesn’t happen.”

“Of course, not,” Grandma Edith says. “He has too much potential.”

I nod. He does, and even I see that. Perhaps a bit too clearly lately.

“You’ll find that we don’t pretend with pleasantries here. I don’t, at least. When you’ve lived for as long as I have and dealt with as much shit as I have, you’ve earned it. Not having to be pleasant.”

“Yes, I’m sure you have,” I say carefully.

She turns her shrewd eyes on me. “Then, I’ll assume you know what Gabriel is up against in this family.”

“His cousin?”

“Yes, among other things. And now his path is linked to yours.”

My mouth feels dry. “Yes. Right.”



“Tell me about yourself,” she orders. “From the beginning.”

There’s a refreshing glass of lemonade on the table in front of us. It’s hers, but I’ve never longed for something more. “All right. I was born in New York City, twenty-nine years ago...”

She listens as I detail my life story. I keep it brief, sticking to the most important parts. Only at one point does she interrupt me.

“And you went to school with my grandson. Did you not?”

I nod. “He was two years ahead of me at St. Regis. We didn’t go to the same college for our undergrads, and as you know, he worked for two years before going to law school. So we ended up attending Harvard Law School at the same time.”

We’re not alone on the porch anymore. At various points in my story other people had appeared, taken seats further down, brought out a giant tray of watermelon. They’re all trying very hard to act casual, even though I’m dead certain every single one is trying to overhear my conversation with Edith.

“Tell me, girl,” she says. “What do you see in him now that you didn’t then?”

Oh.

The real question here is hiding beneath the surface. *Why did you really marry him?* The key part of any lie is the kernel of truth at its center.

The entire porch holds its breath. Gabriel’s other aunts and uncles. Cousins. In-laws. Plus-ones.

“He was impossible to ignore at school,” I say. “He’d show off in front of his friends in the yard, or win trophies for the school in lacrosse. It seemed like he never studied, never came prepared for a test, but he still came out on top every single time. That annoyed me to no end.” I look over at Grandma Edith. “I’m someone who starts preparing weeks before an exam. Months, if possible.”

“I know the type well,” she says. There’s a glint in her eyes that makes me suspect she means herself.

“He was the same in law school, only then, I got to see it up close. He’d charm teachers and students alike, and even when it was *clear* to everyone he hadn’t studied, he still pulled the answers like a rabbit out of a hat. That annoyed me. The fact of him being a Thompson and me a Connovan factored very little into my thinking at the time.

“But I knew, even then... that I liked him. I was dreadfully aware of where he was in the classroom at all times. I didn’t like when he riled me up, but I found that I hated it even more when he ignored me.”

I take a deep breath. All of it is the truth, so far. I had been aware of him, painfully so, all the time.

And I don’t know if that’s ever really stopped.

“In the years since, seeing Gabriel would set off the same old emotions. Only they started to feel different. What I’d once envied him for, I now admired about him. I think, maybe, I always did, and I just couldn’t admit it to myself. He’s handsome, of course, but he’s also smart, talented, funny, and ambitious. He’s incredible.” I look over at Grandma Edith, and my smile turns wry. “Even when he’s annoying as hell.”

“Oh, men often are. The most annoying thing about them, though, is how that never seems to stop us from loving them.”

I think of my father, who is the word “distance” personified. Of my oldest brother, who has never once let me in. And of Gabriel, who seems to know me better than I sometimes know myself... including which buttons to push.

“Perhaps that’s *why* we love them,” I say. “They never make it easy for us, and we love a challenge.”

Her eyes sparkle on mine. “If he doesn’t challenge you, girl, he isn’t the one.”

Someone calls out on the front lawn. Lines are being drawn. I see someone who looks a lot like Jacob, Gabriel’s cousin, in a cap and a polo shirt.

“The game is starting,” Grandma Edith says. She sits up straight and looks over the porch railing with obvious interest.

“What game?” I ask.

But it’s not Edith who responds.

“A touch football tournament,” a voice says behind me. I turn to discover Gabriel leaning against one of the porch’s pillars. There’s a hidden smile on his lips, and I know immediately that he’d heard every single word I’d said.

“Oh,” I breathe. “Are you playing?”

“Yes.”

That’s what she’d been doing, Grandma Edith, on that legal pad. Going over the teams.

I glance at the woman beside me. With a shawl thrown over her shoulders and a pleasant expression on her face, she could be anyone’s sweet old grandma. Only I’m getting the sense that she very much isn’t.

“Wish me luck,” Gabriel says. He walks backward out onto the lawn, that hidden smile blooming into a full grin. Yeah, he’d heard every word all right.

“Good luck,” I say. “Be careful!”

He rolls his eyes, but it’s good-natured. I’m not certain if we’re playing a married couple now or actually being one.

“Are Gabriel and his cousin on opposite teams?” I ask his grandmother.

She keeps her gaze on the teams assembling. “Of course.”

Right. *Of course.*

I grab myself a lemonade and settle down to watch what looks like a very serious setup. Lines are drawn across the grass with white spray paint. I count at least twelve people in various forms of athletic wear, milling about, ready to start. Most are guys, but there are at least three or four women there, too.

Gabriel's chatting with a group of his cousins, all around the same age as him. I lean closer to Grandma Edith.

"Does this happen every family reunion?"

"Oh, yes," she says. "Medals are awarded."

I can't tell if she's joking or not.

The sun shines brightly down on the two teams, standing on opposite sides of the freshly mown lawn. I can still see the lake glittering beyond the trees, a silent spectator to the Thompson family game.

Gabriel is wearing a T-shirt and shorts. He's grinning, flexing his arms, and talking to someone to his left.

I feel like I'm back at prep school.

Someone blows a whistle and the game starts.

I've never been a sporty person. Even when I dabbled, back when I was still fighting my body instead of accepting it, I never tried team sports that involved balls. Cycling, yoga, and pilates. That's my jam.

*Maybe*, I could try a polite game of table tennis.

But this? This is brutal.

The lawn is engulfed in a flurry of activity. I watch Jacob race across with the ball, neatly avoiding rushing defenders, to score the touchdown. His face is set in lines of angry determination.

Around me on the porch, cheers and shouts of encouragement for both teams ring out. Someone yells *don't take it easy on them!* This paradise of a country house has been transformed into a sports arena.

Gabriel gets the ball. He dodges and races across the lawn.

Jacob tackles him.

It's dirty, his leg cutting across Gabriel's. There are shouts on the field from teammates as Gabriel goes down in a rolling heap. Some cheering, some angry.

“That can’t be allowed,” I say. Indignation on his behalf burns in my chest. What the hell?

But Grandma Edith just chuckles. “Don’t you worry, girl. Your husband will give as good as he gets.”

That turns out to be prophetic.

A few minutes of scrimmage later, Gabriel tackles Jacob to the ground before rolling off and running like it was nothing at all. Like they’re not playacting years of aggression out. Both of their faces are flushed with exertion and the desire to win.

Just watching it makes my adrenaline spike. “Do you think Sharon and Richard have placed bets?” I ask Edith.

She laughs at that, longer than she had before. “They should.”

The teams are evenly matched. I’d wager that’s on purpose, crafted by the woman at my side to maximize the game’s tension. My eyes are glued to the battle unfurling in front of me. The roar of people cheering around me ratchets up to a fever pitch, adrenaline pumps through me with every play Gabriel’s team makes.

“You got this!” I yell when he gets the ball.

It’s hard to look away from him. He has a tall frame and is well-muscled, but in his suits, it’s not something I’ve truly seen in action. Now I do.

His team is leading by a few points, and there are only minutes left on the clock when Jacob slams into Gabriel from behind. Gabriel had already passed the ball to another team member. It has to be a clear violation of some kind, and my breath catches as they tumble to the ground.

Gabriel hits the grass hard, head first, elbows second. I hear the sound of it even from where I’m sitting.

“What the hell?” I call. I’m not the only one, but to my horror, other people are applauding.

Jacob pushes off Gabriel and stands over him, holding out a hand to help him up. There’s a smirk on his face that makes my hands tighten.

Gabriel gets up with a grin, but it's laced with anger.

This game isn't a game at all, is it?

Jacob backs up to his sideline with an *oops* expression that looks as real as a three-dollar bill. There's an abrasion on Gabriel's forearm from where he'd scraped it across the ground. It looks long and nasty, red even at this distance.

But Jacob's hit was for nothing in the end. The whistle is blown, the game's over, and Gabriel's team wins.

Cheers ring out around me. Backs are pounded, high fives exchanged, and bottles of water drained.

I lean my elbows against the porch railing and look out at the group of people. There are smiles across everyone's faces, even on the losing team. It's like the entire family has gotten a collective shot of adrenaline.

My eyes lock on Gabriel. Now that he's not running, the abrasion on his forearm looks like it needs cleaning.

He glances at me, as if he can feel my gaze. His smile widens an extra inch, a slash of white on his tanned face. His dark hair clings to his temples with sweat.

He jogs across the lawn to me, the conquering hero returning victorious.

"What'd you think, princess?" he asks me, stopping right beneath where I'm leaning against the railing. His smile is genuine. Not a trace of mocking or taunting in it, and just enough smugness to make it charming.

He's handsome. He always has been, but it's never been as clear to me as it is right now, with him sweaty and grinning beneath the shining sun.

I motion for him to get closer, and he steps up to the porch railing. I bend over the banister and take his face in my hands, and I kiss him, sweaty and all. I feel the eyes on us, and maybe it's for them, but *maybe* it's for me, too.

Gabriel kisses me back, warm and strong, and I catch the scent of freshly mowed grass from where it stained his clothes.

I hear someone whistle.

When I lift my lips from his, I don't pull away. I lean forward instead so I can whisper in his ear. "I wish you would have tackled your cousin even harder."

He chuckles. The sound is warm against my cheek and sends a jolt down my back.

"That's my girl," he says.

## Chapter 21



*Gabriel*

Connie insists that I need to get patched up. I tell her twice that it's not necessary, and that we need to get the barbecue going. But she doesn't relent.

She gives me her most cutting look. It's the one I used to provoke, time and time again, because it had been the only way we'd spoken over the years.

It makes me grin.

"You have like forty relatives here," she says and motions for me to get inside. "One of them can flip the steaks."

"There's more to the ancient art of barbecuing than that," I say.

"Sure. Marinating the meat first, which has already been done. Now come on."

"Did that game get you riled up?"

"Of course, it did." She leads the way into the house, and then stops in the entryway, hands on her hips. "Where do you guys keep a first aid kit?"

I shake my head at her, not that she can see me. This woman is so damnably intriguing and complicated. Stripping earlier in front of me, and now insisting on patching me up... Surely she knows I can do it on my own.

But I know better than to turn down her offer.

"In the guest bathroom," I say. "There should be several."

"Injuries are that common at Thompson family reunions?"

"You saw how we play."

"Yes," she says and sets off toward the bathroom. "Dirty."

"Did you expect us to do it any other way?"

She looks at me over her shoulder, and there's a smile on her lips. It makes my stomach tighten. "Honestly? No."

Ten minutes later, we're in the upstairs bathroom. She makes me sit down on the closed toilet seat and gently washes my right forearm in warm water. It stings, but it isn't too bad.

I watch her face as she works. Her skin is smooth, no furrow between her brow. Eyes focused and mouth relaxed. The freckles across her cheeks and nose have intensified with the summer sun, and her auburn hair is a silky wave around her face.

God, she's so fucking beautiful.

And now, I have an image of her in only her underwear seared into my brain. It'll produce a far more prominent scar than the consequences of my cousin's pent-up aggression, because I know I'll never be able to get it out, no matter how much I try.

Her body in the bright light of day. The soft curves of her legs and waist, and the full tits barely contained in her bra, and the delectable, irresistible V between her legs covered in nothing but a pair of purple lace panties.

And her defiant expression.

Connie being annoyed at me has become an addiction I've nurtured steadily over the years. I crave the moments when her eyes flare and her skin flushes, and she looks at me—really looks at me.

Something sharp stings my forearm, and I flinch, looking down.

She's applying antiseptic.

"Sorry," she murmurs.

"It's fine." All of it, really, but if she wants to touch me... She can go right ahead. At this point, my body wants her so much that I'll take even the pain as long as it's from her.

She gently wraps a bandage around my forearm, and I let her, even knowing I'll have to wear a long-sleeved shirt to dinner so I can avoid good-natured ribbing from some of my family members.

As she works, she puts a hand on my shoulder to brace herself, and pain shoots across my system. It must have been obvious because she immediately removes her hand.

“What happened?” she asks. “Are you hurt there, too?”

“I hit the ground with that shoulder after one of the tackles. It’s fine.”

She pulls back with a frown. The expression on her face is so perturbed that it makes me want to smile. “What was Jacob *thinking*? That if he won the football game, he’d somehow win the company?”

I snort. “No, but he knows he’d win some respect in the eyes of the family. Not that my aunt or father, not to mention Grandma, will ever decide company matters on that alone.”

She shakes her head and motions for me to take off my T-shirt. I raise an eyebrow. “Looking for another excuse to get your hands on me?”

“Gabriel,” she says.

“You know, if you want to see me shirtless, all you have to do is ask. I think I’ve made that very clear.”

She leans back and crosses her arms over her chest. There’s clear impatience in her eyes. *Come on.*

So, I reach down and tug off my T-shirt, tossing the dirty thing to the ground, and turn to let her see my back.

“Shit,” she says, and I feel fingers pressing gently to the skin around the painful part. “Your skin’s torn here, too.”

“Sure feels like it.”

She puts a washcloth under the faucet and starts cleaning my shoulder wound. It burns, but not too badly.

I’m getting used to being in pain around her.

“You might have to sleep on your stomach tonight,” she says absentmindedly.

“Good thing you’ll be there to remind me if I don’t.”

Her hand pauses, just for a moment, before resuming her gentle motions. “I can’t believe we’re in this position.”

“Really? What did you think would happen when we travel together as a couple?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “I suppose I hadn’t thought about it. Just make sure to stay on your side,” she says, but her words are belied by the soft touch of her free hand on my upper arm, and the careful strokes of her other across the abrasion on my back.

“I’m not worried about me,” I say. “It’s you we need to be concerned about.”

“Me?” She sounds vaguely affronted, and I smile again. God, I love riling her up.

“Yes. You’re the one who has repressed feelings.”

“Sure. I’ve repressed thoughts of homicide so far in this marriage. Aren’t I great?”

I ignore that. “Let me make you a bet. If you can make it through the night without coming over to my side, snuggling up to *me*, well...”

She takes a step back. Her eyes meet mine, interest sparkling in those green eyes. “Well, what?”

“What do you want?”

“You’re really willing to make a bet on this,” she says. “You know there’s no possible way I’ll be on your side in the morning.”

“Then you’ll win.”

She taps her fingers against the porcelain of the sink. Her short nails make a sharp sound. “If I win this bet, I want you to be the culprit when we divorce.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “The *culprit*?”

“Yes. Our marriage did not work out because you couldn’t keep up with me. You’ll take full responsibility in conversations with your family, your friends, and any potential public statements.”

“Because I couldn’t keep up with you,” I repeat slowly.

She shrugs. “Phrase it however you’d like. But make it clear that the marriage ended because *you* messed up.”

“So, you get to come out of this marriage with your reputation clean as fresh snow,” I say. “The injured, righteous partner?”

She nods. Her face is set in competitive lines I know so well. Excitement thrums in my chest. *This*, I think, *will be worth it regardless*. I love her when she’s like this. I love *us* when we’re like this.

“If you want me to lie,” I say and run a hand along my jaw, “you’ll need to wager something just as good.”

She looks at me for a long moment. Then, she takes a step forward, so close she’s standing between my spread knees. Me sitting, her standing. Very slowly, she bends her leg to brace her knee against my crotch.

The nerve endings in my body ignite at the brush of contact, her eyes singe into mine. “If I lose the bet...” she says, drawing out the pause. “We have sex.”

Surprise immobilizes my body.

I look at her, but there’s no teasing on her face. She means it. She actually fucking means it. My brain has short-circuited. It’s as close to an admission of want as she’s ever come to.

Her full lips turn down into a faint frown at my silence. “You’re the one who told me what you had to do after the poker game,” she says. “Wouldn’t you rather have me than your right hand?”

Does she think I’m hesitating because I don’t want to? Hell, she needs to remove her knee, or she’ll soon feel just how much that’s not the case. There’s no air left in this bathroom, none at all, and it’s not fair that I’m half-naked and she’s not.

Not when she looks so damn good unclothed.

“You’d really dare to wage that?” I ask. My voice sounds hoarse, even to my own ears.

She shrugs, but it's all fake nonchalance. There's nothing blasé in her eyes. "I've already done it once," she says.

I hold out my hand. "You're on, princess."

Her hand slides against mine, and I grip it tight.

"May the best player win," she says.

Perhaps it's likely I'll lose. *But it's a small price to pay, I think, looking at her, for what she has just revealed.*

Because if there's one thing I know about Connie, it's that she doesn't do things she doesn't want to.

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We return back in time for me to help with the barbecue. Connie murmurs *you're a hero* under her breath when I set off to join my cousins at the grill, and I give her a grin as a response.

The rest of the evening is a pleasant enough cacophony of family, as it always is during these weekends. Connie sits next to me at dinner, but the conversation is all about my cousins and their partners and kids, who are playing tag around us in the rapidly approaching darkness.

The remainder of the evening is dedicated to charades.

“Are all Thompson family reunions so game oriented?” Connie whispers to me as we head inside.

“Of course,” I tell her. “How else would we know who’s the best?”

She rolls her eyes. I fully expect her to sit on the sidelines, but when she’s sorted into one of the teams, she goes to join them.

And participate, she does.

I never should have underestimated her competitive streak. She might be an outsider here, thrown into a lion’s den, but it’s worth remembering that she was raised by wolves.

I watch her from my spot on the couch as she acts out different movie titles in front of the entire Thompson clan. She doesn’t even break a sweat.

It’s late, games over and done with, when I realize I no longer see her milling about in the living room. I’m on my second glass of whiskey and chatting to my cousin Julia.

Where has she slipped off to?

Julia notices my wandering eyes. “Your wife went upstairs a while ago,” she says with a smile. “Said good night to everyone.”

*The minx*, I think. No doubt she's hoping to fall asleep before I get up there.

"Thanks," I tell Julia.

She nods, and her smile widens. "I'm happy for you, by the way. Shocked and surprised, and worried, too, of course, but... you look happy."

Well. Damn.

I nod goodbye and head toward the stairs. There's no answer to a comment like that. Not even to myself.

I fully expect Connie to be in bed, lights out, when I open the door to our bedroom. Instead, I find her sitting in one of the armchairs and drinking a glass of wine.

She looks up when I close the door behind me. She's wearing pajama shorts, her curves on display, and a silk camisole. Her hair must be just brushed or something because it hangs in a waterfall of soft auburn curls around her shoulders.

*Fuck*, I think.

She lifts up the bottle. "Wine?"

"Sure. What are you doing?"

"Getting moral support from my best friend," she says with a wave of her phone, "and some liquid support from my bottle here. I swiped it from the liquor cabinet downstairs. You don't think your grandmother will notice?"

"No." I pour myself a glass. My right leg aches from one of the tumbles earlier, something I hadn't noticed until recently. I sit down on the edge of the bed. "You're doing really great here."

She pulls up a leg on the chair, showing off more of her bare thigh. *Torturing me wasn't part of the deal*, I think. "Thanks. Your family is easier to get along with than I expected."

"They're all on their best behavior."

"That touch football game was their best behavior?"



“Oh yes,” I say, grinning.

She shakes her head, but there’s a smile on her lips. “My family would never do anything like this.”

“No?”

“No,” she says and looks down at her glass. “Thanks for having my back around them. And for the bet.”

“You haven’t won it yet,” I remind her.

She gives a half laugh. “No, I suppose not. But anyway... This is good. It’s going better than I expected.”

“This marriage?”

“Yes.” She takes a lengthy sip of wine and gets up from her seat. I watch her start to fluff pillows on her side of the bed, which includes chucking the ornamental one to the other side of the room.

“What did you expect?” I ask.

She takes off her earrings and her rings, and lays them out on the nightstand. “We haven’t killed one another, yet.”

“No,” I agree. “Not yet.”

“I haven’t been excommunicated from my family,” she says.

“Hmm.” I drain the last of my wine. “Did you think you would be?”

“It was a definite risk.” She looks across the bed at me. Her gaze is striking, holding boldness. I drink it in. It’s far stronger than the wine could ever hope to be. “I’m going to win the bet, you know.”

“If you do, I’ll honor my promise.”

“What, you don’t think I will if I lose?”

“I think you’ve spent a very long time denying that we have chemistry,” I say. “Not sure you can overcome that so easily.”

Her hands, which had been fixing her pillow, stop abruptly. But then she chuckles. “You’re trying to rile me up. You do

that a lot.”

“It’s a reflex.”

“I know,” she says and walks toward the bathroom. Her hips sway softly as if she knows I’m watching her, following the movements of a body I’ve wanted to enjoy for far too long.

I hear her brush her teeth.

I unbutton my shirt and kick off my shoes. If she’s sleeping in that, she should be fine with me in my boxer briefs.

*I’m fully prepared to lose this bet*, I think as I pull back the covers of the queen-size bed. It’s worth it. I’ve always been willing to gamble on outlandish risks. Sometimes, it’s the only way to make real progress.

And I’m dead certain she wants me more than she admits.

## Chapter 22

Connie

I wake up to a pleasant feeling of warm sunlight. It's been a very long time since I slept with my blinds open. I feel warm, too, pleurably so. I nestle deeper against the warmth beside me and tighten my grip on the firm pillow. It smells good, too. Clean and warm and musky.

Something moves over my arm, and I sigh in contentment. Maybe I can fall back asleep.

A hand. That's what had stroked my arm.

My eyes fly open, and with startling clarity, I realize the situation I'm in.

I'm lying with my head on Gabriel's chest, and my arm around his waist.

He'd chosen to go to bed in nothing but his boxer briefs yesterday, and I had studiously avoided looking at him half-clothed. There'd been too much exposed skin, strong legs, and a muscled back, and I'd immediately averted my eyes, even if it hurt to do so.

But it's impossible *not* to take him in now that I'm literally lying on top of him.

My arm at his waist rests across a firm stomach, and I can feel just the hint of a happy trail tickle my skin. God, I must be so close to the edge of his underwear.

Is he awake?

I focus on staying very, very still. If I roll away from him before he wakes up, he doesn't need to find out that I lost the bet. I won't have to go through with it, and the prize is worth a great deal. Getting out of this marriage with the smallest amount of collateral damage possible...

Beneath my cheek, I hear his heart beating, strong and slow. I've never been this close to him. That one night in college had been a frenzy of ripped clothing and hot breath and madness. It hadn't been *this*. A slow melding of bodies.

God, he smells good. He feels good, too. And he might very well wake up when I roll to turn away...

Do I want to get away with it?

The thought of paying the price feels tantalizingly close, and more delicious than it should, lying across him like this. We could have sex again. Once, just like we had in law school. He might want me even more afterward, and that's power in its own right.

I'd finally be able to quench the fire inside of me that's burned for far too long around Gabriel Thompson.

I look up at him, at the sharp cut of his jaw. *Wake up, so we get to have sex without me admitting that I need it, too.*

I release a long, dramatic sigh.

That's when I hear the chuckle, so familiar, even when it's hoarse from sleep. "Finally decided you're awake, princess?"

Shoot.

"Yes."

He looks down and our eyes meet. His hair is mussed against the pillow, thick dark strands curling in different directions. I know what it feels like now, to play with it. To run my nails along his scalp and feel him shiver in pleasure.

"Seems like you're on my side," he says.

There's no way to argue that point. He's on his back, and I'm using him as a pillow. I can't remember moving during the night... but obviously I had.

"Whoops," I whisper.

Neither of us looks away. The silence feels heady, and every point where our bodies touch heats up.

He reaches down and slowly runs his fingers along my cheek. The moment feels fragile. One loud sound and it'll pop.

"Feel sad, Connie?" he murmurs.

A quiver races down my arms, sending goosebumps along my skin. "Devastated."

He smiles. It's a small one, just a curve of his lips, but it's clear he hears that I'm not. Fire burns in his eyes. "Interesting," he says.

My hand on his warm chest stays where it is, but my fingers splay apart of their own accord like they can't wait to touch more of his skin. There's a lazy sheen to his eyes, like he's a large cat studying his prey. Gabriel, just awoken, is a deadly thing.

But then, so am I.

"When are you planning on cashing in?" I ask, turning my fingers inward until my nails dig softly into his skin. "So I can prepare."

His gaze shifts to my hair, spread out around us. It must be a tangled mess. "Eager for me to claim my prize?"

"Eager to leave it behind us," I say. But my voice is breathless, damn it, and it's clear that he notices.

Gabriel flips us over.

One second I'm lying on his warm chest, and the next, I'm on my back, pressed to the comfortable bed with him above me. He supports himself on a forearm, but I can still feel the warmth of his leg against mine beneath the comforter.

Dark hair falls over his brow. "To get it over with?"

"Yes," I say and arch an eyebrow. "Maybe we can go back to acting professional afterward."

"Ah. Fuck once, just to get it out of our systems."

"Out of yours," I say.

Shifting beneath the covers, I move my leg to rest beneath him... and there it is. He's hard again. It's a solid weight against my thigh, hot through the fabric of his boxer briefs. Everything inside me clenches at the feeling.

I'd never been much for morning sex in my last relationship, but right now, I'm more than willing to make an exception.

“Seems like you need it,” I say and press my thigh against the bulge between his.

Gabriel’s eyes narrow. “Introducing yourself to my cock, princess?”

“We’ve met before,” I say. This is a bad idea in every sense of the word. Nothing good will, or can, come from sleeping together. It’ll complicate things in a situation that is already complex enough.

But my hand aches with the urge to reach down and grip him, just to see how it feels, and the expression on his face.

