

THE GLASS SLIPPER

K Webster

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Winston

Since my birthday party.

That's how long my useless maid, my filthy toy, my Cinderelliott has been keeping this secret from me. Not just any secret, but conversations behind my back with Leo *motherfucking* Morelli about God only knows what.

I'm disgusted. Furious. And a whole other array of emotions I have no business feeling.

Another tear rolls down Ash's pink cheek, chasing after the one before it.

One. Two. Three. So many tears, each one a reminder of why I don't do this. Why I keep my heart icy and impenetrable. Because, no matter how good something seems with the perfect woman, it can all come crumbling down with just a few salty teardrops.

Betrayal isn't always a waterfall of fucked up like it was with Meredith. Sometimes it's the drip, drip, drip of *I should have fucking known better*.

I did.

I knew this was a potential outcome.

Not whatever the hell is happening right now between Ash and Morelli.

But the secrets. The lies. The shady bullshit.

It happened with Meredith. I vowed it'd never happen again, and yet here we are. Nate and Mother practically force-

fed me the warnings, but I'd been so distracted with playing games with Ash I didn't see her playing a game of her own.

More tears.

My maid is pretty when she cries. Too fucking pretty. It's almost distracting enough to take my attention away from the reason *why* she's crying. Not because we've made a deal and I'm humiliating her. Not because I'm delivering a little pain with pleasure. Not the usual reasons.

No.

She's crying because she's been hiding something from me and essentially lying to my face. The fact her lies revolve around a Morelli is what makes it unforgivable. She knows she's fucked up.

Royally.

"Win," she starts, but I halt her with a lift of my two fingers off the table.

"Shh," I murmur. "Let me look at you like this a little while longer."

Broken. Devastated. Caught red-handed. The humiliation and regret shining in her eyes is something she managed all by herself this time. I didn't do this. I didn't pay her for this. This was all her.

Her phone continues to buzz, but she ignores it to plead with me using just her leaking, sad hazel eyes and pouty lips. The seconds tick by. Neither of us look away.

"Are...Are you going to leave me here with him?"

Because *I'm* the monster here. That question hurts a lot more than I care to admit. Another reminder of why I don't let people in. I don't like to hurt. Not even a little bit. Cold, hard walls of *I don't give a fuck* are what has gotten me through life thus far. It'll have to get me through it this time.

"That depends." A cruel laugh barks out of me when she flinches at my words. "Do you want me to?"

The devastation on her face transforms into irritation making the green shards in her hazel eyes nearly glow. "Don't be a dick."

"Too late for that, Miss Elliott. I was born that way."

She actually rolls her eyes and for a split second it's just me and Ash. My sassy Cinderelliott. The girl I've grown obsessed with. I'm disappointed at myself. So easily I allowed myself to be charmed by a fucking teenager.

My frigid demeanor has the sassiness leeching from her and she squirms in her seat. Her tits bounce slightly, so goddamn delectable in her dress, but I refuse to acknowledge them and keep my hard stare on her face.

"He told me not to tell you," she whispers, shame creeping over her cheeks in a crimson flood. "I was scared and..."

My brow lifts as I regard her with a bored expression. "Please continue," I urge in a flat tone. "Please tell me why you thought it was better to listen to that rat than talk to me. Me—the same man who rescued you from your disgusting stepbrothers and has more money than God. The same man who could stomp on the entire Morelli empire if provoked. I'm all ears."

I sound pathetic.

Sad.

Upset.

I'm not.

Liar.

"I..." She swallows hard and closes her eyes. "The pictures of us. The videos. The texts. He has it all. I didn't want to help him but he said if I didn't or if I told you, he'd..."

"He'd what?" I ask coolly. "Send them to the paparazzi? Embarrass me by showing my friends? Tell my mommy?"

And what the hell does "help him" even mean?

My blood boils at the thought of Morelli using my toy against me.

"Win—" Her chin wobbles.

I motion at her with a flick of my wrist. "For fuck's sake, pull yourself together."

Fire flashes in her expression. Good. She'll do better being a bitch than playing a sniveling victim.

"Listen, little girl," I say, leaning toward her so she can hear me well. "I came here because there's something I needed to do. This 'thing' with you and Morelli is merely an unexpected sideshow for my entertainment tonight."

Her brows furl together, a frown marring her teary face. "Win—"

"I'm not done talking," I clip out, "and you're not done listening. You can have your sobfest when you're alone. Not while you're out with me. Whatever it is Leo thinks he's going to do, let him. I don't give a fuck about his threats."

She purses her lips together as if fighting not to argue. Pity. I prefer it when the kitty pulls out her claws and tries to take a swipe at me. This meek, broken woeful act doesn't suit her.

"This is how this is going to go down," I explain, sweeping my gaze across the crowded restaurant. "You're going to watch my show I had planned, play the part of willing accomplice, and walk out the door as if you don't give two flying fucks about Morelli."

"Okay." Suspicion laces the muttered word.

"You'll get into the car with me and we'll leave."

"Then what?"

Hope glitters in her eyes. We can't have that now, can we?

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Miss Elliott."

Before she can respond, I wave over the waiter. "Please let Mr. Stevens know I'm ready to finalize our deal."

The waiter hurries off to pass on the message to the restaurant owner. I ignore Ash's imploring gaze as I wait. Glancing over at the Morelli table, I notice how Leo is tense while his older brother, Lucian, is relaxed, ready to enjoy a juicy filet at one of the best steakhouses in the city.

While I wait for Mr. Stevens, I text Deborah with a task that requires immediate attention. It'll earn her the new Lexus she's been hinting at. My employees do love a good bonus. Then, I text my doorman because teamwork makes the dream work.

Mr. Stevens emerges from the back, a nervous smile on his face as he approaches our table. I rise to my feet, offering my hand.

"Lovely doing business with you." I shake his hand. "Drop by Anthony's office in the morning. He'll have all the paperwork drawn up for you."

"Thank you, Mr. Constantine. This is incredibly generous of you." He chuckles, his laughter dying when he glances over at the Morellis. "Though a little vicious if you ask me."

"I think I paid enough not to have to ask you."

He withers under the warning of my glare and gives me a quick nod. "You're very right, sir. Good evening."

Then, just as I ordered, like it was an item on a very expensive menu, the owner and his staff begin filing out the front door in a procession of apron-clad soldiers fighting in a battle that's already been won by yours truly.

"Win," Ash croaks out.

I don't answer her because my stare is on the Morelli table. It takes them all of three seconds to realize what I've done, each of them tensing almost simultaneously with fury.

Yes, assholes, I bought out your fancy little steakhouse and paid handsomely for every damn employee to walk out before you even had a chance to order. Looks like it's Chinese takeout for dinner instead of steak.

"I'd love to stay for the fireworks, but I have an early morning. Today, Miss Elliott." I offer my arm. "Time to leave."

She stands up, tosses her phone into her purse before yanking it off the table, and hooks her arm with mine. Her scent teases and taunts me. I'm annoyed she smells so good. Right now, I don't want to smell her. Hell, I can barely look at her.

The restaurant is still full of patrons. Everyone's faces are a sea of confusion as they wonder why the employees have left. But not the Morellis. They know they've been publicly fucked and now they'll have to do the walk of shame.

I stop in front of their table, flashing them a wolfish grin. "Ahh, well, if it isn't the infamous Morellis. Coincidence running into you all here."

"Unlikely," Lucian says, disgust written all over his face. "Nothing is ever coincidence where the Constantines are concerned. Especially you."

"You give me far too much credit," I say back in a smooth tone. "I must warn you, though. It doesn't look like you'll be dining here tonight."

If looks could kill, I'd be a dead motherfucker. Luckily, their hate-filled glares glance off me without incident. Leo, however, is fuming with rage. The Beast of Bishop's Landing. They call him that for a reason. Ash's grip on my arm tightens, and though I'm pissed at her, I still won't let that asshole touch one hair on her pretty little head.

"Didn't you hear?" I continue, my brow quirking. "The building was overrun by rats. We can't have that, now, can we? A little extermination is in order before we can set this building back to rights."

Lucian stands up and glowers at me. His dark hair is impeccable, and his suit is pristine. But rats dressed in Tom Ford are still rats. Infesting the city as if money makes them royalty.

"Are you threatening us?" Lucian demands in a low growl.

"Gentlemen don't have to resort to threats." I pin Leo with a pointed look. "My father raised me better than that."

Leo scoffs. "And what about your mother? She's a real piece of work. How did she raise you?"

"You fucker."

Lucian's jaw tightens with fury. "You're starting something you won't be able to finish."

They started this when they killed my father. Of course I can't prove it, but I believe it. Who else has such a vendetta against my family? Regardless of what happened before, Leo opened up this can of shit when he thought it'd be okay to threaten something of mine. I didn't sell him that building to protect Ash. I sold it because if he wanted to play, I was ready to fucking play. I'm only getting started.

"I believe your brother started this when he broke our contractual agreement," I tell Lucian. "Keep your beast on a leash."

Leo also rises from his seat, fury rippling from him in violent waves. Ash flinches but I remain unaffected. "This doesn't end happily for you," Leo snarls at me and then points a finger at her, "or for you, princess."

Ash sucks in a sharp breath. I can almost taste the fear emanating from her. Poor girl is terrified. It's time she realizes the world she's playing in.

This isn't a fairy tale.

This is war...

And only Constantines win those.

* * *

As soon as we're squealing out of the parking garage and onto the busy street, I turn on Perry's stupid classic rock station to drown out whatever it is Ash might want to say. It's best she doesn't say anything at all right now. I need to think.

Leo Morelli ignored our deal. He was supposed to leave Ash alone in exchange for the ability to purchase the Baldridge building. It's written into a legal goddamn document.

He didn't listen.

Chose to terrorize her anyway.

She was upset and terrified after he filled her head with threats to make her comply. I'll figure out every detail of what's going on. And once I do, there'll be hell to pay...for all those involved.

We pull into her apartment building an hour later after sitting in heavy traffic. She wisely keeps quiet. I shut off the car and climb out. It's difficult to pry my gaze away from roaming down her smooth legs, but I manage to keep my dick in my pants for once. The ride to the twelfth floor is silent. Ash fidgets as though she wants to speak, but in the end, doesn't. I wait for her to fish her keys out of her purse and then unlock the apartment door.

"Do you want to come in so we can talk?" She gnaws on her pouty pink lip that's always so damn distracting.

"Talk?" A dark chuckle escapes me. "I don't pay you to talk, Cinderelliott. I pay you to be my filthy toy." I gesture toward the inside of the apartment. "Hence the whore apartment."

Her whole body flinches as though I've physically wounded her. I, on the other hand, feel nothing. She's a sexual investment, not my girlfriend. This is a dirty game, not a relationship.

"Don't worry. I'll let you know when I need my dick sucked again," I clip out, turning on my heel so I don't see the heartbreak in her eyes. It doesn't affect me. I warned her. "Goodnight." The door clicks shut almost silently behind me. It cuts deep knowing that she's going to spend the night in that apartment because of what went down tonight, but it doesn't hurt me like it clearly hurts her. The gnawing I feel down to my bones is the sane man inside me reminding me this is why I don't get close to people. They always fuck you in the end.

I vowed my heart would never be open to pain.

It's impossible to break something that doesn't exist, right?

If only I could explain the deep, gutting ache inside my chest.

I think they call that...regret.



Ash

 C_{HIRP}

I love my bird. Shrimp is the best little birdie on the planet. But, the one single sound he makes isn't a pleased one. It's angry. Hurt. Scared. This, above anything else that's happened tonight, is the most upsetting. I've let Winston down. And, I've let my damn bird down.

Stupidly, I got swept up in the little fairy tale I'd imagined where I was a maid turned princess who perfectly fit into her filthy prince's story. Winston, billionaire CEO and world's hottest bachelor, gave me a fantasy not a reality. He offered me a world made of glass. I stepped into those new shoes, blinded by the shininess, eager to be his little plaything.

But the cracking has begun.

At the first sign of trouble, everything feels as though it's going to shatter at my feet.

No charming prince will be sweeping me in his arms this time.

I bite down on my lip to keep from crying. I'm tired of crying. Emotionally exhausted. Sick of it. Swallowing down the tight ache in my throat, I lock the apartment door and then swivel around to greet my bird.

"Shrimp," I say in a raspy, wobbly voice as I toss my purse onto the love seat and kick off my heels. "Welcome home." To the whore apartment.

He flaps his wings angrily from inside his cage. I'm unnerved wondering how he even got here. Winston obviously

handled this during all the chaos that was dinner when he'd been texting someone.

It's not just my bird.

Sitting on my bed is my bag of toiletries, my backpack, and a garment bag that most definitely doesn't belong to me. I don't have to unzip it to know it'll be filled with outfits that were once hanging in my room at Winston's place.

"Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry," I chant, even as fresh, hot tears roll out.

I unlatch Shrimp's cage door so he can get some space. Rather than hopping into my waiting hand, he flutters past me, swooping around the small area. He chirps in sharp, high-pitched noises that indicate he's not pleased about his surroundings. The poor bird misses his chandelier playground, high ceilings, and huge windows.

"I fucked it up," I explain to him with a wave of my hand. "I can't even begin to imagine what the fallout for all of this will be."

And I can't.

Winston wasn't exactly chatty. I'm not sure if we're through or if he expects me at work tomorrow. I don't know if he still plans to interrogate me about Leo or what. Now that I've clearly pissed Leo off, I'm sure my sex life is being dragged through the mud and all over social media as I sit here feeling sorry for myself.

I groan as I think about those videos of Winston doing all the filthy things he does to me getting out for everyone to see. Winston may not be worried about his reputation, but I do not want to start college in the fall having a sex scandal with a billionaire under my belt. Not to mention, Dad will just die if he catches wind of it.

Everyone I know will see it.

My enemies. The few friends I have left. The Constantines.

Images of Keaton, Tinsley, and Perry all watching the video together in different variations of shock and disappointment makes me sick to my stomach.

And his mother?

God.

I feel like such an idiot. Leo was just waiting for me to slip up, eager to blast this information to the world. I allowed him to manipulate me because I was afraid of what people would learn about me and Win.

That he pays me for sick, filthy activities.

Oh, and he pays me well.

Disgust at myself roils in my stomach. I bet the perfect Meredith will sit in her mansion with her stupid husband grinning like an evil witch at the scandal. She's probably waiting to swoop in to rescue the prince from his whore's betrayal.

Shrimp lands on the garment bag and pecks at it. He's still mad but luckily he won't stay that way. That bird loves me even when I royally screw up my life. A note is sticking out of a partially unzipped pocket. I yank it out, startling Shrimp, and flip it open to read.

Miss Elliott,

If you're missing any of your things from Mr. Constantine's residence, please contact me via email with a list. I'll be sure to round up anything that may have gotten overlooked and/or replace any items.

Sincerely,

Deborah

I crumple up the note and throw it to the floor. I'm sure Deborah was all too eager to drop what she was doing to rush over to Winston's to uproot me and my bird. Anger settles in the pit of my stomach. This is ridiculous. Winston hasn't even let me completely explain myself or to try and make things better. While the fire is still burning through me, I grab my phone to text him. I ignore the many from Leo waiting for me and go to Win's contact.

Me: For someone who doesn't care, you sure are pissy about the whole thing.

I hit send and stew while I wait for him to reply.

Win: If that's an attempt at an apology, it sucks. Didn't your daddy teach you any manners?

Me: You know I'm sorry for not telling you that Leo was stalking me but I'm not sorry for trying to keep our private moments out of the media. I was protecting us.

Win: With your guard bird? I'm sure the Morellis were awfully frightened.

Though his lack of response regarding Leo feels like a sting, his willingness to verbally spar with me, even when furious enough to kick me and my bird out of his home, gives me hope that we're not over. This is just a hiccup. A small bump in the road. We'll move past it. I just know it.

Me: Don't bring Shrimp into this. He's not going to forgive you very quickly for letting that witch kidnap him from his home.

Win: His home is with his bird mommy. Also, I'm waiting on pins and needles for that noisy-ass bird to forgive me. Ohhh, that's right. I'm not.

Me: You're lucky he can't read.

Win: If you're done having a childish tantrum, I'm going home to shower and then go to bed. Oh, I don't know if I mentioned it or not, but I don't have a towel warmer.

I stare at his text in confusion.

Me: ???

He doesn't respond anymore. Asshole. I consider calling Perry to talk to him about what happened tonight, but he's Win's brother. I'm not sure I could handle the rejection if Perry snubbed me.

My phone buzzes with another incoming text but it's not Winston.

Dad: They're all three going to need surgery. Me and Manda are up at the hospital waiting to talk to them. I know you probably don't care, but Manda is torn up and worried sick.

Guilt slithers through me which is annoying. They deserve everything they got. If Win hadn't stopped them...I can't even begin to think about what Scout would have done the night they tried to retaliate against me for their losing Harvard. I'm certain it would have irrevocably changed and broken me.

Me: Keep me posted.

Because I'd like to revel in their pain.

Me: And, Dad...if anything comes out about me on the news, don't watch it.

Dad: What does that mean???

Me: Maybe nothing. Maybe it's just me worrying.

Dad: What's wrong? Are you in trouble? Did that man do something to you?

That man.

Winston Constantine is so much more than just that man. He's a god among mortals. Powerful, rich, calculating. A villainous prince. The things he did to me are exactly what I'm afraid of. They're things no normal human should want yet I'm clearly on video begging for it.

Dad: Ash, honey, talk to me. Do I need to call Manda's attorney?

It's her sons' fault those pictures and videos got into Leo Morelli's hands in the first place. No, thank you.

Me: I got this, Dad. Just wanted to give you a warning.

I don't have "this" at all but I'm sure as hell not going to let my dad swoop in and save the day. This is my mess which means I'm going to have to clean it up.

Now that the tears have dried and determination has set in, I get started on unpacking my things. The apartment is admittedly cute and I'm secretly grateful I have a place to lie low. Away from everyone. Just me and my bird. I'm not sure how long I'll be allowed to stay here, especially if Win thinks he's going to try and push me out of his life over this, but I have it when I need it most and that's all that matters.

After a hot shower where I wash away the craptastic day I've had, I turn out the lights, drape Shrimp's blanket over his cage, and then crawl into bed. It's not as soft as the one I sleep on at Win's but it's still nice. I search online on my phone for a bit looking for an apology present. Once I purchase it, I change the direction of my searching. To me and Win.

So far...no sex scandal blasted all over the internet.

Doesn't help my anxiety any. It just feels like a bomb waiting to detonate. The anticipation is worse than the explosion.

I imagine a giant, blown-up version of Winston fucking my ass on one of the billboards in Times Square. Okay, so maybe the explosion will be a lot worse than the anticipation. Ugh.

As much as I want to stew over what Leo may or may not do, I try and channel my thoughts someplace else. My mind drifts to a simpler life when Tate was my boyfriend. Things weren't so stressful back then. Boring, yes, but safe.

Nothing about my life is safe now.

I got in bed with a lion and I'm learning maybe I'm just a little mouse.

I'm way out of my depth here.

Loneliness has me reaching out to someone I once could count on. Tate. That is, until the triplets ran him off. I'm

craving our easy friendship and his steady words. Since his number isn't programed on my new phone, I reach out to him on Facebook.

Me: Life's crazy these days. There's so much I want to tell you. We should grab coffee and catch up soon.

I wish we'd have stayed friends but it's one more thing that the Terror Triplets ruined in my life. It's time to start taking back my life. I can start small. Tate's not like all these other men I've been dealing with. He's a good person. I know him. He'll offer me his shoulder to cry on and then he'll give me the motivation I need to pull myself out of the dirt.

That's exactly what I'll do, too.

Stand up. Dust off. Keep going.

The alternative is letting Leo Morelli beat me. Unlucky for him, I've spent too much time hanging out with Constantines. If I've learned anything from that family thus far, it's that you never let the enemy have the last word.

This isn't over.

I won't let it be.



Winston

This morning, I feel like me.

Fucking finally.

Without Ash's presence or her stupid bird, I managed to find the Constantine armor I usually wear, suit up, and am prepared for battle. There's no time for weakness. Not now. Not when the Morellis are out for blood.

It's early. The only staff in the building thus far are Deborah and Perry. I'd texted them both at the crack of dawn today, requesting their immediate presence at the office. I'm pleased to find Deborah sitting with her perfect posture clacking away on her keyboard while Perry waits outside my office, back leaned against the locked door, two coffees in hand.

"Perry. Deborah." My clipped greeting has both of them straightening. To Deborah, I say, "Hold my calls today and get in contact with Anthony. I want a meeting with him within the next two hours to discuss a breach of contract on one of my business deals."

Deborah flies into action. "On it, sir."

Perry's brow is arched but he wisely doesn't say a word until we're inside my office with the door closed. It's been oddly satisfying to watch him grow into his Constantine shoes lately. I'd hired him to keep him out of trouble and it's proving to be a wise choice. I'm going to need him even more in the coming days, that much I'm aware of. Every time I blink, there's someone else waiting to fuck me over. Never fucking ending. And while I may not have proof right away of my

hunches, I always get it in the end. I'm always right about those hunches, too. It's clear the only people you can trust are the ones with the same blood running through your veins.

Ash is running through my veins on a fast track to my cock but that's another story entirely.

"You're in killer Constantine mode this morning," Perry muses and sips his coffee, a thoughtful expression on his face.

Best he hears it from me first.

"We ran into the Morellis at dinner last night."

Perry laughs. "Not surprised."

"Imagine *their* surprise when I bought the restaurant before they had a chance to order." My lips twist into a sadistic smirk. "They weren't pleased."

"I bet not."

I lean back in my chair, tightening the knot of my tie at my throat before settling my gaze back on my little brother. His suit is crisp today and I don't note any wrinkles. Golden-blond hair is styled in a way that toes the line between casual and business, but I figure it'll do. The scruff he's sporting, though it needs a little taming, makes him seem older which is a befitting look for him. Perry needs all the help he can get.

"Leo has been harassing Ash since the night of my birthday," I say in a cool tone, watching his reaction with sharp intensity.

His humor fades as anger filters through him. He sits up, nostrils flaring. "He fucking what? I'll kill him if he touches one hair on Ash's head."

"Don't get your panties in a wad, Romeo. It seems your beloved girl thought she could handle this all on her own. She's been keeping it from me. I figured it out last night and then made her come clean."

He stares at me as though waiting for the punchline. "And?"

"And nothing. I sent her and her bird back to the whore apartment because that's what she is. A paid-for living, breathing entertaining toy."

"Dude—"

"Don't call me dude."

"Fuck, Winny. Is she okay?"

I bristle and shoot him a fiery glare. "It's Ash. Of course she's okay."

"But you kicked her out."

"You can't kick out someone who doesn't live with you," I growl, quickly losing my cool. "I sent her away so I didn't say something to make her cry."

Lies.

I didn't trust myself not to crawl back into bed with her.

Ash weakens me.

I can't be the Constantine in charge when I have a feisty teenager distracting me.

"Okay." His tone is filled with disappointment in a rare role reversal. I don't like how he sounds exactly like Dad, either. "So that's just it? You're done with her? Just like that?"

"You're missing the big problem here," I explain, voice tense as my patience splinters. "Focus. Morelli was harassing her." Stalking as she put it. "Which means—"

"He's in breach of contract," Perry interrupts, catching up. "What are you going to do?"

"Sue the fuck out of him. Naturally." And take my motherfucking building back.

"You have proof?"

"Ash is on my phone plan now. I'll have the records pulled and sent to Anthony before he even makes it into the office this morning." Perry nods, his brows crashing together as he considers his next words. "Great. So we get to fuck Morelli and get our building back. Now, can we talk about Ash?"

"I'd prefer not to."

"Too bad, man," he says in an authoritative tone that has me arching a brow. "You know Ash. She wouldn't keep this shit from you—from us—unless she was truly scared."

I bristle at his annoying reason. "It's irrelevant. I could have protected her and she knew it. There's no telling what Leo demanded of her in return for his silence. She had access to my office, my home, me." I grit my teeth, hating the sick feeling in my stomach. "She knew how I felt about the Morellis and kept it from me anyway."

"He blackmailed her." Perry grits his teeth. "I want to fucking punch that guy."

He's such a child sometimes.

"He's a Morelli. Did you expect anything less?" My tone is bitter and my surprisingly intelligent brother picks up on it.

"You don't give a shit about Morelli," he says, shaking his head. "You're heartbroken."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Perry, you have to have a heart in order for it to break."

"You look just like Mom right now."

A headache forms and I absently rub at my temple. "Ash betrayed our family."

"What did Leo threaten her with?" he asks, ignoring my statement.

"He has her phone. The night the twatlets ruined her dress and you went to her rescue, Leo had also been involved somehow. Either he was there with them or they gave it to him." The thought of Leo Morelli seeing *my fucking girl* crying with her dress ripped to shreds sends a quiver of rage rippling down my spine. "He has all he could ever need on that phone."

"Which is..."

"Videos of me degrading her. Fucking her. Paying her for filthy deeds including sex."

"Holy shit," he chokes out. "What the hell, Winny?"

"My sex life is not up for your judgment."

"I don't give a rat's ass about your sex life," he snaps, blue eyes blazing with anger that's rarely directed at me. "I'm worried about Ash. Jesus, man. She's probably sick about this."

I scrub my palm over my face in frustration. Perry's soft heart is pissing me off.

"Ash will be fine," I growl.

"I should call her—"

"Sit your ass back down." The fire in my words has him dropping back into his seat, a furious glare on his face.

"So, what happens now?"

"I predict Leo will be upset that, not only did I fuck him over last night with the restaurant in front of his daddy and older brother, but that I also now know about his secret bullshit with Ash. He'll want to retaliate. Punish her and me both."

His eyes widen. "He's going to release the videos and pictures?"

"Presumably so."

"How are you so fucking calm right now?" Perry demands, his face turning bright red. "Mom is going to shit bricks over this."

"Mother is the least of my worries right now," I snap back at him. "The lawsuit will be my primary concern. If those pictures and videos leak out, it's more evidence against Leo and his breach of the contract we had. I'll sue his family right out of every goddamn building in this city if I have to."

"Why not try and stop him *before* he leaks them out?" Perry's tone has gone nearly shrill. It doesn't suit him. "You're going to let naked pictures of Ash get out for all to see?"

The image of every pathetic man in New York City jerking of to pictures of *my* Cinderelliott is sickening. I shouldn't care. I don't care.

Then why am I contemplating murder of the entire male species right now?

"Because, then it'll look as though we've done something wrong. Like I'm trying to hide something. My and Ash's sex life is our business. If it gets out, Morelli is the one who's issued the threats, blackmailed Ash, and delivered on his promise when she didn't comply with whatever it is he tried to get her to do. The case will be a slam dunk win in our favor."

I'll have the Baldridge building back by the end of the week and whatever else I fucking want from those rats.

"Has it happened yet?" He winces but I can tell he's reluctantly on board with my plans to let Leo dig his own grave.

"Not as of yet, but I imagine it will soon."

Perry studies me for a beat. "Is this what we do all day? Is this what Dad did?"

My eyes narrow. "Elaborate."

"Play these fucked-up games all the time trying to outsmart the opponent."

"These 'fucked-up games' are what sent you to prep school at one of the finest establishments in the country. These 'fucked-up games' pay for your muscle cars and wrecked sailboats. These 'fucked-up games' make sure you and your kids and your grandkids and your great-grandkids will never want for a goddamn thing. Ever. If this isn't what you signed up for, Perry, you know where the door is. You can go back to sitting in Mommy's lap and sucking from her tit."

"Defensive much?" He shakes his head. "I get that you're used to everyone trying to fuck you over because we're Constantines, but don't insult me, Winny. I love you. You're my damn brother. If it's fucked-up games we must play, then I'm always on your team, ready to play them. I guess I didn't realize there was more to this job than acquisitions and financial world domination. I should have negotiated a higher salary."

"Prove to me you mean those words and I can guarantee you a lot more than a higher salary."

Like a new position. One much, much higher. His brows crash together as if to interpret the meaning behind my words. In time, he'll understand.

A knock on the door of my office is my only warning before Nate pushes inside. His gaze is intense as he sweeps it over the two of us, brows furrowing slightly as though he doesn't seem to find what he's looking for.

Ash isn't here, buddy. Why so obsessed with her, hmm?

"Can I help you?" I lift a brow at him.

"Just checking in. Seems I missed the memo about the meeting."

Perry remains surprisingly quiet, an impassive expression on his usually telling face. I wait Nate out, offering nothing. It's at least an hour before he usually shows up.

"Unless Deborah is failing at her job, I don't have a meeting scheduled with you," I clip out, an edge to my tone that could flay a man where he stands.

This is the Constantine who's been hiding.

Ash softened my edges when I can't be anything but razor-sharp and brutally hard.

Nate adopts an easy grin, the tension leaving his shoulders. "I take it there are no wedding bells in the future?"

"There never were."

"No, you're right," Nate says, nodding. "For a second there, I was worried you were going to ruin your life over a nice piece of ass. I should have known better. You're Winston fucking Constantine." He grins, reminding me of those years in prep school when he'd be pumped after a thrilling win on the rugby field.

Perry's jaw clenches but he says nothing. Even though Nate's words about Ash irritate me, I ignore them, waving him off with a flick of my wrist. Not the time for this. I'll deal with it later.

"Don't you have money to make me? If you're here early, may as well get to it."

Nate smirks. "You're so bitchy in the mornings. Now that you're not tied to that money-hungry wannabe ball and chain, we should go out tonight and get wasted."

"Bye, Nate."

"Think about it," he says with a chuckle.

Before he can exit my office, Deborah predictably rushes in, a horrified expression on her face.

Oh, Morelli, you really fucked up now.

"What is it?" I ask, apathy dripping from my words.

"It's..." She waves frantically as if that'll answer me. "The news...it's everywhere."

"What?" Nate demands, his brows pinched together.

Deborah shoots me a helpless look.

Perry tugs his phone from his pocket and sighs heavily. "Billionaire CEO Exposed in Humiliating Sex Scandal with Teenager."

"Jesus Christ," Nate chokes out, eyes going wide.

"Deborah," I say in an even tone, "why don't you have Anthony meet me here at his earliest convenience? Looks like the day is getting started early."

It's on now, Morelli.

Predictable bastard.



Ash

I WAKE TO the sound of my alarm with a jolt. It takes all of five seconds to realize where I'm at. The whore's apartment. But Shrimp is here, singing a good-morning tune and that makes it a teeny bit better. Flinging off my blanket, I reach over to unplug my phone from the charger and to check for damages.

Crap.

Based on the million missed texts from Dad, what looks like cruel ones from Leo, a few from an unknown number, and several more from Perry, I'd say the shit has hit the proverbial fan.

Dread settles in the pit of my stomach making me nauseous. I don't know what this day will bring, but I can tell I'm going to hate every second of it. I'm not sure if I should stay in bed or do something.

What?

Go to work?

Do I even still have a job?

Before I even have a chance to reach out to Win, he texts me. My heart does a little flutter in my chest. He knows what time my alarm goes off and he waited until I woke to message me.

It's the little things in life.

Win: A car will be around in an hour to pick you up for work.

Me: I still have a job?

He sends me an eyeroll emoji that makes me tear up. We'll be okay. We can fix this. I know we can.

Win: Don't speak to the paparazzi.

My stomach does a painful flip, twisting my guts.

Me: He really did it, huh?

Win: Of course he did.

Me: Is it bad?

Win: Billionaire CEO Exposed in Humiliating Sex Scandal with Teenager? I'll let you make your own deductions.

Oh. My. God.

Did I expect anything less, though?

I stare at my phone for a long time letting his text sink in. This is bad. Like really bad. The whole world knows about the fucked-up games I play with Win. The exchange of money. The filthy sex. The degradation.

Tears don't come.

Instead, a fiery anger burns through my veins in a violent way.

Screw Leo Morelli for doing this.

He thinks I'll cower and be shamed? Win toughened me up weeks ago when we started our wicked sexual games. Surely I can weather this storm. Especially since the great Winston Constantine is by my side.

Me: You know, I really did try to protect you and your family. Even if you don't believe that.

Win: I don't need protection from a poor maid. Don't be late, Cinderelliott.

I send him a whole bunch of middle-finger emojis mostly because I know it'll annoy him to see so many and that I wasted my time tapping the button that many times.

Tossing the phone on the bed, I get up and search out my best, most expensive-looking outfit. If I'm going to get accosted by the media, I might as well look worthy to be at Winston's side. Based on the headline he sent me, they're painting him as a monster who took advantage of some poor little girl.

I'm not who they think I am.

If I can handle Win, I can handle anything.

