



I'M SUPPOSED TO FOLLOW THE RULES,
TOO BAD HE MAKES ME WANT TO BREAK
EVERY SINGLE ONE

BROODY DEVIL

NASHVILLE DEVILS BOOK THREE

MELISSA IVERS

BROODY DEVIL

A Nashville Devils Novel

Melissa Ivers

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Broody Devil

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To the readers that dare to be themselves.

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Broody Devil-The Playlist

CHAPEL OF LOVE – The Dixie Cups

9-5 – Dolly Parton

Hot For Teacher – Van Halen

Hit Me With Your Best Shot – Pat Benatar

Unsteady – X Ambassadors

Ocean Eyes – Billie Eilish

Bad Habits – Ed Sheeran

Say Something – Justin Timberlake & Chris Stapleton

The Way You Do The Things You Do – The Temptations

Heat Waves – Glass Animals

Sugar – Maroon 5

Dizzy – Missio

There's Nothing Holding Me Back – Shawn Mendes

You Really Got Me – The Kinks

Tennessee Whiskey – Chris Stapleton

It's In The Kiss (The Shoop Shoop Song) – Betty Everett

One Thing Right – Marshmello & Kane Brown

Shivers – Ed Sheeran

Good Vibrations – The Beach Boys

Stay With Me – Sam Smith

Something Just Like This – The Chainsmokers & Coldplay

Here You Come Again – Dolly Parton

Sacrifice – The Weeknd

Let It Go – James Bay

I Can't Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch) – Four Tops

Nothing Breaks Like A Heart – Mark Ronson & Miley
Cyrus

I Will Always Love You – Dolly Parton

Ain't No Sunshine – Bill Withers

Colder Weather – Zac Brown Band

Never Let You Done – The Verve

Here Comes The Sun – The Beatles

Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I'm Yours) – Stevie Wonder

Wonderwall – Oasis

All Of Me – John Legend

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I just want to make a special note to tell you that there are scenes inside this novel that may be triggering for some. The following topic might be considered sensitive to some: domestic abuse (child and adult) and alcoholism (not a main character).

ONE

Lucy

I'M GOING TO KILL him. First, I'm going to maim him beyond recognition—preferably with the heel of my hot pink Louboutin stiletto. Then I'm going to commit premeditated murder.

I've been thinking about what I'd like to do to him since I stepped onto the tarmac at the Las Vegas Airport. Every painstaking detail, courtesy of the last two documentaries I watched on Netflix.

I'll give you two guesses to figure out what they were about, and I'll give you a hint, they had nothing to do with baking.

Maybe if I claim temporary insanity, I won't have to serve hard time. At least in an institution, I'll get a comfortably padded room and a cozy jacket. Plus those great pills you can hide under your tongue and stash under your mattress. See, I already know all the tricks.

Surely a jury of my peers will understand.

Rhett Remington is trouble with a capital T.

Which is why I'm halfway across the country trekking through a gentlemen's club that I can only describe as... sticky. It's my first time in one of these establishments and to be honest, I had no idea what to expect. I should've known it wouldn't be immaculate. I imagine there are several different bodily fluids covering every surface in this place. I'm lucky the men in the audience still have their pants zipped and their dicks put away. Although, I have to say I'm curious about why there are so many of them here on a Wednesday afternoon. It must be the lunch buffet the sign out front boasted.

Tits and wings: the lunch of champions.

I peer around the club, looking for the giant thorn in my side, the low purple glow from the stage doing nothing to make my search easier. Damn him. He's probably in one of those private rooms getting his rocks off.

Picturing him sprawled out on a plastic covered couch in a secluded room with his massive legs spread, his pants undone, and a woman bobbing her head between them sours my stomach and knocks the air from my lungs. It's not because I'm jealous or anything—I'm not—it's because no one should be subjected to his company for any length of time. Not even a woman he paid good money for.

What he needs is to be throttled after running Alice off. I had a hard time finding her after our meeting at the end of January—you know, the one where I listed off all his

infractions and he couldn't even be bothered to learn my name.

All my initial applicants were bunnies and while I don't have anything against them, I needed less drama, not more. I was about ready to pull the position when quiet little Alice showed up. She wasn't even sure if she wanted the job, she needed PR experience and didn't want to handle the athletes directly.

She was perfect. Fucking perfect.

And now in less than a week, Rhett's nearly run her off. I knew he was insufferable, but I thought she'd last longer than that. Poor mousy thing could barely talk when she called me this morning. She failed to stop Remington from getting on a plane. Failed to stop him from exiting the plane and then refused to drag him out once he decided to hunker down in this filthy strip club. I'm not surprised she's afraid of him and his mood swings, but it still gets on my nerves. And where Remington is concerned, I don't have many left.

The last thing I need is for him to make the news *again* for his lewd and inappropriate behavior, so I did what any good public relations liaison would do. I got on a plane. Not because he deserves my help, but the team's reputation is on the line, and I'll do everything in my power to save the Devils from unnecessary bad press. Especially after fielding all the sexual harassment complaints against Adam Barrett, the former GM for the Devils turned disgrace.

Now someone just has to save him from me.

“I’m so sorry.” I lift a tentative hand to give the man I inadvertently nudged with my elbow a pat, but then think better of it and drop my hand at my side. I don’t know where he’s been and the suggestive smile sliding across his face tells me he might not be the discriminating type.

The guy’s sleazy gaze roams up my body, starting with my bare ankles and working up until he’s blatantly staring at my breasts and the little bit of cleavage this dress allows. Spending seconds with this man makes me feel dirtier than the laundry pile in the locker room. After a hockey game. Now I understand why some cultures cover everything including their ankles. I should have worn pants. And an overcoat.

“Anytime, sweet cheeks. Maybe you want to join us for a drink.” *Gross.* “We can pull up a chair for you.”

Everything about this man oozes... ooze. His smile is crooked over yellowing teeth, his dark hair graying and pulled back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. And his eyes dance with the promise of a good time; just not mine.

“No thanks.”

Without waiting for a response, I turn my back and resume my search. Fucking Remington. He has to be here somewhere. Alice never saw him come out.

Van Halen’s *Hot for Teacher* blares through the speakers and music has my heart thumping along to its rhythm. A little blonde number walks out on stage dressed up like nineteen nineties Britney Spears with a button up white shirt tied at the front and red plaid skirt so short her ass peeks out the bottom.

I'm sure when all you're going to do is take it off, length doesn't really matter.

I'm sure she's a nice girl paying off medical school. Shaking what her mama gave her to avoid years of debt. The white thigh highs with little red bows and that sparkly white thong must be a way to get a little extra for books and supplies.

Goosebumps dance along the bare flesh of my arms and a tingle of awareness creeps up my spine. The heavy weight of someone's gaze drills into my back, and I hesitantly turn around.

Between the dim lights and my seared retinas from all the flashing on stage, I can barely make out the lone man spread out in a rounded booth in the back corner. I don't mean spread out because he's laying across the table like some lunatic. I mean spread out because with his arms stretched out along the back of the booth, he looks like a huge mountain of a man—muscled, tattooed and bearded. It's like a biker and a lumberjack kissed tips and he popped out nine months later.

The man should come with a warning label. *Bad attitude: avoid at all costs.*

The lowball glass half-full of amber liquid remains untouched in front of him, and I wonder if he's already had a few or if the drink is just for show. His baseball cap is low, shielding the top half of his face and probably his identity from prowling eyes. He's done one smart thing but it's not enough to keep him from my wrath. He makes no attempt to

move or lift his head from the shadows, but I can feel his determined gaze exploring my body.

The breath rushes out of my lungs and my nipples harden, just from knowing his eyes are on me. It pisses me off. I hate that my body responds to him at all. Bad boys have always been my kryptonite and apparently my hormones don't discriminate. It's a good thing they don't control me.

Rhett Remington can keep his wandering eyes and resting prick face all to himself.

“Excuse me—”

“Unless you're here to hike up that ugly dress of yours and dance on top of my dick, I'm not interested in whatever you have to say to me. You wasted your time coming here.” His voice comes out low and gruff, like he hasn't spoken in days.

Red-hot fury shoots through my veins, and I have half a mind to throw his drink in his face. I plant my hands on my hips and frown. His head is still bowed so I can't look him in the eyes when I tell him off, but that won't stop me. I can talk to his trimmed beard and fleshy lips just as easily as the rest of him.

“Excuse me—”

“You said that part already.”

“I..I am *not* a...and this dress...is...it's not ugly!” I lean over the edge of the bench seat and whisper yell while gesturing to his lap. “Don't think for a second I will be doin' anything to your...you know.”

“You can say dick, sweetheart. I’m sure the rules are pretty lax in this place.” He raises his head, pinning me in place with a pair of mesmerizing hazel eyes that almost have me taking a step back. Almost. I will not be distracted by them. Or the muscles stretching his black shirt so tight it looks like it was stitched around him. Or the way his full lips quirk up at only one corner in a sinister-yet-sexy way.

And not sexy in a *I want to undress you later* kinda way. But sexy in a *I want to slap that smirk off your face* kinda way.

Rhett is no different from every other Mr. Bad-Boy-Asshole hockey player who thinks he’s better than everyone else and isn’t afraid to let them know. It’s guys like him who keep the public relations department busy, and while I should thank him for making sure I have job security, I can think of several other things I’d like to say instead. None of which he’d appreciate.

“I’m not your sweetheart.” My back straightens and my hands fist as my sides.

His tongue darts out to wet his lower lip before a full smile stretches across his face. “I’m sure you could be for the right price. Everything’s negotiable in Vegas. Even you. So, what’s it going to be, baby girl? You gonna come over here and sit on Daddy’s lap?”

“You’re disgusting.”

“You came looking for me, not the other way around.”

“Not for sex.”

“I never specifically mentioned sex.” He crosses his arms over his chest, the short sleeves of his shirt hugging his biceps. One of his arms is covered in swirls of colorful ink, and I’m momentarily stunned, watching his muscles flex under the tattoos. I don’t have any of my own, but God, I love the look of them, especially on muscular arms and shoulders. On anyone else, it’d be almost irresistible. But the second Rhett freaking Remington opens his mouth, he ruins any fantasy I might have. “But if there’s anyone that needs a good pounding, it’s you. You’re wound up tighter than a spring. I’m sure some dick would do wonders for your attitude.”

“My sex life is none of your business, Mr. Remington. Believe it or not, I didn’t come all the way to Vegas for this titillating conversation. I think I told you what would happen if you didn’t start falling in line, and I’d say you leapt across it.”

His eyes flash with anger before they narrow on me. “Last time I checked you didn’t sign my paycheck, Miss...”

“For crying out loud, my name is Lucy Hurst. I don’t know why I have to tell you so many times. Are you hard of hearing or do you have residual brain damage from all those concussions?”

“Excuse me?”

“I said that already. Remember?”

He doesn’t say anything, he just stares at me like my presence is a personal attack. But I don’t care, he can stare all he wants.

“You’ll be lucky if you don’t get kicked down to the minors for pulling a stunt like this.” I continue, propping my fists on my hips. “I told you to keep a low profile. I gave you a laundry list of things you could do to improve your image. I told you to listen to Alice.” I take a deep calming breath, struggling to keep my voice even. “Running off to a strip club in the heart of Sin City isn’t what I had in mind. I don’t know why you can’t seem to follow a rule to save your life.”

“Sorry, sweetheart, I’m not so good with rules.”

Two

Rhett

FUCKING LUCY HURST. YEAH, I know her name. I know it more than she'd probably like.

It was seared into my brain the second I saw her walking off the elevator my first day in the Devils' arena. I was pissed off, didn't want to be there, and sure as shit didn't want to talk to anyone. But there she was, looking like sunshine and unicorns, walking toward me in a dark pink dress and a pair of spiked heels that looked like they could double as weapons.

No getting around it, though: she was easily the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, despite the color of her dress, and her friendly open smile.

Her golden hair was loose that day, tumbling down her back in large waves, and I had this inane urge to run my fingers through it and see if it felt as soft and silky as it looked. Which I didn't do for multiple reasons. First off, she would've murdered me, possibly with a heel. Secondly, I didn't like her, despite not knowing anything about her. Thirdly, I don't do shit like tenderly touch women's hair.

Fist it in my hand while I fuck her from behind, maybe. Gentle stroking? Not my style. So instead of trying to win her over, I opened my damned mouth. My words from that day come back to me as I stare into those gorgeous blue eyes.

“Are you the official welcoming committee? Save your pamphlet and pep talk, I’ve heard it all before.” I leaned forward, rested my arms along my thighs, and gave her a look that said I was already bored with the conversation. “In case you haven’t heard, I don’t want to be here. This isn’t my first team and it won’t be the last. I’ll be out of your hair soon enough.”

I don’t know what possessed me to spew my negativity all over her, but I couldn’t take it back. And the more I thought about it, the more I didn’t want to. She was the kind of girl that you took home to meet your family—hypothetically, I mean; no woman is ever going to meet mine. She was the kind of girl you build a future with. I wasn’t on the damned Devils to build a future; I was being punished.

Wasn’t anything new to me, but I still didn’t like it. I should be back in LA, with my old team, living in my old apartment I shared with my sister. Though my sister was probably better off on her own, I failed to protect her just like I’ve failed at everything else.

“Mr. Remington, are you even listening to me?” Her hand comes down on the table in front of me, banging it with her palm, eliciting looks from several of the men around me. I don’t like it.

Lucy's glossy bow shape lips are tugged down into a frown, her gaze icy, but it doesn't stop her from looking fucking delicious. Her dress today is a light shade of pink, cut so that it's modest, but still clings to her killer curves.

I'm not the only one taking notice, and I have this crazy urge to cover her with a burlap sack and hide her away from all other men. Wouldn't do any good though, she's probably the only woman in existence who would make a burlap sack look sexy.

Why did she have to follow me out here?

I scoot over and gesture to the cushion next to me. "Why don't you sit down?"

I don't mention that her sitting down will keep the other men from staring at her ass. Or that by being next to me, these fuckers will think she's with me and might leave her alone. Especially the prick with the ponytail.

I may not be able to take her for myself but I don't want any of these fuckers having her either. She'd end up in a ditch somewhere and then I'd be the one responsible. That's not something I want on my conscience.

Her face scrunches up like she'd rather sit on broken glass than next to me but she lowers herself to the cushion anyway.

"I'm sitting. Happy now?"

"Am I ever happy?"

"I sincerely doubt it."

We fall into an uncomfortable silence, and I play with my glass, spinning the whiskey around the rim. Moving it from side to side, letting the liquid run to the edge and then tipping it in the other direction. Anything to avoid the conversation I know she wants to have with me.

I broke her rules. So what? They were stupid. If Malibu Barbie thinks I'm going to attend all her charity events, then she has another thing coming. I went to one. One fucking event and never again. It was enough to know it wasn't for me.

Sure, the event was for a good cause, but I'd have gladly donated money and spent the night on my couch nursing a beer. Instead, I had to put on an uncomfortable suit and prance around in front of Nashville's upper crust because Lucy thought I needed to make a good impression. I'm not sure how any of them could be impressed when they're looking down their noses at people like me because we were born with hockey sticks in our hands instead of silver spoons in our mouths.

After three hours of that nonsense I was done. So, I came to Vegas to get away and unwind. I could use a bunny to relax, but after getting my naked ass splashed across several tabloids from what I like to call The Great Hotel Mishap, I put myself on a bunny-free diet.

Plus, the only girl I'm even remotely interested in dresses like she just stepped out of the Barbie Dreamhouse and has a stick twice as big as my dick straight up her ass. The fact that

she's put me and my dick under her fairy princess spell pisses me off worse than anything else.

Underneath all that hideous pink material, Lucy Hurst has a body made for sin, and I've always loved being a sinner. Too bad for the both of us, I'm walking the straight and narrow path.

A quick glance in her direction makes me painfully aware she's staring a hole into my head with her expressive cerulean blue eyes. I technically haven't caused any trouble. I've been sitting here, minding my own business, and we don't have a game for another two days. I don't see what the problem is.

"The problem, Mr. Remington." Shit, I didn't think I said that out loud. "Is that you don't have permission to leave Tennessee."

"I wasn't aware you were in charge of me."

"Alice was supposed to be." She moves to rest her arms on the table but then stops and hovers them over the surface for a few seconds before she sighs and lets them drop. "You've done nothing for the past month and a half but prove you're incapable of... behaving."

"You say that like I'm a toddler."

"You're the one acting like one."

"I don't like being told what to do," I huff, tossing back the rest of my whiskey and leaning back in the booth. I've had a lifetime of being told what to do.

Pass the puck, Rhett, you're not the only one on the team. Smack to the back of my head. Don't pass the puck, only losers don't take the shot. Hard slap across my cheek. You lost that fucking game for the whole team. Punch. Get up you little bastard, it's time to learn to be a man. Six is too old to be hiding beneath your mother's skirts.

Lucy lets out an exasperated sigh. “You were trouble before you came here, Remington. Unfortunately for the both of us, you became my problem the second you signed your new contract. Your reputation is in the gutter, and it's my job to pull it out and clean it up. If you'd tell me what the fight was—”

“No.”

“But I could help you—”

“I said no.”

The fight. The one that cost me my position and cushy salary with the LA Stars. Before that fight I'd been a model employee—that might be a stretch, but I wasn't headline news—and after I was a pariah. No other team wanted me and everyone wanted to know why I threw the first punch at golden boy Ron Cooper. He hasn't told his side of the story and neither will I.

I don't care who's asking.

It's not my story to tell anyway. I was only there for the aftermath.

Whatever she's about to say next gets interrupted as a petite waitress in nothing more than her underwear stops by the

table. She's cute but her smile is too wide and her gaze lingers on my chest and shoulders for too long. "Can I get either of you a drink?"

I nod and peer over at Lucy. "What about you, sweetheart?"

"I'm working. Not drinking."

"If you pull that stick out of your ass maybe you can do both."

Her eyes flash with annoyance and narrow on me.

"What's the matter?" I smirk, stretching my arms along the back of the booth, my fingers mere inches from her silky hair. "Afraid you can't handle a little fun?"

This time she smiles. It's not quite a normal smile, this one has more teeth and might scare a lesser man, but not me. This smile promises a challenge, and I hate to admit that it has my balls tingling in all the right places.

"Fine, Mr. Remington. I'll have a drink, and then we're going to do things my way."

THREE

Lucy

SUNLIGHT CUTS THROUGH THE gap in the drapes, practically backhanding me across the face. There's a sharp pounding in my skull. My mouth feels like it's stuffed with cotton balls and has never before been refreshed with a cool glass of water. My whole damn body aches, feeling like it's been struck with a Mack truck.

Fuck, why is it so bright?

With a groan, I roll over in the bed, snuggling into something solid yet moldable.

Hmmm.

That doesn't make sense.

Whatever it is curls around me and draws me into its warmth. A heavy weight settles across my middle and my legs tangle with...it? Wait... I was alone when I went to sleep, right?

Shit.

The cushion under my cheek rumbles and something strokes up and down my back. Awareness prickles at the back of my mind and in my haze, it's easy to ignore. Until that caress goes lower, dipping over the small of my back and squeezing my ass. It's then I realize the sheets and offending caresser are touching bare skin.

Holy shit, I'm naked.

My eyes fly open and I'm staring straight at a wide expanse of... a chest? A man's chest? A man's muscular chest with tattoos across one side.

Rhett Remington.

I push away, tumbling over, legs and sheets going everywhere until I land to the floor in an undignified heap. My blood boils as I wrestle with the silk fabric. I can't believe he got me drunk and lured me into his hotel room. I knew he was an asshole but I didn't even for a second think he would sink this low. And what the fuck are these sheets made of? I can't get my damn legs free.

"Lucy?"

Oh, great *now* he remembers my name. Rhett's deep timber is rusty from sleep, yet I've never heard my name sound so good. With any luck, he'll forget he heard anything and go back to la la land so I can sneak the hell outta here. My plan is foiled seconds later when his head pops over the side of the bed, and he stares down at me, his expression laced with concern. "Are you okay?"

“What do you think?” I mumble, kicking against these fucking sheets, finally freeing my legs.

“What are you doing in my room?”

I shoot to my feet, careful to keep the sheet wrapped around my front to avoid an accidental boob slip or a vag sighting. The damn sheet is so big, it’s hard to keep a hold of, and I’ve been far too exposed for far too long. “What do you mean, what am I doing in your room? What the fuck did you do to me?”

“What?” He raises his voice as he scoots backward on the bed, hopping to the floor and wrapping the blanket from the bed around his waist. “I should be asking you the same thing. I don’t remember shit from last night.”

“Obviously you got us both drunk. The last thing I remember...” Stickiness. *Hot for Teacher*. Finding Rhett in the gentlemen’s club... and then.... and then he challenged me to a drink. And of course, I accepted because I don’t back down from a challenge. Especially from jerks like him. “You challenged me.”

“One drink.” Rhett holds up his index finger on his left hand and his brows draw together. “I don’t remember anything after that either. That was only my second drink.” His voice drops to a whisper. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re naked, I’m naked. It seems pretty cut and dry to me.”

He gives me a pointed look, one that says he thinks I'm being ridiculous. "I don't get drunk, and I don't take advantage of drunk women."

Ha! That's a joke. Not sure how he thinks he can explain this situation we've found ourselves in. Although, I don't feel sore at all downstairs. He probably has a small dick. Big attitude, small dick. Makes perfect sense to me. The whole big dick energy complex is usually the opposite of what you'd hope for.

He drops his hand and as it does, a ray of light catches something on his ring finger, stealing my attention. THE RING FINGER. The ring finger with a black band circling around it. "What the fuck is that?" I point at it, my finger shaking.

Rhett glances down and gives me an exasperated look. "It's morning wood, sweetheart. Don't worry, it has nothing to do with you. It's as natural as breathing."

I didn't even notice that, but I'm sure looking now. It's like pointing out a car accident and expecting no one to turn their head in that direction. It's human nature. Has nothing to do with him and the tented blanket wrapped around his waist. The very same blanket his left hand just grabbed. The same left hand with the damn ring on.

That shiny black band twists something inside me, turning my thoughts dark and ugly and giving me an insane urge to cause someone bodily harm. That's preposterous. It must be

the residual effects of the alcohol. From the lots and lots of alcohol because there's no way I'm jealous.

As the damn public relations person for the Devils, I don't know how I didn't know about this. I'm not an idiot, I've checked his personnel file. Multiple times.

And now that I think about it, it's actually disgusting. His poor wife must either be completely blind or oblivious to his extracurricular activities. Especially considering his recent hotel exploits with the two blondes after he got to Nashville.

Not only that, but he let whatever happen between us last night happen. I mean, I woke up next to the man naked. N-A-K-E-D.

And he's fucking married.

"I'm not talking about your stubby dick, Remington." I hike up the sheet and stomp across the room grabbing his hand and lifting it between us. "I'm talking about this. What. The. Fuck. Is. This?"

His eyes narrow on me before they slide down to his offending hand and open wide. He takes a step back, almost stumbling backwards but catches himself. I don't think I've seen a man look so completely horrified.

"This isn't mine."

"That's what they all say." I snort. "How else do you explain the damn thing on your hand? Are you married?" I hate that I'm affected. I hate that my voice wavers. And I hate how at home that ring looks on his finger.

He looks between me and the ring, his mouth opening and closing rapidly. Rhett Remington is finally at a loss for words. I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly. And then another. As I'm trying to calm myself and unknot my stomach, Rhett closes the distance between us.

The air crackles and burns with an intensity I can't explain. There's a current between us, pulling us together and my breath catches in my throat.

His hazel eyes catch mine, glowing more green than brown in the morning light and I'm trapped. I can't look away. I can't move.

Rhett is inches away, yet I can feel his hands all over my skin filling me with a fluttery feeling deep in my core. He leans forward. My lips part and a puff of air brushes past them. Closer. He's so close. I could push myself to my tiptoes and eliminate the gap between us. I could, but I remain rooted to the floor.

Instead of pressing his lips to mine like I don't want, he reaches down, grabs my hand and pulls it between us.

"If I'm married," he spits, his hands gripping the tips of my fingers, "then I'm married to you."

FOUR

Rhett

FOR ONCE, MALIBU BARBIE is speechless.

Instead of looking at her ring finger, she's staring at me with the widest eyes I've ever seen. It's like I've grown a second head. Or there's a blue alien with two dicks standing directly behind me. That might be preferable to whatever the fuck is happening here. There's no way. We can't be married. *I can't be married.*

My whole life I've only ever let people down. My dad, mostly, but everyone else at one time or another. My sister. My brother. Hell, I'm surprised anyone in my family still talks to me. I'm nothing but a let down. Which is why I live my life giving people zero fucks and zero expectations.

"How did you get this ring on my finger? Is this a joke?" Lucy stutters as the blood drains from her face, and she grips the sheet tighter around her.

Remember what I said about making the potato sack look sexy? She's doing the same thing with this damn off-white

sheet and I want nothing more than to rip it off and get a close look at her curvy hot-as-fuck body. Just look, though, I won't be touching. The ghost of her skin beneath my fingertips and against my chest when I was waking up is enough. She felt so soft, her flesh so smooth. So fucking perfect and so fucking not mine. I don't care what this damn ring means.

I quirk my brow and roll the ring around my finger, the metal feeling completely foreign. "I don't joke."

Her shoulders fall as she inspects the rather impressively large diamond on her ring finger. She looks so defeated, and I want to pull her in for a hug and tell her everything will be okay. But I won't because I don't need to be anywhere near her when she's not dressed. And if we're married, neither one of us is okay.

"And that diamond is way too gaudy. Not my style."

Her lips twitch. "I'm impressed, a man who spends his time at strip clubs knows what gaudy means."

"Liking a nice pair of tits doesn't mean I'm not educated."

She retightens the blanket around her body and paces the room. "Someone must have set us up. This makes no sense. Why can't we remember last night?"

That's the million dollar question. I don't remember shit after I ordered those drinks from the waitress. I drink, but I don't get drunk. People lose control when they get drunk, and I don't need the help. I can lose my shit just fine on my own.

Maybe it wasn't quite the alcohol. "Do you feel okay?"

“I’ve got a headache, and I feel a bit groggy. You?”

I don’t feel terrible, which is odd. There was only one time I got so drunk I didn’t remember shit from the night before. I lost a game, spent some quality time with my dad’s fists, and then broke into his liquor cabinet. The next day I learned that cheap tequila tastes worse coming up than it does going down.

“About the same. Do you think we were drugged?”

I shake my head and run a hand through my hair. “Who would do that? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Maybe someone mixed up the drinks? I don’t know. Something obviously happened and we didn’t do it. Alice couldn’t get a flight until tonight, so I can have her go back to the club and see what she can find out.” She grabs the hotel phone and asks to be transferred to Alice’s room.

If I could, I’d stay behind just to watch Alice go to the club. She almost had a breakdown when I stopped in front of the damn place and started to go in. Lucy might have to give the girl a raise.

“Hey, Alice. Sorry to wake you.” Lucy’s eyes flick to mine before she continues. “Rhett and I have found ourselves in a bit of a situation. We think we might have been drugged last night at the club. Yeah, yeah. We’re okay, but I need you to go down there and talk to the manager. Maybe track down the waitress. I know it’s a lot to ask, but I wouldn’t ask if this weren’t an emergency.” She pauses and plays with the cord, wrapping it around her slender finger. Not the one with my

ring on it. *My ring.* “Thank you so much. I owe you. Please call me as soon as you find something out.”

As Lucy hangs up the phone, I grab my jeans, turn and pull them up beneath the blanket. When I turn back around and toss it back on the bed, the weight of Lucy’s stare settles on my abs. With a sigh, I throw on a shirt, covering my muscles and tattoos. I can’t have a serious conversation when Barbie is drooling down her chin. “Check your pockets. There must be some clue about what happened.”

“Maybe while we’re at it, we can call Scooby Doo and the gang.”

“Your sarcasm is not helpful. Haven’t you ever seen *The Hangover*?”

“Fine. I’ll check my purse.”

She purses her lips and looks around the room. It takes her a minute but finds it wedged in the side of the arm chair. She shoots me a look, one that says she blames me for all this and digs through it. While she does that, I check my pockets from the pants I wore last night—empty—and my wallet. My fingers shake as I pull out a thin receipt folded over. I don’t remember putting this in there. Or buying anything from the Royal Crown Jewelers.

“I have a receipt from a jewelry store for your ring.” I hold it up, the floor dropping out from under me. If this isn’t real, why would I get her a ring? A very expensive ring at that. At least I know I have good taste. *A lot of good that does me right about now.*

She pulls an identical slip of paper from her purse and several full-sized papers. “I have the one for yours. And our marriage license.”

I’m across the room in two strides and pull the paper out of her hand. Signed, stamped, and dated. Holy fuck. “Shit. Shit. Shit.” I grab my phone from the nightstand, ignoring the unread messages and going straight to the photos to see if we had the sense to take any photographic evidence.

Jackpot.

The last picture on the roll is a selfie of Lucy and I, smiling wide and holding up our rings for the camera. We’re both in our clothes from the strip club and neither one of us looks bothered in the slightest. I’d like to say we look drunk out of our minds but we don’t. We look happy and that’s the biggest conundrum of it all.

I don’t do happy. I don’t do married. I don’t even do girlfriends.

Even with my own smile staring back at me, I don’t believe it. And even more puzzling, why can’t I remember?

“We can fix this. It’s okay.” Lucy speeds around the room, gathers her clothes from various spots around the room, and disappears into the bathroom, leaving me staring at my phone screen. “I’m sure we can get a divorce or an annulment. We didn’t... you know...”

“Fuck?”

Divorce. This is a damn disaster. I'll be a twenty-eight-year-old divorcee with enough baggage to fill an airport terminal and a bad attitude.

She comes back out in her pink dress from yesterday, a bit wrinkled from being thrown on the floor, and her hair is piled on her head in a messy bun that shouldn't look as appealing as it is. A pink tinge dusts across her pale cheeks, and she shifts on her feet. "Yeah. Do you think we did?"

Fuck. I may have done some bad things in my life, but nothing worthy of that kind of punishment. There's no way we live in a world where I've been inside this woman without remembering it. "Are you sore?"

Her eyes dart to mine. "What? What does that matter? You could have a small dick."

Ha. "Sweetheart, do I look like a guy with a small dick?"

"I don't know." She gestures her hands up and down my body. "Looks can always be deceiving. I know from experience that you can't always trust the big-hands-big-penis analogy."

I quirk a brow but remain silent. I have no desire to know how exactly she learned that. Not because I want to rip any man that touched her limb from limb but because I don't care. I mostly don't care.

"No, I'm not sore." She sighs and crosses back to her side of the room to grab her cellphone.

The ring feels heavy around my finger and even heavier in my thoughts. Sex or no, there's a good chance this marriage might be real. And then what? Do we get a divorce? An annulment? There's no fucking way I'm staying married to the perfect Malibu Barbie. Her reputation wouldn't be able to stand it and it would only be a matter of days before I'd let her down.

My phone dings through with a text. And then another adding to the already long string of unread messages from my father.

Dad: We need to have a chat.

Dad: None of us know anything about this girl. Has she even met your brother or sister? I know you never introduced me. That's very disrespectful, I thought we raised you better than that. You must need another lesson.

Dad: I want to know what the hell you were thinking. I'm so disappointed you would put pussy before your career.

Dad: Whores are good for one thing and you don't have to marry one to get it. I'd think you'd have learned that with all your escapades. We've worked hard to get you where you are.

Dad: Always the disappointment.

Dad: Some things never change.

Like your undying love and support, thanks, Dad. He's right. Some things never change which is why this marriage, or whatever you want to call it, needs to end immediately.

"Holy shit." Lucy lets out a high-pitched squeal, rapidly tapping away on her phone screen. "Holy shit." This one is higher than the last. "It's everywhere."

"What's every—"

"Us. The wedding. We're all over the news and sports sites. This can't be happening. This is a fucking nightmare."

For once, we're in agreement.

"Reporters want statements. Interviews with us. Interviews with you. Gordon wants to meet with us as soon as we get back. We're in so much trouble."

"Yeah, it looks like the bunnies are pissed too." I don't know why I'm goading her, especially since we're both in this situation together, but pissing her off gives me a perverse satisfaction.

Her face turns a deep shade of red and her little fists ball at her sides. "Do I look like I give a shit about the bunnies?"

"A little bit." I sit down on the corner of the bed, pull off the ring, and roll it through my fingers. "Look, we can get an annulment. We'll tell everyone we made a mistake. You can blame it all on me if you want. Everyone already knows that out of the two of us, I'm the fuck-up."

"Rhett, I don't think you understand. You don't have any penalties left. This could get you sent down to the minors. Or

even worse, you could find yourself tossed out of hockey completely. Gordon has already given you more chances than anyone else. Your career might have survived a trip to Vegas, but it won't survive this." She glances back down at her phone and after several very long groans, tosses it to the center of the bed. "My parents..."

I drop my head, run my hands through my hair and grab my neck. This morning just keeps getting worse. Between waking up next to this infuriating woman, the possibility of divorce, and potentially losing my career, I'm about to lose my shit. Which would be bad considering any additional outburst on my part would be handing Gordon more ammunition to can my ass. I'm not ready to lose my career, my passion, my... the only thing in my life I'm not worried about disappointing. "Your parents are the least of my concerns right now."

"This is going to sound crazy—"

"Never a good way to start a proposal."

She snorts, very unlady-like and very adorable. "I think we've had enough proposals."

"Funny."

"I think we need to stay married."

"If that's a joke, I'm not laughing, Lucy."

"Neither am I."

FIVE

Lucy

I'VE LOST MY MIND. This ring is seriously messing with my brain. But also, how could it not? The damn thing is freaking huge. The princess cut has to be at least three karats with smaller diamonds going halfway down each side. Even the wedding band has diamonds going most of the way around it. This set must have put a pretty dent in Rhett's wallet.

"You can't be fucking serious." Rhett advances on me, his hair now sticking out in multiple different directions. I almost feel bad. Almost. But this arrangement benefits him as much as it does me. Maybe more.

"Sit back down." I point to the bed and when he complies, I lower myself beside him. "I don't want to be married to you anymore than you want to be married to me." When he tosses me a look of disbelief, I add. "Trust me, you're no fucking picnic, and I don't really like you."

"The feeling's mutual. You're like a Barbie Terrorist," he mumbles.

And no way do I want to be married to anyone, let alone this fucking guy. I've been just fine on my own since my parents kicked me out of the house and practically disowned me. There was a dark period in my life where I didn't have anyone, didn't have a place to stay and or any money in the bank. I was stupid enough to think Mario, my boyfriend at the time, would take me in. As soon as he found out the money was gone, he kicked me to the curb so fast my head spun for a week.

If there's one important life lesson I learned after all that, it's that you can't trust anyone but yourself. Everyone else will only let you down. I made a vow that day: I'd never depend on another person for money or happiness. I haven't broken that promise to myself, and I don't intend to now.

This is purely a business decision.

“Anyway. You need me, this,” I point between us, “to work. You want to stay on the team, right?”

I was serious when I said his entire career was at risk. Gordon and Jazz are very forgiving, but Rhett's been pushing their buttons and causing scenes since he got here a little over a month ago. Between picking fights with Tag because he doesn't like his face, getting in bar fights, missing an away game and now this... This would be the last straw. Even staying married, I'm going to have to put up a hell of an argument to keep him on the team.

His back straightens as he glances at me. “I want to play hockey.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” I sigh and place a light hand on his shoulder. “If you go to Nashville with any more bad press, you’re done. Gordon already thinks this whole thing is your fault, and you forced me into it.”

“I would never—”

I put a hand up to stop him. “I know. You’re an asshole but I don’t think you’re a liar. Staying married could save your career. We can fix your image and save your reputation.”

His eyes narrow on me and he quirks a brow. “What’s the catch? Why would you agree to do this?”

“It helps me too.”

Or rather it helps my dad and the business he’s worked so hard to build. While I want no part in running Hurst Financial, I can appreciate how hard he’s worked to run the business and support the family. Shortly after my sister, Elle, decided she was no longer interested in taking over the business once my father retired, the market shifted. And it didn’t end well for my dad’s company. He lost a lot of money and very well may lose the business and his retirement. Everything hinges on a merger with another Georgia-based financial company which will refill the bank account and keep things running.

Unfortunately, the owner of the other company is a bit dodgy and keeps changing his mind about things. My dad asked for one thing during this transition period: for Elle and me to lay low and try to minimize media attention.

Apparently, the other owner is very easily spooked.

Oops.

After my dad kicked me out of the family, I shouldn't care, but I do. We've been walking down a rocky path the past several years, trying to fix our broken relationship. I harbored a lot of hatred for what seemed like a long time and then I chose to be the bigger person and try to forgive. While some part of me will always hold some resentment for my parents, I love them.

Which means I can sacrifice a small amount of my time to help ensure this deal goes through. While I may not depend on them, or anyone else, they can damn sure depend on me.

"My family can't afford the bad press, at least not right now." I continue, turning my phone over in my hands. "We can still salvage things. We can spin some romantic tale about a whirlwind romance. You found me irresistible and swept me off my feet."

He grunts, clearly impressed with my plan. "Have you met me?"

"I know it's a bit of a stretch."

He mumbles something about how difficult I am and then takes a deep breath. "How long?"

I feel like this is a jail sentence and I'm not sure how long I'll be able to survive these conditions. They don't even come with three meals a day.

"Four months? That'll get us through the rest of the season."

With a nod, he pushes up from the bed and heads to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Four months. I could do that.... Right? That's four months to fix his image. Four months of pretending to be husband and wife. We can do it. We can figure out how to tolerate each other to make this sham look believable.

Assuming we don't kill each other first.

Six

Rhett

THE RIDE TO THE airport with my new *wife* is awkward. And being pressed up against her in this airplane is way worse. Simultaneously wanting to remain pressed up against her and wanting to cut my leg off to avoid all contact is my own personal hell.

I'm still reeling at her proposition and what this means for the next four months of my life. Not to mention that she's wearing jeans. I didn't think she owned any normal clothes but I like it.

I like seeing her comfortable. I like that I'm one of the only people who get to see her like this. I hate that I like it.

"So, what's this marriage going to look like?" I scoot down in my chair and rub my palms along my thighs as the flight attendant passes with the drink cart. What I wouldn't give for a shot of something, but I'm not sure I want to touch a drop of alcohol again. Who knows what would happen next time? A puppy? A baby? I shiver at the horror that thought elicits. Yep, no more alcohol for me.

Lucy turns from the window, checks her lap belt for the seventh time since takeoff, and shrugs. “I know I look like I have it together all the time, but I’m winging it right now. If we want to be convincing, we need to make this look as real as possible. I think we should move in together.”

“Of course, you fucking do.” I’ve never lived with anyone who wasn’t family, and the thought of Lucy and I sharing the same space intrigues me. My first thought is to tell her no fucking way, but it makes the most sense.

“It’s the simplest solution, Remington.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to like it.” I push the sleeves of my sweater up my forearms and cross my arms over my chest. “We’re not sharing a room.”

“Obviously.”

Ignoring the disappointment in my gut, I bite out, “What else?”

“You want me to write down a list of rules or something?” She laughs, but I’m just sitting here not laughing. Eventually she notices and her laughter dies down. “Oh, you’re not kidding.”

“No,” I grunt.

“Okay.” She hums to herself, her brows scrunch together, and I want to reach over and smooth that spot with my thumb. The drugs must still be affecting me. “First rule, no more bunnies.”

I scoff but remain silent, she doesn't need to know that I haven't been with a bunny since I got locked out of that hotel room. Despite what the tabloids say. Nor does she need to know that the bunnies hold absolutely no appeal. Not since she came along.

"I'm serious, Rhett. We can pretend all we want but if you're hopping from bed to bed, this won't be believable." Her hands fly down to her lap, and she fiddles with the belt. "And I don't want to be made a fool of."

I slap her hands away and double check to make sure the belt is fastened, my fingers grazing the bottom of her soft sweatshirt. Her silky skin is so close, and I let my pinky sweep across a small expanse of skin above her jeans. Lucy freezes, staring at my hands, as the air thickens and pulses around us. A zing of electricity travels down my spine, and I suck in a deep breath and pull away.

"No bunnies." I settle back in my seat and recross my arms, catching a whiff of her light floral perfume. It smells—not terrible. "I won't sleep with anyone else but neither can you."

"No problem."

"No sex with each other either. That's rule number two. Sex will complicate things and when this ends, it needs to be a clean break." I pause, looking into her bright blue eyes, seeing the warring emotion in their depths. "Which leads us into rule number three, don't go falling in love with me, sweetheart. I'm not a project you can fix, and I don't believe in happy endings."

“Neither one of those things will be a problem. Happy endings are for other people.” She says this so matter-of-fact, like she doesn’t deserve to find someone to make her happy. I’d like to find the bastard who put that frown on her beautiful face and punch him in the dick. She continues like her words didn’t slice right through me. “Rule number four, no more fights off the ice.”

I can’t help the low growl rumbling from my chest. Fighting is as natural as breathing, which is why I’m a damn good enforcer. It was beaten into me as a kid after every game, win or lose. After every mistake I made. Every time I talked back to my father. Pretty much anything could elicit his wrath. Especially when he was drinking, which was every day that ended with ‘y’.

I took that abuse proudly because every beating on me was a beating that didn’t trickle down to my younger siblings. Although now I know my dad threatened them to control me. Not only was I the oldest, but I played hockey just like he did in high school. My brother, Heath, went in a different direction and played football. Dad wasn’t as big a fan, so he managed to escape our father’s anger, especially during hockey season.

When he’d get drunk and come looking for a punching bag, Heath would take our little sister down to the basement to hide. Mom was no help. Usually, she took the first few punches and then turned a blind eye. The best thing she ever did was divorce that man. Too bad I was already drafted by then. But her freedom didn’t last long, because she got sick

and soon after finding out she had stage-four liver cancer, she was gone.

Like father, like son, I guess. Violence is in my blood. Another reason why Lucy needs to run for the hills as soon as this is over.

“And rule number five, you do what I say—”

“Hard pass.”

“—in order to fix your image. Believe it or not, Remington, I don’t want to control you. I’m here to help and it’s my job to help you. Let me do my job.” She sighs, leans back against the chair, and rubs her eyes.

“Fine,” I mumble. “Is that it?”

“I mean, do you need more?”

Do I need more? She must be out of her fucking mind. What I need is to be as far away from this situation as possible. Being married to her—as fake as it may be—is going to be a disaster. I can see it written all over her face, right down to her glossy pink lipstick.

This is going to be interesting.

The rest of the plane ride, however, is not. Lucy stays quiet, likely lost in thought, even through the small bout of turbulence where she checks her lap belt two more times and does her best not to look freaked out. I almost ask her how flying can make her so nervous. Almost. I’d hate for her to think I care because I don’t. Being curious doesn’t mean I give a flying fuck—pun intended. It’s just that I would’ve figured

with all of the away games she goes to, she'd be used to it by now.

Seconds after the fasten seatbelt sign flashes off, she's on her feet and nudging me up as well. We grab our carry-on luggage and get the hell off this big metal bird. I'm trailing behind Lucy as she weaves her way through the airport, not checking out her ass—I'm a respectable gentleman. Okay fine, I've been watching it since we got off the plane. Sue me, it looks good in a pair of tight jeans.

Not sure if I'm supposed to go home or follow her around all day. As long as I'm back here, I won't complain. Much. But it would be nice to know what's going to happen now that we're back in Nashville. She said we need to live together but failed to specify where.

I'll be damned if she thinks I'm staying in the Barbie Princess Dreamhouse. I'm sure my hockey gear and size fourteen shoes would fit beautifully in her perfectly pink closet.

"Hey, sweetheart, wait up. Where do we go from here?" I increase my stride to catch up to her, catching a whiff of her light floral perfume. It smells—not terrible.

"I'll be going to my place, and you'll be going to yours." She spares me the briefest glance. "Hopefully to shower. And then we can figure things out from there. I'll call you."

I can't help but snort. If I had a dollar for every time I said that to a girl... well, I'd have a few more really nice Italian leather belts.

“Lucy—”

She comes to an abrupt stop, pulling me to a halt beside her. Holy shit, great balls of fire. There must be blood in the water because the sharks are circling. Of course, there'd be a swarm of paparazzi outside the airport. What are the chances Dwayne Johnson or Ironman were on the same plane and I missed them?

Not fucking likely. Especially when they start shouting out my name followed in rapid succession by hers.

Lucy stiffens beside me, her eyes going wide, and she turns to me with this horrified look on her face like she wants—no, like she *needs*—my help. Those light blue eyes connect with mine, swimming with a myriad of emotions.

My first instinct is to push her aside, jump into a car, and mind my own fucking business. Then I see the slightest little quiver in her bottom lip and fuck me. FUCK. ME.

There's one thing I hate more than anything else in the world. Helping. Doesn't stop me from doing something completely stupid like grabbing Lucy's hand and plastering a big stupid smile on my face. What's wrong with me?

Her hand feels so much smaller than mine as I lace our fingers together. Her skin so soft. So delicate. I don't know why but I trace her wedding ring, gliding along the band, not quite hating the way my heart speeds up. Or the bit of possessiveness that snakes up my spine over the fact that she's wearing my ring on her finger.

Mine. No one else's.

I lower my head, ghosting my lips along her cheek, ignoring her sharp inhale, and stopping at the shell of her ear to whisper, "I thought you're supposed to be a badass public relations lady."

"I am." She gives my hand a squeeze. "I didn't know if you were going to play along."

"To be fair, I didn't know if I was going to either." I graze my nose down her earlobe before adding, "Wife."

SEVEN

Lucy

DAMMIT. DAMN HIM. THESE damn paparazzi. My freaking hormones. Especially my hormones. I don't know what it is about "*Wife*" rolling off Rhett's tongue. But that damn word has my insides flapping around like a cage full of hummingbirds.

"We'll do interviews later, Husband." I tug him away from the throngs of people and toward Tag's truck.

I'm sure it's not a good idea to have him and Tag together in the confines of a small vehicle. They can't even be in the same arena without picking a fight. Although that may be the least of my worries once Elle lays into me. She texted me more than twenty questions earlier today about my predicament, none of which I answered. Bringing Rhett may give me a temporary reprieve from a stern lecture, but I'll hear it eventually.

