

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEGHAN  
QUINN

A man with dark hair, a beard, and sunglasses is sitting and looking towards the camera. He has several tattoos on his neck and arms. He is wearing a black t-shirt and blue jeans. The background is a gradient of teal and yellow.

put  
me  
in  
detention

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# Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt - Kiss and Don't Tell](#)

[More Books by Meghan](#)

## Prologue

CORA

“Sweet nectar of life, please don’t ever leave me,” I groan while rubbing my cheek against a stone of chilled bliss.

*Pound.*

*Pound.*

*Pound.*

*Gurgle.*

And . . . *repeat.*

The bad-decision-driven rhythm of my body. Three pounds, vibrating through my head, followed by a very unsettling gurgle.

The only thing keeping me alive is the cool touch of the firm surface beneath me.

“Cora? Cora, where are you?” I hear Stella call out from far away. “Cora, did you order breakfast?”

*Gurgle.*

Nope. No, I did not.

Definitely did not order breakfast.

“Has anyone seen Cora?” Stella asks.

“Is she not in her room?” Greer asks, her voice rather upbeat, a stark contrast to how I’m feeling.

“Do you associate Stella with idiocy?” The snap of Keiko’s voice comes in sharp. “She’s an intelligent female, smart enough to deduct from the obvious places as to where our comrade would be reposing. Why treat her with such—”

“I didn’t check her room,” Stella says.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Keiko huffs. “Analyze her place of slumber before you query individuals of her location. Have you learned nothing as an educator?”

Lucky for us, and I mean that sarcastically, Keiko has been a bit . . . snappy lately. Greer, Stella, and I think we know why, though Keiko, on the other hand, seems clueless.

Ahem.

Bun in the oven.

“I’m . . . here,” I mumble as I start to wiggle my fingers. Yup, those are working. I then check my toes.

Hurray, still intact.

Limbs are accounted for. What about torso? Everything good there?

My stomach is pressed against the floor, and I smooth it along the cold tile—yup, still there, but . . . why is the chilliness of the surface beneath me so strong? Why does it feel as if I’m not wearing any articles of clothing?

“Did you hear that?” Greer asks. “I think it came from the entryway.”

Footsteps parade down the hall to the entryway of the ornately expansive hotel suite I booked for my divorce-cation—a well-thought-out, meticulously planned, and obnoxious ceremony that celebrated the end of my nuptials to Keenan—the one who shall not be named.

The devil himself.

An immoral human with a loose zipper in his pants and a penchant for sleeping with women who weren’t his wife.

My ex-husband.

Cue the Maury Show-style boos.

“Maybe she ordered us breakfast,” Stella says, drawing closer.

“I could use some bacon,” Greer adds. From the proximity of her voice, I think she’s now in the same room as me. *Crap*. “And some—whoa—uh, Cora . . . you’re, uh, you’re naked.”

Yup, that’s what I thought.

Naked as the day I was born.

The front of my body is pressed against the floor, my legs are squeezed together, and my ass is feeling the cool breeze of the air conditioner blowing from the vent above.

“Wow,” Stella says, “you have a really nice ass.”

“I’m clenching,” I say, for Lord knows what reason.

“She does have a nice ass,” Greer says. “Even if she’s clenching, it’s still all round and bubbly.”

“From a quick analysis of her posterior chain I can rapidly deduce that she spends more time in the gym than she announces,” Keiko chimes in. I do spend a good portion of time in the gym, especially ever since I left . . . thou who shall not be named, or TWSNBN.

“Are you putting in squat time?” Stella asks.

“Uh, could someone grab me a blanket or towel?” I whisper.

I lift my head and turn it so I’m now facing my friends. Stella and Greer are both wearing oversized shirts from their men. Stella is drowning in Romeo’s Bobbies shirt, while Greer is wearing one of Arlo’s Forest Heights tees. And Keeks, well, she’s wearing an ankle-length floral nightgown that I’m pretty sure she purchased at Talbots.

“If you must know, I’ve been squatting with bands lately.”

“Well, it’s showing.” Greer claps. “It’s a great ass.”

“Structurally sound,” Keiko adds.



“Jealous of those glutes,” Stella says.

“Well, thank you, but towel, please. Something is poking my boob and I’d rather you not see everything I have to offer.”

Greer grabs my robe from the couch and chucks it at me. I do my best to maneuver on the floor and cover myself up before lifting, only to notice . . .

“Oh hell,” I mutter.

“What?” Greer asks.

With the robe securely around my waist, I turn toward them, part the lapels, and flash them my boobs.

Well, my tassel-covered boobs.

A boisterous laugh falls out of Stella’s mouth and Greer leans forward for a better look. Keiko dramatically shields her eyes, but then peeks through her fingers.

When she notices the tassels, her hand drops and she says, “I’ve heard of wearing such devices on your breasts before, but never quite considered it for Kelvin.” She takes a step forward. “How do they feel? May I examine them?”

“No.” I whip my robe shut and then grip my head from the pounding pain.

“How am I supposed to make an accurate assessment of fringe pasties for your bosom if you deny me an experimental observation?” Keiko asks. Keiko is a dear friend, quirky, a tad nerdy, and incredibly socially awkward. Has zero boundaries, but we love her for it. Even if she does get on our nerves sometimes.

“Buy some, try them on, and reach your own conclusions.” I move to the living room, where I take a seat on the couch, cross one leg over the other, and then lean back against the cushions. “Honest to God, I can’t remember why I put tassels on my boobs. Or why I’m naked, for that matter. Or why I was on the entryway floor.” I smirk. “But I guess it was a good night, right, ladies?”

Stella and Greer exchange glances, while Keiko sits next to me, a little too closely, as if—

“Keiko.” I swat away her hand as she attempts to sneak it into my robe. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“It’s not my fault you’ve stimulated my genius with inquisitiveness.”

“For the love of God.” I reach into my robe, pull off one tassel—oh my God, I think I ripped my nipple off—and I hand it to her. “There, go ham with it.”

Keiko examines it closely as she stands up. “I shall retreat to my quarters. Please inform me when our morning meal has arrived.”

And then she’s gone, leaving me with Greer and Stella and their concerned faces.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

My phone beeps with a text message, the sound echoing in the vast space of the living room. I glance around, spotting my phone on the end table.

“Do you not remember who we ran into last night?” Stella asks.

“Elvis?” I ask. “Uh, doesn’t everyone run into him? I kind of wish ours hadn’t smelled like onions though, because, *woof*. That was rough.”

“Not Elvis,” Greer says as I pick up my phone. “Who we ran into at the bar.”

I think back to last night, trying to recall what we did.

We got ready. I put on a killer emerald-green dress that was far too slutty for me; my ex would’ve had a heart attack if I wore it out with him—which was the reason why I wore it. Got to take advantage of the whole rebellious ex-wife thing. We pre-gamed in the suite with some Keiko-mixed cocktails, saw Elvis in the elevator, and went to dinner . . .

“You know, I think I ended up wearing tassels because I wasn’t wearing a bra last night. I remember saying my nipples were cold. Do you remember that?”

Stella shakes her head. “No, because you left us at the bar.”

“What?” My brow crinkles. “I didn’t leave you. That would mean I was alone last night, and . . .” A flash of a square jaw passes through my mind. “I . . . definitely . . . wasn’t . . .” Dark, piercing eyes penetrate my thoughts—oh God. “Alone.”

A deliciously dirty voice sharpens in the back of my mind.

The press of a large hand to my bare back.

The smell of a deeply masculine scent, which is engrained in my brain.

In the blink of an eye, I snap my phone off the end table and glance at the screen.

*GULP.*

A message.

From . . .

**\*\*Husband\*\***

My eyes flash up to Greer and Stella as the entire night unfolds right in front of me.

Shots.

A British accent.

Bad decisions.

More bad decisions.

And then . . .

“Oh fuck,” I say quietly.

“I don’t think that was a good ‘oh fuck,’” Stella says from the corner of her mouth as both my friends stare at me.

“No, that sounded like an ‘*oh fuck*,’ oh fuck,” Greer says.

Stella slowly nods. “As if she did something really stupid, like get married.”

Greer chuckles. “Could you imagine? Getting married on your divorce-cation.” She shakes her head. “No, that sounded like an ‘I stripped in front of strange men’ oh fuck.”

“That would explain the tassels.” Leaning in, Stella asks, “Did you strip in front of a crowd?”

Unable to answer, I look at my phone again, and this time, I unlock the screen and read the text.

***Husband:** Good morning, wife. About to board my plane back to Chicago. After I arrive, I’m going to pack some things and then head to our place. See you at home . . . snookums.*

Wife?

Packing things?

Our place?

SNOOKUMS??

Oh . . . *fuuuuuck.*

I swallow hard, nerves bristling through me as I look at my friends. Fear and anxiety creep up the back of my neck as I say, “I think I made a huge mistake last night.”

“What kind of mistake?” Greer asks. “Worse than stripping in front of a crowd?”

I nod. “Way worse.”

“What could be worse than that?” Stella asks.

Stunned, I stare off into the suite and say, “I married Pike Greyson last night.”

## Chapter One

---

### PIKE

“Did you land?”

“Yeah,” I mutter, as I make my way through the Las Vegas airport. Slot machines ding and bling as I weave toward the baggage claim. Weary travelers, hungover visitors, and clingy couples filter through the hallways, bumping into me or cutting me off as they spot an open slot machine—just one more chance to win before they leave. “Where the hell did you book me, again?”

“Aria. There should be a car attendant ready to pick you up at baggage claim,” Killian, my oldest brother, says on the phone.

“Does Pa know I’m here?”

“No,” Killian answers. “He’s completely unaware.”

The nerves building inside me from the thought of my father knowing where I am start to ease. Thank fuck.

“And you swear on your cock, I won’t run into him?”

“Swear. You’re staying in different hotels, running in different circles, teeing off at different tee times. There’s no chance. Just go out there, kick arse, and then go home. Simple.”

I hop onto the airport shuttle and stand next to the door, my hand tightly gripping the handle of my carry-on. “I don’t know why I allowed you to convince me to do this.”

“Because you can’t say no when it comes to our foundation.”

He’s right. When it comes to our foundation, Rabid Readers, I *can’t* say no. Many years ago, Killian and I started a foundation to provide an equal opportunity to every child to not only learn to read, but to have the resources to do so, and to keep them invested in literature.

With my recent move to the States, I stepped away from the foundation—and from my old life—but Killian begged me to do the golf tournament, knowing I could win a good chunk of change for the Rabid Readers. It took a lot of convincing, but I agreed.

Now I’m regretting it.

“And I booked you a flight out early Sunday morning. You’ll be back in your flat before you know it.”

“Apartment,” I say absently. “Americans call them apartments.” *Can you see my eye roll?*

“Might not hurt you to loosen up while you’re in Vegas, you know.”

I stare out the window of the shuttle as it picks up speed. “The last thing I should do is loosen up,” I say, finally having a tight grasp on my life.

“Pike, you’re free now. Isn’t this what you wanted? A life of your own?”

I chew on the bottom of my lip.

“I don’t know what the hell I want.” The shuttle stops and I allow a few people to get off before I do. Rolling my bag behind me, I head toward baggage claim, where I see a row of drivers lined up with signs in their hands.

“Maybe this mini holiday will help you figure it out.”

I sarcastically laugh. “I doubt thirty-six hours in Vegas is going to change my life.”

“You never know.”

I spot a driver holding a sign with my last name on it. “I have to go.”

“You better beat Pa’s score.”

“Trust me, that won’t be an issue. Just know, this is the last time I’m doing this shit for you, got it? I’m a silent partner. No more of this public appearance bullshit.”

“Last one.”

“Good. I’ll call you later.”

We hang up and I stick my mobile in my pocket as I approach the driver. When he makes eye contact with me, he asks, “Pike Greyson?”

I nod. “That would be me.”



“PIKE GREYSON, didn’t expect to see your peevish ass out here.”

My back tenses from the sound of that familiar American accent—it’s my pa’s business partner. Fuck.

Slowly, I turn around, golf bag hanging on my shoulder, and adjust my sunglasses as I take in the sight of Cleat Burgess.

“Cleat,” I say, giving him a smooth once-over. “Wasn’t aware you spent your weekends away from your mistress.”

His sharp eyebrows narrow. “She’s waiting in the clubhouse.”

Figures.

Cleat Burgess is the epitome of a wanker. A fucking twat who cheats on his wife every chance he gets, especially on the weekends, and he makes no attempt to change his behavior.

He's a cheat, he's an asshole, and he'd sell his first kid if it meant he could gain an inch on the competition. I've never liked him.

"Does your pa know you're here?" he asks.

Knowing how this man works and the way he enjoys grating on people's nerves, I regain my composure, not showing an ounce of the discomfort I feel, knowing that I'm probably teeing off with this prick.

"No," I answer.

A wicked smile spreads over Cleat's mouth. "And why would that be?"

"Didn't feel like dealing with his ever-present halitosis."

His smile grows even wider. "No wonder why he despises you." The feeling is mutual. "You're a little shit."

I tilt my head in Cleat's direction, not wanting to spend more time with him than I have to. "Always a pleasure." When I turn away from him to see if I can grab a pint before I tee off, I spin right into a familiar body, his cologne a rich musk, the fabric of his clothes velvety soft and expensive. The deep, brown gaze staring back at me, the same as mine.

I'm going to kill my brother.

"Pike," my pa says, his voice stunned. "What on earth are you doing here?"

Strapping on my smart-arse pants, because they're the only ones I know how to wear when I'm around my pa, my only defense mechanism, I say, "Why, Pa-pah"—I make a show of it, raising my voice and acting like a cheerful tosser—"I'm so delighted to see you." I lean in and give him a hug. His body is stiff as a board and I feel him already starting to fume.

"For fuck's sake, Pike, don't cause a scene."

I let go of him. "Cause a scene? Why on earth would I do that? I'm just so happy to see my own flesh and blood, the one who disowned me and told me to crawl up my own asshole and die."



His eyes sharpen. I've struck a chord.

Pa is always about his perceived image. The Greysons are held to a high standard, and we've been forced to live in not only the spotlight, but to live up to both public expectations and those put on us by our patriarch.

"It would behoove you to shut your mouth and act like a civilized human," he whispers through clenched teeth. "Something I know will be quite difficult for you."

"Because I'm a dodgy animal after all, right? Uncaged. Untamed."

He adjusts the collar of his shirt and puts on a fake smile for the people around us. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Making this your worst nightmare." Isn't that obvious? I mean, as a person looking in, it's obvious, right? From previous comments my pa has shouted at me, you'd think that would be his conclusion. Not that I'm here for something other than him. Not that I would be here for, I don't know . . . a foundation.

"I'm going to have a word with the organizer. Your presence isn't needed for our foundation since I'm here."

"I'm not playing for your scam of a foundation that awards grants to rich kids." Yeah, don't even get me fucking started on the McArthur Greyson Scholarly Grant. The biggest crock of shit I've ever seen. "I'm here for Rabid Readers."

"Killian," he whispers, realization hitting him from the obvious setup by my brother. "The half-baked bugger is too lazy to come out here and earn the money himself, so he sends his gormless git brother." Pa rolls his eyes.

The words *gormless git* sear into my bones.

Those two words have been associated to my person for as long as I can remember. One of four kids in my family, I'm smack dab in the middle of my siblings, the troublemaker, according to my parents, the failure, the one who can't seem to get his shit together. The one who didn't make smart choices, but was constantly the gormless git. The idiot. The embarrassment. The black sheep.

It's why I left England, to get away from my pa's toxic hatred, from having to see the constant disappointment in his eyes.

My anger spikes as memories of constant beratement flood to the forefront of my mind.

My skin crawls.

A sheen of sweat breaks out on the back of my neck, and I realize if I don't remove myself from the situation, I might cause a scene.

Taking a deep breath, I say, "Don't break your back trying to show off."

I start to move away when Pa grabs my wrist and stills me.

I'm two inches taller than his six-foot stature. His peppered, gray hair is no match to my dark locks. But his eyes, a sinister, deep mahogany, match mine with such precision that when I look in the mirror in the morning, I see him. And that depresses me.

"It's not too late," Pa whispers as our shoulders brush against each other, me facing one direction, him facing the other. "Iris hasn't moved on. I can speak with her father. We can settle the arrangement and act as if you needed to sow your wild oats before committing. We can get the PR team to make a spin of it. You don't have to be the embarrassment you became by moving to America to be a godforsaken schoolteacher."

"I don't love Iris," I say.

"You'll never love anyone other than yourself. Unfortunately for me, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Commitment isn't in your blood." His eyes focus on mine. "But putting on the show of a long-lasting marriage, doing the duty of a Greyson, now that should be in your blood, and if it takes me until my last breath to prove that to you, then I will."

"I'm not you," I say through clenched teeth.

"Isn't that obvious? If you were, you'd be with Iris instead of breaking the poor girl's heart. You'd be helping this family

by bringing our business dealings closer to our families.” He lets go of my wrist and then pushes away when he sees a future business partner he needs to suck up to.

When Pa is gone, Cleat walks up to me and places his hand on my shoulder. “I love a good father-son moment. That was beautiful.”

Shoving away from Cleat, I say, “Piss off.” I despise every molecule of both men. Hate their bootlicking ways, their soulless attitudes. *Utter scum*. Then I pull out my mobile and dial Killian. He’s about to get an earful.

## Chapter Two

### CORA

“Cora, just a friendly reminder, don’t bend over in that dress,” Greer says as we walk, arms linked, through the bustling casino of the Aria hotel. “Your brother told me to make sure you didn’t do anything stupid while we’re here. Bending over in that dress would most definitely be stupid.”

I smirk.

Yes. Yes, it would be stupid, since it barely covers my backside. When I was shopping for this divorce-cation, I spotted the color of this dress first—a rich emerald-green with a beautiful sheen that I knew would stand out against the lights of the Las Vegas strip. When I pulled it off the rack and saw just how slutty it was, I knew it was a winner. Keiko claimed it was a scarf, not believing it was anything but neckwear as she held it up and tried to decipher where a body was supposed to fit into it.

Maybe it took me a few seconds to figure it out myself, but now that it’s on, I wouldn’t want to wear anything else. It has a deep V-neck in the front, almost to my navel, and there’s no chance of a bra working with this dress, so I wore subtle dress tape to keep it from exposing my boobs, especially since it’s backless as well, showing off my skin from the top of my shoulders all the way to the top curve of my ass.

Hmm . . . maybe it is a scarf.

But guess what—I don't care!

Because I am single.

Finally out of a bad marriage, it's time for me to live my life. And I'm going to do just that.

"If I need to bend over, I'll just ask you to help." I squeeze her arm with mine.

Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought my brother, Arlo, the surly and agitated cardigan-wearing English teacher would ever find love, but I'm so glad he did. Greer is amazing. It's hard not to fall in love with her, and now that she's part of our small family, I couldn't be happier to have a sister at my side. Even if she has overprotective tendencies thanks to my brother, who tends to suffocate me, especially at the beginning of my divorce when I was living with him.

"Why didn't we designate a buffet for food respite?" Keiko asks, looking annoyed, acting grouchy, and totally bringing down the mood.

"I am not going to a buffet to celebrate my divorce."

"But you claim to want to, in your words, 'slurp noodles off a naked man's chest' this evening."

Why do I always forget Keiko is a human computer who not only knows everything, but remembers everything as well?

"That's different," I answer as we follow signs for the restaurant. "That's after dinner, when we really let loose and have a night of debauchery, the whole reason we're out here."

"And where do you plan on acquiring a gentleman who would acquiesce to such behavior as inhaling ribbons of blanched dough off his chest?"

"Thunder From Down Under, of course."

"Do pray tell, what's a *Thunder From Down Under*?" Keiko asks as we turn toward the restaurant and fall into a small line at the hostess stand.

"Oh, Keiko," Stella says. "You still have so much to learn."

“Are we really going to Thunder From Down Under?” Greer asks, looking all too nervous.

“Uh . . . yeah,” I say. “All of us. I don’t care that all three of you are either married or in solid relationships. I’m the single one, this is my divorce party, and I get to say what we do, when we do it.” Greer tugs on my arm and nods toward Keiko, reminding me of what I need to ask her. “Oh, uh, Keiko, since you’re not much of a drinker anyway, I was hoping that you could be our drunk liaison, you know, kind of like a DD. We won’t be driving, so maybe you can usher us where we need to go—as long as you stick to the itinerary.”

“Drunk liaison, does that entail no drinks at all?”

Ugh, I feel bad, but . . .

You see, Greer, Stella, and I have all noticed a certain change in Keiko lately. She’s irritable. Hungry. And did I mention irritable? Her mood swings are flinging around like my bra this weekend, and she seems to have frequent bouts of stuffing her face with food. She’s currently in a relationship with Kelvin, a math teacher at Forest Heights, and they tend to do a lot of “experimenting” in the bedroom. Since Keiko is a scientist, she puts Kelvin through the wringer when it comes to these experiments, and no test has gone untouched . . . including the pull-out method.

See where I’m going with this?

We’re all pretty sure our dear friend Keiko is pregnant. How she hasn’t noticed already is beyond me, given her ability to take in every last ounce of information, but we aren’t going to be the ones to tell her. She’s going to have to come to that conclusion herself. But we can protect her.

It’s why we’re going to have her be the drunk liaison.

And it’s why I slapped a cold cuts sandwich out of her hand earlier, saying I saw a hair on it. She was grateful for the save.

“Unfortunately, that means no drinks at all,” I say, feeling slightly bad. Keiko has really come out of her shell since our little girl gang formed. Once stuck in her lab day in and day

out, she now participates in our Ladies in Heat book club, she has a boyfriend, and she lets loose with a drink here and there. And let me tell you, drunk Keiko is a sight to behold.

“I see. And how was I awarded such an honor?”

“We’re all luses,” I answer. “We need booze in order to let loose and have a good time. We’re not programmed like you, being able to enjoy yourself without alcoholic assistance.” It’s a lie, but anything to make her feel better about herself.

“Ah, yes, that is true. Your threesome tends to lean on the formal side.”

Ha, did you see that? A direct representation of the pot calling the kettle black.

“Well, we’re grateful for your assistance this evening,” Stella says, looping her arm through Keiko’s. “I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“After this morning’s expedition of scouring the hotel for the pool, I would say misplaced in an alcove with an ice machine.”

True. For the life of us, we couldn’t find the pool, despite Keiko constantly telling us where it was.

“It’s one of the many reasons why we love you,” I say, just as we make it to the hostess stand.

“Good evening, ladies. Do you have a reservation?”

“Yes,” Greer says, stepping up. “It’s under Mrs. Cardigan. Party of four.”

I snort. *Mrs. Cardigan*. Greer is that girl who never uses her name when making a reservation, but instead uses an alias. Mrs. Cardigan has been her recent namesake, given to her by me, after constantly seeing her in nothing but one of my brother’s cardigans whenever I visit.

Yeah, she married my brother, the cardigan-wearing, stuck-up Arlo Turner. I’m equally happy, equally nauseated over it—you know, because of the cardigan thing. They know I’m

coming over and yet, they still forget decent etiquette of putting clothes on.

“Ah, yes, Mrs. Cardigan, we have you at one of our best tables, right next to the bar, as requested.”

“Oh, you do love me,” I say.

“You can have all the drinks your little heart desires.” Greer takes my hand in hers and we follow behind the waitress, weaving through the restaurant. The space is dark, giving off nightclub vibes, but instead of a dance floor, the main space is spilling over with booths and tables. The textured surfaces of the walls are awash in blue uplighting, and above us there is a second floor of dining, also bustling with people. The beautiful restaurant is totally getting me in the mood to make some bad decisions.

We’re seated in a booth directly across from the gorgeous bar, which features a brilliantly placed wall waterfall directly behind the booze, representing the flow of alcohol that’s consumed daily.

“Daniel will be your waiter,” the hostess says. “He’ll be right over to take your drink orders.”

“Is Daniel single?” I unapologetically ask.

The hostess smiles. “He is.” She winks. “Have fun, ladies.”

“Hear that?” I ask, opening the narrow menu in front of me. “Daniel is single. He could be our first victim.”

“What do you mean, first victim?” Keiko asks.

Greer sets her purse on the table and says, “Before we get into the goals of the night, which I understand you have some?”

I nod. “Oh yes, one major goal.”

“As I thought. But before we get into that, I have a few housekeeping items.”

Of course she does, but I’m pretty sure these aren’t *her* housekeeping items. I lean back into the plush booth and fold



my arms over my chest. “Let me guess—these are from Arlo?”

She smirks. “Are you referring to your overprotective brother who forced me to read this note from him?” She whips out a note from her purse.

See, I know my brother far too well, which, given our history, isn’t difficult. But he also bathed me in empathy and courage when I needed a place to lie low after I found out about TWSNBN.

“Oh, this has got to be good.” I motion with my fingers for her to hand the list over. “Give it to me. Let’s see what he has to say.”

Greer shakes her head. “Oh no, I’m going to have the distinct pleasure of reading this myself.” She clears her throat and reads, ““Coraline.”” She smirks. He’s the only one who calls me by my full name. Always has, always will. “I understand the excitement of your divorce finally going through. Trust me when I say I couldn’t be happier that you’re free of that grotesque piece of shit.””

“Ooo, I like that he said *grotesque*,” Stella says. “Adding a bit of that snooty attitude of his in there.”

Greer smiles. “He can be such a snob, and I love it.” Continuing, she reads, ““But this is not a free-for-all of sowing any sort of untapped desires.””

“*Untapped desires*.” I snort. “Oh, little does he know.”

Greer continues. “I expect you to have fun, but to make smart decisions. This is not the time to find a baby daddy—”

“He did not say that,” I say, sitting up with humor spread across my face.

“He did.” Greer flashes me the note. “Right there—*baby daddy*.”

“Look at him with some hip lingo. His students are rubbing off on him,” Stella says.

Finishing, Greer reads, ““This is the time to have fun, but for the love of God, don’t do anything rash. I’ll finish this off with the term Greer has been saying over and over around the

house, preparing for this night.” Greer’s head lifts and her eyes connect with mine. ““Boy, bye.””

Laughing, I clap my hands and smile. Yup, *Boy, bye* is right.

“Which leads me to my next housekeeping item.” Greer reaches into her purse again and this time she pulls out a silky, white sash. She stretches it to its length, and written in gold is “Boy, bye.” “Your sash for the evening.” She hands it over to me as if it’s a sword, ready to do some serious destruction tonight.

“This is fantastic.” I slip it on over my head and settle it between my breasts.

“It’s perfect,” Greer says.

“I love it,” Stella adds.

“It’s confusing.” Keiko pees all over our parade.

We all turn our attention to Keiko, who’s tucking her napkin into her neckline. “What do you mean *it’s confusing?*” I glance down at the sash. “I know the grammar probably doesn’t fill your quota of proper structural usage, but it’s slang.”

“Oh, the sentence is atrociously written, despite being slang, but that’s not what I’m referencing.”

“Then what are you referencing?” Stella asks.

Keiko stretches her napkin across her breasts, covering her chest from any possible food droplets, and says, “I presume you are on the hunt for male companionship tonight, correct?”

“Obviously, that’s my one and only goal,” I answer.

She slowly nods. “Well, correct me if I’m wrong, but the sash you’re wearing serves more as a repellent than a welcome sign for your promiscuous ways.”

We all glance at my sash again, and, damn it, she’s right.

“I think she might have a point,” Stella whispers.

“Unfortunately, the sash does scream ‘begone, men, begone,’” Greer says.

Slowly, I slip the sash off my body and lay it across the table. “Perhaps we use it as a centerpiece for now.”

“An intelligent decision,” Keiko says with a smug look just as our waiter approaches our table.

Daniel.

Dainty set of shoulders, crisply shaven face, and shaggy hair.

Not too shabby for someone who looks fresh from his mother’s womb.

Skip.

“Good evening, ladies. Are we celebrating anything tonight?” Huh, deep voice, though. That’s nice.

“Why, yes,” Keiko says, and I brace myself for what she’s about to say. “Our comrade recently departed a binding contract of love from a profligate man, also known as grotesque, according to her brother. Her goal tonight is to achieve promiscuous behaviors whilst maintaining dignity. Not sure how they go hand in hand, but here we are. She did query the hostess if our waiter was single, the hostess disclosed that you are, but just from one overall intake of your threadbare masculine stature, I would say you rate as a five out of ten for Cora, given your feeble arms and lanky disposition. Unfortunate luck, because of how loose with her legs our friend is tonight.”

I. AM. DYING.

“Now,” Keiko continues, “I see that you have pomegranate juice. Any chance you’d be able to fuse an ounce of that with sixteen ounces of Sprite?”

Oh dear God . . .



“THIS STEAK IS AMAZING,” I say, barely having to cut into it.

“I’m definitely going to recreate this salad when I get home,” Greer says.

Stella licks her spoon. “Why do all the good foods have an accompanying sauce, but I never know how to make them?”

*Belchhhh.*

Keiko lets out a monstrous belch that almost shakes the table as she leans back in her chair and pats her stomach. Chocolate sauce rims her lips as she slowly starts to dab at her mouth. “I dare say, what a feast.”

Yeah, a feast indeed.

I’ve never in my life seen someone take down as much food as Keiko just did.

Have you ever seen *The Santa Clause*, you know, when Scott Calvin is in his work meeting, wearing a sweatsuit, because it’s the only thing that will fit him? And you hear the *Jeopardy* music play as he finishes off the feast of a lifetime?

Picture that but with Keiko instead.

“I never understood the concept of one dessert,” Keiko says, bringing her water to her lips. “Or one entrée, for that matter.”

“Usually people can’t take down the amount of food you just consumed, so that’s why they stick to one,” Stella says.

“Amateurs,” Keiko mutters as she sinks into her chair. I have a feeling our friend isn’t going to last tonight, not with that glazed-donut look on her face. Food coma is going to hit her, and hit her hard.

“Are you okay, Keiko?” I ask.

She nods. “Just need to shut my eyes for a moment. Please, proceed with your agenda.”

Greer, Stella, and I all exchange concerned looks while Keiko settles comfortably into the booth. Which one of them is

going to take Keiko back to the room, is the question. I sure as hell know it's not going to be me.

Greer leans toward me and whispers, "Uh, I think she's going to need a forklift to get her back to the room."

Keiko releases another belch, this one bringing a smile to her face. Dear God, what has happened to her? This is not the Keiko I know. She's normally horrified by such behavior, not the one participating in it.

"Yeah, I can't foresee her going to Thunder From Down Under with us." Whispering, I add, "I'm afraid she's going to belch all over them. And if anything, that's going to lessen my chances at scoring one of the hunky men."

"Uh, yeah, you can say that," Stella says, joining in. "I say we—hey." Her face twists in confusion as she stares off at something behind me.

"What?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "That's so weird, that guy over there, he looks like Pike."

"Pike . . . Pike Greyson?" I ask, whipping around. "Where? I don't see him."

Stella grips my head and points it in the right direction, to a man sitting in the corner of the bar, by himself, hovering over a plate of nachos, with a beer in one hand and his phone in the other.

"That's not Pike," Greer says. "Sure looks like him, though. Maybe that's his doppelganger."

"No, look, aren't those his tattoos?" Stella asks.

I'll be the judge of that.

I've stared at Pike Greyson's tattoos far too many times. Whenever I'm visiting my brother or the girls at their school, I just so happen to run into him while pretending to get lost in the halls of the school. Unfortunately for me, he's the most closed-off man I've ever met, and even a blatant flash of my tits wouldn't attract his attention.

For the record, I've never flashed him, that was me just trying to prove a point.

I give the man a good look but can't quite see his tattoos in the restaurant's lighting. One of those dim places, you know, setting the mood. Normally, I relish the feel of mood setting, but right now it's more irritating than anything as I try to get a good look at the man who doesn't seem to know I exist.

"The light in here is terrible. I can't tell," I say.

"It's Pike," Keiko says casually while polishing her fork with her neck napkin. She's awake now?

"How do you know?" I ask.

"The sturdy and muscular silhouette leads me to believe he has the same proportions as Pike. The dark stout in his hand also lends to the conclusion that this is Pike if you combine his silhouette with the fact that he sways toward a girther beer. Also, prior to our jaunt, I retained the knowledge that he's here in Las Vegas attending and participating in a celebrity golf tournament. Furthermore, I know for a fact he's inhabiting this hotel."

"Wait, what?" I ask. "How do you know that?"

"He told me," Keiko says casually.

"When did you talk to Pike Greyson?" I ask, whispering so he doesn't hear us, in case it is him.

"I converse with him quite frequently. He has a thirst for science and will often visit me in my lab."

Am I hearing this correctly? Keiko Seymour, my robot friend, has a . . . camaraderie with Pike? Pike Greyson, the man who barely even looks at me despite my blatant attempts to flirt?

"You're kidding," I say.

Keiko huffs. "I find it particularly odd that you would assume I enjoy 'kidding' on such matters. What a blatant waste of time."

A waste of time is actually what I've been doing these last few months, skirting around the man when I could've gone to a pillar of source: Keiko Seymour.

The minute I laid eyes on Pike Greyson and heard his delicious accent, I knew . . . I just KNEW I had to get to know him, and when I say "get to know him," I mean "get to know him in bed." It's been *more than* a dry spell for me. And if I really think about it, I haven't had good sex in . . . oof, I don't even know how long. *Men who cheat are such bad lays*. They only cheat because they can't keep their partner satisfied, and said partner grows insanely bored. So, it's my turn for some fun. Trust me when I say I have zero desire to be in any sort of relationship right now. Not right after a divorce. Nope, I want to live freely, do as I please, answer to absolutely no one, and have sex . . . ALL OF THE SEX.

"You have an in, Keeks," I say with excitement.

"Are you referring to a resting establishment for travelers? A bed and breakfast, perhaps? Although, an *inn* is vastly different with food preparation. Whereas a bed and breakfast suggests just that, bed and breakfast, an inn will offer all three main courses to their customers, but—"

"Not an actual inn," I say, trying to hold back my irritation. "Not a building, but like . . . you know, an in." I shrug my shoulder, attempting to tell her exactly what I mean.

"I fail to recognize what you are saying to me, and your body language is throwing me off. Is there an arachnid tantalizing your bare shoulder? Why are you lifting it?"

"Ew, is there?" I ask, swatting at my arm and shimmying.

Stella stills me, and through a smile, she says, "I think Cora is trying to say that you know him better than us, and since she finds him attractive, you could possibly help her. Am I right?"

"You find him attractive?" Keiko asks, a crinkle to her brow.

"Uh, I think everyone within a ten-foot radius would find him attractive," I say.

“Sure, if you lean toward obvious attraction,” Keiko says with a dismissive expression.

I blink.

Doesn’t everyone?

“Uh, I don’t see why I should be judged for falling victim to obvious attraction.”

Keiko shrugs. “Just peasant behavior, is all.”

I scoot my chair out, ready to fling myself across this table and—

“Easy,” Stella whispers, while Greer frantically looks between us.

“Uh, you know, Keiko, maybe we should go to the bathroom,” Greer says.

“I have no need to relieve myself, and by now, you should have obtained the knowledge that I’m not one to flounce about in the restroom, treating it like a hip gathering spot where the female population tends to deliberate about what’s happening in the main dining space.”

Nor does she tend to read the room . . . ever.

She looks up from the table and eyes me. She tilts her head to the side and then matter-of-factly states, “You’re angry.”

“Yes, I’m angry.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Uh, I don’t know, because you called me a peasant. Because you’re being rude, because this is supposed to be a fun night and you’re not making it fun.”

Keiko glances around the table and then gasps, hand to her chest. “Oh dear, was I supposed to bring the fun? Did I miss a correspondence? Kind of like how I missed the correspondence that I am supposed to be the DD today?” She lifts an eyebrow.

Oh, she is RIPE!



“Don’t,” Stella says, knowing exactly what I want to do: expose Keiko to the one thing she’s missing—the fact that she’s pregnant. “Deep breaths.”

“Okay, I think things have gotten a little out of control,” Greer says. “Remember we’re here to go over goals for the night, right?” Greer nudges me with her foot.

“Right,” I say, taking the high road. “Goals.” I clear my throat. “The one and only goal I have is to have a meaningless fling with a hot guy.”

“Ah, a one-night stand,” Keiko says. “Kelvin and I roleplayed that once. Quite exhilarating. I would be willing to help you accomplish such a task.”

What an angel.

“Why, thank you, Keiko.”

“But Pike won’t be in cahoots with that plan,” Keiko says before taking a drink from her water glass.

My brow knits together again. “And why do you say that?”

“Because he’s not interested in you.”

“He told you that?” I ask, surprised, while glancing over in his direction.

“No.” She sets her drink down. “But he has yet to mention the thought of you even though you seem to be throwing yourself at him.”

My nostrils flare.

My irritation rises.

And before I know what I’m doing, I shoot my body out of the booth and stand.

“What are you doing?” Greer asks, concerned.

“Proving Keiko wrong.” And without waiting for a response, I turn on my heel and head straight to the corner of the bar.

I’ll show her.

## Chapter Three

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### PIKE

***Killian:*** *I swear, I had no fucking clue he was going to be there when you were.*

I stare at my text from my deceitful brother.

I want to believe him.

But being angry at him is more fun.

***Pike:*** *He touched me.*

***Killian:*** *With his hands?*

***Pike:*** *How the hell else would he touch me?*

***Killian:*** *I don't know, with his golf club?*

***Pike:*** *He touched me with his hands.*

***Killian:*** *Do you need me to order you a bleach bath? I'm sure I can find something like that for you. There's freaky shit in Vegas.*

***Pike:*** *I would prefer it if you never EVER ask me to do anything like this again. You want the money? You fly across the world and do the dirty work yourself.*

***Killian:*** *But don't you feel good about placing first? Must have really chapped Pa's arse.*

That was pleasing and the only reason why I'm not mindlessly drunk right now, just feeling good with two pints down.

*Pike: I'm celebrating with nachos and a pint . . . or three.*

*Killian: Bet it would taste better in England.*

*Pike: Actually, it tastes better here since it has a hint of freedom.*

*Killian: No wonder Pa disowned you.*

*Pike: And here I thought you were holding back the punches for one night.*

*Killian: LOL. In all seriousness, I'm grateful. Thank you.*

*Pike: Yeah, sure.*

*Killian: Any plans tonight?*

I'm in the midst of texting Killian back when a small hand slides over my shoulder. I don't bother turning around, instead I say, "Not interested in any cigarettes." It would be the second time I've been asked by a cigarette girl if I'm interested in something.

"Really? Because a cigarette would tie into the vibe you have over here, in the dark, by yourself."

Why do I know that voice?

Sweet, with a hint of sultry.

I set my mobile on the bar top and slowly turn in my seat to find a familiar pair of grey eyes.

Hell.

Arlo Turner's sister.

I give her a smooth once-over, taking in her barely-there dress, which accentuates her perky tits, flat stomach, and curvy hips. There's no doubt in my mind, her brother would not approve.

"Get a good fill?" she asks, calling me out for my perusal.

Tilting my head to the side, I ask, "Carol, right?"

Her eyes narrow. “Cora.”

I hold back my chuckle, but my smirk peeks through. “Right, Coraline.”

“Only my brother calls me that.” She props a hand on her hip.

“And does your brother know you’re in Vegas wearing that?” I nod toward her dress, which is split down the middle, showing off more skin than a one-piece bathing suit.

“What I do is none of my brother’s business.”

“Good to know.” I glance at her dress again, taking in her cleavage. Not too much, just enough.

Just enough to keep my attention.

Coraline Turner has kept my attention since the moment I laid eyes on her, but because she’s the sister of the English department’s distinguished and uptight leader at Forest Heights, I’ve put her in the back of my mind. Trust me when I say, there’s no way in hell Arlo would ever approve of anything between the two of us.

He’s not a big fan of mine.

Probably because during my interview, I schooled him on his American history. Being from Great Britain, he didn’t think it was possible for me to teach American curriculum. Little did he know, I’m a fucking master at all things history, and I showed off in my interview, leaving him furious and Principal Dewitt charmed, which was all I needed.

“Are you going to invite me to sit down?”

“Are you looking for an invitation?” I ask, bringing my pint to my lips.

“I wouldn’t be over here if I wasn’t.”

With my foot, I push away the chair next to me. “Then take a seat, Coraline.”

I have just enough pints in me—and just enough irritation from running into my pa on the golf course—that I don’t mind playing around with a gorgeous girl in a green dress—even if

she's attached to Turner. *What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas, and all that.*

She studies me for a few breaths before she slips into the seat and faces me. She places her arm on the bar top and crosses one tanned leg over the other. "Didn't think I would find you in Las Vegas," she says.

"Yeah, neither did I, but here I am." I lift up my pint and take a sip. When I set my drink down, she picks it up and takes a sip herself. I'm impressed for a second before she grimaces and sets the glass back down, sliding it toward me.

She blots her mouth with a black cocktail napkin from the bar. "Keiko said you were here for a golf tournament?"

I glance over Cora's shoulder. "Keiko is here?"

"She is. So are Stella and Greer."

"Girls' trip?"

"Something like that," she answers casually while avoiding eye contact.

Interesting. Seems like there's more to the story than she's letting on, and since I don't want to talk about why I'm here . . .

"Something like that?" I ask. "I've only lived in America for a short time, but correct me if I'm wrong, when someone says *girls' trip*, there's normally a string of *woohos* following closely behind."

"You're right, but you don't really give off the vibe that you receive a flamboyant *woohoo* very well."

I shrug. "I'll take a *woohoo*. Give me your best one."

She glances around and then asks, "Right here?"

I slowly nod. "Let it rip. It's a girls' trip after all, right?" I lift a questioning eyebrow in her direction.

"It is," she says. She sits taller, tips her chin up and says, "Girls' trip, woohoo."

It's a feeble attempt at best.

Not an ounce of gusto.

“That was pretty lame.”

“I don’t want to draw attention. You know, men in Vegas hear *girls’ trip* followed by a *woohoo* and their ears perk up, their noses morph into the talents of a hound dog, and they sniff out where bad decisions are a possibility so they can take advantage.”

“Is that so?” I touch my face, feeling around. “I’m not morphing, am I?”

“I don’t think it works on men from England.”

“Ahh, lucky me.”

The bartender comes over to us and asks, “Can I get you anything?”

I thumb toward Cora. “She’s on a girls’ trip.”

The bartender smirks. “With a man?”

“My friends are over there.” She points to a table where I spot Keiko yawning and slowly patting her stomach. I make a mental note to say hi to her. I like Keiko. She’s an odd one, fascinating, really, but always honest. She’s a fresh breath of air. “But spotted Mr. Lonely over here and thought I would chat him up.”

“Lucky guy.” The bartender presses his hands to the bar top and dresses up his smile just for Cora. Don’t blame him, she’s incredibly hot.

Especially in that dress.

I think the dress is why I’m allowing myself to talk to her, because normally, I ignore her. I ignore her blatant flirting, the obvious bumping into me, and the distinct charm she tosses my way whenever she’s “visiting” her brother and friends at the high school.

Why, you ask?

Because she’s Turner’s sister, and nothing good could come of it.

Nothing. And I already dodged one bullet by ending things with Iris. I'm not about to attempt any type of relationship now or in the near future. Especially someone related to a work associate.

But thanks to a few pints and an emerald-green dress, I'm loosening up for the first time around her.

"Could I get a mojito please?" Cora asks.

"Coming up, darling," the bartender says, and he begins to move around the bar, filling up a tumbler.

Turning her attention back to me, Cora drags her finger over my forearm—an unmistakably flirtatious move—and asks, "Any plans tonight?"

I keep still, not letting her touch affect me. "None."

"Hmm, that seems sad. You're in Vegas, after all."

"Which means you should never have a plan and just see where the night takes you."

The bartender sets down her mojito, and she thanks him before picking up the glass and bringing the drink to her painted lips. Her cheeks hollow out as she sucks, while her eyes never disconnect from mine.

"I never thought about it that way," she says. "I guess if you're ever going to not have plans, Vegas is the place to do it."

I twist my pint on the bar top and ask, "So, what were your plans for tonight?"

"You say that in past tense. Are you hinting at something?" She raises a brow.

I pick up a potato crisp doused in cheese and salsa. "Well, you're here with me rather than your friends, so that leads me to believe you're willing to ditch them."

She studies me, her eyes moving back and forth between mine. "You're sure of yourself."

"I'm not blind, Cora," I say while wiping my napkin over my mouth. "I know the way you look at me, you're flirting. If

I asked you to spend the night exploring Vegas with me, you would.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” she asks.

“Depends. What were your plans with the girls?”

“Truth?”

I bring my pint to my lips and nod. “Truth.”

Shifting in her seat, she crosses one of her gorgeous legs over the other and rests her arm on the bar top. “Okay, truth—we were going to head down to Thunder From Down Under, where we were going to try to get me in front of one of the guys so I could have a wild night of freedom.”

“Freedom?” I ask with a raised brow. “Or pleasure?”

“Both.” She smiles.

“So, you’re looking for a one-night stand.”

“I’m looking for a good time.”

“Any reason why?”

She wets her lips. “Do I need a reason? Can’t women just be as free and sexual as men?”

I nod. “You’re right, they can. No reason needed, just seemed as if you were on a mission. I didn’t know if there was reasoning behind the mission.”

She looks away, picks up her mojito, and brings the cold liquid to her lips.

Stalling.

That’s indication enough that there’s reason behind her girls’ trip (woohoo), but she’s not willing to share, which only means it’s something she’s sensitive about.

And I shouldn’t be curious. I really should just leave her alone. Pay my bill, go to my room, and get some sleep before my early morning flight.

But . . . hell, I’m feeling good enough from my alcohol consumption and I’m feeling irritated enough from my



interaction with my pa that blowing off some steam would ease this tension that's built up in my chest.

Spending a night with Cora is appealing.

It's more than appealing. It's what I want to fucking do, in this moment, without thinking about it. It's what I want.

Finally, she tacks on a smile and says, "No reason, just looking to have fun."

She's lying, but that's okay.

I don't need the truth.

I don't need her story.

I just need to know that she wants to spend the night with me.

Fuck the wall I built up.

Fuck Turner.

And fuck my pa.

She wants to let loose and so do I.

"Then let's have some fun for *one* night only, Coraline. That's all it'll be," I say. Leaning over the bar, I ask, "Excuse me, can we get a bottle of tequila over here, some salt, and limes?"

The bartender nods and gets to work on retrieving our items.

"Tequila?" Cora asks, a nervous tilt to her lips.

"Afraid?"

Her brow creases. "No. Just . . . you know, making sure you can handle it."

I smirk. "I can handle it. Can you?"

"As long as it's not Fireball, I'm good." She twirls her drink on the bar top. "Fireball and I have a love-hate relationship—well, actually, it's more toxic than anything."

"Sounds like there's a good story behind that."

“No good stories, really horrible ones, actually. I’ve had fun with Fireball, but my mornings after really aren’t fun at all.”

“Can’t handle it?”

She shakes her head. “In the moment, I can handle it just fine. But then, in the morning, I swear to the good Lord I’ll never drink it again.”

“And you do anyway.”

“It’s a toxic relationship.”

I chuckle as the bartender hands me a small bottle of Don Julio, two shot glasses, a shaker of salt, and limes, all presented on a wooden board. We must not be the only ones who have ordered a bottle of tequila.

“Look at this,” Cora says. “How cute. How many shots do you think are in this bottle?”

“From the amount of lime slices provided, I would say four shots per person.” I glance at her. “Can you do four?”

She slips her wavy brown hair over her shoulder and says, “Easy.”

“Let’s see.” I pour us both a shot and then grab her hand. I bring it to her mouth, and she licks the spot right above her thumb while she keeps her eyes intent on mine. I grab the saltshaker and drizzle some salt on the back of her hand. I do the same to myself and then hand her a lime and a shot glass brimming with tequila.

She holds the glass up to me and says, “To a good night.”

“To a good night,” I repeat. Together, we lick our hands, down the tequila, and then bite into the limes. When she sets her glass down, I tilt my head to the side and say, “No grimace. I’m impressed.”

“It’s a smooth tequila. Makes it easier.”

“I agree.” I refill the shot glasses and ask, “After these shots, are you still planning on going to Thunder From Down Under?”

“I could be persuaded otherwise.” She smirks.

I slowly nod and hand her the shot glass. “Then drink up.”



“HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN THIS FUNNY?” Cora asks.

“I didn’t say anything,” I say as we both sway to the side.

“It’s not what you said, it’s how you said it.”

“But I didn’t say anything,” I repeat, a chuckle on the tip of my tongue.

“Precisely.” She nods and holds up her second mojito. “That’s what makes it so funny.”

“I think you’re drunk.”

Her eyes widen in shock and she clasps her hand to her chest. “How dare you accuse me of such a thing!”

I hold up two fingers in front of her face. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

She studies them, then reaches up and squishes my fingers together. She smiles and says, “Enough to give me just the right amount of pleasure.”

Oh.

Fuck.

That wakes me up from this drunken haze I feel myself retreating into, a warm cocoon of nothingness. The perfect place to go when you’re wanting to escape reality. But seeing my two fingers together, envisioning what they could do to Cora . . . yeah, desire is building.

“Do you like to pleasure women, Pike?”

“What do you think?” I ask as I take a bite of the giant pretzel we ordered to share. She suggested it after shot number three. It was a good idea.

She sits back in her chair and I get a good view of her midsection from the movement. That fucking dress has been

playing with my head all night. Showing off so much cleavage that I'm craving far more than shots and a soft pretzel.

I'm craving a show.

I want to see her peel that dress off for me.

I want to see her ride my lap as the fabric falls off her shoulders.

I want to see those goddamn nipples that keep getting hard with every pass of the air conditioner turning on and off above us.

"Basing my opinion off your appearance and accent alone, I would say you enjoy pleasuring the ladies. But you never stick around."

I move my foot so it's resting on the rung of her stool, my jean-clad leg rubbing against her bare one. "I stick around."

"For how long?"

Flashes of my conversation with my pa pierce through me for a brief second. No. He's not allowed in this space. He's supposed to be forgotten.

"Long enough," I answer.

"Long enough? Are you talking about your sticking power, or what you have to offer?" Her eyes flash to my crotch.

From that one glance, I know she's looking for a lot more than just a few shots and a night out on the town. She's looking for so much more.

"Long enough for sticking power. As for what I have to offer, more than plenty."

"Hmm." She takes a sip of her mojito. "I guess I'll just have to trust you on that."

I fill up the shot glasses one more time and hand her the glass. "Can you do one more?"

"Trust me, I'm barely feeling it."

I give her a challenging stare. "Uh, are you sure about that? Because you're swaying in your chair."

“Because the music is so good,” she counters. “Don’t you just love Justin Bieber?”

“More of a classic rock fan.”

“Ugh.” She rolls her eyes. “Of course, you are.”

“Why do you say that?”

She motions to my arm. “The tattoo—it screams *bad boy*. And to me, bad boys listen to rock, nothing else. They can’t be bothered with the sweet ministrations of Justin Bieber or Dua Lipa.”

“Dua what-a?”

She rolls her eyes again, this time more prominently. Leaning forward, she places her hand on my thigh, and her face moves close to mine, close enough for me to smell her sweet, tantalizing perfume. “You’re a high school teacher, right?”

“Correct,” I answer, keeping still.

“Then that means you should have to at least know some of the trends, some of the hip lingo, the music your students listen to.”

“And why should I know that?”

“Uh . . . because it’s how you can connect with them.”

“I connect with them through history.”

“Oh God.” She grimaces. “Eww, you’re just like my brother.”

I don’t take that as a compliment. Sure, Arlo is a good teacher—excellent, actually—but he’s a stuck-up snob too. Pretentious, an absolute asshole at times. I don’t ever want to be compared to that cardigan-wearing dick.

“Do not compare me to him,” I say in a stern tone. Even in my drunken haze, I know when I don’t like something.

She sits back, a confused look on her face. Her brain is trying to process; if I wasn’t so irritated, I would find it comical. “Wait, do you . . . do you not like my brother?”

To tell the truth or to not tell the truth?

As if I've ever really cared.

"He's a wanker," I unapologetically say.

Her lips turn up in a smile. "Why, yes, he can be a *wanker*. But why do you think that?"

"Nothing you need to worry about. We just don't get along, simple as that."

"Fair enough." She takes her shot, free of salt and lime this time. I follow along with her. "For the record, he does have good intentions. He can be . . . how would you say it . . . stodgy at times, but he's also a good guy. He cares a lot about his students, the school, and the faculty."

"I'm sure he does," I answer while picking up another piece of pretzel.

"You know, I've always found you attractive." She draws her finger over my thigh. "I mean, more than attractive. The moment I first saw you, I thought you were incredibly sexy, and I had to meet you."

"Yeah?" I say, liking this conversation. *Totally felt the same about her.*

She nods. "Yeah, but now that I know you don't get along with my brother . . ." She pauses and I wait for the other shoe to drop, but it never does. Instead, she says, "That just makes you exponentially hotter. Like forbidden fruit." Her hand crawls up my thigh.

Yup, this is an easy decision for me.

There's no doubt that I'll be spending the night with this woman.

We both want it.

I just hope she's a believer in the motto "Whatever happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas."

## Chapter Four

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### CORA

“Be cool, Cora . . . be cool,” I say into the mirror as I touch up my makeup.

My eyes are glossy. Thank you, tequila shots.

My neck is red. Thank you, tequila shots.

And my brain is fuzzy, but still able to comprehend. Thank you, giant soft pretzel, for combatting tequila shots.

And I’m more than ready to take Pike back to his hotel room and do all the naughty things. I want him to strip me out of this scarf, pull me down on his bed, and let him have his way with me.

But Pike has other ideas.

That’s why I excused myself to the restroom to make sure I’m decent enough to be seen around town. It’s one thing to be hunkered in a dark corner, it’s a whole other realm when you’re flashed under the Las Vegas lights.

I finish touching up my lipstick and stick it in my purse, the purse that Daniel the feeble-armed waiter brought over to me. I didn’t bother asking him why he was delivering my purse, but just accepted it.

And now that I think about it . . . where did that purse come from?

My phone buzzes in my clutch and I pull it out to see if it's Arlo bothering me, but when I see Greer's name, I swipe the screen to read the text.

**Greer:** *Uh, I'm going to assume you're okay? You kind of just left us there. We thought giving you your clutch would make you look at the phone and the texts we sent you.*

Huh, there are others?

Not bothering to look at them, I text Greer back.

**Cora:** *Good, just hanging with Pike. We're going to go to the casino. Come with us.*

**Greer:** *We're on Keiko patrol. She passed out, woke back up, and demanded ice cream. It's a two-person job. Why don't you come get ice cream with us?*

**Cora:** *Ice cream or penis? Hmmm . . . think I'll go with the penis. Remember the goal?*

**Greer:** *Oh, so things are going that well?*

**Cora:** *We're headed in the right direction.*

**Greer:** *Okay, so . . . I guess that's it for the girls' trip?*

Guilt pulses through me. Man, I ditched them. I didn't expect to do that, at least not this early.

**Cora:** *I'm sorry. I feel awful.*

**Greer:** *Don't. We're all going to call our men when we get back to the hotel room. Please just be safe.*

**Cora:** *What are you going to tell Arlo?*

**Greer:** *Don't worry about him. I got you covered. Have fun and . . . get some penis!*

**Cora:** *All the penis! I'm getting all of the penis.*

**Greer:** *Gobble, gobble.*

**Cora:** *OMG, don't say shit like that.*

**Greer:** *LOL, being in a relationship has messed me up. I don't know how to properly respond to single-people endeavors.*



*Cora: You're forgiven this time. See you later. XOXO*

I stuff my phone into my purse, look at myself one more time in the mirror, and take a deep breath.

*You got this.*

*Get all the penis, Cora . . . all of it.*

*Gobble, gobble.*

*\*Snorts\**

I push through the bathroom door and look up just in time to catch Pike leaning against the wall, one foot propped up while his thumbs are casually hooked in his pockets. He's not staring at his phone, he's not checking out all the scantily clad girls that walk by. His eyes are fixed on the bathroom door, and when they connect with mine, as he pushes off the wall and walks toward me, my insides twist and turn with excitement.

“Good to go?”

“You tell me.” I hold out my hands and do a little turn for him.

He wets his lips and places his hand on the small of my back, his heated palm connecting with my bare skin. Leaning in to speak in my ear, he says, “You look fucking good to me.” A year ago, this wouldn't have been me. I was not this confident in myself. But my new incredible friends—*who left their other halves to be with me this weekend*—and the psychologists' appointments Arlo attended with me, have helped strip away the negative narration inside my brain about my self-worth. And now? With the most handsome man in the room eye-fucking me? *You look fucking good to me.* Worth every cent.

Chills beat up my arm as I allow him to guide me toward the casino. I'm not much of a gambler, which I told Pike, and he said neither was he, but since we were in Vegas, he thought we needed to at least play a game or two.

I agreed. We were here, might as well.

“What are you thinking?” he asks, his lips still close to my ear as we make our way through the hotel.

“How your hand feels on my back,” I answer, the alcohol making it impossible to mask my thoughts.

“How does it feel?”

“Good,” I say. “I wish it was guiding me back to your room instead.”

I glance up to him and catch the way his eyes turn a deeper shade of brown from my confession. “We’ll get there.”

“Is that a promise?” I ask him.

“Trust me,” he whispers. “You’re not leaving my goddamn sight tonight.”

And just like that, more chills.

“Then lead the way.”

“With pleasure,” he says, guiding me with the slight pressure of his hand.

We make our way past a bank of escalators that lead to conference rooms, through a block of slot machines, and straight to the poker tables.

“Take your pick,” he says.

I scan the tables, observing the dealers and all the players, as well. Given what I’m wearing, I need to take advantage of that, so I point to a table to the right that is full of men, dealer included.

Pike smirks. “As long as you know I’m the one you’re spending the night with.” *God, it’s a good feeling to feel desired. Beautiful.*

“Don’t worry, there’s no competition. But don’t get jealous if some of them get an eyeful.”

His hand curls around my side and his fingers trace the waistband of my thong. “What kind of eyeful?”

“Nothing you haven’t already seen tonight.”

“Good,” he answers before taking me over to the chosen table. He pulls out a chair for me.

The men all look up at me and I shyly wave. “Hello, care to count me in?”

“Depends,” a man wearing a visor says. “Have any money to deal in?”

From behind me, Pike sets down a fifty-dollar bill. Oh, hello, wasn’t expecting to be throwing down that much, but okay.

“Change for fifty,” the dealer says before taking the bill and giving me some poker chips.

“Oh, look at these. I like the purple ones.” I hold them up to Pike, who smiles down at me.

“Are you joining?” Visor guy asks Pike.

Pike shakes his head. “Nah, just going to watch my girl here and stare at her glorious cleavage. Got a problem with that?”

Pike’s hands curl over the back of my chair. Visor’s eyes zero in on Pike’s hands, and then he looks back up at him. With a shake of his head, Pike says, “Good.” He then leans down to my ear and asks quietly, “Do you know how to play?”

“Yeah,” I answer.

“Good. Are you too drunk to realize what you’re doing?”

“Borderline.”

He chuckles, and the sound tickles my nerves, sending more chills down my arm. “Then I should probably get you another drink.”

“Might be ideal.” He goes to leave, but I grab his hand. “Stay here.”

His eyes search mine before he turns back toward me and places his hands on my chair again. “I’ll get us drinks later.”

The dealer calls for everyone to ante up. He deals us all two cards and then flips over two cards in the middle.

“Wait, is this blackjack?” I ask, confused.

The men at the table roll their eyes while Pike squats down next to me. “The cards in the middle are for everyone to play off.”

“Oh . . . interesting.” I pick up my cards and see that I have two sevens. There’s another seven in the middle. Beginner’s luck? I think so.

The men throw some chips into the pile in the middle. I join in, because three of a kind is a great hand. At least I know that.

Dealer throws down another card in the middle. We bet. I throw down some chips. Another card from the dealer. More chips, and before I know it, I’m all out of chips and hands are being called.

Wow, fifty dollars gets thrown around pretty quickly.

Visor shows his cards—two pair.

I give him a small clap.

Mr. Stirs His Drink shows off a pair of queens by tossing them on the table.

Doctor Scratches His Head folded last round, so then it comes to me.

With a smile on my face, I lay down my sevens, and the table erupts in grumbles while the dealer pushes the chips toward me.

“Oh, wow, isn’t this great?” I ask Pike, who’s granting me the most gorgeous smile I’ve ever seen.

“Fucking perfect,” he answers.

“You know, I think I’m good with poker. I think I can only go down from here. I would like to cash out, please.”

The dealer doesn’t ask questions. Instead, he counts my chips and offers me a cash-out slip. I glance down at it. “Two hundred dollars. Wow, Pike . . . what can we do with this?”

“Let’s find out,” he says as he takes my hand in his. “But first—shots.”

“Yes . . . shots.”



“THIS WAS A FANTASTIC IDEA,” I say as we stand in line.

Pike is leaning against a rail and I’m leaning against him with his arms wrapped around my waist.

“The Fireball or the Ferris wheel?”

I glance back and smile. “Both.”

“Sure you’re not going to regret the Fireball tomorrow morning?”

I shake my head and pat my stomach. “No, that pretzel was my lifeline. I’m not drunk at all.”

He chuckles. “Says the girl who almost fell into a fountain.”

“Like I said before, there was a crack in the sidewalk, not my fault.”

“There was no crack. You’re just wearing your sea legs.”

“Okay, fine, maybe I’m drunk, but you are too.”

“Says who?” he asks in a cute tone.

“Says me. You told me in the Uber that your phone was ringing, but you answered your wallet.”

“Simple mistake.”

People move forward and so do we, putting us next in line.

While downing our second shot of Fireball, we heard a couple next to us talking about the Ferris wheel they just went on at the LINQ hotel. We listened intently about how they were able to have drinks and snacks while on board and that was an immediate sell for us.

Ferris wheel.

Las Vegas lights.

Booze.

Snacks.

We're good to go.

But just in case there weren't enough snacks, I dumped a bag of pretzels in my clutch. Who knows if they let counterfeit snacks on the Ferris wheel? We weren't about to find out the hard way.

"We didn't think about one thing," Pike says as we hand our tickets to the ride attendant and step toward the pod dedicated for us.

"What's that?" I ask.

"That we're drunk and about to go on a spinning device."

I pause for a second, thinking about it, but honestly, I'm too drunk to care. "Well, just don't stick your head out the window."

"The windows don't open," the attendant says. "For reasons like this."

I tap my head. "Smart. Very smart." I step up to the pod and glance in. "Um, we were told there were drinks and snacks on this thing?"

The attendant says, "That's the happy-hour ride."

"Is this not the happy-hour ride?"

He shakes his head.

"Gahhhh," I groan as I stumble into the pod. "But what if we get off this thing and we're no longer drunk?"

The attendant starts to close the door on us. "Then visit one of the million bars here in Vegas."

The door clicks shut and the wheel starts to move, sending me straight into Pike, who's sitting on the red leather bench off to the side. His hands grip my hips and hold me in place as I try to gain my bearings.

“God, that guy was rude, wasn’t he?” I move my hair out of my face with my whole hand. “So rude. Is it too much to ask for a drink around here?”

“I might have a drink,” Pike says, his voice like a warm blanket over my heated skin.

I smirk and lean against his chest. “Is this drink in your pants?”

“It is,” he answers.

“Not sure that qualifies as a drink, Mr. Greyson.”

“Not . . . *that*,” he says before moving me off his lap and onto the bench next to him. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out three small bottles of Fireball.

“And here I thought you were happy to have me on your lap. You were just storing booze in your britches.”

“If you don’t have booze in your britches then you’re not a proper Brit.”

“Really?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No, that’s not true at all, but we are made up of sixty percent tea.”

“Now that I believe.” He hands me a mini bottle of Fireball and I twist the top off. I take a sip and let the cinnamon flavor burn down my throat before I reach for my clutch and open it up to him. “When did you get these?”

“When you were filling your handbag with pretzels.”

“Sneaky.” I wink and take another sip. “I love Fireball so much, don’t you?”

He takes a sip and winces. “No, not really.”

“Awww.” I grip his shoulder. “You got these for me and you’re suffering through it to impress me.”

“Sure,” he says, taking another sip.

“Aren’t you the charmer, Pike Greyson.”

Above us, screens span the diameter of the pod, displaying shows and concerts from around the city. They’re mildly

distracting, but not distracting enough to divert my eyes away from the man in front of me.

“I don’t try to be.”

“And why is that?” I ask, crossing one leg over the other. “Do you not care to have attention from females?”

“I don’t need to try to get their attention. I think you are case and point in that regard.”

My mouth falls open, and I catch the smirk spreading across his lips. “If I weren’t drunk right now, I would be offended. Instead, I’m acutely annoyed by that comment.”

“Is it not true?” He pops another pretzel in his mouth.

“Have I attempted to gather your attention? Yes, but that’s because you’re an easy target. You know, I don’t get out much.”

“Why not?”

I shrug. “Why try to get out when there are easy pickings at my brother’s place of work?”

“I wouldn’t say I’ve been easy.”

I scoff. “Just because you’ve been playing hard to get. If I knew wearing this scrap of fabric around my body was going to convince you, then I would’ve done it a while ago.”

“If you wore that dress to school, you’d never be allowed back.”

“True.” I smile drunkenly. “Oh.” I snap my fingers. “I would just wait for you at your car. You know, sit on it until you came out. That way I’m not in school, but still getting your attention.”

“I don’t have a car.”

My brow creases. “Do you walk to work?”

He downs the rest of his bottle and sets it to the side. “Motorcycle.”

I toss my hands up in the air in defeat. “Of course. Of course, you have a freaking motorcycle. Let me guess, you



don't wear a helmet.”

“I'm not a twit. Of course, I wear a helmet.”

“Are you part of a club?” I gasp. “Wait, oh my God, are you friends with Jax Teller?”

“The fictional character from *Sons of Anarchy*?”

I nod vigorously.

He studies me for a few seconds and then says, “Yes, I am.”

I clench my fists as I raise them in the air dramatically. “I knew it. Wow, just wow, you're all kinds of surprise. Think you can introduce me?”

“I can FaceTime him.”

My eyes widen.

“Really?”

He nods and takes his phone out of his pocket and scrolls through it. He finds a name, clicks on it, and then the phone starts beeping. I clutch my mini bottle of Fireball to my chest as I wait in drunken delirium.

The phone connects, showing the man who answered the call in bed, his short brown hair ruffled and his chest sprinkled with hair.

“What the fuck,” he says in a British accent. “It's five in the morning. What's going on? Are you dead?”

“Would I be calling you if I were dead?” Pike asks.

“Possibly. Wouldn't put it past you.” The man, who definitely isn't Jax Teller, rubs his eyes. “What the fuck do you want?”

“My girl here wanted to meet Jax Teller. I told her I knew him and that I would FaceTime you. Say hi, Jax.”

Pike moves the phone toward me and even though I know this is the most ridiculous thing ever, because too much alcohol makes you do stupid shit, I wave frantically. “Jax, it's

so nice to meet you. I love your motorcycle. How does it feel to have such a powerful machine between your legs?”

“What?” the man asks. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Ooo, he gets angry just like in the show. Impression spot on.” I wink at Pike.

“Pike, who the hell is this?”

Pike turns the phone back toward him and says, “Coraline, my escort.”

“You got a bloody escort?” The guy sits up. “Who knows about this? Is she an escort or a prostitute? This isn’t a good image. Has anyone seen you? You know Pa can sniff this shit out.”

“Pa?” I ask. “Aww, are you two brothers?” I bring the phone back to me. “Oh, look, you have the same eyes. I will say, Pike, you’re more ruggedly handsome, while this brother of yours seems more refined, but with a dirty side to him.” Directing my question to the brother, I ask, “Are you dirty? Two fingers or one? Your brother uses two fingers.”

“Jesus . . . Christ.” He drags his hand over his face. “Pike, what the hell are you doing? Please tell me you used two fingers in private.”

I grab the phone from Pike. “Oh, don’t worry, he didn’t use his fingers on me, he just suggested it. And let me tell you, I totally got turned on seeing his two fingers together. They’re long. Have you noticed? I could sit on them and be happy.”

“Pike . . . Pike, where the hell are you?”

“And you might be thinking, am I happy with just two fingers?”

“I wasn’t thinking that at all,” the brother says.

“And I’ll tell you this—yes, I am.” I blow out a heavy breath. “Do you like Fireball? It gets me in trouble, but don’t worry, I stashed away a bunch of pretzels in my clutch so we don’t get really drunk.”

“This isn’t really drunk?”

Pike leans in. “I would say we haven’t reached knackered yet, just toasted.”

“Pike, please, for the love of God, tell me what’s going on.”

Pike starts to speak but I push him away. “We’re just having fun. Good, old-fashioned Vegas fun.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” The brother sits up some more and speaks directly into the phone. “Pike, listen to me. It might be best if you head back to the hotel and just sleep this off. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“You know, he reminds me of Arlo,” I say to Pike. “So controlling. Like, what’s the big deal? Why can’t we have a little fun?”

“Because Pike has eyes watching over him with our pa in town,” the brother says. “Our pa is just waiting for a slipup on Pike’s end. Anything to hold against him, anything to pull the plug on everything we’ve worked towards.”

“Sounds a bit *Succesion-y* to me. Have you seen that show?” I ask.

Pike shakes his head. “Is it good?”

“Yes. One of the guys is named Kendall, though. Isn’t that weird? I’ve never met a guy Kendall. Have you?”

“Pike, can you please take the phone?”

“Gosh, you’re rude,” I say. “It might help you to loosen up a bit. Pike has everything under control. Trust me, he’s not going to do anything stupid. He’s with me. I don’t do stupid things.”

“I don’t even know you—”

“So, rest your weary head and go back to sleep, dear sir. Pike shall converse with you in the morning and give you all the details of his two-finger adventures.” I blow him a kiss. “Nighty night.” I hang up the phone and hand it back to Pike. “That was not Jax Teller.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

I chuckle and turn toward him. I catch his eyes drift down my body before rising back up to my face. His burning gaze only makes the alcohol in my belly burn that much more. What I wouldn't give to have this man's hands all over me. His tongue tracing up and down my neck, his two fingers . . . working in and out of me.

Swallowing hard, I say, "Your brother is a bore."

"He is."

"He doesn't trust me."

"He doesn't trust most people."

"Doesn't he know I'm a smart girl with a good head on her shoulders and enough posh in me to know when to put on a show of maturity?"

Pike shakes his head. "He thinks you're a prostitute I picked up somewhere on the strip."

"Prostitutes are people too."

"He's close-minded."

I reach out and smooth my finger over his chest. "What about you? Are you close-minded?"

"Depends."

"Well . . . you know, it is just us in this pod, and I'm incredibly horny right now . . ."

He greets me with a lopsided grin. "Horny, huh?"

"Yes," I say, my voice laced with desperation. "All I want is for you to fuck me, but you're dragging me around town."

"It's called seduction."

"It's called procrastination. Come on . . . do something thrilling with me. Your brother is such a martyr, a buzzkill, don't you want to do something to spite him?"

"Are you talking about my brother, or your brother?"

"Both," I say, moving closer to him so I'm sitting on his lap. "They think they know everything. Don't you just want to . . . do something crazy?"

His teeth roll over his bottom lip as his hands fall to my ass.

Yes.

I rotate my hips over his crotch, but he stills me in place. “There are cameras in here.”

“What?” I look up at the ceiling and spot a small camera. “Damn it. Why did they do that?”

“Probably because they didn’t want drunk people fucking in their pods where families enjoy the sights and views of the Las Vegas Strip.”

“Lame.” I pout. “God, I’m so hard up right now. Look at my nipples, hard as stone.”

His eyes fall to my breasts, and to my surprise, his right hand lifts and he passes his thumb over one of my nipples. A hiss escapes me.

“Don’t you dare tease me.”

He shakes his head. “I wouldn’t. Just seeing if you were lying.”

“You can see my nipples against the fabric.”

“Wanted to make sure they were actually nipples.”

“As opposed to what?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Marbles.”

“Why would I keep marbles attached to my boobs?”

“I don’t know. Why did you think I knew Jax Teller?”

“Because I’m drunk off my ass.”

He nods. “Precisely.”

“Okay, so we’re admitting to being not just drunk, but very drunk.”

“I believe so,” he answers.

“And we’re also admitting to wanting each other.”

He nods again. “Yes. I want you.”

“And we’re in agreement that fucking in this pod would not be a good idea.”

“Terrible,” he says as his hands fall to my ass again.

“And we also believe our brothers are wet blankets.”

“That’s an actual fact.”

“So . . . does that mean . . . we should do something to spite them?”

“Not seeing the correlation.”

“Me neither, but don’t you think we should do something wild? We’re in Vegas, after all. A family-friendly Ferris wheel isn’t really living our best Vegas life.”

“So, you want crazy?”

A smile spreads across my face. “Oh yeah. Let’s do something we’ll never forget.”



THE HOT WIND blows against my face, pushing my hair behind me as I sit on a stiff bench, arms folded across my chest.

“Any guesses?”

“Two tons,” Pike guesses, looking far too enthused.

“Oh, good guess,” the Sky Bus tour guide, William, says. “But we’d have to more than quadruple that. The actual consumption of shellfish in Las Vegas is over sixty thousand pounds.”

“Not even fucking close,” Pike mumbles as he pulls a pretzel from my purse and plops it in his mouth.

Leaning toward him, I say, “You know, this isn’t what I was thinking when I said ‘let’s do something crazy.’”

He turns to me. “Are you not having fun?”

“Umm . . . I might be drunk, but this does not classify as fun for me. The only thing fun about this tour is how I’m

secretly wearing nipple tassels under my dress because we were afraid I was going to have a nip slip.”

After we got off the Ferris wheel, Pike knew exactly what we were going to do. We stopped by a store, loaded up on more pretzels and little bottles of booze—more Fireball, of course, because we know once I start, I can’t stop—and then bought some nipple tassels because Pike said I might want to be cautious with my dress for our next stop.

An activity with a possible nip slip? Now that sounds like a good time.

You can’t imagine how excited I was. I slipped into a public restroom, plastered those tassels on—*wishing it had been Pike putting them on me*—and then let Pike take me to our next chapter of fun, a place where the wind might be so strong that I might expose my nipples.

You can imagine the disappointment when we hopped on a sightseeing bus tour.

He’d been right about the tassels, though, the wind is stronger on top of the bus. It would’ve been risky.

Pike glances down at my chest and then back up at me. “Good thing we got those.”

“Ugh, Pike. You’re supposed to be a bad boy. How is this the activity you picked?” I gesture toward the bus. “This is something a dad would choose to do because, secretly, he’s excited about the fun facts he’ll learn. This isn’t memorable, this is going to put me to sleep.”

“I’ve enjoyed the fun facts,” he says, draping his arm over the back of our seat.

Staring idly at him, I ask, “Is this your answer to foreplay?”

“Is it working?” He shows off a very lopsided grin.

“No.”

“All right.” He stretches his hands above his head and blows out a heavy breath. “You want adventure? I’ll give you adventure.”

Finally . . .



“WHEN THE MOON hits your eye like a big—”

“Sir.” I hold up my hand. “Can you not sing, please?”

“Why? It’za part of the package.”

“Your attempt at an Italian accent is semi-offensive.”

The gondola captain—is that what you call the person pushing the boat? I don’t know—stares at me for a few seconds and then whispers to Pike, “Good luck, man.”

“I heard that,” I snap at him.

“I said it loud enough.”

I whip toward Pike, who’s leaning back in his seat, hands folded on his stomach, looking at the night sky.

“I’m turning into an angry drunk,” I say.

“Why?” He spreads his arms out. “You’re not enjoying this?”

“Once again, this is not thrilling. This is something an old couple does when they come to Las Vegas because the casinos are too smoky and the concerts are too loud for them.”

“Not true. Look.” He points to a boat passing by. “That’s not an old couple.”

“They’re not young,” I shoot back before pulling a mini bottle of Fireball out of my purse and downing it. “We are young, we should be doing young, fun things. You drive a motorcycle, for fuck’s sake. You are not the man I envisioned.”

“It’s all the booze. It’s mellowed me.” He reaches for a bottle but I smack it out of his hand, sending it to the front of the gondola.

“Then stop drinking.” I turn to the captain and say, “Sir, we need excitement in our night. Something thrilling.”



Something to talk about for years to come. Something that when we wake up tomorrow, we can say, ‘Wow, I can’t believe we did that.’”

“Are you looking for my advice?”

“That’s why I asked you.”

His eyes narrow.

My eyes narrow.

A crease in his brow appears.

My hands go to my side.

And then . . . a slow smile spreads across his lips.

“How drunk are you two?”

“Drunk,” Pike says, sticking a pretzel on his finger and then holding his hand out, examining the pretzel like a ring. “Really drunk.”

“I’ve had far too many Fireballs, so bad decisions are begging to be made.”

The captain’s smile grows. “Then I have the best idea for you.”

“Really?” I ask.

He nods. “Not many people have the nerve to do it—”

“I can do it,” I say, straightening myself. “I can do a lot of things.”

“I accomplish all the things,” Pike says, popping pretzels in his mouth after wearing them like jewelry.

“So don’t tell us we can’t do something.” I stick my chin in the air.

“I didn’t say you couldn’t do it. I said not many people have the nerve to do it.”

“Well, we do, right, Pike?” I whack his leg.

“What? Oh, yeah, we can do anything.”

“See?” I direct my attention back to the captain. “So, just tell us what it is, and we’ll do it.”

“I don’t know . . .” he wavers.

Looking him dead in the eyes, I say, “I swear on the tassels that are covering my nipples, whatever this activity is that you speak of, we’ll do it.”

“Without knowing, you’re committing?”

“Yes.”

He eyes me and then holds out his hand. “Shake on it.”

Without even a thought, I take his hand in mine and shake on it.

I’ll show this two-bit doofus what’s what.

You can’t go and tell me I can’t do something. Nope. Because I can do anything, especially when Fireball is in my system.

I want to do something thrilling tonight.

I want to feel alive.

I want to live my life without having someone hovering behind me, judging my every move like Keenan used to.

This is my chance.

This is my moment.

This is my divorce-cation.

If I’m ever going to do something fun and crazy, now is the time.

“Okay.” The captain pushes the boat toward the dock. “If you really want to do something crazy in Vegas, if you really want to show your nerves of steel . . .” He smirks, then leans in and whispers in our ears.

I feel an evil grin spread across my face. “Done.”

## Chapter Five

---

### PIKE

“Fucking . . . hell,” I say as I roll my suitcase through McCarran Airport.

How I remembered to set an alarm for myself, I have no idea.