* * *

ONE LOOK IN the mirror and I know there's no way in hell Winston will be able to ignore me. And the press? They're going to lose their minds. A smug, victorious feeling washes over me. This must be how Win feels when he financially destroys people.

My black Valentino short crepe couture dress is deceiving. The rounded neckline and capped sleeves seem demure, but the pleated-skirt portion and short length scream flirty. When I move, the material swishes around me, drawing the eye to my thighs. My black Rockstud ankle strap pumps with powderwith colored piping are studded platinum-finish embellishments that give the fairly simple dress a flair for the dramatic with such daring shoes. I snag a small Valentino Garavani 03 Rose Edition Atelier nappa hobo bag, decorated with red leather rose petals, and shove all my items into it from my other purse.

I'd considered putting my hair in pigtails just to fuck with Winston, but at the last minute decided not to press my luck. Instead, I pulled my hair back in a high, sleek, no-nonsense ponytail. My eyes are done dramatically in thick liner and heavy mascara. The smokey eyeshadow and plump red lips finish the look.

The whole ensemble doesn't say, teenager taken advantage of by filthy billionaire.

It also doesn't say, high-paid whore.

Right now, I look like a million bucks. A billion if we want to get technical. The point is, I'm a lioness, not a mouse. Claws are bared. Looks can kill. I'm going to wreck... someone...today. Win is definitely rubbing off on me.

There won't be tears today.

Or shame or humiliation or heartache.

No, this is war.

I'm bringing the big guns to the fight. I chose a side, and though it got stressful with Leo blackmailing me, I know I haven't done anything to sell out the Constantines. Everything I did tell Leo was a lie anyway.

Still Team Constantine.

All the way.

I make sure Shrimp's cage is left open and he has plenty of food and water. After giving him the usual excessive amount of birdie kisses and praise, I leave him to explore his new domain on his own.

I leave my apartment and head down the elevator. So far, I haven't encountered any trouble and I refuse to look at my phone. As promised, a black Mercedes is waiting for me at the curb. I recognize the man as one of Win's fleet of drivers, Daniel. He gives me a polite nod, his eyes flaring with appreciation of my outfit, before opening the car door. That small, impressed look of his does wonders for my ego and I walk taller, chin up, bitch smile affixed.

"Good morning," I greet, my voice even and not jittery to my surprise.

"Good morning, Miss Elliott. Looking lovely today."

A genuine grin fights its way through. "Thanks, Daniel."

He blinks in surprise that I know his name. I'm more than a pretty face which is why Winston likes me though he'll never admit it. I'm the full package. Brains and a killer ass.

Okay, so maybe I should scale back the self-love. I want to be like Win, not become him. Hiding my amusement, I sit down inside the vehicle and try not to fidget. The ride is smooth and oddly relaxing. I can almost smell a hint of Winston's familiar cologne lingering in the air.

I miss him.

Not seeing him last night after what went down was hard. Lonely. Sad. I have to believe that he wouldn't have been so harsh had he not cared. Winston just doesn't want to care. But I've already gotten inside him just as he got inside me.

A buzz from my phone has me tugging it out of my handbag. It's the unknown number again. I open it to discover Tate has been texting me. After saving his name, I read through his texts.

Tate: Catching up sounds great!

Tate: Holy shit, Ash, what happened? You're all over the news. Are you okay?

Tate: I'm really worried about you. Call me.

Tate: At least let me know you're alive and not dead in your bathtub.

I chew on my lip to keep my emotions at bay. I said no tears and, dammit, I don't plan on crying today.

Me: Lunch today?

Tate: She lives! Yes. One of our old haunts?

Me: I miss that gyro place we used to eat at all the time. Noon?

Tate: See you then. Be careful.

Me: I will. Promise.

My thoughts of lunch scatter like leaves on a windy day the second I take in the wild zoo that is Halcyon. Hundreds of people are crowded around the entrance of the building. Security is trying to keep them behind some barriers that have been set up. News vans litter the street and the media is all waiting expectantly with their cameras.

"Wanna go sightseeing instead, Danny Boy?"

He chuckles from the front seat. "I don't know that my boss would appreciate that."

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him," I tease and then let out a heavy sigh before shoving my phone back into my handbag. "If I die from mortification, it was nice knowing you. You were my favorite driver. Tell Win I said so. Maybe he'll give you a raise."

Daniel pulls up in front of the building, earning the attention of the crowd. Cameras start flashing as they mob their way over to the Mercedes. "Can't avoid it now, Miss Elliott. Go on. Get it over with. I imagine you'll survive just fine."

His vote of confidence has me nodding sharply. "You're right. We got this. But, if you want to run over a few reporters on your way out of here, I won't blame you. In fact, I'll send you a tin of homemade cookies at Christmas."

"Goodbye, Miss Elliott."

I groan but face the inevitable.

The consequences of my actions.

Pushing open the door, I try not to flash the fray of people my red thong and scoot out of the car, handbag in my clammy grip. As I rise to my feet, my ponytail swoops behind me and my dress dances in a dainty way around my thighs.

I'm hit with a barrage of questions and demands all at once. The flashing bulbs are blinding. The voices are a roar. I ignore it all, head held high, as I strut my way through the cleared area the security officers made.

Someone screams that I'm a gold-digger. The comment strikes me but I don't flinch. Instead, I pretend that my boss-slash-lover didn't spend thousands on this outfit. I try to imagine that I'm someone who fits in Win's world. Someone

like a Meredith or Manda, but like the sexier, nicer, smarter version.

I manage to make it into the lobby unscathed. The tremble in my hands is slight but as I ride the elevator on the long way up, I calm the tremors and straighten my spine. There's no telling what I'm about to walk into. Regardless, I have to. The only way to the other side is through this mess. There's no getting around it now.

Once the elevator dings to deposit me on the correct floor, I affix my coolest expression despite the nerves buzzing beneath my skin. The lobby falls quiet as several heads turn my way. Each one of the executive assistants seems to turn at once like little robots. Win probably trained them that way. The thought makes a smirk tease at my lips.

I've got this.

Everyone can go to hell.

Win and I fucked. We're freaks. Get over it.

The whispers start as I clack past each assistant on a mission to Winston's office where the door is closed. As I approach, Deborah rises to her feet as though she's going to prevent me from going in to see him.

She does not want to get in my way.

My icy glare must convey that message because she visibly flinches. Good. I keep walking and push into his office, ignoring how she rushes behind me.

Seeing him behind his desk rippling with masculine authority is a match to the lust that's ever present whenever I see this man. I'm immediately drawn to the perfection that is his golden-blond hair, styled in a manner that could sell magazines if he were on the cover. His sharp jaw seems more defined than ever and his full lips are pressed into a cruel slant. God, he's so freaking fine. The suit he's wearing is killer—navy blue and expensive. Seems we both had the same idea this morning. Dress as though we have world domination on the first item of our agenda.

The man sitting across from Winston, older and a bit pudgy, rakes his lecherous gaze over my form, licking his lips before letting out a quiet whistle. If I weren't so fixated on Win's features, I'd have missed the flare of his nostrils and the darkening of his blue eyes.

"Speaking of the teenager I took advantage of..." Win lets his words trail off, flicking his wrist at me as though my presence bothers him. Five bucks says he's hard for me. I flash him a slight, knowing smile that has his shoulders tensing.

Ha.

This isn't over.

"I tried to stop her," Deborah tattles, "but she—"

"I'm Ash Elliott," I say to the man, cutting off Deborah. "And you are?"

The man is all too eager to stand and shake my hand. "Anthony Lambruski. Mr. Constantine's attorney."

"Anthony," Winston his voice sharp and says, "We'll continue this discussion in commanding. the conference room. Grab Perry and I'll meet you both in there." He doesn't have to say anything to Deborah, simply nods at her that it's okay I'm here.

Of course it is.

Winston's mine.

Anthony grabs his bag and gives me another once-over, the interest in his brown eyes apparent. Once he's gone, along with Deborah, I meet Winston's intense stare.

He rounds his desk and my eyes can't help but drop to his slacks where his dick is at half-mast, molding the expensive fabric across his thickness. The outfit is totally doing it for him just as I knew it would. His presence is overpowering and rippling with authority. He stands so close I have to crane my neck up to look at him.

I ache for him to touch me but things are fragile right now.

The door bursts open before Win can speak to me or before I can throw myself at him. In walks Nate, but Winston doesn't even look up at him.

"Need help?" Nate asks in an irritated tone.

As though I'm an intruder and he's the security detail. God, he's such a douchebag.

"Have I ever needed help in my entire life?" Winston's words are frigid, and I suppress a shiver. "The answer is no."

Nate remains for a beat longer before muttering something out under his breath along the lines of, "I sure hope you know what you're doing," and leaving the office.

A thrill shoots through me knowing I have Winston's undivided attention. That he sent away his meddling bestie to focus on me.

"What now?"

His brow lifts as he continues to peel me apart with a probing stare. "You think there's more?"

"It's us, Win. There's always more. We can't seem to ever get enough."



Winston

This woman is maddening.

I shouldn't be surprised. She's been hanging around me too long. This whole "sex scandal" thing would turn most young women into a sobbing, devastated mess. Especially considering this wasn't just any sex scandal—it's New York's most notorious. There probably won't ever be another sex scandal to outperform this one.

I'm a Constantine. We go big or go home.

That makes me think about baseball and Ash being the fucking mascot of Team Constantine.

Irritation prickles across my flesh and I flash her a cruel smile. It's meant to flay her but the pretty girl just grins at me. Fuck. Why does she have to look so hot today? She's killing my resolve to put distance between us. Hell, it's less than five minutes of seeing her and my fingers twitch to ease her short dress up her silky thighs and explore what's underneath.

Now my dick is really at attention.

Traitorous bastard.

"So, I guess that's it, huh?" A single dark eyebrow arches high and her hazel eyes sparkle with challenge. "I mean, I kind of gathered we were through when you dumped me at the whore apartment last night—even sent our bird packing too. I spent all night thinking about how we *must* be over."

Not our bird.

"You thought this was over, Cinderelliott? It's a good thing I don't pay you to think. I pay you to be my filthy, sobbing

maid. My dirty little girl who drops to her knees and begs for whatever scraps I'll toss at her. Money. Praise. Affection. You still need me, but I will never need you."

Liar.

The feisty girl with the sexy-as-sin mouth laughs. Fucking laughs at me. Her laughter is minty this morning and I'm tempted to taste the humor right from the source.

"Gotcha," she says in a triumphant tone.

I clutch on to her throat, my dick twitching at the small gasp of surprise she makes. Everything in me craves to shove her pretty dress up over her hips, bend her over my desk, and fuck the sass right out of her. Fortunately, I refrain from being a Neanderthal. Barely.

"You're playing with fire today." My voice is a rumbled growl of warning. "I'm not in the mood for games."

Hurt and uncertainty glimmers in her stare. Good. Maybe she'll realize this shit is over.

"But I'm not fired?" she asks before chewing on her juicy red bottom lip.

"I have enough lawsuits on my agenda today," I clip out. "I'm not going to fire you."

"Because you still need me."

"I don't need you." I grit my teeth together, trying my damnedest to keep control. She enjoys making me lose it.

"I'm going to need money for an attorney," she murmurs, stepping closer as though she wants me to tighten my grip around her neck. Of course I comply to her unspoken request, squeezing just hard enough her face reddens. "Are there any tasks I can complete, Mr. Constantine, to earn a bonus?" She bats her heavily painted lashes at me, a picture of fucking innocence.

Cinderelliott is not innocent.

She's my depraved, dirty maid.

"You know what I want," I growl, taunting her. "I want to humiliate you."

"Our sex tapes are all over the internet. I think I can handle whatever you can dish out."

I release her throat and step away. It's difficult to look away from the pout on her sexy lips. She's gorgeous today in her ensemble. I'm equal parts annoyed and impressed. So goes the usual for my feelings toward Ash Elliott.

"I want to spank you and make you cry, Cinderelliott. I want to wipe away your smug attitude. I want to remind you you're nothing in my world but paid-for entertainment."

She walks past me, brushing against my side and making sure to give me a whiff of her sweet, perfumed scent, before stopping in front of my wall-safe painting. "How much you got, old man?"

"Enough."

"You can spank me for free if you have dinner with me tonight at my place."

"I don't want your handouts, little girl. I can afford you."

She glances over her shoulder at me, a coy, teasing glimmer in her eyes. "How much will it cost to get you to my whore apartment?"

"Last I checked, it was my whore apartment. You just live there rent-free for the time being."

"Until you let me and Shrimp come back to your place?"

"You're stalling." I loosen the knot of my tie, raking my gaze over her ass and the backs of her naked thighs. "Name your terms."

"We have to talk this out. It's what normal people do," she says, running her finger along the edge of the frame and then has the audacity to check for dust.

"I thought we established we're far from normal."

"Definitely a weird couple. That's for sure."

She laughs when I scoff at the word "couple."

Like a moth fluttering to the hottest fucking flame, I stalk over to her, craving one more hit. Just one more. I take hold of her ponytail that's been taunting me since she sashayed into my office this morning like she owned the place. She cries out when I twist it around in my fist and jerk back so her ear is at my lips. I press my body against hers, pinning her to the cabinets beneath my wall safe.

"Awfully mouthy for someone who's been fraternizing with the enemy. I think your arrogance is going to get you in trouble." I brush my lips over the shell of her ear, pleased with her full-bodied shiver. "Why do you provoke me?"

"So you'll pay attention to me."

I bark out a harsh laugh. "You're such a child."

"And you're a cradle robber," she tosses back. "I want you to spank me, Win. I want it to hurt. I want you to get all this anger out of your system so that tonight you can come to my place and we can talk about it."

Sliding a palm to her ass, I squeeze her cheek through the material. "Your wants aren't relevant anymore."

"Win—"

"What did you give Leo Morelli?"

She struggles against my hold but I'm taller, bigger, stronger. "Fuck you, asshole."

The balls on this woman.

"Tell me," I growl, grinding my erection against her ass. "Tell me before I find out."

"He wanted insider secrets. He wanted to know about Paris. He wanted to know why I had a spa date with your mom. He wanted to know what your real obsession with the Baldridge building was." Her body heaves with fury. "He wanted me to snoop through your emails and your files."

Wrath rears its ugly head inside me. I want to kill fucking Leo Morelli.

"But I didn't. I wouldn't ever give him what he wanted," she murmurs. "I lied and evaded him. I was trying to figure out what to do, Win. I'm sorry."

The office goes silent aside from her heavy breathing and the deafening pounding in my chest. My heart screams at me to listen to her words and believe them. To let us go back to the way things were just yesterday before it all blew up in our faces. To a time where gummy bears and loud-ass birds and coupon books and a sassy maid occupied my home and my mind

She makes me weak.

As much as the man she somehow lured out these past few weeks enjoyed being with her, I've been reminded I'm not some smitten boyfriend falling for a mouthy girl with a kickass body and sharp brain.

I'm Winston motherfucking Constantine.

Hard. Cold. Impenetrable.

"No dinner at the whore apartment," I snarl, nipping at her ear. "You changed the game. There are new rules now. It's much, much harder."

She moans when I grind my cock against her again. Fuck if it doesn't nearly undo all my resolve.

"What are the rules?" she breathes.

"No dates. No dinner. No sleepovers."

"Boring," she complains.

"It's all I have to offer."

"What will we do in our free time, then?"

"Play games. The painful kind."

"So you'll still spank me?"

"But not for free. Nothing is free anymore. I want to pay for every pretty fucking smile. Every touch. Every fuck. You're mine because I pay you to be. You do as I say because I have money. Lots of it. And that's what you need."

"For the record," she whispers, "I'd give you back all that money in my bank, the college fund, the car, the boat, everything for dinner at my place."

Stepping back, I admire her gorgeous ass before smacking it. "I told you, Cinderelliott. You can't afford me. Not anymore. The sweet words you crave are too fucking expensive for you."

"Fine." She twists around to face me, her ponytail swishing from left to right, a fiery expression on her face. "This is simply a transaction?"

"Now she catches on."

"Then you won't care that I have lunch today with my exboyfriend." She smiles prettily at me. "Right?"

I don't care.

I don't.

But why the fuck does she want to have lunch with her exboyfriend?

Failing to answer her, I grab her shoulders and move her away from the safe. I fling open the painting to reveal the safe door. After keying in my code, I open the heavy door and motion toward the stacks of money.

"Grab what you need and then I'm spanking you."

"Hand or belt?"

"Hand."

She picks up two giant stacks. "Will these fit in my handbag?"

The wicked glint in her hazel eyes says she's just fucking with me.

"I'm sure, like my dick, we can make big things fit into small places."

"Anal will cost a lot more than fat stacks of cash," she throws back, her ponytail swinging when she shakes her head.

"I can afford it."

"Prices increased. Inflation."

"You overvalue your worth."

She sets down one stack of bills and then fishes out a few hundred from the other stack before replacing it. Slowly, she counts out six hundreds. "Six smacks. That's all you get." With her other hand, she grips my tie, hauling me closer until my mouth is just inches from hers. "And, Win, I'm just learning my worth. It's a lot more than I realized thanks to you."

I grab her by her delicate throat, walking us backwards back over to my desk. She doesn't protest when I manhandle her, bending her over it. Her sharp hiss of breath as I drag the material of her dress up over her ass makes my dick throb with need. A tiny, silky red string is delicately placed between each of her juicy ass cheeks.

Jesus Christ, this woman is trying to kill me.

Without warning, I smack her cheek. She cries out and the hundreds in her hand get crumpled when she fists them. I rub away the redness before delivering another smack, harder this time. Her whimpers state she's loving the fuck out of my punishment. If I didn't have the world's most colossal fire to put out, I'd take the day off to think up many, many fitting punishments for this little bad girl. I strike her three more times before we're interrupted with a sharp knock on the door.

"What?" I snap, rubbing the crimson flesh of Ash's ass.

"Mr. Constantine," Deborah squeaks out. "You have a call from—"

"What did I say?"

"To hold your calls, but it's your mother. She said you'll take her call or she'll take my job."

Ash snorts out a laugh. I smack her ass hard for the last spanking, making her cry out in indignation.

"I'll take it in just a minute," I grind out.

Once I'm certain Deborah has left, I smooth out Ash's dress to cover her ass. She pushes up from the desk and stands all the way up. Her cheeks—the ones on her face—are also crimson and her pupils are blown. I would love nothing more than to fuck her until she's boneless, but my brain is on straight today and it's ignoring the pitiful pleas of my dick.

"Tell Nate I said you're to work with him today." I study her face, noting the disgusted expression that passes over it. And here I thought they were buddies considering all the times they hang out at my place when I'm not there. "I'm sure you can learn all sorts of things from him today."

"If I have to," she grumbles as she shoves the money into her purse.

"You do." I step forward, hooking a finger under her chin and tilting it up. "And I don't care who the hell you go to lunch with. You're not my girlfriend." Her nostrils flare and her eyes narrow angrily. "But you'll take Perry with you. For protection from the press. You're dismissed, Miss Elliott."

At the mention of my brother's name, she grins all too goofily at me. "Hmm."

"The hmms belong to me."

"Not anymore," she sasses. "You knew I was a fast learner and yet you showed me all your tricks anyway. See you later, *boss*." She gives me an exaggerated wink that makes my blood boil and my dick throb all at once.

This girl drives me fucking crazy.

I try not to admire her fiery determination or the sexy way her lips quirk into a knowing grin or how fucking hot she is in her take-no-shit outfit. I also fail.

Miserably.



Ash

My ass hurts but things between me and Win feel better. Not close to how they were, but I do have hope. Because no matter how mad he is at me, he still wants me. He's still affected by me.

Maybe our story isn't one of princes and princesses and happily ever afters. Maybe ours is a wickedly hot villain and a filthy maid who are happy for now.

All thoughts of Win vanish when I reach Nate's office door. I hate that I have to work with him, but until I smooth things out with Winston, I'll need to give him some space. Plus, I do not want to be in the same room when he has the sex scandal conversation with his mother.

I still have to have that same conversation with my father.

Cringing, I try not to think about all the texts and calls he's sent my way that have gone unanswered. I'm sure he's dying of mortification. I just can't face him right now.

Later. Definitely later.

I rap on Nate's door, and when I hear his deep command to enter, I push into his office. His gaze is fixated on his phone as he texts. I step inside and close the door behind me, waiting for him to acknowledge my presence. After he finishes what he's doing, he sets the phone down and glances my way. When he sees it's me, he does a double take, his spine going rigid.

Sheesh. This guy really hates me.

Lifting my chin, I say, "Win asked me to work with you today. He's busy doing other things."

Nate's lips curl into a smug grin that annoys me. "The shiny toy lost her luster?"

"Something like that," I lie because I'd rather him think he's won than continue to discuss the fact that Win and I will repair our relationship. "What do you need help with?"

His eyes greedily sweep over me. I feel like I should take a bath after the filthy way he undresses me with his stare alone. "Drag up a chair."

I set my handbag down on the table near a couch and then set to pulling the office chair across from his desk around to the other side. He's not satisfied with the distance I've left between us and yanks the seat closer. Gritting my teeth, I take my seat, sitting primly and wishing like hell I'd chosen something longer to cover my legs. The hem rides up revealing more skin than I'd like to show this creep.

He immediately sets me on task scouring through a stack of contracts looking for a particular one for him. It gives me something to do and I don't have to talk to him, so I take my time flipping through each one. Every time his knee brushes against mine, a shiver of disgust slithers through me.

"You know," Nate says in a conversational tone that's contradictory to his words, "he's already growing tired of you. Know what Win does when he's tired of someone?"

I ignore him, my attention on the contract in front of me.

"He lets me have them," he murmurs. "Best friends and all."

"Some friend you are to him if he gives you his leftovers." I flash him an icy smile that makes his eyes harden.

A large hand slides over my bare thigh and he tightens his grip. "You have lots of secrets, don't you, Ash? So much more to you than those dick-sucking lips and golden pussy." He starts to slide his hand under my skirt and I smack it hard. "Don't worry. I'll have it soon enough. When he's done with you and you're reaching for scraps, my hand on your cunt will feel like a blessing."

"Touch me again and I'll skewer your balls with this pen," I grit out, waggling the pen in front of him. "Test me, Nate."

His phone buzzes on the table with an incoming call from "My Baby." After shooting me a dark look, he answers it and stands. "Hey, beautiful." A pause. "Yeah, I can talk. Hold on." He holds up a finger to me in the universal sign that it'll be a minute before he slips from his office.

I didn't even know he was dating anyone.

There's a lot about Nate I don't know.

Like why he would tell me Win had a towel warmer when he clearly doesn't. At first, I'd thought about that text last night from Winston and wondered what it meant, but after some thought, I realized it was Win's way of telling me he thought I was lying. But it wasn't me. It was Nate. Why? About something so dumb? Nate rubs me the wrong way. He's slick—too slick. My gaze slides to his drawer. After a quick look to make sure he's not standing in the doorway, I open the drawer, unsure what I'll find. Inside are a few ink pens, some business cards, rubber bands, and his keys.

Two keys and a fob.

The fob goes to a BMW. The other two seem like they could be an office key and an apartment key. I study the apartment one and decide it's most definitely not the same as Win's.

"Hmm."

"Looking for something?" Nate asks, his voice nearly a growl.

"Chewing gum," I say, tossing the keys back into the drawer. "Nothing."

He sets his phone down and sits back down in his chair. His hand covers mine, pushing the drawer closed but not letting go. "Don't touch my things, Ash."

The chilly words make me shiver but I manage a nod.

He releases me and gets back to work, business as usual. I try to focus on what he's teaching me but my mind can't let go of those keys. Did Win take his key back from him? I make a mental note to ask Win when he's not being pissy with me.

At least an hour passes by without incident until someone bursts through the office door. Of all the people I expect to see, it's not Dad. His face is red with anger and worry shines in his eyes.

"Ash," he growls. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

I leap to my feet and rush over to him. Dad catches me in his embrace, hugging me tight. Tears prickle at my eyes but I blink them back. Now's not the time to cry. Not in front of stupid Nate.

"What in the ever-loving hell is going on?" Dad demands. "If Constantine was here, I'd put my fucking fist through his face."

"Would you now?" Nate practically snarls. "Perhaps I should call security."

"He's joking," I snap at Nate. "I'm taking a break."

Tugging from Dad's hold, I grab my purse and motion for Dad to follow me. We leave Nate's office and I guide him to the employee lounge where people aren't yet milling about with their microwaved lunches.

Once we're out of earshot, I motion for a table and take a seat. Dad's expression is haggard. Guilt trickles through me. He was up all night dealing with the triplets' fiasco and now he's dealing with mine. Talk about a double whammy.

"I'm sorry," I croak out, unable to look him in the eyes. "It's a really long story."

"And I have time," Dad urges. "Tell me what's going on."

I gnaw on my bottom lip before just letting it all spill out. Everything. The maid job that I got caught slacking on. How I grabbed Win's attention. Our games, though not so detailed. The triplets and their scary threats and actions. Leo Morelli

and what happened the night of Win's birthday ball. I even tell him about my spa day with Caroline and the dinner last night, though I conveniently leave out what Winston did to the triplets. By the time I finish explaining the drama that has been my life, his face is stony and unreadable.

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"Dad," I whisper. "I know I screwed up but—"
"Don't."
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I swallow hard, fighting against the tears in my eyes.

He reaches across the table and takes my hand in his. "I thought you were more like me," he says, a tired smile on his face, "but it seems drama finds you much like your mother."

Hearing about Mom has my chest aching painfully. "I'm like you."

"Stubborn like me, yes. But that ability to get yourself into crazy shit? That has Maggie written all over it."

I'm curious to hear this new side about Mom. Dad always painted her as a saint to me. I was eight when she died so my memories are fuzzy. All I remember are humor-filled hazel eyes and the softest brown hair. She had smile lines that I thought were pretty. Her voice was enchanting. God, I miss her.

"I once had to bail her out of jail," Dad says, chuckling.

"What for?" My eyes are wide with shock. This is a first.

"Public indecency."

"No."

"Yes. I mean, it was my fault." He winks at me. "But she's the one who got caught since it was on the hood of the car I was inside."

"Dad! Oh my God!"

"My point is your mother had a wild streak." His smile falls. "It was why your grandmother disinherited her. Well, that, and she married below her class."

"Are you planning on disinheriting me?"

"I haven't yet."

We share a smile and then I cringe at the thought of Dad watching the news about me. I don't even know what they're saying really. I don't want to know. Surely they can't actually show the videos.

"How bad is the news?" I ask, dropping my gaze to our joined hands.

"Apparently Constantine is a predator or you're a gold-digger. The media can't decide. They've alluded to videos but haven't shown any because, and I quote, 'It's unsuitable for all viewers." He sighs. "I would have knocked Constantine on his ass, but he wasn't in his office. If I see him, though, I'm going to hurt him."

"Don't," I say, squeezing his hand. "We did it together. I care about him, Dad. A lot. Everything's a mess right now, but I'm going to make it right."

"A mess she says." Dad groans. "You're on every website and news station. This is more than a mess. It's a nightmare."

"I'm sorry."

He nods and his brows furl. "Sully and Sparrow are getting discharged tomorrow."

I flinch at his statement. "And Scout?"

"Manda is trying to keep him out of jail the moment he's released."

"He belongs there," I grumble, peeking up at him. "That night, if Win hadn't called the police, Scout would have... raped me." I swallow hard, fighting the tears pooling in my eyes. "Sully and Sparrow wouldn't have stopped it either. I know this thing with Win is awful, but he's protected me thus far. I let Leo get inside my head when I should have let Win handle that too."

Dad's eyes are pinched closed. "I'm a failure." His voice cracks. "I brought you into their home. Presented you like a goddamn gift."

"You didn't know," I argue, swallowing down my emotion. "You didn't. But now that you do, please don't ever make me see any of them again."

"Never, but I don't know what to do about Manda," he murmurs. "I love her, though this..."

Is too much.

Her children are monsters who've hurt his own child.

Choose me, Dad. Please choose me.

"I should get going," he says after a long pause. "Manda needs me."

I need you.

My heart cracks down the middle. "Sure, Dad. Of course."

"I can't protect you like I thought I could." His features are pinched with pain. "I'm sorry."

Why does this feel like he's giving up?

"She's never been good to me," I whisper. "I know you love her—"

He cuts me off with a sharp shake of his head. "I can't let your problems become mine. You're an adult now, honey. Act like one."

I'm stung by his words. Manda has poisoned my father. He'll never be the dad who raised me. I think I'm finally beginning to realize that. The dad I knew and loved died when he went out on that first date with Manda Mannford and started draining my college fund to impress her. My dad is gone.

His lips press together as he studies me for a long beat. Then, he stands, bends over the table and plants a kiss on the top of my head. "Let Constantine shield you from this since you wouldn't be here in the first place if it weren't for him. He's the only one with the financial means. I wish it were different, but when your mother married me, we said goodbye to money and chose love instead. I thought it'd be enough, but once again, this damn city waves it in my face reminding me that money rules all." He waves a hand around him. "Luckily, fate is throwing you a bone and giving you a chance that your own father can't give you."

"I don't care about the stupid money," I growl, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Don't be a fool. Money talks. Listen to what it says." He tips his head. "I love you, but I think it's best you focus on making this scandal go away and setting your life straight. Manda needs my help right now more than you do. Goodbye, Ash."

I love you, but...

Love isn't supposed to come with buts.

It's supposed to be *I love you*, period. Full stop. The end.

Minutes after Dad is gone, I'm still sitting there, my heart heavy and dread settling deep in my bones. The loneliness of it is almost too much to bear. I almost don't notice Nate lurking like the creep he is. His hard expression tells me all I need to know. He's back to thinking I'm a money-hungry whore and clearly eavesdropped on my conversation. Quickly, I swallow down the overwhelming sadness threatening to do me in and harden myself.

He may think I'm a gold-digger, but I think he's a sleazy, lying creepy friend who's a little too interested in Winston's life. He wants to treat me as though I'm not good enough? Two of us can play this game.

"When's your birthday, Nate?" I call out. "I thought I'd send you a towel warmer for your bathroom. I went ahead and ordered Win one too. You know, since you rave about them all

the time." And he doesn't have one like you claim, you nosy motherfucker.

His face darkens. "I'm watching you, bitch."

"Right back at you, asshole."



Winston

No control.

All it took was seeing Ash and I'm back to being the starved bastard, aching to get her naked and beneath me. I had to send her away to Nate, not because I wanted to punish her, but because if she stayed close to me, I'd end up fucking her.

And that's not happening.

At least not yet.

I need to get my affairs in order and in control of my maddening thoughts before I even think about sleeping with Ash again.

If I truly were a wise man, I'd cut her off completely. But, like she got me addicted to those damn red gummy bears, she also has me addicted to her. Her taste, her scent, her sexy little mewls when she's being bad for me.

No one, and I've been with a lot of women, has ever come close to pleasing me in all areas of my life. Ash holds her own in conversation and intellect. She's funny, much to my annoyance most of the time. The girl is fucking hot with perfect tits and a round, bitable ass. She isn't a bimbo and works hard while at the office. And in the bedroom? She's a goddamn freak like me.

My kinks are...odd. I know this. But it is what it is.

Ash is the only person to see me at my most vile. The girl doesn't even balk anymore. She's eager to play my games and is good at playing them, too.

"Shall I remain nearby?" my driver asks, his eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Please. I don't anticipate this taking long."

He gives me a nod, and before I can exit, he stops me. "For what it's worth, sir, I hope you bring down whoever did this. You don't deserve this and she certainly doesn't. I've never seen you so happy. Don't let them take this from you."

"Don't worry, Daniel," I say to him with a vicious grin. "Those responsible won't be able to walk after I'm done fucking them over."

He laughs. "Go get 'em, boss."

I've never seen you so happy. Don't let them take this from you.

Happy. Right. Ash pleases me but she doesn't make me happy. I find pleasure when we play but certainly not happiness. Nothing makes me happy.

Liar.

For some reason, I think of a silly selfie Ash took once with her pink bird. Her face was twisted into a goofy expression and the bird was a blur, mid-flap as though he was bothered by her cheesy fucking pose. She'd sent me the picture and I told her I wasn't paying for that low-quality shit. I'd gotten a serious picture right after that I paid for. But the silly one is the one I look at sometimes.

Why?

Because it makes me smile.

A real smile.

Something about that picture makes me...happy.