"Oh no, he's not coming with us."

Tag's already outside of Elle's new white SUV, pointing a finger in our direction. His damn voice carries right through

the brisk winter air. Right toward all the wannabe reporters. He's obviously got more hair than sense.

Rhett's quiet beside me, hiking his duffle high on his shoulder. The pressure of my hand in his is both foreign and comforting. Like he's offering me his support even though the logical side of me tells me that's complete horseshit.

I shake my head and do my own pointing. "Get inside the Caddy. This is not the time nor place for this discussion. Let's not give the media more to work with."

Tag's eyes narrow, volleying between Rhett and I, and shooting down to our joined hands. Tag's arms cross and he continues his stare down for several seconds before he lets out a deep breath and advances on us.

"Maybe I should—" Rhett stiffens and tugs on my hand. "Maybe I should get my own ride."

"I'm sure that's not necessary." Tag is... well, Tag is a goofball with a man bun. But he makes my sister happy and has really grown up a lot since his niece Chloe was dropped off at his doorstep a few months ago. He wasn't ready to be a dad or anything resembling a grown up, but he's done a great job with her.

"Lucy." Tag stops in front of us, his face pinched as his gaze drops to my pastel pink carryon. He mutters something about normal luggage before reaching out and grabbing it from me. "Asshole." He nods at Rhett, a smirk playing on his lips. "We can strap you to the roof."

Rhett scoffs, tossing his bag in the now-open trunk, and gives Tag a hearty pat on the back. “I understand. Can’t fit much else with your ego and your ridiculous man bun in there.”

Tag growls.

Rhett growls.

Jesus. I’m so glad the two of them can resist causing a scene so easily.

“Alright boys.” I clap my hands, glancing at the cameras, which are getting closer. “We can compare penis size inside.”

“Mine’s bigger,” Tag blurts out, despite my warning.

“Doubt it,” Rhett counters just as quickly.

With a sigh, I untangle my fingers from Rhett’s. I had almost forgotten we were still attached. He tosses me a quizzical look, flexing his fingers like they’re a newly discovered toy and jamming them in his hoodie pouch before walking to the other side of the Cadillac. My hand feels strangely empty, yet I don’t want to give into this facade more than I have to. You know, for appearances sake. I give myself a small mental shake and side into the SUV behind Elle’s seat.

“Sorry, I wanted to come out to give you a hug,” Elle twists around in her seat and greets me with a friendly smile, “but Tag thought it might be safer inside the car.”

I pat her hand and fasten my seatbelt. “Probably a good idea. I’m going to cause enough of a problem for Dad and his

company anyway. I don't need to get you all mixed up in it too."

"Yeah, so about all this..."

Before I can respond, the other doors open and the boys invade the car. Their bickering is constant until Tag pulls away from the curb and meets my gaze in the rear-view mirror.

"How the fuck could you marry this fuck?" Tag slaps his palm against the steering wheel and continues, "if you wanted to marry a huge dickbag, I could've set you up with one of the guys down at the gym. Maybe a dirty hobo. Or the guy who got arrested for throwing bags of his own feces at cars. Seriously, Luce. Anyone would be better than this guy."

Rhett angles his legs toward me to stretch out, one of his knees knocking into mine. "Like you're really doing this family any favors? What hole in Kentucky did you climb out of? Schitt Creek?"

"That's a place in a TV show, assbag."

"I wouldn't know, I actually play hockey for a living."

"Could have fooled me."

"I'm surprised you can hold a stick and skate at the same time. Must be pretty hard for someone as inbred as you."

I hold my hand up to my mouth, stifling a laugh. These guys are built in entertainment and so long as there's no press around to hear, I'm all for it. And I guess, now that Rhett and I are married, they're practically brothers-in-law. Elle and I should arrange for a family barbecue once the weather warms

up. Or not. I don't know if I want the two of them together around open flames.

Tag glances at me over his shoulder and grabs Elle's hand, holding it on top of her thigh. "Come on, Lucy. Please tell me this is a joke. I don't know what's more shocking, your fucking marriage or the fact that you're wearing jeans."

"Listen Rag—"

"My name is not Rag. Or Bag. Or Gag. Or even Nag. It's not that fucking hard."

"He's not very good with names," I say, fiddling with my seatbelt.

Elle spins around, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "It's actually Tag. Like a skin tag or a shirt tag."

"Or a luggage tag." I laugh before adding, "you also can't forget about the mattress tag."

"I hate all of you," Tag pouts, eliciting sympathy from no one. Well, maybe Elle, but that's only because she has to.

As the conversation dies down, Elle's giggles disappear and her eyes lace with concern. "Is this thing between the two of you real?"

I suck in a deep breath and continue to fiddle with my seatbelt before answering. I've never really been a fan of lying, especially to my sister. It would be so easy to tell her the truth, but if we tell one person then it becomes easier to tell another and another. Before you know it, everyone knows, and you're left with your proverbial dick in your hand. Not that I

think my sister will run to the news, but there's a good chance that Tag might let something slip. Or with the hatred bubbling between him and Rhett, he may talk solely to piss him off. With my dad's merger on the line, I can't afford for this to get out. I can't be the reason my family loses everything.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. We wanted to keep things a secret until we knew it was going to be something. While we were in Vegas, one thing led to another, and we couldn't help but get married." The lies taste bitter on my tongue, yet roll off so easily.

Elle nods like she understands even though I know she doesn't. "As long as you two are happy. That's really the only thing that matters."

Tag scoffs, then Rhett scoffs, and Elle and I ignore them both.

"Once we get settled, we'll have you two over for dinner. That way we can all get to know each other."

I half expected more scoffing or at the very least a snide comment. Perhaps an insult or two.

Just when I think we finally have a reprieve from the bickering, Tag clears his throat. "I'm only going to your apartment. I'm not taking him to wherever the hell he lives."

"That's fine. Rhett and I have some things to figure out." As the words come out, it dawns on me that Tag doesn't know where Rhett lives. With his attitude, I shouldn't be surprised he doesn't live with the rest of the team, but I am. Since he

was cast out and alienated by his previous team, there's a part of me that wonders why he wouldn't want to find new friends here. Make a new family. At least try to be accepted. I turn to him and lower my voice. "You don't live with the team?"

Rhett grunts, crosses his arms over his chest, and then grunts again. His eyes soften as he gazes at me, giving me a brief glimpse of the man he is inside. A man full of turmoil and perhaps indecision. The need to reach over and grab his hand, to lace our fingers back together, is strong.

Instead, I lean forward slightly, giving his knee a small nudge, offering him a smidge of support, not daring to give him any more than that.

"No," Rhett answers, offering no additional information, making no effort to bridge the gap between us. I may be out of my mind. "I'm not staying in the Barbie Dreamhouse either. You can stay with me. I'm not sleeping in a pink bed."

Tag scoffs. "That may improve your demeanor. I'd even pay to get you some little bedazzled pillows."

"Don't think you're fooling any of us, Hag, we all know you don't need to pay extra. I bet you have one of those bedazzlers in your nightstand."

"Yeah, right where you keep the dildos in yours."

"At least I'm not a twenty-something-year-old virgin."

"Yeah, we were all really lucky to see your ass splashed all over the gossip rags. How is the price of hookers these days? Have their rates gone up with inflation?"

“At least they know how to rise with inflation.”

“Low blow, Remington. I thought dick jokes were beneath you.”

“Nothing is beneath me. Unless, of course, your mom counts.”

“Holy shit. No wonder you took so fucking long.” Rhett’s eyes go wide, and he jumps up from his perch on the couch as I drag my suitcases and garment bags into the living room, depositing them by the front door.

Is it overkill? Maybe. But seeing as how I’ll be living with him for the foreseeable future, a girl has to be prepared. And this girl has a career, not to mention formal and informal business engagements coming up. Plus, I like to be comfy at home. Then there’s my makeup and shoes. Can’t forget all the shoes.

“I’ll be needing a few things if I’m going to be living with you for a few months.”

“I’d say this is more than a few things.” His arms go wide as he gestures to my large pile of stuff.

“It’s okay, we can come back and get the rest tomorrow.”

Rhett stares at me for a moment. Blinks. Then blinks again. “You’re not joking.”

I smile, swinging several of the garment bags over one arm. “The first thing you should know about your new wife is that I

don't joke about clothes. Just like you don't joke about anything. Ever.”

He shakes his head and grunts. That seems to be the typical Rhett response instead of offering conversation. It's been his main response since Tag and Elle dropped us off at my apartment over an hour ago. He wandered around, grunting and nodding at things, picking up a few of my pictures and then making himself at home on my non-pink couch. See, not *everything* is pink.

“You could always move in here?” I shoot him a glance and bat my eyes in the most obnoxious manner.

This earns me another grunt before he grabs a few of my suitcases and frowns. “No way in hell am I staying here. My place is plenty big for the two of us.”

I freeze, my hand halfway to the door. In all the excitement of today—you know, getting married and all that—I forgot to verify sleeping arrangements. The thought of sharing a bed with Rhett, our legs tangling together, and my head resting on his chest fills me with both confusing intrigue and trepidation. I shouldn't want to be anywhere near a bed with my husband, despite how nice it was to wake up wrapped in his muscular arms. It was a one-time thing and the result of some pretty heavy duty (probable) drug induced cocktail. An event that doesn't warrant a repeat because I will never be drinking again.

“I hope that means you have two beds because while we're husband and wife on paper, that doesn't give you typical

marital rights.”

“Don’t worry, Wife. Your virtue is safe with me. I have a guest room with its own bathroom. You can stay there. It’s even on the other side of the penthouse so you don’t have to see me unless you really want to.”

“You mean you won’t be popping a bag of popcorn and inviting me to movie nights on what I’m sure is a very manly couch?”

“Have you met me?”

Now it’s my turn to grunt. It should be a relief, knowing we’ll be at complete opposite sides of his penthouse. Knowing that he has his space and I’ll have mine. It should be... so why isn’t it?

EIGHT

Rhett

AS SOON AS I deposit Lucy and her truckload of suitcases and miscellaneous bags in the guest room, I hightail it to my room and close the door behind me. Then I lock it for good measure.

I'm not sure if it's to keep me in or her out.

Regardless, it's safer this way. I throw my duffel bag in the closet to deal with later. I ignore my phone buzzing in my jean pocket. Then I realize how ridiculous it is to keep my door locked as a precaution against... well, my imagination, so I unlock it and flop down on my bed.

I close my eyes and wonder for the thousandth time how I let this mess happen. Although even I have to admit that so far, Lucy isn't the worst. I guess if I had to be married to someone...

Never mind, this train of thought is as unhealthy as it is irrelevant. Instead of letting my mind wander into places it has

no business being, I pull my phone from my pocket. Time to deal with my family.

Heath not Ledger: Please tell me this is a joke. A horrible, horrible joke.

Avery (favorite sibling): There's no way you just up and married some chick.

Heath not Ledger: Some chick that he didn't even tell us he was dating.

Avery (favorite sibling): Maybe because our brother doesn't date. Only hooks up with random girls he meets in dirty alleys. The same kinda place they exchange drugs and dirty handjobs.

Heath not Ledger: You're thinking about back alley blowjobs.

Heath not Ledger: She looks way more high class. Solid boulevard material.

Me: You both are idiots. And I don't meet women in dirty alleys.

Me: And no one's giving anyone a blowjob.

Avery (favorite sibling): Could have fooled me.

Heath not Ledger: Now that you're married, you can kiss blowjobs goodbye. More women for me.

Avery (favorite sibling): You guys are gross.

Heath not Ledger: This ‘whirlwind’ romance of yours seems pretty suspicious and your wife seems...

Me: Uptight?

Heath not Ledger: Too good for you. That’s what I was looking for.

Me: Go fuck yourself.

Avery (favorite sibling): When do we get to meet her? Will I like her? Will she like me?

Me: This is why you’re my favorite.

Heath not Ledger: Offensive.

Me: This is all really new. We kinda got swept up in the romance of things but once we settle in, we can have a video call. Of course, she’ll love you.

Heath not Ledger: Romance. Who the fuck are you right now?

Avery (favorite sibling): Have you talked to dad?

Me: Not yet. He’s not happy with me but is he ever?

Heath not Ledger: I can talk to him for you.

Me: Nah, I’ll call him later. Maybe give him a few days to calm down.

Avery (favorite sibling): Let me know how that goes.

Me: I’ll be sure to. You guys take care of yourselves. Avery, I’ll check in with you tomorrow. Night.

Heath not Ledger: Look at him, pussy whipped already.

Heath is the one who's a fucking pussy. A football playing, tight pants wearing, pigskin catching pussy. Not that I'm saying all football players are pansies, but well, I am. Football has nothing on hockey. I mean, we skate on knives and punch people for crowd entertainment. And what do they do? Slap each other's asses? No thanks. Heath can have it. As long as he takes care of our little sister, he gets a pass from me. Cause I sure couldn't do it, not even when she was right under my nose.

I'm a fucking failure.

I'm always a failure. At least at everything besides hockey. I guess I can't even say that anymore. The only reason I'm still on the team is probably in the guest room putting on pink pajamas and some kind of organic face mask. Fuck. I can't believe she's staying in my house. I can't believe that I would agree to marry her in any stage of inebriation. Drunk or drugged, it shouldn't have mattered. Now I'm stuck with a wife I never wanted and a ring indenting itself into a finger I thought would stay empty for the rest of my life.

Now I'm shackled for four months. Four months of pretending to be a loving husband to the Queen of Pink. Miss fucking perfect herself. I should've let Gordon kick me off the team.

I strip down to my boxers and lay back down. I toss and turn. Sit up and punch my pillow. And toss and turn some more. The sheets tangle in my legs, reminding me of waking

up this morning, tangled up in Lucy. Her legs wrapped around mine, her silky hair draped across my arm. Stupid me thought it was a dream.

I should consider myself lucky that I didn't act out what Dream Rhett usually does to Dream Lucy when the lights are out and nobody's looking. When I close my eyes, and there's no one inside my head but the two of us, I strip her down. Sometimes I use my hands. Sometimes my teeth. And when I'm feeling particularly cagey, I cut every stitch of clothes from her body with my pocket knife. Then I tie her to my bed, push open her soft thighs, lick her until she screams, and then keep going. I don't stop devouring her pussy until I've had enough and every morning when I wake up, the dream just a haze, I'm still eating her like my favorite cherry pie because I can never get enough.

Real Lucy is probably so polite in bed she thanks a man after giving him a blowjob. I bet she only has sex in the dark, mostly clothed, and minimal foreplay. Absolutely no kissing either. Wouldn't want to smudge her perfect pink lipstick. She'd look at me like a wild animal if she knew half of the dirty shit I want to do to her.

And no way in hell would she still look perfectly polished after I fucking wrecked her.

My cock decides he's interested in my train of thoughts as my stomach rumbles and I remember I skipped dinner. He'll have to wait until after I eat for some one-on-one quality time with Rosie Palm.

After throwing on a pair of gray joggers, I head to the kitchen for a snack. In my quest for food, I completely forget there's another human being living in my house. I don't give a second thought to the light over the sink or the pantry door that's slightly ajar. Instead, I'm debating with myself and I'm at a stalemate. Do I make myself a turkey sandwich or do I go with a classic peanut butter and jelly? I must be feeling nostalgic because I turn around to reach for the peanut butter and freeze.

She has my peanut butter. My peanut butter and my jelly. And my bread.

And holy shit those fucking pajamas should be illegal in most states, including this one.

They're not pink—not a hit of flowers or lace anywhere—and far from polished. They're black as night and those tiny fucking shorts that barely covering her ass must've been made by the Devil himself to torture me.

“What the fuck are you doing?” My voice is low, almost feral, and I barely recognize it.

Lucy spins around, the knife she was holding clattering to the floor and her eyes widen, gluing themselves to my bare chest. I don't chastise her, I can't. Not when my eyes are fastened on the hardened nipples straining against her top.

“What the fuck are you wearing?” I snap again.

This time Lucy comes to life, bending over to pick up the knife from the floor and flashing me a hint of what's

underneath her shirt. Not enough to really see anything, but enough to let me know I want to.

“I was making myself a sandwich. Before I was so rudely interrupted.” She puts the knife in the sink before pulling a replacement from the drawer and resuming her violation of my peanut butter. “And these are called pajamas. I can hardly walk around here naked.”

“Those shorts are indecent. You might as well be naked.” My dick thickens in my pants, letting me know it’s on board with letting her walk around here naked any day of the week. Fucking traitor.

She shrugs like it’s no big deal, like she doesn’t know what she’s doing to me. “They’re comfortable.”

“A fucking pair of fuzzy socks is comfortable.”

Another shrug.

“A worn sweatshirt is comfortable.”

“You seem awfully fixated on my shorts. Are you sure they’re not making you uncomfortable?” With her back to me, I can’t see the smile on her face, but I can hear it in her voice.

I shift my uncomfortable erection. “I don’t get uncomfortable.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“You wear that shit every night?”

“Pretty much. I even have a pair with unicorns.” She turns around, sandwich in hand, has the nerve to meet my fucking

eyes, and takes a huge bite. A dollop of jelly falls out on her palm, hanging out on her cupped hand. She lifts it up, the huge diamond on her ring glinting in the light, and her pink tongue darts out of her mouth. My balls tighten as she very slowly licks the jelly off.

It takes her two licks. Two fucking licks. Her eyes never leave mine.

I've never been so hard in my life.

If it weren't for that ring—if she weren't my wife—if things weren't so complicated, I'd be across the kitchen in two strides—two fucking strides. I'd have her bent over the counter, those devil shorts destroyed, and be buried in her pussy before she could take another bite. And before the night's over I'd claim every part of her body. Every. Part.

But she is wearing my ring and while I don't remember saying 'I do', I did. Which means my ass stays over here and her devil shorts stay intact.

“So...” She takes another bite. “I notice that you don't really have any pictures or anything that would prove an actual human lives here.”

“Your point?” I lean back against the island and cross my arms over my chest.

Not sure what she expects. I'm not exactly a Martha Stewart disciple. She may make a mean panini, but you're not going to find me knitting a blanket for someone's grandkids on a Friday night. This is a temporary stop as part of my punishment, and

while I'll serve out my sentence in Tennessee, I have no intention of making myself comfortable here.

Things could be different with the next team, though I doubt it.

It's not like I had a cozy upbringing either. We didn't have pictures on the walls or odd collectables on the shelves. Anything that was on display ended up shattered on the floor after my dad found his way to the bottom of the whiskey bottle.

Her gaze trails my bare torso before lifting to meet mine. "Seems a little impersonal."

"I don't need throw pillows and bullshit to make me feel better."

"What about your family?"

"They don't usually make me feel better either."

"No?"

"No."

She huffs a breath and takes a few more bites of the sandwich before putting it back down on the paper towel behind her. "You're a very hard man to get to know."

"Who says I want you to get to know me?" None of the rules mentioned playing nice and I'm not a good guy. The sooner she realizes it, the better.

I close the distance between us, stalking her like a lion stalks his prey. The closer I get, the thicker the air seems, until

it's almost suffocating. I pretend like I don't notice how her pink tongue darts out and licks along her bottom lip. Or how her baby blues track every little movement I make, paying particular attention to my lower abs.

Her eyes widen as I stop inches from her and lean down.
Gotcha, sweetheart.

She makes no move to push me away or run back to the guest room like she should. The lower I get, the faster my heart races, and I have to clench my fingers to keep from reaching out and stroking them down her arms. Instead, I snake my hand around her waist, brushing my arm along the curve of her hip.

She lets out a whimper, barely loud enough for me to hear but I do. I bite back a groan, fighting the urge to lower my lips and press them to hers. I should back away. Run clear to the other side of the penthouse and mind my own damn business. Instead, I brush the side of her nose with mine and then take a wide step back, sandwich in hand.

I smirk and then take a healthy bite of the rest of her PB&J, loving her flushed appearance and the look of shock written all over her face. It doesn't take long for her eyes to abandon the stolen sandwich and trail back down to my chest and abs. As the blush climbs up her chest and encases her neck, I can't help but feel a small victory over her and those damned shorts. Two can play this game.

“What... Are you... I thought...” Lucy stammers before giving herself a visible shake and me the evil eye. “You could

have just asked. I just... I mean... Talk about my pajamas. Did you need to borrow a shirt or something?"

"Nope." I lean back against the center island with a smile spreading across my face. If she's going to prance around in those devil shorts every night, you can be damn sure I'm going to be shirtless. I might even get in an extra ab workout before coming home to strut around like a mostly nude peacock. I like the thought of having her off-balance.

I polish off the sandwich, taking the time to run my tongue along the length of my first two fingers before repeating the motion to my thumb.

"Does my lack of shirt make you uncomfortable?"

She snorts, her eyes darting away. "Of course not. I would never be distracted by a man's sex lines."

The corner of my mouth quirks, and I look down at my abs. "What exactly is a sex line?"

"It's the... ummm..." The same pink that painted her chest and neck earlier, spreads to her cheeks. She gestures to the area right above the tops of her thighs with both hands.

"You mean these?" I know exactly what lines she's talking about but I lower the waistband of my sweats anyway. I inch these bad boys down my abs and fully exposing said sex lines, stopping right above my shaft, making sure my entire pelvic area is on display. I'm not a conceited guy, I'm confident. And right now I'm confident Lucy has drool pooling at the corners of her mouth.

She nods, her hands going behind her to grip the countertop for dear life.

“You’re right. You don’t look distracted at all.” I chuckle, leaving my pants slung low, and pushing away from the counter. “Goodnight, sweetheart.”

I laugh all the way back to my bedroom. Lucy wants us to stay married and pretend to be a normal couple in public, fine with me. Doesn’t mean I’m going to be her little lap dog in private. I’m not afraid to fight fire with fire. She can wear her shorts, and I’ll continue to walk around shirtless.

First night as husband and wife with four more months to go. If every night ends like this, it won’t be so bad. If I were keeping score, I’d say I won this round.

NINE

Lucy

MY DAMN HUSBAND THINKS he's so damn cute.

He's been strutting around in nothing but a pair of sweats the past two nights. I take that back. Sweats and an evil smile. We've barely spoken, but we don't need to. Him putting those sex lines on display is enough. And those yummy tattoos wrapping up his arm and spreading across his shoulder and chest. I know I shouldn't, but I love tattoos on a man.

They're rugged and sexy and I can't get enough.

And now it's Monday morning, and I'm sitting at my desk in the arena, exhausted. I doubt I even got an hour of sleep last night. Instead of closing my eyes and drifting off to dreamland, all I could picture were abs and sex lines.

So I stared at my ceiling and hurled curse words into the darkness. Not that I'm writing about it in a diary or anything, but there was a clear victor this weekend and it was not me.

Just wait. I have plans.

He won't be so damn smug once he sees what I've ordered from a little boutique on the internet. The team has a stretch of away games coming up which is the perfect time for some personal deliveries.

After I get my computer booted up and return a few of the more critical emails, I push myself to my feet and smooth down the front of my light pink pencil skirt. It's time to face the music, and I'd rather get it over with than fret about it all day. In between conjuring up mental images of Rhett's sex lines, I worried about this conversation and what I'd say to Gordon.

He sent me one single text over the weekend. One. *Please come to my office Monday morning.* That's it. None of the usual friendly back and forth or jokes. No quips that could be considered borderline flirting and no stories about which player did something stupid this week. Maybe I could have had some of those conversations had I responded, but I didn't. I didn't know what to say then, and I don't have a clue now.

Normally, if his door was open I'd just stroll in, but today I give the door a tentative knock and hover just outside. He doesn't call me in or acknowledge me at all but I know he's in there. Gordon's always one of the first ones in, plus I saw his car in the parking lot.

After what seems like several minutes of listening to the shuffling of papers, he tells me to come in. I take a deep breath and sit down in the chair across from his desk. He's wearing his signature black-on-black suit. Or at least he was. The

jacket has been discarded and is hanging on the back of his chair and the knot of his tie is loose around his neck. His hair is perfectly styled, but his five o'clock shadow has yet to be shaved and dark circles ring the undersides of his eyes. He looks how I feel and I resist the urge to reach across the desk and take his hand.

There was a time when I thought Gordon may be a little more than a friend, but that was a line that neither of us crossed even though we both wanted to. Not really sure why, but the timing was never right.

“Hey, Gordon.” It’s a weak greeting, I know it and I know he knows it. His gaze levels on me, his face an unreadable mask. I shift in the chair, crossing and uncrossing my legs, resisting the urge to bite the sides of my fingernails. “How was your weekend?”

His face remains impassive as he smooths a hand down the length of his tie. “It wasn’t nearly as interesting as yours.”

Fuck me. “Yeah... about that—”

“Please tell me this is some kind of joke.” Gordon doesn’t wait for a response, instead his voice raises and his hand slaps the top of his desk. “Is he blackmailing you? Did that fucker force you into this?”

“Whoa, Gordon. Take a deep breath. Neither of us need you hauling off to the ice again to punch one of your players in front of all your team. You got away with it once, I don’t think it would slide again.” Not that the mental image of him sliding around on the ice with his fist jutting out like a boxing nun

isn't funny, it just isn't very appropriate and wouldn't look very nice on the nightly news.

"He deserved to get punched," he mumbles. "Still does sometimes."

"You know he makes your sister happy."

He leans back in his chair and grunts, reminding me of my vocally stunted husband and all the things he doesn't respond to. Which brings me back full circle to those abs and the lines pointing directly to the treasure down below.

Of course, that makes me wonder what things would be like if we didn't have rule number two. And then I remember, that while I may appreciate his body, I certainly don't like him. He's arrogant and brutish. Not to mention he's a dick most of the time.

"Does he make you happy?" Gordon's voice is soft, a stark contrast to the hard look in his eyes.

"He does." *Not.* "I'm sorry, Gordon. Everything with Rhett happened so fast. I know him and I didn't get along at first, but I think he's misunderstood. There's more to him than he lets on. He's really a softy." My heart races as the lies pour out of my mouth, smooth as my mother's acclaimed chocolate mousse. "We didn't plan on getting married in Vegas." Well, that's not a lie. "It just sort of happened."

How it happened is still unknown. Alice couldn't find out a thing at the club. The owner wasn't talking and the waitress from that night was conveniently unavailable for the next

several days. We have a first name—Cherry— which I’m sure is a fake name and no phone number or address. Basically, it was a big fat waste of time.

“I don’t like it, Lucy. I want to be supportive, but I don’t know if I can right now.”

The hurt on his face wrenches my gut and it feels like I’m being squeezed from the inside. “I understand.”

“I know you think you know him, but he’s got you under some sort of spell, he’s not a good guy. Do you have any idea what he did to his old teammate?”

I’m torn between shaking my head and nodding because while I know the events that happened, I don’t know the why and that’s the most important part.

Before I can open my mouth, Gordon continues, his tone clipped and his hands clench into fists on top of his desk. “He went wild before a game and beat the shit out of his own teammate. His own teammate, Lucy. As far as anyone can tell it was completely unprovoked and the guy he attacked is the fucking golden boy of the entire Los Angeles Stars. Maybe even all of hockey. Not a single bad article in the tabloids. No drugs, no girls... The kid is clean as can be and Rhett, this *husband* of yours, is a ticking time bomb. There’s no telling when he’ll go off again.”

“Gordon—”

“I know, I know. I signed off on the trade. I brought him to our team to fight for us but all he’s done is fight with us. The

guy's a liability for you and the Devils." His head falls in his hands and he shakes his head, his voice lowering. "It's my fault if anything happens to you."

I lean back in the chair and cross my arms. I'd like to feel for him—really, I would—but he's assuming I can't take care of myself and that's something that doesn't sit well with me. I've gone my whole life with people trying to tell me what to do and after my parents booted me from the nest, they all assumed I'd fail.

Even the people who were supposed to be my friends waited for me to fall on my ass and crawl back to my parents, begging for money. Like a phoenix, I rose from the ashes and the confines of my childhood. I spread my pink blazer and started my own life without the help from anyone.

"Are you done?" I struggle to keep my tone flat, even though I'm stewing inside.

"I'm not sure."

"Did Rhett fight with his own teammate? Yes. Do I know why? No. But I know there's a story there and it's his story to tell, not mine. I know you're concerned for me, but I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself." I take a deep breath and then another, uncrossing my arms and laying them across my lap instead. "He's no more of a threat to me than you are. And we'll be working on his reputation. You don't need to worry about a trade just yet."

Gordon raises a brow and gives me a questioning look.

“Surprising as it is, he’s agreed to do whatever it takes to stay on the team and improve his image.”

“Forgive me if I’m skeptical.” He runs a hand through his hair and rests it on his desk.

“You have every right to be. He’s been a pain in the ass since he put on the jersey, but that’s about to change.”

I lean forward and cover his hand with my own. The little flutters that used to take residence in my stomach whenever we touched are gone. There’s nothing but the warmth from his skin and the hardened wood beneath my wrist. I can’t help but feel a little sad at the loss.

I don’t know if it’s me that’s changed or if somehow the wedding ring has changed me. Either way, I’m sure it’s Rhett’s fault.

“I hope you’re right.” Gordon pulls his hand from mine and clears his throat. “If things don’t get better, I don’t think I’ll be able to keep him on the team.” He pauses and shifts in his chair, crossing his legs and fidgeting with his tie. “I also talked to your boss. He’s trying to replace you with some dick who doesn’t even know the first thing about hockey. I’ve held him off for now but he told me that you have until the end of the season to fix things or you’ll be replaced. Doesn’t matter what either of us have to say.”

“Well, great. I’m sure I’ll be hearing from him later today.” Even though he was supposed to be on vacation. “Thanks for buying me some time.”

“You’ve got your work cut out for you. That’s the last I’ll say about this for today.”

For today. I’ve no doubt we’ll be having this conversation again. And again. And again. The problems Rhett’s created for himself won’t go away quickly, if they go away at all.

If they don’t, it could be both our asses on the line.

I retreat from his office and head back down the hall toward my space. As soon as I step inside and close the door, my phone rings. Mr. Coomer and his impeccable timing. I expected his call, but I didn’t think it would be so soon. The man just left for a vacation—for the first time in years years—with his family to somewhere tropical and warm. So much for assuming he’s need time to get settled.

I answer the phone, holding it to my ear and sitting down on the corner of my desk. “Good morning, Mr. Coomer.”

“Miss Hurst.” His voice harsh, his words curt.

“How’s your vacation?”

“Taxing.” He sighs and says a few muffled words, I’m guess to someone else, before he continues, “I imagine you know the reason for my call.”

“I just finished talking to Mr. Benson.” I scoot back on the desk and pick at the invisible lint on my skirt.

“I’m going to cut to the chase here, Miss Hurst. The only reason you aren’t fired right now is because you’re a valued employee and Mr. Benson is hell bent on keeping you with the Devils.”

“Mr. Coomer, please—”

“I’m not looking for your excuses. You and I both know that what you did was a disgrace to this company. When I asked you to see what you could do to improve Rhett Remington’s image and bristly exterior, I didn’t intend for you to marry the guy.”

“Mr. Coomer, I know—”

“I thought I was clear when I hired you that relationships with our clients are against company policy. While he may not pay for our services directly, his team does. I can’t tell you how disappointed I am in your behavior. Hiding a relationship. Getting married and causing a whole damn media circus.”

“It wasn’t quite—”

“I don’t care,” he says firmly. “Just know that your ass is on the line here. One more screw up and you will be looking for a new job. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We will be meeting when I get back.” With that he hangs up, leaving me on the edge of my desk—quite literally—and with a headache that’s sure to last me all day.

One more screw up left and a husband who has a knack for not following the rules. I’m in more trouble than I thought.

TEN

Rhett

IT'S BEEN ONE WEEK. Seven fucking days of Lucy prancing around my penthouse in her horribly pink outfits with her unbelievably high heels that would look so much better on my bedroom floor.

One week of her leaving me dinner—which is surprisingly good, and surprising in general that Malibu Barbie can cook—covered in tin foil while she waits for me to come home while relaxing on the couch in the most ridiculous pajama sets. Not just because most of them are covered in wild patterns and assorted foods, it's the length of the shorts that's the problem. Or the lack thereof. They're all devil shorts and I hate every single pair. There's a good chance they'll all end up in the trash before our marriage expires.

Either that or my sanity will be a thing of the past.

Those shorts are the most tempting thing I've encountered in my life. Or maybe it's just Lucy.

It wouldn't be so bad if her damn legs didn't look a mile long. Or if I didn't remember how soft they felt against my skin.

So even though I've been walking around shirtless to torture her, I've been stuck with a perpetual hard on for a fucking week and no matter how many times I jerk off, I can't get the damn thing to go down. It's there every night like clockwork, practically pointing to the other side of the penthouse, letting me know exactly where he wants to go and what he wants to sink himself into.

The rules are still in place and will remain intact for the duration of this marriage, especially rule number two. Wanting to take a dip in her pussy doesn't change the fact that I can't. The chink in my resolve is purely sexual, nothing more. A damn chink that grows larger each night I'm there to see her in her tiny shorts, her legs stretched out along the length of my couch, just waiting for me to lay between them.

Which is why I'm damn glad for this four-day stretch of away games. I need the distance, the space. I need to reset myself and put my walls back up. She needs to stay up on her pedestal—far away and protected from me and the damage I'd cause her.

The damage I can't cause on the ice like I want to because I agreed to that stupid ass rule number four. And the addendum Lucy added after last night's game, which stated no fighting on the ice unless it's necessary. Apparently racking up the in-game penalties isn't helping my less than stellar reputation.

This is why I nicely pass the puck and skate on by Ackerman, Minnesota's center, instead of slamming his ass into the boards like I want to. Alright, fine, I really want to throw off my gloves and test out my right hook on his snarky smile. They're up by one goal and if his face is any indicator, you'd think they won the damn Stanley Cup.

But no, my darling wife has me turning over a new leaf. Being a new man. Fuck. I very much like the old me. She has me by the balls in every metaphorical sense. From the *heartfelt* statement I had to deliver to the media to all the post-game interviews where I smiled—that's right, I even had to smile—and answered all their ridiculous questions about my whirlwind romance. Both of us expressed our deep love for one another and affirmed our elopement to Las Vegas simply because we couldn't spend another minute waiting to start our forever.

It's the biggest load of horseshit I've ever told.

"Is your pretty wife here?" Another Minnesota douchebag digs his elbow into my side and follows it up with a shoulder check.

"Go fuck yourself, Sailer." I growl, keeping a tight rein on my temper. It's not easy, I'm in new territory here, but if everyone else can do it, I guess I can too.

I make a sharp turn in front of the goalie and skate toward the other side of the arena, where their team currently has control of the puck. Sailer's hot on my tail and it doesn't take him long to bump back into me, pressing me into the glass.

“I’ll take that as a no. Such a shame. Now that I know she likes hockey players, I was going to offer up a night with a real man. Not some pussy in a jersey.”

Rule number four. Rule. Number. Four.

“Does she know how you beat up poor Cooper because his dick’s bigger than yours? I’d feel sorry for him, but I hear he’s even more of a hit with the ladies than he was before. I guess chicks do dig scars. I heard your sister went sniffing around him for a little while.”

My hands flex around my stick and I’m surprised it doesn’t snap in half. My jaw clenches. My eye twitches.

No extra fights.

Take a deep breath in. Now let it out. Another deep breath. Hold it for three seconds. Let it out.

I’m so fucking close to losing my shit and bashing his face in. So fucking close. My sister is off limits. If she were here... well, she wouldn’t want me to fight either.

Fuck.

You’d think he’d move on, chase after Lincoln who actually has the puck, but he doesn’t. He stays plastered to my side, his stick practically locked with mine. “What’s the matter, Remington? Does your wife have your balls in her purse?”

“You better get the fuck off me or I’ll put *your* balls in her purse.” I grind out as I clench my jaw so tight, I can practically feel my teeth rubbing together.

“I’d rather put them in her mouth.”

Lucy said no unnecessary fights and the more this guy opens his mouth, the more it becomes necessary to correct him with my fists. He can talk about me all he wants, but nothing gives him the right to talk about my wife, real or not. He doesn’t know the marriage was a total accident, he doesn’t know that we’re playing the game and making it look real on the outside, and he sure as hell doesn’t know how badly I want my balls in her mouth.

Sailer doesn’t know when to stop because he makes another sly comment, but between the crowd going wild over Lincoln’s goal, I can only hear ‘your wife’ and ‘balls deep.’

I see red.

My stick clatters to the ice and just as I’m about to pull the gloves off, fucking Tag—AKA Bag or Rag or Nag (that one’s my favorite)—wedges himself between us and gives Sailer a healthy shove in the opposite direction.

“Don’t think this means we’re friends, Remington.” He snatches up my stick and thrusts it back in my hands. “If you lose your shit, Lucy will be pissed at me and then I’ll end up in the doghouse with her sister.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

He flashes me an easy-going smile that does little to improve the overall look of his face. I’m not here to make friends or start growing roots. I’m here as a punishment and

once I fix my image, I have no doubt I'll be gone by the start of next season.

No one here wants me to stay around long term. Not my teammates or the owners. Gordon has made it very clear that I'm persona non grata. He didn't exactly say anything but he didn't need to. The look on his face every time he sees me around Lucy is enough. I trespassed on his territory and he doesn't like it. Well, it wasn't intentional. And I don't see Lucy clamoring to his side of the podium.

Tag sticks close to the troublemaker, makes himself a shadow, and when the refs aren't looking loudmouth Adam Sailer finds himself face first, sliding across the ice, and Tag skates away with that same damned smile. I still don't like him very much, but I guess I can admit that was nice. But as they say, no good deed goes unpunished. Sailer is up and on Tag in seconds. Gloves come off and for the first time tonight, I smile.

Protecting my teammate, even if it is *that* guy. Finally, a necessary reason to fight.

I'm in the fray without another thought. Sailer's helmet comes off, I'm sure it didn't have anything to do with my hold on the front of his jersey, and I punch him directly in his smart mouth. His eyes fly open and his head snaps back. Before he can retaliate, I hit him again. And again. And maybe a fourth time as the refs pull us all apart.

Tag catches my eye, jerks his head in a nod, and wipes the blood from the corner of his mouth. I thump my chest with my

fist and then flex my fingers. He had a hard face. It doesn't feel like anything's broken, but I should probably put some ice on my hand when I get back to the hotel.

Coach Weller calls our line back to the bench. His face is so red I almost wonder if his tie's too tight around his neck. He throws me an exasperated look as he sends out the next shift.

The rest of the game is uneventful. I get on the ice a few more times but there are no more fights or goals. Overall, the game was very mediocre. Los Angeles would've wiped the ice with both these teams.

Hopefully the next team I get traded to has a better record.

We get a proper ass reaming back in the locker room. Coach yells, his hands waving in the air like he really does care. His assistant Tessa stands behind him, a small smirk on her face as she tries to hide behind a clipboard. She's been travelling to more and more away games and while I don't know for sure, I think they've got a little thing going on. I'm not here to judge but I'm glad the coach has a way to relieve all this tension he's got. That makes one of us. All I have is my own five finger discount.

Before I run to the showers, I grab my phone and smile—again with all these smiles, it's going to ruin my face. I've already got a few texts from Lucy.

Darling Wife: I'm sorry, I think I made a mistake with the addendum to rule number 4.

Darling Wife: I think a small part of me died when I watched that asshole riding you like a pony.

Me: I hope you're comparing me to a rather large pony.

Darling Wife: Huge.

Darling Wife: I've got a few things lined up when you get back. Go on and fight. Just keep it on the ice.

Me: Yes, dear.

Darling Wife: Husband?

Me: Wife?

Darling Wife: You played a good game.

The swell in my chest is completely foreign and I don't know if I like it or not. Is it gas? A heart attack?

That can't be it, my arm isn't numb or anything. I bet it's allergies. Spouse-induced allergies.

By the time I hit the showers, almost everyone has finished, but I don't mind. I like the quiet. I'm more comfortable being alone than I am surrounded by people. The ride back to the hotel is quick and a much more familiar sense of dread weaves its way to my gut and settles.

I know what's about to happen, I've been here a thousand times before. *You call that hockey? That was a fucking travesty. Obviously, I didn't hit you hard enough after your last game.*

Stop moving around so much, you need to be able to hold a stick tomorrow. You do this to yourself, boy. This will make you better.

Better. It's amazing how he thought everything was for my own good. Still does.

Like clockwork, the second I close the door to the hotel room, my phone begins to ring. I don't need to look at the screen to know that it's dear old dad. No doubt with a full commentary.

With a sigh and a swipe of my finger, I answer. "Hello, Dad."

"Rhett." His voice rumbles over the phone. "What happened with your game tonight?"

Another sigh. "What do you mean, Dad?"

"Don't play games with me, boy. You know exactly what I mean. You played like a three-year-old getting on the ice for the first time. Where were you when the Rush made that final goal? Oh, that's right, you were playing footsies with the left winger. Who, by the way, is a far better player than you. You're a disgrace."

Even though I have a lot to say, I don't bother speaking up. Through the years, I've learned that it's best to let Daddy Dearest say his piece. The few times he had my temper boiling over enough to correct him or (gasp) defend myself, things grew exponentially worse. He's also worse, the further down the whiskey bottle he gets. He's slurring enough that I notice

because I listen for it, but not enough that other people would be concerned.

“I don’t know why you didn’t put him in his place. Did I raise you to be a pussy or did I raise you to be a fighter? Do I need to come out there and show you how to throw a punch?” He pauses and when I don’t answer, he adds, “Well, do I?”

“No, there’s no need for you to come out here—”

“That’s right because you found yourself a rich little cunt. There’s only one thing women are good for and spreading her legs won’t help you play hockey. She’s done nothing but fuck with your game since you married her. She’s going to be the end of you. Mark my words. Your mother was nothing but a headache...”

Alcohol has a funny effect on people. It gives them a false perception of how things were and no matter what happened, it was never their fault. My mother suffered for years at the end of his fist, the back of his hand, and the crack of his belt. She lied for him again and again, perfecting her stories for emergency room nurses and police officers. I lost count of how many times she supposedly fell down the stairs or cracked a bloody smile to admit how clumsy she was. She begged him for years to change, to not drink as much. He refused, of course, and as soon as she found the courage to pack her bags and leave, she became a traitor to the family.

He didn’t even bother to show up for her funeral.

I let my dad ramble on for what feels like hours until he gives me the curt warning, ‘I’ll talk to you later’ and hangs up

without waiting for a response.

After our talks I always feel dirty.

Almost like I can still feel the stain of my childhood spreading all over my skin. The disappointment and resentment coating me like a tar that can't easily wipe off. Normally, I'd strip and head straight for the shower, turning the water up as high as it could go and let it wash over me. Let it burn me. Hoping the water would erode all the feelings deep inside me, leaving me feeling numb. It never does.

Instead, I sit down on the edge of the bed, my feet flat on the floor to keep me from sliding off and pull up Lucy's messages. My fingers hover over the buttons for a while before I give in and send her another message.

Me: Why does flying make you nervous?

Darling Wife: What do you mean?

Me: On the way back from Vegas. You couldn't stop fidgeting and messing with your seatbelt. It was very annoying.

Darling Wife: Your concern is comforting <eye rolling emoji>

Me: Tell me.

Darling Wife: It's not really the plane, it's more of how high it is.

Me: So you're afraid of heights?

Darling Wife: I'm not afraid of anything.

Darling Wife: I'm weary of flights. There's a difference.

Me: Is that why you don't always go to away games?

Darling Wife: My assistant is perfectly capable of handling things.

Me: That doesn't answer my question.

Darling Wife: Why do you want to know? Do you miss me?

Darling Wife: You're so exasperating <annoyed emoji>

Me: Have you always been 'weary' of heights?

Darling Wife: Why the sudden interest in me?

Me: Who says I'm interested in you?

Darling Wife: You're exasperating.

Me: I left you a little something in your closet.

Darling Wife: Oh, I found the floor length robe and then I set it on fire.

Me: I was afraid that would happen. I ordered you a backup. It's in my closet. Someone needs to cover your ass and it's clearly not going to be you.

Darling Wife: Like I said, exasperating.

I really couldn't give a shit about what the media thinks. My relationship with Lucy or lack thereof is none of their business, but the thought of her being here with me for the

next away game is comforting. So, if I have to pretend that I care, I will.

From just this brief text exchange, my mood has lightened, and a small smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. She's cleaned my soul more than any shower could try to do.

In fact, she's done it after every game, after every horrible phone call. I go home feeling numb like usual and she's there to make me feel lighter. And she doesn't even know it. I need her comfort. I crave it. Letting myself find comfort in her should piss me off. I don't want to rely on her for anything, and I damn sure don't want her to rely on me.

But just for tonight I'll allow myself a modicum of solace.

She can be the ray of light in my darkness, just for tonight. I'll try to hate her tomorrow.

ELEVEN

Lucy

“HOLY SHIT!” I SCREECH like a crazy fucking banshee as my heel slides out from under me and I go airborne. I swear on the way to the floor, I perform the flips of a gymnast without the agility and land flat on my ass.

I hug my purse to my chest—the Louis and I have been through a lot together—and lay there for a second to catch my breath. And also to make sure I didn’t break my ass or anything else important.

As I let my head fall back and thunk against the fancy wood floor, a cool wetness permeates the thin material of my dress and soaks my back. I lay there for a few minutes confused. I wasn’t in here this morning and didn’t use the sink, so there’s no way it overflowed. I’m trying to wrack my brain for ideas when I realize it’s colder than a witch’s titty in here.

Fuck me, the pipes.

I scramble to my knees, toss the Louis on the counter, and crawl to the cabinet under the sink. As I inch closer, I notice a

fucking waterfall of water cascading from the cabinet. That may be a bit of an exaggeration but I'm not far off.

I was hot in the penthouse last night, so I turned the heat down—I blame hormones—and must've forgotten to turn it back up. My dumb luck too, the temperature dropped faster than a girl in apple bottom jeans. My apartment is nicely nestled between two elderly couples who love to overheat their apartments, so it doesn't matter if I forget to turn on the heat. Rhett's apartment is very different. He's on a floor by himself and it feels like the bitter air clawed its way through the front door and infiltrated the entire penthouse while I was at work.