How I remembered I was even human this morning—an even better question, because when the piercing sound of my alarm woke me, I almost threw up from the pain and uneasiness in my gut.

Too much to drink.

Way too fucking much to drink.

And I can’t for the life of me remember why.

Instead of trying to figure it all out, I took a quick shower, brushed the fuck out of my teeth, and then bolted to a cab so I wouldn’t miss my flight. I wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of Vegas and back to Chicago where I could resume my peaceful life.

Now that I’m at the airport, the sounds and the lights feel as if they’re inches from my face, blasting, shining so brightly that I can barely see.

Jesus, when was the last time I drank that much?

Probably six months ago, the night Pa told me I needed to marry Iris to help the family business, because I actually thought that was going to be my life. That was until Killian convinced me to break up with her and to live my own damn life, not live the one Pa expected. It's how Killian lives daily, and that next morning, I decided to do the same.

Getting wasted in Vegas was not part of the "live my own damn life" plan though.

I feel like absolute piss.

Needing something for my rolling stomach, I get in line at Starbucks—an egg sandwich is all I want from this establishment, as they don't know how to properly make tea—and I pull my mobile from my pocket, checking it for the first time since I turned off my alarm.

That's when I see three unread text messages.

One is from a number I don't know, and two are from Killian.

Hell, what kind of groveling is he up to now? I'm still fucking furious that I saw Pa at the tournament. *"You're staying in different hotels, running in different circles, teeing off at different tee times. There's no chance. Just go in there, get the money, and then go home. Simple."* Simple, my arse. I read his texts first.

***Killian:*** *YOU MARRIED THE PROSTITUTE?*

***Killian:*** *I'M GOING TO MURDER YOU.*

What?

I blink a few times.

Did I read that right?

Married a prostitute?

Did he get drunk too?

I text him back.

***Pike:*** *What the hell are you talking about?*

I shuffle forward with the line. Killian is quick to respond.

**Killian:** *Please tell me you remember what you did last night.*

A light sheen of sweat breaks out on the back of my neck as I take another step forward.

**Pike:** *Uh . . . not really.*

Instantly, my mobile rings. I don't even have to look at the screen to know who it is.

"Hey," I answer, defeated.

"Pike, please . . . please, for the love of God, tell me you remember what happened last night."

I wince. "Why don't you give me a hint and I'll tell you if I remember or not."

"Jesus . . . fucking . . . Christ. Does this jog your memory?"

My mobile buzzes and I pull it away from my ear to see a text from Killian. It's a picture, and when I click on it, it's like a wave of memories hitting me all at once.

Coraline Turner.

An emerald-green dress.

Tequila shots.

Poker.

Fireball.

Pretzels on a Ferris wheel.

Bitching on a tour bus.

A mouthy gondola ride.

And . . .

"Oh fuck," I whisper.

"Please, Pike. Please tell me that's not a bad *oh fuck*. Please tell me that's the kind of *oh fuck* you laugh about. The kind where we share over a pint as a good story."

"Well . . . it is a story."

“Fuck,” he says in defeat. “So, what you’re telling me is that you got married last night to a prostitute?”

“What? No.”

“Oh,” Killian says with hope in his voice and then a dry chuckle. “Christ, mate. You gave me a heart attack. I thought you got married—”

“I did,” I say, the words feeling like dust on my tongue. “I got, uh . . . married.” I take a step up to the counter and tell Killian, “Hold on, putting in an order.” I quickly order an egg, ham, and cheese sandwich and also throw in a bottle of water. After paying for my breakfast, I step off to the side and say, “I’m back.”

“You’re back . . . that’s all you’re going to say? You’re back?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” I scoot my suitcase to the side so it’s out of the way. “I can barely comprehend it myself. Wait, how did you find out?”

“You texted me. *Meet Mrs. Greyson*. Do you even know who this woman is? How to get in touch with her?”

“Yeah.” I grimace. Arlo is going to have a fucking fit. “She’s, uh . . . she’s the sister to one of my colleagues.”

“Wait, your colleague’s sister is a prostitute?”

“She’s not a prostitute. Why do you keep saying that?”

“Because that’s what you said on FaceTime.”

I chuckle. “I FaceTimed you?”

“I hardly see how this is funny, Pike.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just . . . fuck, I’m trying to understand this.”

“So, you know this girl, then?”

“Yeah. I see her quite often. She’s always coming into school to have lunch with her brother, and her friends are all teachers, as well.”

“Is she a teacher?”

“No, she’s . . . uh . . .” I think about it. What does Cora do? “Not quite sure what she does.”

“Why does this not surprise me?” Killian lets out an exhausted breath. “Well, at least you know her. This will be an easy annulment. As long as Pa doesn’t find out, we’re good.”

“How would he find out?”

“I don’t know—” His voice cuts off and he grows silent.

“Kill, you there?”

“Pike.” His voice comes out harsh, as if he truly is ready to murder me.

“Yeah?”

“Who else did you tell?”

“What do you mean? I didn’t even know I told you. Hell, I didn’t even know it happened until you told me this morning. Why?”

“Cleat Burgess just texted the picture you sent me.”

“What?” I nearly shout, drawing attention from the people around me. Turning away from them, I repeat, “What the fuck are you talking about? What did the text say?”

I hear him fumble around with his mobile and then more silence.

“Kill, what the hell did he say?”

Killian clears his throat and then . . . “Pa knows.”

“Fuck.”

“Pike, your order is ready,” the barista says, setting my sandwich on the counter.

“Are you sure?” I ask as I walk up to the counter and grab my sandwich. I pick up a few napkins and turn around, only to be stopped cold in my tracks.

Standing in front of me, a smug expression across his weathered face, is my pa.

“Shit,” I mutter.

“What?” Killian’s voice sounds panicked. It should be. I think we’re in a whole lot of fucking trouble.

“Pa is here. Call you back.”

Before I can hear Killian’s frightened verbiage, I hang up.

There’s something you might not know about me. I didn’t just grow up in England, in a rich family. My pa is part of the elite in the country. He’s been known to bribe politicians, to be mixed up with some bad blood, and he certainly didn’t get to where he is by always doing the right and fair thing. There’s nothing fair about his business practices. And because of the environment I grew up in, I took it upon myself to not give a shit about what I did. The only things I cared about were my freedom and the foundation Killian and I built. My teenage years were wild. My twenties, even wilder. Iris was the one thing that my pa asked of me, to marry her.

And I refused to go through with it.

Unluckily, when Killian and I started our foundation, Pa assisted us with finding and securing a board of directors. At the time, we were naïve, we didn’t know Pa snuck some of his friends onto the board, friends he has control over. When I told him I wasn’t going to marry Iris, he took it upon himself to tell the board of directors that I was unhinged and needed to be removed from the foundation. If I’m removed, then my position would need to be replaced. And the next in line for my position . . . my pa, unless someone else stepped up.

If he got ahold of the charity, he’d dismantle it in seconds.

Luckily, Killian and I were able to perform damage control then, but I’m not so sure we’re going to be able to do the same this time.

“Well, if it isn’t the groom.”

*Fuck.*

A part of me was hoping he didn’t know, but who am I kidding? He’s been waiting . . . waiting for me to fuck up. *Certain I would.* He knows how important this foundation is to me. And from the evil gleam in his eyes, I know he thinks he has me.



Which he does.

Unless I can think quick on my feet.

That leaves me with two options: act as if I don't see him, or act as if his presence doesn't affect me in the least.

The first option makes me look guilty as shit and like a moron, because it's clear as day that he's talking to me.

That doesn't give me any other options than to face the music . . .

"Didn't get much sleep last night?" I ask him as I clutch my sandwich bag and walk up to him. "Large bags under your eyes."

His eyebrows sharpen. "If anyone has bags under their eyes, it should be you. Care to explain why you're texting Cleat a picture of you and a girl . . . a girl you married?"

Yeah, good question.

Why did I text Cleat? Drunk subconscious?

Self-sabotage?

Because in my blitzed state, I found it appropriate to share the news of my nuptials with my pa's best friend.

I'm not that dumb.

Unless . . .

If I sent a text to Killian, I most likely attempted to send a text to Cleo, our sister. And drunk fingers and brain could very easily mistake *Cleat* for *Cleo*.

Motherfucker.

But of course, I never show weakness with this man. The minute I show weakness is the moment he takes not an inch, but a mile.

"Thought he could be the bearer of bad news for you. You know, since you were dreaming of the day I'd marry Iris."

Keep it cool, keep it smug, just like him. He won't know any better.

The bustle of the airport moves around us, passengers chasing after their flights, hungover individuals sleeping in chairs at their gates, and roller bags being dragged across the lacquered floor, but I ignore all of that as Pa takes a step forward, closing the animosity-filled distance between us.

The sharpness in his eyebrows fades as he coolly says, “So you’re telling me, you married this girl on purpose? That this isn’t some drunken mistake that you’ll be getting annulled the minute you get back to Chicago?”

Married on purpose . . .

Huh.

That very well might be my out.

Although, an annulment was the plan the moment Killian mentioned my nuptials. That would’ve been the easy way out, but because I was a drunken prat, I’m going to have to consider other alternatives.

“What do you think?” I ask.

“I think you fucked up. I think you were upset about seeing me yesterday when you weren’t expecting it. And because you haven’t had the ability to control your emotions since the day you were born, you drank them away, drank them till you were blackout drunk and ended up marrying some random woman you met in Vegas.”

Scary how close to reality that is.

But he doesn’t need to know that.

“Wouldn’t that just make you happy?” I ask as my hand sweats against the paper bag I’m carrying my sandwich in.

“It would. Immensely, because the board is already on edge that you’ve moved to America. You’re one mistake away from me taking over. And we both know how much that wasteful foundation means to you. Within a second, I would make sure it’s taken apart, or better yet, supporting the children I believe are in need.” Which are children who don’t need help at all. “But, you know, I can be persuaded otherwise.”

Unsure where he's going with this, I play it cool but dig for more information. "Oh, this has got to be good." I cross my arms over my chest. "Please, tell me how I can win your affection back."

The only cue that shows his annoyance is the tick in his jaw, but other than that, he's as stoic as a statue. "I sweep this all under the rug, you keep your precious foundation, and you marry Iris."

For fuck's sake.

He must be desperate to salvage that relationship with Iris's father because I've never seen him work this hard to get something. He's been relentless about Iris.

But that's not going to happen.

Over my dead fucking body.

Cora might be crazy at times, a little unhinged, and has some hidden darkness to her, but I'm sure she'll help me out on this. Being married to a bland, emotionless woman like the one that my pa is trying to force me to marry? Not. Happening.

"What do you say? Shall I phone my solicitor?" His mouth crooks to the side, pleased with himself. How long did it take him to brew this scheme? My guess is . . . seconds. The moment Cleat sent him that picture, his plan was formulated.

Too bad I'm not letting it happen.

"That's a great proposition, Pa, but unfortunately, your assistance won't be needed. The woman you saw in that picture? That's Cora. We've been dating for a few weeks now. We knew week one we were meant to be together and decided to make it official last night."

His eyes narrow and he draws even closer. "I don't believe you for one goddamn second."

I casually shrug. "Believe it or not, but she's my wife. Everything about our union was intentional—well, besides our outfits. She wanted to dress up; I didn't think it was necessary . . . now that I think about it, I probably should've

stopped at that dress store with her.” I pull on the back of my neck. “It’s okay, when we have a ceremony for our friends and family, she’ll get to wear whatever she wants.”

Pa studies me, his eyes furious, the tension in his arms stiff and unmoving. “Then where is she?”

“With her friends,” I say, speaking the truth. “They wanted a little more time together and I had to get back early to prepare for class tomorrow. We’re celebrating when she gets home later tonight.”

Hopefully she gets home tonight.

Hell, where even is home for her?

Silence falls between us as Pa takes another step closer. Even though I have two inches on him, I feel like he’s staring down at me instead of the other way around as he says, “I don’t believe a goddamn word of this, BUT, because I enjoy watching you squirm, I’m going to give you three months.”

“Three months? To do what?” I ask.

“Three months until your family-and-friends wedding.”

“What?” I ask, feeling as if the ground is about to drop out from under me.

“If this *woman* is really the love of your life and this abomination called a marriage is real, then I would be more than *thrilled* to throw you a wedding, in England, for everyone to celebrate. I’ll have your mother start planning now. And if you don’t show up, if this wife of yours doesn’t show up, then you can be damn well sure that I’ll make sure your foundation no longer exists.” He smirks and then pats me on the shoulder. “Congrats, son, I look forward to the impending nuptials.” He starts to walk away, but quickly looks back at me and says, “Oh, and if you don’t go through with the England wedding, and you still want to keep your precious foundation, then the wedding your mother plans? It’ll be for you and Iris.”

And then he takes off, a grin gracing his lips, all too pleased with himself.

Shit.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

He's trying to call my bluff because that's the kind of man he is, never trusting. He doesn't believe me for a second, and given my track record, I wouldn't believe me either. He's right about me. So goddamn right.

Just another screwup.

Another reason why I'm not good enough to be a part of the family, something that's been drilled into me from an early age.

The only thing I've ever gotten right in life is Rabid Readers and to hell if I'm going to let that crumble.

Turning in the opposite direction from my pa, I head toward my gate, and pull out my mobile. That's when I'm reminded of the text from a random number. I open it up and read it before calling Killian.

***Cora:** Hey, husband, it's me. Your snookum darling pie. We're married! AHHH. Here's my number so you can text me sweet nothings. Oh, and I stuck the key to my apartment in your pocket. My address is below. Can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you!*

I read her address and then step off to the side, where I set everything down and open my suitcase. I grab my jeans from last night and search the pockets, and luckily enough, there is a key in them.

And just like that, a plan is born.

I zip up my suitcase and text her back.

***Pike:** Good morning, wife. About to board my plane back to Chicago. After I arrive, I'm going to pack some things and then head to our place. See you at home . . . snookums.*

Once that's settled, I dial Killian. He answers on the first ring.

"What the *fuck* is going on?" I don't blame him for his frantic voice or the harsh tone. I would be just as concerned as he was if roles were reversed.

“I got it handled.”

“Do you? Because from here, it seems as if you have nothing handled and that you’re crashing and burning. You got married in Vegas, for fuck’s sake.”

“Deep breaths, Kill. Deep breaths and listen to my plan . . .”

## Chapter Six

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### CORA

“What do you mean you married Pike Greyson?” Stella shouts. “Like . . . you actually married him?”

I grip my forehead and slouch in my seat.

Oh God. This is bad.

This is really, really bad.

How could I have let this happen—wait, I know how this happened.

I sit up, realization smacking me dead in the center of my naked chest. “Fireball,” I whisper.

Stella and Greer both stiffen.

That one word . . . it holds all the weight in the world. They know my toxic relationship with Fireball, they’ve seen it firsthand. They’ve experienced the tantalizing take, take, take of the alcohol villain, never letting up until I’m strewn across the floor like a stack of potatoes.

“No.” Stella shakes her head. “Tell me that’s a lie. Please, for the love of God, tell me you didn’t drink Fireball last night.”

My hand goes to my throat in disbelief as I nod. “Copious amounts.”

“Cora! You know your volatile relationship with Fireball. What were you thinking?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know.” I rub my temples. “I don’t think I was thinking at all.”

“Clearly, you weren’t because you got married,” Stella says, “on your divorce-cation.”

That’s pretty stupid.

In a calmer tone, Greer asks, “Do you know where you went? Maybe we can see if it actually went through. Maybe it was a fake marriage ceremony or something.”

I perk up from that suggestion.

“Maybe . . . but . . . ugh, I don’t remember where we went.”

Greer takes a seat next to me. “Is there anything on your phone that might be able to tell us? Any Google searches in the history, or pictures?”

“God, you’re a modern-day marvel when it comes to solving mysteries,” I say as I unlock my phone again. “My brother is lucky he snagged you.” I go to my Google search history first and the first thing I see is a link to a drive-thru chapel. I frown.

“What?” Stella asks, taking a seat on my other side.

I click on the link and up pops the picture of a white chapel with a drive-thru window on the very front. Recognition immediately seizes me.

“Oh God.”

“Is that where you got married?” Greer asks, a crinkle of distaste to her nose.

“I want to say no, but . . . God, it looks so familiar.”

“That’s horrifying,” Stella says.

“Not helping,” I shoot back at her.

“Sorry, but . . . seriously, Cora, a drive-thru? How could you even drive last night?”



Sweat breaks out on my upper lip. “We didn’t,” I answer as I go to my photos and spot exactly what I was afraid of. Swallowing hard, I hold my phone out to them. “We took an Uber.”

Clear as day, it’s a picture of me and Pike in the back of an old pink Cadillac convertible, an Uber sticker on the windshield in the far corner, our Uber driver with a huge smile on his face.

“Oh . . . my . . . God,” Stella whispers as she leans in closer for a better look.

Greer covers her mouth and does a horrible job of covering up her laughter.

“This isn’t funny,” I groan.

“I mean, it kind of is,” Greer says. “You got married on the day you were celebrating your divorce, but not only did you get married, you got married in a drive-thru in Vegas, an Uber driver being your mode of transportation. Now that’s a story.”

“I don’t want a story, I want . . . I wanted fun, not a colossal mistake.”

“It’s not a big deal.” Greer waves me off.

“Easy for you to say. Arlo isn’t your brother. He’s not going to jump down your throat about being an idiot.”

“No, he’s just my husband,” Greer shoots back. “But we don’t need to worry about him, because we’re going to handle this discreetly. We can get this whole thing annulled. It’ll be as if it never happened. Simple as that.”

“You mean, no one will know about this?”

Greer shakes her head. “No one. This will be in our little circle of trust. Just us three.”

I glance down the hallway, hoping we haven’t been too loud, and whisper, “You can’t tell Keiko, she has no idea what keeping a secret means, and she’ll annoy me to no end with her analytical side if she catches wind of what happened.”

“I would never tell her,” Stella says. “That’s just asking for a nightmare. This stays between us.”

“Perfect. Okay, so, I guess I have to . . .” I pause, my hungover brain working hard. “Wait . . . he said . . .” I pause again. “He was going to meet me at my place.” Right? That’s what he said? I’m not making that up?

“What?” Stella asks. “How does he know where you live?”

Great question.

Only one way to find out.

I check my phone again and open the text thread between—*gulp*—husband and wife.

And there it is, plain as day. My invitation.

Damn you, Fireball, I hope you burn in hell.

Sighing out of complete exhaustion, I say, “Oh, I know how he knows.” I flash them my phone. “I told him. And I gave him my key.”

Greer once again covers her smile.

“This is not funny!”

“It’s not,” she says while holding back her chuckle. “But—and I mean this in the nicest, most supportive way possible—I really kind of wish I’d been a fly on the wall last night.”

“Me too,” Stella says. “You already don’t really have a filter, but to see what little filter you have while completely unhinged and under the control of Fireball would’ve been entertaining.”

Growing agitated, I stand from the couch and tighten the tie of my robe. “You guys, this is no joking matter.” Making sure I keep my voice down, I whisper shout, “There is a man at my apartment, waiting for his wife to come home. That wife . . . is me.” I point to my chest.

Stella and Greer exchange looks, and I can see the minute their eyes connect. They’re going to laugh.

In three . . .

Two . . .

One . . .

An eruption of covered-up giggles explodes from the both of them, which sends me into a pacing tailspin. Hand on my forehead, I say, “This is freaking serious. What if he actually thinks we’re married?”

“I mean . . . you are actually married,” Stella says. “Vegas doesn’t hand out fake marriages.”

“I know it’s real, but what if he thinks this wasn’t a drunken mistake? He said he was grabbing things and heading to my apartment. He’s—oh God . . . is he moving in?”

Greer shakes her head. “No way. I don’t know Pike all that well, but what I do know about him, he’s not the kind of guy who sticks around. He’s probably just . . . teasing you or something.”

“Does he tease?” Stella asks. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him crack a joke at school. He’s always so serious.”

“Yeah.” Greer taps her chin. “Now that I think about it, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him joke around either. He’s actually quite the recluse.”

“Oh . . . my . . . God!” I say through clenched teeth. “I married a recluse? Do you know what that means? He’s going to want to stay married.”

“Oh, please,” Stella scoffs. “There’s no way he’s going to want to stay married. This was all a mistake, and I’m sure when you return later today, it’ll be easy to sort out.”

“And what if it’s not?” I ask, feeling as if this Fireball-induced mistake isn’t going to just wash away that easily. Life has never been like that for me. It’s always been one complication after the other, this being the next one I have to survive.

Greer stands from the couch and walks to me. She places her hands on my shoulders and takes a few calming breaths. Looking me in the eyes, she says, “Trust me—Pike Greyson isn’t the marrying type. He probably already has his lawyers

drawing up annulment papers as we speak. He's most likely going to present them to you when you get home."

I worry my lip. "Are you—are you sure?"

Greer nods. "Trust me. This will all be over sooner than you think." She gives me a reassuring squeeze and then claps her hands together. "Now, shall we order bacon?"



**STELLA:** *Are you home yet? Dying to know what's happening.*

**Greer:** *Yeah, kind of on edge over here. Arlo thinks it's because I haven't seen him in a while . . .*

**Cora:** *Ew, don't allude to sex with my brother.*

**Greer:** *He's my husband. We have sex.*

**Cora:** *I'm AWARE! But please just keep that part of your life to yourself.*

**Stella:** *You're avoiding. What's happening over there? It's been over an hour since we dropped you off.*

**Cora:** *I've been sitting in the hallway.*

**Greer:** *Over an hour? Huh, Arlo was quicker than I thought.*

**Cora:** *OMG! Greer! Stop!*

**Stella:** *Romeo was too. I walked through the door, he looked at me, and with that one glance, my clothes flew off as if they were attached to a string that someone yanked on.*

**Cora:** *I really hate you two.*

**Greer:** *No, you don't. Now, come on. Stand up, put your big girl pants on, and go knock on your apartment door.*

**Cora:** *You laughed when you said that, didn't you?*

**Greer:** *Maybe a little, but only because it's slightly comical that you gave your only key away.*

**Cora:** *I'm nervous.*

***Stella:** Just rip the bandage off. And then, for the love of God, tell us what happens.*

***Greer:** Yes, tell us all the things. We love you.*

***Cora:** I tolerate you.*

***Stella:** Good luck talking to your husband!*

***Greer:** [Ron Swanson Giggling GIF]*

***Cora:** You two are no longer my friends.*

## Chapter Seven

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### PIKE

***Killian:** Is she home yet? I can't fall asleep. I really think I might throw up.*

I glance around Cora's studio apartment, wondering how the hell we're going to make this work. A queen-size bed is situated against the wall, a window to the right of it offering a decent view of a park across the street. There's a miniature-sized bathroom to the right of the bed, which offers absolutely zero room for two people at the same time, and her kitchen is barely a kitchen. Her counter space probably adds up to four square feet altogether. Her apartment is tiny, perfect for one person, but two people? Yeah, this might be difficult.

But convincing her to move to my more spacious apartment? I doubt that's a possibility. Because I know the minute she walks through that door and sees me, unpacked and moved in, I'm going to have to perform some serious squatter's rights to stay here.

When I arrived, I gave myself a self-guided tour, which took about two seconds, given it's a studio apartment and there isn't much to explore at all. But after that, I snooped a bit. I know what you're thinking, *you're invading her privacy*. Maybe, but she's also my wife, and if I want to keep it that way, then I'm going to have to know more about her.

Things I've learned:

She doesn't seem to cook . . . like at all. There are no spices, not much cookware—just a couple pots and frying pan—and there's barely any food in the cabinets or fridge.

Despite packing for Vegas, she's still fully stocked with makeup and face products, and funnily enough, there are condoms in her bathroom drawers. A full box, untouched.

From the collection of paperbacks on the short shelves across from her bed, I noticed she likes to read and she enjoys mysteries. I kind of like that about her.

And of course, I perused her nightstand, where I found a vibrating wand. Not surprised at all. She seems like a woman who has no shame in pleasuring herself.

Shamelessly, I searched for a diary, hoping and praying there was something that would give me more information about her, but sadly, I came up short. After I stopped snooping, I unpacked, somehow made room for my things—basically used the space underneath her bed for all my clothes—and I ordered some food, just going with some simple pizza, because I feel as if you can't go wrong with that.

It's in the oven on warm and the smell is making my stomach gurgle.

Where the hell is she?

*Pike: She's not home yet.*

I can practically hear my brother furiously typing from across the pond.

*Killian: Why the hell not? Where is she? Are you sure you're in the right apartment?*

My eyes fall to a picture frame of Cora and the girls that's on her nightstand. They're in Hawaii and they're all wearing their bathing suits, including Keiko, who seems to be wearing some sort of old-fashioned wetsuit, not an inch of skin showing.

*Pike: Yeah, I'm at the right place. Maybe her flight was delayed.*

*Killian: Can you check?*

***Pike:** You act as if I've actually been talking to my wife.*

***Killian:** I'm going to need you to try harder here. There's too much on the line.*

***Pike:** I assure you—I'm bringing everything I've got, okay? I'll fix this, I promise. Now leave me the fuck alone. I'll text you tomorrow.*

***Killian:** If I need to fly out there, I will.*

***Pike:** Trust me, I know. Good night.*

I silence my mobile and rest it on the dining area table I've been sitting at. I don't need him jacking up my nerves any more than they already are, because the waiting feels impossible as is.

Seriously, where the hell is she?

I stand from the table and pace the small length of her apartment—well, our apartment—and I think about our night, trying to recount exactly what we did. There were a few pictures in my mobile.

One of us on the Ferris wheel, eating pretzels.

One of us on the gondola taken by the guy who convinced us to get married—yeah, that came back in a rush of memory.

One of us outside the chapel, the one I apparently sent to everyone.

And then one of us in a pink Cadillac, sitting in the back, Cora curled against me and my arm wrapped around her.

From there, it really gets fuzzy. I'm not sure what we did, where we went, how I got back to my hotel room, or if we even kissed.

I know one thing is for certain though—there's no way we did anything sexual. Given my drunken state, I can't imagine I did anything in a bed other than pass out.

It was a breezy night. I honestly don't remember having a care in the world at all. Cora wanted to get married, and I just went along with it because it seemed like the thing to do. It was as if I had no decision-making in me.



I pull on the back of my neck in stress. I wish there was some decision-making in me last night. Like, something in my head telling me to stop taking shots. Something maybe telling me to slow down on the excitement of the night. You know, a little angel on my shoulder saying, “Hey, maybe we don’t get married in Vegas to someone you barely know.”

Hell, *barely know* would be putting it nicely.

Cora is more like an acquaintance. I don’t even know what she does for a job. Does she even have a job? She comes to the school for lunch a lot, so part of me believes that she’s not employed. But she does have her own place, so she has to have money somehow.

Maybe I didn’t snoop enough. Is there a computer around here?

*Knock. Knock.*

I pause, my eyes snapping to the door. Is that her?

You’d think if it was her, she’d just walk into her own apartment. Then again, if she gave me her key . . .

With nerves ricocheting through me, I walk to the front door and on a deep breath, I open it.

Light grey eyes meet mine as a soft voice says, “Hi.”

There she is, dressed in leggings and an off-the-shoulder sweatshirt . . . my wife.

I clear my throat. “Hi.”

Nervously, she holds out her arms and says, “Honey, I’m home.”

It’s the perfect icebreaker for this awkward tension between us. I chuckle and take her suitcase from her. I wheel it into the apartment as she walks in behind me, shutting the door quietly.

When I turn around, I see her standing nervously in the entryway, and I realize just how awkward this all is. I’m in her apartment—her freaking home—moved in, which I’m sure she

doesn't quite comprehend yet, and we're married. Not just married, but, as of a few hours ago, living together.

"Safe flight?" I ask, unsure of what to really say to her.

"I'm alive, so I guess so," she answers as she sets down her bag and walks farther into the apartment. "Is that . . . pizza?"

"I wasn't sure if you were going to be hungry when you got back."

"I'm starving. I barely had—" She pauses, and as if something turns on in her brain, her eyes find mine and her hands land on her hips. "What's going on here, Pike?"

"What do you mean?" I ask innocently. Because if you're an outsider looking in, this might not look super great for me.

Married while drunk.

Moved into apartment.

(Snooped)

And doting husband with dinner in the oven when wifey comes home.

If you told me forty-eight hours ago that I'd go anywhere near Cora, and that this is the man I would be, I would tell you that you were off your nob. *Off limits. Content being single.*

Instead of getting into it in the entryway of her apartment, I say, "Why don't you have a seat and we can eat and talk."

She doesn't move right away, but instead just stares at me. I can see it in her eyes, the disbelief, the wondering if this is an alternate reality she walked into, and frankly, it very well might be.

I never saw myself as a married man, ever, but at this point, I would rather be married to Cora—the wild card, than Iris—the disenchanting people pleaser. And it seems as if I have no choice to be single, so here I am.

Finally, she takes a step toward the kitchen and mutters, "Only because the pizza smells good."

Look at me being a good husband already, feeding my wife after a wearying day of travel.

I meet her in the kitchen, and since I already snooped around and figured out where everything was, I gather us plates while she takes the pizza out of the oven and brings it to the table, where she sets it on a trivet.

From over the island that separates the kitchen from the dining area, I say, “We only have water to drink. Hope that’s okay.”

When she faces me, I’m greeted with a crooked eyebrow. “*We* only have water?”

I smirk. “Yeah. We.”

Her eyes narrow and she says, “*I* only have water and, yes, that’s fine.”

Man, is she in for the surprise of a lifetime.

I fill up two glasses of water and slide them onto the kitchen island for her to take to the table. Then, with plates and napkins in hand, I join her in the dining area. She flops down on a chair and folds her arms as she watches me take a seat and set a plate in front of her. Without asking, because it seems as though I have an ornery bride, I set a piece of pizza on her plate and do the same for mine.

With her eyes still connected with mine, she picks up a napkin and haphazardly blots her pizza.

“Not a fan of grease?” I ask as I pick up my slice and take a large bite.

“No,” she answers and then tosses her greased-up napkin onto the table. “Okay, we’re eating, now we should talk. What the hell is going on?”

I set my pizza down on my plate and wipe my hands on a napkin. “As you must be aware by now, we got married last night.”

“Yes, I’m quite aware.”

“Good,” I say, smoothing my hands together. “Glad we agree about what happened last night.”

“Yes, well, hard to wake up and not remember such insanity.”

“Right, well . . .” I look her dead in the eyes and say, “I would like to give this marriage a chance, so, I moved in as you requested.”

I smile.

Her jaw falls open.

It’s quite obvious from her blanched expression that she wasn’t expecting me to say that.

Continuing, I add, “The apartment is smaller than I care for, but we can make it work.”

She blinks.

“But don’t worry about me, I was able to find some space. Nice box of condoms, by the way. Noticed they were untouched.”

She blinks some more.

“So . . . want to tell me about your day . . . *wifey?*”

Silence falls between us as I watch the woman in front of me slowly start to lose grip on her composure. It’s a rather chilling thing to witness, because I know in a matter of seconds, I’ll be the recipient of the wrath that’s swirling and gathering in the lair of her angry, yet confused, eyes.

Her hands slowly slide onto the table until her palms are completely flat. She leans forward, eyebrows drawn down, tension in her jaw, and through her clenched teeth, she asks, “Have you *completely* lost your mind?”

Probably.

But I don’t feel like I have a choice at this point.

If I get an annulment, I’m totally fucked. My pa will take everything Killian and I have worked so goddamn hard at developing. He’d make us a laughingstock, and sure, fine, that

would hurt me, but I've started a new life here. I'm more worried about Killian, who's rooted in England and is part of multiple boards to a vast array of charitable organizations.

The only choice I have is to make this marriage work, even if she hates me for it. Which, from the look of it, is a strong possibility. But, since we have a long road ahead of us, there's always time to make her happy. Besides, she *had* been pursuing me even before Vegas.

"Lost my mind?" I nervously laugh. "Why do you ask?"

"Uh . . . because you barely know me, and yet you want to make this marriage work?"

"If anything, I believe in commitment." I pick up my pizza and take a bite. "We spoke vows, Cora. *Until death do us part.*"

"Oh my God." Her hand rises to her forehead as she looks around her apartment. "I've married someone suffering from a psychosis."

"Actually, I'm quite fine. Thanks."

Her eyes snap to mine and her finger shakily points at me. "You are not fine. You are insane."

"Darling, do you really think we should be calling each other names? So early in our marriage?" I ask.

"Do *NOT* call me *darling*. Don't call me *wifey*, and for the love of God, do not call me *snookums*."

"What should I call you, then?"

"Nothing," she shouts. "You should call me nothing, because this is nothing." She motions between us. "This was just . . . I don't know, this was . . . this . . ." Her eyes look crazy when she finishes, "This was a product of the devil's juice, Fireball."

"A lot of Fireball," I say. "But, hey, you live and you learn, right?" I take another bite of my pizza.

"You live and you learn?" she asks in disbelief. "That's your answer to us getting married?" When I nod, she says,

“Uh, no, Pike. This isn’t a ‘you live and you learn’ moment. This is a ‘we call up the lawyers and get an annulment’ moment.”

I wince. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen.”

“Excuse me?”

I lift my glass of water to my lips and before taking a sip, I say, “We’re not getting an annulment.”

“Uh . . . why not?”

“Because why get an annulment when we can see if we can make this thing work?”

“Wo-work?” She stumbles over her words. “As in, continue to be husband and wife?”

“Yeah, why not?” I ask with a shrug of my shoulder.

“Because we’re not in love,” she shouts.

“Semantics.”

“Se-semantics?” she repeats, lifting out of her chair. Her anger is boiling over, and I realize that maybe I didn’t go about this the right way. What do they say—“you can catch more flies with honey”? Maybe if I was slightly nicer, she’d be more apt to give this a go? Then again, I did provide her with dinner. That was chivalrous.

I also made her bed, which was unmade when I arrived.

Another act of kindness.

*Who am I trying to kid, here? Fuck.* I know I’m in the wrong, here, but is there a way to make Cora want to make this work? *Even if it’s only for six months.* Maybe she—

“Pike, you can’t be serious. We don’t even know each other. How are we supposed to be married if we don’t even know each other?”

“We get to know each other, simple as that.” I lean back in my chair. “You admitted it yourself, you find me attractive. You wanted to bed me.”

“Ew, I did not say *bed you*,” she says, crossing her arms.

“Either way, it’s not like I’m some dude you want nothing to do with.”

“I want nothing to do with you right now.”

I smile at her. “Too late.”

“Urrghh, you’re so frustrating.” Cora flexes her fingers in front of her, looking as though she wants to strangle me.

Yeah, I’m not winning any points. My acts of kindness have no clout at the moment.

“What’s the problem? Why can’t we just get the annulment? What’s the big deal?” she asks.

“I don’t want to,” I answer. “I want to give this a shot.”

“Why? Why is this—” She pauses. Her eyes bounce back and forth, and I can tell she’s attempting to comprehend an idea. “Oh my God,” she finally says. She leans in and whispers, “Is this some sort of green card necessity? If so, just tell me now, because I don’t want to be involved. Prison wouldn’t look good on me. I wouldn’t last a second.”

“I don’t need a green card.”

“Then what the hell is this all about?” she yells. “Why do you want to stay married to me? Because, I’m telling you right now, I’m not pleasant. I don’t share well. I don’t cook. I like to watch sappy love movies. And I refuse to hide my feminine products; they’re out in the open for the world to see.”

Holding back my smirk—because my smile seems to irritate her—I say, “That’s fine. I’m not scared of tampons.”

In a deep, demonic voice, she asks, “What about nighttime pads?”

Christ, if this is what marriage is like, I might be making a big mistake.

“Uh, those are fine too.”

“You say that now, but wait until you see how they run from belly button to crack.”

What? The visual in my head is too much.

“And how about how I like to talk with my mouth full of food?” She reaches for her pizza and takes a large bite. Mouth chock-full of crust, sauce, and cheese, she asks, “You want to have dinner conversations with this?”

Sauce drips down her chin.

Cheese spews out of her mouth.

“Find this attractive, do you?” she continues.

“I’ve seen worse.”

Growling in frustration, she wipes her mouth and paces the apartment. “God, Arlo is going to murder me,” she mumbles.

Fascinating how much she cares what Arlo thinks, and if I were to guess, he would in fact kill her if he knew she got married in Vegas. He’s very protective of her, not sure exactly why, but there’s a tight bond between the two of them.

Cora continues to pace before she pauses and turns toward me, an evil glint in her eye. “I’ll sue you. Is that what you want? For me to sue you?”

“Sue me for what?”

“Errr . . . negligence.”

“Negligence of what?”

“Of . . . of . . . my sanity!” She tosses her hands in the air.

“I don’t think that’s a thing.” Before she can absolutely lose it, I say, “Three months.”

“Huh?” she asks, looking at me from over her shoulder.

“Give me three months.”

“To do what?”

“To be married to me.”

“Why on earth would I do that?” Looking exhausted, she takes a seat at the table again and succumbs to eating her pizza once more.

“Because.” When she eyes me, I know I’m going to need more than just that. So, I go in for the kill. “Because you don’t



want your brother finding out about your wild night.”

In a flash, her eyes turn murderous, and she slowly says, “You *wouldn't*.”

This is risky, really freaking risky. This is something my pa would do—hell, he is doing it to me. But I need her. I need this to work and there’s no way in hell I can tell her why. For one, I don’t know her, and I don’t know if I can trust her. And two . . . well, I need to live with this woman, and I need her to think I’m actually trying to make this marriage work.

So, blackmail it is.

Which, fuck, just makes me realize no matter how much I want it to be different, the apple doesn’t really fall far from the tree.

“I would.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asks, and the dejected tone of her voice makes me feel bad.

But not bad enough to back away.

“Because don’t you want to know if there could be something between us?”

“Uh . . . no. The last thing I want to be right now is someone’s wife. I want to be single. I want to have fun.”

“Clearly, you’ve never been married to me. I can be fun.”

She scoffs. “Okay. Coming from the man who’d never said more than two words to me before yesterday.”

“Things changed yesterday.”

“So, what are you going to do? Just . . . live here? Share a bed with me? Fuck me? Act like the doting husband?”

“Yes, I’ll be living here, that’s what married couples do. We’ll be sharing a bed because I don’t sleep on the couch. Fucking you . . . well, that’s completely up to you. I’m not going to pressure you on that. But I wouldn’t be opposed. And the doting husband”—I gesture to the pizza—“I think I’m doing an excellent job at that already.”

Her jaw works back and forth, her eyes never lifting from mine.

She's thinking.

She's plotting.

Just from that one look. I know this isn't going to be easy. She's going to make my life difficult, and no matter what, I'm going to have to be up for the challenge, because the kids need me.

Killian needs me.

Her tongue runs over the front of her teeth and she says, "Fine."

Now, men, I might not currently be in a serious relationship, and the woman I was with prior to all of this might have been an absolute robot, but I know when a woman says FINE, nothing about the situation is fine.

Absolutely nothing.

There's a whole lorry to unpack behind that FINE.

"So . . . fine?" I ask.

She smiles and picks up her pizza. Before she takes a bite, she says, "Yeah. *Fine.*"

I have a sinking feeling nothing about this is going to be fine.

## Chapter Eight

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CORA

***Cora:*** RED ALERT. RED ALERT. DEFCON 1. NUCLEAR LEVEL. ALL HANDS-ON DECK!!!!

***Greer:*** What the hell is going on? Do you need me to come over?

***Stella:*** Are things not going well with the husband?

***Cora:*** EMERGENCY LADIES IN HEAT MEETING. TOMORROW! GREER'S CLASSROOM. AT LUNCH.

***Greer:*** Oh God, what's going on?

***Stella:*** Uh . . . so I take it things aren't going well?

***Cora:*** DO NOT TELL KEIKO!

***Greer:*** We won't. Is everything okay? The all-caps is making me worried.

***Stella:*** It was nuclear level for me that got me shaking.

***Greer:*** I can't tell if you're being sarcastic, Stella.

***Stella:*** If Fireball was involved, I'm DEAD SERIOUS.

***Cora:*** I need you to bring your thinking caps, because we're about to go to war.

***Stella:*** \*Gulp\* Fireball, you nasty mistress.

***Greer:*** Why am I sweating?

*Stella: Ditto. Pools of it. Care to give us a hint about what we're dealing with?*

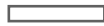
*Cora: The Loch Ness Monster.*

*Stella: I know you're in a sensitive moment right now, and I appreciate you attempting to characterize Pike, but the Loch Ness Monster is Scottish.*

*Greer: Oh Stella . . .*

*Cora: STELLA! You are on my list.*

*Stella: \*Nods\* That's fair.*



WITH A DEEP BREATH, I open the door to the front office of the high school and wave to Norma, the receptionist. I quickly sign in, because, you know, rules, and then I head toward the English wing wearing a heavy coat, baseball cap, and bags under my eyes.

The heavy coat and cap are so Keiko and Pike don't recognize me and the bags under my eyes are courtesy of not getting an ounce of sleep as I shared a bed with my *husband*.

Is Pike an attractive man? Uh, yeah. Really freaking hot, but was he as repulsive as a rotten banana peel at the bottom of a trash can to me yesterday? Oh yes.

Yes, he was.

You can imagine how I wanted nothing to do with him last night. It's why I didn't speak to him for the rest of the night. Why I got ready to go to sleep without a word, brushed my teeth with a scowl, and then hunkered down in my bed, up against the wall, curled up turned away so I didn't have to look at him.

I've never been more horrified to share a bed with an attractive man.

I'll give it to him for being respectful of my sleeping space, though. You always hear about people platonically

sharing a bed only to end up with a boob in the hand by morning. Not us. Both stiff as boards—not his penis—never leaving our designated zones.

This morning when I was getting ready, I felt like an old-world peasant woman in an arranged marriage, skulking around the residence and wanting nothing to do with her husband. Except, I'm not an old-world peasant woman, I'm a modern-day lady who's still captured in her own living space.

And could I possibly tell Arlo to have him help me get out of this? Probably, but the last thing I need is for him to get involved. He's already too protective and always harping on me about making the right decisions for my life. I don't need him involved in this.

Nope. I can handle it. I have a plan.

I just need the meat of the plan to unfold, and that's why I called together the Ladies in Heat Book Club—minus Keiko, but that's because she won't get it and she's far too temperamental right now to keep in check.

Passing the math wing, I head up the stairs toward the English department, taking the stairs two at a time. I usually meet the girls once a week for lunch, because I work from home and enjoy some company every once in a while. I bring my own lunch, they bring theirs, and we chat and gab about nothing and everything.

Today, I don't have a lunch.

I have a can of whipped cream.

A notebook.

A pen.

And a menacing grimace that means business.

Turning the corner, I head down the English department wing and straight to Greer's door. I don't bother knocking, instead, I bust through the door. I find Greer up against her whiteboard, Arlo holding her in place.

“Jesus Christ.” I shield my eyes from the compromising position. “Please tell me appendages are all in their proper

confines.”

Arlo growls—such an idiot—and asks, “What are you doing here, Coraline?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? It’s a lunch date.” I peek through my fingers and thankfully see that everyone is properly clothed, so I drop my hand. Looking at Greer, I say, “I thought we had a date.”

“Yes, I was just telling Arlo that.” She adjusts her shirt. “He was having a hard time listening.”

“It’s because men tend to think and listen with their dicks, but are quite unaware that dicks don’t have ears.”

“Cute,” Arlo says before placing a soft kiss on Greer’s lips. “Tonight, we finish this.”

Ew.

Seriously!

Ew.

A sister should never be subjected to her brother being all alpha and demanding. Let me just go dry-heave in the trash can for a second.

Arlo walks toward me and pauses, taking my appearance in. “Why are you dressed like that?”

“It’s the new trend. Frump. God, get a clue Professor Stick Up My Ass.”

“I’m not a professor.”

“For the love of God, leave,” I say, losing my patience, which only causes him to stand firmly in place. I lift the can of whipped cream to my mouth and spray, filling my mouth to the brim.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

“Nothing.” I look away. Huge mistake.

“Coraline, do not lie to me.”

See, this is what I’m talking about. He reacts like this from just a ball cap and oversized coat—and whipped cream. How

would he react if he knew I got wasted in Vegas and then married Pike, someone he apparently doesn't get along with?

Spoiler alert—he'd raise hell!

"Arlo," Greer says, stepping up to him and gently placing her hand on his arm. "Cora has some womanly things she wanted to talk to me and Stella about."

His eyes flash to mine. "Are you pregnant?"

"What? God, no," I answer. "There hasn't been a man near my naked body in far too long."

He cringes. "I don't need the details."

"You asked."

He gives me a once-over and I can see he's not fully satisfied, but he offers Greer one more kiss before moving past me, just as Stella busts through the door.

"I'm here. Sorry, Romeo was being a whiny baby about not having lunch with me." When she looks up at Arlo, she says, "Looks like Mr. Cardigan is having the same issue. What would these men do without us?"

"Clearly not survive," I answer, moving to one of the desks in Greer's classroom.

"Looks like I'll be joining Romeo for lunch," Arlo says. "Maybe he has an idea what this is all about?"

And with one last glance, he takes off. Stella shuts the door behind him and locks it, and before I can even open my mouth, Stella says, "Don't worry, I told Romeo nothing."

I slouch in my chair. "Thank God." I set my whipped cream can, notepad, and pen on the desk.

Stella and Greer just stare at me.

"This can't be good," Stella says.

I lift the can of whipped cream, tilt my head back, and shoot some in my mouth. "It's not. Pull up a chair." Of course, with said mouthful of whipped cream, that sounded more like "Ifwot. Poowupafair." But, hey.

Greer and Stella both situate themselves in desks, forming a small circle as we always do so we're all facing each other. Their lunches aren't present and that's probably because I left them hanging last night with what this is all about. Probably the last thing on their minds is lunch.

But telling them what happened through text? No way. This is too big. Too monumental. I needed to have this conversation in person.

I let out a deep sigh and say, "He wants to stay married."

Silence.

Blank stares greet me.

And then . . .

"What did you say?" Stella asks while rubbing her ear. "Because it sounded as though you said he wants to stay married."

With a nervous laugh, Greer grimaces. "I thought she said that too. Did you say that?"

I stare at the whiteboard without seeing it, my mouth seeming to move at a glacier's pace as I force out the words. "Yes, you heard me correctly. He wants to stay married."

"As in . . . like . . . be a married couple?" Stella asks.

"Yes. As in, husband and wife."

"But . . . how is that—" Greer pauses and says, "What?"

"You're going to have to walk us through what happened last night," Stella says.

"It's simple," I answer. I shoot some more whipped cream into my mouth and then continue, "I came home, mentioned an annulment, and he said no, that he wants to give this marriage thing a shot, and that was that. Then pizza was consumed."

"But why?" Stella asks.

"That's the question of the century, my friend. Why? Why does this man want to stay married to me?" I fling my arm to



the side. “Why would any man want to stay married to a stranger?” Feeling that I’m starting to reach a hysterical level, I shoot some more whipped cream into my mouth to settle myself down.

“Is it a green card thing?” Greer asks.

I shake my head. “No, I asked him that last night. He just said maybe there could be something between us and we should give it a shot.”

“That doesn’t sound like Pike Greyson at all.” Stella shifts in her chair. “He’s so . . . aloof. He doesn’t seem like the type of guy who would want to give marriage a shot, specifically to someone he barely knows. Did you try to deter him?”

“Uh, yeah,” I say in an annoyed voice. “Desperately. I even brought up mega nighttime pads and how I refused to hide them from him.”

“And he still wants to stay married?” Stella asks.

“He barely even flinched at the mention of feminine products. It was maddening. And he was so . . . calm. Like everything was going to be okay.” I slap my hand on the desk. “How on earth are things going to be okay? We’re married. Freaking married! This isn’t normal. This isn’t a time to be calm. This is a time to FREAK OUT!”

“Whoa.” Stella pats my arm. “Cora, your eyes are popping out of their sockets.”

I take a calming breath and bring my hand to my chest. “I apologize that you had to witness that outburst.” With another press of my finger to the nozzle, I take down more whipped cream. Mouth full, I say, “I’m good now.”

Stella and Greer exchange glances and I don’t blame them. I know how unhinged I am. They met me when I was in a dark place, but I’ve never lost the plot like that in front of them before. I’m not as stoic as Arlo, but we were both raised to think before we speak. Hence, our reticence. *And their shock.*

“Can you just, you know, kick him out?” Greer asks.

I pick at a piece of lint on my coat. “I thought about that, but he laid down the hammer last night.”

“What do you mean?” Stella asks.

“Well, you see, he asked for three months to see if this marriage could work and if I don’t give him those three months, he’s going to tell Arlo.”

“Nooooo,” Greer says in absolute horror.

“He wouldn’t,” Stella shouts.

“Oh, he would.”

Stella slams her fist on the desk. “What the absolute hell? He can’t do that.”

“Oh, he is.” I take another shot of whipped cream and then pass it around the circle. The girls join me. “And do you know what I said last night?” Cheeks puffed with whipped cream, both of them shake their heads *no*. “I told him, *fine*.”

Greer’s eyes widen. “You said that? You used the four-letter word?”

“Yup.”

“And how did he react?” Stella asks.

“Absolutely unfazed.”

“Oh God, I feel like you’re either dealing with a completely tone-deaf man or some sort of wizard. I would like to believe he’s tone deaf, but I’m afraid I’m leaning toward wizard status,” Stella says.

“That’s exactly why I called this meeting.” I flip open my notepad, take the cap off my pen, and poise it at the top of the paper. “Ladies, we need to make his life miserable.”

Smiles creep across their faces.

Stella rubs her hands together. “Are you talking pranks? You know I live for this.”

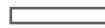
“I’m talking the worst things you can possibly think of, things that would turn Arlo and Romeo off, things so vile that

within a week, Pike will have no choice but to pretend none of this ever happened.”

Greer giggles. “Oh, this could be good.”

“Very good,” Stella adds. “He wants a wife? Well, we’ll give him a *wife*.”

“Now this is the kind of attitude I was looking for, ladies.” I flip my ball cap so it’s backwards and say, “Let’s get down to business.”



THIS MORNING, I thought my life was over. Dramatic? Maybe. But let’s be honest, I just got divorced, only to be hitched shortly after to a man I don’t know. Should I be flattered that the man wants to stay married to me?

Maybe a little.

But the overall theme here is I don’t want to be married, possibly never married ever again. That’s how much the first marriage took a toll on me.

But now, oh man, talk about a pep in my step.

This girl’s head is held high.

Pride is pushing through me at a rapid rate.

I can’t stop smiling.

And on occasion, while thinking about the list of things we came up with to deter Pike, I start to giggle.

He wants to play hardball? Well, guess what? He’s playing with the wrong person.

After a good brainstorming session and the agreement that Keiko might have been helpful with ideas, given how she helped Greer with pranking Arlo early on, we came up with a solid list.

The overall goal—make his life hell.

We have phases of hell, though.

We have to start out slowly. If we go in too strong, he's going to realize what I'm doing and just put up with it. He's smart, I can see it in his eyes, so there's no way he'd fall for my antics. But if we ease him into hell, then he might very well think this is the person he married.

So, phase one starts today, and that begins with me being his chef.

It's a simple thing.

We have to eat, so therefore, he can eat what I make. If he wants to be the doting husband he claims to be, then he should eat the food I make. And let me tell you, the food I make is barely tolerable to me, so I know he's going to hate it.

So, after I left the girls, I made a menu and went grocery shopping. I thought it would be fun to try some traditional English dishes, but since I don't want to overdo it, I'm going with mushy peas as a side dish tonight. The main course, burnt-to-hell chicken and over-salted fries, in the oven.

I have no idea when he gets home from school, so I'll have to be casual when he arrives. Casual, but irritated.

Sitting on my bed, my computer on my lap, I glance at the time and note that it's four already. I could start making dinner now. I mean, I have no perception of how long it takes to make things, but that's the joy in all of this—I know how to mess up a meal.

Done with my work for the day, I shut my computer, hop off my bed, and check myself in the mirror. The girls and I went back and forth about whether or not I should play the whole "sleeps naked in bed" angle, flaunting my body and driving him nuts. Although it would be satisfying to watch him get sexually aggravated with no release in sight, we all agreed that it might keep him around, hoping that one of us caves, and the last thing we need in this messed-up situation is the complication of sex. And let me tell you how frustrated I am by that. *I've been waiting to have all the penises* when my divorce came through. And now, the man I wanted to have my first pole dance on is vag-blocking me. This is just so, so unfair.

So, I'm going in the opposite direction. Frumpy, doesn't-care wife. I scoured my wardrobe for some real doozies and found cotton shorts that awkwardly hit me mid-thigh, Paisley-patterned long sleeves, and a simple Chicago Rebels T-shirt to top off the look. I don't pay much attention to baseball, but I did see Maddox Paige on a billboard once and thought if I were ever a baseball fan, it would be for him and him alone. The next day, I bought a Chicago Rebels shirt.

When Stella and Romeo saw me wearing the shirt, they of course had to embarrass me and invite him and a couple of other guys over one night. They introduced me, and I nearly turned into a puddle from how amazingly handsome he is, but then left it at that. I'll send the Rebels donuts every now and again, just as a reminder that they have a friend at Frankie Donuts.

But back to my outfit—I think the clash of colors, patterns, and garment lengths are less than appealing and will hopefully deter him.

When I enter the kitchen, I take a deep breath and glance around the foreign space. I'm really not much of a cook at all. I've made a few things here and there, and I tend to make food to survive, but putting together a meal like today? Yeah, completely out of my wheelhouse.

But nothing like trying for my husband, right?

First thing's first, cook the chicken. I might be a bad cook, but I do know one thing: I'm aware that you can get food poisoning from uncooked chicken, which is why I've chosen to completely char it.

I preheat the oven—because the basic recipe I looked up said to do that—and am grabbing a sheet pan and the chicken when the door opens. I'm startled at first, because I'm not used to people just walking into my apartment. Every visitor I get at least knocks.

When the door shuts and Pike comes into view, I restrain myself from sighing because, God, if I wasn't so mad at him, I would want to help him take off his clothes right now.

He's so sexy it actually hurts.

Hair slightly askew, he has his motorcycle helmet tucked under his jacket-covered arm, a black JanSport backpack strapped around his shoulders, and is wearing dark-washed jeans and a black shirt.

If I was a student, history would be my favorite class.

I watch him look around the apartment and when his eyes land on me in the kitchen, it seems like he sighs in relief.

Probably thought I ran away.

I thought about it.

But reinventing myself in a new town held no appeal.

A soft smile greets me as he sets down his helmet in the entryway. "Hey, how was your day?" he asks.

The tone of his voice is easygoing.

But not like yesterday. Yesterday—even though he was relaxed—there was tension to his voice. A passive manipulation that I didn't care for at all.

But today, right now, it's as if he's attempting to be human.

Too bad for him that I've switched it into high-gear antichrist-wife mode . . . well, I'm easing into it.

"It was fine," I answer in a clipped tone. I almost ask him how his was, because that's a natural thing I would do, but I hold my tongue. I honestly don't want to know how his day went. I don't want to know much about him at all.

He briefly scans my outfit, an odd look crosses his face, but the smart man doesn't comment on my attire.

Damn it.

"Fine, huh?" he says as he takes off his shoes. "Seems as though everything is fine to you."

I don't answer him. Instead, I let the chicken breasts slip from their packaging and plop them into my brand-new baking pan. After taking care of the packaging and washing my hands under scalding water, I take a wooden spoon—because that's a

kitchen tool and will do the trick—and I spread out the chicken. There, would you look at that? I'm practically a professional.

“Making dinner?” he asks, stating the obvious.

As he draws closer, I feel the hairs on the back of my neck start to rise as if I were a rabid dog unhappy with his approach.

“No, just playing around with raw chicken, because that's an enjoyable pastime.” The sarcasm in my voice is incredibly heavy, and even though I have a plan of attack to get this man out of my apartment without having to recruit my brother, I still have a heavy dose of irritation where he's concerned.

Which, you know what? That pleases me. Look at me being all grown up. A handsome, chiseled jaw and scruffy, damp hair isn't going to deter me. Oh no, the irritation level is at an all-time high. It's nice having morals. They feel great in this very moment.

He sighs heavily and moves in closer. “Do you need help?”

Ooo, he smells good.

How can his cologne still be that heavy on him? After a long day of dealing with pubescent pukers and teaching them about the wonders of way back when, how can he possibly still smell like the most attractive, enticing . . . alluring man on the planet?

And what kind of cologne is he using? Because . . . YUM!

Swallowing back the desire bubbling inside of me, I say, “If you'd like to fill up a pot of water, that would be great.”

Wait . . . do I want him to help?

I think his cologne distracted me. I don't want him to help, right? Cooking in my compact kitchen together, when he smells like that, isn't going to help my stance that he's the worst human in the entire world.

“On second thought, you can excuse yourself from the premises,” I say, chin held high. “I'm quite confident in my ability to boil water on my own.” I tap the breasts with the

wooden spoon, finding the sound of the hard surface of my kitchen utensil hitting the wet chicken quite satisfying.

“I’m not knocking your cooking abilities at all. The way you’re sweetly massaging the chicken makes me believe I’m in for the meal of a lifetime.” Was that sarcasm? I can’t tell with his accent. “But I’ll help you with the water.”

He goes straight to the cabinet where I keep my pots and pans and picks the smaller one. There’s no doubt in my mind that the man snooped in my apartment while I was stalling in my building’s hallway, because he’s far too familiar with where everything is. And what’s with that? I don’t really know much about Pike Greyson, although I got to know parts of him in Vegas—I *think*—but a snooper? Wouldn’t have suspected that about him.

Once the pot is filled and on the stove—and the chicken has been “massaged”—I go to my spices, which I picked up today, and grab salt, pepper, onion stuff, and something that apparently is supposed to be for chicken. I realize this meal is going to be disgusting and that I’ll question all my decisions while eating it, but if I’m going to do this, I’m going all in.

With his eyes watching my every move, I pick up the onion stuff and just dump.

“Whoa,” he says from behind me. “That’s quite a bit of seasoning.”

“Just the way us Americans like it,” I say as I dump the chicken spice on as well, followed by the pepper and a tiny, itty bitty pinch of salt. I might be wanting to get rid of him, but a girl has to watch her sodium intake.

“Very well. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No. I’m quite capable of making dinner for my husband, thank you very much.” I take the pan and move past him, my shoulder brushing against his. With irritated force, I stick the chicken in the oven and slam the door shut. It was nice knowing you, birds, but you’ve got to roast.

Once that’s taken care of, I set up my air fryer, the one and only thing in my kitchen that I actually know how to properly



use, because frankly, it can do everything. And that's what I like, an all-purpose machine.

“What are you making in there?”

I stand up straight and look him in the eyes. “Are you going to stand there and question everything I'm doing? Don't you have something better to do like grade papers or watch cricket or soccer?”

“I don't like cricket, and it's called football, not soccer.”

“You know what I mean. I don't need you hovering in here. The space is small enough as it is.”

He moves around the kitchen and to the island, where he pulls up one of the stools I recently purchased. He props his arms on the counter and says, “Then I'll keep you company over here.”

I set my hands on the counter and stare him down. “What is this?” I ask, motioning to him.

“What's what?”

“This . . . this nice-guy persona you have going on. Frankly, I'm not a fan.” I fold my arms over my chest. “I prefer the aloof asshole who didn't speak to me.”

“You realize men can be nice, right?”

“Uh, yeah, I'm aware, but apparently I fascinate the assholes.” I flip my hair over my shoulder. “Something I should probably talk to my therapist about.”

“You go to therapy?” he asks, more inquisitive to find out something personal about me than anything.

“I do, but if you think I'm going to tell you why, you have the wrong impression of me.”

“I wouldn't ask,” he says in a calm tone, and this side of him, this non-grumpy side—I'm not liking it, because it's not what I was expecting. It's hard to be mad and angry and irritated at someone when they're being nice.

Since the water is boiling now, I open the freezer drawer, pull out a bag of peas, and toss them in the water before

turning around and asking, “Can you be an asshole, please?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes. I’d prefer you be an asshole. It would make this easier.”

The corner of his lips tilt toward the sky. “Easier? So, what you’re saying is that if I were an arsehole, it would be easier for you to hate me?”

“Precisely.”

“And when I’m not an arsehole, you’re finding it difficult to hate me.”

“Yes . . . wait, no. I mean . . . I always hate you.” Damn it. He’s playing with my head.

“Uh-huh.” He steeples his fingers together. “So, you don’t want me asking you if you need help or how your day was, or making sure you have everything you need?”

Ummm, why am I confused?

Technically, as a woman, that would be nice. Keenan never gave me what I needed; even in the beginning, he always fell short. So, yes, it would be nice to have a man in my life that read me like a book, who anticipated my needs, but in this given scenario when I’m trying to shed a drunken mistake, I don’t want any of those things.

“Listen.” I look him in the eyes. “Just be an asshole, okay?”

“As you wish.” He pushes away from the island, but still faces me. Eyes focused on mine, he reaches behind him and tugs on his shirt.

Oh no . . .

The over-the-head shirt pull-off move.

In my mind, only the sexiest, most assholeish men know how to pull off their shirt like that.

As if they all went to a secret class to learn how to remove an article of clothing in the exact way that will drive women

nuts.

And he's doing it.

WITH EYE CONTACT.

My uterus twitches.

My nipples tingle.

And my eyes remain fixed on him as he masterfully pulls his shirt over his head and brings it forward, every muscle in his well-defined chest firing off.

Well, well, well.

I can see that we're not playing fair, by any means.

He tosses his shirt to the side, letting it fall haphazardly on the floor, and then backs up to the bed, where he flops down and rests his hands behind his head, showing off his impeccably built body.

Mr. Pin Me Down Pike is all kinds of deliciousness. Holy shit.

Sculpted shoulders, biceps that are surprisingly bigger than I expected, pecs that I could find myself getting lost in, abs that travel past the waistline of his jeans, and his most devastating attribute . . . his sleeve tattoo.

What I wouldn't give to just lick the damn thing.

Clearing my throat, I say, "That's not where dirty laundry goes."

"I'm aware. I'm sure my wife will pick it up." He smirks and then turns on the TV to some sports game.

Well, he's being an asshole, that's for sure, but do you know what really chaps my ass? It's that he's listening to me. He's not being an asshole because that's his inherent nature. He's being an asshole because I asked him to be one, therefore, he's actually being a nice guy because he's listening to my direction.

God!

Can't a girl win?



I STARE in shock as Pike finishes off the rest of the mushy peas in the serving bowl, tops off the last bite of his charred chicken, and then chases it all down with one last over-salted fry.

With his napkin, he pats his mouth, and he then throws back the rest of his lady drink—at least, that’s what he called it, but I refer to it as a sparkling water. I watch as his throat contracts, taking down every last drop.

Good.

God.

He ate it all.

Without a comment. Without saying a word. Without one single complaint.

The only thing he did say was how hideous my outfit was as he sat across from me, gnawing on his chicken. At first, I took great offense, but then realized he was playing the asshole. I wanted to pierce him between the eyes with my fork.

Keenan criticized every part of the meals I cooked him. Granted, I wasn’t serving up luxury dishes. We’re talking simple things that a child could make, but even at that, he’d have something to say about it.

Correct me if I’m wrong, but I think if someone makes you a meal, you should act grateful.

Which is exactly what Pike is doing.

And I know he didn’t like it, because I didn’t like it. The chicken tasted like I was chewing on skeleton bones. The peas were made with milk and garlic, not traditional at all, according to the English standards, and the fries . . . well, they were the best part of the meal, but I doused them in ketchup and salt. The whole platter. I didn’t leave one fry untouched, so Pike was forced to eat his salty-tomatoey fries.

Can’t say that he hated it.

So, my meticulously planned out, “get rid of husband plan A” has proven to be a massive failure.

He tosses his napkin on his bare plate and stands from his chair, stretching his arms over his head. My shameless eyes fall to where his jeans meet his waistline and the enticing divots that cut into his sides.

Yum.

Ughhh . . . he’s so freaking yummy. Why, God . . . why?

“Going to grade some papers now.” He picks up his backpack and unzips it as he walks toward the bed.

“Uh, are you going to clear the plates? Do the dishes?” I ask him.

“Nah, I’m good.”

He flops down on the bed again and uncaps a pen by biting on one end and pulling with his hand.

“Seriously?” I ask him.

He glances toward me. “Seriously. Isn’t that what wives are for?”

Okay. *Okay.*

*Deep breaths, Coraline.*

He’s just doing what you asked of him. Really going to town on the asshole status. Fine by me.

I push away from the table, grab the dishes, and take them into the kitchen. I toss them in the sink, along with all the items I used to cook the meal. I pick up my dish soap and spritz everything, then turn on the water for a quick second to activate the soap before turning it off. Then I reach for my phone on the island, slip on my sandals, grab my keys, and head out the door.

Fresh air and some texts with my friends will do me some good.

***Cora: CODE RED!***

I head down the stairs of my apartment building and straight toward the park across the street. I'm not in the mood for a walk, but I do need some space. I find a bench under a tree and take a seat just as my phone buzzes in my hand with two text messages.

*Stella: Oh God, if you somehow got pregnant, I'm going to freak.*

*Greer: What's happening now?*

I cross my legs and get comfortable as I text my friends back.

*Cora: No pregnancy, but I'm surprised I didn't get pregnant today when Pike took his shirt off in front of me. My ovaries twitched. TWITCHED!*

*Stella: What? Really?*

*Greer: Did he pull his shirt off from over his head?*

*Cora: Yup. My loins did the Macarena from the sight of him. The lordship builds them quite nicely over in England. He's not playing fair.*

*Greer: How did dinner go?*

*Cora: Horribly. I did my best at making a disgusting dinner, succeeded, and yet he was practically licking his plate at the end of it all.*

*Stella: Did you torch the chicken?*

*Cora: Yes, it was getting stuck in my teeth.*

*Greer: And the peas, were they disgusting?*

*Cora: I'll be burping those up for days. I truly outdid myself and he was unfazed. Trust me, I watched him, not one single grimace. And then, when he got home, he had the audacity to ask me how my day was.*

*Stella: Wow . . . just wow.*

*Cora: Asked if he could help with anything.*

*Greer: What an absolute dick.*

**Cora:** *And when I told him to be an asshole . . . he listened. He's now treating me like crap, which only pisses me off more because I know he's doing it because I asked him to . . .*

**Greer:** *So, in reality, he's actually being nice to you.*

**Cora:** *YOU GET IT! God, I don't know what to do. It's only day one!*

**Stella:** *Can I be the devil's advocate for a second?*

**Cora:** *You realize NO ONE likes the person who says that sentence, right?*

**Greer:** *It's true. The devil's advocate is trigger-worthy.*

**Stella:** *I know, but I feel like I just need to say this—once—and then I'll drop it.*

**Cora:** *\*SIGH\* Fine, what is it?*

**Stella:** *Well, you are really attracted to him, were quite interested in getting his attention, and he seems to actually be pretty nice and accommodating. Have we thought about not deterring him, but giving this a try?*

**Cora:** *ARE YOU INSANE?*

**Greer:** *I mean . . . she has a point.*

**Cora:** *Oh my God! You two are not supposed to be on his side, you're supposed to help me be the husband repellent. This is not helpful. This is actually very unhelpful. Do you not understand the words CODE RED? We're in desperation mode, ladies. I need repelling ideas, not suggestions to maybe give it a shot with the man who's calling himself my husband.*

**Stella:** *It would be a good story. Finding love in Fireball. Oh God, it would be full circle.*

**Cora:** *This is what I get for having two friends newly in love. I don't need your romantic, lovely-dovey hearts controlling this conversation. I need the vengeful bitches. Where are they?*

**Greer:** *Riding unicorns, utterly in love.*

*Stella:* While sipping iced tea, lying on the beach, our men's nuts in the palms of our hands.

*Greer:* Oh yeah. We have them by the balls.

*Stella:* Which makes it that much more romantic. I love holding Romeo's balls.

*Greer:* It's a powerful feeling. You should try it, Cora. Bet you Pike has good balls.

*Stella:* Well-landscaped balls.

*Greer:* Not too big, just the right size.

*Stella:* And his penis has got to be big.

*Cora:* WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU TWO?

*Greer:* Hmm, you know, I can see how this might not be helpful.

*Stella:* Yeah, I got slightly sidetracked.

*Cora:* Should I continue the "bad food" thing?

*Greer:* Wouldn't hurt. Should we consider the "flaunting yourself" trick?

*Cora:* No, that's what he's doing, and let me tell you, it's not making me want to flee. I'm nervous to bring this to school, where I know I could embarrass him, because Arlo doesn't know. I think about being messy, but he's being messy because he's being an asshole like I told him to be, so, therefore, we can't have two messy people. Ugh . . . what should I do? I feel like the phases we came up with aren't going to cut it.

*Stella:* If only Keiko knew.

*Cora:* No. We can't tell her.

*Greer:* Let me think on this. I'm sure there's something we can do.

*Cora:* Everyone is required to do research and present ideas tomorrow morning. Got it?

*Stella:* After Romeo fucks me in the pool, it's happening.



*Greer: Once I take care of Arlo's bedroom eyes, I'm all yours.*

*Cora: Ew!!*

Feeling only marginally better, and since it's getting dark, I head back to the apartment. I head up the stairs again, skipping the elevator in order to get some extra steps in for the day, and unlock my apartment door, only to see Pike lounging on the bed, TV turned on to some game, and papers in his lap.

Just perfect.

Well, the dishes aren't going to do themselves. However, when I turn to the kitchen, I'm not greeted by a sink full of dirty dishes. Instead, they've all been washed or stacked in the dishwasher. The counters are clean, the lights are off, and even from here I can see he wiped down the dining room table.

Mother.

Fucker.

"Why did you do the dishes?" I ask in a seething tone.

He glances up at me. "The dishes are done? Huh, good job, wife."

"I didn't do them, you dick. You did."

"I don't recall that happening." He glances down at the paper in front of him and marks something with his red pen.

"I'm not an idiot, Pike."

"Good to know," he mumbles, keeping his voice low.

Frustrated, I stomp toward the bathroom to get ready for bed, because, if anything, this day needs to end so I can recharge and reset for tomorrow. When I reach the bathroom, I stare into the mirror for a few seconds, just long enough for Pike to push through the door I left ajar and step into the crowded space. I'm about to say something to him when he leans forward, his bare chest brushing up against my back.

Involuntarily, I inhale from that brisk yet enticing contact, and my eyes connect with his in the mirror.

And in that moment, with his mysterious gaze staring back at me, I wonder. No, I do *not* want to be married again. I don't. Been there. Done that. Got the divorce certificate. But I have no idea why Pike wants to give this a shot when he barely acknowledged me during the months he's known me. So, why now? He hasn't explained himself nor told me he's actually attracted to me. No "I want this, Cora. I want us." justification. *Shouldn't that come first? Shouldn't he try to prove why he wants me?*

## Chapter Nine

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### PIKE

“Have you been able to make your wife fall in love with you yet?” Killian asks when I answer his FaceTime call.

It’s lunchtime, and instead of going to the break room, I’ve opted to stay in my classroom and catch a deep breath before the chaos of teaching know-it-all high schoolers commences once more.

I drag my hand over my face and say, “Love, not so much. But I am on the list of those to be murdered by my consort. I fear for my life every night.”

Killian frowns. “What?”

“Listen, I have this under control.”

“Why don’t I believe that to be true?”

“It’s just proving to be more difficult than I expected. I arrived home yesterday ready to get to know her and help her around the kitchen, but she practically hissed at me and told me to stop being kind and act like an asshole instead.”

Killian emits a quiet chuckle. “I’m sure you turned on the charm from there, being extra nice.”

“Nope, I was an asshole.”

Killian’s delighted face drops. “What?”

“Because she asked me to do it. And I want to make her happy; therefore, I was an asshole because she asked me to be one.”

“That . . .” He pauses and chuckles. “That’s brilliant.”

I tap my head. “You see, it’s all about listening and communicating. She did ask me to do the dishes, but I told her that’s what wives are for.”

Killian winces.

“And then she stormed off and went for a walk. I felt really fucking bad so I did them before she got back but pretended I didn’t do them, which made her angry.”

“But you did them and she didn’t.”

“Exactly. I did what she asked, but still played the asshole.”

Killian slowly nods. “Okay, maybe you do have this under control. How do you feel about her? Has she asked why you want to stay married?”

I rub my palm over my jaw. “She did but she didn’t pry too deep. She was mainly worried it was a green card marriage and she would end up in prison. How do I feel about her? She’s feisty, vivacious. She has life and spirit about her.” *Something Iris definitely lacks.* “She can be brash, but her eyes tell all, so I know there’s attraction there. She wants me.” *That was very clear in Vegas . . . from what I can remember.* “Honestly, she’s fucking hot, man. There’s chemistry between us, but there’s also a huge mental block that I’m not sure how to get around it. I need to win her over, but I’m not sure being an asshole is going to do that.”

“I see your point. Well, maybe ride it out a bit, and continue to do thoughtful things while acting like the asshole.”

“Yeah, I was really fucking thoughtful last night when I was eating the dinner she cooked.”

“What do you mean?”

I lean forward in my chair. “Kill, she’s probably the worst cook I’ve ever come across. And, yeah, I might have a snobby palate, but fuck, I’m still picking the chicken out of my teeth. And I flossed. Dry as hell. She made mushy peas and they were chunky as fuck, and the fries she plated were doused in salt and tomato sauce. Sorry . . . *ketchup*.”

“Aw, fuck, gross.”

“I know. It was an atrocious dinner, but I ate it like a champ, didn’t make one facial expression of distaste, and made sure to eat every last bite.”

“Taking one for the team. It’s appreciated. Just make sure she doesn’t make you tea. I can’t imagine the kind of sins she’d commit doing that.”

I shiver. “Fuck, I know.”

Just then, the door to my classroom opens and I’m surprised to see Cora walk through it, wearing plaid blue-and-green bell-bottoms, a neon-orange shirt, and a puffy vest. Jesus, what’s with the outfits?

“Uh, Kill, I have to go.”

Before he can answer, I hang up my mobile and set it on my desk. Leaning back in my chair, I ask, “To what do I owe the pleasure of seeing my wife during the day?”

With a smile that frankly terrifies me, she holds out a brown sacked lunch bag and says, “I wasn’t sure if you had lunch with you. I couldn’t let my dearest husband go hungry.”

She bats her eyelashes and holds out the lunch.

Any other intelligent man would look at that lunch and think it’s been tampered with in some way. There’s no way the food in that bag hasn’t been doctored to get back at me. Could be her own saliva. Could be over-seasoning once again. Could be the worst of them all . . . a laxative.

Given I’m not in a position to make smart decisions . . . I lift my fingers and motion for her to come closer.

To my surprise, she does.

When she gets close enough, I grab her by the wrist and sit her on my lap. She makes a small squealing noise but then settles down, rather stiffly. My hand wraps around her waist, holding her close, while I take the bag from her with the other.

“Such a good wife,” I say, looking her in the eyes.

She wets her lips and, for a second, that bravado she so expertly wears drops and I see a side of vulnerability.

But in an instant, that vulnerability washes away and the bravado reappears. “I’m so glad I can please you.”

I tighten my grip around her waist. “You know, there’s more ways you could please me.”

Her neck reddens and she looks away from me. Fucking adorable. She puts on such a front, but just a hint of interest from me and she’s blushing. Gathering herself, she says, “I’m sure there are other ways I can please you, but you see, Pike, this wife doesn’t put out.”

“Shame.” I wet my lips. “Because this husband really wants to bury his head between his wife’s legs.”

And that’s fucking true.

I’ve glanced through the pictures from our wedding night, taking in the fun we had, that fucking dress she wore, and it makes me realize one, glaring truth. I would happily fuck this woman.

Bloody hell, I *want* to fuck her.

Despite the clothes she’s trying to dissuade me with.

Her eyes widen and she shifts on my lap, but I hold her in place. Looking unsure of what to do, she shouts, “Your lunch. You should, uh, eat your lunch.”

“I’d rather eat you. On this desk.”

That’s all it takes. She bolts off my lap and takes a few steps back, making sure to put enough distance between us so I can’t reach her. Her chest heaves as she clasps her hands in front of her. “You shouldn’t talk to me like that.”

“Why not?” I ask. “You’re my wife.”

“It’s inappropriate.”

“It actually isn’t.” I draw a circle on the desk with my finger and watch as her eyes follow the circles, over and over again. “What’s the problem with me admitting to wanting to eat your pussy? Turning you on?”

“No,” she rapidly says.

“Uh-huh, then why is your neck red?”

Her hand goes to her neck. “Sunburn.”

“Funny how you’re indoors and that sunburn just magically appeared.”

Her eyes narrow, and with her finger, she flicks the brown bag and asks, “Are you going to eat this or not?”

“Do you want me to eat it?”

“That’s why I brought it here.”

“Okay.” Keeping my eyes on her, I say a silent prayer to the Lord Savior Himself and hope there isn’t any sort of crushed-up ex-lax in whatever she’s prepared for me. But when I pull out a sandwich, I’m surprised. “What’s this?” I ask.

She smiles. “Peanut butter and jelly. It’s an American delicacy.”

“Oh.” The mere idea of mixing peanut butter with jam is repulsive, but if I know Cora like I think I do, she’s probably done some Google searching and has come up with some ideas to try to get me to crack. Little does she know, after that chicken last night, I have a stomach of steel—and apparently non-existing tastebuds.

I take it out of the container and bring it to my mouth. The peanut butter smell hits me first, followed by something very berry. Without skipping a beat, though, I take a large bite and hide my look of absolute displeasure as I chew.

How?

How is this something Americans like?

It's gooey. There's no texture. And it's just . . . gauche.

But Cora watches me intently, and with her watchful eyes on me, I take another large mouthful.

“You—you like it?”

“Am I not supposed to?”

“You're supposed to—I mean, it's . . . well, I thought . . . have you ever had one before?”

“No,” I answer. I look inside the bag and see an accompanying apple. I take that out of the bag as well and take a large bite out of it. “Trying to be teacher's pet?” I gesture to the apple.

Her eyes narrow. “You're annoying.”

“Am I not being asshole enough for you? I can try harder if you'd like.”

“I would like for you to climb up your own asshole and suffocate.”

I clutch my chest. “Words brimming with love.”

Hands on her hips, she studies me. “I would like nothing more than to punch you right in the eye socket.”

“Have at it, wife.” I lean forward for her, giving her up-close access to my face.

Growling out her frustration, she turns on her heel and stomps out of my classroom. When the door slams shut, I know maybe I didn't play that interaction all too well. Killian would not be impressed.

Then again, *arsehole* is what she wants, so *arsehole* is what she gets.



LET ME TELL YOU, last night's dinner was an abomination.

But eating the leftovers for dinner tonight, positively poisonous.