Which is why I'll delete it the second I get the chance. Refocusing my thoughts, I forget about the picture and enter Anthony's office. When Mother called, I knew we needed to take this conversation away from Halcyon which is why I'm meeting them both here. Luckily, Daniel gave the paparazzi

the slip on the way here so I'm not bombarded with a hundred fucking cameras like I was when I left Halcyon shortly after Anthony did. Once inside, I take the elevator to Anthony's floor. As soon as the doors open, I sense Mother's presence. Her familiar perfume lingers in the lobby. I'm reminded of when I was a small boy before all the kids joined the fray. I'd misbehaved once badly enough to piss my nanny off. She warned me that my mother would tear me a new backside when she got back from lunch with her friends or shopping or wherever it was Mother had been that day. I'd sat with my nose in the corner of the piano room that smelled of my mother. Same perfume.

"Winston," Mother says from Anthony's office doorway. "Come here."

It's like I'm there again. Five years old. Unsure of how Mother will react to the news of what I'd done. And, like back then, I walk right over to her. This time, instead of peering up at her sharp features, I look down since I tower over her now.

"Mother." My voice is much deeper this time but carries the same hint of respect.

"I'll take care of it," she says, her voice cold and cruel.

She'd said those same words when I was five. That nanny was fired on the spot. Mother took me by the hand, walked me through the estate, and set me in front of the window with the spectacular views. It was then she explained that Constantines make mistakes, but the difference between us and those who weren't us, was we could afford to make those mistakes disappear.

Even though I can handle this shitstorm, I give her a nod. "Thank you, Mother."

She purses her lips, plucks a stray piece of Ash's dark hair off my lapel, and gives me a flicker of a smile. Not a soft, warm and motherly smile. No, this one promises pain and retribution.

I close the office door and take a seat beside Mother on the couch in Anthony's office. He ends a phone call he's on before joining us.

"How long before we make the scandal go away?" Mother asks, getting right down to business. "And more importantly, how much? I want this handled."

Anthony chuckles, one of the few people who can laugh at my mother and get away with it. I think the only reason she allows it is because he was thick as thieves with Dad back in the day. He's practically a brother to her.

"You cut right to the chase, Caroline." Anthony grins. "Lane always loved it when you'd get in protective momma bear mode. Said it turned him on. Probably why you two had so many damn kids—"

"Anthony," I interrupt. "You can take the walk down memory lane later when my reputation isn't on the line."

Not that I care about my reputation, but I'm not in the mood to talk about my parents' love life. It'll make me think about my own love life and I'd prefer if mine was nonexistent. Besides, my mother's been touchy about my father ever since he died. Before that, really. Society saw their marriage as a happy one. Only a few people know there was infidelity, but she was still devastated by his death.

"So grumpy," Anthony says in a jovial tone. "I hope this girlfriend of yours is worth all the trouble."

Mother's lips press into a thin line but she doesn't say a word.

"She's not my girlfriend," I grit out, "but if that's the way we need to play it, so be it."

"Your old ass could do worse." He chuckles again. "She's a beauty."

"I'm less concerned about the scandal and am more eager to find out how I can get my building in my name again." I lean back against the leather sofa and cross my arms over my chest. "How quickly can we make Morelli squeal like a pig?"

Mother quirks a brow. "You and that wretched building. Just like your father. The more important thing is that we keep family secrets...secret."

Something about the way she says it makes my suspicion rise. On the surface she means my relationship with Ash, but it almost sounds as if she has other secrets. What could Leo know about us that I don't? I keep my voice dry. "What can I say? I like that property."

"It's right in the heart of Morelli real estate," Anthony says. "This vendetta against those gangsters was yet another thing Lane passed down to his eldest."

"I want it back. Force Leo into handing it back over to me or I'll sue them until they're penniless rats." I smirk at Anthony. "By the end of the week."

"And what do you have on Leo that'll make this happen? I know you've got something, kid."

Kid.

I try not to bristle at the nickname he's called me often over the years. I supposed I'll always be a kid to him no matter the fact I pay his salary.

"Phone records. Proof of threats and blackmail. Check your email. I sent it over on the car ride over here." I crack my neck and then say, "There's enough to prove he violated the terms of our agreement therefore nullifying our contract. It's written explicitly that if he were to violate my terms, which he did so heinously, he'll sell me the building back for the same price."

"Seems simple enough," Anthony says.

"They're Morellis," Mother clips out, an edge to her voice. "And Leo Morelli, in particular. Nothing is simple with him." She smooths her palm over her tweed skirt, and I have the sense again that there are undercurrents in the dark waters,

some personal conflict between her and Leo Morelli, though I can't imagine what. "I'll speak to Bryant."

"No," I spit out, anger burning hot inside my chest.

"Winston." Her eyes are shrewd, and despite her small frame, she's poised to strike like a snake. "I'll schedule a meeting with Bryant. This has to go away. Now."

An uneasy feeling settles in my gut. Worry? Panic? Something claws at me to the point I can't breathe. I yank at my tie, loosening it and popping the top button. Anthony gets up and returns a moment later with a bottle of water. I untwist the cap and guzzle down the water. Both Mother and Anthony wait until I've pulled myself together before either of them speaks.

"I'll handle it," I finally tell her in a semi-calm voice. "Besides, my inside line on the Morellis says that Bryant's out of power. I'll handle this with Leo, man to man."

"Don't push him too hard," Mother says, her voice uncharacteristically placating. "People call him the Beast of Bishop's Landing for a reason."

I set the empty bottle on the table in front of me, ignoring her suggestion. "I'll handle this, Mother. On my own. I won't negotiate."

I'll be damned if the Morellis take out my mother too.

Mother's phone rings. She pulls it from her purse and answers, "Hello, Ulrich. What do you have for me?" A pause. "I see." She stands and exits the office, taking her private conversation elsewhere.

Anthony yammers on about his plan of attack and how he'll get Leo to heel like a good dog. I'm confident in his abilities, so I absently nod through his monologue. When he's finished, I check the time. It's close to noon, so I text my brother.

Me: I need you to babysit Ash while she has lunch with her boyfriend.

Perry: Nate?

His comment rankles me.

Me: No. He hates her. Tate.

Perry: Who the hell is Tate???

Me: Stop taking excessive punctuation tips from Ash.

Perry: I'm not even going to pretend to understand what that means. Who is Tate and am I supposed to kill him?

Me: Ash's ex-boyfriend. He wants to hold her during her time of need. Make sure he doesn't get handsy. If he does, break both his hands.

Perry: You forgive her yet?

Me: This isn't gossip hour.

Perry: You want me to smash body parts on your girlfriend's ex. I'd say this is gossip-worthy, Winny.

Me: Only if he gets handsy and she's not my girlfriend.

Perry: LOL...can you even type that with a straight face?

I send him several middle-finger emojis which earns me an obnoxious amount of crying-laughing emojis.

Me: You're a child.

Perry: And you're dating one...

Me: Are you done?

Perry: I mean...I could go on for hours, but I have a lunch date with a dweeb and my hot future sister-in-law.

Me: Remind him that we're Constantines.

Perry: Don't worry, big bro. I've got this.

Mother sits down beside me, not so discreetly peeking at my texts. She arches a brow at me but says nothing. Approval ripples from her and for some reason it relaxes me. I suppose when you play nice with the golden child, you earn a little favor too.

I get the same light feeling as I do when I look at that picture of Ash and her bird. The picture I'm probably—okay, so never—going to delete one day soon.

Apparently Constantines do have the ability to be happy.

Unfortunately, this Constantine finds happiness in the strangest fucking things and needs his head checked.



Ash

I'm NERVOUS.

Not because I'm seeing Tate, but because Perry will be coming with me. Is he mad at me? For some reason, I can handle Winston being pissy because that's his usual, but having Perry upset with me makes my heart hurt.

Because he's my friend.

I don't have too many of those lately and I've really come to think of Perry as one. It sucks that I may have potentially screwed up my most valued friendship too.

"You ready?" Perry asks, leaning on the doorjamb of the conference room.

After my altercation with Nate, he sent me to the conference room to continue hunting through contracts, but "out of his way." I'd been all too happy to get away from that creep.

"Yep." I pile the contracts on top of each other and neaten them up. "I need to drop these back off at Nate's."

Perry is unusually quiet and his features are hard to read. A rock forms in the pit of my stomach. I'd really hoped to see his playful, smiling face. All this seriousness is stressful.

I grab my purse up and the stack of contracts. Perry steps out into the lobby, allowing me to go ahead of him. My knees are wobbly with nerves as I make my way to Nate's. He's on his phone chatting with someone but glowers at me as I bring back the contracts. I toss them on his desk and mouth the word, "lunch," at him. Not waiting for his approval, I bolt out

of his office. Perry stands nearby, hands shoved into his pockets and face tilted down.

Great.

He hates me now.

I bet he wants to kill Winston for making him babysit me.

It's not until we're in the elevator, alone, that Perry unleashes on me. I expect him to sling angry words at me. What I'm not prepared for is for them to be laced with brotherly concern.

"Jesus, Ash, what the hell happened? Morelli? Really? You should have come to us. Win and I could have helped. Now..." He curses under his breath and scrubs his palm over his face. "Now it's a fucking forest fire that'll never get put out."

"I was trying to avoid all this," I grumble, hating the emotions rising up inside me threatening tears once again.

"Are you okay?"

I flinch at his words. "What?"

"How are you handling all this?"

I won't cry. I won't.

Swallowing hard, I shrug. "I'm fine."

"Hmm."

An unexpected laugh tumbles out of me, slightly shrill and a bit crazed. "You're turning into him."

His smile is boyish and wide. "New York can't handle two of us. They're barely keeping their shit together with just Winny at the helm." He studies me for a beat, growing serious once more. "He really kicked you *and* the bird out? What a dick."

"Shrimp is not impressed," I agree, "but I guess I had it coming."

"No, my brother is just an idiot. Don't worry. He'll come back around." He winks at me. "You didn't really give him a choice in that." His hand gestures at my outfit.

"I had to pull out the big guns."

"That you did." He crosses his arms over his chest and lifts a brow. "Tell me about this boy."

Boy?

"Tate?"

His nostrils flare as though the name disgusts him. "Your ex. Yeah. What the fuck, Ash? How is this helping?"

The elevator doors open and it gives me an opportunity to escape his probing. There's still a crowd outside the building. My stomach does an anxious flip.

"Don't answer any questions," he grits out, motioning at the chaos just beyond the doors. "Pumpkin Pie will be here soon."

"Oh God. You named it," I groan. "Your mother is going to die when she sees your car plastered all over the news."

He laughs as he opens the glass door to usher me outside. "I can't always be the favorite child. It's unfair for the others and Winny cries."

Our conversation gets trampled by cameras flashing and reporters demanding answers. Someone asks if I'm making my way through the entire Constantine family tree. It takes everything in me to refrain from flipping that asshole off. Perry gives the crowd an arrogant head nod of acknowledgment Keaton would be proud of—like, *hey, groupies*—as he guides me to his orange eyesore that someone has pulled up to the curb.

"Do you think we'll make it to Torino's in time for lunch with Winston?" Perry asks, his voice carrying loud enough to be picked up by a few close cameramen.

"Hope so," I lie.

He opens the passenger door for me, and once I'm secured inside, he fist-bumps a security guy who brought his car up front, before climbing inside. His engine roars obnoxiously loud as he burns rubber, flying away from the waiting crowd without so much as a wave goodbye.

"Torino's?" I ask, arching a brow at him.

"Five bucks says Winny and Mother eat there after their meeting. They'll be thrilled with their visitors."

"You're evil, Perry Constantine."

"I learned from the best."

Not sure if he means Win or Caroline or both. They're turning my sweet boy into a monster. This makes me smile.

"You can't avoid this forever," he says, weaving in and out of cars, trying to give me a freaking heart attack.

"What? Early death?"

"No, dumbass, *Tate*." He says Tate like it's soured milk he accidently took a swallow of. "How is this helping you and Shrimp win my brother back over?"

Since Perry is driving around aimlessly, I plug in the address to the gyro restaurant in his GPS, before sitting back, picking at one of the leather roses on my purse. "I lost all my friends. The triplets ran them all off. Even Tate."

"Even more reason for me to hate the guy."

"You can't hate him because you've never met him," I grumble.

"I hate him on principle. He's my brother's competition."

An unladylike snort escapes me. "Tate and Winston are in two totally different leagues. Hell, two different planes of existence. Tate is like a tiny blinking star. Winston is a giant black hole sucking everything into his void including the sun and the planets and the whole damn solar system."

"But you slept with him."

"I'm not talking to you about this." I shoot him a fiery look. "You don't get to be jealous on Win's behalf."

"I'm protecting his interests."

"Now you sound just like him, Perry. Not cute."

We stew in silence. I kind of wish he'd drop me off.

"I'm sorry," Perry grumbles. "It's just been a fucked-up day. I want Winston to be happy. This *Tate*," he says sourly again, "is a threat to the only happiness my brother has ever had in his life."

My heart flutters and a silly smile tugs at my lips. "Win would die if he heard you say I make him happy."

"Tell him I said it and I'll kill you." His smile is teasing and warm. "Tell me *Tate* isn't going to be a problem."

"Tate and I should have been friends and only friends. He's sweet and funny but a little shy. Awkward even. I don't want Tate. He was fine for a high school boyfriend, but after being with Win, I realize we weren't just missing some passion, we were missing all of it."

"Hmm."

I roll my eyes because he's still not convinced, though it is a little sweet how dedicated he is at backing up his big brother. It makes me wonder if Winston knows how much Perry adores him.

"Good luck finding a parking spot," I state as we pull up to the crummy dive that has the best tzatziki sauce on the planet.

Perry grumbles but I climb out and leave him to sort out his parking issues all alone. Plus, I'd like a second to see Tate before I have Perry breathing down my neck. I push past a few people walking briskly by and step into the Greek restaurant that's rich with salty meat aromas that make my stomach growl. Tate is standing near the counter, absently scrolling on his phone. His light brown hair is messy and hangs in his eyes. Rather than his usual preppy attire, he's wearing cargo shorts, loafers, and a navy T-shirt that's inside out. The unkempt look

suits him. Maybe adulthood is treating him well. I sure hope so.

"Long time no see," I chirp in greeting.

He nearly drops his phone. His grin is wide as he shoves it into his pocket before bear hugging me and spinning me around. Maybe if he'd ever been this excited to see me back when we dated, I'd have enjoyed being his girlfriend more.

"Damn, Ash, you really know how to cause a ruckus."

"I'm a good girl," I scoff as he releases me.

"I was never fooled." His grin is infectious. "You don't seem like you're letting it affect you."

"I'm not easily rattled. You know this." I shoot a glance over my shoulder. "My uh, boss's brother is chaperoning me today. I left him to try and find a parking spot."

We both snigger because there's no way in hell he'll find a spot on this road.

"The usual?" he asks as we each grab a tray and stand in line.

"Beef gyro no onions. But make it two. The least I can do is feed Perry after ditching him out there."

We fall into easy conversation, checking in on each other. He went to Europe with his family for a couple weeks after graduation but is back in the city until it's time to leave for college. It isn't until we're seated at a small table, waiting for our food, that Tate grows serious, his green eyes narrowing in concern.

"The news headlines said..." He trails off. "Do you want me to kill him?"

"Nah, I can handle him myself. Winston's a great guy beneath all that asshole exterior."

"Degradation, though?"

"We all have our kinks, I guess. He and I are both consenting adults. It's fun."

He considers my words for a bit. "So I was probably boring in comparison."

"You were a good friend to me. That's all that matters."

"Ouch." He doesn't wince, though. His grin is still in place. "There's a reason I kept you safely friend-zoned." His cheeks flood crimson. "Let's just say I discovered new things about myself while at a rave in Milan."

"Oh?" I lean forward, interested in this new turn of events.

He glances around like someone might hear before leaning in and whispering, "I fooled around with a guy."

"What?" I shriek. "Oh my God! You're bi?!"

He gnaws on his bottom lip and absently plays with his straw wrapper. "I don't know what I am. All I know is that it felt hotter and realer than anything I've ever known before."

"We should have never slept together," I say with a laugh.

"We were pitiful virgins. No one else would take us."

We're still laughing when Perry storms in looking so much like Winston it's comical. I wave at him and give him my most innocent smile.

"Trouble finding a spot?"

He flips me off. "I just paid some random window-washing dude a thousand bucks to drive around the block a few times. You're an asshole, Ash."

"Oops." I gesture at Perry. "Tate, meet Perry. Perry, meet my friend Tate."

Perry drops into the seat next to me, his cocky, arrogant expression so over the top I want to smack him. This attitude has Winston written all over it.

"Hey, man," Tate says, offering his hand.

Perry shakes it, a little too hard because Tate winces. "Hey."

"We were just talking about what a freak your brother is in the bedroom," I explain, noting the quirk of amusement on Perry's lips.

Tate kicks me under the table and I scowl at him.

"So," Perry rumbles, his penetrating stare on Tate. "Tell me what it is you're doing here with my brother's girl."

"Oh my God," I groan. "Stop or go get back in the orange abomination."

"I was hoping we could be friends again. Though, Scout said—"

"Scout is laid up in a hospital bed, both his knees broken, and looking at jail time for reckless driving while under the influence." Perry narrows his eyes. "I wouldn't listen to a damn word a Mannford says."

Tate gapes at me, fear glimmering in his green eyes. "I, uh, I'm not—"

"Ignore Perry. He's found the stick that was in his big brother's ass and decided to sit on it."

The man who took our order brings out a tray of food, temporarily interrupting our tense lunch. I pass out our food to each of us before handing the tray back to the guy. Once he's gone, I ignore Perry to focus on my gyro. It's so good. Glancing over at Tate, he's grinning around a bite of his. This was one of our favorite places to go. I didn't realize how much I missed it until now.

"That should do it," Perry says, pocketing his phone.

"What?"

Perry shrugs and pokes at his gyro. "What is this?"

"It's not caviar or whatever Caroline fed to you as a baby. It's a gyro. So good. Eat it and you'll thank me." My phone buzzes from inside my purse that's sitting on my lap. Perry's grin is wolfish.

"Answer it," he encourages.

Great.

I take a huge bite of my gyro before setting the messy thing down in order to clean off my hands and fish out my phone. It's a text from Winston.

Win: Get up and walk out the door right now in exchange for dinner at the whore apartment with the noisy-ass bird.

Me: Jealous?

Win: Of the picture of you and the precious little boy you were making googly eyes at as you deep throated whatever the fuck you were eating? No.

Me: Fine, but Tate is gay. Just so you know.

Win: Tell your gay fuck buddy you're leaving. Now, Cinderelliott.

I tap out at least seventeen middle-finger emojis before I hit send. Then, I type out my actual reply.

Me: See you tonight. Bring your coupon book. We still need to use the movie night coupon.

Win: I burned the coupon book. Besides...your apartment didn't come with a television.

Me: Liar. I bet you carry the coupon book in your pocket. (And who needs a TV when you have a laptop?) I'll leave as soon as I finish my meal. Not negotiating that no matter how much I want you in my lair because this gyro tastes better than you do. Sorry not sorry.

Win: Five minutes, little girl. Wolf it down like you wolf down my dick.

Me: Deal. See you soon, boyfriend.

Win: We're nothing. Just a transaction.

Me: Hmm...

Win: Four minutes. I'm done talking to your bratty ass.

I send him a few more texts to try and goad him but he's clearly done with playing because he doesn't bite. Quickly, I devour my gyro in less than two minutes and spend the next two jabbering to Tate, ignoring every sneer or scoff Perry throws my way.

Win would be so proud of his little brother.

When the time is up, I give Tate a hug, promise to keep in touch, and then help Perry chase down his stupid orange monster car. For starting the day off with a sex scandal with a billionaire, it's turned out to be a pretty great one. I'm hoping tonight I can convince Winston I'm sorry for keeping Leo's blackmail and threats from him so the two of us can go back to being Ash and Win.

Filthy freaks who are *more* than a transaction.

So much more.

He'll see. I'll make sure of it.



Winston

I'm losing the battle and I blame Perry.

That picture he sent me pissed me off. I'd told Ash I didn't care who she had lunch with but I'm a liar. Seeing her looking so carefree and happy with that *child* sent me over the edge. So much for keeping my cool when it comes to her.

Which is why, after a long-ass day dealing with attorneys and Mother and the vulture horde of reporters, I'm standing outside the whore apartment.

Nervous.

No, annoyed.

Whatever it is, it makes me tense as fuck.

I rap on the door with my knuckles. Even the sound of that is impatient and irritated. As though just three knocks gives Ash a preview of my mood. Spoiler alert: It's not good.

She opens the door seconds later, a bright smile on her face. I sweep my stare over her body, disappointed she's no longer wearing the sexy-ass dress she had on earlier. My annoyance fades as I appreciate her new outfit. Cutoff denim shorts and an off-the-shoulder, thin, mauve-colored shirt that shows a black bra underneath. She's barefoot, her cute toes painted an orangy-red.

"Hey," she greets. "Come in. Dinner's almost ready."

She turns on her heel giving me a perfect view of her tight, round ass that hangs out of her shorts. I'm not sure if her intention was to drive me crazy with a cheap pair of shorts or if it was purely innocent. Something tells me it's the former.

The girl has been playing an A-game way out of her league and whipping my ass while she's at it. I'd be proud if it didn't piss me off so bad.

I shut the apartment door behind me and lock it. A flash of pink divebombs me, screeching angrily. Shrimp lands on my shoulder, chirping all sorts of bitchy birdie nonsense in my ear.

"It's her fault," I explain, reaching up to stroke his tiny head. "Don't worry, I punished her earlier."

After flapping his wings several times, he settles and sets to pecking behind my ear like I suddenly got infested with fleas overnight without him there to look after me. Ash is standing in the kitchen, stirring something in a skillet. It smells surprisingly appealing, though it's unusual looking.

"Sloppy joes," she says. "I was craving them."

My lip curls up when I notice the hamburger buns. Surely she doesn't expect me to eat that slop on a bun. When she starts dishing up two plates, I realize that, yes, I'm going to have to put that redneck shit in my mouth. If it didn't smell so damn good, I'd probably leave without another word, and take her bird with me as punishment.

"Beer is in the fridge." She points toward it. "I picked up the kind you like."

So domestic.

More so than she's ever been at my place. For some reason, this bothers me. How is she more comfortable in the whore apartment than in one of the finest homes in the city? Shrimp doesn't even have anywhere to fly. It's basically a shithole and Ash is practically singing with cheer. I've spent the entire goddamn day immersed in stress while she's been living her best life.

Shrimp decides I'm critter-free and flaps off toward his cage. I pull out a couple beers from the fridge and set them on the bar once I've popped the caps. I wonder how in the hell she managed to buy beer since she's only eighteen, but I figured with the dress she had on earlier, she got whatever the

fuck she wanted with just her pretty smile. Ash sets our food down before climbing onto a stool.

"Sit," she says, hazel eyes searching mine. "Please."

I bite back a sigh and drop down into the seat beside her. "This is positively the most disgusting-looking meal I've ever seen."

"Don't be a diva, Win. Eat your supper like a good boy."

Her bright smile is what wins me over enough to take a bite. Admittedly, it's good. But I swear to fuck if I find it came from a can...

"Want to know the recipe?" she taunts, an evil smirk on her lips as though she can read my mind.

"No," I growl. "You wanted to talk, so talk. I don't have all night."

Her playfulness melts away and she sips her beer, a pensive expression on her face. "How did it go today with your mother?"

Not what I expected to talk about. "As good as can be expected when you have to accept your mother's help to make your sex scandal go away."

"Does she hate me now?"

"She never liked you in the first place."

She considers this for a moment. "Hmm."

"You're not allowed to do that. It's my thing."

"My thing now. I like watching that vein pulse in your forehead when I do it."

I ignore her to polish off my sloppy hamburger bullshit. She watches my every move as I get up and make myself another helping, pretending not to see the Manwich can sitting on top of the trash can. When I sit back down, she angles her body toward me, abandoning her food to study me up close.

"Win, I said I was sorry."

"Why? I'm not your boyfriend. What are you apologizing for?"

Anger flashes in her eyes. "I'm sorry for breaking what we had. But, damn, grow up and stop pouting."

"Pouting." I bark out a scornful laugh. "You've been scheming with a Morelli behind my back, Ash. It's not pouting, it's called being pissed off."

"And hurt." She bites down on her juicy bottom lip making me want to bite it too. "I hurt you."

No.

Liar.

"Constantines don't get hurt. We do the hurting."

"I don't believe that for a second."

"You believe in fairy tales, Cinderelliott, so your opinion is irrelevant."

"I hurt you and I'm sorry for that. But I didn't betray you. Yes, I kept things from you because Leo was terrifying and threatening me at every turn, but I didn't sell you guys out."

"I said I don't care."

"You do," she argues. "You care about me and it makes you angry."

"Are we done here?" I bark out. "I'm done discussing this. I don't care. You're my fucking employee. How many times do I have to say it?"

Her gaze hardens. "As many times as you need to in order to convince yourself. Meanwhile, I'm not buying the bullshit you're selling."

"I'm leaving."

"And not get to pay me back?" She leans forward, toying with my tie. "That's not your style. You're Winston fucking Constantine. You always get what's owed to you."

"Hmm."

"There's my guy," she murmurs, tugging on my tie to pull me closer.

"Not your guy."

"Liar."

Her lips brush against mine, soft and sweet. For a moment, I almost give in, kissing her pouty lips like I would have two days ago. In the last second, I bite her fat bottom lip. Her hazel eyes flare as she glowers at me.

"Asshole."

"I think the headlines called me a monster. Or was it a predator? Sex fiend?"

"I'm pretty sure at least one writeup called you an asshole."

"Your diary doesn't count."

I grab a handful of her hair that's no longer in a sleek ponytail but now in a messy bun. She whimpers when I twist it in my fist. Slowly, I pull her head back, exposing her creamy neck to me.

"What can I do to make this better?" she murmurs, her body shuddering as I run my nose along a silky path on her neck to her jaw. "I want to fix us."

"We're not an us, therefore we were never broken, thus there is nothing to fix." I bite her jawbone making her gasp.

"If I find a way to get Leo back, will that make it better?"

His name on her lips has a fierce growl rumbling through me. "Don't you fucking dare speak to him. Ever again."

She laughs, sexy and a little bit crazed. "I could hire one of your hitmen with all my money. Rich guys like you probably have paid killers on hand. Am I right?"

"Get on your knees. Your mouth is only useful for one thing at this point."

Her head pulls back despite the savage grip I have on her hair. With eyes watering from the pain of it, she flashes me a filthy grin. "You can only shut me up for a little while with that thing," she sasses. "In forty seconds, we'll be back to discussing how you're going to fall in love with me even though you hate the very idea of it."

"Forty seconds," I scoff, forcefully jerking her away from her barstool and onto unsteady feet.

"Like a typical man, that's the part you fixate on."

Ignoring her, I state in my most businesslike tone, "Name the terms."

"I suck you off and then you stay the night."

"Fuck no."

"For Shrimp."

The damn bird actually chatters from his cage in agreement.

"If I stay over, I won't let you sleep. I'll fuck you and use you like the toy I pay for. Every hole, Cinderelliott. All three of them belong to me."

"Maybe the next headline can be Hot Gold-Digger Trades Anal for Movie Night with a Billionaire."

"Like I said, your diary doesn't count as real news, little girl."

Her hands brush over the buckle of my leather belt, and her lips part. I suck in a breath because sometimes she's too damn beautiful for my mind to operate properly. Like now when her lips are just begging to wrap around my dick.

"New rules," she says. "You want this to be a transaction? Fine. But I'm done trading in money. You don't care about it. And honestly, neither do I."

"This should be good," I say in an impatient tone. "Get on with it so I can deny you."

She rolls her eyes, her lashes batting at the movement. "And here I thought you liked a challenge."

"I've been playing with your obnoxious ass for quite some time now. I'd say you know I do."

"Good," she purrs, unlatching the buckle of my belt. "You messed up by giving me a bazillion dollars, a boat, a car, and a college fund."

"Spoken like a true spoiled brat."

She shrugs. "Not my fault you made me that way, Win."

"Get on with it. I don't have all night."

"We'll trade in what I want too. You want to stick your big dick in my ass and call me mean names while you bite me?"

My cock jolts. Fucking traitor.

Her hazel eyes gleam in a knowing way. "Fine. Great. Deal. However..." She twists her lips into a wicked grin. "I get what I want in return."

"Flowery words."

"No, Constantine. I've upped my game. I'm playing a big one now."

"What could you possibly want that I would be willing to give you?"

"Just you."

I grit my teeth, boring my hard gaze into her. "Elaborate."

"If you want to do all the filthy stuff, then I get the boyfriend stuff after. End of story."

"This game is boring. Maybe I should find a new toy."

"No other toy entertains you like I do," she throws back in a cocky tone. "Admit it."

"Bragging about being a toy. Hmm. That's all you have to offer?"

"Take it or leave it, Win. I won't budge on this. The stakes are too high. I'm all in."

I study her face for a beat, quickly weighing all the risks. It's foolish to play such a dangerous game with such an intelligent, sassy, hot-as-fuck woman. She has the potential to destroy me.

I'll just have to keep her a sobbing, begging mess so she'll be too exhausted to do much else. The mental image of her cheeks smeared with black mascara as she cries, lips stretched over my dick are what seals the deal.

"Okay, Cinderelliott, we've just leveled-up in our game. I don't think you know what you're asking for." I release her hair to grip her delicate chin, squeezing it. "I'm a Constantine. I always win."

Her eyes flicker with defiance. "You've never played anyone like me before. Game on, Win."



Ash

Lust swims in his blue eyes but there's a vulnerability peeking through. Something he'd die if he knew I could see. I was right. I did hurt him because he does care about me. He can spout off all he wants about us being nothing but a business deal, but I know better. I may not be the older person in our relationship, but I'm not emotionally closed off. He's busy trying to keep his guard up that he's blind to what's right in front of him.

Us.

We're a thing.

We'll be a big thing if he'll let us.

It'll take a helluva lot of convincing on my part, but he's worth it. Beneath the icy cold asshole exterior is a man I could see myself spending my life with. Decades of our fiery banter. The most incredible sex ever. Each of us showing the other glimpses into a world they know nothing of. Win is used to enemies at every turn, but I want to show him that just because someone isn't your blood, doesn't mean they don't have your back. No matter how pissed he is about Leo, it doesn't change the fact I did it to protect him and his name.

He's not a man who believes words, so I'll have to prove it with my actions. Right now, the action he's craving is my lips around his dick.

"Stand up," I murmur, palming his cock through his slacks. It jolts at my touch and I grin in a taunting way that earns me a scowl.

He shoves me down to my knees but obeys me, sliding off the stool. Peering up at him through my lashes, I unbutton the top button of his slacks and then slowly drag the zipper down. Shrimp has gone quiet, so the only thing that can be heard is the soft ticking as I unzip him.

I want to undress him completely to ensure he stays with me, but I know he's in control freak mode right now. He'll want this filthy. He'll want me frazzled and teary-eyed and coming apart at the seams. I draw his pants and boxers down far enough I can free his dick but not his balls and then curl my hand around his hot thickness. A bead of pre-come glistens at the top. Greedily, I lick it off before flashing him a pleased smile.

His features are impassive as though me blowing him is the most boring chore he's had to deal with today, but the sharp glint in his blue eyes is telling. The slight tick of the vein in his neck is too. He craves me so bad he can barely keep himself in check.

I lick a circle around his tip, teasing him, before darting my eyes back up at him. "Should we talk about which movie we'll watch?"

A growl rumbles through him and he loses control as I'd hoped. With a possessive grip on my hair, he shoves his cock into my mouth, not relenting when it meets resistance in my throat. I fight a gag but lose the battle. Hot tears spring in my eyes but I don't blink them back. I let them fall. Win likes it when I'm his messy little fuck toy. A groan of pleasure can be heard above me which makes the gagging and inability to breathe worth it. Jerking back, he completely slips from my mouth as though to catch his breath.

"Almost forty seconds," I tease.

His lips curl into an amused smirk that feels like progress. A thumb caresses my scalp so tenderly I nearly lean into it and then the vicious Winston Constantine is back, pushing his throbbing dick between my lips once more. He thrusts his hips forward, not at all put off by the way my throat constricts as I

struggle to find air. More tears leak out. This blowjob is different than our usual. He's upset and punishing in his very Winny way, but it's also a test. I think if I can make it through to the other side, he'll warm up to me again.

This goes on for far longer than forty seconds. In fact, my jaw aches and I wish he'd finish on my face instead.

"Am I boring you, Cinderelliott?" He doesn't let me answer, just tightens his grip on my hair, fucking my mouth like it's the last time he'll ever come.

Slobber runs down my chin and I can feel it leaving a slick puddle on my thighs. My lips are numb and my throat is growing sore from his constant thrusting. Just when I think I might have to tap out to draw a few breaths, his cock swells and begins to pulsate. My name is uttered from his lips and I swear to God it sounds like a prayer. I keep that sound tucked away in my memory. Something just for me. Something I won't ever tease him about because it's too sweet and unexpected. I'm not sure he even realizes he said it.