Good lord, his plane's already landed and he should be here any minute. I'm not going to be allowed here without a babysitter. He's already not pleased I'm in his space, he hasn't said that exactly but things between us aren't what you'd call friendly. He spends his free time scowling at me, and I haven't even told him what I have planned for improving his image.

In all reality, it's safer that way. The more he's an asshole, the less likely I am to catch any feelings, and since this marriage has a clear expiration date, that would only make our separation more complicated.

I'm not worried about him developing feelings; the man is made of stone, and I'm not just talking about those abs.

“Shit. Shit. Shit. Fuck,” I chant, opening the cabinet door and then let out a high pitched scream as the water sprays me in the face. I raise my hands to ward off the water only to have it run down my palms and soak the front of my dress.

I stick my head in the cabinet looking for some kind of valve. Off switch. Anything to stop the water that's now shooting directly down the front of my dress. Fuck. Nothing.

After pulling myself to my feet, I race to the other cabinets to check for more pipes. I start to slide again but catch myself on the kitchen island and then kick off my shoes.

I find various pot and pans, a lone cookie sheet, and some cleaning supplies. No other pipes. No kind of switches. Not that I really know what I'm looking for. Growing up in Georgia, February was cold but not generally freezing, and we never worried about the pipes.

Not having any luck in the kitchen, I run to the hall closet and grab all the spare towels I can find to throw on the kitchen floor. At least I can make a dam or something so the water doesn't continue to flood the apartment while I call someone for help.

I race back in the kitchen, towels stacked high in my arms, and stop short before colliding with a muscular chest. I straighten, tossing the towels on the nearby countertop, and fighting to look everywhere but Rhett's face. His kitchen is flooding and there's water spraying out from under the sink. It's a disaster, and I'm nothing more than an unwanted guest in his home.

And he stands there looking all, well, fucking nice in his charcoal gray suit.

"There seems to be a bit of a leak." My voice comes out so fast and high-pitched, I barely recognize it as my own.

Rhett takes a step back, his gaze surveying the damage that is his kitchen before landing on me. His penetrative stare roams up my body and lingers on my breasts. My nipples tighten and strain against the soft material of my dress, practically begging for Rhett to lurch forward and pluck them with the tips of his fingers or, even better, suck them into his mouth and give them a sound tongue lashing.

A look of hunger flashes on his face for the briefest of moments, and I let out a whimper.

He looks up, his eyes darting to mine. His nostrils flare as he takes a small step forward, his dress shoes sloshing through the water. My insides warm despite the chilly air and the dampness of my dress. A magnetic energy radiates between us, pulling me toward him but I remain rooted in place.

His hand reaches between us but then falls back to his side, like he, too, is resisting this pull. His breathing goes heavy, his chest visibly moving with every inhale and exhale. He's never seemed more wild. More uncontrollable. It's thrilling in a way, freeing even.

Rhett takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly before his hand juts out, and he grabs a towel from the counter, tossing it at me.

"Cover yourself up," he barks, moving quickly from the kitchen. "I can see your fucking tits."

My face heats as I look beneath the towel to see a perfect outline of each nipple, the light pink material turning near translucent. With a gasp, I reach up and run my hands along

my wavy hair that's now plastered to my head. I'm sure I look like a fucking disaster. Rhett was probably just shocked at the state of his kitchen, and I was thinking about his mouth on my nipples. I'm such an idiot.

A door slam brings me back to reality. Rhett must've found the water switch I was looking for earlier because the water is no longer shooting out of the cabinet. I shiver, goosebumps raising along my arms as I unfold the towels and spread them out on the floor. Another door slams, this time on the other side of the apartment.

This wet dress is getting more and more uncomfortable, and I quickly change into an old t-shirt from Emory and a pair of sweats.

When I get back to the kitchen, Rhett is still nowhere in sight. I ignore the heaviness in my gut and swallow past the lump in my throat, pushing all thoughts of Rhett and the wild look on his face out of my mind.

I spend the next hour sopping up the water, wiping down cabinets, and tossing the used towels in the washing machine. All the while glancing toward the other side of the penthouse, watching... waiting for Rhett to come back out of his room and grace me with his broody presence.

Only he never does.

His door remains closed, his travel bag is still by the front door, and my heart is very confused about why I care.

TWELVE

Rhett

EVERY TIME I CLOSE my eyes, I see nipples. Perfectly rosy, pink nipples. It's been days, and I swear they're seared into my brain. I avoid my wife at every turn and disappear into my room like a criminal on the run every day when I get home.

Which is where I am right now, sitting on my bed, hiding from my wife, and trying not to think about how hungry I am. Or what she's making for dinner. Or how I haven't eaten since my early lunch before a rigorous practice. My stomach rumbles my entire torso, and I lay back, fluffing a pillow behind my head.

Did she say something about pork chops? Pork loin? I'm pretty sure there was pork involved. I'm also pretty sure my belly is very heavily invested.

Is it possible to be annoyed at my wife's mere presence but to also want her around to cook pork?

I must've summoned the Devil just by thinking about her because there are a few light knocks on my bedroom door. "Dinner is ready."

There's a pause and for a second, I thought she left, but then I hear shuffling on the other side of the door. I groan or maybe that's my stomach, I'm not sure.

"I braised some pork belly," she calls out sweetly. Too sweetly.

My hunger demands that I get my ass up and acquaint myself with a plate of delicious pork, but there's something in the extra niceness of her tone that makes me suspicious. I refuse to be a lamb being led to slaughter. Or maybe in this case, a pig.

She thinks I don't pay attention but I do. Mostly. I know she has some crap lined up for me that I won't want to do. I know she's trying to help me and my career but that doesn't mean I'm going to willingly put on a monkey suit and dance.

I try to relax, close my eyes, and think about a time when I wasn't hungry but then my stomach rumbles again, telling me I'm full of shit. With a sigh, I roll out of bed and head to the dining room.

Time to face the wife.

"I wasn't sure you'd come." Lucy says with a smile as I sit down across from her at the small circle table that sits in something called a breakfast nook.

She must've been home for a while because she's changed into a pair of light blue ripped jeans and a pink sweatshirt that's extra pink. Not only is that the color, but it's written across the front just in case you couldn't figure it out.

I love and hate that I'm the only one who gets to see her so casual. I want to savor these moments and relax with her on the couch. Hide her away from the rest of the world so they don't get to see what's mine. What's special... And then I want to punch myself in the face for thinking any of it.

I grunt, spooning the Asian-style pork and a generous amount of white rice and veggies on my plate. "I almost didn't."

"Does this mean you're done avoiding me?"

"The jury's still out."

She lets out an exasperated sigh and takes a bite of food. She's irritated as she chews. You know how I know? She's got a little twitch in the corner of her right eye. She always does when she's irritated with me.

Fuck. I hate that I'm getting to know my wife. I hate that I'm starting to learn her moods. I really hate that I don't hate her all that much anymore. Well, if I even did in the first place.

"I need to talk to you about—"

I raise a hand to cut her off and point at her plate. "I'm here to eat, not talk about work."

“I would have talked to you earlier but you’ve been avoiding me for days. I told you I was sorry about the kitchen.” Another right eye twitch.

Little does she know I couldn’t give two shits about the kitchen. The damn room could catch fire and float away on the Mississippi River, and I probably wouldn’t even notice. Lucy’s the only one who has ever really made use of it. There’s only one reason I was avoiding her and it starts with ‘n’ and rhymes with ripples.

Thank God they’re covered right now or I’d lay her across the kitchen table and be having her for dinner.

I’d ruin everything that’s pure and good in her simply because that’s who I am. I’d want to own her, push her knees down into the dirt, gather up a handful of her hair and then make her like it.

“I’ve got several things lined up for you for the next two weeks,” she continues, laying down her fork and folding her hands in front of her. “I need to make sure you’ll be—”

“Lucy.” I hold the fork halfway between the plate and my mouth and give her a look, one that tells her to drop it. “I promise we can talk about this later. Let me enjoy dinner.”

“But—”

“No.”

“I just—”

“No.”

Another sigh. “Fine.”

Her little twitch makes it painstakingly clear that she doesn't like it, but after pursing her lips and staring at me for several seconds, she drops the act and continues to eat. We try really hard to look at our plates and not at each other, and after a while, Lucy starts to hum. It's barely noticeable at first but then gets a bit louder.

My money says it's either Dolly Parton or a golden oldie. They're her favorites. Like I said, she thinks I don't notice things, but I do.

She does her laundry on Sundays and as she's folding clothes, puts in her headphones and sings along to whatever's playing. It's a little tone-deaf but it's nice. It's usually Dolly. She likes all her songs. And if it's not, it's your classic oldies. Beachboys. The Temptations. Four Tops. Stevie Wonder.

As much as it pains me to admit it, the woman is a paragon of perfection. Yes, she's so perfect, she's perfectly perfect. She handles hockey players better than most men, and she does it in a dress and heels. The other guys on the team don't dare mess with her, a little bit because they know I'll knock the piss out of them, but mostly because they respect her so much. You can tell every time she walks into the locker room. The guys quiet down and after she talks, it's all head nods and murmurs of agreement.

I've also heard her yell at some of the rookies after they done fucked up and got themselves into a hairy situation. She's downright scary.

Almost as scary as she looks right now with her brows scrunched together, her lips flattened in a straight line, and the murderous waves that are radiating from her body. For a second, I thought I inappropriately farted but then realize she's staring a hole into her phone.

"You doing okay over there?" I set my fork down, ready to slowly back away, just in case the wrath gets turned my way.

Lucy meets my gaze, and her anger instantly morphs into desperation. "We have a big problem."

"I told you, we can talk about your—"

"No. No. This is bad." Her eyes go back to her phone, and she pecks at the screen so hard I think there's a chance it may shatter.

"Lucy, what's going on?"

"It's my parents."

When I haven't been avoiding her—I know, I'm a dick—she hasn't talked much about her family outside of her sister. I assume they're a perfect little American family. Sorry, perfect little rich American family because let's face it, Lucy and I probably had complete opposite childhood experiences. She had a silver spoon in her mouth, and I got punched in mine.

But if there's something I can do to wipe that look of distress off her face, I'll do it. I'd rather have her scowling at me every day of the week.

"What's wrong with your parents? Are they sick?" I pick up my phone and bring up my internet browser. "Do we need to

look at flights?”

“No need for a flight. They just landed at the airport and are on their way here.”

My jaw hits the floor. “Here?” I echo. “Like stopping by before they go to a hotel?”

“Nooooooooo.” Lucy drags out the words, her eyes growing wider by the second. “They’re coming here to stay. Like with us.” She shoots to her feet, her chair screeching behind her. “Shit, they’re going to have to stay in my room.”

“It’s going to be awfully tight in there, the three of you in a queen bed.” I cross my arms over my chest and eat my last bite of pork.

“I’m pretty sure they’re going to expect me to sleep with my *husband*,” she says drolly.

“Well, that’s not happening.”

“Oh, but it is.”

“Don’t think so.”

“But you have a king-size bed. There’s plenty of room for the two of us.”

“Nope.” I pause. “I’m pretty sure I have a sleeping bag somewhere. Or better yet, I could sleep at a hotel and you all can have my whole house.”

“Rhett.” Her voice raises an octave. “This is not optional. The entire world, my parents included, think we are husband and wife. It needs to stay that way for both our sakes.”

I take a deep breath and pinch the bridge of my nose. Maybe if I click my heels together three times real fast, I'll wake up from this dream. I'll still be laying on my bed, my stomach rumbling, no food or Lucy in sight.

I'm not sure how she expects me not to touch her when we're in the same bed together. Especially with her in those fucking shorts. I'm not sure I'm strong enough. There are only two things I do well. Fuck. And fuck things up. I already fucked things up by marrying her. Fucking her would be detrimental. Though there's no question in my mind that the path to ruin never tasted so sweet.

Before I can react, Lucy's at my side, her delicate hand brushing down my back. The tips of her fingers press into my muscles, and I relax into her touch. I can feel my resolve crumbling with every sweep of her fingertips, every note hummed from her pretty lips. She's lulling me into a false sense of security, and I'm letting her do it.

Not even married two full weeks and I'm already getting whipped.

I'm a fucking mess.

"You know I'm right." Her fingers trail up my spine and then back down. Up and down again. "We need this to be real. We *both* need this to be real."

I hang my head in my hands and shake my head. "I know you're right. It doesn't mean I have to like it."

“We have the no sex rule. What’s the worst that can happen?”

I could get used to falling asleep next to you, waking up wrapped around you, and then you’ll leave, and I’ll never fucking sleep again. That’s all. No biggie.

“Yeah. Sure.”

She pats me on the shoulder. “We’ve got about ten minutes to move all my shit in your bedroom. Better get your ass in gear, buttercup.”

After mumbling some choice four-letter words, I push to my feet and follow her to the guest room. Even though this room is labeled for guests, I’ve never had one here, so it was pretty sparse. Before Lucy got here, it was just a bed, a nightstand and a couple of dressers. Now, there’s a silver rectangular lamp by the bed—no idea where that came from—a few pictures hanging on the wall and much nicer bedding. This room looks more comfortable than my entire house.

“I’ll get everything out of the bathroom and the stuff out of the dressers.” She points to the other side of the room. “You can transfer everything from this closet to yours. And hurry.”

She wants fast, she’ll get fast. But as I walk into the closet, I’m momentarily stunned. I’ve never seen so much pink in one place in my entire fucking life. I’m talking the vast majority of the closet. Obviously, I knew she owned a lot of pink shit but knowing and actually seeing are two completely separate things. I was not prepared.

Knowing our time is dwindling down, I grab an armload of hangers, run them across the penthouse, and drop them on my closet floor. We'll have more time to get things situated later. If her clothes get a few wrinkles, she can toss them in the dryer. It only takes a couple of trips to get everything transferred to my closet, and I have to hand it to Lucy, she tolerated it well. Her right eye twitched the entire time, and she glared at my closet floor like it was lava about to singe her favorite pantsuit, but she remained quiet. Only a few unintelligible grumbles here and there.

As we're dumping the last of the stuff from her bathroom in my sink, the doorbell rings. Her eyes widen, and her teeth clench together. She looks way more stricken than excited and I wonder if I was wrong about her family dynamic.

"Is everything okay?" I ask cautiously, raising a brow. "Do you not have a great relationship with your parents?"

She blows out a long breath and shifts on her feet. "It's a long story. Just please try to remember that you're my loving husband."

"Sure. What's the worst that can happen, right?"

THIRTEEN

Lucy

THE WORST THING THAT could happen is my parents showing up unannounced to check in on me and my accidental husband, forcing me to move into his bedroom to cement this lie. Now that it's happening, I'm not sure how it could get any worse. Did I mention all my nice stuff is sitting in a pile at the bottom of Rhett's closet?

"Lucille," my mom squeals, pulling me in for a tight hug. "We're sorry to barge in on such a short notice, but your father thought it would be nice to surprise you."

"I'm pretty surprised." I pull back, letting my parents into the foyer of the penthouse, and closing the door behind them.

Their text from the airport didn't say how long they were planning on staying, but they didn't pack for an overnight visit. They each have their own dark red suitcase. Large ones. And my mom is toting around a matching carry on.

Not sure how I got so lucky, Elle and Tag never got the parents showing up for a surprise visit. Then again, they're

living in sin, and I eloped with an almost stranger.

That's why they're really here. I don't believe for a single second that my dad wanted this to be a nice surprise. More like a sneak attack to catch us completely off-guard while he interrogates us. No doubt he's trying to figure out how much trouble we'll give him in this business deal of his.

Jokes on him, he won't find any drama here.

My dad inclines his head in my direction, his affection *so* touching. I try not to let his coolness bother me, but it does.

"This must be your new husband."

He assesses Rhett with a shrewd gaze, almost like sizing up the enemy.

A least he's fully dressed right now, that's something.

My father's face remains neutral but I can see the disdain flash in his eyes. He's never cared for athletes and that was before Elle started dating them. Growing up, he always went on rants about how they made too much money for playing these games no one really cares about. How all the money and fame got to their heads and made them think they were untouchable.

Working for sports teams has only shown me how wrong he is. Yes, these guys make a lot of money but they put their bodies through hell. Practice, games, workouts... they're brutal. And sure, there are some athletes who let the money go to their heads, but you see that everywhere. Even in his precious world of finance.

If my dad's examination makes Rhett uncomfortable, he doesn't show it. Instead, he extends a hand and offers a polite smile—didn't even know his face could do that. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Hurst, I'm Rhett."

"Rhett." My dad's tone is curt but he shakes Rhett's hand anyway. "I didn't expect you to ask my permission for my daughter's hand in marriage, but I certainly expected to meet you first. I can't say I'm not disappointed."

"I'm sorry, Dad, it wasn't planned."

"So you keep saying, which makes me wonder what was so pressing."

He glances to my stomach and heat crawls up my face as I realize what he's insinuating.

"I'm not pregnant," I grit out. No one is having sex and getting pregnant. We have rules about that sort of thing.

"We'll see."

No one has the ability to quite get under my skin like my dad. It didn't used to be like this. When I was young, I was a total daddy's girl. I refused to let my mom read my bedtime stories, insisted he push me on the swings every weekend because no one else could ever get me as high, and when I was old enough, begged him to let me hang out with him at the office. At the time, I didn't know he was grooming me to take over his business.

But then everything changed. I realized I wanted to pursue something other than banking, and he cut me out of his life

without a backward glance. For a while, it was like I never existed in the first place. And until recently, I'm not sure I did.

We've tried to mend our broken relationship, but he's too stubborn to apologize, and I'm too afraid to bring it up. I don't want to know that his love for me only goes so far. It was heartbreaking then and it's heartbreaking now. Which is why our relationship is so strained. I chose myself all those years ago and this fake marriage to Rhett should make up for that choice. It should allow him to save the company and have a lucrative retirement.

I look to the ground and shift on my feet, letting silence fill the empty spaces of the penthouse. For once, I'm not sure what to say or what to do.

"We're sorry for any inconvenience we've caused you." Rhett slips his hand around mine, enveloping my small fingers with his larger ones. His touch is comforting, letting me know that I'm not alone, and it feels nice. "Your daughter is such a fantastic woman that I couldn't pass up the opportunity to make her mine."

My gaze snaps up to his and the way he smiles down at me, his eyes softened, I almost believe it. Almost because this is Rhett and he has no feelings.

"Oh, honey. I didn't know you two were in such desperate need for a decorator. It looks like you just moved in."

I roll my eyes and squeeze Rhett's hand as I follow my mom into the living area. She means well, but she nitpicks

everything. It drives Elle crazy, but it doesn't bother me as much. "I'm still working on bringing everything over from my apartment and with all the excitement, I haven't had time to decorate."

"Let me know if you need help. I know some wonderful designers."

"Thanks, Mom."

"Oh, Rhett, honey?" She turns around and hands him her carry on, which he accepts and slings over his shoulder like it weighs nothing. I know my mom, it doesn't weigh nothing.

"Yes, Mrs. Hurst?" He sounds amused.

"Are you a fan of shrimp and grits?"

"I can't say I've ever had them."

My mom gasps so loud my dad jumps and almost loses his grip on his suitcase. It's a good thing we're not dramatic in this family.

Rhett leans down, his nose grazing along the shell of my ear. "Have I said something offensive?"

I laugh, despite the tingles going down my spine and the butterflies taking off in my stomach. "Shrimp and grits are my mom's favorite thing to make. Actually, one of the few things she cooks herself."

He snorts while my mom makes a tsking sound. "Lucy, you can take me to the grocery tomorrow so I can make your husband a proper meal."

Rhett chuckles, and I ignore them both as I wave my parents into the guest room and back away slowly to let them get settled. When I get back to the dining room, I realize I'm still holding Rhett's hand and unwind my fingers from his. I grab the dishes from our dinner and load everything in the dishwasher.

I continue to ignore Rhett and the questioning looks he throws my way.

I'm sure he wants to know about my relationship with my parents, and I don't have the energy to unpack all that right now.

Especially not with them in earshot.

It doesn't take long for my parents to emerge and settle down with Rhett in the family room while I busy myself in the kitchen, washing the pans from dinner and wiping everything down. They pepper him with questions, and he answers every single one, although he steers the conversation away from his family every time the subject heads in that direction. If he wants to know about my relationship with my family, then I hope he's ready to tell me about his. I've been good so far and not snooped around in his personnel file, although they usually don't have much information.

Before long, my parents head to bed, something about jet lag from their hour and a half flight, and Rhett and I are left alone. He hovers on the other side of the kitchen counter, fidgeting with a roll of paper towels.

“So, uh, are you ready for bed?”

Rhett refuses to meet my eyes and really, I can't blame him. Sharing a marital bed was never part of the deal. It's too much to ask, but given this surprise visit, we don't really have a choice.

“Yeah. Sure. I need to pick up all my stuff from your closet anyway.”

He nods and disappears to his side of the penthouse.

Our side.

As I step around the island, my heart pounds, and I swear my palms are sweating. I don't know why I'm so nervous. It's not like I've never spent the night with a man before. I mean, it's been a little bit but I'm no blushing virgin.

There's something about Rhett that's both intriguing and damning. His body is fantastic, one of the best I've ever seen. He has that whole bad boy vibe going for him and as much as we all try to deny it, there's an appeal to what a dangerous man can do to you. How far he'll go. How much he'll push you. How he'll leave you broken and begging for more because that's exactly what Rhett would do. He doesn't do long-term relationships, or even friendships, as far as I can tell.

I've been broken before and I don't have a desire to be there again. Which is why the no sex rule will stay in place. Doesn't matter how shirtless he is.

While he gets ready for bed, I distract myself with the disaster in his closet. I take over half of it, picking things up one by one, smoothing out the wrinkles and hanging

everything in order of size and color. When I'm satisfied and my shoes are lined on the floor, I drag myself into the bedroom and freeze.

Rhett's standing next to what I assume is his side of the bed in a pair of basketball shorts and nothing else. The lamp is on behind him, highlighting every dip, every ridge, every swirl of ink from his tattoos. I haven't allowed myself to get close enough to look, but he has them up his left arm and over his shoulder, extending to his chest. Most of them are shades of black and gray but there are a few splashes of color. I want to trace every single one of them with my tongue. Those and the ridges of his abdomen.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. "What the fuck are you wearing?"

"Shorts."

"I'm well aware that you're just wearing shorts. Where are the rest of your clothes?"

He snorts and rests his hands on his hips, which draws my attention to the blasted sex lines. "If you remember correctly, I sleep naked. This is my compromise."

Which of course, I'm now picturing him naked when I'm supposed to be steering away from all things sexual. And now my mouth's watering because even though I accused Rhett of having a small dick there's no way that's true. Not with those broad shoulders, big feet, big hands... I know it's not always true but I'd be so utterly disappointed. Not that I have any intention of finding out personally.

“This is not a compromise. Put a damn shirt on.”

“Take it or leave it sweetheart.” His smile is slow as it stretches across his face.

He wants to play dirty, I’m game. The nighties I ordered from the online boutique arrived a few days ago, but I’ve been hesitant to wear them. I grab a few things from my new dresser and head to the bathroom, a smile of my own growing. I change into the delicate silk and run my hands down my body as I check myself out in the mirror.

Everything is covered but barely. I look good. Sinful. Perfect.

When I get back into the bedroom, Rhett sits up straight in bed, his eyes roaming my body, a scowl on his face. “What the fuck are you wearing?”

“Don’t you like my new pajamas? You didn’t seem to like the shorts. I think this is cute.” I twirl around, well aware the nightgown flares slightly, giving him a view of my matching cheekini panties.

He growls and turns out the light. “Get in the fucking bed.”

This round goes to me.

FOURTEEN

Rhett

I TAKE BACK EVERYTHING I ever said about the devil shorts. This... whatever this is, is exponentially fucking worse.

It's even shorter, which I didn't even think was possible, and barely covers anything.

I can't even talk about those things that she calls panties.

I don't give a fuck what anyone says. Those damn things are worse than nothing at all. They give you the sweetest glimpse of her perfect ass cheeks and drive you so fucking mad you want to rip them in half like a fucking animal.

Fucking nightgown.

Fucking Lucy.

Fuck my life.

"I wasn't ready for you to turn out the light." Lucy's indigent tone and slight movement tell me she's coming around to the other side of the bed.

I couldn't give two shits about what she wants, not tonight. Not when the only thing separating us is a thin pair of shorts and whatever the fuck is half-covering her ass. "Deal with it."

"You know, you're quite rude most of the time. You really should work on that."

"Yeah, well, you should have thought better about who you married."

"Like either of us had a choice?"

I've thought about that a few times since the wedding I can't remember. Did I have a choice or was it all coincidence? Who gets trashed and marries someone they barely know, let alone like? Sure, you see it in movies and shit all the time but usually there's feelings involved somewhere.

Which really poses the question: did I like my wife enough to marry her? Somewhere deep down in my blackened heart, did I want to spend more time with this pink terrorist? Did I subconsciously need a reason?

Nah. That doesn't sound like me at all.

My marriage was likely the result of some serious mind-altering drugs that obviously gave me a case of temporary insanity. Temporary insanity and an onyx ring that after a week, has already made itself at home on my ring finger.

Now that my eyes have adjusted to the dark, I watch Lucy fold back the sheets—my sheets—and slide into bed. One of her legs grazes mine as she pulls up the blankets and rolls over to face me. I suck in a breath and bend my arms so that I'm

hugging myself. Not because I need the extra affection, but because I have an overwhelming desire to pull her against me.

“So, is now a good time to talk to you about the stuff I have scheduled? You did say we could talk after you ate.”

The absolute last thing I ever want to do is talk about the image improving things she wants me to do. Things that I’m sure I won’t like. There’s not even a question about it. I. Will. Hate. It. All of it.

I sigh and roll to my side as well. Thank God, she has the blankets pulled up to her shoulders. I don’t think I could take anything else. Seeing her in my bed, barely a thing on, would give me heart palpitations. Her twirling around in that fucking nightie was bad enough.

“But then your parents showed up. I think that killed the mood.”

“Wasn’t like I invited them here.” The bitter edge to her voice has me more than a bit curious.

“Tell me what the deal is between you and your parents, and I’ll let you tell me about your plans for the week.”

“That hardly seems fair.”

“It hardly seems like you have a choice.”

Lucy frowns so hard I can hear it, or maybe that was an actual growl. Either way I’m not swayed. She remains quiet for several minutes and I don’t say anything either, letting the silence wrap around us like a cozy blanket. Her soft breaths have me relaxing into the pillow and my eyelids drooping.

“So, my dad and I used to be close.” Her voice is quiet, like she’s almost afraid of disturbing the peace we’ve created.

I rearrange my pillow, propping myself up higher, and resting a hand between us on the bed. “Then what happened?”

“I guess I grew up. He wanted me to take over his company, and I wanted something different for myself.”

“And he wasn’t okay with that?” I knew the answer before I even asked the question. I only spent a small amount of time with her father, but he’s an imposing man. The kind of guy who wasn’t used to being told no. After growing up in my family, I know what they looked like. Those guys were so impossible to please, eventually you gave up trying because nothing you could do was ever good enough.

She laughed a bitter laugh that had my hand inching closer, wanting to comfort her, but I don’t. The closeness is enough. “You met him. *I can’t say I’m not disappointed.* What a load of shit. This was nothing compared to how he acted when I told him I wanted to do something in public relations or marketing.”

“Did he...” I trail off, not able to make myself finish that sentence. I can’t imagine anyone raising a hand to her perfect flesh. I swear if he hit her, if he gave her a taste of what I suffered, he will find himself flat out on his ass. I don’t care how late it is. And that’s if I’m feeling generous.

I know what it’s like all too well to find yourself on the receiving end of your fathers’ wrath. I used to curl up at night and wonder what I did wrong, how I could change, how I

could be better. There were some nights I would sit there and cry on the floor by my bed. Sometimes I had no comfort, and sometimes my brother or sister would sneak into my room to hug me and tell me everything was going to be okay. But they didn't really know. None of us did.

It took me a long time to realize he had the problem, not me. I couldn't imagine her feeling like that, being lower than dirt. A big part of me still feels that way, probably always will. I think it's ingrained in my skin the same way his belt buckle was after almost every game.

“He pretty much disowned me. Kicked me out of the house with a few bags of clothes and very little money.”

“Wow. I thought—”

“I know what you thought,” she interrupts me. “That I live off Mommy and Daddy and haven't worked for a single thing in my entire life.” Her tone turns bitter, and her hand curls into a fist. “It's what everyone thinks and for a part of my life, that may have been true. But the second he kicked me out I was on my own and had to start from scratch. I never took another dime from them.”

All the guys on the team know how hardworking Lucy is, I certainly won't deny that. But if I'm honest, I also thought she had an easy life and didn't really have to work hard to get where she is. If anything, this makes me like her a little more. Makes me feel like in some way, we're similar. Still doesn't mean I want to let her get to know me.

Her hand relaxes next to mine, our pinkies only millimeters apart. “It was tough at first. My boyfriend at the time dumped me as soon as he found out.”

“He’s obviously an idiot.” My fingers flex, moving slightly closer to hers. The need to reach out, grab her hand and pull her close to me is strong. I can’t say I’ve ever provided comfort to someone who wasn’t a sibling, and I’m not sure I know how.

“Agree. But he gained about two hundred pounds and lost most of his hair, so I think I came out on top.” She sighs and shifts her legs under the sheets. “I stayed with friends and saved my money until I got offered a job in Nashville.”

“But you’ve obviously made up, right? I mean he’s here?”

She brushes along the side of my finger. I struggle to remain perfectly still. I don’t want to make any sudden moves and scare her away. As much as I try to deny it, I like having a physical connection to her, even one that’s small. Maybe especially one that’s small; it’s safer. It still allows me to keep some distance.

“My sister can be quite persuasive when she wants to be. I saw how much my estrangement affected her and she was always in the middle. My mom and I made up almost instantly but things with my dad have been kinda tense ever since.”

“Have you ever really talked about things?”

“No, not really. What about your family? You never really talk about them?”

“What do you have planned for me this week?” I change the subject, hoping she takes the hint. Talking about my family isn’t something I do. Not even with her. Wife or not. Some things are better left unsaid, and I don’t need to see her look at me differently. Look at me with pity. I wouldn’t be able to stand it.

Her pinkie overlaps mine and she drags it down the back of my hand before drawing circles on my skin. I suck in a breath, my heart rate increases, and my whole damn arm tingles. Jesus. I need to pull myself together.

“I know you’re changing the subject, but I’ll let it slide because I really do need to talk to you about this.” Her voice is soft, like she’s placating me. I’m torn because I don’t want to like it, but also she’s touching me. Fuck.

“I know I’m not going to like any of this so you might as well continue.”

“On Tuesday, I’ve got a large group of kids from low income areas touring the arena. I need some of the guys there for autographs, photo ops, and maybe some ice time with the kids.”

Well, that one’s not too bad. “Done.”

“There’s a charity dinner Thursday night.”

“Which I’m not going to like.”

“Which you’re not going to like but the mayor will be there so the press coverage will be over the top. Plus the proceeds benefit a local women’s shelter. I also like to go to the animal

shelter once or twice a month, and I haven't had time to go yet. It might be nice if you went with me. No press or anything but they usually have puppies."

"Done." My voice is even, but I'm suspicious. Even with the dinner I won't like, I feel like she's trying to distract me with puppies because, who doesn't like puppies? You'd have to be a complete psychopath to not want to go play with animals. "What else is there, Lucy? I know you're not done."

This time, her hand stops to cover mine, like she's trying to hold me in place and make me listen. I don't know if she's noticed, but I'm a lot bigger than her. It would take more than a hand to hold me down. "I mean, that's it for next week."

"Lucy."

"Well, there is this calendar shoot. I need a few guys—"

"Absolutely not."

"You don't even know what it's for."

"It doesn't matter what it's for. I know what they do. They expect you to parade around in skimpy little underwear and pose for pictures while you're rubbed down with baby oil. Excuse me if that doesn't sound like my idea of a good time."

Despite my recent behavior, I've never been one to flaunt my body. Sure, I'm comfortable in my own skin, but I choose who gets to see what and when. I spent years covering myself up, trying to hide the bruises and the welts. So far, I've been lucky to avoid doing any kind of advertisement that involves

more than a few undone buttons. I no longer have anything to hide, but old habits die hard.

“Besides,” I continued, “I’m sure there are plenty of other guys on the team who would be interested in this kind of shit.”

“I’m not saying there aren’t. Tag jumped at the idea.”

“Of course he did.” The guy probably already has a large selection of tiny underwear at his disposal. Not to mention his ego is the size of Alaska.

“As did the McIver brothers. I need one more person. Aside from a few tabloid images, I have not seen much of you in pictures. You could really pull some profits.”

“If you want to see me naked, all you have to do is ask. I’ll show you everything you want.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.” Lucy pulls her hand away and clutches it to her chest. I bet she’s blushing right now. I can’t see it, but I know it’s there. The way her cheeks flush before her favorite color creeps up her neck and stains her cheeks. It’s beautiful.

“Why don’t you ask the British guy to do it? He’s pretty enough.” His hair is almost as long as Tag’s, and his ego twice as big.

“Foster and Lincoln will already be there. I’ve got them shooting a picture together. I need someone to be with Tag.”

“No fucking way.” He can find someone else to braid his hair. I barely want to be in the same room with the guy. Fuck no. I can find much better things to do with my time. You

know, like getting my eyeball gouged out, my fingernails ripped off... you get the idea.

“I need you for this. I’ve got players lined up from the football team and the baseball team. You’d be doing me a favor. No one else on the team is as good looking as you.”

With a scoff, I roll over, put my back to her, and close my eyes. Now I know she’s buttering me up. False flattery will get her nowhere, no matter how much I want it to be true. “Not happening.”

“Come on, Rhett. I’d owe you a favor.”

“There’s nothing I need.”

“Doesn’t mean there won’t be something you need later.”

She’s got a point. Sooner or later, I’ll find myself getting into trouble and it might be handy to have someone from public relations in my back pocket. “Fine.”

“I know you’d see things my way eventually.” Her tone is smug and I’m going to enjoy setting her straight.

“On one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You come with me to the photoshoot and you don’t leave until I do. If anyone has to touch me, you do it. No one else. And I don’t want a lot of extra people there.”

She remains silent for several seconds and just as I think she won’t agree to my terms, she does. “Fine.”

“Good. Now go to sleep and next time put on something that covers your entire ass.”

“Is that your favor?”

“No.” I grumble.

“Then nighties it is.”

Why does my wife have to be so damn difficult? And why do I find it so damn appealing?

FIFTEEN

Lucy

I WON'T ADMIT THIS out loud, but Rhett in his game day suit has me a little weak at the knees. Rhett at home, relaxed, without a shirt on is even better. Rhett in his jersey and a pair of jeans, surrounded by children, makes my ovaries explode.

I'm talking fireworks on the Fourth of July. Like the grand finale kind of explosion.

He's doing his damndest to keep a smile off his face while signing autographs, posing for pictures and answering questions ranging from his game day ritual to his favorite food. His answer 'anything my wife makes' with a sneaky wink in my direction, has me crossing my legs and shifting uncomfortably in my chair.

Doesn't he know how weak I am right now?

I know I'm a grown ass woman who doesn't need a man to satisfy her and yet I've been reduced to a squirming puddle of need by a fucking wink. And not just any wink, a wink from my husband, who I'm supposed to be *pretending* to like.

It's not entirely his fault, although sleeping next to him the past two nights with barely a scrap material between us doesn't help. If my parents hadn't shown up for a surprise visit, we wouldn't be in this mess to begin with. I'd be in my own room, all by myself, free to relieve all this pent-up tension I seem to collect day in and day out.

Not now. Not since my parents got here.

They've already been here a few days, and I'm still not sure why they flew all the way up in the first place. My dad hasn't said much, just set up shop in the home office neither of us use. My mom got to make her shrimp and grits, which got plenty of praise from Rhett, and has been spending most of her time with Elle and Chloe. Not sure why they didn't just stay with Elle and Tag in the first place. They have plenty of room, and I'm sure everything would be far less awkward.

"Come skate with me."

I jump, holding my hand over my rapidly beating heart, and then scold myself for being so lost in thought I didn't notice my husband. Rhett's standing in front of me, his hand extended, a small smile playing on his lips.

"I don't have any skates."

His smile grows and if I wasn't sitting down, my legs would've buckled. His full smile also explodes ovaries. It's no wonder he frowns most of the time. That damn smile of his is dangerous. Oh, good Lord in Heaven he even has a dimple on one side. I'm dead. Literally dead.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, I’m like a boy scout. I’m always prepared.” He opens his gear bag, which I also didn’t notice, and pulls out a new pair of skates—black with hot pink laces and a pair of matching socks. They’re so cute, so me, and my heart clogs with emotion.

I reach out, stroking a finger over the pink laces. “I don’t know how to skate. I don’t want to embarrass you.”

Rhett tosses the bag in the chair next to me and kneels down. “You could never embarrass me. You’re the perfect one.”

Before I could correct him and admit that he was pretty perfect today, he slides a hand around my calf and runs it down to grip my ankle. My breath catches in my throat and my stomach flops. His hazel eyes hold mine as he slides off my ballet shoe, and strokes his finger up and down my calf. His eyes are more brown today, with a green starburst through the middle.

I love how they change color; how expressive they can be when he lets himself be vulnerable.

But is he doing it for me? Or is he doing it for the camera? Doesn’t he actually want to skate with me or is he taking advantage of a great photo opportunity?

I’d like to think I know my husband enough to say with absolute certainty that he’s here for me, but I just don’t know.

He drags his teeth along his bottom lip as he pulls the sock on my foot before working on the skate. I’m mesmerized by

his fingers as they move in tandem to pull and tie the lace.

There are several other things he could be doing with those fingers right now and I wouldn't stop him.

I snap my mouth shut to prevent a groan from escaping and curl my fingers around the chair to keep myself from reaching out and pushing back a lock of dark hair that's fallen across his forehead.

He switches legs and as soon as both skates are on and fully laced, helps me to my feet. My fingers entangle with his like it's as natural as breathing, and I can't help but swipe my finger along his wedding ring. This can't be for the cameras. It feels too real.

Getting married in Vegas was a complete and utter accident, I didn't mean for it to happen. Sure as shit didn't want it to happen. But now that it has, now that I get these little moments with Rhett, I'm not sure I would change it.

"Are you going to catch me if I fall?" I stand at the edge of the ice, watching Rhett step on and glide around like he was born to skate. Well, seeing him in his element, it's not too hard to believe.

His mouth flattens, and he gets this almost sad look in his eyes before he whispers, "Always," in a voice so slow I almost didn't catch it. But then he's there, crowding me with his big body, flashing me another one of his smiles, and pulling me onto the ice.

We glide out slowly. Well, more like he pulls me by both my hands while my legs remain straight. Some of the other players are on the ice along with most of the kids. This is the last planned activity before they leave.

“Lucy, I’m going to need you to move your legs. One at a time. Toward me. Just like that.”

I shuffle forward, a little unsteady, but Rhett’s there the whole time, making sure I stay upright. The kids are whirling around the practice arena, and Tag skates a few circles around us until Rhett’s glare sends him to the other side of the arena with Linc and Jazz who are sending me some very curious looks. I’ve been so busy, I haven’t been able to talk to Jazz—just a few texts here and there with a promise to catch up soon. Either way I’ll need to talk to her; I don’t like that I’ve been putting our friendship on hold because I’m perpetuating a lie. A lie that doesn’t feel like a lie right now.

“Alright,” Rhett murmurs, “I’m going to let go of one of your hands and skate beside you.”

I nod, unsure of what to say to this nice and helpful version of Rhett. Snarky Rhett, agitated Rhett, grumpy Rhett, those I can handle no problem. This guy, however, is a conundrum.

“So today isn’t terrible.” He laces his fingers with me and smirks my way before turning forward and guiding us around the outer edge of the ring.

“You know if you weren’t so broody all the time and relaxed a little bit you might find out I’m a good time.” I bite my bottom lip as my cheeks heat with embarrassment. “That

came out far more sexual than I meant it to in a rink full of children.”

His brow quirks, and he casts me a sideways glance. “And if we were at home?”

“Well, we have rules in place and my parents are staying on the other side of your apartment.”

“No offense but fuck them. Parents haven’t stopped me before. And if you keep wearing those tiny nightgowns, I may have to rip one off you. Then we’ll see how prim and proper you are when I have you begging for my dick on your hands and knees.”

Prim and—?

“Oomph.” One foot crosses in front of the other, and I pitch forward. My free hand reaches out, but before I can fall, Rhett pulls me to him, catching me in his arms. He steadies me against his chest and my hands land on his shoulders.

His big muscular shoulders. Shoulders I shouldn’t be touching right now.

His hands run over my shoulders and down my back as he murmurs, “I’ve got you, Lucy.”

My tongue darts and brushes along my bottom lip, and Rhett tracks the movement with his gaze. His eyes darken, and he grips my waist with one hand while the other travels up to brush through my hair. A shudder runs down my spine and my heart races. My hand trembles as I reach up to brush through

his hair, pushing it away from his forehead with the back of my fingers.

He leans down, searching my eyes, for what I don't know. And in this moment, I'm not sure I care. Not when his lips are inches from mine, when his hand is tightening in the waves of my hair, when we're breathing the same air.

My hand tightens around his neck, holding onto him so I don't lose myself. Or maybe so I can lose myself.

Rhett growls, a low rumbling spreading across his chest, and he closes the small gap between us and presses his lips to mine. They're softer than I expected and so is he. He kisses with gentle strokes and teasing licks, sipping at my mouth like he's trying to savor every moment, every touch.

My arms wind around his neck, and I find myself leaning into him, letting him support me. His hand tightens in my hair, and I whimper against his lips. I want him to take me harder, kiss me deeper, lay his claim on me as his right as my husband. I need him to show me what it's like to be consumed by Rhett Remington, rules be damned.

"Jesus, Lucy," Rhett whispers, pulling back and smoothing his hand down my hair and meeting his other at my waist.

Several flashing lights pull me out of the moment and it takes me a second to realize some of the reporters covering this event are taking our picture. Being photographed doesn't bother me but it makes me wonder again if Rhett knew they were there the whole time. If he was putting on a show.

He had to have known. This was all a show and I fed right into it like an affection starved puppy. He should have let me fall, at least then the only thing bruised would be my ass.

I let my arms unwind from his neck and fall to my side, a heavy feeling settling in my gut.

“We should get back.” His eyes don’t leave mine right away, and he gives my waist a squeeze before letting go and grabbing my hand.

I nod and let him lead me off the ice. My mind wanders back to the kiss and how good his lips felt against mine. Rhett’s giving nothing away. I don’t know if the kiss has affected him at all. If he wants more. Or if he set the whole thing up to perpetuate this lie we’re living. “We gave them the footage they needed. Right?”

“Right.”

He helps me off the ice, neither his tone or his straight face giving anything away. I sit back down next to his gear bag and without uttering a single word, he gets back on the ice and skates to the locker room on the other side of the rink.

I stretch my legs out and sigh, dropping my head in my hands. My heart and my head are riddled with a myriad of emotions, none of them able to reconcile into a single train of thought. Not anything helpful anyway. Do I want to be affected by my husband? Do I want him to be affected by me?

I don’t know if I can lay next to him tonight, all these things running through my head, and actually hope to sleep.

“I was going to yell at you for avoiding me but I see you’ve been otherwise occupied.” Jazz moves Rhett’s gear bag down a seat and takes its place. “The few texts you’ve sent have hardly been enough.”

I lift my head from my hands and sit back, laying my hand on her arm. “I know, I’m sorry. I totally failed. First there was the whole whirlwind wedding and the aftermath with the media and then my parents showed up over the weekend. Things have been... uncomfortable.”

“So first let’s unpack this whirlwind wedding. How about you tell me what really happened?”

“What can I say?” I hold my hands out and chuckle. “We were in love and drunk like everyone else.”

Not a complete lie, but since we haven’t been able to piece together what actually happened, it works. Plus, it’s Vegas. People get drunk and married all the time so it’s not a stretch by any means.

Jazz eyes me speculatively. “You can say what you want in front of the media but we both know you weren’t dating before you left to go to Vegas. You can fool everyone else, Lucy, but I know you. And even better, I know first-hand what’s at stake.”

That she did. Jazz had first-hand experience with how savage the media could be when they got their hands on a juicy story. It wasn’t that long ago that they exposed her and Lincoln to the world. He was working to be traded to another team, and she might’ve been forced to step down as team owner before she made the choice and did it on her own.

It was a hard time for the both of them, but things worked out and they're right where they're supposed to be. With each other.

I glance around, making sure we're alone, and lower my voice. "What I said wasn't a complete lie."

"Being in love or being drunk?"

"Drunk." I snort a laugh. It's very unladylike, but I don't think I give a shit. Not around Jazz, with her I can relax and be who I am without judgment. "I found him at a strip club, behaving for the most part. He was just sitting in the back by himself nursing a drink. When I got there, he was pissed, said he needed a break from all the shit. And then he challenged me to a drink."

"You didn't have to accept."

"You know I did."

Jazz tosses her head back and laughs. "And then what happened? How many did you have?"

"Actually, just one." I lean closer to her. "I think someone spiked our drinks. We woke up in the same bed with rings on our fingers and no memories of the night before. I had Alice go back to the club to ask around and see if anyone knew anything, but everyone was very tight lipped."

"Wow."

"Yeah." I lean back in the chair and sigh. "Then the media found out and made a big mess of things."

“Trust me, I know what that’s like.”

“Luckily, we didn’t have quite the coverage you did. But unlike Lincoln, Rhett’s image left a lot to be desired. Staying married was a flash decision to try to fix everything. I’m still trying to clean up that mess.”

Jazz’s eyes meet mine, and they’re full of concern. “Gordon said Coomer and associates wants to replace you. And he wants to trade Rhett once the season ends.”

“I know.” I blow out a deep breath and sigh. “Which is why we have to be smart about things.”

“I didn’t think you and him would make a good match. Him being a disaster and a pain in my ass and you being a delight, but he’s changed since the two of you got married.”

I hold in my snort of laughter. Rhett’s only behaving because we have a deal. No doubt, once we go our separate ways, he’ll start acting out and get himself traded.

Unless he wants to stay.

But he has nothing keeping him here.

He’s only putting on an act. Right?