How I gulped that down without throwing up is beyond me, but here I am, an absolute hero for conquering such a feat. Since there weren't many dishes besides our plates and glasses, I didn't bother fighting about who would do them. I just grabbed her plate and mine and put them in the dishwasher.

And since she lives in a studio apartment, there isn't any place for her to go to stew, so instead, she brings her knees up to her chest as she sits at the table and studies her mobile.

Unsure of what to do, I return to the table and take a seat.

Her eyes lift from her mobile and she stares me down. "What are you doing?"

"Sitting, breathing . . . living."

Her brow crinkles. "What kind of answer is that?"

"Truthful. Would you like a lie? Because I can give you one." In a girly American voice, I ask, "Pike, what are you doing?" Changing to my normal voice, I say, "Knitting a scarf for my neighbor's dog who's hairless and finds autumn in Chicago far too chilly."

"Why are you making this worse than it should be?"

"I'm making it worse?" I ask, shocked. "I was trying to be nice to you, you were the one who asked me to be an asshole. I'm just doing what you asked."

"Well, stop it," she snaps at me.

"So, you don't want me to be an asshole?"

"I want you to be gone, but it doesn't seem like that's going to be happening anytime soon."

"You're right about that." I slouch in my chair. Silence falls between us, and I really have no idea where to go from here. How to cross the bridge with her from angry to lukewarm. If she was lukewarm, then I could work with that, I could help her open up.

But when she's so closed off like this, buried in her mobile, most likely texting her friends on how she's going to

continue to feed me horrible food—yeah, it’s obvious—I’m not sure I’m ever going to break through to her.

“Are you just going to sit there?” she asks from over her mobile.

“Are you?”

“I would prefer not to, but since it’s raining out, I can’t go for a walk.”

“You could walk the hallways of the apartment building.” I say it as a joke, but when her head perks up, I see that she’s taking it as a serious suggestion. “I’m kidding,” I say.

“You know, that’s actually not a bad idea. I wasn’t able to hit the gym today because of my stewing over a barnacle of a husband, so I’ll do that. Maybe run up and down the stairs.”

“You’d seriously rather run up and down the stuffy stairwell than be in the same room as me?”

As she stands, she stretches her arms in the air and moves them side to side. “I’m glad you’re starting to understand my absolute distaste for you.”

Without another word, she digs into her dresser drawer and heads into the bathroom. She slams the door, and that, my friends, is that.

“Fuck,” I mutter, pushing my hand through my hair.

Three months is not long enough; at this rate, I’m going to need three years.

And then I think of an idea.

Something I know she’s going to hate me for, but it’ll force her to stay near me. Before I can change my mind, I pop out of my chair and grab a pair of shorts to change into from my space under the bed. I ditch the shirt, because no need for that, and quickly put on some socks and shoes. As I’m finishing lacing up, she pops out of the bathroom, fixing her ponytail. When her eyes land on me, she halts immediately.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

I rub my hand over my thick chest, drawing her eyes in the right spot, because I know she can't seem to resist looking. And I'm right—she takes me in, her eyes blazing a steamy trail starting at my waistband and traveling all the way up to my face.

“Didn't get to the gym either. And you know what they say—couples that work out together, stay together.” I smirk at her.

“You're not working out with me.”

“Of course not. I'll just work out behind you, enjoying the view of your arse in that spandex.”

“There will be no staring at my ass.”

“Then stop staring at my bare chest.”

Her cheeks bloom with a light shade of pink as she mutters something under her breath and turns away from me toward the entryway, where she grabs her shoes.

“I don't work out with people.”

“Great, neither do I. We can *not* work out with people together.”

“You realize that your pestering is not helping your case.”

I close the space between us and watch as her gaze slowly rakes me over one more time. “Or is it helping?”

After she finishes tying her shoes, she stands tall in nothing but a sports bra and spandex shorts and says, “It's not.”

“How about we place a little wager?”

“A wager? Like money?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I don't want your money. I want your mind.”

“I'd rather give you my money.”

“Funny,” I say. “Twenty minutes, let's see who can do more flights of stairs. If I win, you owe me five minutes of honest, no-hostility conversation.”

She fits her hands on her hips. “And what do I get if I win?”

“What do you want? And it can’t be a divorce or annulment or me moving out, because I won’t agree to that.”

“That takes away everything I want.”

“Think harder.”

She heaves a sigh and says, “Fine, if I win, you sleep on the floor.”

“For tonight only. Challenge me again tomorrow if you want me to sleep on the floor again.”

She perks up. “Okay, that seems fair.” She holds out her hand.

Happy with the bet, I shake her hand.

I’m not a superstar when it comes to cardio, but I do run about eight miles a week. Doing some flights of stairs should be a piece of cake. I motion to the door. “Lead the way.”

She smirks up at me. “My pleasure.”



“HOW’S IT GOING?” Killian asks over the phone as I start my lunch break at school.

I wince as I take a seat at my desk chair. “Could be better.”

“Why do you sound as if you’re in pain?”

“Because I am.” I reach into my lunch bag that Cora packed me, and once again, she packed me leftovers from dinner.

Kill.

Me.

Now.

But since food waste is one of the largest contributors to greenhouse gases, I’ll eat the swill.

I pop open the container of soggy green beans accompanying the charred and unseasoned meatloaf. When I was warming it up in the teachers' lounge, I tried adding in a leftover seasoning packet someone left behind, hoping it would offer some support for my tastebuds that, after just a few nights of consuming Cora's cooking, are pretty much non-existent now.

“Why are you sore?”

I pick up my fork and toss the green beans around, mentally preparing myself to chew fast and swallow quickly.

“Because I thought it would be a good idea to try to get to know my wife.”

“And you're sore from—ohhhh.” He chuckles. “That kind of sore, huh?”

I expel a sarcastic laugh. “I fucking wish. No, I'm sore from doing twenty minutes of stairs three days in a row, attempting to beat Cora in a bet.”

“And you lost?”

“Every single time,” I answer. “I've slept on the floor the past three nights. It's fucking brutal, mate.”

“How do you keep losing?”

“I found out yesterday.” I scoop up some green beans and quickly chew and swallow. “After I was heaving when the twenty minutes were up, she smiled down at me and said the StairMaster is her best friend at the gym.”

“Oh fuck.”

“Yeah. So, I've been played. All I asked for was a five-minute conversation, and instead, I've slept on the hardwood floor. Not fucking tonight.”

“Are you bound and determined to win?”

I shake my head, even though he can't see me. “I won't be partaking in any stairs tonight. I need to find a different way. And for the love of God, I'm taking home dinner. I can't suffer through another one of these meals.”

Killian chuckles on the other end of the mobile.

“What’s so goddamn funny?” I ask him.

“When you first told me your plan, I assumed you were going to be very persuasive in the bedroom. Here I thought you were going to be having all this sex, when in reality, you’re choking down burnt dinners and sleeping on the floor. This is too comical.”

“I’m glad you’re finding humor in all of this.”

“I am. A lot of humor.”

“I need to figure out another way of attack. She’s not breaking. I still have no fucking clue what she does, just that it’s something she can do from home. I have no idea what kind of activities she likes other than kicking my arse on the stairwell. And I don’t have a clue what food she likes other than apparently roasted to its very core. And I’m pretty sure there’s a lot more to her than those few things.” I sigh. “I don’t think I’ve ever met a woman like her.”

“Which is why you need to go beyond what you’d normally do. You have to do some recon. Look around the apartment, see if there’s something she really likes. Hell, Pike, there has to be something you can use to chisel at her resistance. Time is ticking and we need her in England after Christmas.”

“I know, Kill. I know.” I drag my hand over my face. “Trust me, I’m working on it.”

“Is there someone who knows her who might be able to help you?”

“No, all her—” I pause as a lightbulb goes off in my head and, a smirk spreads across my face. “Oh, there is someone.”

“Really? Who?”

Smiling even brighter, I say, “Keiko Seymour.”

## Chapter Ten

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CORA

*Husband: Bringing home dinner. Save your delicious cooking for tomorrow.*

I toss my phone to the side and heave a sigh of relief.

Thank God.

I don't think I could stomach another shitty meal tonight, nor do I want my apartment smelling like burnt food one more time. I spent my entire day airing out the smell, only to recreate it the next night. I'm over it. Having a break from it all will be nice.

Do you know what else I need a break from? Running the GD stairs.

Oh my God, my legs are absolute mush.

I can barely walk.

And sitting down to go to the bathroom—impossible. I have to hold on to the walls to make it all the way.

But the worst of it all, and I would never—and I mean never—say this to him, but I kind of miss the warmth he brought to the bed. It was nice, having him there almost as a brace, a support system to keep me in place at night.

I stand from my bed just as there's a frantic knock at the door.

“Thou shall unfurl the door this instant.”

Oh God . . . *Keiko*.

What the hell is she doing here?

Quickly, I go to the door and open it, only to have a brown bag thrust in my face.

“I’m imploring your facilitation.”

“What?” I ask as she walks past me, holding a jug of water in one hand and a bag of marshmallows in the other.

Following behind her are Greer and Stella, looking just as confused as I feel.

When I shut the door, Keiko lowers her head and says, “I have some disquieting news to convey.” She lifts a marshmallow to her mouth. “I’ve been postulating for a fortnight, and I’ve come to the realization that I might possibly be enceinte.”

“Enc-see-tee what now?” I ask.

Keiko presses her hand to her stomach. “Fruitful in my loins.”

“Oh, gross,” Stella says. “Just say *pregnant*, for fuck’s sake.” Stella takes a seat at my dining table. “*Fruitful in my loins* legit makes me dry-heave.”

“I don’t recall witnessing any retroperistalsis of the esophagus.”

“It’s just a phrase, Keiko.”

“I don’t see how practicing unnecessary phrases during this moment of uncertainty assists me in any way.” She stuffs three marshmallows in her mouth. “I have missed my menses.”

I wince.

*Menses* is just as bad as *fruitful in my loins*.

Honestly, I’m not sure which one is worse.

Being the calm one of the group, Greer walks up to Keiko and rests her hand on her shoulder. “We’ve thought that you



might be pregnant for a while now.”

“Pardon me?” Keiko asks. “Why was it that I was never informed of my unplanned gestation?”

Stepping up now, I say, “Because we were too scared to tell you.”

“Scared? Preposterous,” Keiko shouts as particles of marshmallow fly out of her mouth. “Why do you proclaim to be terror-struck?”

Talking evenly, I say, “You’ve been a tad volatile recently. We weren’t sure how you’d handle the news.”

“Volatile?” Keiko shouts and then chucks a marshmallow at me, pegging me right in the forehead.

The collective occupants of the room gasp as I slowly bring my hand to my head, where the marshmallow is surprisingly stuck.

“Oh, dear me,” Keiko says, covering her mouth with her hand. “I—I hurled a gelatin confection at you.”

I peel the marshmallow off my head and hold it out in front of me. “Exhibit A of your volatile behavior.”

Slowly, Keiko slides down to the floor and cuddles her jug of water close to her chest. “I am ashamed of myself.”

“Oh, Keeks, no need to be ashamed,” Greer says, sitting next to her. “You can’t help the way you’re acting right now. It’s the hormones.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if your fruitful fetus has a set of puppet strings inside your uterus and is the master of your movements,” Stella says, a small smile playing at her lips.

Keiko directs her attention toward Stella. “I don’t see how fabricated fables are of any use.”

Stella crosses her legs and leans back in her chair. “Yeah, I think I’m done helping.”

Keiko lets out a guffaw. “Rather laughable that you perceive your commentary as assistance.”

“You know what, Keeks—”

“Shhh,” Greer says, holding up her hand. “I think we all need to take a deep breath. We don’t want to say anything we don’t mean.”

“Or articulate completely inane remarks by the ton.” Keiko lifts her chin.

Not wanting Stella to strike a pregnant woman, I hold up the brown bag that’s in my hand. “What’s this?”

“Oh, on the way here, we picked up a pregnancy test. It’s why Keiko is carrying around a jug of water, so she can pee on a stick and we can make sure she’s pregnant,” Greer says in an even tone.

“Either she’s pregnant, or the alien that’s been living inside of her has finally decided to vacate the vessel,” Stella says.

Keiko goes to open her mouth, but Greer snatches the bag from me and thrusts it at her. “I’m sure you have to pee by now. Why don’t you go try?”

“There is in fact a need to urinate pressing against my urethra.”

What a roundabout way to say she has to pee. Honestly, I don’t think I’ll ever understand her. Not sure I ever want to.

“Okay.” Greer helps Keiko off the floor. “Why don’t you do that?”

“It will take me at least five minutes to thoroughly read through the directions.”

“It’s simple, Keeks. Just pee on the stick,” I say.

“Conducting unknown ventures is never that rudimentary, Cora.” And then she disappears into the bathroom.

The moment the door clicks shut, Greer, Stella, and I all converge in the kitchen so she can’t hear our conversation.

Whispering, Stella says, “I’m going to murder her.”

“She is quite snippy today.” Greer worries her lip.

“Hey,” I snap at the both of them. “What the hell are you doing here? I thought I told you specifically that Keiko isn’t allowed to know about Pike.”

“Is he here?” Greer asks, genuinely looking around the small space.

“Does it look like there’s an Englishman lurking around the two-by-two space of Cora’s apartment?” Stella asks.

“I have no clue where the hell he is. Last he said, he was picking up dinner for us. I have no idea when he’ll be home and I can’t have a hysterical woman—”

“Cora, there is a male’s shaving device in this bathroom. Are you in a courtship unbeknownst to me?” Keiko calls out from the bathroom.

I squeeze my eyes shut out of pure desperation.

“No,” I say. “I like how they shave better. You know how it is, the pink tax and all. Men’s stuff is always better.”

“Misogyny at its finest,” she shouts back, but then leaves it at that.

I point toward the bathroom. “And that’s exactly why I can’t have her here. What were you two thinking?”

“You realize that we have no ability to control her, right?” Stella asks. “It’s nearly impossible to get her to do something right now. I truly believe the baby is controlling her and when it comes out, it’ll rule the world by the time it’s six months old.” Leaning in closer, Stella whisper shouts, “I’m terrified.”

Greer grabs both of us and says, “We all need to calm—”

“Why did you guys come here?”

Greer sighs. “Because she wanted to. Because she’s scared. Because she has no idea what’s happening to her even though she’s the most intelligent person we know. She wanted us to be around her when she finds out, and as we are her friends, I think that’s a decent request.”

Guilt swarms me as I realize Greer is right.

“Shit, I’m sorry.” I press my hand to my forehead. “I’m freaking out and my head isn’t in the right space at the moment.”

“It’s understandable,” Greer says. “How are things with Pike?”

I lean against the counter and keep my voice low. “Honestly, I feel like I’ve made the smallest of dents in wearing him down, but I almost feel as if he’s planning another wave of attack, and I don’t know what he’s going to do.”

“Do you have your counterattack ready?” Stella asks.

I shake my head. “I’m pretty much flying by the seat of my pants now. The only thing I have going for me right now is growing out my leg hair so I can scare him away with wooly mammoth legs.”

Stella chuckles. “If he thinks you’re hairy there, he might think you’re hairy everywhere.”

I tap the side of my head. “That’s what I’m thinking.”

“What happened to the plan we came up with?” Greer asks.

“The plan was thrown out the window the minute he started walking around the apartment in only boxer briefs.”

“Ooo.” Stella winces. “Let me guess—body of a god.”

My teeth roll over my bottom lip. “Oh yeah, and from what I can see—not that I’m getting a close examination—he has quite the package.”

“Really?” Stella asks, looking far too excited. “And let me guess, you’re horny?”

“Uh, did you not get that from the Las Vegas trip? It’s been a really freaking long time for me and I have this man that, before all of this happened, I thought was beyond any male comparison. And now that he’s here, that’s making it exponentially harder to keep it together.”

Looking off to the side in thought, Greer says, “You know, I still think that maybe you should give this a shot. You two could be good together.”

“I’m going to say this for the last time.” I stare down both of my friends. “That won’t be happening. The only connection Pike and I will ever have is this Vegas mistake and, possibly, if a girl can dream, one single wild night in bed.”

“What do you think he’s bringing home for dinner?” Stella asks.

My eyes flash to hers. “Did you hear anything I said?”

“Yeah, you’re not getting together, blah, blah, blah. Tale as old as time. You know I love you and I’m in total support of whatever you decide, but I think you’re just prolonging the inevitable.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, hands on my hips.

“You guys are going to hook up. Trust me when I say, I know. I know very well from experience how this all works. Greer, you know it as well. When you get in front of a man like Pike, like Romeo . . . like Arlo, and they’re relentless with what they want, there’s no way in avoiding it. My guess, three months from now, you two will still be married.”

“Stella, that isn’t funny,” I say, shivering from the thought.

“I’m not trying to be funny. I’m just trying to lay out the facts. I don’t think you have enough defense to ignore him. I think you’re barely treading water right now, and unless you come up with something that will absolutely break him, he’s staying, and I’m sorry to say, I don’t think your food plan is going to cut it.”

Greer winces. “I think she might be right.”

“So, what do I do?”

Stella grows incredibly serious and says, “You need to open up to him.”

“Fuck, no,” I nearly shout and then realize I need to keep my voice down. “Are you insane? I’m not about to open up to him—”

“Let me finish,” Stella says. “I think you talk to him, like he wants, but you don’t necessarily tell him the truth.” I catch the evil glint in her eye.

“Ohhh,” I say, a smile passing over my face. “Oh my God, that’s genius. Let him see who I am.” I wink.

“Exactly. He wants to get to know you, so let him. Let him get to know a completely fabricated life.”

Greer chuckles. “You can have some fun with that.”

I smile even wider and rub my hands together. “Oh, I plan on it.”

The bathroom door swings open and we quickly round the kitchen to see Keiko standing in the doorway, holding a pregnancy test in her hand. Shoulders back, chin held high, she says, “It appears I have ovulated at the direct time Kelvin’s healthy, vivacious sperm seeped into my uterus, joining together in union to create a new life deep within my fruitful loins.”

“Are you saying you’re pregnant?” Stella asks.

A lone tear slides down Keiko’s face as she nods. “In fact, I am with child.”

Unsure of how she feels about it, we cautiously stay put as Greer asks, “Are you okay, Keeks?”

She nods but maintains an impassive façade. “I would like to request a change in our monthly book club pick.”

That’s what she’s thinking about right now? A book-club book?

“Oh, sure,” Greer says, brow pinched together. “What would you like to read?”

*“What to Expect when You’re Expecting.”*

Ahhhh, I get it.

“It will be a layman’s read for me, but a touch easier for you three to comprehend.”

Isn’t she sweet?

“I would prefer, since we are all going through this together, we educated ourselves and set up weekly meetings to go over book content.”

Stella scoffs. “In the wise words of David Rose—your body, your problem.”

“Stella,” Greer scolds.

Sheepishly, she shrugs. “What? It’s true.”

Keiko takes a step toward us, and unsure of what she might do—given the expressionless look on her face—as a collective whole, we take a step back. She takes another step forward, we take another step back, and we all repeat the process until we’re pressed against the wall.

Fearful for my life, I consider if this is God’s way of smiting me for all my poor decisions . . . until Keiko opens her arms and gathers us all in a hug.

Confused.

Frightened.

Unsure of how to act.

All three of us exchange terrified looks before slowly placing our arms around Keiko and returning the sentiment.

After a few moments of hugging, Keiko straightens herself, adjusts the collar of her shirt, and announces, “I shall call this fetus Blanche if a girl, Seymour if a boy, in honor of my lineage.”

“Um, don’t you think you should discuss that with Kelvin?” Stella asks.

Smiling, Keiko says, “I think you put it quite nicely, Stella—my body, my problem.”

Oh God.

“Keiko, you have to include Kelvin,” Greer says. “This is his baby too. And he might not be carrying it, but he’s still very much a part of this.”

“She’s right,” I add. “Kelvin deserves to be a part of this.”

Keiko looks away. “I will be ending our accord later this week.”

“What?” we all shout at the same time.

Keiko and Kelvin, they’re . . . they’re like—God, they’re like Sheldon and Amy from *The Big Bang Theory*, oddly meant to be together. There isn’t anyone else on this world made for either of them, and if they break up, it very well might throw the earth off its axis.

As if she’s trying to save face, Keiko says, “Kelvin has clearly stated he is not desiring to father children. Therefore, I shall end our accord so he does not feel obligated to dawdle within the confines of a union.”

“Keiko,” I say softly. “You can’t break up with him just because of the baby. Maybe he changed his mind.”

Keiko tugs on the hem of her dress shirt. “I appreciate your lackluster attempt at soothing the bruised muscular organ that rests beneath my chest bone, but ’tis not necessary. The time has come for me to operate as an adult. Kelvin does not want to acquire offspring; therefore, Blanche slash Seymour and I will cohabit, and when the time comes, he or she will climb the scientific social ladder as the next child prodigy.” She hands Greer the pregnancy stick. “Please discard with today’s trash. I shall retreat to my dwellings now. Thank you for your time.” She bows—I don’t know why—and then takes off, leaving us all confused and concerned.

When the door clicks shut, Greer says, “We can’t let her break up with Kelvin. He’s going to be heartbroken.”

“Maybe one of us should go after her,” I say, looking toward Greer and Stella.

Stella touches her nose. “Not it. I can’t imagine a conversation where we don’t end up battling each other, her with some medieval sword she pulls out of nowhere, and me with a bobby pin from my purse. There will be bloodshed, and it won’t be pretty.”

I hate to admit it, but she might be right.

So, I turn to Greer. “That leaves you.”



“Why do I have to go? Why can’t you?”

“Uh”—I motion to my apartment—“I’m kind of caught up in the seventh circle of hell, a bit busy over here.”

“I wouldn’t say sharing a studio apartment with Pike Greyson is the seventh circle of hell,” Stella says. “He’s hot. He has an accent. And he wants you. Seems like a pretty good deal to me.”

“You two have been great,” I say, tugging at their arms. “But I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave before my—before *Pike* gets home.” Maybe if I refuse to say the loathsome word, it won’t be true. “Now hurry along.” I move them to the door and add, “And go check on your friend. She’s pregnant and out of control.”

Stella pauses at the door and asks, “Are you going to do the lie thing?”

“Of course. Even though I’m irritated with you, that was a brilliant idea.” I shove her out the door as she smiles.

“Good, but remember, in order to make it believable, ease him into it. You can’t just go spouting off information, because he’ll see right through you.”

“Ugh, I’m not stupid.” I roll my eyes even though that’s good advice, because I was ready to spout gibberish the minute he walked through the door.

“Okay, let us know how it goes, and if this works, you owe me a box of donuts.”

“If this works, I’ll get you a box, every week, for a month.”

“Deal!”

“Now, leave.” I shove them out the door, but I catch Pike approaching with a bag of carryout in hand, his motorcycle helmet in the other.

“Well, hello, Mr. Greyson.” Stella wiggles her fingers at him. “Wifey is waiting for you.”

He smirks. “Yeah? She tell you all about the marital bliss we’ve been living in?”

Stella snorts. “Of course. How’s the floor, by the way? Find the perfect spot yet?”

“Working on it.” And then he winks.

Freaking winks.

Did marriage make him come alive or something? He was never like this before. Very elusive, very quiet, very withdrawn. But now he’s a whole new man? What the hell is that about?

“Is it weird to say if I weren’t madly in love with Romeo, I might take that motorcycle for a ride?” Stella asks.

“Yes,” I shout. “Now get out of here.”

“See you at school tomorrow.” He gives them a nod and then turns his attention to me. Those dark, piercing eyes strike me first, followed by a cheeky grin as he approaches me. I’m standing in the doorway, arms crossed. When he reaches me, he pauses, and then to my horror—and absolute delight—he leans down and presses a light kiss to the top of my head. “Happy to see me?” he asks.

“No,” I say flatly and then move into the apartment and toward the kitchen, where I gather plates and silverware for dinner, trying to ignore the wave of butterflies that erupted in my stomach from that peck.

That’s all it was, a peck. A simple touch. There was nothing sexual about it, and yet, it felt far too intimate.

This is the problem—he’s too . . . enigmatic.

Everything about him is appealing, everything but the fifty-dollar gold ring on his finger. A ring I placed there.

“I hope you like calzones.” He leans close to me, his chest to my back. “I got one for us to share.”

And just like that, my body heats up and my brain fights the urge to part my legs.

That motherfucker . . .



PIKE BROUGHT HIS A-GAME TONIGHT.

I mean . . . A-GAME!

From the cologne he's wearing, to the deep tone in his voice, to the way he licked sauce off his fork throughout dinner, all I could think about was how much I wanted to be that fork.

I've never been one to sexualize every movement a man makes, but that's changed ever since Pike picked up the calzone like a freaking barbarian and split it in half with his bare hands.

BARE HANDS!

Who does that?

The civilized—you know, polite humans who have learned to use utensils throughout evolution—use things called knives to cut objects. Not their bare hands.

But, oh my God, watching Pike split that calzone in half, his strong man hands flexing in the process . . . it took everything in me not to heave a deep, throaty moan.

And when he handed me my plate with half of the torn-apart calzone, all I wanted to say was “Thank you, sir. Now put those hands to good use between my legs.”

I bet if I did say that, he would, without delay, and then I would be gone.

It would be over from there.

Because that tongue . . .

Those hands . . .

His voice . . .

I can easily imagine sex with Pike being the best sex I've ever had.

“You’re not sneering. Does that mean you liked the calzone?” Pike asks, taking my empty plate to the sink.

Yeah, I liked it because it wasn’t charred to death and I didn’t make it.

“It was good . . . thanks,” I say, offering him an olive branch. Well, an olive branch meant to lure him into the vault of lies I’m ready to spew in his direction.

His head peeks up from the sink and a genuinely shocked expression crosses his face.

Aw, I almost feel bad for giving him hope, because it’s there, in his eyes. A sign of unbridled hope that maybe, just maybe, he’s cracked my armor. Little does he know . . .

“You’re welcome,” he says quietly, clearly not pushing his luck.

My phone buzzes on the table and I catch Keiko’s name across the screen.

Uh-oh, I hope it’s not bad news.

I unlock the screen and read the text message.

***Keiko:** As of six seventeen this evening, I am no longer in a committed rapport with Kelvin Thimble. I hold him in high regard and thanked him graciously for his loving devotion and taking on the duty of the male species by producing a viral, yet amiable service in the bedroom. Furthermore, I provided him with a recommendation letter for future accords, offering him high marks in coitus as well as outstanding conversational techniques. I shall require three days to mourn the termination of this union. Please provide me with ample space. After the third day, Blanche/Seymour and I will be requiring your companionship.*

“Oh no,” I say out loud.

“Everything okay?” Pike asks as he comes back into the dining space.

I consider not telling him, but then realize he’ll probably find out when he gets to school tomorrow, so I say, “Keiko just broke up with Kelvin.”

His brow creases and he takes a seat next to me at the table. I'm expecting him to say something like "What?" or "Seriously?", you know, a normal reaction to such news, but instead, he quietly asks, "Is she okay?"

Is she okay . . . *IS SHE OKAY?*

That's—God, that's such a considerate thing to ask.

There was no questioning her decision.

No "what happened?"

Just making sure she's okay.

This isn't good for the flimsy wall I've built to keep Pike at a safe distance, because I don't need to know that he's sensitive as well. Sensitive, sexy, British accent, sleeve tattoo . . . I'm barely holding on over here.

"I, uh, I'm not sure."

I might have broken the news about their breakup, but I'm sure as hell not going to break the news about her pregnancy. That's so not my information to talk about, especially since we don't know how far along she is.

"Do you need to go to her place to make sure she's okay?"

I shake my head. "No, she asked for space."

He nods but then stays silent.

That's it?

That's all he's going to ask?

Nothing else?

If he were Keenan, he'd be asking for all the details, and not because he was concerned, but because he always enjoyed gossip and truly appreciated someone else's downfall. And more often than not, that malicious streak was aimed at me. God, he hurt me. *Why did I stay with him?*

Unsure what to do, I retrieve my laptop from the bed and take it to the dresser to plug it in.

"You know, I hate to admit it, but I'm not sure I know exactly what you do."

I glance at him from over my shoulder. He's pulling on the back of his neck, looking adorably sheepish.

"Kind of shitty, your husband not knowing the kind of job you have."

And this is my opening.

I don't think I could've made this play out any better.

He opened the conversation by checking in on my friend, which warmed me up, and now he's going in for more information. I was waiting for the moment he'd do just this.

But play it cool . . .

"I work from home," I say softly as I return to the bed to take a seat.

"I gathered that," he says, "you know, since I go off to work and you tend to stay home. But what do you do?"

Here goes nothing. Let the lies begin!

With a serious face, I say, "Professional mourner."

The odd expression that crosses his face nearly causes me to bust out in laughter. Adorably confused. He shifts in his seat and, with a crease in his brow, he asks, "Professional mourner? What exactly is that?"

"I'm hired to mourn with people all around the country. I have an online forum, people come online, and I cry with them."

"Wait . . . what? You cry with them? You can cry on cue?"

I nod. "Yup. Not that hard, especially when someone is telling you about their loved one passing."

"I—I've never heard of such a profession."

I shrug. "Not for the faint of heart."

"How did you, erm, how did you get into that?"

Good question.

Errr . . . think Cora, think.

Oh, I've got it.

“I’m not proud of it, but I was in line to feed an elephant at the zoo and when it came to my turn, they cut off the feedings and said they had to move on. Well, I broke out in heavy tears, tears so large that I was able to convince the zookeepers to not only let me feed the elephant, but also give me extra time. When I was done, a lady pulled me to the side and said she had never seen anything like it and asked if I was a professional crier. I told her I had my moments. She handed me her card and said she could use someone like me on her team. I learned the tricks of the trade from her, and a year ago, I started my own business.” I shrug as if it’s nothing. “I now specialize in mourning over pets. It’s quite a niche market, but also lucrative. Today, I mourned over a Bichon Frise, a snake named Slytherin, and a snail.”

“A snail?”

I nod. “We don’t judge over here. Snails are friends too.”

“Yeah, of course.” He clears his throat. “Not to sound like a wanker, but you make a living from this?” he asks, completely blown away.

“Yup, quite a good living.”

“Wow, that’s . . . different.”

I look away, hiding my smirk.

Professional mourner? Yeah, that’s so not me. I read an article about it today while conducting my real job, social media expert for Frankie Donuts, Chicago’s premier donut shop. I was attempting to write a blog post that matched donuts to professions. For instance, I paired our famous cherry donut with a police officer because the flashing light on the roof of their car is called a cherry. And for the nurses out there, I gave them our scrumptious rocky road donut because they might have a rocky road at work, but they can indulge in something sweet to bring some joy to their day. At the end of the article, I wanted to throw in an odd job, just to make people laugh, and that’s when I came across professional mourners. I found it quite interesting and a little odd, but as I said it in my article, there’s always room in this world for

people to offer their best self. Crying just very well might be in someone's wheelhouse. Who are we to judge?

It's just not one of my abilities.

"So, you've cried all day today?"

"Three times. I shed some tears and listened. There are people who actually go to funerals to fill out the space, but I've taken a different approach and try to connect with the people who might not be getting that level of connection from family or friends."

"Never would've guessed," he says, and then his eyes connect with mine. "Thank you for telling me."

I shrug casually and pick up my phone. I lean back on the bed and scroll through social media. This is going to be fun.



**GREER:** *You told him you did what?*

**Cora:** *Professional mourner. People hire me to cry with them. It's all the rage.*

**Stella:** *Is it really?*

**Cora:** *No, but that's what I convinced him of.*

**Greer:** *What did he say?*

**Cora:** *He was quite surprised but then listened and nodded. I told him I do it more for people who lost animals.*

**Stella:** *I'm not sure if I'm proud or worried.*

**Greer:** *Are we sure lying is the way to go? I mean, have we thought about having an honest conversation? You know, telling him "Hey, you're a nice guy, but maybe we're just friends"?*

**Cora:** *I tried that, and guess what, he's still living with me.*

**Stella:** *Did he sleep in the bed last night?*

**Cora:** *Yes. In just his boxer briefs. I'm telling you, I find myself moving closer and closer to him every night. I need to*



*challenge him to the stairs again.*

The doorbell rings, and I glance toward the entryway.

That's odd. It's the middle of the day. I'm not expecting anyone.

I hop off the bed, tiptoe over to the door, and look out the peephole. No one is at the door, but there is a delivery.

Carefully I open the door, you know, just in case someone pops out of nowhere, and then quickly grab the brown bag, which is stapled shut at the top. I carry it to the dining area table and pop it open. A box of tissues, a bar of dark chocolate, and a card. I pick up the card and read it.

*Dearest wife,*

*To get you through the mourning today. Looking forward to talking to you tonight.*

*Xoxo – your dutiful husband*

Uh-oh.

This is not good.

That's not supposed to happen. He's supposed to be thrown off by my job, not offering me comfort. I don't need to know that the incredibly hot Englishman I'm sharing a bed with has a sensitive side.

Grabbing my phone, I snap a picture of the tissues and chocolate—and the note—and send it to the girls.

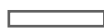
*Cora: I'm in trouble.*

It takes them only seconds to reply, and I don't even have to look at their responses to know what they're going to say.

*Greer: You're screwed.*

*Stella: I say throw in the towel now.*

*Cora: I can't. This just means I have to step it up a notch.*



“THANK YOU FOR DINNER,” Pike says as he takes my plate to the kitchen, just like every night.

I labored over a meal tonight fit only for murderers and ruffians, and yet, he eats every last morsel, and then he cleans up and does the dishes.

Does the man not have any tastebuds?

Does he really think it’s good?

I nearly choked on my own scalloped potatoes tonight from the amount of salt in them. But there he was, eating them up with a freaking jolly look on his face. And I’ve thought about ending the whole “bad cooking” thing, but then what happens? All of a sudden I start cooking better? Maybe if I put a cooking show on in the background, so when he gets home it seems like I’m trying to learn, and slowly I can get better. Because *I* can’t stomach this shit every day.

That might be a good idea.

“What are you doing tonight?” he asks.

I glance out the window. “Going for a walk.”

“It’s chilly out.”

“Not chilly enough to stop me,” I answer. “I try to get in as many walks as I can since I work from home.”

He finishes sticking the dishes in the dishwasher and asks, “Can I join you?”

Normally, I would say no. I want to keep my distance, but we’re operating under Plan B right now, and Plan B requires me to talk to him, therefore, I say, “If you want.”

A flash of surprise crosses his face before he says, “Great. I’ll grab my hoodie and shoes.”

Together, we get ready for our walk, and I’m surprised to see him in a black hoodie with a Rebels logo on the front. As we lock up and walk toward the stairwell, I ask, “Are you a Rebels fan?”

“I felt the need to choose after being educated about the rivalry by my students. The Bobbies didn’t fit my vibe—

according to the kids—so I went with the Rebels. Are you a Rebels fan?”

We make it outside and I lead the way across the street to the park. “I am, but that’s because one of my ex-boyfriends plays for the Rebels. We ended things on good terms, which is why I still support them. If we didn’t end things amicably, I would hope they’d never win another game again.”

When I glance at him, I notice the look of irritation on his face. “You used to date a professional baseball player?” he asks.

No.

“Yup, have you heard of Maddox Paige?”

“The pitcher?”

“That’s the one. We dated for about a year a while back.” We’ll keep the timeframe a blur, because I don’t know enough about the man to be sure I’m saying the right thing.

“Why did you end it?”

“The schedule was too tough for me. He understood and didn’t blame me, but he did say if I ever changed my mind, the door is always open.”

“I thought he’s married.”

Oh shit, is he?

I have no clue. All I know is that Maddox is hot and there have been rumors he has a Prince Albert piercing. If that’s true, I’m incredibly jealous of his wife.

Like . . . really jealous.

“He said that a while ago,” I say with a dismissive wave.

“So, you don’t talk to him anymore?”

“No. Just on birthdays, we shoot each other a quick text, but that’s about it.”

He nods. “Did you love him?”

“Of course,” I answer without care. “Madly. But, you know, some things aren’t meant to be. But the sex, God, was it

good.”

I throw in that last sentence to needle him.

And I’m not surprised when it does.

Pike Greyson seems to be the jealous type. The man who claims what’s his, including his woman, and no one else is allowed to have a piece of it. Hearing that his wife was madly in love with another man and obsessed with the sex can’t sit well.

“Not the best you’ve ever had,” he says, his voice tight.

“How do you know?”

“Because.” He looks me in the eyes. “You haven’t had sex with me yet.”

In other circumstances, I would’ve scoffed, maybe laughed, but the seriousness in his eyes, the firm tone in his voice—in this moment, I actually believe him.

I believe that, without a doubt, he’d be the best sex of my life.

Clearing my throat, I ask, “Well, do you have a pierced penis?”

“Only one way to find out,” he says as we turn a corner around a small pond.

“Are you suggesting I stick my hand down your pants to find out?”

“However you want to do it, Coraline. It’s up to you.”

The use of my full name throws me off, but not in a bad way, surprisingly. I like the way it rolls off his tongue.

Delicious and sexy.

I can imagine him whispering it right before his tongue trails against my neck.

“I think you’re bluffing,” I say, trying to keep it together.

He just shrugs.

And that drives me crazy . . . actually legit nutty.

Because I want to know—is his penis pierced?

I mean, if it is, oh my God, I'll rip his pants down right now and sit on that dick, but if he's not pierced, if he's lying, what a massive disappointment that will be.

Not that I have plans to have sex with him or anything. I mean a massive disappointment for women in general. In my opinion, all penises should be pierced. I don't think that's too much to ask of the male species.

They make more money.

They're weirdly respected more—for God knows what reason, because the vast percentage of them are morons.

And they can stand up to pee every day, whereas women need to do the public-restroom hover so we don't share butt sweat with other humans.

The least they can do is get their diddly-dong pierced.

Sheesh.

“Well, I'm pierced too,” I say.

“Is that so?” he asks with a raise of his brow, and that one look shows me he doesn't believe a word I'm saying right now.

“Yup. Pierced my clit,” I say, pointing to my crotch. “Right there. All pierced up.”

“And what would the term be called, for getting your clit pierced?”

There are terms?

Uhh . . .

With all the confidence I can muster, I say, “I keep it unprofessional and just call it my clit knickknack. Easier that way, you know?”

The corner of his lip twitches. “I see. Clit knickknack, that's . . . certainly unprofessional.”

“You know what they say . . .”

I have no end to that sentence. I honestly have no idea where I was going with that.

“No, what do *they* say?” Pike asks. I had a stroke of genius when it came to lying about my profession, but now, I’m struggling.

Thinking on the spot is hard, especially when you know the person is trying to trap you in a lie, and if you get angry, you know they will pinpoint the lie, and we can’t have that.

“Uh, they say . . . your clit, uh, your name.”

Wow, way to absolutely murder that, Cora.

Christ, you couldn’t have come up with something better?

“You know, I’m pretty sure my auntie has that saying cross-stitched on a pillow on her bed. Your clit, your name. Very eloquent.”

Okay, abort. This is a disaster.

There’s no salvaging this.

“Then I should be friends with your aunt. Seems like we’d get along swimmingly.”

He playfully bumps his shoulder against mine and says, “Maybe you can be my friend first, and then we can move on to my auntie.”

The bump.

The smile.

The sincerity.

It’s all bad news. It’s all taking a shot at the wall I’ve erected to keep this man at a safe distance. He’s attacking it brick by brick.

“You’re pushing your luck with this walk, but asking to be friends? Might as well ask for me to birth a unicorn.”

“I have no problem trying to help you out with that.” When I don’t respond, he adds, “You know, help impregnate you. Men from Surrey have been known to carry a little something extra in their sperm.”

I glance over at him. “Are you saying you have magic sperm?”

“It’s what I’ve been told.”

“Uh-huh, well, I’ve been told that the average size of the penis for an Englishman is three inches.”

“Bullshit,” he says so quickly that I almost bust out in laughter.

“Read it in a few places, you know, when I considered giving this marriage a shot. It was a brief second, but then I read that and thought, no way. Three inches doesn’t work for me. I’m not a penis snob by any means, but I have a deep cervix and I need the penis I’m married to, to be able to tantalize that.” I pat his shoulder and oh . . . boy, is that strong. “Sorry, but I think we should just call it quits now.”

“Funny, I didn’t know you were married to the average Englishmen. Being an educated woman like yourself, I’d assume instead of taking a fact from the Internet about penis size—a fact that’s entirely inaccurate—you’d go straight to the source to find out.”

“Let me guess, you want me to stick my hand down your pants again?” We make our way back to the apartment building. “You know, it’s quite vulgar for you to keep suggesting such a thing.”

“You’re my wife. It’s not vulgar at all.”

“You know, the term *wife* and *husband* when it comes to us should really have an asterisk next to it.”

“And what would the asterisk say?”

“Married by ways of Fireball.” Once again, damn you Fireball . . . damn you.

“If that’s the case, maybe I should buy some more. Maybe that will move this marriage along.”

I look up at him and ask, “And what exactly do you want to move this marriage along to?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Telling family and friends. Celebrating our nuptials.”

I legit laugh out loud, but when I see he doesn’t smirk or laugh too, I pause in our walk. “You’re serious? You want to announce this to friends and family?”

“I heard you get presents when you’re married. Who doesn’t like presents?” he says with a cute shrug.

“You want to stay married for the presents?” I shake my head. “It’s shocking to me how mental you are.”

“Just makes me more fun.”

“I don’t want fun—”

“You want an arsehole,” he says.

“I think I still prefer the asshole.”

“Okay, what my wifey wants, my wifey gets.”

Why do I feel like he doesn’t mean that in a good way?



THE LIGHT in the bathroom turns off and I brace myself for what’s to come.

Another night of sharing a bed with Pike.

After our walk, we came back to the apartment and I played a stupid block game on my phone while he read a book about Thomas Jefferson.

I dozed off just looking at the cover, but he was entranced by it. I glanced over occasionally and watched his eyes fly across the paper. He was completely interested. I mean, to each their own, right?

But once he started to yawn, I knew he was going to call it a night, and that’s exactly what he did. He always lets me get ready for bed first, which I think he does on purpose.

Because I’m all tucked into bed, ready to close my eyes, but in the pit of my stomach, I’m waiting in anticipation for



him to slide in and very softly say good night. Not to mention he walks out of the bathroom, shirtless, in nothing but his boxer briefs, and he carries himself with swagger as he walks toward the bed. That sleeve tattoo, the five o'clock shadow that covers his distinct jawline, and the V in his waist that trails under the elastic of his boxer briefs. It's tempting, very freaking tempting.

What would one night feel like with him?

Bliss.

I already know it.

All I want to see is if he's pierced or not.

The door to the bathroom opens and I tell myself to look away, to not be sucked in to the late-night show he offers, but my eyes disobey me, and once again, I take in the sight of him as he approaches.

Not only do I take him in, but my eyes are drawn to his crotch as they attempt to see through the fabric of his briefs.

"You can just ask, you know," he says as he slips under the covers.

"Ask what?" I move my gaze to the ceiling, feeling my cheeks heat up.

He turns toward me, his large body resting on his side—something he hasn't done yet; he always sleeps on his back or turns away—and he reaches out and runs a finger down my arm.

A wave of chills erupts across my skin.

Oh my God.

All he did was touch me and my body is ready to go.

"You can ask to see it."

"See . . . uh . . . what?" I ask, even though I damn well know what he's talking about.

In a deep, sultry voice that affects me in the best way possible, he says, "My cock."

I think I just had a flutter of an orgasm.

*My cock.*

God, do I want to see it.

I desperately want to know what it looks like, what it feels like in my palm, how it fits in my mouth . . . between my legs.

But I can't.

I need to divert him. Put a damper on this exchange. Throw down the wet blanket, because—*Oooooee*—I'm getting all fired up inside.

"Shaved legs," I shout.

"Huh?" he asks.

I grab his hand, bend my leg up to my chest, and force him to feel my unshaven shin.

"I don't feel the need to shave my legs around you."

His hand caresses my shin, and oh God, this was a bad idea, because that feels good, even under the shield of my hairy legs.

"Erm . . . okay," he says, utterly confused.

"Stocking up on leg warmth for winter, you know. The hairier the leg, the better."

"Good to know."

"So, yeah, probably don't want to have sex with Miss Sweater Weather Legs, right?"

I attempt to lower my leg, but he keeps it in place and slowly drags his palm up my shin, over my knee, and to my upper thigh . . . hello.

Giggling, because I'm an absolute moron and unable to keep it together, I swat him away and try to scoot closer to the wall.

"I couldn't care less if you shave your legs or not, Coraline."

Of course he wouldn't care. OF COURSE!

“And I would fuck you, hair or not. Doesn’t matter to me.”  
His hand drags back down my leg, but turns inward, caressing my inner thigh, and it takes everything in me not to let my legs fall open to grant him better access. “So . . . do you want to see my cock, Coraline?”

Sweet Jesus, YES!

Give it to me.

Give me that cock, Pike.

Drive me into the wall with that cock.

End my misery and finally give me what I’ve wanted for months.

But . . . of course, that’s not what I say.

Clearing my throat, I say, “I’m good, but thanks for the invitation.”

“It’s always there, Coraline. Anytime you want it, all you need is to ask.”

His eyes are on me, eating me up with every breath I take.

I can feel the heat of his body against my skin, burning me.

And his hand, as he shifts, brushes against my hip, and my legs part involuntarily, causing a dull throb to erupt between my legs.

I want him so badly.

And he knows it.

I bet he can sense it.

He probably knows my body language well enough to understand that I haven’t turned away from him tonight, that lying on my back means I’m currently indecisive, that I have mixed feelings, mixed thoughts.

And he’s taking advantage of that.

“If I were truly playing the arsehole role, do you know what I’d do?”

I’m afraid to ask, but I do anyway. “What?”

“Instead of giving you the option, I’d interpret the intense perusal you made of my body as I walked across the apartment as an invitation. I’d take your hand”—he grabs my hand and I continue to stare at the ceiling as my breathing picks up—“and I’d bring it to my crotch, allowing you to take exactly what you want.”

Yup, that sounds about right. And wouldn’t it be great if he actually did that?

“Well, once again, not living up to your husbandly duties . . . not listening to your wife.”

“Is that so?” he asks as he drags the back of my hand over his stomach, letting me feel each and every indent of his abs.

I don’t move.

I don’t even think I breathe as he moves my hand to the waistband of his briefs.

I want him to flip my hand over, I want to cup him, to feel him.

“But I’m not sure I’m good at the asshole role you so desperately want me to play.” He drags my hand back up his stomach and I want to scream at him to go back, but I bite my tongue.

When I don’t say anything, he releases my hand, but rests it on his stomach, and for the life of me, I can’t remove it.

“If I really was an asshole, I’d do something about this tank top you like to wear to bed.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, my chest tight with anticipation.

His hand falls to the hem and he slips his fingers under the fabric. When his fingers connect with my skin, my stomach hollows out and my legs spread just a tiny bit more, desperation heavy in my bones.

His hand drags up along my stomach, bringing my tank top with it.

“I’d demand you take this off and put on one of my shirts instead. Because in my world, you either sleep naked, or you sleep in my clothes.”

“Wh-why your clothes?” I ask as his hand smooths back down my stomach.

“Because, it’s a reminder.” His hand reaches the waistband of my shorts. “That you . . . belong . . . to . . . me.” He bites out each word in a dark, clipped tone and then lifts his hand, only to bring it back to mine, which he lowers down his stomach to the waistband of his shorts, and then farther.

Centimeter by tortuous centimeter, he drags my hand until I’m so close, I can feel the heat of his cock on the back of my hand.

“Go ahead, Coraline. Touch me.” His voice grows even deeper. “Feel me.”

My body shakes, adrenaline zipping through me as my mind wavers with my impulses.

My brain is screaming, “No, hold strong, don’t do it.”

But my hand, my arm, my *everything* wants to reach down and grab him.

I wet my lips, unsure of what to do, how to react.

My chest rises and falls as my clit pounds with need.

“*Feel* me, Coraline,” he repeats.

No, I won’t do it, I won’t feel him, and yet, my hand turns over . . .

My fingers inch down . . .

And I connect with the large bulge between his thighs.

Oh fuck.

That one touch sets me loose and I move my entire palm over his package, and motherfucker, he’s huge. When I said that crap about three inches, that’s all it was—crap. I made it up on the fly. Pike is far more than three inches.

“Just like that,” he whispers. “Take what you want.”

What I want is for his briefs to be gone.

What I want is a better angle.

Before I can stop myself, I flip to my side so my eyes meet his.

And in an instant, I realize what a colossal mistake this was, because I can see just how much he's enjoying this.

But that doesn't prevent me from slipping my fingers under the waistband of his briefs and pulling them down just enough to release him. I keep my eyes on his as I trail my fingers along his hard length, starting at the base and then moving up until my fingers rub over something smooth and cold.

I swallow hard.

*Oh my God.*

He wasn't lying.

I move my fingers up more and come across another metal ball, and then another.

My eyes widen as I look at him. "You—you have a Jacob's Ladder?"

"I thought you didn't use the professional terms."

Ignoring him, I feel his cock some more, loving the stark contrast of his velvety skin against the cool, hard metal of his piercings. And as I explore them, all I can think about is how amazing it would feel to have him inside of me, how I would love to feel these piercings moving in and out of me, stretching me.

Just as my hand circles around his cock, he stills my wrist.

My eyes land on his and he says, "I said you could explore, but you're not allowed to fuck me with your hand."

"I wasn't."

"Don't lie to me. That's exactly what you were doing. You want to see me come."

“No.” I shake my head, but it’s a feeble attempt at a lie. We both know it. It’s obvious.

He moves my hand back to my side and then he rolls out of bed. In the dark night, I can see an outline of him as he stands in front of me, his hand gripping his cock.

All I can think about is how powerful he looks.

“This cock isn’t yours yet, Coraline.”

“But you’re my husband,” I say, even though my head is screaming . . . *what are you doing?*

“Until you show up in this bed wearing my shirt or naked, this cock is not yours.”

He heads toward the bathroom and I call out, “What are you doing?”

He doesn’t turn around as he says, “Thinking of your luscious tits as I jack off in the bathroom.”

And then he’s gone, and all I can think about is how he gets to stroke his cock and I don’t.

Worked up, horny, and in the need of release, I move my hand under my shorts and between my legs and find just how wet I am.

“Fuck,” I mutter as I press two fingers to my clit and slowly start to massage it.

Yes, this is what I need. I only wish it wasn’t me doing it. That it wasn’t me seeking my release, but rather him.

From the bathroom, I hear him grunt, which sends a white-hot flush over my skin.

My fingers quicken.

A light moan falls past my lips and my other hand travels to my breast, where I give my hardened nipple a good squeeze.

A bolt of pleasure zips through me, but it’s not good enough. I need more.

I need him.

I want him on my body, controlling me, owning me.

I might not want marriage, but I certainly want to know what it's like to be fucked by Pike Greyson.

God, I've wanted him for months. The other night in Vegas, I'd thought I'd finally get him.

And now I've seen him shirtless. Felt his incredibly hard and toned body. Held his cock in my hand. The bar . . .

I speed up my fingers.

My stomach bottoms out and every nerve in me bundles and twists to the juncture between my thighs as I think about Pike inside me, kissing me, licking me, fucking me so hard that I forget who I am or what I'm doing.

"Yes," I whisper, moving my hips along with my finger. "Yes, Pike," I say, the words slipping past my lips.

My orgasm builds, bunching, collecting, pulsing, until I'm right there, hanging on the cliff, about to fall over. My back arches, and with a heavy sigh, I fall over, euphoria ripping through me as I finger myself to completion.

God, that felt—

Fingers wrap around my wrist and snatch my hand up from between my legs. My eyes fly open in shock to discover Pike hovering over me.

Frightened, I watch his scowl morph into understanding as he slowly brings my fingers to his mouth. In awe, I stare him down as he sucks my fingers into his mouth before releasing them back to me.

"Next time, it'll be my face between your legs, not your hand. Got it?"

I don't know how to respond.

I'm not even sure I should.

So, instead, I lift up from the bed and scoot to the side to go use the bathroom. I start to move past him when his hand lands on my stomach, stopping me.

I don't turn to look at him. I can't.



My mind is an absolute mess of emotions, of need. I'm sure if I look him in the eyes, everything will come crumbling to an end and I'll give in to him.

I can't give in to him.

I just can't.

His voice rumbles over me as he asks, "Do you need one of my shirts to change into?"

*Yes.*

"No," I say on a heavy breath. Wearing one of his shirts would be like waving a white flag, and even though I've had a momentary setback today, I'm still going to continue the plan of scaring Pike away.

Angrily, he releases me, and I retreat to the bathroom, where I attempt to gather myself, to remind myself exactly what the goal is.

It's not to stare at the beautiful body of Pike Greyson.

It's not to cup his cock, palm his length, and dream about what it would feel like between my legs.

And it sure as hell is not to think about him while I finger myself to completion.

The goal is to scare this man. To get him to run.

## Chapter Eleven

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### PIKE

*Pike: I can still taste you on my tongue.*

I pocket my mobile, happy with myself, and walk into the science lab. I find Keiko sitting at her desk, staring into nothing, hands folded on her desk.

“Good morning, Keiko,” I say with a gentle wave.

Her eyes slowly glance in my direction before returning to her stare. In a monotone voice, she says, “Pike, it is morning, that is true. As far as it being good, I can’t muster the strength to acknowledge the good in anything.”

When Cora told me Keiko had broken up with Kelvin, I was surprised. I thought Keiko and Kelvin would end up getting married, and while I haven’t known them that long, I have hung out with them quite a bit during our lunch breaks, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen a better match. They were truly made for each other.

But I didn’t want to get into it with Cora because I didn’t want her to think she needed to share with me.

Not wanting to clue Keiko in that I know about her and Kelvin, I approach her desk and ask, “Everything okay, Keiko? You seem sad.”

“A melancholy cloud has descended over me, Pike.” Her eyes flash to mine. “I’m not sure if word has spread, but I’ve

reached the conclusion of my courtship with Kelvin.”

“Oh, wow, I had no idea,” I say as I take a seat on her desk. “I’m really sorry to hear that.”

She nods. “There comes a time in a woman’s life when she realizes she needs to part ways. It was a perplexing decision to make, but after thoughtful insight on my end, I mustered the fortitude to conduct the equitable decision for all parties involved. In fact, I took a page out of Cora’s book.”

What does she mean by that?

“Cora’s book?” I ask.

She nods. “Cora exhibited that, intermittently, we must implement what’s most suitable for self-sustaining processes. As she illustrated in her divorce with Keenan, I discovered the prowess to sever amorous ties with Kelvin.”

Divorce?

Keenan?

What the hell is Keiko talking about? Cora was married before me?

This is all new information. Information that’s quite vital to know, because if Cora has been married and divorced, that could explain her reluctance to be open to our marriage.

But I need to put that aside. Keiko needs a friend.

“If breaking up with Kelvin is what you feel was the right thing to do, then—”

“I just hope this fetus understands the sacrifice I made, based off conveyed desires. Kelvin didn’t want kids and I wasn’t going to force him to raise one with me.”

“You’re pregnant?” I ask, shocked. Jesus, what else do I not know?

“Indeed.”

“Wow, Keiko. That’s a lot to deal with.”

“I’m glad you recognize the staggering emotional complexities I’m working through at the moment. It seems as

though no one quite understands my turmoil.”

“Well, if you ever need someone to talk to, I’m here for you . . .”



NOTE TO SELF—KEIKO likes to talk.

And talk.

And talk.

Not only did we talk all morning, but we ate lunch together, shared a box of cookies she brought into school today, and then after school, as I was about to leave, I found her standing in my doorway, a two-foot-long Red Vine in hand and a look of devastation on her face.

We spent another two hours talking.

She told me about how she and Kelvin first started dating.

Their first night “sharing coitus.”

The scientific research they conducted on how to produce the best male orgasm—I can’t unsee the image of a vibrator attached to Kelvin’s scrotum as he’s strapped down to the bed. Keiko told me it was the most cum she’d gathered from him in three weeks of experiments.

I mean—hell, poor Kelvin, but also . . . I want to see what *that* feels like.

And she also told me all about a batch of cookies she made Kelvin once. I’m not sure where that came from, but I listened intently.

But my listening paid off, because I found out that I’ve been duped by my wife.

Professional mourner? Not so much. Keiko went off about how she’s pregnant and not once did Cora bring her free donuts from Frankie Donuts, and as an employee of a confectionary establishment—her words—Keiko was “flabbergasted” Cora hadn’t sent anything to help with Keiko’s

pregnancy cravings. Of course, Cora had sent plenty of donuts to the Rebels and the Bobbies, maintaining relations with the “baseball stars,” but not her dear friend.

I would like to say I was surprised by the information about Cora’s job, but I’m not. I’d started to notice a trend with our conversations. She’s opening up, but she’s not opening up with the truth. How did I know? Well, the whole “pierced clit knickknack” thing was a dead giveaway. But she also told me she has her pilot’s license, drove a car into a fast-food drive-thru sign once because a bee startled her, and she paid for college by stripping once a week. Yeah, none of that was true, and I knew from the get-go. But lying about her job, that’s another level.

And then I found out she was divorced, and what seems like recently.

That’s probably why she doesn’t want to be married, because she has recently become single.

I can understand that, and if it were under any other circumstances, I wouldn’t be pushing like I am, but it’s not me I’m thinking about—it’s my brother. It’s the children.

Thanks to Keiko, I’m more prepared for when I get home and for what to expect.

One: she’s trying to poison me with charred and over-salted dinners.

Two: she’s purposefully growing her body hair to disgust me. Too bad for her, I don’t care.

Three: she’s dishing up lies to throw me off.

Now I’m wondering how far she’ll go with the lies, what’s the end game—probably to get me to dislike her, well, two can play at that game—and what the hell is she going to do next?

But the worst of it all . . . I can still hear her moans in my head. I’ve heard them all fucking day, on repeat. And then tasting her fingers after she made herself come . . . bloody hell, I wanted more. So much more.

When I went to the bathroom after she cupped me, I came fast and hard. Having her hand explore me, even for seconds, really turned me on. I can't decide if it's because I haven't been with someone for a while, or if it was because of her innocent perusal. But it was a nibble of the woman I want, and I woke up this morning wanting so much more.

But I won't push her again. I gave her a taste, and if she wants more, she can get it. She knows the rules now.

I climb the stairs of our building—Frankie Donuts in hand, because that's the game I'm playing—and walk into our apartment, a smile on my face.

That smile brightens even more when I walk in on Cora dancing in the kitchen, wearing nothing but an oversized shirt and tube socks, rocking the Tom Cruise *Risky Business* look, and swinging around a turner. Pancakes are on the griddle and they actually smell good.

I walk up behind her and place my hand on her lower back, startling her so badly that she chucks the turner in the air, spins around, and smacks me directly across the face.

I fly back, drop the donuts to the floor, and bump backwards into the fridge as my hand goes to my cheek.

“Oh my God,” she screams, holding her chest. “I thought you were a murderer.”

I run my hand over my stinging cheek. “Nope, just your husband.” Jesus Christ, that hurt. I bend over and pick up the box of donuts and hold them out to her. “I brought you donuts.”

Her eyes land on the box and her brows draw back. Uneasiness is written all over her face. *Yup, I know you bloody well work there.*

“Oh, thank you.” She takes the box and sets it to the side. “Are you okay?” She reaches out and pulls my hand away from my face. “Yikes, I left a mark. We should probably ice that.”

“I've had worse,” I say, but don't fight her as she pulls me toward the counter and makes me sit on the island. I enjoy

watching her grab ice from the freezer and putting it in a towel. She gently places it on my face.

She might be lying to me and she might be trying to scare me away with her cooking, but she does care about me. It's evident in the way she's taking care of me right now. And I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it.

"There, does that feel okay?"

"Yes," I answer, and when she tries to pull away, I hook my leg around her to keep her in place. "Where did you get this shirt?"

She glances down at the faded black shirt, which hits her mid thigh.

She shrugs. "Old boyfriend."

Yesterday, that would've put me into a tailspin of jealousy. But today, knowing she's been lying up a storm, I don't believe it for a second, especially since her eyes looked away when she answered.

"And you wear it in front of your husband?" I ask, my hand falling to the hem of the T-shirt.

"Remember what I said about that title?"

"You said 'I do' to me. That means something." I pull on the hem, lifting it up. "And I don't like you wearing another man's shirt in front of me."

Really, I don't care. But this is what she wants, so this is the ungentlemanly attitude she'll get.

I lift the fabric higher, exposing her flat stomach, and a piece of me wishes she wasn't wearing a bra, but I can see the underwire of her bra as I lift higher. To my surprise, she lifts her arms to the sky, and I drag the shirt up and over her head and then toss it on the floor.

My eyes fall to her body. Wearing a black bra and pink underwear, she stands there with no shame, no shyness. Just as she is, and it's bloody sexy.

"Go put something on that isn't an insult to me."

Her mouth ticks up, a smile spreading across her lips.

“You brought me home donuts and then act possessive? Are you the asshole or are you the nice guy?”

“Both. When it comes to what’s mine, I’ll be the asshole.”

She reaches for the shirt and puts it back on. When I go to say something, she says, “I got this shirt when I was in high school. I found it at a thrift store and thought it was cool to wear something completely oversized. I haven’t been able to part with it since.”

Her eyes stay focused on mine as she speaks, and this story I believe.

I adjust the ice on my face. “Good.”

“Settled now?”

“Yes,” I answer, enjoying this authentic interaction.

“Well, then, welcome home. I made pancakes.”

I smirk. “I brought home donuts.”

“I see that.”

“Have you ever had Frankie Donuts?” I ask as I keep my eyes trained on her. “The kids in my classroom are always talking about them.”

“Uh, yeah,” she answers while turning away from me.

Her lies . . . I can read them so easily.

“A kid in my class, Drake Goodwin, was showing me the Instagram page for Frankie Donuts.”

Cora picks up the turner without comment and moves to the griddle to flip the pancakes.

Undeterred by her silence, I continue, “I thought the donuts looked good, but the pictures don’t really do them any justice.”

“What?” She looks over at me. “I think they have an awesome social media presence. Some might say the best in the business.”



I shrug. “I think Crumbl Cookies does a better job.”

She gasps and points her finger at me. “Take that back.”

“Take what back?”

“That blatant lie.”

“It’s not a lie, it’s the truth. They do a better job.”

Her eyes narrow and it takes everything in me not to laugh.

“That’s just . . . mean.”

“Mean? Why are you so defensive about their social media?” I ask. “Are you an avid follower?”

“I just . . . uh, I happen to, uh, know the person who does their social media.”

I’m *sure* she does.

“And it’s hurtful, because I know how hard she works at building a loyal following. She’s actually scored them some big connections in the donut game, possible talks of franchising, you know.”

“Is that so? Well, good for your friend. Maybe tell her to add some more videos. Drake was telling me the Instagram algorithm likes videos. It’s probably why Crumbl does them so much.”

“Well, Crumbl also has a huge marketing team behind them, whereas Frankie Donuts has one person, and they can only do so much,” she shoots back at me.

“Just an observation.”

“It’s a stupid one,” she grumbles, going back to the pancakes.

“The donuts are good, though. So good I sent some over to the Rebels.”

She stiffens and then slowly turns around to face me. “What?”

Her steady but worried reaction couldn’t be more perfect.

“Yeah, I have a friend who works in marketing with them. I sent some over.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Thought I’d let Maddox Paige know there were no hard feelings.”

Her eyes widen in horror.

“Wait . . . did you send them to the Rebels or did you send them to Maddox Paige?”

I shrug. “Does it matter?”

“Yes.” She nods. “Yes, it does matter.”

“Okay, I sent them to Maddox. Told him Coraline Turner was my wife, and even though you guys dated, there are no hard feelings.”

Her eyes widen even more in horror and, I’m so fucking pleased with myself that I actually feel joy surge through me like it’s a drug.

“Why . . . why would you do that? Oh my God, Pike.”

“Does it matter? Seems like you guys have a close, understanding bond. Just thought I’d tell him we’re cool, you know? Told him the invitation is always open for a dinner date.”

“You didn’t.”

I nod. “I did.”

She switches off the griddle and places her hands at her temples, rubbing them. “What on earth would possess you to do such a thing? You wrote my name? Like you actually said *Coraline Turner*?”

“Yeah. Figured he’d need to know whose husband was sending him donuts.”

Fury rages through her, her shoulders tense, and before I know exactly what’s going to happen next, she steps up to me and pokes me in the leg, hard. “Ow, that hurt.” I rub my leg, still holding the ice up to my slapped face. Brutal night.

She growls, throws her arms up in the air, and then says, “Pike, you can’t just go sending donuts to people, donuts that—oh my God . . .” Her eyes move back and forth as her brain starts to process what’s going on.

Fun fact—I know Coraline works at Frankie Donuts.

I also am quite aware that she’s good friends with Gunner and Romeo, teachers at our school. Teachers who used to be professional baseball players. Teachers who are friends with people like Maddox Paige and Jason Orson and Knox Gentry.

I also was informed by Keiko today that, this past summer, Arlo had a large party at his house during the All-Star break. Said baseball players were there, and Cora made a fool of herself in front of Maddox Paige.

Furthermore, I know that said baseball players all know Cora works at Frankie Donuts and that she hooks them up by sending boxes to the stadium, another fact that Keiko was very upset about. They get free donuts, but she’s “with child” and gets nothing.

Therefore, I’m swimming in absolute joy from the look of mortification on her face.

Did I send donuts?

No.

I don’t know anyone in marketing there.

I had no intentions of sending anything.

But if one of us can lie in this marriage, both of us can. Only problem is, she doesn’t know that I know she’s lying, whereas I know everything that comes out of her mouth is a bold-faced, constructed lie.

Coraline Turner has met her match.

“Something wrong, darling?” I ask in a sweet tone.

I see the connections she’s making in her head.

The mortification running through her eyes.

It’s bloody brilliant on my end. Positively comical.

They're going to think she's lost her fucking mind.

And that's what's absolutely making my day.

She's playing with fire when it comes to fucking around with me.

"I, uh . . . I need to make a phone call."

She snags her mobile from the counter and runs off to the bathroom, slamming the door. She turns on the shower, probably to drown out her voice.

Chuckling, I hop off the counter and shake the ice into the sink before reaching for a plate and placing some pancakes on them. Luckily for me, she must be tired of eating gross dinners, and she's giving us both a break. I douse the pancakes in syrup and take them to the table where I dig in—well, carefully dig in. I take a small mouthful and let the flavor sit on my tongue for a second, and when everything seems normal, I continue to eat them.

They look normal, but with my luck, she'd have put sardine extract in them.

While I eat, I scroll through the news on my mobile, listening to Cora's hushed tones on the other side of the bathroom door.

After a few minutes, the door opens and a composed Cora walks out.

"Everything okay in there?"

"Yes, everything is fine." Her chin rises to the sky. "Everything is quite all right."

There's an air about her that screams trouble. Like she's planning something, seeking revenge. Little does she know, I have three obnoxious siblings, so I can take anything that comes my way. And I mean anything.



“GOOD MORNING,” I say to my first-period class, or as I like to call them, the zombie hour.

History first thing in the morning . . . next to impossible to get these kids engaged. I call it a good day if they remember to call me Mr. Greyson.

A myriad of mumbles sound throughout the classroom, but that’s pretty much all I get from them.

I set my bag on top of my desk and pull out my textbook. I set it on my desk. At the same time, I hear a whisper amongst the zombies. I glance up at them and there are some amused faces, the ones that are paying attention, at least. One kid in the back points and chuckles.

Points at me.

Hell, did I forget to wipe my face after brushing my teeth or something? Toothpaste residue is a real thing.

I’m tempted to wipe at my mouth as more students start to wake up as they stare at me. Smirks cross their faces. They hide their chuckles behind their hands, and blatant whispering begins.

Okay, what the hell is going on?

A student in the front, Blake, raises his hand.

“Yes?” I ask.

“Uh, Mr. Greyson . . .”

When he doesn’t say anything else, I say, “Yes, Blake?”

“Uh, not to be the bearer of bad news, but you have a thong attached to your book.”

“What?” I ask while lifting my book to examine it. And sure enough, dangling from a string, attached to my book, is a thong.

A hot-pink lace thong.

Bloody hell.

Embarrassment sears up the back of my neck as I quickly rip the thong off the book and shove it back into my bag. A

gaggle of laughter rings through the room as I attempt to compose myself.

This is what she calls war.

That's fine.

Yup, I said *fine*.

If that's how she wants to play this . . . then game on.



**CORA:** *GIRLS' night at the Atomic Saloon. Don't wait up.*

I reread Cora's text and smile to myself as I look up from my mobile and at the restaurant sign in front of me. I've heard the other teachers in the lounge talk about the Atomic Saloon and how it's their favorite bar, but I've never visited. Before I came, I decided to look up the restaurant to see if there was anything I could work with when it came to embarrassing my wife.

But there was nothing in particular that caught my eye, so instead, I stayed with my initial idea. Not super creative, but it'll do the trick.

I dismount my bike and remove my helmet before heading into the bar. The atmosphere of the bar is industrial, with Edison-bulb light fixtures, cool metal chairs, and exposed, darkly stained wood. Just from stepping inside, I can see why it's a favorite of the teaching staff; it has a very relaxed vibe. To the left, there are booths lined up along the wall, with TVs overhead, and that's where I spot Cora, Stella, and Greer.

Smiling to myself, I tuck my helmet under my arm and walk toward their booth. Cora has her hair tied up in a tight bun and she's wearing an off-the-shoulder jumper that shows off her delicate collarbone. As I walk toward her, all I can think about is tearing that jumper off and pressing my lips along her skin. Exploring the length of her collarbone. Tasting her skin. Marveling at the moans that slip past those pouty lips.

I want her . . . bad.

Greer is the first to spot me and her smile quickly morphs into a concerned look. I see her mouth something, which causes Cora to fling her head in my direction to make eye contact with me.

I smirk.

She frowns.

I make a kissing motion at her.

Her eyebrows form a menacing scowl.

Oh yeah, this will be a lot of fun.

When I reach the table, I say, “Hey, *wife*.” Stella covers her mouth to hide her laugh.

Cora stiffens. “Pike, what the hell are you doing here?” she whispers, while her eyes travel the vast space of the restaurant, fear in them.

What could she be so scared of?

Curious, I glance over my shoulder, and at the bar, I see Romeo and Arlo chatting with beers in their hands.

Girls’ night? Not so much.

I face Cora again and say, “You know, I was in class today and I happened to pull out my textbook.” Her lips press together in a nervous grimace. “And there happened to be a string attached to it, and attached to the string was this.” I pull the pink thong out of my pocket and hold it out to her.

“Oh, Cora,” Greer says, shaking her head.

Stella laughs out loud.

And Cora’s eyes widen.

I dangle it from my finger and say, “I was so worried you were missing it that I thought I’d bring it to you. Funny, though, I haven’t seen you wear this one yet.”

“Has he seen you wear other ones?” Stella asks.

“No,” Cora nearly shouts. “He hasn’t seen me in anything.”

“Not true. I recall your black bra last night.”

“You told us nothing was going on,” Greer says.

“Nothing is going on,” Cora replies with panic in her voice.

“Babe, is that what you’re telling your friends? You didn’t tell them about how you had your hand down my pants—”

“You can leave now,” Cora says, a combination of mortification and anger flushing through her.

“Uh, no. I would like him to stay.” Stella steps in. “Because it seems as if there has been some information we’re missing out on.”

“There’s no information to be told. Nothing is happening.”

“Then how do I know what you taste like?” I ask.

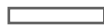
“Oh . . . my . . . God,” Stella says, turning toward Cora. “What the actual hell? You’re having sex with Pike and not telling us about it?”

Fury flies through Cora’s eyes as she sits up in the booth and snatches the thong from my hand. She points to the door. “You’re excused.”

My work here is done. “See you at home, wifey.” I wink and take off.

Needless to say, she doesn’t talk to me when she gets home.

Nor does she talk to me in the morning.



“HOW DID YOU SLEEP?” Cora asks as I walk into the kitchen, freshly showered.

She’s rather . . . jovial . . . this morning, and that’s quite unnerving, especially since she jabbed me multiple times with



her foot throughout the night. It's been her latest idea of trying to get me to give in to her annulment demands—disruptive sleep.

I hate to admit it, but after the fifth jab, I was just about ready to smack her leg away, but I held it together and she finally fell asleep.

“Uh . . . could've been better.”

She lifts a mug to her lips, takes a sip, and then presses her lips together. “Mmm, that's good.” Her eyes connect with mine and she hands the mug to me. “Here.”

I eye her, then the coffee, then I eye her again. “Why are you giving me this?”

“You drink coffee, don't you?”

“I prefer tea, but yes, I drink coffee. But you don't ever make me coffee,” I counter.

“Thought I would pick it up on my wifely duties.”

“That's sexist,” I say. “It isn't the wife's duty to make coffee for her husband.”

She rolls her eyes. “Just trying to be a good spouse. You know, since you dropped a bomb on my friends the other night. They don't understand why I don't try to stick it out with you, see where this marriage takes us.”

“Remind me to get your friends something nice. Do they like donuts?” I bring the coffee to my lips and take a sip, not a gulp, because, you know, just in case. When all seems good, I take another large sip.

“Don't worry, their tactics to keep you around didn't work with me. I still very much want a divorce, but they said maybe if I'm nicer to you, then I'll be able to get what I want.” She steps up to me and traces her fingers over my chest. “And what I want is for you to no longer be my husband.”

“Shame,” I say before gulping down the rest of the coffee. “Because I don't foresee that happening.” I hand her the cup of coffee, lean forward, and press a kiss to her forehead. “Have a good day, Coraline.”

On my way out, I grab a protein bar and stuff it in my backpack.

Would you be surprised to know that I don't trust her? That I don't believe a single word that just came out of her mouth? There's no way she's going to try to be nicer. Not with the streak she's been on lately. No, she's planning something. I just have to figure out what exactly she's planning.

It takes me ten minutes to get to school. I park in the same spot, next to a giant oak tree at the far end of the car park. I don't mind the walk, and I prefer parking my bike in the shade, even though it's autumn.

Apparently, Thanksgiving is right around the corner, and I'm wondering if Cora is going to her brother's house. Will she take me with her? Not that I have anything to celebrate, but I've learned it's a time for family. Well, I'm family now. *In my opinion, anyway.*

Once I'm in the school, instead of going to my classroom, I make my way to the science lab and stick my head through the doorway. Keiko is at her desk again, so I give the door a quick rap with my knuckles and ask, "Hey, how are you today?"

She glances up from her desk and pushes her glasses up on her nose. "Not faring well, dear Pike."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't care to communicate at this time."

I nod. "Okay, well, you know where I am if you do want to talk."

"I appreciate your camaraderie," she says, and hell, I feel fucking bad for her. Really bad.

I wish there was more that I could do, maybe talk to Kelvin, see where he's at, but then again, Keiko broke up with Kelvin because she knew he didn't want kids. She hasn't told him she's pregnant, and it's not my place to say anything to him. Hopefully she'll change her mind soon.

“Anytime, I just—” My stomach gurgles, loud enough for Keiko to hear from across the room.

“Dear sir, did that bellow erupt from your intestines?”

I place my hand on my stomach. “Yeah, I believe so.”

“Concerning. The deep rumble accompanied by the severity of boisterous sound ripping through your intestines leads me to believe that you are going to be incapacitated in a few minutes.”

“No, I think I’m just—” *Rumble, rumble, gurgle.* Oh fuck. That does not feel right.

Keiko winces. “Do you require the assistance of a toilet?”

I shake my head and take a deep breath. “No. I’m okay. Probably just hungry.” I straighten up and say, “I’m heading to my classroom and I’ll eat something before the students arrive.”

“Well, you’ve obtained my phone number. Please feel obliged to message me if there seems to be any gastrointestinal issues.” She adjusts her glasses again. “I’m not a gastroenterologist, but I must say, that inharmonious clamoring is not orderly.”

Yeah, they don’t feel *orderly* either.

“Thanks, Keiko,” I say, raising my hand and then disappearing down the hall to my classroom. I set my things down and carefully take a seat as my stomach rumbles again.

I didn’t have much to eat last night, so maybe my stomach is just telling me to feed it. I reach into my backpack, find the protein bar I packed for myself, and down that pretty quickly, hoping it helps my stomach. I top it off with some water and take a few deep breaths.

When nothing else happens, I heave a sigh of relief.

See? Hungry.

That’s all it was.

Just a very empty stomach.

Thank goodness.

The bell rings overhead and kids shuffle into my room, all tired, all not wanting to be at school today. They take their seats, and I let them talk for a few minutes as I collect my notes for the day. Just as I reach for my journal, my stomach grumbles again, but this time, the grumbling is lower.

Not quite in my stomach this go-around.

Fuck, that doesn't feel right.

I pause, hands on my desk, and glance down. A heavy pressure starts to build at the base of my spine, and not a good kind of pressure. My intestines cramp, I start to sweat, and it hits me all at once . . .

Fucking Cora and her coffee.

I push back from the desk, clenching my butt cheeks together, and shoot up from my chair, my feet getting tangled on the chair legs, and at the same time snagging my mobile from the front pocket of my bag. My frantic movements draw the attention of my students.

“Be right back,” I say quickly as I charge out of the room and straight toward the teachers' lounge, which is right across from my classroom—thank God.

I run into the bathroom, texting Principal Dewitt, asking her to go to my class, and then rush to the toilet.

I'll spare you the details of what happens next, but all you need to know is that Cora went too fucking far.

## Chapter Twelve

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### CORA

“I think I went too far,” I whisper quietly as I sit at the teachers’ lounge table. Normally, we have lunch in Greer’s classroom, but some kid threw up in the middle of her class and the room is being cleaned, and Stella’s classroom is being used by the Chess Club right now, so our lunch has been switched to the teachers’ lounge, which makes me uncomfortable.

I don’t like being out in the open like this. I want to be able to speak freely, without hushed tones. I don’t like having to keep my voice down or use code words.

Currently, *Sunflower* is code for Pike. Just to keep you abreast.

We hoped to have Keiko join us for lunch today but she refused our invitation and said even though the three days were up, she still wanted time to herself. I sent her donuts this morning, and her reply was . . . *did he tell you?*

Did who tell me?

I was so confused and was about to ask her what she was talking about, but then we had a social media nightmare I had to clean up, and by the end of that, I forgot to respond. When I was walking to the teachers’ lounge, I just texted her back and told her to enjoy.

“What do you mean, you went too far?” Stella asks. “You mean when you touched Sunflower’s . . . uh . . . stem?”

“Good one,” Greer says with a smile.

“Is that not talking about it anymore?” I ask.