"At least you're still decent at taking my dick down your pretty throat," he bites out, though his words are lacking the venom from earlier. He pulls out, painting my lips with remnants of his leaking come.

I kiss the tip of his dick, eyes locking on to his intense blues. "That was fun. Ready for dessert?"

His nostrils flare. "Dessert?"

"Calm yourself," I tease as I tuck him back into his boxers and slacks. "Not me. Ice cream. I got your favorite."

"I don't have a favorite"

"Not yet." I stand up and press a quick kiss to his lips. "You will."

* * *

Turns out, the mean, tough billionaire has a thing for Cherry Garcia. Leave it to Ben & Jerry to smooth things over with my surly guy. I'd bought several different four-ounce mini cups

for us to try. Once he'd tasted the Cherry Garcia, he stopped trying the others and leaned away any time I tried to steal a bite.

He is so my boyfriend and doesn't realize it yet.

"I don't like that smile," he mutters, polishing off the rest of his container. "It's a devious one."

I adopt a more innocent grin. "Just happy is all."

He bristles at the word "happy." "I don't like it."

"Too bad." I set down my mini cup of Chocolate Fudge Brownie. "Get used to it." I reach over to place my hand in his. "It's okay for you to be happy too."

His phone buzzes from his pocket and relief floods over his features. I give him some space to take the call while I clean up our dinner and dessert mess. He greets someone by the name of Ulrich and the rest of the conversation is a bunch of affirmative grunts. By the time I've put away the leftovers and washed the last dish, he's ended his call. I sneak a peek at the way he bends over in front of Shrimp's cage, petting our little bird on the head.

Shrimp adopted him, so he's our bird now.

I bite back a smile and then make my way over to him. "What movie do you want to watch?"

"Oh no," he deadpans, "I left the coupon book at home. Guess we'll have to watch the news instead."

I smack at his chest. "I'd rather stare at the wall." Or you.

He must feel something similar because his glare is heavy and probing, cutting into me like a blade. Seeing parts of me I'm not keen on sharing. But, if he needs this, then I'll give it to him. Win needs to feel in control.

"Take your clothes off," he growls, his eyes lingering at my bare shoulder. "I need to see my investment."

Ignoring his poor attempt to put a wall around his heart, I peel off my shirt. His tongue peeks out and runs a delicious

trail along his lower lip as he drinks in how my breasts are nearly spilling from my bra.

"Like what you see?"

"It'll do," he rumbles, his voice playing for uninterested but also failing.

I unbutton my shorts and then shimmy them down my thighs. He takes a step closer, his nostrils flaring. The denim falls to the floor at my ankles. I step out of them and peer up at him.

"This red thong has to be the hottest thing you've ever worn."

His confession makes my heart thud double time in my chest. I reach up to unknot his tie. He narrows his eyes, jaw clenching, as I slip it from around his neck. In a teasing way, I flick my way through each button on his shirt and the ones on his vest. He'd already divested himself of his suit jacket before dessert, so all I have to do is make him lose the vest and dress shirt. Once I've peeled off the vest, I let my palms roam over his undershirt, untucking it from his slacks so I can slip my fingers to his hard, bare skin. Everything about Winston is so perfect.

"I missed you," I confess, shivering at the possessive grip on my ass.

He ignores me, certainly not returning the sentiment, choosing to squeeze my ass hard enough I yelp. Dipping down, he captures my earlobe between his teeth and tugs. His hot breath tickling my ear sends a shudder of excitement down my spine. I push his shirt off his shoulders, and he lets go of me long enough to wrestle out of it. Once it's gone, I greedily play with his abs again, running my fingers along the sharp grooves.

"For an old man, you have the nicest abs I've ever seen."

He grabs my hips, turning me away from him, and pushes me onto the bed. I land on my elbows, my ass in the air. Like the predator he is, he pounces on me, not wasting a second. The heat of his body envelops me from behind. I'm awarded with the press of his cock through his clothes against my backside. His large, capable hand teases along the crack of my ass, hooking into the material of the thong and pulls it aside.

"Does it make you wet knowing every fucking man in the city is jerking off to the sound of your moans tonight?"

I groan at that vision. "Ew, Win."

His finger teases along my slick opening and he barely presses into my pussy. "Shocker. You're wet just thinking about it." He pushes deeper inside me. "I always knew you were an attention whore."

"Your attention whore," I sass back, sliding back and forth along his finger.

Another finger joins the first as he stretches me open, finding places inside me that have me seeing stars. I'm vaguely aware of him stripping off the rest of his clothes while never losing his stride as he fingerfucks me. He rubs against my G-spot, finding it like he's memorized the location and easily brings me to an earth-shattering orgasm. I chant his name like it's the only one I know. My legs quaver as pleasure continues to ripple through me. I've barely come down before his fingers leave my body, smearing the arousal on my ass cheek. Once more, he pulls aside my thong, this time it's his cock entering me.

This man is big.

So big and sure of the way he fucks.

Arrogant in the bedroom like he is in the boardroom.

And I love it.

I love him.

I'd wanted to tell him yesterday but he wouldn't let me. Stopped me before it even left my mouth. As much as I want to blurt it out today, I bite down on the words, saving them for another day. A day when he'll be ready to receive them.

His hand cracks against my ass, drawing me from my head to the physical act. Winston Constantine consumes me. Powerful body, alluring and masculine scent, vicious grunts of bliss. I give all of me to him, letting him fuck away this anger that's burning inside him. He can't be mad forever. We're too good together to be distracted by such an unhelpful emotion. The sooner he gets back to trusting me, the better.

Fingers bite into my hips, bruising my flesh as he pounds into me hard enough the slaps of our skin are ricocheting all around us. I fist the blankets, overwhelmed by the fullness of him. His dick rubs me in a delicious way, teasing over the still swollen and sensitive G-spot he'd rubbed to ecstasy only moments ago.

I lose control, the world spinning around me as I scream out something garbled and frantic. It sets him off because a few more thrusts and he's coming inside me, filling me up impossibly with more come. All too soon, though, he pulls out abruptly, leaving me achingly empty.

My body collapses onto the bed, my chest heaving. Tears spring in my eyes. I'm not sure why I'm overcome with emotion all of a sudden, but I have to bite on my lip hard to keep the tears from falling. I can hear him moving about the apartment which I can only assume he's dressing to leave.

"Messy girl," he croons, a warm cloth swiping across my thighs and then between my legs. "First you make a mess of your life and now you make a mess all over your bed."

The tears do sneak out this time.

His words are meant to mess with me but they feel every bit as tender as his touch. We have to be okay. We have to.

Because if we don't make it through to the other side...

I won't survive it.

How does one have Winston Constantine and ever go back to life as it was?

The answer is you can't.

He's changed me and I don't ever want to be the person who I was before I knew him.



Winston

SHE'S CRYING.

Of all the shit that should have made her cry, I'm confused as to why she's upset. She got what she wanted. She got me.

After cleaning us up, I steal her phone charger and plug in my phone. I set it on the end table before sliding into the bed. Grabbing hold of her arms, I haul her up to me. She tugs the blanket to cover us up and buries her tearstained face against my chest. Neither of us speak. I absently twirl my fingers around a strand of her hair that's come loose of her bun.

It's moments like these I almost forget who I am.

When it's quiet and we're both sated, I can turn off my mind and just...feel. I like the way her soft breaths tickle over my pectoral muscle, tightening my nipple. The scent of sex in the air lingers—sweet and sweaty. How her leg hooks over mine as if she has the strength to lock me in her hold forever.

I run my fingertips along her silky skin, letting them trail to the crack of her ass. She shivers which draws a smile across my lips.

My smile falls when I think about Ulrich's call earlier. He had info on Manda. I'd asked him to find whatever he could on her. It's the gift that keeps on giving. He says he's found a picture of Manda when she was pregnant with the triplets—a picture where Meredith is in it. I'm supposed to meet up with him in the morning to see that and whatever else he's uncovered.

Manda Mannford and her affiliation with Meredith should be the last thing on my mind. The Morellis and the motherfucking media are my biggest concerns at the moment. But there's a nagging feeling that settles in my bones that I can't ignore. Besides, if Manda becomes a problem, regarding her horrible fucking children, having anything I can against her will be necessary.

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"Win?"

"What?"

"I saw my dad today."

"Lovely."
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I can feel her smile against my chest at my smartass response. "He said my mom gave up her inheritance for him."

"Don't get any grandiose ideas, Cinderelliott. I quite like being rich. Your pussy isn't that addictive."

"But you do admit it's a little addictive?"

"Always fishing."

She laughs which I prefer over her tears. "I love my dad, but he sort of gave up on me. He chose *her*."

I know exactly who her is.

Her evil stepmother.

"You gave him an ultimatum?"

"I told him everything..." She pauses. "Not what you did to the triplets, but everything else. How we met. Our relationship. Leo getting involved. Your mother and siblings. And I told him that had you not called the police that day, Scout would have raped me and his brothers would have watched."

The crack in her voice has me grinding my teeth together. "And?"

"He said I need to just let you protect me."

"Better yet, my money to protect you."

"This is coming from the same man who walked away from money for the love of his life. Now, all these years later, he's telling me to choose money. So I can protect myself."

Irritation prickles through me like pinches on my skin. "Your father has proven himself time and time again of being a spineless bastard with his nose so far up Manda's ass he can't see the world around him."

"The thing is, I don't care about stupid money. I must be like Mom because if you were penniless, I'd still want you. We're a match, Win. A great one. You'd protect me even if you were poor because that's who you are. You care about me."

I don't ever want to imagine a scenario where money, and lots of it, isn't at my fingertips.

"Go to sleep," I grumble. "I'm not in the mood for heart-to-hearts."

She obeys me and goes silent. For all of five minutes. Then, almost nervously, she runs her thumb over my nipple. It's annoying, so I capture her hand in mine but don't let go.

"Why is Nate so obsessed with you?"

The question comes so far out of left field, I get clobbered with it. Confusion sets in as I try to comprehend what she even means by this.

"I don't follow."

"Me, for instance," she says, her voice barely a whisper. "He hates me."

"Because he thinks you're a gold-digging whore. But can you blame him? Have you seen the news?"

She huffs out a breath of frustration. I won't admit it to her, because I'm not sure what goes on inside her head all the time and who she shares that with, but I know something is off with Nate. His desperation to separate me from her is...concerning. Which is why I'll deal with it. It's none of her business and I can handle my own shit.

"I don't like him."

"Why don't you add that to your diary too, little girl?"

"I'm being serious." She sits up, her hair bedraggled and wild. So fucking pretty. "He's shady."

"That's all you've got? Just so we're clear, *you* were shady, too. You got busted slumming it with a Morelli. If we're comparing offenses, yours is much, much worse since you know how much I hate those fuckers."

"I think he's up to something," she continues, undeterred. "Did you take your key back from him or was that a lie? What about the woman who's his 'baby.' Did you even know he was dating someone?"

Interesting. But still not her problem. I'll handle this. I always do. My way. The right way. Ash has proven her methods—as proven with the Morelli situation—are fucking terrible.

"I don't care about Nate's love life," I lie. If he's keeping secrets from me, I care. And I will unearth them.

"Really? Because he really cares about yours."

"Again, it doesn't matter. Nate's always been that way. Ever since prep school."

"Yeah," she spits out, a flash of irritation on her features. "He said he gets *all* your leftovers." She shudders, darting her eyes away from mine.

That one move makes my blood run cold.

"At least you have a pair of arms to land in when we're done playing."

Her pouty dick-sucking lips part as she sucks in a shocked gasp. "Don't be an asshole."

"I told you. That ship sailed a long time ago. Go to sleep."

"I would never willingly touch him." She cringes at the thought. "He's no better than my stepbrothers."

I hold her stare for a long beat and then I take my out. "If you're going to spend all night trying to drive a wedge between me and my best friend, you can waste those efforts on someone else. I'm sure Shrimp would love to hear all your conspiracy theories."

"Win..."

"I have an early meeting tomorrow."

"You're going to renege on your deal? Since when, Constantine?" Her eyes are hot with anger. "This isn't your style."

"And fucking poor, lying maids isn't either but here we are. It appears I'm doing all sorts of new activities I'd never see myself doing." I slide out of bed to start yanking on my clothes.

"You can't do this," she hisses, sitting up on her knees, hot as hell naked and temptation personified. "Don't go. This is a breach of our agreement."

"Sue me." I smirk at her. "We both know I have more money. You'll run out of steam long before I do, little girl."

"This makes you a liar, Win." Her gaze hardens. "This makes us even."

I throw on the rest of my clothes and then start for the door. "I'll send Daniel again in the morning. Don't be late."

"Winston!"

"Go to sleep, Ash. For fuck's sake, just go to sleep and let me go."

* * *

TURNS OUT, I obviously didn't want to sleep alone. My dick and my mind both punished me after walking out on Ash last night. I was tortured with memories of the evening which only served to make my dick hard. I'd slept fitfully and now I'm grumpier than usual.

"Sir," Deborah says from my doorway, "your eight o'clock is here."

"Send him in. And bring me more coffee."

She scurries off. Seconds later, Ulrich saunters in. At six and a half feet tall, Ulrich is a Russian giant who towers over everyone in sight. Since he was tall for his age, growing up, his mother would use him to help her con men out of money. He'd pretend to be her abusive boyfriend or some shit, and when the mark came to her aide, she'd rob them clean. Poor Ulrich took a lot of ass beatings, hence his horribly crooked nose, but it also made him a bit fearless. Once, he tried to scam Dad, before I was born, but my father was quicker at putting the pieces together than most men. When he called them out on it, Ulrich's mother took off running, leaving her son to deal with the aftermath. Dad offered him a job, at first getting information from enemies, and it only escalated from there. The only caveat was he wasn't allowed to go crawling back to his manipulative mother who used him for her own gain. In return, Dad took care of Ulrich. Now, all these years later, I'm the one taking care of him.

Luckily, he's worth his weight in gold.

Ulrich drops into a seat, reeking of stale cigarette smoke, smacking his file folder down on the desk with a *thwap* and sending his smell my way. It makes my eye twitch knowing the scent will linger. If my maid wasn't so useless, I'd have her do something about it.

"What do you have for me?" I ask, cutting straight to business.

As promised, Ulrich pulls a photo from his file folder and slides it over to me. "This for starters."

I pick the aged photograph up by the corner and bring it closer so I can see it. My heart does a regretful twist at the image of Meredith when she was younger, around the age when I'd stopped dating her if I had to guess. Her goldenblond hair curled under back then giving her a wholesome

look. Little did I know, it was all an act. She had no problems luring Vincent Morelli into her bed. My gaze slides over to the other woman in the picture. Manda. Back then she was older, maybe nineteen or twenty or so. You can't tell for sure that Manda is pregnant, but the way her hand cradles her stomach, it's pretty obvious.

"They go way back," Ulrich explains.

"I didn't know they were friends back then."

Deborah hurries in to drop off my coffee and keeps her eyes averted while doing so. When she's gone, Ulrich speaks again.

"It wasn't common knowledge," he says, tossing another picture of them, this time with them both in evening gowns. "Back when Manda got pregnant, she was barely making a name for herself in the social circle. She'd come into some money, though she remained tightlipped about it. After you and her split, Meredith had gone to some rich women's retreat up north." He shoves a copy of an email at me. "They were both there. It was after that they were inseparable."

I thumb through the file. It amazes me how resourceful this guy is. Over the years, he's learned some tricks and made some connections. Plus, he has damn near an unlimited amount of my money to work with and make shit happen.

"Check this out," he says, thumping the folder, "half of those botched surgeries I found the other day were of women who they also went to this retreat with."

That sparks my interest. "Do you have a list of all the names?"

"You know I do."

I scan the list, recognizing many of them. "Seems suspect that those surgeries also came from this group of women. Some kind of catty revenge?"

"Women can be bitches. Especially rich ones. Who the hell knows what happened to piss Manda off, but I'd say she got them back with fucked-up boob jobs and shit." He points at another paper in the file. "And there's this. Thought it might prove to be useful."

Meredith's social calendar. And she has an upcoming appointment labeled "lunch to discuss Paris." Interesting.

Not that I would give a fuck before, but now that I know she's involved this deeply with Manda, I have a more vested interest. The mention of Paris has the wheels turning in my head.

"This is good," I commend. "Find out the details on where Manda met Baron Elliott. I want all the specifics on how that union came to be."

He winks at me. "Don't worry, my man. Your momma has me already looking into it."

Ash's life was always going to be up for scrutiny simply by being involved with me. I knew Mother would eventually start shredding it to bits. Considering the way she behaved at my birthday ball inviting Meredith and feigning shock when she'd been offered the introduction to Manda, I'd say Mother has been sniffing out this bone long before me.

"Let me know what you find out. I'd rather just get what I need from you rather than cross-referencing notes with my mother."

"You got it, boss." He tips his head at me. "If they're hiding something, I'll find it. It's what I'm good at."

I'm counting on it.

I can't be the king of the whole goddamn city if there are snakes slithering around with secrets I don't know about. The thing with snakes, though, is they always strike. You just have to be ready to grab them by the throat when they do.

And then you cut off their heads.



Ash

THREE DAYS.

Winston has gotten away with ignoring me for three days because he's been slammed busy with meetings with his attorneys, some creepy tall guy, and Nate. The last one bothers me the most for some reason.

He's the reason, after all, Win bailed on me.

I'm still mad that he'd do such a thing. Since when does he ever back down from a challenge?

Since you became too much of one...

I let the self-doubt trickle through me for only a second before I push it away. Nate was clearly a touchy subject which makes me want to poke at it more. I'm tempted to go snooping around in his office again, but the last time I peeked into his drawer, the look of pure hatred he gave me chilled me to my bones.

Don't touch my things.

Not eager to get myself locked away in his office with him. Luckily, despite Win's ignoring me, he's put me back with Perry. At least Perry's my friend, not counting when he was being a dick at lunch with Tate. The workday isn't so horrible when I spend it with Perry.

"When will Win be back?" I ask Deborah, though it kills me to have to do so.

A smug grin teases her lips. "He's out with Mr. Lambruski. Taking care of..." She trails off, her lip curling up as she flitters her fingers my way. "You know what."

The scandal that keeps growing with each passing day rather than going away. Just this morning, I was horrified to find a journalist outside my apartment. Daniel had to practically manhandle me into the car to keep me protected from the guy.

Whore apartment, I correct.

It's hard to think of it as a whore apartment though. Especially since I spent my lunch hour yesterday buying new plants and décor for it. I even got a pretty new bedspread and a matching rug. It's feeling a lot more like home.

"Can you tell him to come see me after?" I grit out since he's not been responding to my texts either.

More ammunition for this hag.

"Oh," she says, making a fake sad face, "I'm afraid he can't do that. He has a lunch date with Layla Reynard." She lowers her voice. "Between us, I think this is exactly what he needs to take the heat off him. She's his age and of his same caliber. It really is for the best. I hope you understand."

I blink at her, unimpressed with her attempt to run me off. Winston can be an asshole of epic proportions, but when he's truly done with me, he'll have the balls to say it to my face. No, this thing is something else entirely. I'm curious what he's up to.

"Right," I throw back, "I guess I should just grab the next best thing. You know, someone closer to my age. Have you seen Perry around?" I flash her a sly grin that promises deviant behavior with him as well.

She scowls. "I'm not responsible for his schedule. You're more than welcome to check with Cora—"

"Perry!" I call out across the lobby when I see him exit the elevator. "There you are!"

Now that we've smoothed things over since the lunch from hell, he's back to his usual self. He saunters my way, a grin on his handsome face. Knowing it'll just give the office something to gossip about, I hug him and whisper, "Pretend you're thrilled to see me."

"There's my favorite girl," he says loud enough for Deborah to hear. "What's up?"

"Just missed you is all. What's on the agenda?"

I pull away from our hug and hook my arm in his. We walk past the executive assistants, not looking at them. I chatter to him about my new bedspread that I can't wait for him to see. By the time we make it to his office, we're both no longer able to smother our laughter. He closes the office door and takes his seat. I drop down into the one across from him.

"Well, that was dramatic. For my brother's benefit?"

"He's not here." I frown, crossing my arms over my chest. "Apparently he's going on a date with *Layla*." I say her name like Perry says Tate's.

"Layla who?"

"Reynard. According to Deborah, he's moving on from me and using Layla to steer the attention away from our filthy sex scandal."

He studies me as he takes in this new information. "Win's not moving on from you. He's just being a pissy bastard."

I haven't told Perry about that night Win came over, our deal, and his subsequent leaving before upholding his end of said deal. He still thinks his brother is mad about Leo. I'm pretty sure we've moved past that. At this point, I think Win strategizes all day on ways to be annoyed with me so it'll be easier to push me away.

"Let's look her up," I tell him, standing to come around to his side of the desk. "I want to see what makes her so damn interesting to him that he'd be having a second lunch with her."

Perry turns on his laptop and opens Facebook. He types in her name, quickly finding her profile. Since he's Perry, he friend-requests her and she immediately accepts, giving us access to her life.

"Your pretty face and last name are good for something," I tease him. "Now let's see what this lady looks like."

Ugh.

"Not gonna lie, Ash, she's hot." Perry laughs when I scoff. "Not as hot as you, of course."

"You're a dick. Focus." I swat his hand away from the touchpad and use my fingers to navigate our search toward her photos. "Married. Ew."

But it doesn't take long to find out that her husband passed away. They had a yacht named Layla Love and the pair stand proudly in front of it. The smile she wears in that picture is missing from the more recent ones. Guilt twists in my gut.

"Pretty, rich, and sad." I let out a sigh. "I can't hate her on anything except that she's got his attention while I don't."

"She's not his type," Perry says in a reassuring tone. "Trust me."

"Hmph."

"Too sweet. He likes his women filled with fire."

And a fucking freak like him.

"She looks kind of vanilla," I agree. "I bet yacht sex was her thing."

"Yacht sex is everyone's thing."

"For boring rich people, yes. You're not much older than me, Perry. Tell me you don't have yacht sex. Gross."

"Do yacht blowjobs count?"

I elbow him and go to the search bar, changing it from Layla to Leo Morelli. This time, Perry smacks my hand away. He closes the app on his computer and glowers at me.

"What?" I demand, hands flying to my hips.

"That's not how we get information, dumbass."

"We literally just got information about *Layla* that way."

"Don't say her name like that. Makes you sound bitchy."

"I say *Layla* the same way you say *Tate*."

"Tate." He grimaces. "Okay, so they do sort of come out the same way."

"I rest my case. Now, tell me how we can drum up more information on Leo."

He scrubs a palm over his face in exasperation. "How did I get stuck on babysitting duty again?"

"Screw off."

"Seriously. Haven't you gotten into enough shit because of Morelli?"

"I just hate sitting around twiddling my thumbs...waiting for something to happen."

"You think Winny is playing at something big?"

"It's the only logical reason as to why he could ignore this." I wave a hand down my outfit that had a guy on the elevator earlier stammering all over his words as he tried to keep his gaze from my cleavage.

"You play dirty. Just like him. This is why you'll have all his babies one day."

I try to ignore the flutter in my stomach at the thought of being pregnant with his child. It's too sweet of a fantasy. Quickly, I lock it away and stay focused on the present.

"What's up with the building anyway?" I demand. "I'd have thought he'd make his move by now. Everything is too stagnant. I can't take it."

"Calm your tits, woman." He laughs at himself and then says, "My brother doesn't announce his moves before he makes them. He prefers to arrange all the dominoes just so and

then *thunk*." He makes a flicking motion. "He watches them all topple into each other one by one."

"Win and his games," I grumble.

"It's one of the things you love about him."

A smile tugs at my lips. "That list is small."

"I thought you were Cinderella, not Pinocchio."

"Fine. I enjoy his mastermind. Happy?"

"Unbelievably so." He pulls his phone from his pocket and flashes me an evil grin. "Now, what is it you want to know about Leo? If we're going to scheme, we have to do it the right way."

"Which is..."

"Ulrich. I'm pretty sure it was his ass who tattled on me for wrecking my dad's sailboat once. He's Mom's creepy eyes —all seeing."

"Giant scary guy?"

"That's the one."

"Seems like maybe he's seeing things for Win too."

"Told you," Perry says with a grin.

"We need to find out why Leo was at my house the night of the birthday ball. What is his connection to the triplets?"

"Speaking of the psychotwats, what ever happened with them?"

I shrug, trying not to think about the fact that Dad hasn't returned my texts since our visit the other day. I even sent him the address to my apartment and invited him to dinner. The message was read but he didn't respond. He chose Manda and let me fend for myself. It hurts more than I care to dwell on. Something on my face must have the perceptive Perry Constantine sniffing out my pain because he gives me a firm glare that's as serious as I've ever seen him.

"You're Team Constantine now," he assures me. "You have us."

"Not all of you."

"Win will come around. Trust me."



Winston

Layla Reynard waits by the hostess stand of an upscale bistro that's more my mother's taste than mine. I'm usually not caught dead in a place like this—quiches and muffins and flavored teas. But this was my idea, not Layla's. Apparently it's where all the rich bitches like Meredith like to go.

There's a method to my madness. There always is.

"Layla," I greet, offering my hand. "Thanks for agreeing to lunch again."

"Lunch with the most notorious man in New York City," she says with a pleasant smile. "How could I refuse?"

I chuckle and then hold up two fingers to the hostess and tell her my last name before turning my attention to Layla. "My lawyers are working to keep my notoriety at a more manageable level."

"They certainly have their work cut out for them." She flashes me another friendly smile.

The hostess guides us around to a table I'd called ahead to request. It has a great view of the entire restaurant. Once I've pulled out a chair for Layla, I take my seat across from her. My phone buzzes and I pull it out to check to see if it's anything from Ulrich or Mother.

Ash.

It's a selfie of her and Perry. They're both discreetly flipping the bird at the camera. I'm half-tempted to send her five hundred bucks before remembering I called a time-out on everything Ash related.

"Haven't ever seen that smile on you before, Winston."

My frown chases away the stupid grin on my face. "My brother." And the gorgeous fucking girl right beside him.

"Ahh, brothers. I have three myself. They're all annoying as can be."

Our conversation is paused as the server comes by to take our drink order. Thankfully, when we return back to talking, I've regrouped and am not distracted by Ash Elliott.

"How have things been?"

"Hard," she admits. "Everyone wants me to move on. But..."

"You can't move on from someone who was such an important part of your life. The hole is too gaping."

Her gaze softens and she nods. "Your dad?"

I give her a clipped nod. "It's been five years. Still a gaping wound."

"You're different than I remember from prep school."

I certainly don't tell her I can't even remember her. Which was part of the reason for wanting to have lunch with her again. I'd been curious as to what her motives were in all this. She was clearly roped into our initial lunch date, but I get the sense she's just a distraction and nothing more. This woman doesn't have ulterior motives. Just a pawn in someone else's game.

"So," I say, changing the subject, "what are you doing these days?"

She takes a sip of her martini and sighs. "Whatever I can to stay busy. I want to go back out on the yacht but I'm afraid it won't be the same."

"It won't," I tell her honestly. There are many things that I can't do now that Dad is gone. "But you'll find other things."

"Maybe," she says, a glimmer of interest flickering in her gaze.

Sorry, Layla, but your flicker of interest won't do. Not when I have a girl sending me "fuck you" selfies with my baby brother in order to get my attention. Besides, this isn't *that* kind of lunch. This is a different lunch altogether.

"Meredith," Layla calls out, waving.

Ahh, the other reason for wanting to have this lunch. Kill two birds with one stone and all that. I lean back in my seat, tracking my eyes over to where Meredith stares at me dumfounded with Manda by her side.

"Layla," Meredith says as they approach. "So random seeing you here. And with Winny, too."

Still so jealous.

I wonder if Duncan knows his wife would sell her left tit to get back in my good graces.

"So random," I agree in a tone that says this isn't random at all but in fact very orchestrated. "Your hair looks nice, Mer."

Mer.

Predictably so, Meredith fluffs at her hair, flashing me a seductive smile. Her eyes flit over to Layla, roaming over her to sense whether or not she's a threat, and then she reaches over to pat my shoulder. "You're such a sweetheart. Careful or I'll divorce Dunc for you." She winks in a playful way that says she's not joking in the least.

Manda's lips thin out from beside Meredith. I seriously doubt it's because she thinks I'm dating her stepdaughter. No, Manda doesn't like her bestie turning into a Constantine fangirl.

Constantine fangirl?

I've been hanging around Perry too much.

"We should go to our table now," Manda says, forcing a polite smile at me and Layla. "Lovely seeing you again, Mr. Constantine."

"How are the boys?" I ask, feigning concern. "I heard about the terrible accident." I also watched it from the best seat in the house.

Manda bristles, her features melding back and forth between embarrassment and motherly protectiveness. "They're back home recovering. Thank you for asking." She grabs hold of Meredith's arm, but the woman has her eye on the prize. Me. She's not going anywhere.

"I'd assumed Scout would be in jail," I say with a lifted brow. "Rumor has it he was wasted."

"The boys are traumatized from the accident. It's been like pulling teeth trying to get them to tell me exactly what happened." Manda straightens her spine. "Boys will be boys. Nothing a little money can't smooth over. You understand being a Constantine and all."

"Our well is endless," I agree, "but I'm sorry to hear about your recent lawsuits."

"Lawsuits?" Layla asks, brows scrunching.

"Malpractice," I state as Manda huffs out, "Misunderstanding."

"And all people you've known for years," I goad, pinning Manda with a knowing glare. "What a coincidence. It makes you wonder if it was planned by those women. A conspiracy to take all your money."

Manda's features darken and her nostrils flare.

"Maybe you should take a vacation from it all," I suggest. "Paris is great this time of year. Perry and I just went."

Meredith nudges Manda. "Why don't you order us our drinks? I'll be over in a second."

"How's Ash doing?" Manda asks, feet planted firmly despite her friend trying to get her to move along to avoid sparring with me. Seems the temptation is too great. "Her father was horribly embarrassed over her behavior. They're not even speaking."

Her barb hits me in the gut. I'm not supposed to be worrying about Ash right now, but a wave of hot irritation flashes over me. Her father's a dick if he's not speaking to her over this. She'd mentioned he'd basically chosen Manda over her, but seeing it with my own two eyes makes it more real. It also makes me want to call Ash to check on her.

Later.

My chest tightens. I've been pretending like I don't miss that bratty girl, but it's getting more difficult to lie to myself. I'm starting to call out my own bullshit.

"Ash is an incredibly resilient young lady. She's been working with my colleagues, really getting her footing in at the company. It's almost as if the scandal hasn't even affected her. Remarkable really." I pick up my water glass and take a refreshing sip. "If we're comparing scandals, I'd say your sons' has affected them greatly."

Manda's face burns bright red and then she storms off without another word. I shrug my shoulders feigning innocence. "Was it something I said?"

"She's going through a rough time," Meredith assures me. "She doesn't understand your sense of humor." She lingers for a moment longer, remaining in my space as though I might suddenly choose her, yank her into my lap, and kiss away the past nearly two decades.

"It was good seeing you," I say, dismissing her. "See you around."

Her plastic smile wavers. "Of course." To Layla, she says, "Don't let this one go. He's a catch."

Layla doesn't say anything until Meredith walks away. "Was this some strange attempt to use me to make your ex-

girlfriend jealous?"

At this, I laugh, genuine and loud. "The only jealous girl right now is Manda's stepdaughter."

"The teenager you corrupted according to the news?"

"That one."

"You knew this wasn't that sort of lunch, didn't you?"

"Yes. You're still grieving. I'm not an asshole. Besides, guys don't go on *that* sort of lunch when they have a jealous teenage girlfriend sending them selfies every ten minutes. That's just begging for drama."

She relaxes at my honesty. "Now that we've cleared that up that I'm not trying to date anyone, can I be frank with you?"

"Of course."

"That whole encounter just now was really strange."

"Can't agree with you more."

We move the conversation on to other things. She circles back to her husband she lost and I divulge bits of the loss of my father as well. Layla isn't that bad, but she's no Ash. Even if I were in the market and Layla wasn't still aching over her husband, we still wouldn't be a match. On paper we'd look good, sure, but there's no fiery chemistry like what I have with Ash.

No one has ever gotten me so riled up the way Ash does.

Not even Meredith.

Ash is everywhere all at once. There's no escaping her. I'm not sure I even want to.

After a pleasant lunch, I find myself once again distracted by texts from Ash, this time smirking at her most recent one.

Ash: If you don't respond, I'll be forced to take your brother hostage in an Uber.