I arch my back, making sure that my tits press up to his chest through my camisole. His gaze flickers down and then back up to me.

He reaches up with his free hand and rests it on my throat, thumb on one side and his long fingers on the other. Firm enough that I feel it.

“Careful, Constance,” he says, “or I’ll think you lost the bet on purpose.”

“Maybe I just enjoy having power over you.”

He raises an eyebrow, and the hand at my throat tightens slightly. “Maybe you do,” he agrees. “So I’ll pay you back in kind. I won’t tell you when I plan on claiming you as my prize.”

Annoyance fizzles in my stomach, warring with the desire already there. Against my thigh, he’s still bulging and hot, and I’m so *very* aware of the contact.

Amusement flickers in his eyes. He’d seen that annoyance.

“You want to keep me right on the edge, princess? I’ll do the same to you.”

He releases my throat and throws the comforter off us. I watch as he gets out of bed, the strength of his body on full display. Tanned skin stretched over wide shoulders and a muscled back.

God, he looks good. Manly and healthy and vigorous, somehow, so clearly in the prime of his life.

He stops by the foot of the bed and looks at me. His eyes burn with intensity, and I have to look away from them, down to the clear outline of his cock inside his boxer briefs. It looks heavy, straining against the fabric.

He reaches down and tugs at the elastic, slipping one hand beyond. He grips himself. "That's right," he says darkly. "You want to know how hard you get me? How much I want you?"

I don't nod. I don't speak. I don't think I can even move. But he's waiting for me to admit it.

"Yes," I whisper.

He tugs down the garment with his free hand, showing me his thick cock and its dark-red head. Gabriel strokes himself once, his hand moving and forearm flexing.

The grip looks almost painful.

"Is this the power you want, princess? To know it's *you* making me this hard?"

"Yes," I breathe. My knees are pressed tight together, and I prop up on my elbows for a better view. It had been so dark, that night all those years ago, and there had been none of *this*. I wasn't able to drink in the sight of him, tall and strong and arrogant, and needing me like this.

He gives his cock another lazy stroke. It's long and thick in the best of ways, girthy in a way I know I'll feel afterward.

"That's right," he says and lets his gaze wander down my body. My camisole and my shorts aren't indecent, but they aren't exactly covering everything, either. "I want to see how long it'll take until you're begging me to claim my prize."

He gives himself one last tight stroke, his face tensing, before pulling his underwear back up. He turns and heads to the bathroom, as if this was nothing.

But just before he closes the door behind him, I call out. "Two can play that game!"



He takes a deep breath, the muscles of his back flexing with the motion. “Bring it on,” he says.

He shuts the bathroom door behind him, and a few seconds later, I hear the water of the shower turn on. I bet it’s ice-cold.

I lie back on the bed and stare up at the ceiling. I wouldn’t mind one of my own right now.

I suspect that he’s closer to combusting than I am, even if it’s by a slim margin. And that’s something I can use to my advantage.

I look over at my suitcase and the bikini I’d packed for this weekend. Maybe I can ask for a ride in that leaky boat of his.

Before I ride him.

# Chapter 23

Connie

A few hours later, I found my bearings again. *Slightly*. Gabriel had disappeared after his shower, and I'd taken my time to get ready, fix my hair, and do a light pass of makeup. I answered my work emails and sent a text to Alec.

Can I come over for dinner with you and the kids next week? I'd love to take Harper to the zoo or a park someday, too.

Seeing how the Thompsons live out here, dysfunction and all, made me want to do better for the next generation in my own family. I'd been the distant aunt for too long, partly because Alec was a distant brother. One thing breeds the other, but it doesn't have to.

Maybe charade nights with the whole Connovan family were a little unrealistic for us. But dinners that didn't involve company talk weren't.

Then, I dig through my suitcase for the bikini I knew I'd packed. I'd thrown in two of my regular ones in case there'd be lakeside activities. Gabriel hadn't exactly been very forthcoming about the itinerary for a normal Thompson family Oak Hill weekend, so I'd packed for most eventualities.

Which had included me packing a third bikini. It's dark navy, edged with white trim, and it's teeny weeny. Two triangles for the top, and the bottoms aren't much better, with two ties on either side of my hips.

It puts entirely too much of me on display, which is why I rarely use it... even if I feel like a badass when I wear it.

I throw a camisole and a skirt on over it and head downstairs.

That's how I find myself standing by the lake an hour later.

Gabriel is beside me, untying the rope that keeps the small dinghy tethered to the dock. It floats peacefully on the still waters of the lake. It looks ordinary enough. Normal-looking even, although I'm hardly the person to tell a good dinghy from a bad one. But according to his friends, he does this often.

Going out on the lake after breakfast on the porch had been his suggestion. Well, not so much a suggestion. He'd announced it. *I'm going out on the lake.*

I don't know who was more surprised, him or his family members when I stood up. "I want to come."

So here we are.

He holds out a hand. He's been oddly silent since leaving our room earlier in the morning.

I look at his hand for a moment too long. It's hard not to remember where it's been, what I'd seen it grip, just a few hours earlier.

He helps me into the small boat. It undulates precariously with my movements, but steadies as soon as I sit down.

The sun is out in full force today, shining down on the calm waters of the lake. I put my sunglasses on and look around. It really is a pretty place. A far cry from the world we both inhabit, though, I'll give it that. The contrast to Manhattan feels heightened by Gabriel sitting across from me. I've never seen him in nature. At school, lecture halls, event venues in New York—yes.

This is entirely uncharted territory for us.

He reaches for the oars and starts rowing, propelling us further and further away from the dock. The country house is still visible through the trees, but I can't make out any of the people playing games on the lawn or sitting on the porch.

"This is some family reunion," I say. "I think I counted thirty-eight family members yesterday."

Gabriel nods. "That's not counting the people who migrated out West, either."

“You guys are insane.”

“No Connovan family reunions I’ll be expected to attend?”

I chuckle. It’s a dry sound. “You were at one the other night, at Salt.”

He keeps rowing, strong movements that steadily take us across the lake. “That’s it?”

“Yeah. Our family events are usually funerals.”

It’s meant as a dry joke, but Gabriel doesn’t smile. “Who?”

I’d planned on seducing him today; the bikini is a chafing reminder beneath my clothes about that. I hadn’t planned on talking about this. But I say the words anyway.

“My mother was first,” I say. “Not that I remember her funeral, really.”

“How old were you?”

“Two. Then it was one grandmother, and then both of my grandfathers. Alec’s wife died a few years ago, and last year, my other grandmother bid us adieu.”

“I’m sorry,” Gabriel says. There’s no teasing or mocking in his voice. It’s just steady, the way it often is.

I force levity into my tone. “There are no cousins we’re close with,” I say. “But seeing you with yours, maybe that’s a good thing.”

His lips curve. “Maybe, yeah.”

I lean back, bracing my hands against the bench I’m sitting on. It’s calm out here. So different from the intensity inside that house. My eyes land on his hands, strong and broad, gripping the oars. His fingers just barely meet around the weathered wood.

I have to look away from that grip.

“Does your mother still come to Oak Hill weekends?” I ask. As far as I know, his parents’ divorce happened a while back.

He makes another hard stroke with the oars. “No,” he says. “She moved back to the West Coast shortly after the divorce, and she’s rarely been back to New York since.”

I wonder if that bothers him. What their relationship is like. The forces that shaped the kind of man who’d do... *that* to me this morning, before calmly rowing out on this lake like it had never happened.

I know he’s not as nonchalant as he seems. The tension between us makes that clear. It hadn’t been there just a few days ago, at least not in this iteration.

“Why are you curious?” Gabriel asks. “Do you need more info for our fabricated backstory?”

I stretch my legs out in the boat. They end up between his splayed knees, and with my skirt riding up, there’s plenty of me on display.

His eyes register the movement.

“Knowledge is power.”

“Right,” he says and pulls on the oars one more time. “And I know you like power.”

“You’re going to pretend you don’t?”

He grins. It’s a crooked thing, more of a smirk, here out in the middle of the lake. “No, princess, I won’t. So, what do you want to know? Was I held enough as a baby? Do I resent being an only child?”

“Do you?”

“No. I have plenty of cousins.”

“Were you held enough as a baby?”

“No clue,” he says. “I was a baby.”

That makes me roll my eyes. “What’s the deal with your father, then?”

His rowing speeds up. “What about him?”

“You two seem to be somewhat... well. I wouldn’t use the word close, maybe.”

“Are you saying you and your father stay up late and braid each other’s hair? Because I’ve met Mr. Connovan, and I call bullshit.”

“Of course, not,” I say, frowning. There’s just something there, something I can’t put my finger on. Gabriel appears like a perfect son for a business magnate and social staple. Everything he does seems annoyingly ideal. But the comment his dad had made in the hallway about the sports team had been standoffish.

“You know how families are,” Gabriel says. There’s a word he leaves out, but I hear it nonetheless. *Our* families. As much as we’re different, in this regard, we’re very similar.

“I do.” I lean back in the boat and look around. “Have you brought friends up here? Some people mentioned the boat at your poker night.”

“When I was younger, yes.”

“Not anymore?”

“No,” he says. “No time, really.”

“How come you get out here, then?” I reach for the hem of my camisole and play with it for a bit. Adrenaline rolls through my body in waves.

“It’s usually very serene on the boat,” he says dryly. “I like it. Besides, I have some good memories here.”

“From when you were a kid?”

“Yes.”

I slide my hand beneath the hem of my top. “Have you ever brought dates up here?”

He frowns at me, and a furrow appears between his drawn-together brows. “Dates? To Oak Hill?”

“Yes.” I tug the camisole off and I drop it beside me in the boat, leaving me in nothing but my skirt and my skimpy triangle bikini top.

Gabriel stops rowing. “What are you doing?”

“I’m getting some sun.” I lean back on my elbows and turn my face toward the cloudless sky, closing my eyes. The pose forces my chest up, breasts out, and I have to bite my tongue not to smile.

As dangerous as playing with him is, it’s also incredibly fun. I can’t remember the last time I was this energized outside of work.

“So?” I ask.

“So what? Put your shirt back on, Connie.”

“Why?” I crack open an eye to find him staring at me. “Can’t handle some exposed skin?”

“It’s your skin that can’t handle it. You’ll burn,” he says harshly and starts rowing the boat again. “Your skin is very pale.”

“I put on sunscreen. And I was asking if you ever brought girls out here.”

His voice sounds genuinely bewildered, and more than a little hoarse. “Why the fuck are you— oh. Are you jealous, Connie?”

“Never,” I say softly.

The tone in his voice turns smug. “Oh, but you are. How does it feel?”

“I’m just curious.” I reach for the zipper of my skirt. “That’s all.”

“To know if you’re the only one I’ve ever brought out here. Are you hoping the answer is yes?” he asks. His voice falls quiet toward the end as I wriggle out of the skirt. I drop it beside me, on top of the camisole.

My heart is pounding in my chest. Only a lifetime of tough negotiations, presentations, and learning how to hide all emotion allows me to keep my composure.

Confidence. The key to pulling this off is just that. Confidence. Even if I have to fake it.



“What the fuck,” he asks in a growling tone, “are you doing?”

“I told you. I’m getting some sun.”

“What if someone else comes out on the lake?”

“Then, they’ll see me tanning. In a bikini. On a lake.”

“That’s not a bikini. It covers almost nothing.”

I crack open my eyes again. He has stopped rowing entirely, and we’re softly bobbing in the middle of the dark blue lake. “That’s kinda the purpose of bikinis.”

He chuckles. The sound sends goosebumps down my arms. “So *this* is why you wanted to come out in the boat with me.”

“Was it?”

His hand closes around my left knee, where it rests next to his. It feels warm and a little rough against my skin.

I can’t look down, or I’ll see just how much of me is on display. I’ve never been aware of my curves more than I do now, in this tiny bikini, beneath the scorching sun.

“Doesn’t feel great, being jealous,” he says. “Does it?”

My heart speeds up. His thumb moves in a slow sweep, pausing a few inches above my knee. “No,” I whisper.

“No,” he agrees. “It really fucking doesn’t.”

His hand pushes my knee to the side, just a few inches, spreading me wider. And I can’t breathe, can’t think above the sudden influx of nerves racing through my body.

“Why did you marry me?” he asks. There’s a lethal quietness to his words. They sit in the space between us, hanging in the air, accompanied only by the soft breeze and the sound of a bird’s song.

“Because we were drunk.”

He gives a low hum. His hand sweeps higher, up to the round outer part of my thigh. “Not good enough, princess.”

I look up at the sky, unable to focus on anything but the touch of his hand. He's raising the stakes. He always does, and I elevate them further, until we end up somewhere I never planned on being in the first place.

Like in front of the altar.

I reach behind my neck for the tie of my bikini. "I don't like tan lines," I say.

His hand tightens sharply around my leg, harsh enough that it halts my movements. My stomach clenches at the fierceness in his eyes, and the possessiveness that burns in them.

"Don't," he says. "You want to taunt me, Connie, into claiming my prize? Fine."

A soft breath escapes me. Jesus.

"I want you waiting in our room at 3 p.m. Everyone should be out of the house by then."

I feel too hot, even with the gentle wind against my mostly bare skin. "Okay," I say.

He reaches for the oars and resumes rowing, with more vigor than he had before, back toward the distant dock. "And put your clothes back on."

"Can't handle it?"

"No," he says and accelerates. "I really fucking can't."

# Chapter 24

*Gabriel*

Connie disappears after we return to the dock. She walks back up the lawn and to the house, and I watch as the auburn hair down her back swings softly with every step.

I tug at the neckline of my T-shirt. It's already hot as sin. It seems like every conversation we have results in the same kind of a standoff. It's exhausting.

And it's arousing.

Seeing her like that... Fuck, it's a sight I'd never thought possible. Connie undressing in front of me, stretched out in my childhood rowboat, wearing a tiny dark blue bikini. Underneath the brilliant sun, it had given me a full view of her curves, every inch of her fairer-than-cream skin on display.

Well, not *every* inch.

I stay down at the dock for longer than I need to, just to quell the raging fire inside me. Wanting Connie from afar had been one thing. Craving her up close is an entirely different beast, one that has its claws embedded at the base of my spine and wrapped around my cock. Waking up to her draped over me in bed had been the sweetest kind of victory. Her soft breathing and the smoothness of her face, relaxed in sleep. No anger and no distrust.

I make my way back to the house where I'm forced into a polite conversation with my cousins and some of their kids. Cute as they are, and as much as I usually enjoy the reprieve from the stress of New York, I can't focus on the discussion. It's all gibberish to me at the moment.

I make my escape across the porch when a voice stops me.

"Gabriel," she says.

I turn to Grandma Edith, sitting in her usual chair. She gives me a thorough look. "I've been talking to your new wife. The Connovan girl."

Yes, I want to say. *Also, the only wife I have.*

“I noticed. What do you think?”

Her lips purse. “She’s far too clever for whatever schemes your father and aunt think you’ve pulled over her.”

My shoulders tense. I hadn’t been the one to plant that idea, but I hadn’t discouraged it, either. Most of my family likely believes I’m playing a long game, as opposed to our marriage being a genuine love match.

As long as no one knows the truth, though. That’s what matters. We’d all do much better without picturing Connie and me drunk in a Vegas chapel.

“She is,” I say.

Grandma nods again and looks out at the lawn where the newest generations of Thompsons are playing. “Just know what you’re doing,” she cautions.

“I do.”

But as I walk through the house, toward the stairs leading up to our bedroom, I feel it for the lie that it is. In one way or another, this will probably blow up. My body feels wound tight, a coil ready to spring, as I walk up the stairwell. *Let it explode.* It’ll be worth it.

I stop outside the guest bedroom I share with Connie and glance down at my watch. I’m two minutes early, but waiting isn’t an option. I don’t think I could even if I wanted to.

I turn the handle and push the door open.

Connie is waiting for me on the bed.

She’s lying on her back, bracing herself on her elbows. One leg is bent and the other extended in front of her, her foot pointed. Around her shoulders, her auburn hair is hanging long and gleaming. She must have done something to her lips, I don’t know what, to make them look that cherry color.

And she’s wearing the same bikini she had on in the boat.

I feel rooted in place. I drink in the view and know in my bones that I’ll remember this sight until my dying day. The

soft curves, the rounded hips, and the way her tits push against the triangles of that bikini top.

The way she looks at me, looking at her.

Her face is unreadable, which makes me think she's nervous. Around me, she's never bothered to hide her anger or her annoyance. It's only the other feelings, the ones she doesn't want me to know, that she keeps firmly under lock and key.

I close the door behind me and turn the lock. The loud click seems laden with meaning.

"Right on time," she says.

I undo the top button of my shirt. She's shut the linen curtains, hiding the backyard from view, but light trickles in through the thin fabric. Soft shadows and luster play across her skin.

I roll up my shirtsleeves inch by inch. "Look at you," I say. "Laid out and waiting."

Her chest rises with a deep breath. "You said you wanted to claim your prize."

"I did, didn't I?" My steps take me close to the foot of the bed until my legs brush against the comforter. "And what's my prize again?"

Her green eyes capture mine. "Me," she breathes.

"That's right." I run my fingers up her smooth calf and past the curve of her knee. "Tell me what you remember from our night together in college."

Her knees close, and a frown turns down her full lips.

"Come on, princess," I say. "Tell me."

She lifts herself higher up on her braced elbows, and damn it, my gaze drops to the way her tits fill out the barely-there bikini top. Probably just what she sought with that move, too. The need to tear it off and see her breasts for myself, to weigh them in my hands, and suck on her nipples, burns low in my stomach.

“I barely remember it,” she says. The haughtiness in her tone turns me on another notch.

Sparring with her always does.

“Is that right?” I smooth both hands up the outside of her thighs. Her skin is impossibly soft to the touch.

I push her thighs apart. I don’t let myself focus on the triangle of fabric between them. No, I kneel there instead and brace a hand next to her head. Hovering above her, I watch the war of emotions in her eyes. A flush spreads up her chest to her cheeks, and her breathing is coming fast.

“Tell me what you remember.”

Her lips part. “This wasn’t part of the bet.”

I brush my lips over her collarbone. “Tell me.”

Another breath whooshes out of her. It’s softer this time, and her chest arches up against me. The brush of her round breasts makes my brain short-circuit.

“It was late. It was dark,” she murmurs. “We’d all been drinking at the party.”

“That’s right.” I kiss across her neck. She smells fresh and clean, like she’s just had a shower.

I’m already hard.

“What happened?”

“We were alone in the corridor,” she whispers. “We were arguing about... about...”

I grip her hands and place them above her head. Her eyes are wide and searing on mine. There’s irritation there, but also desire, so clear it cuts like a knife through my own.

“Property law,” I say. My lips are inches from hers. “The McMillian case.”

She gives a tiny nod. Her skin looks smooth this close up, and beneath me, I can feel every inch of where our bodies align. “What happened then? Come on, princess.”

Her hips twist beneath mine. “Gabriel,” she says.

“Don’t want to think about it?” I brush my lips over hers. “About the time you wanted me without a bet to blame it on?”

“Screw you,” she whispers, and then she kisses me. She lifts her head and presses her lips against mine, intense and soft, and my self-restraint snaps.

She tastes so damn good.

Her mouth is warm and insistent, and moves with just a hint of anger, as if she hates me for this. Or maybe she hates herself for not really hating me at all.

*But she has to admit it*, I think, even as my hand tightens around her bare waist. Even as all my blood rushes south, and she gives a soft moan into my mouth, and I’m overcome with the need to get inside her.

I kiss my way down her body. It’s a safer territory, with smooth skin under my lips and blood pounding in my ears.

I pause at the edge of her bikini bottoms.

If there’s one thing I won’t let her, it’s to use today as an excuse that we can never do this again. To only see it as a bet that has been lost and all dues paid, as her placating me, as an “Exhibit A” in a list of arguments why we should never repeat it.

I slide my hands under her ass and push her up the bed. Connie crawls backward, her head falling back onto a pillow. I run my fingers over the triangle between her legs, rubbing her gently through the lycra fabric. “This is my prize, princess. Isn’t it?”

She’s watching me with fiery eyes. “Yes.”

There are ties on either side of her hips, holding the bikini bottoms together. Very handy. I untie one of them, and then the other, like I’m unwrapping a present.

“Gabriel,” she says. There’s irritation and something else, frustration maybe, in her voice. Like I’m not going about this in the way she’d expected.

It makes me grin.



“What?” I ask, my hands pausing at the waistband of her bottoms.

She breathes out an exasperated sigh and wiggles against my hands. “Never mind.”

Right. Because she can’t admit what she wants.

I peel off the triangle of fabric and reveal her to my gaze.

Everything in me tightens at the sight.

“Fuck,” I say. She’s pink and pretty and *glistening*, and that’s all the evidence I’ve been craving. She’s turned on, all right.

I toss her bikini bottoms to the side and push her knees asunder, spreading her wide for me. “You look so damn pretty,” I say.

She stares at me like she can’t look away, can’t quite believe I’m here. There’s a sharp blush on her cheeks. “Touch me.”

It’s a whispered demand, but it makes me grin all the same. “Gladly.”

I stroke my fingers over her softness, once and then twice, lost to the sensations of caressing her. I find the aroused nub at the top of her slit and circle my thumb around it.

Her shoulders drop back down to the bed. “Oh my God.”

I do it again, and again, and revel in her uneven breathing as it grows louder. I lower my head and taste her, and fuck, it’s everything I knew it would be. It’s almost a good thing we never did this in college, or I would have been a man starved for years.

She’s so responsive to my touch, her hips undulating under my hands, and her pale skin flushing with color.

I could do this all day.

I push a finger inside of her without stopping the movement of my tongue. Around my head, her thighs are soft and warm.

“Yes,” she breathes. “Please...”

From my viewpoint, she looks like a beautiful feast, one that’s close to combusting. Her nipples are hard and poking through the fabric of her bikini top. In my pants, my cock is painfully hard, trapped against the zipper.

“Look at that,” I murmur, my finger still stroking inside of her. Her swollen clit winks at me, begging to be tasted. “You’re so wet for me.”

I add another finger, and her breath turns into a shaky mewl. Her hips push up against my hand.

“That’s it. I want you to come for me, princess.”

Her breathing stutters, and when I put my mouth back on her, she explodes with a moan. I lap at her clit and don’t stop, not as her back arches, and not when her legs go ramrod straight around me.

Connie comes, and it’s the most glorious thing I’ve ever experienced. She tightens around my fingers, squeezing me hard enough that my cock aches with jealousy. I kiss her through the orgasm, and when she finally slumps to the bed, I lift my head.

My grin is victorious, and I pat her inner thighs. “That’s a good wife.”

Her face is soft, wiped clean of frowns or furrows. There’s a beautiful blush staining her cheeks. *No, this is the sight I’ll remember forever.* Her, beautiful and blushing, and spent against my tongue.

“Gabriel,” she murmurs. She shifts down on the bed, and her gaze drops to the obvious bulge between my legs.

“You want me to fuck you now?” I ask. I smooth my hand back up to the wetness between her legs, and Connie shivers as I stroke her gently.

She arches her hips, and her eyes burn on mine with all the words she won’t say. Insistent. Demanding. Fiery. Everything that makes Connie, *Connie*.

I stroke her one last time before I push off the bed. Knowing my nonchalance will annoy her, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and roll my shirtsleeves back down.

Like I've just finished a day of hard work.

"Gabriel," she says again. "What are you doing?"

"I've claimed my prize."

She blows out a frustrated breath. "That wasn't the bet."

"You should be pleased I didn't demand more, shouldn't you?" I step closer and put my finger under her chin, tilting her beautifully flushed face up to face me. "Princess, I don't need to make bets to sleep with women."

Her eyes flash with irritation.

"When you want me," I tell her, "I want to hear you say it. *Then*, I'll fuck you."

"Damn you," she says.

I take a step toward the door and give her the smile I know she hates the most. It says I won. "Not the words I want to hear."

"I'll never say *that* to you."

I glance meaningfully down at her body, still flushed and languid from her orgasm. "Your body just told me something different," I say. "Let me know when you finally decide to listen."

# Chapter 25

*Connie*

It had been humiliating, lying alone and sweaty on our bed in the silence that followed Gabriel's departure. My heart was still racing and my body craved more, craved *him*. And I was annoyed at myself for just not giving in. For not saying those three little words he wanted to hear and revel in the reward afterward.

I waited a solid ten minutes before I dragged myself into yet another shower. Over an hour later, I descended the stairs to the preparations for the final Thompson family reunion dinner. I'd helped a few of his cousins in the kitchen by chopping tomatoes, cucumbers, and radishes into a huge salad bowl while making small talk about the weather.

Taking my seat next to Gabriel at the dinner table had been tough. I felt electrified, each of my nerve endings delicately aware of every single one of his.

I hadn't come that hard in... I can't even remember how long. Anticipation had been building since I lost the bet, and then taunted him on the boat... and nearly brimmed while I was lying on the bed, waiting for him to arrive.

I wanted us to do it. To scratch the itch he's always been able to elicit and to indulge in the desire he sets aflame in me, so I could go back to ignoring the attraction he entices in every room he's ever in.

But he had other plans. And my need for him hadn't gone away... not even a little bit.

Not as I lay awake that final night at Oak Hill, staring up at the ceiling, and avoiding the man resting on the other end of the bed from me. Gabriel had fallen asleep with the ease he seems to have for everything, while I was left with a pounding heart and a need I couldn't deny anymore. At least not to myself.

Catching feelings would make things so much more difficult... and they were already hard enough.

I wallowed away the hours painfully aware of his nearness until the sun rose and I could head downstairs for an early walk around the lake. We'd driven back to New York after the brunch with his family, and gone our separate ways, the way we always did.

Now, I'm back in my familiar, prized office. I'd been given it a few years ago, and I decorated it more diligently than I've decorated my apartment. I tap my toe on the carpeted floor of my office in a sharp rhythm and refocus on the emails in front of me.