The other night, when Pike dropped my thong off at the Atomic Saloon, I nearly had a heart attack, because it wasn’t a girls’ night, it was a friends’ gathering, with Gunner and Lindsay, Gunner’s baby mama and fiancée, showing up right after, and the last thing I needed was for Arlo to question why Pike was handing me a pink thong. Luckily for me, he was talking to Romeo about a new line of clothes Banana Republic was coming out with. I know this because Romeo was bitching about the boring conversation afterwards.

But once Pike left, I had to explain to Stella and Greer what happened between me and Pike, and I did a crap job of it, because honestly, I still don’t know what happened. I’m still confused about it all. Why I touched him, why I fingered myself to completion, his name heavy on my tongue. And I’m very much confused why I go to bed every night, hoping and praying that he touches me again.

Of course, I told them about his piercings, and Stella went on to tell me what a moron I was being, how I should totally give him a shot, and for a brief second, I thought about it, but then again, I just don’t want to be in a serious relationship right now.

Even if Pike and I had ended up having the hot and heavy night I’d wanted in Vegas, and even if I’d been really attracted to him before then, I didn’t want marriage. One night of fun. That’s what I was after.

Keenan was emotionally abusive, selfish, and vindictive. And living with a man who never sticks up for you and throws your wealth in your face as if you’re nothing without it, takes its toll. He never saw my value, or me as a human and, after being treated so badly, I know I need more time to find myself before I can give myself to anyone again.

*I need to love myself before I can consider loving someone else.* That's one of the most helpful tips from therapy I've gained.

I told Greer and Stella we're not to talk about what happened the other night between me and Pike ever again. Because if we complicate this *arrangement* with sex, Pike will believe we have a chance. Clearly, Stella didn't get the clue.

"I'm just curious, you know . . . if you've done it again," Stella says.

"No. I told you. It was a one-time thing and that I would never be doing it again." Even though I desperately want to feel those piercings in my mouth.

"Then how did you go too far?"

I bite my bottom lip. "I'm surprised Arlo didn't say anything to you," I say to Greer.

She perks up at the mention of her husband's name. "Say what to me?"

"He called me yesterday, you know, for his weekly chat to make sure I'm living my best life, aka, being overly protective, and he told me how Principal Dewitt had to step in for Sunflower yesterday. All day."

"What?" Greer asks. "Why?"

"Because, I might have . . . uh . . . put an extreme amount of ex-lax in his coffee."

"Oh God," Stella says, pressing her hand to her forehead, while shaking her head. "Please tell me he didn't do anything in front of the kids."

"Not that I know of. I mean, he came home early, didn't say anything to me, and was still wearing the same pants. But I know he wasn't feeling well. There was no blame pointed in my direction, but he didn't talk to me much either." I glance over my shoulder. "I feel like that might have been too much."

"Giving a man the runs when he's supposed to be teaching all day, yeah, that's pushing your luck."

“I know.” I pop open my water bottle. “I was just so angry about him showing up at the Atomic Saloon. After the conversation I had with Arlo last night, the last thing I want him to know is what happened in Vegas.”

“He was in a bit of a mood last night,” Greer says. “And he does worry about you a lot. He was asking about you the other day, trying to see if you were okay. He said you haven’t been answering some of his texts.”

“Because I have a life and the last thing I want to talk to him about are stock options.”

Stella pops a grape into her mouth. “That really is a boring conversation. But what I want to know is if Sunflower came to school today. Did he make a full recovery?”

“He did. But he didn’t talk much to me this morning. Just a general *good morning* and *see you later*. I think I might have broken him.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted?” Greer asks just as the teachers’ lounge door swings open. I hold my breath, hoping it isn’t Pike, but when my cardigan-wearing brother walks through, a different kind of nervousness runs through me.

He spots us immediately and walks up to our table. He places one hand on the back of Greer’s chair, lifts her chin, and places a kiss on her lips. “How’s your day so far?” he asks her.

“Better now.”

Ugh . . . seriously, let me go puke in the sink. These two are nauseating.

Arlo turns to me and says, “Coraline, I didn’t know you were coming in today.”

“Impromptu lunch.” I smile and nod toward the counter. “I brought in donuts for the staff.”

“I’m sure everyone loves you for it.” He eyes me. “Have you thought about those stocks I sent you?”

See? Boring.



Ever since he's gotten married, it's like he's completely dulled out. Where's the pizzazz in this man?

He's just content now. A snooze-fest.

"Haven't had a chance," I say as Stella snickers next to me.

"Well, you have the money to invest now. You need to consider it. Might be time to drop the job at Frankie Donuts and focus on something that you can grow into."

"I'm fine with where I am right now," I say, knowing full well that even though Arlo was supportive at first, deep down he hates that his sister works for a donut shop.

"I just think—"

The door to the teachers' lounge bursts open and in walk four men, all dressed in white-and-red striped suits, wearing old-timey hats, and sporting rather impressive mustaches.

"Is there a Coraline Turner in the room?"

Oh.

Dear.

God.

"Oh, right here," Stella says, pointing toward me.

I swat at her hand. "Shhh."

But it's too late. They walk up to me, followed by a woman with arms full of balloons, chocolates, and a teddy bear wearing a shirt that says "I love you."

"This might be my favorite day," Stella whispers as the woman drops the paraphernalia in my arms.

I don't even dare to look at Arlo, but I know he must be confused.

One of the men from the barbershop quartet blows a petite whistle, and, together, they bounce up and down while singing,

"Bum, bum, bum, bum.

Cora dear, I'm at such a loss.  
Is it really me you want to toss?  
I want to know the girl you are.  
What do you say? Meet me at the bar?  
Tonight at eight, let's make a plan.  
Love your truly . . . devoted man.  
Your beloved husband who—”

“Stop!” I shout, standing from my chair, so much fear inside me that I might puke, right here, right now, all over the “I love you” teddy bear. “That’s—that’s enough.” The room silences and the quartet look between each other. “Thank you for the obnoxious song. Got the picture. You can move on.”

Confused, the barbershop quartet stares at me.

When they don't move, I shout, “Begone!”

Now insulted—I don't blame them—they take off, shuffling through the quiet and still teachers' lounge.

How freaking humiliating.

Horrifying.

The poem wasn't even good. Did Pike write that?

Not that it matters, because I can't seem to focus on anything but the fear of God Arlo has begun in me with his hands on his hips as he looks at me for answers.

“Coraline, my room. Now.”

I swallow hard. “You know, I actually, uh, I have something I need to take care of.”

“Coraline.”

I ignore the stern voice of my brother and shuffle past him, clutching the chocolates, balloons, and bear to my chest. I head toward the door and throw it open, only to see Pike standing in the doorway of his classroom, arms folded, a look of satisfaction across his face.

“Looking spoiled, Miss Turner,” he says casually.

I mouth back to him, “I’m going to murder you.”

“Bring it,” he mouths back.

Arlo is hot on my heels. “Coraline, we need to talk.”

“Later,” I say, shuffling away. “Much later.” And then I take off down the hallway and out the door, my tail tucked between my legs, balloons bumping along the hallway walls.



**GREER:** *Arlo is asking questions. I don't know what to do. I don't like lying to my husband.*

**Stella:** *Romeo is asking questions too, because Arlo asked Romeo to ask. I silenced him with a blow job. He's now passed out on the bed, but I'm not sure how long I can keep his dick in my mouth to silence him.*

**Greer:** *I wonder if Arlo's dick in my mouth will help.*

**Cora:** *Normally I would prefer you don't talk about my brother's dick in your mouth, but for the love of God, do whatever it takes. He can't find out. Keep all the dicks in your mouths.*

**Greer:** *Do you have a plan?*

**Cora:** *Does it look like I have a plan? I'm still clenching my ass out of pure mortification from what happened to me earlier. I'm barely hanging on by a thread, here. Arlo is onto me.*

**Greer:** *Yeah, and he's not going to drop it. You need to figure something out.*

**Cora:** *I know, but I don't know what the next plan of attack should be. I for sure thought the ex-lax was going to do it for him. Maybe I need to step it up even more.*

**Stella:** *That's what you keep saying, but you're failing drastically. At least when Greer was pranking Arlo, she made an impact.*

***Cora:** Arlo also didn't know that Greer was the one after him. The situation is different.*

***Greer:** It's true. Whatever Cora does, Pike is going to counterattack.*

***Cora:** That's why the next plan of attack has to be calculated. We really have to think about it.*

***Stella:** You know, I think I might have an idea.*

***Cora:** Please, for the love of God, tell me.*

***Stella:** Did Arlo ever tell you about his interview with Pike?*

***Cora:** No.*

***Greer:** Ohhh, wait, are you going to say what I think you're going to say?*

***Cora:** What are you going to say?*

***Stella:** Once again, Mr. Stick Up His Ass doesn't care for the new hire. He was totally schooled by Pike in history. Romeo told me Arlo was fuming about it.*

***Greer:** Yeah, I remember that. Pike absolutely destroyed Arlo in knowledge.*

***Cora:** Sooo, what you're telling me is not only is Arlo going to be mad that I got wasted and married in Vegas, but he's going to be livid that it's to a guy he can't stand?*

***Stella:** Pretty much. But I bet you it's on Pike's radar to impress after that interview, and when I say impress, I mean impress the staff. Staff members tend to follow Arlo's lead, and he hasn't been quiet about his dislike for Pike.*

***Cora:** Okay, what's the plan, then?*

***Stella:** Leave it to me. We're going to take care of this once and for all. In the meantime, fuck with his tea.*

***Cora:** What do you mean?*

***Greer:** Ooo, good one. But don't fuck with his tea, he'll think it's on purpose. Make your tea wrong, that will drive him nuts.*

*Cora: How do I make it wrong? It's a tea bag in water.*

*Stella: Read this link [link]. It'll give you everything you need to know.*



“WHAT ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT?” Pike asks, cutting through the silence of the night.

I didn't bother with dinner tonight—frankly, I'm exhausted from trying to decide how to destroy my *husband's* tastebuds—and instead served him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, thinking at least he can cringe over that.

But lo and behold, the fucker liked it.

Yes, fucker.

That's what he is in my head at the moment, because my brother won't stop texting me to find out if the balloons were from Keenan and if I was getting back with him. While I thought saying *no* would put him at ease, Arlo continued, wanting to know why the quartet said *husband*. Basically, Pike has made my life with my brother a living hell.

I'm stretched out across the bed, while Pike is sitting at the dining table with his book. I've always loved my little apartment. I never needed anything bigger than this, that was until an Englishman started crashing at my place. Now I realize I need so much more space. I need a couch, and I need another room other than the bathroom. Because at night, this is how it is—we're in the same room, but we're not talking, or barely talking, just sharing the same air.

Looking to the side, I say, “I'm thinking about all the ways I can possibly get away with murdering you in your sleep.”

“Aw, babe, you're thinking about me?” He presses his hand to his chest.

I scoot off the bed and say, “I hate you.”

“You know . . . now that hurts.”

I walk over to the kitchen and he sets his book down to follow me.

“I hurt your feelings?” I ask him in a sarcastic tone.

“Yes, you did.” He leans against the counter, watching me. “I think you should make them feel better.”

I pause in my pursuit of making some tea and look over my shoulder at the stud of a man that I despise. God, he looks so good. Tight, black shirt that clings to his biceps, grey-washed jeans hanging low on his hips, and dare I say it . . . bare feet. I might as well stick my hand down his pants now, because that’s how enticing his bare feet are to me.

I swear, I don’t have a foot fetish, but a man in jeans and no socks is . . . \*bites down on fist\* . . . just irresistible.

“If you’re expecting me to make you feel better, you have lost your mind.” I grab the tea bags from the cabinet and pull one out. Then I reach for a mug.

“Making some tea?”

“Very observant,” I say.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you make tea.”

“It’s because you’re teaching children—Lord help them—while I usually drink my tea, but I need something to calm me so I don’t pierce your eye with my finger.”

“I should be grateful, then.”

I shimmy past him and fill up my mug with water.

His hand lands on my arm. “Wait, what are you doing?”

“Making tea.”

“What are you doing with that?”

I tear my arm away from him. “Getting the water. Jesus, you’d think for someone who grew up in England, you’d understand the concept.”

I walk over to the microwave and open the door, only for it to be slammed shut.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asks, and I’m pretty sure this is the first time I’ve seen him lose his cool. He’s been pretty even-tempered about everything that’s happened, but me making tea? He’s been set off.

“Heating up my water.”

“In the microwave?” he asks, insulted.

“Yes, in fact, you are correct about that. Very, very observant.” I go to open the microwave again, but he slams the door once more. “Uh, excuse me, you’re being rude.”

“You’re being rude,” he shoots back.

“Excuse me?”

“You don’t make tea in the microwave. That’s . . . sacrilege.”

I set my mug down. “Well, then, how else am I supposed to heat my water?”

He gestures toward the stove. “In the kettle.”

Yes, that’s how I would normally boil the water, but after some fun research, I found out heating water in the microwave is a cardinal sin to Brits. But I didn’t think it would get this kind of reaction from him.

And just like that, I’m starting to feel better.

“That kettle is purely for decoration.” I reach for the handle of the microwave again, but he maneuvers in front of me and takes the mug out of my hand.

“You are not microwaving your water. Jesus Christ.” He takes the kettle off the stove and fills it up with water. He places it back on the stove, lights the burner, and steps away.

“Excuse me, that’s not how I make my tea.”

“It is now,” he says, guarding the tea kettle like it’s the Queen of England. Arms folded over his chest, he stares me down, as if begging me to test him.

But I don’t. I let it rest . . . for now. I have one more trick up my sleeve.

“This is taking forever,” I say. “It’ll be tomorrow by the time the water is ready.”

“I literally just put it on the stove.”

“And if it was in the microwave, then I would have it ready by now.”

“In thirty seconds? Your water would be the perfect steeping temperature after thirty seconds?”

I roll my eyes and walk away. “You’re being a tea snob.”

“Rightfully so. Christ. You can’t just microwave the bloody water, Coraline.”

He’s legit upset.

Actually agitated.

Maybe even slightly stressed, and honestly, this is the best thing that’s happened to me since he moved in.

This moment, right here, with his hands pulling through his hair in distress . . . over *tea*.

If only I knew this was going to throw him over the edge, I would’ve started microwaving tea water on day one.

While I wait for the kettle, I figure I might as well strike him while he’s weak. He’s confused, he’s disoriented, and he’s out of his mind with worry about tea, so I might as well go in for the kill.

I thought I’d never use my body as a tool in this cockeyed tournament of deceit, but desperate times call for desperate measures. He’s clearly in distress, which means I need to mess with his mind.

From my dresser, I pull out my skimpiest pajamas and head into the bathroom. Once the door is shut, I shed my clothes and slip on my black bikini-cut shorts—if that’s what you want to call them. They’re cut high, up to my bikini line on the sides, but offer a little bit of coverage like a short. And then I slip on the loose, silk crop top that offers absolutely zero support. I check myself out in the mirror and slowly smile. My midriff is showing, the shorts are sitting low, and the crop top,



if I move quickly enough, shows the underside of my boobs. This—this is dangerous. But after today, I'm willing to work with dangerous.

I gather my clothes and exit the bathroom. I toss my clothes in the hamper, take a deep breath, and head back into the kitchen. Pike is staring down at his phone when I enter. Thankfully, my presence pulls his attention away from his screen just long enough to catch what I'm wearing. He pauses, looks down, and then does a double take with an unexpected crease to his brow.

Satisfied, I turn away from him, hiding my smile, and go to the fridge to take out the milk for the tea.

When I turn back around, he has set his phone down and now his hands are clenching the counter, his eyes completely focused on me.

“What?” I ask as the tea kettle starts to whistle.

He doesn't answer, but instead removes the kettle and turns off the stove. Once again, I reach for my mug and do the one thing I know will set him off. Slowly, deliberately, I uncap the milk and pour some into my mug.

“What the hell are you doing?” he snaps from behind me.

I glance over my shoulder to find him towering over me, chest heaving, hands fisted at his side. Huh, this very well might break him.

“Adding milk for my tea.”

His hands go to his head, gripping his hair. “Before—fuck . . . before you steep the tea?”

Hold it together, Cora.

Do not break.

I stifle my laugh, keep my smirk at bay, and say, “Yeah. Why wait when you can get a head start on making the tea?”

I reach for the honey, but that's it—he steps in and places his hand over mine. His rock-hard chest presses against my back as he steps up behind me.

“You’re fucking with me, aren’t you?” His voice is not amused. He’s irritated.

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe I’ve hit a nerve.

“No. This is how I make tea.”

“You make it wrong.”

“There isn’t a right way to make tea,” I say, turning around to face him.

His body heat, his anger . . . they warm me up.

The perusal of his angry eyes over my chest ignites a flame deep within me.

And the step forward he takes, leaving no space between us, sparks my need for him again.

The brushes of his shoulder while we share a bed, the morning smiles he gives me when walking out of the bathroom, the distinct way he compliments how I look, even when I think I look my worst, they’re all compiling together, swirling around in my head and confusing me. Turning this burning desire I have for him into an absolute need.

“There is a correct way to make tea, you just need to be educated.” He steps away and sets up two mugs on the counter next to the stove, along with two tea bags and the milk, and that’s it. He then walks back to me, grabs my hands, and pulls me in front of the counter, closing me in by stepping up behind me.

I’m trapped, his burly chest keeping me in place, as one of his hands falls to my hip and the other lands against the counter.

He lowers his head directly next to mine, his breath tickling my cheek, and softly, he asks, “Are you ready to learn how to make a proper tea?”

Uh, no, I’m ready for you to push me up against the counter and screw me from behind.

When I don’t answer—because I’ve swallowed my tongue—he repeats, “Are you, Coraline?”

“Y-yes,” I say.

“Good.” His lips dance close to my ear. “You start with heating water in a kettle. Then, you pour water into the mugs three-quarters of the way.” When I don’t move, he says, “Pick up the kettle, Coraline.”

“Oh.” I’ve lost all control of the situation. I had him, I was doing so well, but one close encounter with the man and now I’m listening to every word he says. Performing as if he controls the strings to my limbs.

I fill the mugs and set the kettle back on the stove.

“Good girl,” he says, his thumb on my hip rubbing against my skin.

Yes . . . yes, that feels so good. Having a man touch me, but not just any man, this man. The one I’ve been lusting after for months. I really shouldn’t be pleased with his encouragement, but damn it, I am. And I’m more than pleased with his touch as well. His stroke. His mouth so close to my ear.

“Now put the tea bags in the hot water.” I do as he says, his voice rumbling over me, soothing my very soul. I jiggle the tea bags and he says, “Don’t.” The harsh tone pauses me. “Let them steep; don’t touch them.”

“Okay.”

When he doesn’t move away, I look back and ask, “Are we just going to stand here and watch it steep?”

“You can tell me about your day, since you didn’t say much to me during dinner.”

“Because I was mad at you.”

“Mad?” he whispers. “Why were you mad? I send you praises of my affection and you’re mad?” His nose rubs against my cheek and I lean into his caress.

“It was obnoxious.”

“It’s how I feel.”

“Bullshit,” I say as his hand smooths around my hip and to my stomach. His pinky finger slips past the waistband of my shorts as he splays his hand across my skin. “You don’t even like me.”

“I do,” he says, but there’s no teasing in his voice. It feels honest, real. “I think you’re pretty fucking cool, Cora.”

“Why?” I say before I can stop myself. “You barely know anything about me.”

“I don’t need to know the details to enjoy your personality, to see you’re courageous, outgoing, and you won’t step down. I like that. There’s life in you. Vibrant, sometimes out-of-control life.”

“Some might say that side of my personality is a downfall.”

His hand rises up my stomach until his thumb caresses the underside of my breast. Involuntarily, I suck in a sharp breath. I can’t remember the last time someone touched me like this: slow, deliberately. And I can’t recall feeling this charged from one touch, one caress.

“I don’t think it’s a downfall.” Like a feather, barely touching me, his mouth trails across my neck. A delicious wave of goosebumps spreads over my skin as I feel myself lean into him more. “It’s what I find most attractive about you.”

Lost in the moment, I ask, “So you do find me attractive? Because from all those times I tried to get your attention, I thought you didn’t.”

He shakes his head. “Nah, I ignored you because I knew if I gave in, it would end up like this, you pressed up against me, me trying to hold back. To not go too far.”

His thumb rubs against my breast, and all I can focus on is what it would be like if he stroked my nipple, sucked it into his mouth, giving me exactly what I need.

“Why don’t you want to go too far?”

“Wasn’t ready for something serious.” His teeth nibble on my ear.

“And yet, you want to stay married. *That’s* something serious.”

“There’s no point turning back now. I have you. I want to keep you.”

He presses a kiss behind my ear and, fuck me, I melt. Right into him. I let him control me, take over my thoughts, make me think of nothing but the sweet pleasure he could give me.

I want to tell him to touch me, to move his hand south to where I’m pulsing . . . pulsing for him.

“Do you want to keep me?” he asks.

No . . .

Yes . . .

God, I don’t know.

When he holds me like this, teases me, taunts me, tells me that my faults are why he likes me, it makes me think that there could be something between us, that maybe, just maybe, this was all meant to be.

I’m about to answer, when he says, “Time’s up, Cora.”

“What?”

His hand drops from my stomach and he repeats, “Time’s up. Steeping is done.”

Oh, right, we were making tea.

God, the last thing I want right now is tea, especially when I’m all keyed up, ready to go. I want to go back to him touching me. Him whispering in my ear, pressing sweet kisses against my skin. I want him to turn me around, lift me up on the counter, and spread my legs so he fits between them. I want him to bend me backwards and run his hand down my chest, followed by his mouth. I want his mouth on my breasts, his tongue flicking—

“Coraline.” His voice demands my attention.

“Huh? What?” I ask.

“You’re not listening to my directions.”

“Oh, what?” I clear my throat. “Uh, the milk, right?”

I can’t tell if he’s amused by my scatterbrain or not, but I lean against him as he says, “This is where you pour in the milk.”

Honestly, my brain can’t process what he’s saying.

I’m a muddled mess of desperation.

Just those few touches, those gentle whispers . . . they’ve fried my brain into nothing.

I can’t be held accountable for what happens next.

I turn in his embrace and rest my hands on his chest. “I would rather finish what you were doing.” Because, honestly, all plans are thrown out the window when I’m feeling like this, hungry for the man in front of me.

“Finish what? I was just talking.”

“You were not just talking,” I say, as my body physically aches, pleading for release.

“We were.” He stuffs his hands in his pockets, and that right there pisses me off. He knew exactly what he was doing and instead of finishing me off, he’s going to leave me wishing he gave me more.

Well, I’m not going to have it.

“Fine,” I say.

“Fine?” He quirks a brow.

“Yup. Fine.” If he’s not going to finish what he started, then I am. I push past him and go to my nightstand, where I open the bottom drawer and whip out my vibrating wand.

I plug in the wand, lie down on my bed, and I’m about to stick the wand down my shorts when it’s grabbed from above me. My eyes immediately find Pike’s angry ones.

“Give me that.” I reach for it.

“No.”

“Excuse me?” I ask.

“If you’re going to come, you’re coming on my terms.”

Before I can ask him what he’s talking about, he whips his belt off his waist and places the bulb of the wand right at my clit, over my silk shorts.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

He doesn’t answer, instead, he takes the belt, loops it under my legs and over the wand and secures it tightly, keeping the wand in place and my legs shut.

Oh.

God.

Then, he gets up on the bed with me and straddles my body. He sits back on his heels, only to reach up and turn on the wand.

The heavy vibration shivers against my clit and I suck in a sharp breath. I’m not going to last long at all.

But then he turns it off. No longer than five seconds was it shaking against me. The fucker.

“Don’t,” I say. “Don’t tease me.”

“Tell me you want it.”

Of course he wants me to beg. He wants control, he wants to see me falter.

This is dangerous. I shouldn’t be engaging in this kind of behavior with him because I know it’s weakening my defenses, but for the life of me, I can’t seem to stop him. I want this. I need this. I’m desperate for that connection with him, if anything to edge out this tension that has been building and accumulating between us.

But my stubborn pride can’t seem to let out the words.

“Not going to give in, are you?” he asks. “Okay. Fine by me.” He flicks on the wand and it vibrates for two seconds

before he flicks it off again.

The asshole.

He does it again.

And again.

And again, until I'm squirming and a light sheen of sweat breaks out over my heated skin.

"Pike, you motherfucker."

His finger lands on my stomach and he trails circles around my belly button.

"Say it, Cora. Say you want this."

"Do you really think I would admit that?"

"If you want to come, you will."

I keep my mouth shut and look away.

"Very well." He trails his fingers up my torso until they reach the hem of my top. He stares down at me and then, in one smooth motion, he lifts my top, exposing my breasts.

And his eyes feast.

I feel him grow hard. I see the way my body affects him, and I was right—dressing like this will not push him away, it's going to make him go even further with me.

"Fucking beautiful," he whispers as he leans forward, one hand on either side of my body, and bends his head over my right breast. His tongue peeks out and he very lightly flicks my nipple.

I groan.

I try to hold it back, I attempt to make sure he doesn't see how he's affecting me, but it's impossible. The control he has over me is unlike anything I've ever experienced. He's demanding but relaxed. He knows how to work me up and bring me back down. He knows exactly what I need, only to steal it away, which just causes my need to orgasm to build. To consume me until all responsible and coherent thoughts are thrown out the window.



With flicks of his tongue, he laps at my nipples, each stroke more maddening than the last, because he's not giving me the pressure I desire. Only instances of it, and I don't want instances. I want it all.

He turns on the wand and it vibrates against my pulsing clit, filling the room with a buzzing sound. I squirm to try to separate my legs, to let the vibrations dive deeper, but the belt he wrapped around my legs is unforgiving, keeping me in place.

"God," I moan, just as he sucks one of my nipples into his mouth—hard. "Oh fuck," I say as I move against him, my back arching toward his mouth.

He switches off the vibrator.

"Fuck . . . you," I groan, pushing at him, but he stays put, only lifting his head.

"Say it."

"No," I respond.

Determination sparks through his eyes. He gathers my hands over my head, pinning them there with his strong grasp, and then he turns on the vibrator again. I'm at his mercy as he returns his rapt attention to my breasts.

It's an onslaught of pleasure, and all I can do is get lost in it.

Get lost in the feel of his mouth on my nipples.

Get lost in the vibrations pulsing against my clit.

And get lost in the heaviness of his body straddling mine.

My orgasm starts as a dull throb between my legs and travels to my stomach, where it swirls and grows until my limbs start to tingle and the base of my spine grows heavy.

"Yes," I say as my hips push against the vibrator. "Oh my God, yes," I groan while I arch my back toward Pike's mouth. "Right there, Pike. Right—"

He turns off the wand.

“Noo,” I cry as tears well in my eyes, my orgasm teetering. “Fuck.” I squirm against him, release so close, but I need that extra push, that extra stimulant.

His nose drags across my jaw. “Say it, Coraline. Tell me you want this, and I’ll make sure you come so hard you forget your own goddamn name.”

I black out.

His voice.

The way he owns my body.

There’s no saving me.

And before I can stop myself, I whisper, “I want this. I want you.”

He lifts off my body and undoes the belt. Then he spreads my legs wide, pulls down the hem of my shorts, sticks the wand against my clit, and turns it on. The new position sends bolts of ecstasy through me, and in seconds, I’m screaming—yes, screaming—his name as I come hard and fast.

“Fuck, yes. Oh fuck, Pike. I can’t . . . God, it’s too much.”

Orgasm after orgasm strikes me, my clit growing overly sensitive as he continues to maneuver the wand over me. And my orgasm goes on until tears are streaming down my cheeks and the convulsions that rock my body subside.

Satisfied, he turns off the wand and pulls it from my shorts. I feel him set it to the side, and then he leans in close and presses a kiss to each of my nipples before pulling my top back down.

He lightly presses his hand to my stomach and asks, “Are you okay?”

“No,” I groan, hating that I gave in but so thankful that I did. “I didn’t want to want that from you.”

“Stop denying it, Cora. Give in and I promise I’ll give you everything you need.”

For some reason, I truly believe he would.

“I don’t want anything from you.”

He nips at my neck. “Clearly you do.” When he lifts up, my eyes immediately fall to his crotch, where there’s a very large outline of his cock, straining against the fabric of his jeans.

Because I’m a glutton for punishment, I sit up and reach for him, but he backs away.

“Let me take care of that,” I say.

He shakes his head. “Like I’ve said before, you can have my cock when you show up to bed naked or in one of my shirts.”

And then he heads to the bathroom. The door shuts and I hear him flip the shower on.

What I wouldn’t give to see him naked.

To see him stroking his long, hard cock.

To listen to the sound of his orgasm ripping through him.

I bet his moans are masculine, needy. Fulfilling.

I bite the corner of my lip and wonder if he locked the door to the bathroom. I didn’t hear it lock.

Would he be mad if I walked in on him? Would he tell me to leave, or would he let me watch?

I waver on what to do but curiosity wins out. I get out of bed and tiptoe to the bathroom. I carefully test the door handle to see if it’s open. When it twists, I squeeze my eyes shut in relief and then slowly push forward.

Through the glass shower door, I spot Pike with his back toward me. Muscular, tapered, sexy as hell, leading down to his tight rear end. But that’s not what’s causing a wave of heat to scorch up my neck.

It’s the furious pumping his arm is doing over his cock.

One arm pressed against the tiled wall, the other dragging over his cock. A cock I can’t see because he’s turned away from me.

“Fuck,” he mutters.

My cheeks go hot.

“Aww, fuck,” he says again, his arm now pumping harder and harder until his butt cheeks clench and he lets out a low groan of his release.

So hot. So what I needed to see. His limp body leans against the shower wall, and I take that moment to duck out of the bathroom. I go back to the bed and sit there, staring at the kitchen, wondering how we went from making tea to me seeing Pike jerk off in the shower.

I quickly grab my phone and text the girls.

***Cora:** Pike just made me come so hard I blacked out. It was with a vibrator and sucking my nipples. Don't ask how, it just happened. I'm losing my will.*

Thankfully, my friends text back immediately.

***Stella:** Girl, I would ride that orgasm train all the way to happily ever after. When you find a man who can please you, keep him around.*

***Greer:** Did you make him come in return?*

***Cora:** He won't let me touch him. But I did watch him jack off in the shower. It was so fucking hot.*

***Stella:** Did you see his cock?*

***Cora:** No, his back was toward me.*

***Stella:** Damn.*

***Cora:** I don't think I can hold out much longer. We need to get rid of him. Stella, I hope your plan is formulated.*

***Stella:** Coming together, but I fear you'll regret it.*

***Cora:** At this point, I need him out or I'm going to get lost in another man, and I don't want that. I can't get lost in someone else.*

The bathroom door opens and Pike walks out in nothing but a towel around his waist. Droplets of water slide down over the curves and divots of his beautifully sculpted chest.

Yes, please.

Just remove the towel now.

When his eyes meet mine, he says, “Next time, I’ll be sure to lock the door.”

I gasp and say, “You knew I was in there?”

He walks up to me and pushes me back on the bed. Eyes connected with mine, he says, “I can sense those gorgeous eyes on me everywhere.”

“Gorgeous?” I ask, struggling to catch my breath from his proximity.

“Yes, gorgeous.” His hand falls to my face, his thumb stroking my cheek. “These eyes haunt me. They consume my thoughts all day long. And when I get home, you might not think they do, but they welcome me, making me feel so goddamn warm inside.”

I can’t catch my breath. My heart beats so fast, it bruises against my ribs, sending a jolt of pain through my chest.

The honesty.

The warmth.

The confusion.

It all hits me at once, and before I can even think about a response, he pushes off the bed and goes back to the bathroom with a pair of boxer briefs in hand.

For the rest of the night, we don’t talk. He reads and I mindlessly play games on my phone until it’s time to turn off the light. I sneak under the covers and he slips in behind me. I turn away from him. He scoots in close.

I hold my breath.

He moves in even closer.

I prepare myself for his touch.

For a wandering hand.

But then he curls in close, his large body offering comfort as he whispers in my ear, “Good night, Coraline.”

The softness of his voice pulls me in closer and I lean against him as he shares my pillow with me.

His hand falls to my bare stomach, and the light touch causes an involuntary tremor to pulse between my legs.

*Please don't get aroused, body.* Not again, not when I should be figuring out ways to drive this man away.

But when his hand slides under my top and grips my breast, I moan quietly. His palm encompasses my roundness, and he offers the lightest of squeezes, just enough for me to react by pressing my butt against his crotch.

His response—his fingers find my nipple and twist and pull on it until I'm rolling to my back, giving him better access. When I look up at him, I find him smiling with satisfaction.

He has me right where he wants me.

And no matter how much of a fight I put up, I know there's no mercy in sight.

"I'm so goddamn turned on," I admit. "I'm throbbing, Pike."

"Then let's take care of that for you."

He reaches behind him and pulls the wand out again. But this time, I shimmy out of my shorts and spread my legs for him. He presses his lips to my neck and drags them along my skin, murmuring how stunning I am with his sexy, deep rumble. *God, I love his voice. His accent.* He plays my body as if it's his own personal instrument, knowing exactly when and where to pluck, rub, and squeeze, making me come once again on his terms.

## Chapter Thirteen

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### PIKE

Cora bites the corner of her lip, and I see it in her eyes, she's about to come.

"I have to get to work," I whisper to her as she writhes in bed.

"Don't stop. Please, Pike. Please don't stop."

And I don't, because, fuck, I want to see her come one more time. I want to hear her call out my name. I want to drag my fingers over her pussy and taste her so when I'm at work, I can remember just how goddamn sexy she is.

I move the wand farther down and then back up over her slit, tracing circles. I found out last night that this little maneuver drives her crazy.

"Oh fuck, Pike. Yes, I'm coming," she screams, her body convulsing. Her hand digs into my hair as I suck her nipple all the way into my mouth.

When her hips slow down and her body relaxes, I turn off the wand and set it on her nightstand. Releasing her nipple, I drag my mouth to her ear and say, "I have to go." Then I swipe two fingers over her clit, lift up so she can see me, and suck my fingers into my mouth.

Her eyes go dark and she reaches for me, cupping my cock.

“Put this in my mouth,” she says.

And, fuck, I want to. I want to choke her with my goddamn cock, but not yet. I have to get her to cross over to not just doing this because she’s horny, but because she wants me. Because she wants to be married to me. I’m still surprised by Cora. I knew she was sexy, that she was passionate, but I hadn’t realized how much she’d turn me on. I’ve had a few girlfriends over the years. One at uni that, for a while, I wondered if we’d become more. But she wanted different things. *Not me*. Even though I initially ignored Cora, I did wonder . . . *what if*. And now, knowing how fucking passionate she is, I’m wondering if she’ll ever just . . . *want me*. But for the sake of keeping my pa off my fucking back . . .

“You know what to do in order to earn my cock.”

I back away, hard as goddamn stone, and head toward the hallway to pick up my backpack and helmet.

“Pike,” she calls out in distress.

I glance over my shoulder. “Hmm?”

“No more,” she says. “No more making me come.”

“You’re the one begging for it, babe. Not me.”

Standing up, she walks toward me and lifts her short top up and over her head, revealing those perfect breasts to me. “I don’t beg for it.”

I reach up and play with one of her tits. “Then what do you call this?”

“Getting comfortable in my own apartment.”

I drop my helmet, spin her around, and push her up against the wall. She gasps as I lift her up and fit her carefully against my cock.

My fucking aching cock.

She smiles and I shake my head.

“You don’t want to come anymore? Then feel me come instead.” I reach down to my pants and undo my jeans, leaving my cock in my briefs. I push up against her core and pulse fast



and hard against her while keeping her pinned to the wall. “You don’t want this?” I push hard and she gasps. “You don’t want this cock inside of you?”

“Oh God,” she grinds out.

“Because my cock wants your pussy. It wants to feel how tight it is. It wants to feel my piercings rubbing against your sensitive skin. And I want to feel you come around my cock, squeezing it so goddamn tight”—I thrust into her—“that you make me black out.”

I thrust again and my legs start to give out as pleasure rips up the back of them.

“Fuck, I want your pussy. That sweet cunt, sensitive and sexy. Give it to me, Coraline. Give me that goddamn pussy.” I thrust once more and then we’re both panting and calling out each other’s names as we come together.

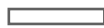
After a few more thrusts, I rest my head against her shoulder and take a deep breath.

Jesus Christ, that wasn’t part of the plan. But seeing her naked tits, watching her sashay toward me did me in.

I slowly lower her to the ground and press a gentle kiss to her forehead as she catches her breath.

When I pull away, I lift her chin and say, “I’m going to own that pussy of yours, and when I do, there will be no going back for you.”

I press one more kiss to her forehead and then go change my goddamn underwear.



***PIKE:** I can’t stop making her come. I’ve lost all track of what I’m supposed to be doing.*

***Killian:** Uh . . . what? She’s letting you touch her?*

***Pike:** Technically, I haven’t touched her yet. I’ve only used a vibrator, and I dry-humped her against a wall this morning.*

*Dude, I'm out of control. Five orgasms in the last twenty-four hours.*

**Killian:** *Jesus Christ, dude. That's one hell of a libido she has.*

**Pike:** *Tell me about it. Fuck. I'm so screwed, because I want more.*

**Killian:** *Wait, isn't that a good thing?*

**Pike:** *Not when she's still trying to get rid of me. She's still in denial and she's stubborn. I'm not sure a few great orgasms are going to change her mind. And I can feel her planning something. She lets me get her off, but she's still very guarded.*

**Killian:** *Then you need to find a way to get inside her heart. You need to find out what matters to her and then figure out how you can show her you care about it too. You have her, man, you're so close.*

**Pike:** *It doesn't feel like I am. It still feels like I'm really fucking far away.*

**Killian:** *Pa asked about you yesterday.*

**Pike:** *What did he want?*

**Killian:** *Was trying to get information out of me. I told him that you and the missus were happy and moved in together. I'm not sure he believed it for a second, but then I heard from one of my PI friends that Pa hired a private investigator to follow you around.*

**Pike:** *What a bloody psychopath. Good thing Cora and I are really living together.*

**Killian:** *Yeah, it helps your case immensely. But he's doing everything he can to expose you. Let me ask you a question—do you like this girl? Could you actually see yourself with her?*

**Pike:** *Honestly . . . I could. I'm still trying to learn her backstory, but I like her courage. Her stubbornness. Her tenacity. And she's chill, quirky at times, and also vibrant as fuck. She's everything Iris never was and she keeps me on my toes. It's fascinating.*

*Killian: Pike, are you—are you falling for her?*

*Pike: No, I don't think so. Not yet, at least, but I could see it happening. The more I spend time with her, the more I can see us connecting. Making this into a reality.*

*Killian: Damn, I had no clue.*

*Pike: Me neither.*

*Killian: When do I get to meet her, you know, when you're not wasted and on a Ferris wheel?*

*Pike: Probably when she doesn't mind being in the same room as me for anything other than orgasms.*

*Killian: Keep working at it. Seems like you're making progress.*

*Pike: You might be right. I think I am.*



"I BROUGHT YOU SOME PIZZA," I say to Keiko, who's sitting at her desk, all alone once again.

"Deep dish?" she asks, lifting her head.

"Of course. I know how much you like it." I know this because the last time I had lunch with Keiko, she spent the entire time talking about how deep dish is superior to regular pizza. Internally, I didn't agree with her—I prefer New York-style pizza—but externally I nodded and smiled because Keiko is fragile and slightly unhinged at the moment, and I wasn't sure what would happen if I didn't agree.

"Then perhaps you would join me for a food respite?"

"That's what I was hoping for," I say as I walk into her classroom and pull up a chair next to her desk. I set down the pizza box along with the plates, napkins, cutlery, and water bottles I brought.

She pops open the box, lowers her head to the pizza, and takes a giant sniff, a sniff so deep her nostrils pull in. When she lifts up, she slowly lets the air out through puckered lips.

“After a rather ineffective, but proper, sniff test, I would like to announce, this round Italian dish is ready to be consumed.”

She’s so weird, but I bloody well like it.

With a fork and my hands, I scoop up a piece for each of us and set them on the plates. “Dig in, Keeks.”

Her hands pause and she tilts her head while taking me in. “You referred to me as Keeks.”

“Erm, was I not supposed to?”

“I don’t retain rules about what individuals may call me so long as it’s not derogatory, but only my best friends have referred to me as the shortened version of my name. Does that entail we are best friends?”

“You’re my only friend at this school, so I would say yes.”

She straightens, and for the first time since she broke up with Kelvin, I see a hint of a smile cross her face.

“That would make you my first best friend that is of the male species.”

“Then I’m honored,” I say.

She nods and cuts into her pizza. “If we are best friends, then that means we tell each other everything, correct?”

Not sure where she’s going with this and also not wanting to piss off the beast, I say, “I believe that’s correct.”

She nods and gives her next comment some thought. “If that is the case, then I would prefer for you to tell me something. You see, I have alienated myself from my other friends, by my choosing, not theirs. They reach out every day, but I have a sense of dread when I think about corresponding with them, and it’s because they remind me of Kelvin.”

“Do they bring him up?”

She shakes her head. “No. Physically being around them reminds me of Kelvin because I would converse with the ladies all about the carnal acts of love Kelvin and I experienced together. And I no longer have those

conversations to share with them, therefore . . . well . . . I presume they wouldn't care to have much to talk about with me anymore."

"Keiko, that's not true. They must have hung out with you before you had your, uh"—\*swallows hard\*—"your stories of carnal acts of love to share."

Her chin lifts as she gives it some thought. "You know, presiding over the timeline of our friendship, I would say you are correct."

"See?" I give her arm a nudge with mine.

"Quite observant, Pike. But I would still like you to tell me something. Best friends engage in recapitulation concerning their day to day lives, but you are rather reticent."

True, I listen a lot when it comes to Keiko, but I've also learned a lot by listening. Keiko doesn't have much of a filter and that's okay with me, because the brilliance of listening to her talk is that she's easily the most honest and upfront person I've ever met.

This might be the moment when I could get more information out of Keiko to help me with Cora.

"Okay." I clear my throat. "So, you know how Cora and I got married in Vegas—"

"Coraline Turner?" Keiko interrupts, her eyebrows drawing together in confusion.

"Yeah, your friend," I answer, confused as well.

Does Keiko not know about the marriage?

From the distant look on her face, I'm going to guess she doesn't.

Fucking hell.

"What do you mean, you married her in Vegas?"

Why wouldn't Cora tell Keiko? I know she told Greer and Stella, but why not Keiko? There has to be a reason.

“Color me surprised. I didn’t perceive you two to be in love. Marriage is sacred and should not be entered into without eternal affection for one’s counterpart.”

Hmm . . . maybe I know exactly why Cora didn’t tell Keiko.

But I’ve opened the conversation, so I can’t hide away from it now.

“Yeah, I can understand that, but unfortunately, when we were in Vegas, we got really drunk and ended up getting married. She didn’t tell you?”

She shakes her head. “She has not divulged that information to me.” She takes a second to think. “She was on her divorce-cation—at least, that’s what she referred to it as, I don’t care for such a title. It feels like a bunch of jumbled words on my tongue. I don’t believe her plan was to get married, but rather have a wild one-night stand.” Keiko’s eyes connect with mine. “Did you join together with her in matrimony and then partake in a wild night?”

“Uh, are you talking about sex?”

“Presumably, I am.”

“Then, no. We haven’t.”

“Haven’t?” She looks at me, a little more confused. “Why would you say that in present tense?”

Oh God, I’m in too deep now. I think I spilled the beans on something I probably shouldn’t have, but there’s no going back once Keiko knows something, because she doesn’t grasp the concept of “just kidding.”

I drag my hand over my face and lean back in my chair, neglecting my pizza completely.

“Present tense because, presently, we’re living together, and even though we’re living together, we haven’t had sex yet.”

Talk about shocking the eyebrows right off Keiko. Her eyes shoot wide open and her jaw drops. Yeah, news about your friend living with someone—

“You haven’t had sex with her?” She pokes me in the arm. “Are you not aware that she is what the street terms refer to as horny?”

Well, I wasn’t expecting that. I laugh and say, “I thought you were more shocked about us living together.”

“Dwellings are not as shocking as Cora living with a man and not participating in coitus.” She studies me. “Are you inept with the basic acts of flirtation?”

“No,” I answer. “I know how to flirt, and it’s not as if we haven’t done things. We just haven’t, you know, done the whole ‘penetrating’ thing.”

“Ah, I am quite aware of the types of pleasurable experiences one can offer to a partner.”

“Yeah, so . . . uh . . . I don’t know what to say now.”

“Not much to be said, other than . . . do you like your wife? It seems as though you must if you married her and are now residing with her in the same apartment, unless you’ve relocated to a single-family home in the hopes of procreating, like myself.” She touches her belly.

“No, we’re in her studio apartment together. But I guess I brought it up because I thought that maybe you could help me.”

“Assistance.” She nods. “That’s what best friends are for.”

“Yes, they are, I suppose.”

She presses her hand to my arm. “Please, ask for my assistance, and I will be sure to see if I can be of service.”

“Thank you,” I say awkwardly. “So, I’m struggling to get Cora to let down her guard and actually get to know me. She’s been trying to drive me away by telling me lies, cooking me horrible dinners, and denying me any part of her.”

“That seems off base,” Keiko says. “Because her singular goal the last few months was to have coitus with you. Her behavior doesn’t equate to what she has been telling us.”

I knew she was flirting, but I wasn't aware it had been going on for months. Interesting.

“There is a disconnect in her behaviors. If we were to put reasoning and thought behind it, we could reduce the timeline down to when she wanted to, for lack of a better term, bang you, and when she was trying to extricate you.” Keiko taps her chin. “When you returned from Vegas, did she still attempt to remove your trousers?”

“No. She wanted nothing to do with me.”

She nods. “As I suspected. After spending much time with Cora, I've been privileged to an inside examination of her psyche. I'm quite aware that her ex-husband cheated on her and her divorce has tarnished her outlook on relationships with men.”

Huh . . . that would make sense. *What tosser would cheat on Cora?*

“This is all conjecture, but I could postulate that her marriage to you was unsuspected, unplanned, and an event in her life she was not prepared for, even if her intentions were to bang you. Therefore, her reluctance is because—well, she never wanted to be joined in matrimony again.”

I gathered that from the way she's been trying to push me away.

“That's seems true from the way she acts around me,” I say. “But, you see, I'm starting to like her.”

Keiko's brows knit in confusion. “Did you not feel akin to her before you were married?”

“It was a drunken night; I wasn't aware of what I was doing. I never assumed things would go in that direction. Honestly, I barely know her, but what I do know of her, I really like. And the personality she's showing, her fight, I like that too.”

Keiko nods. “Ah, I see. So, are you coming to me for assistance or just a pair of listening ears?”



“Both, I guess. I wasn’t sure if you had any insight on how to get Cora to let me in.”

Keiko goes back to her pizza, cuts a piece, and puts it in her mouth. Once she swallows, she says, “I’m not skilled at understanding emotional cues, or emotions in general. But what I do know of Cora is she is headstrong, fears what her brother thinks of her, and has a sense of urgency to prove herself. Cora and Arlo were both left with large sums of money from their grandparents, but she lives modestly. She works not because she needs the money but because it offers her a sense of purpose. I don’t suppose this is the least bit helpful, but it’s what I know of her.”

I reach out and squeeze her hand. “It’s really helpful, Keiko. Thank you.”

She nods. “If you can get past her perturbation, I believe you could be a tolerable consort for Cora.”

“Thanks, Keeks.” *I think.*



*TO: Pike Greyson*

*From: Brock “Romeo” Romero*

*Subject: Thanksgiving Eve*

*The girlfriend is making me send this, and, yes, I’ll do anything she wants.*

*You are cordially invited to a barbeque pool party (we have an indoor pool) at our house on the eve of Thanksgiving.*

*And when I say cordially, I mean you have to be there.*

*And when I say you have to be there, I mean your presence is required.*

*You are also required to bring a dish to share, because fuck if I’m making all the food.*

*If you bring a store bought fruit plater, that’s such a cop-out. Make something, for fuck’s sake.*

*Also, don't tell Stella about the informality of this invitation.*

*See you Wednesday. Time and address listed below. Don't be a dick and show up late.*



IT'S JUST after six when I walk through the door and immediately smell something cooking, but to my surprise, it's not burnt.

As usual, I set my helmet and backpack down, remove my jacket and shoes, and then walk into the kitchen, where Cora is stirring a pot on the stove. It actually smells really fucking good, whatever it is.

“Hey,” I say, learning not to approach right away, in case I scare her. My cheek was sore for days after she slapped me from being startled. “What are you cooking?”

I walk up behind her, place my hand on her lower back, and peek over her shoulder into the pot. It is halfway filled with a yellow liquid sprinkled with what seems to be carrots and broccoli.

“Cheddar broccoli soup,” she answers.

“Smells really good.” I place a kiss on her neck and then retreat to the bathroom with a pair of shorts in hand that I grabbed from my laundry stash.

Unsure of what my next plan of attack is, I hope we can simply have a normal night tonight. But who knows? That soup could be laden with salt, causing me to have one hell of a time with heartburn later.

I shuck my shirt, jeans, and boxers and slip into my shorts so at least I can be comfortable tonight. I've been trying to be polite and stay clothed, but fuck it, if she can wear another one of those skimpy silk sets with the crop top and no bra, I can walk around without a goddamn shirt.

I gather my clothes and exit the bathroom, only to find Cora setting two bowls on the table. When she turns around, her eyes land directly on my chest. She wets her lips, and *that's* another open invitation to do what I want to her.

I'm sure I'll fucking touch her somehow tonight, because I can't seem to keep my hands off her. Although, the vibrator has been doing all the hard work. I've yet to make her come on my fingers, tongue, or cock. But I'm not sure how much longer I can hold out, especially when she walks around in outfits like that.

"You look hot," I say, not hiding how I feel, because, fuck, her nipples are tenting the silk of the shirt, and I know exactly what those nipples taste like.

Her cheeks blush. "Thank you, I guess."

She retreats back to the kitchen, then brings out a cutting board with a knife and baguette served on it. "Dinner is ready."

I toss my clothes in the hamper and say, "I can see that." I walk up to her, place my hand on her hip, and say directly into her ear, "Looks fucking amazing."

Goosebumps erupt over her skin as she looks up at me. "Thanks."

We each take a seat. I watch her cut a piece of bread off the baguette and then dip it in her soup. When she takes a bite and savors the flavor on her tongue, I assume it's safe.

But just to make sure . . . "Is there ex-lax in here?"

She chuckles. "Nothing is wrong with the soup. I swear."

Okay, now I'm really uneasy because I feel like she's being nice. Why is she being nice? Does she want something? Does she know something?

When she was being vindictive, I knew she was after one thing—an annulment—and that was all she wanted from me, but right now, her easygoing attitude is incredibly unnerving.

"I want to believe you . . ."

She chuckles again, gets up from her seat, and rounds the table, only to push me back and sit on my lap. My hand falls to her thigh. I immediately like this position.

She takes my spoon from my hand, scoops up a large helping of the soup and eats some, then she takes another, and another.

“See?” she asks, looking over her shoulder. “It’s fine.”

She goes to get up, but I pin her back down on my lap. “You can stay here, you know.”

“If you let me sit on your bare dick, I will.”

I chuckle and release her. “You know what you need to do to earn that right.”

She groans and returns to her own chair, pulling one foot up on the seat. “You realize you’re the most infuriating man. I’m offering you so much and you refuse to take it because you’re stubborn.”

“I’m not stubborn, you are,” I counter. “All you have to do is either wear one of my shirts or come to bed naked, and you refuse to.”

She stirs her spoon in her soup and then looks up at me through her lashes. “Because it means something to you, it’s a symbol of giving in, and I’m not about to give in.”

Interesting. Not sure I’d ever have imagined her admitting that, but it’s good information to know.

Wanting to change the subject, because I don’t want to push her too far, I ask, “Did Stella talk to you about some indoor pool party at her house before Thanksgiving?”

She nods and dips a piece of her bread in her soup. “She wanted to get everyone together before the holidays. Why? Did you get an invite?”

I nod. “Romeo invited me, which I’m assuming means staff will be there?”

“Most likely. Usually, those gatherings are full of staff members, but she told me it was going to be quiet, just some

close friends.” She glances up at me. “I’m assuming you were invited because Stella knows about you and me.” She rolls her eyes. “And frankly, she’s Team Marriage.”

“Really?” I ask with a smirk. “Tell me more about that.”

“It’s infuriating, actually. She has told me constantly to give you a chance.”

“Maybe you should listen to your friend.” I quirk a brow.

“Maybe you should offer me the annulment I asked for several weeks ago.”

“Ehh, don’t really feel like letting go of you, especially when I know what you sound like when you come.”

Her cheeks redden. “You can’t possibly base a marriage off the sound of someone orgasming.”

“Clearly, you’re not paying attention to the way you sound. Trust me, one moan from you would cause any man to push you down the aisle to the altar.”

“Aren’t you charming?”

I smirk. “I can be.”

I have a mouthful of the soup and, damn, it really is good. When I catch her studying me, I ask, “Did you miraculously figure out how to cook overnight, or are my assumptions correct when I say you were trying to poison me to death via charred food?”

She shrugs. “I really don’t know how to cook, besides a few things. But did I possibly make sure things were over-seasoned and overcooked every night? Yes. But before you say anything, I suffered right along with you.”

I chuckle. “Your dedication to getting me to leave is commendable.”

“I learned early in life—you do what it takes to get what you want.”

I nod. “And it seems your recent goal is to get my dick.”

She nods, eyes trained on me.

“And what are your plans to get that?”

“If I told you, it would give everything away.”

I stir my soup and ask, “Is one of your tactics to actually be nice to me?”

“Might be.” She offers me a smirk. “Is it working?”

“Slightly,” I answer, because it’s true.

This feels like a turn of events, like the massive hill I’ve been climbing is finally starting to even out and I can have a reprieve soon.

But no matter how much I want her, I won’t give in until she gives me what I want, until she surrenders. She might be playing nice right now, but that doesn’t mean she’s stopped. That doesn’t mean she’s put an end to this battle. Which means I still need to stay on guard.

We spend the rest of the dinner exchanging glances, but not really talking. I clean up the kitchen as usual, but instead of her retreating to the bed, she sits on the counter and watches me while she plays a playlist of Taylor Swift songs on her mobile.

Done with the dishes, I wipe my hands on a towel and then hang it over the oven handle. I turn toward Cora. She reaches out and I allow her to pull me between her legs. She locks me in by crossing her ankles against my back. I rest my hands on her hips and take a deep breath.

Stay calm, man.

Her hand goes to my hair and she plays with the ends of it. “Are you going to go to the pool party?” she asks.

“I think so. The invitation told me I was required. Are you going?”

“My invitation told me I was required as well.”

“Did yours come from Romeo?”

She shakes her head. “It came from Stella.”

I scratch the side of my jaw and ask, “Do you think they’re trying to do some sort of *Parent Trap* thing? You know, when they bring us together in the hopes of making a love connection?”

“I feel like I should be disturbed that you know that movie.”

“I have two sisters. I grew up watching Lindsay Lohan movies with them.”

“Two sisters?” she asks. “What are their names?”

“Cleo and Agnes.”

“Agnes?” she says in shock.

“Yeah.” I chuckle. “We call her Aggie. She, uh, she was named after our grandma, unfortunately.”

“Sheesh, middle name that.”

“That’s what we’ve all said, but she wears the name with pride, because our grandma was probably the most amazing person you’d ever meet.”

“Tell me more about her,” Cora says.

If we’re going to finally talk, finally share, I decide that we need to be more comfortable, so I scoop her up and take her to the bed, where I sit and prop some pillows behind me so I’m leaning against the headboard. I situate her on my lap and say, “That’s better.”

Her hand falls to my chest and she casually drags her fingers over the short-clipped hair sprinkled on my pecs.

“So, tell me about Grandma Agnes.”

“Well, she’s the one who showed us how to make tea properly. She’d have scolded you until you were a puddle of nothing if she saw the way you attempted to make tea.”

“She wasn’t a ‘milk first’ kind of gal?”

“Never.” I laugh. “She’d have been horrified.”

“Did you used to have tea parties with her?”

“Afternoon tea, and yes. And she always had scones, jam, and clotted cream.”

Cora’s nose turns up. “Clotted cream? What’s that?”

“A thick cream spread made from milk. You put a touch of it on your scone, along with jam, and that’s how you prepare your scone for consumption.”

“Are there any cardinal sins when it comes to preparing your scone?”

“Not really. There’s more flexibility in that area.”

She nods. “Good to know.”

I move my hands up her side. “I like you like this—calm, not trying to calculate my demise.”

“Had to give my plan of attack a break for a second. It’s pretty tiresome being diabolical all the time.”

“Imagine how every villain ever created feels.”

“Tired, worn out, and ready to give in to peer pressure.”

“Is that so?” I ask. I lean over the bed and reach under it, pulling out one of my shirts. I offer it to her and say, “If you’re giving in to peer pressure, put this on, see what happens.”

She rolls her eyes, takes the shirt—offering me a smidge of hope, only for said hope to be washed away when she sets the shirt on the nightstand.

“Nice try. Not happening.”

“A man could dream.”

“Keep dreaming.”

“What’s it going to take to get you to surrender?”

“Nothing, because it’s never going to happen,” she says, shifting on my lap.

“Seems like I’m closer than ever, you know, since you’re currently sitting on my lap, dragging your fingers over my chest.”



“Because I’m trying to get you to fold, don’t you see? There’s no way you can hold out that long. The tension between us has been building, intensifying to the point that I’m not sure you’re going to be able to take much more from me.”

“Try me, babe. I’m pretty confident.”

“Are you?” she asks while spreading her legs a little wider and sinking down on my bulge.

“Do what you want, Cora, I’m not giving in.”

Determination sets in her eyes. She grabs the hem of her crop top and pulls it over her head, dropping it to the side of the bed.

My dick pulses against her center.

Her fucking tits are perfection. Bigger than what you’d think just looking at her, dark nipples that grow tight when our eyes connect, and slightly more than a handful.

My hands slide up her sides and land right below her breasts.

“You want to suck them.”

“I do,” I say. “I want to fuck them, too.”

She presses her tits together, and, Jesus Christ, I can practically feel them engulfing my cock. “Then go for it.”

I shake my head. “I told you, you’re not getting this dick.”

“You gave it to me this morning.”

“You didn’t get my bare cock,” I say as she starts to glide over my erection. I help her.

I might not give her what she wants, but I still need some fucking relief. I’m wearing thin, here. Holding strong is causing me great pain and, each day that goes by, my willpower is slipping. I desperately want to take this woman, flip her to her stomach, and fuck her from behind until she’s screaming my name.

“I got a piece of it.” She throws her head back and I take that moment to bring my mouth to her exposed neck and trail my lips down her neck and back up again. Her hands curl around my neck and hold me close to her, looking for more as her hips press against mine.

Hell, *I* need more.

I need so much more with this woman.

“And that’s all you’ll get,” I say, before flipping her to her back and crawling on top of her. With a quick glance between us, I see my fucking hard-on, tenting my shorts, seeking relief.

It might not be the relief I want, but it’s better than nothing, so I spread her legs wide, press my dick against her, and thrust.

“God, yes.” Her hands fall to her tits and I watch as she twists her nipples, playing with them. Normally, I’d want to be the one to do that, but I enjoy watching her do it. “You’re so big, Pike. I know you’d stretch me, you’d fill me up more than any other man.”

Fuck, she’s messing with my head, trying to get me to break. To snap.

It’s working.

She rotates her hips with mine, intensifying the friction between us.

“If my cock was inside you, I would fuck you until you couldn’t breathe.” I thrust against her with force. “I would fuck you so hard you’d forget about every other man before me.” I thrust again and she cries out. “I would make you come so violently that you wouldn’t ever want to leave me, because you’d be addicted.”

Her eyes meet mine as her teeth roll over her bottom lip. “I already feel slightly addicted.”

As much as her words mean something to me, it’s not physical addiction I want. Cora was betrayed by her ex-husband, so she’s not just playing hard to get. She’s unwilling to trust. To want to be married. But I want her. God, I want

her. I'll get her off, get some relief, but I need to work out how to get to her heart, as well.

“Good.” I thrust again and rotate my hips. She cries out once more. “How close are you?”

“Close,” she says.

“Perfect.” I back away, removing myself from her and relishing her pleading cry.

“Pike, don't. Don't fucking leave me like this.”

I smooth my hand over her stomach. “I can be an arsehole, but I'm not that much of an arsehole.”

I reach behind me to grab our trusty wand. I bring it between us and press it against her clit, and then position myself right next to the bulb of the wand so it vibrates at the base of my cock. Immediately, my dick sticks straight up and throbs.

“God . . . oh God, Pike,” she says, my name so sweet on her tongue.

“Fu-uck,” I grind out as I try not to come too early, but it's fucking difficult with Cora playing with her tits beneath me, the vibrator pleasuring me, and Cora's moans. “Jesus Christ . . . Cora, tell me you're going to come.”

“Yes,” she says, her head thrashing to the side. “Yes, Pike, oh God . . . I . . . I'm coming.” And she cries out in a feral moan.

That's all I needed.

My balls tighten and my cock swells right before a powerful groan slips past my lips and I come. I ride the vibrator as I continue to orgasm until there's nothing left.

Turning off the vibrator, I toss it to the side and collapse to the right of Cora, my hand over my chest as I catch my breath.

And, for the first time since we've been married, she rolls into me and tucks into my shoulder. I want to change my shorts, maybe get her a change of clothes as well, but she rests her hand on my chest and sweetly curls against me.

Together, we pass out, just like this, our heads at the foot of the bed. It isn't until past one in the morning that I stir awake, with Cora cuddled next to me. Not wanting her to catch cold, I lift her up and situate her at the head of the bed. She doesn't even stir. I make quick work of changing my shorts and then hop back into bed. When I stretch out along the mattress, she takes that moment to slide in sleepily and cling to my chest.

The feel of her pressed against my body and the cadence of her breathing, lulls me back to sleep in no time. That night I have a dream, and it's me and Cora, living in a tiny cottage in England. She's pregnant, and we have a dog running at our feet.

Nothing has ever felt more real.

## Chapter Fourteen

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### CORA

“Good morning.”

The rough timbre of Pike’s voice stirs me fully awake. Sleepily, I open my eyes and find him standing in the middle of the apartment wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist.

“Morning,” I mumble into my pillow, not wanting to move from my comfortable cocoon.

He turns from me and drops his towel, giving me a front-row-seat view of his ass. And, God, it’s so nice. Indents on the side from how muscular it is, indents on the top because God isn’t fair and thought gracing this man with butt dimples would be the cherry on top. And not hairy. Not hairy at all. Such a big bonus.

Just as I get comfortable staring at perfection, he slips his black boxer briefs up and over his rear, covering up the beautiful sight.

When he turns back around, he must notice my disappointment, because he smiles and keeps his eyes fixed on me as he slips on a pair of black jeans. “I’m going to run to the coffee shop around the block and grab breakfast for us. What would you like?”

“Really?” I ask.

He chuckles. “Yeah, really.” He takes a seat on the bed and stretches his hand out to my face. Gently, he strokes my cheek with his thumb. It’s such an intimate touch, but for some reason, it’s not throwing me off in the slightest. “You okay with eating breakfast with me?”

There’s vulnerability in his eyes, as though he’s afraid I’ll say no, and that would be devastating to him. I hate to admit it, but seeing him unsure of himself around me, it makes me . . . sad.

“Yeah,” I answer, capturing his hand with mine. “Of course . . . but only if you get me a giant cherry Danish.”

He nods. “I was planning on getting one myself. I’m going to make tea here, but do you want anything to drink?”

“You know, I think I might have tea with my Danish as well.”

“Yeah?” He quirks a brow.

“Yeah, I never got to try the tea you made the other night, so I’m ready to be schooled again.”

“I would never pass up schooling someone on how to make a proper tea.” He leans down and presses a kiss to my forehead before standing up and putting on a shirt and socks.

The whole time, I watch him move around the apartment smoothly, completely comfortable in his dwellings, and what’s even more scary is that I’m comfortable with him being comfortable in this apartment.

Once he has his jacket and worn-out, black boots on, he gives me a wave and says, “I’ll text you when to put the kettle on.” He points at me. “No microwaving.”

I hold up my hand. “I learned my lesson the first time.”

And with that, he’s out the door, and that’s when I roll to my back and stare up at the ceiling.

Oh no . . .

I think . . .

I think I’m starting to like my husband.

I bite down on the corner of my mouth as I replay last night and how—oh shit.

With my hands, I take in my body and notice no shirt. Did I show up to bed naked? My hand travels south until I hit the waistband of my shorts.

Okay, phew. Close one.

But would it have been so bad if I went to bed naked?

*Yes, yes, it would, because you're trying to get rid of him, Cora.*

But do I want to get rid of him? Yes. I don't want to be married. Ever again. But Pike? *I actually like him* as a person. I still don't know why he wants this marriage so dearly, why he's insistent that I capitulate to his demands to have sex, too. If we were just dating, we would've slept together by now.

Mixed emotions swirl in my head, but instead of driving myself crazy with them, I hop out of bed and go into the bathroom to take a shower, spending extra time soaping down my body. I don't realize how long I've been in the shower until I hear the front door click shut.

"Pike, is that you?" I ask, peeking my head through the cracked door.

"Yeah, babe," he says. The tone of his voice and the ease of using a pet name . . . it's like fireworks going off in my stomach. Dangerous, but also thrilling. "I see you didn't get my text."

"Sorry, I took longer in the shower than I thought."

"It's okay. I'll put the kettle on right now. You finish up what you're doing."

"Okay," I reply as I dry off, realizing how domestic and normal this feels and how it's nothing—and I mean nothing—like it was with Keenan.

With Keenan, I constantly felt guilty for doing anything for myself. Keenan would never allow me to just have a moment. He was always telling me that I lay around the house, so why would I need time to myself? He never would've gone to the

coffee shop to get morning Danish. And he'd have yelled at me for not putting water on the stove, because, as he'd put it, I never listened to him.

Pike is so different, and it's scary, because I don't want to be falling for this guy. I don't want to feel attached to him in any way. I don't think it would be healthy for me to be in a relationship, let alone a marriage, so shortly after my divorce.

Why am I even considering it? Because he went to get a Danish?

No, because he's sweet. Caring. Really good in bed—I mean, fucking phenomenal and he has yet to actually kiss me on the lips or show me his cock. It feels like he could be someone's rock. Strong, unmoving, a solid person in someone's life.

But do I want that person to be me?

"Hey," he says, sticking his head in the bathroom. When he sees that he startled me, he smirks and enters fully. A towel is wrapped around me so he can't see anything, but that doesn't stop him from closing the space between us and putting his arms around me. "You okay?" he asks while reaching up and pressing his thumb to my brow, which he gives a quick wiggle. "You're all tense up here."

"Just, you know, thinking about how you won't be able to eat my cooking tonight since we have that pool party to go to."

"Such a shame. I was really looking forward to watered-down mushy peas and broiled chicken."

I pat his cheek. "There's always time for me to tackle that meal later this week."

"I'm looking forward to it." His hands grip my sides and he leans in. "English breakfast good?"

"Yeah, that works."

"Good." He presses a sweet kiss to my cheek and takes off toward the kitchen again.

See? That's what I'm talking about. He's getting all touchy feely and calling me *babe* and making this actually seem like



it's real, whereas I've been pretending it's a weird dream where I orgasm constantly.

But it's not.

What's happening between us seems like more.

So much more.

I change into a basic shirt and pair of leggings, wrap my hair up in the towel, and approach the kitchen. His eyes track me, and when I get close, he snags me by the hand and pulls me against his chest.

"You seemed to enjoy sleeping on my chest last night."

"Did I?" I ask, knowing damn well I did. Because he felt so comfortable, because, for a brief moment, I knew how right it felt.

He chuckles. "You did, and I fucking liked it."

Of course he did.

So did I.

"You know what I liked?"

"Hmm?" he asks, rubbing his hands over my ass.

"Watching you come from a vibrator. That was really hot."

And it was. Holy crap, I've never done anything like it, shared a vibrator with a man, and he acted like it was no big deal. Which, in the grand scheme of things, I guess it's not, but he came from a vibrator. Keenan would've dropped dead before he tried something like that.

"You liked watching me come with a vibrator? So did I. I really fucking liked it."

"What does it feel like?" I ask, curious about how a vibrator affects a man.

The tea kettle whistles, and he releases me to grab it and fill two mugs with the boiling water. I watch how he places the tea bags in the mugs as well, with such . . . respect . . . for the tea. It seems weird to say that, but I don't know how else to describe it.

When he's done, he turns back toward me and repeats my question. "What does it feel like?" He shrugs. "I guess like a vibrator against your cock. The vibrations, the way they shoot down to my balls, it just feels fucking good. And having you beneath me, enjoying the same pleasure, seeing you playing with your tits? There was no stopping me with that orgasm. And bloody hell, it was a good one."

"Interesting." I nibble on my bottom lip. "Have you done it before—you know, the vibrator?"

"I've done some vibrator stuff," he says, not looking uncomfortable in the slightest.

"Really? Do you have one?"

He smirks. "I do."

"Seriously?" I feel my eyes widen. "You have a vibrator?"

"I do. It's not like the mammoth one you have that plugs into the wall." He chuckles. "Just a small battery-operated one. On occasion, I place it at the base of my balls, right against the seam, turn it on, and jack off. Easily thirty seconds tops before I'm coming all over my stomach."

"That's, uh . . ." I wave my hand in front of my heated face. "That's news to me. I didn't know men play with vibrators as well."

He winks at me. "Only the confident, smart ones do."

After that, he works around the kitchen, then takes the plated Danishes to the dining table. He follows with our mugs of tea, which he places next to each plate with something bordering on reverence, and once everything is set, he takes my hand and guides me to my seat.

When he takes his seat, he looks me in the eye and says, "Thanks for having breakfast with me, Coraline."

And then he bites into his Danish and I realize just how fucked I am.

Yup, I like my husband. I like him a lot.



I PUT my car in park and keep my eyes forward. Pike goes to get out of my car, but I stop him with my hand to his arm. “I need to tell you something.”

He twists toward me. “Is it that you’re madly in love and want to get remarried?”

I roll my eyes but am thankful for the humor. “No. My brother doesn’t know about me and you, because you know, he’d lose his shit, so I was kind of hoping that maybe . . .”

“I act like you don’t exist?”

“No, I mean . . . yes, but no.”

“Which is it, Cora?” he asks with an edge to his voice.

“You can talk to me, but, you know, no touching or anything like that.”

“Basically, you don’t want me to act like a husband who can’t keep his hands off his wife.”

I swallow hard, thinking back to how I wanted him so freaking badly this morning, but he wouldn’t give in, no matter how hard I tried, until we were just about to leave, which is when he pinned me up against the wall near our bed, my chest to the wall, made me spread my legs, and then pressed the vibrator between my spread legs. I crumpled when I came, thankful he was there to catch me.

“Sort of,” I say with a wince.

“Sort of? I’m going to need a direct answer from you, Coraline.”

I nervously twirl a piece of my hair as I try to answer him without insulting him. Not that I should care about insulting him . . . but I do. Over the last few days, I’ve begun to care a lot about how he feels. But the goal here is to break up this marriage, not enjoy it. I need to stay true to the original plan because, let’s face it, I’m not emotionally ready to be in another relationship, let alone be married again, especially to

someone who could possibly still be classified as a stranger. Not to mention, Arlo would flip his shit, and the last thing I want to deal with is a mad Arlo. And I know I'm going to have to face him today, he's going to ask questions, and it's going to be stressful. I just can't have Pike coming up to me and placing a kiss on my forehead, telling me how good I look in a bikini. Because that's what he did when we were at the apartment, it's how I ended up pinned against the wall.

"Please, just act like you did before we got married."

He slowly nods, his eyes cast down. "Got it."

And those two words, full of disappointment, cut right through me.

But instead of comforting him, telling him *I'm sorry* like any other normal person would do, I allow him to get out of my car and head to the party alone.

Talk about feeling like absolute crap.

I feel positively awful.

Gripping the steering wheel, I stare out through the windshield and take a deep breath. *Get it together, Cora*. You don't want to be married. You don't want to be in a relationship. You don't want any of this.

At least, I'm trying to convince myself of that.



"YOU'RE ACTING WEIRD," Stella says as she comes up next to me with a platter of deviled eggs.

"How so?" I ask, my voice more high-pitched than I would've hoped for.

"You're fidgety and your eyes are shifting all around, like you know something is going to happen and you're waiting for it to occur."

"Something is going to happen," I say. "I gave him the swim trunks."

“You did?” Stella asks, surprised.

“Yeah, wasn’t that the plan?” I ask her.

“Well, yeah, but I thought, you know, since you two have been having fun that maybe you were going to give everything a chance.”

“I have no intentions of giving anything a chance.”

“Okay.” Stella shrugs and places the eggs on the table in front of me.

“*Okay?* That’s all you’re going to say?” I ask her.

“I don’t know what else you want me to say. Frankly, I’m exhausted from the entire situation. He’s a good guy, Cora.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want anyone in my life right now.”

“Do you think you ever will?” she asks with a raised eyebrow.

She doesn’t give me time to answer before she’s walking back into the kitchen.

Will I ever give another relationship a try? Not sure I could say either way. Emotionally, I know I still have some issues to work through, a lot of trust issues. Physically, I know I could benefit from being in a relationship, even if it is just friends with benefits. But from the way Pike has been acting, I don’t think that’s what he’s looking for.

I heave a gusty sigh just as Arlo and Greer walk into the house. Chin held high, eyes like daggers, my brother scans the space, finding me in the corner of the dining room.

Uh-oh.

He is not who I want to talk to, especially not right now.

So, I do what every little sister would do before they get in trouble, I bolt.

I bolt right toward the bar and pour myself a shot of—no, not Fireball—but a shot of tequila. When Arlo approaches, I pour another . . . and then another.

“Trying to mask something?” Arlo asks as he steps up next to me.

Midway through pouring my fourth shot, I turn toward him, bottle and shot glass in hand, and smile at him. “Nothing to mask. Just trying to get this party started.”

“That’s why when you saw me, you bolted to the bar and started serving yourself shots?”

I finish pouring the fourth shot and tip it back into my mouth before I say, “You give yourself way too much credit, brother.”

I set the bottle down on the counter, but keep my shot glass, because I’ll be needing this.

Arlo stops me, hand on my shoulder. “Cora, we need to have a conversation.”

“About what?” I ask, playing dumb.

His eyes narrow, and I know that look—he’s pissed.

“You know damn well what I want to talk to you about.”

I tap my chin. “Hmm, I can’t seem—”

“Cora,” he says sternly.

“Is this about the thing in the teachers’ lounge the other day?” I roll my eyes. “It was from a guy I know at work. He was only joking. Pranking me, you know.” From the corner of my eye, I catch Pike walking toward the indoor pool, wearing the swim trunks I gave him and talking to Keiko.

Huh, I didn’t know Keiko was going to be here. She’s been very distant lately.

“If that’s the truth, then how come you didn’t say that from the beginning?”

“Because you were acting like a crazy person and I didn’t know if the truth would ignite that.”

“I don’t think you’re telling the truth.”

My eyes drift to Pike, and my stomach twists as I see him enter the water, the only person in the pool.

Arlo looks over his shoulder. “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” I say, snapping my eyes back to him.

He grows even more irritated. “Coraline, I don’t like entertaining the way you’re acting.”

“Then don’t entertain it . . . you weirdo.”

“Uh, Cora,” Stella says from behind me. I turn to see her eyes grow wide and then she nods toward the pool.

I glance over to the water again and see Pike swimming on his stomach . . . his ass out in the open for everyone to see.

*Fuck.*

Oh God, what have I done?

“Coraline, what the hell is going on?”

“Pike,” Romeo calls out. “Uh, dude, no skinny dipping.”

“What?” Pike asks.

Everyone’s attention is now on the pool.

Mortification beats through me as, from a distance, I watch Pike realize that his bathing suit has come apart and is barely hanging on in the front. His eyes snap to mine immediately and for the first time since I’ve been married to him, I can honestly say he does not like me in this moment. I should be happy as he clutches at the remains of his disappearing swimsuit that Stella and I bought online. It worked.

He’s embarrassed—*mortified*—in front of his peers. But guilt swarms me. My heart aches for him.

He didn’t deserve *this*.

“Pike, it seems as though you’ve lost your clothing,” Keiko says.

“It seems that way,” Pike says through clenched teeth. “Could you hand me a towel?”

“It is my duty, as your friend, to do so.” Keiko grabs a towel and hands it to Pike as he shimmies out of the pool, his hand over his crotch. He maneuvers the towel around him and then snaps his attention to me once more.

He's not happy . . . at all.

"Why do you keep looking at him?" Arlo asks.

"What?"

"Pike. You keep looking at him."

"His bathing suit just came off, excuse me for being curious." I turn back around and pour myself another shot, because I need it. I want to forget all of this.

I want to forget Arlo and his controlling, older-brother tendencies.

I want to forget the look of shame on Pike's face.

And I especially want to forget these burning feelings I'm developing for the one man I shouldn't be having feelings for.

"Uh, Cora, can I talk to you?" Stella asks, a nervous look in her eyes.

"Yeah." I take one more shot, then hand the bottle to Arlo and take off with Stella.

Together, we walk back into the house and into the kitchen, where Stella turns me toward her. "Pike is *pissed*. Like really fucking mad. He walked past me on his way to the bathroom and told me to send my *friend* his way."

My stomach twists in knots.

"He said that?"

She nods. "And I'm sorry, but I'm not going to protect you on this one. You need to see him, or else I think he might erupt, and you don't want that."

"Yeah, you're right." I twist my hands together. "Things are getting out of control," I say. "Arlo is onto me; I can feel it. Pike looks like he's about to murder me. And I—"

"Coraline, a word," Arlo says from the entryway of the kitchen.

For fuck's sake.

"Arlo, just give me a second," I say to him.



“She needs to go to the bathroom. Duty calls,” Stella says with a smile, pushing me toward the main level bath.

Arlo’s eyes narrow even more, but before he can say anything, I take off quickly.

I make my way through the kitchen and to the right, where the main-level bath is. I knock and hear Pike snap, “Who is it?”

Quietly, I whisper, “Me.”

I ease the door open and walk in. Before I can take a breath to say anything, Pike slams the door behind me and locks it. Then he pins me against the door, fuming, dressed only in a pair of jeans, the top still undone.

“What the actual fuck, Cora?”

“I . . . I wanted—”

“Wanted to what? Humiliate me in front of all of my colleagues?”