Me: Who's the villain now, evil one? I'm practically the hero from saving the little prince from certain death by communicable disease picked up in a petri dish Ford Focus.

Ash: You and hero don't go in the same sentence. Nice try. Did you have to google "normal people" cars? I'm a little shocked you even know what a Ford Focus is.

Me: You're distracting me from my lunch date.

Ash: With Layla (said in the same voice Perry says Tate). Are you halfway to Vegas with your future Stepford wife?

Tate. I'm pretty sure I say it in my head in the same voice as Perry. Like it tastes like sour lemons or earwax or something equally cringe-worthy.

Me: Yes, I'll send you a postcard from my honeymoon.

Ash: Just think of my mouth when she gives you a boring blowie so you'll actually come.

Me: Awfully sure of your blowjob skills.

Ash: If you need a reminder, you know where the whore apartment is.

Me: You reek of desperation, Cinderelliott.

Ash: I know what makes you hot, Win.

She sends me a winky-face emoji. I send her back the middle finger.

"I really hope it works out for you," Layla says. "I can tell you're smitten."

I shove the phone in my pocket and pull out my wallet, ignoring her assumption. "Lunch was nice. Let's do it again sometime."

"Bring the girlfriend next time." She stands and offers me a smile. "I miss that kind of easy love. It's refreshing to see again. That doesn't always happen in our world."

With those words, she leaves me dumfounded at the table.

Girlfriend. No.

Love. Not just no, but fuck no.

Then explain the stupid thumping in your chest from just a few playful texts from that crazy, beautiful girl.

I can't explain it.

After dropping a wad of cash onto the table, I stride out of the restaurant. I've just made it outside when someone calls my name.

Meredith.

"I wanted to catch you alone," she says, her paid-for tits bouncing as she rushes my way. "How are you doing? Really? The news is horrible."

The predatory glint in her eyes says she's waiting for me to show some sort of weakness so she can sink her teeth into it.

"I'll live," I clip out.

"If you ever need to talk," she starts but then frowns at something behind me. Her face blanches and then she hugs me.

I try to crane my neck to see what it is she's looking at but by the time she releases me, I don't see anything but hurried people rushing by along the sidewalk.

"What is it?" I demand. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

She drops her gaze to the concrete at our feet. "It's, uh, a stalker. I'm so embarrassed."

"You're embarrassed about having a stalker," I say slowly. "As though you have any control over that."

But we both know she's a liar.

I play along because that's the name of the game.

"Want me to call your husband?" I offer, reaching into my pocket for my phone.

"Oh, God no," she hisses, her face scrunching up in disgust. "He's worthless. He'd probably sell me to my stalker if he thought he could turn a good profit."

Poor, pitiful Meredith.

"Best run back inside where it's safe, then." I give her a nod of my head. "I'm sure I'll see you around."

I disappear into the crowd bustling by. On the way to where my driver will be waiting, I call Ulrich and put him on one more task.

"I need video footage in front of a restaurant. Can you get it for me?"

"I can get whatever you want, boss. All's you gotta do is ask."

Your secrets won't be secrets for long, Meredith.



Ash

We're not broken.

Still fractured, but not broken.

I knew my Uber threat would get him. I'm a little smug at the fact I was able to distract him while on his lunch date. It was like the old Win was back—my Win.

He never returned from his lunch date. While it annoyed me, I didn't let it bug me too much. Perry said Layla isn't his type and that Win has an ulterior motive. I have to trust in that because the alternative hurts too much.

"What happened in Paris?" I ask, looking up from the file spread out in front of me to meet Perry's tired stare.

"You're all over the place today," he replies, frowning.

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Nothing good."

"Still doesn't answer it."

I lift a brow, conveying I'm not going to let this go.

"Why do you care? Where is this even coming from?"

"I just noticed Halcyon does a lot of business in France. If Win had to jump on a plane to take care of something, I figured it must be important."

"Everything my brother does is important."

I try not to preen at the idea I'm considered important based on that logic.

Perry studies me for a beat as if he can see inside my mind to figure out where I'm going with all this. I'm not even sure, really. All I know is the files I've been poring over today are filled with French names just like the contracts I was looking over earlier this week with Nate.

"A big acquisition we were working on over there fell through at the last minute. Everything was good and then suddenly we were being steamrolled by another buyer." He scowls. "No one outbids a Constantine."

"And yet you lost it anyway?"

"Is that why Nate's been digging so deep through all those foreign contracts?"

Perry's brow furls and he opens his mouth to speak but a light tap at his door stops him. "It's open," he calls out, his voice filled with gruff authority that reminds me of his brother.

The door swings open and Caroline Constantine's presence fills the office like a gust of icy air, freezing me to my marrow.

"Mom," Perry says, rising to his feet, a bright smile on his face.

She thaws a little at his greeting and accepts the hug he gives her. I've never seen her anything less than frigid and poised, but with Perry, she's a bit warmer than usual. He has that way about him.

"What's up?" he asks her, pulling back to study her face with a glint of worry on his features. "Winny isn't here. Lunch date with *Layla* and then who knows what after."

The fact he now says *Layla* like he says Tate has me smothering a grin.

Like the perceptive woman she is, Caroline zeroes in on me. "Layla, hmm? Lovely woman."

"Lovely Layla," Perry deadpans.

"You know the name of her yacht." Caroline's lips twitch slightly as though she might smile, pleased with her son's sleuthing skills.

"As do you," I mutter, unable to keep quiet.

Her narrowed eyes find me and she peels me apart layer by layer. I have nothing to hide. Not now. Win knows I was dealing with stalker Leo and the whole damn world knows about our sex life.

"Just the woman I came to see," Caroline says, her words chilly and borderline cruel. "Would it be possible to steal you away?"

That sounds ominous.

I'm about to tell her I'm busy helping Perry when he shoots me a pleased grin. "Take her. She's making me work too hard anyway."

"Can't have that now, can we?" Caroline murmurs. "Your brother works hard enough the rest of you don't have to."

"But he *does* work hard," I can't help but defend. "Perry's smart and dedicated like Win is. This isn't some blow-off job he got because of his brother. He enjoys it and is really good at it."

Perry rubs at the back of his neck like he's both embarrassed and surprised. They should remind him of how important he is to their family. Just because he's not ruthless like Win doesn't mean he's not a capable contributor.

"Let's go, Miss Elliott. We have much to discuss." Caroline turns to her son, pulling something off his lapel—a stray hair or piece of lint—before saying, "Don't work too hard, son. I'm looking forward to brunch again soon with my children. Say you'll make it."

"Wouldn't miss it," he agrees and I can tell he means it. "Go easy on her, Mom."

"Oh, you sweet, sweet boy," Caroline says. "Nothing is easy in our world."

* * *

Another awkward car ride with the matriarch of the Constantine empire. This one is only amplified by the fact she knows I've been up to some really naughty stuff with her eldest son. I try not to fidget in my seat, but it proves to be an impossible feat when Caroline's hard eyes flay me where I sit.

"Where are we going?" I ask, unable to keep quiet any longer.

"Shopping." Her lips thin out. "Then dinner. My treat."

Most women would probably die to go shopping with a Constantine and then get treated to dinner by her. Not me. I want to run far, far away. But, if I plan on keeping Win for the long term, then that means I have to play nice with his scary mommy.

"What is it, dear? You look nervous."

I bark out a slightly crazed laugh. "I'm wondering if 'shopping' is code for something sinister like strangulation and 'dinner' is code for dumping my body in the Hudson."

"I guess we'll find out," she purrs, her blue eyes alight with mirth.

A joke.

She knows how to joke.

Who knew?

For some reason, this settles me a bit and I take to enjoying the hustling people on every sidewalk. Rather than taking me to some warehouse to off me, we pull up in front of Brookfield Place. The mall is one I've been to many times over the years but it doesn't exactly strike me as the sort of place Caroline would visit.

"I'll call you when we're done," she tells the driver when he opens her car door and offers his hand.

I follow her out, accepting his help, and then shoot Caroline an expectant look. She keeps her lips pursed. In a serious, businesslike way that reminds me of Win, she heads straight inside, making a beeline for the first store she wants to visit. Salvatore Ferragamo. I'm not in the market for a new purse or wallet, so I just stand nearby as she runs her finger along a leather handbag.

Since she's not talking to me, I decide to text Win a selfie. His response is immediate.

Win: Handbag shopping with my mother. You've sunk to new lows, Cinderelliott.

Me: I thought we decided we leveled up. Playing the big game here. Remember?

Win: And here I thought the game was over...

Me: You ignore me for three days and thought I'd go away? It's like you don't even know me.

I send him a few heart-eye emojis since he loves them. Naturally, he doesn't respond.

Caroline purchases a purse and then we're off to the next store. I'm patient as I wait for her to get to the point of all this. I'm not stupid. She doesn't drag someone like me along unless she has an agenda. Like Winston, she enjoys toying with her victim first. But, since I'm used to him, I let her get it out of her system.

We pass by a candy store and a disproving shake to her head has me skipping it. I nearly roll my eyes but then remember this is Caroline, not Win. That kind of disrespect might earn me more than a spanking. Swimming in the Hudson doesn't sound like my idea of a fun time.

She ushers me into a furniture and décor store. Despite not being here to shop for myself, I manage to find a cute set of salt and pepper shakers shaped like pink birds. Her brow lifts at my purchase.

"Win will like them," I explain. "It'll remind him of Shrimp."

Her features pinch as she tries to interpret my words. Finally, she gives up and points to the register. After I've paid and they've bagged it up, I follow her back out of the store to the busy mall. This goes on forever, but soon I grow used to her intense silence. It makes me miss my mom. If she were still here, we'd probably take mall shopping trips all the time.

Caroline, keen on everything around her including me, gestures to an upscale grille. "I'm famished. Will this place do?"

It's a bit below a billionairess's normal dining choice, but it smells good enough to make my stomach growl.

"Perfect," I agree.

Once we're seated by a window that overlooks the North Cove Marina, she orders a bottle of wine and then finally turns her intense gaze on me.

"So," she says, her critical eye raking down my front, taking in every tiny detail about me. "You caused quite a stir for my son."

"Quite." I pin her with a fierce look.

She waits for a beat before smoothing her delicate palm over her linen napkin. "Your family must be horrified."

"Not as much as me, I can assure you."

"You're ashamed."

"Not of Win."

Her brows furl, anger flashing in her eyes. "Of course not. I meant—"

"Of myself?" I scoff. "The things Win and I did were our business. I'm sure if you broadcast anyone's sex life, it'd be humiliating."

"What, then?"

"I was worried what his family would think." What you would think.

"And why would you care?"

"You know why."

"Spell it out for me, darling."

"Because I like Win. Really, really, really like him."

She grows impatient with my excessive use of *really* but I figure it's more palatable than *love*. "Get to the point."

"Team Constantine, remember?"

"Oh, yes, your silly ideations of becoming a part of my family."

"Winston needs me."

"Winston needs no one," she spits out, words like acid.

"That's not true. He needs his family. He needs people who have his back."

"And that's you?"

"Yes."

She glares at me, waiting for me to elaborate or explain more. I don't. That's all there is to say. He needs me. Because I'm me and I get him in a way no one else does. Because I can make him lower his guard and be normal from time to time. Because I humanize him. I entertain him but I also give him an opportunity to be himself free of judgment or reparation.

"My dad told me recently that he and my mother gave up money for love. Not everything in this world has a monetary value. Some things are better when you don't throw a black plastic credit card at them."

"My AMEX is made of metal but that's beside the point."

"You loved your husband?"

"Of course," she sneers. "What kind of odd question is that?"

"So many people in your, uh, social circle don't always marry for love."

"I loved Lane dearly."

"If he were poor, would you still have loved him? If you were forced to give up the Italian leather handbags and personal drivers and metal credit cards with unlimited money attached to them? Would you still have chosen Lane?"

She doesn't answer the question but I see the glimmer of love in her eyes. The flash of grief. She would have married him if he were poor. So she's not the frigid ice queen she pretends to be. "That's beside the point. Love doesn't last."

Or maybe she is a frigid ice queen. Something happened in her marriage. I don't know what, but it made her this way. Jaded. "That's sad," I say, not disputing her words. It happened to her, but that doesn't mean it will happen to me.

"You don't love my son," she says finally, "and he certainly can't love you. I won't allow it."

"Why? Because of what Meredith did? No one is good enough for him or is it just me?"

"You've barely been in his life and look at all the drama you've caused." She waves me off in dismissal. "He deserves better."

"He deserves someone who cares about him. Someone who makes him happy. Someone who will fight him when he's being an asshole. I'm going to take care of him whether you like it or not."

"You?" She arches a beautiful, sculpted brow. "You have the means to take care of *my* son?"

"I'll figure it out," I tell her, shrugging my shoulders.

"That's a childish view."

"At least it's not a cynical one. Winston takes care of everyone around him. He needs me to take care of him every once in a while."

"Your tone is bordering on offensive and threatening. Constantines don't take threats lightly."

"He's spent his entire life being rock-solid and impenetrable. The one time he softened, *Meredith* bit him in the ass." I say her name a lot worse than I say Layla or how Perry says Tate. "He deserves to have tender moments and let his guard down."

"And look how that's turned out for him with you," she sneers.

"Do you know what his favorite ice cream is?"

Her glare is chilly but I don't let it bother me. "He doesn't eat ice cream."

"Cherry Garcia." I give her a bitchy smile. "Did you also know when he's still and not thinking about the weight of his empire, he toys with my hair in such a sweet, absent way that makes my heart ache?" My eyes water, just thinking about him. I'm tired of this distance between us. I miss him. "Lane wasn't hard all of the time, was he? I bet behind closed doors and with his children, he was loving and tender."

She turns her head, staring out at the marina. I admire her profile. Even with the sun shining in, highlighting her every detail, she's young and vibrant and beautiful. I'm sure Lane was smitten with her. People don't have that many kids and not enjoy each other immensely.

"I can make him happy," I say softly. "Once he realizes that, nothing will stop us. Not even you."

Her eyes cut over to me and she peels back my every layer as though seeing parts of me I don't even know exist. I hold my chin high and meet her stare. My dad wouldn't fight for me, but I'll fight for Win. Even if that means going against his scary mother and his stubborn ego.

"Let's order, darling. Time is getting away from us."

* * *

CAROLINE CONVENIENTLY TAKES a call just as we pull up in front of my apartment building. It's such a Winston thing to do. Avoid an awkward goodbye by feigning being busy. But,

because I'm me, I interrupt her conversation to thank her and give her a hug. She's stiff and doesn't return the hug. No surprise there. The driver opens the door for me and I exit. Once he retrieves my bag from the trunk, he opens the front door for me to usher me inside. I linger as I watch him return to the car.

With my purse hooked on one arm and my shopping bag on the other, I text Win on the way to the elevator.

Me: Let me cook you dinner.

Win: You had dinner with my mother.

Me: Didn't say I was gonna eat it.

Win: Pass. Your cooking skills are lacking.

Me: I miss you.

He doesn't respond.

I let out a ragged sigh of frustration, but don't give up. I'll send him a picture later that he'll be unable to ignore. I'm smiling when I bump into someone.

"Ash Elliott?"

Snapping my head up, I meet the stare of a man with slicked-back hair, a fake tan, and obnoxiously white teeth. Same guy Daniel had to run off the other day outside of the building. And now he's inside my building. "Huh?"

"I'm Clay Povich from the New York Daily—"

"No comment," I bite out, mashing the elevator button.

The doors open and he follows me in, filling the space with his overpowering cologne. Ignoring him, I hit the button for the twelfth floor.

"You can't ignore the press forever," he says, stepping too close. "We have questions and it's your obligation to answer them."

"I don't have to do shit," I snarl. "Go away."

"A source says you're staying in this building on Mr. Constantine's dime. Is it or isn't it true you're an escort?"

How could he possibly know I'm staying here and Win is paying for it?

My hand shakes as I dial Winston's number. It rings and rings. Finally, I give up and end the call. The elevator doors open on my floor. I rush out, heading for my apartment. Clay is on my heels, hammering out questions. I try and dial Dad next but he doesn't answer. The guy grows more and more agitated when I ignore him. When I stop suddenly in front of my door, he plows into me. Since we're both caught off guard, he lands on me hard. My head hits the doorframe. Everything goes black and soundless for an indeterminable amount of time.

I eventually blink open my eyes, wincing against the throbbing in my skull. Clay is standing over me, snapping pictures with his phone. It takes a second for me to notice my dress has ridden up, revealing my pink panties. Jerking my dress down to cover myself, I screech at him.

"Get away from me!"

"I only want answers," he says in a cool, confident tone, "and these pictures will disappear."

"Fuck you!"

Clay is blocking my apartment door with his body, making it impossible for me to get inside if he decides to make this difficult.

"You'd probably do that, wouldn't you? Rumor has it you're also sleeping with the other Constantine, Perry. Can you go on record and state that you are, in fact, having a romantic relationship with Winston Constantine's little brother?"

I dial Winston again, but he doesn't answer. Tears have begun to burn in my eyes but I'm trying desperately to keep them from falling so this asshole doesn't take pictures of that too. I shoot Win a quick text.

Me: Help me!



Winston

Nate continues to drone on, but I'm not listening. When Ash's call came through, I figured I'd see her soon enough. The text, though, sends a wave of panic washing over me.

"I have to go," I blurt out, hanging up on Nate. "Step on it, Daniel."

Daniel must sense my urgency because he floors it, weaving in and out of traffic. I try to call Ash back, but she doesn't answer.

Morelli?

If that motherfucker touches one hair on her head, I will burn this city to the ground, starting with every goddamn rat. I'm rage-filled by the time we reach her apartment building, further incensed by the rather large crowd of reporters exiting vans and beginning to crowd around the door.

We've been discreet.

No one, but a handful of people, knows she's even here which means someone tipped them off.

I don't have time to worry about that, though. I need to find out what the hell is going on with Ash. As soon as Daniel pulls up to the curb, I fly out of the vehicle, rippling with fury. As though they're the Red Sea, they part to allow me through. Whatever pissed-off vibes I'm giving off must be enough warning.

Once inside, I take the elevator to the twelfth floor. I hear voices. Male and female. Without considering further consequence, I charge at the asshole looming over Ash. He lets

out a startled cry when he hears me coming, whipping around in time to adopt a shocked expression only a second before my fist impacts his face. He crumples to the ground, moaning in pain. I'm no longer concerned about this pussy because Ash is pressed against the wall, her face buried in her knees, hands pressed to her ears. She bellows, scrambling away from me, frantic, teary eyes landing on me. If the guy wasn't crying like a bitch, I'd happily knock his ass out right now for doing this to her.

"Hey, baby," I croon. "It's me. It's just me. I'm here. That asshole is leaving."

It takes her a second to understand that I'm really here and no one is going to hurt her. She flings herself into my arms, a sad fucking sob escaping her.

"He f-followed me and pushed me d-down. I hit m-my head." She hiccups, her entire body trembling. "When I woke up, m-my dress...and he was t-taking p-pictures..."

"Man, it wasn't like that," the motherfucker says from behind me.

I release Ash and pounce on him, gripping his now bruised face in my punishing hold. "You touched my fucking girlfriend?"

The man whimpers. "I...n-no...I..."

"Give me your phone," I growl. "Now."

He hands it to me. I find several pictures of her unconscious with her pink panties showing and a few voice recordings. After I delete all evidence of his encounter with her, I pocket the phone. Mine now.

"Listen here, asshole," I snarl, shoving him against the wall. "You'll walk the fuck out of here. And when my attorney calls you, you better be ready to sing like a fucking canary about how you found out she was going to be here and who the hell tipped you off. Your career and reputation rely on it. Go before I change my mind and kick your ass all the way down twelve flights of stairs."

I release him and glower after him as he runs for the elevator. As soon as he's gone, I use my key to unlock Ash's door. Then, I toss her phone that's on the ground beside her into her purse, scoop it and her bag up, and set them just inside. She remains on the floor, visibly shaken. I pull her into my arms and carry her over the threshold like she's my bride. I'm not sure what it is about this woman, but she brings out a feral, protective side of me I never knew existed.

No matter how much she pisses me off or I think I want to move on from her, I can't even delude myself. She feels good in my arms, filling my nose with her sweet scent, and her very presence invading other parts of me that didn't function before I met her. My heart beats wildly for her, and I don't know that I'll be able to stop it now that she's shocked it to life like a goddamn defibrillator.

I set her down on her bed and then lock up the apartment. Shrimp is going crazy with excitement at seeing me, but I'm too focused on Ash to give him my attention yet.

Kneeling down in front of Ash, I place my palms on her hips and try to read her expression. "Are you okay?"

"I missed you."

Of course this damn girl would care more about our relationship than the fact some asshole was terrorizing her in the hallway.

"I missed you too," I admit. "I can give you flowery words later. I'm more concerned about your head and if that motherfucker touched you."

"You came. I called and you came."

"How hard did you hit your head?"

"Hard enough there're two of you and I'm not complaining. It's almost like having a threesome—"

I cut her off with a brutal kiss to her pouty lips. Tasting her again sends floods of relief washing through me. It feels good to have her in my grasp once more. Hooking an arm around her back, I pull her up the bed as I climb on. She lets out a breathy sigh when I settle my body over hers. My lips find hers again, taking my time kissing her, relearning her tongue and lips as though I didn't just kiss her three days ago.

I'm hard as fuck but I could be content kissing her all night.

Does that make me a pussy?

Probably. Right now, I don't care. I might regret it later, but not now. She doesn't taste like regret—she tastes like happiness and I can't devour her fast enough, starved to fill up on such a blissful emotion I've been denied for far too long.

I break from our kiss to look at her. Seeing her at the office but not touching her has been torture of my own doing. I've been busy putting out fires and trying to make sense of what it is about Ash that drives me so insane. I'm no closer to figuring it out. Instead, I only managed to make myself miss her.

"Did you have fun shopping with my mother?"

While she was off with my mother, I was knee-deep in all the shit Ulrich has been uncovering for me. My day has been productive to say the least.

A smile tugs at her swollen pink lips. "Fun is a stretch. I survived."

"Seems you always do where she's concerned."

"I didn't end up in the Hudson, so there's that." Her hazel eyes twinkle. "I bought you a present."

"You bought your non-boyfriend a present."

"My boyfriend in denial," she corrects.

"I thought you were mad at me for walking out on our deal." I arch a brow at her. "Did you forget?"

"I'm always mad at you, Win. What else is new? Doesn't mean I don't lov—"

I cover her mouth with my hand, letting the rest of that sentence get muffled. "You hit your head too hard, Cinderelliott. It's making you more desperate than usual."

Pulling my hand away, I kiss her pretty mouth again. This time, the kiss turns dirty quickly and I find myself nipping a trail over her cheek and jaw to get to her throat. Her breasts heave with each staggering breath she takes.

"This cleavage was cruel," I complain, pulling down her dress so I can marvel at her tits that have been damn near on display all day. "I had to leave so I didn't fuck you over Deborah's desk."

"To go to lunch with Layla."

I bite on her juicy tit that's about to fall out of her bra. "Mmhmm."

"It just made you miss me more, though, right?"

Ignoring her, I pull the cups of her bra down to free her gorgeous tits. I suck one of her nipples into my mouth, loving the mewl that escapes her. I take turns sucking on each nipple until they're both rock-hard peaks. Once I'm satisfied with how red and wet they are, I suck on the skin of her breasts, my sole purpose marking them with purple bruises for her to remember me by later.

"Make love to me," she murmurs, her eyes heavy-lidded and mouth parted. "Please."

"And the tradeoff?" I ask as I sit up to yank off my suit jacket.

"You already saved me. It's my turn to thank you."

I don't argue with that logic, ripping off my clothes in record speed. Once I've snatched away her dress and undergarments, I kiss my way down to her pussy. Her aroused scent makes my mouth water to taste her. It seems like eons since I've had my tongue on her here when in actuality, it's only been a few days.

"Spread your legs and let me see how wet you are," I command. "Playing the damsel in distress turns you on."

My filthy girl parts her thighs, revealing all her slick sweetness to me. I grin as I dive in, eager to have her on my lips and tongue.

"Win," she cries out as my tongue slides up her slit. "Oh, God!"

I suck on one of her pussy lips before wiggling my tongue between them seeking out her tight bud of pleasure. She jolts at the touch, a keening sound rasping from her.

Fuck, she tastes so damn good.

Like sweet cherry Starburst and mine.

Definitely tastes like mine.

I nip at her clit which throws her over the edge, screaming my name like she's mad at me. But the way her body vibrates, I'd say she's a fan of my efforts. Before she's even done coming down from her high, I'm teasing my dick along her slippery cunt and pushing into her with a hard, claiming thrust.

Capturing her throat with a gentle grip, I squeeze just enough to garner her attention. Her hazel eyes lock on mine as I fuck her into oblivion. As much as we've had sex, I quite like staring at her while I drive my dick into her needy body. It's all-consuming—a shock of fire blazing through my entire system, burning away everything but her.

My lips find hers again, watering to taste her sexy mouth. She moans out her praises as I ravish her tongue and lips. The wet, juicy sounds as I thrust in and out of her are a testament to how good I make her feel. I love having this power over her.

Her fingernails rake through my hair, messing it up. A heel presses into my ass, and I wonder if I'll be bruised from it. I grind my hips against her, trying to fuck my way as deep inside her as I can possibly get. I want to fill her with so much goddamn come it leaks out of her for days.

That's a good way to get her pregnant.

Again with those dangerous thoughts.

She does this to me. It's easy to forget who I am when I'm balls-deep inside this girl and pretending to be her hero. I can imagine a world where she carries my children and holds my heart. With those stupid thoughts dancing in my mind, I come with a growl. Her pussy clenches in time with each throb of my release.

I don't immediately pull out of her. I'm drunk on her scent and taste and touch, burying my face against the side of her head so I can inhale her. My dick has softened and I can feel my come running out of her. Regretfully, I slide out of her to lie next to her, but that's only because I want to push the come back into her tight body. She wears an amused grin that I ignore.

"Win..."

"Heart eyes," I complain. "It's not a cute look."

"You love it." Her triumphant grin only goes wider when I don't argue.

Tomorrow I can go back to being Winston fucking Constantine. Tonight, I like just being hers. This man. Simple and available and protective. And, with my fingers, wet with my come, now teasing at her asshole because we aren't us unless we're getting a little nasty.

I'm already fantasizing about fucking her ass but my phone starts ringing from my pile of clothes on the floor. Since I'm waiting to find out when my meeting is tonight, I'll need to answer it. I pull my fingers away from her pussy and put them to her lips. With her hot eyes burning into mine, she sucks off the come like the dirty girl she is.

Goddamn, I will never get tired of this.

Chump.

I pull away from her, focused on finding out who's calling me. The unknown number has me frowning, but I answer it anyway. "Constantine."

"Fucking the whore in the whore apartment. That's what you two call it, right? How cute," the voice snarls on the other line. "You can't keep an eye on her forever. Tonight was proof."

My blood runs cold. "Don't call me again, you little shit."

Scout Mannford. I should have known it wouldn't be the last I'd hear of the fucklets.

"What you did..." He sucks in a sharp, furious breath. "I'll make you pay, motherfucker. I'll hurt you like you hurt me and my brothers." His laughter is cruel. "I'll start with my bitch of a stepsister. Tell her next time I won't hesitate to fuck her. Maybe we'll have a sex scandal of our own."

"Touch her and it'll be the last thing you do," I warn, malevolence tinting my every word.

"Oh, I'll touch her. You can't protect her forever. Maybe I'll sneak into your condo next time you're running away for business. I'll slit her pretty little throat after I fuck her raw. Have fun explaining why there's a dead prostitute in your bed."

That image of Scout hurting Ash and then carving her up like a pumpkin will give me fucking nightmares. Turning the hatred back on him, I hiss, "Can you do all that from a wheelchair?" A deadly pause. "Didn't think so. Bye, brat."

The line goes dead.

"Who was it?" Ash demands, hair messy and eyes wild with worry.

She knows. Of course she knows. And based on the horrified expression on her face, she's more terrified of her stepbrothers than the lawless Morellis.

"Pack your shit and your bird. You're going home."



Ash

Home?

I'm shaking my head as panic threatens to consume me. Dad won't speak to me and Manda hates me. The triplets. A shudder ripples through me. I can't go home. Not ever again.

"I can't," I croak out. "Please, Win, don't make me go back to them."

He's in the middle of zipping up his pants when my words finally register in his brain. Without a shirt on and the fiery expression on his face, he looks like some vengeful angel—beautiful and golden and perfect.

"My home, Cinderelliott. I'll be damned if that sick sonofabitch or his two clones comes within fifty feet of you."

Home. His home.

I crawl across the bed, his come still running from my body, and reach for him. He steps toward me, letting me wrap my arms around his neck.

"That was Scout? What did he want?"

His body is tense and thrumming with pent-up violence. "Something he will never have."

The unspoken word is *you*. Terror at the thought of Scout getting me alone again is chased away by Win's protectiveness that's clouding around me. He wants to take me home. Me and our bird.

"Let me shower and then we can go."

I race through my shower trying to gain control over the swelling panic. I'd stupidly thought the triplets were no longer a threat. They're vindictive and evil. Now that everything has been stripped from them, they'll do everything in their power to pay Winston back for what he did. And that means me. Will I ever be free of those monsters?

By the time I dress and leave the bathroom, Winston is in boardroom boss mode, barking out orders to someone over the phone. It would be intimidating if it weren't for the pink bird sitting on his shoulder, hunting for bugs in his hair. Every so often, Winston reaches up to stroke Shrimp on the top of his head. I fight a grin as I pack up my clothes and toiletries.

He eventually hangs up on the person he's talking to and carefully deposits our bird into his cage. Once Shrimp is secure inside, Winston prowls over to me. He snags my jaw in his punishing grip and presses a searing kiss against my lips. It's times like this I'm reminded why I put up with all the shit when it comes to Win. Because there's so much potential for us being something strong and unstoppable.

"Time to go, Cinderelliott."

When we step out of the apartment, a huge scary dude dressed in black is glowering our way. Before I can have time to panic, Winston greets him with a clipped nod.

"Did you take care of the reporters?" Winston asks him, striding toward the elevators, the two of us following behind.

"Xavier's handling it," the beefy guy says. "I'm Todd."

I relax a little. "Ash."

"Pleased to meet you, Ash. We won't let these assholes get near you." He winks at me. "Just stay close and don't talk to anyone."

We step onto the elevator and Winston is a cold statue. I lean into him, needing some of his strength because I'm slightly freaked out having to face more people like Clay. And what if Scout is out there? I tremble and Win plants a kiss on top of my head. It's such a sweet, simple gesture—one a

boyfriend would do. Later I'll give him all kinds of hell for it. Not now, though. Now I need him.

Winston guides me outside once the elevator chimes. A crowd of reporters have gathered in front of the building. I keep my head down and move my legs quickly to keep up with him. He practically shoves me into the vehicle waiting at the curb. Once my bird is stowed beside me, he climbs in on my other side.

"Miss Elliott." Daniel's eyes are concerned in the mirror.

"I'm still holding you to our sightseeing date, Danny Boy."

He chuckles. "I'll see what I can arrange."

Winston, like the jerk he can be, pushes the button to close the partition. I scowl at him.

"Don't flirt with the help, Cinderelliott."

"I am the help and you do a lot more than flirt with me," I argue. "I'm pretty sure your come is still running down my leg."

His nostrils flare. "Always pressing my buttons."

"I have to make up for all those days you avoided me."

"All those days? It was three. Don't exaggerate."

All playfulness fades as I take his hand, threading his fingers with mine. Surprisingly he allows it, squeezing my hand once.

"Win, are we good?"

A wicked grin tugs at one corner of his lips. "No, *baby*, we're not good. That's not who we are. We're bad, but don't worry, we're really, really good at it."

In Win speak, we are good.

"You called me *baby*," I taunt, barely able to hold back a giggle.

"If the shoe fits, Cinderelliott..."

"Asshole."

"And for some reason you like me."

Oh, no, Constantine. I don't like you. Not even a little.

But love?

You better believe I've fallen for you despite your every attempt to keep me from doing it. And I'm going to drag you right along with me whether you like it or not.

* * *

I FOLLOW WINSTON into his condo, surprised to find both Keaton and Perry sprawled out on the sofa. Winston sets Shrimp's cage in its usual spot in the living room and then frees him. Our bird chirps happily and flies straight to his favorite chandelier. Keaton smirks at Winston where Perry just grins like an idiot at him.

"Don't," Winston growls.

Perry laughs. "What? I didn't say anything."

Winston shoots both his brothers a fiery glare. "Don't look at me like that."