I've been at work since the early hours of the morning, arriving even before Alec to find a slew of emails from Nate about our European acquisition. In addition, Nicour, the tech start-up I've been working on finalizing the purchase of for Contron, is requesting yet another round of negotiations.

I thought we'd settled all that.

That's ultimately what we do, Nate and I. We help Alec and Dad juggle the ins and outs of this massive corporation and try, at all times, to find the rewards amid the risks of doing business.

The Connovan Foundation is my foray into creating something entirely new that could benefit us all. The paperwork is all filed, the trademark is registered, and everyone on my prospective dream board has accepted the position. It's ready.

It's been ready for weeks.

I just need to convince Alec to pull the trigger. A charitable foundation will have a cost, yes, but the PR benefits the company may reap could be significant. Not to mention it's a way for us to use our expertise in a charitable way, even if I know that argument won't sway Dad.

Alec, maybe. If he's in the right mood.

I rest my head on my hands. It feels heavy. I love my job. I love this company, and the desire to be a part of the team, to pull my weight, has never been stronger. But I'm starting to wonder if Alec and Dad stopped including me in confidential

company matters because of Gabriel. If they think I will divulge things to him that he can take to Thompson Enterprises. There have been fewer meeting requests in my calendar, and not as many fires I've been asked to put out.

Maybe they're right. Gabriel wants my body, that much is obvious. But perhaps he wants my surrender even more. What if encouraging my feelings, feelings for *him*, is his way to control me... just like, I suppose, sex may control him?

But after this weekend, I suspect I'm just as susceptible to that kind of power.

Zahra knocks on my door and pops it open a few inches. "There's a call for you," she says.

"Who is it?"

"Someone you should talk to. A journalist."

"From Business Digest?" I ask. "Give them the standard response."

"I think you should really speak to her this time," Zahra says. Judging from the tone of her voice, something's up.

Something always is.

"Patch it through."

When I pick up my phone a minute later, the curt voice on the other end introduces herself as someone I know well from her many, many emails. "Hello, Ms. Connovan. I'm Cynthia Schultz, with Business Digest."

I lean back in my chair. "Hello, Cynthia. What can I do for you today?"

"As you're no doubt aware," she says, her voice deceptively pleasant, "we've tried to reach both you and your husband for an interview with BD."

"Ah, that's right. We've been meaning to respond to that."

"I'm sure you have," she says. "Given your respective companies' significant stake in the broadcasting, entertainment, and energy markets, your marriage to a Thompson family member who is presently employed by the

Thompson Enterprises has been a cause of widespread speculation.”

“I’ve noticed that,” I say and give a little laugh, like this is all just so preposterous. “It’s not something we’ve encouraged, I can assure you.”

“I’m sure,” she says, and her voice settles into a pitch too syrupy to actually be kind. *So here it comes.* “This is a courtesy call, more than anything, that we at Business Digest have been doing some investigative work of our own. We’ve discovered that you and your husband don’t appear to be residing at the same address, and none of your daily activities have changed since the marriage came to light. We will be publishing an article next week that highlights our findings and raises serious questions about the real nature of this union.”

My voice dries in my throat. And with every passing millisecond I’m silent, I know I’m giving her fodder. Her *theory* fodder.

“Really?” I ask, still sounding mildly amused by it all. “And what questions are you planning to raise?”

“Well, given the dominant stakes both of your companies have on segments of our national economy... people are bound to speculate. Is this the first step in a merger that could have the Federal Trade Commission investigating potential violation of antitrust laws?”

This time, my laughter is genuine. The idea of Contron and Thompson Enterprises ever merging... I can’t imagine Gabriel’s dad and his aunt in the same room as my father. Not ever.

“Funny,” Cynthia Schultz says on the other end. “Your husband had a similar reaction.”

That cuts my laughter right off, even if I keep my voice light. “You’ve spoken to Gabe?”

“Yes,” she says. “Anyway, I won’t keep you any longer. This was just a courtesy notice. As journalists, we have a duty



to report on the dealings of corporations as esteemed and large as yours. You know, the role of the Fourth Estate, and all that.”

“Of course,” I say. “I’ve been a loyal subscriber of *Business Digest* since I was a teenager.”

“We appreciate the support,” she says. “I hope you have a good rest of your day.”

Then she hangs up, and I curse in the silence that she leaves behind. I know a threat when I hear one, and she had phrased it perfectly.

There’s no way that article will run. She knows it, and I know it. Which means we’ll have to give her something else in return.

Fourth Estate, my ass.

I scroll through my contacts to find the one I saved as *Plumber*. Gabriel answers on the fifth ring.

“Hello,” he says.

Something tightens in my stomach at the single word spoken in his deep drawl. Somehow, he always sounds just a little amused, like life is a joke that only he gets.

“I heard you just got a call from one very passive-aggressive reporter.”

He chuckles. “I sure did. She called you, too?”

“Yes. We have to kill that article. I think we need to give her—”

“What she really wants,” Gabriel says, “is a sit-down interview with the two of us.”

“Yes. We have to sell this marriage. She has evidence of us not living at the same address, too. Did she mention that in your call? That might be trickier, but we should still be able to kill that pretty easily, I think.”

“We will,” he says, “because I just put in an offer on the apartment we viewed the other week.”

My hand tightens around my phone. “You did what?”

“You loved that apartment, Connie,” he drawls. “Remember the his and hers vanities you raved about?”

“I was pretending.”

“So you’d rather we share a sink? I’m sure we can arrange that.”

“Thompson, we can’t *live* together.”

Gabriel’s voice goes from an easy drawl to sharp, the one he sometimes uses when we spar. “You realize this article might be only the first of many. We can give her something else to kill it, sure, but she’ll still have that info. She can leak it to someone else. And if she was able to find out that we don’t live together, do you think it’ll be hard for other reporters to track down? For our families?”

“You’re right,” I say, and blow out a frustrated breath. “A private investigator could find that out on day one. Eventually, our excuses will run out.”

“Yes,” he says. “How long do you think *we’re just looking for a place* will hold up?”

I rub my temple. Every atom in my body protests at the suggestion. At the logic of it. *Of course*, it makes sense. That’s the whole problem. Having Gabriel close by, all the time... It’s too much. I can barely handle him in small doses.

My body wants him too much.

And I’m afraid that so do I.

“Okay,” I say. “We offer her an exclusive sit-down interview with the two of us, in our new apartment, with a photographer present.”

“Right. That’ll look good.”

“It’ll look fantastic,” I say. “Did you buy it furnished?”

“Yes,” he says. “Figured it was easier.”

“Oh, definitely. Good call. We need to make it look like ours, too, before she arrives.”

“Ours,” he says, and the amused tone is back. “And what is *our* style, princess?”

I ignore the question. “Will you call her back with the offer, or shall I?”

“I can do it,” he says. “I don’t take well to being blackmailed. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure we get a deal that’ll benefit us.”

For once, I believe that entirely.

“Think your offer will be accepted on the apartment?”

“Yes,” he says simply. “I offered all cash, no contingencies.”

“Good. When do you think we’ll have access?”

“If my lawyer has anything to do with it, no later than next week. We’ll ride the sellers hard.”

“Great work,” I say, drumming my fingers along the desk. “I’ll fix it up.”

“I do love your interior design skills, honey,” he says. There’s a mocking intensity in his voice, and layered beneath it all, I hear the memory of the past weekend. Of the two of us in that room. On that bed. And him, with his head between my thighs.

I cross my legs beneath my glass office table and try to focus on the issue at hand. *Reporter. Photographer. Selling the idea of a perfect marriage.*

“Send over a few childhood pictures,” I say.

“You want to plaster the walls with them?”

“I want to place a few framed photographs here and there, yeah.”

He chuckles. “Any particular requests?”

“The one where you won the lacrosse tournament that I saw at Oak Hill. And maybe something from when you graduated law school?” My fingers speed up their drumming.

What we really need is a wedding photo. A proper one, too, and not one from that seedy chapel in Vegas.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Gabriel says. “You know, Connie, this will mean a lot of great things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, for one, I’ll always be nearby. All you have to do is say those three little words, and we both know you want to.”

I close my eyes. *Yes*, I think, and don’t I wish it wasn’t so. The past weekend hadn’t made my inconvenient attraction any less compelling or potent.

It had only intensified it.

“You wish,” I whisper. It sounds like a lie even to my own ears.

“I sure do,” Gabriel says with a chuckle. “But so do you, princess.”

# Chapter 26

*Connie*

Cynthia Schultz agreed to our trade without reservations. Clearly, access is what she was aiming for, in one way or another, and we're providing it for her. Gabriel's assistant dropped off a set of keys to the new apartment a few days ago, and I spent the rest of the week getting it ready for our interview with Cynthia.

Although I'd acted the part during the viewing with Gabriel's aunt, the apartment *is* beautiful. Large, airy, and a combination of modern and traditional that makes it neither and both at the same time.

While it's fully furnished, the interior design style makes it clear that the space was staged. Everything's beige, and there's not a single touch of personality. There are no utensils in the kitchen and no towels in the bathrooms, and the art pieces on the walls are all impersonal abstracts, no doubt a dime a dozen.

Zahra helps me get the apartment ready, scheduling the deliveries and ordering the plants and flowers online for the terrace. When Gabriel finally sends me the pictures I'd asked for, they come through from his assistant to mine. Zahra and Darryl have developed quite a working relationship over the past week. At this point, they know far more about the true nature of our relationship than anyone in our respective families.

On Sunday, I meet up with Isabel for our yoga lesson. After that, she comes with me back to the apartment I need to start calling "home" tonight. My suitcases were delivered that morning. They've got enough clothing to last me... well... At least a few weeks. Beyond that, the future feels more uncertain than it has in a very long time.

Spending time with Isabel helps. She has a calmness and a logical nature that feels like a balm for my stressed soul.

“Wow,” she says, as we walk into the lobby of my new building. “This is stunning. Look at that chandelier.”

“It’s not the Winslow,” I say.

“No, but it’s very close.”

“Yeah, and I’m not staying here forever.”

She nods. “Did you say the apartment has two stories?”

“Yes. It’s honestly pretty nice, and it’s huge. Much bigger than we need, at least to keep up this charade.”

We get in the elevator, and I type in the code that sends it directly to the floor we share with only one other tenant. In the mirrored walls, our forms are reflected back to me.

When I first met Isabel, I still struggled with accepting my natural curves. I’d been so jealous of her lean physique. Isabel has been a ballerina for over fifteen years and dances every day. Standing next to me now, she cuts a slender shape, our differences highlighted even more by her long black hair and light-brown complexion. Isabel’s parents are from Puerto Rico, and she speaks fluent Spanish.

But despite my early jealousy, she’d been key in helping me learn to accept my body. Just witnessing up close how she viewed hers as a tool, something to hone, take pride in, and care for, had changed how I viewed my own.

It’s the only one I’ll ever have, and it’s a pretty damn good one.

“How are the nerves?” she asks.

“For the interview tomorrow? Or for officially moving in with Gabriel?” I ask.

“Both,” she says, smile widening. “Either.”

“Pretty damn intense. I’ve been doing my best to ignore them all week, and they’re coming back with a vengeance now.” We walk through the corridor of my floor, and I unlock the door to my new apartment.

The hallway opens up to a combined kitchen and living room where the giant windows stretch the full two stories.

“Oh my God,” Isabel says beside me. She sounds stunned. “Okay, I... wow. I mean, I love your place at Winslow, but this is *incredible*.”

“It’s really something, isn’t it?”

“Yes. He just bought this for the interview, right?”

“Yes. Well, we needed to have the same address, so I suppose it was for that, too,” I say. It was a significant purchase, but he’ll be able to use it for whatever he’d like later. Sell it. Rent it out. Make a profit.

I don’t know the details of his bank account, but he’s a Thompson. Just as I’m a Connovan. Of all of our problems, finances aren’t one of them.

Isabel walks beside me in an awe-struck silence. We come from different backgrounds, in some ways. While we’d met as neighbors, I’d bought my apartment in Winslow, while she leases hers. Her place is actually owned by the New York Ballet. They have a few in the building and rent them out to their principal dancers, a century-old tradition.

“Wait, there are guest rooms on the lower floor?” She peers down the hall. “Did he get a place this huge so the two of you could avoid each other?”

I chuckle. “Gosh, I hope that’s what happens. We can live in different wings.”

She enters the kitchen and runs a hand along the kitchen counter. I’d added small details here to make it look lived in. A tray with olive oil and balsamic vinegar, a large bowl of fruit, and some cloves of garlic.

Because Gabriel and I are totally that couple who cooks together... or at least that’s what Cynthia Schultz will think tomorrow.

Isabel jumps up onto one of the bar stools by the kitchen island. “So, what are you planning to wear tomorrow for the interview? They’re taking pictures, too, right?”

“They sure are,” I say. “I was thinking, my blue dress, the one with the tie at the waist. I wore it to your last premiere.”



“That’s right! I love that one. It’ll photograph really well.”

“I hope so.” I lean against the counter. “Want some food? We can order something in. Gabriel won’t be here until later.”

There was a set of suitcases in the hallway already that wasn’t mine. Large, black, and probably filled with his belongings.

I try not to think about them.

“Sure,” Isabel says. “Poke bowls?”

“Sounds great.”

“Okay, so now that we’ve done yoga, and we’ve had our smoothies... will you please tell me how the past weekend went? How was meeting his family?”

I place the food order on my phone while giving her the full account. It feels good to get the story out... even if talking about it forces me to relive it. Including what happened that afternoon, in our bedroom.

“Oh my God. *Seriously?* He just went down on you?”

“Yes,” I say. “Even though technically, the bet was to sleep together. And it was pretty obvious I wanted to, you know. Even if I didn’t say the words. So, now I’m screwed.”

She shrugs. “Well, not really. You’re married to the guy, and you’re trying to sell this marriage as real to both your families and the public. Why would it matter what you two do in private?”

I dig my teeth into my lower lip. That’s just the thing. It wouldn’t bother anyone... but me. Sleeping with Gabriel, *being* with Gabriel, would mean opening myself up. It would mean admitting that I like him.

It would mean being vulnerable with him.

“It could complicate things,” I say. “Our divorce might already be ugly. Dividing assets without a prenup, fielding journalists... I still can’t believe I was that stupid.”

She frowns. “Well, your family bought it. Right? I can’t imagine your father or your brothers will hold it against you if

it gets ugly.”

“I definitely can.”

“Really? Even Alec?”

“Especially Alec,” I say. “He’s been even worse than usual lately.”

Her eyebrows lift. “How so?”

“He’s constantly in a bad mood, even if that’s not something new. But you know how he sees me. I’m his little sister, not... not an equal. He can’t trust me with serious decisions about Contron. Marrying a Thompson means I’ve already fucked up, but having an ugly, public divorce? Potentially risking my stake in the company during the division of assets? He’d never trust me again.”

Isabel looks down at her long hair and runs a few strands of it through her fingers. Her voice is thoughtful. “I think Alec would be more understanding than that. From what you’ve told me.”

I chuckle. “He’s the least understanding person in the world. Unless, you’re one of his kids, that is.”

“You’re probably right,” she says and looks up at me. She smiles brightly. “Besides, it’s not like I know him well or anything.”

“No, and trust me, that’s probably for the better.” My phone pings with a notification, and I glance down. “Oh, food’s here.”

We pass the afternoon by eating and talking about my upcoming domestic bliss with Gabriel, as well as Isabel’s new dance director who’s giving her grief. Spending time with her calms my nerves somewhat, but as soon as she leaves, they return in full force.

I take a long shower in the en suite of the master bedroom. I’ve put my suitcases in here and claimed it as my territory, for however long we’ll be living here. Afterwards I walk through the apartment’s lower level and fix the finishing touches. Adding a throw pillow to an armchair, and a book with a

bookmark in it to the nearby side table. There's food in the fridge, and I double-check that it'll look good enough to a snooping reporter.

I'm arranging a stack of magazines on the coffee table when the front door clicks open, and my nerves immediately jump another notch.

I haven't seen Gabriel since we returned from Oak Hill.

"Honey, I'm home!" he calls, a mocking lilt to his voice. He strolls into the living room, and there's that smile, too. The crookedly arrogant one. He's in a pair of chinos and a button-down, and in his arms is a giant bouquet.

"You brought flowers?"

"For you." He puts the bouquet down on the kitchen island. I bought an arrangement of white lilies for the hallway table, but this one is so much more impressive. A dizzying array of pinks and purples and whites. It'll look great set on this countertop.

"Good thinking," I say. "It'll photograph well."

Gabriel nods and looks around at the space and the changes I've made. "Looks different," he says. "You've been busy."

I move past him and grab the documents I'd prepared earlier off the counter. It's a list of questions Cynthia Schultz had sent over that will guide the interview tomorrow. We should talk them over.

*Keeping this on a professional level with Gabriel has always worked, I think. It's my safety blanket and my baseline. It's when he knocks me off-kilter that things go wrong.*

"It's late, but we should go through these questions to make sure we're on the same page," I say. "Here's one I know she'll press us on. How do we handle conflicts that arise due to our respective jobs?"

There's no response behind me. I turn to spot Gabriel at the giant built-in bookcases behind the couches. Between the

preexisting pieces of decor, I filled the shelves with books, photos, and memorabilia.

“You used to ride?” he asks. He’s holding a framed picture in his hand.

“Yeah. I stopped when I went away to college.” I’d put a picture of me in a dressage competition right next to the picture of him winning a lacrosse tournament.

He nods and puts it back, shifting his attention to the next shelf. The one with our framed marriage certificate. He looks at it for a long moment before chuckling. “You framed this?”

“Well, we don’t exactly have a wedding picture. It’ll do.”

He runs a finger along the spines of books I’d filled a shelf with. “Who reads all of the presidential biographies?”

“Both of us,” I say. “Then we discuss them in bed.”

He chuckles again. “Right. And who likes to read... *One Fatal Step*? What’s this?”

“It’s a cozy mystery.” I hadn’t expected him to pay this close attention, especially not to the books I’d thrown together. Some are my favorites from home, and a whole bunch I got at the bookstore down the street.

“Interesting. One of yours?”

“Yes.”

Gabriel pulls it out and flips it over to read the back. “This is probably a good time,” he says, “to tell you I’m dyslexic.”

“What?”

His eyes are locked on the book he’s holding, and he’s seemingly a picture of casualness. “Oh, yes. Couldn’t read for shit as a kid.”

“I didn’t know that.”

He puts the book back with a wry smile. “Of course not, princess. It’s not something I ran around telling people.”

“But you never seemed to have trouble in school,” I say. “I mean, from an outsider’s perspective, it seemed like you

just... breezed through. Barely studied and still aced things.”

He reaches for another framed picture, this time of me and my family. I have pigtails and a polka-dot dress, and I’m standing in between my brothers. They look huge compared to my seven-year-old self.

Gabriel’s hands tighten around the frame. “I’m good at making it seem that way. Besides, I have a great memory and a knack for thinking on my feet. Came in handy since it went undiagnosed until I was eight.”

I frown. “Oh.”

He puts the frame back and walks toward the wine cooler installed beneath the kitchen island. I watch in silence as he uncorks a bottle of white wine and searches through cabinets for glasses.

“Besides,” he says, “it’s not like you read my essays, did you?”

“No, I suppose not.” My brain reels from the revelation. I’d always thought he’d had it easy. Effortlessly skilled in school, making things up on the fly, ad-libbing during presentations, and showing up with a grin on his face two minutes before a test. Just breezed through.

But looks can be deceiving.

He nods toward the documents in my hand. “So you want us to practice before the interview,” he says. His eyes are steady and calm, and they throw me completely off. He’s supposed to be teasing. Mocking. The Gabriel I know and can handle. “I don’t feel the need to, but we can do it if it’ll make you feel better.”

I look down at the piece of paper with neatly spaced-out questions. “Have you read them?”

“No.”

“Well, I suppose I’m overprepared, then. It’s probably a good idea if you shoot more from the hip. We don’t want to come off rehearsed or anything. I can be the boring one, and you’re the one improvising?”

He pushes a glass of wine in my direction. “The interview will go great, Connie.”

I accept the glass, my fingers curling around the stem. “We have the story of our great love affair down, at least.”

“Yes,” he says. “We’ve told that to enough people.”

I take a long sip of my wine. Tension seeps out of me at the taste, and I sink down on a chair across from him.

“I like what you’ve done with the place,” he says.

“Thanks.”

“Did it take a lot of time?”

“Some, but I had help. Now, there’s food in the fridge, trash in the garbage can, and soap in the bathrooms.”

“Detail-oriented help, it seems.” Gabriel tips back his own glass. I watch as his throat works, and the triangle of skin above the first unfastened button of his shirt. I remember what he looked like not wearing one this past weekend. Broad chest, strong abs, and his hand wrapped around his erection. Stroking it as he watched me with his burning eyes.

My heart rate increases at the memory. It’s been hard not to think about it, and with him here, it’s impossible not to.

“I brought the suit you asked me,” he says. “The navy one, to match your dress.”

“Good,” I say softly. My hand is curved over the back of the chair, and I can feel my twin rings, digging into my palm. The beautiful engagement ring he’d chosen.

Gabriel’s lips lift into a smirk. “Have you prepared our bedroom?”

“Bedrooms,” I correct. “You’re in the guest suite.”

His eyebrows rise. “Oh, am I? In the apartment I bought?”

“Yes.”

“I see,” he says. “You’re afraid.”

Irritation flares in my chest. That’s the last emotion I’m feeling. It’s all need and anger—at myself, at him, for wanting

him when I know I shouldn't. When I know I can't even trust him, not really.

I get up and head to the stairs. Escape is the only solution. "Is that what you think?"

He follows me. "Yes. You might wake up draped over me again."

"I might. But I won't enjoy the self-loathing after."

Gabriel chuckles. The sound is warm and heady, and I hear his footsteps as he follows me up the stairs. My heartbeat speeds up. The games, always these games... and I don't know if I want us to stop.

"If you think that wounds me," he says, voice amused, "you should come up with a better lie."

I turn toward the master bedroom. The door is ajar, and I see the bed I'll be sleeping in for the foreseeable future. King-size and still small-looking in the enormous room.

I pause outside the half-open door and face the man coming my way. He walks up the hallway like he owns it. Technically, he does.

Gabriel's hair has fallen over his forehead, thick and dark. His eyes are locked on mine, and while there is amusement there, it's not alone. His gaze is full of heat.

"I'm not coming up with lies," I say.

He stops a few feet in front of me, and with tantalizing slowness, braces an arm against the wall beside me. "Even that is a lie."

I lean my head against the wall. "Agree to disagree."

He bends down until his cheek is next to mine. I catch the scent of his cologne and... him—man and soap. "Tell me you haven't been thinking about the other day, when you came against my tongue."

A breath escapes me. I open my mouth to answer, but then he's there, hot lips pressing against mine.

I should push him away.

But there's not a single cell in my body that wants to. He tastes so good, and he's so warm, and he kisses me like he can't wait to do so much more. I kiss him back with all the intensity I've struggled to bear.

Gabriel lifts his head. "Tell me," he demands.

"Yes, I have thought about it."

"Good girl," he says, and his hand lands on the curve of my waist. "Tell me you've been wanting my mouth on you again."

I glance down at our bodies, nearly touching. His hand on my waist. It's impossible not to want him... and he knows it. "Of course, I have."

It's all I've been able to think about.

He kisses my cheek, and the stubble on his jaw sends goose bumps across my skin. His lips shift to my neck and the sensitive skin there. "Have you been wet, thinking about it?"

My breathing constricts in my chest, and my body moves without a conscious thought. My hips arch up against him, and the reply is born and then dies on my lips. *Yes.*

Gabriel looks down at where I'm pressed against him. "I see..." he says. "You want me to check?"

As soon as he says the words, it becomes all I can think about. His hands on my body are electric, sending currents through me, and I can't wait to be zapped again. I can see him half-naked so clearly, standing there by the foot of the bed, hand around his cock, and face etched with pleasure-pain.

I still haven't touched *him*.

Gabriel reaches down to the edge of my skirt and traces a slow line up my thigh, inch by inch, until his hand is toying with the lace of my panties. He tugs them to the side, and then his hand is right there.

Cupping me fully.

My breath catches at the firm touch of his fingers and the heel of his palm. God, it feels so good, sparks of electricity



spreading from the contact.

He explores me with a strong finger. “You are,” he says. His voice is hoarse, and he lowers his head again, resting his lips by my ear. “Tell me, princess. Tell me you want me, and I’ll fuck you in our master bedroom.”

I have to focus on my breathing to keep from trembling against his body. His fingers stroke me slowly before one of them slips inside. It’s a poor substitute for his girth, but it makes me imagine it all the same.

“Just tell me that you want me.”

I lock my knees in place to stop the tremors. *If I do, it’s over.* The game ends. Another might start, but it won’t be *this*. It won’t be his full attention and this overwhelming desire. It’ll be a different kind of power play, and it won’t be lust we’ll be playing with. It’ll be emotions.

And if sleeping with Gabriel Thompson is dangerous, falling for him would be lethal.

“I don’t.” I reach down to grip his thick wrist. It takes effort to just hold it there, and not push his hand even harder against me, the way I really want to.

Gabriel’s voice is in my ear, and he whispers a single word. “Liar.”

It reverberates through my system because it’s the truth. And maybe that is why I can’t face him. He takes his hand off me, and I turn before he can say another word, disappearing into the master bedroom. I shut the door behind me and breathe hard, my heartbeat like a stampede in my chest.

When I crawl into bed fifteen minutes later, face washed and teeth brushed, it’s with one aim in mind. I use the vibrator I’d packed, and in the safety of my thoughts, I let myself imagine what would have happened had I said the three little words he demanded from me.