“And now that I’ve seen the two of you together.” Jazz continues, a smile on her face. “Well...”

“Well, what?”

“Well, now I know it’s for real. You say it’s fake, but I think you’re crossing the line.”

I should leave it alone but I can’t help but ask, “You do?”

“Oh yeah.” She slings an arm around me and rests her head on my shoulder. “He looks at you like you’re his next breath. Like you’re his reason for existing. You may not see it, Lucille, but the rest of us do.”

I smile, even though I shouldn’t because she used my full name. Even though I should be re-establishing our boundaries and creating more distance. I smile because it’s quite possible I like my husband and maybe he likes me back.

Even if it does cross the line and push at the rules we’ve put in place.

SIXTEEN

Rhett

I'VE DONE MY FAIR share of stupid things. I'm talking monumentally stupid, but I think kissing my wife is the stupidest thing of all. My brain has obviously taken a late holiday to a faraway land which left me unsupervised and stupid.

Fuck.

She felt so good in my arms. Her body pressed against mine. Looking at me like I was something more. Like I was fucking worth it. Like I wouldn't strip her of everything good and leave her hurt and alone. I would ruin her. She's everything good in the world and I'm not good enough for her. Hell, I never will be.

I couldn't resist one little taste, and damn if it didn't leave me wanting more. Her lips were so soft, her body so pliant, I almost didn't stop. Thank God I did. Going down that path would ruin us both. And her question after about the reporters. I knew exactly what she was asking, if it was all for show, and

it's easier to let her think it was than to let her in on the truth. To let her know that I feel things for her I shouldn't.

I sit down on the bench in front of the empty lockers, rest my elbows on my thighs and dangle my hands and head between my legs. I always make a mess of things. That's one thing you can count on.

There's shuffling of skates against the mats and thumps on both sides of me, telling me I'm not alone, but I don't lift my head.

"Not sure what you're doing in here when your wife is out there."

"I don't remember inviting you to follow me, Dallas. I don't think your position as captain extends to my personal life."

He chuckles. "It doesn't."

"We're just nosey bastards."

This time, I do look up and scowl at Lincoln to my right and then Foster on my left. Great, an intervention. It's too bad I'm not a drunk and they're not my friends. They're right, they are a pair of nosey bastards. I'm surprised they don't have Nag in here too.

"Then go stick your noses into someone else's business. I'm doing just fine and I don't need either of you to keep me company." I clasp my hands in front of me, maybe because I need something to hold onto and maybe so I don't punch one of these guys in the face. I'm the volatile one who likes to start fights with his teammates, after all.

“Does he look good to you, mate?” Foster looks around me and addresses Lincoln like I’m not right in front of his British face.

Lincoln shakes his head. “Hard to tell because he’s always so damn grumpy looking, but I do think he looks worse than usual.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Maybe because he knows that whatever he’s doing will just blow up in his face.”

“I think you’re right there.”

“And what is it that you think I’m doing?” I interrupt the both of them, gripping my fingers a little bit tighter.

Lincoln leans forward, mimicking my pose. “I think the two of you made a very large mistake in Vegas and Lucy, being the fixer that she is, wanted to keep up this charade so it didn’t further damage either of your reputations.”

“Careful, Dallas.” I growl as my gaze narrows and my jaw clenches.

“And now I think this is getting to feel a little too real for the both of you.” He runs a hand through his hair and smirks. “Does that sound about right, Foster?”

Foster slaps me on the back with a laugh. “I think that about sums it up.”

“Are you two idiots done?” I gesture around me. “I came here for a little peace and quiet, not for you to tell me your

theories about my marriage. Which are completely false by the way. My marriage to Lucy is real.”

“I’m not doubting it’s validity.” Lincoln chuckles. “Just how you got there.”

“Do you have a point?” I ground out.

He gives me a pointed look. “Lucy is our friend and while you’re our teammate, we don’t know you and most of us don’t care for you very much.” I snort, but he ignores me and continues. “We don’t want to see her hurt.”

“Is this where you tell me I’m not good enough for her? You can spare me that lecture because I already know.”

I knew it the second I laid eyes on her. I knew I wasn’t good enough to lay a finger on her even though I want to with my entire being. I fucking knew.

Foster puts his arm around my shoulders and smiles, one of those wide smiles that guys flash before they’re about to stir up some trouble. “Nah. I actually think you’re good for her. You shake things up in her perfect world and make things interesting. At least, if you let yourself be a decent human being. She must see something in you, or you wouldn’t still be in Nashville.”

“But also, if you hurt her, we’ll smash your face,” Lincoln adds in before nodding to Foster. “If it’s not real now, it will be soon enough.”

I don’t respond because I’ve got nothing. Literally nothing and before I can think up some kind of witty comeback,

they've left the room and I'm alone again. Not that I mind because I came here to be alone in the first fucking place. No one seems to know how to mind their own damn business here.

If it's not real, it will be soon enough. Who the fuck does he think he is? And what's that supposed to mean? If this thing isn't real, I'm the fucking Easter Bunny. No matter how this marriage started out, it felt very real with her in my arms and my lips on hers.

This is the realest thing in my life, and it's supposed to be fake. What does that say about me? I guess that I'm pretty fucking pathetic. Looks like my dad was right about me.

You're never going to amount to anything. It doesn't matter how much money is in your contract. You. Are. Worthless. No amount of money or a jersey on your back will change that.

Pushing myself to my feet, I get back on the ice and cross to the other side of the arena where my perfect wife is waiting for me. Well, she's chatting with Jazz so maybe not waiting for me exactly, but I'll take it.

Her face is flushed from the cold air, and her hair has fallen out from its bun and is framing her face. She looks exquisite. The ice is good for her. I'm a bit surprised she's worked here for as long as she has and doesn't know how to skate, but there's something satisfying about being the one to teach her. To be the who that gets an excuse to touch her, even if it's supposed to be innocent.

“Hey there, Remington.” Jazz smiles as I sit down next to my gear bag and unlace my skates. “We were just talking about you.”

“All bad things, I’m sure.” I toss a skate in my bag followed by the other. Lucy’s already taken hers off and is back in her flats.

She pushes herself from the chair and winks. “You might be surprised. Stay out of trouble, you two. Call me later, Luce.”

With a small wave of her fingers, she’s gone, leaving me alone with Lucy.

I’m not sure I know the right thing to say or if I ever know the right thing to say. What do you say to your fake/real wife who you kissed even though you shouldn’t have and now she thinks you did it for positive press?

Wonder if Hallmark has a card for that. Maybe something along the lines of ‘I’m sorry you married an idiot.’

Instead of meeting her gaze, I look down out at the ice, watching the kids get shuffled back to the benches to change into their sneakers and say goodbyes to their favorite Devils. I’m not going to pretend I’m on anyone’s list of favorites. Not after I beat up hockey’s golden boy, doesn’t matter how much he deserved it. My only regret is dragging Lucy into my mess. Despite working with minimal information about me and the fight heard round the world, she’s doing a great job fixing my image.

The longer we sit there not looking at each other, the thicker the air gets between us, and with each second that passes, I become more aware of her presence. It's like she's wormed herself under my skin and I don't know how to get her out.

“So.” Lucy clears her throat. “We might want to get home and changed soon. My parents want to have dinner with us tonight.”

I turn toward her, ignoring the way her tongue darts out to lick along her lips and the voice in my head that's telling me to grab her and kiss her with everything I've got. Kiss her like I wanted to before. Not that sweet chaste kiss but a kiss that lays claim to her and leaves no doubt in anyone's head that she's mine. Including hers.

“You mean they're not eating with your sister and Bag again?”

Her lips curve into a small smile. It's one that usually means she doesn't outwardly endorse what I'm saying but secretly thinks it's funny. “I know you know his name is Tag. And I guess they've decided to grace us with their presence again. I'm not sure why they're not staying with them in the first place, but it is what it is.”

“Do we need to stop by the store and pick up stuff for dinner?”

“Actually, we're going out.” Lucy glances off to the side of the practice arena and picks at her nails.

I run my index finger along the soft skin of Lucy's jaw and turn her gaze back to mine. "And what aren't you telling me?"

"It's a *family* dinner." At my raised brow she continues, "It'll be the four of us plus Elle and Tag. Chloe will be hanging with Jazz and Lincoln."

"Fuck," I mumble, zipping up my bag.

At least with other people around, I won't be tempted to kiss her again. Not with five cockblocks sitting at the same table. I'm sure her father wouldn't approve of that either, not that I really care what he thinks.

There's only one person whose opinion matters to me right now and no matter how much I hate it, I can't seem to stop it.

The pink terrorist that is my wife has me under her spell. Now I need to break it before we're both ruined.

SEVENTEEN

Lucy

“SO NICE OF YOU two to join us.” My father shakes out his napkin and slides it onto his lap. He looks around the table before his gaze settles back on us. “We weren’t sure if you were still coming.”

I squeeze Rhett’s hand and grit my teeth. My father really knows how to push my buttons and get a reaction from me. He knew damn well that I was going to be late.

Not only did I text my mom twice to let her know, but I told them this morning that I had to close out the event before I could leave the arena. It’s not like I could leave a handful of children or photographers in the arena unattended. I shudder just thinking about the potential damage a handful of loose photographers could do if they snuck their way into certain spaces. Not the physical damage, but the aftermath when the pictures they’d undoubtedly stage went viral.

Tag and Elle left earlier but had to get Chloe settled before heading this way and by the looks of things, they just got here. They don’t even have drinks yet. Leave it to Dad to be extra

today. If they were all waiting for us, they'd all be halfway through their cocktails by now.

“We’re sorry, Mr. Hurst, I thought Lucy told you we’d be a little late.” Rhett gives my dad a forced smile as he pulls out the chair next to my mom and guides me to sit. “Mrs. Hurst, as always, you look lovely tonight. Thank you for inviting us to dinner.”

“Thank you, Rhett.” She waves him off, a faint blush dusting her cheeks underneath her artificial coloring. As my mom looks him over, her smile gets so big you’d think someone told her there was a half price sale at Gucci. “You look so nice in a tie; you should wear one more often.”

I snort a laugh, not because I don’t think he looks good—quite the opposite in fact—but there’s no way Rhett is going to even consider wearing ties more often. I’m lucky to get him in a shirt at home, but I think that may be more to torture me than it is about his comfort. As my mom’s smile shrinks and her gaze turns my way, I quickly raise my hand to muffle the noise and pretend to clear my throat.

I don’t care about extra attention, but I don’t need to add my mother’s ire to my father’s attitude problem. Unfortunately, it’s too late. Her smile has morphed into a full-blown frown while Rhett hides a smile of his own behind the cocktail menu, and Tag chuckles. Only my father and Elle remain straight-faced.

“Really, Lucy. Must you be so unrefined?” My mom chides, clucking her tongue.

My father takes a slow sip of his water and meets my gaze. “It must be all the time she spends around athletes. I can see our years of parenting have gone in the trash.”

I don’t say anything, no one does, even though it’s an insult clearly directed at me, Rhett, and Tag. My hands fist under the table, clenching so hard my nails bite into the skin of my palms. I can’t even escape this dinner and go home to get away from my parents because they’re only going to follow me. At this point who knows how long they’ll be staying, but I can say with absolute certainty that they can’t leave soon enough.

Rhett reaches over, covers my fist with his hand, and rubs my knuckles with his thumb. I relax a little and let him settle his fingers between mine. It’s nice to know he’s there, even though he doesn’t have to be. Most of the guys I’ve dated were so far up my parents’ asses they agreed with everything they said. Even when it reflected poorly on me. At least I did one thing right with this accidental marriage.

“How long are you two planning on staying?” Tag accepts his bourbon from the waitress and takes a lingering sip. I’ll buy him a bottle of his favorite bourbon if they actually answer this question with a date. Poor guy is probably sick of them hanging out at his house too.

My mom leans forward and opens her mouth to answer, but Dad cuts her off, “It’s undecided right now.”

She sits back in her seat with her lips pursed. I’d bet anything they had a date planned before Dad decided to drop

this bomb on all of us. I'm not sure what he's here to prove. Aside from his snide comments and outwards attacks on me, my marriage, and my life, he hasn't said two words to me. I could be the bigger man and say something about the divide between us, but I was the one kicked out and basically disowned. Not him.

I bet he doesn't think he did anything wrong. Just another day in the life of David Hurst.

"How are things going with the merger?" Elle bless her heart, tries to steer the conversation to a perpetually safe place, but with everything that's happened in the past two weeks, I'd say this is still a volatile subject.

His gaze cuts to me before flitting back to her. "It's back on track after your sister's complications. Leaving me without a successor has proven to be very difficult."

Oh look, he managed a dig at both of us.

"Well, that's good to hear." I force a smile and I swear my eye might be having a seizure with the amount of twitching it's doing. "I'd hate to think that my marriage has upset you or your business in any way."

"I think the validity of the marriage is still to be determined."

"I have a copy of the marriage license at home if you'd like me to show it to you when we're done with dinner. Maybe that would help give you some clarity."

“A piece of paper isn’t a real commitment. How well can you know a man after two months? And then to get married on some whim without even inviting your family. I had to hear about it from the neighbor who saw it on the Sports Network. This whole thing is absurd.”

“What’s absurd? That I found a man that I intend to spend the rest of my life with or that you didn’t get to pick him for me?”

His face turns a shade of pink that deepens with each passing second. Rhett, Tag, and Elle are all lowering in their chairs with menus covering their faces. It’d be funny if I didn’t feel endless amounts of rage bubbling inside me. After I told him I wanted to forge my own path and not take his place as the company, he hasn’t agreed with a single one of my decisions. Not a one.

“It’s time to face it, Dad, we’re no longer in your world.” I should stop, I really should, but I can’t seem to prevent the words from flowing out of my mouth. “Now I’m sorry we didn’t have the foresight to invite you to the wedding. I’m sorry we didn’t call you immediately after, but I wanted to spend some time with my husband. Sooner or later you’re going to have to realize we’re all grown up with our own lives. We don’t need you to make our decisions for us.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

His lips flatten and disapproval is written all over his face. No one else says anything, not even my mom. We continue to

hold each other's gaze in some kind of stare down until the waitress clears her throat.

“Have you all decided what you'd like to order?” she asks carefully, glancing around the table. “Or I could come back.”

My father opens his mouth, but before he can utter a single syllable Rhett stands up, his chair scraping across the floor. He gives my shoulder a squeeze, gets out his wallet and tosses a couple hundred-dollar bills on the table.

“I'm so sorry, I just remembered a meeting I was supposed to have with the owners of the team. You know, stupid athlete, always forgetting things.” His hand goes back on my shoulder, and he smirks the *up to no good smirk*. “Remember, Lucy, this is the one you were supposed to be there for. You know to talk about my image and all the things you're doing to fix it because you're so good at your job.”

“That was today?” I toss my napkin on the table and toss my mom a very faked apologetic look. “I'm so sorry we can't stay. Maybe we can make you guys something special at home tomorrow.”

“Traitors,” Tag coughs into his hand. “Traitors.”

“I know, not all of us can be perfect and well-mannered like you.” Rhett pats Tag on the back. Too hard, if I had to judge by the way Tag lurches forward.

Elle gets up and holds me in a tight hug while whispering in my ear. “Bless that husband of yours. Go. Save yourself. You guys can come over after the next game.”

“I’ll be there. I love you.”

“I love you too. Now hurry, Daddy looks like he wants to explode.”

“I’m so sorry.” I repeat, giving my mom a quick sideways hug and grabbing onto Rhett’s outstretched hand. Neither one of us looks back at the table as we power walk out of the restaurant like an older couple doing laps around the mall.

“We’re almost free,” Rhett whispers a few feet from the door.

“You’re my fucking hero, Remington.”

“Glad to be of service, sweetheart.”

We’re out the door and back in his fully restored nineteen-sixty-nine AMX3 in less than a minute. This sexy little car is his baby, and it suits him. It’s all attitude, muscle, and sex appeal, just like Rhett. I’m not even going to deny it tonight, not after saving my bacon.

The engine fires up with a roar, the car practically purring around us. Rhett slides his large hands around the steering wheel, caressing the smooth leather with the tips of his fingers. My mouth waters at the thought of those hands running up my thigh and disappearing under the hem of my dress. Roaming over my ass, parting my legs, and running a finger between my folds. Feeling how wet I am for him and then diving inside because he just can’t help himself. I bet that finger would feel divine as—

“Dinner?”

I jump, realizing I've been staring at my husband's hands and lost in thought. My neck heats with embarrassment. "Sorry?"

He glances at me and winks, reducing me to a puddle on his expensive leather seats. "While you were staring at me, I asked if you wanted dinner."

"Uh, yes." I straighten up and fasten my seatbelt. "You pick. I'm good with anything."

EIGHTEEN

Rhett

I CAN'T SAY I'VE ever done something nice and not lived to regret doing the deed in the first place. Tonight's dinner fiasco wasn't any different.

Granted, Lucy's parents were also getting on my nerves, but I could have suffered through the dinner and been totally fine. Did I do that? No, no I didn't. Why?

Because I'm starting to like my wife and it's weakening my resolve. Weakening me. Turning me into a man who has... feelings.

I don't do feelings or any of that lovey dovey bullshit. My dad made sure to beat it out of me as soon as I could talk. Or at least I thought he did. Now, they're starting to worm their way through my icy exterior, and I don't know how to get rid of them.

Not only do I have feelings, but Lucy is dragging me into a country music bar down the street from the little Mexican restaurant I took her to for dinner. As soon as we stepped out

the doors toward my car, they started playing Dolly, and it was over. I knew those two-for-one margaritas she ordered would be a mistake.

The bar is crowded, the live band is too loud, and an asshole in cowboy boots and a flannel shirt just stepped on my dress shoe. I'm out of place and with this fucking tie that *makes me look nice*, I'm drastically overdressed. Lucy doesn't seem to mind. In fact, she's swaying to the music without a care in the world. Doesn't even notice the sudsy beer being spilled on my rolled-up shirt sleeve.

No good deed is worth this Hillbilly Hell.

Lucy pulls me to the bar, orders two waters from the bartender and then orders me to sit in the one remaining barstool. After hanging her jacket from the back, I turn around, putting my backside to the bar so I can keep an eye on my wife and make sure no one else is doing the same thing.

Not that I could blame them. Her pale pink strapless dress is both sexy and innocent. Sexy... well, because it's a strapless dress and my wife looks sexy in anything. Especially something that shows off her ridiculously soft shoulders. And innocent because that shade of pink makes her look like a blushing virgin, and I want to rip it to shreds. I'm talking werewolf on a bender; that dress would be in tatters.

The music changes to something slower, more sultry, and after taking a sip of water Lucy comes to rest in between my legs. I'm torn between keeping the space tight so her hips bump and rub against me and opening them as wide as I can to

rub on the guys next to me. I'm sure Leather Jacket to my right and Tight Pants to my left wouldn't mind.

Then she takes a slight step back and my dilemma is gone. I'm forced to close my legs a little, caging her in this small space. The flare of her hip brushes against my crotch and her ass is so close to my dick, he thinks we're getting lucky. The dress pants do little to conceal me as my cock elongates and hardens against my thigh.

She continues to sway, grazing my dick with her body every few seconds, and I swear I'm about to explode in my fucking pants.

At a country music bar.

Just as I'm about to suggest she join the bachelorette party out on the dancefloor—they're all in pink so it seems likely they'll get along—a group passes in front of us and Lucy stumbles backward. She lands right in my lap, right against my throbbing cock. I want nothing more than to shove it inside her and punish her for affecting me this way. Stroke after stroke of pure destruction until she's begging me for release.

The thought of pulling Lucy around the corner and making this a reality is strong. I'm so close to losing my mind, I don't even care if we're in a public place. It's thrilling even. To have the crowd feet from us yet have no idea what we're going. To have to stifle her moans every time I plunge my cock inside her fucking cunt. I wouldn't use my hand either. I'd make her choke on her own sopping wet panties.

“Sorry.” Lucy giggles and tries to stand but I clamp my hands around her waist and keep her in place.

“I’m going to need you to stay right where you are,” I whisper, dragging the tip of my nose around the shell of her ear.

Lucy freezes except for the tremor that runs down her spine. No doubt she can feel hardness against the plush curves of her delicious backside.

I shift her hair to the side and trail my nose down her neck, inhaling her light jasmine perfume. “Good girl.”

I can hear her low moan over the music but to her credit she remains completely rigid. Well except for her hands that come down to my knees and grab on for dear life. I can feel her nails perfectly through the dress pants as they press in and indent my skin.

Right now, I live for her arousal and need the pain it brings in its wake. I need the pain to remind me why I can’t show her what it’s really like to be a good girl. To push her down on her knees and feed her my cock until she cries and begs for me to take her. To push her boundaries and let her know exactly who owns her and who always will.

My body hums with the desire to claim her, and my blood simmers with lust. I long to teach her what it means to be my wife. Even if it’s just once. My hands tighten, clamping around her hips in a punishing grip, as I nip at the hammering pulse at the base of her neck. But it can’t happen. I hate myself for

wanting it and a part of me hates her for leading me down this path of temptation.

“You have no idea how much I want to bury myself in your cunt right now,” I grit out, every word coming out strangled.

She wilts against me, sagging along my chest. “Probably inappropriate with all these people.” Her words come out a little breathless and it doesn’t sound like much of a protest at all. In fact, if I’d be brave enough to snake my fingers up my wife’s fucking innocent dress, I bet she’d be dripping for me.

“I want them to watch.” I flatten my tongue against the side of her neck and lick up the delicate skin, only stopping at her earlobe to suck it into my mouth briefly before biting down. “I want them to know who you fucking belong to.”

Lucy sucks in a breath, her nails digging further into the sides of my legs.

“But that would break rule number two and neither one of us want that. Right?”

Instead of waiting for an answer, I push her away, close my legs and turn to drain my entire glass of water. I want nothing more than to say fuck the rules and drag her out of here so I can sure her exactly how much I want to breath the rules.

But I can’t. I won’t. At least not tonight. Tonight I’m still strong enough to resist.

When I turn back around, Lucy is standing on the edge of the dance floor. Her back is to me and she’s swaying her hips

to the beat of a Zac Brown Band song. I don't remember which one, but it's not terrible. Or it could be the view.

She turns back and glares at me, her eyes narrowing and her plush mouth pursing before she flips her long blonde locks over her shoulder and resumes watching the band.

Good. I don't like me very much either. It's easier that way anyway. You can't crawl down the path of love, if all you feel is disdain.

My cock twitches, telling me that it feels something else entirely. I drain the rest of her water and mutter a few choice four letter words as I palm my persistent erection. If I have any chance of keeping on my side of the bed and my hands to myself, I need to take care of this pronto.

By the end of this marriage I'm going to look like a damn fiddler crab.

NINETEEN

Lucy

I WANT THEM TO know who you fucking belong to.

Fucking two days and I haven't been able to get those words out of my head. Ten seemingly innocent words, but when growled in my ear by my sexy brute of a husband while trapped against an erection that is NOT small... Let's say I've had an awakening. I am one innocent touch away from taking rule number two, crumbling it up into a little ball, and throwing it into my bright pink trash can.

I can't believe I ever accused him of having a small dick.

He's been more distant since that night, and I can't say I blame him. I'm sure he's trying to keep the boundaries between us intact while I'm thinking about smashing them to pieces with the heel of my stilettos.

He really is doing us a favor and at least one of us has a clear headspace.

While Gordon has loosened up on Rhett, my boss is back from his tropical vacation and has sent me a firmly worded

email requesting a meeting tomorrow. Mr. Coomer made it clear that nothing short of death would excuse me. I don't think he'll fire me, at least I hope not, but I'm sure I'm in for a solid ass chewing.

This fundraiser needs to go off without a hitch, which is why I had Rhett drop me off hours early to make sure everything looks perfect.

I smooth a hand down the front of my off-the-shoulder dusky pink floor-length gown, adjusting it to center over my frame. After a few swipes of mascara, I toss my makeup in the duffle bag with my old clothes and quickly change into my heels. I leave everything in a little office at the front of the Marathon Music Works and head to the event space.

Watching the couples chatting at the bar and browsing the silent auction tables makes me wish I hadn't told Rhett to arrive later. As much as he'd hate this, it would be nice to have someone to drag around.

With nothing left to do, I grab a glass of champagne and let myself take a deep breath before I mingle with the guests who have already arrived. I flit from guest to guest and before I know it, the room is packed and several of the more influential guests have arrived.

I plaster on my best smile and head toward the mayor and his oldest sister. I've only met with him a few times, but he's always been nice. Not to mention, as the youngest mayor we've had in Nashville, he's nice to look at. His sister, also a stunner, is a bit of a wild child. I've been out with her a few

times and by midnight I'm drunk and exhausted while she's good to go for another several hours. And she's pushing thirty while I'm only twenty-seven.

"Mayor Camden." I greet him with a handshake which he returns with a friendly smile. "Such a pleasure to see you here."

"Someone said there'd be an open bar." His laugh is smooth as silk and practiced to tee. It's no surprise that his tux, his megawatt smile, and his short salt-and-pepper hair are also impeccable. "It doesn't hurt that it's for a good cause."

I nod and take a quick sip of my champagne. "The few women's shelters that are functioning downtown are in drastic need of some upgrades. Including some security features. They've had several break-ins over the past few months, a couple resulted in hospitalization for the women and staff in our care."

"Don't worry, Lucille, you'll be getting a fat check from me and all the other guys I can guilt into it. I can be plenty persuasive." He places a friendly hand on my shoulder and winks.

"Good lord, Everett," his sister, Violet, groans. "She's a married woman."

The mayor's face turns about five shades of red before he stutters an apology. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for—"

Violet laughs and pulls me in for a quick hug. "Jeez, lighten up. It was a fucking joke. This one gets divorced and turns into

a prude. I've got him convinced his secretary left because she felt sexually harassed."

"He is the mayor," I point out. "An indiscretion like that could be trouble for his political career."

She scoffs. "Please. He'd probably go up in the polls."

"Oh, look, the fire chief." He points off into the distance before shaking my hand again and glaring at his sister. "Lucille, it was lovely to see you again. I'm sure we'll be in touch soon. Violet, always a pleasure."

"The pleasure is all mine, brother." Violet raises her hand and waves her fingers at her brother's back before linking her arm around mine. "You look killer in that dress. Has that sexy husband of yours seen it yet?"

"Not yet, I told him to meet me a little later."

"And what about the rest of the team? Will they be here? I don't think you've properly introduced me."

I toss my head back and laugh, patting her hand. "I'm not sure if any of the hockey players will be able to handle you."

"You're right." Her smile widens, turning a little scary. "I might need to meet more than one. And maybe some of the guys from the football team too."

Before I can tell her just how bad that idea sounds, she gives me an air kiss and flits away to the bar. I'm about to turn away when I see a few familiar faces. Should have known the Devils wouldn't be too far from the whiskey. I'm on my way to say

hello to Coach Weller, his assistant Tessa, and Gordon, when a hand snakes around my waist, and I'm pulled to a broad chest.

"I wasn't aware you had such an indecent dress hanging in our closet." Rhett's lips graze my ear as he grips my hip with one hand and trails the other to the high slit on the side of my dress.

"“Maybe you should pay better attention,” I murmur, shivering at the contact.

"This time you get a warning," he purrs, flicking my earlobe with his tongue. "The next time you sass me, you will get a punishment."

As much as I don't want to like the thought of being punished, I can't help the arousal that tingles between my legs and jumpstarts my heart. There's a part of me that wants to act out and see exactly what he'll do, but the more rational side of my brain tells me this is neither the time nor the place.

Here I was thinking Rhett was the levelheaded one of us. His change in moods and levels of attentiveness this week are going to give me whiplash.

"And what about rule number two?"

Rhett chuckles, the rumble of his laugh brushing down my spine. "There're so many things I can do to you that won't violate rule number two."

"I just—I don't—Your boss is standing right over there." I weakly gesture to Gordon, knowing damn well that I'm not putting up much of a fight.

“Doesn’t matter to me. He’s a big boy. What did I say about letting everyone watch?”

“Rhett...”

“What did I say, Lucy?” he grinds out, his fingers digging into my hip.

I lower my voice and tilt my head back. “You want them to watch.” I inhale sharply, my body trembling as I finish the rest. “So they know I’m yours.”

“Good girl.” It’s barely a whisper, but my body hears it loud and clear. My core clenches, my knees are weak, and if it weren’t for Rhett’s support, I’d be a puddle on the floor. What’s wrong with me? No other man I’ve been with ever talked to me like this. I should be appalled, not intrigued.

“We should probably socialize.”

“Overrated. But I guess that’s why I’m in this uncomfortable tux.” He spins me around, and if I wasn’t weak at the knees before, I would be now. The black tux fits him like a glove. Tailored to fit every muscle, every movement to absolute perfection. And the best part? Even though he’s wearing a black button-up collared shirt and bowtie that cover up his tattoos, I know they’re there, and it feels like a dirty little secret. He looks clean-cut, professional even, but I know he’s not. Underneath the polished exterior, the bad boy lurks, and it’s only a matter of time before he comes out to play.

“You look...” I trail off, unable to come out with the right word to describe how fucking perfect he looks. He’d take

offense to beautiful—and probably anything else that counts as a genuine compliment. “You look like a walking sex advertisement.”

His mouth quirks into a smirk and then grows into a full-on grin the longer he looks at me. “And you, sweetheart. You look like a wet dream come true.”

“Thanks?”

He answers with a very Rhett-like grunt before running a hand down my back and leading me around the room. For a man who claims he hates these events and making small talk with anyone, he’s good at it. He enters into conversations with ease. Smiles at all the right times. Laughs at the right jokes. Sure, in between conversations, he has a smart-ass commentary about the people we’ve just talked to, mostly funny and also accurate.

“That one over there.” He points to an older gentleman; portly, balding, but reeking of money. “Is banging his secretary in the green dress.” His finger leads me in a different direction where sure enough, there’s a much younger woman in a very short green dress who is—well, I be damned—making eyes at the old guy.

“What about those two?” I gesture to Gunner Rose and Ryan Devlin, Nashville Aces quarterback and tight end.

Rhett scoffs. “Please. Those two football blockheads are using all those models and rising country music stars to cover up their undying love for each other.”

“How do you know this?”

“I know football players, and I have great intuition.”

“Your brother plays football, right?” I ask very casually. He hasn’t brought up his family yet and anytime the topic comes up, he’s quick to deflect.

He nods and looks off to the side of the room. “He plays for San Francisco, but his contract’s up next year.”

“Are you guys originally from California?”

“Washington.”

“And the rest of you—”

“Drop it, Lucy.” His voice hardens and when his gaze comes back to rest on me, a myriad of emotions crosses his face. Despair. Hopelessness. Resilience. Anger.

Whatever happened with his family must have been pretty bad, and I can’t help but push. “Rhett, this is something you probably need to talk about.”

“No.”

“Dammit, Rhett. You have to let someone in sometime. You can’t go around being this asshole all the time.”

He doesn’t respond. He doesn’t grunt. He doesn’t move an inch. He just keeps his eyes on me, narrowing bit by bit.

I stare right back at him, narrowing my own eyes. “Fine. Get all pissy if you want. Be a dick. Doesn’t mean I’m going to stop pushing.”

I plant my hands on my hips and I wait. I bite the inside of my cheek and wait some more. Just when I'm about to shake him or turn around and walk away—I hadn't decided yet—he smirks. I don't know what it is about that smirk, but I don't think it means anything good.

“Come along, wife.” Rhett smiles and his eyes twinkle as he grabs my hand and pulls me into a small alcove off to the side of the main room.

It's darker here and definitely more secluded, yet at the same time, anyone could walk in here and discover us.

As I open my mouth to protest, he spins me around, pinning my back to his front. His right hand holds me firmly in place, and with these stilettos, I can feel his hardening cock in the cleft of my ass. I lean back against his chest, close my eyes, and inhale the scent of rose wood and cardamom from his Tom Ford cologne, allowing myself to get lost in the moment, the feeling of his arms, the safety of his embrace before I have to pull away.

“What did I say about sassing me?” he rasps in my ear, his dangerous tone causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end.

My eyes pop open. Wait... “Are you...? Is this...?”

“You have two options.” Using his free hand, he trails his fingers up and down my thigh through the slit in the dress. “You can be quiet and take what I give you.”

I swallow past the lump in the throat and whisper. “Or?”

“Or I’ll find something to shove in that bratty mouth of yours and take what I want anyway. What will it be, *Wife?*”

I clamp my mouth shut and whimper.

“Good girl.” His breath tickles the back of my neck before he places a gentle kiss behind my ear.

His hands inch up my thigh so slowly that I think my heart may jump out of my chest from anticipation. When his fingers get to the top of the slit, they drift under the fabric, and I forget how to breathe. My pulse races and my core clenches.

I’m so fucking desperate right now, I’d seriously maim someone for an orgasm.

Rhett bites the skin on the side of my neck, scraping over it with his teeth, and then soothing it with his tongue. I barely stifle a moan as his fingers slide under my lace thong and brush against my already sensitive clit. He taps it with two fingers before moving lower and dipping them into my greedy pussy.

He rumbles his approval against my back as he works the digits in and out of me with shallow strokes. “Already so wet for me. I could take you right here.” He nips at my neck again, and I shake my head, wanting to remind him of the rules, but not daring to utter a single syllable. “Fuck rule number two, Lucy. You drive me so fucking crazy I won’t be able to hold back much longer. You make me feel like an animal.”

I whimper as his fingers drag back to my clit, circling it, kneading it, pinching it.

All his touches are light and exact. It's pure torture. I need the pressure. I need to come. I just *need*.

My legs quiver as he increases his pressure and my hips move on their own accord, chasing release. I'm so close. Just a little bit more. Rhett brings me right to the precipice of orgasm and right before I can fall over the edge into orgasmic bliss, he pulls his hand away and smooths down my dress.

"What the hell was that?" I grind out, whipping around and leveling him with my best ball-withering stare.

He has the fucking audacity to put that smug smile back on his face. If I could think straight, I'd knock it off. He leans down, looks me straight in the eyes and then lifts his fingers, licking them clean.

My face flushes, and my hands fist at my side.

"Your punishment is so damn sweet." He flashes me that smile again, dimples and all, and beckons me forward with the two fingers he just had inside me. "Come on, we have some more *socializing* to do."

I grit my teeth and let out a disgruntled groan because fuck he's right. I completely forgot about this event. The one I spent all day setting up. That one that has to be perfect, so my boss doesn't have an excuse to fire me.

My husband is turning into a distraction I didn't anticipate, and I can't help but think I might be in over my head.

Way over my head.

TWENTY

Rhett

I'M NOT SURE WHO'S punished more, her or me. Someone needs to call the Guinness records people because I have the longest case of blue balls any man has ever had. Maybe that's why I've been acting so crazy around her.

One minute I'm fine, keeping my distance and avoiding her like the plague, and the next I've got my hand up her damn dress strumming her body like a... I don't know... something you strum. A guitar. A cello. A harp.

Her polished exterior calls to something primal deep inside me and when I see her all dolled up in her little pink dresses, I want nothing more than to sully her. Inside and out.

Especially now that I've had my fingers inside her tight wet pussy. I can only imagine how it'll feel wrapped around my dick. And that's what I'll have to help me sleep: my imagination. No way is she going to be doing anything with me, especially tonight.

She hasn't spoken to me since bringing her to the edge of orgasm and leaving her hanging. Not the last several hours at that monkey suit convention or on the ride home.

I did give her fair warning; it was her choice not to heed it.

Lucy slams the door to my AMC AMX3, and I cringe, giving the car a pat on the hood and whispering an apology. Lucy huffs out a breath and stalks across the underground parking garage to the elevator that will take us to the penthouse. I tilt my head, trying to catch her gaze, but she turns her head, clearly not having it.

Her fingers jab the button. She huffs again, and then jabs the button impatiently, as if pressing it several times will somehow speed it up. But I take a step back and let her poke that thing to death because better it than me.

When it finally does arrive, she curses under her breath, not pleased with how long it took and jabs the button and code for the penthouse, the more her finger stabs, the more violent it gets, and I debate getting in there with her. We have a game tomorrow and I'd like to play with all my body parts.

"Sometime today, Remington," she fumes, throwing her duffel bag over her shoulder and crossing her arms.

I let out a low whistle as I step into the elevator and hold my hands in front of me, careful to keep my distance, but I can't help poking the bear. "Would you like me to carry your bag?"

"No."

“Everyone seemed to have a good time tonight.” Everyone but her. Well, she was for a little while.

“Yep.”

The elevator opens to my dimly lit penthouse. It’s late—no doubt her parents are already in bed. Probably for the best. Lucy is a ticking time bomb and it’s only a matter of time before she explodes and tells me off.

I follow her into the bedroom, close the door behind us, and lock it for good measure. I’m not the biggest fan of her parents and the more barriers I can put between us, the better. Plus, waking up to her dad’s face peering down at me is one of my recurring nightmares and if I can prevent that from ever happening, I’d die a happier man. And I wouldn’t end up in jail for beating up an old defenseless bastard.

Lucy tosses her bag on the floor by the bed and kicks off her heels. I follow suit, tugging my bowtie to loosen it and unbuttoning the tux jacket. I’ve got one arm free when I notice Lucy staring at me. After shrugging the jacket off, I chuck it on the bed and turn to face her.

“Alright, come on, Lucy. I know you’ve got something to say. You might as well spit it out.”

Instead of responding right away, she continues to burn a hole right into my very essence with her deadly gaze. Her face is a blank mask instead of the usual emotional canvas, and I kinda hate that she’s locked away. The seconds tick by, and she remains silent.

“Lucy.” My growl is low, guttural, and laced with warning.

Her lips curl into a sly smile as she reaches up to unzip the side of her dress. She grips it with one hand, holding it to her chest. Finger by finger, she lets it go and in one smooth motion, the dress falls down her body and pools at her feet. My heart hammers against my rib cage, and I fist my hands at my side to keep from reaching out and pulling her to me. To smooth my hands all over her body and finally let myself get lost in all her curves.

I don't know what to make of this bolder Lucy.

She's always changed into her little nightgowns in the bathroom so I'm sure this is payback for earlier. Can't say I regret what I did, and I'm well aware she's not happy. My wife is certainly not one to back down from a challenge. But if she doesn't scamper off to the bathroom soon, I won't be able to control myself.

Everyone knows I'm practically a wild animal—housebroken, yes, but otherwise an animal—and with her in nothing but a white strapless bra and a matching scrap of lace she calls panties, I can't be held responsible for my behavior.

With that damn smirk still on her face, she turns around, giving me a magnificent view of her backside. I was right about the scrap of lace; it does very little to cover anything, and my cock stirs to life. She takes one step out of her dress and then another. Then as slow as humanly possible, she bends over to pick up the dress, and I'm mentally assaulted with all the things I want to do to that ass.

And more importantly, what I need to do to prepare it for my dick.

I bet my entire bank account she's untouched back there, and I am five seconds away from thumping my chest and laying claim to that virgin hole.

"Lucy." I ground out. "Cover yourself up."

She folds the dress over her arm but doesn't turn around. "What's the matter? Can't handle a little fun?"

"I'm all for fun but I don't know how smart it would be to start throwing out the rules."

"Aren't rules made to be broken? Come on, don't tell me a bad boy like you follows every pesky little rule. I thought you did what you wanted." She turns around and nibbles on her bottom lip, eyeing me with curiosity.

My knuckles are white from my tight fists, and I think I'm losing feeling in my fingers, but I don't dare unfurl them. "I do."

"Don't you want me?" She flutters her lashes and looks to the ground.

"You know I do."

"Then come get me."

We stare at each other for what seems like hours. The air gets so heavy around us that I struggle to breath as the weight settles on my chest. But then in an instant we both lunge toward each other.

I grab her ass, digging my fingers into her skin and lift her up. Her legs go around my waist, and she lets out a desperate cry before I crash my mouth to hers. She opens up beneath me and my tongue sweeps into her mouth. She tastes like champagne with a hint of strawberries from the mini shortcake desserts. If Heaven had a taste, I imagine this would be it.

I could do this for fucking hours. Years. Forever.

I moan, my tongue licking the roof of her mouth and then tangling with hers in a desperate quest for dominance. I explore every inch of her delicious mouth. Her hands run over my shoulders and plunge into my hair, pulling on the strands, and I almost lose control. The sharp pain eggs me on, has me devouring her mouth, pulling her up against me and rocking my rock-hard dick against her core. I force her head back and take the kiss deeper, claiming every single fucking inch of her mouth. I'm hanging on by a thread, but I want this to be good for her. I want to make up for leaving her hanging earlier and give her an orgasm so intense she'll still feel the spasms of it tomorrow.

She moans and squirms, riding the ridge of my cock, taking her own pleasure from my hardened length. Her hands grip my hair, and she pulls my head back. "I need you... I need you inside me, Rhett." Her words are breathless, and her eyes are so eager, so impatient.

"You'll get what I give you. When I give it to you." I nip at her bottom lip, sucking it into my mouth and tugging on it before letting go. Her lips look so soft and full, bruised from

my mouth, and I can't wait to see them wrapped around my dick. She'd look so pretty with them painted with my cum and wearing my hand as a necklace.

Lucy answers with a whimper, her legs tightening around me. I set her down on the long dresser across from the bed and shove open her thighs, stepping between them. Taking my sweet ass time, I run a knuckle along the front of her thong, right along her seam, and circle her clit. She's fucking drenched. I could plunge inside her right now, and I bet I'd get little resistance.

"Such a good girl, all wet and ready for me." I continue to tease her and lean forward to run my tongue along the top of her breasts, nibbling at the swells of each one.

She shivers and runs her hand through my hair, grabbing on and trying to pull me back to her mouth.

"Not yet, sweetheart. I plan on kissing something else for a while."

Without waiting for a reply, I rip the lacey thong from her body and pull her hips forward. Lucy cries out as I lower myself to the ground and lick the length of her slit. Her pussy tastes as good as I imagined—just like the rest of her—and I dive in for more, plunging my tongue inside of her and fucking her with every stroke, every lick.

Her thighs quiver, and I push them open wider, snaking my hands around her thighs and grabbing her ass with both hands. With a groan, I brush my lips across her clit before flattening my tongue over the hardened nub and kneading. Lucy cries

out, her head falling back to clunk on the mirror behind her. Her hands are back in my hair, and she's pulling me against her, grinding against my face shamelessly.

I love it. Wild. Uninhibited. Mine.

Sweet little Lucy isn't as innocent as she seems.

I work her clit harder, faster, circling it with my tongue and then flicking it to change up the rhythm. Keeping her on edge for as long as I can. Her moans and desperate whimpers have my dick so hard, and I want nothing more than to make her come on my tongue. To have her flood my mouth and suffocate me with her core. Because I can't seem to control myself around her, I slide my thumb into her pussy, gathering the wetness and trailing it down her ass. That beautiful fucking ass.

Lucy's hands tighten in my hair, and she freezes. That tells me everything I need to know. She's a virgin back here and sooner or later that hole will be mine. She will be all mine.

I ignore her, not bothering to placate her with words, instead I continue to strum her clit with my tongue and lightly massage her puckered hole with my thumb. I don't breach it, I don't push, I just apply some gentle pressure and eventually she relaxes although she still has a death grip on my hair. I continue to lap at her, toying with her clit, rubbing her asshole, until she's a quivering mess underneath me. I increase the pressure on both places, and she explodes. My name is a cry on her pretty lips, her nails dig into my scalp, her body spasms and tightens.

As the orgasm rolls through her, I remove my thumb but continue to lick her pussy in gentle strokes, letting her come down gently. When she finally relaxes, I kiss one thigh and then the other.

“Holy fuck,” she pants, finally loosening her grip on my hair and allowing me to lean back. “Just holy fuck.” Her upper body slumps back against the mirror and she takes a deep breath. “Very sneaky on the finger moves.”

“That’s to get you used to the idea because if we’re doing this, I will own you.” I rub the back of my hand over my mouth, wiping away her juices. “All of you.”

TWENTY-ONE

Lucy

ALL. OF. ME.

Holy fuck.

I shouldn't like the sound of that. I know I shouldn't like that, in fact the southern girl that's deeply rooted inside me is appalled. But the rest of me... the rest of me is so on-edge and intrigued. I've never done anything back there, but I've always wondered.

“Don't worry, sweetheart, it'll be good for you. I promise.”

With a wink, he pushes up from the floor, squeezes my ass, and lowers his mouth to mine. Compared to earlier, this kiss is tame. His hand rests along the side of my face, cupping my jaw, while the other brushes along my ribs to rest at my back.

It's almost sweet, like he wants to savor me instead of devouring.

He licks along my lips and this time when I open up to him, he takes his time entering my mouth. I can taste myself on him, and I have to admit that turns me on something fierce.

And while I know I should let him remain at this measured pace, it's my turn to call the shots.

I push him back, and he stumbles, his eyebrows flying into his hairline. He looks intrigued, a smirk growing on his face even though I'll bet he's ready to take back control. Too bad for him. It's my turn to make him lose himself, and that's one opportunity I'm not passing up.

I lean forward, grip the middle of his dress shirt and pull. The buttons fly off and scatter around us, bouncing off the floor and the mirror behind me. His eyes turn wild, feral, and his breath becomes uneven, erratic. He looks like a caged animal, and it awakes something inside me. Something just as aggressive. Something I'm not sure I even knew was there.

"My turn." I jump off the dresser and advance on him.

Rhett takes a few steps back, stopping when the back of his legs hit the bed. I push him again, and he falls back on the bed with a slight bounce. He opens his mouth, to say what, I don't care because I don't stop to listen, I reach behind me and unsnap my bra. Whatever he was about to say turns into gibberish as his gaze settles on my chest. Feeling bold, I slide my hands up my sides, cup my breasts and pinch my nipples. His gaze sharpens, and he growls as he reaches for me, but I take a quick step back.

"You'll get what I give you. When I give it to you." I throw out his words from earlier.

He utters a harsh curse under his breath, rubs a palm over the bulge in his pants, and a thrill shoots down my spine. I

tweak my nipples again and stalk forward, slapping his hand away and unbuttoning the top button of his dress pants. I pull them and his boxer briefs off his legs and toss them behind me.

My gaze darts from his face down to his impressive erection, long and girthy with a throbbing vein running down the back. I want it in my mouth. In my pussy. I want him to rub it all over my body and then mark me with his cum.