"I'm just smiling," Perry deflects. "Not a crime, Winny."

"And I'm only trying to understand what it is exactly I just witnessed," Keaton says, craning his head up to watch Shrimp flap his wings in excitement.

"You can birdwatch later, kid," Winston gripes. "Right now, we need to discuss some family shit."

Keaton's gaze skims over to me. His features tighten when he takes in my red, puffy eyes. I'm sure I look like absolute shit after the craptastic day I've had.

"Anthony got something set up?" Perry asks, leaning forward on the sofa, resting his elbows on his knees.

He's thrumming with excitement whereas Keaton is kicked back with his bulky arms stretched out over the top of the sofa, not a care in the world. I drop my bags on the floor and then plop down on the cushion between Perry and Keaton. Winston crosses his arms over his chest, a scowl hardening his face.

"I spoke to him a bit ago," Winston says. "We're to meet the Morellis at a restaurant in neutral territory."

"Wait..." I tense at his words, frowning at him. "You're meeting with the Morellis?"

"I'm taking my damn building back." Winston's blue eyes flash with victory. "Leo fucked up. I knew he would which is why I tied him with a binding agreement. This meeting is merely a chance to watch him throw a tantrum as he signs it back over to me."

His arrogance, when directed my way is annoying, but when he's screwing someone over who truly deserves it, I'm mesmerized by it. Winston Constantine is a powerhouse who gets what he wants no matter the cost or effort.

"You're obsessed with that building," I tease, enjoying the way his lips quirk up on one side at my words.

"Aww." Perry tugs at a piece of my hair. "You and Winny kissed and made up."

"We get to move back," I say with a triumphant grin.

Keaton snorts out a laugh while Winston rolls his eyes.

"You can't move back if you never lived here in the first place," Winston explains as though we're dense children and he's the daddy. "You and the bird—"

"Our bird," I interrupt and Shrimp chirps loudly in agreement from above us. "Shrimp is our bird."

"You and the goddamn bird are simply being relocated." He shoots me an agitated glare. "For fuck's sake, Cinderelliott, get the hearts out of your eyes."

"She's not the only one with hearts in their eyes," Perry mutters unwisely beside me.

Winston flips his middle finger out and waves it at him. "Enough of this. We have important things to discuss. Firstly, someone leaked out the fact that Ash was staying at the whore apartment?"

"The *whore* apartment?" Keaton mutters, amusement in his voice.

"Why?" Perry demands, growing serious. "What happened?"

"Some reporter guy was waiting for me upstairs and..." I shiver at the disgust that slithers through my veins. "He was a creep."

Winston produces a phone and tosses it at Keaton. "I want all you can find on this journalist. Get Ulrich on it if you need to. Then, I want you to destroy him. Perverts who knock women out and then take pictures of their fucking underwear while they're unconscious deserve much more than a simple ass beating."

"What the fuck?" Keaton growls. "I'm on it."

I shoot him a thankful smile.

"Not many people knew where Ash was staying," Winston continues, "but the press found out. What's really fucking alarming is how Scout Mannford knew. I'm certain he leaked it, but the big question is how did he know?"

I'm about to mention Nate, but that didn't go over too well last time, so I throw Deborah under the bus instead. "Your secretary hates me. She dropped off my bird and belongings. Maybe it was her."

"What about Nate?" Perry asks and I want to high-five him.

"Hmm," is all Winston says. "I'll get to the bottom of it. After my meeting with the Morellis. But, the bigger issue at hand is the threats Scout slung at me."

Keaton leans forward, body tense and aching for a fight. "Need me to kick his ass?"

"He will be dealt with soon," Winston growls. "Permanently."

That sounds ominous, but at this point, I don't care. I'm tired of Scout and his brothers trying to hurt me at every turn.

Perry squeezes my knee. "Are you okay?"

"Ash is fine. She didn't talk to him and she won't have to. If he comes near her, fuck him up." Win's command is directed at Keaton. "I need you to keep an eye on her while Perry and I have the Morelli meeting tonight. *No one* comes into this apartment."

Winston paces in front of the empty birdcage. He's usually tightly held together, so it's a little unnerving to see him so unwound.

"Will you guys be safe?" I ask, drawing Winston's intense stare my way. "From Leo?"

Winston scoffs. "We'll be doing all the fucking at this meeting. Leo won't be safe from *us*."

"What if Leo goes all beast mode and decides to beat the shit out of you?" Keaton demands, making my stomach twist violently. "I've heard rumors about him. This is more than just bad business deals. This is life and death. Don't leave me in charge of this family. I swear to God, I'll fucking find you in Hell and kill you again if you do."

"Keep your panties on," Winston grinds out. "They won't do anything in public. And if they try, that's what Xavier and Todd are for."

Keaton settles, but only marginally so. "Don't provoke them. Just get your stupid building and get out of there."

"Have you met Winston?" Perry asks, snorting. "He'll provoke Leo until he loses his shit just for the entertainment value."

"Please don't," I murmur, locking eyes with Winston. "I can't raise our baby bird on my own. He needs a daddy."

Winston's lips twitch but he doesn't smile. "I'll make sure his inheritance is sufficient."

Keaton sniggers, shaking his head. "Never thought I'd see the day when—"

"And you won't see another one if you finish that statement," Winston snaps at Keaton and then to Perry barks, "Let's go."

I launch myself from the couch and leap into Winston's arms. He catches me on instinct, his palms going to my ass. With my fingers diving into his hair, I kiss him like it might be our last. He indulges me with a little tongue action and then he smacks my ass.

"We can do this later," he grumbles.

"From your bed?" I bat my lashes at him. "Pretty please. I'll pay handsomely for it."

"I do not want to hear this," Keaton complains. "I'm going to see what Francis can cook me up."

As he passes, Winston plucks me from his body and sets me to my feet. "I'm serious. *No one* comes in this apartment."

I can almost read the warning in his gaze. Not even Nate. Don't worry. I'm not falling for that again.

"I won't let *anyone* in." I smooth his hair back that I'd messed up during our kiss. "And you never answered my question."

Perry laughs as he stands from the couch. "On that note, I'm gone too. You driving or am I?"

"Daniel," Win says. "I told him to wait in valet."

"I'll go sit in the car so you two lovebirds can make out."

Winston ignores his brother's comment, instead letting his hot gaze drag down to my lips. "How will you pay for it?"

He loves our games as much as I do.

"What do you want?"

"That's a dangerous thing to ask a man who has everything," he warns. "It might be something you can't give me."

"I'll figure out a way to make it happen."

"So desperate." He reaches up and hooks a finger under my chin, tilting my face up. "If you're going to be in my bed, maybe I should get to tie you up so you can't get needy and cling to me all night."

"Hmm, naked and tied up in a billionaire's bed. You really twisted my arm, Win. Where do I sign up?"

He rubs his thumb over my bottom lip. "Your smart mouth needs to be punished."

"I'll be the naked teenager in your bed waiting for you to defile me."

His glare is murderous. I'm highly entertained, though, when my palm covers the bulge in his pants. This guy is mine. A perfect match for me. Always down to do the same filthy things I want to do.

"Please be careful," I say, standing on my tiptoes to brush a kiss over his handsome mouth.

"You make good on your end of the deal and I'll get through tonight to make good on mine."

With those words, he turns on his heel, leaving me alone, but taking my heart with him.

He better bring it back.



Winston

Manhattan Mile High Club is a swanky restaurant on the 80th floor of one of the tallest buildings I don't own. *Yet*. It belongs to a family who's been in this city far longer than the Constantines have. However, they can't hold on to it forever. Eventually they'll sell to me because I'll keep sweetening the deal until they do.

"You think this will go smoothly?" Perry asks, tension in his voice, as we pull up to the curb in front of the building.

"It will."

"So sure of yourself."

"I have to be," I tell him with a shrug. "If I doubt myself, then my opponent will too. If I enter every fight knowing I'll win, they'll never have a chance." He starts to open the door, but I stop him by grabbing his arm. "Stay quiet and let me or Anthony do all the talking. We'll be in and out soon enough. For some reason, if Leo loses his shit and things go sideways, you find Xavier and Todd and get the hell out."

He frowns hard at me, his eyes darkened by shadows. "If things go sideways, I'll find *you* and *then* get the hell out. I'm not leaving you, Winny. Ever."

"Mother will never let me hear the end of it if I let her golden child get killed."

"I know in Win's World, you're this sole dark hero who saves everyone in his wicked vicinity, but in the *real* world, your brother—who can bench just as much, if not more than you—is going to back you up no matter what. You don't have

to do everything by yourself." He holds up a fist. "Team Constantine, remember?"

"I'm not bumping your fist like we're hoodlum teenagers. And you've been hanging out with Ash too much."

He just grins at me, still holding his fist up like an idiot. I finally bump it, so he'll get out of the goddamn car and on with it.

We enter the Manhattan building that's been around probably since the beginning of time for all I know. The lobby is elegant and has the distinct, cloying scent of old money and privilege—sweet and a little bitter. Whereas most of my buildings have been renovated and updated with the changing times, this particular one still boasts Art Deco from the late '30s. Brass-inlaid geometric patterns adorn the arched ceilings, terrazzo floors gleam as though they've been recently polished to perfection, and the etched-glass doors along the corridor to the elevators all complete the dated look.

When this building is mine, I'll rip all of this out and give it a much-needed makeover.

Perry and I stand in front of brass elevator doors, staring at our distorted reflection. From this viewpoint, we could be twins. Both suited. Both blond. Both similar in build. Despite my brother being a man child a lot of the time, he's stepping up considerably where this family and Halcyon are concerned. Maybe he's right. Maybe I don't have to shoulder all of the burden. Once, I shared that burden with Dad. It'd feel good to unload some of it on Perry once he can handle it.

The slightly twangy ding of the elevator signals it's ready for our ascent eighty floors into the clouds where a family of rats await. Footsteps approach, and before we enter the elevator, said rats scurry around us, chasing off the building's natural scent with that of aggression. Perry's body tenses, but I ignore them, stepping into the elevator. My brother and I stand with our backs to the wall as the Morellis file inside.

"Evening, gentlemen," I greet, my grin wolfish. "If you like steak, the Manhattan Mile High Club has the second best..." I trail off, tapping my jaw. "Now that Edge is no longer around, I suppose theirs is the best now."

Lucian doesn't reward me with a reaction, remaining rigid and stone-faced. Leo, though, is predictably a bastard. He glares at me with glittering menace. Lucian must be keeping him on a leash because he doesn't say anything. The box becomes crowded as several bodyguards join them and a man with a thick file folder tucked under his arm. From the looks of it, one of their bastard attorneys. It's ridiculous the two of us against this army of assholes. They're probably strapped with weapons whereas the only thing Perry and I carry are our powerful last name and heavy wallets. The Morellis are reckless cowboys in a world that's long-past blurred by them. Where everyone else in this city has evolved and realizes that money is the sharpest blade there is, they're still clinging to their guns and macho fucking attitudes.

Perry mashes the button for the 80th floor and then keeps his hands threaded together in front of him. I take my time sweeping my stare over each one of our enemies, taking in all their imperfections one by one.

"Just the two of you?" Lucian asks with a lift of his dark eyebrow. "Aren't you a little...unprepared?"

I glance at Leo pointedly. "I think, Lucian, that your little brother was the one who was unprepared when he started making deals he wasn't capable of upholding."

The elevator dings and opens on the 27th floor, saving us from a Leo explosion. An elderly couple on a residential level eyes the tense crowd and waves us on to take the next elevator. The doors close once more. My phone buzzes and I pull it out to read a text from Ulrich.

Ulrich: Found more stuff for you, boss. Gave it all to Tony earlier.

Me: Nice work.

The elevators open again on the 68th floor. A man in a suit —my man—steps on. Xavier says nothing as his imposing presence fills the otherwise crowded space. Now we both have security. I know they hire the best. So do we. Here's hoping neither of them need to draw their weapons during this meeting.

The tick of Lucian's jaw tells me he realizes he knows better than to underestimate me. My expression is smug. If it irritates him, he manages to keep it in check. We stop at another floor near the top, making room for Todd. Where Xavier tends to be more broody, Todd is a little more friendly. He's not smiling tonight, though. Both my men are a tense wall of muscle blocking the elevator doors. The unease rippling from the Morellis is a nice appetizer before I feast on their stupidity.

Finally, the doors open, depositing us onto the 80th floor. The savory scents of perfectly seared beef and garlic hanging in the air has my stomach grumbling. I'd give up any five-star meal, though, to have canned hamburger slop with Ash.

I try not to think about her making that bizarre shit in my kitchen the next time, but the thoughts barge in anyway. Barefoot and a messy bun piled on top of her head. A sassy grin and moving about as though my space belongs to her. It's a dangerous thought—one I haven't been keen on entertaining until now.

Things are changing.

I'm beginning to accept that Ash is a formidable opponent.

She plays my game better than me.

As tempting as it is to dwell on thoughts of the girl who stormed into my world leaving a trail of Starburst wrappers, pink feathers, and a whole lot of fucking attitude, I need to focus.

I have Morellis to shame.

The maître d' greets us and ushers us through the busy restaurant to an eight-top table in the all-glass floor-to-ceiling-windowed corner. It's set for six place settings. Anthony is seated beside one head of the table, a thick file of paperwork sitting on the tabletop in front of him. The goons and my two men flank the windows on either side, remaining nearby in case they're needed, but out of earshot for our business dealings.

I take a seat at the head of the table beside Anthony and Perry sits next to me. Leo takes the other end with their attorney between him and Anthony. Lucian sits to the right on Perry's side of the table.

All present and accounted for.

"Gentlemen," their attorney says, cutting right to the chase, "I'll be representing Mr. Leo Morelli this evening. I understand there is the sale of a property to discuss."

I give him a nod of my head. "That property belongs to me now."

Perry's foot nudges mine, probably reminding me not to goad them. I move my foot away because it's going to take a lot more than Perry's kicking to keep me from fucking with the Morellis when I have their undivided attention.

A waiter comes by to take our drink order, momentarily pausing our game. As soon as the waiter leaves, I nod at Anthony.

"Mr. Constantine wishes to make this as painless as possible. He's offering to purchase the Baldridge building back at the original thirty-eight-point-five-million-dollar sales price. I've pre-written the contract." He untucks the papers from his folder and hands them to Evan beside him. "It's fairly cut and dry as you'll see."

Leo scoffs but Lucian's hard gaze cuts off whatever refute he might have been ready to throw out. That lasts all of three seconds. "Forty," Leo throws back, leaning forward and turning his head my way. "Take it or leave it."

I relax in my chair, studying Leo for a long beat. "No."

"You're lucky, Mr. Morelli," Anthony says, "that he's not asking to shave down the price any considering everything you've done."

The Morelli lawyer shakes his head at Leo to stop him from speaking. "Leo Morelli doesn't concede that he's reneged on the original deal. This offer of sale is merely the Morellis entertaining the Constantines."

Anthony pulls out more documentation. "These text records between Mr. Morelli and Miss Elliott are indicative of Mr. Morelli's efforts to threaten, harass, and blackmail the young woman when it was explicitly detailed in the original agreement that if this were to happen, Mr. Morelli would immediately sell the building back to my client."

"You can't prove it was me," Leo says, his voice bored, ignoring the efforts of his attorney to keep him quiet. He doesn't even glance at the papers. "That's not my phone number."

"Sworn testimony by Miss Elliott that you took her phone when you came into her home is but one piece of evidence," Anthony says in a bored tone. "However, we also have records from the phone company that pings the location of her stolen phone to that of your residence, Mr. Morelli. Furthermore, we have video documentation from a few nights ago at the former Edge Steakhouse that you were the one using the stolen phone to threaten Miss Elliott."

I smirk at Leo, waiting for him to argue. His jaw works as he attempts to contain his rage. Fucking hothead always flies off the handle and loses his temper.

Anthony continues, "When Miss Elliott failed to give Mr. Morelli information on my client—"

"You have no proof of this," their lawyer says.

"Again, sworn testimony," Anthony says, "and the text messages are clear that if Miss Elliott wasn't to produce information regarding my client, Mr. Morelli would leak private sexual photos and videos to the press in an effort to defame both Miss Elliott and Mr. Constantine."

"This is bullshit," Leo mutters.

"Then sign the contract," Anthony clips out, "and the bullshit goes away."

Leo starts to speak, but I cut him off, my eyes landing on his older brother. "Lucian, teach your brother something, will you? Even Perry here knows there are some battles that aren't worth fighting. This is one of those that your family will not win. We made an agreement and it was breached. Let's behave like adults and move this along." I dart my gaze to Leo, pinning him with a hard stare. "Trust me when I say I will drag this through the courts for as long as I must. I will see to it that every dark secret you Morellis possess is brought into the light."

"You're threatening my client?" the Morelli lawyer has the balls to ask.

"I'm simply predicting their future if they don't play by the agreed-upon rules."

Our heated battle of wills ends when the waiter returns to pour wine and take food orders. The Morellis order steak, because they've been craving a good one for days now. Team Constantine—I'm going to kill Ash for that one day—order, too. The Morellis' humiliation and acquiescence are satisfying enough, but I'm hungry.

While they're deciding on side dishes, Anthony passes me his file folder. I pull it toward me and open it. Pictures and documentation sit neatly tucked inside. Ulrich's information. Interesting and useful. His timing is impeccable as always. I'll be making sure to give that man a bonus.

Perry leans in to peek at the folder and surprisingly doesn't give away his thoughts once he sees what's inside. I flip the

folder closed and hand it back to Anthony with a nod of approval to proceed.

"Forty and this goes away," Leo tries again, once the waiter leaves. "For good. You might be surprised at what you find out if you drag this through court. The Morelli secrets? Sure. You'd get those, but some of them have to do with Constantines."

Bullshit. It has to be bullshit, right? I flash back to my mother's urgency to shut this down, that sense that she's hiding something about Leo Morelli. So much deception all around me. I wouldn't be a Constantine, though, if I didn't uncover all of it. Rid the trash, build the empire walls higher, and fuck everyone who doesn't share our last name.

"Empty promises," I say, taking a moment to sip my wine. "You've proven to be a liar and a bastard." My gaze lands on Lucian as I set my glass down. "The Beast of Bishop's Landing, right?"

"Listen here," Leo growls, living up to his whispered nickname. "You don't get to come in here and—"

"Enough," Lucian interrupts. "The way I see it, Constantine is offering a simple solution to a problem that shouldn't even be one." Lucian glowers at me from across the table. "As simple as it is, though, I'm inclined to resist. It's clear you have some sort of attachment to that building."

"Your resistance would be a waste of your time, energy, and limited funds," I throw back. "I'm sure my mother also said as much."

"Is the proposed contract of sale legitimate?" Lucian asks their lawyer.

A nod. "It's straightforward."

"As was the original agreement," Anthony reminds them.

Leo glares at me. Yeah, fucker, you made this difficult, not me.

"Are you really going to give him what he wants?" Leo demands, turning his fiery hot anger on his older brother.

Lucian sighs. "Do *you* really want all our secrets dragged out in court? Maybe Winston would live to regret that, but so would we."

A dark look from Leo, but he doesn't dispute it.

"Mr. Constantine will purchase the building at the original price," Anthony says, bringing our meeting back on track. "Mr. Morelli, you can go ahead and sign the places indicated with a sticker. This will all be over soon."

Leo glowers at the document that's slid toward him. The Morellis always wear their emotions on their sleeves. Leo in particular has a legendary temper. Constantines are known for keeping their emotions beneath impenetrable layers of icy cold indifference. The fact that I'm burning with my own cold rage makes no appearance on my face.

Leo scrawls his name in the designated places. The documents are passed back to me where I take my time to read through the agreement again. Then, I sign in the necessary places. Harold will move the money tomorrow.

"Stop by my office in the morning," Anthony says to the Morellis, "to receive your check and to finalize the paperwork."

Once the signed document is tucked away in Anthony's folder, I stare down Lucian. "Now, for the other matters of business. First and foremost, let's talk about the consequences of Leo's actions when he released those defaming photos and videos."

"Is this a threat?" the lawyer interjects.

"No," I say with a one-shouldered shrug. "It's a conversation. Surely you must know how damaging the release of those private pictures and videos were to the Constantine name."

"So?" Lucian demands. "The contract is signed. It's finished."

Leo gives me a smug look, as if he's happy I'm forcing the issue. Understanding washes over him long before it does for his attorney. The contract was simple. Incredibly simple. So simple that it doesn't mention anything about the lawsuits I plan to file for the defamation. A separate issue entirely.

They took my word at face value. At the insinuation that this would all go away with the signing of Leo Morelli's name. But I'm not done fucking with them.

"Here's how it's going to go," I say, staring down Leo. "You'll make them go away. Whoever your people are in the media, contact them. Your efforts to squelch the fire your family started will be acknowledged. The lawsuits we have lined up ready to move forward on will remain unfiled. This problem will fade just as quickly as the stories all over the news will."

Leo, clearly irritated by my demands, bristles. "There will be no photos."

"See to it that it happens quickly," I state in a hard tone. "Otherwise, by Monday, we'll begin proceedings. Ticktock."

"Is that all?" Lucian demands. "We're growing tired of your games, Constantine. Get to the fucking point so we can eat in peace."

I lean back in my chair, bringing my fingertips together and grin. "Settle in, boys, I'm just getting started."



Ash

As soon as Winston left, I locked the door behind him, carried my bags upstairs, and began to explore his space since I have permission now. I'd been up here before under the premise of cleaning, but I'd been too nervous to properly snoop. Now I have the access I want.

I take my time checking out the other rooms once I've dropped my bags by his bedroom door. Each room is well-decorated. I'm sure he spends a fortune on an interior designer. When money is no option, you can have knickknacks that probably cost more than most people's homes. I grow bored at looking at the other rooms, saving the best for last.

His room.

It's dark navy like the rest of his home. High ceilings and massive king-sized bed with charcoal gray bedding. An enormous television hangs on the wall. I bet he wakes up to watch the news in super-size like an old man. Sniggering at my joke, I make my way into his giant bathroom. The clawfoot tub is gorgeous and I imagine us taking a bath together.

Dream on, girl.

At least he has warm towels now. I marvel over the inexpensive towel warmer I bought him off the internet. He's already installed it. Brat didn't even say thank you. I unpack my toiletries, making sure to leave all of my makeup and hair stuff on the pristine counter just to make his eye twitch. Satisfied with my presence in the bathroom, I make my way back into his room. His closet is huge and looks like a suit

warehouse bigger than my whore apartment. It's almost comical how many suits Win has. I take great pleasure in pushing a clump of them aside to hang my dresses. He's going to punish me for this later—when I'm tied and at his mercy on his bed—and I'm going to love every second of it.

Once I'm unpacked, I head back downstairs. I make a pit stop in the dining room to deposit the matching pair of pink bird salt and pepper shakers on the middle of his table. It makes me smile because they stand out like a sore thumb, but I'm pretty confident he won't move them because despite what he says, he loves our little bird. Just as I walk back into the living room, someone knocks on the front door.

Scout.

Oh, God, I hope not.

My heart nearly hammers out of my chest. I tiptoe over to the door to peek out the hole. The relief that floods through me is brief until dread slams into me.

Nate.

He makes a great show of jangling his keys, his glare on the peephole like he can see me through it. "Let me in, Ash. I know you're in there."

I cringe and hold my breath as if he can hear me.

"Fine," he grumbles, "I'll use my key and you can explain to Winston why you're trying to keep me out of his place when he *just* told me to get my ass up here to make sure you're not stealing anything."

Flipping off the door, I pretend he can see, and continue to bite my tongue. His fist slams hard on the door and I squeak out in surprise.

"I can hear you in there, dammit." He continues to shake his keys. "I'm coming in."

I wait him out.

"I said, I'm coming in," he grits out.

Unable to hold back, I say, "Then do it already."

A beat of silence.

"Don't be a bitch."

"Too late," I say sweetly. "You don't have a key, Nate."

He jiggles the handle. "Let me in, Ash."

"Go away," I yell and then cry out when his fists begin pounding hard on the wood.

Keaton comes flying out of the kitchen area, a scowl on his face. I hold my finger to my lips and mouth, "Nate." His brows furl together in a way that reminds me so much of Win.

"Jesus Christ let me in," Nate barks out, desperation in his tone. "Now."

"Why?" I demand. "So you can snoop around in his things? That's what you were doing after all, wasn't it? What were you looking for, Nate? I know all about your scheme."

I don't but I can pretend.

"Fuck off," he bites back. "That's rich coming from a gold-digging skank. That's what *you're* doing, isn't it? What's the matter? Does my presence impede on your attempt to bleed my best friend dry?"

Keaton's jaw works furiously but he keeps his mouth shut.

"Does Winston know you're fucking his baby brother, too?" Nate laughs, cruel and cold.

Keaton's glare is murderous. He opens his mouth like he's going to tell Nate off, but I slap my hand over it.

"Keaton's not here," I lie. "And Win knows better than to believe that bullshit."

"He never left when they did. What is it? Did I interrupt a kitchen quickie?"

My blood runs cold and Keaton's eyes widen. It's like he can see us. The thought makes me shiver.

"If you're done threatening me, you should go. I have a busy evening ahead of me contemplating how to get Winston to shower me with all his money. Bye, Nate. I'm calling building security now."

His hand slaps the door once more and then it's quiet. I peek out the hole, thankful to no longer see him standing there.

I go to open my mouth to say something to Keaton, but he presses a finger to his lips and shakes his head. Slowly, he walks to the edge of the entryway hallway that opens up into the living room and scans the space.

A creepy sense of dread fills me.

Are we being watched?

Keaton seems to think so and I'm not far behind him.

Those times Nate showed up, he made a beeline straight for the bar each time. I lean close and whisper to Keaton that we need to check the bar area. He gives me a clipped nod of understanding.

"Want to get shit-faced and watch a movie?" Keaton asks, his voice loud.

My heart is hammering in my chest. "Yeah, sure."

"Go turn on a movie in your room. No chick-flick shit. Action. Explosions. Something exciting." And loud. Noted.

I give him a bright smile as I casually walk into the living room. Then, I make my way into my bedroom. Once I turn on the television, I increase the volume and land it on an obnoxious action movie. Peeking around the corner, I note Keaton's back as he rummages around to make a drink.

"Need a hand?" I ask, prancing over to him. "I'm not that bad of a bartender."

We carry on, chattering about nothing of importance as we make our drinks. Both of us are discreetly looking for any cameras or bugs. There's a plant toward the end of the bar. I glance over at it looking for anything of interest.

"Here you go," Keaton says, handing me a drink. "This is the good stuff." He points to an old bottle of liquor at the back of the collection along the wall. "What movie did you choose?"

I notice the tiny black device taped to the side of the bottle. While I chatter about the actors in the movie, I set a dark bottle in front of the bottle with the device on it, blocking its view. We carry on our talking on our way toward the bedroom. Keaton leans in and closes the door. The movie plays a muffled sound while we tiptoe back to the entryway. He takes our drinks, sets them down soundlessly on the table by the door, and quietly turns the lock. It's understood we need to be silent, so neither of us speak as we sneak out of the apartment. Keaton locks it back and then grabs my elbow, motioning me away from the elevator and toward a stairwell. It's not until we're about five flights down and I'm panting, does Keaton speak.

"Neither Win nor Perry are answering, but that's to be expected," he says in a low tone. "I texted them to let them know we're leaving."

"Where are we going to?" I ask, my chest panting with exertion.

He shakes his head. "I'll tell you in the car."

I glance over my shoulder, paranoid that Nate is following, but no one is there. It's smart not to announce where we're going, though. I bite on my lip and nod. By the time we've made it down the million flights of stairs, Keaton has called the valet to bring his car to a side door. We head opposite of the lobby and out the door once we reach the first floor. Outside, a tricked-out black Range Rover waits at the curb. A valet tosses Keaton his keys and Keaton hands him a wad of hundreds. We both climb in and Keaton gets us the hell out of there.

"This is my fault," I grumble, lungs still screaming in protest at us going the long way down from Win's. "I let Nate in. I thought he was allowed to be there."

"It wouldn't surprise me if Nate had a key," Keaton grunts, "but the fact he's watching what goes on in Winston's house is fucking creepy."

"But he *doesn't* have a key. And why would he be doing that? What's his problem? Is he trying to catch me doing something?" I ask, frustration bleeding in my words. "You saw how much he hates me."

"I don't know, but my brother won't be happy."

"I feel like an idiot."

Keaton sighs as he puts on his blinker. "People are always out to get us, Ash. Always. When I'm at Pembroke, it's different. I sometimes forget about how ruthless this city is. But, every holiday and summer, I'm reminded. Now that you're Winston's girlfriend, his enemies become your enemies. It's just the way things are."

"But Nate is his best friend. His beef is with me, not Win, right?"

Keaton scoffs. "Anyone who messes with Winston's *things* has beef with my brother. He doesn't take that shit lightly."

"I prefer girlfriend over things," I huff out.

"My point is it won't matter that Nate is his best friend. This is a gross abuse of Winston's trust." Keaton shrugs. "He's possessive over you. If he thinks this is a threat against you, he'll retaliate in kind."

"I don't know," I argue, "I tried to tell him Nate's an asshole of epic proportions and shady. We fought over it. He left me and basically ignored me for days."

"Hmm"

A laugh bubbles out of me. "That was probably every Constantine's first word."

He shakes his head, though he's amused. "We're going to the Constantine Compound. I texted Perry and Winston both to give them the update. We can hang out there until they finish." "With your mother. Yay," I deadpan.

"I'm sure Mother will be busy planning whose life she's going to destroy next," Keaton mutters. "Tinsley will be happy to see us, though."

"Will my bird be okay at Win's?"

"Francis is there. She'll keep an eye on him."

"What do you think Nate wanted inside for?"

"Besides catching you saying or doing something to prove you're a money-thieving bitch, I don't know."

"I think he's been looking for something. Not just on me." I frown as I look out the window. "When he showed up, both times he wanted to go upstairs to use Winston's towel warmer."

"Winston doesn't have a towel warmer."

I flash him a grin. "He does now."

"I will never in a million years understand your relationship with him, but if we're basing it on what I've gathered and the never-ending news clips, it's super fucked up."

"Gee. Thanks. But you're right. Totally fucked up."

"And you're happy about that..." He laughs. "He joked about putting your bird in his will. That's not the brother I know."

"He's pretty amazing when he stops acting like a total and complete dick."

"So Nate's been snooping around in Winston's room? Looking for what? To borrow a boring-ass necktie?"

"I'm not sure but he convinced me twice he needed to go up there and I let him." I hate that I can be so blind sometimes. "No wonder Win looked at me like I had three heads when I told him Nate came by. He wasn't supposed to be there. Why didn't he say anything?"

"Because my brother holds his cards close to the vest. He doesn't typically go out guns blazing on a hunch. If he thought something was shady, he'd investigate it endlessly until he was ready to move."

"Like dominoes," I say absently. "Perry said the same thing. He's calculating and a master strategist."

"When he gets done wiping the floor with the Morellis, he can confront Nate and see what the hell is his problem. Whatever Nate is doing needs to be addressed."

I chew on my bottom lip, thinking. "Do you think it was Nate who tipped off the press?"

"But it was Scout who called Win, right?"

"Connected?"

"Doubtful. Nate might be up to some shit, but he doesn't associate with little assholes like the Mannford triplets."

"Leo Morelli does. Associate, I mean. With the Terror Triplets."

"Leo's trash like the rest of the Morellis," he says simply. "Nate wouldn't risk his friendship with my brother to go behind his back with them. That's like the ultimate sin in Winston's book."

"Trust me," I grumble. "I know."

I wish I had my phone or my purse. It'd give me something to do other than wring my hands together as I try to piece together the mess that is my life. I ache for Winston to finish up with Leo and come back to me. In the past, I might have relied on my father if I were afraid or worried, but lately, it's Win who keeps popping up as my knight in shining armor.

"Don't worry," Keaton assures me. "Whatever it is, Win will figure it out. He's good at that shit—good at everything if I'm being real. Don't tell him I said it though. I'll deny it to the death."

"Your secret is safe with me."

Jokes aside, he's right.

Winston Constantine is the king of this godforsaken city for a reason.

Because no matter what, he always lands on top.

This time, it'll be with me and our bird.



Winston

I wait until the waiter has dropped off an appetizer the Morellis ordered. They busy themselves with piling bruschetta onto their plates. Tension fills the air, but I sip my wine as though I don't have a care in the world.

Truth is, I have lots of things worrying me, but I'll be damned if I give off any vibes to these bottom feeders.

Perry discreetly shows me his phone. It's a couple of messages from Keaton.

Keaton: Me and Ash have to bail.

And then, a few minutes later.