I bite my bottom lip. “That, uh, that was the plan.”

“For what? To get rid of me?” I look to the side, but he grips my cheeks with one hand and forces me to look at him. “You’ll tell me the goddamn truth.”

Keeping my eyes on him, I say, “Yes, to make you want to leave.”

He pushes away from me, and I feel foreboding ricochet through me.

He pushes his hand through his hair and then turns on me again. “You went too far, Cora. How would you like it if I embarrassed you in front of your co-workers at Frankie Donuts?” When my eyes widen, he says, “Yeah, I fucking know you work there. Would you have liked that? Would you have thought it was okay?”

I shake my head.

“And what about—fuck, what about the last few days? Were you just using me? Did those moments mean nothing to you?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” His brows raise. “If you don’t know, then clearly they didn’t mean anything.” He zips his jeans and buttons them. Then he pulls his shirt over his head and slips his socks and shoes on.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“What does it look like? I’m getting dressed.”

“Don’t you, uh, don’t you want to talk about this?”

His eyes shoot to mine. “There’s nothing to talk about.” He straightens and fixes his hair in the mirror. He then turns on me and steps in close. “If I could, I’d leave immediately, but given I came with you, I’ll need to stay here in my humiliation. Quite frankly, I never would’ve thought you’d be capable of something like this, Coraline.”

And with that, he pushes past me and out of the bathroom, back into the party where I shamed him. Instead of joining him, I shut the door and take a seat on the counter as my head begins to spin and the alcohol begins to do its job.

He’s so angry, so hurt. I’m not sure I know how to fix this, even if I wanted to.

I don’t think I’ve ever been more confused in my life about what to do. All I know is that I hurt Pike, and it’s not sitting well with me, not one bit.

Hopping off the counter, I face the mirror and take in my reflection.

I don’t even recognize the girl staring back at me. She’s deceiving, blank, and lacking life.

But why?

Yesterday, when I looked in the mirror, I felt like everything was . . . right.

But today, I feel off. I feel like I’m not in the right place.

What is the right place?

Not in this bathroom.

I exit the bathroom and head back to the party area. Do I apologize to the group? Tell them it was just a silly prank on the new guy? *Would they believe that?* Shit. But, as if nothing happened, Romeo, Stella, Gunner, and Lindsay, his fiancée, are in the pool playing volleyball. Arlo is standing in the corner with Greer. From her body language, it seems as though she's trying to calm him down. And sitting on a lounge chair, side by side, are Keiko and Pike. When did they become such great friends?

Doesn't matter. *Maybe he needs a friend.*

Suddenly, the doors to the pool area are thrown open, startling everyone at the party.

Standing in the doorway, chest heaving and looking frantic, is Kelvin Thimble, sweating profusely in a button-up Hawaiian shirt.

"Kelvin?" Keiko says while standing up. "The aggressive propulsion in which you swung those doors open could have driven a large-diameter dent into the wall. A dent that would've required drywall repair."

Heaving for breath, Kelvin raises his finger and points right at Pike. Gasping for air, he shakily says, "I knew it."

"Knew what, precisely?" Keiko crosses her arms over her chest.

"You two." Kelvin motions between Pike and Keiko. "The reason you broke up with me is because of him."

Ha . . . if he only knew.

If only Keiko knew.

Wait . . . does Keiko know?

She and Pike are close, so would he tell her?

The thought never crossed my mind until this very moment.

Keiko guffaws with her head thrown back. When she straightens again, she says, "We disassembled our romantic agreement because you showed no interest in raising

offspring.” Head held high, acting as if she’s in a soap opera for nerds, she grips her stomach and says, “And I’m with child.”

I gasp, because . . . it feels like a gasping moment.

“With *his* child?” Kelvin asks, his face turning white.

Keiko glances at Pike. “No, you nimrod.” Huh, first time I think I’ve ever heard Keiko insult someone verbally without using a thesaurus. “The fetus developing in my uterus is yours, for you are the only man with whom I’ve shared coitus.”

“How do I know you’re not with him?”

The collective group’s heads ping back and forth, watching everything go down, and in my foggy head, I have to admit, what’s unfolding is quite entertaining. Takes my mind off what I’m dealing with.

That is, until . . .

“How do you know I’m not with Pike?” Keiko asks. “Because he’s married, you unwisely halfwit.”

Unwisely halfwit, that’s a good one. I think I shall use that

---

Wait . . .

Did she just say Pike is married?

Kelvin adjusts his glasses. “Pike isn’t married.”

Keiko nods and I can feel everything in the room still as her voice comes out in slow motion.

“Indeed, he is. He’s legally bound to Cora.”

Fuuuuuuu—ck.

I don’t even bother to look at Arlo, because I know he’s staring me down, ready to pounce.

Kelvin takes a step closer. “Is that true, Pike?”

And in that moment, I know what Pike is going to say, not because he wants to get back at me, but because I know he’s a good guy, and seeing the desperation in Kelvin’s eyes for the truth, I know he’s going to give it to him.

“It’s true. We got married in Vegas.”

“What the actual fuck,” Arlo says loud enough for me to hear him from across the room. Greer tugs on his arm, but it’s no use, he’s headed right my way.

“You—you don’t love him?” Kelvin asks.

Keiko shakes her head. “I have not experienced any romantic feelings toward him. For, as I believe, my heart belongs to you.”

If I wasn’t so terrified of the angry brother approaching me, I would actually think this is a sweet moment, seeing Keiko reveal her feelings to Kelvin. *But I have other things on my mind.*

Like finding an escape route.

Brain not working to its full capacity—thank you, shots—I have no idea what to do other than pour another shot and hold it up to Arlo the moment he steps in front of me.

“To ease the pain?” I ask him.

But he doesn’t say a word, just fumes.

“Or perhaps a peace offering?”

“Cora, kitchen, now.”

I set the shot and bottle down and twist my hands together. “You know, that doesn’t sound like the place I want to be, because I’m afraid you’re going to yell at me and I really want to avoid that.” Gesturing toward the floor, I continue, “So if we can stay here, that would be preferable. Thanks.”

“You don’t think I’m going to yell at you out here?”

“I feel like it would be less likely.”

“Then you’d be wrong,” he says. When I don’t move, he continues, “Fine, we’ll do this here.” He pulls on his hair and says in a crazed tone, “You got married in Vegas? On your divorce-cation? What the hell were you thinking?”

“She wasn’t,” Keiko says from the side. “She was quite inebriated and on the prowl. I believe she’d have committed

‘till death do us part’ to a slot machine if they’d met at the altar.”

When did she become the comedian?

Looking over Arlo’s shoulder, I raise my hand to Keiko. “Got this, Keeks. Why don’t you go settle up with Kelvin?”

“I find your pending argument more stimulating at the moment.”

Of course she does.

“Cora, the last thing you need is another goddamn divorce. You just battled through the last one to keep your inheritance. You don’t think he’s going to do that as well?” Arlo motions to Pike, who’s still standing by the lounge.

“He doesn’t know I have an inheritance,” I say, and then ask Pike, “Do you?”

He doesn’t answer, but he’s watching very carefully.

“You need that inheritance, especially with the way you’ve been living your life.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask him.

“You work part-time posting pictures for Frankie Donuts. There’s nowhere to grow from there.”

“Hey, I can go from part-time to full-time. There’s growth in there.”

Arlo pushes his hand through his hair. “And why didn’t you fucking tell me?”

“Because I didn’t want you involved, like you’re involved in every aspect of my life. I’m a big girl,” I say to Arlo, growing defensive. “I don’t need you constantly inserting yourself in my life.”

“Clearly you do if you got married to someone in Vegas. Christ, Cora. I thought we were done making bad decisions. I thought we were done with your wild years. Now that you’re divorced, are you just going to settle back into the rhythm of your teenage years that almost got you killed?”

I'm about to answer when a sharp voice bites through the air, "Hey." My eyes fly to Pike, who is quickly approaching the scene. "Lay off. It takes two to make the decision to get married."

Arlo turns on Pike, and with hands on his hips, Arlo says, "I suggest you stay the fuck out of this."

Just then, Gunner and Romeo hop out of the pool and approach us as well.

Pike places his hand on my lower back and asks, "Is that your attempt at trying to scare me away? Pathetic, Turner."

"Greyson, I suggest you step aside and mind your own business."

"My *wife* is my business."

Arlo doesn't like that because his eyes narrow.

"And say what you want about our relationship and marriage, but I know one thing for certain—I would never berate Coraline in front of her friends or family. I would never insult her profession or where she's headed in life, because everyone goes at their own speed."

Arlo stares Pike down and asks, "You think you know Coraline?"

"I know her well enough to know that I want to be married to her."

"Is that so?" Arlo nods. "Did you know she used to be addicted to pain killers? Or that she tried to commit suicide once?"

"Arlo," Greer says, pulling on his arm.

But he keeps going as all the blood in me rushes to my feet.

"Did you know that she married Keenan in the hopes of finding the love she was lacking in her life, only to be cheated on because she was emotionally unavailable?"

"Arlo, stop," Greer says, tugging on him some more.

“She’s damaged, Pike, and I don’t need some man she barely knows destroying her all over again. I just got her back. I don’t want to lose her again.”

I’m too numb to reply.

So I just stand there, wavering back and forth, my mind swirling with alcohol. *And utter disappointment.*

And just as I feel the room start to spin and my legs beginning to go out, a strong pair of arms keep me upright . . . but that’s all I remember before everything goes dark.



“WOULD you be able to give us a moment to ourselves?”

I know that voice.

But even though I know it, I can’t seem to place it.

“Sure,” a manly, English voice replies.

Now, I know who belongs to that.

The bed dips and I hear footsteps cross the floor and then the soft click of the door.

Once again, the bed dips and a soft arm presses against mine.

“Cora, wake up.” Someone gives my arm a shake, and even though it feels like my head weighs two hundred pounds, I find it within me to open my eyes, and see Greer sitting next to me.

“Hey,” she says softly. “How are you?”

Mouth dry, I barely squeak out, “Not well.”

She hands me a glass of water and helps me sit up.

“Oh my God, my head.”

“Yeah, you definitely drank a lot in a short amount of time last night.”

“Wish I had more.”



“Are you okay?” Greer asks in that mothering tone.

“Besides the fact that I know puking is in my future, just swell.”

“I mean, with what Arlo said.”

I shrug. “I mean, it was the truth.”

“But a truth that didn’t need to be told like that.” She presses her hand to my forearm. “I made him sleep on the couch last night. Not even in the guest room. I forced him to sleep on the couch. I couldn’t even speak to him I was so mad. And when I did speak to him, I let him have it.”

Staring down at my lap, I say, “Thank you, but it’s not necessary. I know where Arlo is coming from. He saw me at my worst and he’s terrified I’ll go back to that life. And it’s not like I’ve been entirely truthful with him, just like how I wasn’t truthful with him when I was young. Hearing I was married to Pike, it probably triggered him.”

“That’s not an excuse,” Greer says. “And he owes you a massive apology.”

“Probably,” I say, exhausted. “But I’m not sure I want to speak with him right now, or anybody, for that matter.”

“I can understand that. You must be feeling raw.” I nod and she pats my hand. “I’ll let you process, then, but there was something I wanted to tell you.”

“That Arlo got a crick in his back from sleeping on the sofa? Because that would please me.”

She chuckles. “Not that I know of, but he has a few nights ahead of him there, so there’s hope.”

“That’s a true friend.”

She smiles and then grows serious. “So, you kind of passed out last night, and while we were helping you out, Pike and Arlo got into it.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I mean . . . Pike stood up to Arlo, defended you, and when Arlo wouldn’t let up, when he was spouting off about

how Pike wasn't good enough for you, Pike drew back and punched Arlo in the face."

"What?" I exclaim, eyes wide. "No, he didn't. Did he?"

She nods. "Yeah, and then all hell broke loose. Romeo and Gunner had to step in. Kelvin even helped, because Pike was furious. I've never seen anything like it. He was . . . incredibly protective. Kept saying that because Arlo's only focused on the past you, he doesn't see the present, he doesn't know how thoughtful, and spunky, and amazingly smart you are."

"He said that?" I ask.

"Yeah. He put Arlo in his place. It's one of the things that I think is bothering Arlo the most, because Pike's words rang true. Arlo isn't sure he really knows you at all anymore."

"He doesn't," I say softly. My thoughts immediately go to Pike. "But how does Pike know me? I've been lying to him this entire time."

"You don't have to know the facts about someone in order to grasp the fundamental person they are. He reads your actions, your spirit, your tenacity. He looks past the surface and sees you for who you are."

I bite the corner of my mouth and think about last night. I don't remember much that was said, but I do recall the possessive grip on my back and the way he snapped at Arlo.

"He really defended me?" I ask. "After what I did to him? After how I embarrassed him?"

Greer nods. "He did, and then he carried you to your car and drove you back to your apartment. I checked in with him later and he said you were doing fine and that he was taking care of you." Greer nervously glances to the side and then whispers, "He blew everyone away at the party, even Arlo. Pike treated you like you truly were the only thing he ever cared about in his life."

I can't tell you why.

I can't tell you how, but . . .

A tear slowly trickles down my cheek.

“I think he really likes you,” Greer says softly. “And I wanted to tell you this, because I think you need to know. You need to understand that I think this is more for him.”

I glance to the side, out the window, as I come face to face with the truth.

“I think I like him too.”

“Then stop messing around and get to know him, Cora.” She forces me to look at her. “I know Keenan messed you up and your childhood has messed with your ability to open your heart, but please give him a chance. I think he could make you happy.”

“I wasn’t expecting him to come along. I just got divorced.”

“We can’t control our own timeline when fate intervenes in our lives. Don’t push away from fate, embrace it.”

The door opens and Pike walks in, holding a bag from the coffee shop from around the corner. Greer glances at him and stands.

“Text me, okay?” she asks.

I nod and then whisper, “Thank you.”

She winks and takes off, leaving me alone with Pike.

When the door clicks shut and he comes toward me, I notice a gash on his cheek and the bruising surrounding it. Was that from Arlo?

I’m about to ask when he says, “I got you an egg and sausage sandwich. Figured you’d need something greasy.” He sets the bag down and then takes a step back from me. He pulls on the back of his neck and says, “I have some things to do. Water and Ibuprofen are on the nightstand. Text if you need anything.”

Without a goodbye, he leaves me completely alone with my thoughts.

Something incredibly dangerous to do.

## Chapter Fifteen

### PIKE

“Pick up, pick up, pick up,” I mumble as my leg bounces while sitting on a park bench.

“Hello?” Killian answers.

“Thank fuck,” I breathe into the mobile.

“Pike, what’s going on? Everything okay?”

“No,” I say as I stand and start to pace. “Nothing is okay.”

“Isn’t it Thanksgiving over there?”

I pause and look up. That must be why the park is so empty. I completely forgot.

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Uh, are you not with Cora right now?”

“No. I’m in a park fucking freaking out.”

“Okay, deep, calming breaths. What’s going on?”

I pause my pacing and take a deep breath. After I let it out, I say, “I punched Arlo in the face.”

“Arlo, who is Ar—wait . . . the head teacher at your school?”

“Yes.”

“Why the fuck would you do that?”

“Because I’ve lost the plot.” I push my hand through my hair.

“Is he pressing charges?”

I start pacing again. “I have no fucking clue. He swung at me too, but fuck, the last thing I need is for the school to find out about the altercation and fire me. You know Pa would catch wind of it. And that PI—I saw his car parked outside where the fight broke out. There were windows in the back where we were. He could’ve been in the bushes for all I know.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Killian yells. “Jesus Christ, Pike. What happened?”

I sit down on the bench and say, “Cora.”

“What about her?”

“He was attacking her. I couldn’t sit back and let him do that.”

“Like physically?” Killian asks, his tone becoming angry.

“No, verbally. He didn’t know about our marriage. Keiko spilled the beans yesterday, Arlo lost his shit, I didn’t like how he was talking to her, and I let him know it.”

“So, you were the knight in shining armor, then?”

“No, it wasn’t my intention, I just—fuck, I blacked out and next thing I know, we’re being pulled off each other. We both walked away with gashes on our faces.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Killian says. “If this gets out, Pa is going to roast us.”

“I know.” I squeeze my eyes shut. “But, fuck, Killian, you should’ve seen her face. Completely devastated. I fucking lost it.”

He’s silent, and then he says, “Because you like her.”

“I do,” I answer honestly. “I fucking like her a great deal, and no matter how hard I try, I know the sentiment will never be returned. She has a troubled past and it affects her everyday life. I just—I think I should step down from the foundation.”

“What?” Killian roars. “No. No fucking way are you doing that. Do you hear me? If you step down, then Pa takes over.”

“Then maybe—I don’t know. Maybe I just marry Iris, get it over with. Because what the hell am I really doing over here? I’m just fucking everything up.”

“Do you really think she’s not going to go for it, that you won’t be able to get her to England?”

I shake my head. “I really don’t think I will. I thought I was making some headway, until she humiliated me in front of everyone at the party.”

“What did she do?”

“Gave me one of those dissolvable swimsuits. I had no clue. I ended up showing my bare arse to my colleagues.”

Killian chuckles.

“It wasn’t fucking funny.”

“Pike, that’s quite funny.”

“It’s not,” I shoot back. “And do you know why it’s not fucking funny? Because she knows how much I’m still trying to impress them, to fit in. That didn’t fucking help. And on top of that, I was—hell, my pride was wounded, because for a moment, I thought we were becoming more, when in reality, she was just making me think that we were.”

“I think that’s what you’re more upset about.”

“Yeah, I know,” I say, smoothing my hand over my jaw. “I don’t think I can do much more of this.” I pause. “I think I’m going to return to the apartment and tell her I’m out.”

“Don’t,” Killian says.

“Pa is right, I should just be with fucking Iris.” The more I say it out loud, the more it pains me to actually consider it.

“Pike, you’ll be miserable.”

“Better to be miserable than risk what we’ve worked so hard at building.” I’m silent for a moment and then add, “He won’t quit. You know he won’t. If it’s not this, it’s going to be

something else. I didn't do what he wanted, and because of that, he's bound to make my life a living hell."

"Pike, listen to me. It's a hiccup, okay? You can still fix things with Cora."

I shake my head even though he can't see me. It's wishful thinking on his end, but he's not here, he doesn't see the way Cora distances herself, even when I think I'm getting close. He doesn't see her strong reluctance. I'd like to believe that maybe there's a chance, but after yesterday, I'm 100% certain she'll never give in.

"I can't, and I have to go. I'll talk to you later."

"Pike, wait—"

I hang up and lean back on the bench. I press my hands into my eyebrows, attempting to massage the headache away.

Fuck.

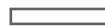
For a second there, I thought there was a chance of making this marriage an actual reality, but I meant what I said. There's no way she's going to give in.

Ever.

Not after the swimsuit prank. We had a good few days, and if she was going to pull back, that would've been the time. But she didn't.

Which means . . . there's only one thing left for me to do.

End it.



CARRYOUT BAG IN HAND, I take a deep breath and then unlock the door to the apartment. The lights are off and the apartment is completely sheathed in darkness.

I spent the last few hours walking around the city, looking for a place that serves take-away Thanksgiving dinners. After waiting in line for over an hour and a half at a diner fifteen

blocks away, I got dinner. Figured I could at least offer her dinner before taking off.

I set the food on the counter and flip on the light in the kitchen, catching sight of Cora lying in bed, covers pulled up to her neck.

When her eyes meet mine, I see a single tear fall into the fabric of the already wet pillowcase.

Fuck.

That single tear cuts through me, deep. I wish it didn't. I wish I could stop caring about her, but the heart doesn't work like that.

"Hey," I say somberly.

She wipes at her eyes. "You came back."

"Did you think I wouldn't?" I ask, sticking my hands in my pockets, unsure of what to do. I know what I need to say to her, but my body is aching to go to her, to make sure she's okay, to reassure her that I'm here.

She nods. "I thought you went back to your place."

"Nah, just took forever to find a turkey dinner." I scratch the back of my neck. It's now or never. Just end it and be done with this mess. "Listen, Cora," I start.

She sits up, the covers falling from her shoulders and to her lap, and slowly, her shirt comes into view. It feels like a ton of bricks hitting me all at once.

Sitting on the bed, tears streaming down her face, she's wearing my Save the Queen shirt.

*My shirt.*

I'm . . . fuck . . . I'm gutted.

She doesn't need to say anything, because it's written all over her face, in her actions.

She's giving me a chance.

Hell . . . she's giving *us* a chance.



Her lip trembles as she rises from the bed. She stands there tentatively for a second, her hands twisting in front of her. The hem of my shirt reaches midthigh and swallows her shoulders, making her look much smaller than she is.

After a few breaths, she takes a step forward.

And then another.

And another, until she has closed the space between us.

Tears still stream down her face as her hand goes to my chest, then slowly up my neck, and to the gash on my face. She gently strokes it, her thumb hot on my already heated skin, and then another wave of tears trickles down her cheek.

“I’m—I’m so sorry,” she says, her lip trembling some more.

Call me a masochist.

Call me a bloody nob-head.

But I can’t let her cry like this.

I can’t pass up the meaning behind the shirt.

And I can’t walk away from her without knowing what her lips taste like.

I cup her cheek, placing my thumb under her chin so I can better angle her mouth.

From the first time I saw her at the teachers’ barbeque at the beginning of the school year, I was curious what her lips tasted like. Curious about what she’d be like in bed. But I kept my distance, because I wasn’t here to find someone, I was here to find myself. Find my passion. Forest Heights was one of five schools I interviewed with. Principal Dewitt gave me a chance, and I wasn’t going to screw that up.

But then everything changed in one night, over a few bottles of Fireball, and now I’m addicted.

I can’t walk away, no matter how much I think I should.

Not with her like this.

It may have seemed pigheaded, making her acquiesce. But I can see now that in part, I was protecting my heart too. *Because Cora could tear it in two.*

Without a word, I lean down and gently press my lips to hers. From that first contact, more tears spill from her eyes, but her arms loop around my neck and pull me in even closer, holding me tight as her lips part for mine and she gives me everything I could've hoped for—all of her.

No boundaries.

No walls.

No speed bumps.

Just her.

I slip my hand under her shirt, dragging my fingers up her side until they connect with . . . nothing.

She's wearing nothing under my shirt.

Just her beautiful, bare body.

It does me in.

I separate from her lips briefly, reach behind my head, and pull off my shirt, dropping it on the floor. Then I close the distance between us once more. My lips find hers, and our kiss is more frantic this time.

Her tongue presses against my lips and I open-mouth kiss her, letting her tongue tangle with mine, letting her take everything she wants. One of her hands slides down my chest, across my abs, and then to my jeans, where she cups me through the fabric.

I groan into her mouth and then back her up to the bed. Before pushing her onto the mattress, I grab the hem of the shirt she's wearing and pull it over her head, leaving her bare.

My teeth roll over my bottom lip as I take in the sight of her.

“Fuck, Coraline. You're so beautiful.”

Her cheeks blush, and with her eyes on mine, she sits on the bed and reaches for my jeans. I give in easily, allowing her to undo my pants and push them down my legs. I help her get them off and when her eyes return to mine, looking for permission, I nod.

With her eyes trained in front of her, she slips her fingers inside the waistband of my briefs and drags them down, pulling the fabric with her until my hard cock springs free from the confines.

A small gasp slips past her lips as she takes me in.

I step out of my briefs and grip the root of my cock, gently pumping.

She wets her lips, glances up at me, and then her mouth opens.

And fuck if I'm going to stop her.

My cock slips between her beautiful lips and she sucks me in, letting each piercing have its own moment with her delectable lips.

I move her hair to the side and stroke her soft cheek.

“So beautiful,” I mutter as her hands land on my thighs and she moves her lips up and down my cock, sucking hard. I knew her mouth would be addictive, but I had no clue it would be this addictive, this enticing.

I watch as her cheeks hollow out as she moves to the tip of my cock. She drags her tongue around the head and down the underside until she reaches where my hand is gripping the base. She removes my hand and replaces it with her own, squeezing just enough to cause my eyes to roll to the back of my head.

Holy shit, that feels good.

My legs tremble under me and she must notice because she disengages and guides me to the bed. I lie down and she climbs between my legs, taking my dick back into her mouth. I spread wider for her, giving her more room, and she takes advantage of it by threading her hand under my balls to cup

them. One hand strokes the seam as her other hand pumps my cock and her tongue rolls over the head.

It's so many sensations at once and I can't seem to focus on anything but the building of my orgasm.

It starts as a dull throb at the base of my spine, then turns into a tingling sensation that runs up and down my legs until it pulses up my balls.

Fuck, I'm going to come in about five seconds if she keeps this up.

"Coraline. Stop." My commanding voice startles her.

I sit up and swap places with her, placing her on her back as I hover over her. "Did I do something wrong?" she asks, looking incredibly insecure.

I shake my head. "No, baby." I stroke her cheek. "You did everything right, but I don't want to come in your mouth and I was about to."

"Oh." She smiles. "Then come in me."

"That's the plan. But I need to know that you're ready."

She grabs my hand and brings it between her legs. "I've never been more ready, Pike."

I drag two fingers along her slit. "So fucking soft, so wet." Desperate for a taste, I lower my body between her legs, spread her with two fingers, and then lap at her clit.

Her body tenses and her hands grip the bedding beneath us. "Pike . . . yes," she whispers softly. "You're amazing."

I don't bother replying. I focus on bringing her pleasure, in getting lost in this woman.

In her scent.

In her taste.

In her sweet moans.

I slip two fingers inside her and curve them up as I continue to lick and swirl her clit with my tongue.

She writhes beneath me.

She pulls my hair.

She calls out my name.

“I’m going to come,” she announces, and I take that as my cue to pull away. “Pike, what are you doing?” She breathes heavily, her eyes frantic. “Please, don’t. Don’t leave me like this. I’m sorry about—”

“Shhh,” I say, pulling her up to a sitting position. I flip her to her stomach, press my hand to her back, and lift her hips up until she’s angled perfectly. “Stay like this.”

She obeys.

I smooth my hand over her curved back and then over her arse cheeks. I spread them and marvel at just how sexy she is.

“Stunning,” I say, moving my fingers over her tight hole and down to her pussy. She moans loudly and lifts her butt toward me. “Patience, Coraline.”

Keeping contact with her, I smooth my hand all the way over her pussy, to her pubic bone, and to her stomach, only to slowly drag my fingers all the way back up.

“Oh my fuck,” she says, breathing heavily. “Pike, I’m throbbing so hard right now.” She gasps. “Fuck, I might cry.”

“Because you’re happy?”

“That, and because I’m so turned on.” She swallows. “It’s pulsing deep in my veins.”

I repeat the drag of my fingers; this time when I’m touching her stomach, I reach a little farther and pinch her nipple as my teeth bite into her arse.

“Ahhh,” she screams, and I feel her wetness on my arm, soaking my skin. “Again,” she huffs out.

So, once again, I repeat the route.

And again.

And again, until she’s gripping the bedding so tightly her knuckles are white. That’s when I release her.

She holds still, on all fours, heaving for air, her arousal sliding down her leg.

“Tell me, Coraline.” I position my cock behind her. Knowing she’s on birth control, I don’t bother with a condom. “Who do you belong to?”

I rub my cock over her entrance.

“Ahhh, yes, Pike,” she says, backing her arse against me, but she doesn’t answer, so I pull away.

“Answer the question. Who do you belong to?”

“You,” she says breathlessly.

I press my cock to her entrance and she moans loudly.

Teeth grinding together, I tightly ask, “And who the fuck is your husband?”

“You,” she answers.

That’s all I need. I plunge into her all at once. One giant thrust until I bottom out.

“Oh my GOD!” she yells as her back curves, angling her arse higher.

“Jesus . . . Christ,” I mutter, attempting to calm my cock as it surges against her tight walls. “Fuck, you’re so warm, so soft.” I pulse rapidly inside her. “So fucking narrow.” I groan as my pace picks up. “I can’t stop,” I say. “I need to fuck this pussy. To claim it.”

And without stopping, I grip her hips and move in and out of her rapidly, losing all control, the sound of our slapping skin setting the rhythm.

In and out.

In and out.

We moan together.

We climb together.

We desperately call each other’s names together.

“Fuck, baby. So good. So fucking good.” My balls tighten and I know it’s only seconds before I unload. “Baby, I’m right there.”

“Me too,” she says. “I want you, Pike. You’re mine.”

Hell . . .

I reach around her, massage her clit, causing her inner walls to squeeze me like a death grip as she calls out my name and comes.

My cock swells inside of her, my body stills, and I orgasm inside of my gorgeous, smart-mouthed wife until there’s nothing left inside of me.

Spent, I collapse on top of her and let out a deep breath.

“Holy. Fuck,” I say, pressing a kiss to her back. I move off her and lie on the mattress, on my back, staring at the ceiling, my wet cock still throbbing as it rests against my stomach.

Cora turns over as well, but curls against my side and gently kisses my chest.

I kiss the top of her head, and when she looks up at me, I tilt her chin up and press a kiss to her lips.

It’s a simple kiss, a kiss that isn’t supposed to turn into anything, but when she angles up and her hair dances over my chest as she climbs on top of me, the kiss deepens. Our tongues tangling, our hands grasping . . . before I know it, she’s riding me, her tits bouncing in front of my face, making me come all over again.



“YOU OKAY?” I ask as Cora slips my shirt back on and lifts her wet hair out from under the collar.

She nods and smiles at me as I sit up in bed. After she slowly brought me to orgasm again, we stuffed the turkey dinners in the fridge and took a shower together. If I didn’t just come twice in a short amount of time, I would’ve fucked her in there as well, but instead, we silently washed each other and

then dried off. She spent a few more minutes putting on this really nice-smelling lotion and now she's joining me.

"Great." She climbs into bed next to me and on top of my lap.

I lift an eyebrow at her. "More?"

She chuckles. "Yes, but first I want to talk to you."

My hands rub over her thighs. "Talk all you want, as long as you stay right here and you don't have any regrets."

She shakes her head. "No regrets. Well, actually, that's not true." My heart sinks. "I regret the way I've treated you these last few weeks, and especially yesterday."

Oh.

"Cora, it's—"

She silences me with her hand to my mouth. "No, I don't want you to say it's okay. I don't want you to excuse my behavior." She chews on the side of her mouth as she says, "I wouldn't say you hit the jackpot by marrying me. I'm emotionally unhealthy. I've looked for love in all the wrong places, and I have a sordid past. Frankly, I don't believe I'm good enough for anyone, let alone have any business being married to someone like you."

"Someone like me?" I ask.

"Someone understanding. Someone who's willing to work with me, be patient with me, deal with all the bullshit I throw in their direction. You should've left weeks ago, but you stuck around. I have no idea why, but you did."

Guilt swarms me because I know exactly why I stuck around, but as the weeks went on, the lines began to blur. I wanted to stay because of the foundation—because my pa will do anything to belittle me and force his hand—but I also wanted to stay because of her.

Wanting to be at least partially honest with her, I say, "I was going to leave tonight."

Her eyes snap to mine, tears welling up in them.



I soothe my hands over her thighs, attempting to calm her.

“But the minute I saw you, the moment I realized you were wearing my shirt, I knew there was no way in hell I would ever be able to part with you.” I reach up and grip her cheek, looking her in the eyes, and say, “I like you, Cora. I like your spunk, your candidness, your ability to be real, and even ugly at times. I like the ups and downs, the roller coaster, because it makes me feel alive, more alive than I’ve ever felt before. I know it’s not going to be easy, but I would really like to give this a shot with you.”

Tears crest in her eyes and I wipe them away.

“I hope those are happy tears.”

She nods. “They are.” She takes a deep breath and says, “I didn’t realize how much I wanted to try this until I realized I might have fucked it up forever.” Nervously, she presses her hand to my chest. “Pike, do you think you’d want to date your wife?”

*Fuck. Yes.*

I never thought I’d hear that question, but it’s so right coming from Cora’s kiss-stung lips.

I chuckle and curl my hand behind her neck, pulling her closer. “I would like nothing more.”

And then I press a kiss to her lips, and once again, we sink into bed. This time, we take it nice and slow.

## Chapter Sixteen

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### CORA

**Stella:** *Checking in. Haven't heard from you. Wanting to make sure you're okay.*

**Greer:** *Same. How are you?*

**Keiko:** *Quite well, thank you. Kelvin and I catalogued our romantic exchange into a bountiful pros-and-cons list that extended into three full legal-sized pages. We devoured five hours cross-examining each bullet point, made separate pros and cons for each pro and con, cross-examined those points, and then, in the end, performed coitus on the lists.*

**Stella:** *Umm . . . wow.*

**Greer:** *That's, uh, great, Keiko.*

**Stella:** *So you're back together and Kelvin is cool with the baby?*

**Keiko:** *Yes, we have agreed upon a mutual understanding that I am pregnant, he is the paterfamilias, and we shall raise this child together, under holy matrimony.*

**Greer:** *Wait . . . what? Are you engaged?*

**Keiko:** *We married at the courthouse two hours ago. Finished consummating five minutes prior to your initial text.*

**Stella:** *You got married without us???*

**Keiko:** *I assumed that was par for the course, given how Cora entered into wedlock. Am I mistaken?*

**Greer:** *Well, that's really up to you, Keiko. If a courthouse wedding is what you intended, then I'm sure it was beautiful. Did you at least take pictures?*

**Keiko:** *Indeed. We procured a disposable camera from a Gen Z-er walking down the street. We assumed it would be more authentic.*

**Stella:** *Well, maybe you can show them off at our next book club meeting, which will be . . .*

**Greer:** *Yeah, Cora, care to tell us when that will be?*

**Keiko:** *Also curious about solidifying a date in my agenda. I would like to discuss in great detail the fetal membrane.*

**Cora:** *Uh, wow, just catching up. Keiko, congrats, girl, that's so amazing. You and Kelvin are meant for each other, and I know you will be wonderful parents to Blanche/Seymour. Maybe, if it's okay with you, we can hold a small reception in a week or two to celebrate? We can invite close family and friends. Greer, I suggest your place.*

**Greer:** *I would love that. We can set up a tent in the backyard, have the view of the lake in the background. What do you say, Keiko?*

**Stella:** *Ooo, can I be in charge of décor? I have the PERFECT idea.*

**Cora:** *Might be fun to throw you a little mini wedding. Only if you care to have one.*

**Keiko:** *A strange sensation has eclipsed my eyes. So it seems my visual organs have begun misting.*

**Stella:** *Does that mean you're crying?*

**Keiko:** *Precisely.*

**Greer:** *Aw, Keeks. No need to cry. We love you and we want you to be happy. Can we please do this for you?*

**Stella:** *Pleeeeeeease!*

**Cora:** *I can sponsor a donut cake from Frankie Donuts.*

**Keiko:** *As Renee Zellweger would say, you had me at donuts (hello).*

**Greer:** *YAY! I'm so excited.*

**Stella:** *Let the party planning commence!*

**Cora:** *As long as no Fireball is involved, I'm in.*

**Greer:** *There will be absolutely NONE!*

**Stella:** *Well, now that we have that settled, I was actually asking if Cora was okay. \*Winces\**

**Keiko:** *Ah. I perceived your text message incorrectly. Maybe next time, you insert a name into your question so there is no confusion on a group thread as to who you might be corresponding with.*

**Stella:** *Lesson learned, thank you, Keeks. So, Cora . . .*

**Cora:** *Well, I'm lying in bed, curled against Pike, texting you three. So what do you think?*

**Greer:** *OMG, are you giving him a chance?*

**Cora:** *I am. I'm officially dating my husband.*

**Stella:** *Be still my heart. A match made in Uber Drive-Thru Wedding heaven. Maybe Fireball really isn't your enemy.*

**Cora:** *Let's not get out of hand. Fireball is still Satan's mistress.*

**Keiko:** *Technically an inanimate object can't adhere to the title "mistress," because in order to heed said title, the object or "woman" must be engaging in an extramarital relationship. Since Fireball doesn't possess sexual organs, but rather is a liquid, it can't possibly be a mistress.*

**Greer:** *I don't know what to say other than you're correct.*

**Keiko:** *I am quite aware. Thank you.*

**Stella:** *SOOO, Cora, you're dating your husband?*

**Cora:** *Yes, and, as a matter of fact, I need to get ready. He's taking me out. Love you all!*



HOLDING MY HAND TIGHTLY, Pike walks me along the streets of Chicago as we make our way to the restaurant where he made reservations. Surprisingly, it isn't as chilly tonight as one would think it might be for a night at the end of November in Chicago. Normally, walking outside this time of the year would require three layers, a parka, and a face mask to block the wind, but I'm only wearing one layer and a jacket.

Gloves, though, those I wore, because I wasn't about to ride on the back of Pike's motorcycle without them.

"I can't believe Keiko told you she got married and she didn't tell me first. We had to practically drag it out of her."

Pike shrugs. "What can I say? Our bond is strong."

"And I can't believe you didn't tell me."

"Not my place to say anything."

"Ugh, that's what's so annoying about guys—they never gossip."

We pause at a crosswalk, look both ways, and then walk across the street, not a car in sight to hurry our pace. "We don't need to gossip. We'll find out the information eventually."

"Annoying," I say, curling more closely against him as a whip of wind nearly unwinds my scarf from my neck. Maybe I spoke too soon about the weather. "Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"I prefer this whole 'surprise' thing. Makes it more fun for me."

We come up to a large, light grey—at least that's what it seems in the dark—brick building. Outdoor seating lines the side of the building, but the chairs are empty despite the heat lamps. I can't imagine sitting outside for dinner, even if there is a heat lamp. Pike guides me to the entry at the corner of the

building, two large, black doors with an oversized *W* carved into them.

I immediately know where we are.

“The Whale?” I ask, excited.

He nods. “I thought it might be fun, since it has a Las Vegas vibe to it. You know, taking it back to where we started.”

“Clever. Have you been here before?”

“No, but I’ve heard it’s good. Have you?”

I shake my head. “No, but I’ve always wanted to try it.”

Pike holds open the large metal door for me and guides me inside with a hand to my lower back.

Taking one step into the building feels like taking a time machine back to old-school Las Vegas. A classy, sophisticated parlor room is how I would describe the setting. A large bar to the right, the back wall covered in blue subway tiles laid out in a herringbone pattern. Gold accents and blue, tufted leather bar stools line the bar top. Archways are a common theme throughout the space, whether built into alcoves in the wall or offering privacy walls to each of the red, leather booths. Damask wallpaper covers the walls that aren’t tiled, lending to the sophistication, and in the corner is the most refined and beautiful jukebox I’ve ever seen. Not one of those neon rainbows you see at a dive bar. No, this one is sleek in cream and gold colors with a flat top.

“I can tell you right now, I love it already,” I say.

The hostess greets us. “Welcome to The Whale. Do you have a reservation?”

Pike nods and says, “Under Greyson.”

“Yes, party of two.” She gathers menus and says, “Right this way.” She guides us to an arched booth in the back, right next to the jukebox.

Pike steps up behind me and helps me remove my jacket before helping me into the booth. I’ve never experienced such

gentlemanly attention before. He hangs my jacket on a hook outside the booth, then hangs his leather jacket there as well. He slides into the booth in the seat across from me.

The hostess happily hands us menus and tells us Mika will be with us shortly to grab our drink order.

“This place is incredible.” The distance between us is a three-foot table’s width, but it feels like a football field, and maybe that’s because I’m so used to having to share a small shoebox space with him. Our dining table is curated for two, but really comfortable for one. This is so different.

“I’ve heard great things about it. Bit of a foodie.”

“Wait . . . are you?” I ask.

He glances up at me from over his menu. “I am, so all that charred food you served the first weeks of our marriage nearly destroyed my palate.”

I cover my mouth with my hand as I chuckle. “But you still ate it.”

“Because you made it, even if it was out of spite. Plus, you know . . . food waste and all.”

“Let me ask you this—what has been the worst thing I’ve served you?”

He sets his menu down, laying it flat on the polished wood between us. “The worst thing you served me? Well, you almost served me microwaved tea and that would’ve easily taken the cake, but since you never truly served it, I can’t count that.”

“Ugh, Englishmen and their tea. Is it really that big of a deal?”

“Yes.” His thick brows draw down into a *V*. “I dare you to serve microwaved tea to the queen.”

“Bet she wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.”

His mouth draws into a flat line, making me chuckle even harder. “Are you saying we need to do a taste test later? See

which one is microwaved and which one is properly brewed and steeped so I can prove you wrong?”

“Nothing would give me more joy.”

He lifts his menu and casually looks at it as he says, “Fine by me. A tea-off it shall be later tonight.”

“Things are about to get frisky.” I nudge his leg under the table, and he smirks while staring at his menu. “You never answered my question. What was the worst thing I served?”

“No brainer. You made it a few times, and every time I felt like it got worse and worse. From your vengeful tactics, I believe you did it on purpose.”

“Probably. What was it?”

His eyes quirk over the menu, and in a deep voice, he says, “The mushy peas.”

A rumble of laughter pops out of my mouth as I nod. “Oh, yes. I wanted to destroy any hopes of you connecting back to England through food.”

“Well done. I don’t think I ever want to see mushy peas again. The last time you made them, they tasted fishy.”

“Because I added anchovy oil to your helping, but only to yours. There was no way I was going to stomach that.”

His dark eyes turn into a sly understanding. “You don’t play fair, Coraline.”

“If anyone isn’t playing fair, it would be you, the man who would make me orgasm but never truly touch me. That was torture.”

“Was it?” he deadpans. “Because as I was choking down fishy peas, you were orgasming. Tell me how that’s worse?”

“Because I was the one being tortured.”

His head falls back, showing the thick of his neck as he laughs. It’s a delicious sound, carefree, full of true joy, and in this moment, I realize the Pike I’ve been living with is the same man I’m having dinner with right now.



Nothing has changed other than now I can start to lower my wall and open up to him. And appreciate him. *Rather than resist him.*

When I first met him, he was aloof, distanced, but since he let me into his world, I can see he's anything but that. He's sweet, charming, and a good man. He takes his relationships seriously, even the ones with his friends. That's evident in the way he treats Keiko and protects her.

We take a few minutes to look over the menu, marveling at the varied dishes, and decide to split each of our entrees so we can have a taste of the two dishes we were trying to decide between. We also ordered some waters, skipping the alcoholic beverages tonight—for obvious reasons. I don't believe I'll be drinking anything anytime soon.

Once we've ordered, I cross one of my legs over the other and rest my hands on my lap. "You're so far away."

"Missing me?"

"Do you really think I would admit to something like that?"

He rests his large hand on the table and my eyes go to his thick fingers, fingers I've felt deep inside me, curving, pulsing.

"I would expect you to admit to something like that." His jovial disposition switches into a commanding one, drawing my attention quickly to those devilish eyes. "After all that you've put me through, I expect more from you now."

I wet my lips, turned on from the authoritative lilt. "What else do you expect from me?"

"Are you looking for a list?"

"Are you offering one up?"

The cashmere of his sweater stretches across his thick chest as he shifts in the booth, his hand resting on the table now bringing his glass to his mouth. Dressed in a five o'clock shadow, his jaw is sinister, caked in scruff and pulled tight from his demanding stare.

Cockiness in his every move, he says, “I have one if you’re actually going to listen.”

The smallest of smirks pulls at the corner of my lips. “I’m listening.”

“Good, because I will not repeat myself.”

My nipples grow hard, pressing against the thin lace of the demi bra I wore specifically for Pike so he’ll be enthralled when taking it off me later tonight.

“Is this the asshole side of you showing?”

His eyes bore into me, capturing my attention. “This is what you get when you’re married to me. The fun, the demanding, the caring. This is the demanding side.”

I lean in close to him, my voice a whisper as I say, “I hope this carries into the bedroom, because with every word you speak, you’re turning me on.”

“Foreplay is in everything you do. Remember that.”

Noted.

He sets down his glass, and condensation remains on his fingers, and I watch as he slowly rubs his fingers together, his thumb smoothing over the tips until the water disappears.

“When you’re sharing a bed with me, you’re either naked or wearing my shirt,” he starts. “You should be well aware of this by now.”

“I am. Trust me.”

“I expect you to be honest with me. No games. Just you and me, nothing between us.”

“Given how my previous marriage went down, I would enjoy the same in return,” I say.

“You’ll get nothing but honesty from me, Coraline. And Keiko told me that you were divorced. I hadn’t realized that, so I’m sorry if my determination to stay married rattled you.”

I shrug, then smile and stretch my hand out to him. To my luck, he leans forward and takes it, intertwining our fingers,

his large ones making my fingers look tiny in comparison. I'm not ready to talk to Pike about the disaster that was my first marriage.

“No more pranks, no more trying to push me away.” His eyes bore into me, like steel, pinning me straight. “You have given yourself to me, which means I get all of you, the past, your thoughts, your baggage. I want all of it. No holding back.”

Thanks to Arlo, he's already heard the summarized version. Surely that's enough. That was humiliating, especially knowing how Arlo feels about me. *“Christ, Cora. I thought we were done making bad decisions. I thought we were done with your wild years. Now that you're divorced, are you just going to settle back into the rhythm of your teenage years that almost got you killed?”*

“You don't want all of it, Pike.”

His hand squeezes mine. “If I didn't, I wouldn't ask for it. You'll give me every last piece of you, even if it takes a while. I want all of it, Coraline.”

I glance away, unable to look him in the eyes. “It's not all pretty.”

“No one's life is all pretty, that's what makes us human. My sordid past isn't anything I care to share with the world, but with you, that's different. You're my wife, and despite it being from a drunken incident, it still means something to me.”

I study him for a few beats, watching the fabric of his shirt pull as he breathes. “Your version of loyalty is hard to come by these days, Pike.”

“If you don't have loyalty, then you don't have a leg to stand on. You can have all the money in the world, but without loyalty, you're just another soulless void wasting room on this crowded planet.”

“Did you learn loyalty or was it pushed upon you?”

“A bit of both,” he answers earnestly. “I was never led by example, probably the opposite, if I'm honest, which caused

me to learn that loyalty is the key to any human. You offer them unbreakable loyalty and they will stick by your side.”

“You speak from experience.”

He nods. “I do, but I would prefer to not dive so deep right away. This is our first date, after all.”

Noticing him wanting to lighten the mood, I join him. “Did I tell you I don’t kiss on the first date?”

“Is that so?” he asks. “Well, did I tell you I fuck on the first date?”

“A bit of a ho, are we?”

He chuckles. “No, just know what I want, when I want it.”

“Are you saying you want me, Pike?”

“Desperately.” His eyes narrow. “Only you, Cora.”

How is it possible that he can make me want him every second he’s around so effortlessly?

“Good thing you married me then, huh?”

“Very good for me.”



“WHY DO you believe they named this place The Whale?” I ask as we bite into our meals.

I ordered the cauliflower steak and Pike ordered the blackened trout. We each chose a side to split—I went with the crispy fingerling potatoes and Pike ordered the mixed greens, giving us way more food than we could possibly eat in one sitting. But knowing Pike’s dedication to leftovers, I know he’ll be eating this tomorrow.

“I read about it on their website. It’s a play on the difference between a high-roller and a whale.”

“Uh, what?” I chuckle.

“Gamblers. High-rollers are the ones spending from one hundred thousand dollars to one million as their budget.”

“Good God, could you imagine dropping that much money without even blinking?”

“I’ve seen it. But I’ve also seen a whale at play, as well.”

“What’s a whale?” I ask before I pinch a fingerling potato between my fingers and lift it to my mouth. The hint of almond is really doing it for me.

“A whale is the person who rolls in on a private jet provided by the casino, offered a suite that’s big enough for twenty people and every perk you can think of, just so the casino can gain their business. These people drop a minimum of one million dollars and usually spend more because they can.”

“More than one million dollars?” I ask. “That’s . . . insane. And you’ve seen someone do that?”

He nods and forks the last piece of his trout. “I have.” He leans back and studies me. “Do you know of my family?”

“Uh, should I?”

“All of England does, but usually that doesn’t translate over to the States.”

I set down my fork, eyes wide, and whisper, “Are you royalty? Is that why you’re so fancy about your tea?”

He laughs loud enough to gather attention from the bar. He shakes his head. “No, we aren’t royalty, but my pa likes to believe he is.”

“Pa, aww, how cute is that?”

“Not cute at all. The man is wretched. An absolute twit.”

“Ooo, twit. I like that word. The next person who wrongs me, I’m calling them a twit. So, your pa, what does he do?”

“Financial investments, to keep it short. The truth—fuck people over for his own benefit.”

“Oh, well, isn’t that commendable.” My voice is laced with sarcasm.

“And there’s nothing that will stop him from getting what he wants, even if that means fucking over his own children.”

“What? Seriously?” I ask. “I mean, granted, my mom was never upstanding, but at least she knew she didn’t want to raise me and Arlo, so she passed us over to our grandparents and left to do her own thing. We were in better hands. They never hurt us, but I’m not sure they loved us, either. But to screw over your own children for your benefit . . .” I shake my head. “I can’t imagine.”

He forks some of his greens. “I believe he had children to use them as assets, not to love them, raise them, or leave a lasting impression on society.”

“Can I ask you what he did to you?”

His eyes flash up to mine, hurt deep within his pupils, causing his brows to droop. “There was a business he wanted to secure with someone he absolutely hates and has screwed over in the past.”

“Hence the ‘no loyalty.’”

“Exactly.”

I can tell he’s nervous talking about this subject because he pulls on the back of his neck, leaving his food to just rest on his plate as he speaks. I’m tempted to break the distance between us, to scoot to his side, but I also want to be able to look him in the eyes, and I know if I move to his side of the booth, I won’t have access to his expression as freely as I do now.

“So, he came to me,” he says.

“What could you do to help?”

“Date the daughter of the man he wants to be in business with.”

Color me shocked, because that was the last thing I expected him to say.

“Really? Wow, I thought that kind of thing only happened in TV and movies. I didn’t think it existed in the real world.”

“It does.”

“Did you date her?”

To my shock, he slowly nods. “For five years.”

“FIVE years?” I shout and then hush my voice. “You dated someone you didn’t like for five years?”

“It’s not that I didn’t like her.”

“Oh.” I straighten. “I just assumed. Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound rude.”

“Iris is a nice girl,” he says, and for some reason, hearing her name blasts me with a rush of jealousy. It’s one thing to know that maybe in a faraway reality, he once dated someone so his dad could gain ground in his business, but to have a name to her, that puts a whole new spin on it. “Quite pleasant, actually. She never did anything wrong. She was . . . perfect.”

Yeah, I don’t like that.

Because Iris sounds like the antithesis of me. I’m a far cry from perfect. Not even close. I carry truckloads of baggage, some baggage that should never be opened. *Iris is perfect . . .* and he walked away from her. What chance do I have that he’ll stay with me?

He must sense my insecurity, because he says, “She’s not perfect in the way you must be thinking. Not perfect in my eyes, but just perfect in general. She never showed fault. Hair was never out of place, dresses were always pressed, skin flawless, makeup impeccable. It was as though she was a real-life porcelain doll that was never touched, never played with.”

“Did you . . . not play with her?” I ask, genuinely curious.

He glances away. “If you’re asking if I was celibate for five years, the answer would be no.”

He fucked her; how could you not? Five years with someone, you’re bound to strip down.

But did he fuck her like he fucks me?

Did he speak into her ear as he pulsed deep inside her? Did he use toys on her? Did he let her use toys on him? Did he

bend her over in the shower and fuck her against the tile? Did he ever come so hard inside her that he collapsed on top of her back, unable to move for a solid two minutes?

“That mind of yours is working too hard,” he says, cutting through my sordid and unwanted thoughts.

I have no right to think of his sex life with Iris and compare it to ours.

He’s my husband, but that’s only a technicality at this point in time. We didn’t marry for love. And right now, we’re simply dating to see if we want to stay married. It’s so backward. It doesn’t give me the right to compare. *And yet . . .* all I can feel is a niggling fear.

“Was she good?”

“Coraline.” He pins me with a glare.

I pick up my fork and move some leftover sauce around on my plate. “I’m sorry, but I’m curious. I didn’t know you were in such a serious relationship with someone else. Five years . . . that’s on the fast track to engagement and marriage.”

“Exactly what my pa and her dad wanted. Marriage. Babies. A union of not only families, but businesses.”

“Who broke it off?”

“I did,” he says while he takes a sip of his water. I can’t help but stare at those lips and wonder how many countless hours were spent sucking perfect Iris’s nipples. How many times they sucked on her clit . . .

“You broke it off?” I ask.

His expression grows serious as he twists his water on the table, staring at the glass and swishing liquid. “She was perfect. Everything a man could possibly ask for. She cooked. She kept our place clean. She even would greet me when I came home, naked, begging me to fuck her.” I honestly think I could throw up. His eyes flash to mine. “But she was empty. A shell. There was no substance to her. Sure, fucking her at first was fun, because who doesn’t like sex? But after a while, I noticed the lack of life in her pupils. There was no passion. No



excitement. She didn't love me. She was just playing the part, and I didn't want that. I didn't want this woman playing a role for the benefit of our families. I broke it off and then fled to the States, hoping and praying I'd score a teaching job."

Trying to swallow the confession about their sex life, I push past it and focus on what he said. "What, uh . . . what's it like fucking me?"

When I look up at him, I catch the tick in his tight, tense jaw. His expression is unwavering and he never diverts his eyes away as he answers me. "Fucking you feels like I'm brought into another world, your world. There's emotion behind it. There's passionate need. There's feeling in your touch, in the way you grip my hair, in the way your pussy clenches around my cock. I feel you, Cora, to my bloody core. I feel you. I never got that with her. It's why I'm addicted to you, and only you."

My lips roll together and I can't help but feel silly for even asking. I married this man because a guy who pushes a gondola around for a living basically bet me I wouldn't. There was nothing between us other than a passion for eating pretzels while drunk. I spent the first month of our marriage harassing him, making his life a living hell to scare him away. And then I proceeded to humiliate him in front of colleagues because I have a hard time letting someone in, someone I care about. The foundation of our relationship is based off mini liquor bottles and lies.

I have no basis to even be asking him the things I'm asking him.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, feeling completely ridiculous. "I had no right to ask you that."

"Yes, you did," he says. "You're my wife, Cora. You have the right to ask me anything."

I let out a deep sigh. "You take that title so seriously. Why? You barely know me."

"Remember what I said about loyalty?"

I nod.

“You have that loyalty until you strip it away. So, yes, I take the title seriously. I take our marriage seriously, and I’ll do everything I can to see if we can make this work, because I like you, Cora. With you, I feel I’ve made the right match. Even if it was accidental in the beginning.”

*With you, I feel I’ve made the right match.* That’s what hasn’t made sense. Why he chose to stay with me, especially when I was—*am*—a hot mess. Keenan never thought I was worth his time, let alone his loyalty. *“Marriage to you was only for what I could get from you. Your fucking fortune. Why are you stupid enough not to know that? Why would I want to be married to you?”*

God, I hated that moment when Keenan yelled those words at me. Yet, in front of me is a man who’s *choosing* to be loyal because he made vows he won’t recant. He wants me for me.

Attempting to lighten the mood, I ask, “How’s that going for you so far?”

“Could be better if my wife were to actually sit next to me.”

“I think that could be arranged, but first . . . shall we get dessert?”

“I was hoping your pussy would be dessert tonight, but I can always have two.”

My cheeks flame.

“I’m never going to complain about two desserts.”



“I’M TRUSTING YOU, YOU KNOW,” Pike says, whispering in my ear.

After our waiter cleared our plates from the table and we ordered dessert, I switched to Pike’s side of the booth and sank into his embrace as his strong, toned arm wrapped around my shoulders. I let my hand drift to his thigh and slowly took advantage of the privacy of our table as I dragged my fingers

up and down the length of his quad. When my fingers danced over his cock, I delighted in the strangled moan that came from his throat, followed by his lips pressing to my ear and offering me an empty warning.

Empty, because I did it two more times and he did nothing about it other than spread his legs wider.

His fingers pull on my dark hair, twirling a strand around his finger. “Trusting me with what?”

“With your dessert choice.”

“Have you never had pineapple upside-down cake?”

He shakes his head. “No. This will be a first for me.”

I slide my hand up his inner thigh and cup him softly.

“Fuck, baby,” he whispers and the feel of his breath on my ear and the desperation in his voice has me rising from the booth and pulling on his hand. “What are you doing?” he asks.

“Bathroom.”

His brows narrow. “Not happening.”

I lean back into the booth and whisper, “Are you passing up a blow job?”

Slowly, he raises his hand past the curtain of hair that has fallen over my shoulder and cups my cheek. “No, you’ll blow me when we get home. I’m passing up on the moment to cheapen my wife in a restaurant bathroom. I’d rather you stroke me under this table, make me as hard as stone, so I have to wait until we get home for those delicious lips to suck me off.”

When he says it like that . . .

I scoot back into the booth, and this time, I face him, bringing one of my legs up on the booth seat, giving me a better angle.

“If that’s the case.” I press my hand to his crotch and delight in the way he leans back in the booth, his arms spreading along the length of the red leather. “You realize how sexy you are?”

I smooth my hand back down his thigh, not wanting to be too obvious in the booth. We are in public, after all, and I really like it here. I don't want to be banned because of cupping my husband under the table.

“Not as sexy as you are.”

I roll my eyes. “Lame, Greyson.”

“Maybe.” He reaches out and twirls a strand of my hair again. “But it's the truth.”

From the corner of my eye, I catch another patron of the restaurant walk up to the jukebox and flip through the songs for a few moments before picking one. “Brown Eyed Girl” plays, and Pike smirks.

“If only the lyrics would be grey-eyed girl, then this moment would be perfect.”

Mika drops off our dessert and leaves us with one fork, just as Pike requested. He stares at the dessert and then picks up the fork, carefully cutting into it. The yellow cake and pineapple stick together and the brown sugar sauce threatens to drip off the cake as he brings me the first bite. Eyes on him, I wrap my lips around the fork and allow him to drag it out of my mouth.

“You're in so much fucking trouble tonight.”

I chew and swallow. “Just the way I like it.” I take the fork from him and cut a piece of the cake so I can feed him myself. I bring the fork to his lips and ask, “Are you into spanking, Pike?”

He takes the cake and says, “I'm into everything.”

“Everything?” I ask, a quirk to my brow.

“Everything.”

Fascinated by this answer, I ask, “Okay, what's the craziest thing you've done?”

He studies me. “You want the truth?”

“I do,” I answer, even though from his expression, I'm guessing it's not going to be anything I've ever done.

“Okay.” He offers me a bite of the cake and I take it, letting the sweet taste of caramelized, buttered brown sugar sit on my tongue. “I used to be a member of a sex club.”

Uhh . . .

What?

My eyes widen.

“Wait, seriously?”

He nods. *What?* I can’t wrap my head around this.

Leaning in close so no one can hear me, I ask, “Are you telling me that Mr. Greyson, the newest member of the Forest Heights teaching staff, used to be a member of a sex club?”

“I was.”

“Wow . . . I mean, I was expecting you to say something like you let someone fuck you with a vibrator, but a sex club . . .”

“That, too.” He winks and I gulp as my mouth waters. The thought of fucking Pike with a vibrator while I swallow his come sounds so appealing that I actually yearn for it.

I can focus on that fantasy later, but right now, I need to know more about this sex club. Because I’ve always thought that British men were more . . . staid. Reserved. But nothing about this man is staid and reserved. In fact, the more I learn, the more I see he’s valiant and provocative. And he wants me. *Lucky me.* “When? How? With who?”

“When I was finishing university. It was my last year when I decided to join. Thought that joining would add that missing spice in my life with Iris.”

“You went with her?”

“I did. She was all for it. Like I said, she was all for anything.”

She was probably the one who fucked Pike with the vibrator.

“Did you guys just go and watch?”

“We did.” He smooths his hand over my thigh. “And we also performed.”

Umm . . .

What, now?

“People saw you have sex?”

“Yeah.” He tilts his head to the side. “Does that bother you?”

“I mean . . . I don’t think it should. I guess I just wasn’t expecting you to have such a vibrant sexual past. Although I should’ve guessed, given the piercings on your cock. Did you have those when you were with her?”

“I’m going to keep your mind from wandering. Everything crazy I’ve ever done was with Iris. And it wasn’t because we wanted it together, it was because we were filling the void between us. The lack of connection. Everything we tried, we assumed it would help us in the long run. That it would be what we needed to improve our relationship, when, in reality, all we had was sex. And honestly, the sex was just a means to an end. Nothing more. I got off more watching people watch us, than what Iris ever did to me.”

“I can understand that.” I look up at him through my thick lashes. “Would you ever do something like that with me?”

“Never,” he answers, his voice terse.

“Just because you respect me, doesn’t mean you can’t do, you know, crazy things with me.”

“I understand that,” he says. “And trust me when I say we’ll have our fair share of moments, but one thing you need to know about me? I don’t share what’s mine. Iris never felt like she belonged to me. She was . . . a mere accessory to my life. Whereas, you, Coraline”—he wraps his hand around the back of my neck and holds me tight, possessively—“you’re mine. No one else gets access to your beautiful body. No one else gets to see your delicious lips wrap around my cock. And no one, and I mean no one, gets to watch firsthand as you come on my cock. That’s for me, and me alone.”

We stare at each other, our eyes never faltering.

“I would like to go home now,” I say, my breath picking up.

“Why, Coraline?”

“So you can claim me as yours, all over again.”

“Perfect answer.”

## Chapter Seventeen

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### PIKE

I drag my fingertips over Cora's nipple and curse myself for having to leave for school.

She moans and rolls over, her eyes slowly opening. When she sees me, the sexiest smile spreads across her lips.

After our date, we didn't leave the apartment the rest of the weekend. We spent every waking hour either eating, talking, or fucking. And although I was worried that I put a speed bump in our relationship from talking about Iris, I thought it was important, because I'm working up to the truth. I want to warm her up to my dilemma rather than springing it on her, because if she can understand the root of it all, then my assumption is that she'll be more accommodating when I tell her about my pa's threats.

This weekend was the first step toward that.

Talking about Iris, that's going to make a difference.

The jealousy in her eyes solidified what I thought about Cora—she cares more about me than she tends to let on. *But . . .* there's still the nagging guilt that I'm withholding the full truth.

“You're leaving?” she asks, stretching her arm over her head, dragging the blanket down her torso so her breasts are visible.



“Fuck, I wish I wasn’t.” I take a seat on the edge of the bed, lean forward, and press a kiss to each of her nipples.

“Mmm.” She grips the back of my head and keeps me in place against her taut, turned-on breasts.

Hell . . .

I tear down the covers and move between her legs. When I glance up at her, I see a pleased smile cross her lips as I spread her and swipe her clit with my tongue.

“You need to come fast,” I say as I plunge two fingers inside of her.

“Give me your dick and I’ll come fast.”

For a second, I consider telling her *no* until I realize I won’t be able to think straight unless I fuck her, so I flip her to her stomach and, like the good fucking woman that she is, she props her ass in the air. I reach for the vibrator, because I know that will get the job done fast and press it against her clit as I undo my pants and slip my cock out. I give it a few strokes and then press it against her entrance.

She’s wet.

I’m so goddamn hard.

I slide right in and then grip her hips, feeling the vibration of the massager against my balls as I thrust into her.

Fucking amazing.

This won’t take long at all, not when her pussy is already convulsing around my cock.

“Harder,” she breathes out.

So, I drive into her harder, fuck her the way I know she likes it.

“Yes, Pike. You’re so good. You make me come so hard.” She adjusts the vibrator and I feel it more as she moans louder. “Oh God, I’m right there.”

“Me too,” I grind out as my legs grow stiff and I swell inside her. “Fuck, babe. I’m coming.”

I explode in her just as she calls out my name and thrusts her hips back against me. Together, we ride out our quick fuck until we're both drained.

I smooth my hand over her backside and give it a quick slap, causing her to convulse one more time over my cock.

“Motherfucker,” I say, squeezing my eyes shut.

“Weren't you the one who told me not to play with fire a while back?”

“Apparently.” I lean forward, press a kiss to her back, and pull out of her warmth . . . unfortunately. I go into the bathroom to clean up, and I'm about to bring her a flannel, but she meets me in the bathroom.

Her hand drags across my back. Her clear, light grey eyes meet mine in the mirror. I look at her reflection, how freshly fucked she looks with her tousled hair and gorgeous, pouty lips.

I grant her some privacy and fix myself up before I strap on my jacket and backpack. I'm about to tell her I'm leaving when she pops out of the bathroom in a silk robe barely closed at the corner of her hip.

She saunters toward me, and my eyes fall to the way the silk cascades over her curves.

When she reaches me, she presses her palm to my chest and stands on her toes, placing a kiss to my mouth. “I was thinking about making dinner for us tonight.”

“Actually make dinner? Or char something?”

She chuckles. “Actually make something.”

“Works for me.”

“Any requests?”

I smooth my hand down to her lower back and pull her close. “Nope, surprise me.”

“Okay.”

I tilt her chin up and press a soft kiss to her lips. “I’ll see you later.” I give her one more kiss and then distance myself before I end up being late. “Bye, babe.”

“Bye.” She holds the door open for me and wiggles her fingers at me in farewell.

Life isn’t fair. If I didn’t have kids depending on me to teach them American history, then I would skip work and spend one more day in bed with my girl.

Instead, I jog down the stairs of our apartment building and out to my motorbike. This weekend, we had a conversation about me driving Cora’s car when it starts to snow. I told her I drive in the snow on my bike all the time during the winter months. She didn’t like that at all. The whole “argument” just made me chuckle, because not only was she talking about the future, but she was also showing how much she cared about me. That feeling settles well.

On the ten-minute ride to school, I think about how well the weekend went. How Cora and I seemed to mesh well together—now that she’s let down her guard. And even though we’ve had a lot of sex, we’ve also spent time getting to know each other. And going into the holiday season, I feel like I know her better than ever, and that gives me relief, because my three-month deadline is closing in. The more I can connect with Cora, the easier it’s going to be to take her to England for a real wedding.

When I arrive at school, I park my bike in my usual spot, remove my helmet, and tuck it under my arm as I walk into the school. Thankfully, I’m early, which means when I arrive at my classroom door, I’m greeted by an angry-looking Arlo Turner.

Fuck.

I forgot about him. I was pleasantly surprised that the weekend with Cora wasn’t ruined by interruptions from her brother. I was certain he’d call, text, or at least arrive uninvited. His silence actually surprised me.

Never one to back down, especially from a cardigan-wearing, pompous wanker, I move past him, my shoulder brushing his as I unlock my classroom door.

“Greyson, a word,” he says in that commanding tone that startles students but has zero effect on me.

“Have as many as you want,” I say, pushing through my door, not bothering to hold it open for him.

To my dismay, he follows behind me. Ignoring his blatant attempt to intimidate me, I set my things on my desk and wake up my computer. While my students are working through a pop quiz—I’m *that* teacher—I enter grades into the system.

From his back pocket, Arlo pulls out a business card, which he tosses onto my desk.

I glance at it. “What’s that?” I ask.

“The name of our lawyer. He knows you’ll be calling and he’s ready to work on annulment papers for you and Coraline.”

I pick up the card, pinching the slick paper between my fingers, and flick it back at Arlo. The corner of the card smacks him in the chest and then falls like a feather to the ground.

“Not happening.”

“What do you mean, *not happening?*” Arlo asks, fury lining his every word.

“It means, we’re staying married.”

“You don’t even know her.”

“I know her enough *not* to air her dirty laundry in front of her friends. I know enough to understand that she doesn’t want to be judged or chastised by her older brother. You’re supposed to protect her, not expose her faults.”

His brows shoot upward in shock as his fists clench at his sides. “You don’t know what I’ve been through with her. I’m protective for a reason.”

“You’re not being protective. You’re smothering her,” I say. “You’re not giving her a chance to prove herself, not that

she needs to prove anything to anyone. But you certainly aren't providing her the space to grow."

"You have no goddamn clue what you're talking about. Because you've been with her since Vegas, you think you're the authority on who Coraline is? You have no fucking idea. There's a reason I treat her the way that I do, because I almost lost her and she's all I have left. I can't lose her again."

"Keep treating her the way you're treating her and you're bound to lose her either way." The bell rings for school to start, so I say, "I'm not about to come between the two of you. Clearly you have some things to work on, but I'll be damned if you embarrass her like that again. You'll suffer far worse than that cut under your eye."

My door pops open and Greer steps in, a worried look on her face. Hand to her heart, she heaves a sigh of relief and says, "Arlo, leave him alone."

"*Leave him alone?*" Arlo repeats. "Is my wife really taking his side?"

"Yes, I am. Because you have been acting like a buffoon ever since the pool party. I love you dearly and I know you have good intentions, but you're going about this the wrong way. Try to understand before you chastise. Your sister likes him. Figure out why."

When Arlo turns back to me, I smile. "Listening to your wife would be in your best interest."

"Fuck. You," he says. He blows past Greer and heads out of the classroom.

"Sorry about that," I say, feeling bad for Greer. Their home life can't be comfortable right now.

"Why are you sorry? I should be the one apologizing. My husband is the one who's currently unhinged."

"Yeah, but it can't be easy for you."

She waves her hand dismissively. "Oh please, he's the one suffering. I'm making him sleep on the couch, even though we have a guest room. What he did was uncalled for. Yes, I

understand his actions go deeper than what's at surface level, and it's not my place to talk about Cora's past, but he never should've said what he said. And he owes a lot of people apologies."

"I can see he's making the rounds," I say sarcastically.

She chuckles. "Arlo is an interesting guy. He has a hard time admitting when he's wrong. It takes him a bit to figure it out, but when he does, he's wonderful at making it known how sorry he is. And maybe it's so wonderful because he has to suck up his pride and admit to not knowing everything. Either way, give it some time, and if you can, encourage Cora to reach out to him."

I scratch the side of my face. "I planned on broaching the subject this week. I didn't want to push it, though, you know? She just started opening up. I don't want her to shut back down."

"Understandable." Greer smiles shyly and then says, "I like you for her. And I know that's weird to say, given the situation, but I think you're a good guy, Pike."

A pang of guilt hits me in the chest, because the situation *is* weird. Initially, I didn't want anything to do with her because of Arlo, but then my pa's threats forced me to open my eyes, set aside my reservations, and let her in.

Now that I have, I don't want to let go.

"Thank you."

"Just be careful with her," Greer says. "She's had a troubled past and has trust issues. The fact that she opened up to you and accepted your situation, is significant, and I'm not sure you know how much."

I swallow back the anxiety rising in my chest. "I'll be as careful as I can," I answer, because I can't make any promises.

"Good. And as for Arlo, keep holding your ground. He's going to respect that more in the long run."

"Figured he would." I rub my hand over my cheek. "Also, he has a pretty good right hook."

She chuckles. “How about we don’t find out about that again, okay? Keep all punching to ourselves.”

“Can you keep punching to yourself?”

“Uh, if you have a punching bag.”

“True.” I give her a quick wave. “I’ll see you later, Greer.”

“Bye, Pike.”

When she exits, some students start to filter in, but before class starts, I shoot a quick text off to Cora.

*Pike: Thinking of you and those sweet tits. I’m fucking them later.*

She texts back immediately, and there’s a picture attached. I bite down on my bottom lip, glance to the side to make sure there are no students near me, and then open the text message. It’s a picture of her cleavage.

Fuck me.

*Cora: I’m ready for you.*



“HEY, KEIKO,” I say as I join her and Kelvin in her lab for lunch. She sent a very proper email to me, asking for my presence during our meal respite. Not sure I’ll ever get over her way of speaking. It’s confusing, funny, and entertaining.

“Pike Greyson, how wonderful of you to join us during this respite.”

See, who talks like that? I’m not sure some of the most obnoxious prats I know have such a voracious vernacular.

“Hey, Kelvin.” I nod at him and then hold out a hand for a shake. He glances at me, perplexed for a second, and then realizes what I’m doing and limply takes my hand for a shake. “Good to see you two back together. All seems right with the world.”

“Why would you say that? Was the world thrown off its axis and I wasn’t informed?”

“Just a phrase people say. The world is still on its axis,” I answer.

“Well, we’d plummet to our deaths if it wasn’t.” She unfolds the napkin that’s wrapped precisely around her cheese-and-ketchup sandwich. It’s probably the most grotesque thing I’ve ever seen someone eat, but she craves it every day. Two pieces of rye-swirl bread, three slices of cheese, and two tablespoons of ketchup. I know, because she went into great detail about it a few days ago. She accompanies the sandwich with pickle-flavored crisps from Trader Joe’s, and then, to round out the meal, she eats three rectangular squares of a Hersey bar, that’s it. No fruit. No vegetables. Blanche/Seymour can’t currently be bothered with them is what she’s told me. She believes they will be more welcoming to the nutrients later in her pregnancy.

I mean, who am I to tell her what she should eat? I’m not the one carrying a baby.

“So . . . how are you two?” I ask, feeling slightly awkward because Kelvin keeps staring at me. I’ve spent a lot of time with Keiko, but not so much with Kelvin. He’s always been a bit standoffish, and from what Keiko has said, he’s intimidated by me. According to Keiko, Kelvin is threatened by people with tattoos. I didn’t dive too deeply into that fear because I didn’t have it in me to sit through the intricacies of Kelvin’s feelings.

“We are quite well. Thank you. We shared our fair share of make-up coitus and were quite pleased with the new development of going bareback—I believe that’s the slang for it. Kelvin has struggled tremendously with condoms in the past. He does not possess dexterous fingers and is rather fumbly with contraceptives. I was once hanging upside down while he was attaching a condom to his erect penis and it snapped off and struck me in the ocular organ.”

Poor fucking Kelvin.



Wanting him to not feel like a bloody numpty in bed, I lean toward him and say, “Hey, mate, condoms are a fucking bitch. Especially if they’re lubed. They can be little fuckers to get on.”

Kelvin stares at his untouched ketchup-and-cheese sandwich. “It’s the roll that makes things difficult.”

“I feel you,” I say, even though I have no problem putting a condom on. Maybe my guy needs a little more practice. Then again, from the rate he and Keiko go at, you’d think he’d be a professional at this point.

“Do you utilize contraceptives with Cora while performing coitus?” Keiko asks.

I nearly choke on my leftover shrimp scampi from this weekend and press my napkin to my face. At this point, I shouldn’t be shocked by Keiko’s unfiltered questions and conversations, but she always catches me off guard.

“Uh, we do,” I say.

“Not quite ready to conceive, are we?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Still trying to get my wife to say ‘I love you.’”

Keiko straightens in surprise. “Have you yet to proclaim your love to each other?”

“Well, we’re still kind of new to this whole ‘marriage and dating’ thing, you know.”

“That’s right, you went backwards.” She knocks herself in the head. “I believe I’m suffering from what the books call pregnancy brain. Let’s just hope pregnancy brain doesn’t appear while I’m mixing chemicals in the lab.”

“Yeah, that wouldn’t be good,” I say, scooping up some noodles.

“But that’s not why we asked you to join us this afternoon.” Keiko picks up her napkin and wipes her fingers, spending extra time making sure her palms are clean before linking her hand with Kelvin’s, who’s been fairly mute at this point. “We’d like to propose a question to you.”

There's a weird look in her eyes.

A look that feels as though it's . . . undressing me, in a way.

A sudden sweat breaks out on the back of my neck as my mind whirls with the possibilities of what she and Kelvin could possibly be asking me.

*Please, Jesus, don't let it be a threesome request.*

I know that came out of nowhere, but knowing Keiko and her need to explore every aspect of her sexual nature, I can see her asking the question "Will you join us for a night of unadulterated freedom?" Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if she invited Cora, as well.

Wait . . . was that why she was asking about contraceptives?

I should've said no.

I should've said we're free as free can be.

Keiko sticks her chin up, as if she's preparing to ask the question of all questions, and a bead of sweat trickles down my back as I try to think of how I can politely turn down this request without insulting her.

"We have spoken at great length about this."

Oh God, it *is* a threesome. I know it's on her list of sexual things she wants to partake in. Because she showed the list to me.

I wince, holding my breath as she continues, "We'd be honored . . ." Fuck me . . . FUCK ME! "If you would agree to . . ." My hand clenches around my fork, my body shaking. "Be my . . ." *Fuck buddy?, second man, the top to my bottom?* "Man of honor," she finishes.

"Aw, you know, Keiko, I just don't—wait, did you say 'man of honor'?"

She tilts her head in confusion. "That is precisely what I said." She gives me a once-over. "Why are you sweating?"

I waft the collar of my shirt while trying to calm my nerves. Christ, man, way to think of the worst-case scenario and run with it.

“Hot in here,” I say. “And I thought you said, uh . . . *maid* of honor. I was confused for a second.”

She nods. “I can understand the confusion. Quite a play on words.” She stiffens again and continues, “As you must be aware by now, Kelvin and I will be celebrating our matrimony and reciting our vows publicly in front of family and friends. I would like for you to be by my side, if that is something you would be interested in.”

I smile and reach out to grab her hand. Kelvin’s eyes zero in on the hold and I carefully retract my hand. “I would be honored, Keiko.”

She nods. “Well, I’m overjoyed.”

Is she? Because she hasn’t even cracked a smile. Then again, it’s Keiko, so . . .

“Is there anything I should wear as your man of honor?”

“Yes, I will have a traditional English wedding tuxedo for you to don.”

Why do I feel like it’s going to be something I would never be caught dead in?

But hey, not my day, hers—as a good friend would say.

“Great.”

“I will send you explicit details in a lengthy email this evening. I shall not require a hen’s party since I am a spoken-for woman. Just for you to stand by my side, and novelty pictures, of course.”

“Whatever you need, Keiko. I’m there for you.” I wink and then smile at Kelvin, who, once again, looks like he’s ready to push me down on a metal rod and roast me for dinner—and not in a good way.

My smile fades, and I go back to my lunch. Doesn’t look like I’m going to win over Kelvin anytime soon. I’ll put him in

the category of not being friends, along with Arlo.



“CHRIST,” I say, trying to catch my breath.

Cora chuckles as she swipes her fingers across my abs on her way out of bed. She sashays to the kitchen to check on the meatloaf she decided to make for dinner tonight.

“You wanted to fuck my tits, so your wish was granted.”

Yeah . . . it was. But I wasn’t expecting to be pushed to my back, legs spread, vibrator up my ass, with her tits squeezing my cock like a vise.

“Please . . .” I catch my breath. “Tell me I’m the only man you’ve done that with.”

“God, no one else would ever even consider letting me do that to them.”

I prop myself up on my elbows, my cock still throbbing as I watch her move around the kitchen, her silk robe tightly cinched around her waist, showing off her curves.

“Then how the hell did you know what to do?”

She glances at me. “Can’t a girl have an imagination? I just went for it, and as long as you didn’t say ‘ow, that hurts,’ I was going all the way.”