## Chapter 27

*Gabriel*

The interview went well, preparation or no preparation. Cynthia Schultz arrived with her photographer early on Monday. Connie greeted them in a stunning mid-length dress, bare feet, and with her hair down as if she walks around like this all the time while we are home. I'm still impressed by how easily she shape-shifts into a persona she knows, on some instinctive level, will serve us best at any particular moment. Like with my aunt and my cousin.

I kept my arm around her waist as we showed Cynthia and her photographer Steve around the large kitchen and living room. The questions weren't unexpected. Cynthia asked them with a sharp eye but an easy tone, and we answered them in much the same fashion. It was easy to see why she had the job that she had. I felt a begrudging sort of respect for what she'd gotten us to agree to, even if I could never like someone who blackmails me, on principle.

Connie and I had been required to pose for pictures, too. We'd sat together on the couch for nearly fifteen minutes, the New York skyline and our bookshelves behind us, as the photographer snapped shots and instructed us in the same breath. *Hand on her back, hand on his leg, smile at one another, that's it... maybe we can see your engagement ring, Connie? Rest your hand on his chest...*

After a quick change of clothes, I head off to work. Connie does the same. We catch two different cabs and speed away to two very different companies.

The rest of the day passes slowly. So does the next day, and the one after that, and I barely see Connie. She's not in the apartment when I arrive home, or if she is, she's already shut herself inside her bedroom. Once, I heard her arrive late as I lay in my bed, angry at her as much as with myself for putting us in this horrible fucking position.

Even worse is knowing how close she is every night and each morning. Sleeping. Showering. Being.

I have the taste of her on my tongue and the feel of the wet softness between her legs on my hand, and it has only made me want her more. Three days into living together with my wife, and I've jerked off more than since I was a teenager. Each day, it's once in the morning shower, and once at night, while imagining Connie's curves and auburn hair.

By the fourth evening, I'm testy when I arrive back at the apartment. The day was long, spent going over the legal framework for Thompson's new renewable energy investment. I feel more wound up than usual about the prospect of a night spent with glimpses of Connie and the quickly traded barbs in the hallway.

But the sight I'm met with when I walk through the door stops me short.

Connie sits on one of the couches. She's wearing a sundress—the straps thin on her bare shoulders—that reaches her mid-thighs. Her hair is down and shining around her shoulders.

She's holding a glass of wine and staring out at the view of the city. I'm sure she heard me arrive. And, judging by the tense look on her face and the tight grip on her wine glass, she's in a bad mood.

I pour myself a glass of whiskey and watch her out of the corner of my eye. Her expression is stony. After shrugging out of my suit jacket, I walk into the living room and sit down on the couch across from her.

I stretch out my legs and take a long sip of my drink. “So, I take it work didn't go well today?”

For a lengthy moment, I'm not certain that she'll answer me. But then she turns toward me, and it's her all right. The fire in her eyes is one I've seen plenty of times. Stoked it myself.

“No,” she says, “I can't say that it did.”

“What happened?”

“The Connovan Foundation was set to launch in two weeks, but I was told today it will have to wait. For at least a

year. The order came straight from Dad.”

“It’s your brother’s decision, though. Isn’t it?”

“Ultimately,” she says. “But he’s deferred to my father here. Apparently, they’re not convinced I have... ‘the appropriate *focus* needed right now to spearhead such a delicate operation.’”

That makes me smile. “Really?”

“Yes.” Her eyes are hard on me. She’s itching for a fight, I realize. One of the ones we’ve had so often throughout the years. The ones I’ve lived for in law school. Going head-to-head with her in a mock trial case would make my week.

So, I drape my arms along the back of the couch, my tumbler dangling from my right hand, and raise an eyebrow at her. “Well, maybe they’re right.”

Her eyes flare. “Of *course* they’re not!”

“I don’t know. You’ve been pretty... preoccupied lately. You’re a newlywed, after all. Decorating your new home, doing a media interview.”

“I could run twenty foundations and still manage this marriage,” she says. “It takes no effort at all.”

“Ouch.” I rub my free hand over my chest. “Keeping your husband satisfied isn’t at the top of your priorities?”

“Keeping him unsatisfied certainly is.” She uncrosses her legs and stretches them out. “I’m so tired of being underestimated and underutilized.”

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “And did you tell them that?”

Her eyes return to mine, but she doesn’t answer. Anger simmers in her eyes.

“No, you didn’t, did you?” I ask. “You should. Tell them what you really think.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Of course it is. You have no problem speaking your mind with me. Never have.”

“It’s not the same thing,” she says with an irritated flick of her hand.

“Because you’ve never cared about what I think,” I say. “So just pretend they’re me.”

“That’s ridiculous, in more ways than one.” Her empty glass ends up on the coffee table, and she swings her legs off the couch, planting her bare feet on the plush rug. She looks at me with a fierceness I haven’t seen in a very long time.

Maybe ever.

“I’m so done with feeling this way,” she tells me. “Of repressing it, and have it eating me up inside.”

“Repressing what?” I put my own glass down. “Tell me how you really feel, princess.”

Connie pushes off the couch. The dress drapes softly around her standing form, accentuating every curve. “I’m angry,” she says. “I’m *furious*. At you, and at myself, for letting us get into this situation.”

“That’s it,” I say. “Let it out.”

She takes a step closer. “I’m tired of wanting what I know I shouldn’t. I’m tired of fighting it. Of fighting with the entire world and getting absolutely nowhere.”

“Of course you are, Connie. You were a teacher’s pet in school. Straight A’s. Afraid of messing up. I know for a fact that you did extra work for professors in law school. Spent weekends and every break working for Contron, too, didn’t you? It must be exhausting, being so good all the time.”

“Yeah.” Connie’s green eyes burn on mine. She looks flushed—like she’s just been out for a run—as she takes another step closer to me. “But I’m not going to do it anymore.”

She sinks to her knees between my splayed legs, dropping onto the soft rug. And then she reaches for my belt buckle.

Fuck.

“Constance,” I say.

But she doesn't stop. She undoes my belt with swift movements, and then she's pulling down my zipper, her face set in determined lines.

She hasn't said them, the words I want to hear. But this is pretty damn close. I open my mouth to request them, but then, her hand grips my bare cock, and my brain short-circuits.

Of all the things we've done, it's never been *this*. Her long-fingered hand wrapped around me, on her knees before me, her fiery hair falling over my thighs... and her mouth opening to take me in.

At the first hot touch of her tongue, my head falls back against the couch, and I close my eyes, fighting against the dizzying need sweeping through me.

“Fuck,” I mutter again.

She chuckles. The sound waves of her laugh ripple over my sensitive head, and it's a fight to keep my hips from bucking off the couch.

I look down, and the sight will be etched in my mind forever. Connie on her knees. Her fiery hair is a curtain around her, but it doesn't shield her face from view. No, I can see all of it. Her eyes, burning with triumph as they look up at me. Her flushed, hollowed cheeks. The desire in her gaze.

And my cock, reappearing between her plump lips.

I could finish from the sight alone.

Her hands dig into my thighs, and she speeds up her movements. Her tongue flutters with every bob of her head, and it's too much. This is the culmination of every single one of my illicit daydreams, and after this past week it's—

She sheathes her teeth and sucks harder, the pressure increasing to nearly painful level. My hand shoots down and tangles in her hair.

“That's it, princess,” I say. “Take all of me.”

Connie's eyes flash with pleasure. Her mouth is tight and hot, and then she adds her hand, squeezing right at the root. Heat tingles at the base of my spine, my balls draw up tight, and I can't look away. Not from Connie's face or her lips around me. Everything I am, and everything I've ever been, feels centered in my cock.

My fingers tighten around her hair. "Fucking hell. Yes. Yes..."

I erupt inside her mouth.

It feels like my life force drains out of me along with my cum. My hips buck up into her mouth, and she drains me dry, her tongue sweet, sweet torture, and then far too much on my sensitive skin.

I can't look away from her. She sits back on her heels, victory in her eyes, looking like the goddess of triumph herself. The black sundress clings to her form. One of the straps has slid down, and the fabric flows over her skin, hinting at the full swell of her breasts.

"That's all you've got?" she asks. Her skin is flushed, her eyes glowing.

She looks glorious.

I lean forward and run my thumb along her plump lower lip. "You haven't said the words yet," I tell her.

Her lips part. "You still want me to?"

"Yes, if you want me to fuck you."

"Hard," she breathes.

"Hard," I agree. "Want me to bend you over this couch, princess?"

A shiver racks her body. I look down and watch as goose bumps rise on her arms. She'd been sitting on the couch, waiting for me tonight, I realize. Even if she hadn't admitted that to herself.

But I want her to admit it. To herself, and to me.



And if hard is the way she wants it tonight... well, it won't be difficult to oblige. Her mouth hadn't quelled the fire inside me. It's only stoked it.

I want all of her.

"Fine," she says. Her eyes are locked on mine, her hair an auburn tumble around her face. "I want you."

A smile spreads across my face. "That's it, Connie. Wasn't so hard to say, after all."

I pull her onto the couch. Her body is warm and soft against me. I kiss her and slide my hands up, under the hem of her dress, until I can grip her ass in my hands.

God, I'm already half-hard again.

Connie kisses me back. It's angry, heated, and full of frustration. This won't be sweet or romantic. Or prolonged. It'll be exactly what she needs. What we both need. I've wanted her for too long to go slow right now.

She tears off my button-down. I shrug out of it and waste no time getting my hands back on her, and pull her dress clean off.

She's so gorgeous. Her body is decadent, all soft curves and smooth skin. I grip her ass, and she rolls her hips against me, breathing hard. The heat between us is intense, the friction so hot, we're ready to combust into a raging fire. She kisses me hard, and I tug her grinding hips closer, down onto my erection.

"Stand up," I tell her. "Bend over the back of the couch."

She walks over to the edge of the giant couch and flicks her hair back with a smile. Her black underwear cuts a sharp contrast to her pale skin. Damn. I haven't gotten her out of her bra yet, not once, and I need to rectify that.

"Stay there," I tell her and go get a condom from my wallet. It's painful to walk, I'm so hard.

Years of waiting.

Weeks of pining.

I return to the living room to see Connie obediently draped over the back of the couch. Her arms gripping the furniture, her spine arched, and her full ass up in the air. It's glorious.

I come to stand behind her and run my hands down her hips. "That's it," I say and grip the waistband of her panties. "You want it hard, princess?"

She arches against me. "Yes."

I pull the panties down her legs, leaving them around her knees. I slap her bare ass, just once, and then I can't stand it anymore. My cock is an aching weight jutting out from my body and it knows exactly where it needs to go.

I line up and push inside her, watching inch after inch as my dick disappears into the warm, tight heat. I close my eyes at the pleasure. *Finally*. I grip Connie's hips, the perfect handholds, and thrust. It's hard and it's fast, just like she demanded.

Connie gives a breathy moan and tosses her hair back. It falls in an auburn curtain over her upper back, and I reach out, grabbing a fist full of it.

She pushes her ass back against me, and I groan, my hips slapping against her with force. It's a repeat of what happened between us that night over five years ago, only it's so much more. Years of pent-up frustration in every stroke of my cock.

Connie breathes fast, and moans every time I bottom out within her. "Slap my ass again," she says and braces her arms against the couch. "Or is this all you've got?"

I grit my teeth. If she wants this kind of sex, well...

Buried inside of her, I pause and spank her ass again. Hard.

She jolts with a loud groan, so I do it again, and again before I start thrusting once more. A release is already building at the base of my spine and setting my blood on fire.

I think of her when she danced with her ex at her father's gala. How her eyes shimmered with anger in that Vegas bar. All the times she's turned and walked away from me at the

events, bars, and business meetings. And the sway of her hips that told me she knew I was watching her leave.

Of all the wasted years we could have spent fucking just like this.

The frustration translates into my movements, and judging by her moans, it's exactly what she wants from me. I tighten my grip on her hair and pull her toward me with every thrust. "You want to come, princess?"

She gives a mewling *yes*.

"Touch yourself."

She reaches down her body to do just that, and I feel the tips of her fingers brush against me as I drill her. I hold out, wanting her with me when we reach the peak.

As Connie comes, she presses her head against the couch, and her whole body trembles.

My grip tightens on her hips. She's like a vise around me—squeezing—and the intense need inside of me explodes for a second time tonight. My thrusts turn erratic as I come, and after, I stay enveloped in her warmth.

Our hard breathing is the only sound in the silence.

I smooth my hand down her soft hips. Her skin looks impossibly pale against my tanned hand. "Feel better now, princess?"

Connie twists her head to meet my gaze. Her mascara is smudged under one eye, and her cherry lips are parted in labored breathing. But her eyes are fierce. "Much better."

I pull out of her heat with a wince. She straightens and reaches down, pulling her panties back in place. I tug off the condom and knot it calmly, watching her out of the corner of my eye. She walks around the couch, but leaves her discarded sundress in favor of her wine glass.

I pull up my pants and lean against the edge of our prop. "Wasn't so hard, was it?" I ask. My voice doesn't betray the rapid beating of my heart, just barely calming down from the explosiveness of my orgasm. "Admitting the truth."

Connie heads to the staircase that leads up to our bedrooms. Her hair is a wild mess, and she's only wearing a matching set of black lace underwear. I stare at the clasp of her bra with annoyance.

Next time, I won't overlook getting that thing off her.

She pauses at the base, wine glass in hand, and looks over at me. There's a satisfied smile on her lips. "It was very hard."

I cross my arms. "You asked for it."

"I did," she says and climbs the stairs. It gives me a glorious view of her ass and legs. "That's the only way we'll do this, Thompson."

"So, that means we're doing it again."

She doesn't answer. Just walks away, retreating to her bedroom, but in her silence, I hear the yes she won't say.

# Chapter 28

*Connie*

The following two days are nothing short of frustrating. Something has changed at the Contron office. I used to walk into it and feel at home and proud to be there, but now, all I notice are the looks. Many of my coworkers are curious, still, even though it's been weeks since my ill-advised wedding in Vegas.

Others are calculating. Perhaps counting the days until my brother or my father fire me.

I've started to glare right back at any employee who stares at me. Sometimes, I even smile and say hello. That seems to freak them out the most.

So, that's not great. Hasn't been for a while.

Delaying the launch of the foundation certainly hasn't helped. It required numerous phone calls, a meeting with the proposed team, and a whole lot of arguing with my brother.

I was in his office for at least an hour yesterday, laying out every single argument on why he's wrong. He didn't budge. I'm still considered a liability. And what makes it feel even worse is that they decided to postpone it, rather than appoint someone else as the head of the project. Goes to show how much merit they see in my idea. It made it perfectly clear that the foundation was something they'd approved just to humor me.

I scroll through my emails without really seeing them and reach for the still warm cup of coffee on my desk. My throat's sore, and the headache that had plagued me since yesterday hasn't abated.

My thoughts stray, readily returning to Gabriel. The night we slept together, I was so upset before he walked through our door... my emotions whirled every which way. Taking my worry out on him, working it out *with* him, had been exactly what I needed.

Even if it meant saying those three little words and handing him a victory.

The next day, he headed to Boston for a two-day conference. I can only be grateful he hasn't been around to gloat. I wouldn't be able to deal with that on top of everything else.

There's a knock on my door. I clear my throat before I speak, but my voice still comes out raspy. "Come in!"

It's Alec.

My brother rarely makes the journey across the floor to my office. "Everything okay?" I ask.

He nods and takes a seat in front of my desk. There are dark circles beneath his eyes, but apart from that, he looks like his usual self. Tense. Focused.

"Have you heard from Nate recently?"

"Yeah. He said the acquisition is going well."

Alec nods. His hands rest loosely over the armrests of his chair. "It is. We're set to extend his stay there."

"Oh. That's probably for the best," I say, even if that sucks. Not for Nate, who I'm sure is having the best time. But I miss having him here in New York.

"Yeah, I'll talk to him about it by the end of the week. I want to have a clearer picture of the progress first."

"Good," I say. "Dad's still at the country house?"

Alec nods again. Dad had fled the city, it seemed, after he informed me that the foundation launch was being postponed. I wondered if it was punishment for me going to Oak Hill, or for marrying Gabriel in the first place, but I can't ask that. Some power plays in this family aren't spoken about out loud.

"How's the husband?" Alec says. His voice is carefully neutral.

"He's good. We've moved in together," I say. Then, I tell him about the Business Digest article and the trade we'd made to kill her original headline.

Alec frowns when I'm done. "You should come to me right away, Con, if someone's blackmailing you."

"We took care of it."

"Still." His eyebrows are pulled down low, and I know Cynthia Schultz has now landed at the top of his shit list. It must be miles long by now.

"How are the kids?" I ask.

He sighs and looks to the left, toward one of the paintings I have framed in my office. "Harper made the new nanny cry yesterday."

"Oh no. Not again?"

"Yeah. I don't have high hopes of that one sticking around much longer, either."

"You can never keep staff," I say. If it's not nannies, it's assistants, one after the other quitting or getting fired.

His eyes flash back to mine in annoyance, but then he nods. "Yeah. Sure seems like it."

"Samuel, though? He's okay?"

Alec's mouth relaxes. "He's good. He's always good."

That makes me smile. My nephew is the sweetest. My niece is too, even if she's gotten feistier as she gets older. Losing their mother so young had been hard on both of them... but her in particular. Samuel has no memories to grieve, while Harper has a few.

"So," Alec says. His tone shifts. "The Nicour deal."

"What about it?" I ask. It's an investment deal I've been spearheading for months. I'd searched out the company, built the rapport with the founder, and drafted the legal framework for our investment. The start-up has great prospects, and I want Contron to get in there before anyone else does.

We're set to sign the deal in two weeks.

"I don't want you to be the one to close it," Alec says.

"What?"



Alec looks at me calmly, his face set in familiar lines of determination. He won't budge. "You've done great work on it, Con. But remember what happened in Chicago?"

Irritation blazes through me, and my temples pound with a headache. *Yes, I remember.* The CEO in Chicago had been a dick, I'd turned down his groping hands, and he'd taken it out on our business deal.

Not that Alec knows about that.

"I just don't think you're ready yet," he continues. "It's not personal. You're young, Connie. There will be more deals to close, and this doesn't take away from all the work you've done leading up to it."

I focus on breathing through my nose. "But I'm the one who brokered the agreement and knows all the terms."

"Yes. Pass the details on to my assistant, will you?"

I start to protest, but a coughing fit robs me of my arguments.

"Have some water," Alec says and motions to the glass on my desk. I drain it, and then I point a finger at him. "I shouldn't be taken off the Nicour deal. I'm ready."

"You sound sick," he says. He gets up and buttons his suit jacket, as if the conversation is finished. Like it's all settled. "Go home, okay? Take a day off to get better."

My head pounds, and I don't know what's worse, the headache or the anger. "Is it because I married Gabriel?"

Alec heads to the door. His last words are spoken over his shoulder, matter-of-fact, and more bruising because of it.

"I trust that you mean well," he says. "But I don't trust him."

Which means he doesn't really trust me at all.

I try to do more work, but after a while, it gets near impossible. My head and my cough won't let me. By the time I leave the office, I only have one goal. To get home and order something warm, like soup or ramen.

When I finally unlock the door to the apartment I now share with Gabriel, there's already a food delivery on the way. I'd ordered in the cab, as quickly as I could, so I could spend the rest of the ride with my eyes closed.

God, my head is pounding.

I slip off my shoes, shrug out of my blazer, and head straight for one of the giant couches in the living room.

Lying down feels amazing. I stretch out and put my phone beside me to track the food delivery.

My head feels like a drum being steadily beaten, with every throb of my heart. I focus on breathing through it, and welcome the blackness behind my closed eyelids.

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“Connie?”

I burrow deeper into the pillow. Everything hurts, and I just want to sleep.

Something cool rests on my arm. “Fuck, you're burning up.”

I mumble something and keep my eyes tightly closed. The hand on my arm feels good, though. Cool. But then it disappears, and I hear footsteps recede. I don't know if it's only a few minutes or much longer, but when he returns, he slides those hands under me.

I force my eyes open. The room is dim, illuminated only by a few lights. It's already dark?

“Gabriel?”

“Yeah.

“Come on. Let's get you into bed.”

Bed sounds good. I close my eyes, and then I'm suddenly airborne, being lifted into his arms. My eyes fly open again. My legs dangle in the air, and I'm shifted closer to his chest.

He heads across the living room to the staircase. A brief thought breezes through my brain, like a whisp of cloud caught in the wind. *Something about asking to be set down, about being too heavy.* But then it's gone, and I relax into his hold.

The next thing I know, I'm stretched out on my bed. He tugs warm covers up around me, and I push them off. I'm way too hot. I turn to my side and look up at him, standing beside my bed. His eyes are locked on mine.

"Connie," he says. "I'll get you some cold cloths and an aspirin. Can you swallow that for me?"

I blink at him. But he must take that as a yes because he disappears and returns a while later. Something cool is pressed to my forehead, and an arm wraps around my waist, forcing me to sit up.

"Here." He holds out a pill. "I want you to swallow this. Okay?"

I do what he asks, and then break into a coughing fit for a solid five minutes after. When it's done, I collapse back on the mattress in exhaustion.

"How long have you been like this?" He readjusts the cold compress on my forehead, and I close my eyes again, relaxing into the soft embrace of the bed.

"Just today," I mumble.

"I don't think that's true," he says in a dark voice. "Did you order food? There was a delivery outside of our door."

"Mmm."

"Right. Well, you're not in any state for it now..." A hand brushes along my arm. It feels cool against my feverish skin, a welcome reprieve. I like it.

The mattress springs as he gets off, and the hand disappears.

"Stay," I say. Somewhere a light is shut off and the backs of my eyelids go mercifully black. I mumble the word again, before succumbing to sleep.

# Chapter 29

## *Gabriel*

I spend the night sleeping on the armchair in the master bedroom. *Sleeping* might be a generous term, but she asked, and I stayed. Coming home at midnight to a pitch-dark apartment and Connie stretched out motionless on the couch had stopped me dead in my tracks. I stared at her nonmoving form and felt like an icy hand gripped my insides.

But she was breathing, just passed out so deeply that shaking her shoulder gently did nothing. She'd been burning up, too, her skin far too hot.

I rub my eyes and glance across the master bedroom at my wife. It's morning now, and the light slips in through the gaps in the curtains. Connie is twisted around the sheets. Her breathing is fast and audible in the silent room. If the fever doesn't break soon, I'll call someone to come check on her. Fuck, maybe I should have done that already.

I shoot a text to my assistant with the instructions before I get up and stretch out my aching joints. Armchairs are good for many things, but sleeping isn't one of them.

Connie shifts in bed with restless movements. She's still in her dress, her hair a mess on her pillow. Her skin is flushed, and her eyes closed.

The cold cloth has fallen off her forehead.

I grab it and head into the bathroom, wringing it under the cold water. When I return it to Connie's forehead, she gives a soft sigh. My fingers glide down to her neck, and I press them against her skin.

She's still far too hot.

Her eyes blink open. "Hey."

"Hi," I say. "How are you feeling?"

She clears her throat, but her voice remains faint. "Awful."

"There's water here."

Connie sits up with a groan and accepts the glass I hand her. She drains more than half of it before lying back against the pillows.

“When did you get back?” she asks. Her eyes are glazed, watching mine.

“Late last night. I found you asleep on the couch, burning up with fever.”

“Oh right.” Her lids drift closed, her lips parting on a soft exhale. But then, her eyes open with a sudden realization. “Did you carry me up here?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” she mumbles. “I must have been heavy.”

“No. You’re perfect.”

She smiles a little and closes her eyes again, and I suspect she’s about to fall back asleep. I’m halfway to my armchair when she speaks again.

Her voice is a low mumble. “I didn’t expect it to be so good. So much better... than I remembered. From all those years ago.”

I pause. It’s hard not to smile. “Are you talking about you and me?”

“Mmm.” She turns over and settles in with a sigh. But then, she speaks again. “What... am I wearing a *bra*?” She says the word like it’s a personal offense.

“Probably, yeah.”

She gives an annoyed grunt and reaches behind her. She can’t quite grasp it, though, and the cold compress slides off her forehead. “Gabriel,” she says.

“Yeah, I’ll help.” I unclasp it through the fabric of her dress, and she breathes a sigh of relief, tugging the straps down her arms. “So much better,” she mumbles. “I can’t... remember the last time I was sick.”

“It’s been a few intense weeks,” I say. “Maybe your body just needs a break.”

“I don’t have the time.”

I sit down on the bed beside her and smooth her hair back.  
“You have time. You can *make* time.”

She sighs and seems to sink deeper into her pillow. “I didn’t know about you.”

“Hmm?”

“The... dyslexia.”

“Oh.” With her hair all smoothed back, I have no excuse to touch her. I settle against the headboard instead, sitting up beside her curved form. “Yeah.”

“Was it hard?”

“At times.” I look down at my hands, resting palm-up on my lap. “Mostly in the first few years of school, before I learned how to work around it.”

“What’s it like?” she asks.

Her eyes are still closed, but her hoarse voice holds nothing but soft curiosity. I wonder how lucid she is. How much of this she’ll remember.

“It’s all I’ve ever known,” I say. “My brain sometimes mixes up letters, or entire words. I’m more likely to remember things by hearing them, or watching them, than by reading. Documentaries are more helpful than nonfiction books for me.”

“Mmm. You were good in law school. I never... suspected.”

I smile. Of course, she hadn’t. I hired someone to read and spell-check all of my assignments. I’d been in contact with the administration and received extra time on tests. And I was determined, running on motivation alone, to learn things by heart rather than referring back to textbooks. I’d recited paragraphs out loud, committed them to memory, used every trick in the book. Once, I even paid a first-year law student to read an entire case file out loud for me to memorize.

“I compensated.” My hand moves of its own accord, returning to her head. I stroke her hair. Maybe I shouldn’t, but I can’t resist, and she seems to relax under my touch.

“Mmm,” she says.

I find myself speaking to the rosy curve of her ear and the matted mass of her beautiful hair. “My parents never understood it, of course. Nearly failed grade three *and* four. My father hated it. His only son... stupid.”