Keaton: On way to CC. We're fine but call me as soon as you can. Cameras at your place, so don't go home.

As much as I want to start demanding to know what the hell happened, I pretend as though the texts don't have me on the verge of losing my mind. I give Perry a nod of acknowledgment. He puts his phone away and together we watch the Morellis plow their way through the bruschetta.

"I know you're friends with the Mannford triplets," I say to Leo, just as he's swallowing a gulp of his wine.

"Teenagers? No, that's more your style, Constantine."

"The twatlets let you into their house the night of my birthday party. That's when you stole Ash's phone." I cock my head to the side, bullying my way inside his mind with just one penetrative stare. "They're your buddies." "Hardly," Leo says, his tone mocking. "After the night we saw each other in the club, let's just say I had a sudden interest to know everything there was about Winston Constantine's new plaything. When I learned she had brothers, I contacted them to get more information on her and her connection to you. We met up and that was that."

You met up with them and conspired to terrorize her together like some sort of douchebag gang.

"Why would you even give a shit about me?" I ask.

"You really don't know, do you?" A hard smile crosses Leo's face. "The things you don't know about your own family would shock you, Winston. It's not about you. It never was. I'm not surprised your mother never told her favorite son all her dirty secrets."

Lucian cuts in before Leo can say anymore. "As entertaining as this gossip hour is, can you get to the point?"

"The point is," I say, my glare still locked on Leo, "your brother here isn't the only one threatening Ash. The Mannford monsters are out of control."

The lawyer chooses to speak. "The Mannfords are not the Morellis' problem."

"When they're threatening Ash under Leo's direction, they do become their problem," I clip out. "Just this evening, Scout Mannford threatened Ash's life."

Leo's eyes are narrowed. "I'm sorry to hear that your soon-to-be child bride has been getting her feelings hurt by her evil stepbrothers, but it's still not our problem. Have fun proving in court that it is. This is reaching and you know it."

I remain in a staring match with the head Morelli. His arrogance ripens the air with each passing second. If he wants to gloat on a win he hasn't won, I'll allow him his moment. Probably been having wet dreams for years for this very second in time. As the silence stretches on, his smugness fades and apprehension glints in his dark eyes.

That's right, fucker, you forgot who you're sitting across from.

I smirk, taking a long swallow of my wine. Cracking my neck, I allow the silence to continue to drag. In the distance, the dull murmur of couples having a romantic dinner can be heard. But at our table it's so quiet you can hear the faint strains of the piano out in the lobby.

The waiter returns with our meals. I'm patient as I wait for everyone to get situated. The delicious aromas have my stomach growling, but I'll deal with that later. One by one, the men cut into their meat so the waiter can ensure they're cooked to their specification. Once the waiter scurries off, I wait for them to begin their meal. Lucian cuts off a hunk of his filet and shoves it into his mouth. He's barely started chewing when I decide to speak again.

"The Mannford triplets are your problem because, spoiler alert, they belong to you." I grin at Lucian who growls. "Well, not you specifically, but your uncle, Vincent."

Anthony opens the file folder, takes hold of the pictures and documents Ulrich sent to him, and bypasses their lawyer to hand them to Leo. He snatches them from Anthony's grip to glower at what we've provided.

Evidence.

And lots of it.

Manda Mannford was one of Vincent Morelli's young mistresses while she was in college. It took some digging on Ulrich's part, but he produced photos of the two of them kissing and handholding, many hotel receipts, and monetary gifts to Manda all around the time she found out she was pregnant. Everything stopped not long after she went to the doctor to confirm her pregnancy. There are surveillance photos of Manda with Vincent the evening of her doctor appointment walking into a restaurant together. The next day, the two of them met up with his attorney. Based on the documentation pilfered by Ulrich, Manda left that law office a million dollars

richer, had three education funds set up, and was the owner of a new Porsche. All to keep quiet about who the father of her babies was.

"What's your play, Constantine?" Lucian demands since his brother is still flipping through the documentation.

It pleases me greatly that they're all neglecting their juicy steaks, letting them grow cold as they try to make sense of the mindfuck I just dropped in their laps. Even if it means my steak also turns cold and rubbery.

"I already told you. I want Ash left alone. That's what I always wanted."

"This is all illegally obtained information," Leo says.

"Which is why I'm coming to you first," I say smoothly. "We wouldn't want the press to get ahold of this because they won't care how they got the information. Imagine what other secrets they might uncover if they look too closely." I shake my head. "Coming from someone who recently experienced a scandal, I must say it's expensive and time consuming. But where I can staunch the financial bleeding, what exactly can a Morelli do? Your best bet is cutting it off at the pass."

Sure, they have money, but they also have more dirty, dark secrets.

"What do you want?" Leo demands. "You have the building and my word that the media will be dealt with regarding your sex scandal and the promise I will leave your girlfriend alone." He growls. "But that's not enough, is it? Spoiled little shit. I should call your bluff and make you drag this into court. See if you like what secrets would be uncovered about your mother."

Ignoring his dig, I shrug and polish off the rest of my wine. I flick two fingers at Lucian. "I want you to claim them."

Lucian's jaw clenches, rage rippling from him. "The Mannford triplets?"

"Now, Mr. Constantine," the lawyer begins, huffing, "my client will not—"

"I don't care how it's done, but I want you to put the triplets under Morelli control. They're your cousins after all," I grind out, ignoring the attorney. "Right now, they're useless with their idle threats because they can't hardly fucking walk, but when they can again, rest assured, they'll continue to terrorize Ash. Leo got the ball rolling when he conspired with them and now you're going to finish what he started."

Leo started this shit and we're not leaving until they've agreed to deal with it. It's strange that he's looking at me with a satisfied gleam in his eyes, as if he actually wanted this outcome. As if he knows something that I don't.

"What else do you have in your folder?" Lucian says, his tone hard. "What other surprises should I be looking forward to?"

"That's all," I say with a wicked smirk, "for now anyway."

"We'll have to verify these claims first. Paternity tests."

"Take your time. They won't be walking for a few weeks anyway." I push my chair out and stand. "But once you confirm what we already know based on your uncle's history with sleeping around, deal with them. They're reckless and out of control. I don't want them near my...girlfriend."

No sense in denying it now. By claiming her officially, they'll definitely be forced to back the fuck off or I will unleash every power to destroy them that I have in my arsenal.

I give the Morellis another minute before I walk around the table to stand beside Lucian. Two of their meathead musclemen take a step forward but I'm not worried about them. Xavier could handle them with his eyes closed if push came to shove. Leo's shoulders are tense and Lucian glowers at me as though he can melt me with his glare alone.

Me.

The man frozen solid in cold, hard apathy.

There aren't enough fires in this world to make that happen.

I hold my hand out to Lucian. Where Leo needed a written agreement and he still reneged on it, people like Lucian and me, prefer to shake on it. A man's word is binding. We're both the oldest sons in our families.

"I'm calling a temporary truce," I tell him. "I will back off on all things Morelli once the Baldridge building is back in my name."

"And..." Lucian implores, making no move to lift his hand.

"All you have to do is keep the triplet fuckwads in your territory, under your rule."

"Is that all?" Lucian mocks.

"It's very simple. If you don't and those assholes come after my girlfriend, the truce will be off. Not only will it be off, but I'll see it as an act of war. You do *not* want to go to war with me."

I will make it my entire mission to destroy each of their lives one by one until they have nothing left but regret that they let a rare truce from a Constantine slip through their meaty grip.

Lucian makes me wait for almost a minute longer. I stand there, nonplussed, hand waiting in the air as he eyes it like it's a loaded gun. Finally, he juts out a hand despite his attorney's grumble of argument. I shake the hand of a man I hate—the family my dad hated too. This feels like a dirty deal and the urge to wash my hands is strong, but it's necessary. Our parents may have started this feud, but it's up to us to keep the peace.

Morelli is just another bastard in a corrupt city that runs on filth and greed.

The deal he made is with the devil who runs everything with an iron fist.

"Evening, boys," I say after we shake on it. I drop a couple of hundred-dollar bills to cover the meal, letting them rain down on Leo's cold steak. "Pleasure doing business with you."

Perry follows me but Anthony lingers, probably to finalize any details on his end. Xavier and Todd remain with him in case he needs backup. It's not until we're in the elevator and going down does Perry finally speak.

"Holy fuck," he breathes. "That was intense. What was that shit Leo was saying about our mother?"

"I don't know," I admit as unease pools in my stomach. *I* should call your bluff and make you drag this into court. See if you like what secrets would be uncovered about your mother. "It's probably nothing. Bullshit and lies."

"You think they'll really deal with the triplets?"

"They have no choice and Lucian knows it. Leo fucked them and it all goes away if they play nicely. I'm sure the Morellis have bigger fish to fry than our little guppy, Ash. A truce with us is worth its weight in gold. They'll bring those twatlets to heel."

"Well done," Perry says, holding up his fist.

I bump it with a roll of my eyes. Thankfully my phone buzzes saving me from further brotherly bonding weird-ass bullshit.

"Constantine," I bark out in greeting.

I listen for a bit and then grunt out my agreement before hanging up.

"I'm dropping you off so you can get your car," I tell Perry, "and then I want you to get to Ash and Keaton. Find out what happened and make sure they're okay. Something just came up at the office."

It seems the night just got a little more interesting.



Ash

I'm overjoyed at getting to see Win's mom twice in one day. Completely ecstatic. So excited I can barely contain my giddiness.

My attempts to convince myself are squashed the moment Keaton leads me into the living room where Caroline and Tinsley are seated. Caroline, in a leather armchair, is no longer wearing her smart suit but has changed into what must be considered casual for her—a rose gold velour tracksuit. It's such an old lady thing to wear but of course she looks like a million bucks. Not a billion because, well, it's a tracksuit. Tinsley is comfortable on the couch in a pair of white, fuzzy pajama pants and a giant Pembroke Prep rugby hoodie, that if I had to guess based on the sheer size of it, belongs to her brother.

"A little late for an unannounced visit," Caroline says, setting her iPad aside on the end table beside a lamp, her tone cool and bitchy as always. Though she also seems a little more high-strung than usual. As if she's worried. "Winston at his Morelli meeting? They're taking a long time. I told him I wanted this shut down. Now."

Keaton saunters in and plops down next to his sister. "He's there, and I got stuck babysitting his girlfriend."

I could smack him right now. While his mother's attention is still on him, I scratch my face with my middle finger earning a smirk from him.

"Someone explain," Caroline clips out, clearly not in the mood for games.

That makes two of us.

"After you dropped me off today when we went shopping ___"

"Wait," Keaton interrupts me, "you went shopping with Mom?"

Tinsley's brows lift in surprise.

"Yes," I mutter, continuing on. "Win needed new salt and pepper shakers."

Tinsley smothers a laugh while Keaton shakes his head. Caroline is not impressed. She flicks her fingers at me in one of Win's signature moves, indicating for me to keep the story moving.

"This reporter was waiting for me by my door. I, uh, tried to call my dad but..." I chew on my bottom lip to keep from crying. "I called Winston. He didn't pick up, so I left him a text. The reporter accidentally pushed me or fell into me, I'm not sure, and I bumped my head. When I came to, he was taking pictures." A flood of heat burns my cheeks. "My dress had ridden up and—"

"That's enough," Caroline bites out, thankfully ending that disgusting retelling. "Keaton, call Ulrich."

"Already two steps ahead," he says waving his phone. "I called him earlier while Francis made me dinner."

Caroline's glare is back on me, searching for answers.

"Winston showed up," I say, unable to keep the smile off my face, "and he ran the guy off. We were, uh, hanging out when he got a call from my stepbrother. It must have been threatening because Win then helped me pack my stuff up and my bird so we could go back home."

"Home," Caroline repeats as though the word is sour on her tongue.

"He made some calls," I continue, "obviously to Keaton and Perry. I'm not sure who else. When we arrived at

Winston's, they were there waiting for us. Keaton stayed with me while they went to their meeting."

Keaton's features grow stormy as he takes over. "I was talking to Ulrich when I heard banging. Nate was trying to get into Win's place."

Caroline's brows pinch together. "And you didn't let him in?"

"Win said no one was to come inside," I explain. "Nate started freaking out about how Win would be angry I didn't let him in. Then, he accused me and Keaton of being together. Oh, he also called me some choice names. But, when I threatened to call security, he left."

"He knew I was there," Keaton chimes in. "He knew I didn't leave with Perry and Winston. Nate's always been cool but he was flipping his shit. I got a weird feeling by some of the things he'd said like maybe he could see us."

I pace the floor, guilt eating at me. "A couple times before, he'd tried to come in and wait for Winston. He said he had a key. I'd believed him. I'm sure he planted a camera during one of those visits."

"A camera?" Tinsley asks, eyes wide with shock.

"We pretended to be getting drinks to watch a movie," Keaton says, "and found it stuck to a liquor bottle."

Caroline's expression is unreadable. "What does your brother think of this tidbit of information?"

"Still with the Morellis," Keaton answers. "Decided this was our safest place to lie low until they finish."

"I don't understand why Nate would put a camera in Winston's house," Tinsley says, a frown of confusion on her face. "He comes to family brunch a lot and is like a partner or something at Halcyon."

"Not a partner," Caroline and I say in unison.

"I think Nate hates me," I admit with a sigh. "He's probably trying to get proof that I'm just some poor maid after Winston's money. Then Win can be free to date *Layla*." I make sure to say her name in the distasteful way so they know exactly how I feel about the rich widow who sometimes goes to lunch with *my* boyfriend.

"You're not poor," Caroline says, ignoring the Layla comment altogether. "Not by a long shot."

"I've earned some money," I admit, not meeting her gaze because how I earned that money isn't something you want to tell your boyfriend's mother.

"I'm not talking about that money."

That money?

As though I have piles of it lying around.

"I was having a little chat with Ulrich when I dropped you off today," Caroline reveals. "He found some interesting information about Winston's new little..." She trails off.

"Lover? Obsession? Girlfriend?" I offer with a shrug. Future love of his life and mother of his children?

"Distraction." Caroline flashes me a predatory smile that makes me shiver. "You have many secrets, don't you?"

I frown at her. "My only secrets were revealed this week."

"Tell me," Caroline says, iciness in her tone, "since you couldn't have your inheritance, you thought to go after something better?"

I glance over at Keaton in confusion. His brows are furrowed but he says nothing. Tinsley is just as lost as I am.

"I don't have an inheritance," I explain slowly. "I had a college fund but Dad blew through that when he was wooing the stepmonster mommy." I sigh, waving my hand in the air. "That's what got me into this whole mess in the first place."

Caroline's probing stare peels me apart, flaying through every miniscule expression I make. She can probably even hear my heartbeat because she's creepy like that. I wait for her to find whatever it is she's looking for—whatever it is she thinks I'm hiding. I'd like to know about it too if it's there.

"This 'mess' being a relationship with my son." Her brow arches.

I stifle a grin, biting on my bottom lip so hard it hurts. "'Mess' is the polite way of putting it." The Winston Freak Show is more like it.

"Sit down, girl, you're giving me a headache having to crane my neck up to look at you," Caroline finally says in exasperation, her veneered façade cracking slightly. "Keaton, make us some tea."

He elbows his sister. "Go make some tea."

"Isn't that what Agatha is for? I don't know how to make tea." Tinsley scowls at him.

"I could make it," I offer with a shrug.

"Sit," Caroline commands.

She doesn't have to say anything else to Keaton because he stands, yanking Tinsley up to her feet, and mutters, "You have to help me figure this shit out."

Once we're alone, Caroline's grimaced features smooth out. "When I began looking into—the poor maid who was distracting my son—imagine my surprise when I learned who your grandmother was."

Mom didn't talk much about her. My grandmother died when I was little, but Mom didn't take me to the funeral. I'd always guessed there was bad blood between them, but never asked since Mom never brought her mother up.

"Barbara comes from one of the oldest families in the city," Caroline tells me. "Old money."

"Mom didn't like her all that much. I think they had a strained relationship. From what Dad told me the other day, though, Mom gave up her inheritance to be with him. Kind of romantic, really."

"What do you think became of the money?" Caroline asks. "When Barbara died?"

"Went to charity?"

She laughs, cold and mocking. "Silly, naïve child. No."

"It certainly didn't go to me," I grit out. "Dad wouldn't have had to rob my college fund if so."

"That's because it's still tied up in stipulations." Her blue eyes harden as she sweeps her critical stare over me. "Do you know what those were?"

"Umm, no."

"Don't slouch," Caroline bites out, waving an irritated hand at me that has my spine straightening. "You can have all your grandmother's old, old money. Your entire inheritance."

"If?" There's always an if.

"Marry a Morelli."

All the blood drains from my face and the room spins. "W-what?"

"According to what Ulrich and Anthony uncovered for me, you're able to have your inheritance if you take the same deal your mother said no to. Marry a Morelli."

"Ew," I snarl. "Never. They're evil, scary rats. They're the enemy."

She glowers at me, continuing to peel me apart. "Anthony is still looking into a number, but, darling, it would make you rich. We're talking millions and millions."

An image of Leo's handsome but frightening face fills my mind. A full-bodied shudder wracks through me. I'd rather die poor and living under a bridge than willingly marry one of those mobster creeps.

"I would never marry a Morelli," I grind out. "I don't care if Win and I break up. Nothing would ever make me marry one of those monsters."

"The Morellis have money too," she reminds me, her gaze fierce and calculating. "But you're playing a long game, hmm? Why have your grandmother's money and the Morellis' money when you could be...how do you put it? Team Constantine?"

"I have no long game. I don't care about the money."

"It's a gamble." Her blue eyes blaze with challenge. "You could lose both."

"I said I don't care," I growl. "I'm going to college to make my own damn way. Winston and I started as some sort of game, but we're not anymore. It's complicated to others, I'm sure, but something the two of us understand." I pin her with a hard stare. "I don't plan on losing Win, and honestly, I don't think he'd let me go." A smile curves my lips up. "He put Shrimp in the will."

She blinks hard several times.

"Our bird," I elaborate, enjoying the way her sculpted eyebrow twitches.

Ignoring my comment, she grabs her iPad, swipes it on, and then hands it to me. Her perfumed scent wafts around me, threatening to choke me. I snatch the device from her and stare at the document in front of me.

A will.

My grandmother's will.

Curious, I read through it. Caroline was right. I'm to be the sole heiress to the Huffington fortune as long as one certain provision is met. I must marry a Morelli. If I don't marry a Morelli by my twenty-first birthday, or if I marry someone else, my money goes to the next of kin. There's a lot of legal jargon that I don't understand, but that's the main gist.

"Like, if I got pregnant?" I ask, confused on the "next of kin" part.

Caroline Constantine shudders, actually shudders. "Dear God you better not be pregnant." She rushes along as though that thought is too horrifying to consider. "Since you have no siblings, your next of kin is your father."

I don't like where she's going with this.

"Dad can have the money," I grumble. "I said I don't care."

"I'm sure he was counting on that childish attitude," she bites out, stinging me with her words. "He probably thought he could manage the money on your behalf as well. Such a noble father. But you just said he blew through your college fund on Manda Mannford. Hmm. Something doesn't add up. That doesn't seem very noble at all."

Tears prickle at my eyes. Dad couldn't have known about this. He and Mom gave up the inheritance so they could be together. If he didn't care then, he certainly doesn't care now. Right? Dread pools in my stomach. Ever since Manda came into the picture, Dad has been different.

"Baron knew," Caroline says, eerily reading my mind. "There's documentation of him reaching out to your grandmother's attorney when you were still a minor to obtain the newest copy of the will. Not long after he started his relationship with Manda."

My blood runs cold. "What are you saying?"

"That you may not care about money, but every single person around you does." Her glare is icy cold. "If you're so set on my son, surely you've noticed that money is the driving factor of everything he does."

"No, his family is," I interrupt. "Then the money."

She studies me for a beat before continuing. "My point is, if you have any hope of being with him in the long run, you're going to have to start to care. His fortune is his legacy. It's

what makes him a Constantine. Ignoring his money is ignoring a part of him."

"Manda is loaded." My brows scrunch together as I try and figure out what all this means. "She wouldn't care about my inheritance. I don't understand it, but she really loves my dad."

"Does she?" Caroline asks. "Or was this some scheme? The woman has a history of getting what she wants."

"Dad wouldn't allow himself to get manipulated."

"No?" she asks, arching a brow. "Then that means he's a co-conspirator."

Anger surges up inside me. "A co-conspirator to what?"

"To defrauding you out of your fortune."

"I'm not going to marry a Morelli," I grumble. "According to the will, it's his if I don't. That's not defrauding. That's just life."

Caroline shakes her head, pursing her lips together. "Read the extenuating circumstances clause again. Or better yet, let me sum it up for you. That fortune is yours and your father forfeited it to you by marrying Manda."

"That makes no sense."

Keaton bursts into the living room holding his phone up. "Ulrich just called. Clay sang like a canary. The person who leaked that you were at the whore apartment to him was Manda Mannford. Your stepmother. That's how Scout must have found out, too."

A sick feeling of dread has bile creeping up my throat. "W-what?" It was supposed to be Nate or Deborah. Not Manda. "I don't understand."

"She's trying to do everything in her power to destroy your relationship with my son," Caroline reveals.

"Why though? If I get married to Win one day, the inheritance goes to her and Dad. She should be happy I'm taking care of it for her."

"No, sweetheart," Caroline says in a condescending tone that makes me tense with unease. "Manda nullified the will by marrying Baron. Her children are the sons of a Morelli. You can't marry someone of relation, by blood or legally binding marriage certificate. It cancels out the intent of the will."

"What?" Keaton and I both demand at once.

"The triplets are test tube babies," I murmur, my voice so soft I'm sure she barely hears.

"So naïve," Caroline says with a frustrated sigh. "You don't really believe a woman in college studying to become a doctor would willingly get pregnant during that time with triplets?"

Okay, so that doesn't sound plausible at all.

"It means your inheritance is owed to you. Now."

"Oh "

"Why does Manda care, then, if I get with Winston? I would be out of her hair and I'd never have known about the money. She could have let it play out."

Caroline smiles, almost prettily at me, but then I realize it's the same smile Win has when they've won something hard earned. "Because she knew we'd find out her dirty secrets. When you got involved with Winston, that put my spotlight on you. In my effort to know every little thing about you, I'd uncover her secrets and the will."

Manda tried to keep me under her thumb. Let Dad drain my college fund so I would be reliant on her for my education. Probably why she had her sons chase off all my friends and Tate in effort to keep me from accidentally getting knocked up or something. And when I started randomly seeing Winston, she pretended, at first, to be thrilled by the idea, but it wasn't long that she was telling me I wasn't deserving of it. She's always hated me and now I know why.

Money.

She's always wanted money.

"How did Manda even know about the will and my grandmother?" I ask, accepting the fact that Manda really is the evil stepmother I thought her to be and Dad is either compliant or just heavily under her spell.

"We all have secrets," Caroline says, with a mysterious and slightly sad cast to her tone. It makes me think she has secrets, too. "But actually, Manda knew Maggie. In fact, they went to the same retreat together many years ago."

"My mom told her about being disinherited?"

"They were at a women's retreat. Those things bring the ladies close together and they often reveal things to one another that they normally wouldn't. Manda has been waiting years to swoop in."

"That's so...creepy. Why? It's just an inheritance from one woman."

Caroline's smile is wolfish. "An inheritance from one woman that rivals the Constantine fortune, darling. She's been waiting for this for a very long time."

"But it's mine," I say, finally understanding a little of how Win feels when people are always out to get him because of his money. It's frustrating and it makes you want to keep it from them on principle.

"Good girl," Caroline praises. "That's the spirit."

Manda, the scheming, lying, cheating bitch won't get a penny of it. I won't let that happen and something tells me Caroline Constantine, an unlikely ally, won't allow that to happen either.

"What do we do now?"

"We?"

"I'm Team Constantine now," I remind her.

She smirks at me but doesn't deny my words. "Keaton, get a hold of your brother. There's much to do."



Winston

HALCYON BUSTLES WITH activity all during the week from sunup to sundown. At night, though, once the cleaners have restored the offices back to their pristine glory, it becomes a silent tomb. Often, over the years, I've come in late at night to work in silence.

As I walk through the lobby on our floor, I inhale the fresh scent of lavender floor cleaner, turning on lights along the way to my office. My impromptu meeting will begin soon.

We need to talk.

I've spent the better part of nearly two decades avoiding "talking." There's nothing to say. Betrayal is the ultimate sin. It cuts off the tongue of the offender. Words are cheap and I'm anything but cheap.

Unlocking my office, I step inside and make my way over to my desk. As annoyed as I was to have to eat Greek takeout on the way here, I'm glad Perry forced me to. I don't want to have this conversation on an empty stomach. If my gut can handle Ash's canned food, I think it can handle the surprisingly delicious gyro from a cheap hole-in-the-wall restaurant he'd recently discovered.

While I wait, I text Keaton.

Me: Explain your texts.

The dots move and stop as he replies. An echo of the elevator dinging can be heard in the lobby. I pocket my phone and listen for the clacking of heels. Within seconds, the woman who tried to ruin my life appears in my office doorway.

Meredith Baldridge.

She's perfect as ever—on the outside. Her blond hair is sleek and straight. A form-fitting black dress hugs her endless curves. Spiked heels make her taller than normal. Expensive tits all but spill out of the low-cut V of her dress.

Her agenda is quite obvious.

Too bad I'm not biting at the worm she's dangling on her hook.

"Mer," I say in a bored tone. "Please, have a seat."

She flings her hair over her shoulder and struts over. The hem of her dress rides up with each long stride she takes.

Flawless.

Meredith has always been perfection.

I prefer messy and silly and sassy as hell.

Thinking about Ash nearly brings a smile to my face. I'll be damned if I let that creep out, though, and have Meredith thinking she earned it. This woman will never get my smiles ever again. She's lucky I'm giving her my time right now.

"You look tired, Winny," she purrs, taking her seat across from me. She leans forward, letting her dress gape a bit to show the barely hidden red lace of her bra.

"So do you."

She blinks at my words and stiffens slightly. "Uh, yes. Things are...stressful lately."

"Because of the stalker?"

Her perfectly plucked brows pinch together. "That too. Well, there's just so much to it really."

You don't say. You're a conniving bitch, Meredith, and I'm onto your game. Ulrich had lots of interesting things to show me this afternoon.

"That involves me somehow?"

"Everything in this city involves you," she says in a flirty voice. "You know that. It's one of the things I've always loved about you. Your unwavering authority. You're the man who runs everything and knows it."

To think I used to fall for her adulation. When I was a teenager, I was a fucking idiot, too busy being dazzled by her adoration and blowjob skills. Looking back, she was just playing me. I was a tool for her to use.

I'm no one's tool now.

"You flatter me." I lean back in my chair, arching a brow. "I'm assuming you'll get to the point of this meeting soon."

She lets out a measured sigh. "I'm sorry for what happened when we were kids. That was a lifetime ago and I was a foolish girl who made foolish decisions. I realize that now. I've spent years regretting the day I hurt you."

Blah, blah, fucking blah.

"Hmm."

"I recently took a long hard look at what I really wanted in life." She leans forward again, reaching a manicured hand across the desk toward me. "You. It was always you."

My bland, unaffected expression or the fact I don't reach to touch her back doesn't deter her.

"I'm leaving Duncan," she tells me, lifting her chin. "And not just because he'll be bankrupt by the end of the year. He's...well, he's a useless idiot who can't even get his dick up half the time."

So cold this vicious barracuda.

"Poor Duncan," I mutter. "His wife doesn't want him because he's about to be poor and he can't fuck."

"It's so much more than that," she mumbles, unbothered by my sarcasm. "He's weak. I mentioned to him I had a stalker and you know what he said?" "I could never presume to think like Duncan, so no, I have no idea what he said."

"That I should stay inside and stop going out so much." Her lip curls up. "As though that would stop a stalker."

"Did you really call me here to complain about your marriage, because if so, I don't have the time or patience for it?"

"My point is a real man would protect his woman." She leans forward again. "You would protect me."

"Before you tried to fuck me over when we were teenagers, perhaps, but you can't seriously be deluding yourself into thinking I would now."

Her painted-red lips purse into a pout. "You're still not angry about the past. I know you better than that, Winny."

"You're right. I honestly don't care anymore. About you or that time in my life."

She doesn't even flinch at my words. "Because of Layla?"

"Layla is a friend."

"Oh, that's right, because of the little girl." Her forehead wrinkles as she makes a sour face. "I understand you're almost forty, hon, but that cliché midlife crisis of dating someone half your age is beneath you." She flicks her wrist as if to dust off the thought. "These are small problems just as my marriage to Duncan is a small problem."

"Small problems indeed in the grand scheme of things," I agree. "We should discuss the bigger problems."

This finally gets her attention.

"Oh?"

"I know about you and Manda."

She titters out a laugh that makes her tits jiggle. "That she's my friend. That's not a secret, darling. We go way back."

"Way, way back." I lift a brow at her. "You met her at a retreat, didn't you?"

"Does it matter where I met her?"

"I think it matters more how you two became to be friends."

"And how do you think that is?"

"The both of you fucked that sleazy bastard Vincent Morelli. But whereas you got the abortion, she carried hers to term. All three of them."

She swallows but her lying face remains otherwise unflinching. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I bet that was quite a conversation. The two of you in your jammies, snuggled up by the fire talking about boys at the retreat. How did that even come about anyway? Did you say, 'Hi, I'm Meredith. I fucked a rat'? Manda confessed that, she too, fucked a rat. Just your usual rich lady gossip."

"Don't be ridiculous," Meredith snips, losing her cool.

"Ridiculous. Hmm. Was Maggie a part of this rat conversation?"

Her lips thin. "Who?"

"Don't be *ridiculous*, Mer. Maggie. My teenager girlfriend's dead mother. You know the one. Your bestie is now married to her husband."

"What does this even matter?" she snaps, pinning me with an angry scowl that probably has Duncan tucking his pathetic tail between his legs anytime she does it.

Me? I'm unimpressed with her dirty looks.

"It matters. Tell me something," I continue. "Did Maggie mention her own horrible fate that tied her to the Morellis? Here you two had gotten pregnant by one—the same one, in fact—and Manda was paid hush money to keep quiet about her babies, but Maggie was damn near being forced into their family and offered a considerable inheritance to do so."

"As if I'd ever want to be a part of that rotten family," she scoffs. "You know I hate them just as much as you do."

Never.

She could never hate them the way I do.

"Still, it had to sting that the two of you weren't allowed into the Morelli family. Not even Manda who carried their own flesh and blood." I cross my arms over my chest and study her fracturing façade. "I bet it made the two of you bitter. You were able to commiserate together at how wrong you'd been done. To moan about all you were owed. I'm getting hotter. I can tell by the look on your face. So whose plan was it to have Maggie killed?"

"I beg your pardon," Meredith scoffs. "I have no idea who you think I am, but I'm not some thug who has people killed. Seriously, Winny, you've lost your damn mind."

"Don't insult me," I growl, my tone harsh and cruel. "I pay good money for the best private investigators. They uncover anything there is to find. No matter how hard you try and hide, nothing is safe when a Constantine goes digging."

"I didn't have her killed. Didn't she die of natural causes?"

"Did she?" I shrug. "I guess I'll eventually find out for sure. I always do."

Her phone buzzes in her purse and she takes the opportunity to distract herself from our conversation to pull it out. She reads the text and then tosses it back into her purse.

"The idea to have Maggie killed probably didn't happen right away, did it?" I goad, poking at her with each word. "Each year on your annual retreats, you both probably started to resent her more and more, especially Manda who was saddled with three Morelli psycho-shits. Maggie had it made with her cushy life with her handsome husband whom she loved and her little princess. She'd chosen love over money and kissed her inheritance goodbye while she still pulled in a sizable income doing speeches. Everything in her life was going perfectly. It wasn't fair, was it?"

Anger flashes in her eyes. "You think you know everything."

"I know your stalker isn't a stalker at all."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Mer, Mer, Mer. It's like you don't even know who I am." I pause, letting that sink in. "That's right, you don't. You knew me intimately as a vulnerable young man. Not this man. You don't know what I'm capable of."

"Who do you think you saw?" she challenges, defiance making her nostrils flare.

"I had my guy retrieve the video surveillance at the restaurant that day I saw you and Manda. Your so-called stalker wasn't a stalker. It was my friend. Nate."

She gives a sharp shake of her head in denial. As if that'll convince me.

"It was Nate," I growl. "Question is, why was my friend, my best friend, meeting up with my ex and her bestie? Clearly, I intercepted a lunch between the three of you. Something I wasn't supposed to know about." I pause, quirking a brow. "To discuss Paris."

The color drains from her face. "Winny..."