I laugh out loud. “Well, glad I could be your guinea pig.” I stand from the bed, letting my shaky legs find stability first before I pull on a pair of shorts and make my way toward the kitchen. “Want me to set the table?”

“That would be useful,” she says with a smirk.

Together, we move around the kitchen harmoniously, as if we’ve been doing it for years. She preps the food, and I set our drinks and cutlery on the table. I add some napkins and the bread and butter plate Cora prepared, which I think is terribly cute.

“Smells amazing,” I say, pressing my hand to her back and leaning over her shoulder.

“I’ve been watching some cooking shows and they made it seem easy.”

“Was it easy?”

“Easier than purposefully making horrible food. I just hope it tastes good. Rachael Ray better not steer me wrong.”

“She seems pretty honest. I’m sure she won’t steer you wrong when it comes to meatloaf.” I press a kiss to her cheek and help her fill our plates with meatloaf, steamed broccoli—which Cora sprinkles some Hidden Valley ranch seasoning on—and mashed potatoes that she already warned me were lumpy. She didn’t have the patience to make them smooth.

I told her I couldn’t care less.

Together, we sit at our small dinner table and dive in. I’m the first to have a mouthful of the meatloaf, and even though it looks good and smells great, I am still slightly scarred from all the bad food she served me, so I hold my breath. But when the delicious flavors melt across my tongue, I’m delightfully shocked.

“It’s good.”

“Really?” she asks, taking a mouthful for herself. Her eyes widen and she covers her mouth while she says, “Oh my God, it is good.”

I chuckle. “Really good, Cora.”

Pride consumes her. “Wow, I did this. I made this taste like something people would eat at a restaurant.”

“You did. You did quite well, Cora.”

“Thank you.” She smiles and shimmies her shoulders as she dives in for more. “I’m so pleased with myself. I really haven’t been much of a cook, and given that it’s just been me for a bit now, I’ve had no reason to really attempt it. But I enjoyed making this.”

“Did you?” I ask.

She nods. “And the bread—that’s homemade too. I watched a tutorial and thought, why not try it?”

“Homemade bread too?” I pick up a piece and take a bite. And once again, it’s really fucking good. “Damn, Cora, there’s no way I’m leaving you now, not with these remarkable skills in the kitchen.”

“Look at me excelling at something new.” Her smile is bright, wide, and so goddamn attractive. Seeing the pride on her face is phenomenal. In some senses, I’m sad, because it’s as if her expectation is to fail, thanks to so many negative voices in her life. But I’m gratified too, as it also seems that each time she’s knocked down, she gets back up and keeps trying. That’s worth being proud of.

“You’re amazing.”

“Thank you.” She prepares some more meatloaf and asks, “How was your day?”

The moment I stepped inside our flat, Cora ripped my clothes off and went right to work. I didn’t have a second to greet her, let alone talk about our days, but this feels real, talking about it over dinner.

“It was good,” I answer. “Keiko actually asked me to have lunch today.”

“Don’t you have lunch with her every day?” Cora asks.

“Not every day. Sometimes I eat by myself. I think I’ve had lunch with Gunner and Romeo once, but they have an allegiance to your brother, so I don’t bother.”

“Because he doesn’t like you,” Cora says with a sigh.

Not wanting to get into the topic of her brother just yet, I say, “Yeah, something like that. But, uh, Keiko asked me an interesting question today.”

Cora pauses midbite with a pile of mashed potatoes and broccoli on the tines of her fork, and her eyes flash to mine. “Oh my God, was it sexual?”

“I feared the same thing. I was mentally preparing myself to be asked into a threesome with her and Kelvin.”

Cora slaps the table. “That was my first thought too. Is that what she asked?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Thankfully it was nothing to do with her sexual adventures.”

“What was it?”

“She asked me to be her man of honor.”

Cora’s face falls flat, her brows drooping as her mouth thins out. “Excuse me? She did what?”

Confused by her reaction, I say, “Uh, she asked me to be her man of honor, you know, like a maid of honor—”

“Oh, I know what it is.” Cora holds up her hand. “I’m just confused why she’d ask *you*? When you aren’t even part of the Ladies in Heat book club.”

“The *what*?”

“Are you even reading about mucus plugs?” Cora points to her chest. “Because I am, and I would rather stick my head in a toilet, but I’m reading it because she asked me to, and you come waltzing in with a smile and you’re the one she asks?”

“Huh?” I ask, confused. “Did you want to be her maid of honor?”

“I mean, it wouldn’t hurt to be considered.”

“Maybe you were. You know Keiko. She might have a list of pros and cons about who to ask. Maybe I was the easy ask.”

“The easy ask?” She sets down her fork. “Or maybe you’re the arm candy she wants next to her. I see her little game.” Cora stands from the table.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting to the bottom of this.” She retrieves her mobile from the nightstand and sits back down.

“Don’t bother her.”

Cora’s eyes flash to mine. “Hold on a second . . .” She studies me. “Are you—are you excited about the prospect of being the man of honor?”

“No. She has some ridiculous outfit she wants me to wear. I haven’t seen it, but the words she used to describe it didn’t reassure me.”

Cora crosses one silky, long leg over the other and leans her elbow on the table as she stares me down. With a poke of her finger to my arm, she says, “I believe you’re positively thrilled about the idea of being her man of honor. Actually, brimming with excitement.”

I point to my face. “You think this is brimming with excitement?”

“I think you’re putting on a show.”

I roll my eyes, exasperated with the conversation, but when I see Cora start to text, I yank the mobile from her hand.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Don’t text her. I’m sure she’s overwhelmed. She doesn’t need you making her feel bad about a decision I’m sure she spent some time making.”

“Uh . . . she took the weekend to figure it out. That’s not a long time in Keiko’s world. Might as well have been five minutes.”

“Either way, she made her decision, and I think we all need to live with it.”

Cora’s face lights up with humor. “Oh my God, you are excited about this. You truly want to be her man of honor.” She crosses her arms over her chest, leaning back in her chair, the joy on her face more of a sarcastic jab than anything.

“I really don’t.”

“Liar.” She chuckles.

“Whatever, Cora.”

That only makes her laugh even more. “Look at you getting all upset. Well, well, well, looks like Pike Greyson doesn’t like to be teased.”

“Keep it up. That asshole might show up again.”



“You’re acting like that’s a threat. Except, it’s a turn-on.”  
She picks up her fork and digs into her dinner, far too happy  
with herself.

I should be irritated, but I can’t find it within me to care,  
because I’m being teased by Cora and I fucking like it.

## Chapter Eighteen

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### CORA

“Is everyone accounted for?” Keiko asks, pen poised on her notepad.

I sigh. “Keeks, you go through this every time. When are you going to let up on the formality?”

“I don’t see how taking attendance at a scheduled meeting is a formality. It’s merely an exercise to assess if all persons are present.”

“Don’t question her process,” Greer says, bringing her glass of wine to her lips.

As requested by Keiko, we’ve moved up our Ladies in Heat book club meeting, because Keiko believes the information we’re learning in the pregnancy book is far too important not to discuss in sections rather than all at the end. I beg to differ.

If I were going to tell the truth here, I barely got through the required chapters. It’s just not my type of reading. Educational stuff is just . . . blah, boring.

I came tonight for three reasons—Arlo wasn’t going to be here, I want to ask about Pike being the man of honor, and the wine. Pike will pick me up later, so I’ll be drinking to my heart’s content and taking advantage of my drunkenness when

I get home later. I plan on riding Pike until I can't ride him any longer.

“Cora, are you paying attention?” Stella asks.

“Huh? Oh, sorry.” I raise my hand. “Present.”

“Attendance has been finalized,” Keiko says in an annoyed tone. “We are going over housekeeping items.”

“Oh, sorry.” I smile apologetically.

“Let me guess, you were daydreaming about Pike,” Stella says.

“Oh please, as if you weren't caught doing that when you first started dating Romeo. You actually missed a book club meeting.”

“His penis was stuck inside me, I couldn't leave.” Stella smirks. “Remember? Keiko went into great detail about how a cat's—”

“Please, for the love of God, not that conversation again,” Greer says.

“At least I'm here, because if I was doing what I really wanted to be doing right now, I would be in my apartment tracing Pike's piercings until he couldn't take it any longer.”

“Piercings?” Stella asks, curling her feet under her on the couch and leaning on the armrest. “What kind of piercings?”

I wiggle my brows. “*Those* kind of piercings.”

“There are more than one?”

I hold up my fingers. “There are four.”

Stella fans her face. “What I wouldn't give for Romeo to just have one. Four? God, I'm jealous.”

Keiko adjusts her glasses and says, “Your evasiveness is irritating. Please share with the group as to what sort of piercings you're referring to. As far as I know, Pike has none.”

“Well, if you stuck your hand down his pants, you'd find out the kind of piercings he has.”

“Why on earth—” Keiko pauses. “Oh.” She clears her throat. “I see. Well, I was unaware of such a thing.”

“Not sure that’s something he shares with everyone.”

“Then why did you share it with us?” Keiko asks.

“The same reason why you told us Kelvin is getting the wart on his ass removed, because we’re girlfriends and we gab.”

With a dignified set to her shoulders, Keiko says, “I shared the news of the lancing of Kelvin’s wart because I felt it was important to keep all informed, in case he had a limp after. I didn’t want you to assume he pulled a muscle.”

“A pulled muscle is way better than the details of a wart removal from the ass, Keiko,” Stella says before taking a large sip from her wine glass.

“Well, now that I’m properly informed of your distaste for wart-removal anecdotes, I shall refrain from sharing any others.”

Greer claps her hands together. “Why don’t we talk about the ceremony we’re throwing for you next weekend?”

“If you must,” Keiko says. “But I don’t mind being surprised, either.”

“We don’t have to go into detail, but we can make sure we have everything you’d like.”

“We were able to book the string quartet you talked about,” Stella says.

“And I’ll have the donut wall organized so you can eat all the donuts you like,” I add.

“The tent and the rentals are all accounted for and we’re set with the Victorian Christmas theme, as requested.”

“Marvelous,” Keiko says, actually looking quite pleased.

“I do have one question,” I say, raising my hand for God knows what reason. “Why did you feel Pike was a better fit as your man of honor over one of us?” I motion to the girls, who both gasp and turn to Keiko.

“You asked Pike to be your man of honor?” Stella asks. “I know you’re friends, but . . . does he know about Kelvin’s ass-wart lancing?”

“In fact, he does not. I wasn’t acquaintances with him at the time of the lancing, therefore, I didn’t feel the need to inform him.”

That makes sense, but still . . . Pike?

“You asked Pike?” Greer asks, looking upset. I can understand how she might feel, because out of all of us, she’s probably the closest to Keiko at this point. Stella was the one who started a friendship with Keiko, and when Greer joined in, she sort of became the mother hen of the group, and accepts Keiko’s quirks more easily.

“I did. I assumed you three would be far too busy and overloaded with the actual planning, so I asked someone who wasn’t involved. If I’d hired a professional to plan this impromptu ceremony that was your idea, I would’ve chosen the following ladies to stand by my side, in order.” She clears her throat. “Greer.”

“Yes.” Greer pumps her arm.

“Stella.”

“Ha, not last.” Stella points at me.

“Pike.”

“Hey, you said ladies,” I complain.

“And then Cora.”

Stella and Greer both chuckle.

“I see how it is,” I say. “And here I thought we were closer than that.”

“Did you?” Keiko asks, truly confused. “Because if we were closer, wouldn’t you have informed me of your nuptials to Pike, rather than him?”

“Oooo, she’s got you there,” Stella says.

“I mean, it’s a valid point,” Greer agrees.

Trying to remain calm, I speak in an even tone. “I didn’t think you would’ve understood the complexities of my marriage, nor understood that under no circumstance could Arlo find out, but you told him anyway.”

“Because I wasn’t officially informed. I assumed you didn’t consider me an esteemed companion to announce your nuptials to.”

“Keiko, of course you’re a good friend, it’s just hard getting you to understand why I have to do things a certain way.”

She nods. “I am quite different, aren’t I?” She sniffs.

The room stills.

Is she—is she going to cry?

Oh God, I can’t see Keiko cry. That’s going to be too much for me to handle.

“You know what, Keeks? I’m sorry I even brought up the whole ‘man of honor’ thing. I didn’t mean to upset you. Please don’t cry.”

She lifts up the hem of her shirt, exposing her stomach and cotton bra, and dabs at her eyes. “I don’t tend to become emotional, but Blanche/Seymour has forced me to endure distress during odd times.” She takes a deep breath. “I apologize. Shall we get back to the meeting?”

I lean over and press my hand to Keiko’s arm. “Hey, I really am sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. I know we can get at each other sometimes, but I really do adore you. You know that, right?”

To my surprise, Keiko nods.

And that’s probably the most real interaction I’ve ever had with her.

I’ll keep it close to my heart forever.



GREER SHUTS the door and blows out a heavy breath. “Holy. Shit.”

“I know,” I say, eyes wide. “Who knew Keiko was going to be an emotional wreck tonight? I’m glad we cut the meeting short so she could leave and gather herself.”

“At one point, I tracked that she sobbed for five minutes straight.”

“She started this pregnancy eating everything in sight and snarling if we even looked at her, but now she’s a whole other woman with emotions, and it’s freaking me out.”

“Me too.” Greer and I walk to the kitchen as I wait for Pike to pick me up. I told him I finished early. He was finishing up grocery shopping, so he’s on his way once he checks out. “I wasn’t expecting that at all.” She leans against the counter. “I also wasn’t expecting her to show us a live video of a birth.”

“I think Stella turned green.”

“I feel bad for Romeo,” Greer says. “I don’t think Stella is going to let him touch her for weeks after that.”

“I don’t blame her. I got slightly nauseous myself. I mean, I’m all for childbirth, but when you’re three crab cakes and a cup of salt-and-vinegar chips in and not expecting it, it can make anyone’s stomach roll.”

Greer straightens from her position against the counter just as the door to the garage opens.

My eyes flash to her and she whispers, “I’m sorry.”

“I swear to Christ, Greer.”

She clasps her hands together. “Please, just talk to him.”

I point at her. “You are not my friend.”

My body says *flee*, so not even thinking about shoes or walking barefoot in December, I head for the front door, but I’m stopped by the snag of my wrist.

“Cora, please just let me have a word with you,” Arlo says, his voice missing that usual commanding tone.

When I turn to look him in the eyes, I see fatigue there.

He looks absolutely exhausted, with dark circles under his eyes and his hair disheveled.

Even though I could just about dropkick my brother across Lake Michigan for everything he said, I know that he's done a lot for me in the past. He's taken care of me when I've made stupid decisions, and he brought me into his home when I needed a place to stay after I left Keenan. I owe him at least a conversation.

"Fine." I snatch my wrist away and then head toward the back of the house, where I slip on a pair of Greer's slippers, grab one of her shawls, and head into the backyard, next to two loungers with a heater in between.

I sit on the lounge and pull a blanket over my body while Arlo turns on the heater. Once it's roaring, he sits on the lounge as well. Instead of facing the lake like I am, he turns toward me and intertwines his fingers together.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush," he says. "I want you to know how sorry I am for the way I treated you at the pool party. There's no excuse for the way I acted, but I can tell you what brought me to such murderous rage."

"I can guess," I say while fluffing the blanket over my legs. "Not knowing I'm married and finding out like that could easily tip your anger."

"You could say that. Why didn't you tell me?" he asks in a soft tone. "I thought we told each other everything."

I let out a deep sigh and then twist to the side so I can look my brother in the eyes. I've been dreading this conversation. Arlo has been through thick and thin with me, the last thing I wanted to do was disappoint him. I want him to be proud of me, see how far I've come since my wild teenage years. Getting married while intoxicated is far from mature.

"I was embarrassed," I admit. "I feel like you've done so much for me, especially regarding Keenan, and I didn't want you to think I disregarded any of that by haphazardly getting married to Pike in Vegas. I've worked hard to find happiness,



with your help, and with you by my side for all of it. I felt like getting drunk and married in Vegas was a huge step back at the time.”

“At the time?” His brow raises.

With my index finger, I swirl the fluffiness of the blanket. “I’ve gotten to know Pike and I actually . . .” I look at Arlo. “I like him.”

“Like him enough to stay married?”

I glance away and let out a deep breath. “He brings me joy, Arlo. He sees me for who I am and he doesn’t ask me to be anyone else.”

“But marriage is a commitment.”

“You don’t have to lecture me about marriage, Arlo. Remember, I was married, I know what it takes to make it work, and to not make it work.”

He presses his hand to mine, drawing my eyes back to his. The scowl he usually wears is gone, but he’s showing great concern, a look I’ve grown to know quite well. “I’m worried that you’re jumping into a relationship too early.” I start to talk but he holds up his hand. “Let me finish.” I nod. “The trip to Vegas was about celebrating your freedom, having fun, being single. You came home with a marriage certificate and a husband attached at the hip. I don’t want you to get lost in something, when the reality is, you weren’t looking for it.”

“I understand your concern, I really do. I would probably be saying the same thing to you if the roles were reversed—”

“I would never get drunk in Vegas.”

A sarcastic laugh pops past my lips. “Oh, pardon me, I forgot you never take the stick out of your ass.” I smirk at him so he knows I’m teasing—well, sort of. “As I was saying, I would be saying the same thing if roles—in some magical fantasy land—were reversed. But the crazy thing is, Arlo, sometimes the most important things in life fall in your lap when you’re least expecting it. Look at Greer, for instance. You were bound and determined to be a single man, but that

all changed when she walked into Forest Heights, ready to raise hell in the English department.”

He sits back and presses his hand against his jaw, the muscles ticking as the wheels in his head turn, considering what I’m saying.

“He’s a good man, Arlo. You need to give him a chance.”

“Is that what you’re doing? Giving him a chance?”

The back door opens, drawing our attention. I spot Pike in the doorway, arms crossed, watching over us. Making sure I know he’s there . . . for me. *He’s a good man*. When I look back at Arlo, I say, “Yes, I’m giving him a chance. I’m giving the marriage a chance. I know it’s unorthodox, getting to know your husband after you’re married, but I’m willing to give it a try. The alternative is being married and divorced twice. And *that* screams failure to me, Arlo. In all the years I was with Keenan, dating and marriage, I never felt seen or appreciated. He manipulated every weakness and sabotaged my self-worth. So, although *how* Pike and I started our relationship is unorthodox, I’d much rather stay with a man who spends moments every day trying to build my self-confidence and helping me explore what other strengths I might have, than feel as though I’ve simply failed again. He’s appreciative, sweet, and treats me well. I’m not sure, in this day and age, if I could find anything better.”

“You don’t need to settle,” Arlo says.

“That’s the thing.” I swing my legs off the lounge and face Arlo. “I don’t believe I am.” I glance at Pike again. “I’m leveling up, leveling up on happiness.”

When I look back at Arlo, I can see he’s not entirely happy, but he also knows when he can’t win the argument, so he reaches out and takes my hand. “Promise me you’ll tell me if you need help, if you need me to kick his ass again.”

“Again?” I quirk a singular brow. “Uh, I’m pretty sure he kicked yours.”

Arlo’s expression flattens. “Is that what he told you?” Not waiting for a response, Arlo stands from the lounge and calls

out to Pike, “You told her you kicked my ass?”

“Didn’t have to. Evidence on your face speaks for itself.” Pike follows up the comment with a knowing smirk, which tells Arlo he’s offering an olive branch. I hold my breath, waiting to see if Arlo takes it.

He points his finger at Pike and says, “You better hope we don’t need a rematch.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Pike walks up to me and takes my hand in his, helping me off the lounge. He presses a kiss to my knuckles and quietly asks, “Are you ready to go?”

“I am.” I turn to Arlo. “Unless you have anything else you want to say.”

Arlo looks between the two of us, his displeasure evident in the scrunch of his eyes. And this is typical Arlo. It’s going to take him a while to be okay with me and Pike. I’m not asking him to understand it right away, or even necessarily agree with it, but all I want is for him to be open, and I think after this conversation, he will be.

“No, I have nothing else to say, other than . . . maybe you two should get a bigger place. I can’t imagine sharing a studio apartment is ideal.”

Pike pushes his hand through his hair. “My flat is bigger, but I’m not sure she’s ready for that.”

“Aw, look at you saying *flat* instead of *apartment*. Does the British in you come out when you’re nervous?”

“That’s our cue to leave.” Pike sticks his hand out to Arlo and thankfully my brother takes it.

“I will end you if you hurt her.”

“Fair,” Pike says, breaking off their handshake.

There’s no doubt in my mind that Arlo would do just that. And that’s why I love him, because he’ll always have my back, no matter what.

## Chapter Nineteen

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### PIKE

“Where are we going?” Cora asks, looking out the window and trying to gauge where we are.

I make a right down the quiet street I’ve grown to love. Three-story brick brownstones line the street, with wrought-iron, hip-height fencing blocking off the courtyards. Slowly, I maneuver my way past a few cars and then make another right, into a driveway and stop in front of a garage door.

“Where are we?” Cora asks as I put the car in park.

I look at her and say, “My place.”

Her eyes widen and then she scoots closer to the windscreen to get a better look. “*This* is where you live?”

“No. I live with you, but before I lived with you, this is where I stayed.”

She turns toward me, nostrils flared. “You mean to tell me, you’ve had a brownstone this entire time, yet we’ve been sharing a freaking studio apartment? How on earth can you even afford to live here? No offense, but I know teachers don’t make enough to afford a place like this.”

“No, they don’t. But my background is quite different than other teachers.” I open my car door and nod toward the building. “Come on.”

Cora hurries out of the car and joins me, taking my hand. Together, we walk up a flight of concrete stairs to the front door, and I unlock it for the both of us, letting her go in first.

“Oh my God,” she says as she explores the entryway. A sweeping staircase leads to the second floor, where the bedrooms are located, and a long hallway stretches to the kitchen, parlor, and living room. “I can’t believe you haven’t brought me here before now.”

“To be fair, you were trying to poison me at the start of our marriage. I didn’t really think bringing you to my place was a smart choice at that time.”

She chuckles. “Probably not, but, wow, Pike.” She travels down the hallway and into the combined living room and kitchen space. She pauses in the doorway and then whips around to look at me. “Pike, that kitchen is the size of our entire studio apartment.”

I smile and wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her against my chest. I kiss her neck and say, “You just said *our* studio apartment.”

“Only because squatter’s rights have presented you with that title.”

“Liar,” I say with a kiss behind her ear before I let her go.

“Wait, is that a balcony? You have a balcony?”

“Two, actually. The second is upstairs off the master bedroom, and I also have rooftop access.”

“You are in so much trouble.” Shaking her head in disbelief, she walks over to the sliding glass door and opens it, letting in the calming sounds of the quiet street. “Unbelievable.”

I join her on the balcony and lean against the stone wall next to her. I hadn’t lived here long before I met Cora, but it’s funny how seeing her in my place makes it feel more like a home.

“This balcony, this spot, was the main reason I chose to rent this place. It’s calm. It reminds me of back home,” I say.

“I grew up in a small town, outside of London, far enough from the city, but close enough for Pa to commute. Most of the time, though, he didn’t come home during the workweek, only the weekends. We’d go into the city to meet up with him for dinners, and I always thought it was so selfish, to force my ma to take her four children into the city for him. And it was always chaotic. We always had to . . . share his attention. He frequently left us at the table to *catch* someone at the bar, and in later years, often took calls on his mobile while we sat waiting for him with Ma. But this place reminds me of the days we stayed home at the cottage, sharing a picnic outside, surrounded by the leaves blowing in the wind. It was peaceful. Ma was always at her happiest in the cottage.”

“Does she still live there? Now that all of you are grown up, I’m assuming, at least.”

“Youngest sister, Cleo, is still at university, but, yes, we’re all out of the house. Killian is the oldest and he’s doing his own entrepreneurial work, while Aggie is happily living a sinful life with her girlfriend, Jade, in Edinburgh. I say ‘sinful’ because that’s what my parents think. Jokes on them though, because she didn’t tell them until her trust fund was activated. Now she’s living her dream, with the love of her life, helping teenagers of the LGBTQ community navigate through the challenges of talking to their family and friends.”

“Wow, I’m sorry to hear about your parents not accepting her, but I’m glad she feels free and happy.”

“Pa, mainly,” I say, turning toward her. “He controls our ma. For a while, I felt bad for her, but her kids are older now. She could leave him, she just chooses to stick to his demanding lifestyle. But Aggie, yeah, she’s fucking happy, and I’m happy for her.”

“So Killian, Aggie, Pike, and then Cleo. Did I get the order correct?”

I nod. “Yup.”

“Does Killian have a family of his own?”

I shake my head. “No. Not too sure he’s interested in that. Although,” I say with a smirk, “I do believe if he was interested in starting something, I know exactly who it would be.”

Cora grows excited. “Ooo, from the look on your face, it seems as if it could be someone he’s not supposed to be with. Hmm, let me guess . . . is it the daughter of a competitor of your pa?”

“No, but I think any one of us would do that just to spite him.”

“Hmmm . . . oh—” Her eyes widen. “Is it Iris? What a scandal that would be.”

“I don’t think that would be a scandal at all, as I think Pa would celebrate the union. I even believe he tried to get Killian to be with Iris at one point, but Killian refused.”

“Seems as if you didn’t have as strong a will.”

“Attempting to win your father’s affections never turns out well. Any more guesses?”

She taps her lips. “Hmm, not an enemy, not a former ex of yours, maybe . . . ooo, maybe a friend of your mom’s?”

“Close,” I answer.

“Really? Uh, oh God, a mistress of your pa’s?”

“Surprisingly, I’m not one hundred percent sure if Pa has ever cheated on Ma. If he has, he’s been discreet. I know, I’m just as shocked as you. I think that’s one of the reasons Ma sticks around.”

“Okay then . . . I give up.”

“I don’t have anything to prove this other than before I left for America, Killian had a party, and I saw quite a few glances from him.”

“Who was he glancing at?” Cora pleads, tugging on my hand. “The suspense is killing me.”

I smirk. “Cleo’s best friend, Madeline.”

“Nooo . . . really? What’s the age difference?”

“Ten years.”

“Stop it.” Cora nudges my shoulder. “Wow, a budding romance with the youngest sister’s best friend, with a ten-year age gap? God, if that was a story, I would read it so hard.” She heads back into the apartment and I follow. “Do you think he’ll ever make a move?”

“No. There’s no way he’d cross that line, even though I think if Madeline wasn’t Cleo’s friend, he’d consider it.”

“This is incredibly fascinating to me. What’s holding him back, just that she’s Cleo’s friend?”

“I believe so. I mean, I haven’t talked to him about it, because I doubt he’d even admit to having feelings for her, but I don’t believe he’d be one to put Cleo’s friendship with Madeline at risk.”

“Makes sense.” She sighs. “Would’ve been a cute story, though.” Turning toward me, she wiggles her eyebrows. “Show me your bedroom.”



“OH FUCK, PIKE!” Cora screams as she comes, her pussy clenching around my cock.

I bite down on her shoulder, grunting as I come as well, stilling my thrusting hips so her pussy does all the glorious work.

“Shit . . .” I mutter as I attempt to catch my breath and then unfold from our tangled position.

The comforter from my bed somehow ended up on the floor, and my sheets are wrapped around us, twisted and askew. Cora rolls away from me and presses her hand to her chest as we both attempt to catch our breath.

“Oh my God.”



“Yeah,” I say, my body still pulsing. “Jesus, you were loud.”

“Because I could be.” She curls against my side, her hand landing on my chest. “Not that I want you to get all cocky on me, but you’re easily the best I’ve ever had.”

I rest my hand on her thigh and kiss the top of her head. “Same, babe. Same.”

“Even better than your sex robot, Iris?”

I let out a loud laugh, not expecting that. “Yes, a thousand times better. No question.”

“Good.” She presses a kiss to my chest and props her chin on my sternum. I stare into her beautiful, grey eyes and know that the happiness I see in them is the same fucking happiness I feel right now.

I reach out and stroke her cheek with my thumb. “You’re gorgeous, Coraline.”

Her cheeks blush. “Thank you.”

“Not sure how I got so lucky, but I’m glad I did.”

“Fireball.” She winks. “Fireball and pretzels.”

“Remind me to keep those two things in stock at all times.”

She chuckles and tilts her head to the side. “So, you’re still sticking with me, then? Sticking to this marriage?”

“I have zero plans to go anywhere else. If I had it my way, I’d move you into this place and we’d be spending Saturdays bundled up and taking walks down the nicely decorated streets, hand in hand. We’d be braving the weather just to walk around the corner to the little coffee shop, where we’d spend the mornings sharing a scone and reading books. We’d go to my favorite Mediterranean restaurant every Thursday for trivia night, where we’d share a sampler, possibly sucking at every trivia question since I know nothing about American pop culture.”

“You think about that?” she asks.

“Yeah, I do. From the look on your face, I’m going to guess you don’t?”

“I’m just nervous to think about things like that. It has nothing to do with you and everything to do with me.”

“Why does that sound like the clichéd beginning of a breakup?” I ask as I gently stroke up and down her back.

“It’s not. It’s the truth.”

“Can you tell me more about the truth? I mean, if you’re comfortable. Arlo said a lot of things that have me curious, but I don’t want to pry until you’re ready. Until you trust me with something that seems to be so close to your heart.”

She places her hand on my chest and then rests her chin on her hand as she draws even closer to me. “I think you’re getting pretty close to my heart, and maybe it’s time I start to share that space.”

“I would really like that,” I say softly, because it’s something I’ve never had. Iris was never warm and open. If I’m honest, I’ve often been envious of Aggie’s and Jade’s genuine transparency with each other. *The trust. Joy in each other.*

CORA CLOSES her eyes and rests her cheek against my chest. I gently run my fingers through her hair, urging her to trust me and that she can take her time.

After a few moments, she asks, “Did you know Arlo is technically my half-brother?”

“Really?” I ask. “I didn’t know that.”

“We share the same mom. Neither of us know our fathers, really, or our mom for that matter. She didn’t want to raise us, so she dumped us off at our grandparents’ house. They weren’t thrilled to have to start parenting again, but they did the best they could . . . I guess. We were sent to boarding schools when we were teenagers and sort of forgotten about after that. When Arlo was in college and I was a senior in high school, our

grandparents passed away, leaving us a large trust fund. Arlo moved mountains with his share, but I just fucked around.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I was depressed, like very depressed. I tried to commit suicide—”

“God, Cora.” My heart stutters in my chest.

Tears well in her eyes. “Arlo found me on the bathroom floor. I believe the only reason I’m still alive is because of him. It’s why he’s so protective, because of the grief we’ve grieved together, because of everything I put him through. I started going to therapy after that, and when I was feeling healthy, I met Keenan. At that point, he gave me attention, he gave me love, even if it was halfhearted love. It was more than I was getting anywhere else. And I love Arlo, but he was often emotionally unavailable, dealing with his own insecurities and shortcomings.”

“Jesus, Cora.” I move my hand to her cheek, wanting to keep close to her, to love on her. “I’m so sorry.”

“No need to be sorry. It’s my past, and I figured you should know. Arlo wasn’t being an ass, he’s never been an ass to me, but he does try to protect me. Protect himself. He gets worried because of my past with depression. I’ve always had a handle on it, well for the most part, my divorce was tough. But his concern is heavy whenever I drink because he worries I’m trying to numb my feelings, and I get it. He doesn’t want me going back to where I came from. He already lost a dad, a mom, and grandparents. I’m all he has left. He’d do just about anything to make sure I don’t go anywhere, either.”

“I get that. I really do. I would do anything for my siblings. I understand what it’s like not to be loved by a parent, and to seek that connection with a brother or a sister, instead.”

“Arlo is all I really have, all I’ve ever had, so even when he’s a stuck-up asshole, I deal with it.”

“Seems like Arlo and Killian could be good friends, because Kill is the same way, maybe not as pompous, though.”

“It’s the long-lasting effects of boarding school.” She tilts her head to the side. “I’m surprised you didn’t go to a boarding school, since it seems as though you grew up in the British elite.”

“Pa was never a fan, which is quite surprising, given he could’ve forced us to make connections with the children of people he wanted to do business with, but he found that private, conservative Christian school was more suited for us.”

“Oh, so your parents must have been doubly thrilled that Aggie has a girlfriend.” She winces. “That’s a horrible assumption. Not all conservative Christians have issues with the LGBTQ community—”

“I know what you mean, and, yeah, that’s one of the reasons it wasn’t well received. I’m actually glad Aggie is so happy with what she’s doing and how she’s living her life because Ma and Pa haven’t been fair to her at all.”

“Just like they haven’t been fair to you with Iris?”

I shrug. “I suppose. I guess we were both shunned from the family for different reasons.”

“Is that why you’re here, in America? Because you were shunned?”

“My life felt like a merry-go-round that never changed. I wasn’t thriving, but simply meeting expectations, and I wanted more. I wanted a fresh start, a place where I didn’t feel like I was being watched over every second of every day. I wanted freedom to make my own choices and do what I wanted to do. I’m surprised I was hired, in all honesty.”

“Principal Dewitt is a pretty amazing woman. She sees the potential in people and gives them a chance. She actually spoke to me about putting together a marketing workshop and offering it to the seniors.”

“When did she do that?” I ask.

“At the staff barbeque. When she heard I was working for Frankie Donuts, she thought it would be a great thing to offer as an extracurricular activity to the kids to further their education.”

“Are you going to do it?”

“I work on the presentation during the day when I’m not working on social media. I want to make it good, you know? Give it some thought. Not just throw it up there and hope for the best. I’ve been to my fair share of presentations, and I don’t want kids walking out, thinking, ‘Wow, that was a waste of my time.’”

“Well, if you ever want to practice in front of me, you know I’ll listen.”

“Thank you,” she says softly. Her finger strokes over my collarbone. “Is this what a marriage is supposed to be like? Listening to each other, being interested in each other’s lives, being there when you need them . . . fucking like animals?”

I chuckle at the last part and say, “I think marriage can be however we want it to be. Clearly, we haven’t had good examples to follow, but I think as long as we continue to communicate and enjoy each other, that’s all that really matters.”

She smiles. “I like you, Pike Greyson. Never thought I’d say that when I first saw the pictures of us hanging out of the Uber car with a *Just Married* sign, but I do. I really like you.”

I know for certain that I don’t just like the girl staring back at me with her beautiful eyes and addicting smile . . . I’m starting to love her.



“KEIKO, THIS DOESN’T FEEL RIGHT.”

With a cloth measuring tape draped over her shoulders, fingers perched to her lip, she walks around me, studying. Her eyes feel like lasers, taking in every last inch of me, until she adjusts her glasses and says, “No, that’s correct.”

Well, fuck me, then, because I never should’ve agreed to this “man of honor” thing.

Keiko has me cinched up in a tight, aristocrat-style, light blue—sheen—tuxedo with a puffy lace neck thing and all. The pants hug my junk, the cravat tickles my chin and makes me feel far too fucking fancy, and the knee-high stockings are uncalled for. I feel like goddamn George Washington on his wedding day. I'm just missing the wig.

“You actually appear quite dapper,” Keiko says, taking a step back. “And the hue of this blue will go perfectly with the winter wonderland décor the girls have promised me.” Keiko steps up to me and drags her fingers over the fabric. “Lovely. Just lovely.”

“What do you think?” the costume tailor asks, stepping into the room.

“We shall take it,” Keiko says with a snap of her fingers and a stomp of her foot. “Huzzah!”

How does the saying go? If the bride is happy, then I should be happy?

I just can't imagine what the fuck Cora is going to say when she sees me.

“I'll wrap it up for you.” The tailor closes in on my space. “Do you need my assistance in taking it off?”

I hold up my hand. “I'm good. Thank you.” I've had enough of his groping at this point.

I wiggle into the dressing room and shed the clothing as quickly as I can. If I didn't like Keiko so much, there's no way in hell I would ever wear what she picked out. But it's Keiko. She's different, and I wouldn't want to make her feel bad for her fashion choices, as strange as they are.

Once I'm dressed in normal clothes, I take the outfit to the front and pull out my wallet, ready to pay.

“I've already compensated them for their services,” Keiko says.

“You bought my outfit?”

“Of course.” She holds open a bag. “For convenience of carrying.”

Perplexed, I stick the outfit in the bag and then take it from her. “Keiko, this couldn’t have been cheap. I’m more than happy to pay for it.”

“Not necessary. ’Tis not a garment you would frequent, I’m aware, therefore, I shall make the acquisition.”

“Keiko—”

“We will not discuss it any further.”

I guess not.

“Well, thank you.”

She glances at the ground and says, “No, thank you.” When her eyes meet mine, I’m struck by her genuine expression. “I realize I am quite different, Pike. More different than my companions. I can also be quite contrary and unamenable. At times, I don’t understand your, or the girls’ sensitivities. Sarcasm is not my second language, and I sense my awkwardness in recreational settings. But as a ton, you have accepted me for who I am, and shown benevolence to me for the personage I’ll always be.” She reaches out and touches my hand. “I never experienced such friendship, especially in my preadolescence. I am filled with gratitude for you.”

Hell . . .

“No need to thank me, Keiko. You’re perfect, just the way you are. Remember that, okay? And when Blanche/Seymour comes into this world, they’re going to realize very quickly just how lucky they are to have you as a mum, even if you struggle to understand them sometimes.” It really did shock me that Keiko asked me to be her bridal party, but I do see her point. I’ve been surrounded by my siblings all my life, and I guess I’ve probably taken for granted what being part of a large family gives you. *Friends. Support. Relationships.* Not perfection, but I rarely felt alone. Unlike Keiko. Maybe embracing her like I would one of my sisters has given Keiko such a strong feeling of connection to me.

She glances behind her and then says, “I told the Ladies in Heat that if they were not organizing the wedding, they would have been queried about the maid of honor role. I misled them

so as to resolve their feelings of insult. The truth is, I've obtained more of a connection with you recently and enjoy your presence in my life."

"Thank you, Keiko. I feel the same way." Unsure of what to do, I ask, "Can I give you a hug?"

"Since we share a strictly platonic relationship, I can't see why you couldn't."

"I'm taking that as a *yes*." I loop my arms around her and pull her against my chest. "Can't wait for Saturday, Keiko."

"It will be quite the soiree. I will need you in my dressing quarters no later than four sharp."

I let go of her and ask, "Dressing quarters?"

"Yes, it is your duty to assist me into my wedding garb."

"Uh, don't you think Kelvin would get upset, you know, if I saw you in your underwear?"

"I'm wearing a traditional sheath. You shall see nothing but my arms and ankles. Dare I say, that's not too provocative for you, is it?"

I chuckle. "No, it's not. Then I shall be there." I hold up my hand for a high five, but she just stares at it.

"What is that?" She points.

"A high five."

"Do pray tell, what are we celebrating?"

"Uh, a successful shopping trip?"

"Ah, very well." She dabs her fingers on my palm and then says, "Good day, Pike." And she takes off.

Shaking my head in amusement, I leave the store as well, texting Cora that I'm done. She's around the corner at a restaurant, waiting for me.

The frigid Chicago winter temperatures hit me harder than I was expecting. I should ask Kill to pack up my winter gear and send it here. This leather thing is not going to last me all winter.



When I reach the restaurant, my body full-on shivers as I adjust to the warmth again. I hate to admit it, but Cora was right—the motorbike will not last me through the winter without my winter-weight riding gear. Not if I’m already shaking in my fucking boots.

I glance around the space and spot Cora in the back, reading, looking as beautiful as ever, wearing a winter hat, scarf, and a tight-fitted turtleneck tucked into her jeans. She doesn’t notice me at first as I walk toward her, so when I catch sight of what she’s reading, I nearly choke on my own saliva.

I stand there, stunned.

My goddamn balls slowly crawl up inside my body.

Sensing my presence, she glances up and smiles when her eyes meet mine. “Hey, how was—why do you have that look on your face?”

Unable to move, I ask, “Why are you reading that?”

She glances at the book about *pregnancy* and then back up at me, confused for a few seconds, and then she laughs. “Oh my God, it’s for Keiko. Did you think I was reading this because of me?”

Slightly relieved but still spooked, I take the seat across from her, setting my costume bag on the back of my chair. “Jesus Christ.” I push my hand through my hair. “I thought you were pregnant.”

“I’m on birth control.” She chuckles some more.

“Yeah, but we’ve had a lot of sex . . . like more sex than I’ve ever had. Who knows how much those pills can take?”

Her lips flatten in a testy expression. “Please. Your sperm isn’t *that* powerful.”

“You don’t know that.”

“If I haven’t gotten pregnant by now, then I think we’re going to be okay, but good to know where you stand.”

“Hey,” I say, leaning forward and taking her hand in mine. “It’s not that I don’t want kids one day, it’s just, you know, a

little shocking seeing your wife read that book when you think there's not even a chance, you know?"

"You want kids one day?"

"Don't you?" I ask, not sure this restaurant is the place to be having this conversation.

"I haven't given it too much thought." She sets the book to the side. "I didn't have a fine example of what a parent should be, so I guess I never thought I would be a good one."

"Are you kidding me?" I ask. How could she think that? If anyone would be a wonderfully loving mum, it would be Cora. Yeah, she might tease her kids, perhaps pull a few pranks on them, but at the end of the day, I know she'd love her children more than anything. "Cora, you'll be a beautifully loving mother."

"How do you know that?" she asks. "It's not like your first impression of me was super great."

"And I'm sure a baby's initial meeting of their screaming, crying mother as they come out of the womb isn't a great first impression either, but we all have time to work on it." I wink. "In all seriousness, I think what matters the most is you know what you've suffered from not having the parents you wish you had, therefore, in my heart, I know you'd try to be the parent you wish you'd had."

Her eyes well and she glances away.

"Baby, look at me."

She takes a few breaths, and when her eyes meet mine, two teardrops cascade down her rosy cheeks. I reach out and brush them away.

"When the time comes, when you're ready, I know you're going to be a great mum."

"Thank you." She runs her fingers over the back of my hand and asks, "Is that something, maybe down the line, you know, if this marriage turns out to be successful, that you'd want with me? Kids?"

When her eyes lift to mine, insecurity fills her pupils, and I can tell this could be a make-or-break for her. Funny thing is, there's no anxiety rising in my chest. No qualms.

Just . . . excitement.

When Iris used to speak of marriage, children, and a family in the countryside, I felt choked, claustrophobic, like my world was closing in on me. But with Cora, it feels . . . right.

“Yes,” I answer honestly, straight from the heart. “That is something I would want with you, when the time comes, of course. I still need to defile you in every way I can first. Then we can move on to the next chapter of our lives.”

“How much more defiling is there?” she whispers.

“Oh, babe . . . so, so much more.”

## Chapter Twenty

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### CORA

“I love him,” I whisper to Stella as we put the final touches on the backdrop for the altar, which we made of twigs, pine branches, and silver teardrop ornaments.

“Love who?” Stella asks. “The donut delivery guy? I mean, yeah, he was super convenient.”

“Not the donut delivery guy,” I say, biting the inside of my cheek as I look toward the house, where Pike, with Greer’s assistance, is helping Keiko get ready. Stella and I decided to hang back and make sure the finishing touches were complete.

“Then who—” She pauses and then slowly, very slowly, turns toward me, mouth open. “Wait . . . are you talking about Pike?”

I wince. “Maybe.”

Stella carefully lowers the bulbs in her hand and then stands tall. Taking a deep breath, she asks, “When? How?”

I pack up the extra bulbs and shrug. “I don’t know. It kind of happened all at once. He was taking a shower and I was playing around on my phone. He opened the bathroom door, walked out in his towel, and it was like a semitruck smacking me in the chest with these crazy, intense feelings. I’m in love with him, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know what to do about it? You tell him, you goof.”

“Tell him?” I shake my head. “No way. Are you insane? There’s no way I would tell him that.”

“Why not?”

“Uh, because it’s weird.”

Stella laughs and gathers the leftover boxes. “How is it weird to tell your husband that you love him?”

“Shhh,” I say, looking around. “Keep your voice down.” I grab the rest of the boxes, and we take them to the cart that Arlo so nicely brought into the tent for us. He’s been extra kind lately. I think Greer put him in his place, and I’m grateful for it. “I don’t need him overhearing this conversation.”

We set the boxes down and Stella straightens her dress. Luckily for us, we got to choose what we wore. Stella went with a silk lavender dress with an asymmetrical front and high-slit cut. She informed me Romeo had a hard time letting her out of the house. I chose a deep-blue floor-length dress with a high neckline but a non-existent back.

“Why not? I bet he’d love to hear you tell him those three little words.”

“No way, it’ll scare him away.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted in the first place? To get rid of him?” Her cheeky grin irritates me.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Well, that’s clearly not the case now.”

She laughs and walks up to me, pulling me into a hug. “You, my friend, are screwed.” She gives me a tight squeeze.

“I realize that.” I let out a heavy sigh. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m not sure there is much to do,” Stella says. “You know, other than tell him how you feel.”

“That’s not happening.”

“And why not, again?”

“Because.” I worry my lip. “What if he doesn’t feel the same way about me? This all started out weird and crazy and not like a normal relationship. For all I know, he could just be enjoying his time with me.”

“Is that what you really think?”

“No,” I say quietly and then look my friend in the eyes. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I wasn’t supposed to fall for him. I was supposed to scare him away, get an annulment, and live the single life. But look at me.” I throw my hands out to the sides. “I’m still married, I’m falling in love with my husband, and I’m wearing the thong he likes because I know, after this wedding, he’ll peel this dress off me and it will please him when he does.”

Stella chuckles and takes my hand in hers. “Cora, this is a good thing. A really good thing. Maybe don’t worry about your feelings and what to do with them, but instead, just enjoy them. And when the time is right, then you tell him how you feel, but until then, just enjoy.”

“What if it accidentally slips out?”

“Then it does. Trust me when I say I’m pretty sure he returns the sentiment.”

“How do you know?”

“The way he looks at you, cares for you, touches you. He’s protective, loving, attentive. And above all else, he believes in you, he believes in your connection, and he’s trying. He’s tried from the very beginning. I don’t think there are a lot of men like Pike Greyson on this earth. I know, because I snagged one somehow. Don’t let the fear take over. Live for it . . . and love on him. Okay?”

I nod and smile. “Okay.” We hug one more time, and when we pull away, I ask, “Do you think he’ll like this dress?”

“I fucking love it,” Pike says as he walks into the tent.

I spin frantically toward him, hoping he didn’t hear our conversation, only to buckle over in laughter when I take in

his outfit.

Knee-high white socks strain up his legs, followed by light blue, damask-print pants cinched at his knees, a matching light blue suit jacket with tails, buttons, and flourishes, and a billowy, white cravat at his neck. I've never seen anything more ridiculous yet handsome in my life.

"Get it out now," Pike says, adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves. "Because you will not be laughing when Keiko is around. She's quite fond of my outfit."

Stella is crippled, bent over, tears flowing from her eyes. "Oh Jesus. Out of all the people she could've chosen to wear that outfit, she chose the motorcycle-riding bad boy. The only thing better than Pike wearing this outfit, would be Arlo wearing it."

"He's not man enough to pull it off," I say while catching my breath and walking up to Pike.

My laughter fades as I make my way toward him, because his eyes peruse me hungrily with every step I take. When I reach him, he slips his hand around me and, like a moth to a flame, his palm meets my lower back. His fingers slip just beyond the fabric of my dress to the waistband of my thong.

Just what I wanted him to do when I picked out this dress.

"You look stunning," he says as he lifts my chin with his index finger. "Bloody gorgeous, Coraline." *And now I melt, because that accent slays me.* His voice slides over me. Sounds so decadent.

"Thank you," I say, right before his lips lightly press against mine. "You look . . . interesting."

He chuckles. "I've never been more uncomfortable in my life. Thankfully, Keiko said I can shed the jacket after the ceremony."

"And the cravat?"

He nods. "But the knee-highs stay. She said I have nice ankles and she'd appreciate them joining the festivities."

I move away from him for a second to glance at his ankles. “They seem normal to me.”

“Looks like my wife doesn’t know how to appreciate a fine ankle when she sees one.”

“Apparently not.” I lift up on my toes and press another kiss to his lips.

There’s no doubt about it, I love this man. Like I told Stella, it crept up on me, and then *BAM*, out of nowhere, I fell . . . fell in love. Now, whenever I see him—apart from when he’s in a damask tuxedo—butterflies erupt in my stomach, nerves eat away at me, and I can’t get into his arms quick enough.

“Well, this is fun,” Stella says, off to the side.

I step away, but Pike keeps his arm around me, tucking me against his side.

“Sorry, just seeing him in this outfit, it makes me want to maul him,” I say in a sarcastic tone.

“I can see why.” Stella gives him another once-over. “I believe I’m seconds away from having an orgasm just from the sheen of the damask.”

“Like I said, get it out now, ladies, because there will be no insults when Keiko can hear.”

“Please, we’d never do that,” Stella says. “I’m going to assume, since you’re out here, that the bride is ready?”

“She is,” Pike replies. “She wanted to see if you were ready.”

“We are,” I say. “Has anyone checked on Kelvin?”

“Romeo and Gunner are with him presently,” Pike says. “Romeo was running around a few minutes ago looking for a fan because Kelvin started to sweat through his outfit from nerves.”

“But they’re already married,” Stella says. “What’s he nervous about?”

“Saying his vows in front of everyone.”



“Poor Kelvin,” I say. “Thank God he loves Keiko so much.”

“He does.” Pike looks at me and then presses a kiss to my forehead. “So, we’re ready for this?”

“We’re ready,” I say.

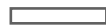
“Then I’ll go get the bride. See you out here.” With a parting kiss, Pike takes off toward the house while I stare after him.

Stella walks up next to me and says, “You know, even in that outfit, he’s pretty damn hot. I think it’s the accent.”

“I think it’s the whole package. Every last piece of him.”

Stella laughs. “Oh yeah, you’re so in love with that man.”

I am. Very much so.



“I, ahem, I’m quite the, uh, lucky man,” Kelvin says, glancing around, a tidal wave of sweat falling from his forehead, which Romeo keeps dabbing with a handkerchief. “I never—” Kelvin pulls on the collar of his shirt and clears his throat. Oh, this is painful to watch. The poor guy wants nothing to do with proclaiming his love in front of a small crowd. How the heck does he teach? “I never thought I would find a specimen of the female variety, quite like you.” He lets out a deep breath. The paper in his hand rattles and shakes. “You please me.” He looks up at Keiko, who’s standing dignified, hands crossed and resting in front of her, chin held high, flower headdress affixed like a crown and stretching a foot into the sky. An impressive height.

When we started planning this wedding, Keiko said *Victorian Christmas*, and yet, she seems to be wearing something from the medieval era. I was expecting puffy sleeves and a robust skirt, but instead, she’s wearing a simple white sheath dress, an outfit I would expect to see in *Pride and Prejudice*. And Kelvin, well, he’s decked out in an outfit I believe to be from the renaissance era—funny little hat, kilt,

and velvety king's jacket—probably why he's sweating so much.

And then my husband, in that . . . suit . . . looking completely out of place, and yet, the colors flow and it somehow works.

Kelvin takes one final breath and says, "I look forward to bedding you for the rest of my life." Eh, yikes. Who says that in wedding vows?

"Oh, Kelvin," Keiko says, dabbing her eyes.

Kelvin stuffs his paper in his pocket, retrieves his handkerchief from Romeo, and then dabs his face while taking a few deep breaths. The sag in his shoulders shows how relieved he is to be done with his vows.

*You please me. I look forward to bedding you for the rest of my life.*

I believe those two sentences will stay in my brain, rent-free, for the rest of *my* life.

Pike steps up to Keiko and hands her a notebook. Carefully, Keiko opens the leather-bound book, flips it open to the second page, clears her throat, and reads, "*To whom it may concern.*"

*To whom it may concern?*

Is this a cover letter or wedding vows?

"I hereby declare, on this day of December, that the male species standing forthright parallel to my person, is intellectually inclined, heroically tenacious, awkwardly introverted, boundlessly obsessed with me, an admirer of arithmetic, and enormously endowed."

*Oh God.*

"After yearlong examinations, multiple yet thoughtful calculations, and precisely one accurate astrology test that was dabbled upon due to germination hormones, I, Keiko Priscilla Artemis Seymour can assuredly announce my pulmonary organ and lady loins are appropriated for and will forever and

always belong in the prehensile appendages of Kelvin Timtom Thimble.”

Gingerly, she shuts the book, chin still held high, and hands it back to Pike. My mind is whirling with what the hell she just said. All I got from her declaration of love was *enormously endowed* and *lady loins*.

Also, Timtom?

Arlo, the “master of ceremonies,” according to Keiko, hands both of them their rings, and without saying a word, they place the rings on each other’s fingers and then clasp their hands together.

“Do you Keiko Priscilla Artemis Seymour take Kelvin TimTom Thimble to be your husband?” Arlo asks.

“I receive him in marriage,” Keiko says stoically.

Arlo turns to Kelvin who—when did he start breathing into a brown paper bag?

“Are you okay?” Arlo asks.

Kelvin nods and hands the bag over to Romeo, who keeps it on standby. “Proceed.”

“Do you Kelvin Timtom Thimble take Keiko to—”

“Keiko Priscilla Artemis Seymour,” Keiko interjects.

Arlo’s nostrils flare and I hold back my giggle.

“Do you Kelvin Timtom Thimble take Keiko Priscilla Artemis Seymour to be your wife?”

“I . . . I . . .” Kelvin tumbles over his words. “I receive her in marriage.”

“Huzzah!” Keiko says, lifting her fist to the air.

“Congratulations on renewing your vows,” Arlo says awkwardly. “You may kiss.”

In a clash of arms and lips, Keiko and Kelvin very sloppily maul each other, their hands gripping clothes, their mouths gaped open, their tongues . . . tangling.

Dear Jesus.

Uncomfortably, we sit there, watching this indecent public display of affection with no end in sight until, thankfully, Arlo sticks his hand between the two of them and pries them apart. “For the love of God, save it for later.” Once they’ve parted and righted their clothes, Arlo says, “It’s my pleasure to introduce you to your family and friends as Mr. and Mrs. Kelvin Timtom Thimble.”

Kelvin snags the brown bag from Romeo and brings it to his mouth, taking big breaths, causing the bag to inflate and deflate rapidly while, oblivious, Keiko holds their joined hands in the air and smiles with pride.

I clap.

I laugh.

I slightly tear up.

Because I love her. Even with her quirks and all, she’s a dear friend, and the smile on her face is one that was absent when I first met her. Yes, Keiko tends to be more open than one should, and, yes, she can be entirely too frustrating at times, but she’s also a loyal friend. Solid to the core, and before Kelvin, she wasn’t truly happy.

I can honestly say, Keiko Priscilla Artemis Seymour is content in her life.

And that makes me happy.



“I DON’T GET IT,” I say as Pike’s hand slowly smooths over my exposed back.

We spent a good portion of the evening taking posed pictures only suitable for promotion of a show like *Game of Thrones*, and eating a feast for kings, as Keiko put it so nicely. The pictures took extra-long because Kelvin passed out twice. When asked if he was okay, Keiko just said he wasn’t good in big crowds, and yet, when I asked how he’s able to teach, Keiko clearly stated that when it comes to math, he’s in a different zone. When he needs to be social, he panics.

I get that, though, crowds and friends and family can be quite overwhelming.

“What don’t you get?” Pike asks as we slow dance under the soft twinkle lights spanning across the tent.

“Keiko’s parents. They seem so normal.”

Pike glances over to where Mr. and Mrs. Seymour are sitting, both very prestigious-looking in their evening wear, but I never would’ve guessed they were Keiko’s parents.

“Are they normal? Or are they the odd ones and Keiko is the one who’s normal?” he whispers in my ear.

“Very good point. I think you’re right.”

“I know I am. Keiko is living her best life. I think we’re the ones who are odd, holding back on insecurities.”

“Do you have insecurities?” I ask him.

He nods. “Don’t we all?”

“What are yours?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asks.

“Not really. You seem incredibly confident in everything that you do.”

“You haven’t seen me under the correct circumstances that would cause me to show my insecurities.”

“And what would those circumstances be?”

He slides his hand farther down my back until it’s at the curve right above my ass. His fingers dance under the silk fabric, and I don’t even flinch or recoil from the touch, I welcome it. I want more.

“If I was around my pa or my ma, I believe you’d truly see me at my worst.”

“So, you avoid them as much as you can?”

“Yes. I do. It really is one of the main reasons I came here. As much as I miss England and my siblings, it was a toxic world over there for me, and I couldn’t be around it anymore.”

“That’s how I felt with Keenan. It was toxic, which isn’t fully his fault. I wasn’t the best wife, either.”

Pike tilts my chin up. “What makes you say that?”

I glance around the tent at everyone coupled off, intimately talking to each other while dancing. It provides a sense of security as I sway in Pike’s arms. Makes me feel comfortable to open up to him.

“I was cold toward him. Intimacy was tricky for me because I never really knew how to act, how to love. He wanted affection all the time and I had a difficult time showing him that. So, he looked for it elsewhere.”

“That’s bullshit,” Pike says, his voice harsh. “If he wanted more affection, he should’ve asked for it. He shouldn’t have looked for it in someone else. Don’t give him excuses.”

“I’m not. I’m just telling you how I see that marriage. I guess . . . warning you.”

“Warning me of what?” he asks. Thankfully, he shed the jacket and billowy cravat, so when I talk to him, I’m not on the verge of laughter.

“Of how I can be. Cold at times—”

“Maybe the problem was you weren’t with the right person,” Pike says, holding me captured with his eyes. “Maybe you weren’t affectionate because you didn’t feel a connection with him. Because the way I see it, you’re not cold, not in the slightest. Not even lukewarm. I feel the way you burn for me, Cora. Your touch, your kisses, your cuddles, they’re all there, and nothing is lacking when it comes to intimacy with you and me. There’s no denying our chemistry or the feelings forming between us.”

My heart skips a beat.

“Feelings?” I ask.

“Yeah . . . feelings,” he says on an exhale. He rests his forehead against mine. “Really fucking strong feelings.”

“How strong?” I ask as one of my hands smooths up his chest and to the back of his neck, keeping him close.

I hear him swallow and then his eyes flash to mine. “Falling in love feelings,” he says, his voice shaky, but also confident.

“Really?” Tears well in my eyes.

“Yeah. Really.” He takes my hands in his, and without another word, he leads me out of the tent and into the chilly night air, granting us privacy. The subtle sounds of the band intertwine with the gentle lapping of Lake Michigan’s waters against the rocky shore of my brother’s backyard. It’s a sweet melody mixed together, creating a romantic atmosphere.

“What are we doing out here?” I ask, trying not to show how the cold immediately seeps into my bones.

“I wanted a second away from everything. The moment was too big to be surrounded by people.” He lifts his hand to my cheek and passes his thumb over my skin. His brow crinkles and in a strong, clear voice, he says, “I love you, Coraline. I feel like I’ve known for a while, but have been too afraid to admit it. Too afraid that I would scare you away, and maybe I just might scare you away with this conversation, but I don’t think I can hold it in anymore. I need you to know how I feel, where I want this marriage to go. I want you to move in with me, into my place, make it our place. I want to start a life with you and stop living in this world where I’m not sure where we stand. I’m telling you where I’m at. If you’re not there yet, just—”

“I love you, too, Pike,” I say, blurting out my feelings, feeling a wave of relief. I smile and grip the back of his head. “I love you.”

His smile grows larger than I’ve ever seen and he picks me up and spins me around, causing me to laugh. He sets me down and grips my face, forcing me to look him in the eyes.

“Seriously? You love me? You’re not just saying that? Pranking me? About to pull the rug out from under me?”

“I would never joke about that,” I say seriously. “Trust me, it took me a while to figure out the feelings inside me, but once I did, I couldn’t keep them in. I was just telling Stella

earlier how I love you and how I wasn't sure how to handle it."

"What?" He chuckles. "You tell me. That's how you handle it."

"That's what she said, but again, I was too nervous."

"Nervous about what?"

*That I wouldn't be enough for you. That you'd never give yourself to me and me alone.* "About how you might feel. I wasn't sure we were on the same wavelength, you know?"

"Babe." He stoops to look me in the eyes. "I think we've been on the same wavelength from the very beginning, but never acknowledged it. Even when you were trying to poison me, everything felt so easy. Slipping into bed to fall asleep next to you, it was easy. Making room for each other around the apartment was easy. Transitioning from hate to . . . where we are now, love, it was seamless. You shouldn't be scared, because we've always been thinking the same, even when drunk in Vegas."

I chuckle and grip his hands tighter. "I guess so." I pause and then say, "God, I hate that you're keeping me around. That I wasn't able to best you by making you think I'm a vile human to be married to."

"No." He chuckles. "You just made me fall in love with you instead."

"Man, I should've done the *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days* clingy approach. Maybe that would've solidified our demise."

He shakes his head. "No, I would've seen right through it, like I did with your pranks, and still fallen in love with you."

"Well, aren't you just the ever romantic?" I ask, looping my arms around him.

He pulls me in even closer. "Not really, but you bring it out in me." He presses his lips to my forehead, and I can confidently say, in this moment, I'm the most content I've ever been in my entire life.



No anxieties.

No fears.

No insecurities.

No self-doubt.

Just content, and it's because of the man wrapping me up  
in his arms.

“I love you,” he whispers softly. “So damn much.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

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### PIKE

She fucking loves me.

I'm not sure I believe it, but then again, when I look her in the eyes, I see it.

It's right there.

She loves me.

And I can honestly say I feel like the luckiest bloke in the world.

"What are you thinking about?" Cora asks as our Uber driver takes us to the hotel room I booked.

Cora has no idea that I booked us a room at one of the nicest hotels in Chicago. I wanted to surprise her, something special for after the wedding. Thankfully, I brought a change of clothes, so before we left, I slipped into a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved shirt so I wasn't parading around in my damask tuxedo made specifically for George Washington.

"Thinking about you," I say while squeezing her hand.

"Thinking about how beautiful I am in this dress?" she asks, fluffing her hair.

"I've been thinking about that all night, but also thinking about how I can't believe you love me."

“I can’t believe it either.”

I chuckle. “Snuck up on you, huh?”

“Just a little.” She glances out the window. “Where the hell are we going?”

I bring the back of her hand to my lips and kiss her knuckles. “I thought we could spend the night at the Waldorf Astoria.”

“Wait, seriously?” She perks up as we cross over into the city.

“Yes. We’ll get some room service in the morning, and a couples’ massage tomorrow.”

Cora turns toward me. “Pike, that’s expensive.”

I lightly chuckle. “And I told you, I have money.”

“But I don’t want you thinking you need to spend it on me.”

“Who else would I spend it on?” I ask.

“Yourself?”

“The only thing I need is staring back at me. Anything after that is a bonus.”

“Liar,” she says with a smirk. “You need your tea, as well.”

“Ah, my mistress.”

She laughs and curls against me. “Thank you for thinking of me, of planning a wonderful night.”

“Of course.”

She’s quiet while we drive through the city, and I’m about to ask her what she’s thinking when she says, “You know, I have money too, Pike.”

I awkwardly laugh. “Okay.”

She lifts up to look me in the eyes. “Like, a lot of money. Millions.”

“Okay.” I swallow hard. “Where are you going with this?”

“Do you . . . uh . . . do you have millions?”

I slowly nod my head. “Yes, I do. Is that okay?”

She leans back against me. Quiet again. “We should do something with it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know just yet, but something. Something that will help people.”

I kiss the top of her head. “I like the sound of that.”

“You’d want to do that with me?”

“Cora, I want to do everything with you.” And that’s the truth. In fact, one of the things that has most stood out since I told Cora about my family growing up is how much I would hate to be working away from home five days a week and only see her on weekends, like my pa did with my ma. *How did he like that so much that he did it for years?* How did he stay away from us? Selfish bastard.

She lifts up and presses a kiss to my jaw before settling back against my chest.

We stay like that, silent and cuddled into each other, until we reach the Waldorf Astoria.

Along with my change of clothes, I snuck in some clothes for her so she doesn’t have to wear her dress tomorrow morning. With the overnight bag in one hand and my girl on the other, I lead the way to the front desk. We check in and make our way up to a suite. It’s not too big, because it’s just the two of us, but it does offer a view of Lake Michigan, a balcony, a sitting area, and a huge bed. Everything we might need.

“This is so romantic,” Cora says, taking in the room. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“I can’t believe this hotel room is bigger than our actual apartment.”

She chuckles and walks over to open the balcony doors. The wind lifts her hair, causing it to blow in the breeze as she

steps up to the stone wall.

Instead of joining her right away, I take a moment to observe her silhouette, the curves and beauty of the woman in front of me. Going into this, I was hoping to just make things bearable between us to save the foundation, hoping that Cora wouldn't annul the marriage. I didn't know her well enough to expect anything more, if I'm honest. But she's surprised me at every turn. I don't know how she'll handle the truth of my pa's threats, but I can hope that her love for me will endure that challenge. The connection we share is once in a lifetime, and I know I'm lucky I actually found it.

*Her.*

I walk up behind her and bring my hands to her shoulders before moving my lips along her neck. "You're gorgeous," I say while moving one of the straps of her dress over her delicate shoulder.

She lets the strap fall, the elegant fabric cascading down until she slips her arm out. I smooth my hand up her naked arm, all the way up to her jaw so I can tilt her head to the side, and light up the side of her neck with my mouth.

A soft moan falls past her lips as I drag the other strap of her dress off her shoulder, letting it fall until the silky fabric pools at her waist. Still kissing her neck, I torturously glide my fingers up her front until they reach her breasts. I knew the minute I saw her she wasn't wearing a bra with this dress, and I've been yearning to do this, to take her breasts in my hands.

"Your nipples," I whisper. "They've been hard all goddamn night. Taunting me."

With my thumb and forefinger, I roll her right nipple, pulling a sweet hiss of pleasure from her.

"Is that what you were trying to do? Torment me?" When she doesn't answer right away, I tweak her nipple. "Answer me."

Her head rests on my shoulder and she says, "Yes."

"I knew it." I nibble on the spot just below her ear. "It worked."

One hand still on her breast, I drag the other to the zipper on the side of her hip and pull it down, allowing gravity to do its job. The dress gathers at her feet and she steps out of it, leaving her in nothing but the black lace thong, which I fucking love, and a pair of high heels.

“Fuck, Coraline,” I say as my hands drag over the delicate waistband. “If I knew you were wearing this underneath, we would’ve left a lot sooner.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” She turns in my arms and links her hands behind my neck. “I enjoyed the wait, the surprise.”

She stands on her toes and her mouth finds mine in a passionate, open-mouthed kiss. I seize her arse and pull her in closer until she wraps her legs around me, deepening our kiss at the same time.

With a firm grip on her, I carry her back into the hotel room and close the door of the balcony behind us with a kick of my foot.

I want this woman . . . desperately.

And even though I’ve fucked her in more ways than I can count, I’ve never made love to her.

That’s what I want. To slowly, mindlessly, torturously make love to her.

So, I walk her to the bed and gently lay her down. Staring at her, I reach behind my head and pull my shirt up and over, then drop it on the floor. I shed the rest of my clothes, leaving me in nothing.

She kicks off her heels and then lowers her thong off her body. I grip the base of my cock and stroke it, growing harder as I take in the sight of the beautiful woman in front of me.  
*The woman I love.*

Her eyes on me, she bites the corner of her lip and then brings her hand between her legs. They fall open, and then she slips her fingers over her clit. I can see how wet she is, how ready.

“Do you wish I was touching you instead?”

She nods. “Yes. But I love watching you stroke your cock.” Her fingers slide with ease. “You’re so handsome, so powerful, Pike. You turn me on more than anyone ever has . . . just from the sight of you.”

Hell, when she says things like that . . .

I release my cock and lower my body onto hers, dragging one of her legs up and over my shoulder and positioning myself at her entrance.

My lips find hers, and for a few moments, I don’t move. I let her feel the tip of me play with her arousal while I tangle our tongues.

It’s slow.

There’s a rhythm.

There’s no need to rush.

I pull myself away for a brief moment to look her in the eyes as I position my cock and slowly push into her.

From the onslaught of my size and the rub of my piercings against her tight hole, her mouth falls open and her eyes squeeze shut.

“This will never get old,” she says once I’m fully inside of her. “This—you and me—it’ll never get old.”

“Never,” I answer, pulsing my hips as she sinks into our connection.

And for the first time in my life, I can honestly say I’m making love to the woman of my dreams.

There’s no turning back from here.

I’m all in with Cora.

She’s it.

And I’ll be damned if I let that be taken away from me, which is why I need to come up with an alternative to my pa’s ultimatum.

There has to be a solution, and I’m going to figure it out.



“ARE you talking to your secret lover in here?” Cora asks, walking into the sparse bedroom of my townhome—well, our townhome.

“I hope to shit I’m not his secret lover,” Killian says on FaceTime.

“Is that your brother?” Cora asks.

I nod. “Yes. Checking on me to make sure I haven’t screwed things up with you. I was just telling him the big news.”

I’m resting on the windowsill of one of the large, almost floor-to-ceiling windows in the master bedroom, and Cora walks over and sits between my legs. I hold out the mobile so Killian can see the both of us.

“Hello, Cora,” Killian says with a smile that irritates me.

“Pull back the charm, Kill.”

“I think it’s sweet.” Cora twiddles her fingers at my brother. “Hello, Killian. Tell me, am I making a mistake by moving in with your brother? Should I be talking to you instead?”

I poke her side, causing her to laugh.

“Move in?” Killian asks. “I thought you two were already living together.”

“I would say Pike has been more of a squatter than anything.”

I kiss the side of Cora’s neck. “It worked, though, didn’t it?”

“Oddly enough. Then again, I think it’s common for captives to fall in love with their captors,” Cora says jokingly, causing Killian to laugh out loud.

“Cute,” I say.



“So, you’re moving in together, officially, by your own choosing, Cora?” Killian asks.

She nods. “Yes. Somehow, somehow, I’ve fallen for this man, and we’re taking the next step, moving out of my sardine can and moving into his place.”

“Ah, yes, the brownstone. It’s quite lovely, isn’t it? When he moved, he took me on a tour through FaceTime.”

“Yes. I can’t believe he’s been hiding it all this time. A two-bedroom place, multiple floors, with balconies and a rooftop. We’ve been suffering in a two-by-two space, breathing on each other.”

“You paint a beautiful picture,” I say. Then to Killian, I add, “Cora is going to turn the second bedroom into her office and guest room, give her more room to get her work done—”

“And the rooftop, I’m turning into a topless yoga space.”

“Topless yoga, huh?”

“She isn’t,” I say. “The only topless things you’ll be doing are indoors.”

“We shall see about that.” She kisses my cheek. “I’m going to grab those bags from the car. I want to see if the curtains I bought will work in the living room.” She turns back to the mobile. “When are you going to visit so I can officially meet you?”

“Hopefully soon,” Killian says. “Maybe Pike will bring you out here?”

“That’s the plan,” I say, keeping it vague.

Cora stands and I smack her on the arse as she retreats. She spins, gives me a cocky grin, and then heads out of the master bedroom and down the stairs. When I know she’s out of earshot, I turn back to Killian.

“Well . . . things have escalated since the last time we spoke.”

“I know,” I say, pushing my hand through my hair. “Sorry I’ve missed your calls. I’ve been busy.”

“I’d say. And I’m not the only one who knows how busy you’ve been.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Whispering, he asks, “Is she gone?”

“Yeah. What’s up?”

“I heard from my mate who’s fucking Pa’s assistant that Pa is not happy at all. The private investigator he hired to follow you—”

“Oh shit, I forgot about that.”

“Yeah, well he has nothing but lovey-dovey bullshit of you two. Picture after picture of you two all over each other.”

“Really?” I chuckle. “Man, that must chap Pa’s arse.”

“You could say that. His assistant heard him screaming at the PI, asking if he was actually doing his job. He even has pictures of you two in your apartment, taken from across the street.”

“Jesus, fuck, that’s violating.”

“Yeah, but it’s you two cuddling on the bed. I haven’t seen them, obviously, but from what I’ve been told, Pa is fucking livid and trying to figure out another way to prove you’re not really suited for the foundation.”

“He’s off his rocker.” But fucking hell. Does that mean there are naked photos of Cora in someone’s hands? That’s absolutely disgusting. To think my father could stoop that low. Would he act that deplorably and expose them? *Shit*. I shake my head and then say, “You know, Kill, I’ve been thinking about the foundation—”

“Don’t say it.” Killian shakes his head. “Please don’t step down.”

Unable to look at my brother, I say, “It’ll be easier.”

“No, it won’t. Pa will take your spot.”

“I actually was thinking, what if Aggie steps in?”

“Ag—” Killian pauses, thinking on it. “Do you think she’d do it?”

I nod. “I believe she would. She’s involved in her own foundation right now, and combining the two could be something the board would approve, wanting to move forward with helping kids in all aspects. I know they’ve been wanting to expand. It might be the perfect combination.”

“We’d need to convince Aggie. How difficult do you think that would be?”

“Not hard. I think if it means sticking it to Pa and helping kids, she’s going to be more than happy to take part in that.”

Killian gives it some thought and then asks, “Want me to approach her about it?”

“Yeah, because my guess is Pa is tracking everything I’m doing. We don’t want him to expect this move. If we can get the board involved once Aggie consents, then we can make a smooth transition, and Pa can’t have any control over what we do.”

“And this is what you want? To step down? You’ve put a lot of effort and time into the foundation.”

“I have, but I also know time shifts and life changes. I’m in a different place in my life, and I’m not sure I can dedicate the time I should to the foundation, while I know someone like Aggie can offer so much more. And with my name off it, Pa can’t use the foundation as leverage against me.”

Killian glances to the side, a contemplative look on his face.

“What are you not saying?” I ask him.

“Things are serious with Cora?”

“They are,” I answer.

He lets out a dry laugh. “Damn it, my worst fears are coming true.”

“What’s that?”

He brings his attention back to me. “That you’d move to the States, fall in love, and not come back home.”

“Surely you’re not saying you miss me.”

“I am. I miss my brother. I’m afraid you’re not going to come back here . . . because of our wanker father.”

“My disdain for that prick won’t keep me from visiting you. I promise you that.”

“Good.” He sighs. “I should let you get back to playing house with your love. Tell her I said hi.”

“Hey, Kill?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you speak to Aggie sooner than later? I don’t want to have to follow through on Pa’s threat of the wedding. The sooner we can make the transition to Aggie, the better. I don’t want to fuck anything up with Cora.”

“I’ll call her now.”

“Keep me in the loop.”

“I will.”

Why am I being forced to step away from something I truly believe in, just because my father cannot let go of his control?

When we hang up, I pocket my mobile and glance around the empty space. Yes, there might be a bed, but that’s it. I never truly moved into the place, so it doesn’t quite feel like home, but it will with Cora here.

I move to the living room, where I find Cora ironing curtains and listening to Olivia Rodrigo, her new favorite.

“Why are you ironing the curtains?”

She glances up at me. “We aren’t primitive hogs, Pike. We iron curtains around here before putting them up. There will be no fold lines in our drapes.”

I hold up my hands. “Sorry I asked.” I walk up to her and place a kiss on her cheek. “Want me to grab the rest of the

bags?”

“Got them all, but if you want to order us dinner, I would love that.”

“What are you in the mood for?” I ask, slipping my hands around her and pulling her against my chest. I pass my lips over her neck—one of my favorite parts to kiss.

“You,” she says, shifting her head to the side.

“And after me, what do you want?”

“More of you.”

I chuckle against her skin. “Babe, I love you, but we both know if you don’t have dinner, you’re going to get hangry, and no one enjoys hangry Coraline. You don’t even enjoy her.”

“Fine.” She sighs. “How about some sandwiches? You said the deli around the corner is really good. I enjoy a Reuben from time to time.”

“Done. I’ll order. Want a fruit salad to go with it?”

“Yes, please. And a Diet Coke.”

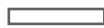
“How could I forget?” I kiss her one more time and head toward the door. “Hey, Cora?”

“Yeah?” She looks over her shoulder.

“You look good in here.”

She smiles. “*We* look good in here.”

We really fucking do.



**KILLIAN:** *Aggie is in. I’m currently talking to our solicitors to see how we can make this a smooth, easy transition. Keeping it quiet so Pa doesn’t find out. Give me a day or two.*

**Pike:** *Fuck, that’s amazing. I knew she’d want to do it. I’ll call her tonight.*

**Killian:** *Don't! There's no doubt Pa is tracking your every move. He'll get suspicious. Just lie low until I can settle everything.*

**Pike:** *Okay. Thanks, Kill. I appreciate everything you're doing.*

**Killian:** *Just remember this when I'm begging you to visit me again.*

**Pike:** *Spring break, I'll be there.*

**Killian:** *Does that mean I'm not going to see you for Christmas?*

**Pike:** *Sorry, mate. I'm actually thinking about proposing to Cora over Christmas.*

**Killian:** *Wow, that's—wait, proposing? Aren't you already married?*

**Pike:** *Technically, but I want to do this right. She doesn't have a proper ring. I want to make her feel special. She deserves it.*

**Killian:** *Proposing to your wife, wow . . . I never thought this would be the outcome when you called me from that Ferris wheel. I thought you completely fucked up.*

**Pike:** *Maybe I did, but looks like I fucked up in the best way possible.*

**Killian:** *She's it for you.*

**Pike:** *Absolutely. She's it.*



"HAVE YOU CONSIDERED OFFERING A DOWN PAYMENT?"

Pulling my attention away from a platinum, halo engagement ring, I glance at Keiko and ask, "A down payment? On a ring? Keiko, I don't need to make a down payment. I have plenty of money to afford these."

“I’m quite aware of your sizeable dowry. I’m inquiring about a down payment on a house?”

“What?” I ask, confused.

“As a substitute of the emblematic engagement ring, maybe offer an alternative that declares your admiration for Cora but is of the practical nature.”

“Like a down payment?” I ask, deadpan.

“Precisely. Present her with a check, subject line . . . *future dwellings*.”

I knew bringing Keiko to go ring shopping with me would either go poorly or she’d surprise me and be helpful. I was hoping for the latter.

“That doesn’t quite speak romance like I want it to.”

“Fair enough.” Keiko leans against the jewelry case, not even bothering to peruse the rings with me. “Perhaps a savings bond. Nothing conveys romance more than a long-term, maturing investment.”

“A savings bond? You want me to propose to my wife with a present that a cooky aunt buys for their one-year-old great-grandnephew?”

Keiko adjusts her glasses. “Quite a specific example, but that would be correct. I can’t imagine a moment that someone would turn down such a proposal.”

I can, and I’m pretty sure it would be 99.9% of people, the point one percent being Keiko.

“I don’t really think a savings bond is the way I want to go.”