I walk up his body, stopping briefly to lick along the back of his shaft. It throbs against my tongue, and I swirl my tongue around the tip, flicking briefly over it and then circling again. His abs are next, and I explore the dips and ridges, going over all of those hard-earned muscles. And then there's those fucking sex lines. I spend so much time on those sex lines, he groans in frustration before pulling me up and flipping us over.

“That’s enough playtime, sweetheart,” he growls, running his nose along the length of my neck and nipping at the underside of my chin. “I need to be inside you.” He pauses and lightly kisses the side of my mouth. “I’ve never been bare, but I want to be with you.”

I want nothing more than to have Rhett inside me with nothing between us. No more barriers. No more pretending.

With a nod, I reply. “I’m on the pill. I want this. I want you.”

Rhett tilts my head back, peering into my eyes as he shifts his hips and lines himself up at my entrance. He enters me with a moan, driving in all the way and stopping only when

he's buried deep inside me. I shift under him as I adjust to his size, relishing the stretch and burn around him.

He feels so fucking good.

So fucking right.

I wrap my legs around his waist, scrape my nails down his back, and he begins to move. He pulls back, almost slipping out of me, and then pushing forward with a brutal thrust.

My eyes practically roll back in my head, and I hang onto his shoulders for dear life as he continues his punishing pace. Fucking in and out of me with long quick thrusts that have my pussy quivering around him.

His name is a moan on my lips, and I arch into him, changing the angle of my pelvis so that every time he pushes into me, it rubs my clit. My hands inevitably move up to his hair, and I pull on the strands, forcing him back to my mouth. He meets my tongue with a fevered passion, sucking it into his mouth before spearing his inside me. I meet him stroke for stroke, thrust for thrust.

My legs tremble and quake. My cries become louder. I'm so close.

Rhett ends the kiss and pulls back slightly to slip his hand between us. Instead of toying with my clit or tweaking my nipples his hand snakes up to my neck. He traps me with his gaze as his fingers wind around my throat, and he squeezes slightly. Not enough to choke me but enough to let me know that he can.

That he's in charge of my pleasure.

Of me.

My breath quickens into shallow pants, and my pussy clenches his cock as the need for release sweeps through me. He strokes into me again and again, and his fingers tighten around my neck. My eyes flutter closed, and I gasp his name as an orgasm stronger than a tsunami rips through me. I see stars, literal stars, and after several more thrusts, he groans my name followed by a string of curses as he shudders and empties himself inside me.

He stills, his fingers loosen from my throat, and a thumb caresses the pulsing vein in my neck. After releasing a deep breath, Rhett lowers himself, dusting his lips across my lips and down my chin to meet his hand at my throat.

“Lucy.” His voice is raspy and thick with emotion.

I close my eyes and relax, loosening my legs from his waist and sliding them down to cradle him between my thighs. While I wait for him to collect himself and gather his thoughts, I trail my nails up and down his back, savoring this moment with him. Finally able to let down some of my walls and just be with him to enjoy this moment.

No expectations. No responsibilities.

Only the best guilty pleasure and what had to be the single most intense orgasm of my life.

He nudges my face with this tip of his nose, and I open my eyes to meet his intense stare. He's no longer a stranger hiding

himself behind a façade. His hazel eyes have shifted to a golden brown, and in their depths I see an assortment of conflicting emotions.

“I want you, Lucy. I want you more than I should.”

I frame his face with my hand, and he nuzzles into me, pressing a kiss to my palm. “I want you too.” *Maybe this could be real.* I think it, I think it so hard but I don’t have the nerve to say it because I know, one wrong move will topple everything down and cause Rhett to retreat.

Rhett pulls out of me and rolls over on his back next to me. “I’m not good for you and if I were a better man, I’d walk away right now.”

I don’t say anything, I don’t need to. Instead, I lace our fingers together and hum *Can’t Help Myself* by the Four Tops. It’s one of my favorites and the irony of my brain latching onto this song isn’t lost on me.

The reality is that rule number three—no falling in love—is the one rule he won’t break. No matter what. Doesn’t stop my stupid heart from cracking open and letting a part of him in. Doesn’t stop me from wanting to be the one to mend his poor heart.

The reason Rhett’s a broody bastard is to keep people away. To prevent anyone from getting too close. I’m not delusional enough to think one night of shared passion will change who he is at his very core.

So, why do I want to try?

TWENTY-TWO

Lucy

I'M FILLED WITH DREAD as I walk down the hallway to Mr. Coomer's office. It might be a little dramatic, but I feel akin to a prisoner walking down death row. My crime: accidental marriage to a player I'm supposed to be keeping out of trouble. Instead of keeping my distance, I'm wearing his ring. And riding his cock.

My stomach lurches, rebelling against the biscuits and gravy my mom made for Rhett and me this morning while giving me the eye.

You know the eye.

The one that says she heard everything last night. The first time in his bed. The second in his shower. And the third on his bathroom counter.

I tried not to let the eye bother me as Rhett ate his food obliviously, not a care in the world. Granted, I'd had a phenomenal evening and didn't regret a second of it. I had more orgasms in one night than I had with my past two

boyfriends. Combined. But I'd forgotten about this meeting until the notification popped up on my phone, and I flew from the house like a banshee.

"Lucy." Jane, his personal assistant, stands to greet me and ushers me to his office door. "He's expecting you." She lowers her voice. "He's in a mood today too. He's already reamed out Jerry."

Jerry is a jackass who fucks up every account he gets put in charge of, but he's also Mr. Coomer's nephew. So, he'll be a perpetual fuckup forever and never get fired. Unlike me, who may not have a job after today.

Even Jane is wearing her sympathy face. She's been with Mr. Coomer since they opened this firm, so she knows all his moods. If she's giving me that face, it can't be good.

"Thanks, Jane." I give her shoulder a quick squeeze. I take a deep breath, trying my best to seem calm, but my insides are twisting up, and every beat of my heart is hammering in my ears. I love this job, and I don't want to lose it.

Mr. Coomer is behind his desk, bent over some paperwork, the top of his head glinting in the morning sun. He knows I'm here. I know he knows.

He had the barest lift of his eyes when I closed his office door and that's all I've gotten since walking in and sitting down in one of the chairs on the other side of his desk.

So, I sit, and I wait to be acknowledged because he's the fucking boss and if he really is in a mood, then it would be

better for me if I sat here until addressed. I cross one leg over the other and rest my hands on my knee. My foot shakes and my hands tighten, one of my fingers brushing over my wedding ring.

My ridiculously large wedding ring that's felt more at home on my finger with every day that passes. It's the reason I'm here, and I know I should be having second thoughts about Rhett and our marriage, but I can't bring myself to have a single regret.

Last night... Jesus, last night.

Rhett didn't treat me like some delicate flower. He didn't take and give nothing back. He was completely different than any man I'd been with. His thrusts were brutal and the way he wrapped his hand around my throat and squeezed was unlike anything I'd experienced.

He wasn't gentle, yet he soothed and sated every part of me. Including the ones I didn't know existed. He knew what I wanted, what I craved. He knew the little bit of darkness that lived deep in my soul, and he brought it to the surface and caressed it with his.

He makes me feel seen. Understood. I'm not quite sure what to make of it but it feels right. He feels right. But for how long, I don't know.

"Miss Hurst." He finally looks up from his desk, shuffling his papers and pushing his glasses to the bridge of his nose.

“Mr. Coomer. I’m glad to have you back after your vacation. Hope you’re having a good morning.” My voice is light and chipper though I’m about ready to jump out of my skin.

“It’s shit actually. Jerry can’t handle the simplest account without me wiping his ass behind him.”

I keep my lips sealed nice and tight. While I agree with everything he says and can add a few digs of my own, I don’t dare speak out against his blood.

“That’s what I get for hiring family,” he continues, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes. “I can’t fire him. My sister will kill me. You on the other hand.” He looks me straight in the eye with his hardened stare. “You, I can fire.”

“Mr. Coomer—”

He holds up a hand and gives me another stern look. “Don’t worry, it’s not going to be today. It seems you’ve done a good job getting that husband of yours under control. The pictures of the two of you ice skating with the children from low-income families was priceless and the ones from last night with the mayor didn’t hurt either.”

“Thank you.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re off the hook. If the owners express any sort of dissatisfaction with your performance or if you become another negative news headline, you’ll be looking for a new job.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. You may head back to the arena and get ready for the game today.”

“Thank you, Mr. Coomer.”

As he goes back to his papers, I stand and scurry from the office. I give Jane a nod and hurry back down the hallway to my very under-used office. With a sigh, I throw myself down in my chair and pull out my phone to see a message from Rhett.

Grumpy Hubby: How did your meeting go, darling wife? As terrible as predicted? Do you need some <eggplant emoji> to make it all better?

Me: You’re in a sassy mood this morning.

Grumpy hubby: I think I have biscuits and gravy overload. When your mom wants to feed someone, she makes sure they’re fed until the point of bursting.

Me: Southern hospitality at its finest.

Grumpy Hubby: If I’m a slow skater today, you know why. You didn’t answer my question.

Me: I’m not fired.

Me: At least not yet.

Grumpy Hubby: That’s good, right? <emoji face with raised eyebrow>

Me: I think so. I just can’t marry any more hockey players.

Grumpy Hubby: I don't think that will be a problem.

Me: No? Planning on scaring everyone away?

Grumpy Hubby: I'm not nearly done with you yet, and I don't let anyone touch what's mine.

Me: <flushed face emoji>

Grumpy Hubby: See you after the game.

TWENTY-THREE

Rhett

I MAY BE FULL of biscuits and gravy, but I'm light on my skates. I'm ready for this game against Chicago, and actually feeling optimistic about it. Tag hasn't bothered me all day. I think I even smiled at a joke one of the McIvers brothers made.

Lucy's pussy must have some sort of voodoo magic inside it.

Not only does being with her make me a semi-pleasant person, but she brings out a wild side I thought was long buried. She brings out my darkest desires, an animal in me. Never before have I wanted to claim a woman so badly. I usually don't give two fucks. Now here I am, big bad Rhett Remington, and I can't wait to win this hockey game so I can go home and sink into my wife.

Who am I?

"Look alive, Remington." Lincoln nudges me with his shoulder as we head out to the ice.

I stand there for a second, momentarily confused. Not sure when we became friends or what exactly the shoulder nudge is supposed to mean. I mean, he is the team captain so he can't not talk to me. But it's always been professional.

Am I expected to attend a weekly sleepover? Bake him some cookies?

Maybe I need to muster up my famous Remington scowl and scare him and his merry band of idiots away. I don't need them thinking they can adopt me into their friend group. I'm not that delusional.

"We have a game to win." Tag slaps me in the back of my head and fine, I may be a little delusional because I don't even try to hit him back. In fact, I still feel pleasant. "Try not to make eyes at your wife the whole time. We're getting paid to play hockey."

Foster slings his arm around me and taps my stick with his. "I don't know what happened to you, mate, but this less growly version scares me a little bit."

"And why's that?"

"I don't know, it freaks me out. I like it better when you're antagonizing Tag."

I remove his arm from my shoulders and clap him on the back. Not hard enough to actually hurt the guy, but hard enough he'll be able to feel it through his pads. Foster looks pretty, and he's not as bulky as the rest of us—you wouldn't assume he was a hockey player if you saw him on the street. It

would be fair to imagine he's one of those Abercrombie and Fitch employees that stand outside shirtless and usher people inside. But when he gets on the ice, it's no question the man is doing what he's supposed to do. He's fast on a pair of skates. Almost like the Devil himself is hot on his heels.

“I can punch him if you like. Maybe offer to cut his long lady hair.”

His reply is lost in all the noise from the arena as we step out on the ice. The crowd is hyped today, a bit louder than usual because we're playing Chicago, one of the top ranked teams in the league right now. I know I said I was feeling optimistic and maybe that's a little naïve of me, but I feel like we have a fighting chance. There's something different in the air. Maybe it's the new cinnamon roll place.

I take my lap around the ice and as I do, I can't help but scan the crowd. Lucy said she'd be here tonight with her sister but didn't specify where she'd be sitting.

Technically she has several options. The owner's box with Jazz and crabby-faced Gordon, the media box which will be full of vulture reporters—unlikely she'll be there—or the seats reserved for players' family and friends. Since my family is on the west coast and I have no friends, I never bothered to figure out where it was.

Tag snakes up from behind me and abruptly cuts me off, rounding the net, and tapping on the glass with his stick. The desire to push his face into the glass hits, and I start to feel a little like myself, but then I see him standing in front of Lucy

and Elle. Both wearing red jerseys. And just like that, Tag is forgotten.

Lucy is a vision in red, her hair is pulled back in a ponytail and her usually pink lips are a bright red. My dick stirs slightly, and I know he's thinking what I'm thinking; that she needs to be on her knees with that lipstick smeared over her face while I fuck her mouth.

She finds my gaze and gives me a slight wave. I'm entranced by her, by her beauty, and I don't realize I've moved until I'm almost next to the glass. Lucy raises a brow before a warm smile breaks out across her face.

She points to her jersey and winks, turning around to show me the back.

I've clearly died and gone to a heaven that doesn't exist and I don't deserve.

The back of Lucy's jersey has my name across the top and the number twenty-eight in the middle.

My chest swells, and I'm filled with warmth despite the chill coming off the ice. My sister tried when she was older, but support was never something I got from family. I knew my mom wanted to be there, wanted to reach out, but my father always held her back. At the time, I thought he was trying to make me better. It took a long time to realize he was only trying to alienate me to keep me down. In a way, he still does.

Her simple gesture tells me she has my back, and I better soak it up while I can. Sooner or later, I'm going to break her

rules, let her down, and ruin everything. It's inevitable. It's why I'm better off alone.

Coach Weller's shrill whistle jerks me back to reality and I give Lucy a small wave as I head to the bench. I have a game to win and a fucking lady to impress. By the end of the third period, she'll be proud to wear that Remington jersey.

As a hockey player, I'm naturally a little superstitious. It comes with the territory.

I played with a guy in high school who refused to wash his game-day socks. He only had one pair and by the end of the season those sticky fuckers could stand up on their own, but no one questioned it. Our goalie, an odd Ukrainian guy, talks to the goal posts before every game. I'm talking full-on conversation. The McIver brothers tape each other's sticks and tap them on the floor for a certain number of times afterward. And me? I don't shave if I make the playoffs. I get some kind of workout in every day, even if it's a small run...

...and now, I'm obviously going to be forced to have sex with my wife before every game. The sport demands it.

I know I was optimistic, but this wasn't a game we should have won. Chicago is a good team, but today we were better. Plain and simple. Whatever our goalie said to the posts before the game must've worked because nothing got past him while we zinged five pucks around their goalie.

Five goals that have Coach so worked up that our post game talk is running way longer than usual, which won't leave me much time until my dad calls. I'll have to hang out in the locker room because I'm supposed to take Lucy home with me, and I do not need her overhearing that conversation. The last thing I need is her pitying looks. I've gotten enough of those from my siblings to last a lifetime.

I take my time removing my pads and am one of the last ones in the shower. The cool water trickles down my back, and I step under the stream, closing my eyes and bowing forward to put my head under the spray. I wash away the sweat, the grime, the success from the game. I wash away everything so that it's not tainted with the impending disappointment and resentment.

After thoroughly washing everything twice, I get dressed in my light gray game-day suit, draping the navy tie around my neck and leaving the top few buttons undone. The last few guys mumble their goodbyes before leaving me alone in the locker room. I stare down at my phone, turning it over in my hands and wishing he'd call and get it over with.

I spend the next several minutes contemplating my life and thoroughly debating leaving and not answering my phone. But I know he'll keep calling, and every time he has to call again, his anger will only grow; he'll only drink more. If I'm not there to take the brunt of it, who will he call?

My sister? My brother? The burden has always been mine and it needs to stay that way. I couldn't protect my mom from

him, but I can protect them. I've always protected them.

My phone vibrates in my hand, and my stomach drops as I answer. "Hey, Dad."

"I don't know why you sound tired," he barks through the phone, his words moderately slurred. Must have been why he took longer to call. "It's not like you were playing out there on the ice. Do they pay you to stand around with your thumb up your ass? What is that dumb fuck coach telling you? Obviously, he doesn't know what he's doing. I can't wait until you get traded to a half-decent team."

"We did win tonight, Dad."

"Yeah, by five fucking goals. What a fucking disgrace. You know why you're on this shit team? Because you're a shit player with a shit attitude. You've always been like that, so I don't know why I'd expect it to change now. If your mother were alive, she'd be so disappointed in you."

I sit down on the bench and pitch forward, resting my elbows on my knees and rubbing my eyes with my free hand. My dad drones on, and my attention drifts like it always does when he's reaming my ass. I try like hell to think back to a simpler time, a time when maybe he wasn't so dissatisfied with me, but as always, I come up empty. I can't remember a time when he wasn't drinking or angry, although usually those were hand-in-hand.

Growing up the way I did wasn't all bad. I did have my brother and sister, and I wouldn't trade them for the world. They used to show up to almost all my practices and were

always the loudest, most obnoxious pair in the crowd. The other guys would rib me, but I loved it.

My mom, when she wasn't drowning in a bottle of her own, used to make us special treats and take us to the park. She would push me on the swings for hours. She didn't do it for the others, but then again, they didn't get beaten on a weekly basis. I'm sure that was her way of making up for it. Trying, at least in her small way, to make it up to me.

"Do you hear me?" my father yells, breaking me from my walk down memory lane. "It's like I'm talking to a fucking wall. Hello?"

"I'm here, Dad." I run my hand through my hair and grip the back of my neck, squeezing as hard as I can.

He mumbles something I can't make out and clears his throat. "Just like your idiot sister. Neither one of you can hold a conversation to save your lives. We're not done here. We'll continue this conversation tomorrow."

Typical Dad, he doesn't wait for my response before hanging up the phone and leaving me with a knot in my stomach I'll never be able to get undone. I place the phone on the bench beside me instead of throwing it across the locker room like I really want to and drop my head in my hands.

I release a heavy sigh. You'd think I'd be used to this by now, numb to the pain, but every time we have the same conversation, the cut only runs deeper. The hurt only intensifies. It never disappears. Never wanes. Never fucking stops.

I jump, immediately sitting up straight, as someone plops down on the bench next to me. I was in here alone, I was careful. There's no way Foster—fucking Foster of all people—overheard me... but the grim look on his face tells me he did.

“Heavy, mate.” He shakes his head after giving me an assessing glance and stares down at the floor in front of us.

I take a deep breath and then another before I open my mouth and let my temper get the best of me. Then he'll absolutely squeal to all the other guys, and I can't have that. “I don't know what you think you heard, but you're mistaken.”

“No, I don't think I am.” His voice is flat, monotone.

I curl my hands into tight fists, resting them on my knees. “What is it you want? What will it take to keep you quiet?”

He turns to face me, his brows almost in his hairline. “What makes you think I want something? Maybe I'm trying to be supportive of my teammate.”

“That's what my jockstrap is for.” I grunt. “I don't need you to cup my balls for me.”

“Dammit Rhett, if you weren't such a fucking dick all the time, you'd see that we're not that bad. I was hoping Lucy would thaw you out a little.”

“I'm not going to be here next season, don't worry about me.”

“And if you are?”

I narrow my eyes and stare at him for a long time. He doesn't move, doesn't flinch, he just stares back. He's not entirely wrong. There is a chance the Devils don't kick me to the curb. I doubt it, but stranger things have happened. You know, like this conversation.

“Look, we don't know what's going to happen. We have no control over who we play for and where we go, we can only control how we react to our circumstances. So, you're a royal knob.”

I scoff, “Is this where you go all Dr. Phil on me and offer to solve all my problems?”

“Not even a little bit.” He laughs, clapping my shoulder. “My life hasn't always been rainbow farts and unicorn bubbles either.”

“What's the matter? Target run out of your favorite hair balm?”

His gaze moves back to the ground, and he mimics my pose from earlier with his elbows on his thighs and his hands dangling between his legs. “My mom died when I was little.” He pauses to take a deep breath before continuing. “Dad worked two jobs, so he wasn't always around. He remarried a few times, but nothing ever worked out. It was tough.”

“That doesn't make us the same.”

“No, it doesn't. My point is that we all carry something with us. I think you should tell him to fuck off, but that's none of my business.” He stands and his hand goes back to my

shoulder. “In the meantime, maybe you can try not being such a twat.”

I grunt as he grabs his bags and heads out of the locker room. I wish I had a more eloquent response, but I’m still mulling that over in my head. Did he just call me a vagina?

TWENTY-FOUR

Rhett

AS SOON AS LUCY and I close the door to our bedroom, she gives me a coy smile and slips into the bathroom. I run a hand down my face and tug off my tie, tossing on the dresser. My fingers work down the front of my dress shirt, flicking open each button, and then pulling it off to join my tie, all the while lost in thought.

These phone calls from my dad are only getting worse, more aggressive. It doesn't seem to matter if we win or lose. The increase in slurred speech seems to correlate with his increased rage. It's only a matter of time before he ends up in the hospital for liver damage or worse.

What he really needs is a rehab program, but unless he gets to the point where he wants help, I don't see an intervention doing anything but pissing him off.

After discarding the rest of my clothes—with the exception of my boxer briefs—I crawl into bed, picking up my phone from the nightstand. It's been blowing up since I got home,

leaving me with no doubt that Avery and Heath have me on a group chat again.

Avery (favorite sibling): You played such a good game. Seriously. You. Were. Fire.

Heath not Ledger: Even the football players agree.

Heath not Ledger: None of us thought you'd win.

Avery (favorite sibling): That's not very nice.

Heath not Ledger: Did I say I was very nice?

Me: Thanks. It's nice knowing that you and your team have my back.

Heath not Ledger: <rolling on the floor laughing emoji> That's what brothers are for.

Avery (favorite sibling): You two are morons. Is there a limit on the amount of concussions you can get? I think you both may have gone over. I'm concerned.

Me: His head is as hard as a rock. Don't worry about him.

Heath not Ledger: I'd be offended if it weren't true.

Avery (favorite sibling): How're things? Have you talked to Dad lately?

Me: He still calls after every game.

Avery (favorite sibling): He's calling me more. I don't know. He keeps asking me to come home. Every time he calls, it's clear he's been drinking.

Heath not Ledger: The man's an alcoholic, Avery. He drinks every day. That's why we don't talk anymore. I suggested he put down the bottle and dry out a bit. No more calls for me after that.

Me: Avery, you cannot move back in with that man.

Avery (favorite sibling): <eye roll emoji> I'm not an idiot. I don't want him doing to me what he did to Mom. Or you. And you can't keep letting him call you. It's not healthy.

Heath not Ledger: Speaking of things that aren't healthy, how's your marriage?

Me: Very funny.

Me: Her parents are here driving me crazy.

Heath not Ledger: Have you even met a girl's parents before?

Me: No.

Heath not Ledger: Do you know how to be nice?

Me: I'm nice.

Avery (favorite sibling): He's nice to me.

Heath not Ledger: Because you're his favorite.

Avery (favorite sibling): Seriously, are you doing okay with everything? Between Dad and this marriage that came out of nowhere... I worry about you.

Me: Don't worry about me, worry about yourself. You have enough on your plate.

The last thing I need is anyone worrying about me, especially when they have their own shit going on. Football keeps my brother busy enough. And the bit about Dad not talking to him is new, although not surprising. Out of all of us, he was the one to talk back when we were young, he just didn't take the punishments. Between that and his request for Avery to move back to Washington, it might be time to bring up the topic of rehab and get them both on board.

The only way we have a chance at talking some sense to Dad is by doing it together. Even then I think it's a long shot.

I sigh and exhale, running a hand through my hair and plugging in my phone on the nightstand.

Sinking down in bed, I wonder what's holding Lucy up in the bathroom. She'd been relatively quiet on the way home, and I'm not sure if it was a reflection of my somber mood or if her meeting with her boss was still weighing on her mind.

Just as I click off the bedroom light, the door to the bathroom opens and Lucy steps out, the light behind her illuminating her body in a faint glow. My family, my problems, all forgotten.

She looks... well, too good for me.

Her blonde hair is piled on her head in a messy bun, and it looks like her makeup has been wiped clean, yet she looks radiant. She's still in my jersey and holy shit—only my jersey. My dick immediately responds, sitting in an upright position, straining against my briefs. My mouth waters, and my fingers

itch to crawl up her legs and vanish under the hem of the jersey to find out if she's wearing panties underneath.

“You played so good today.” She bites on her lip, her gaze flitting to the ground before coming back to meet mine. “And I know you usually have some pent-up energy after games. I thought I would help.”

I love being married. I don't care what I said before. And what can I say now?

Well, I've got nothing, my tongue is tied and the sight of her in my jersey has me floored. There're plenty of things I should say. At the very least, I could express my appreciation for her lack of pants. But I can't find the words. Not when she's wearing my name and number across her back like a brand. Can't forget that giant diamond ring she's wearing either.

“How do you plan on doing that?” I manage to rasp, despite the fact that my mouth is drier than the fucking desert.

She smiles and licks her lips, trailing her tongue along the top one and then the bottom. “Just lay back and see.”

I'm usually not one to be submissive, but I'm curious to see what she has up her sleeve. I let her take some control last night, and she was hell bent on making me as crazy as I'd made her. She had fire in her eyes, fire that's still there but smoldering and building in heat.

I lay back in bed and kick the sheets down to the bottom of the bed, shucking my boxer briefs, and tossing them on the

floor. She crosses the room, a sway in her hips, as her hands coast over her breasts and down to her thighs.

Every step is slow. Deliberate. Meant to torture.

The closer she gets, the harder my dick. Her eyes follow my hand as I reach down and grip my cock, giving it a squeeze. My hips shift, thrusting into my hand, and as she tracks the movement, she wets her lips again. So, I repeat the motion, milking out a bead of pre-cum and sweeping it on the pad of my thumb.

Lucy is so close, I want to pull her down on my erection, but I don't. Not yet. Instead, I hold out my thumb. "Do you want a taste?"

Her eyes never leave mine as she leans forwards and takes my thumb in her mouth. Her tongue flicks across my skin and then holy fuck she sucks. My cock-tease of a wife sucks the cum off my fucking thumb.

My breath clogs on an inhale. My dick twitches, my balls ache, and I can't wait to bury myself inside her hot, tight cunt.

With a wink, she bites down before releasing my thumb from her naughty mouth. "A taste is good and all, but I'm thinking I want more."

I lay perfectly still, my hand still hovering by her face. I'm not stupid. I won't tell her she can't put her mouth on my dick, but... "If you're going to suck me off wearing my jersey, I'm going to need you to put on that hot-as-fuck red lipstick."

She smiles, pushing my hand back to my cock and sauntering to her purse to grab a tube of lipstick. The way Lucy turns the little tube and paints her lips with that fire engine red color, knowing it's for me, has me stroking my length with a harsh grip, and my balls tingling with the need for release.

I grunt as she walks back to the bed, her eyes glued to the motion of my hand, and I swallow past the lump in my throat.

Instead of coming back to my side, she climbs on top of the bed and over my outstretched legs. Her fingers trail up my calves, over my knees, and inch up my thighs.

She's moving so slow, I'm about to explode, and almost do when her hand replaces mine.

She squeezes me like she means it, like she can't get enough, like she wants me more than anything else right now. She bites her lower lip as she works her hand around the thick head of my cock, down the hardened length, and then lightly cups and massages my balls.

My groan vibrates down my whole body, and my heart's beating so hard I might be having a heart attack. Lucy's hands are so soft and delicate and they feel so fucking good. I have to grab the pillow behind my head to keep from grabbing her and making her ride me until I can't see straight.

And then she puts her mouth on me. The head of my dick parting those pouty red lips.

“Oh, fuck, Lucy.” My hips pitch forward, my cock working its way into her hot wet mouth. “You look so beautiful with my cock in your mouth.” My words end on a moan as she licks me from balls to tip before running her tongue around the head.

Lucy doesn't just tease my cock, she fucking savors it, alternating licks and sucks before she leans forward and takes my entire length in her mouth. My hands go to her hair, and I rip out that stupid elastic band, pulling it in a ponytail of my own. Lucy takes me deeper, deeper than I thought she could, and my fingers tighten in her hair, holding her in place.

As I hit the back of her throat, she hums around me, and I'm on the verge of coming right down her throat and choking her with my cum. She pulls back, dragging her tongue along the underside of my dick.

Her lipstick is still perfect. Not even a smudge.

She surges forward, working my shaft with her free hand, while the other one continues to tease my balls. My eyes roll to the back of my head, and I release several expletives as I tangle my fingers further in her hair and lift my hips off the bed. She lets out a little cry, protesting the loss of control, but I don't care. I hold her steady, fucking her mouth with short, measured strokes. Her hands drift to my sides and her nails dig into my hips. I pick up the pace and drive into her mouth a little deeper with each stroke. Her nails dig in further and I love the thought of her leaving her marks on me.

My blood boils with lust, desire, desperation and I plunge my cock to the back of her throat, punishing her with every thrust.

For making me feel this way.

For taking away my control.

For making me like her. Want her. *Need her.*

Her whimper makes me go faster. The tears falling from her eyes as I abuse her mouth and throat make me go deeper. And that red lipstick. The fucking red lipstick remains perfect. I can't wait to paint it with my cum.

My orgasm hits me hard. My balls tingle and tighten and with a growl that would rival most animals, I still and empty myself between her ruby lips.

Lucy—my little good girl—swallows every last drop. She even licks the tip as I pull out of her mouth and collapse back on the pillow. I release her hair, smoothing it from her face, and wiping the tears from her cheeks. She reaches up and runs a finger around her lips before giving me a smirk and collapsing on the bed beside me.

She rolls over to face me and curls her arm under her head. “Do you still think I’m prim and proper?”

I take a deep breath and turn to my side. “You don’t look too proper with that lipstick on your lips and my cock in your dirty mouth.”

“You feel relaxed?”

“More than you know. And when I can feel my legs again, I’m going to fuck you so hard, you won’t be able to stand tomorrow.”

“We have all weekend.” Her fingers walk up my arm and stroke my biceps. “I don’t have to walk until we get on the plane for Canada on Tuesday.”

“What would your parents say if they don’t see us all weekend?”

“I don’t think they’d even notice.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Lucy

DAMN, MY LEGS STILL feel like Jello. I can barely board the plane without them wobbling, and it has nothing to do with nerves this time.

Rhett held up his end of the bargain and kept me occupied for most of the weekend and it turns out, my parents did notice. We did emerge for meals here and there and no surprise, got more disapproving looks from my mom. My dad, also no surprise, had something to say every time we saw him.

So of course, he and I got into another fight. More shit about how disrespectful and inconsiderate we are before the two of them left to go spend time with Chloe. Which was fine with me, because it gave Rhett and I a chance to christen the kitchen, along with a few other rooms in the house.

“What’s the matter?” Rhett leans down to whisper in my ear. His tongue darts out to flick across my lobe, and I grip my carry-on to keep from melting into him in front of the whole damn team. “Your legs seem a little wobbly.”

“You know how I get when I fly,” I whisper back, elbowing him in the ribs to create some distance between us.

“I know, which is why you’re coming back to sit with me.”

“What?” I spin around, my brows creasing as I study his face. “The staff never sits with the athletes.”

“If you haven’t noticed by now, I’m not so good at following the rules.” He gives me a crooked grin, his dimples popping out to say hello, and I’m a damn puddle on the floor.

He’s right. He’s not good at following the rules.

It’s how we got into this whole fake/real marriage in the first place. It’s also how I’m having without a doubt, the best sex of my life right now. Slowly but surely, he’s also going to make me break rule number three. I can already feel it, when I catch him looking at me, when he touches me with even the most innocent of touches. It’s like this warmth spreading out from the center of my chest and radiating through my whole body. He makes me feel better after a shitty day. He makes me smile, even when he doesn’t mean to. And below that broody exterior, he’s a good man. He just doesn’t want anyone to know.

Rhett Remington is more trouble than I initially thought. He’s making me lose myself in him, and there’s a good chance I’ll end up broken at the end of this. Not because he won’t have feelings for me, but because he’d rather run away and lock them up than admit any kind of weakness.

Still, knowing this, there's a chance that we can be happy. That we can be more than this arrangement. For now, that's all I need.

"What's the holdup, Lucy?" Owen calls out from behind Rhett.

"Do you need me to carry you to your seat?" Ian joins in, ruffling Rhett's hair.

Rhett frowns, and I'm pretty sure he growls at him. A warning to stop touching him? To stop talking to me? And then he turns around to say a few choice words. I don't hear what he says, but it can't be very friendly because Ian's face turns beet red, and Owen howls with laughter.

Rhett turns back to me, and his hand goes to my lower back. "Let's get moving before I put these two in a time out they won't like."

I open my mouth to protest. To tell him violence off the ice is the one rule he can't violate, especially against his own teammate but he pushes me forward down the center aisle of the plane before I can get a word out. My next thought is to slap his hand away and tell him that he can't manhandle me, not out of the bedroom anyway, but those words also die on my lips. I like the bit of possession that comes with him putting his hand on me. How it's splayed across my back like he owns me.

In a sense, I guess he does, I think to myself. My thumb flicks across the underside of my wedding band, and a smile

curls over my face... but with a matching ring on his finger, I own him right back.

Rhett leads me toward the back of the plane and steers me into the window seat, taking my suitcase from me and lifting it to the compartment above us. He's wearing a maroon sweater that rides up, giving me a delightful view of his abs. The sex lines cut above his jeans and frame his washboard stomach perfectly. I have to bite my bottom lip and grip on to the arm rests to keep from reaching out and running my tongue along his ridges and making an absolute fool of myself.

"Did you get your fill? Or do you need me to pretend to have some trouble with the bags?" He tosses me a wink, and I slouch down in my seat, heat crawling up my neck and engulfing my face. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone you married me for my body."

I groan and cover my face with my hands. "You're the worst."

"Am I wrong?" He grins, and those damn dimples, they're going to be the end of me.

"It certainly wasn't for your sunny disposition."

He laughs a real genuine laugh and sits down beside me, prying my hands loose from the armrest and putting my purse under the chair in front of me. "I married you despite yours."

I scoff as he gives me a stern look and reaches down to secure my seatbelt. "It's fastened. It's tight. You don't need to mess with it the whole flight."

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes but barely. Because, you know, he's right. Flying has always made me nervous. Well, not flying per se, but the thought of falling from the sky and crashing to my death. I don't think that's unreasonable.

He fixes his own belt and relaxes back, stretching his feet out in front of him. Tag and Foster take the seats in front of us and the Bruiser brothers sit beside us. I give them each a wave, not feeling any less out of place being back here with the players, though it's pretty unusual for someone outside the team to sit with them. Even Jazz sits up front with Lincoln instead of back here.

Rhett doesn't acknowledge the team, and they don't greet him either, but the strained undercurrent that's usually there when Rhett's around his teammates is nonexistent. The silence almost feels comfortable, and I can't help but wonder if something has changed.

“Are the guys starting to grow on you?” I ask quietly.

He pops an eye open and grabs my hand, pulling it into his lap and resting it on his thigh. “Like a fungus.” Rhett smacks the back of Tag's seat and adds, “A smelly one.”

“You're one to talk, Remington.” Tag turns around, eyeing me before a slow smile spreads across his face. “Why does your wife get to sit back here with the team?”

“I don't see any of you fuckers with a wife.”

“Yet,” I add with a laugh, grabbing the kindle from my purse. “It won't be long before you two are officially brother-

in-laws. Think of all the holidays we'll get to spend together.”

“And birthdays.” Foster interjects. “Mine’s in October in case you want to jot that down. I expect a large party with plenty of bunnies—I’m a man who likes choices—and a fully stocked bar.”

“I’ll get right on that, *mate*. Now stop checking out my wife and turn around.” Rhett twirls his index finger. He tilts his head toward me, ignoring Foster’s stare, and lowers his voice. “When is your birthday? I should probably learn it so I can forget it later.”

“It’s in September. The twenty-fifth.” Long after the four months we agreed to stay married. He probably won’t even call. A pang hits me hard, but I push it away.

If Rhett realizes what I’m thinking, he doesn’t give anything away.

“When is yours?” I ask.

“July nineteenth.”

I swallow past the lump in my throat, wading into dangerous territory. We’ve never talked about anything beyond the season. Neither of us have mentioned what happens when it ends, and I feel like I’m tip toeing between some very large land mines. “What do you normally do to celebrate your birthday?”

“Is it sad to say that I usually stay at home and drink by myself?”

“If I say yes will you be offended?”

“My brother and sister generally send me a few gag gifts and call me at precisely 7:55 pm to sing me happy birthday. They’re more off key than you are when you sing.”

“I’m not that bad.” The plane lurches and moves to the runway. I remove my hand from Rhett’s thigh, a little scared I’ll grip him too hard, and hold onto the armrests for dear life as we start to take off.

This time, he doesn’t try to detach my hand, he just rests his over mine and gives it a squeeze. “You *are* that bad.”

“Your brother and sister are younger?”

“Uh, yeah.” He runs his other hand down his face and lets out a sigh. “Heath is twenty-four, cocky as hell—which is normal for most football players—and a bit wild.”

“Wonder where he gets that?”

His gaze narrows on me but he continues, “My sister is the youngest and the polar opposite of both of us. Smart, mature, and easy going. My brother and I looked out for her growing up. There were a lot of times, she wasn’t too happy with either of us.”

“Oh?” I laugh, picturing Rhett stomping around school, beating up anyone who looked in his sister’s direction. “Did you threaten her boyfriends?”

Something dark flickers across his face but before I can single it out, it’s gone. “Every single one of them.”

I laugh again and start to relax, sinking down in my seat and pulling my nails out of the armrest to intertwine my fingers

with his. We chat for hours, telling each other stories about growing up and navigating our early twenties. Not that we're much older now, but being young, dumb, and twenty-one was far more hectic than being twenty-seven.

He still holds back any information about his home life or his parents which I find strange. I get the feeling it wasn't the best, but I'm not here to judge. I know he's not ready to open up and let me in, but I wish he'd try a little bit. While we talk, his thumb strokes over the back of my hand, and somewhere between Tennessee and Calgary, Canada, I fall asleep.

I don't dream, or at least I don't have any that I remember, I only feel content. And rested. By the time I wake, we've already landed and almost all the guys have left the plane.

Rhett undoes my belt and brushes the hair from my face. The way he's looking at me, like I'm something precious, knocks my breath from my lungs. I don't dare say anything or move, afraid that doing anything would destroy this perfect moment.

His thumb swipes across my lower lip, sending my heart into overdrive and my stomach to the ground. Rhett's hands frame my face as he leans forward and presses his lips to mine. His kiss is hungry, demanding, and he forces it deeper, licking his tongue inside my mouth and devouring everything I have. Everything I am.

I cling to his shoulders. I cling to this lie that brought us together. And I cling to the life we could have if he allowed it. I push everything I have into the kiss. Every emotion and

insecurity. Meeting every stroke of his tongue. Pulling him as close as he can get without ripping off our clothes and burying him inside me.

A throat clears next to us, and we part slowly, lingering a bit longer than polite. Rhett presses a kiss to my forehead before tossing Tag an irate look. He's standing next to Foster with his eyebrow raised, assessing us with interest. Foster is leaning on his shoulder, a wide smile on his face while heat engulfs mine.

"Well, that's the grossest thing I've ever seen." Tag scrunches his face.

Foster shrugs casually like this is something he sees every day. Although, with his pretty face, he may do this every day. I don't judge. "Nah, I like it. Feel free to invite me to watch anytime. I'll even throw in a few moves if you want me to."

"You two better get the fuck off this plane before you find my foot up both your asses." Rhett growls, throwing his arm around my shoulders and feathering his lips across my temple.

"Mate, that's not very nice."

"I'm not a nice guy."

"You can think that, growly pants."

"Call me growly pants again and you'll find out just how bad I can be." Rhett leans over the chair and punches Foster in the arm, scowling at Tag.

Foster groans like a wounded animal and rubs his arm in a very exaggerated manner. "Is that how you talk to your new best mate?"

“I thought I was your best friend.” Tag rubs a hand over his heart, grabs his bag from the chair in front of us and walks toward the front of the plane, calling over his shoulder, “Make sure you get some rest tonight, Remington.”

Foster winks, putting his whole face into the motion. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. Call me if you need anything, bestie. Better start my pre-game ritual.”

He skips off to join Tag and as he disappears off the plane, I move to stand but Rhett puts a hand out to stop me.

“Yes?” I peer at him, fluttering my lashes. “Don’t you have some kind of pre-game thing you have to do?”

He pushes up the arm holder dividing our seats and pulls me into his lap, nuzzling his nose into my neck. “I might?”

“Really? You do? I know you guys can be pretty superstitious.”

“I didn’t really have one until last Thursday.”

“Wait... What happened...” I trail off, remembering full well what happened on Thursday and how many times it happened.

“What happened last Thursday was that I fucked my wife all night long and then proceeded to win a hockey game. Clearly, that’s something that needs to happen before every game. The team needs you. I need you.”

I wrap my arms around his neck with a smile. “Well, I’m not going to be the reason you lose a game.”

TWENTY-SIX

Rhett

HOLY FUCK, I MIGHT be onto something with this ritual thing. We all know it was an excuse to fuck my wife, but whatever mojo we're creating between our thighs is working. Five minutes left of this game against the Wolves and we're leading by a goal. Not that it's brag worthy—although, it was a good goal, even if it was made by Rag. Okay fine, I guess I can start referring to him as Tag, especially since everyone keeps reminding me that we're practically family.

Or I guess until the season ends—which also marks the end of my marriage. At least that's the plan. It's always been the plan. So, why does thinking about it make my chest ache?

Tremblay, the center for Calgary, snags the puck and I slam him into the wall, slapping it away from his Canadian ass and toward Dallas. The puck goes back and forth between him and Foster in an intense game of keep away as they make their way to the other side of the ice. The Wolves are scrambling to get the puck back, but Foster and Dallas are unstoppable as they make their way to the net.

I'm hot on their heels when Lincoln fakes a pass to Foster and sweeps the puck my way. As the other team scrambles to catch up with me, Foster is left completely unguarded. I pass it back to him. He lines up with the net and damn if his slap shot isn't a thing of beauty. I might have shed a tear.

I'm jolted forward as Tag and Owen sweep me into a (very manly) group hug. It's a lot of back slapping, helmet patting, and shoulder nudging. I know it sounds stupid and I'll kick myself later for thinking about it, but for the first time in a long time, I finally feel like part of a team.

Like maybe all the bullshit and the drama was worth it to get to this point. LA is a good team, don't get me wrong, but I never really felt that connection—the sense of belonging—that I do right now.

And that was before the fucking fight that almost blackballed me from the damn industry. Assholes.

With another win under our belt, the goalie has a small conversation with the crossbar, tapping on it a few times, as we leave the ice. This was a big game. Hell, any game against a Canadian team is a big game and that makes this victory even more sweet.

The buzz in the air is almost palpable, settling on my skin, mingling with my sweat—and maybe some Canadian blood, I did have a few fights in the first two periods.

There's more backslapping and—oh, butt slapping too.

“There’s a bunch of us going to the hotel bar tonight.” Tag settles in at the locker across from me and removes his gear.

Foster walks past us, giving me a fist bump and a rather creepy wink. “You should join us, mate.”

“I don’t know.” I run a hand through my hair, damp with sweat. “I’m supposed to meet Lucy back at the hotel.”

Lincoln shoots me a grin, pulling off his pads. “Pretty sure she’ll be there when you get back. Not all of us,” he glances between Ian and Owen, “stay out and party until the early hours of the morning.”

“I’ll think about it.”

And I will. I might even go, though that depends on the phone call with my father and how shitty I feel after. We won tonight, and I played well, but that won’t matter. Not to him. It’ll all depend on his mood and how much he’s had to drink.

Just thinking about him and my impending phone call sucks all the excitement from my body and replaces it with a heavy weight. A weight that hunches my shoulders and settles like a five-hundred-pound gorilla on my back.

I can’t help but think of Heath and Avery and the advice they gave as I make my way to the showers. I’m so torn between answering his calls and letting them flood my voicemail. But every time I lean toward not answering, I crawl right back to the other side. If he’s already not talking to Heath, he’ll increase his calls to Avery, and she has enough problems to deal with, so I don’t want that. And then there’s

the possibility that he won't call any of us. While that sounds initially appealing, he's still my dad, and I can't find it in me to cut him out of my life completely.

This internal debate wears on me the entire time I dress in my game-day suit and get back to the hotel. With each step closer to the room, my heart rate increases, and I sweat. I can feel it dripping down my neck and sliding down my spine, soaking my ridiculously expensive dress shirt.

Lucy should still be busy with all her post-game shenanigans, so I'm not surprised to find a quiet room when I open the hotel door. Her suitcase—yes, it's pink—is open on the bed, surrounded by a few blouses and a pair of heels. She's always so meticulous and tidy at home that I can't help but smile at her mess.

I shake my head and walk to the other, cleaner, side of the bed and unknot my tie, tugging it until it hangs loose around my neck. I slide off my jacket, tossing it over the back of the hotel chair, and that's when my phone rings. I answer it, turning it on speaker and tossing it on the bed so I can continue getting undressed.

“Hey, Dad.”

He grunts, not a great start to the conversation.

“How are you doing tonight?” I know how he's doing. He's fucking seething on the other side of the phone. I can hear it in his stony silence. That's how you knew the beating was going to be worse than usual.

I hunker down on the end of the couch, crouching to make myself seem smaller. If I could disappear into the cushions, I would, but he would know. There's no escape from punishment. Dad paces in front of me. He doesn't say a word. He's eerily silent except for the thud of each footstep on the hardwood floor. Thud. Thud. Thud. At some point the sounds all meld together and I don't know if I'm hearing each step or the blood pounding in my ears. He finally stops and turns to me, his face hard, his eyes darkened to almost-black. He stays silent as he undoes his belt. It whooshes out of his belt loops... And then as he starts swinging.

He gives me that same stony silence tonight, and I wait. Finally, after what feels like hours, he huffs. "I'd be having a better night if my fucking worthless son would learn how to play hockey. I spent all that money on you growing up. All those nights and weekends sacrificed. And for what?" He sucks in a breath and if the clinking glass is any indication, takes another drink. "So you can embarrass your whole family on the ice."