She makes a low sound of protest.

“Yeah. I spent years trying to prove him wrong about that. He wanted a kid who went to law school, but I knew he never thought I’d be able to. My cousin got in. And so I applied... and I did it.”

Connie blinks her eyes open. She looks around for me, finally glancing up to see me beside her. My hand stills on her head.

“He’s an asshole,” she says.

“My dad or my cousin?” I ask. “Either way, though, the answer’s yes.”

She nods, but the movement is immediately interrupted by a groan.

“Headache?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“I’ll get you another aspirin.” I get up from the bed and head to the en suite where all the medicines I’ve raided from her stash are lined on the counter.

Her broken voice reaches me regardless, soft and filled with curiosity. “What about your mother?”

“She cared,” I say. “But not enough. She was in a marriage she didn’t like, in a city she despised. They divorced two months to the day after I turned eighteen, like they’d been waiting for the clock to run out. Mom moved to Montecito soon after. She’s from San Diego, originally, and I think she



has a deep mistrust of the East Coast. Anyway, she's never looked back."

"Wow." Connie sits up and takes the pill from me. She swallows with a painful sound before taking another sip of water. I've never seen her like this. Without a mask, without her fierceness. It's a rare thing indeed, and somehow...

It feels like a privilege.

She relaxes back against the pillows and closes her eyes. A long breath escapes her. "My mother died," she murmurs.

I pause by the foot of her bed. "Yes," I say carefully. "When you were very young?"

"Mm-hmm. I don't remember her."

"Do you wish you could?"

She turns onto her side and, for a full minute, I don't think she'll answer. I've grabbed my phone to check if Darryl has replied about the doctor when her voice returns, half-muffled by the pillow.

"I used to. But maybe... it would have made it harder."

"Yeah. I can understand that."

"I've seen how much my father misses her. My brothers. Maybe it's a blessing," she says and sighs again, "that I don't."

Her breathing evens out, and the moment to ask her anything else is gone. I watch her for a while before I head out of the bedroom and call my assistant. The doctor arrives two hours later. She has to gently rouse Connie to take her temperature and assess her.

"You'll be just fine," the doctor tells her after. "It's just a flu, even if it's a strong one. The fever should break in the next day or so, and then, you'll be back on your feet, still coughing, probably, but on the mend."

I uncross my arms. "Thank God."

She smiles at me. "Your wife will be perfectly fine, Mr. Thompson."

Yes, I think, looking back at Connie's prone form. *She has to be.*

Later that day, Connie's phone rings, and then again—the same name appears on the screen. I answer on the third ring. It's her assistant Zahra.

“Mr. Thompson?” she asks. Her voice is so professional, the surprise is barely detectable. But I hear it all the same. I tell Zahra that Connie is sick and to cancel all her meetings for today and tomorrow. There's genuine concern in Zahra's responses. The two of them must be close.

Around lunchtime, I coax Connie to eat some takeout soup and bread. She falls asleep again soon after, and I return to the armchair with my laptop in hand.

There were a few meetings to cancel today, and I'm sending voice notes to Darryl for emails he's to draft. That's one of the best things about no longer being in school. I'll never have to write another essay for as long as I live. So much of business can be done on the phone, in meetings, or delegated to people with far better grammar than me.

True to the doctor's word, Connie feels better by the evening. Her fever has lessened, although her skin is still too hot for my liking. She gets out of bed to go to the bathroom, and then insists on going down to the kitchen herself to get a glass of juice.

Risky as it is, it has to be a good sign.

When she makes it back to her bed, it's with a collapse worthy of a film scene. “God, that was tough,” she says. “Why do I feel so awful?”

I lean against the door frame to the bedroom. “Because you're sick.”

She glares at me. “It's not fair that you look like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you've actually had a shower today, and changed clothes, and maybe brushed your hair.”

I chuckle. “You’re sick, princess. It’s okay not to be at your best.”

“You’re supposed to say I look great.” She piles up a few pillows behind her. It’s nearly dark out again, the day has gone by in a blur of worry.

“What do you want?” I ask. “Hungry again?”

She shakes her head and relaxes against the pillows. “No. I want to watch something on this giant TV I haven’t used yet.”

There is indeed a giant TV, mounted to the wall opposite the bed. It’s framed, too, and blends in beautifully with the decor.

“I’ll get the remote,” I say.

It takes Connie three minutes to choose an old rom-com, before she turns those green eyes on me. “Won’t you watch it, too?”

I sit down next to her on the bed, stretching out on top of the comforter. The light from the TV flickers in the half-lit room. Of all the receptions home I’d imagined on the road back from Boston, this had not been it.

Considering her mood the other day, bending her over the couch... the memories of us made it difficult to concentrate during my meetings. Anticipating what might happen next, even more so.

Beside me, Connie sighs. “My brother took my lead investment away from me yesterday.”

“He did?”

“Yes. I was set to begin the final negotiations next week. It would be my first major closure for the company. But...” She runs a hand over her face. “He said I wasn’t focused, and that I’m not ready yet.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Yeah. I don’t think they trust me fully.”

Anger burns in my chest. “What? Because of me?”

“Probably, yes.”

“Fuck that,” I say. “You’d never tell me a single Contron secret.”

She chuckles weakly. “Yeah, and you’d never give me Thompson Enterprises intel. But you know...”

“They don’t believe that,” I say. It’s not hard to picture her father on that stage, at the gala, accepting his award. *And Connie, my youngest... who gives me gray hair.*

I’ve never met anyone more eager to please or do right than Connie. Sure, she coats it in fierceness and competitiveness that’s in no way fake, but beneath it all, is the desire to do the right thing.

“It’s not just that,” she says. Her eyes are glued to the TV, but I get the feeling she’s not really watching the people on screen. “You know... the thing in Chicago?”

“The deal you negotiated for Contron?”

“Yes. They think it fell apart because I screwed up.”

“And that wasn’t the real reason,” I say. I remember what had been said following that. The statement her counterpart had made in the newspapers.

“Well, the day before the signing, he came on to me. Grabbed my ass and suggested we celebrate appropriately... I said no. Obviously.”

Something a lot like fury builds in my stomach. On the screen, characters scurry back and forth. I don’t see any of them. “He did *what?*”

“And then he issued that public statement... I didn’t know what to do. So I did nothing.” She sighs and snuggles deeper into the covers. Her eyelashes lower over her green eyes.

“Does Alec know?” I ask. “Does your father?”

There must be something in my voice because she turns to look at me. “No.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t tell them. They’ve always been... Well, overprotective is a nice way of phrasing it. I’m the baby of the family. If they knew this?” She digs her teeth into her lower lip. “They might treat me differently. Take me off negotiations, or not send me to conferences...”

My hand aches and I look down, only to see that it’s gripping the comforter so hard, my tendons stand out. I force myself to relax. “That really fucking annoys me,” I say instead.

Connie looks up at me in surprise again. “It does?”

“That the slimeball of a CEO would do that? Hell yes. That he would blame it on you? And that you felt you couldn’t... yes. It pisses me off.”

Her eyes linger on mine before she turns back to the TV. “Oh,” she says softly.

I try to watch the movie, too, but I barely see what’s happening or follow the plot, which seems pretty thin to begin with. We don’t talk for a long time. When she gets the chills—her body shaking—I grab the blanket off the armchair and drape it over her.

“Thank you.” She burrows deeper into bed. I hope it’s a good sign that she’s gone from burning up to feeling cold, but the worry still lingers.

She moves closer until she’s pressed against my side through the comforter. “Hey.”

“Connie?”

“Can you get into bed? Properly?”

I pause, staring down at her messy auburn hair and the eyes looking up at me. They look more lucid than they have been all day.

“Yeah,” I say. “Okay.”

I get off the bed and lift up the comforter, climbing inside instead. She turns to me immediately, curving up against my frame. Her arms settle over my stomach, and her head comes to rest on my shoulder. “God, you’re warm,” she murmurs.

I wrap my free arm around her and tug her close. She might be cold, but she still feels hot to the touch. I rub my hand over the smooth skin of her bare arm to heat her up.

“Thank you,” she murmurs. “I know what I said the other day. That we’d... well.”

She swallows. I feel the movement against my chest, pressed close as we are. Yeah. She had made it clear. *Hard, or nothing at all.*

I stroke her hair. “It’s okay,” I say. “We’re good. We’ll always be good, princess.”

She relaxes fully against me, her body going limp. It doesn’t take long for her breathing to even out with sleep. I hold her, relishing the feel of her warmth against me as the romantic film she chose plays out on the TV.

# Chapter 30

*Connie*

I'm too warm. My skin feels stretched thin, like my body is taking up too much space. Every sensation is heightened. The softness of the comforter against my skin. The plushness of the pillow cradling my head. And the heavy weight of an arm around my waist.

Against me, too.

Gabriel is wrapped around my body, like a hard wall behind me to cuddle up to.

Pressing myself against him feels good. It soothes some of the intense pressure within me and sends shivers down my arms. I shift closer, wiggling my hips. There's a hardness pushing against my backside, and all of my attention goes straight to it. It's a possible solution for my taut skin and the heat racing through me.

The arm around my waist tightens, almost as if in a warning. "Ignore it," he mutters into my hair.

I roll my hips again, and this time he groans.

It's tough, with his arm around me like that, to reach my pajama shorts. But I manage to find the waistband and attempt to push them down.

"Connie," Gabriel says again, voice stronger now. "You're sick."

"Mmm. I want you."

"Shit," he mutters.

His hand is splayed over my bare stomach. I reach back between our bodies. Pressed tight together as they are, it's difficult to get access, but I succeed. His erection is thick under the fabric of his boxer briefs.

"Come on." I don't know if I've ever felt this clawing need before, the way I do right now. Sex feels like it's the only solution to soothing the ache in my limbs. Between my legs.



I tighten my grip and twist to look at him. His face is close, lying on the pillow next to mine. His hair is mussed, and his eyes look hazy with sleep and desire. They meet mine, searching.

“Please,” I whisper.

He watches me for a long moment before nodding. “Yeah. I’ll go get a condom.”

A smile stretches across my lips. *Victory*, my body straining with anticipation. Gabriel’s arm disappears from my waist, and he rolls to get out of bed.

“Wait,” I say. My voice is hoarse, too, from sleep and the illness. “Check the nightstand.”

He pauses. “You stocked up?”

I lift my hips to slide off my shorts and panties. They don’t go further than my thighs, but that’ll work. “Best to be prepared,” I murmur and lie back on my side. God, I’m hot, and so needy. I don’t know if I’ve ever felt like this before. Like I might crawl out of my skin if I don’t orgasm.

“You planned on us doing this,” he says, and his voice sounds inordinately pleased. “When did you buy them?”

“A week ago.” I look over my shoulder, the words *hurry up* on the tip of my tongue. But they die when I see him rolling on a condom, lying on his back, the comforter thrown off. His cock juts up straight from his body.

Jesus.

Gabriel curves his body around mine again, his skin cool and firm against my feverish body. I wiggle closer, sticking out my ass, and his hands slip down.

He curses at what he finds. “You’re soaking.”

“Yes,” I say. *That’s the whole point.*

Gabriel tugs me near and lifts my top leg a few inches. The first slide of him against me makes me groan. My skin feels so sensitive. He finally nudges me and pushes in from behind.

A shaky breath escapes me at the delicious feeling, and my eyes flutter closed. *God, yes.*

He sinks in to the hilt and then pauses there, his left hand gripping my hip tightly. “Fuck. You’re scorching hot, Connie.”

“Mmm.” I reach down to touch myself, needing it at the same time. Needing all of it. Gabriel starts to move, and it’s with slow, careful rolls of his hips. At some point, he coaxes me to lift so he can slide his arm beneath my head. The arm wraps over my torso, gripping one of my breasts in his hand.

The slow way he fucks me is everything our last time by the couch wasn’t. Leisurely, measured, bare skin against bare skin. There’s barely an inch of me he’s not pressed against.

A distant part of me knows I should care about that.

This is the opposite of maintaining our cool, of staying unattached. But, the much larger part of me can’t be bothered to be concerned.

An orgasm barrels through me like a cool ocean breeze, soothing and powerful. I shake against Gabriel, and he curses, pausing again while buried deep inside. Another orgasm explodes, this time intensified by his circling fingers, and only then does the fire within me begin to dim.

He follows me shortly after, gripping me tight and groaning against the hot skin of my neck. I reach back and dig my hands into his hips as he thrusts deep and erratic with the force of his release.

We stay there for a very long time, still joined, bodies wrapped together tightly. My breathing comes easier now. It’s as if the fever needed a final push to break.

“Princess,” he mutters against my neck.

His lips trace my jaw, and a large hand tips my head back to meet his mouth. His lips are cool and insistent on mine. The kiss feels like a promise and a seal.

I pull back, smiling at him. “Sorry. I must be gross.”

His thumb traces my cheek. “You’re not,” he mumbles, so quietly I just barely hear him. Then, his eyes clear and his lips

tip back into the smirk I'm used to. "Want breakfast?"

"Mmm. I probably should, right?"

"It'll help you feel better." He throws the comforter back, baring us both to the warm morning light. I look down and blush at the sight. I really had just tugged my pajama shorts down.

He pulls out of me and gives my hip a familiar pat before getting out of bed.

My head feels better. Still cloudy, but that pounding headache that had been my friend over the last few days is mercifully gone. I'm painfully aware of how sweaty I feel, and gross, and *my hair*. I can't even think about it.

"I'm gonna have a shower," I say.

Gabriel pauses at the door, still naked, and looks over his shoulder. A furrow appears between his eyebrows. "Need help?"

"No thanks, I think I can handle it."

"Okay. But call out if you feel dizzy."

I nod. He grins in response and disappears.

The shower takes me much too long, but it's amazing. The water is refreshing over my skin, and I scrub at my scalp, the skin sensitive from the headaches. By the end, I'm physically exhausted but still feel ten times better.

I brush my teeth and even moisturize, too.

The woman in the mirror looking back at me looks rosy and, somehow, unarmed, too, without my usual makeup and silk blouses. I'm not a Connovan lieutenant in this moment. I look flushed and younger than I feel, especially with my hair still damp around my shoulders. The summer sun has already started to bring out my freckles. I hated them as a child, but now, I like seeing them emerge with the turning of the season.

*My mother was a redhead, too.* Neither of my brothers got that gene. Only me, and I'm the only one who has no memories of her.

I wrap a fluffy bathrobe around myself and step back into my bedroom. It looks like a bomb has gone off. The comforter is a mess, the pillows rumped, and the once taut sheet is loose from my feverish kicking.

I leave it all behind and head out. Halfway down the staircase, I catch a scent of bacon and coffee.

Gabriel's cooking?

He is indeed, I discover, finding him standing in front of the stove. He's put on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. I sit on one of the chairs by the kitchen island and rest my head on my hands. I have no energy for anything but watching him go through the motions.

"You can cook?" I ask.

He shoots me a smug grin. "Of course. Trained in France one summer, under a Michelin star chef."

"Wow."

"That was sarcasm," he says. "You would have caught that if you weren't sick. But, princess, even I can fry some bacon."

I tug on the cuff of my sleeve. "I can't."

"Oh?"

"No. No one cooked in my home growing up. Well, Annie did. She was my nanny and then our housekeeper, and stayed with us my entire childhood. But my brothers and Dad didn't."

"Not even barbecues?"

"Maybe a few," I say, "but none that I can remember. We didn't exactly have Oak Hill summers."

He makes a humming sound that's neither judging or approving. Just listening. He's good at that, I realize. Better than I would have thought.

He places a glass of cold water in front of me, complete with ice cubes, and I drain half of it.

There's something domestic about this entire scene. I know it should bother me, but I feel too drained at the moment. I

can't fight both him *and* myself.

A thought bursts through my tired brain. "Zahra!"

"What?"

"I need to call her. Tell her to cancel—"

"I did that yesterday," Gabriel says calmly. "She kept calling you, so I answered."

"Oh. Really?"

"Yes."

I sink back down onto the chair. "Good."

He grins at me, leaning against the kitchen counter. His T-shirt has ridden up to reveal an inch of skin across his lower abs. Desire turns over in my stomach again. "That's it? No reprimand?"

"No. I mean... no. That was good thinking. Thanks."

He crosses his arms over his chest, still smiling. "I think I like sick Connie."

I look down at my glass of water and twist it around. The movement sends tiny ripples over the surface. *I do, too*, I think. Or at least who we are together when the distrust is put away for a little while. Placed in a high, out-of-reach cupboard. Not forgotten, but... out of sight and temporarily out of mind.

"I like healthy Connie, too," Gabriel says. "There's no one I love arguing with more."

That makes me chuckle.

I watch him as he plates eggs and bacon and toast. It's not fancy, but it looks and smells good. He sets down my breakfast and cutlery in front of me before serving himself.

I dig into the warm eggs, chewing slowly, when another thought strikes me. "Don't you have work today?"

He doesn't pause loading the eggs, but his shoulders tense somewhat. "Technically, yeah."

"Oh. I didn't mean to keep you, you know."

“You mean this isn’t corporate sabotage?” he asks lightly, moving on to the bacon. “No, I know. But I can work from home. Unless you want the space.”

I eat an entire strip of bacon before responding. It tastes good, but I don’t feel particularly hungry. The coffee tastes amazing, though. One can never be too sick for that.

Gabriel sits down across from me, eyes briefly darting to me before returning to his food. He looks broad and casual in that T-shirt, and his hair is still mussed. *Domestic*, I think again.

“I don’t want the space,” I say. “Actually, I think I’ll watch a movie after this.”

“In bed?”

“On the couch,” I say. “Change of scenery may do me good.”

He smiles. It’s a crooked thing, and he nods. “Good thinking.”

“Join me? You know. If you have the time.”

He takes a long sip of his coffee before replying. “Yeah. I think I will.”

I change into clean clothes after breakfast and park on the giant sectional in the TV room. It’s a separate space—away from the fancy living room—complete with blackout curtains and a giant screen. This apartment is stupidly big, especially considering Gabriel got it as a facade for a happy marriage, but it sure has its perks.

Gabriel comes to join me after an hour of phone calls. Based on his damp hair, he’s just had a shower.

He laughs when he sees what I’m watching. “*This?*”

“She’s a lawyer,” I protest. On screen, the blonde actress walks across the Harvard campus in a pink two-piece, underestimated by everyone around her.

Gabriel sits down beside me and stretches out his long legs, propping them on the coffee table. I debate for a minute

or two before grabbing a pillow and tossing it on his lap.

He looks over at me in surprise.

“Stay there,” I say and lie with my head on his lap. It’s comfortable... far more than it should be.

After a few uncertain seconds, his arm comes around me. The other brushes away a few strands of my hair. I watch the screen and dig my teeth into my lower lip.

Finally, I just go for it.

“I don’t know what we are,” I say, “or what this morning was.”

Gabriel’s hand pauses on my shoulder, and I keep going. Forging through the uncomfortable feeling in my chest.

“Honestly, I don’t know if I’m a fool for starting to trust you,” I say. “But I don’t want to pretend like I don’t like... this.”

His mouth softens, and it isn’t into a smirk. It’s a half smile. His thumb smoothes over my cheek. “The feeling is very mutual, princess.”

“Oh.”

“Truce?” he asks.

I nod into the cradle of his hand. “Truce.”

He leans down, pressing his lips to mine. They’re becoming familiar in the best of ways, warm and full, and capable of spreading liquid heat through me.

“That means,” he murmurs, “that I get to choose the next movie.”

“I knew you had ulterior motives.”

He laughs and settles back against the couch, and his arm stays wrapped around me all through the film.

# Chapter 31



*Gabriel*

Connie's flu doesn't last much longer. She works from home the very next day and insists I go to the office. But she smiled while she said it.

The mood at Thompson Enterprises is good. It's hectic, too. Our deal with the firm we'd partnered with as a result of my Las Vegas visit is picking up steam, and I'm the head of the project. It involves back-to-back meetings and phone calls, which is the way I prefer to work, anyway. Getting things done on the phone is infinitely better than endless emails.

After a busy day, I arrive home to find Constance leaning against the kitchen island, scrolling on her phone. Judging by her clothes, she just got back from the office, too. Her blouse is tucked into a gray pencil skirt, and she's in a pair of heels. Her auburn hair is pulled back in a low ponytail.

She looks professional, skilled, and focused, which I'd always known her to be, but now I also know the other side of her. The soft side. The side of her that watches old movies on the couch.

I haven't lived with anyone since college. Not in a million years would I have thought that the first person I'd do it with would be Constance Connovan.

Not that I'm complaining.

She looks up, her expression softening with a smile. "Hey."

"Hello."

"I was going to order some food. Do you want some?"

"Yeah, I'm starving. What are you in the mood for?"

She leans over the kitchen island, bracing her elbows on the marble. It puts her curves on full display, and a pang of want runs through me, remembering her in just that pose, but over the couch.

“There’s a Thai place I like,” she says.

“You want some spice?”

“Yeah, I think so.” She looks over at me, and a mischievous spark lights up her eyes. It makes my body strain with familiar anticipation. “Do you?”

I walk around the kitchen counter. “Of course, I do.”

“I’ll order the spiciest thing on the menu, then.”

“Make that two.”

She chuckles and starts to order. I come to stand beside her, watching her fingers fly over the screen. Running my hand down her spine, I trace the waistband of her skirt. I dip my hand beneath it and glide my palm over her round curves.

Connie giggles again. “What are you doing?”

“I’m just saying hello, properly.” I bend to kiss her neck.

She sets her phone on the counter with a soft sigh. “Food will be here in twenty minutes.”

“Oceans of time,” I say.

She twists toward me. “I added ‘*make it really spicy*’ in the special instructions box.”

I tip her head back and lower my own, bringing our lips close. “Bring it on, princess.”

She sure does. Twenty minutes later, we’re sitting at the table with boxes of takeout, and the spicy aroma rising from the dishes is already making my eyes sting.

“Well,” Connie says. “Time to dig in, then.”

I reach for one of the curries. It’s hard not to smile. This is so goddamn silly, and yet, it’s what we’ve always done. Competed over every little thing.

“How was work?” I ask.

That fires her up. She talks while filling up her plate, about the conference she’s scheduled to attend in a few weeks, and about the project she’s working on.

I eat and listen, my mouth obscurely burning away.

“But,” she says, “I’m still so angry with Alec for the Nicour deal.”

“Oh, the acquisition he took you off?”

“Yes.”

“That was unfair of him.”

“It was unnecessary,” she says and cuts through a piece of chicken. “They’re entering final negotiations next week, and I’m the one who’s familiar with all the ins and outs of the deal. If my stepping aside was genuinely in the company’s best interests, I wouldn’t complain. Not at all. But knowing it’s just because of...”

“Me,” I say.

She looks over at me, and some of the frustration in her eyes eases. She’s gained more freckles in the sun, a beautiful smattering over her cheeks and up her forehead. “Not your fault,” she says. “Not mine, either, really. They don’t think I’m... mature enough for this, I suppose.”

“You’ve been mature since you were a kid.”

She chuckles and looks down at her food. “Feels like that sometimes. My brothers were adults most of my life, you know, and I had no cousins to play with. Makes one grow up fast under the circumstances.”

“I remember you in school.”

“Law school?”

I shake my head. “No. Well, yes, there too. But back at St. Regis.”

“You were two years ahead of me,” she says. “I saw you on campus, but I wasn’t sure if you were aware of me.”

“Of course I was. The Connovan heiress, in the same school? I was deadly aware.” The rivalry had been instilled in me as a kid, with Contron regularly mentioned in adult conversations around me. It had never been a positive thing.

Connie reaches for more rice. I need to do the same. The burning in my mouth and on my lips has reached a scorching level. “I never suspected,” she says. “We didn’t really talk until... well, law school.”

“No, we just quietly hated one another from afar,” I say.

She’d been a girl with shoulder-length hair. For a few years, she wore glasses. She usually stuck with her small group of friends, always carrying a backpack filled with books, and, sometimes, sending me dark glares across the schoolyard or the cafeteria.

Connie nods. “It was hard not to. I was told to... well. I’m sure you were, too.”

“Yeah.”

“I remember feeling so envious of you when we were at St. Regis,” she says. Her cheeks look rosy, and there’s a light sheen on her forehead.

The spicy food is affecting her, too.

“Envious?”

“Yeah. You were so popular, the captain of the lacrosse team, and always surrounded by a group of people.” She shrugs and looks down at her food. “You were good-looking, had great opportunities ahead of you...”

Both my eyebrows rise at that. Of all the assessments she’s had of me, I would never have guessed that would be one.

“Did I?”

“Yes.” Her bare foot grazes against my shin beneath the table. “Come on. What did you think of me?”

“Fishing for compliments?” I shake my head with a frown. “I always knew you’d be a needy wife.”

She laughs and reaches for her giant glass of ice water. Her lips look extra red, and I wonder if mine are the same, set ablaze by the spice. “Fine, be that way.”

“I thought you were very focused. Definitely studious,” I say. “At the prep school, I mean. We didn’t hang out in the

same circles, so I didn't really hear much. You were cute, though."

She rolls her eyes. "Right."

"You were. But it wasn't until law school that we really..."

That's when we'd been in the same class. Had our first proper conversation. Circled one another from afar, and then, in ever-tightening circles until that one night right before the summer break of our final year.

"Yeah," she says. Her eyes look glazed, and she reaches with her napkin to pat the moisture in them. "I'm not crying because of this walk down memory lane, you know."

"Oh, you're not?"

"No."

"Is it the food? Too spicy for you?"

She reaches to take another bite. "Of course not."

I wipe my own forehead. "You know, one-upping each other like this led us to an impromptu marriage. It's probably not safe for us to play this kind of game."

"Probably not," she says. "But this feels much safer than our last attempt. Hey, you can't be handling this as well as you look."

"I might be using my poker face," I say. The curry I'm eating had stopped tasting good about fifteen bites ago. Now it's just pure fire.