“Mature investing is not for everyone.” She taps her chin. “In the Middle Ages, the groom would offer a compact, yet valuable piece of furniture, a peace offering for acquiring her virginity. Perhaps a secretary desk for the entryway?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and attempt to speak calmly. “I didn’t take Cora’s virginity. She was married before me.”

“Ah, yes, I do recall that marriage now. Hmm . . .” More tapping. “We could act with originality and purchase her a wool cape.”

“How about a ring?” I shout, losing my patience. “We’re here at a jewelry store. Why don’t we just pick a ring?”

“Well, if you would like to be pedestrian, but of course, purchase the conventional jewelry.” She waves her hand toward the jewelry case. “But if you must make such a humdrum choice for your proposal, at least purchase an *anulus pronubis* with stature.”

“Annual-what?”

Keiko rolls her eyes. “Being you’re a history teacher, I’m quite disappointed in you. *Anulus pronubis*, from the Roman culture, is an engagement ring. And when I recommend one with stature, I mean one like this.” She points to a ring in the jewelry case, in the men’s section, that resembles a class ring from the seventies.

Yup, it’s official. Bringing Keiko with me was a big mistake.



“DID YOU GET A RING?” Killian asks as I pull into the driveway of my brownstone. Cora and I spent the last few days moving into my place. Thankfully, we had help from friends and made it as smooth a transition as possible. We considered waiting until after Christmas to move, but then both agreed that we wanted to be in my place before Christmas, even if that meant still having boxes around and not being able to fully decorate.

“I did,” I say, putting the car in park. “Took longer than I wanted, but I got one.”

“When do you plan on giving it to her?”

“I wasn’t sure if I should do it as a Christmas present or not, but then thought it would be more romantic if I proposed Christmas Eve. We plan on going ice skating at Maggie Daley



Park. It's an ice-skating ribbon that Cora has talked a lot about. I thought I would take her there, and when we're sitting under the stars, enjoying a warm beverage, I would ask her."

"Sounds like a good plan. And you think she'll say yes to marrying her husband?"

"She better. We just moved into a bigger place."

Killian laughs as I lock up and walk toward our front door. "I think you're good, man. I sent you something. It should be getting to you soonish."

"I sent you something too. Cora helped me, so I can't take all the credit. There are presents in there for Aggie, Jade, and Cleo as well. Make sure they get them."

"Cheap fucker, saving on shipping."

"Not cheap. Smart." Before I step inside the house, I say, "Everything good with Aggie? The transition went smoothly?"

"Very," Killian says.

Two days ago, I officially signed over my position to Aggie. The board unanimously voted on the decision and welcomed Aggie and her ideas with open arms. We've yet to hear from Pa. I know we will, though, he can't be happy with us finding a way around his blackmail. But he has nothing over me now.

Absolutely nothing.

"Good. Think it's okay for me to call her now?"

"Yes, since everything is solidified, you're fine. Not sure if Pa is following you around anymore, but I don't think there's any need to be careful now. I think you can live your life, Pike."

Relief floods through me. "You think so?"

"I do. I think it's over. Heave that sigh of relief. You're good. Just promise me one thing . . ."

Smirking because we bested Pa, I open the door to our home and push into the entryway, only to stop dead in my tracks.

My stomach drops to the floor in panic.

My lungs seize up on me.

And my heart thumps heavily against my ribs, the pounding so hard it rattles my legs.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I say as I catch Cora with tears in her eyes, her arms wrapped around herself.

“What’s going on?” Killian asks. “Who’s there?”

A sardonic smirk passes over the man’s face as he saunters toward me.

“It’s been too long . . . *son.*”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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CORA

*Stella: You're giving him lingerie for Christmas?*

*Cora: Do you think that's lame? I don't know what else to get him. He doesn't want anything and anything he does want, he can buy.*

*Greer: I think lingerie is a great present. If he's anything like Arlo, having you as a present is all he's going to want.*

*Cora: I hate that you just used my brother as an example, but you're probably right.*

*Keiko: I've been informed of the purchase Pike has made for you for Christmas. According to popular majority, it is a gift that will be very well received.*

*Stella: You know what he got her?*

*Keiko: Affirmative. I was present when he made the purchase.*

*Stella: What did he get her?*

*Greer: Ooo, yes, tell us.*

*Keiko: It's surprisingly asinine how you presume I would divulge such private information. Shame on you.*

*Cora: It was a good try, girls.*

There's a knock at the door that startles me from my texting. We were so close to finding out what Pike got me.

Surrounded by a mound of freshly washed clothing and bedding, I unfold myself from the cross-legged position on the floor and head to the entryway. I glance through the peephole and find an older gentleman on the other side, dressed in a suit, hair slicked back.

Huh, maybe a neighbor?

I unlock the door, prop it open, and ask, "Hello, can I help you?"

The man adjusts his shirt cuffs and slowly looks up at me. "Coraline Turner?"

"Yes?" I ask.

He smirks and holds out his hand. "Louis Greyson. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Louis Greyson . . . who the hell is Louis Greyson?

"Hello," I say, confused. "I'm sorry, but I'm not sure—"

"Of course he hasn't talked much about me." And then it hits me. That smile is too familiar. Those eyes, too dark. That accent. "I'm Pike's father."

"Oh, wow," I say feeling completely unprepared and wishing I wasn't wearing these holey sweatpants and an oversized, long-sleeved shirt. "I had no idea you were in town." Should I let him in? I mean . . . of course I should probably let him in. He's Pike's father. Maybe he's here to make amends. "Would you like to come in?"

"That would be delightful."

I open the door, and he steps in while unbuttoning his suit jacket.

"Sorry about the mess," I say. "We just moved in and weren't expecting company."

"Quite all right." He examines the space and then turns toward me. "Quaint."

Ha, he should've seen the first place.

“Can I offer you a drink? Some tea, perhaps?”

“No, I'm fine.” He looks around again. “Is Pike here?”

“He's out. I believe he should be home any second now. You can have a seat and wait for him if you'd like.”

“Yes, I think I shall. Maybe we can chat.”

“Sure.” I smile, even though I feel incredibly awkward. “Are you sure I can't get you a drink?”

“Positive.” He works his way over to the single mid-century modern leather chair, flicks a shirt off of the armrest, and then takes a seat.

That was rude; then again, I believe that's his nature.

I take a seat across from him on the couch and ask, “When did you get in?”

“This afternoon. Have some business to tend to. Thought I would stop in and congratulate the new couple.”

“Oh, thank you.” I look out the window, willing Pike to come home. “It's been kind of a whirlwind,” I say, not sure how much his father knows.

“It has . . . hasn't it?” he says slowly, almost calculated. “I was quite surprised, actually.”

He's probably still angry about the whole “not marrying Iris” thing, so I should probably tread very carefully.

“I think we both were.”

He leans back in his chair and props his chin on his hand. “I didn't think he'd go through with it.”

My brows draw together. “Go through with what?” I ask.

His thick eyebrows draw together, the wrinkles in the corners of his eyes contracting. “With convincing you to stay married to him. After I wagered it wasn't possible, he went all out, didn't he?”

Wagered? As in a bet?

I swallow hard. “You wagered him?”

“A gentleman’s wager, of course. Three months to convince you to move in with him.” Three months, that’s what Pike said to me when I first wanted an annulment. He said to give him three months. Nerves prickle my skin as Louis gestures to the apartment. “Mission accomplished. Now his foundation will be saved.”

Bile rises up my throat.

This is all too much.

And yet, I need to know it all.

I tilt my head to the side. “What foundation?”

“He didn’t tell you?” Louis nods. “Well, good on my son for playing fair. You see, his foundation means everything to him, and getting married in Vegas to a complete stranger absolutely destroyed his image, especially with the board of directors. So, of course, I told him, either make this woman fall in love with you, or lose the foundation.” He adjusts the collar of his shirt. “Job well done.”

And that’s when the air in the room stops moving. Like a carousel of images, the devastating realization that I might have been duped by Pike sinks in, and I recount the last two and a half months.

Him moving into my studio apartment, acting as if he wanted to give this a shot.

Putting up with my antics, doing as I asked.

Trying to butter me up.

Constantly being there for me.

Saying he . . . loves me.

Is it even true? Any of it?

“I can see you’re questioning your relationship with him,” Louis says with a smirk. “Rightfully so. If I were you, I’d be doing the same thing, because he hasn’t been known to have the most honest track record. Did he tell you about Iris?”

“Yes,” I drag out as my chest constricts, tightening to the point that I feel my lungs don’t have enough room to expand and contract. *Why me? Why is this happening to me?*

“He did?” Louis looks genuinely shocked. “So, he told you about their engagement? And how he used her to get his current job at the high school?” When I don’t say anything, he continues. “Iris is great friends with Principal Dewitt. Were you unaware?”

“I . . . I didn’t know.”

“Ah, yes, probably because he’s ensured things stayed superficial with you.”

Tears well in my eyes. “Why are you telling me this?”

He stands and buttons his suit jacket. “Because he’s been using you, and better for you to find out now before anything gets too serious.” He glances around. “Although, maybe he’s convinced you he is serious. I wonder what his plan is, now that he’s made the transition with his foundation.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Precisely my point.” His eyes cast down upon me. “You don’t know, because he hasn’t told you. You think you know him, but you don’t. It’s part of his game. You’re just a pawn.”

The door opens and, smiling, Pike steps into the townhome, only for his smile to fall flat, replaced by a venomous anger I’ve never seen before.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

The tension in the room grows to palpable levels while the two men, who bear a strong resemblance to each other, exchange stares.

“It’s been too long . . . *son.*”

Pike looks past his father and spots me on the couch. I wipe at the tears that fall down my cheeks, trying to hide how Louis’s words have affected me, but it’s too hard. Uncertainty washes over me. My trust issues from growing up without parents, from Keenan’s betrayal, crash into me like a tidal

wave, and I feel myself curl inward, putting on my protective shell that Pike broke through.

“What the fuck did you say to her?” Pike says, pointing at me.

“Nothing that she shouldn’t already know.” Louis adjusts his suit jacket. “But I must be going. Prior engagements await.”

Louis begins to walk past Pike, but just as he reaches him, Pike slams his father up against the wall and pins him there. The veins in Pike’s neck pulse and the grip of his fist tightens, causing his knuckles to whiten.

“You came here to fuck everything up, didn’t you?” When Louis doesn’t answer, Pike yells, “Didn’t you?”

“I came here to enlighten Cora on the type of man you are.” Louis shakes off Pike’s grip. “Clearly, one without class.” He smooths his suit jacket and looks back at me. “It was a pleasure, Cora.”

And then he takes off, the door softly clicking shut behind him.

The room falls silent, nothing but the sound of the fridge humming in the background fills the now cold space.

I watch as Pike stands there, stiff, his fist clenching at his side, his breath rushing in and out of his lips, forcing his chest to rise and fall. After a few seconds, he turns to face me. In a controlled tone, he asks, “What did he say to you?”

I have no idea what to believe, and as I’m sitting here, crying, staring at the man I love, I wonder . . . do I really know him at all?

“Coraline, what did he say to you?” Pike asks again, this time setting his things down and walking up to me.

I pull my legs against my chest and rest my chin on my knees, keeping my eyes fixed on the floor in front of me.

How much of my heart did I give to this man?

How much of my trust did I hand over?



And now to have the doubt that he's not the person I thought he was bleed through me?

It's cutting me in half.

"Coraline." He squats down in front of me and places his hand on my foot. Usually, the feel of his palm against my skin would warm me, comfort me. But right now, I feel nothing. "Please, tell me what he said to you."

"That you stayed married to me to save your foundation, not because you were actually interested in me." I just say it, because what's the use of beating around the bush? Might as well get it all out there and see what his reaction is.

When I see the slight flinch of his eyes, I realize that what Louis said is true, and my heart collapses into a thousand pieces, broken and shattered.

"Let me explain," he says quickly.

"No need," I say, getting up from the couch. "Your father explained enough."

Pike snags my wrist before I can get too far. "Cora—"

"Let go," I shout, ripping my hand away from him.

"Please, let me explain."

"Why? So you can lie to me again? Are you going to tell me that you were actually interested in me this entire time? That you didn't pursue this marriage because you were trying to save your image? That I wasn't some pawn in your game to prove to your father that you're not a screwup?"

He looks away, and that's all I need.

"Unbelievable." I move toward my purse and shoes. "I can't believe I actually fell for it. Fell for you. Was all of this"—I motion to the townhome—"was it all just a joke to you? When was it going to end? When were you going to put a stop to it? Once you felt fully satisfied that you'd got back at your father?"

"It's not like that, Cora."

“So, you’re telling me you didn’t stay married to me to save some sort of foundation?”

He blows out a heavy breath. “That’s how it started—”

“That’s all I need to know.” I slip my shoes on, grab my car keys, and head toward the front door.

“You’re just going to leave? You’re not going to talk this through?”

“What’s there to talk about, Pike? None of what we had is real.”

“Bullshit,” he says, stepping toward me. “That’s fucking bullshit. Because I can look you in the eyes right now and tell you without a doubt that I love you. That you’re it for me. That I want no one else to share this life with other than you. That’s fucking real.”

“How can I even believe you? You didn’t tell me the truth in the first place.”

“Because you wanted to get rid of me. What the hell was I supposed to say?”

“That we made a mistake and should annul the marriage. Not use me as a freaking pawn in your fucked-up issues with your father. Jesus, Pike,” I yell. “I’ve been fucked over enough by men in my life, didn’t you think that maybe you should’ve told me the truth?”

“I planned on it.”

“Oh, really?” I ask in an obnoxious voice. “How convenient for you to say that now, after you’ve been caught.”

“I was.” His voice rises. “I was waiting for everything to be solidified with the transfer over to Aggie.”

“What does Aggie have to do with this?”

“That’s why I want to explain it to you.”

I consider hearing him out, consider listening to what he calls the truth, but in the end, what does it matter? Will it change that I feel used?

No. That feeling won't go away.

Will it help me trust him again?

Not even in the slightest.

Will it mend this broken, heart-wrenching pain ripping through me with every breath I take?

No. Most likely, it will make it worse.

"It doesn't matter," I say, pushing past him again and reaching for the handle of the front door.

"What do you mean *it doesn't matter*?" He presses his hand to the door, keeping me from opening it.

"Do you really think whatever you're going to say is going to make a difference?"

"I sure as hell hope so."

"It won't," I say, feeling defeated. "It won't make a difference, because you already lost my trust." I look him in the eyes. "You lied to me."

"I didn't lie to you," he says in a desperate voice.

I fold my arms across my chest. "Really? So, you really wanted to stay married to get to know me? Not because you were scrounging to save your image?"

He takes a deep breath and I can tell he's treading carefully with his words. "I did want to get to know you. I did from the moment I met you at the teachers' barbeque, but given the way I didn't hit it off with your brother, I didn't believe getting to know you was an option. Why do you think I talked to you in Vegas? Because I was interested." He tries to take my hand, but I refuse to let him hold it. "Coraline, please, let's sit down and discuss this. Leaving isn't going to help the situation."

"The situation you created. I was fine moving on. I was fine with getting the annulment and living my single life, but you're the one who pushed, you're the one who lied—by omission—you're the one who made me believe that I actually matter."

“You do matter,” he shouts. “You fucking matter so much, Cora.”

“How can I believe one single word that comes out of your mouth, Pike? You speak so ill of your parents, and yet, you’re not that much better than them.”

He rears back, removing his hand from the door. Determination sets in his expression. “Do not throw them in my face. I’ve worked my arse off trying to get away from that life—”

“Worked your ass off? You used Iris to get a job here at Forest Heights. To me, it seems like you’ve barely done the work, Pike.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your dad told me. How you were engaged to Iris, how you used her to get your current job.”

Pike grips his head. “What? That’s not fucking true. I was never engaged to Iris, no matter how much she and my pa wanted it. Never once did I ask her to be my wife. And I didn’t use her connections to get this teaching job. Don’t you see, Cora? My pa came here to ruin my image, ruin us, because I took away the control he had over me. He had no other option than to try to fuck up our relationship, and that’s exactly what he did.”

“Maybe he wasn’t entirely truthful,” I say, placing my hand on the doorknob. “But you weren’t truthful either. And that’s what matters, Pike.”

“I’m sorry, Cora.”

I open the door.

“I wasn’t thinking.”

I cross the threshold of the townhome.

“I didn’t expect to fall in love with you.”

I pause.

Look over my shoulder.

“That right there proves that I was a pawn in your game, because your reasoning for staying married was to see if we could make it work, get to know each other. So, it doesn’t match up. If you’re trying to get to know me, and you like me, you stick around. You’re bound to fall in love. But this was all for your benefit and nothing else. I asked you why you wanted to stay married, what was behind it. You had multiple chances to come clean and you never did. This is on you, Pike. Your heartache . . . and mine. It rests on your shoulders.”

Without another word, I push away from the door and head to my car. In a daze, I send a text to the girls, telling them to meet me at my place, and then I pull out of the driveway and drive away from him . . . away from the future I thought I had. *Again.*



SILENCE FILLS the small confines of my apartment. My friends sit in their respective spots around the space, trying to take in my sobbing recollection of everything that happened.

When no one says anything, I say, “Hello, you’re supposed to be comforting me, telling me how much you hate Pike.”

Stella crosses her legs. “I’m sorry, I’m just trying to understand. He lied to you about why he wanted to stay married?”

“Yes,” I say, dabbing my eyes. “He made me think that it was me he was interested in, but, really, he was just trying to save himself. I didn’t want to be married, he knew that, and he didn’t care. He thought about himself first.”

“Yeah, that’s shitty,” Stella says.

Greer is sitting on the bed with me and I can tell she’s not happy from the pensive look on her face. “I thought he was a good guy,” she finally says. “I stuck up for him in front of my husband, and this is what he does?”

“I think we all threw down for him,” Stella says. “We were on his side, convincing you that he was a good guy, that he

wasn't going to hurt you. I don't understand."

"Yeah, why would he move you into his place if it was all a game for him?" Greer asks.

From the kitchen, Keiko clears her throat. We all lift our heads and watch her adjust her glasses. I considered not inviting her, but then I thought that maybe she'd have an inside scoop, that maybe she knew something I didn't know. From the look in her eyes, I think I was right.

"Do you have something to say, Keiko?"

"I do." She holds her chin high. "Although, with the present animosity built around my comrade, I do believe my opinion will fall on empty ears. Therefore, I shall wait until the outrage has simmered."

"Oh, don't hold back. Please, tell us what a great man Pike Greyson is," I say, my voice full of sarcasm, and I know I'm taking my hurt out on Keiko, but I can't control it.

Quietly, she says, "He is a good man."

Guilt hits me in the chest as I realize he's Keiko's friend, her good friend, and inviting her probably wasn't the best idea. She'll become defensive, stick up for him.

Keiko's eyes meet mine. "He is in love with you, Cora. That is all I shall say for now." She adjusts her glasses again and then rests her hand on the small swell of her belly.

"He might be in love with her, but that doesn't negate the lying," Stella says, always the one you can trust to get angry on your behalf. "How can she possibly trust him after this?"

"The same way you were able to find solid ground with Romeo," Keiko says. "You were determined to find resolution. The same way Greer became accustomed to Arlo. There is a foundation of love. You don't flee from it."

"You ran from Kelvin," I say, defending myself.

"Ooo, good one. That's true. She did run from Kelvin," Stella says.

“Because she thought he didn’t want children,” Greer says, stepping in. “And I don’t think pointing out each other’s flaws in relationships is the way to go.”

“She started it,” I say, pointing to Keiko, who stands there stoically.

“Either way, we should be letting Cora grieve, because she’s hurt right now and, as her friends, we need to allow her to be hurt.” Greer takes my hand in hers. “It’s okay to be upset. It’s okay to feel betrayed.”

*Betrayal. Heartbreak. Anger.* Every emotion is present.

“It’s okay to mourn the loss of what you thought you had. Trust me, I think all of us in this room have done that.”

“We have,” Stella says.

“I consumed a chocolate-and-vanilla marble cake generated for ten individuals, in one sitting, while viewing late-night reruns of *The Golden Girls*,” Keiko chimes in.

Oh God.

“Is that where Blanche came from?” Stella asks.

Keiko holds her stomach and nods. “I feel akin to Blanche and her promiscuous behavior.”

“I can see it,” Stella says and then turns to me. “Do you want to order something? I can call up Romeo and he can have some food delivered; we can have a slumber party or something at my place so you don’t have to be here alone.”

I glance out the window, taking in the white, crystalized snow that decorates the ground. It started snowing on my drive over here, making my retreat from Pike that much slower. “I don’t know. You guys should probably get home because of the weather.”

“Well, then I’ll stay with you,” Greer says, holding my hand. “I don’t want you to be alone.”

“We can all—”

*Ring. Ring. Ring.*

I roll my eyes. “It’s probably Pike, calling for the hundredth time.” I lift the phone to look at the caller ID. But I don’t see Pike’s name on the screen. Instead, it’s a local Chicago number.

“Who is it?” Stella asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. I press the button to answer the call. “Hello?”

“Mrs. Greyson?”

The name eats away at my soul. Not wanting to get into a barrage of reasons as to why she shouldn’t call me that, since she’s a stranger, I just go with it. “Yes?”

“This is Officer Butan with the Chicago Police Department.”

My stomach drops.

A wave of nausea stirs within me as I clutch the phone more tightly to my ear.

“Uh, hi. Can I help you?”

“Your husband, Pike, has been in a serious motorcycle accident and has been taken to Kindred Hospital.”

“What?” I ask, sitting taller. Greer, Stella, and Keiko all go on high alert. “Is he okay?”

“We have no other information other than he’s at Kindred and he’s in the ICU at the moment. Do you have someone who could drive you to the hospital?”

“Yes. But . . . what happened?”

“We aren’t quite be sure yet. It seems his motorcycle slipped on some black ice, and he slid into oncoming traffic. I’m very sorry. I wish I had more information. The best thing you can do is have someone drive you to the hospital so you can be with your husband.”

“Okay,” I say, the hand holding the phone starting to shake. “Thank you.”



When she hangs up, I drop the phone to my lap and bury my face in my hands. I let out a wail of a cry.

“What’s going on?” Greer asks, her hand to my back.

“Pike . . . he’s been in a motorcycle accident.” I look up at Keiko, whose complexion turns white. “He’s in the ICU.”



“MRS. GREYSON?” A man in a white coat and a stethoscope around his neck comes out of the swinging doors.

I wipe at my eyes and stand from the chair I’ve been sitting in for the past three hours.

“Yes?”

“Would you come with me, please?”

“Of course.” Greer and Stella both squeeze my hand, while Keiko rocks back and forth in her seat, arms wrapped around herself in a tight hug. Since I hung up the phone at my apartment, she hasn’t said a word. Instead, she’s gone pale and, without a word, has followed at my heels. For some reason, I assumed she’d be spouting off medical terms and conducting research in the waiting room about the probability of surviving a motorcycle crash.

But, nothing.

And that’s making me feel more uneasy than I already felt.

The doctor leads me to a private corridor and rests his clipboard at his hip as he says, “Mr. Greyson is currently stable. He’s lost a lot of blood, so we’re monitoring his blood pressure and cardiac output closely.

“We’ve done a full-body CT scan to check for any possible internal injuries, including whether he has any type of brain hemorrhage or skull fractures. His helmet must have come off at some point, as he has a concussion and a superficial laceration, which we’ve sutured. He has a closed fracture of his left radius, extending to the wrist, with an open wound, and a fractured right tibia with some grazing on both hips.”

The bile that was threatening to rise returns, and I find myself taking deep breaths so I don't lose the contents in my stomach.

“We've done a closed reduction to align the fractured bones. He's doing remarkably well, considering, but it'll be a very long recovery.”

I nod, unsure of what to say. “Is he—is it okay to see him?”

He nods. “But I must warn you, even though his helmet saved his life, he's sustained abrasions—road rash—to his face.”

What the hell happened? And how fast was he going?

The doctor directs me to Pike's room, and as he opens the door for me, he says, “I'm sure this will be the last time he rides a bike in the winter. If you need anything, please let us know.”

I thank him and then secure my holey, grey cardigan closer around my torso. I tiptoe into the quiet room, a faint beeping the only sound filling the silence.

As his bed comes into view, I hold my breath. I slowly take in the sight of him. His legs are covered by a blanket, and his left arm is wrapped in bandages and secured in place with a sling. The hospital gown makes his usual barrel of a chest seem small, and when my eyes land on his sleeping face, tears immediately fall down my cheeks and onto my forearms.

The left side of his face is red, blistered from the road. There's a bandage wrapped around the top of his head, and dried blood along his hairline.

I cover my mouth as I stand there, staring at him. He seems almost lifeless in the hospital bed. And even though I feel betrayed and foolish from his lies, I can't stop the pain that sears through me, settling in my bones, from seeing him so helpless.

*He's doing remarkably well, considering, but it'll be a very long recovery.*

*Internal bleeding. CAT scan on his brain. His helmet came off. . .*

He could've died.

And what if he had?

I walk toward the bed quietly, still unsure of what I'm doing.

What if the last things I said to him were hurtful? How would I feel if this hospital visit was different?

I'm not sure I would ever forgive myself.

Because, even if my heart is shattered, I can't stop loving him.

It doesn't work that fast, losing the love you harbor in your heart for someone. It takes a while for that to fade away.

I close the distance between us. Seeing him like this has made me realize one thing: I'm not sure I'll ever get over this man.

I take a seat on his hospital bed and reach for one of his hands, but they're both scraped up, bloody from the accident. I don't want to hurt him, so I sit there and stare at him, at the rhythm of his breathing.

In and out.

In and out.

I might be broken-hearted.

I might not have any intention of being with this man.

But God, I'm grateful.

I'm so grateful he's okay.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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### PIKE

“I’m quite good, thank you,” I hear a familiar voice say.

“If you need anything, just ring,” a feminine voice says before the click of a door shutting sounds through the space.

A pounding headache vibrates as I attempt to open my eyes.

What the actual fuck is going on?

Throat dry, I try to talk, but nothing comes out, and it feels like a Herculean feat to open my eyes.

Everything in my body hurts. I can’t move my fucking leg and the entire left side of my face feels like it’s on fire. Jesus Christ.

I wrack my brain for what could’ve happened. What could’ve . . .

Cora.

Her beautiful face flashes through my mind, but instead of seeing love in those grey eyes I’ve grown addicted to, I see them full of tears. Why is she crying? Why . . .

Fuck.

It hits me like a ton of bricks.

*My pa. The townhouse. The truth.*

The lies.

Her walking out.

Me chasing after her on my bike.

Sirens.

Pain . . .

“Cora,” I say, my voice little more than a squeak.

“Ah, I wish I could oblige, but unfortunately, it’s just me, your faithful brother.”

Killian?

With one last attempt, I pry open my eyes and blink a few times before Killian’s face comes into view. His voice might sound teasing, but his appearance is anything but jovial. Normally, my well-polished brother is dressed impeccably in a three-piece suit, hair properly styled, and a clean-shaven face, but right now he’s the complete opposite of what I’m used to seeing. Dressed in jeans and a hoodie, his face is unshaven and his hair is askew, while his eyes are weary with uncertainty.

“I really like what you’ve done with your face,” Killian says. “Very earthy. The dried blood is a nice touch.”

“Fuck,” I croak and then cough a few times. Killian offers me a cup of water with a straw and I take a sip, wetting my mouth and throat. After a few sips, I ask, “What the bloody hell?”

He chuckles. “It’s called riding a motorbike during a winter storm, you numpty.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing the nausea to ease. “What’s injured?”

“Well, your dick is okay, if that’s what you’re wondering, but your pride, yeah, not sure that’s ever going to be resurrected.”

“Killian . . . please,” I beg.

I hear him shift in his seat and his voice grow closer as he says, “Road rash on your face, neck, hands, and leg. Five

stitches on your forehead, twenty in your arm. Broken wrist and broken tibia. If you weren't wearing your helmet, you'd be dead. It flew off while you were being tossed around, but it saved your life."

"Christ." I open my eyes, and when I see the despair on my brother's face, I attempt to lighten the mood. "But my dick is okay?"

He chuckles and then lets out a heavy breath. "Fuck, Pike. I've been a goddamn wreck. If you weren't so pathetic right now, I would be punching you in the bloody face. But, you know, since it's Christmas and half your face is torn off anyway, I'll give you a break."

"It's Christmas?" I ask. "Hell, how much time has passed?"

"Enough." Killian grows serious. "You lost a lot of blood, and you've been in the ICU for a few days. They finally moved you today. It was a Christmas miracle."

I slowly look around the room and spot a few flower arrangements, but that's about it, nothing else.

No one else.

"Where's Cora?"

"Not sure," Killian says. "When I arrived, she wasn't here. She did call me, though, and from what the nurses told me, she didn't leave until the day I arrived. I don't think she wanted you to be alone. But she sure as hell didn't want to be here, either. Care to explain what happened?"

"Pa," I say while shifting in pain. "He told Cora why I didn't want the marriage annulled. With bonus bullshit." I take another sip of water, my throat burning.

"Hell." Killian drives his hand through his hair. "I'm assuming that's why she's not here."

"She's who I was chasing after when I got in my accident."

"That makes sense." He leans back in his chair and blows out a heavy breath. "I'm sorry, man. Besides all the pain, how are you feeling?"

I glance down at my body, then back at him. “Could be better.” Knowing I’m pushing my luck, I ask, “Has she asked how I am?”

He shakes his head. “No. I’ve given her updates, but she hasn’t texted back.” He pulls his mobile from his pocket and types out a text.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Telling her you’re awake and asking about her.”

I take in a large bouquet of purple flowers and green sprigs. I can just barely read that the arrangement is from Forest Heights. “She probably won’t care. She wants nothing to do with me.”

“I wouldn’t say she doesn’t care,” Killian says. “If she didn’t care, she wouldn’t have called me, and she wouldn’t have stayed in your hospital room until I showed up. She’s probably too hurt to stick around, though.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” I cough a few more times.

Killian offers me some water, and after I drink enough that my throat no longer feels like sandpaper, he sets the cup on the bedside table and shakes his head. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like for her here, seeing you like this, knowing your fight, your deceit, is the reason for all of this.”

“She’s so fucking strong,” I say with a sigh.

“She is,” Killian agrees. “And you fucked it up.”

“I did.” My eyes feel heavy, so I slip them shut. “And knowing her and her past, I don’t think there’s any recovering from this.”



“HELLO, DEAR SIR.”

“Uh, hi,” Killian says. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, I am here to pay my respects to Pike.”

Keiko.

“He’s not dead,” Killian says.

“I’m aware of his immortality. But I do still need to pay my respects as a friend.”

“What?”

“Killian,” I say, my voice groggy. “It’s okay. It’s Keiko.”

I’ve had many conversations with Killian, trying to explain the odd bond I have with Keiko. On her wedding day—well, the reciting of her vows to Kelvin day—I sent a picture of my outfit to Killian. He saved the picture as my contact image in his mobile. I don’t blame him one bit. So he knows all too well about the perplexities of Keiko Seymour.

“Oh, Keiko.” Killian stands and offers his hand to her, but she doesn’t take it. She stands stiff, staring at him. Awkwardly, Killian stuffs his outstretched hand into his pocket and says, “I’ve heard so much about you. Congratulations on the recent nuptials and pregnancy.”

“Congratulations are not necessary but are accepted. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I request the room to be emptied while I speak with Mr. Greyson.”

“Uh, okay.” Killian glances at me and then says, “I’ll grab something to eat.”

I don’t see Keiko yet because she’s still in the hallway. After a few silent seconds, she skirts past the corner, entering the room.

Her normally perfect coif is askew and falling out of her ponytail. Her clothes—mismatched like always—give off the impression of maybe being slept in from their crumpled appearance. And even though round-rimmed glasses distract from her weary eyes, I can still see the dark circles that cloud her usually alert eyes.

“Hey, Keiko,” I say as I press the button on the bed to lift me up so I can see her better.

Shyly, from the edge of the doorway, she flicks her wrist up in a quick wave, but then huddles next to the wall.

“Do you want to come in?”



Her teeth roll over her bottom lip and she slowly nods.

“Come here,” I say, seeing just how upset she is. I can’t imagine what she must be feeling. I still haven’t seen what I look like, but from my brother’s descriptions, I know it can’t be pretty.

She shuffles over to the bed, and when I think she’s about to sit in the chair Killian just vacated, she surprises me by crawling up onto the bed. She snuggles against me, resting her head on my chest, right before she breaks into a fit of tears.

“Hey,” I say softly. “Keiko, it’s okay. I’m okay.”

She shakes her head. “Do you know the probability of surviving a motorcycle accident of that magnitude? It’s one out of eight hundred ninety-nine people. Without a helmet, the percentage drops drastically.”

“I was lucky.”

She clutches me more tightly and doesn’t say anything. Instead, she lies with me on my bed and sobs.

I’ve never seen Keiko like this, so emotional. It brings tears to my eyes.

Her hand curls around the fabric of my hospital gown and in a voice wet with tears, she says, “You’re my best friend, Pike.”

The tears that welled in my eyes slip out, and I carefully lift my good arm to wrap it around her shoulder. Even though the movement feels like drawing the energy to run ten miles, I hold her tightly.

“I can’t lose you.”

“You won’t,” I say. “I’m here.”

She shakes her head again. “I’m aware, but with Cora, everything is a mess.”

Oh.

Fuck.

I didn’t even think about how this all would affect Keiko.

“Hey.” I give her a squeeze. “No matter what happens with me and Cora, I’ll always be your friend. I promise. You’re not losing me.”

“Promise?” she asks, lifting up. When she’s vulnerable like this, she almost feels . . . abnormal. Probably to someone who doesn’t know anything about her, this would look normal, like a concerned friend experiencing a rush of relief to see the person she cares about awake, but to me, who has always known Keiko to be calm, collected, a walking thesaurus, it’s abnormal. Strange. I half expected to hear her exclaim the percentages of my chances of getting Cora to talk to me again. But I never would’ve expected this in a million years.

“Promise.” I move my hand over her hair. “Best friends, right, Keiko?”

“Best friends,” she says softly, and then she snuggles in closer.

We lie like that, not saying anything, not moving, but reassuring each other that, no matter what, we’ll always be best friends. Such an unexpected friendship, one I never thought I would share with a woman, but one that I cherish greatly.

When Killian comes back into the room, he stumbles to a stop at the sight of Keiko sleeping on my chest. His brow quirks to the sky as he looks at me.

I chuckle and whisper, “Friends . . . only friends.”

Killian holds his hands up but doesn’t say anything as he takes a seat in the corner. After another ten minutes, Keiko stirs and slowly sits up, realizing where she is. Her eyes flash to mine in a panic and she hurries out of bed, stumbling and nearly falling.

“Whoa, Keiko, are you okay?”

Killian hops to his feet quickly and catches her by the arm, which she of course pulls away quickly. She smooths her hands over her hair and straightens, making sure her clothes aren’t askew. She then rubs her hand over her slightly rounded belly and says, “This is not to be told to Kelvin.”

“Who’s Kelvin?” Killian asks.

“My husband and the father of my baby.” Gone is the emotional woman who walked into the hospital room, and in her place is the Keiko I recognize. “If you must know, I haven’t slept very well since the accident. I was quite worried.” She holds her chin up high but her lip trembles. “It was a relief to see that you are breathing.”

Jesus.

“Keiko, you could’ve just called, or asked, or come in sooner.”

“We were visiting with Kelvin’s family for the holiday celebration since your calamity, and it is impossible to be in two places at once.”

“You’re right about that. But, hey, I’m okay. No need to worry. Just some broken bones and cuts. I’ll be fine.”

“I can see that. Although, your face is ungodly repellent right now.”

Ouch.

I chuckle. “That hideous, huh?”

“Grotesque.” She shivers. Okay, it can’t be that bad. “Cora said it looked like the road ate your face, but I couldn’t quite put an image to her metaphor. But I can see now what she was trying to convey. Quite awful.”

“You should’ve seen it a few days ago.” Killian shakes his head. “A disaster.”

“I can imagine it was unmentionable.”

“Wow, you two aren’t making me feel any better.”

“Are we supposed to be making you feel better?” Keiko asks with genuine curiosity. “Because even though you are my best friend, you still remain on my bad side.” Dignified, she stands there, hands clasped in front of her. “You hurt Cora. You lied. And you were reckless. That type of behavior deserves to be punished.”

“Brutal,” Killian mutters as he sits back down in his chair.

“You’re right,” I say, not even trying to argue with her. “I fucked up.”

“You did,” Keiko says. “And to your dismay, and mine, I don’t believe there is any rectifying of the situation, which has made things for me incredibly awkward and uncomfortable.”

“What do you mean?” I ask her.

“The divorce,” Keiko says. “The papers are just waiting for you to sign. I asked Cora if she wanted me to deliver them to you today, but she said it could wait until you were out of the hospital. I believe the legal documents are drawn up, signed by Cora, and she’s waiting to transport them to your abode.”

I glance at Killian, who winces but continues to stare at his mobile.

“She . . . she’s had divorce papers drawn up?”

Keiko nods. “Of course she did. From the beginning of your marriage, she wanted it to end. Why wouldn’t she proceed with the divorce after you deceived her?”

“Valid point,” Killian mumbles.

“I only speak the truth,” Keiko says. “For what it’s worth, I believe she is making a mistake, because I know how fondly you feel toward her, but it is not my position to say anything. In this case, given you are both my friends, I would prefer to be Switzerland.”

“I respect that.” I glance down at the scabs on my hand. “Can I ask you one thing, though?”

“I believe one inquiry is in my wheelhouse at the moment, although, make it quick, for I am still quite emotional and hanging on by a thread. Observing my friend battered and bruised in a hospital bed does not settle well in my conventional and scientific mind. The emotions are far too intense for my comprehension.”

“I understand. I’ll be quick. I just want to know, is Cora okay?”

“As far as I’ve seen, she is not. I’ve observed her quite often with tears in her eyes. I don’t believe she celebrated Christmas, and it is to my understanding that she hasn’t left her apartment with frequency, either. Stella and Greer have been taking shifts of observation. I haven’t been useful, for I have also been incapacitated due to the emotional turmoil I’ve been battling.”

My chest constricts with pain, wrapping around me in a noose of chaos. What was supposed to be the best Christmas of my life, hell, hopefully the best Christmas of her life, has turned into an abomination, a total and utter disaster. All because I couldn’t come clean with the truth. But, then again, if I was clean about why I wanted to stay married to her, would she ever have opened her heart to me?

I don’t think she would have.

“I’m sorry I put you through this, Keiko. You know I would never want to hurt you.”

“I do believe it’s not in your inherent nature to be cruel. But humans are programmed to make mistakes. Some bigger than others. Unfortunately, you have killed the one relationship you cared about, resulting in your loneliness.”

“Damn,” Killian says with a chuckle. “She does not hold back.”

“Why would I?” Keiko asks. “The truth speaks for itself. Standing here, sugarcoating your blunders, doesn’t accomplish anything. Learning from those blunders, now that is how we metamorphose as a human race.” Keiko looks me in the eyes. “I encourage you to ruminate in your discrepancies, Pike, and make discoveries from them. For this is how we evolve.” She nods curtly, turns on her heel, and walks out the door.

“Wow,” Killian says. “Talk about a kick to the dick. Jesus Christ, you okay, mate?”

Looking at the door through which Keiko just left, I nod. “Yeah. I am.”

“Absolutely brutal.” Killian busies himself with cleaning up some of the rubbish we have around the room.

“Brutal,” I say. “But absolutely accurate.”

There’s no use in sugarcoating it. I fucked up. I’m the reason I’m in this hospital bed. Why Keiko has had a hard time sleeping, and why Cora is heartbroken. There’s no one else to blame but me.

But how can I fix it?

I think about what Keiko said, about how we evolve, we grow . . .

If there’s one thing I know about myself, it’s that I can be selfish. What I desire, I want, and I get. I wanted Cora, I got her, and I want to keep her, but . . . that might not be the best thing for her. That’s evident from the divorce papers she’s waiting to hand me once I’m out of the hospital.

So, what can make this better?

How can I make this better?

Job number one—when Cora hands me the divorce papers, sign them and let her go. Even though it’ll be more painful than sitting in this hospital bed. I need to let her go, because that’s what will help her move on, help her find happiness.

Job number two—maintain my friendship with Keiko, make sure she never feels the way she’s felt the last few days again.



“I DON’T FEEL RIGHT LEAVING you here by yourself,” Killian says, looking around my empty townhouse.

The boxes are gone, Cora’s things are nowhere in sight, and the only reminder of her ever having been here are the ironed curtains hanging in the living room. Other than that, everything else is gone.

My place has never felt so empty.

The hospital released me early, thank fuck, because I couldn’t take one more second being there. The constant

beeping of the machines, the unappealing television options, the relentless staring of Killian, who watched my every move. I need to return every second day for outpatient rehab, but at least I get to sleep in my own bed again.

And I have to live with the reminder that the woman I wanted by my side at the hospital is now doing everything in her power to stay as far away from me as possible.

“I’ll be fine,” I say as I hobble over to the couch. Luckily—if that’s what you want to call it, luck—I broke my right leg, but broke my left wrist, making it possible to hobble around, using a crutch under one arm. They offered an electric wheelchair, but to fuck if I would be driving that thing around.

“You can barely move around,” Killian says. “And what about your baths?”

“I don’t need them.”

Killian swallows. “Mate, you do.”

“I told you, I have a nurse coming to check on me,” I say. I don’t, actually, but I knew the only way Killian would consider letting me come back to my place was with the idea that I wouldn’t be alone.

“Why won’t you just come home to England for a bit? You’re on winter break, so you can rest up with family. Cleo said she’d come over and help take care of you, as well.”

I shake my head as I slowly—and I mean slowly—lower myself onto the couch. “I don’t want to make that trip like this. I promise, I’ll be okay. We have that food delivery service set up, and the nurse is coming in and out. I’ll be fine.”

I can see Killian’s conscience waver, but there’s no way I’m changing my mind, and I think he knows it. He heaves a heavy sigh of frustration, and with his hands deep in his pockets, he rocks back on the heels of his shoes. “Fine. But you’re required to call me three times a day to assure me you’re alive and not stuck in the tub or something.”

I chuckle, even though the sound of my laugh sounds flat to my ears. “I promise. I will.”

He closes the space between us and then squats in front of me. I can see the protective big brother in him. “What are you doing about Cora?”

“Exactly what I told you I was going to do. Sign the papers and let her live her life without me as a burden. She deserves that. She deserves happiness.”

“But don’t you think you were the one who gave her happiness?”

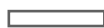
“No.” I glance away, unable to continue meeting my brother’s intense stare. For a moment, when one of the nurses told me how worried Cora had been, how she barely left the chair beside my bed for the first twenty-four hours, I felt hope. But then she didn’t come back. Cora’s one hell of a strong woman, but if she can’t look beyond what my father told her, if she doesn’t want to know the whole truth, then I won’t drag this out for her. She deserves to be treasured. To always be told the truth. “I might have helped her realize that there are guys out there who can treat her with respect, but happiness? I think someone else can give her exactly what she needs. I just hope I didn’t do too much damage.” My throat grows tight as I think about all the wrongs in her life. Chalk me up as one of the biggest ones she’s had to face.

“You were going to propose.”

“I’m well aware,” I say, dusting off a piece of lint from my pants. “But despite the love I have for her, it doesn’t outweigh the hate she has for me. There’s no turning back, no changing her mind. The damage has been done. It’s time to let her go.”

“Are you sure?” Killian asks.

I nod. “I’m sure.”



**KILLIAN:** *Just landed. I feel guilty as hell. Please reconsider. Come home. Be with me and Cleo.*

I read the text from Killian from my spot on the kitchen floor. I’ve been here ever since I toppled over while attempting



to prepare my delivered dinner, thanks to the slippery rug in front of the sink.

Luckily, I landed on my good side, leaving me with minimal pain.

This is going to be so much fucking harder than I expected.

But . . . I welcome the purgatory.

*Pike: I'm fine. Don't worry about me. Call you tomorrow.*

I set my mobile to the side and roll to my back so I'm staring up at the ceiling. My eyes slip shut, and I resign myself to lying here for the rest of the night on the cold, tiled floor of my kitchen, because I don't have enough energy to get myself off the ground. *Basically? I'm fucked.*

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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### CORA

I stare at the brownstone I so quickly fell in love with. The shades are drawn, the courtyard is empty—his motorcycle is probably in some junkyard by now—and not a single light is on.

When I casually asked Keiko about Pike the other day, she said Killian was trying to convince Pike to fly back to England with him. From the look of the dark windows, I would say Killian did a good job convincing him. Then again, it's not as if Pike had anything to stick around for.

After the accident and my decision to have divorce papers drawn up, I asked Greer and Stella to grab my things from the brownstone so I didn't have to. Being the amazing friends that they are, they brought all my boxes back to my studio apartment . . . with the help of my brother.

Surprisingly, Arlo hasn't said much to me. He's asked me how I'm doing, he's hugged me, he's checked in on where I stand with Pike, but other than that, he's been quite contemplative. I asked Greer how he was doing, thinking maybe he was holding it together in front of me, but she said he'd been very quiet.

Everyone has been . . . quiet.

I haven't talked much and neither have my friends.

Keiko doesn't even answer text messages now. Only phone calls. And those phone calls are painful. She rattles on so much to avoid the topic of Pike that the last time I called her, I ended up listening to her describe to me—in detail—the intricacies of how her nose is growing with her pregnancy.

It was far too disturbing.

Thankfully, Stella and Greer have given me space to figure things out. And what I figured out is I can't sit back and mourn this loss. I need to move forward with my life, which means I need to make the final split with Pike.

From the passenger seat of my car, I pick up my purse—which has the divorce papers inside—and sling it over my shoulder. I'm not sure when Pike will be back, if he went to England, or what's happening with him, but I know if I hold on to these papers any longer, I'm never going to be able to move forward.

Also, the girls left a few things behind and I want to grab them, as well.

I make my way to the front door, unlock it, and let myself in. Thankfully it seems like no one is home.

I'm met with a pitch-dark room. Unfamiliar still with the space, I run my hand along the textured wall until I stumble across a light switch. I flip it on and shut the door behind me. When I turn back around, I walk down the hallway to the dining room—

“What are you doing here?”

“Ahhhhh,” I scream, jumping back against the wall and clutching at my chest.

Pike is sprawled across the floor of the kitchen, looking like he's in extreme pain.

“Wh-what are you doing on the floor?” I ask, catching my breath.

“It doesn't matter,” he says quietly. “What are you doing here?”

The last thing I expected to see was Pike, let alone on the floor in the dark. My heart is racing.

“I, uh . . .” I swallow hard and slowly lower my hand. “I was dropping something off and grabbing some makeup that I left in the bathroom.”

He slowly nods. “Don’t let me bother you.” He lowers his head and continues to rest on the floor.

Unsure of what’s going on and thrown off by seeing him when I expected the place to be empty, I awkwardly slide along the wall and head into the dining room, pausing there to look back at the kitchen. I can’t see him, because of the island, but . . . *what is he doing on the floor?*

My eyes land on a meal and an unopened can of Diet Coke on the countertop. Was he about to eat dinner? If so, what’s he doing on the ground? And where’s Killian? Maybe he went to the store or something.

Not wanting to spend too much time on it, I take the envelope from my purse and set it on the table. I consider telling him about the papers, but can’t quite muster the courage. It might be the coward’s way out, but just being in the same space is painful enough. Holding a conversation about our divorce seems impossible.

Without another look back, I quickly head upstairs to the master bedroom and into the bathroom. I open the bottom vanity drawer and find my makeup bag the girls missed. I stuff it in my purse and then hurry out of the room. Too many memories. *Despite only being here for such a short time.*

I walk by the guest room, and out of maddening curiosity, I push open the door, only to find the space completely empty. Sheets are folded and resting on the mattress next to a folded comforter. The curtains are drawn shut, and there isn’t a suitcase in sight.

So . . . is Killian not staying here?

Feeling even more confused, I head down the stairs, and my eyes land on the couch, where there’s a pillow and blanket set up. On the coffee table, a myriad of prescription bottles are

lined up next to a water bottle. I look back toward the kitchen but there isn't any movement.

No movement anywhere.

Slowly, I move toward the kitchen and peek around the corner. I see Pike struggling to sit up. Out of habit, I bend down and attempt to assist him in sitting up.

"Don't," he says, shaking me off.

I move away, but stay crouched to the floor as I watch him finish sitting up.

"Pike . . . did you—did you fall?"

He groans and attempts to roll to his side to get up but struggles.

"Pike—"

"Cora, just leave," he says in an exasperated tone.

"Where's Killian?" I ask. When he doesn't answer, I repeat, "Pike, where is Killian?"

His head falls back and he says, "England."

"England?" I ask, my eyes widening. I glance around the place one more time. "So . . . does that mean you're here by yourself?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It does matter," I say. "You can't be here by yourself." It's obvious that he fell while making his dinner and now he's having a hard time getting up. "You can't possibly believe that you can do this on your own."

"I'm not. I have a nurse coming to help." His eyes look away and I know he's lying.

He's planning on doing this all by himself.

And even though my heart feels like bursting out of my chest just from the sight of him, I can't in good conscience leave him like this.

Even if he has too much pride to admit it, he needs help.

And I'm the only one who can help him.

I stand and dig into my purse, pulling out my phone. Before I can stop myself by overthinking, I dial Stella and bring the phone to my ear. She answers on the second ring.

"Hey, boo-boo, how's it going?"

"Uh, can you do me a favor?"

A loud groan comes from the kitchen and then Pike appears over the counter, standing on one leg. His good palm falls to the counter as he winces and breathes heavily. He's in pain. There's no way in hell he can do this by himself.

I might not want anything to do with him right now, nor do I think my heart can possibly take staying in the same room as him, but I can't possibly allow him to be by himself while he's healing.

"Sure, what's up?" Stella asks.

"Can you go to my place and pack a bag for me?"

Pike's eyes flash to me.

"Ooo, going on a trip?"

"Not exactly," I answer. "Pack me some comfortable clothes and the basic toiletries, as well as my computer and chargers. And then can you bring it to Pike's place?"

"Uhh . . . what is going on?"

"Just bring it over, please. I'll explain later."

"Sure. If you think of anything else you might need, text me."

"I will. Thanks, Stella." I hang up and move toward the entryway to take off my shoes.

"What the hell are you doing?" Pike asks, hobbling over toward me on one crutch.

"Staying here," I say, turning toward him.

"The hell you are."

"I'm not going to let you do this alone."

“Cora, I don’t need you here.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t.” He pushes his hand through his hair.

“Pike, don’t be—”

“I can’t have you here,” he yells and then looks away before pounding his good fist into the wall. “Fuck, I can’t—I don’t deserve to have you here.” His head droops and he turns away, offering me his back. He makes his way down the hallway and to the dining room, where he pauses. I visibly see his shoulders stiffen.

The papers.

He must see them.

With purpose, he moves toward the dining room table and picks up the envelope.

For some reason, guilt swarms me. I know I shouldn’t feel guilty. He’s the one who hurt me. He’s the one who lied, and yet, tears prickle at my eyes as he opens the envelope.

“Don’t, uh . . . don’t worry about that right now.”

He doesn’t say a word. Instead, he reaches for a pen on the kitchen island and then slowly takes a seat at the dining room table. In jaded, sharp movements, he pulls the papers from the envelope and flips to the tabs where his signature is required.

“Pike—”

He signs, the scratch of the pen against the paper feeling like a knife to my heart.

He flips the pages over and signs again.

Initials.

Signs.

And . . . signs.

He tosses the pen on the table, stuffs the documents back in the envelope, and then slowly, painfully, stands and hobbles over to me. He gestures to the papers tucked under his left arm. “What you really want.”

I don't quite understand why he's being so cruel, why he's so angry, but I'm not going to let him scare me away.

He might have hurt me, but that doesn't change what his current needs are. It'll be painful. It'll be uncomfortable. It'll be awkward, but I'm not leaving, not until I think he can do everything on his own.

I take the papers from him and toss them to the kitchen island. "I'm not leaving."

"Cora," he groans. "There's no need for you to be here. I don't—I don't fucking deserve it."

"So, what? You're just going to punish yourself when you should be healing?"

"It shouldn't matter to you. I signed the divorce papers. You're free. You don't need to be here anymore. Go, live your single life."

"Don't be cruel, Pike."

"But that's who I am, Cora. I'm a cruel human who lies and cheats his way through life. Right? So why the fuck would you stick around to be around me when you know exactly the kind of person I am?"

I fold my arms over my chest and say, "Honestly, I have no clue why I would stick around other than I know if I walk out that door, I won't ever forgive myself. We might not get along, you might not like me being here, but I'll be damned if you attempt to do this on your own."

I turn around and go to the kitchen to pick up his dinner so I can take it to the dining room table.

"You're so fucking stubborn," he yells.

I set the dinner on the table and say, "Get used to it." And then I go upstairs to the guest bedroom, the room that I was supposed to make my office, and take a seat on the bed. The tightness in my chest feels overwhelming, and before I can stop the wave of emotions that hit me, I let out a loud sob and curl into a ball on the bed, then silently cry to myself.





**STELLA:** *Cora, I don't think this is a good idea. Staying with Pike, it's only going to be more harmful to your already fragile heart.*

**Greer:** *I agree. This is not a good idea.*

**Cora:** *He won't take help from anyone. He can't heal by himself. He's down one arm and one leg. He needs help.*

**Stella:** *Why do you need to be the one that helps him?*

**Greer:** *It's not your fault he got in the accident. You know that, right?*

**Cora:** *I don't want to talk about this.*

**Greer:** *Cora, it wasn't your fault. He chose to get on his motorcycle when it was snowing. He chose to go faster than he should have. That isn't your fault. Don't feel guilty. Don't feel like this is on you.*

**Stella:** *She's right. This is not on you. This is all on him.*

**Cora:** *Just because he made bad choices doesn't mean that I can leave him to fend for himself. He was on the floor in the dark when I arrived. Who knows how long he was lying there, unable to get up? I can't, in good conscience, leave him like that.*

**Stella:** *You're a much better person than I am, because I would've told him "Peace" and bolted.*

**Greer:** *Are you thinking that you want to get back together with him?*

**Cora:** *No. We're over. He signed the papers last night. Once he can do things on his own more, I'm out. Until then, I'll interact with him with the bare minimum.*

**Greer:** *You're a really good person.*

**Stella:** *Yeah, I'm glad I'm friends with you, because I would not be able to pay him the same respect.*

*Cora: Can you two just do me a favor and check on Keiko? I'm worried about her.*

*Greer: I had tea with her yesterday. She's doing okay. Confused, I think. And with the baby throwing her emotions around, she's unsure of what to do. She wants to support the both of you.*

*Cora: I would never make her choose.*

*Greer: Might help if you tell her that.*

*Cora: I will. Thanks for checking in.*

*Stella: Are you sure you're going to be okay? Can we send you anything?*

*Cora: I'm good. Just working and trying not to spend too much time with my . . . ex-husband.*



*BANG!*

*Crash.*

*Groan.*

I peel my eyes away from my computer as the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention.

“Fuck,” I hear muttered from downstairs, and I know Pike was trying to do something he shouldn't be doing.

I rush downstairs and find him sprawled on the floor with the shattered remains of a glass scattered across the hardwood floors around him.

“Oh my God, are you okay?” I squat down next to him and he tenses.

“I'm fine.” He attempts to lift himself, but I know he's weak. Weaker than I've ever seen him, and it's because he's tired, not resting like he should, given he's short an arm and a leg.

“You’re not fine. What did you land on?” I attempt to assess him but he rolls to the side and sits up.

“Cora, just leave me alone.”

“Oh, sure, yeah. I’m going to leave you alone on the floor with shattered glass everywhere. Yup, I’ll get right on that.”

I walk over to the entryway closet and grab the broom and dustpan to start cleaning up the glass.

“I can do that,” he says stubbornly.

“Oh, can you?” I ask. “With one hand and one leg? I would love to see that. Please entertain me.” I hold out the broom to him. When he doesn’t get up—because he can’t—I say, “That’s what I thought. You can’t even get up without my help.”

He grumbles something under his breath but stays seated while I clean up the shattered glass. Once I’m done, I grab a reusable water bottle from the kitchen cabinet and fill it up with water. I take it over to him and say, “See how this has a loop? You can loop it through your fingers and still walk around with one crutch, not hop around like an idiot. And it won’t shatter if you drop it.” I reach down, help him to his feet, and then guide him back to the couch.

I set the water on the coffee table and say, “If you need anything, just text me.”

“You’re not my fucking maid.”

“I’m well aware what I am to you . . .”

His eyes flash up to mine, and I catch the anger in them, the frustration.

“You’re a lot more to me than what you think you are,” he says with a strained voice.

“Don’t even start with me on that bullshit, Pike. If I meant something to you, you never would’ve lied to me. And I’m not here to rehash what happened to us.”

“Then why the hell are you here?”

“To make sure you don’t hurt yourself any further than you already have.”

“Why?” he asks while leaning forward, his penetrating eyes piercing right through me. “You don’t have any obligations, so why stay? Unless there’s something else you want.”

“I want nothing from you,” I answer.

“Then leave.”

“I can’t.”

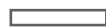
“Why not?”

“Because I’m not heartless,” I shout. “I might hate you, I might not even want to look at you, but I’m not an asshole. I’m not going to leave you here when you clearly need help. It might be painful just looking at you, but I’m not the type of person to leave someone in need.” I lift my chin higher, willing my eyes to stay clear and free of tears. “Now, do us both a favor—if you need something, ask. I don’t want to be cleaning up any more of your messes.”

I turn on my heel, and without another word, I head back up the stairs. When I reach my room, I shut the door behind me and then lean against it. I squeeze my eyes shut and slide all the way down to the floor.

Cue the tears. *More fucking tears.* How is it that I was with Keenan for several years and felt only a fraction of this hurt? Pike didn’t even betray me like Keenan did, yet I feel so torn apart. *How will I get over him?*

Just seeing him downstairs, looking like a total wreck, I know that this is going to be much more painful than I expected. I’m not sure if I’m strong enough.



“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?” I shout as I catch Pike in the kitchen, attempting to make himself some soup. “What did I tell you?”

I walk up to him and grab the bowl from his hand.

He grips the counter impatiently and says, “Cora, give me the fucking bowl.”

“Oh, so you can just drop it on your way back to the couch, causing another mess for me to clean up? I’ll pass. What are you even doing?”

“Making soup.”

“Soup?” I laugh out loud. “You think you’re going to make soup, take it over to the table, and eat it?”

“I was going to eat it here, in the kitchen.” He reaches for the bowl, but I keep it out of his grasp.

“And how do you think you’re going to open the can, genius? It requires two hands, you know? You’re short one.”

“I have my ways.”

“Oh, really?” I reach into the cabinet and pull out a can of soup. I hand it to him and say, “Please, show me.”

He eyes the can and then looks back up at me. “As much as I would love to entertain you, I think I’ll let you take this one.”

“That’s what I thought.” I move in beside him, but he doesn’t move. Instead, he keeps his body close to mine as I grab his can of soup. The warmth of his chest is hot on my back.

“Do you want some soup?” he asks, his voice close to my ear, igniting a lingering flame that I thought was completely extinguished.

My body temperature rises and goosebumps spread over my right arm, betraying my heart.

When I don’t answer, he reaches over me with his good hand and opens the cabinet. “Before Killian left, he got me quite a few cans.”

The beat of my heart nearly drowns out my ability to hear.

“I, uh, I’m not hungry,” I say awkwardly, hating that even though I want nothing to do with him, being this close, with his strong chest pressed against my back, can have such a visceral effect.

“It’s dinnertime. You have to be hungry. You’ve barely eaten anything.”

I glance at him over my shoulder. “I don’t need you keeping track of my eating habits. Thank you very much.”

I snap my head back to the can and open it quickly, fumbling to pull the tab up, which only skyrockets my core temperature even more. I dump the soup into the bowl, plop it in the microwave, and then turn it on for two minutes.

“Go sit down. I’ll bring it over when it’s done.”

He doesn’t move, though. Instead, he says, “You need to eat too, Coraline.”

“Don’t.” I whip around and hold my finger up to him. “Don’t call me that. You don’t have the right to.”

“Don’t like that, huh?” he asks, looking like the devil just bit him in the ass given the satanic smirk on his lips. “Maybe I should treat you the same way you treated me when I first moved in. Try to drive you away. What do you think . . . *Coraline?*”

“I would love to see you try. I invented that game; you can’t beat me at it.”

“You don’t think so?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“We’ll see about that.”



“CORALINE.” A bell jingles. “Coraline, where’s that drink? I’m dying of thirst.”

I am going to MURDER him.

His goal is wanting to drive me away? Well, he's winning. He's winning so hard.

The last two days have been absolute hell.

The minute I sit down, he needs something else. The moment I take a breath, his bell jingles—a bell that's on his phone. And when I don't answer him, he texts me relentlessly until I appear at his side, only to be greeted by a smarmy smile and the need for one tissue.

I might have thrown the box at him and stormed off.

I would say I'm pretty decent when it comes to being patient, but I'm about to break.

“Coraline, my drink.” *Jingle.*

*Jingle . . .*

*JINGLE!*

That . . . IS . . . IT!

The inner dragon beast, which has been simmering in my belly for the last two days, bursts out in a frenzy, turning my fingers into talons, my teeth into snarly, sharp veneers, and my eyes a dangerous shade of yellow with blistering red veins.

From the bellows of my being, fire erupts from my throat, and I scream, “IT’S FUCKING COMING, YOU NARCISSISTIC TWIT!”

I charge through the kitchen, grab his drink, and then chuck the bottle at him, hitting him directly in the chest. Two days ago, I would've asked him if he was okay, today I want to know if I broke any ribs because I hope I did.

“Jesus,” he says, rubbing his chest.

“Oh, did I hurt ya? Did the bottle hit you in the wrong spot? Get a bruise?” I clasp my hands together and hold them to my chest. “I wouldn't want you to get hurt, have a rib penetrate your lungs and make it hard for you to breathe. That would just be terrible.”

He eyes me. “I think you're being sarcastic.”

“Oh, what gave you that impression, Sherlock?” *Jesus*. I start up the stairs, and I’m on the third step when his bell jingles. My skin curdles and steam blows out of my ears as I turn around and, through clenched teeth, ask, “What now?”

“This is mango. I asked for fruit punch.” He shakes the bottle I just threw at him at me.

And just like that, my face splits in two.

A feral scream roars out of me.

And I spin around and donkey-kick a dining room chair across the room before charging out of the house, keys and phone in hand. On the way out to my car, I text Stella and tell her I’m coming over and to make sure she’s dressed and ready for company.

I cannot take another minute in this house with Pike.

Not ANOTHER minute.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

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### PIKE

My mobile beeps, and then Killian's face comes into view. "Pike, how are you feeling?"

I shift uncomfortably on the couch and say, "Not fucking great."

"Well, I'm glad to see Nurse Ratched hasn't killed you yet."

"Yeah, it was touch and go there for a second."

"Finally push her over the edge?"

"I think so," I say, looking toward the entryway. It's been hours and she hasn't come back yet. I'm pretty sure my demand for fruit punch was the final straw. "She kicked a chair and then flew out of here. That was hours ago. Pretty sure she's done."

"And why are you pushing her away, again? Don't you love her? Don't you want to be married to her? Don't you want to spend the rest of your life with her?"

"Yes," I say with a deep sigh. "But, Kill, she wants nothing to do with me. I know she's here out of pity, and I don't fucking want that. I either want her here because she wants to be with me, or I want her gone. It's too fucking painful to have her here. To not touch her, hold her, kiss her. Thank her the way I want to thank her."

“And you don’t think there’s any chance you can win her back?”

I shake my head. “There was a moment we had in the kitchen, a very small moment, but I think it was just old habits, you know? Because she’s put up a strong guard ever since.”

“Maybe you should switch up tactics.”

“What do you mean?” I ask as I wince from the pain that’s radiating up my leg. I was supposed to take my pain meds an hour ago but haven’t found the strength to stand up and get them.

“I mean . . . instead of pushing her away, try to win her back.”

“I told you,” I say, exasperated, “she wants nothing to do with me. And, frankly, I don’t deserve her, Kill.”

“I don’t believe that. I think you do deserve her. Yes, you might not have told her the truth in the beginning, but everything you two experienced, that was real. And she loves you. You just don’t get over something like that so easily.”

“She had papers drawn up. I signed them. It’s over.”

“Papers mean nothing. And that was probably a gut reaction on her part, done out of anger. If you’re saying you had a moment in the kitchen, then there’s still something there. Instead of pushing her away, try winning her back.”

I stare up at the ceiling, thinking about the prospect of getting Cora to fall back in love with me. It holds great appeal, because I still fucking love her. Even when she’s kicking dining room chairs across the room, I still love her. Hell, I think I love her even more, seeing that fiery spirit come to life all over again.

I’d want nothing more than to be able to pull her onto my lap when or if she gets back and tell her how much I love her, how much I appreciate her, how much I would do anything to have her in my life again.

But I’m currently at her mercy with some severe limitations.

“How do you suppose I win her back, Kill? I can’t quite maneuver around the place very well.”

“You have a mobile, right? Have some of her favorite things delivered. Slowly, when you’re feeling strong, work around the house, get some things done. Help out where you can. And then, thank her. Thank her for everything. Show her how much you appreciate her, find some solid ground, and grow off that. I have confidence you can do it.”

“I don’t know. I told her to leave, to be done with me.”

“Well, she should know by now that we men are idiots and don’t know what we want. Tell me this—are you miserable without her?”

“Fucking miserable.”

“Then don’t be a wanker. Go after her.”

“Yeah . . . but going after her is being selfish. She wants out. I should just let her go.”

“From the conversations I’ve had with her and with you, I know that’s not the truth but a gut reaction to protect her heart. She loves you. Don’t let her throw away what she feels for you because Pa had a vendetta. If you owe her anything, you owe her that.”

“Fuck,” I groan. “You’re right.”

“I know I’m right. Always am.”

“Let me guess, you won’t let me live this one down.”

“Not so much. If you need any wooing ideas, I might have some up my sleeve.”

“Over my dead body will I let my older, inexperienced brother try to help me woo the woman I love.”

Killian laughs. “You’re probably correct about that.”



I STARE AT THE CLOCK, it's past ten, closing in on eleven, and now I'm starting to worry.

I think I pushed her too far.

Granted, that was the goal, to get her out of here and stop caring for me. Well, mission accomplished.

Now I want her back.

After I got off the phone, I spent two hours hobbling around the house, cleaning up, clumsily doing the dishes, and making sure what I could reach was in place. I ordered some flowers and those shortbread cookies she likes from a bakery downtown. I attempted to make her bed for her, but that didn't go well. I ended up flopping around on it several times like a goddamn fish out of water. Eventually, I rolled off and left the bed as is. I had to. It smelled of Cora, and that nearly broke my heart. *Her scent should only be in my bed.*

Once I felt like I did a good enough job to impress her, I set the flowers on the table and the cookies beside them. Then passed out on the couch because, Jesus fuck, getting around on one leg with one arm is exhausting.

But she's still not back yet.

I consider texting her, but that seems desperate.

And I don't want her thinking that I'm texting her to find out where she is because I need something. That ship has sailed. I've thought back to what Cora said about me to Arlo a few weeks ago. How happy I made her. How I helped her self-worth. How she hated the idea of failing at a second marriage. *I'd much rather stay with a man who spends moments every day trying to build my self-confidence and helping me explore what other strengths I might have, than feel as though I've simply failed again.*

I love Cora Greyson, and I want her to have my name. My utmost support. My love. She is not a failure and should never feel that way.

We're pivoting to a new mission, and that's to win her back.

Kind of hard to win her back if she's not here, though.

I sigh into the couch just as I hear a jingle against the door.

My ears perk up and I sit a little taller as I hold my breath. When the door unlocks and opens, my stomach erupts with nerves. I left the entryway light on, so when she comes in, I'm relieved to see her.

I lean forward, brace myself with the coffee table, and then slowly lift up just in time for her to come into the room. She initially looks at me and then her eyes fall to the flowers.

"Hey," I say softly as I pick up my crutch.

"What are these?" she asks, pointing to the cookies.

"Those are the shortbread cookies you love." I make my way toward her. "I had some delivered."

"Why would you do that?"

When I reach her, I'm tempted to reach out and take her hand in mine, but I refrain. "As a peace offering," I answer.

She crosses her arms over her chest. "And what sort of peace are you offering?"

Her chin is held high and there's a note of defiance in her voice. Just reminds me how much I love this woman. Stubborn but loving, wrapped up into a feisty ball of beauty.

I take another step forward and say, "I'm saying thank you."

"Thank you?" Her brow crinkles.

I nod. "Yes. Thank you. I shouldn't be pushing you away, giving you a hard time, especially since you're not going anywhere. I just . . . I didn't want you wasting your time. I want you to be happy, to move on to what you want in your life. Staying here, helping me, it's holding you back, and I don't want to be the reason you're being held back. That's why I was trying to push you away. But I realize, despite how hard I try, you're loyal to your core and you're not going anywhere until you feel like I can handle things on my own."

Her eyes dash away and her foot toes the ground. “Yeah, well, if I murder you in the process, that’s not on me.”

I chuckle and take a risk by reaching out with my good hand and pressing my palm to her cheek.

She doesn’t shake me away, but she doesn’t lean into my touch either like she used to. I still take it as a win.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly. “I’m sorry for making things so difficult on you when you’re just trying to help me.”

Her eyes meet mine.

“And I’m really appreciative of you helping me out. I know it’s the last thing you want to be doing, especially after, well, after everything. But I am grateful. Thank you, Coraline.”

Her lips rub together and she almost seems confused as she looks back at me. Like she can’t quite tell if I’m being serious or not. Well, I’m dead fucking serious, and she needs to know that.

I drag my thumb over her cheek and repeat, “Thank you.”

Her eyes search mine.

Her fists flex at her sides.

And she worries her lower lip.

If only I could read what’s going on in her head. If only I could see those thoughts, I would be at such an advantage.

“You’re, uh, you’re welcome,” she says, taking a step back. She points at the shortbread and says, “I’m taking that up to my room. I don’t think you deserve any of it.”

I hold back my laugh. “I wouldn’t dream of eating your shortbread.”

“And the flowers. I’m taking those up to my room as well. You don’t deserve to look at them.”

“Punishment well received. No flower gazing for me.”

She points at me now. “And none of that charming shit. Got it? I’m still very mad at you, Pike. You . . . you broke my

heart.”

And just like that, I’m brought back to reality. For a split second, I believed that maybe that sassy attitude was coming back and we could share in some repartee, but the droop in her shoulders and the defeat in her voice slices me open.

She’s right.

I broke her heart.

And some flowers and shortbread aren’t going to fix that.

“I know,” I say, looking down at the floor. “And I realize that you being here has nothing to do with anything other than my injuries. Believe me, I get that. And when you leave, the fact of the matter is, we’re going our separate ways. But I just want you to know, I’m grateful.”

“Okay. As long as you’re aware. We’re done, Pike.”

Hearing her say it fucking stings, but I also know that, deep down in that beautiful soul of hers, we’re not done.

To protect her heart, she’s saying we’re done.

But there’s still something there.

There has to be.

“I understand,” I say, even though, in the back of my head, I know there’s no chance in hell I’m going to give up on her.

“Okay.” She looks around the townhouse. “Did you clean?”

“Attempted to. I, uh, I tried to make your bed, but just ended up flopping around on the mattress instead.” I blow out a heavy breath. “I’m in an extreme amount of pain right now.”

She rolls her eyes and takes me by the arm. “Seriously, stop trying to do things, or else you’ll never heal and I’ll never be able to leave.”

Well, if that’s the case . . .

“I wanted to show you how thankful I am.”

She doesn’t say anything, but continues to guide me to the couch. She then helps me down and asks, “Have you taken

your medication?"

"Yeah." I yawn. "Sorry, tired."

"Probably best that you lie down." She grabs the folded blanket from the arm of the chair and drapes it over me as I situate my leg in its cast up on a stack of pillows.

Once I'm settled, I look up at her and say, "Thank you."

She takes a step back and clasps her hands together. "I don't expect you to say *thank you* every time, Pike. Probably be best if we don't really talk. Let's just go through the motions and then we can move on."

It's almost as if I can see her using brick and mortar to build a wall right between us. She couldn't be more obvious with her distance.

The last thing I want is distance between us, but she's skittish, and I think one bad move on my end will send me a few lightyears behind when it comes to winning her back. I need to tread carefully.

"Whatever you want," I say quietly.

She takes another step back. "Okay." I can see her wanting to say something else, but she closes her mouth and turns on her heel. She walks over to the dining room table, grabs the shortbread and flowers, and takes them to her room, turning the lights off as she goes.

Cloaked in the dark of the night, I lie there, staring at the ceiling, thinking about the uphill battle I'm about to face. This could be stupid.

This could be very selfish on my end.

Something learned?

I haven't spoken to my pa, as what would be the point? He thinks I'm a screwup and that will probably never change. But hurting Cora? That was abhorrent. I'm so fucking angry at him. I won't let him win this inane war he has with me.

I love her.



Which is also why I would never forgive myself if I at least didn't try to win her back.



"WHAT'S THAT SMELL?" Cora asks, coming downstairs. Her hair is wet from her shower and she's dressed in a pair of sweats and a long-sleeved T-shirt that clings to her arms, chest, and waist. She pulls off comfortable yet sexy very well.

"Breakfast," I say from the dining room table, where I'm sitting next to a takeout bag that was just delivered.

"Oh." She pauses at the bottom of the stairs.

"Don't worry," I say. "You don't have to eat with me. You can take it up to your room. I know you have work to do." I pull out a take-away box and set it down. I lift the lid and see the breakfast I ordered for her. "This is yours. Orange almond French toast."

Her eyes light up.

"I know how much you like it," I say. I push it toward the edge of the table and then pull out my breakfast. Banana and grain pancakes with caramel syrup. I grab the cutlery I snagged from the kitchen, pop open my take-away box, and dig in. The pancakes are smothered in syrup, just the way I like them, and steaming hot.

I don't say another word because I know she doesn't want to talk. Instead, I enjoy my breakfast and wait to see what her next move is.

After a few drawn-out seconds, she steps up to the dining room table and asks, "Do you need a drink?"

I move the carryout bag to the side, revealing my bottle of water, and say, "I'm good."

She nods and picks up her box. "Okay."

"Here." I push a fork toward her. "Enjoy."

She picks up the fork, and her eyes fall to the chair across from mine. For a brief second, I think she's about to sit with me, but she instead walks into the kitchen and opens the fridge to grab herself a drink.

When she turns around, I keep my eyes on my breakfast and listen to her steps. She stops in the dining room and says, "Thank you for breakfast."

"Yup," I say with a quick wave, but then pick up my mobile and pretend to scroll through it as she walks back upstairs. When I hear her door click shut, I sit back in my chair and let out a deep sigh.

Fuck, that felt incredibly awkward. More awkward than any other interaction I've had with her.

Worried, I shoot a text over to Killian.

***Pike:** Things went from hostile to awkward. I think my balls just shriveled from the conversation we shared.*

I prepare another mouthful of pancakes and shove it in my mouth just as Killian texts back.

***Killian:** Awkward is good.*

***Pike:** How is awkward good?*

***Killian:** Because awkward means that there could be feelings there, she just doesn't know what to do with them, how to react. Seems like she's cooled down from her anger and now is fishing around for a new normal with you.*

***Pike:** You think so?*

***Killian:** I'm just guessing. Since I'm not there, I really have no clue, but from what you're telling me, that would be my assumption.*

***Pike:** So, keep going?*

***Killian:** It's been one day, you clod. Yes, keep going.*



“DINNER IS GOOD,” I say to Cora, filling the silence that is otherwise only broken by the clanking of our cutlery.

“Thank you,” she says, staring at her plate of mashed potatoes, peas, and chicken. It’s very similar to the very first meal she made me, but nothing is charred and the peas aren’t smashed.

We’ve been . . . cordial . . . to each other all day and it’s slowly driving me crazy.

I don’t like cordial.

I like fiery Cora.

Pissed-off Cora.

Loving Cora.

But it feels like living in purgatory with this bland version of her. I get to see her, but I don’t get all of her, the best parts of her, and that’s more painful than not having her at all.

“I, uh, I have a doctor’s appointment tomorrow,” I say, causing her to lift her gaze. “I scheduled an Uber to pick me up so you don’t have to worry about taking me.”

Her brows sharpen. “You’re not taking an Uber to your appointment. I’ll take you.”

“I don’t want to bother you.”

“And I don’t want you to forget anything the doctor says. Therefore, I’ll take you.”

“Cora, really—”

She holds up her hand. “You do realize that if we follow directions specifically, then this will all be over sooner, right? I can’t have you missing anything, Pike. The quicker I can move on with my life, the better.”

Ouch.

That’s a fucking punch to the gut.

“Okay, sure. Yeah. If you don’t mind.”

“I mind, but I’ll do it.” Her words cut through me just like her knife cuts through her chicken, with jarring ease.

Unsure what else to say, other than “thank you”—but we established she doesn’t want to be thanked for everything—I stay silent and finish off my mashed potatoes and chicken. When I’m done, I dab my mouth with my napkin and set the napkin on my plate, only for the plate to be ripped out from underneath me by Cora, who angrily charges toward the kitchen.

What the hell is going on?

For a few seconds, I watch as she slams things around the kitchen, cleaning up from dinner, and I try to wrack my brain for what could be the cause of her anger, but I come up completely short.

I have two options here. I can go into the kitchen to attempt to help her and see what’s bothering her, or I can tuck my tail between my legs, shut my mouth, and sit on the couch.

One has the risk of getting my head chewed off. The other has the risk of distancing us even more.

I’m pretty sure taking the risk of getting yelled at is better than not seeing that fiery spirit though.

So, like the dumb man that I am, I stand, slip my one crutch under my arm, and hobble over to the kitchen. I lean against the counter, close to her, and ask, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she snaps.

Oof.

Fine.

I think we’ve been over the way “FINE” doesn’t actually mean *fine*. In this moment, “fine” means she’s two seconds away from ripping someone’s head in half and feeding it to the pigeons outside. “Fine” means duck for cover. “Fine” means protect your scrotum, because chances are, a foot is seeking out your unborn.

And yet . . . knowing all of that, I press on.

“It doesn’t seem like you’re fine.”

Her eyes flare in my direction and, oh boy, if looks could kill, I would be toast right now.

“Please, Pike, please inform me of how I’m feeling if you know so well.”

Sarcasm—another precursor to one losing their manhood. When paired with the word “fine,” one must duck for cover.