"Dad—"

"There's nothing you can say to change my mind. I regret having you as a son. I regret you and your brother and your disgraceful sister every day of my damn life."

I hang my head and close my eyes, letting his words wash over me as I unbutton my shirt. He continues his tirade, taking breaks every so often to take a drink.

My stomach clenches, and I run a hand through my hair, tugging on the ends. I'm ready to start pacing when I feel a light hand rest on the center of my back. I want to ignore it. Hope she takes the hint and leaves. Hope she didn't hear any of this even though I know it's impossible because my dad is still going. *Why doesn't he ever shut the fuck up?*

She doesn't say anything, not at first, and I don't turn around. She won't look at me the same, and I won't be able to stand seeing pity in her eyes.

There's no coming back from this. If she didn't know how fucking worthless I was before, she'll know now. Her hand rubs up and down my spine like she's calming me, but it doesn't work. It makes me bristle. It may wash away some of the shame, but it only replaces it with anger.

I spin around so quick her hand is still hanging in the air and a look of shock registers across her face. I don't know if her wide eyes are from my reaction or my father's words.

Doesn't really matter anyway. The damage is done.

My teeth grind as I clench my jaw with each expletive coming from the phone, yet I refuse to break her gaze. I might be a disappointment. I might be no more than gum on the bottom of her hot pink heel. But I'm not weak and I refuse to hide. She flinches when my father says something particularly nasty about my mother and her character, but she doesn't look away either.

The minutes tick by until my father finally grumbles his farewell and hangs up the phone, shrouding us in silence.

Neither one of us move. Not yet anyway. Lucy is the first one to break, blowing out a deep breath, her eyes softening.

“Rhett—”

“Save it, Lucy.” I turn back toward the bed and fiddle with my open dress shirt. She’s seen me naked many times now, but there’s something about this that makes me feel completely stripped bare. Vulnerable.

“The things he said—”

“It’s nothing he hasn’t said before. Just leave it alone.”

She grunts and sits down on the corner of the bed facing me. Trying to exploit me with those sad baby blue eyes. “Those things aren’t true. None of that was true. Does he call you after every game?”

“I said leave it alone.” My voice comes out low. Gruff. Menacing. “Maybe your time would be better spent standing up to your family instead of trying to solve the problems in mine. Which are none. Of. Your. Business.”

Lucy flinches but continues on. “Does he drink a lot? Are his phone calls always like that? What about your brother? Your sister?”

“I don’t need a fucking therapy session.”

“You can talk to me, Rhett.” She wrings her hands on her lap, a look of worry crossing her features. “I’m your wife.”

“You’re my wife on paper. Nothing more.” I take a deep breath and rebutton my shirt. “Don’t make the mistake of

thinking this is something other than an inconvenience because you rode my dick a few times.”

Her mouth opens and closes. Nothing comes out but the hurt in her eyes is as clear as day. If I were a better man, I'd try to make it better. I'd tell her how full of shit I am. How I am, in fact, feeling things that are more.

But I don't.

I can't.

I'm not a better man.

Which is why I grab my jacket, toss it over my shoulder, and leave the hotel room without a backwards glance. The guys are downstairs in the lobby and while I'm sure I'm not good company, I could use a drink. And if I'm honest, a distraction to make me forget.

Forget my shit family. My sham marriage. That fact that I'm not enough for anyone. And the struggle that I want to be. For that one person I just can't face right now.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Lucy

MY HUSBAND IS THE most irritating man in the entire world. No, I don't know every man in existence, but I don't need to. Not about this. I know I'm right.

I'm still seething over the way his dad talked to him after the away game on Tuesday. It's not just the things that were said, but the way Rhett accepted them like it was the absolute truth. He's better than that, we both know it, even if he is in denial. And I really can't fault him for leaving and staying out with the team until the middle of the night. He needed something from them, and he refused to get it from me.

Plus, the way Foster brought him home, practically tucking him into bed, was both precious and hilarious. I even managed to take a picture. It's a little blurry, but you can tell what's happening.

I thought he would get over it come morning, and we could talk about it like rational adults.

But no, he returned to his grunting ways, and we haven't talked since.

Real fucking mature.

But I guess that's what I get for marrying a Neanderthal who can't even cope with his own feelings.

Damn him and damn this photoshoot. I shouldn't even be here, but my parents are driving me insane, and I made a promise. As much as I'd like to go back on my word, I'm not that kind of gal. Plus, it's for charity, and I kinda arranged the whole thing.

It's just really inconvenient.

I hesitate for a moment before pushing through the locker room door. The pictures were supposed to be taken on the ice, but my husband convinced Tag and the photographer to take them here. Something about shrinkage and not putting his best 'foot' forward. I didn't have the heart to tell him the pictures wouldn't be nude. And no one but him cares about the size of his dick. A week ago, I might have put myself on that list, but not today.

The locker room is empty aside from Rhett, Tag, Derek the photographer, and a college-aged guy, Nick, who's working as his assistant. The guys are lounged on the benches, and I can only assume they're waiting for me. The lights have all been set up and everything looks good to go. If it weren't for my high-maintenance husband, they could already be half done.

“You’re late.” He stands up, arms crossed over his jersey and eyes me, his gaze traveling the length of my body. My soft pink dress hits mid-calf, but I feel exposed under his scrutiny.

“Leave Lucy alone. I imagine it’s not easy being married to your big, dumb ass.” Tag nods at me and swipes his hair back from his forehead. He’s casually stretched out on the bench in his tight hockey pants and only his tight hockey pants. They’re gaping at the front, showing way more of his tan chiseled abs than I ever wanted to see.

I wave to the photographer, ignoring the both of them. “Sorry I’m late, but I had to take care of a few things in my office. I missed a few calls while we were doing the football shoot.”

“Someone refused to start without you.” Tag motions Rhett, a lazy smile spreading across his face. “Caused a whole scene.”

“I hardly call that a scene.” Rhett throws him a look of displeasure. “And stop sitting like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re selling yourself.”

“Are you interested in buying?”

Derek snaps his fingers and motions for his assistant. “Let’s get things moving. The two of you can verbally assault each other after the shoot. Mr. Remington, if you can lose the jersey, that would be great.”

Rhett looks like he wants to argue. Although that's not far off from his normal face because he literally always looks like he wants to argue. Part of that resting prick face he's perfected so well.

Instead, he glares at Derek for two-point-five seconds before reaching behind him, grabbing his shirt with both hands. And then I have a movie moment. One of those moments where time slows down. His shirt comes up, inch by delicious inch, showing sex lines and rippled abs. Muscle after muscle. Suddenly, I'm finding it very hard to remember why I'm supposed to be mad at him.

A fine line of sweat trickles down my back, and I shift, rubbing my legs together. I bite my lower lip. Shift again on my feet. And then a white hand towel appears in front of my face and time snaps back to normal.

"Do you need a little something to wipe the drool trailing out of your mouth?" Tag, whom I didn't even realize had moved to stand next to me, waves the towel in front of my face, his mouth quirked up in a smirk.

"Oh, shut the fuck up," I mutter, waving away the towel, but turning to the side to quickly wipe my face with the back of my hand.

He chuckles and shakes his head. "You may be just as bad as your sister. She's constantly looking at me like I'm a three-course meal and she hasn't eaten for days."

"Gross."

“You like it.”

Rhett tosses his jersey in a nearby locker and growls at the both of us. “Stop flirting with my wife, Harris.”

“Alright boys.” Derek claps, stealing our attention. His assistant scurries to grab a bottle and turn on the lights. “This is Nick, he’s here to assist me with your shoot. So long as you’re comfortable, he’ll do the oil.”

Rhett’s face falls and his gaze locks on to the bottle in Nick’s hands. As he makes his way to Tag, Rhett comes to stand by me, grumbling the whole time. Something about not knowing there would be oil. Not believing I talked him into doing this crap. All the while, his gaze is glued to Nick rubbing the oil on Tag, slathering his arms, chest and back.

Tag doesn’t seem to mind at all—neither have the other guys, in fact. I watched the shoot with the football players this morning and aside from one of the guys trying to get my number, it was uneventful. They even let Nick do the oil without complaint. But not my damn husband.

As Nick finishes up, Tag looks over at Rhett and winks. Another growl rumbles in Rhett’s chest, and I nudge him with my elbow. Nick’s footsteps slow the closer he gets, probably because one of us is acting no better than a rabid dog.

“Here.” I extend my hand toward Nick and gesture for the bottle in his hand. “Why don’t you let me get this guy. I think he may bite.”

Nick's eyes go wide, and he visibly swallows, his gaze sliding over Rhett's chest and stepping back once he looks up to his face. He doesn't say a word, he simply hands over the bottle of oil and walks back to Derek.

I take a deep breath and squirt some of the cool liquid in my palm. The other three head down the benches and direct Tag into some solo shots, leaving Rhett and I ignored and virtually alone. With one last glance toward the others, I turn back to Rhett.

He's staring down at me. Tall. Scowly. Imposing. Undeniably sexy.

Dammit. I'm supposed to be mad at him.

"Do you want to turn around? I'll start on the back."

He arches a brow but turns around, giving me an unrestricted view of his muscled back. I thought it would be easier to start here, away from his penetrative gaze. I was wrong. The man's backside is like a fucking sculpture in the Louvre. You'd think I'm a blushing virgin touching a man's body for the first time. Like I haven't been sleeping next to him every night for a month. Jesus. Like I didn't rake my nails up and down it two days ago while he fucked me all over the hotel room in Canada.

I put the bottle on the bench and rub the oil between my hands. My slickened fingers glide over each other effortlessly, which of course makes me think of his promise to own me everywhere, and I can't help but wonder how he'd do it. Would he slide in one finger? Or two? Would he fuck me like

that, make me orgasm on his hand before he slid in his cock? Or would he use a toy? Maybe all of the above.

“You doing okay back there?” Rhett’s low voice has my face heating, and my cheeks flaming with embarrassment.

I nod, like he can see me, even though I know he can’t. If he could, he’d be able to read me like a book and know exactly where my thoughts went. Straight to the gutter. I blow out a breath and hesitantly smooth my hands over the tops of his shoulders. His muscles tense under my touch, but he relaxes more with each stroke, each glide down the expanse of his broad back. Once I have every inch of skin covered, I squirt more oil in my hand and direct him to turn around.

His penetrative gaze has me looking everywhere but at his face. Doesn’t matter though, I can feel his eyes on me. As I work my hands along his chest, down his arms and across his abs. His chest rumbles beneath my fingers, and I ignore him, keeping my eyes trained on his body.

“Lucy.”

“I’m almost done.”

“Dammit, Lucy. Will you look at me?” His voice is low, but laced with a desperation... for me?

I grab a towel, wipe the oil from my hands and finally lift my head. His expression is tight, pinched, but his eyes are soft, more green than brown today, and I find myself hypnotized by them. “I’m finished.”

“Lucy,” he rasps, grabbing my hand and brushing his thumb across my knuckles. “I’m sorry about the other night. What I said. I—”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t even remember any specifics.” I interrupt, my smile fake but firmly in place. Of course, I remember the specifics. When your husband—accidental marriage or not—tells you that you’re no more than an inconvenience, it tends to stick with you. But this is neither the time nor the place to get into it. Not when we have an audience and certainly not when the wound is so fresh.

“Lucy.”

“We’ll talk later.”

He continues to hold my gaze, as if trying to communicate. Like he’s trying to tell me something he can’t or doesn’t dare to put into words. As much as I appreciate his effort, I need more. After being cut down in such a drastic way, being reduced to a nuisance, I need to know that I mean something—anything—to him. A look won’t be enough.

I pull my hand away, letting it fall to my side. Hurt flashes across his face for the briefest second before he pulls his mask back in place. I cant my head toward the guys and this time my smile is sad. “There’s plenty of time to talk later. Right now, you have some photos to take.”

His nod is tight, and he heads to the other side of the locker room without uttering a word. True to mine, I stay put for the entire shoot. Derek and Nick are nothing but professional and

take Rhett's surly behavior in stride, particularly when they ask him to take some individual shots.

I'd like to say I'm a strong woman, able to resist base impulses, but that would be a lie.

The second those hockey pants dip dangerously low on his hips and his arms are up behind his head in a stretch... well, I think I'm dead. My vagina died and then I quickly followed leaving behind two very annoying parents who have greatly overstayed their welcome and a beautiful sister who I'm so proud of.

Pretty sure I stumbled and tripped over my own feet while standing still, eliciting a few laughs from Tag and a heated look from Rhett.

As things wind down, Lincoln and Foster come in for their pictures—which are being taken on the ice—and things get real noisy real quick. Much to my surprise Rhett fits in rather nicely, joking around with Lincoln and slinging his arm around Foster in a way that doesn't look like he wants to choke him. It's surreal watching him become an actual Devil. A member of our little family, and he doesn't even know it. Or at least, he won't admit it.

Which is why I turn and slip out of the locker room with a heavy heart. Until Rhett realizes his worth, we really don't have a chance at a future.

It doesn't matter how either one of us feel.

And that makes it hurt worse.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Rhett

I MEANT TO CATCH Lucy after the shoot and make her talk to me. I'm not sure if she believed me or not, but I really am sorry. As much as I'd like to deny it, she means way more to me than some inconvenience.

Fuck. Lucy is everything and I don't know how to tell her.

I've tried to convey my thoughts with my body. Using my eyes to plead and my body to love, but I'm afraid it won't be enough. Shit. I'm not enough. It's only a matter of time before she realizes that, before I let her down in the worst way and she walks away from me without looking back.

Because let's face facts, that's exactly what Lucy should do. I'm a selfish man so I won't tell her to run away, but I won't pretend to be surprised when she does.

I checked for her around the ice. I checked in the arena offices. I even risked Gordon's look of disappointment when I asked him and Jazz if they'd seen her. Out of options and patience, I head back to my townhouse, only to remember her

parents are still here. Seriously. They were here too long after the second day and don't look like they're ready to leave any time soon.

Her mom isn't bad. She touches my arms a little more than I find comfortable, but it's completely harmless. And she's always pleasant.

Her dad though. He's a full bag of dicks. All he does is sit in my recliner and judge me.

He judges what I eat. How I sit on my couch. When I talk to his wife and even more when I talk to my wife. Every syllable he utters to me is dripping with condescension and disapproval. I get enough of that from my own dad, I really don't need him jumping on the bandwagon.

Which is why when I get home, I put my head down and try to get to my bedroom without interruption. I don't make it too far.

“Rhett. Why don't you join me for a minute.”

Mr. Hurst is not just sitting at my dining room table but dominating it with his power stance—yes, even sitting—laptop and newspaper. I have no doubt it's open to something posher than the sports section. There's no way Mr. Fancy Pants will be caught dead reading that *trash*.

As I approach the table, he shakes out the paper and folds it in front of him. With any luck, Lucy's mom will come out of the guest room and save me from what I'm sure will be a

dumpster fire of a conversation. “Will Mrs. Hurst be joining us?”

“My wife is out with Lucy, Elle, and Chloe and will not be around to save you from this conversation. You may want to sit down.”

I bite back the sarcasm wanting to spew from my mouth and instead give him a tight smile, sitting in the chair across from him. “How can I help you, Mr. Hurst?”

“I’m going to cut to the chase here, Rhett, you are no good for my daughter.”

“Too bad we’re already married.”

“None of us could ever forget about your Las Vegas ‘whirlwind’ wedding.” He on the other hand is not cutting back on the sarcasm, even using finger quotes for emphasis. “You think you’re the first two drunk idiots to get married? Normally people get an annulment after making a huge mistake like that. But no. Not the two of you.”

I lean forward, resting my arms on the table and lacing my fingers together in front of me. “What is it you’re insinuating?”

“I’m insinuating that this marriage is a charade. My wife is eating up this whole song and dance you’re doing, so I applaud you for that, but I’m not fooled by whatever show you’re putting on here. I know Lucy’s trying to make nice to save the both of us from some bad press, but my company will

be fine, we're signing paperwork to close out the merger soon. This doesn't need to keep going."

"You're making a lot of assumptions here, Mr. Hurst."

"Cut the horse shit. Look at you. You play hockey. You're a glorified thug on a pair of skates. You'll never be good enough for my daughter. I've seen pictures of your extracurricular activities online. Don't pretend like my daughter is anything special to you. You go through women like my wife goes through moisturizer. It's only a matter of time before you screw everything up. Just cut your losses while you can. Besides, you can never be what she wants."

He's not right but he's also not wrong. I am going to screw this up eventually but it's really none of his damn business. And who does he think he is to assume he knows anything about Lucy and what she wants? He kicked her out of his life as soon as she passed on his company and decided to live her own life. I know she says they've moved past their issues, but he's done nothing but be unpleasant to her since he got here. He's made no effort to apologize. No effort to bridge the gap between them. Nothing. And he's supposed to be her father.

He can say whatever he wants about me, but how he's been treating Lucy is completely unacceptable. My blood pressure rises, and I can feel my blood start to boil. This guy thinks he's so fucking perfect.

"What do you know about your daughter and what she wants?"

His face turns pink and then darkens to a shade of red before he sputters a few times and spits out. “She’s my daughter.”

“Being her father doesn’t mean you know anything about her. Have you had an actual conversation with her in the past five years? Did you ever really have a conversation that didn’t revolve around your company and the life you wanted her to have?”

“I don’t like your tone, Mr. Remington.”

“And I don’t like how you treat your daughter.” I stand, unclasping my hands, pressing them on the top of the table and leaning forward. “You’ve never once apologized for the hell you put her through. And why? Because she wanted to live her own life. All you do is pick fights with her and all she wants is to repair your relationship. I’m not good enough for Lucy. You know it and newsflash; I know it too. But you know what? Neither are you. She deserves a father who wants her to be happy no matter what she’s doing.” I take a deep breath and stand up straight. “The difference between the two of us? I actually give a fuck what happens to her.”

His mouth gapes as he stares at me with wide eyes. I’m sure he has plenty to say but I don’t care. I don’t give him the opportunity to retort.

I don’t care what he has to say. I’m not the one he needs to be talking to, so I push in my chair, puff out my chest like the fucking beast I am, and make my way to my room.

I'll never be the man she needs, but maybe I can give her the family she deserves.

TWENTY-NINE

Lucy

I'M ASTOUNDED. NEVER DID I think I'd see the day when my dad apologized to me. Not just for what happened years ago, but how he's acted since. How he should've been more of a father. More present. And most importantly how he should've realized he needed to let Elle and me live our lives. Supported us in our decisions and helped us clean up our mistakes.

It doesn't escape my notice that his eyes flick to the other side of the apartment at the word mistake. He might still not approve of my marriage, but at least he's giving me an allowance to live how I want. At least he's trying.

...Or this is a trap?

Either way, I'm stunned. My mom is beside me, staring at him like he has two heads. She obviously didn't know anything about his sudden change of heart and is just as flabbergasted as I am. If you'd asked me an hour ago, I would have bet money that it was more likely I would be abducted by

aliens than that I would ever hear the words ‘I’m sorry’ fall from my father’s lips.

“I better get ready for bed.” He stands, folding his newspaper and tucking it under his arm. He stops in front of me and pulls me in for a hug, patting my back before pulling away. “Maybe you can take us to your sister’s place, and then to the airport on Saturday. As much as I’ve loved spending time with you girls, I think we’ve intruded long enough. Maybe we can plan something this summer for all of us. I hear South America is nice.”

Again, stunned. I stand there, practically a statue, as my dad gives us a nod and heads to the guest room. Once he’s out of sight, I turn to my mom, looking at her with disbelief.

“Did he just apologize for everything?”

“He did.” She nods, flipping her curled blonde hair over her shoulder, still staring after him even though he’s already disappeared.

“Did you say something?”

“I’ve been saying something to him for the past five years, and it’s never done a lick of good. You know your father. He won’t listen to anyone once he’s made up his mind.” Mom shakes her head and follows his trail to the guest room.

She says he won’t listen to anyone once he’s made up his mind, but he obviously did. Or else, why the sudden change? There’s no way I believe he just woke up from bed this

morning and thought, *Hey, I'm going to make up with Lucy today after years of being a prick.*

Someone said something. They had to. That's the only explanation that makes sense.

When I walk into our bedroom, I find Rhett lounging against the headboard with his legs stretched out and a book in his hand. He's wearing a pair of black joggers and a gray Devil's tee. He's looking casual. Too casual.

"Did you say anything to my dad?"

"Like?" His response is quick, snarky per usual, and he doesn't lift his eyes from the page.

I close the door behind me and lean against the dresser, crossing my arms. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe a little something about his crappy behavior for the past several years."

"Doesn't sound like something I would do."

"No?"

"Nope." He shakes his book, his eyes flicking to me for a brief second. "If you don't mind. I'm trying to read. I'm sure your dad decided to apologize on his own."

Oh, this man. He tries too hard not to bring attention to anything good he does. "I didn't say he apologized."

"Hmmm."

"And he *never* changes his mind. And he *never* admits he was wrong."

“Strange.”

“And you had nothing to do with it?”

“Not a thing. Now if you don’t mind, I’m almost to the end.”

When he fluffs the book like a damn newspaper, I realize what he’s reading. A special edition signed copy of my favorite vampire smut. One that’s crawling with page after page of dirty vampire sex. “Oh my God, stop reading that book.”

He clutches it to his chest and gasps. “This is my new favorite book. It’s giving me lots of ideas.” Rhett bookmarks the page with an actual bookmark (I couldn’t be more proud) and smirks. “I didn’t know you were such a dirty girl.”

“Did you read the whole thing?”

“Yep.” He smiles, that damn dimple popping out to kill me. “I don’t have a fountain to recreate that first scene for you, but I can eat your pussy on the edge of the bathtub if you’d like. I don’t think we need to be too exact, especially because you’re no virgin.”

“Rhett!”

“Not that there’s anything wrong with that. I had a question about the blood exchange though. Do you think something like that really heightens the sexual experience?” The way he looks at me, that naughty glint in his eyes, has me locking the door rather quickly and running over to his side of the bed to gently rip the book from his hands.

He shifts on the bed, lifting his shirt to run a lazy hand up and down his abs, and continuing like he's not putting himself on display or setting me on fire. "I have to say I really identify with August and this whole possessive thing he has going on. I just don't get why they take so long to get together. Clearly they were into each other."

"It increases the sexual tension." Just like he's doing trailing his damn fingers over every abdominal ridge.

"If I knew you were into some of this, I would've picked up a few different things for you at the store." Rhett moves his other hand along the stubbled edge of his jaw as he hums to himself. "I'm afraid what I got you might be too cutesy."

Interest peaked, I put the book down on the nightstand and sit down next to him on the bed. "You got me something?"

"It's a little naughty."

Which of course has my mind racing with the possibilities. Lingerie? Vibrator? Lube? My face heats, and I bite my bottom lip as he reaches around me to pull a velvet bag from his nightstand drawer.

"I thought we could try a few new things." Damn, the dimple again. That sexy little dimple as his smile grows, and he pulls out a silver butt plug with a pink jewel on the end of it and a bottle of lube. My heart hammers at the thought of him using it on me. Of it being in me.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. "Is that...?"

"Going in your ass? Yes."

A shiver works its way down my body, filling me with a wicked thrill I've never felt before. Especially with him being so casual like we're discussing what we're having for dinner. It's my ass for fuck's sake. Not a plate of spaghetti. Yet I want it; the plug, not the pasta. I want to feel his hands all over me. I want him to dribble the lube down the crack of my ass.

And fuck me, I want him to push his finger inside me, branding me like no man has done before, and then push in the plug. Stretching me. Making me his.

“What else do you have in there?” I croak, my mouth going dry.

He raises a brow, but pulls out a wand. It's hot pink and bigger than the one I had that stopped charging last year. “I don't want to scare you, but I also have these.” He reaches down and pulls up a light-pink wrist cuff attached to a black rope that disappears under the bed. “What do you think, sweetheart? Do you trust me?”

I nod, shifting on the bed as my clit aches. I don't know what it is about Rhett, but I want him to dominate me. Pleasure me. Use me.

“Good girl,” he whispers in my ear, pushing up from the bed and pulling off his shirt. “Now take off your clothes and get on your knees.”

I'm quick to comply, ripping everything off and tossing it in a pile on the floor. Watching Rhett grab the cuff from the other side of the bed, I crawl back on the mattress and lean back on my heels, waiting. The bed dips as Rhett comes up behind me

and after pressing a light kiss to my cheek, puts a hand on my back and pushes me down to the mattress. I let out a low moan as his body folds over mine and his hands run along my left arm. He fastens the wrist cuff around my wrist and then repeats the process on the other side. I give the cuffs a tentative pull. I can move my arms enough to prop myself up, but no more.

Rhett's at my ear, sweeping my hair to the side, and running a hand down my spine. "I want to make one thing very clear. I'm in charge now. Of you. Of your pleasure. You do what I say, when I say it. Is that understood?"

Oh.

My.

God.

Yes please.

THIRTY

Rhett

I'VE NEVER SEEN LUCY look as beautiful as she does right now. Naked and tied to my bed, her ass up and ready for me. Whimpering softly as my hands caress the length of her body. Over her perky breasts. Pinching her peaked nipples. Rubbing the cheeks of her ass.

She groans and pulls against her bonds as I run a finger along her slit. Soaked.

I move back up her body to offer her the finger that was just inside her, and she sucks it greedily into her mouth. The way her tongue wraps around the tip, cleaning my finger of her juices, I almost lose it. She's sucking it like she would my dick, and I want nothing more than to feed it to her, but I resist. There'll be plenty of time for that later.

Right now, I want to see how ready she is for me.

I smooth my thumbs down the crack of her ass and spread her cheeks, my gaze zeroing in on her virgin hole. The one I'm going to own in a few minutes. My eyes lower, I knew she was

wet for me, but fuck, she's dripping. Needy. Quivering. Waiting me to fill her. Claim her.

Lucy arches as I turn on the massaging wand, lowering the settings just a little bit so I don't get her off too quick. I'm in the mood to play. I run it down her spine, tease the inside of her thighs, and lightly press the pulsating tip to her clit. She yips and jerks her hips before settling back against the toy, rocking herself into it.

Her cries and whimpers have me desperate to get inside her. Feel her tight pussy wrapped around me, squeezing the life out of me. Taking me to a heaven I didn't even know existed. My cock is straining against the soft material of the joggers, impatient. Just as eager as I am.

"That's it, sweetheart." I move the toy back and forth, teasing her, and she bucks against it. "Fuck this toy. Fuck it like you would my face."

She responds with a groan, moving her hips, grinding herself against the toy. I grab the lube and nudge her legs further apart, dribbling it down the crack of her ass and loving the way it disappears between her cheeks. After tossing the bottle back on the bed, I trail my finger through the lube, gathering up the slickness and rubbing her puckered hole. Lucy tenses and stills.

I lean forward and kiss along the base of her spine, biting and licking along the smooth expanse of skin. "Relax, sweetheart. You've got to let me in. I'll make it feel good for

you. So good.” I continue to rub circles around her hole until her muscles loosen, and she pushes against me. “Good girl.”

I push forward, breaching the tight ring while Lucy buries her face in the mattress and cries out. She clenches around me, fighting me, as I bury my finger to the first knuckle.

“Oh, God.” She groans, pulling on the cuffs and pressing her face further into the bed.

She’s so tight, her ass gripping my finger like the sweetest vice. Holy fuck when I get to sink my dick inside her snug asshole, I’m never going to want to leave. That or I’m going to orgasm within seconds and embarrass myself.

I draw my finger back and put more pressure on the toy, holding it directly to her clit. Her hips buck again as I push forward, this time sinking in further before I withdraw again and continue to fuck her with my finger. Nice and slow then building up to a quicker pace. She rocks between the toy and my hand as her thighs shake. Her cries become louder, more strangled. She grips my finger, convulsing around me and shaking until her orgasm subsides.

Removing the wand, I turn it off and cast it aside, grabbing the plug, and covering it with lube. I smooth a hand down her back and grip her hips, slowly driving the plug all the way into her ass. My chest swells, seeing my plug inside her. The pink jewel twinkling in the dim light of the evening moon.

Something about being the first to touch her like this, to see her like this, and knowing she trusts me enough to give me this part of herself... It sets something off deep inside me, this

protective instinct to give her everything I have. Everything I am.

I crawl up her body, kissing and licking as I make my way up her neck and nibbling below her ear. “How do you feel, Lucy?”

“Full.” She wiggles beneath me, rubbing herself against my cock, and I bite back a moan. She takes in a deep breath and then another. “But I want more. I want you.”

“I’m going to fuck you so hard, so deep, you’ll feel me everywhere.” I grip her hair at the nape of her neck, force her head back, and crash my lips to hers. I lick into her mouth, tangle my tongue with hers and kiss her with a desperation only she’s made me feel. I pull back, biting down on her lower lip, and tugging on it with my teeth.

She’s everything. My world. My hopes. My dreams.

I push the top half of her body back down and line myself up with her entrance. I grip her hips, my fingers digging into her skin as I thrust forward, burying myself inside her. She’s so fucking tight with the plug. She feels so good. So mine. She’s destroying me bit by bit. Inch by inch.

This woman owns me.

Lucy lets out a long groan, and I start to move. Plunging into her at a measured pace, giving her time to adjust to both me and the plug.

“Fuck, Rhett. Fuck.”

I tap the back of the plug and increase my pace, my pelvis slapping into her backside with every stroke. “Such a good girl.”

My name is a whimper on her lips as I continue to fuck her, slamming into her, bruising her waist with my grip. Her tight pussy quivers around me, and my balls tighten with the need to release. She pushes back against me, meeting me with everything thrust. I wrap my hand back in her hair and pull her head back, making her back arch and her neck crane as she peers back at me.

Her eyes mirror everything I feel. Lust. Desperation. Want. Desire. Overcome with the feel of each other, this connection. Drowning in an emotion that runs below the surface and threatens to consume us both.

My heart hammers, and I know I’m close, but I’m determined not to come alone. I reach around her, strumming her clit with my fingers, pinching it between them and losing myself in her cries. I fuck her faster, staring into her baby blue eyes. She’s destroying me with every sigh, every moan, every fucking whimper. She’s everything I need.

Lucy’s body shakes and her pussy clenches around my cock. I increase the pressure on her clit, and she cries out and pulses around me. Grabbing me so damn tightly, I jerk and empty inside her.

I still and release her hair, resting my forehead on her shoulder before kissing her damp skin. Worshiping her body like it’s a sacred temple, and I’m nothing but a lifelong sinner.

With one last kiss, I reach up and release her wrists from the cuffs, curling my body around hers and pulling her to my chest. Lucy snuggles into me with a sigh, and we lay there until our breathing slows, and my heart no longer feels like it's going to bust out of my chest.

I smooth a hand over her hair and peer down at her, gliding my hand down to trail along her back. Looking at her, laying in my arms like she belongs there has my chest tightening with a foreign emotion. She doesn't just look like she belongs there. She *does* belong there. "Lucy."

"I know, Rhett. I know." She tilts her head and captures my lips in a kiss. It's sweet, soulful, and tells me everything I can't put into words.

This woman slays me.

Maybe, just maybe, there's a chance I can keep her.

THIRTY-ONE

Lucy

“ARE YOU SURE YOU don’t want to get me a snake to keep at your house?” Chloe presses my mom.

Again.

I think at this point she realizes her Uncle Tag is never going to allow her to have anything other than a stuffed snake at their place, and she’s scrambling to find a pet snake by proxy. She hasn’t figured out my mom, the quintessential role model of the Savannah elite, is NOT going to allow a snake in her house. Pet or no.

To my mom’s credit, she doesn’t scrunch up her nose or look as aghast as I know she feels. “I don’t think I’ve got the space for a snake.”

“But you can get a small one. They don’t need much room. And it’s real fun to watch them eat. Sometimes they play with their food.”

Tag blanches behind her. Elle covers her mouth with her hand and coughs to hide her laughter. My parents take a step

back like there's an actual snake on the floor ready to pounce.

"We better get going." My dad looks at his watch and then taps it for emphasis. "We don't want to miss our flight."

As my parents hug Chloe and say their goodbyes, Elle pulls me beside her and loops her arm through mine. "Not that I'm complaining, but how the hell did you get them to agree to leave?"

"Seriously," Tag interjects with a whisper, sticking his head between us and resting his chin on my shoulder. "I didn't think they were ever going to go."

I shake my head as Chloe pulls out of the hug with my mom and makes one more snake plea.

"I didn't say anything. I think Rhett did, but he won't admit to saying anything. Dad even apologized for basically disowning me."

Tag and Elle both turn to me wearing matching expressions of shock.

"He told me he was happy with how my life was turning out, and that he supported my choices. I didn't know what to say. I thought he had too much whiskey," Elle murmurs in a rush. "You better call me later, we need to catch up."

"You got it." I give her and Tag a quick hug before they say goodbye to our parents. "Chloe." I give her little fist a bump. "I'll be seeing you next week to watch the game."

Her smile is wide and genuine. "Don't forget your jersey, Lucy."

“I won’t.” Especially now that I have my very own player to support. No more generic Devil’s jerseys for me, though Elle very helpfully suggested I wear one with Benson emblazoned across the back.

I boop Chloe’s nose and with a wave, follow my parents out the door and back into my car. The ride to the airport is relatively quiet. Oddly quiet. I think I’m still waiting for the other shoe to drop. I’m not sure what to do with this new, more understanding version of my parents.

My mother doesn’t even have any criticism for the city of Nashville. Not a word about the dry air or the hustle of the city. Nothing. It’s not until I pull into the airport terminal that my dad breaks out of his reprieve.

“Thanks for letting us stay with you.”

“Not a problem,” I answer with a tight smile, getting out of the car to help them get their bags out of the trunk.

My dad grabs his suitcase and peers down at me, his mouth set in a straight line. “I’m not going to lie and say that I like your husband because I don’t. I can tell you care about each other, but I hope you didn’t find yourself stuck in this marriage situation on my account. This merger is on me, not you to try and fix things for me. In fact, they want to sign papers as soon as we get back. You have a nice life here, and I don’t want you to mess it up because of some jackass. I worry about you.”

My heart stutters as emotion swells in my chest. That little girl inside me who craved Daddy’s attention is preening. Even if he still doesn’t like my husband, the fact that he wants to

support me and my choices means the world to me. Maybe we can finally move past the civilities and the awkwardness and be a family once again.

Mom hums to herself and grabs her carryon. “I like him. I don’t care what your father says.”

“You like everyone,” my father growls.

“I promise, Dad, you have nothing to worry about. My marriage is real.” *Mostly.* “And I intend to stay married to Rhett.” *If I can convince him to give this a try. Give me a chance.*

“I really am sorry about my behavior. When you told me you didn’t want to take over the company, I took it too far. Acted too harshly. You girls are the most important thing to me, and I know I haven’t always acted that way. I thought I knew what was best for you and didn’t allow you to make your own decisions. I love you.”

“I love you, Dad. Thanks. It’s really nice to hear that.” I nod and pull him in for a tight hug. Then I turn and wrap my arms around my mom. “Love you too, Mom.”

“Love you, Lucy Darling.” My mom pats my cheek with a smile. “I’ll call you when we land.”

With one more quick hug, they’re gone, and I’m driving back to the penthouse, lost in thought. There’s zero doubt in my mind that Rhett and my dad had a conversation.

What I don’t get is why he refuses to talk to his own father and try to fix their broken relationship. If family weren’t

important to him, he wouldn't keep his brother and sister so close to his chest. And he definitely wouldn't have given a shit about the problems between my dad and me.

So, why doesn't he say anything? Why does he let his dad call week after week just to spew garbage all over him?

I don't get it. And he won't tell me, not until he's good and ready. All I know is that something bad—like I'm talking next-level bad—happened between them.

I know we've grown closer the past couple days; I swear I can feel some of the chinks in the armor around his heart falling away. Bit by bit, he's making himself available to me, but I've yet to get all the pieces of him. He's still holding back. Something is keeping him locked away, protecting him from hurt, and keeping him from loving like I know he could.

Like I could possibly... well, you know. Fuck. We're both messes. Epic messes.

I pull into the parking lot and when I get out of the car notice a visibly pregnant girl pacing outside the elevator. She's not someone I recognize from the other apartments, or at least I haven't seen her before, and she looks somewhat distraught. She wrings her hands as she stomps back and forth, her eyes darting to every shadowed corner. Her dark hair is pulled to a ponytail cascading over one shoulder and the closer I get the more I can see the tension written all over her face.

“Can I help you?”

She jumps at the sound of my voice, stopping in her tracks and spinning around. “Sorry. I was waiting for someone. He lives in the penthouse, and I don’t know how to get in. It looks like you need a code.”

My heart jumps in my throat and for a second, I can’t breathe. As far as I know, there’s only one penthouse which means...

There’s a pregnant girl wandering in the parking garage looking for my husband. A girl he’s never told me about, but he’s good at keeping secrets. Good at locking things away, this I know for a fact.

Or maybe... he doesn’t even know....

No, that doesn’t make any sense. If he didn’t know who she was, she wouldn’t know how to find him and clearly that’s not the case. So, maybe she’s an old fling, and he doesn’t know she’s pregnant. That would explain why she looks so apprehensive.

“I know it’s stupid, but I wanted to surprise him.” She glances to the ground, scuffing her feet along the pavement.

I swallow down the bitter resentment threatening to spew from my mouth. Resentment at this girl for having a piece of Rhett that I may never have. That she knows him well enough to want to surprise him. Does he even like surprises? I take a deep breath and fake my best southern smile. “Rhett Remington?”

Her smile is wide and twists my insides up in knots. “Yep. But I don’t know when he’ll be out of practice.”

She even knows he has practice today.

“I’m heading up. You could come with me and keep me company while we wait for him to get home.” My smile is getting tighter and tighter. I don’t want this woman who’s clearly been sent to wreck my life to come up and hang out with me, but I can’t in good conscience leave a pregnant woman alone in the parking garage. Is it relatively safe? Yes, it is. Despite that, if something were to happen to her, anything at all, I would hold myself responsible. Damn southern sense of hospitality and responsibility.

“Are you sure?” She looks at me, her dark green eyes brimming with unshed tears. “That’s so nice of you to offer.”

I nod, but before I can open my mouth Rhett pulls into the garage and scrambles to get out of the car. His eyes are wide as he looks between us and when they connect with mine, I can see the panic written in them clear as day.

“Glad you made it back. I was just about to bring *your friend* up to the apartment.” He flinches at my words but doesn’t say a thing. Just ambles his big body over to where we stand and stops in front of us, grabbing a suitcase I failed to notice off to the side of the elevator.

He nods to the woman, and she smiles back but neither one of them offer me her name or any kind of explanation as to exactly what the fuck is going on here.

As he nudges us into the elevator, my blood begins to boil, and I can feel the anger swirling in the pit of my stomach replacing the dread that was there five minutes ago. His vow of silence continues the entire way to the top of the building, and I think I might explode. My blood pressure is climbing with every floor we pass.

Rhett gaze flicks to mine before settling on the stranger. “What are you doing in Tennessee? Did you fly here alone?”

So, she’s from his past. From Los Angeles. Is she an old girlfriend? A one-night stand? Did they have some sort of friends with benefits arrangement?

He’s not at all surprised that she’s pregnant. If anything, he looks concerned at her well-being. *Oh God. He knew.*

He fucking knew and didn’t say a word even though he’s had weeks to tell me. Even if he didn’t trust me in the beginning, he should have said something when we started getting closer. When we started having feelings.

When *I* started having feelings. I’m obviously the only one.

“I wanted to surprise you.” She shrugs like it’s no big deal. Like every word out of her mouth isn’t destroying me piece by piece. “I was worried.”

“As you can see, I’m fine.” Rhett turns back to me and sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Lucy, I’m gonna need you to take a deep breath before you explode. Don’t tell me you’re not because I can see it all over your face. This is my sister. Avery.”

Just like that, I deflate. The anger and indignation pouring out and leaving me with a sour taste in my mouth. In a sense, I'm relieved that Rhett doesn't have a child with a random woman, but this still stings. He kept his sister and her condition from me and judging by the pained look on his face, he planned on keeping this a secret.

That tells me all I need to know. This relationship is a complete sham. It's completely one-sided, and I'm nothing but a fool to think otherwise.

"Lucy?" Avery squeals, her eyes widen with recognition, and she pulls me in for a very tight hug. "I've heard so much about you."

"I wish I could say the same. Your brother isn't the sharing type." I mumble, stepping back and taking off my suit jacket.

She rounds on Rhett and points an accusatory finger right at his face. "You didn't tell her anything?" Her forehead wrinkles and her brows crash together. "You didn't tell her about me?"

"No." Is all he says before he heads into the kitchen and grabs an apple from the bowl of fruit I put out this morning.

"What about Heath? Mom? Dad?"

"No." He takes a bite of apple, watching us as he chews.

Avery grabs her suitcase and trails after him, leaving it beside the kitchen. "What's wrong with you? She's your wife, Rhett. I think she deserves to know about your family. About your life."

I plant my hands on my hips and the look I give Rhett would destroy most men. Of course he doesn't seem at all affected. He just tilts his head to the side and raises a brow.

Yep, completely unaffected. And why would he be, if this relationship of ours is completely fucking fake.

“My husband doesn't share a thing except his bed. I don't know if it's me he can't trust or people in general.”

“Lucy.” There's a strain in his voice, a gravely quality.

“I'm a little sick of you shutting me out. I told you my story.” My voice rises with every word. “I let you into my life and you can't even tell me about your family.”

He laughs, a dead, hollow sound without feeling. “I think our stories are a little different. Our experiences don't even compare. Yeah, your dad was shitty. He did a bad thing, but it's nothing compared to what I had to live with.”

“And what was that? I can't pretend to understand if you don't tell me.” My hands cut through the air.

Rhett looks to his sister who steps back and shrugs, her gaze volleying between us. He slams the apple on the counter, and it rolls to the floor with a thud, anger rolling off him in waves. “What do you want to know, Lucy? You want me to tell you that my father used to beat me every day? That I lived most of my life covered in welts and bruises? That I'm an utter fuckin' disappointment to everyone around me, always have been, including the both of you?”

“Rhett—”

“No, don’t even go there. This right here.” He points to my face before curling his fists at his side. “This is why I didn’t say anything. I don’t want you to look at me like you are right now. I don’t need your pity and your sweet words telling me that everything will be okay. I know what I am. I know who I am and nothing you say is going to change that.”

“Oh, come on—” Avery takes a few steps toward him but he shakes her off and darts around her.

“Rhett, we need to talk about this. You can’t just drop this on me and run off.” My voice wavers as I start in his direction.

Rhett cuts me off in my tracks, pinning me with a hardened glare and freezing me in place. “You guys want to talk, I’m not going to stop you, but I’m not going to stay here and listen to this bullshit. I’m going to meet the guys. Don’t wait up.”

Before either of us can say a word, he’s gone, leaving Avery and I staring after him. Both of us likely wondering what the hell just happened.

I knew his relationship with his dad wasn’t good, but I didn’t think it was that bad. I couldn’t imagine growing up like that. Being beaten by the very person you’re supposed to trust, who’s supposed to protect you. No wonder he thinks he’ll only let us all down. That’s a heavy burden to carry around by yourself.

“He blames himself, you know.” Avery shuffles over to me and waves to her stomach. “For letting this happen to me. I don’t think he realizes that while things may have started out

on a negative note, I'm happy about it. He fixates on the bad and prepares for the worst.”

“What do you mean, he blames himself?” I hedge, sitting down at the table and offering her a seat.

She flops down and eyes me with sad hazel eyes, the same at Rhett's. I should have seen the similarities earlier, but I was blinded by my own insecurities. They even have the same dark brown hair, although hers is a little thicker and more naturally wavy.

She scrubs a hand down her face before resting it on her belly. “About five months ago I started dating one of his teammates on the Stars. And by dating, I mean we had a casual thing, nothing serious.”

“No judgment. We've all been there.”

“Well, we weren't always careful and then this happened.” She chuckles and slouches down in the chair. “Needless to say he wasn't pleased with our situation. He offered me a pretty hefty check to take care of things and told me to let him know when the problem was gone.”

I gasp, horrified that this guy not only had the audacity to tell her what to do to her body, but felt comfortable acting like he wasn't a contributing factor. “Wow. What a dick.”

“That's what I thought. I wrestled with myself for a couple weeks and then realized he didn't make the decisions for me. I wanted to keep the baby, didn't matter what he wanted.”

I lean forward on the table, resting my elbows on the surface. “What does this have to do with Rhett? You seem like a pretty capable woman to me, but I’m assuming big brother doesn’t think so.”

She gives me a look. “He’ll always think of me as his baby sister. Someone he has to protect. He’s been doing it for as long as I remember. When our dad would get drunk and start looking for a punching bag, Rhett always made sure he was the one who was found, and my brother and I were safe. He would literally sacrifice himself to make sure we were unharmed.”

No wonder Rhett has issues with his dad a mile long. I can’t even fathom living with the pain, the burden, the guilt for so long. This is his shame, and he wants to carry it alone. He wants to be the only one to suffer because it’s what he’s always done.

Rhett Remington would take on the world if it protected those he loved.

“Holy shit,” I muse, blowing out a long breath.

“Yeah. It was bad. He blames himself for letting his teammate touch me. He thinks it’s his fault I’m in this position to begin with. And now that I’m here alone...”

“And the fight with Ron Cooper?” I knew the answer before I asked, knew he had to be the father. Nothing else could have provoked Rhett to fight with his own teammate midseason. His reputation was nowhere near impeccable but he kept his fights out of the locker room.

“He’s the dad. I told him about the money and how he wanted me to get an abortion. And then Ron was in the locker room later that day bragging about some chick he picked up at a bar the night before. Rhett lost it.”

“Holy shit,” I repeat, awed.

The fight, his attitude, all of it. Rhett will deny it, but he’s got a savior complex. He will put himself in harm’s way over and over again, despite the consequences, simply because he has this need to protect everyone around him. Even if it costs him his career. His flesh. His soul.

He’s been shouldering everything by himself for so long that he doesn’t know how to lean on anyone else. He’s too blind to realize I’d fight right beside him. Hell, I’d fight for him because God knows that man won’t fight for himself. He’d offer himself on a silver platter whether the sins were his or not.