Connie pushes her plate away and puts her hands over her eyes. I have a brief thought that she may be crying, but then muffled sounds emerge from behind her hands.

She's laughing.

"Princess?"

"We're so stupid," she says and lowers her hands. Her eyes glitter with mirth.

"Yeah, but I thought that was a given."

"Let's call the spice-off a tie."

I put down my fork. “Thank God. I can’t wait to *never* eat another bite of this.”

She laughs and reaches up to wipe her eyes. A strand of hair has come undone from her ponytail, falling in a soft tendril down the side of her face. “Maybe we’ll always compete,” she says. “Maybe that’s just us.”

“Maybe,” I say, relishing the thought. I love when her eyes flare up in a challenge and she gives just as good as she gets. When we’re both fully present in the moment. “But I think I like it best when we’re on the same team.”

Connie’s eyes soften on mine. “Come on,” she says and gets up from the table. She’s still in her office outfit, but with flushed cheeks and a smile on her lips. “I think there’s ice cream in the freezer. I bought it before our interview.”

I watch her head into the kitchen. “You really thought Cynthia Schultz was going to open our *freezer*?”

“She’s an investigative journalist,” Connie calls back. “She wanted to prove our marriage is a sham. We couldn’t give her any reason to.”

“I get that. But again, why would she open our freezer?”

“I was covering our bases.” Connie grabs a pint and heads to the couches in the living room. “Someone had to. You didn’t even want to rehearse the questions.”

I follow her at a leisurely pace, my hands in my pockets. “Because I didn’t have to. Tell me my answers weren’t perfect.”

“I’ll give you that, actually. You performed very well.”

Something about those words makes my insides tighten. I don’t know if there will ever be a time when I won’t want her so much. Crave every inch of her against me—over, and over, and over again.

“Oh, did I?”

“Yes.” She sinks down on the couch, lying back against the pillows. The pint of ice cream is forgotten on the table as she reaches up and starts loosening her ponytail. “The article

hasn't come out yet. I called Cynthia's office yesterday, but they didn't have a firm publishing date set so far."

"Odd," I say. It's not, really. I called Business Digest the other day and asked Schultz to add a special something to that article.

"Mmm." Connie's hair falls onto her pillow. It's an auburn mane, beautiful and shiny. She lifts up a knee and gives me a look. *That look*. It's a seductive pose, and judging from the smile on her lips, she knows it, too.

"Is your mouth burning, too?"

"Yes," I say.

"We should eat that ice cream."

I close the distance between us and sink down to my knees on the couch beside her. She spreads hers a bit wider, giving me room. I let my hands trace up her bare legs to the hem of her skirt.

"If you really want to know, I thought you were fucking gorgeous the first time I saw you at law school again."

"You did, did you?"

"Mm-hmm. It's been years since St. Regis. Years since I've seen you last." She'd been in the classroom when I walked in on the first day. Already seated, books on her desk. Her hair had been longer then and braided to the side. She'd worn a tweed blazer—I can still remember it—and somehow looked both prim and ready for battle.

I grip her thighs in my hands and slide my palms further up to the curve of her backside. "God, I love your ass so much."

She chuckles. "This won't cool you down, you know."

"Worth it," I say and kiss her. Her lips feel hot and swollen from the spicy food. My need for her is immediate. Natural, strong, irresistible. Her knee comes up to my waist, bracing against me, and her hand dives into my hair. I love it when she twines her fingers into it.

I undo the buttons on her blouse, one at a time. Her chest is lightly freckled, too, little dots spreading like the stars in a galaxy over her pale skin. Her generous tits are hidden beneath the cups of her bra. I've spent some real time with them now, and fuck, there's just nothing like them. Soft swells and pink nipples, and bigger than a handful, spilling out of my grip in the most delicious sense.

"So, you never thought I was... too big?" Connie asks. Her breathing has sped up, and her arm is still around me, but there's a shyness to her voice.

I lift my head. "What?"

"Too much," she says and gestures down her form. "I didn't use to like my... body. When I was younger."

*"What?"*

She chuckles. Her blush has intensified, spreading up from her chest to her cheeks. "That's the second time you've said that."

"Because it doesn't make sense. I mean, sure, everyone has their insecurities. But this body..." I shake my head and look down at the deliciousness on display. Pinkish, smooth skin, soft stomach, generous hips, full thighs. "You're a work of goddamn art."

Connie laughs and shrugs out of her blouse, leaving only the skirt I've rucked up around her hips and her lace bra. "And you're an art connoisseur, are you?"

"No, I'm your husband."

Her eyes widen. "Oh."

I kiss along her neck, her chest, and let my free hand grip her ass again. "You're gorgeous, princess. Every last inch of you."

Her hand slides into my hair, fingers gripping in the way that shoots electric jolts straight down my spine. I reach for her other hand and twine our fingers together, looking into her green eyes. "There's no way I'm sleeping in the guest room again."



Her eyes dance. “You’re not?”

“No.” I lower down until my lips are only an inch from hers. “I’m going to sleep in my king bed, in my apartment... with *my* wife.”

Her hand glides along my jaw. “Call me that again.”

So I do, over and over again, while fucking her on the couch. Her legs wrap around mine, her nails dig into my shoulders, both of us on fire. Quelling it this way is so much better than ice cream.

I really do like us better on the same team.

# Chapter 32

Connie

“Is that you?” I call. I’m standing by the mirror in the bathroom, putting on my earrings. I’ve changed after work into a breezy summer dress and sandals, ready for a fun night out in the city. Gabriel and I are going on a date.

“Of course, it’s me,” he says. His voice is unusually irritated. “If it wasn’t, I’d want you to arm yourself.”

“With what? Nail scissors?” I ask.

Gabriel had suggested the night out yesterday. *Let’s not do takeout*. As dates go, not a very romantic proposition. It was casual... just like everything has been lately with this unexpected slide into intimacy between us.

I’m afraid that if we speak about it, if we acknowledge the shift between us, the bubble might pop.

“Yes.” There’s a sigh and the sound of the bed creaking.

I look out to see him stretched out on our bed. He’s still in a navy suit from work, and his eyes are closed, a hand over his forehead.

The pose makes me smile. “Dramatic, are we?”

“Honey, I’m home,” he says dryly, “and I’ve had an *awful* day.”

“Tell me about it.”

He groans. “My cousin is a dick.”

“Did you play football today, too?”

“No, I wish. He’s just smug and insufferable, and does it in front of our employees, too. We were in meetings all day about a joint new investment, and he was so much worse than usual. I know this is hard to believe, but, sometimes, he’s actually all right. Today, though... man, he looked way too pleased with himself. He’s up to something.”

“I’m glad I don’t have any cousins.”

Gabriel's eyes flare with anger. "You know what really pisses me off? How unnecessary this is. We have the same goddamn goal. The CEO position is still at least a decade away. Neither my dad nor aunt will retire anytime soon. Jacob should be working *with* me, instead of against me."

"I'm sorry." I come to stand at the edge of the bed, and Gabriel sits up. He leans his head on my chest, and I run my hands through his thick hair.

"I wish we'd have another game soon," he mutters, "so I could beat him up."

That makes me chuckle. "As long as I don't have to watch. The last game was... brutal."

"Mmm." He leans back with his arms still locked around my waist. "You look nice." Then he frowns, a deep groove appearing between his eyebrows. "Right. We have dinner plans."

"Yes." I smooth some hair back from his brow. "But we can order in."

"No, we should go out. Soon." His hands glide over my hips, his eyes dipping down to the low neckline of my dress. "You're very pretty."

I laugh again. "Thank you."

"You in a sundress is... distracting."

"Well, so are you in a suit, you know."

His mouth tips up into that smug smile, like he enjoyed that a little too much. "Good to know," he says and leans forward to rest his head on my breasts. "So you—"

The ringing of his phone breaks through the moment. He curses, and I laugh again, stepping out of his embrace. He lies back on the bed and pulls his phone out of his pocket, answering it without looking at the screen.

"Thompson," he says.

I head into the bathroom to finish getting ready, but his conversation is impossible not to overhear.

“Right. I appreciate you getting back to me,” he says. “Mm-hmm. Right. I’ll talk to her. Yes. Yes, I’ll do that... Thank you. Bye.”

I reach for the bottle of perfume and raise my voice. “That sounded interesting.”

There’s complete silence from the bedroom.

“Gabriel?”

He’s staring up at the ceiling, and there’s a tension in his jaw that hadn’t been there before. “Who was that?” I ask.

“Francis Kilburn,” he says.

Oh.

The city’s premier divorce lawyer. Famous for his negotiating skills, his talented team, and his ruthless way with words.

I’d contacted him, too, right after our wedding. I’ve been told I was on a waitlist.

“What did he say?” I ask.

Gabriel looks at me. There’s an emotion in his eyes I can’t name, can’t place. “He said you emailed his office first, by three hours, and so he can’t represent me.”

My mouth opens in surprise. I can’t think of a single word to say. Not one.

Gabriel looks back up at the ceiling. “At least great minds think alike.”

“There are other divorce lawyers,” I say. “Trevor from law school does divorces, I know. Whittler & Sons specialize in these kinds of cases—you can reach out to them. I’m sure they’d put you at the top of the waitlist with a bit of encouragement.”

“Are you giving me recommendations for a divorce lawyer, princess?”

“Oh. I suppose I am... yeah.”

He shakes his head again and then he sits up so quickly I have to blink. “But not yet,” he says. “Right? Not yet.”

“No... not yet. Not for a long time,” I say.

Not while things are this good. Not when I’ve just discovered *this*, the joy to be had here. In enjoying him, and us enjoying this. The rest will have to come later. The real conversations.

The heavy decisions.

“You’re not getting rid of me yet.” He reaches out and catches me around the waist, pulling me close. I teeter on the balls of my feet and then tip over, landing next to him on the bed.

Our bed.

“Not yet,” he mutters and starts kissing my neck. The sundress has thin straps over my shoulders, and he easily brushes them aside to kiss along my collarbone. I slide my hand into his hair and relish the sensations. I love this. How much he needs me, and how much I need him. The fire hasn’t lessened, yet.

It blazes up again, every time he touches me.

“Not yet,” I agree. I wrap my leg around his hip. He’s big and warm against me, and so real, so *here*, that it’s hard to think of a scenario when we’d end this. I know it has to come eventually, but I can’t picture it.

My hands tear at his suit jacket and the buttons of his shirt. He shrugs out of both and tosses them to the side before returning to me, bracing himself above me.

“Screw dinner,” I mumble. He kisses me hotly, fiercely, like we’re racing against the clock.

“No.” His lips move down to my neck, and the scruff along his jaw sends shivers over my sensitive skin. “I’m going to fuck you first, yes, but then, I’ll take you out to dinner in this pretty dress.”

“Oh?” I wiggle against him and feel the dress ride up around my hips, freeing my legs to wrap completely around

him. I reach down to his belt buckle. “Hurry, then. We have a reservation.”

He sits back on his knees and shoves my dress up to my waist. There’s a fierce color on his cheeks and determination in his eyes. He looks glorious. A conqueror, a warrior, and a man I’ve known most of my life. Perhaps, the only man who’s ever truly seen me.

He pushes his pants and boxers down, freeing himself. I’m well acquainted with his cock by now, but my throat still goes dry at the heavy weight of it. He tugs my panties to the side and lines himself up, a blunt, hot pressure against me.

“You’re mine,” he says.

Yes, yes, and I can’t wait, I need it so badly—

“Shit,” I say. “Condom. We need a condom.”

He pauses, hands gripping my thighs. A wry trace of amusement crosses his face. “Really? You *don’t* want me to put the next Thompson heir in you?”

I roll my eyes. “No. Come on, Gabriel. I need you.”

His smile turns crooked. He fists himself hard and reaches over to the nightstand, grabbing a condom. “Don’t worry,” he says dryly and rolls it on with practiced skill. “I wouldn’t saddle you with a kid you’d hate.”

I open my mouth to protest, but then he’s pushing inside me, holding my left leg up high, and the words die on my lips. All I can do is focus on breathing. The angle allows him to hit all the right spots, and I can’t think around the pleasure.

He rolls his hips in quick, hard movements.

“Not, yet,” I say in between moans. “Not... yet.”

He lowers down onto his elbows until his mouth is only inches from mine. “You’re mine,” he says again. “You’ve been mine since that drunken night in Vegas... and before that, too, even though you didn’t know it, yet.”

“Yes,” I breathe.

His thrusts speed up with bruising intensity. “And I’m tired of us both pretending you’re not.”



## Chapter 33

Connie

I wake up the next morning well rested. Warm summer light shines into the window, Gabriel is sleeping beside me, and there's a pleasant ache in my body from both the before and the after-dinner activities.

My mood darkens almost immediately, though, upon checking my phone. There's a text waiting for me from Alec.

Come to my office as soon as you can this morning. It's important. Dad's here.

And right below it, one from Nate. With him in London, he's been awake for hours already, but his text is only from about forty minutes ago.

I'm afraid they've discovered your little charade, Con. Sorry. Call me later if you want.

Ice-cold dread floods my veins.

It doesn't disappear with the hot shower I race through, or with the hot coffee I drink in the cab on my way to the office. If anything, the fear settles deeper, turning to nausea in my stomach.

The way to work is painfully familiar. The grand lobby of the office building, the elevator that takes me to the twenty-first floor, the space that is owned and operated entirely by this company. By my family. Our kingdom, the one I've wanted to live in and fight for my entire life. The employees give me nods of hello as I walk through, and I do the same to them, careful to keep a neutral smile on my face.

I briefly stop by my office to leave my purse and then walk down the long hallway to the corner office. It had once been my father's but is now Alec's. *CEO* is emblazoned on the door in gold letters. Some offices have glass doors, encouraging openness and transparency. That has never been the case here.

Alec's assistant calls to let him know about me being here, and shortly after, the wooden door swings open. It's automatic. One of Alec's installments, one he can control from behind his desk.

A king who never has to leave his throne.

I step inside.

Alec is sitting behind his desk. Behind him, leaning against one of the glass windows, is Dad. He's casually dressed in khakis and a button-down, a pair of sunglasses on his head. He was probably heading out boating or golfing today. Great. I've annoyed him *and* disrupted his plans.

They're wearing identical frowns.

"Good morning," I say.

"Connie," Dad says. "Have a seat."

I do just that, ignoring the nerves that are buzzing in my stomach. The coffee had been a bad idea. I feel jittery and too on edge, and I need to be sharp to handle whatever is thrown my way.

Alec's eyes are kind. That's what throws me off. They look just slightly soft, like he's sorry, and he never looks like that.

"I want to show you something," he says and turns his laptop around. There's a grainy image on it, and as he hits *Enter* on the keyboard, it comes to life.

It's a video.

It seems it's from some sort of CCTV camera, judging by the odd angle. My stomach drops when I recognize the building on the screen. It's the chapel I got married in. It's a feed from Las Vegas.

"What is this?" I ask.

"Just wait." Dad is still standing behind Alec. His eyes are heavy on mine. If Alec's were kind, his are disappointed.

I look back at the video in time to see the doors open. Two people stumble out. One is wearing a veil set askew, and the other has a cigar in hand.

Gabriel and me.

In the top right corner of the screen, the CCTV's built-in clock blinks in red, incriminating numbers. 03:16 a.m.

I watch myself in horror. In the video, I look giddy and almost manic from this angle, laughing at something Gabriel is saying. His hands move about, and his hair is a mess, and then I break out laughing, almost doubling over.

It's somewhat eerie to watch it without any sound.

On screen, I take a stumbling step off the sidewalk. Gabriel is there a second after, an arm around my waist and a huge grin on his face. Even in this grainy video, I see that he looks intoxicated. We both do.

Very obviously so.

We disappear out of frame. The last thing I see is a cab pulling up, and then the video ends.

"A planned Las Vegas elopement, huh?" Alec asks.

I lean back in my seat to buy myself some time to find the right words, but they won't come.

"It was a drunken decision," Dad says. "Were you too proud to admit that?"

I wet my lips. "It wasn't planned, no. But—"

"My PI has been investigating this so-called relationship," Dad continues. "You two weren't dating for months, so there's no need to pretend like you were. There's no evidence of either of you seeing each other."

"No. We weren't," I admit. Panic is starting to set in, growing stronger with every second they both continue to look at me like that. "It was a drunken mistake. But it was one I've tried to correct. Both of us are already in talks with divorce lawyers, and... and... pretending as if the marriage is real was the best decision. Optics-wise, for myself and for the company. We'll quietly divorce when the speculation has died down."

Alec's mouth tightens into a thin line. "Yes, the company. Have you never considered that he married you because of Contron?"

"Of course, I have," I say. "But it's not true. You saw that video. He was drunk, too."

"Easy to fake," Dad says.

"How did you get that video, by the way? Was that the PI?"

Alec ignores my question. "Connie, he's in line to be the next CEO of Thompson Enterprises."

"I know that."

"He's competing with his cousin."

"I know that, too."

Alec shakes his head. "Gaining company secrets from you, or even just gaining your trust to then hurt you... it would put him ahead of his cousin for the position. Surely you realize that. What might have struck you as a drunken mistake on both of your parts was really a calculated move."

"It wasn't. I was there, and I'm the one who has been talking—"

"Enough," Dad says. He doesn't use that tone often anymore, but all of a sudden, I'm ten years old again. He steps forward and tosses a stack of papers my way. "You're divorcing him, and you're doing it now."

I stare down at the papers in front of me. Francis Kilburn's name is on the top.

"This won't be cheap, but it doesn't matter," Dad says. "There's no way he'll get his hands on your stake in Contron, and he won't get a penny from your trust."

"This will make the papers," I say. My head is spinning. "We haven't even been married for—"

"It's not up for debate," Dad says.

“Look, I know he’s not playing me,” I say. “Trust me for once, okay? That’s not the kind of... that’s not why Vegas happened.” I look across the desk at Alec.

His eyes have gone even softer. Like he pities me. “Con,” he says. “We just got a call this morning from the founder of Nicour.”

My eyes blink rapidly. “What?”

“They’ve been poached by Thompson Enterprises.”

I look from my brother to my father and back again. The words barely register, but then they do, and the reason for why they’re looking at me like that. “You think Gabriel had something to do with it?”

“Did you tell him about the Nicour deal?” Alec asks. “How close we were to signing it?”

I shake my head on instinct, but stop as soon as the memory resurfaces. *Yes, I had.* Because I’d been so disappointed that Alec took me off running point on the negotiations...

But Gabriel can’t have. He couldn’t.

“It’s okay,” Dad says. “You’ve made a few mistakes. Let us handle things from here on out.”

I look from one to the other. It can’t be, though. Why would he risk everything for that deal? Why would he... unless they’re right.

But it doesn’t make any sense to me.

“From here on out,” Alec says, “I don’t want you discussing a single thing about Contron with Thompson. Not even what you had for lunch at the office.”

I nod. If it was hard to find my words earlier, they’re completely gone now. All I’ve ever wanted is for them to see me as a valuable asset. To be a part of the team, like Alec. Like Nate.

“These papers?” Dad says and reaches over to tap his fingers on the desk. “Look them over. Prepare for negotiations.

There's no way he'll go down easy, but we'll be ready. I want you free of him."

The heavy tone of disappointment is laced through every single word. They drop like stones upon me, settling heavy and painfully in my stomach.

I feel like crying.

It's irrational, but it's there, welling like a wave behind my eyes. I bite on my tongue hard enough to taste blood. I can't show them that. They'll think it's because of this, and maybe it is, but maybe it's because of the way they're looking at me.

Maybe it's both. All of it. It's like the tightrope I've been walking for weeks has suddenly been cut, leaving me in freefall.

"Connie?" Alec asks.

I look down at the papers. *One problem at a time*, I think. It's the only way to make it through this.

"I'm sorry I lied about the marriage." I get up off the chair and scoop up the divorce papers. "I'll give Nicour a call."

"I don't think that's—"

"Let me try," I say. "It can't hurt."

They reluctantly nod, so similar, the two of them, just several decades apart. I leave them like that. Both of them in the corner office, Dad in his golfing attire and Alec in a tailored suit.

*Good thing Dad already has all his gray hairs*, I think wryly. I make it into my office before my mask crumbles. Nicour. Stealing clients. Who has the video? Who knows?

My brain runs a mile a minute, and I force it to slow down, force my breathing to even out.

Then I call the founder of Nicour. He picks up on the third ring, sounding slightly rueful.

"Hello, Constance," he says. "I'm sorry."

I force some cheer into my voice. “Don’t be. I’m assuming you got a great offer from Thompson Enterprises.”

“Yes, we did. It wasn’t... look, it wasn’t planned. But then, we heard that you wouldn’t be there for the final negotiations. To be honest, it made me wonder how much Contron really values my business.”

I close my eyes and force myself to breathe.

“Constance?”

“Sorry, Jake,” I say. “I understand if you want to take your company elsewhere, but let me give this one last shot. I promise we’ll match whatever Thompson is offering and more. You know me, you know us, and what we can deliver. I’ll personally be at the helm every step of the way. Including at the negotiations.”

Fifteen minutes later he sounds convinced, and will give me a firm response by the end of the day. I am good at my job. *I* know that. But why does it feel like it’s only me?

The way they’d looked at me... it was like every single one of my fears had come true. They’ll never see me as anything but the girl they need to protect and coddle, who isn’t capable of being the mistress of her own destiny. Who can’t be trusted with her own decisions, not to mention those concerning others. Clients and companies.

Failure after failure.

I look down at my left hand and the two rings that rest side by side. The emerald engagement ring he’d chosen for me.

I knew I shouldn’t have gotten feelings.

But here I am, and damn him, and *damn me*, because I had anyway. Remaining distant with Gabriel Thompson was impossible. He’d made it impossible.

And damn him for that, too.



## Chapter 34

*Gabriel*

Connie doesn't come home that evening. It's not like her, She's not the type to unexpectedly stay out all night. I text her and call her twice, but there's no response. Not until it's almost 10 p.m.

Sorry, I'm staying with my friend Isabel tonight.  
Forgot to tell you.

Right. I go to sleep in the bed we now share, the sheets carrying her scent but not her. It feels too big without her, and my night is far from restful, but maybe that's the price I have to pay for getting used to having her close. It's one I'm happy to pay.

But she's not home the next morning, either.

I head straight to the office. My cousin is out of the city for a few days, thankfully, and I can focus uninterrupted on the projects I'm driving forward.

So when he calls me midday, I consider not picking up. Why ruin a day that's going well? But it could be important. There *are* times when we can be civil and just focus on the work at hand, after all, even if these are becoming increasingly less common.

So I answer it, against my better judgment.

"Hey," I say.

"Hello, Gabriel," he says. His smug voice instantly rubs me the wrong way. "Have you checked your email inbox?"

"No." I haven't checked my email at all. It's my least favorite part of the job.

"Well, I suggest you do. I'll stay on the line."

There's a new email waiting there for me from Jacob. It doesn't have a subject line, and embedded into it is a grainy video file.

It takes me five seconds to figure out what I'm watching.

"Jacob," I say.

"You know, I think my mother and uncle would like to see it, too. Because it doesn't look like you were playing some kind of long game here. It looks like you made a drunken mistake. One without a prenup, and one the company might have to pay for." He makes a clicking sound with his tongue in disapproval. "Doesn't speak very highly of your character."

"And you think this speaks highly of yours?" I ask. Anger is a raging fire in my veins.

"I think the reporter at Business Digest would love to see this. Don't you? What a headline... The heirs to the competing New York companies get married while too drunk to stand."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I? After all, Thompson Enterprises is a legacy intended for both of us. I want to make sure there's one left for me to steward."

"Leaking that video publicly would harm its reputation. If you're seriously thinking of doing that, I have news for you. You're not the one caring for this company."

"Hmm. And you are?" He chuckles. "God, to be a fly on the wall over at Contron."

"What do you mean?"

"You always were slow, weren't you."

I don't have time for this. "You sent this video to Contron."

"Sure did, around this time yesterday. How's the wife? Oh, someone's calling my name. I have to run. Enjoy the rest of your day, cousin."

"Fuck you."

He chuckles a final time before hanging up.

Anger makes it hard to see straight. I watch the video again, seeing her, seeing me. Seeing us.

Making the best mistake of my life.

I text Connie again. The pounding in my temples is making it harder than usual to focus on getting the letters right, and after a few attempts, I give up and dictate the text instead.

I've seen the video. Call me back, or meet me at the apartment. We need to talk.

Hours pass without a reply. *Hours*. It's so unlike her and her Type A personality that a worry starts to gnaw on my stomach. I make it back home, to the apartment we now share. In the last few days, it started to feel like home. But the place is dark, without a single light on, and painfully empty.

I manage to wait fifteen minutes before I call her. She doesn't pick up. I scroll down my contacts list and find the one number I've never interacted with before.

I never thought I would.

I place the call. Signal after signal rings out until there's a crisp voice on the other end.

"Connovan. Who's this?"

"It's Gabriel. Where's Connie?"

Her brother is silent on the other end. Then his voice comes, acidic and cold. "Why would I tell you that?"

"Because I need to talk to her."

"I'm sure you do," Alec says. "Not my problem."

Oh, this fucking guy. Everything Connie has told me flashes through my mind, crystallizing in a dislike so clear, it tastes bitter on my tongue.

"Where's my wife?" I ask again.

He scoffs. "Just because the two of you signed a piece of paper in Vegas, it doesn't make you a husband and wife. That takes far more than a signature."

"I don't have time for this," I say. "Ask Connie to call me so we can figure this out."

“Right. I’ll do that right after I drive her over to your place, shall I?”

“Fine. We were drunk when we got married. You know that now. Honestly, it’s probably for the best, even if it was my cousin who sent you that video.”

There’s silence on the other end.

“Oh, you didn’t know about that?” I ask. “Yeah. He has no love for me, but a great deal for himself. If this marriage was planned in some way, do you think he’d impede my progress by sending you that video?”