But once again, I’m an ignorant man, and I’m attracted to the Cora with life in her eyes.

“Well, it sort of seems like you’re pissed at something, and I was wondering if it had to do with me.”

When a sarcastic laugh falls past her lips, it leads me to assume that, in fact, her mood has to do entirely with me.

But after she laughs, she doesn’t say anything. Instead, she turns toward the sink and starts washing the dishes. Dishes that she can put in the dishwasher . . .

Bollocks. She must be really fucking pissed.

I can feel her rage, so what do I do? I scoot in closer so I’m standing right next to her, my shoulder bumping against hers.

“You know, there’s a funny joke about an Englishman who \_\_\_”

“Has his dick chopped off because he couldn’t take a hint?” Cora asks, looking up at me.

Annnnd . . . yup, my balls just shriveled up into dust. Poof. Gone.

I awkwardly laugh. “That’s one way to tell the joke.”

She rests her hands on the edge of the sink and says, “I would suggest taking about five steps to your left unless you want your other arm broken.”

“Technically, it’s my wrist that’s broken.”

She growls.

Legit *growls*. And I take it that maybe correcting her wasn’t the best thing to do in the moment.

Calm her down, man.

Calm.

Her.

Down.

“Listen, I’m not sure what I did to make you so—”

Her eyes angrily glare at me.

“Err . . . so *pleasant*.” I smile, teeth on full display. “But I just want to say I’m sorry, for whatever I did.”

“Just leave me alone, Pike.”

Yeah, I probably should’ve done that in the first place.

I push away from the counter and take one step toward the living room when I realize something, and I stop. I look over my shoulder and ask, “Was it the Uber?”

She pauses, her back turning stiff, and I have my answer.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, Cora. Or that I don’t want you there. Trust me, having you here is making this easier for me, but I feel like I’m stretching you thin. That’s all.”

Her shoulders slump and as she scrubs a dish, she says, “Don’t assume anything. I’ll tell you if I need a break.”

“Okay,” I say, turning back to her. I take a giant risk and sidle up next to her. Using the counter as support, I reach out and grab her chin, forcing her to look me in the eyes. Her body is nearly pressing against mine, and I can feel her breath on my hand, her breath heavy from my touch. Our gazes lock and fuck, what I wouldn’t give to lean down and capture those lips one more time. What I wouldn’t give to taste the anger on her mouth, ease the tension in her muscles with one swipe of my tongue.

And when her eyes float to my mouth briefly, for a second, I think about taking a chance, consider claiming her mouth, but I know it’s too soon. Far too fucking soon. So, instead, I keep my eyes on hers and say, “Appointment is at three, but I have to be there at two thirty.”

She swallows and nods.

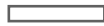
“Dinner was delicious. Thank you.”

Then I drop my hand from her face and crutch over to the couch, where I slowly take a seat. Even from across the room, I can see her staring at the wall, unmoving, as her chest heaves.

She was affected. I’m causing her to think.

To rethink.

Which only means one thing—maybe I do have a shot.



“MRS. GREYSON, would you like to come back with your husband?”

I hold back my smirk, because I know that title must drive her crazy, but as far as I know, the title still stands. And thankfully, she doesn’t make it awkward by correcting the nurse.

“Yes,” Cora says. “I would like to come back.”

She stands with me and, together, we weave through the doctor’s office to exam room number six. I don’t even bother trying to get up on the exam table, but instead, take a seat in one of the chairs in the room. Cora sits right next to me while the nurse rolls in with her computer cart.

“How are you feeling?” the nurse asks. “Any pain?”

“Feel pretty good,” I say.

“He had pain the other day,” Cora says, cutting in. “He was moving around too much and wound up overdoing it.” I glance at her and her eyes connect with mine. “Am I not correct?”

The nurse smirks, and I say, “That’s true. I was trying to clean around the house to make up for being an arse to her.”

This time, the nurse snorts. “Not sure if I should write that in your chart or not.”

“I think it’s necessary information,” Cora says, crossing her legs. To my benefit, her body language doesn’t turn away from me, instead, she turns inward toward me, and I take that as a good sign. “If you want to put *giant* in front of *ass*, that might help the doctor as well.”

“Ah, yes, let me write that down.” The nurse types away and I wonder if she’s actually putting that in my chart. Not that I care. Cora is correct. “And how are the ass tendencies as of recently?”

“Better,” Cora says, her voice softening. “He’s no longer using a bell to summon me.”

The nurse looks at me over the top of her glasses and asks, “You were using a bell?”

Well . . . this is awkward.

“More of an annoying joke than anything.”

The nurse shakes her head. “Boy, you’re lucky. If you were my husband, that bell would’ve been tossed out on the curb, along with you.”

“I’m pretty sure that had been on the agenda had I not turned things around.” Taking a chance, I place my good hand on Cora’s thigh and say, “Thankfully, this woman has been incredibly patient with me and has made this entire process easier, even though I don’t deserve it.”

When I glance over at her, she’s not looking at me, but she’s focused on the way my hand is touching her thigh. So, I graze my thumb over her jean-clad leg, gently, slowly, hoping and praying she doesn’t swat my hand away.

“That’s the sign of a good wife.” The nurse turns back to her computer. “You should keep her around.”

I turn toward Cora and say, “I plan on doing everything I can to keep her around, even if it means begging and pleading.”



Cora looks up, her expression unreadable as her eyes search my face. “Smart man,” the nurse says.

The next few minutes, we go over my multitude of injuries, how they’re doing after a week, and then the nurse stands, guides her computer cart to the door, and says, “Dr. Frederick will be right with you.”

After the door shuts behind the nurse and I’m left alone with Cora, I say, “They always say they will be right with you, but it’s like half an hour later.”

Cora doesn’t say anything. Instead, she stands from her chair and starts to pace.

“Everything okay?” I ask her.

Her attention flashes to me. “It’s not going to help if you lie about how you’re feeling, Pike.”

“I wasn’t lying. I really wasn’t feeling too much pain today.”

“But you were the other day. We need to make sure we give the doctor all the information.”

“So you can be on your own way. I know, Cora.” I glance down at my hand, the hand that was just gripping Cora’s thigh. How I wish she was still sitting next to me.

“This isn’t easy for me, Pike,” she says, pulling my attention.

Vulnerability laces those stunning eyes, and I wonder what she means by that. Is it not easy because she still has feelings for me when she doesn’t want to? I can practically hear Killian’s voice saying, “Yes, she still has feelings for you, you nob-head.”

“This isn’t easy for me either,” I say. “I can’t stand the fact that I have to rely on you, depend on you to help me out, but I can’t thank you the way I want to.” The words fly out of my mouth before I can stop myself. “Do you think I like sleeping on the couch when I know you’re upstairs, by yourself? Do you think I like having silent dinners with you, when all I want

is to ask how you are, talk about your day, pick your beautiful mind?”

“Pike, don’t.” She shakes her head, tearing her gaze away.

But I don’t stop.

“I want to cuddle with you and watch some stupid show that we joke and laugh about. I want to be able to look you in the goddamn eyes and tell you how I’ll spend every last waking hour of my life trying to make you happy, trying to make up for what I did.”

“Pike.” Her eyes well and she turns away.

“I want to tell you how emphatically in love I am with you and how that feeling is never going to go away. My love for you, Cora, will never fade.”

The rap of knuckles hit the door right before it opens. “Hello,” Dr. Frederick says, completely blowing up my confession.

What happened to the half-hour wait?

He looks between the two of us and asks, “How are we today?”

“Good,” I say, my eyes on Cora. “A little sore the other day, but feeling pretty good today.”

“Great to hear.” Dr. Frederick glances at the exam table and then back at me. “Gimpy couldn’t get up on the table?”

He lightens the mood with the nickname, so I chuckle and shake my head. “Didn’t even attempt to make a fool out of myself.” I glance at Cora. “Trying to save some face in front of the lady.”

“Ah, I can understand that.” He takes a seat on the rolling stool and clasps his hands together, facing me. “Shall we begin with the exam?”

“I’m ready when you are.”

For the next ten minutes, Dr. Frederick asks about any headaches, blurry vision, if there’s any pain in my right leg, and goes over my lacerations. He removes the stitches from

my head, but not from my arm just yet. He examines my wrist, since it's in a removeable cast, and then takes a look at the road rash on my face, which is healing rather nicely thanks to the globs of Neosporin I've been putting on it.

With one leg crossed over the other, Dr. Frederick says, "Everything looks to be healing well, except this wound on your arm. It's not looking as healthy as I would hope. Then again, it was a major gash. Try not to move that arm around too much. I fear you're delaying recovery if you're attempting to do too much. Come back in a week so we can check on it again."

Cora gives me a quick look and then turns away.

"Keep up with your pain medication, if and *only if* you still need it. And you're clear to submerge your body under water now for baths, but not your leg in the cast. It might be difficult, but thankfully you have your wife to assist you."

Cora's eyes widen.

"Great," I say. "Those flannel baths haven't been cutting it."

"I can tell," Dr. Frederick says while wafting his hand over his nose. When I go to protest, he says, "Only kidding. But yes, baths are acceptable, as long as you keep your cast wrapped and dry. Other than that, we'll see you in a week." Dr. Frederick stands and pats me gently on the shoulder. "You're a lucky one, Pike Greyson. Not sure I've seen someone survive a motorcycle accident like the one you were in. Take care."

And then he takes off, shutting the door behind him.

When I look at Cora, I find her leaning against the wall, hands behind her back, staring at the ground.

"Are you ready?" I ask her.

She glances up at me and quietly nods. "Yeah, I'm ready."

Together, we head down the hallway of the doctor's office, schedule another appointment to get my wounds checked again, and then head out to the front of the building. Beyond

the windows and glass doors, the wind has picked up, gusts of snow blowing around in the air.

“Here, let me help you with your jacket,” Cora says. She takes her time, unfolding it from her grasp and then guiding my arms into the arm holes. Then, she steps in front of me and zips up my coat. I reach out and place my hand on her cheek.

When her eyes connect with mine, I say, “I meant everything I said, Coraline. Every bloody word. You’re the love of my life, and if I have to spend all the years I have on this earth proving that to you, then I will.”

Her eyes gloss over with tears and I can’t tell if she’s happy, sad . . . indifferent.

I can’t seem to place her feelings like I used to. I’m not conditioned to this version of her. I know when she’s angry, when she’s acting stubborn, when she’s utterly in love or in a euphoric state. But this docile woman standing in front of me has me at a loss.

“We should get going,” she finally says before putting on her winter hat and opening the door to the wintery tundra.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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CORA

*Stella: How did the doctor's appointment go? Any closer to freedom?*

*Cora: He touched me.*

*Greer: Who touched you?*

*Stella: The doctor touched you?*

*Cora: No, Pike touched me.*

*Stella: How? Where? You can't just say he touched you and not give us details.*

*Greer: She's right. What's happening over there?*

*Cora: On the leg, and then stroked my inner thigh with his thumb while we were at the doctor's office.*

*Stella: Did you like it?*

*Cora: Of course I did. I didn't even flinch. Instead, I melted into my seat and enjoyed it. I should NOT be enjoying his touch.*

*Greer: Well, I mean, it might not be such a bad thing . . .*

*Cora: He told me he's emphatically in love with me.*

*Stella: WHAT?*

**Greer:** *Uh . . . you should've led with that news. A touch is a touch, but him saying he loves you . . . emphatically? That's a whole other ballgame.*

**Stella:** *Agreed. That's just . . . wow! What did you say?*

**Cora:** *The doctor walked in.*

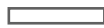
**Stella:** *For the love of God.*

**Greer:** *What would you have said if he hadn't?*

**Cora:** *Probably would've continued to tell him to stop, to not say things like that.*

**Greer:** *Would you have meant it?*

**Cora:** *That's the scary part. I don't think I would have.*



HIS WORDS HAVE NOT STOPPED RINGING through my head.

He wants to touch me.

Hold me.

Prove to me how happy he can make me.

His words are on constant replay, drowning out any other thoughts that I might have.

I feel frustrated.

Annoyed.

Confused.

But most of all, I feel sick to my stomach, because in the back of my head, I know I love him too. I love him more than anything. The love I harbor for this man is lightyears ahead of the way I ever felt about Keenan, and I know it's because he sees me for who I am. Despite what his dad said to me, I know he loves me for who I am. And he's never wanted to change me.

But those feelings don't negate the fact that he lied to me. That he broke my trust. And that he made me feel used.

"Thank you . . . for today," he says from where he stands at my doorframe, startling me. I didn't even hear him hobble up the stairs.

"You shouldn't climb the stairs, Pike."

"It was the only way I knew I could talk to you."

I look away, because staring into those deep, tantalizing eyes is too difficult. With every gaze, they pull me in, they force my body to beg, to plead, for one more touch. But my heart is screaming *no*. The hollowness in my chest is imploring that I don't reach out, because the heartache is too great.

I shake my head. "There's nothing to talk about, Pike."

"There is," he says, using his crutch to propel himself into the room, to my side of the bed, where he takes a seat. If he wasn't a gimp, I would kick him off the mattress, but I don't have it in me to force him to stand on one leg while talking to me. "I want to talk about what I said in the doctor's office."

"Why?" I pick at a piece of lint on my sweatpants. "You said some things, exposed some feelings, but I don't share the same sentiment," I lie. "So there's no use talking about it. You're only going to get hurt."

I don't realize how close he is until his good hand lands on my leg. "You don't share the same sentiment?"

"No." I pick at my nails, doing pretty much anything to avoid eye contact with him.

"If that's true, then look at me when you say it."

Damn it.

My teeth roll over my bottom lip and I quickly look up at his handsome face. He hasn't shaved in a while so his beard is filling in, covering his square jaw. His eyes are soft but also commanding, and they don't stray from me. And his lips, lightly glistening because he just wet them with his tongue.

“Say it,” he says quietly. “Say you don’t share the same feelings I have.”

When I don’t say anything, he scoots even closer on the bed, so I’m trapped between him and the headboard now, his large, battered body mere inches from mine.

“Tell me to my face, Coraline, that you don’t love me. That you don’t still feel a deep, throbbing pulse in your veins when I’m around. Tell me you don’t want to reach out to me, touch me . . . kiss me.”

I do.

I want all of those things.

But he hurt me, and for some reason, getting over that hurt feels monumental, impossible.

“I . . . I don’t share . . .” I pause and look away. “I don’t share the same feelings.”

“Liar,” he says, calling me out, and then brings his hand to my cheek, forcing me to look him in the eyes. “You can’t say it to my face, because, deep down, you still want me.”

I try to shake my head, but it’s a feeble attempt at best.

“That’s okay,” he says softly. “I don’t need to hear you say it, because I can see it in your body language, the way you look at me . . . the way you care for me.”

I look up at the ceiling, willing the tears that are forming to go away, but no such luck, as they tumble down over my cheeks.

“Cora—”

“You hurt me, Pike,” I say, swiping away at the tears. “You hurt me more than Keenan ever did.” I meet his steady gaze. “He might have cheated on me, but he also never loved me the way you did. He didn’t love me unconditionally. I think I was a means to an end for him, something to check off on his list of things to do. But with you, I felt . . . God, I felt wanted. Needed. I felt like you actually gave a shit about me. That you desired so much more than a marriage, that you fought for a connection. I thought it was all real.”



“It is all real,” he says, his voice growing tight. “Every last second of it. It was real, Cora. Every touch, every kiss, every confession of love. You should never question that, because it came from the heart.”

“How do I know that?” I ask. “How do I know it was real, when it all started with a wager from your dad? How do I know you would’ve given this marriage between us a shot if it weren’t for your dad and his manipulation?” *Show me that I was worth more to you than a means to help your reputation. That I meant something.*

He heaves a heavy sigh and then scratches the back of his neck. “I can’t swear to you that I wouldn’t have asked for an annulment.” His eyes flash to mine and he speaks sincerely when he says, “But I sure as hell would’ve asked you out on a date the next day. I would’ve wanted to get to know you better. I know, deep in my bloody soul, that there’s no way I would’ve been able to walk away from you after our night in Vegas. That night meant something to me, Cora. The sooner you realize that, the better.”

He stands from the bed, carefully, and hovers over me. He leans his armpit on his crutch and then reaches out and grips my chin. “I love you, Coraline. That’s never going to change. And maybe you don’t want to hear it, and maybe I’m being a selfish prick by repeating this, but I want you in my life. I don’t want to lose you. Not over my pa’s revenge. Not when I know you and I are supposed to be together.”

And then, slowly, he lowers down until his lips press against my forehead.

I don’t move.

I don’t pull away.

I don’t even breathe as I feel the sweet satisfaction of that simple act of affection.

When he pulls away and looks at me, I can’t seem to keep my eyes from jolting to his lips. Those lips that have controlled me in every aspect over the last couple of months. The way they’ve travelled over my body, igniting a worn-out

flame within me. How they've comforted me. How they've protected me. Those lips have transformed me into a different woman, and all I want is for them to take me once again.

And then my breath gets caught in my throat as he lowers again, this time pressing a sweet kiss to the tip of my nose.

My hands tremble on my lap as a cloudy pressure builds in my chest, stilling my breath.

Quietly, just above a whisper, he says, "I love you, Coraline. And I'm so fucking sorry I hurt you."

Tears well in my eyes once again just before his lips graze mine. I'm embarrassed by the whimper that passes through my throat as he slowly pulls away. My eyes connect with his as a tear dribbles down my cheek. He wipes it away with his thumb and then says, "Have a good night."

Before I can protest, he makes his way out of my room, and I listen as he carefully works his way downstairs. That's when I let out a deep breath and sink into my covers. I pull them up and over my head and curl against my pillow.

How?

How can I still feel so strongly about him after what he did?

How can I possibly still love him so much even though he broke down every ounce of trust I was able to build back up?

And how come all I want to do is run down the stairs, tell him I love him too, and then curl up in his strong, protective arms?

But I don't.

Because even though my body is screaming one thing, my heart is still trying to piece itself back together.



*STELLA: How are things going over there?*

*Cora: Not great.*

**Greer:** *Is he being a dick again?*

**Cora:** *No. Every day, every moment he gets, he tells me how beautiful I am. How much I make him happy. How I make him laugh. How I'm the best thing that ever happened to him. How he's so deeply in love with me that just seeing me puts a smile on his face.*

**Stella:** *Ummm . . . I think my nipples are hard.*

**Greer:** *Yeah, that's, uh . . . wow.*

**Cora:** *See! I would rather him be jingling for something every two seconds, pissing me off. That I can take. This onslaught of love, it's too much.*

**Stella:** *Because you love him too.*

**Cora:** *I do.*

**Greer:** *And you wish he'd never hurt you and broken your trust.*

**Cora:** *Exactly.*

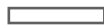
**Stella:** *And you want nothing more than to be with him, as if nothing ever happened.*

**Cora:** *Correct.*

**Greer:** *Well . . . that's your answer, Cora. We all make mistakes. We all do stupid things. Think about what Arlo did, how he filled out that evaluation during my first year of teaching that almost got me fired. If I can get over that, don't you think you could get over what Pike did to you?*

**Cora:** *You were stronger than me.*

**Greer:** *You're a lot stronger than you think you are.*



I HEAR THE *HOP, thud, hop* of Pike climbing up the stairs, and I hold my breath as I sit in front of my computer, typing out a schedule for the new year and the plans for reshaping Frankie Donut's social media profile . . . to reflect the style of

some other accounts that seem to be gaining attention. I shall not name which ones.

I half expect him to come into my room again, but this time, he moves past my door and into the master bedroom.

What is he doing?

Every morning, I take him a new set of clothes to change into, and his toiletries are downstairs, so there shouldn't be anything he needs upstairs.

The faucet to the bathtub turns on.

Scratch that, there is something he needs to do upstairs.

I consider offering him some help, but think better of it, because, well, he's going to be naked, so he can figure that bath stuff out on his own.

So, I turn back to my computer, but instead of picking up where I left off, I stare at my computer screen, barely breathing as I listen in on what he's doing. The water turns off after a bit, and I hear the rustling of a plastic bag. That must be him covering his cast.

Then I hear him mutter some swear words.

A few "bloodies" in there about the bag—which makes me smile, even though it shouldn't.

Followed by an "Ah, fuck." And then a thud against the wall.

That's when I fly out of my chair and into the master bathroom. I find Pike leaning against the wall, wearing nothing but a pair of boxer briefs, and holding a garbage bag in his hand. The road rash he acquired during his accident has almost completely healed, and even though he hasn't been able to work out like he normally does, he's still very much filled out in muscles, and his abs look tighter and more defined than before.

"Do you need help?"

His eyes flash to mine and he doesn't answer right away. He pushes off from the wall and hops over to the toilet to take

a seat on the lid. He lets out a heavy sigh and pushes his hand through his hair.

“I thought I could do this on my own, but it doesn’t look like I can. Do you mind helping me?”

Yes.

“No, it’s fine.”

I take the trash bag from him, guide his leg with the cast on it into the bag, and then cinch the top, hoping I did a good enough job to keep the water out. Since his wrist cast is removeable, I help him take that off, and then say, “Okay, there you go.” I stand. “If you need anything else . . .”

“Cora,” he says, his eyes looking desperate. “I don’t think I can get in that tub alone.”

I glance at the tub, and then back at him. He’s right. It would be a miracle if he did. Which only means . . .

He stands and, with his eyes trained on me, pushes his boxer briefs down to the floor.

He’s naked.

In front of me.

Completely naked.

And it’s taking everything in me not to look down at his glorious cock.

I clear my throat and turn away. “Okay, so if you want to use me as a crutch, to help you, I don’t mind that.”

“Thank you,” he says softly.

Awkwardly, we move around, me staying as far away from his penis as possible, and we fit him into the tub after a few attempts, but we finally get it. He leaves his bagged leg out of the tub while the bottom half of his body slips under the water.

Still averting my eyes, I ask, “That good?”

He winces as he shifts. “Fuck. I won’t be able to squeeze the shampoo bottle.”

He's correct. And that's about the time that I realize I'm going to bathe Pike Greyson myself.

Succumbing to the inevitable, I gather a washcloth, a cup for rinsing, and his soaps, and bring them to the edge of the tub.

When I wet the washcloth, Pike grabs my hand, and I'm forced to look at him. "Thank you, for helping. I know this can't be comfortable for you."

I shrug it off and say, "I've seen you naked before. I've touched your man parts, I'll be fine."

He chuckles, and the sound is such a sexy rumble that my legs clench together in desperation.

*Get it together, Cora.*

I fill up the cup with water and start pouring it over his chest. That's when I catch first sight of his penis.

God, why is it so perfect? Even not erect, it's a work of art.

Trying to keep my mind off the erotic scene in front of me—Pike, wet and naked—I ask, "Is the water okay?"

"The water is fine," he says, swallowing hard.

I glance up to catch him looking at my chest. I glance down and realize that my shirt is peeping open, and I'm not wearing a bra.

"Uh, sorry." I try to adjust my shirt, but it's no use.

He shakes his head. "Don't be. I always thought you had the most beautiful breasts. Sexy little nipples. A palmful. Just perfect."

Heat blazes up my spine and my mouth goes dry.

*Focus on bathing the man, Cora.* The quicker you get this done, the quicker you can move on with your day. And by moving on, if that means you lock yourself in your room and make yourself come to get rid of this building heat between your legs, then so be it.

Once he's wet, I take the shampoo and squeeze it into my hand. Since he has short hair, I don't need more than a nickel-sized dollop. I lather it up in my hands and then lean over and start working it through his hair, my breasts unfortunately jostling near his face.

"Hell, Cora." He shifts in the tub, but I keep my eyes where they need to be, on his hair.

I drive my fingers through his thick strands, massaging his scalp the way I do in the shower, and I hear him groan. For some reason, that spurs me on.

I should stop.

I should rinse him quickly and be done, but my hands won't stop. Instead, they drift to his temples and draw light circles, careful to avoid where he still has leftover abrasions. His eyes flutter shut and his head tips back, exposing the thick column of his neck. I've never seen anything more erotic. Until my eyes have a mind of their own and I glance down to discover his cock straining upwards.

Dear Mary, mother of Jesus.

I bite down on my bottom lip as I continue to watch his cock grow with every deep rub of his scalp.

"Bloody hell, Cora," he says, his good hand resting on his flat stomach. "You're making me hard."

"Oh," I mutter. "Uh, sorry." I remove my hands from his head and dip them into the water to rinse them.

"Don't be sorry," he says, reaching up and tilting up my chin. When our gazes collide, he says, "This was bound to happen, having your hands on me again. You're the only woman to ever make me feel so alive."

I don't answer him, because my mouth feels dry, and because I can barely hear my own voice over the pounding of my heart. My stomach clenches tight as the shift that has been slowly moving between us continues to rotate, forcing me to see him as the man he was before his pa arrived.

The sexy, thoughtful, beautiful man that I fell in love with.

And with every deep breath from his brawny chest, a wave of apprehension gnaws away at my confidence to keep my distance.

“Sit up for me,” I say, filling the cup with water. He leans forward and tilts his head back as I rinse the shampoo out of his hair.

It takes a few cups to get it all out, but once I do, I set the cup back down and he lies against the tub again while I rub his bar of soap into a washcloth, lathering it up until I feel like it’s ready.

With a deep swallow, I press the washcloth to his chest and start soaping him up.

God, his soap smells so freaking good. Like the mountains and streams and something entirely too masculine to pinpoint. All I know is, this smell, it’s associated with Pike, it’s a smell I’ve grown quite fond of, and it’s doing tricky things to my thoughts.

I smooth the washcloth over his shoulders, under his arms, and across his pecs. The entire time, I feel his eyes on me. With an unsteady hand, I move the washcloth down his abs to just above his straining cock. I have no idea what to do, so I stutter to a halt, not sure if I should clean that part of him or not.

But I don’t get much time to think about it, because Pike’s hand falls to mine, and he moves the washcloth and my hand over his cock, cleaning the tip, then the length—I suck in a sharp hiss as we go over his piercings—and then all the way to his balls.

He groans.

I hold in my erotic moan that begs to be let out, and when he releases my hand so I can continue down his legs, I instead travel back up the length of his cock and smooth the washcloth against his stomach, letting his cock brush against the back of my hand as I clean close to his pubic bone.

“Fuck,” he whispers, his stomach hollowing out as I take him in my hand again, stretching the washcloth down his



length and to his balls. “Baby,” he says lightly. “You have to stop.”

But I don't.

I don't know why.

Maybe because I'm so desperate to touch him.

So desperate to feel him one more time.

I move the washcloth down his leg and then back up his inner thigh, back to his cock. His legs spread and his head falls back against the tub. I watch as his muscles contract with each pass of my hand. The veins leading down to his cock from the V in his hips throb and his cock bobs as I swipe past it.

“Coraline,” he whispers while I drag the washcloth over his tip and then back down. His teeth roll over his bottom lip, his eyes squeeze shut, and his chest heaves.

I'm unable to stop. I can't, I'm too fascinated.

I'm too turned on.

*His cock is glorious.*

I'm too far down the road of no return, so I drop the washcloth, grip his cock with my hand, and pump him.

*I want to suck his cock.*

His eyes fly open to mine, and I watch as his mouth drops open in sexy shock as I grip him tighter and stroke.

*He's so fucking hard, and I'm so, so wet.*

His good hand reaches for my face and cups the back of my head, bringing me closer, and I let him.

*I want his kiss.*

I let him drag me in until we're a whisper away from each other.

I stroke him hard and fast.

*I want to be riding his rock-hard cock. God, I want him.*

He gasps against my lips, and just as he's about to kiss me, his grip tightens even further and he moans as he comes on his

stomach.

“Fu-uck,” he says as I pull my head away, a dizzying feeling passing over me.

What did I just do?

*You just gave Pike Greyson a hand job, that’s what you did, you moron.*

His head falls against the back of the tub and I take that moment to clean up his stomach with the washcloth and then quickly make use of the cup, pouring water over the suds on his body. I need to get out of here, and quick.

“All done,” I say awkwardly, grabbing his plush, white towel and draping it over my arm.

I hold out my hand and wait for him to grab it. He leans forward, pulls the plug, and then he takes my hand in his. Together, we get him out of the tub and onto the bath rug. I quickly wrap the towel around his waist and take a step back.

He fixes his hands to the towel at his waist and stares down at me.

He goes to say something, but I hold up my hand. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

He smirks. “Okay.”

“And this doesn’t change anything.”

His smirk turns into a grin. “Okay.”

“Okay.” I let out a deep breath and take another step back. I motion to his body and say, “I believe you’ve got it from here.”

“I do.” He’s still smiling and it’s taking everything in me not to kiss that smile right off his face.

“Okay, then.” I straighten my shirt, the fabric pulling on my tight nipples. “Well, I’ll be going back to my room, then.” I thumb toward my room.

“Sounds good.”

I nod and then slowly start to back away.

“Hey, Cora?”

“Hmm?” I glance up at him.

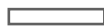
“I love you, baby. So fucking hard.”

Dead.

I.

Am.

Dead.



**CORA:** *S.O.S. I gave him a hand job. I REPEAT, I gave him a hand job.*

**Greer:** *Wait . . . what? Like an actual hand job?*

**Stella:** *Did he come?*

**Cora:** *Yes, and yes. God, what is wrong with me?*

**Greer:** *How did this even happen?*

**Cora:** *I had to give him a bath, and then I was shampooing his head, one thing led to another, his cock was hard, and I couldn't resist. One touch was all I needed, and then there I was, jerking him off in the bathtub. I can still hear the low groan of his orgasm.*

**Stella:** *That's soooo hot. I jerked Romeo off in the bath once. The water sloshing around still plays in my head.*

**Greer:** *I would tell you about the time Arlo and I did it in the bathtub, but I shall spare you. Let's just say—some of the best sex of my life.*

**Cora:** *I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I'm slipping up every second I get.*

**Stella:** *Or you're finally giving in to what's meant to be.*

**Greer:** *She's right.*

**Cora:** *I can't. I'm not ready. I'm not healed.*

*Greer: Maybe you need to lean on him to heal.*

*Cora: What happened to “we hate Pike”?*

*Stella: We’ve seen you with him and we’ve seen you without him. He makes you happy. There’s no debating that. And he’s trying. He’s always tried with you, Cora. That right there should tell you that he’s a good man.*

*Greer: Give him a chance. You deserve to be happy.*



PIKE IS ON THE COUCH, doing a crossword puzzle in a book his brother sent him, while I sit at the dining room table, getting some work done. Ever since the “hand job incident,” I haven’t really interacted with Pike at all.

I’ve reverted back to not talking to him, getting away with the bare minimum of making him meals, eating quietly, and then taking care of any needs he might have. And when I say “need,” I don’t mean the erotic kind. He took another bath this morning, but I prepared properly this time. I lined things up that made it easy for him to do it himself. I was only in attendance when he needed help getting in and out.

Greer and Stella might be on the side of reconciliation, but for some reason, I can’t seem to find it within me to cross over. There’s something missing, and I can’t figure out what it is. Him speaking the truth, acting kind, getting me flowers, showing me how much he cares for me around the house—yes, it’s all great, but it still makes me wonder . . . has he always felt like that?

How long has he actually loved me?

Was any of it a show?

“I hope it’s okay, but I invited Keiko over,” Pike says from the couch. “She has wedding photos and she wants to show them to me.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s fine. I can give you guys privacy.”

“I’m sure she’d want to talk to you too,” Pike says. “She’s told me in her own way that she misses your friendship.”

Guilt swarms me.

“I didn’t want her to have to choose.”

“So you chose for her?” he asks.

I look up at him over the top of my computer. “Why did you say that in that angry tone?”

“Because she’s your friend, Cora. You might be mad at me, but you can’t be mad at her.”

“I’m not mad at her,” I say. “I’m just—I don’t know. I don’t want to put her in the middle of it all. I don’t want her to feel like she has to defend you. So, I just talk to Greer and Stella about it all.”

“What do you say?” he asks.

I shut my computer. “That’s none of your business.”

He lets out an irritated sigh. “What’s going on, Cora? One second, I feel like you’re coming back to me, like you’re finally willing to forgive me, and then the next, you’re angry, resigned, barely even looking at me. I know you love me. Why are you putting us through this?”

“Me?” I ask, pointing to my chest. “I’m not putting us through anything. You’re the one who fucked this up. You’re the one who lied. This isn’t on me, Pike, this is on you.”

“I understand that,” he says, aggravated. “But I’m trying the best I can to show you how much I love you, how much I want you back. Don’t you want to give this a chance? Give us a chance?”

My eyes search his and even though my brain is saying *yes*, my heart is screaming *no*.

I stand and shake my head. “No. I don’t want to give this another chance.” I gather my computer and hold it to my chest.

“Then what has all of this been about? Have you just been teasing me? Giving me hope, only to take it away?”

“There have been momentary lapses in judgment, and I’ll take the blame on those, but just because we shared a few moments, it doesn’t mean we’re getting back together, Pike.”

“Are you saying there’s no chance?”

A piercing pain hits me square in the chest from the thought of closing this door, of saying *no* to him and walking away. But throughout my life, I’ve known the best thing for me is to walk away when something or someone hurts me. I gave up trying with my mom, I didn’t bother gaining the affection of my grandparents, I divorced Keenan without a second thought . . . how is Pike any different?

“There’s no chance.”

“Bullshit.” He rises from the couch, sticks his crutch under his arm, and charges toward me. “That’s bloody bullshit, Cora, and you know it. You’re just too scared to let down your guard.”

“Because every time I let down my guard, I get hurt, Pike,” I shout at him. “You should know that, because I told you everything about my life. Everything. And you still thought it was okay to lie to me.”

“I was going to tell you.”

“When?” I look around the space. “Because as far as I know, we were moving in together without a conversation in sight.”

“I needed everything to be finalized with the foundation first.” He lets out a deep breath. “The foundation I started with Killian years ago, it was the one thing that made me feel like I was doing something good to counteract the ugly my dad was sending into the world. It gave me purpose, helping those kids read, seeing the looks on their faces when they got a new book. It was everything to me and yes, I should have told you about the foundation. I honestly don’t know why I didn’t. Maybe I was too nervous that I would let out the truth, the truth I knew wouldn’t sit well with you. And I needed you, Cora. I needed you so fucking bad to help save those kids.” He grips his crutch tightly, his knuckles going white. “I love you,

Cora, but I love those kids too, and if I fucked up their chances at a future, I never could've lived with myself."

My gut clenches. Hearing him talk about the foundation ... he should have told me earlier. He should have shared with me, but he didn't.

"Instead, you screwed me over."

"I didn't screw you over," he says. "I was waiting for the right time."

"The right time would've been day one, Pike."

"Fuck, you're so—you're so frustrating," he shouts. "It was a mistake, Cora, and yet you're punishing me, punishing us. Hell, your brother said worse things to you in front of your friends, and you forgave him, but you can't forgive me?"

"He's my brother. He's all I have left."

"You have me, Cora," he says, patting his chest. "You've always had me. Day one, you had me, but you never truly let me in."

"You should understand why, since it all started with a drunken night. None of it was real, Pike."

"It was real to me," he yells, his face growing angry. "Fuck, it was real to me. How do you not get that? How do you not feel how real it was? How do you not see it?"

There's a knock at the door, and both of us look toward the entryway.

He blows out a heavy breath and starts to crutch past me, but then stops. Staring at the ground, he says, "I truly, passionately, and unequivocally love you, Cora. That will never change. But I'm not going to keep trying to prove that to you if you're not going to let me in." He glances up and says, "I'll call up a nursing service tomorrow so you won't be bothered anymore. I can't have you here if there's no chance. It's too fucking painful."

And then he hobbles over to the door and opens it.

"Greetings," Keiko's stiff voice says from the entryway.

“Hey, Keiko. Good to see you,” Pike says in a cheery tone that I know is all for show. He doesn’t mean it.

“You, as well. Looks as though you’ve been healing properly. Congrats on properly repairing your living tissue.”

“Uh, thanks.” He motions to the house. “Come in.”

Keiko takes a step inside and sees me in the dining room. She pauses and then turns to Pike. “I was unaware your former lover was going to be in attendance. Shall I come back?”  
*Former lover? Not even former wife?*

“No, it’s fine,” I say to Keiko, and then glance at her belly. “How’s Blanche/Seymour?”

“Well. The fetus has finally started craving vegetables. As I told Kelvin, all in due time, as he observed me consume a family-size bag of Cool Ranch Doritos in one sitting. Now I prefer to suckle on the end of a carrot until my teeth turn a brilliant hue of orange.”

“That sounds . . . fun,” I say, not sure what else to say.

“Quite right. It has provided much-needed entertainment while I compete in rather tiresome competitions of chess against Kelvin. I’m grateful for the intermission with my comrade.” She stiffens her shoulders. “I only wish another comrade would prefer my company as well.”

And there it is. I don’t know why I thought Keiko would ignore the elephant in the room. Nope, she gives it a pat on the back and scoots it right on out.

“I didn’t want you to feel weird around Pike,” I say.

“Why would I feel weird around him? I’m a matured gentleperson, I obtain the capabilities of compartmentalizing my emotions. Do you not?”

“No, I don’t,” I answer honestly. “You know, I’ll just leave you two to it.” I gesture toward them. “I’ll be upstairs.”

I start to walk away when Pike calls out, “You can start packing. What I said earlier was true. You can believe that much.” And then he shuffles past me and to the couch, where



he takes a seat. Keiko stands awkwardly in the entryway, her eyes flashing between me and Pike.

“I’m uncomfortable,” she says.

“Just go hang out with him,” I say before heading up the stairs to my bedroom.

I sit at the end of my bed and rest my hands in my lap as tears form at the backs of my eyes.

This is what I want, right? An out?

He’s giving it to me.

He’s demanding it.

And yet, here I am, crying on my bed about it.

I’ve never been so confused in my life.

I wipe away my tears and spot the basket of laundry that I folded earlier. Might as well put myself to work so I forget about the burning pain in the pit of my stomach. I stand up, wipe my tears, and then pick up the laundry basket. I walk into Pike’s room and open up his bottom dresser drawer, stuffing his sweatpants inside.

I have no idea why I’m putting his clothes away. I should just drop them on his bed and be done with it.

I slam the drawer shut and am startled by the sound of a throat clearing in the doorway.

I look over my shoulder to find Keiko standing there, arms crossed.

“Jesus, Keiko, you startled me.”

“Perhaps if you weren’t violently sealing the bureau, you would have heard my approach.”

“Perhaps,” I say. “Listen, I’m sorry if I’m acting—”

“I thought you loved him,” she says, a tilt to her head.

“I don’t think we should talk about this.”

“May I query as to why we shouldn’t?”

“Because,” I say, feeling exhausted. “He’s your friend.”

“And you’re my friend too.” Her brow crinkles. “I don’t see why I should have to choose between the two of you.”

“Come on, Keiko. I know you like him better than me.”

“I was rather unaware of the knowledge that you’ve become a mind reader in the last few weeks. Pray tell, are you certified?”

“Keiko, listen.” I stuff his shirts in his shirt drawer and shut it. “I’m sorry that I’ve been quiet, but I honestly wasn’t sure how to act with you. I didn’t want to taint your friendship with Pike. I wanted to respect your friendship.” I open the top drawer to toss in his briefs. Noticing a shirt out of place, I pick it up to fold and put back in the T-shirt drawer. “I haven’t been a good friend, and I’m—”

*Plonk.*

Something falls from the shirt and to the floor. Together, we both look at the floor, and my breath catches in my chest when I see a black, velvet box.

“Ah, I wondered if he still possessed the ring he bought you,” Keiko says casually.

“The . . . the what?” I ask, looking up to her.

“The engagement ring. I attempted to convince him a check for a down payment on a house or a practical savings bond would be more appealing than a diamond to show his dedication to your amorous entanglement, but he insisted on the traditional circle of wedlock.” Keiko shrugs. “To each their own.”

“When did he get that?” I ask, pointing to the ring box on the ground.

Keiko looks to the ceiling as she thinks about her answer. “If I remember correctly, the twentieth of December. I attended the shopping adventure with him. He treated me to a slice of deep-dish pizza after. The pizza did not settle well with Blanche/Seymour, therefore, I spent the rest of the evening in the lavatory.”

“He . . . he got it before the accident?”

“Oh, yes. He intended on purchasing earlier, but due to a heavy dose of intestinal gas during that timeframe, I cancelled on him twice. From the conversation I walked in on, I dare say he has no intention of presenting it to you anymore.”

“But he was going to?” I ask.

“Naturally. He loves you. As I heard it, he wanted to give you the wedding you deserved. The engagement you deserved. He planned to bow on bended knee on Christmas Eve. Unfortunately, that did not transpire.”

I glance up at her. “He said that to you?”

Keiko adjusts her glasses. “Correct. He felt confident with our friendship to share a surprise he had planned for you. He was exuberant in expression about it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It was not my position to say anything.”

“But . . . you’re telling me now.”

“Ah”—she nods—“that’s because you have very clearly now seen the ring box from your own actions and it seems there is no chance of you coupling again. Am I right?”

Stunned.

In shock.

I walk over to his bed and take a seat.

“I don’t know, Keiko. I—I don’t even know what’s real anymore.”

“Well, I dare say, I’m not proficient with emotions, but I do know sadness. You are exhibiting the classic symptoms of sadness. Are you sad?”

I nod. “I am.”

“Are you sad from Pike omitting the truth? Or are you sad because you miss him?”

I glance up at her. “Both.”

She nods. “The answer is simple, then. One can mend the trust between two humans, but one cannot mend a broken

heart. You need to love yourself and trust in yourself before you can trust someone else. But you *can* trust that he loves you. Trust that he would do anything for you. Trust that he wants only unsurpassed conditions for you. As for your heart, that won't be revived unless you are with the correct person. I know firsthand of this heartache. And I am conscious of the mending of a broken heart that occurs when with the love of your existence. I might not specialize in relationships, but I do know one thing . . .” She straightens her shoulders. “That man occupying the lower story of this house, he is the ‘real deal.’ He loves you exponentially, and if you leave this abode, you will be composing the most commodious inaccuracy of your life. Don't be a nitwit, Cora.”

And with that, she turns on her heel and heads back downstairs, leaving me alone with my thoughts and with the ring box. I wrestle with her words and the therapist's words, so alike . . .

*I need to love myself before I can even consider loving someone else.* Because I have a man who loves me and is waiting for my love in return. For my trust.

But it has to start with me.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

---

### PIKE

I slouch down in the cushions of the couch and pull out my mobile, which has just buzzed in my pocket. Keiko left about twenty minutes ago, claiming a craving for chocolate, and then scolding me for not having any in the house.

But first, she showed me the wedding pictures and handed me a printed one of me and her, standing awkwardly shoulder to shoulder and not smiling at the camera. She declared it one of her favorites.

We look like sociopaths.

I sent a picture of it to Killian because I knew he'd appreciate it.

***Killian:** That's the best thing I've ever seen. Keiko looks beautiful, though, even if she's not smiling.*

***Pike:** She really was beautiful that day.*

***Killian:** What about your girl? Any pictures with her?*

I sigh and stare at the text.

My girl.

If only that were the truth.

But it seems as though, no matter what I say or do, it's not going to change anything. She'll always hold what happened

against me. And even though it's frustrating, I also understand where she's coming from. She's had such a difficult time with trust throughout her entire life, and then I go and break what little trust she'd given me.

Do I wish she'd been able to fight past those feelings and rebuild with me?

Yes.

But I know there's no chance I'm going to be able to change her mind.

She's set.

We're over.

***Pike:*** *Not my girl.*

***Killian:*** *What are you talking about? I thought things were going well.*

***Pike:*** *So did I, but we had a fight today and I realized there's no hope for us. She's not going to forgive me. As much as I wish she would, she's not going to let it go.*

***Killian:*** *Ah, mate. I'm sorry.*

***Pike:*** *She's going to leave. School starts up in a few days, but I'm not going to be able to teach until the doctor clears me. I'm wondering if I should return to England, tail tucked between my legs.*

***Killian:*** *Is that what you want?*

***Pike:*** *I don't think I can stay here. Maybe I can get a teaching job in London, or go to Edinburgh with Aggie. I just need the hell out of here.*

***Killian:*** *Are you okay?*

A gut-wrenching pain sears through me as I shake my head.

***Pike:*** *No, mate. No, I'm not.*

***Killian:*** *Do you want me to come there? It's a short flight.*

***Pike:*** *A short flight? What are you talking about?*

*Killian: I'm in NYC on business. I can be in Chicago in a few hours.*

It's tempting. Killian can come here, help me on a plane. I'm feeling a little more agile. I can find a doctor in England. And I can forget all of this ever happened.

My eyes fall on the picture of me and Keiko.

What about Keiko?

Would she understand?

This evening, she patted me on the shoulder and said in a very monotone voice that she knows how much I adore Coraline and wishes Cora could open her eyes. I appreciated the sentiment, but I believe there's no one on this earth who can help Cora except herself.

And that's the reason I need to leave, because I can't possibly be around her, share the same friends, see her around school, knowing damn well she loves me but is too fearful to fall into that love again.

I start texting Killian back when there's a creak on the stairs. I glance up and see Cora, clad in sweatshirt and sweatpants, suitcase in hand.

My heart tumbles down my ribs and to the pit of my stomach, crashing and burning.

Nothing needs to be said in this moment. There's nothing else I can say other than "I love you, please don't leave, I didn't mean it," but begging will do nothing.

She's immune to it.

So instead, I turn back to my mobile and finish typing a text to Killian.

"Did Keiko leave?" she asks, her voice coming off timid, a contrast to the anger I heard earlier.

"Yeah," I say.

"Okay." She doesn't say anything else, nor does she move.

I glance up from my mobile once more and take in her nervous swaying. “Is there something you need before you go?” I ask.

Her eyes flash to mine, and she nods. She walks into the living room, reaches into the pocket of her hoodie, and sets a black box on the coffee table.

The ring.

How the hell did she find that?

When I was cleaning the other day, I found it in my backpack and wrapped it in a T-shirt before shoving it into my sock drawer, not wanting her to find it.

“What were your plans with that ring, Pike?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I mean . . . were you really going to propose to me?”

“I wouldn’t get a ring if I wasn’t,” I say.

“How? Why?”

“How? Well, Christmas Eve at the skating rink. I picked out a bench under a tree sprinkled in lights that would’ve been perfect. Keiko was going to take pictures for me of the moment. And why? Isn’t it obvious? I fucking love you, Coraline, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. But I’ve said that far too much, now, haven’t I?”

“You got that, uh, you got that before your dad approached me?”

I lean forward and rest my arms on my legs. “Yes, because like I’ve been saying, my intentions are pure with you. Because even though I pressed you to stay married to me for a different reason, after a week, I knew I was getting to know you for a real reason, because I liked you, and I knew I would be making a huge mistake if I didn’t get to know you. My father hates losing, and he was so determined to win against me that he had someone tracking us. Taking photos. Trying to discredit me so he could take my position on the board and abolish the foundation. It’s why I proposed stepping down from Rabid Readers, suggesting Aggie take my position. I did



that for us, Cora. I removed the ace my pa felt he had up his sleeve. I had no idea he'd come here to . . . to ruin me. And losing you? *That* ruined me. That he'd ruin your trust in me by choosing to tell you only some elements of the situation, but not others." I take a deep breath, because I need her to hear me. "You're special. You're unlike anyone I've ever met. You're so vibrant, full of life, with a stubborn streak that could drive any person nuts, but the stubbornness is what draws me to you. And your heart is fucking gold. So beautiful, so soulful. That's my truth." I point to the ring. "And when I bought that ring, it was because I wanted to hold on to that happiness for the rest of my life. I know when there's a good thing in my life, I need to hold on to it. You're that good thing."

Tears stream down her cheeks as she nods, and then, to my surprise, she kicks off her shoes and then pulls her hoodie up and over her head, only to drop it to the floor.

Confused, I take in her appearance, and that's when I see it.

My Save the Queen shirt.

Every nerve in my body goes numb as I receive the symbolism behind wearing that shirt.

She's mine.

All fucking mine.

"Cora," I choke out as she closes the distance between us. She pushes me back on the couch and gently climbs onto my lap, settling herself. She smooths her hand up my chest and to my face, taking my chin in her hand.

Looking me in the eyes, she says, "It's hard for me to accept the truth when there's an easy out for me, an out that prevents me from getting hurt. The out was leaving you, not doing the work to make this happen. I told myself you didn't really love me, care for me, and your words to the contrary fell on deaf ears."

"I'm telling the truth."

She silences me with her hand.

“I wish I’d known about the foundation, Pike. It was a huge part of you, and you left that out. But I do understand now why you did. I can forgive the omission, because I now have the bigger picture. Thank you.”

“I—”

“I haven’t finished.”

I smile. *My beautiful goddess.*

“It wasn’t until I stumbled across the ring that I realized, despite how we started, we ended up falling for each other over the course of time, and there’s no denying it. Keiko said something that has finally penetrated that wall I was trying to build up to block you out. She told me you can always learn to trust, but you can’t always mend a broken heart, especially without the right person. Well, in her words it sounded much different.” She pats my chest. “You’re the only one who can mend my heart, Pike.” She presses her forehead to mine and whispers, “Please, help me mend it.”

“Baby.” I reach up with my good hand and cup her cheek. “Open up and let me mend it, because I will. I’ll spend every minute until my dying breath making sure I mend this beautiful, loving heart.”

“Promise?” she asks.

“Promise,” I answer.

I wipe at her tears just before she closes the last few inches between us and presses her mouth to mine.

A combination of relief and joy hits me. I curl my hand around the back of her neck and hold her in place as I part my lips and grow our kiss.

Here I was, ready to throw in the towel, move back to England, change everything in my life, because I knew I couldn’t live near her and not live in pain, so to have her sitting on my lap, kissing me, tangling her hands in my hair? Fuck . . . I will never take this feeling for granted.

Ever.

When she pulls away, she whispers, “I love you, Pike.”

“You have no idea how desperately I wanted to hear you say that again.” I smooth my hand across her neck. “I thought I lost you forever.”

“You have me, Pike. You’ve had me from the day I saw you at the teachers’ barbeque.”

“If only I knew the kind of beautiful hellion you’d end up being, I would’ve asked you out that night.”

“But marrying in Vegas, via drive-thru, in an Uber, while drunk off our asses, is just so much more romantic.”

I chuckle. “A story for the books, that’s for sure.” I glance toward the engagement ring box and ask, “Do you want an elaborate proposal, or can I finally claim you properly, in this moment?”

She smirks. “I don’t think I could think of a more perfect moment than me in your shirt, promising to be yours forever.”

I nod at the ring. “Hand that thing over to me.”

She leans back, grabs it, and hands it to me. I hold it in front of her and say, “Coraline, my heart has been captured since you said *I do*, hanging out the back of a Cadillac.”

She laughs.

“I fell in love with your charred chicken, your microwaved tea . . . and even your hairy legs. There is nothing you can do that will push me away from you, because you’re the counterpoint to my heart, and we’ll forever be in each other’s souls. Please, do me the honor, and marry me again?” I pop open the ring box, and she gasps.

She nods and says, “I’m all yours, Pike.”

I grip the back of her head and bring her to my lips, never wanting to let go.

I came to the States to find myself, to find freedom, but instead, I found a woman who challenges me, who makes me laugh, who fills my heart with so much life, that I know, until the day I die, I’ll forever be fulfilled.

I might not have had the unconditional love a child deserves growing up, but Cora makes up for it in bloody spades.

My girl.

My world.

## Epilogue

### CORA

“You look stunning, Mrs. Greyson,” Pike says in my ear as we move across the dance floor, all eyes on us. The deep blue English countryside evening cloaks us on this beautiful night, offering a wisp of breeze, just enough to keep us cool, but not so much for it to be cold.

It rained earlier in the morning, but cleared up by the time I walked down the aisle, causing a beautiful mist to lift off the grass as we said our vows, staring into each other’s eyes, with only close family and friends at our side.

It wasn’t an easy road to get to where we are.

We stumbled, especially when we presented our engagement to Arlo. He wasn’t happy at first, and I didn’t blame him, but over time, Pike put in the work to win over Arlo’s approval, showing him how good of a man he is and how happy he makes me.

Once Pike was fully on the mend, we rounded up the troops again and moved me back into Pike’s place—well, our place now—where we’ve spent a decent amount of time decorating, that is, when we aren’t walking hand in hand down the quiet streets or going to the Mediterranean restaurant for trivia night, like Pike always thought we would.

We also have spent a fair amount of time hosting Keiko and Kelvin on double dates. Oddly, they’ve become my

favorite couple to hang out with, because you never know what's going to happen when they're around. And pregnant Keiko, God, she's greatly missed. Especially third-trimester Keiko. I've never in my life seen someone take down a dozen donuts like her, only to fast-walk on a treadmill right after. Positively fascinating. And you can bet she tracked all of her behaviors down to the very hour.

On the day she presented Blanche to us—yes, they had a girl, little baby Blanche—she also presented us with a twenty-page write-up about her pregnancy, graphs included. Apparently, so we have an idea what to notate when we get pregnant. She'd like to compare the findings.

God, I love her. Perhaps most importantly, I've learned more about myself and what triggers both my insecurity and self-loathing at times. I do trust Pike now, with my life. But I also trust in myself. I am learning to love myself, which is helping me love the man in my arms as well. I'm stronger. And as a result, we're stronger. And I finally feel . . . content. At peace.

I smooth my hand over Pike's navy-blue suit and say, "You're so going to be ravished tonight."

"Yeah? Tell me more about that," he whispers before placing a kiss on my neck, his hand smoothing over my naked back.

When I was picking out my dress, Pike had only one request—for me to pick a dress that didn't have a back, so he could hold me the way he likes to, skin on skin. It was an easy *yes* for me, because nothing feels better than the warmth of his palm on the lower part of my back, his fingers tantalizing me by creeping past the fabric.

"I'm wearing a thong under this dress that's begging you to peel it off me."

"Mmm, don't tease me. I'll whisk you away right now."

"But where's the fun in that?"

"There's plenty of fun in making love to my wife right now."

I chuckle and pull him in closer. It's been such a fun night, and part of that's because Pike's dad didn't come. He's a manipulative *tosser*. I love that word. He never apologized for his actions, which says a lot about his character. Thank God his son knows how to apologize. *He's* the best man I know. His mom is kind and sweet, and it's amazed me that she's stayed with Louis for as long as she has.

I glance over Pike's shoulder, spotting Killian, who's holding a beer—oh sorry, a pint—and watching us dance.

He lifts his glass to me and then takes a sip, and I watch as his eyes trail to the side, where Cleo and Madeline are standing, swaying together.

The first time I came to England with Pike to meet his family, I was struck by just how handsome Killian was. Yes, I've seen him on FaceTime, and he resembles Pike very much, but there's a darkness to him, not the darkness Pike has with his bad-boy persona, but a troubled darkness. It was evident in his eyes, but masked by his smile. But when Cleo and her friends showed up, the darkness turned into utter passion as he stared down Madeline. I told Pike that night that it was the most intense stare I've ever seen. He said he caught a glimpse of it as well and agreed with me.

It was one of the main reasons we invited Madeline to the wedding, because I wanted to tempt Killian to loosen up enough and test the waters, tempt fate, finally make a move.

“Do you think Killian is going to go for it?” I ask.

“With Madeline?”

I nod. “Yeah, he keeps looking over at her.”

Pike's hand glides up my back and then down. “The night is still early. We have time for it to happen.”

“He'll need more liquid courage, and I need to get them to dance somehow.”

“Are you a matchmaker now?” he asks with a laugh.

“I am when I can see that the man is desperate.”

“Give it time. The tension between them is building, I’m sure it’ll happen.”

“I hope so,” I say, pulling away and bringing my lips to his. He gladly takes them. “Did I tell you today how lucky I feel that I found you?”

“In your vows, but, please, shower me with more compliments.”

I chuckle and press another kiss to his lips. “I’m obsessed with you, Pike Greyson.”

“It’s the piercings.”

I shake my head. “It’s you. From the very moment I saw you at the barbeque and told the girls you could put me in detention and I’d be happy about it, I’ve been obsessed. And I’m so happy that, today, I can once again call you my husband. I love you so much.”

He smiles softly . . .

“Did you really say I could put you in detention?”

I roll my eyes as he laughs and grips me tightly.

“I love you, too, baby.” He kisses my forehead and then whispers, “Now let’s make the rounds, say our thank-yous, and then head to our hotel room, because although I’ve been able to touch some of your skin tonight, I’m ready to worship the rest.”



Keep reading for an excerpt from my hockey romance, [Kiss and Don’t Tell](#)

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## Excerpt - Kiss and Don't Tell

### Prologue

PACEY

Man, I'm a fucking idiot.

Bet you haven't heard that from a man before ...

Yeah, every man on the face of this earth has uttered those sacred words at least a dozen times.

I've been a fucking idiot so many times, I've lost count.

But this ...

This is by far the biggest screwup I've ever made.

Oh, you're intrigued? You want to know what qualifies this particular situation as my biggest screwup?

Easy.

One word ... love.

Okay, okay, I know I'm not the only guy who's fucked up when it comes to love. Frankly, I believe it's human nature to fuck up with matters of the heart. But it's my first time. That's what makes this so special.

Yup, first-timer.

A virgin ... well, not a sexual virgin, a love virgin. I've had plenty of sex. Not that we need to get into that, but I'm not a virgin.

See, this is the problem. This right here. The rambling, the not using my brain. I would like to blame my almost season-ending injury, but that would be a scapegoat. I'm just a dumbass.

Getting sick of me beating around the bush? If you were in my bed you wouldn't.

I know, I'm annoyed with me too.

Okay, so I fucked up. How? Well, I'll keep it short and simple ...

Rainstorm.

Random girl shows up at cabin.

Random girl stays with us ... don't worry, we will get into that.

Random girl turns out to be my half-brother's ex-girlfriend.

She doesn't know.

But I know.

Do you think I tell her?

Nah, why would I do that? That's the intelligent thing to do and as we established, I am a dumbass.

Does she find out? Yup.

Does she get mad? Ohhh yeah.

Does she leave me ... sad, alone, and love deprived?

One hundred percent.

Do I deserve it?

More than you know.

But more importantly, do you think I should have a chance at winning her heart back?

NO?

What?

Before you decide, just listen to the story. I'm pretty sure you will have a change of heart.

## Chapter One

### PACEY

"Dude, you're killing the vibe," Hornsby says from the pool. "Don't make me be the dad and make me turn off the Wi-Fi."

Ignoring him, I watch the highlight clip on my phone one more time. Body fake to the left, deke right, crossover, shoots to upper left pocket . . . and he fucking scores.

It was simple.

Any teenager could pull off that move. Hell, I wouldn't even call it a move, I would call it basic hockey skills.

And yet, I didn't stop it.

"Watch it all you want. It's not going to change anything," Taters, our right wing, says.

"But how, *how* did we miss this block?" I toss my phone on my large pool lounge and lean back, pushing my hand through my hair. "It was fucking rudimentary, and I let it go right between my legs."

"That one shot didn't cost us the playoffs," Taters answers. "Everyone had a part in that massive failure of a game."

Yeah, but that one shot was the winning goal, which means the blame still falls on me.

"Nothing you can do about it now, though," says Eli Hornsby, the prettiest fucking defenseman in the game. He places his hands behind his head and lounges back, accepting the loss and allowing himself to relax. Not sure how he can. I'm still reeling from our loss and drop out of the playoffs. "And what's rule number one when we get to the cabin?" he continues.

"No fucking hockey," Posey says before he runs, jumps, and cannonballs into the pool.

Every summer, after the season, me and my boys head up to Banff, Canada, to Silas Taters's cabin—well, mansion, but

he calls it a cabin—and we de-stress. We forget about the season, soak up the sun and picturesque mountains, and just . . . fuck around.

The cabin is the perfect place to do that, with views of the Canadian Rocky Mountains, the small-town feel of Banff, being away from Vancouver city life, and far from any sort of training facility—besides the million-dollar gym in the “basement” of the “cabin.”

But this year, I’m not quite in the mood to relax. Not when we were so close. So fucking close for our third championship win. I wanted that win. I’m not sure how much time I have left in front of the net, and after we were so close to making it to the finals, for a chance to hold the Stanley Cup over my head again and skate around the ice, knowing that my team, the Vancouver Agitators, are number one—fuck, it burns my soul.

I thought we had it this year. We were the sure win.

A stacked team.

The favorite.

And we fucking blew it.

How can they be so accepting with how the season ended?

“You’re scowling,” Taters says, splashing water in my direction.

Silas Taters, the fast-as-fuck right wing, currently has a chip on his shoulder for other reasons we won’t get into, and he’s known for using snarky quips to provoke the people around him, and doing it well. He signed the same year as I did, and I know he wanted this win just as much as I did. So, he’s either in denial, or he has a hell of a way of compartmentalizing.

I stand from the lounge and say, “I’m going to grab a drink.”

“If you’re going to do that, be a gentleman and grab everyone a goddamn drink,” Hornsby says.

Eli Hornsby, our team pretty boy. Hell, our league pretty boy. Perfect teeth, perfect nose, perfect face. He’s strong as

shit, thighs for days, and the horniest motherfucker I've ever met. I think he's slept with every single woman in Vancouver, plus or minus a few. He trains like a badass, parties as though it's his job, eats as if food won't be here tomorrow, and then does it all over again the next day. His lifestyle gives me anxiety, and he's the one always trying to get me to "loosen up."

"You want a chocolate milk?" I ask him.

He rubs his hand over his thick chest. "Milk does do the body good, as you can tell, but bring me a brewski."

Rolling my eyes, I head into the house proper from the indoor pool. Taters says the space is called a natatorium, but that's just a fancy word for a patio enclosed with sliding glass doors. It is nice, though, because you feel like you're outside when the doors are open, but when it's cold, you can turn up the pool heater, close the doors, and still swim.

I enter the kitchen just as Posey closes the fridge. Caught red-handed, he has a piece of bologna hanging out of his mouth and a beer in each hand.

Levi Posey, the dedicated bruiser of our group, and an absolute beast. Known as a teddy bear on the inside but a brutal devil on the ice, you don't want to be smashed into the boards by this guy because it'll feel as though a freight train just took you out.

"Why do you eat that shit?" I ask him.

He takes the bologna out of his mouth and says, "Honestly, I think I have a problem, and I don't even think I want help with it."

Posey is the king of bologna. Before every game he scarfs down a bologna sandwich with mustard. It's vile, and how he can skate the way he does with that churning in his stomach makes me queasy just thinking about it.

"Is one of those beers for sharing?"

He glances down at the drinks and then back at me. "Uh, no. They were both for me."

“Do me a favor and bring Horny and Taters one as well.” I move past him and open the fridge. Every shelf is stacked with beer, even the deli drawer where Posey keeps his bologna. We always have a chef come stay with us while we’re here. He’s really chill and ends up hanging out with us in the evenings. But he’s supposed to show up tonight, therefore, the fridge is currently stocked only with beer.

Loads and loads of beer.

So much beer that someone might walk in and think there’s a problem in this household. But taking down one can at a time is how we decompress from a long-ass season.

How we relax.

And how we forget.

I grab myself a can and then shut the door. I glance around the living room of the open-concept floor plan and ask, “Where’s Holmes?”

“I think on the balcony, that’s where I saw him last,” Posey answers.

“He have a drink?”

“Nah, not yet.”

I reach back into the fridge, grab a beer for Holmes as well, and head upstairs to the balcony, because if I know anything to be true, misery loves company.

“I think he wants to be left alone,” Posey calls out to me.

“When does he not want to be left alone?”

I take the steps to the second floor two at a time.

As the only single guys on the team, we, the guys here in the cabin, made a pact to come here during the off-season while our other teammates are off with their families and girlfriends. It works for us.

Especially for Holmes, who prefers to be alone.

I spot him on the balcony, just like Posey said, leaning back in a rocking chair, shoulders slumped, his eyes trained on

his lap rather than the majestic view of the mountains in front of him.

Halsey Holmes, center, the best hands on the ice, can snap a puck off the stick so fast you don't even realize he attempted to score until the buzzer is sounding off. He holds the record for most goals and assists. He's the glue that holds the team together on the ice, even though he's falling apart off the ice. Two years ago, he lost his twin brother, Holden, in a car accident. Being one of three Holmes boys playing hockey professionally, Halsey has completely separated himself from his family, ignored life, and has focused on hockey and nothing else. He comes to Banff because we force him. When we leave, we all trade off on helping him through the off-season.

I open the screen door to the balcony. He doesn't even bother to look to see who joined him. I hand him a beer, and he takes it.

“Care if I join?”

“Nope,” he says while cracking his beer open.

“I can't be down there right now, with them acting as though we didn't just blow the fucking playoffs.” When Holmes doesn't say anything, I continue, “It's been a week and I'm still rethinking that last goal, over and over again.”

“You froze,” he says, lifting the beer to his lips.

“What?” I ask.

“I saw it happen. The minute Frederic planted his foot to shoot, your body stiffened and you froze.”

“I didn't—”

“You still have fear,” Holmes continues, not making eye contact with me. “As the goalie, you need to be fearless. Your body isn't yours in the game, your body belongs to the team. You act as if it's still yours, and that's why you missed that block.” When I don't say anything, he says, “Prove me wrong.”

And that's the shit part, I can't.

*It was one fucking hit. One shot . . . and I blacked out.*

As a goalie, that's not supposed to bother me. But when I realized there were specific problems, that's when shit got real.

I bring my beer to my mouth and say, "I can't prove you wrong."

And it's true, I can't.

He's fucking right.

If I think about it, I did freeze.

In that moment, when I saw Frederic plant his foot, fear crept up the back of my neck, just like every other time I anticipated a slap shot. But this time, I wasn't quick enough. I let the fear consume me.

Off in the distance, a crack of thunder echoes through the mountains. The once blue sky quickly shifts to gray, the clouds moving a mile a minute.

A storm is coming.

Feels about right.

Because a storm is brewing inside me as well.



"I don't think Stephan is making it up here tonight," Posey says as he sits at the bar of the kitchen, another piece of bologna in his hand.

"He has to," Hornsby says, looking in the fridge. "We don't have anything to eat besides Chips Ahoy cookies and Cheez-Its."

"Don't forget my bologna," Posey chimes in. "I can make bologna sandwiches for everyone."

"No one wants your goddamn bologna," I say as my stomach rumbles just as loud as the thunder.

The storm picked up quickly. The cell service is spotty at best, the Internet is out, and the windows are being pelted by



rain while lightning lights up the dark night sky. It's a rough storm; with every crash of thunder, you can feel the house shake beneath your feet.

Stephan is our chef—the best there is—and unfortunately, I think Posey is right. There's no way he's making it up here. The house is at the top of a steep dirt hill. When it rains like this, that hill turns into a muddy slip and slide. Even Stephan's truck doesn't stand a chance.

“I can live off cookies until morning,” Hornsby says while picking up the package. His eyes narrow, he pulls out the plastic sleeve, which he discovers is empty, and turns a furious glare at Posey, who steadfastly refuses to meet his eye.

“What the actual fuck, Posey? You ate all the cookies?”

“How do you know it was me?” He tosses his hand to the side. “It very well could've been Holmes for all we know.”

“Wasn't me,” Holmes says from the couch where he's reading a book.

Posey could've picked on someone more believable. Holmes is a hermit; he's not going to spend his time in the kitchen scarfing down cookies.

“You're the only one who's been hanging out in the kitchen all day,” Taters says, snagging the package from Hornsby. “And who the hell puts the package back like this? That's just a dick move.”

“How was I supposed to know there was going to be a storm? If anyone is to blame, it's YOU, Taters. You're the host, you were supposed to provide us with food.” Posey has a very valid point.

“I did. I provided you Stephan.”

Posey folds his arms over his chest. “I think we know how well that went, you fuck.”

Thunder crashes around us, causing us all to sink into our shoulders from the forceful booming sound.

“Think it's too bad to drive into town?” I ask.

Taters laughs. “Unless you’re excited about sliding down a dirt road, I’m pretty sure you’re going to want to stay put.”

It was worth a shot.

“My bologna sandwich is looking more and more delicious, isn’t it?” Posey asks with a grin.

Just then, there’s a knock at the door.

We all look at each other in surprise.

“Holy shit, Stephan made it?” Taters jogs to the entryway. When he opens the door, he reveals a short, drenched figure. Raincoat on, hood over their head, they stand there shivering as lightning shoots off in the distance. The scene could be picked straight from a horror film, and yet, we all look closer.

“I don’t think that’s Stephan,” Hornsby whispers.

At that moment, lightning strikes what sounds like the roof. There’s a brilliant flash of blinding light and a deafening crash, and the stranger’s head jerks up, the lightning illuminating the lower half of their rain-soaked face while leaving the rest in hollowed shadows. The velocity of the storm, along with that sudden movement, startles us all backwards. And I can probably vouch for every man in this house when I say our balls just curdled from the horror.

“Jesus, fuck,” Posey says, falling out of his chair. “Satan.” He points toward the door.

Satan is right. What the actual fuck is this? Why is Taters still holding the door open? Does he not watch horror films at all? This is how people receive an axe to the skull, because they don’t slam the door.

The person flips their hood down and collectively we hold our breath while a timid voice says, “No, I swear I’m not a murderer.”

That’s a girl’s voice.

“Turn on the outside light, for fuck’s sake,” I say.

Taters flips on the light, and the girl’s face comes into view, but this is no girl.

Nope, our visitor is a woman with drenched blonde hair, scared eyes, and a perfectly heart-shaped face.

Shivering, she says, “I’m s-sorry to bother you, but my car got stuck in the mud. I saw the lights from the pool and followed them. Do you have any cell service?” The storm booms behind her, causing her to shrink even smaller.

“We don’t. Sorry.” Taters goes to shut the door, but Hornsby quickly stops him.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Confused, Taters says, “Our phones aren’t working, and that’s what she’s looking for. Clearly, we don’t make a match.”

“Ask her if she wants to come inside, you idiot.”

Taters looks from the girl to Hornsby, and back again. “She could be a murderer.” He doesn’t bother keeping his voice down.

“She said she wasn’t,” Posey says while picking at the crumbs in the Chips Ahoy sleeve.

“So we’re just going to take her word for it?” Taters asks.

We all turn to the girl for confirmation. When she realizes we’re waiting, she stumbles out, “I’m not. I don’t do the murdering things. Hell, I don’t even know how to murder.”

Taters rolls his eyes. “Everyone knows how to murder.”

“I don’t know how to murder and get away with it,” she corrects herself.

Once again, Taters scoffs. “Please, everyone knows a woodchipper is a solid bet.”

“Jesus Christ,” I say. “Just let her in.”

“What if she’s a psycho?” Taters asks. “You want a psycho in here?”

Chiming in, the girl says, “I promise I’m not a psycho. I was just hoping I could use your phone.”

“And like I said”—Taters does a dramatic pause as he turns to her again—“they aren’t working. So, sorry for the

inconvenience, but you should be on your way.”

“Holy shit, dude, where the hell is your chivalry?” Hornsby asks, pushing Taters out of the way and holding the door open wider. “Excuse our friend. He’s an enneagram six. A stranger in his house is his worst nightmare.”

With understanding in her voice, she says, “My best friend is a six. I totally get it. I got her a Ring camera for her birthday and she told me it was the best gift she ever received.”

“Was it the Ring Doorbell Pro?” Taters asks, perking up. “Did you get her a spotlight as well? You know you can link them together.”

“Ignore him. Come in,” Hornsby says.

The girl doesn’t move. Instead, she scans the space. “I don’t want to bother you. Your phones aren’t working, so there really is no reason for me to be here.”

“Where are you going to go?” Hornsby asks.

“I don’t know, back to my car, I guess, to wait out the storm.”

“You’ll be waiting for a while.” Hornsby nods inside. “Seriously, we don’t mind.”

She glances around again, and when her eyes land on me, taking me in, I have a moment of déjà vu. She looks . . . familiar. “Not to sound rude or anything, but it seems as if you’re a bunch of big guys. I have nothing with me but my backpack, which despite my best friend begging me to fill it with self-defense items, is instead stuffed with snacks. I’m not sure I could trust *you* not to murder *me*.”

“You have snacks?” Taters asks, sounding more welcoming.

“I do,” she says skeptically, backing up.

“He’s not going to take them.” Hornsby pushes Taters completely away. “Ignore him. His blood sugar is low. And yes, we might be big and intimidating, but we aren’t murderers. We’re Agitators.”

She backs away again. “That doesn’t sound reassuring.”

“Vancouver,” Hornsby clarifies.

But not an ounce of comprehension crosses her face, just nerves and uncertainty.

“We play professional hockey,” I say, clarifying, because who really understands someone just saying the word Vancouver? Her eyes land on me, dark lashes highlighting concerned pupils, and I swear they feel like heat rays, zooming in on me.

I know her. I swear I fucking do. But from where?

Turning away from me, she says, “I don’t watch hockey.”

All the guys groan together as Taters quickly goes on the defensive. Every time someone says they don’t watch hockey—which isn’t too often, given we all live in Canada—Taters makes it his mission to find out why.

“You don’t watch hockey? Is there a reason for that?” His body language reads that he’s ready to fight.

“Uh, better things to do?” she asks as the wind picks up, shooting some of the rain into the house.

“Better things to do?” Taters asks in disbelief. He shakes his head and thumbs toward her. “I was right about this one, she needs to move on.”

“Cut the shit,” Hornsby says. “Not everyone watches hockey. Are they making poor decisions in their life? Yes, but we’re not here to judge. We’re here to help.” He turns back to the girl. “Seriously, we’re not going to hurt you. It would be stupid on our end. Bad publicity. We’re good guys. I promise.”

“How do I know you’re telling the truth? That you’re hockey players?”

Hornsby pulls out his phone. “You can look us up.”

“Internet is out,” I say.

“Fuck.” He sticks his phone back in his pocket and then thinks for a second.

“I know.” He pulls out the umbrellas from the umbrella stand and tosses one to Posey and one to Taters. He doesn’t bother with Holmes, because we all know he hasn’t even lifted his head since our visitor knocked on the door. Then he snags a coaster off the coffee table and says, “Let’s show her. Lawes, set up a goal.”

“Seriously?” I ask.

His eyes land on me. “Yes, I’m fucking serious.”

Sighing, I push two bar stools to the side in front of the island, using the counter as the top of the goal and the chairs as the side. I stand in front of the goal and get in position.

“Now, watch carefully as we display our extreme athleticism.” Hornsby, our defenseman, drops the coaster on the floor and moves it back and forth with the tip of the umbrella. It’s comical that he’s attempting to have some semblance of coordination like Holmes. “This isn’t ideal, especially being guarded by two players. Holmes, I could use your help.”

“Nope,” he says.

With a sigh, Hornsby says, “Taters, you’re out. Make this two on one.”

“Fine by me.” Taters takes a seat and uses the umbrella as a mic. “I’ll announce.”

Hating every second of this, I watch as Hornsby gets in position, Posey defending him. Together, they tap the ground and then each other’s umbrellas. They do this three times, and then Hornsby snags the coaster and spins toward me. Look at Horny, making the moves—most likely trying to impress the girl since he’s not playing his actual position right now. Posey is right on his ass, though, using his shoulder like he does best as he reaches for the coaster.

“Welcome to an impromptu exhibition of umbrella coaster athleticism,” Taters says. “Guarding the goal tonight, we have Pacey Lawes. Quick on his feet, he’s a menace in front of the net. They’re going to have to work hard to squeak something by him. Socking across the hardwood floor, we have Eli

Hornsby with the green umbrella, struggling to keep the coaster close to him, or to even slide across the floor. I believe he's regretting his choice of puck at the moment."

"Accurate," Hornsby says, his voice tight.

"And with the yellow umbrella, we have one of the best defensemen in the league. Unafraid to throw a punch and then end the night with a bologna sandwich, Levi Posey sticks to Horny like glue."

"Don't call me that in front of company," Hornsby says as he spins toward me. I keep my eye on the coaster, ready to make a grab for whatever shot he attempts.

"Horny is zeroing in on his target, but will he be able to get by the Chips Ahoy annihilator? Or will an entire pack of cookies affect Posey's ability to move quickly enough to steal the coaster away?"

"Really feeling those cookies?" I ask.

"Light as a feather over here," Posey says, grappling for the coaster.

"Knock it off with your goddamn elbows," Hornsby says as he takes the coaster the other way, then switches back.

"He's closing in. This goal will be his. I can feel it," Taters says. "Signature move. Deke to the left, spins and . . ."

Hornsby flicks the umbrella, shooting the coaster to the upper left side of the "goal." Without even a second thought, I reach up and block the coaster. Hornsby had no chance.

"And the coaster is stopped by Lawes, a block he could've easily done in his sleep. That must sting for our dear friend Horny."

"Uh, what about my superior defense?" Posey asks.

"I think it was the take down of the Chips Ahoy package that helped you. You were unmovable."

Done with this, I toss the coaster on the counter and take a seat at the island again while Hornsby shoves his umbrella in

the stand. He pushes his hair back and asks, “So, does that help?”

The girl stands there, holding the straps of the backpack resting on her shoulders, taking in the scene. I don’t blame the absolute confused look on her face right now. Hell, I’d pay good money to know exactly what she must be thinking at this moment.

“Uh, no, just made you more insane. And the nickname ‘Horny’ doesn’t help either.”

“They’re idiots,” Hornsby says.

“Here,” Holmes says from the couch, handing over his phone.

Taters walks over to him and takes his phone in his hand. “You have the team photo on your phone?”

Holmes doesn’t say anything. Instead, he goes back to his book.

Hornsby snags the phone and shows it to the girl, who examines the photo intently. Smirking, she asks, “Why aren’t you all smiling? It’s a team photo, after all.”

“Athletes aren’t supposed to smile in photos,” Taters says. “We’re supposed to be intimidating.”

“Oh, was that the look you were going for? You look more constipated than anything.”

We all bust out in laughter as Taters snatches the phone from her. “You realize this is my house you’re trying to gain access to, right? Referring to me as constipated isn’t going to grant you access, but rather punch your ticket out of here.”

“Settle the fuck down,” Hornsby says. “Come on, at least dry off for a bit. We have Cheez-Its and bologna sandwiches and plenty of beer. Maybe we can find some cell service while waiting it out.”

She still seems suspicious but instead of backing away this time, she steps into the entryway.



“Let me take that for you,” Hornsby says as he reaches for her backpack.

She sheds her backpack and then takes off her raincoat as well, revealing an hourglass figure in a pair of black leggings and a tight red top that shows off her cleavage.

Damn.

I think I know what’s going through every guy’s mind in this house—besides Holmes, who hasn’t lifted his head from his book—this girl is hot.

But the question is, are they having déjà vu thoughts like I am? Because I swear I’ve seen her face before.

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