Now I have to figure out how to get through to my thick-headed husband and show him that he’s worth it. That he’s not the disappointment he thinks he is.

“Well.” I stand, tapping the table. “I knew your brother wasn’t going to do anything the easy way. Regardless of his attitude at the moment, he and I are here for you and whatever you need.”

“Thank you. With these two knucklehead brothers, I’ve always wanted a sister. I haven’t had a good girl talk in ages.”

“I’ve got you covered there. Just ask Rhett, I can talk for days without taking a breath.”

She smiles, raising her brows up and down. “You can start by telling me all about your wedding and how you got my brother to the altar.”

I nod, chuckling as I stand. “Let me show you to the guest room so you can unpack and then we’ll have ice cream and gossip.”

“I knew I liked you.”

THIRTY-TWO

Rhett

AS SOON AS I walk into Whiskey and Rye, I know I've made a mistake. I should've stayed home and talked to Lucy like an adult instead of running off like a child at the first sign of trouble.

It's not like we haven't fought before. In fact, we used to fight regularly—you know, before we were married and I thought she was a Barbie demon sent from Hell strictly to make me miserable.

Some days I still think that's what she is... but instead of making me miserable, most days she's just a walking temptation. Her sassy attitude and those baby blues that cut right through me are like a sin I want to commit, all wrapped up in a perfectly pink dress.

And I walked away.

Because I'm an idiot.

Even though I haven't been completely terrible at this whole husband thing, there are some things I still need to work on.

Obviously.

Because now I look like a fucking asshole. I didn't tell her my sister was pregnant. Or that the father of said baby is the very same former teammate I beat up before I was traded. Or about my fucked-up childhood. How I grew up under my father's fists and occasionally his belt. How I suffered—oh, did I suffer. How I still suffer with every single phone call from my father.

I don't look like the asshole; I *am* the asshole.

“Hey Grumpy Pants,” Tag calls out, waving me over to where half the team is seated around a group of tables. “Glad you could make it.”

I give him a tight nod and a grunt, pulling out a chair and sitting between him and Foster. I made it, but I'm not sure about how glad I am. I know I should say hello, talk with the guys for a few minutes and leave, but the welcoming smiles have me leaning back against my chair.

You couldn't pay me enough to admit this out loud, but the team has really grown on me. It wasn't that I disliked my old teammates, but I never spent time with them unless it was mandatory. Never wanted to. There's something about these guys and the way they welcomed me in, despite my poor behavior. They aren't just coming to work and going home. No one is going through the motions because they're getting paid to.

These guys actually like each other. They're brothers by choice. By circumstance.

And I'm starting to feel like they could be mine too.

Foster passes me a glass of pale ale with a wink. "He looks grumpier now than when he left practice. Did you get in a fight with the Mrs.?"

I grunt again and take a generous sip of beer. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I'm going to take that as a yes."

"Take it however you want it, Bond." I'm normally not one for nicknames but this one the Bruiser Brothers gave him irks him, so I make an exception.

"I wonder who won. My money is on Lucy. I've seen her mad." Owen smiles at us from across the table.

"Somehow I don't think seeing an angry woman is an uncommon occurrence for you," Foster says with a laugh.

"They don't always like facing the reality in the morning."

"And what's that, Owen? That you have a small knob?"

Owen rolls his eyes and gestures to his nether regions. "Don't pretend like we don't all shower together. And no. They don't always like being shown the door even though I'm upfront before we hook up."

"You're such a gentleman," I scoff. "Most women don't want to be treated like your dirty laundry once you're done having your fun."

"Which is why I never spent the night. That way I never had to deal with leaving in the AM," Tag chimes in, running a hair

through his hair.

“How did that work for you, Harris?” Dimitri Kozak, the Ukrainian goalie, calls out from the table next to us, his accent stronger after a few beers. He elicits a laugh from a few of the rookies and second stringers, and a frown from my long-haired friend formerly known as Bag. Hag. Nag. Rag. Gag.

“Why don’t you mind your business over there? Don’t make me tell the waitress what you said about her... What was it? Dump truck?” Tag looks between him and the tall leggy lady behind the bar with short spiky pink hair.

Dimitri slides down in his chair and starts talking to the rookie next to him. Probably a smart choice because that waitress looks like she would slap the shit out of someone for talking about her ass—compliment or no.

“Speaking of.” I cross my arm and raise a brow, my gaze settling back on Tag. “Where’s your girlfriend tonight?”

“She’s at the house with Chloe,” he answers instantly, totally missing my implications.

“Not that one.”

The little divot between his eyebrows deepens as he stares at me until it dawns on him, and he lets out a chuckle. “Oh, Linc. His mom came to visit so he’s having a family dinner with Jazz and Gordon. I didn’t get invited.”

“Me either.” Ian shakes his head. “Damn shame too. I think we were promised a pancake breakfast served by Benson himself. I’m still waiting.”

“I don’t think our owner is going to be serving me pancakes anytime soon.” I take a sip of my beer and shift in the seat.

Foster nudges me with his elbow, a crooked smile across his face. “I think he’d rather stab you with a butter knife. He had his eye on Lucy as soon as she tottered into the arena in those high heels of hers.”

I instantly bristle, sitting up a little taller in the chair, squaring my shoulders, but then I look down at the ring on my left hand and relax. She may not have chosen me, but I have her just the same.

Ian and Owen both open their mouths but quickly close them at the rise of voices coming up from the back of the bar. I turn around and sigh. The fucking football players. A whole table full of them.

My brother’s one so I feel like I can say this: they’re loud and obnoxious. Plus, they think they play the better, more manly sport and clearly that is false.

Heath is also under this delusion.

I didn’t even notice them come in, but judging by the large amount of empty beer bottles and shot glasses, they’ve been here a while. And now that their season is over, they don’t have any reason why they shouldn’t stay out all night.

Except maybe to keep themselves from doing something stupid and ending up on the front of the gossip rags.

Or is that just me?

The only two I recognize are Gunner Rose and Ryan Devlin. Both with their fair share of endorsements, underwear ads, and cockiness. Definitely no pun intended.

They're off to the side chatting up a table of ladies while the rest of the guys are high fiving like it's the nineties. I'm about to turn around when a few of them—the beefy, not so smart looking ones, probably the defensive lineman—get up and head our way. Or rather, start to walk around us to get to a couple of hot waitresses behind the bar.

Tag mutters something under his breath and as he leans forward to sip from his beer, one of the football guys knocks into him and it spills down the front of his shirt. As he jumps back and pulls his damp shirt away from his chest, my gaze—along with the rest of the table—flicks up to the football players.

They smile at each other, these little smirks that tell me whatever they're about to say is going to cause trouble.

Trouble I can't afford to get in. Not tonight. Not when I've promised my wife I wouldn't get into any fights outside the arena. Not when her job and my reputation are both at stake.

But these guys don't seem to care. The one closest to Tag is the first one to open his mouth. "Sorry, I didn't think they let hockey pussy into this bar."

"We've been itching all night for a fight, little girl. Why don't you show us what hockey players are made of."

The chair clatters to the floor as Tag stands up and squares off with the first guy. They size each other up. Doing the delicate dance where neither one is actually touching the other. But it's not this guy I'm watching. It's the other guy who's taking advantage of the distraction and cocking back his fist to make the first strike.

Too bad I don't like cheap shots.

I may or may not like Tag, but I won't tolerate a sneak attack.

I only hope I can end this before it starts.

THIRTY-THREE

Rhett

I'VE MANAGED TO FUCK up everything Lucy's done to improve my image since we've been married in a matter of minutes. No seconds.

About thirty of them.

I know because there's a little television across the room replaying the cell footage of my fist connecting with that meathead's face over and over again. Afterwards, all hell breaks loose at the bar and some good Samaritan caught it all on camera.

Oh, and just in case you were wondering, it looks as bad in slow motion as it did in real time. Only, when you play the fight back slow enough, I'm pretty sure you can hear my career and my marriage being thrown directly into the garbage and being lit on fire.

"Sorry about your face." Ryan glances over at me and sinks down on the bench. The bench running along the side of the

fucking jail cell where we're waiting for someone to bail us out.

I grunt, cross my arms over my chest, and continue to watch my reputation go down in flames. My aching jaw and busted lip are the least of my worries.

When we were sitting back at the bar, minding our own business, I saw the look in Bronson's eye when he knocked into Tag. I knew the fucker did it on purpose. I knew he was itching for a fight. And I just fucking knew he was going to get us all in trouble. I did not, however, imagine for a second that we'd end up in jail.

I figured we'd get tossed out of the bar or something.

But no.

You take a couple big-ass football players with way too much testosterone and combine them with hockey rookies with more heart than sense and well... you have a fucking mess. Why? Because alcohol clouds judgment. And I'll be the first to admit that most hockey players have more balls than brains. Seems the same thing goes for football players.

It was only a matter of seconds between the two defensive linemen, Bronson and Teagan, knocking into Tag and everyone thinking they were extras on *Wrestle Mania*. The rookies were itching for a fight. The football guys weren't backing down and before the big one's fist landed on Tag's face, I knocked him on his ass.

I was defending my teammate. The brother I never wanted and the brother-in-law I almost had. But it doesn't matter. That's not how it looks. One damn video.

That was all it took.

And now I'm the cause of the whole thing. The entire damn fight rests in my lap, and I only have myself to blame.

"Did anyone get to make a call?" Foster pushes himself to his feet and paces the length of the cell. "Don't you guys get a phone call in America?"

"I called someone." That's all Tag says as he leans forward and with a dramatic sigh, drops his head in his hands. His tone is flat. Defeated. Not like Tag at all.

Gunner chuckles and then winces and puts a hand up to his cheek where a bruise is darkening under his eye. "I hope they have a big ass car for all of us."

"What makes you think we're bailing you out of jail with us? You lot started it." Foster points at Gunner and Ryan, who glance at each other before looking back at Foster, both with their eyebrows nearly in their hairlines. "Your guy bumped into Tag first." Foster continues pacing and then adds, "We just threw the first punch."

"That's fair." Gunner nods his head and pauses. "How much trouble do you think we're going to get in for all this?"

He's the star quarterback for the Aces. He doesn't have to worry. Not like me. I've been trying not to think about it since

they slapped the handcuffs around my wrists. This is the last straw for me. The end of the road.

Gordon has no reason to keep me on the team. He gave me one last chance to prove that I belong, that I can follow the rules, and I blew it. Like my dad always says, I'm a poison. Eroding and destroying anything good. This brotherhood I found with the Devils. My position on the team. Lucy.

I've tainted it all.

Lucy and I were living on borrowed time. I knew the end would come eventually, but I thought I had some more time before I had to let her go.

It's for the best though. This latest news release won't bode well for her either. Her job was on the line the second she said, 'I do'. The job that took care of her when her family kicked her out. The job she loves. Being with me will cost her everything.

Not to mention I broke another one of our rules and probably shattered whatever trust we had left.

I know we agreed to stay married until the end of the season, but she might have a fighting chance at staying employed if I end things early. As much as it pains me. As much as I'll miss her. As much as the thought of losing her is worse than losing a limb. It's for the best.

Maybe if she puts as much distance between us as she can, she might be able to keep her job. And then find someone

better than me. Someone who deserves her because God knows I never did.

“Who did you call?” Ian asks, breaking the silence.

Tag raises his head and the pitying look he sends me has my stomach flipping and filling with dread. I’m frozen in place, gripping the bench for dear life as he utters the name of the one person I didn’t want to see me like this.

“Lucy. I’m real sorry, man.”

Fuck. I didn’t think I’d have to do this tonight.

THIRTY-FOUR

Lucy

I'M FUMING.

I'm going to kill him. I'm going to maim him beyond recognition with his own hockey stick. Then I'm going to wring his neck with my bare hands.

I'm going to meet the guys. Don't wait up.

Not like I had much of a choice. I stayed up with Avery until her eyelids started to droop, and I sent her to bed. I showered, shaved my legs, watched a little late-night TV, and then everything happened at once.

The news flashed on—a special breaking report—and I almost turned it off, but my husband's face flashed on the screen. They hurled words like *violent, unstable, menace*, and *disgrace*.

I was on the edge of my seat—well, the bed—when they showed what was clearly a cell phone video of Rhett punching one of the Nashville Aces. They followed it up with more professional-looking footage of his actual arrest. My first

thought was that the story was faked. That this was footage from before. You know, before we were married, and he promised me that he wouldn't fight off the ice.

But it wasn't from before.

He was wearing the same distressed blue jeans and faded Nirvana t-shirt he was in earlier today when he came home from practice.

If there was any doubt in my mind, it was shattered when I got an apologetic phone call from Tag. Not the person who should be calling me, but my sister's boyfriend. That was it. My own damn husband didn't even have the decency to call me and tell me he was in jail.

Tag told me where they were being held and figured I'd be able to get them all out. He's not wrong. I know people. But I shouldn't have had to hear it from him.

The only thing Tag had to say about the incident was, 'It's not as bad as it looks.' I hate to be the one to break it to him, but it looks pretty bad from every angle. And that's strictly talking as a professional. There's no silver lining to this story. Not for Rhett. It looks like he went crazy on that guy for no good reason. That's already the story the media is slinging.

I'm sure he has an explanation, but who knows if he'll tell me. Because I know Rhett will want to keep as tight lipped as possible. It's his MO. But none of that will fly this time.

Gordon will want to know each and every detail before he makes his final decision about Rhett's career. If he still has

one.

And that's not even talking about mine. I don't even want to know what Mr. Coomer will have to say about this latest fiasco. He was very clear about his expectations at our last meeting.

Fuck me.

This is why we made up the damn rules in the first place. And maybe—and this is a big ass maybe—you don't toss them all right out the freaking window. A normal person wouldn't do that.

But this is Rhett Remington we're talking about. The wild card. The rule breaker. The troublemaker.

I should've known.

Only I didn't.

I genuinely thought he was getting better with me. With the team. With everything. I foolishly thought that maybe he'd want to stay. That maybe he could be happy with me and not sabotage himself.

If he wants to come out of this in one piece, if he wants to keep his job and this marriage, he only has one choice. Honesty. That and he needs to want it. He needs to believe that he can have a future. A good one. Without the toxic influence of his dad and the thoughts of self-loathing that eat away at him every time he answers a phone call from that man.

I see it. I see that he's a good man. I see that he deserves to be happy.

But he needs to see it.

He needs to fight for himself because I can't always be there to do that for him.

As much as I want a future with him. As much as I think he could have a great place with the Devils. I can't make that choice. I can't force him to fight for his place on the team or at my side.

And that scares me.

And it pisses me off.

By the time I pull into the jail on the outskirts of town, I've worked myself into a frenzy. I shift my car into park and stomp across the parking lot, the sandals I threw on in haste flopping against the pavement with each step. My hair is bouncing angrily in its bun on top of my head and I'm sure if my mom were still here, she'd be mortified that I left the house in joggers and a hoodie.

"Good evening, Lucy," Gerald greets me from behind the desk with a smile and a cup of coffee.

I take the coffee from him with a weak smile and immediately take a large sip. I let the warmth seep through my body and hope the heavenly mixture with a touch of hazelnut does some voodoo magic and calms me down. It doesn't. "Hey, Gerald. Or I guess I should say Officer Morgan since you're on duty."

He blushes and fiddles with his utility belt. I'm sure police belts have a special name, but I don't know it.

“Officer Morgan has a certain ring to it, falling from your pretty lips.”

Now it’s my turn to blush, the heat spreading up my neck and over my cheeks. Gerald is one of the good ones. He and I went out a time or two when I first moved to Nashville. He’s tall, scruffy, handsome, and at the time, I was too busy starting my career to really put effort into a relationship.

We fell out of touch after that and on the rare occasion we’ve ran into each other, he’s been nothing but nice. So when the mayor—who I woke up about forty minutes ago—told me that he would be the one at the station where the boys were being held, I was pleased.

“I hear you have my husband and his band of idiots in the back.”

“I do.” He nods, his voice taking on a serious tone. “They were pretty damn lucky the bar isn’t pressing charges. They just want damages taken care of.”

I wince. “How bad was it?”

“I didn’t get to see it myself, but I heard there was quite a bit of broken glass and damage to a few of the tables and chairs. They were damn lucky no one got hurt, the place was pretty crowded. Either way it looks like you have a bit of a mess to clean up.”

I polish off the rest of the coffee and sigh. “I sure do. Any idea what started the fight?”

“Nope.” He bites his bottom lip and shakes his head. “No one’s talking.”

“Of course not.” I pause and take a not-so-calming deep breath. “Any chance we can get them out so I can get everyone home?”

He grabs a rather impressive set of keys and buzzes me through the side door. “I shouldn’t really be taking you back there but it’s a slow night. And it seems you know the mayor.”

“And the police chief. Can’t forget him. I met him a few months ago.”

He chuckles and shakes his head again. “You’re a rather impressive woman.”

“Thanks. I like to think so.”

He smiles but it doesn’t seem to meet his eyes. Before I can ask him about it, he motions for me to follow him and takes off down a short hallway and through a couple sets of doors. I don’t know what I was expecting but it wasn’t two cells full of large men in various states of disarray. Bloodied lips, black eyes, torn shirts, wild hair, and haunted eyes. These are men who are living in a state of regret. Men who probably want more than anything to turn back the clock a few hours and make different decisions.

They’re lucky no charges have been filed, but I’ll bet anything that the coaches and the administrations from each team will absolutely own their asses come Monday morning.

My gaze roams the first cell, taking in the rookies, the football players I don't know and scowling at the goalie who should know better. There are two other football players in the cell next door and despite their bruised faces, I recognize them from the fundraiser. They were the ones Rhett insinuated were in love with each other.

They don't look too happy now.

Tag, Owen, and Ian are sitting on a bench along the back of the cell and Foster is wearing out the floor in front of them. Even after a game with a lot of fighting on the ice, I don't think I've seen these guys look this bad.

Tag's hair is tangled and disheveled around his face and his shirt has some blood on the front. Not sure if it's his or someone else's.

Foster keeps clenching and unclenching his fists, his eyes dart around, looking everywhere and nowhere.

The Bruiser Brothers... Well, they don't look that bad. Just a bit dejected and surprised when they see me. I mean, this is the first time they've seen me in casual clothes, so I'll let it slide.

My scrutiny stops when I get to Rhett, sitting on the end of the bench as far down as he can get. His lip is split on one side and there's already a dark bruise forming on the other side of his jaw, spreading up to his cheek. His face is unreadable, not a single emotion flashing across his face. He meets my eyes for only a millisecond before he looks at the ground, staring at it like it has all the answers.

I don't move. I don't let my gaze leave his downturned face. Not when Gerald opens up the other cells and ushers the men out. And not when he opens Rhett's cell.

He still has yet to lift his head.

Tag and Foster shuffle past me, murmuring their thanks. Foster glances between Rhett and I, shaking his head and frowning at the both of us. He pats my shoulder, the pity written across his face clear as day. Does he know something I don't? Or does he see more than what I give him credit for?

In a few minutes, the cells are empty. With the exception of my husband. He hasn't moved a muscle. Not even adjusted himself on the bench. He's still hunched over, arms resting on his legs, staring at the floor. My stomach twists and drops. My insides feel like I'm on a roller coaster, yet my feet are still cemented in place. The longer we wait, the clearer it becomes that Rhett has no intention of moving so long as I'm back here.

With a huff I whirl around and have Gerald let me back out to the waiting room while he finishes the paperwork and returns everyone's belongings. There's a heavy weight in my gut and the longer I wait, the worse it gets.

With the extra time, I try to distract myself. I order a few cars to take the guys home, work on a press release, and respond to several emails from news stations. Basically, anything I can do to keep my mind busy and off the fact that my husband can't even look me in the eye. If he can't face me, there's no way he'll be able to face himself and do what's right

for himself. I just can't shake the feeling that we're on the edge of a precipice, and I'm about to fall.

"You're all set, Lucy." Gerald waves the group out of the station, including a reluctant Rhett who's looking intently at the back of Tag's head. Gerald comes over to give me a quick hug. "I hope the next time we see each other, it's under better circumstances."

"Me too." I pause for a moment and collect myself. "Thanks for all your help." My smile is tight as I squeeze his hand and follow Tag out the door. As soon as we hit the parking lot and the door closes behind me with a resounding thud, I erupt. "Is someone going to tell me what the fuck happened tonight?"

The guys wince collectively. Even the football players look uncomfortable, shifting around and looking at each other with wide eyes. This must be what it's like to be a mother. A whole lot of frustration and a constant test of your patience.

They're not going to be a lick of help. The rookies sulk down, trying to make themselves seem smaller. Even Tag avoids my withering stare.

"No?" My voice raises and I might growl a little bit. "Not a single one of you have anything to say? You're pretty damn lucky it's not a circus out here. I managed to hold off the news stations till morning, but I need some answers."

Silence.

My blood begins to boil, and I couldn't give two shits if I'm making a scene. My face heats and I'm seconds away from

stomping my feet like a petulant child.

This time Rhett does meet my eyes and I don't like the mask of indifference he has in place. "Why don't you ask Officer Flirty back there? I'm sure he'll be able to address all your concerns."

"Excuse me? I can't believe this." I mutter the last sentence, squeeze the bridge of my nose and blow out a deep breath. "Now is not the time to be jealous."

"I'm sure it's not."

"For once in your life, Rhett, I need you to talk to me. I need to know what the hell happened and why you took it upon yourself to get in a fight even though you know your reputation can't afford it. You were already on the edge."

"You want to do this here?" He makes a point to look around at the other guys, who've stepped away from us and are looking everywhere but at us. I'm not stupid, I know they can hear every word, but right now I can't find it in me to care.

"At this point, I really don't give a shit. I need you to start talking."

"What do you want from me, Lucy?"

"I want the truth. I want you to let me in. I want you to be the fucking husband you promised you'd be." I don't know where the last part came from, and I can't take it back now. I didn't mean to air out our personal laundry, but I can't stop thinking about what his current behavior means for us.

“We both know exactly what this is and what we promised each other. I told you upfront that I’m not a problem you can fix. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, but I think it’s time we end this charade.” He shakes his head and clenches his hand at his side. “I don’t need you, and you don’t need me dragging you down.”

My chest tightens and I swallow past the lump building in the throat. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about this need you have to fix everyone and their problems. I get that it’s part of your job and that’s partially why you’re so good at what you do, but I don’t need you, Lucy. I’m not part of your job. This marriage was a mistake. I appreciate the time we’ve spent together but it’s time to move on. I can’t and won’t drag this on until the end of the season.”

“You—you can’t be serious.”

“As serious as a heart attack.”

“Can you seriously look me in the eye and tell me that I mean nothing to you?” My voice wavers, my eyes blur with unshed tears, and I take a deep breath.

Rhett takes a step toward me, his gaze glued to mine. His eyes are hard. Emotionless. His voice unwavering when he speaks. “I told you not to fall in love with me, sweetheart. Thanks for a good time.”

He lip curls as he studies my face and I try... I fucking try to keep it together. I try not to tremble. I try not to let the tears

fall. I try not to let him know just how much he's hurt me. I fail.

For once, I don't fight. I don't try to fix things. I don't say a word. I just let the tears stream down my face as I watch my husband walk away. He's right. He did tell me not to fall in love with him and like a fool, I did.

I can't deny it anymore. I fell in love with my husband and all he wants is for me to let him go.

He doesn't even spare me a glance as he gets in one of the waiting SUVs.

THIRTY-FIVE

Rhett

“YOU’RE AN IDIOT.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” I groan and flop down face first on the couch, ignoring the pointed look my sister sends me.

I’ve been berating myself constantly since ending things with Lucy Saturday night. The look she gave me. The tears building up in the corners of her eyes and running down her beautiful face. The hurt and heartbreak that were written so plainly across her face. I almost took it all back and begged her to forgive me.

Almost.

As much as it pains me—and trust me, it does—it’s for the best. Her future and her happiness depend on it.

I just wish I didn’t have to cause her grief to save her from it.

Avery sits down on the cushion above my head, bouncing me around and clearly not taking the hint that I want to lay

alone with my own self-loathing. Although to be fair, she's never been very good at giving me space when I want it.

When I was eleven, I took a stray baseball to the eye, blackening it instantly and costing us the game. My intention was to lock myself in my room all weekend—my dad was out of town on a business trip—but Avery picked my lock and dragged Heath and me into her bougie pillow fort. After my first breakup, she forced me to eat ice cream and watch romcoms. She's relentless in her quest to torture me.

“A chef's hat has one hundred pleats, and each pleat represents a way to prepare an egg.” Her tone is upbeat, and I want nothing more than to lock her out of my penthouse and never let her back in.

“What are you talking about?”

“That's something you don't know.”

“Jesus,” I grumble, rolling over and throwing an arm over my face.

“Bananas not only lower your blood pressure, they also float in water.”

I groan, closing my eyes and massaging my temples. “Please stop talking.”

Avery sighs and relaxes back against the couch. She stays silent for a few minutes and then just can't seem to help herself. “Doesn't matter how much you bitch and moan, or close your eyes, or wish you were a different person, she's not

coming back. Not unless you do something drastic and beg for her forgiveness. I liked her by the way.”

Yeah, me too.

Too much in fact.

Tag and Foster had a lot to say on the way home as well. They also suggested I beg her for forgiveness. They don't understand. I had to listen to them the whole way back to our cars.

Then I came back to a quiet house. Avery was asleep and Lucy never came home. But I guess this isn't her home anymore. A point that was driven home yesterday when I got back to the apartment after Avery dragged me to lunch and found all Lucy's stuff gone. Every stiletto. Every pink dress.

I should be mad at Avery. She obviously orchestrated the whole thing, but I really can't blame her for being on Lucy's side.

Normally, I'd bury myself in hockey. Throw myself into practice and take out my frustrations at the games, but I don't even have that. Not after my fight Saturday night. I'm pretty sure that was the final nail in my coffin.

After all the bad press, Gordon suspended me for a week until he figures out what he wants to do with me. Likely unload me to some shit farm team in the middle of nowhere.

Which is why I stand by my decision to end things with Lucy. She doesn't need to be shackled to a guy who won't be here next month and will only drag her name and good

reputation through the mud. It's why I paid a lawyer an exorbitant amount of money to draw up divorce papers. The sooner it's over and done with, the better.

She can move on and find someone else.

And me?

I'd like to say I'll move on too. Get back to my old bunny-filled life, but that would be a lie. I'll be hung up on Lucy for a while. She's worked her way under my skin, into my thoughts. She dominates my dreams. I'm not sure I want to let go of that. At least, keeping her there, behind my eyelids every night when I go to sleep, I'll be able to hold a part of her.

"Are you really going to send her divorce papers?" Avery breaks the silence, pointing at the stack of papers on the table before letting her hand fall back to rest on her belly.

"Trust me." My voice is gruff. Raw. Every word that comes out of my mouth sounds like it's been dragged across broken glass. "It's for the best."

"Do you actually believe—?"

I don't know what I'm supposed to believe because she's cut off by a low buzzing noise.

"Are you doing laundry?"

For the first time in days, I manage to crack a smile. "Does it look like I know how to do laundry?" I shake my head, pushing myself up from the couch. "It's the intercom. Someone's downstairs. Did you order food?"

Her eyes narrow as she rubs her swollen belly. Seeing my sister visibly pregnant is still an adjustment for me. When I left her in LA, back in December, she was only about a month pregnant and wasn't showing. Now, three months later, she has a baby mound. It's cute, and every time I catch her looking down at the baby bump, there's a light in her eyes that's undeniably happy. And while I'm glad that she's turned her experience into something positive, it's just another reminder that I'm a failure.

“We just ate like thirty minutes ago. I'm pregnant, not a bottomless pit.”

“Are you sure?”

“I'm also not senile.”

Aside from food delivery drivers, the only person who ever used the buzzer was Lucy's mom and that was because she was too *busy* to remember the code for the elevator. Not at all because she couldn't be bothered to remember it when she knew I'd be home and could help her get in.

Sadly (please note the sarcasm here), they're back in Georgia and the only reason they'd be in the parking garage is to come up and kick my ass, but we all know they're too proper for that. Not that I don't deserve it.

Literally no one else knows where I live. And yes, that's on purpose.

As soon as I hit the button for the intercom, a deep British accent shouts, “Let us up you bloody wanker.”

I sigh and bang my head against the wall as my sister rushes over and does the not-so-subtle whisper yell. “Oh, who’s that? Is he really British?”

“Yes.” I groan, gripping the back of my neck. “He’s also a pain in my ass.”

“I’m a delight,” Foster corrects, clucking his tongue. “Are you going to let us up there or what?”

I straighten and narrow my eyes on the speaker like I could see through it and all the way down to the ground floor. “Wait. Did you say ‘us’? Also, how do you know where I live?”

“You didn’t think I’d let this guy come alone did ya? And how the fuck do you think we know, jackass?”

Fucking Tag. Of course. I should’ve known. He hasn’t been here personally, but his girlfriend has, and there’s no doubt in my mind that she led him straight to me.

I need to move.

Well, I guess that’s one positive thing about being booted to some minor league team in the middle of nowhere. No one except the pizza delivery guy will know where I live.

With a groan, I tell them the code and wait by the elevator for them to come up. Not because I want to see anyone, but because I know if I don’t, they won’t walk away. Knowing them, they’ll have a tent set up in the parking garage and be grilling hot dogs for dinner. Which is precisely why I moved here instead of staying in the team apartments. These guys

aren't used to having their own space. Or being around other people who want it.

Avery comes to stand next to me, and my arm snaps out. Yes, it's the mom arm, and I'm not afraid to use it. I narrow my eyes, give her a pointed look and then physically point back to the living room.

"I don't need any more mishaps between you and hockey players."

"Come on, big brother." Avery giggles and slaps my arm away. "What's the worst that could happen? I'm already pregnant."

I squeeze the bridge of my nose and mutter some of my favorite expletives as the elevator opens and Tag and Foster amble out. Not looking happy to see me, I might add, even though they're the ones who showed up at my place.

"Remington."

"Wanker."

"I see you've met my brother." Avery smiles and extends her hand, completely disregarding my wishes to make herself scarce. "I'm Avery, his little sister."

"His untouchable little sister." I grumble even though the guys are now all smiles as they shake her hand and introduce themselves.

Foster grins, his gaze volleying between my sister and me. "I hate to be the one to tell you mate, but it looks like someone already touched your sister."

I growl, and he rolls his eyes, pushing me aside and walking further into the house. “Won’t you please come in?” I say dryly.

Tag follows Foster, but not before staring me down for several seconds. He’s searching my eyes, but there’s no life left in them. Not anymore.

“If you’re here to kick my ass, you might as well get it over with.” I open my arms and lean my head back, ready to take any punishment he feels like he needs to give. Maybe if I were in physical pain, the rest of me wouldn’t hurt so bad.

His lip twitches, and he shakes his head, his long hair falling into his face before he pushes it back. “I have the feeling you’re beating yourself up enough right about now.”

“I see you’re going with the minimalist décor.” Foster falls back on my couch and props his feet on my coffee table.

Tag takes the seat next to him, and Avery dances into the room, grabbing her water from the table. “It seems like you guys have some stuff to talk about, so I’ll get out of your hair. Please feel free to knock some actual sense into him. Nice meeting you guys. Especially the one with the accent.”

“Rude.” Tag mutters as she disappears.

Foster crosses his legs at the ankle, his feet still on my coffee table. His feet are inches away from the divorce papers, and I can only hope he doesn’t notice. I don’t need or want to have to answer those questions.

“I don’t know. I thought she was rather nice.”

I sit down in my recliner and sweep out my hand, gesturing to the both of them. “Is there a reason you two are here?”

“Is she the reason you got in a fight with your old teammate?” Foster points his thumb toward the guest room and eyes me speculatively.

“We’re not talking about my sister. She’s not your concern.”

“A simple yes would’ve sufficed you bloody asshole,” he tsks, his smile flattening out and his face turning more serious. “It seems this complex of yours goes deeper than I thought.”

“What complex?”

“Your savior complex.” This time it’s Tag who answers. “You know, where you sacrifice yourself in order to save everyone around you.”

“I don’t—”

“You do.” He sweeps his hair back with both hands and shifts on the couch, also propping his feet on my coffee table. “I know it’s none of my business, but since you were almost my brother-in-law, I’m going to ask. What happened with Lucy?”

I sigh and lean back, running a hand along the scruff of my three-day-old beard. I haven’t cared enough to shave. Or shower. Or change into a new pair of sweatpants. “You’re right. It is none of your business.”

They exchange a look, and suddenly I’m ready for them to leave. I don’t need them showing up at my place unannounced and uninvited, having silent conversations with each other, and

trying to get me to talk about asinine shit... You know, like feelings.

“Did you know she quit?” Foster says this so casually, picking at his nails like he doesn’t have a care in the world.

“What?” I lurch forward, resting my arms along my thighs. “Lucy quit her job?”

“No, she quit smoking.” He rolls his eyes.

“Yes, she quit her job.” Tag pipes in. “She didn’t show up Monday or Tuesday. Hasn’t answered any of Elle’s calls either.”

I clasp my hands together and dangle them between my legs. My fingers instantly go to the wedding band I’ve yet to take off. The wedding band that used to feel so foreign. So heavy. And now feels like a part of me.

“What happened?” Tag asks again, taking his feet off the coffee table and sitting up straight.

“Not everything works out like a damn fairytale,” I grunt, circling my ring around my finger. “We can’t all be like you.”

Tag chuckles, but there’s no humor behind it. “You don’t know the half of it. Nothing I have with Elle came easy. I didn’t realize what I had with her until I watched her walk out the door. Ended up chasing her all the way to Georgia to win her back. I was in a bad place. Lucy pulled me out of it.”

My heart pounds in my chest and each breath is more difficult to take in than the last.

“I’m sorry to let you down but no one is going to be chasing anyone. This is for the best.”

“Are you convincing me or your—?” Tag shifts forward and my stomach twists as he grabs the divorce papers from the table and reads. “What the fuck is this? Are you seriously sending her divorce papers?”

“I told you. It’s for the best.” My voice sounds hollow, even to my own ears.

“Lucy is the best thing that ever happened to you.” Tag tosses the papers back on the table and looks at me with disgust.

“I know.”

“You know, and you’re still going to divorce her? You’re not going to fight for your marriage? Fight for your wife?” Foster shakes his head and mutters under his breath.

I hang my head, pulling off my ring, and holding it between both thumbs and index fingers. “You guys were right about everything.”

“You’re going to have to be more specific, mate.”

“When you guys came into the locker room.” I take a deep breath and then another. “Our marriage was an accident. Something happened to us in Vegas. Neither one of us remember getting married.”

Tag swears but Foster remains silent, studying me.

“We woke up the next morning and decided to pretend everything was real. It was all for show.”

“Was it?” Tag asks softly. “Was it all just for show?”

“Not all of it.” I shake my head, slipping the ring back on my finger even though I know I should keep it off. “But it really doesn’t matter. I wasn’t good enough for her then, and I’m certainly not good enough for her now. I’m the reason she quit her job. I’m the reason she has to start over. I’m no good for her.”

“I’m sure it’s not that bad.”

“What can I give her? What do I have? Gordon suspended me until he figures out what to do with me. I can see the writing on the wall. I’ve enjoyed playing with you guys, I really have, but I’m sure I’ll be off the team in the next couple weeks. I don’t know if he’ll trade me or just let me go as a free agent. No one will want me. I’m damaged goods. A curse. A fucking disappointment.”

Neither one of them says anything, at least not right away, and I don’t know if they’re staring off into space or staring at my signature on the bottom of the strewn-out divorce papers.

I’m not lying. I am a fucking disappointment. My dad’s known it since birth, I just didn’t realize the extent of it. The poison that flows through my veins and tarnishes everything I touch, turning it all to shit.

Tag and Foster look at each other and then at me and then back at each other. They push up from the couch, Tag heads

back to the elevator and Foster follows, stopping to pat my shoulder on the way out. “Despite what you think, you’re not what your dad says you are. He doesn’t define you. Your actions do.”

His words stay with me even though he joins Tag at the elevator. They rattle through my skull and feel wrong. I’ve spent so many years perpetrating his beliefs, it’s all I know. And suddenly, I’m not sure I want to be alone.

I could stop them. I could beg them to stay. I could hope the pain inside me doesn’t grow with each step they take.

But I don’t, and it does.

Once they leave, the penthouse becomes shrouded in silence. Draped in a loneliness that I know I deserve. Knowing that Lucy is suffering too. That she quit the job she loved because of me. It makes everything worse. It sharpens the pain. The suffering. The absolute misery.

I wish I could make it better. At least for her. I wish I could be the person she deserves. I grip my wedding ring and wish for so many things.

And after hours of staring into nothingness, of craving a reality that doesn’t exist, I slide off my wedding band for the last time and place it on top of the divorce papers.

It’s for the best.

THIRTY-SIX

Lucy

I'M RIGHT BACK WHERE I started when this marriage began. In my room, lying face down on my bed, wondering what the hell happened. Only this time instead of packing up my life to move into my husband's penthouse, I'm surrounded by suitcases that need to be unpacked, wads of tissues, and empty containers of ice cream.

There also might be an empty bottle of wine under my bed from last night.

Stupid me thought it would be good therapy to stay up all night and watch cheesy rom coms, but I ended up drinking straight from the bottle and crying for a solid six hours while I watched three of them in a row. Each one more romantic than the last, and I was a blubbery, snotty mess. I one-hundred-percent do not recommend this post breakup.

I haven't exactly made the smartest decisions.... Well, since I got married. Or maybe it was when Rhett joined the team in the first place, and I thought I could control him. Either way, the man is clearly fucking with my common sense.

I turn my head to the side and grab a tissue that's only slightly crinkled—which probably means slightly used—and blow my nose. Once I'm done, I toss it off the foot of the bed with the others and bury my face back in my pillow.

Where it's safe.

Where I am totally and completely alone with every single one of my erratic thoughts.

My life since Saturday has been a rollercoaster of emotions, and I don't know if I want to throw up or get back in line for another go. You can't count on anyone—they'll only disappoint you. It's happened with everyone I've let get close to me and there's a part of me that thinks I deserve the pain for letting someone else in.

For being naive. For being hopeful.

When I was driving to the jail, I was furious, but it never occurred to me that Rhett would do what he did. I thought there was a chance he'd fight for me. The team. Himself. I thought he had a glimpse of how life could be if he'd just get out of his own damn way and live it.

But no.

Not Rhett.

And you know the craziest thing of all?

I knew going into it. I fucking knew. I knew exactly who he was, and not once did he ever pretended to be anything different. I was the one who, between my parents showing up and the fundraiser dinner, put on those rose-colored glasses

that let me believe in this false reality that was my own making. I was the one who disillusioned myself into thinking this whole thing actually meant something. That it was more than some mistake made under the twinkling Vegas stars.

And even though I knew who he was, it didn't prepare me for the gut-wrenching moment when he looked me in the eyes and thanked me for a good time. Like I was no different from a meaningless fling. Like he hadn't become my husband in all the ways that mattered. Like he didn't take a piece of my heart, despite the rules we made on day one.

Which leads us into rule number three, don't go falling in love with me, sweetheart. I'm not a project you can fix, and I don't believe in happy endings.

He was upfront. He didn't lie. He didn't twist the truth.

I was foolish.

Still am. Because five days later, I'm still a mess over that man. Rhett Remington. Destroyer of hearts. Rule breaker. Husband. Although, I'm not sure how much longer that will remain the case since he sent me divorce papers this morning.

I haven't surfaced from the plush part of my pillow long enough to read through them but the word DIVORCE at the top was enough for me to get the gist of it. They're on my nightstand where they're close enough, I still feel them looming over me like a dark shadow, but also far enough away that I don't have to look at them if I don't want to.

And right now, I don't.

Just thinking about it has my chest swelling with emotion, and I suck in a breath as my eyes blur with tears. The longer I lay with my face in the pillow, the more suffocated I feel. My chest heaves with each labored breath, and it gets harder and harder to breathe. It hurts and I don't know if it's from the ragged air pulling in and out of my lungs or my shattered heart. Either way, it sucks.

Before I can roll over on my back, there's a soft knock on my door followed by a pounding that sounds like a police battering ram. With a sigh, I push myself up from my bed and swipe at my puffy eyes with the back of my hand. My hair is a tangled mess that hasn't seen a shower in days, and I think I'm still in the same pajamas I put on Monday night. And it's Thursday.

My first thought is to ignore the door, climb back into bed and pull the comforter over my head, but the pounding persists. My second thought is to change or at least throw my hair into a bun, but maybe I'll scare off whoever's at my door.

I grab the box of tissues, taking one from the box and swiping at my nose as I make my way to the door. As soon as I unlock the deadbolt, the door swings open, and Elle and Jazz barrel into my apartment, kicking the door closed behind them.

Neither one of them say a word.

All it takes is one look and they surround me with their warmth, enveloping me in the tightest hug two people can give at the same time. I'd like to say I hold it together, but I don't. As they hold me together, I fall apart.

Jazz keeps me upright as my body trembles then shakes. Elle presses her head against mine as I bury my face into her shoulder and let the tears fall. I hiccup. I sob. I absolutely soak Elle's shirt.

We stay this way, stuck in this timeless moment, where the three of us are living and breathing the same grief for what feels like hours even though I know it's only been a few minutes.

Their hold relaxes, and I slump to the floor. They kick off their shoes and sit on either side of me, scooting up against the back of the couch, our legs stretched out in front of us.

Elle's the first one to speak. "You ready to tell us what happened?"

I shrug and then nod, grabbing several tissues from the box still gripped in my hand and wiping my nose. "I'm an idiot."

"I think we've all been there." Jazz laughs, resting her head on my shoulder.

"My marriage was a sham." I sniff and toss the tissues on the floor by our feet.

Jazz remains silent, but Elle sends me a questioning look. "What do you mean, exactly?"

"I lied to you. I lied to everyone." I pause and take a deep breath before continuing. "I went to Vegas to bring Rhett back before he got himself and the team in trouble. One minute we're sitting down to a drink, the next we're waking up in the same bed with wedding rings and no memory of the night

before. We never figured out what happened, but we think someone put something in our drinks. I sent my assistant back to ask but she came up empty handed.”

“What?” Elle gasps, pulling away, hurt flashing across her face. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“We didn’t want the media to find out. It needed to look real for both our sakes. Dad didn’t need a scandal, or his merger might have fallen through, and Rhett would have been kicked off the team for sure.”

“But I’m your sister,” she says softly. “I wouldn’t have said anything.”

“No,” I agree, pulling my legs up to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. “But I didn’t know about Tag, and I didn’t want to put you in a position to lie to him. At the time, he and Rhett weren’t exactly getting along, and I wasn’t sure he wouldn’t say something.”

She nods and settles back down next to me. “That’s fair. So, then what happened?”

“We decided to do what anyone in a fake marriage would do. We laid down some ground rules, and I moved into his penthouse to keep up appearances. He had a guest room and despite the fact that he liked to walk around shirtless, we had a good arrangement.”

“And then your parents got here,” Jazz mused.

“And then my parents showed up,” I repeat with a nod. “That forced us in the same room and it wasn’t long before we

started breaking all the rules. But he was always holding back. I knew and I..."

"Fell in love with him anyway," Elle finishes for me, grabbing my hand and holding it tightly in hers.

I nod again and swipe at a stray tear trailing down my cheek. I tell them about meeting his sister in the parking garage. Why he really fought with his teammate back in LA. And about the bar fight. The only thing I leave out is the abuse that Rhett suffered at the hands of his own father. It's not my story to tell and regardless of what's happening between us, I'm going to respect his privacy. When I'm done, Jazz and Elle are staring at me with a mix of shock and awe.

"I'm not going to lie, Gordon is still pretty pissed about that fight. I don't know what he wants to do with Rhett. Right now, he's on a suspension." Jazz shifts, tucking her legs underneath her.

"Avery said something about that. She's super nice, you guys would like her. She even got Rhett out of the house for me so I could get all my stuff without having to run into him."

"Are you sure you don't want to talk to him? Tell him how you feel? You never know, he might feel the same way about you but not know how to express his feelings." My sister, always the romantic.

"I'm pretty sure it's over. He sent me divorce papers yesterday. He must've paid a pretty penny to have everything filed in such a short period of time. He's done. I'm not going to fight for someone who doesn't want me."

I've spent the last several days thinking about this. Over-analyzing everything. I can't make it real for him. I can't make him feel things for me. The only thing I can do is mourn the marriage I thought I had and then try to move on with my life.

"Is he why you quit your job?" There's a bite to Jazz's question although her eyes are still soft as they study my face.

I shake my head and tuck my hair behind my ears after it falls in my face. "No. I'm pretty sure I was going to be fired." Even though I stayed on top of the press the best I could, I avoided my boss's phone call like the plague and had Jane schedule a meeting with him later in the week to give me time to get my shit together.

Turns out, I didn't need it. I got an offer I couldn't refuse, and I quit yesterday. On top of the other reasons I've had to bury my head in the sand, I didn't know how to break the news to Gordon and Jazz. "But that wasn't why I quit. I got a pretty good job offer."

Jazz's eyes narrow, and she purses her lips rather dramatically, so I know she's not entirely serious. "With?"

I swallow and look toward my sister for moral support, and she squeezes my hand. "It's for the Aces. They loved how I handled things after the fight, and their PR person just retired. I was in the right place at the right time."

"I love you so I'm not going to sulk until I get home. I hope you love it there. Just don't tell Gordon I said that."

"Your secret is safe with me."

Before I can come back with something that I'm sure would have been brilliant, Elle scrunches her nose. "I don't know how to say this nicely, but you really smell."

"To be honest, I don't remember the last time I showered."

Elle and Jazz simultaneously scoot away from me and for the first time in what feels like forever, I laugh. Not a normal laugh either. I'm talking head thrown back, maniacal laughter. I must look like an unkempt crazy person, and I don't give a shit.

Here on the floor of my apartment, sitting between my two favorite people in the world, my heart doesn't feel as heavy.

I can do this. I can sign those papers and start to move on with my life. But first, maybe I'll take a shower. Nah, fuck it. I've made it this far.

"Can someone get me a pen?"

Elle and Jazz exchange a look before their gazes come back to me.