“I’ll look into it,” is Alec’s clipped reply. There’s a sharp sound in the background, like a child’s raised voice.

“Where’s Connie?”

“If she wants to talk to you, she will,” he says. The line goes dead immediately after, and I’m left alone in the silence of my apartment. Of our apartment.

It’s very easy to imagine the shit he must have given Connie upon finding out, upon seeing that video. I feel charged with energy—anger and frustration pounding through my body.

She’s safe, at least. Just nursing her wounds alone, the way I know I’d prefer, too. Or at least I used to. Now there’s no one I want to be around more than her.

Wounds or no wounds.

I pour myself a bourbon and sink down on the couch, waiting for her to return to me. She always has in the past. It might take months or years, but inevitably, she’ll show up fierce and strong as always.

It takes a few hours, but she does this time, too.

# Chapter 35

Connie

I open up the door to the apartment that has become my home. There's dread in my stomach, mingled with anticipation. The night away had been necessary... but also painful. Gabriel's become so familiar to me now that it had been a physical ache to be away from him.

"Hello?" My voice sounds steadier than I feel. I drop my bag on the hallway table but leave my sandals on. "Gabriel?"

Steps echo through the oversized living room, with the giant windows and the double couches. It looks vacant and dark, but an empty tumbler on the coffee table gives me hope.

Gabriel strolls out of the home office with a grim expression on his face. It's so unlike him that it strikes a punch straight through my nerves. Is he upset, too? Or is this his real face? Had he really been...

I can't think the words. *Playing me* sounds too silly, but exploiting sounds far, far worse.

Guilt is a churning emotion within me. There's so much of it, I can't even pinpoint who it's for. My family. Him. Myself.

The looks from my father and my brother haunt me.

"Hi," I say. "So... they know. My father, my brother. About what our marriage really is. Soon enough, perhaps everyone will."

He leans against the couch and crosses his arms across his chest. "You think everyone will know?"

"If the video gets spread publicly. Somehow, they got a hold of the CCTV footage from our wedding chapel." I don't know if my family will ever trust me again. "Gabriel, did you tell your coworkers or family about Nicour?"

A deep furrow appears between his brows. "What about it?"

“That we were set to sign next week.” There’s something crawling inside of me, and I can’t stand still. I start to pace the room. “Because Thompson Enterprises tried to poach them yesterday. Someone on your team had to *know* we were signing next week because they offered them a better deal.”

There’s absolute silence from his side.

“Gabriel, just tell me the truth,” I say. “Just... whatever it is, I can handle it. Just tell me. Okay? Because if you did it...”

He laughs.

It’s not a happy sound. It sounds disbelieving. “Princess, of course I fucking didn’t.”

“But how did—”

“Was it public knowledge?”

“Not public,” I say, shaking my head rapidly. “No, not... I mean, it wasn’t a secret. I know the founder of Nicour spoke with members of his team about the deal.”

Gabriel curses. It catches me so off guard that I stop my pacing. “What?”

“It had to be my cousin. He’s the one who emailed the video to your brother, too, by the way. I should wring his scrawny neck.”

“*What?*”

“Jacob called me about it earlier to gloat. I have to admit, him telling me about it helped explain why you weren’t answering my calls.” He shoots me a dark look. “I don’t like not knowing where you are.”

“I needed some time. People *know* now. He could leak that video to everyone!”

“He won’t,” Gabriel says.

“He might! And if he has access to the video, there’s no telling who else does. But it doesn’t matter. The damage is already done.” The painful ball of guilt in my stomach flips over, lodges itself against my insides. “We have to speed up



the divorce proceedings. I got some papers here... we should start negotiations right away. It's the only way."

"The only way for what?"

"To make this right," I say. My voice sounds shrill to my own ears. "My family, they were so... Gabriel, they'll never trust me again if I don't make this right. I have to prove to them that it wasn't you who tried to poach Nicour. That marrying you was a mistake, sure, but not the one they think. I *have* to make it right."

His eyes are flinty. "Stop it."

"Stop what?" I shake my head, pacing behind the couch again. "There's no other way. We need to put this behind us and have the most amicable divorce. If you want us to negotiate for months, Gabriel, we can, but I would ask you to *please* not. Please. Let's be cordial about it, and then I can... shit." I feel on the brink of tears. "Then I can try to get back into the good graces of my dad. God, my brother is never going to trust me again. Not with anything."

"Princess," Gabriel says. His voice is hard, and when I look over, his eyes are on fire. "*Stop it*. Stop trying to please everybody for *once* in your life."

My eyes widen. "What?"

"Stop being a damn coward," he snarls. It's so unlike him, unlike the man I've gotten to know, that it feels like a slap in the face.

"You... asshole," I whisper.

"Yeah, Connie, maybe I am an asshole, but you're being a fool, and I know who I'd rather be." His chest rises and falls, and I'm stuck with the harsh shock of his words. "You have an opportunity to make something yours here. Yours, outside of the family company and your oppressive brothers, and the expectations you've tried to live up to your entire life. Because I'll tell you something about trying to live up to expectations—you never will. The goalposts will keep moving, one foot at a time, and you'll *never* catch up. Never."

“That’s not fair,” I whisper. “They’re my family. They’re the only thing I have.”

Gabriel’s eyes are angry, his eyebrows drawn down. “Are they, Connie? The *only* thing you have?”

“Yes,” I say. What else is there? I can’t... *him?*

“You married me,” he says fiercely. “Own up to that.”

I can’t breathe, looking at him. He can’t mean what I think he does. We’ve never spoken about feelings. Not once. Never admitted to anything beyond desire. Surely he can’t mean...

I feel unmoored, adrift.

This isn’t how I anticipated this conversation.

Gabriel shakes his head like he’s also disappointed in me. It seems as if letting people down is the only thing I know how to do today. He heads for the front door.

But I can’t handle that from him, not on top of everything else. I follow him before I can think of what to say, racing after him to the door. “Gabriel.”

“Whatever,” he says.

“No, not whatever. We need to solve this.”

His shoulders look tense, and he doesn’t turn around. Just pauses by the door.

“I don’t know what to say,” he says. His voice sounds rough, and there’s something broken about it, hidden beneath all the anger. “I can’t give you what you want. Not right now.”

“I don’t know what I want.” It feels like the truest thing I’ve said in a long time, and it’s so scary, I can’t speak it any louder than a whisper.

*I think I want you, my mind murmurs. Do you want me, too?*

“Well, that’s a problem,” he says, “because I do, princess.” He walks down the hallway to the elevators that will take him away from me.

“Gabriel!” I call.

He doesn't turn. I watch him disappear into the elevator—the stainless steel door sliding shut—leaving me alone, reeling with those words in my head.

# Chapter 36

*Gabriel*

Wanting something is much easier when you don't know what having it feels like. How good it could be, or how sweet the forbidden fruit tastes.

Now I know, and the knowledge haunts me.

It's so much worse than it was after law school because this had potential. It wasn't drunken inhibition, and it wasn't brief. It was real. It *is* real.

I rest my head on my hands. Sitting on the couch in our apartment feels like a double-edged sword. She might walk in at any time, but after our argument, odds are, she won't. But the memory of her is all around me.

She'd wanted to run from the very beginning. Hadn't she? Maybe her family's disapproval is just an excuse.

I told her to stop trying to live up to their expectations. God knows I've learned that the hard way, through a childhood of constantly failing to impress. I became a master of subverting them instead.

Her fucking family.

The anger I feel is partly at myself, partly at her, and so much at them. For sidelining her and then doing *this*, making her feel like she has to choose. And in this scenario, I know I'll be the one who is left by the curb. She has too much to lose to make any other decision.

*Nothing lasts*, I think. My mother had left as soon as she could. My aunt's marriage was over by the time my cousin was ten. However real something is, it doesn't last.

I head into the office the next day, anger still burning inside me. It's near bursting, and I know exactly who will bear the brunt of it. My cousin is finally back at headquarters. He's a smug speck in the distance, standing outside my aunt's office. I head straight in that direction, my strides lengthening like I'm charging to war.

He looks up at me, and for just a second, his smug expression falters. But the mask quickly slips back into place. “Hello, cousin.”

My aunt is beside him. She pushes the door open wider. “Your father’s already inside,” she says. Her lips are pinched in disapproval, but there’s a glint in her eyes that tells me she enjoys this.

Dad is lying on the couch my aunt keeps in her office, his feet up on a cushion, his hands clasped over his chest. “Gabriel,” he says. “How nice of you to join us.”

“I assume by now you’ve seen the video,” I say. I’m only looking at Dad and Sharon. If I focus on my cousin, I might lose it.

“That’d be a correct assumption.” My aunt leans against her giant desk, a lioness sharpening her claws. “Tell me again how marrying the Connovan heiress was some kind of brilliant business plot.”

“It wasn’t. We were drunk in Vegas.”

There’s a chuckle from the couch. “You’ve always had a way with words, son.”

“So give it to us straight,” Sharon says. “How are you planning on leveraging this? Are you plying her with wine and pillow talk to get the Contron secrets... or did your stupid mistake open you up to the possibility of years-long contested divorce and loss of assets?”

My hand fists at my side. It’s my left one, and I feel the cold bite of the wedding ring digging into my flesh. “I’m not trying to leverage it.”

The room falls quiet, like we’re collectively holding our breaths.

Dad’s the first to break the restless silence. “*What?*”

“It was a drunken mistake, but that doesn’t mean I regret it,” I say. “If we divorce, it will be because we choose to. It won’t have anything to do with the companies, the families, or the press. None of it.”

My cousin comes to stand beside my dad. His eyes are wide in what looks like horrified amusement. Probably because the bastard can't imagine having a single sincere emotion.

My aunt scoffs. "Don't tell me you've started to care for the girl."

"She's my wife."

"She's a Connovan."

My anger rises to the surface. It bleeds through my voice. "What is this rivalry anyway, but petty fucking competition? A yardstick to measure us against? We have increased our revenue every consecutive year bar two for the past *three* decades. We're Thompsons. We thrive on competition. If anything, the Connovans have kept us on our toes. We should be *thanking* them for never allowing us to get complacent."

My cousin shakes his head. "You're proving your true loyalties now."

"No," I say. "You've proven you have none."

Dad laughs. It's a surprising sound, and we all turn to where he's reclining on the couch. My aunt has always been the attack dog, but that doesn't mean my dad lacks fangs. He just has different tactics.

"What's so funny?" Sharon asks.

He shakes his head, a grin on his face. "My son has fallen in love with a Connovan. Isn't that just my luck?"

I take a deep breath. The next words are tough to say. They go against the grain that runs so deep, it's practically carved into my bones.

"You both know how much value I add to this company. I'm the best closer we've got, and you both know it, even if you won't admit it right now."

My cousin opens his mouth, but I hold up a hand in his direction. "Not you," I say. "I'm not talking to you. Look, Connie and I will figure out our lives independently of the companies. I'll never leak Enterprises' information, or sell the

company out in any way that would harm our employees. But I can promise you this, if it comes to a choice between my wife or my career, I know what I'll pick."

The words seem to echo in the spacious office my aunt calls her own. She stares at me with a frown, like she'd heard the not-so-subtle threat in my words. My father stares at me with inscrutable eyes. I can't tell if he's proud or angry. But then, I never could.

I turn to leave. There's more to say, more swirling beneath the surface, but not right now. I'm over this.

"Gabriel," Dad says. "The family *is* the company."

My shoulders tense. *Don't I know it, I think. But I have my own family now.*

---

Returning to our apartment that evening is an exercise in patience. Riding the elevator, opening the door, *wondering...* only to find it empty.

Again.

I spend the next hour googling the asshole in Chicago who pulled the moves on Connie, and trying to find angles to ruin his business. It doesn't make me feel better, but it definitely takes the edge off some of the bitterness. At least I can do this. Leverage my position somehow to make this man's life fucking miserable.

It's late when I remember to order takeout. I sit on the couch, staring at the front door like I expect it to open. For Connie to come in and say she's sorry. That the divorce isn't right, that it's actually the wrongest of decisions. For her to finally say those words.

*I want you.*

And mean them in more than just the physical sense.

The doorbell rings, and I sigh, getting up to answer it. It'll be Indian food, not Connie. That I know.



It's not the food.

But it's not Connie, either.

I frown at the man staring back at me. "Alec?"

The dark-haired man I've only met a handful of times steps past me into the apartment. His facial features are tense, speaking of a man trying to keep his anger at bay. It's an expression I recognize well.

Worn it myself often these last few days.

"Gabriel," he says. He stops by the kitchen counter to put his briefcase down. "Never a pleasure."

"Right back at you," I say.

He looks up with a flicker of surprise, but then his frown deepens. "This whole thing has been really low of you," he says. "Even for a Thompson."

"You think?" There's restrained fury in my voice. "Please explain to me how you have the moral high ground here."

"You exploited someone in a vulnerable state in Vegas," he says. His hand is white-knuckled on the kitchen island. "You dragged out this farce of a marriage instead of getting a quick and quiet divorce. You forced her to move in here with you, and you did it all to steal what? Company secrets? I hope blowing your cover for Nicour was worth it." He shakes his head.

The man has to be a decade older than me, and about an inch taller, and suddenly he looks just as tired as furious. He pulls out a stack of papers from his briefcase.

"Fuck you, Thompson. You will sign these divorce papers, leave Constance alone, and then you and I will go to war."

I nod, like all of it makes perfect sense. "Okay. And just ignore what Connie wants, right?"

Alec's eyes narrow. "She wants the divorce."

The words cut like a knife. "Maybe she does, but I want to hear that from her. See, you have a really bad habit of

underestimating her. From what I've seen, you've been nothing but a shitty brother."

"That's rich, coming from you," he spits.

"Yes, coming from me, someone who actually *sees* what you and your father have been doing. You sideline her at every fucking turn." My voice rises, I'm so angry. "She's the most professional person I've ever met. I saw her in law school, pouring over books and asking for extra assignments. I've seen her work late nights for Contron, go to conferences, and fight to make *you* happy. And you've denied her every opportunity."

His mouth pulls down at the corners. "You have no idea what you're talking about. You don't know anything about her, or us."

"You're the one who's blind. Her foundation? You and your father nixed it just as punishment." My temper is rising, and I shake my head as if I can cast some of it off. "And that fucking thing in Chicago. You punished her for that, too."

"It fell through. The memo made it clear—"

"Because the asshole made a pass at her, she turned him down, and he pulled the deal as retribution," I snarl. "And you two have her so damn terrified of showing any kind of weakness that she never *told* you!"

Alec stills. "That's not true."

"No? Ask her about it, then," I say. "You come in here like you're protecting her, when all she's ever asked you for is to treat her like an adult. An equal."

He shakes his head. There's still anger etched on his face, but there's frustration there, too. "She's still young."

"She's not a child. Don't treat her as one." I look down at the divorce papers he's left on the kitchen island. "Did she ask you to bring those over?"

"Thompson, just—"

"Answer the question."

“No,” he says, “she didn’t.”

“Where is she?”

“When she wants to talk to you, she’ll let you know.” He taps his fingers against the kitchen island, and a silence descends over us. It’s thick.

“You care for her,” he finally says.

I look away from him. Of all the people I’d admit that to, Connie’s asshole big brother is very low on the list. But apparently my non-answer speaks loud enough for even him to hear.

“You do,” he mutters. “Shit.”

I chuckle. The sound is humorless. “Yeah.”

“Does she know?”

My hand finds its way to my hair, running through the strands. The anger is still pulsing beneath my skin. Why is he asking me this?

“She doesn’t,” he says. “You haven’t told her. Not in any real sense.”

No, I haven’t.

I should’ve. That day, that argument. But she’d been set on divorce, and I couldn’t handle telling her the truth. It would be so much worse later if I had. Going back to our flirty, antagonistic relationship would be one thing. But becoming *nothing*, our roles turning into the rejected and the rejectee, would kill me. It would destroy what we had, and I’d rather have some of her than none at all.

Alec snaps his briefcase shut and steps past me to the front door. He blows out a frustrated sigh.

“I never thought I’d see the day,” he mutters. Then, he clears his throat and turns toward me. “Look. If Connie chooses you, I’ll... accept it.”

“I want you to do one better,” I say. “I want you to make sure she *knows* you accept it.”

He seems frustrated, but in those eyes, so alike to his sister's, there's a spark of something. "I will," he says. After a moment, he shakes his head. "It doesn't happen often. That's all I'm saying."

He opens the door so abruptly as if he can't wait to leave this interaction, either. I feel the same way. It's been long enough already.

But there's one more thing I need to know.

"What's *it*? What doesn't happen often?"

"Love," he says.

Then he squares his shoulders and walks down the hall, like he's fleeing from the word itself as much as from me.

# Chapter 37

*Connie*

I'm sitting on the couch in my old apartment. The one that had been my fortress, my home, since Blake had moved out. And it feels comfortable, like slipping into a pair of well-worn winter boots when the weather turns cold. But it feels odd, too, in a way that speaks of weeks of disuse. Not being here, not walking these paths, using the bed or the sofa.

It doesn't feel like home anymore.

Across from me, Isabel sits on the floor. She is twisted into a stretch, and in the tank top she's got on, the smooth muscles of her arms are clearly visible.

She's performing tonight, like she does most nights, and is taking the time to loosen up.

"I think it all comes down to what you want," she says and sinks deeper into the feats of flexibility that are beyond me. "Let's pretend you don't care about your family, like they didn't even exist. What would you do?"

I look down at the magazine resting on my lap. It's Business Digest's latest issue, out just yesterday. There's a full-page spread in the middle about Gabriel and me. We're standing next to one another in the carefully styled kitchen, looking straight into the camera like we're daring the reader to say anything negative about our marriage.

"I'd want to try," I say. "But it's not just my family. It's everything else. It's... him."

"You miss him?"

"Yeah," I admit. So much more than I expected. I lean back on the couch and close my eyes. "Telling him that though..."

"It'd be hard." Isabel's voice is soothing. She's always been good at that. Listening, and asking the right questions.

"Yeah. It would mean putting it in his hands. All of me, you know? It would be like surrendering." I take a deep

breath. “He could do whatever he wants with it. With me.”

“Mmm. Loving someone is an act of trust,” she says. I look over to see her sitting in the splits, her dark hair shielding her face from my view. “Letting him know you want to stay in this marriage gives him power.”

“Yes, exactly. And I’ve spent so much time fighting that. Trying not to give up any kind of power to him. What if I do... and he...” I shake my head. The words are hard to say out loud.

Hard even to admit to myself.

“Then you’ve tried,” she says. “I know you like to take calculated risks, where you’ve thoroughly prepared beforehand. But relationships are more unpredictable than business. You just have to do what you can, make life your stage... and hope for the best.”

I look down at the picture in the magazine again. Gabriel stares back at me, his expression deceptively serious. But there’s a glint in his eye and a barely-there curve to his lips that betray him. Like he’s privately smiling at a joke only we know, his arm firmly wrapped around my waist.

I can’t read the article again. Not after what it had said at the very end. Those words are imprinted on my mind.

Apparently, Gabriel had called Cynthia to add the part about my foundation. *Set to launch in a few weeks’ time, the new foundation will be Connovan’s first foray into investing on charitable grounds.*

He announced the Connovan Foundation to the entire world.

And I’m sure, because I know him, that he’d done it to force my brother’s and father’s hands. With the foundation announced in Business Digest, they’ll have no choice but to greenlight it.

Which means Gabriel had convinced Cynthia to add it for one reason and one reason only.

To make me happy.

And knowing that ignites hope in me that feels almost painful.

“I think it would hurt even worse, though,” I say to Isabel, “if I try and fail. To tell him how I feel, just for it not to work out.” I know what he looks like when he wins. That arrogant grin, the smug laugh. I’d die if he did that to me after talking about our feelings.

Isabel smiles. “From what you’ve told me, I think he feels the same way.”

I dig my teeth into my lower lip. Maybe he does, maybe he doesn’t. But I do have to tell him.

I’ll regret it forever if I don’t.

Because there’s only one reason why the thought of letting him go, of sliding the wedding band off my finger, and never waking up next to him again, hurts this much.

I’m in love with him.

Probably have been for longer than I’ve been able to admit to myself. Because the promise of something good, something genuine, something *true*, scares me most of all. Being with Gabriel will never be easy or shallow. It won’t be something I can walk away from unscathed.

Loving him will consume me.

There’s a sharp knock on my front door. I stare at Isabel, and she gazes at me, our eyes locking.

“I don’t know who it is,” I say with a frown. I head to the door and look through the peeping hole with a growing suspicion. The concierge won’t let just anyone in.

But it’s not just anyone.

“Alec’s here.”

“*What?*” Isabel asks.

I sigh and open the door. My brother’s expression is serious, and his eyes are heavy on mine.



“Connie.” He steps past me into the hallway of my apartment. “You can’t just send that email and then refuse to answer your phone.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“You’re quitting?” He shakes his head. The dark circles beneath his eyes look deeper than usual, as if he hasn’t properly slept in a week. “Right after you announced the foundation in the biggest business magazine in the country?”

“That was before everything blew up. Alec, I can’t stay at a company where I’m not trusted. You have to see that.”

“You are trusted, Con.”

“Clearly, I’m not. It’s been one thing after another, and not once have you given me the benefit of the doubt.” My voice rises with irritation, and I blow out a sharp breath. “Alec, I’ve never betrayed Contron, but I’m tired of being treated like I have.”

“I know,” he says. “Damn it, I know that. I see that now. Let’s talk. I have a lot to—”

He falls quiet when he sees Isabel. She’s not stretched out on my living room rug anymore. No, she’s sitting on my couch with the magazine on her lap. The messy bun her dark hair had been in is gone, too, and her locks now fall sleekly around her shoulders.

“Hi, Alec,” she says with a smile.

“Isabel,” he says. He turns back to me with a frown. “Sorry, I didn’t know you had company.”

“It’s okay,” Isabel says and stands. “I should get going anyway, to prepare for tonight... thanks for the coffee, Connie.”

“Of course. Talk to you later?”

“Yes, sounds good.”

“Break a leg tonight.”

She gives me a slanted smile. “Always,” she says and steps past us. “It was nice seeing you again,” she tells Alec.

She's always been unfailingly polite, even when he has been nothing but curt back. I like to think she does it to infuriate him. Lord knows he deserves it.

"Yeah. Likewise," he says. His gaze follows her out of the door, and then he turns to me with a frown on his face. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"That's why you didn't call ahead?"

"No. That was so you wouldn't be able to find an excuse not to talk to me." He runs a hand along his jaw. "Right. So, great job on getting Nicour back. I don't know how you pulled that off."

"I promised them I'd run point, like I told you in the email. So I'll stay at Contron until they're fully signed."

He sighs. "I don't know what to say here. I've... look, I don't want you to leave. Think it over, okay? If you stay, I can promise you things will be different. I'll try to make sure they are."

Of all the responses I'd expected from my brother, this wasn't it.

"There's another thing. About... damn," he says again, and it's been a long time since I've seen my brother flustered. He doesn't have that emotion. "Look, I know what really happened in Chicago."

My lips fall open. "You do?"

"Yes. How could you not have told me?"

"Who told you?"

"I spoke to Gabriel yesterday, tried to get him to sign the divorce papers. He was angry at me, too."

"You did *what*?"

"Yeah, he didn't like it, either." Alec runs a hand over his face, but every tired line stays etched in place.

"Why the hell did you do that?" I ask. "Did he sign?"

“No, he didn’t. I was doing what I thought was right. But I see now that you don’t need my help.”

“Not this time.” I sink back down on the couch. My heart is a race horse in my chest. Gabriel hadn’t signed.

He’d refused.

“No, I’m learning that.” Alec sighs. “Connie, why couldn’t you come to me?”

“When?”

“After Chicago,” he says. “And after you woke up in Vegas and realized you’d made a mistake.”

I stare at him. These are questions I never thought he’d ask, and a conversation I never suspected we’d have.

“Alec,” I say slowly. “Surely you know why.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“Look, you’re... overprotective at times. You always have been, and I know it comes from a good place, but it also means you judge me harshly. If I make a mistake, it proves that I might make another one, right? And so I can’t be trusted.”

His frown deepens. “But Chicago, and that asshole?”

“Would you have put me on projects like that again, if you’d known? Or would you have insisted to be with me every time, or to send others along to babysit me?” I shake my head. “That’s why I didn’t tell you. I mean, how long did it take you to let me solo lead staff meetings?”

“You were new,” Alec mutters.

“Yes, but *you were* the one to teach me how to do it. Look, I know I’m the kid in the family, with you and Nate, and Dad, it’s... I know. But I’m grown up now. I went to the same college as you and Nate. I did the same Contron internship as both of you. Please trust that I know what I’m doing.”

He leans back on the couch and sighs. Frustration is written all over his face, and pronounced lines fan his tired eyes. “Damn.”

The heartfelt response almost makes me smile. I doubt he's had a more honest, or less difficult, conversation in a very long time. Me, too, for that matter. There are a lot of crumbs that we Connovans have swept under the family rug.

"Damn," I echo.

We look at each other across the space.

"So. What are you going to do about that man of yours?" he asks.

I look down at my hands, and the rings that still adorn my left ring finger. "Well, I'm going to start by taking back the idea of divorce. At least until after Gabriel and I have a proper conversation."

Alec doesn't protest or sigh. He only gazes back at me with steady and calm eyes.

"You're not upset at that?" I ask. "So, you finally believe that he didn't pass the information about Nicour to his company?"

"Yeah, I'm sure he didn't. He made that quite clear yesterday."

My eyebrows rise. "What did he say?"

"It was more about what he didn't say." Alec looks away, and there's a setness to his mouth, like he's said too much. Or maybe because he's uncomfortable with the topic.

Well, so am I. But here we are, having this talk nonetheless. This may be the first time we've ever had.

"I'm in love with him," I say. "And I'm going to tell him that... and then we'll see what happens. But you might have a Thompson brother-in-law for a very long time, Alec. And I won't apologize for it any longer. Not to you, and not to Dad."

My brother gets up off the couch. He brushes something off his shoulder, and then he looks down at me with a gaze that isn't the least bit detached.

"Good," he says. "It's about time."

# Chapter 38

Connie

I stand outside the familiar door with my heart in my throat. It's been lodged there the entire time it took me to walk over to the apartment that's been my home the previous few weeks.

Gabriel's home.

Earlier, I was gripping my phone, thinking about what I would say to him, when it had rung. He'd called me before I had a chance to call him.

*Let me come to you*, he'd said.

But I'd wanted us to talk at home. *Can I meet you there instead?* I asked. *In an hour?*

Turns out he was already there. He came back after our fight and has stayed there ever since.

I thought he walked out, and that he spent his nights at his old apartment, a hotel room, at Oak Hill. But no... he returned, and he's been nearby all along.

Like he's always been.

Across the classroom, the quad, the city. Close by, and yet, so very far away.

I unlock the door and step inside.

The place looks as I remember. Of course it does. I leave the keys on the hallway table and let my bag slide down to the floor.

"Gabriel?"

He's standing by the windows in the living room. His form looks inscrutable. Still, tall and strong, and unmoving like a statue.

I take a few steps in his direction. "Gabriel, I'm sorry that I \_\_\_"

He turns, and the expression on his face stops me short. He's calm and serious in a way I've never seen him before. I

know what I need to say, what I *want* to say.

But suddenly the words feel impossible.

“It’s good to see you,” Gabriel says.

My mouth feels dry. “You, too. I didn’t know you were... here. Staying here, I mean.”

“It’s my home.”

I nod. It sounds so simple when he says it. Yes. His home... and mine.

I take another step forward. “Gabriel, I really want to say that I’m sorry for the other day. For accusing you like that, and for... for reacting the way I did. I was scared.”

“I know,” he says. He looks down at his shoes and takes a deep breath. When he looks up his eyes are fierce. “There’s something I need to tell you. Something I haven’t been honest about.”

My stomach tightens into a hard ball of anxiety. But somehow I manage to nod. “Okay.”

Gabriel gestures at the couches and I sink down on the closest one. There’s nothing comfortable about it, not now with tension lining every part of my body.

He doesn’t sit. He stands behind the couch across from me, bracing his hands against its back.

“I’ve thought about writing all of this down in a letter for you. But that’s never been my strong suit. The written word.” He looks away from me, out through our windows. “But, all those years ago, I walked into my first class at Harvard, and there you were. That was my first sight of you in years.”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“And I’ve never been able to look away. Arguing with you was the best part of my time in law school, hands down. It made all the fucking tedious hours writing essays and struggling through textbooks, worth it.” He sighs and shakes his head. “And then we slept together that night before the summer break. Immediately after, I knew that you’d see it as a

mistake. Summer break was just a week away, which meant summer internships... but when we returned in the fall? I'd put my plan into effect. But then you came back with him."

I stare at Gabriel, and the tension inside me unravels, turning to a shock that feels bone-deep. He's talking about my ex. About college. About... But not once has he let on that he felt that way. He'd been the way he always was. Smug, popular, condescending.

"I hated Blake," Gabriel says. "I knew it was unfair. But I hated him—for being allowed near you, for being the smart and logical choice, for being so damn boring. I hated him for not being a Thompson."

"You did?"

"Yes," he says fiercely. "I came back to college that fall looking for you, and he was always by your side."

"We were friends first," I say quietly. I remember that fall. I'd changed my hairstyle, cutting bangs over the summer, and started spending more time with Blake. When I got back to Harvard, I'd looked everywhere for Gabriel. I'd seen him across campus, but always from a distance, and he'd always been with his posse. Only once did I catch him looking at me.

And after that, he never did again.

Not until we were lawyers meeting out in the field. A Connovan and a Thompson, squaring off in the battle we'd been bred and trained for.

"Yeah," he says. "Well, we were never friends, you and I."

"No, I guess we weren't."

"Didn't stop me from wanting you," he says.

My voice is shaky. "All these years?"

"Every single one."

"I never knew," I mumble. "You never told me."

He gives me a dark look, filled with something like regret. "Of course not. You hated me."



“Because I thought you hated me. You’d wind me up every chance you got. Saying things... finding flaws in my arguments... calling me a princess... all we’ve done for years is argue!”

Agitated, he runs a hand through his hair. “Yes, because that was the only option I had. It was a shit method, I admit. I’ve said things to you that I didn’t mean far too many times.”

“You *made* me angry at you. Time and time again.”

His jaw clenches, and then he blows out a frustrated breath. “Yes. And every fucking time it happened, I knew you’d walk away from me. Back toward your dreams and plans, to an apartment you shared with milquetoast. Flirting with you wouldn’t have been fair. Not when I couldn’t offer you... not when I knew what being with me would mean for you.”

I shake my head slowly. The words are barely penetrating. He had been... all this time?

Memories flash through my mind, one quicker than the other. Of brief interactions at conferences, across the negotiating tables, at events and galas. Always brief. Always fiery. I thought he loved pushing my buttons. That he got off on my anger, somehow.

“I never knew you felt like that,” I say.

“Yeah,” he says. “I have a lot to atone for.”

My eyes widen with a sudden realization. “All those reasons you listed while we were drunk in Vegas? Why us getting married was a good idea?”

He chuckles. “Yeah. Didn’t exactly come up with those on the spot.”

“But you didn’t—”

“Plan that night? Not in the slightest. I promise you, princess, if you hadn’t suggested the chapel, I wouldn’t have gone that route. But then, you did, and well, I was drunk, too. Only that wore off real quick the next day.”

I sit up straight, frowning. “You weren’t in the hotel room when I woke up.”

“No, I was busy feeling sick to my fucking stomach,” he says. “I knew you’d hate yourself for what we’d done. I’ve won plenty of negotiations in my career so far. Used all kinds of dirty tricks. But I’ve never felt as terrible as I did then.”

“We agreed to it together. It was a joint mistake.”

“Yes, I suppose it was.” He walks around the couch and grabs something from the side table. It’s a stack of papers. He puts them on the coffee table in front of me.

I see his signature on the front page. *They’re divorce papers.* Signed just like that, without a lengthy negotiation. Not a harrowing process of divvying up our assets, of our lawyers scratching their heads at our lack of prenup. No battle or fight at all.

I stare at his signature in silence.

“You’re my wife,” he says, “and I want you to keep being my wife. I want that more than anything. We could be good, Connie. I know that, and I think you know that, too.”

“But there’s a cost to being my wife. Your family might never accept it. The world might never understand. We’ll have to navigate the familial dynamics for the rest of our lives if we do this. And I’d... fuck, princess, I’d rather you be free and happy than shackled to me, if that’s not truly what you want.”

“Gabriel,” I whisper.

“The months since Vegas have been some of the best of my life. I discovered what I like even better than arguing with you, and that’s being happy with you. I’ve never been in a long-term relationship. I work too much, I come with terrible in-laws, and I have no fucking clue how to be a husband. But I want to be yours, if you’ll have me.”

He sits down across from me, his eyes full of heat. “It doesn’t have to be this apartment. Doesn’t have to be that ring on your finger if you’d rather pick something else. And princess... I don’t have to be a Thompson.”

The words feel stuck in my throat. “You... what?”

“I can resign. There’s plenty of work in New York for a lawyer. If that would make things easier for us, I’m more than happy to do that.”

I can’t breathe. Enough oxygen isn’t reaching my lungs, and I blink rapidly, like I’m trying to stop tears from falling. Maybe I am. I’m too overwhelmed to notice.

“Constance... I’m telling you that I love you,” he says. “Will you let me love you?”

A tear slips down my cheek, hot along my skin.

His eyes widen. “Connie?”

“I quit my job,” I say.

“You did *what*?”

“I quit my job yesterday. Well, emailed Alec my resignation notice.”

“Why?” Shock is etched across his face.

My eyes well up again. “Because I don’t want us to get a divorce.”

Something flashes in his eyes, and then he’s up and off the couch. He sits down beside me and reaches his large hand to caress my cheek, brushing away my tears with his thumb. “You don’t?”

“No, I really, really don’t.”

“Then why are you crying?” he asks. “I just want you to be happy, princess.”

“I’m happy when I’m arguing with you,” I say. “It always made me feel alive. And I love it when... we don’t argue, too. Even if it scares me. All of this has scared me. I think I was afraid to admit it to myself, and to you, because... it makes me feel powerless.”

His voice warms. “Powerless? That could never be you.”

I cup his face in my hands. His sharp cheekbones, the stubble on his cheeks, my pinkies curving over the cut of his

jaw. “I love you, too,” I say.

“Mm-hmm. You do?”

“Yes. I think you’re incredible, and funny, and supportive, and... I want us to be a team. You and me.”

His lips turn up into a wide smile, his cheeks moving beneath my fingers. “What was that?”

“I love you, you idiot.”

“One more time.”

“I love you.”

He kisses me, and the warm press of his lips feels like coming home. His arms dip down to circle my waist. “So no divorce, then.”

I lock my hands behind his head. “Let’s burn those papers.”

“I’ll torch them myself.” He tugs me up and onto his lap until I’m straddling him on the couch. “You’ll let me be your husband for real?”

The word sends a shiver down my spine. “Yes,” I say. My hand slides into his hair, fingers weaving into the thick strands.

His hands tighten around my hips. “Say that again.”

“Husband?”

“Mmm.”

“You’re my husband,” I say against his lips.

He deepens the kiss with a groan, and beneath me, I feel him growing hard.

I pull back with a chuckle. “That does it for you?”

“Yes.” He leans in to kiss my neck, his lips moving over sensitive skin. “Again.”

“I love you,” I say. It feels liberating, hearing my own voice speak the words out loud. “It frightens me how much, really. You’re my husband. I love—oh my God, Gabriel.”

He lifts his head. “What?”

“If we’re staying married, that means our Vegas wedding is it. That was our ceremony. I didn’t wear a wedding dress! We don’t have a single wedding photo!”

His hair mussed from my fingers, and there’s a glint in his eyes that speaks of happiness. “We have blurry security camera footage.”

“Doesn’t count. Maybe we can have a wedding party... or hire a photographer. Or a vow renewal?”

“We can do all of it.” He leans back against the couch and grins, his arms still wrapped around me. “Fuck, I love you in my arms like this. It hasn’t felt right being away from you these days.”

“Not for me, either,” I say. “I missed you.”

His eyes soften. To think that I get to see that. Gabriel, serene and happy, with his arrogant smirk put away. “You’re going to get me dangerously addicted, princess.”

“To what?”

“To you,” he says.

I lean closer, so our lips almost touch again. “Let’s get addicted together.”

# Chapter 39

*Gabriel*

“You should answer your phone,” Connie says. She’s stretched out beside me on the sectional in the TV room. We’ve just finished watching a movie—even though it’s just after one in the afternoon—and my phone is buzzing loudly from its spot on the side table.

“Maybe tomorrow,” I say.

She turns in my arms and looks up at me. After nearly a week of relaxing in the sun, her summer freckles are more prominent than ever.

We spent a few days in Spain.

I was the one to suggest it. *A surprise honeymoon*, I’d called it when I showed her the website for the five-star oceanfront resort Darryl had found.

We’ve had five amazing days on the beach. In the water. Between the hotel sheets. Ordering room service while ignoring all the emails and calls from our families until we got back last night.

In my arms, Connie makes a tutting sound. Her eyes are a warm green, the color of the leaves on the dense tree canopy outside our windows. “Gabriel... We can’t hide forever.”

I kiss her forehead. She smells good, like the shampoo from our shared shower this morning. “I don’t want you to give anything up for me.”

“I’m not. Nothing I don’t want to, at any rate.”

I raise a skeptical eyebrow. “Connie,” I say. “You got the foundation. It’s ready for you. It’s everything you want, all the things you’ve worked for.”

Her brothers—both of them—had been quite explicit in their emails over the past week. They both want her back.

“I don’t know,” she says.

“Maybe you just want them to grovel some more.”

She rolls her eyes, but she's smiling now. "I'm definitely enjoying that," she says. "Why do you want me to go back to Contron? It might complicate things with us."

"It won't," I say. My fingers trace her cheek, across the impossibly soft skin of her neck. She's tanned somewhat on the trip, but her skin still looks several shades paler than my bronzed fingers. "I just don't want to take anything from you. I only want to give. You wanted a spot at the table for years. Your brother is offering one to you now... one of your own making, with the foundation. Take it, or don't take it, princess. But don't choose either on my account."

Her lips part and I take the opportunity to run my thumb over her lower lip. "Why are you so romantic?" she murmurs. "You always know just what I need to hear."

I chuckle. "You inspire me. What did Nate say in his last email?"

She traces the collar of my T-shirt, her nail teasing my skin. "He said he wants to shake your hand."

"What?"

"He never thought he'd see a day when I'd quit, and doing so for a Thompson means there's only one reason why."

I frown at her. "And that's what?"

"Love, of course." She reaches up to smooth out the furrows between my brows.

"What do you want? For you?"

She digs her teeth into her lower lip and hesitates, and that's all the answer I need. I grin at her. "See? You want to run the Connovan Foundation. Go for it."

Her hands tighten around my shoulders. "You know, you've never doubted me."

"Of course, not. I saw you at Harvard. I know what you're capable of."

She lies back on the couch beside me, her auburn hair a fiery tapestry around her. There's a smile dancing at the



corners of her lips, and her eyes are relaxed and warm. Happiness explodes in my chest. It's like being punched by it, so poignant is the hit.

*I get to have this forever, I think. Her.*

"I love the ring you chose," she says. Her voice is soft.

On the TV, another movie begins to autoplay, and I wonder if we can have more days like this. Just us, and no schedules.

Her shirt has ridden up, and I trace the smooth skin of her stomach. "Oh, you did?"

"Yes. It was my first red flag."

"Red flag?"

"Yes." She says with a wide smile. "That you were so much better than I thought. So much *more*. I had a few of those along the way, and I started to realize I was in trouble."

I inch her shirt higher to access more of her bare skin. "Tell me more."

"Mmm, more times I realized just how much I liked you?"

"Yes."

"Well... How angry you were at my father at the gala, for what he said in his speech. How you spoke up for me. How understanding you were about the Chicago thing. The bet we made at Oak Hill..."

My hand slides further up, brushing the heavy underside of her breasts. "Mm-hmm. Keep going."

She chuckles and stretches out, luxuriously at ease beside me. "You're just asking for compliments now, aren't you?"

"You married an insatiable man, princess."

"Did I?" Her eyes narrow, and the glint in them sends heat barreling down my body. "Is that why you want to have sex all the time?"

"We were robbed of a few days last week." I lean down to kiss her neck and exposed collarbone.

“I’m not complaining.” She slides her hand into my hair and tugs at the strands just the way she knows I like. “We haven’t christened the desk yet, you know. In the home office.”

“Damn. You’re right.”

“It’s an oversight on our part.”

“One we should rectify immediately.”

She sits up, rearranging her shirt. “After lunch.”

I groan.

That makes her laugh. It’s my favorite sound. “Come on, there are still leftovers from yesterday, and I’m starving.”

“So am I,” I mutter.

On the side table, my phone lets out another aggressive rhythmic buzz.

“Answer it,” Connie says. “You know where I stand.”

I watch her walk out of the TV room and disappear down the hall to the combined living room and kitchen. Yeah, I know where she stands. She wants me to be happy, too, and if it’s working at Thompson Enterprises, she has no problem with that.

Funny how similar we are. How similar we’ve always been at our cores.

The name on the phone’s screen is not the one I suspected. It’s not Darryl’s or Dad’s, not my aunt’s, and not even my cousin’s.

I answer it. “Hello, Grandma.”

“Finally.” Her voice is its usual dry self. “Are you done avoiding everyone now?”

“I told my father I’d be taking a week off.”

“You also told him you weren’t sure if you’d be coming back,” she says.

“Yes. I know competition is at the core of who we are, but I can’t work with Jacob anymore. At least not the way it’s

been.”

“He’ll take that as a victory.”

“Yes, because he’s an idiot.”

Grandma chuckles. “He’s my grandson, too, you know.”

“I know. I’m not sure if you’re aware of what happened—”

“Just because I’m not in New York doesn’t mean I’m ignorant, boy,” she says, voice sharpening. “I know everything.”

“Right.”

“He paid the fake protesters outside the gala when David Connovan was honored. Did *you* know that?”

Surprise is the only thing dulling my anger. “Shit. The *snake*.”

“He won’t share the security footage of your wedding with anyone. It’s been taken care of,” she says. “It’s clear you have the heart for the company, *and* the brains. A family business needs both, and your cousin only has the one.”

I close my eyes. “He won’t like hearing that.”

“He doesn’t need to like it. I’ve made a strong recommendation to Richard and Sharon that he should be relocated to the newly established Singapore office. Your cousin can spend a good few years helping us expand through Asia.”

“That’s... a very good idea.” Despite all of his maliciousness, Jacob is good at his job.

“Of course, it is,” Grandma says briskly. “Now, when are you coming back to work?”

“I can be in tomorrow.”

“Good,” she says. “My children aren’t getting any younger.”

That makes me chuckle. “Grandma, with all due respect, neither are you.”

“Why do you think I’m busy micromanaging everyone? I know that. That’s why the company needs to be in good hands. Now, I want you to come to Oak Hill one of these weekends and bring your wife. I like her.”

“She likes you, too.”

“Now you’re just flattering me,” Grandma says, but she sounds pleased. A second later, she hangs up without saying goodbye, as is her usual manner.

I stare at the phone for a few long moments before I head out in search of my wife. I find her in the living room. She’s standing in front of the giant bookshelves she’d styled in an array of books and framed pictures for the Business Digest interview. Wearing nothing but my T-shirt, her legs on full display. The afternoon sun gilds her hair as the tresses cascade down her back.

“What are you looking at?”

“Us,” she says. I wrap my arms around her waist, resting my head next to hers. On the shelf are the two framed pictures of us as teenagers. Me after the lacrosse victory, and her as she rode in a dressage tournament. Both of us focused on conquering our respective fields.

“Can you imagine if we’d known back then?” she asks softly.

“No,” I say. “It’s probably a good thing we didn’t, or we’d have fought against it. The Connovan girl?”

“A Thompson boy?” she echoes, a smile in her voice. “Who would have thought?”

“It makes a certain kind of sense, though. Who else could understand you but me?” I push her hair to the side and kiss her neck. “Did you heat up the food?”

“Yes. Did you answer the phone?”

“Yes,” I murmur. “Seems like my cousin is out of the company.”

“What?”

“Well, out of the country, I should say. My grandmother is moving him to Singapore.”

“That’s amazing!” She turns in my arms, her smile wide. “So you’re going back to work?”

“I was thinking of it, yeah.”

“Your grandmother, huh? She really knows everything.”

“Oh, yes. Probably a lot more than I’d like her to.”

Connie smiles “Seems like we’re back where we started. You at Enterprises, me at Contron—the two of us professional enemies.”

“Mmm,” I say. “I prefer rivals.”

“Competing against you always did make me better.”

“Right back at you, princess. There’s no one else I’d rather lose to.”

Her eyes soften. “How will we handle it, you think?”

“Just fine,” I say. “I know what’s important, and which team I belong to. And it’s yours.”

She kisses me back. It’s the sweetest feeling, having her in my arms, in our apartment, knowing she feels what I feel.

“I love you,” she whispers. “And I’m on your team, too.”

“Our team.”

“Yes.”

“And now our team has a date with a desk,” I say and bend to kiss her neck again. God, she feels so good. I can’t wait to —

“Food first,” she says with a chuckle. “We need fuel.”

“I like the way you think.”

“I like everything about you.”

“Oh, we’re going to one-up each other?”

She smiles and walks away from me, toward the kitchen island. “Isn’t that what we do?”

*Yes, I think. And I'll gladly spend the rest of my life doing it.*

*Epilogue*

*Connie, one year later*

I cross my legs on the barstool, and the hem of my cocktail dress slides further up my bare skin. The martini in front of me is almost finished. I've been sitting at the hotel bar for half an hour already, but I haven't been alone.

Anticipation has kept me company.

Behind the counter, the bartender notices my nearly empty cocktail. "Another one, miss?"

I don't correct him. "Yes, please. Make it a double."

He smiles. "Had a long day?"

"Planning to have a long night."

His eyebrows rise and the smile turns crooked. "I see," he says. "Waiting for someone?"

The real answer is yes... but that's not the game we're playing here. "No," I say. "Just taking the edge off. I'm just in Vegas for a conference."

That's true.

"Ah." He reaches under the counter and pulls out a cocktail shaker. "Was it interesting?"

"Very." I glance over my shoulder at the giant lobby of the luxury hotel. A group of business people lingers across the space, likely from the same conference I'd just come from. The speakers haven't been that informative, but it was still a great opportunity to network on behalf of both Contron and the Connovan Foundation.

I'd finished just an hour ago with my last meeting. I stopped by the hotel room to change into a dress and apply the red lipstick I know he likes.

The bartender puts down the drink in front of me. "Here you go," he says. He adds a small dish of olives with a wink. "On the house."



*Has to be the dress, I think to myself. “Thank you.”*

He drifts off, somewhat reluctantly, to help another customer. I twist my fingers around the stem of the martini glass and stretch out one of my legs. The scrappy high heels are comfortable enough... when seated.

“Drinking alone, princess?” a voice says. “How sad.”

“I prefer independent.”

He leans against the bar beside me. He’s ditched the tie and undone the top button of his white shirt. The suit is pressed and tailored, enhancing his already-wide shoulders.

He smiles.

“Besides, I’m waiting for someone.” I lift the drink to my lips.

“Who?”

“My husband.”

“He’d leave you alone in Vegas dressed like that?”

He’s wearing the cologne I got him for his birthday, and the scent washes over me—cedar and warm musk.

“The man must be insane,” he adds.

“Maybe he just trusts me.”

“Maybe he does,” he says. “But he shouldn’t trust any other male around you. Tell me the bartender hasn’t tried to make a move.”

I trace my finger along the rim of my martini glass. “All bartenders flirt.”

“No,” he says darkly, “they don’t.”

He pulls out the stool next to me, and I look up, as if I’m surprised. “I told you I was waiting for someone.”

“Well, he’s not here, is he?” Gabriel sits down and moves the seat closer until our thighs touch beneath the counter. “Had a productive day?”

I look at him over the edge of my glass. “Wouldn’t you like to know,” I say, “but I won’t tell you a thing.”

“Mmm. Not that easily, at least.”

“Never.”

He raises an eyebrow. “That’s a challenge.”

“I’ll never yield to a Thompson.”

“Never?” His voice turns husky. “That sounds like a lie, princess. The dress you’ve put on for me tells me something different.”

A shiver races down my arms. A year ago, we’d been right here, at this same hotel bar. I look at my dress and frown, like I’ve just realized what I’m wearing. “My husband likes this dress.”

“Does he?” Gabriel says darkly. “I can see why.”

I straighten my shoulders, as if I’m about to start arguing. “Whatever you’re about to say, Thompson, just zip it. I’m not in the mood to congratulate you on the new merger or your quarterly results. Go gloat somewhere else.”

A slow grin stretches across his face. “You been checking up on me, princess?”

“Keep your enemies close.” I lift the drink to my lips.

He focuses on me sipping with intensity that feels almost predatory. “I could say the same,” he says. “I heard your foundation just got approved to provide microfinancing to women in need.”

I look at him out of the corner of my eye. “Maybe.”

“Hiding your cards?”

“Always.” I glance down at his hand, resting on the counter. The sight of the gold band on his ring finger hasn’t yet stopped being a thrill.

I doubt it ever will.

“You’ve gotten married, too,” I say. “Does your wife know you’re here flirting with me?”

“Is that what I’m doing, princess? Flirting?”

“Isn’t that what we’ve always done? We’ve just disguised it as bickering.”

Gabriel smiles. It’s wide and slow and just a bit smug. “I’m glad you’ve finally admitted it.”

I lean in closer. “So, tell me about this wife of yours.”

“Mmm. Well, she keeps me honest.”

“Does she?”

“Yes. She’s smart as a whip and competitive, which is mostly useful and only sometimes annoying.”

I smile. “Really?”

“Mm-hmm. She’s funny when she lets down her guard. She doesn’t do that around a lot of people.” His hand lands on my leg, right below the hem of my dress. His fingers are warm on my bare skin. “She’s gorgeous. The most stunning redhead I’ve ever seen. Green eyes, full lips, and a body sculpted by the gods.”

My eyes widen. “That’s quite the description.”

His fingers curl over my leg, and he leans closer, only a few inches separating us. “My wife is quite the woman.”

“Mmm, is she?”

“Yes. It’s actually our one-year anniversary today.”

“Funny,” I say. “It’s mine, too.”

His lip quirks up. “I don’t believe in coincidences, princess.”

“And seeing as your wife isn’t here…”

“And your husband is so terribly negligent…”

“Come here,” I whisper.

He kisses me. It’s a soft brush of his lips, like it’s the first time we’ve done this. They’re warm and sure over mine.

“Hello,” he murmurs. “Ready to let me take my favorite rival out to dinner?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

His hand finds mine, and he threads our fingers together.  
“Come. Let’s retrace our steps.”

We walk out of the hotel and into the warm Vegas air, into the night so much like the one just a year ago when Gabriel and I had made the best mistake of our lives.

It’s a perfect night.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thank you!

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# ABOUT OLIVIA

Olivia is a hopeless romantic who loves billionaires heroes, despite never having met one. So she took matters into her own hands and creates them on the page instead. Stern, charming, cold or brooding, so far she's never met a (fictional) billionaire she didn't like.

She picked up the pen in 2019, and she hasn't put it down since. With over a million books sold, Olivia writes fast-paced, swoon-worthy stories filled with banter and spice. Join the heroes as they meet, clash with, or stumble into the ambitious heroines that make them fall, and fall hard.

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