"I don't think a pen is going to help this whole situation." Elle waves her hands in my general direction. "I was thinking more like soap. Lots of soap."

I push to my feet, steel my spine, and clasp my hands together. I trail my fingers around my wedding ring, twisting it around my finger a few times before pulling it off. "I need to sign those divorce papers and send them back to Rhett, along with his gaudy ass ring." I toss a look to my sister and add,

“Then I’ll take a shower. I might even let you guys buy me wine and pizza and watch TV with me.”

“No sappy romance movies.” Jazz points a finger at me after she stands.

“Nope. I think I’m romanced out.”

THIRTY-SEVEN

Rhett

MY STOMACH DROPS WITH each step I take down the long corridor toward Gordon's office. My week suspension from the team is almost up, and my life is still in the shitter.

Lucy's still moved out, yet my sister has decided to stay and torment me, probably for the rest of my life. Not that I need help, I can torture myself just fine. In fact, when the guys left the penthouse on Thursday, I ordered some throw pillows for the couch. They're bright pink and frilly. The exact thing Lucy would love, and I would grumble about endlessly.

Now, they're arranged on my bed because I can't stand for them to be too far away. It's the only pink left in my apartment.

It's pretty pathetic, but they're the only bright spot in my existence. Especially since I got the divorce papers back this morning with all the t's crossed and the i's dotted. She even sent back her wedding ring. The fucking big, flashy thing that looked so damn perfect on her finger.

I don't know what I expected. I mean, I sent them to her in the first place, but I guess I thought she'd sit on them a little longer. That it wouldn't be such an easy thing for her to sign them and send them back. Not that I stewed on them for very long before I sent them to her first, but I knew the longer I looked at them, the more likely it was that my resolve would crumble, and I would be on her doorstep begging her to take me back.

As it is, the signed papers are sitting beside my bed—with the ring sitting on top—and they haven't moved since this morning.

I should've brought them with me and dropped them off with the lawyer on my way to the arena.

But I didn't.

I'm not ready.

Which is the same reason I'm still wearing my wedding ring. I took it off. I tried to put it away and as I turned to step back, my stomach churned, I felt like I was going to be sick. So, I put it back on and told myself I would try again the next day.

I haven't.

That same gut-wrenching feeling is back as I peek in Lucy's dark and empty office. It's like my insides are twisting and turning, and I feel so fucking helpless. I hope she didn't quit because of me, but I know she did. It's the kind of toxicity I carry around with me. The kind that erodes. Ruins. Corrupts.

That's why she's so much better off on her own, and why I need to make sure those papers get dropped off today.

I push myself to move on, past the empty space that my... Lucy used to occupy and come to an abrupt stop outside Gordon's office. The door is wide open and several voices I recognize are already inside. Did I get the time wrong? I pull out my phone and bring up the email from him, but it looks like I'm right on time.

"I recognize that look. You're not early, nor are you late." Jazz appears at my elbow and gives me a sad smile. I know her and Lucy are close, and it makes me wonder what she knows. If this weak smile is solely because of my marriage ending or if she knows about me and the abuse I suffered at the hands of my father.

The thought of that spreading around, of people knowing about my past, turns my blood to ice.

Regardless, it's not the time nor the place to ask. "I can wait down the hall and come back when you guys are done." I gesture to Gordon's office. "I don't mind waiting."

Her laugh is light as she pushes me inside the office. "They're all here for you. Trust me, I didn't believe it either."

I start to turn and ask her to elaborate but am stunned at the sight in front of me. Completely shocked and frozen in place. Lincoln and Tag are lounging in the chairs across from Gordon, and Foster, Ian, and Owen are all scattered throughout the office. Everyone looks relaxed... well, everyone except for Gordon, who never looks relaxed when I'm around. In fact, I'd

say he looks torn between wanting to punch me in the face and telling me to fuck off. Or maybe he's deciding which order would be best.

“Remington.”

He addresses me, running a hand along his freshly shaved jaw line. It's a stark reminder of our differences. I can't remember the last time I shaved, and I'm wearing joggers and a hoodie. He's in a full suit and tie and the only thing I can think is that this is the kind of guy Lucy should be with.

Fuck.

He *is* the guy Lucy should have been with. And if it weren't for me, they might have had a chance. I know it, and the look he gives me tells me that he knows it too.

My heart stutters, and my breath catches in my throat, but I manage to croak, “Mr. Benson.”

Gordon leans forward and laces his hand in front of him. “We're here to discuss the events from this past Saturday and your place on the team from this day forward.”

I nod, closing my eyes and leaning my head back. I'm not ready to be let go, but I understand. I just don't understand the need for an audience.

“Do you want to tell me what happened that night?”

I open my eyes and take a deep breath. “I started the fight with the football players at the bar. I threw the first punch. I take full responsibility for everything.”

“Interesting.” He runs his hand through his hair and then steepled his fingers and taps his fingertips together.

Tag looks over his shoulder, meeting my gaze with wide eyes and gives a slight shake of his head. He looks a little disappointed but there’s no reason anyone else needs to be in trouble. Not when I’m about to get shipped to the lowest bidder. Or worse. No bidder.

“So, that’s not quite the story I was told.” Gordon lifts a brow, his voice not giving anything away.

I look from player to player and not a single one of them will meet my eyes. *What in the actual fuck is going on here?*

“It seems to me that while you did throw the first punch, you didn’t provoke it. It looks like that honor goes to those blockheads Bronson and Teagan. These guys think the only reason you got involved was to protect his pretty face.” He points to Tag who’s now all smiles with the aforementioned pretty face. “Between this fight and the fight in Los Angeles, the media is calling for you head on a silver platter, yet you take full ownership.”

“What I want to know,” Jazz sits on the edge of the desk and crosses her arms over her chest, “is why you wouldn’t tell your wife, who was the public relations rep for the Devils at the time, what really happened that night at the bar?”

I open my mouth to say something—what, I don’t know, because I have no good defense—but Jazz continues, “I’d also like to know why you never said anything about your sister and the real reason why you got into it with Ron Cooper.”

“Because it’s none of anyone’s business.” I glare at Foster who holds up his hands.

Gordon holds up a hand. “Technically he didn’t say anything. He gave her my number, and she called me herself. We had a very lengthy discussion about how we both think you’re an idiot.”

“Contrary to what you may think,” Jazz interjects, brushing her hair over her shoulder, “we’re a family here and we tend to stick up for each other. Like it or not, you’re a Devil, and we’ve got your back. You don’t need to keep shouldering the responsibility of everyone around you. We deal with things together, but we expect honesty in return.”

“You mean you’re not kicking me off the team?” I ask slowly, not sure everything translated correctly between my ears and my brain.

“Like I said, an idiot.” Gordon shakes his head and unbuttons his suit jacket. “You’ll be meeting with the new PR person in about an hour. You will tell your side of both stories, and you will redeem yourself to the media. You’re done with the savior complex, it won’t do you any good here. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” He stands up, smooths his hand down the length of his tie and walks out.

Lincoln follows him, stopping briefly to shake my hand and officially welcome me to the team. Tag gives me a hug,

pulling me much closer to his body than I ever wanted to be, but I'm much too dazed to stop it. Ian and Owen pat each shoulder as they walk past.

Jazz hops off the desk and stops in front of me. She has to crane her neck to meet my eyes, but it doesn't make her any less intimidating. "I also think you should know that Lucy didn't quit her job because of you. She got a better opportunity and even though I'm sad that I won't see her every day, I know she's going to do great things." She hesitates for a second and just when I think she's going to leave, she chuckles. "Lucy will kick my ass if she knew I was telling you anything, but I'm going to anyway and hope you do the right thing. She loves you and you're an even bigger idiot than my brother thinks if you haven't realized it by now. She doesn't need you to change for her or become some better man. She loves you as-is, with whatever damage you think you have. You make each other better people, and you both deserve to be happy."

She gives me a genuine smile and pats my arm before walking away and leaving me more speechless than I was before. Like so speechless my brain has stopped firing all together.

Lucy loves *me*? Despite my trauma. Despite the fact that I'm no good for her. Despite the fact that I let her down. Jesus. I sent her fucking divorce papers.

"I see your brain kicking on," Foster laughs, startling me. I'd completely forgotten he was still here. He pushes off the wall and sits down on the front side of Gordon's desk, eyeing

me with a raised brow. “Is this where you realize you’ve made a grave mistake?”

I blow out a deep breath and fall back into one of the chairs across from him. “I don’t know. I’m still not sure I have. She deserves so much more—”

“Than what, mate? Than you? When are you going to realize you are not the failure your father says you are? He’s the one with the problem, not you.”

“You don’t know—”

“Oh, I overheard all I needed to. Your dad’s an abusive fuck who’s been putting you down your whole life, making you believe you’re nothing because that’s what he’s afraid of becoming. He makes himself feel better by belittling you, and it’s bullshit. We stood up for you today because you’re our brother. It’s about time you stand up for yourself. He needs to either get help to deal with his demons, or you need to walk away. There’s no shame in living your life.”

“I’m not sure I know how.”

“Then you better fucking figure it out. And fast. I don’t think Lucy will wait around for you forever and from where I’m standing, you have some pretty serious groveling to do. Do you love her?”

I take a deep breath and look at the floor. My first instinct is to say no. I don’t do feelings. I don’t do love. I don’t do relationships. But all of those things now feel like lies.

My fingers go to my wedding ring.

I've never been one to believe in love at first sight, but I think I fell in love with Lucy on that first day we met. I'm sure that's the reason I opened my mouth and pushed her away. She was the one person who could get close to me. Who could work her way into my heart and discover all my secrets. It was safer if she hated me, if she thought I was trouble.

And then when fate stepped in and shoved us together, I let my wall crumble a little. I let her in, and every day that we spent together was better than the last. Each day, I fell a little deeper.

Do I love her? More than I thought I could. But I'm not sure that changes the situation.

I slowly raise my head, meeting his gaze. He must see it all written all over my face because all he does is nod.

"I'll only tell you that you don't deserve her if you don't fight for her. If you don't, I give Gordon a month before he makes his move. Women like Lucy don't come around often, and I feel like without her you'd be a miserable bastard. I need a wingman not a broody bloke sitting in the corner, giving everyone the stink eye."

"You really think she'll take me back? After everything I said to her?"

"There's only one way to find out." Foster cocks a brow and smirks. "And if that doesn't work, take off your shirt and show off your sex lines."

"Fucking Tag."

“He’s the best.” Foster winks. “Don’t forget to deal with your dad first though. He’s the dark cloud hanging over your head. Let in the light.”

I shake my head and scoff. “Aren’t you a fucking poet?”

“I’m not just a pretty face.”

Before I can tell him how wrong he is, Foster hops off the desk and leaves me alone in Gordon’s office. I’m not sure if I should wait here or go out to the lobby but I’d rather not have to People right now. I’m not sure what to do about Lucy or if there is anything I can do about Lucy, but there is something I can do about my dad.

I can end the cycle of abuse and take a step back. I can try my best to get him to seek treatment for his anger and issues with alcohol. Heath and Avery will have my back, I know they want him to be better too. But this, I have to do on my own.

My phone is heavy in my hands as I bring up his number. I stare down at my phone for several seconds. My heart thumps in my chest and the dread that’s ever present whenever I talk to my dad is back, weaving its way through me. This is my chance. It’s now or never.

This is my life and I need to take it back.

He answers on the third ring, his voice curt. “I was wondering when you’d call.”

“Hey, Dad.”

“So, are you off the team? Did they finally realize what a mistake it was, bringing you on board? I fucking told you what

marrying that girl would do to you. She was a distraction you couldn't afford and now look at you. Worthless."

"Dad." I stand up and pace in front of the desk, doing my best to sound firm. "You need to stop."

"What the fuck did you say to me?" He booms through the phone, and I can hear his glass slamming down on the living room coffee table. It's still early enough, he'll be watching the sports channel downstairs.

"I told you to stop. I didn't get kicked off the team, and my marriage was one of the best things that ever happened to me."

"Oh yeah. That's why you're suspended right now. And for what? Pussy."

"I'm not going to let you keep talking to me like this, and I'm sure as hell not going to tolerate you talking about my wife. You have a serious problem, Dad. How many drinks have you had today?"

"That's none of your fucking business."

"I think it is. I'm worried about you. Heath and Avery are worried about you. You need help."

"What I need is for my kids to butt out of my life. You're the one with the problem, not me."

"Dad." I sigh, sitting back down in the chair and running a hand around the back of my neck. "I'm not trying to attack you, but I think your drinking is out of control. It won't be long before it starts affecting your health. Don't you want to be here—?"

“For what?” His laugh is hollow, self-depreciating. “My grandkids? Please don’t tell me you’re going to feed me that horseshit.”

I wasn’t thinking about grandkids and while my mind should go to Avery, who’s almost five months pregnant, it doesn’t. I can very clearly picture a little bossy thing with bright blue eyes and a blonde ponytail making me teach her how to skate. Lucy’s in the players box, sitting on the bench with a bag of pretzels—her favorite snack—and talking to her very pregnant belly. A son, another daughter, we wouldn’t care.

“Yeah, Dad. Maybe if you sobered up, you’d learn a thing or two about what it means to be a part of a family. I’m finally starting to realize what that means. I’ll do whatever I can to help you, but only if you help yourself. I know trying to get sober after so many years isn’t going to be easy; I can be there every step of the way. But I won’t allow you to continue to call me and put me down. It’s not healthy for either of us. We’ve been down this road long enough.”

He remains silent, taking a sip of his drink. I know because I can hear the ice clinking against the glass.

“Fuck you, Rhett. I’m the parent, not you. You don’t get a say in how I live my life. If you don’t want to hear what I have to say, then that’s your choice. Disappointing as always. Goodbye, Rhett.”

He doesn’t wait for me to say anything before he hangs up the phone; he never does.

While the phone call didn't go perfectly, his response was what I expected. This isn't going to be a change that'll happen overnight, if at all. I didn't think he'd take it well; in fact, I would've been surprised if he did. But damn, did it feel good to finally stand up to him.

That damn dread that's plagued me for years, that I thought was seeping into my very core, is gone. I feel lighter than I have in days. Years.

Foster might be onto something. Maybe I can have nice things. Maybe I do deserve more than a shitty past and a bad attitude.

I'm staying on the team. I don't have to leave Nashville. I've got people here for me and for the first time in my life, I finally feel like I'm not alone. Like I have people to rely on. People that will be there if things go south.

I finally have the family I've always wanted.

There's only one thing missing.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Rhett

ME: I NEED HELP.

Bloody Wanker: Avery? Did you get a hold of your brother's phone again?

Me: What do you mean *again*?

Me: Wait. No. Don't answer that. That's a discussion for later.

Naggy Rag: What is it you said you needed? I don't think I heard you properly. <thinking face emoji>

Me: Are you just trying to get me to ask again?

Bloody Wanker: I'm not sure he even asked in the first place. What do you think, Tag?

Naggy Rag: Nope. There was no question.

Me: Will you guys help me?

Bloody Wanker: And what's the magic word? <sparkles emoji>

Me: <middle finger emoji>

Bloody Wanker: Hurtful.

Naggy Rag: I'm beginning to think he really doesn't need our help.

Bloody Wanker: Doesn't sound like it.

Me: Just to be clear, I hate the both of you. Will you help me, please?

Naggy Rag: Does this mean he finally considers us friends?

Bloody Wanker: Obviously, his best friends.

Naggy Rag: I am practically his brother-in-law.

Bloody Wanker: I'll give you that, but I think it's clear he likes me best.

Me: Are you guys done? If you can't help it's ok. I can call Linc. He seems to have it together in the romance department.

Bloody Wanker: I'm very romantic.

Bloody Wanker: Are you trying to woo a lady? <heart emoji>

Me: Please never say woo again.

Naggy Rag: Don't insult me. Lincoln's idea of romance is child's play compared to mine. I don't remember him turning his backyard into a love oasis.

Bloody Wanker: I have questions about the term 'love oasis'.

Me: As do I.

Naggy Rag: I don't remember him flying down to Georgia to stand in the pouring rain just to tell his lady he loves her.

Me: That sounds straight out of a movie.

Naggy Rag: It was romantic as shit.

Bloody Wanker: I think I'm swooning.

Bloody Wanker: How do I know? Is there a way I can check? Let me google.

Me: Ok. I need something like that. I need fucking fireworks. I need.... I don't even know but it has to be big.

Me: And Foster, if you tell me my dick, I'm going to punch you the next time I see you.

Bloody Wanker: <zipper mouth emoji>

Naggy Rag: And what's the end goal here? What are you trying to accomplish? I need to make sure my powers are used for good and not evil.

Me: I feel like you're just trying to get me to admit all this shit to you, and I hate it.

Naggy Rag: Maybe. But go on.

Me: I need my wife back. I pushed her away and made the biggest mistake of my life. I love her.

Me: Does that make you happy?

Me: I fucked up royally. I'm desperate. Obviously. I love my fucking wife and I can't live without her. Can you help me please?

Naggy Rag: I think I have some ideas.

Bloody Wanker: <eggplant emoji> <peach emoji>

THIRTY-NINE

Lucy

I PUSH AWAY FROM my desk and swivel my chair around to look out on the football field. From my very generous corner office, I can see everything. It's a great day: sunny, warm. The birds are chirping. One of the assistant coaches is playing *Here Comes the Sun* by the Beatles from the office next door, and I LOVE the Beatles and all things oldies. I'm wearing my favorite hot pink heels. It's a good hair day.

Everything *should* be perfect.

I *should* be all smiles and rainbows, but I'm not.

I thought I could put on my big girl panties and move on. I really did. But I haven't been able to focus.

It's definitely not the job. It's been two weeks since I started, but I love it here. I've already met most of the football team and the coaching staff. They've stopped by my office on their way to or from the stadium gym to introduce themselves and gawk at the new girl. One of the veteran players told me the old PR guy looked like he was over a hundred years old

and that there are very few women in the organization, so naturally everyone is curious.

And they all want to get a chance to meet the woman who married the broodiest asshole in hockey and lived to tell the tale.

I've got the scars to prove it.

Aside from the divorce papers, I haven't heard from him in weeks. Not even a piece of paper confirming our divorce. Nothing.

Of course, he's been all over the sports channels, so I can't help but see him everywhere. Even when I don't want to. Even when seeing him and simply hearing his voice rips my barely beating heart from my chest and throws it in a nearby dumpster. Then sets it on fire.

He wouldn't talk to me. Not about his sister. Not about the fight that almost cost him his position on the team. None of it.

But he told the fucking world.

It's hard to be bitter when his truth exonerated him and kept him playing hockey. Maybe it makes me a shitty person, but I wish he told me those things before he told everyone else. I guess that's why this marriage was a failed one. Ha. More like a fake one. It was only real for one of us.

"Hey there, Lucy." Mr. Winters comes into my office and instead of sitting down in one of the plush seats in front of my desk, stands off to the side and looks out the window onto the field. I'm not really sure of his title but his department

organizes all the stadium tours and in-house fan events. “It’s a lovely day outside, don’t you think?”

I nod, giving the field one last glance before turning back around. “It is. What can I do for you, Mr. Winters.”

“Please.” He blushes, shoving his hands in the pockets of what I’m pretty sure is a green tweed suit. He’s the same age as my dad, and I’m not sure if he has more or less style. “You flatter me. How many times do I need to ask you to call me Alex?”

“At least twice more.” I wink, giving him the same answer I gave him yesterday. “What can I do for you?”

He shuffles backward and looks at the ground before answering. “I hate to impose, but are you terribly busy today?”

I glance at my day planner which is light this week. “Nope. I only have a few things left and then I’m free.”

“Thank God.” He relaxes and slumps into the chair closest to the door.

“Is the situation that dire?”

“It could be.” He blows out a breath and leans his head against the back of the chair. “Today is my twenty-five-year wedding anniversary, and I completely forgot.”

“Oh, noooooo.”

“Oh, yes. Charlene is expecting me home early to get to our dinner reservations we made months ago. And I still need to stop by the little flower shop on Sixth Avenue.”

“Well, how can I help? I’d hate for you to get in trouble with Charlene.” I lean forward, folding my hands together. I haven’t met his wife yet, but he told me all about her last week and showed me several pictures of their single sons.

“If you really aren’t that busy, I’d need some help with the tour this afternoon. There are a few VIP guests, and I want to make sure there’s someone to walk around with them and provide extra attention.”

“Is that all? I can absolutely do that.”

“Are you sure?” His eyebrows raise like he’s surprised, and I can’t help but laugh. The Aces do stadium tours at least once a month and from what I hear, they’re always packed. And they can take a couple of hours if you get fans who like to dawdle and ask a lot of questions. There’s no way he’d be able to walk the stadium with the VIP clients, hit up the flower shop, and make it home early.

I nod, a smile working its way across my face. “One hundred percent. My afternoon is completely free.”

He sighs and swipes the back of his hand across his forehead. “You’re really saving my bacon. I owe you one.”

“No need.” I wave him off. “Only the best for Charlene.”

“Thank you so much. The tour starts at one. Jerry will be able to point you to the right people.”

“Sounds good.”

Mr. Winters thanks me again, and as he goes to leave my office, gives me a backwards glance and a small smile. It’s

slightly odd, but I don't know him that well and he might be nervous about tonight.

Granted, he could also be nervous about these VIP people joining the tour this afternoon. I don't know who they are, and it really doesn't matter. I've handled my fair share of divas, and unless these guys are complete assholes, they won't bother me. Even then I won't say anything until I get home and complain to Elle.

Over the next couple hours, I get so submersed in a new media campaign for the upcoming season that I completely lose track of time. My stomach grumbles and after a quick glance at the time, I unleash a string of expletives that might make some of these football players blush. It's five minutes to one and if I don't hustle the fuck up, I'm going to be late.

I grab a protein bar from my purse and my employee badge, hanging it around my neck and dashing from my office.

As soon as I get to the front entrance, Jerry gives me his version of a stern look, followed by a grin and a wave. I shove the rest of the protein bar in my mouth and close the distance between us.

"You could have at least finished chewing." He frowns at me. Between him and Mr. Winters, I have my fair share of work dads. "I hope that wasn't your lunch."

I swallow everything down, wishing I'd snagged a water, and smile. "Of course not."

He grumbles something under his breath, shaking his head before pointing to the back of the room. “Your guests are in the back. They don’t look like much, but they donated a pretty penny to our youth football program. I’m sorry I didn’t get their names; someone was late, and I had to get everyone else checked in. Alex handled them right before he ran out of here.”

“Not a problem.” I pat his arm and as I turn to walk to the back, he calls my name, and I spin back around. “Yes?”

“There’s one of them that has a face.”

“What kind of face?” My lips twitch, and I cock a brow.

“Is there a male equivalent to a resting witch face?”

I toss my head back and laugh. “There is actually. I’ll tell you about it later. Don’t worry, I know all about dealing with those types.”

I smooth my hair back and plaster a smile on my face as I weave through the crowd, welcoming people as I go. About halfway across the lobby, I spot them. Four guys standing off to the side with baseball caps pulled low to hide half their faces. I take another step and then one more before I pause.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

This is fan-fucking-tastic.

Ball caps or no, I’d recognize the four of them anywhere.

Lincoln Dallas. Tag Harris. Foster Craig. And my... husband? Ex-husband? Rhett fucking Remington. The man

with the resting prick face. I should've known. He has some pretty big balls coming here after everything that went down.

My pulse quickens, but even though I want to run in the other direction, I square my shoulders, and flip my hair over my shoulder. You can bet that this time, my smile is as fake as can be.

“Lincoln. Tag. Foster. So nice to see you guys.” I glance between the three of them, completely ignoring Rhett even though I can feel the weight of his stare as it settles on me. I grew up in the south. He'll have to do a little more than stare at me to ruffle my feathers. “Shall we get started? Jerry will be leading the tour, but if you have any questions, I'll be here to try to answer everything. I'm a little new, so you'll have to bear with me.”

I don't wait for their response. I don't care what they have to say. They can either follow me or turn around and head back out to the parking lot.

In fact, that might be preferable.

“How are you liking things so far?” Tag jogs after me, falling into step at my side.

“I like it just fine. Elle didn't say anything about you guys stopping by.”

“I didn't want to ruin the surprise.”

Surprise my ass. More like an ambush. This whole damn thing was a set up. I bet it isn't even Alex and Charlene's anniversary.

But why?

What would they accomplish bringing *him* here? Do they think I need some kind of closure? Is this a publicity stunt?

Whatever it is, I'll be doing my job and then getting back to my office. I have no desire to be a part of whatever this is.

Forty

Rhett

LUCY IS PISSED.

I knew she wouldn't be happy to see me but damn. There's practically steam rolling out of her ears. She won't even look at me. Hell, she barely looked at the other guys, and she has no problem with them.

It might be harder to win her over than I thought.

But I have to try. If I don't, I know I'll regret it for the rest of my life.

She's worth it. She's worth absolutely everything and more. There's nothing I wouldn't give to see her smile one more time. To hold her. To be able to kiss her. To tell her how fucking much I missed her.

I want her to melt in my arms. I want to wake up wrapped around her, breathing in her floral scent. I want to hold her hand. Kiss her neck. Cook her dinner, burn the dinner, and then have to order pizza. I want everything with Lucy.

I should have told her how I felt. I should have told her so many times. I hope I'm not too late.

Tag said I needed to do something big.

I hope this is big enough.

"I'm not going to lie; you've got your work cut out for you." Lincoln whispers as we walk through the locker room.

I nod, looking around even though I don't give a single fuck what the football locker room looks like. You've seen one, you've seen them all. Plus, I think we all know there's nothing special about these football players. Especially not their right hooks. A little weak, if you ask me. "She's still pissed."

"Understatement of the year right there. I hope you know what you're doing, Remington."

"No clue. But I'm glad you guys have my back."

"Clearly, you needed the backup. What kind of captain would I be if I left you hanging in this very hostile situation?"

I laugh and start to shake my head, but as soon as I turn away from Lincoln, my gaze connects with Lucy's. She's a few feet away yet I can feel the miles between us. Her bright blue eyes are startled for a moment before they harden, and she looks away.

Foster comes up behind me and claps my shoulder. "Don't worry, mate. I'm sure she'll come around. And if she doesn't, remember there's always plan B."

“No offense, Foster, but I will not be whipping out my dick in front of all these people.”

“It’s an option,” he mutters.

“It’s really not.” I roll my eyes and push him toward the exit. “I’m trying to only have positive things in the news, remember?”

“I think I liked the fun Remington better. Oh, wait. There never was a fun Remington.”

Tag comes up behind us and whistles. “Damn. I should’ve brought a winter coat, I might get frostbite with look she just gave you. I hope you got everything planned out.”

I’m not sure there’s a proper way to plan your grovel. Is there? Should I have written things down? I’m so fucking screwed. She’s going to hit me, I know it. Right in front of everyone.

She leads us through several more rooms—where the players work out, where they watch game day footage, where they wax each other’s balls—and I follow her like a dutiful puppy. I couldn’t care less if one of them came in and took a shit in front of us, but I hang onto every word and pretend to be interested.

I can’t take my eyes off her. Not when she smooths the hair away from her face. Not the slight sway in her hips when she walks. I’m even entranced by the click of her heels as she strolls down the tunnel that leads us to the field.

She hasn’t looked at me again.

If I need to wear Gunner Rose's jersey and scream from the top of the bleachers to get her attention, I will. At this point I'm not above anything. Case in point: I'm at a football stadium.

The five of us are the last ones on the field, and by the time we step past the end zone, everyone else from the tour is already wandering around, taking pictures and acting like proper fans. No one's recognized us yet, but it's only a matter of time.

Lucy turns around, waving her arms up and down the field, careful to only address the other two. I'm not sure what Tag's doing but he's still at the edge of the field. "Well, this is where the magic happens. I'm going to assume you guys watch more football than I do and know what all these lines and numbers mean. Feel free to continue hanging back or wander around and take pictures with the other visitors."

The smile she gives us is as practiced and as fake as Tag's enthusiasm over the goal post.

She whips back around and as she weaves through the crowd, Lincoln and Foster grip each shoulder. Lincoln remains silent but Foster gives my shoulder a squeeze and shakes his head. "I'm a little scared for you, mate. I take back everything I said about option B. I think if you whipped out your knob, she'd likely chop it up and display it in the trophy case."

I nod and shake them both off as Tag rejoins our group. "If I don't make it back alive, someone needs to take care of my

sister. And not you, Foster.” I pause, allowing Foster to scoff with indignation before I say, “Hats off boys.”

My hands shake as I pull the hat from my head and run a hand through my hair. I pass it over my shoulder, knowing one of them will take it, and they do. I don’t need to turn around to know the other guys have taken theirs off as well because several people nearby turn around and then the whispers and pointing begin.

The more people that notice us, the faster my heart races, and I wipe my palms down the front of my jeans.

On instinct, my fingers go to my obsidian wedding band and twist around the cool metal. It used to be something that represented what I thought was a huge mistake. And now it’s a symbol of hope. Of love. Of forgiveness. This marriage between Lucy and I may have started out as a sham, but it’s morphed into so much more.

It’s about time she knows it.

After taking a deep breath to steady my nerves, I reach into my pocket, running my finger along the platinum band of *her* ring and pull it out. I won’t be able to rest until it’s back where it belongs.

I drop down to one knee and the growing crowd does exactly what I anticipated. They collectively gasp, point, and what were hushed whispers get louder. I don’t look at them. I can’t. I’ve only got eyes for my wife and right now I need her to turn around.

She doesn't.

She walks straight up to the tour guide—a man wearing too much Aces' attire—and her shoulders shake as she laughs at something he says. She doesn't notice me, but it only takes another couple of seconds before he does and points in my direction.

Waiting for Lucy to turn feels like hours. It's torture. Not knowing what she'll say. If she'll forgive me. If she'll even hear me out.

Her gaze meets mine and if I weren't already on my knee, what I see would've leveled me. She's surprised, that much is evident. And she's forgotten to keep her mask of indifference in place. Her shields are down, and I can see every emotion, the hurt, the betrayal, all of it in her eyes.

I hate that I caused it, and if she'll let me, I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to her.

The hurt turns to anger as she stomps toward me, stopping inches from me but it's still not close enough.

“What are you doing?” she hisses, taking a deep breath and lowering her voice. “You're making a scene. Stand up before you make the news. *Again*. You hate attention.”

“There are a lot of things I'd suffer through for you.”

Her mouth opens and then closes again. She purses her lips and takes several deep breaths. “I'm not sure what you're hoping to accomplish, but whatever was between us is over. Or did you forget sending me divorce papers?”

“I’m not going to lie and say I didn’t mean to hurt you, because at the time, I did.” Her eyes water, but I don’t let her tears sway me. I can’t. “You were too close and I wanted—no, I needed to push you away. I didn’t understand what I had, what you mean to me.” I pause, gripping her ring tightly in my hand. “Lucy, I fell in love with you my first day with the Devils, and it took an accidental wedding in Vegas to make me realize it. I will forever be grateful for the Elvis that married us. Even for your parents, because without their visit, we may have never been forced to be so close.”

Her eyes flutter, and she wipes a stray tear from her cheek. We’re surrounded by the entire tour, yet her gaze never strays from mine.

“Lucy.” Her name is a prayer that falls from my lips, and I repeat it, putting all my emotions behind that single word. Making her name a declaration. “I know I messed up. I know I said things I didn’t mean. I know I’m not even close to being good enough for you. You are the reason I get up every morning. Why I want to be a better man. Why I take every breath. I live for you.”

She gasps, her hand flying up to cover her mouth.

“Every single day that you’ve been out of my life is pure misery. And I don’t want to live another second without you in it. You’re the fucking stars on a dark night and without you, I’m simply lost. I love you, Lucy. I love you so fucking much it hurts.” I open my hand and hold the ring—*her ring*—out to her. “Will you marry me? Again? This time no Elvis. No rules.

No false pretenses. Just you and me and maybe these fuckers behind me.”

Lucy laughs, wiping away a few more fallen tears. “No.” The crowd gasps again, but she smiles. “I want one rule. I want the truth, Rhett. No more lies.”

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know. I don’t want any more secrets between us. What do you say, Lucy? Will you be mine? Can you love a broody bastard like me?”

This time she doesn’t hesitate, she drops to her knees and takes the ring from my palm, slipping it back on her finger where it belongs. “I already do. I love you.”

“Fuck me.” I breathe out, threading my fingers through the silky strands of her hair and crashing my lips to hers with a desperation I’ve never felt before. I can’t get enough. Of her. Of her kiss. She’s fucking mine and I can’t wait to show her what that means.

There are cheers. Whoops of excitement. Congratulations.

I ignore them all.

My wife is the only thing I’ll ever need, and I’ll spend the rest of my life making sure she knows it.

FORTY-ONE

Lucy

WHEN RHETT PULLS AWAY, I run the tips of my fingers across his cheeks, over his facial hair, down the length of his neck.

I can't and don't want to stop touching him.

Never in a million years did I think I'd ever see him get on his knees for anyone. Or apologize. Or tell me that he loves me. Or ask me to be his wife on purpose.

For the first time in weeks, everything is perfect, and I can finally smile and not feel like a fraud. It's as if everything I've wanted and been trying to ignore has finally clicked into place.

Rhett stands and helps me to my feet but instead of letting me stand on my own, he pulls me against his chest. He runs his nose alongside mine and frames my face with his hands. "I was hoping I hadn't lost you forever."

"That was one hell of a grand gesture. Although," I chuckle, resting my palms on his chest, loving that I can feel every beat

of his heart, “if you had just come to my office and talked, I’d probably have slammed the door in your face.”

“I know.”

“Wait.” I pull back as much as he’ll let me. “Are we divorced? I never got any other paperwork?”

“About that...” He trails off, glancing at the guys before turning back to me, a sheepish expression on his face. “I might have never filed. Technically we’re still married until the papers are submitted, and I might have shredded them.”

It feels like my heart is expanding in my chest as I push to my tiptoes and press our lips together. While I keep this kiss chaste, it’s no less intense. The emotions that have been wrestling inside me since I woke up naked, tangled up in this man, finally coming to a head.

Rhett pulls away, panting slightly, his eyes darkened, hunger written all over his face.

We stare at each other for several seconds before Foster breaks our revelry, coming over and wrapping an arm around each of us. “I think we’re all going to need to be hosed off at this rate. I didn’t think you were going to try to shag her on the field. Although if you want to give us a show, I’m going to need some popcorn. You’ve scared everyone else away.”

I glance around and sure enough, everyone but a straggler or two is following Jerry to the other side of the field. Lincoln and Tag are standing on the other side of us, and I swear Tag

swipes under his eyes. I'll never ask, and I'm sure he'll never admit to shedding a tear.

“Now what?” Foster looks between us, a big smile on his face. “Should we all go out to celebrate with some lunch? I think this asshole promised me food. I'm a growing boy and need to be nourished.”

Rhett politely shoves him away and mumbles, “Get fucked.”

“I think they want to be alone for a bit.” Lincoln swoops in to pull Foster back.

“They have some things to catch up on, I'm sure. I'll spare you the details of what happened after I very romantically chased Elle to Georgia, but after I confessed my undying love for her, we needed some privacy.” Tag winks, and Foster pretends to gag. Rhett merely blinks at him before meeting Lincoln's gaze.

“Let's go eat. Rhett will call us later.” He pulls the two of them away, but not before Foster flashes us a very sad looking face. They disappear back into the tunnel, leaving us alone on the ten-yard line.

As soon as they're gone, Rhett doesn't hesitate to guide my face back around and kiss my forehead. The tip of my nose. And finally, my lips. It's a slow, languid kiss but as his hands dip lower, grab my ass, and press me against his growing erection, it speeds up. I open to him and his tongue slides along mine. He licks into my mouth, and I moan, squirming against him.

I need more. I need him. But we need a little more privacy than the open football field.

This time when I pull back, he lets me, but takes my hand and laces our fingers together.

“Do you want a private tour of my office?” I ask.

“How private is this tour?” he muses as we head back to the stadium offices.

I point up to the right corner of the upper offices. “Well, that is one way glass. And I have a corner office.”

“Then I really don’t know why the fuck we’re still standing out here.”

I laugh as he practically pulls me back inside the building and then stops when he realizes he doesn’t know where he’s going. He lets me pull him down the hallway, past the locker rooms and athletic facilities, but then tugs my hand and swings me around to face him.

His hands are everywhere as he backs me into a single bathroom and locks the door behind us. “I’m sorry, I can’t wait.”

His fingers are inching below the hem of my skirt, and his tongue is flicking along my collarbone before he licks up the length of my neck and flicks my earlobe. I turn my head to the side and can’t help the low moan that escapes my lips.

“I’ll let you ride me all night long, but if I don’t get inside you right now, I’m going to go crazy. I need to feel you around

me, sweetheart.” His voice is low and husky in my ear, and I shiver.

Nothing about our relationship has been conventional, and I see no reason to start now. Especially as his fingers tease my inner thighs and fuck if I don’t want him more than I want to breathe.

“Rhett.” My hands go to his jeans, and I flick open the button and work them over his hips. “I need you too.”

“Thank fuck.”

He crowds me against the door and grabs my ass again, this time lifting me up and pinning me against it. My legs go around his waist, and my hands dive into his hair, pulling him down to me. I’m burning as our tongues tangle together, and he absolutely dominates my mouth.

He forces my head back and takes the kiss deeper, branding me with every swipe, every lick of his tongue. And I meet every thrust of his tongue because he’s mine too, and I need him to know it.

I shift as he works my panties to the side and lines himself at my entrance. I’m already so wet. So desperate. So ready. And we both know it.

I dig my heels into his lower back and force him to slide the head of his cock into me. He doesn’t stop. He doesn’t hesitate. He keeps pushing forward until he’s buried inside me. I flutter around him, adjusting to his size. I love the stretch. I love the

burn. I love how complete I feel when we're joined together. I love everything about this man.

Rhett doesn't give me much time before he begins to move, setting a hurried pace. Fucking me with almost a wild abandon. Pistoning in and out of me like he's just as desperate as I am.

My nails scrape across his scalp and down his neck. His name is a loud cry as he slips a hand between us and works my clit at the same fevered pace. I moan into his mouth. My hands are frantically trying to pull him closer. My thighs tremble. Quake. Oh God, he feels so fucking good.

He pants my name, working me into a frenzy. He quickens his movements, fucking me so fast, so deep, all I can do is hold on. His thumb pushes into my clit, and I close my eyes and scream his name as an orgasm hits me. I clench around his cock as I ride every wave of pleasure.

Rhett pushes forward and groans as he empties inside me, pressing us together as tightly as possible as he rides out his own orgasm.

He collapses against me, wrapping both arms around my thighs to support me, as he presses his lips along my jaw and pulls out of me.

"Lucy." There's a raw edge to his voice. "I love you. I love you so damn much."

"I love you." I smooth my hands over his shoulders and force him to meet my gaze.

His eyes are swimming with emotion. Vulnerability. Love. Hope.

“Is there a chance you’ll move back in with me?” He leans forward and gives me a quick peck. “We can get a bigger apartment. A house. A dog. Whatever you want. I’ll even move into the Barbie Dreamhouse. I don’t care. I just want to be with you.”

“There’s a lot of pink in my apartment.”

He rests his forehead against mine, closes his eyes, and huffs a laugh. “I bought pink pillows for my bed. I don’t care. You’ve ruined me.”

“Really?” I pull back slightly, a smile tugging on my lips. “I think we’re both ruined.”

“Good.”

“Yes.” I stroke my hand along his short beard, enjoying how it scrapes against my palm. “I’ll move back in.”

“I can’t wait to be married to you.” Rhett smirks, a little lopsided grin that pops out the dimple I’ve missed so much. “You know, for real this time. No more pretend. No more rules. Just us.”

“Perfect.”

EPILOGUE

Avery

THE LIGHTS ARE TOO flashy. Too bright when they're right in my face, yet too dim when they disappear to flash at someone else.

This nightclub is sleek and swanky. I'd expect nothing less from these hockey boys. They gave Rhett and Lucy a week before insisting that we all go out to celebrate their marriage, even though they've technically been married since February—sham or no, it was still legal. Not that I'm going to point that out when they're all so happy.

Everyone except me.

I'm five months pregnant and already feel huge. Especially at this club with all these girls who look utterly spectacular.

I can't wear heels because my feet are starting to swell. I can't wear those short dresses. Not just because my brother would go apeshit but because I'm not sure one would be able to cover both my belly and my ass.

So, I'm fat. Pregnant. Alone. Sitting in the corner of a leather booth, sipping on a Shirley Temple, when I wish it were something with vodka. Rhett and Lucy are in a heated discussion with Lincoln and Jazz. Tag has pulled Elle out to the dancefloor and all the other guys are scattered around the VIP area, flirting with the many single girls that have found their way up here.

My eyes float back to Foster. They haven't strayed far from him. They never do when he's around.

The man looks good in anything he wears, and I suspect he looks even better in nothing. Tonight, he's wearing black dress pants and a white button up, open at the collar with the sleeves rolled up to the middle of his forearm. It's stretched perfectly across his chest, and while I can't see the definition, I know he's got some spectacular muscles under there. It's like lady porn, and I can barely tear my eyes away.

He's got a blonde and a brunette on either side, hanging on to him and every word that comes out of his mouth. He must've said something funny because they both laugh and lean in to touch him. It must be the accent. It gets me every time.

I suck down the rest of my drink and slam it down on the table, turning away and gazing out on the dance floor below us.

I need to get him out of my mind. For multiple reasons. The first being my hockey playing brother who's a tad overprotective and isn't always the most understanding. The

second being that I've already made a rather large mistake with one of my brother's teammates. And the third is hanging out in my uterus enjoying the rhythm of the country music.

No man thinks a pregnant woman is sexy.

Any man who disagrees is lying.

"Hey, baby Remington. What are you doing over here all by yourself?" Foster slides in the booth next to me, grabbing my drink and sniffing. "What the bloody hell are you drinking?"

"Shirly Temple. Can't have alcohol, remember?" I spit out, gesturing to my belly. "Why are you over here? Ian and Owen will swoop in and steal your girls if you're over here too long."

I'll give him credit. He looks genuinely confused for a second before he smirks. "I'm not here for them, baby Remington. I want to know why you're over here pouting when you should be out on the dance floor living your best life."

"Trust me. No one wants me out there."

"Maybe I do." He slides out of the booth and holds his hand out for me. When I hesitate, he beckons me with two fingers. I die. The two-finger come hither will get me every time.

Against all better judgment, I slide my hand into his. I think about how warm and smooth his skin feels. How much stronger and bigger his hand is compared to mine. How sexy those bulging veins are on the back of his hand and up his arm.

I know I'm making a mistake. I know I'm asking for trouble. I know I'm only allowing myself to get dragged in deeper.

I know all this, but I follow him anyway.

I ignore my brother's narrowed eyes. I ignore the looks I get from the people we pass. I ignore everything except for Foster's hand in mine and when he spins me around and puts his hand on my lower back, pulling me way closer than I dared go on my own, I know I've got a problem.

I'm in too deep, and I don't know how to ignore his pull.

Send help.

Thank you so much for reading BROODY DEVIL!! I really hope you loved seeing Rhett and Lucy fall in love because I know I enjoyed writing it. I love every book I've done but this one holds a special place in my heart.

Are you not ready to let go? Do you need more Rhett and Lucy? For a sweet and *spicy* bonus scene [CLICK HERE](#) and sign up for my newsletter.

Need more Nashville Devils Hockey? Avery and Foster will be sneaking around next and trying to navigate all the pucks life shoots their way. [Click here to order DIRTY DEVIL.](#)

Couldn't get enough Ryan, Gunner, and the other football players? You're in luck **TIGHT END**, the start of the Nashville Aces is coming out the summer of 2022. What happens when Ryan finds himself face-to-face with the one girl who left? The one he wanted more with? The one who wasn't ready to settle down, yet left him wanting more?

[Click here to order TIGHT END](#) and fall in love with the Nashville Aces Football Team.

Rule number one: don't fall in love.

Simple, right?

I couldn't be more wrong.

The rules are there for a reason and no matter how much the ladies beg, I won't break them for anyone. I almost did once, but I learned my lesson after a one night stand had her fleeing faster than Cinderella. She left me with no last name, no phone number, and a ridiculously fluffy wedding dress.

She did me a favor. Really, she did.

Now, I'm at the top of my game and one of the best tight ends in the NFL. So you can imagine my surprise when the new locker room reporter is none other than Cinderella herself. June is even more beautiful than I remember. Funny, witty, and completely over her head.

Our relationship needs to stay strictly professional, despite those bedroom eyes she keeps throwing my way. June deserves a man who can give her a future and that's something I can't do.

I won't break my rules for anyone. Even her.

[One-click TIGHT END here.](#)

I appreciate each and every one of you for taking this journey with me.

Want to stay in the know about all my upcoming releases? Just sign up for my [newsletter](#).

As an Indie Author, I would love your help spreading the word about BROODY DEVIL. If you enjoyed the story please consider leaving a review on [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#), or even referring to a friend. Even a sentence or two makes a huge difference.

Thank you for taking this journey with me.

Melissa

Also by Melissa Ivers

Devils Hockey

[FORBIDDEN DEVIL](#) (Lincoln and Jazz)

[UNTAMED DEVIL](#) (Tag and Elle)

[BROODY DEVIL](#) (Rhett and Lucy)

[DIRTY DEVIL](#) (Foster and Avery)

Nashville Aces Football

[TIGHT END](#) (Ryan and June)

Love in Aspen

[MISTLETOE AND MISCHIEF](#) (Nash and Jules)

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And I especially want to thank you! Thank you for reading. Thank you for making it to the end. And hopefully, thank you for loving it.

Melissa

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LOVER OF ALL THINGS romance and hockey, she also loves to bake extra delicious treats. Melissa Ivers loves to write steamy stories with all those hot, alpha men and women who can bring them to their knees, literally and figuratively. Melissa lives in Kentucky with her eye-rolling teenage son and two of the laziest dogs known to man. She has numerous fictional boyfriends, but—shhhh—they don't know about each other.

When she isn't writing or working, you'll find her under a blanket on the couch reading a book on her Kindle, binge watching shows off Netflix, such as the *Office* and *Vampire Diaries* and being an all-around joy. To keep current with what Melissa is doing stalk her on social media

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