"He's on the company phone plan you know. Nate. Funny how a little digging pulled up a number he talked to and often. Your number. Tell me. Are you his *baby*?"

"What? No," she chokes out.

When Ash revealed Nate seeing someone, I was surprised. He'd never mentioned it. Now I know why. His *baby* was Meredith. The phone records proved they communicated *a lot*. There's a ton of video footage—footage I easily obtained because Nate lives in the building I own—of her showing up at Nate's apartment. Sometimes she stayed the night. There were many pictures of them seen coming and going together, wrapped in each other's arms like lovers. So fucking bold.

Today—well, this whole week for that matter—has been a busy and eye-opening one.

"Your lies are getting old, Meredith. You're a conniving bitch. End of fucking story."

She gapes at me. "N-no. You don't understand. I was only seeing him to get close to you! He meant nothing to me!"

"You fucked him for no reason because your plan didn't work. Who else did you spread your legs for, Mer? Besides the Morellis? We know it wasn't for your pathetic husband."

"Winny..."

Defeat shines in her eyes which has her doing what every diva would do when she doesn't get her way. She throws a tantrum. Tears and all.

"Winny! I did this for us! All of this was for us!" Fat tears fall from her lids, streaking down her rosy cheeks. Unlike Ash, Meredith wears waterproof mascara. Even as she has a fit, she still remains put together. "Why do you think I called you tonight?"

This gets my attention. I arch a brow at her to continue.

"Nate's not who you think he is," she murmurs. "He's..."

"What? Embezzling behind my back? Fucking up my foreign deals like in Paris?"

Money was being funneled right under my nose, opened up under international Halcyon accounts with my forged signature. Specifically, in France. I'd come across something strange months ago and pulled the contracts to look at with Harold eventually. But then Ash showed up, distracting me for the time being. I'd planned to get back to it eventually, even going as far as to change the accessibility on the accounts that now require a series of passwords, different for each one and all locked away in my home safe in my closet. When Perry and I had to make our Paris trip, it was clear I'd needed to move things along, and I got Harold working on it.

She stands from the desk and walks over to the bookshelf to grab a tissue. After she dabs at her cheeks, she frowns at me. "You knew?"

"It took me a minute, but yes, I came to this conclusion."

It also must have been what Nate was searching for when he showed up at my house and somehow conned Ash into letting him in. He wanted access to the money he'd carefully funneled away for himself. If Ash was in on it with him, he'd have obtained what he needed because I gave her the access to it. But she wasn't his accomplice.

"You're not mad?"

"Are you insane? Of course I'm pissed." I also rise to my feet. "Thanks for this wonderful waste of my time where you told me everything I already knew. It'd be in your best interest to vacate the premises and never contact me again."

She rushes up to me, her face scrunching as more tears fall, her head shaking back and forth. "No, Winny. That's not all. He's...He's been losing it. Paranoid that you're going to find out. Ever since the Paris accounts he'd set up suddenly required passwords, he panicked. Worried that you knew and were playing some sort of game with him. Even went as far as to sneak into your house and look around for them but he couldn't ever get inside the safe. He was mad because he thought Ash was messing everything up."

Messing everything up?

Dread coils in the pit of my stomach and I don't like it.

"Start talking, Meredith, and fast."



Ash

I'm antsy without my phone. I don't know how the meeting went with the Morellis and it's driving me crazy. The second I hear Perry's voice, I bolt out of my chair on a hunt for him. I find him in a hallway but Winston is nowhere to be found.

"Where's Win? How did it go?"

Perry stops, runs his fingers through his hair, and sighs. "It was stressful but we got what we wanted. He got a call after and had to meet up at the office. Sent me to check on you and Keaton."

"Who was he meeting?" I demand, a sinking sensation in the pit of my belly.

"I don't know. Why?"

"Take me there," I tell him. "Come on. Let's go."

"No," Perry growls, sounding just like his bossy older brother. "We're staying here until he gets done."

"What if someone tries to hurt him?"

He smiles at me. "It's Winston. He's practically untouchable."

"Perry, I'm worried about him."

"He can handle himself. I'm not about to piss him off and go against his wishes." He starts walking toward the living room. "Come on."

"I'll be right back. I need to visit the ladies' room."

"There's a powder room right here."

"Win's room has a bidet," I argue.

He snorts, shaking his head and leaves me. As soon as he's gone, I hurry to Win's room. It's immaculate and beautiful as ever. The dread that started in the pit of my stomach has begun infecting other parts of my body like my heart and my mind.

Something is wrong.

I can sense it.

With a quick mash of a few numbers, I get Win's safe open. He's done the code in front of me here and at the office. It's also the door code to the Escalade he bought me. They're all the same. The fact he hasn't tried to hide it from me makes me want to cry. He trusted me with his Bugatti.

Okay, well, maybe not the Bugatti specifically but the keys are inside and waiting for me, so it kind of feels like serendipity.

I snag the keys and then slip out of his room, weave my way through the halls, and end up in the garage. After mashing a button to open one of the garage bays, I run over to the pearly white beauty. The fob opens the scissor door and I hop inside. As soon as the door closes, I mash the button to fire up the engine. It purrs like a kitten. I buckle my belt and then reverse out of the garage. My heart is hammering in my chest as I skid down the driveway, trying to keep a handle on the extremely fast vehicle that costs more money than I could dream of having.

Liar.

You're a rich bitch now.

At least I will be after I meet with my grandmother's attorney. Caroline, for usually being such a witch, was eager to help me. She got Anthony on the phone and started making plans. By next week, I can buy my own damn Bugatti. Or pay Win back if I accidentally wreck his.

My knuckles are white as I grip the steering wheel, cruising as quickly as I can while still keeping the car on the

road. I make the boring, too-long drive to Halcyon. When I whip into the valet lane, a man trots up, a confused expression on his face.

"Win let me borrow it. Keep it safe, please," I say as I jump out and toss him the keys.

He gives me a nod and I don't wait around. My shoes squeak across the quiet building lobby floors as I hurry over to the elevators. I hit the button several times, impatiently. As I wait, I wonder what I'll say to Win.

"Sorry I interrupted your meeting, but I was worried about you. Oh, and I stole your Bugatti. Wanna have sex now on my piles of money?"

He's going to kill me if I interrupt something serious and non-life threatening. But I have sick feeling. If he's meeting with Nate and doesn't know what a creepy bastard he is, he could be in trouble. The idea of Nate ever besting Win is nearly laughable. Still, I'd be devastated if something happened and I didn't at least try to warn him.

The elevators finally open. I'm lost in my own world as I mash the button for Halcyon's executive floor. Someone else steps into the elevator and hits the sixteenth floor. The doors close as I lift my gaze.

No.

"Nate—"

He backhands me across my cheek, sending me smacking into the panel of floor buttons. Before I can hit the alarm button, Nate yanks me to his chest, a hand slapping over my mouth.

"Shh," Nate rumbles, his pinky gently stroking my jaw despite the punishing grip he has on me. "It's time."

It's time? For what?

I struggle against him, kicking out, but he holds me in the center of the elevator so I can't reach anything. He's creepily quiet as we reach the sixteenth floor. His floor. A whimper

claws at my throat when the doors open. It's late, so no one is in the hallway. Too easily, he drags me to what must be his apartment. I start squealing behind his hand over my mouth, clawing and kicking.

"So help me, if you don't shut the fuck up, I'll snap your neck and push you down a flight of stairs."

I go deathly still at his words. What does he want from me? This goes beyond him thinking I'm a gold-digger. This is crazy. Win will lose his shit over him hitting me.

He manhandles me into his apartment. It's fancy but not as nice as Win's. Always second best. I wonder if that's his problem. But what's he going to prove by kidnapping me? Is this some effort to blackmail Winston out of his money?

"Sit down and don't breathe a word," Nate growls, his eyes manic and filled with fury. "I'm going to make a call."

He shoves me to the floor in front of the sliding glass door to the balcony. As soon as my ass hits the wood floors, I scream at the top of my lungs hoping a neighbor will hear. This is the wrong move, apparently, because it earns me a kick that catches me across my jaw. My head slams against the glass door hard enough the glass wobbles and my vision darkens. I blink my eyes trying to make the fuzziness around me fade. A metallic tang floods my mouth. Blood. I tongue the side of my cheek that my teeth cut into.

Screaming is just going to get my ass beat.

Think, Ash.

What would Win do?

He'd destroy him with his words.

"Wow," I sneer. "I knew you were pathetic, but this is an all-time low"

He glowers at me. "The fuck you say?"

"Poor little Nate. Always second best. It must really suck to always be in Win's shadow. It's a big shadow. Far reaching. So dark. And you were nothing."

His entire body tenses and I know I've hit a nerve. "Fuck you."

"Never. I know you're into scrounging up Win's leftovers, but I wouldn't fuck you if you were the last man on earth. I prefer powerful men. Not wannabees. Does it make you feel like a big man to have fucked Meredith?"

The surprise that morphs his features tells me I'm right. Predictable bastard. He basically served me that nugget of information when in his office the other day. Now I know it's true.

"Did she call you by Winston's name in the bedroom?" I taunt, giving him a cruel laugh. "I bet that fuck lasted all of two minutes it took you to come and then *you* were the leftovers because we both know that woman still has it bad for him"

He snags me by my hair, hauling me back to my feet. "You don't know shit, skank. You're just a money-grubbing whore who had to get in the middle of years of fucking work. It's all ruined because of you!"

Keep him talking.

Someone will have heard my screams and come running. Right?

"Winston will destroy you," I warn. "He's richer and more powerful than you could ever dream to be. You were supposed to be his best friend but you betrayed him. Why? Because you hate me?"

His hand comes around my throat, squeezing so tight, my eyes feel like they're bulging, and my face will burst. I claw at his hand as I desperately try to suck air into my lungs. Grabbing a handful of his hair, I yank him hard to the side. We both fall to the floor. Even with my fingers ripping at his hair, he manages to keep his brutal grip on my neck.

"Stop struggling and I'll let you breathe," he growls, sweat dripping off his brow and flinging into my hair.

I relax, mostly because my strength has left me. Thankfully he loosens his hold. His body still pins me to the hard floor and it disgusts me to have him pressed against me.

"She's more than leftovers," he says, his voice soft. "Meredith. She's my...everything."

I believe him. I'd heard it in his voice when he spoke to her the other day.

"Does she know that?" I rasp out, unable to keep from taunting him, even at such a disadvantage.

He squeezes my cheeks, his thumb digging in on the side I bit, and squishes my face as he brings his mouth close to mine. "She fucking knows. She loves me too, bitch." His hand relaxes. "I'm going to marry her."

"She's already married," I hiss out. "You're delusional."

"Stop talking." He sits up and grabs my wrists. I screech and wriggle but he's too strong. Easily, he painfully pins my wrists to the wood floors. "Just stop fucking talking."

Nope.

Not now.

Not when I'm trying to keep him busy until someone comes to help me.

"You screwed Paris up for him, didn't you?" I croak out, hating that tears are prickling at my eyes. "How long have you been messing up business for him and skimming off the top?"

"Skimming?" He barks out a harsh laugh. "Winston's so fucking rich he doesn't notice when millions walk out his door and into my pocket. It's not skimming, it's dumping handfuls of his wasted money into my damn bucket."

"What was in the safe that you wanted?"

"Documents I needed." He sneers. "He had to have found out what I'd done. I wanted in his home safe to get them. I'd searched everywhere I could. His office has cameras, so I couldn't try and get into that safe, but the one at his house is where he keeps his important shit. That was my money and he wasn't supposed to notice."

"Your money? Because you couldn't earn it yourself, you had to steal his," I throw back.

"Because my last name isn't Constantine, goddammit! That's the only thing he has on me—the only thing he's ever had on me! His motherfucking last name!"

"Delusional!" I hiss out. "He has everything on you! Smarter, sexier, better dressed, richer, better taste in women! You're nothing compared to him. You'll never be him which is why Meredith never left Duncan for you."

He releases my wrist to strike my face. The pain is so severe I choke out a sob, wincing at the overwhelming throbbing that's rattling the bones in my skull. Hot tears leak out as I use my free hand to protect myself from more hits.

"What are you going to do to me?" I whimper. "Winston won't let you get away with this."

"Why? Because you think he loves you?" Nate taunts. "Who's delusional now? You're an expensive fuck toy." He paws at my breast. "Maybe I should see why he's so goddamned interested in you. Is it these perky young tits?" His hand slides between us. "Or maybe it's this pussy."

I call his bluff and spit bloody saliva in his face. "You wouldn't dare. You love her too much."

His wild eyes flare at the challenge of my words. "You think you know everything, don't you?"

"I know you're risking everything for your love for her."

His features deaden as he yanks at the button of his jeans. "Maybe this has nothing to do with love and everything to do with hate. If I hurt you, it'll hurt him." He drags down the

zipper. "It's retribution for everything he's done. It's payback for being Winston motherfucking Constantine."

I scream until it earns me another brutal hit to the face and everything goes black.



Winston

MY PHONE BUZZES in my pocket as Meredith tries to pull herself together. I ignore her sobs to grab my phone. Keaton must have finished his text earlier. I read that one first.

Keaton: Dude, where are you? Some shit is going down. Nate is fucking you over. Call me. Some conspiracy shit with your ex and the triplets' mom too.

Then, there are about fifteen missed calls from Perry. I read the text he's also left.

Perry: Ash took off in the Bugatti. She was worried about you. Did she make it to the office?

Me: No. Find out where my car is. Let me know when you find her.

I text Xavier next.

Me: Get up to the office. I might need you to escort Meredith out.

"Hello?"

Looking up from my phone, I see Meredith's features go from annoyed to shocked to panicked in the span of a few seconds.

"Nate, slow down. You're not making any sense." A pause. "You have her? Why?"

I stalk up to Meredith and she cowers under my murderous glare.

"Ash?"

She nods, more tears spilling. "Winston—"

Yanking the phone from her hand, I start snarling threats to Nate but he's no longer on the line. I throw Meredith's phone back at her and then trot over to my safe on the wall.

"Where is he?" I demand as I start to input the combination. "Fucking spit it out."

"He...He's at his place. Oh God. Nate's losing it. Oh God."

I fling open my safe, pull out a loaded Glock, and then slam the safe shut. After chambering a bullet, I snap at her. "Walk. You better hope to fucking God she's okay."

She nods rapidly and starts for the door. "I'm sorry—"

"Why does he have Ash? Why is he so fucking obsessed with her? Tell me, goddammit!"

Meredith squeaks at my bellowed words that echo in the lobby of our floor. "I-I don't know."

"Liar. Talk and move faster," I bark out, taking off into a sprint toward the elevators. "Don't leave out anything. So help me, Meredith, if you dick me around right now, I will ruin you in any and all ways that I can."

I text Xavier once I reach the elevators and have pushed the button.

Me: 16th floor. Ash may be in trouble. Nate has her.

"He keeps saying she's ruining everything," Meredith says, breathless as she comes to a stop beside me as I wait for the elevator to reach this floor. "He thinks everything started going to hell when she came into the picture. It wasn't supposed to be this way. She was never supposed to date you."

The elevator doors open and I step inside. I mash the sixteenth-floor button and glower at Meredith.

"My money wasn't good enough? He wanted to fuck with my love life too?"

"You don't love her," Meredith scoffs.

I swear to fuck this woman is going to make me insane. "Why does he care?"

"Because! Before that little girl came into the picture, you were numb. A damn zombie. So focused on making money that you never paid attention to anything around you. But then she showed up and grabbed your interest out of nowhere. You started spending your money so fast you had to go and get Harold involved which made Nate nervous, especially since he lost access to those accounts. Ash is a nosy bitch, too. She was always around. Asking too many questions. Nate was paranoid she was going to find something out and tell you. He'd even tried to distract you by hooking you up with Layla, but that didn't work either. I told him to back off because you would start to notice, but he wouldn't listen."

The elevator opens on the sixteenth floor and I rush out, hauling ass to Nate's apartment. I can hear Meredith running to keep up with me. When I reach Nate's door, I twist the knob and push it open.

Red.

Blood-red fury clouds my vision.

Nate, someone I considered to be a brother, holds Ash against his chest, a sharp kitchen knife at her throat. I want to murder him with my own two hands. Right now, all I can focus on is the way the point of the blade pokes against the bruised flesh on her neck. He hurt her. He fucking hurt her while I was taking a goddamn stroll down memory lane with Meredith. And now, Ash is unconscious, her head lolled to the side. Blood is smeared over her lips and her jeans are unzipped.

Slowly, I approach him, hoping like fuck he doesn't completely lose his mind and cut her throat.

"Nate!" Meredith cries out behind me as she clacks her way into the apartment. "What are you doing? Oh my God!"

Nate's features contort into a pained expression. "Hey, baby."

"Let her go," she shrieks. "You'll go to jail for this."

"Jail?" He laughs. "No one's going to jail. Right, Win?"

"Right," I agree, my tone smooth and cool. "Put Ash down. She's hurt, man."

"I thought you liked to make her cry," Nate snaps back. "Kind of sick if you ask me. Who makes bitches cry and gets off on it?"

I clench my jaw, holding in a slew of insults. "Put Ash down. Walk out of here. Both you and Meredith can leave. I won't follow you. I'll even give you the passwords to those accounts you dumped money into."

"Nate," Meredith begs. "Please don't do this. You're messing everything up."

He glares at her. "Me? Everything I've done is for us, baby. Everything. What have you been doing besides trying to get back into his pants?"

Ash blinks her eyes open slowly. Hazel eyes meet mine and she smiles. Happy for one second. That is, until she realizes where she's at and what's happening. Terror morphs her features and she lets out a strained mewl, fresh tears streaking down her messy face. Always so beautiful, especially when wrecked.

I'm going to rescue you, Cinderelliott. I can be a prince some of the time.

"Put the knife down," I urge Nate. "Put it down, take your bitch, and walk out of here."

"You won't let me get to the end of the block," Nate snaps. "I'll be arrested before I can even take my next breath. I'm not falling for your bullshit."

"What do you want?" I demand. "We can come to an agreement. You want money? Name your price. You want to leave the country? I'll give you a fucking jet. Just hand Ash over to me. Please."

"So you can shoot me? Fuck off, Win." Nate nods his chin at Meredith. "Grab his Glock, baby."

"W-what? No, Nate. What are you going to do?"

"So help me, take his fucking gun or I will cut this bitch's throat," Nate growls. "Now, baby. Take the gun."

Ash whimpers when the knife digs into her neck. I don't wait for Meredith to take it from me and instead nearly knock her over when I shove it against her chest. She awkwardly takes the gun from me.

"There," I say in a calm tone. "You can walk out of here."

Nate's manic stare darts back and forth between me and Meredith. "She said she'd leave her husband for you, didn't she?" He glowers at Meredith. "Didn't you? Same bullshit line you told me?"

"You're unhinged," Meredith hisses. "Why would I ever choose you if this was how you'd end up?"

"Mer," I grind out. "Stop."

She bristles at my tone. "Just saying—"

"Don't."

Nate's nostrils flare with fury. "You still love him. Fucking bitch. You used me. All these years you used me to get to him. Fucked me and had me do your and Manda's legwork. *I* was the one who got us the money. Me. Not you or Manda. Me. And when it came time to fix things, it wasn't you sneaking into his apartment, it was me. I put everything on the line. You couldn't even bother to divorce your loser husband."

"Nate," I growl. "Just go. She's not worth all this. Trust me."

"Screw off, Winny," Meredith hisses.

"I risked everything for you," Nate murmurs to Meredith, his voice cracking. "It was all a lie, wasn't it? I was the pawn. It was never the three of us doing this together. It was always

you and Manda." He laughs and it's empty. "I guess we know how this ends."

The finality in his tone has me stepping forward. With his free hand, he shoves the glass door open. Ash lets out an anguished cry as the blade cuts deeper into her flesh. I stop dead in my tracks.

"Nate," I plead. "Don't do this. Please don't fucking do this."

"You two can have each other," Nate says in a defeated tone as he walks backwards onto the balcony. "It was always going to end that way. I was just too stupid to believe her." Then to Meredith he shakes his head, disgust on his face. "I loved you. Since we were kids. I loved you and you always loved him. You could have married me but you didn't. You chose Duncan because marrying me would be 'too obvious' and we'd never get what we wanted. I fucking believed you. Fuck."

He's too close to the balcony edge. My heart is hammering in my chest but I don't know what the fuck to do. I could charge for them but he'd probably slit her throat before I made it.

"Nate," I choke out, approaching slowly so that I'm at the threshold, "we can talk this out, man. Just us. You're my best friend. The girls can get out of here. We can have a drink and get this shit off our chest."

For a moment, he considers it, and then he gives a violent shake of his head. "I'm not stupid, Win. I don't walk out of this situation unscathed. But since this whole fucking thing is Ash's fault, I don't think she should walk out unscathed either. If I'm going down, she's going with me."

Down.

Down. Down. Down.

No.

"Nate!" Meredith yells, pointing to the right of the balcony where a gun is aimed his way.

As soon as Nate turns his head, a deafening crack can be heard as the person on the other end of the gun fires. I'm rushing forward even as Nate's head snaps back, tracking each move with sharp calculations. Ash's scream is otherworldly as Nate falls over the edge with Ash still in his grip. I'm already on the move, diving across the concrete, my arm chasing after them between the iron bars.

The side of my face digs painfully into the railing, but I don't give a fuck because a tiny, feminine wrist is in my grasp. And she's screaming. She's screaming so fucking loud. Still so fucking close.

"Don't drop me!"

My grip on her wrist is so tight I actually feel the bones pop from the pressure. She screams some more, her words littered with more curse words than I've ever heard in one sentence.

"Stop. Fucking. Moving," I growl. "I'm going to drop your ass if you don't stop."

Her sobs are my undoing. If I can't figure out a way to pull her up, she'll drop sixteen floors and she won't live. I can't lose her. Fuck.

Meredith is crying hysterically from nearby. Shut the hell up.

"Don't let go, boss," Xavier growls. "I'm coming down to get her."

I tighten my grasp on Ash, refusing to let go even if I break all the bones in her goddamn arm. If only I could see her. I want to see her face. I fucking need to see her face.

"Cinderelliott," I rasp out. "I love you."

Her sobs slow and she chokes out a teary laugh. "I hate you."

"Wrong answer."

"I'm hanging from the side of a building and now you tell me?! You're the biggest asshole I know!"

"I wanted to make you work for it."

At least when she's talking, she's not moving so goddamn much. My palm is sweaty but I don't let go. I'll never let go.

"Okay, boss," Xavier bellows from a floor below. "You can let go now."

"I can't," I whisper. "I can't see you. I can't."

"You have to, man. You can't hold on to her forever."

"Fucking watch me," I growl.

She screams and it feels as though she's being tugged from my grip. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I try to hold on but she's slipping. My hand is too slick from sweat.

"No," I roar. "Nooo!"

"Win!" Ash screeches.

And then she's gone.

One second she's in my hand and the next she's being yanked away by gravity.

"Got her," Xavier yells. "She's on the balcony below!"

"Win," Ash cries out. "Win!"

"Ash!"

"I'm okay!" She sobs and her words are filled with disbelief. "Oh my God, I'm okay!"

Pain lances through my shoulder and I grimace as I pull my arm back through the iron bars. My face begins throbbing and I can feel burning across my chest. Rolling onto my back, I glance down to see blood seeping through my now torn dress shirt from skidding across the concrete. My shoulder is screaming like a motherfucker and I'm pretty sure I'm going to have a bruise the size of Texas on my face.

But she's alive.

Ash, my crazy, annoying, so fucking beautiful girl with the bird is alive.

I can't move because I'm too overcome with relief. I'd have given up everything if it meant saving her from a horrific death. The money and cars and company. It's insane, but true.

"You love her," Meredith whimpers from just inside the apartment. "You love her."

"Put the gun down!" Todd bellows. "Now!"

Meredith shrieks and drops the Glock with a loud clatter. She starts crying for me to save her as he manhandles her to the ground. I can't move. My heart is racing and all I can do is stare up at the ceiling of the balcony above me.

"Win!"

Ash's voice is close and like fucking music to my ears. She appears in the doorway, face bruised and red and streaked with tears. So fucking pretty.

"I love it when you're messy," I murmur reaching my good arm for her. "Come here."

With her wrist cradled to her chest, she falls to her knees beside me. I clutch on to her tangled hair, yanking her to my mouth. The kiss I give her is frantic and needy and so goddamn thankful. She tastes like cherry Starbursts and forever.

"I love you too," she says between kisses. "I tried to tell you and your stupid ass wouldn't listen."

"Your mouth moves a lot and so much nonsense spills out, it's hard to sift through to the important stuff."

She smiles against my mouth. "You looooove me."

"I take it back."

"Too late. You said it. The damage is done."

I kiss her again. That's one way to shut her up. She doesn't seem to mind.

"Win?" Her whispered breath tickles my lips.

"Hmm?"

"Thank you for saving me."

"Don't get used to the hero act, Cinderelliott."

"Too late. I'll expect daring displays to prove your love for me all the time now."

"For fuck's sake."

"We can start with movie night. In your bed. Popcorn and candy."

"What kind of candy?"

"Red gummy bears."

"Hmm."

She lifts up, her teary eyes meeting mine. "What?"

"Just thinking that if I get a cavity from that shit you force-feed me, I'm breaking up with you."

Her lips spread into a beautiful grin I hope to see every day for as long as I live. "You're my *boyfriend*. I can't wait to tell your mom. She's gonna freak when I tell her I told you so."

"I bet she'll freak all right." I stroke my fingers through her hair. "Don't tell her I told you so. I've already rescued you from one death. Let's not make it two."

She curls her body around mine, resting her head on my shoulder that's still throbbing painfully. But I don't care. I'm quite content in holding her.

Soon, we'll have to get our injuries seen to. I'll have to deal with the police and the fact Nate's body is somewhere on the pavement. There's the issue of Meredith and Manda. So much bullshit.

Until that time comes, I hold her for as long as I can.

I almost lost her.

Fuck.

The gravity of the situation hits me like a ton of bricks. She must feel it too because she cries softly against my neck, clinging to my tattered shirt.

We made it through.

We'll always make it through.



Ash

Everything hurts and I'm dying.

I want to whine, but how can I when I'm in Win's bed watching him sleep? Seeing his bruised face relaxed and softened with sleep makes me tear up. He's a sight to behold when he's rocking his three-piece suits. But, something about seeing him in nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs and matching arm sling, his lips parted and his golden-blond lashes fanned over his slightly pink cheeks is the most beautiful I've ever seen him. His hair that's usually styled so perfectly is messy and hanging over his brows. So perfect in this moment.

I'm aching to reach out and touch him. I don't want to move, though. After getting back late from the emergency room in the early hours of the morning before the sun came up, we fell into bed completely exhausted. I didn't even get to enjoy my first sleepover in his bed because I was in pain and traumatized after the day I'd had.

Nate's dead.

I shiver, the entire bed moving. He'd hurt me and I thought I could handle that. Everything changed when he dragged me onto the balcony. I was scared to death. So afraid I'd never see Winston or my bird again. I didn't want to die.

And yet I was yanked over the balcony.

I'd barely registered I was falling when a powerful hand snagged my arm. It hurt and my legs were dangling beneath me meeting nothing but air.

He caught me.

Win caught me.

And broke my wrist in the process.

Small price to pay for not dying.

Glancing down at the light blue cast, I smile. In black Sharpie, Winston wrote: Constantine Property – Return to Winston if Lost.

When my eyes leave my cast and fall to his chest, I wince in pain. He's scabbed over. Looks like road rash. Since he dove across concrete to catch me, he shredded his chest and tore some ligaments in his shoulder. He's going to most likely need surgery, but we'll know more when he meets with a specialist next week.

"Creepy," Win grumbles, his voice thick with sleep.

"What?" I dart my eyes to his, lifting a brow in question.

"You. Watching me. Please don't tell me this is what I have to look forward to with you in my bed every night."

I flash him a wicked grin. "Every single night. You chose this life, *boyfriend*. I was just minding my own business, living my own life, and there you had to go professing your love for me while also heroically saving me from falling to my death."

"Hmm."

Leaning forward, I try not to grimace at the tugging of my sore skin beneath the bandage on my neck, and press my lips to his. The fingers on his good hand card through my messy hair stroking me in a possessive way that makes my heart skip a beat.

"Can we stay in bed all day?" I murmur. "Please. I'll pay you a million dollars."

He groans. "This is going to go to your head, isn't it? You don't even have your supposed fortune and you're already trying to use it to get what you want."

"I literally learned that from you. It's your signature move, Win. Lording your money over the lesser thans."

"I'm not a lesser than, so don't insult me."

"A billion?"

He nips at my bottom lip. "Be quiet."

"Bazillion?"

"Not a real number." His grin is roguish. "Besides, you don't know how much is coming to you. Could be a measly five hundred grand."

"I'll just borrow it from you. An IOU."

"I'm not lending you money to give to me."

"It's for a good cause," I say, teasing his dick with my fingertip through his boxers. "I'd make it worth your while."

He's hard, so I know he's considering it.

Someone bangs on the bedroom door and I let out a shriek, nearly coming out of my skin.

"Francis is almost done with breakfast. Stop humping and get downstairs."

"Perry," Win growls. "You have a home. Go there."

"While you're on the mend, I'm the Constantine in charge," Perry booms, all authoritative like he might actually convince someone. "Well, until Mom gets here."

"Caroline's coming over?"

"She'll be here any minute."

Winston sighs but he doesn't really seem mad. If anything, there's a lightness to his expression that wasn't there before yesterday. He looks at me now like I might vanish, so his eyes linger for longer than they should. Each stare is a lover's caress that makes me shiver.

"We'll be right down," Win calls out to Perry.

He grimaces as he slides out of bed. I hate that he's in pain because of me but I'm also thankful he cared enough to put himself in harm's way to save me. "Stop staring at my ass and get dressed," he grumbles, his back to me as he opens one of his dresser drawers.

"It's a lovely ass."

He tosses sweats at me followed by a T-shirt. Then, he yanks out a pair of sweats for himself. As though he's not even injured, he uses one hand with an admirable gracefulness to pull the sweats on.

God he's hot.

Even scraped up and bruised and in a sling.

All the golden, muscled curves of his upper body are on full display. His dick that's still hard bulges beneath the gray material making my mouth water.

"Move your ass," he barks out, sounding more like himself than he has since the drama from last night.

He saunters into the bathroom and I can hear the water at the sink turn on. I'm not nearly as graceful as he is while trying to pull on his clothes. They swallow me but they smell like him which makes me happy. This isn't my best look, but Caroline will just have to deal with it. Once I'm dressed, I make my way into the bathroom where he's brushing his teeth. I can't help but grin at his sexy reflection.

"What?" he demands around the toothbrush that's jammed in his mouth.

"You're kinda hot right now. Like a bad boy rather than a suit. I'm into it."

He rolls his eyes and spits. "Do something about your hair, Cinderelliott. It's criminal."

Ignoring him, I brush my teeth and then gently wash my face with one hand. When I'm done struggling and wincing against the pain, I notice his irritated expression has morphed into a fierce glower.

He grips my hips and turns me toward him. Intense blue eyes catalogue each bruise on my face. Then, with such a

gentleness I nearly sob, he strokes his thumb over my bottom lip.

"So beautiful," he murmurs, making my heart flutter wildly. He moves his thumb along my sore cheek to my jaw. "So mine."

A smile tugs at my lips and he kisses it away. I could stay like this forever—wrapped up in his loving embrace with his powerful lips on mine. He steps back and assesses my hair.

"Except that. Your hair looks like total shit. Seriously. Put a hat on."

"There he is," I grumble as I snatch my hairbrush off the counter. "There's my guy."

"Your guy?" He scoffs, plucking the hairbrush from my grip. "Your *man*. Guy makes me seem like I'm *Tate*." He says Tate like I say Layla. Poor Tate and Layla. "I'm not *Tate*."

He tugs on the hairband in my hair, pulling it loose from the tangled bun it was in. Once my hair tumbles over my shoulders, he moves around me, brushing out the tangles with such patience and care, I decide I'd fall in love with him right here in this moment if I already hadn't.

But I have.

And he loves me too.

"That smile means trouble," he complains, brows furrowed as he brushes my hair.

"Hmm."

"That's my line."

"We share now."

"You're going to drive me fucking crazy from here on out, aren't you?"

"It's one of the things you love about me."

His eyes roll again, and without his billionaire badass power suit on, he looks boyish and much younger than his nearly forty years. He doesn't argue my words which makes me ridiculously happy.

Since we're both injured, neither of us can manage to put my hair back up, so he settles for swooping it over one shoulder, hiding the bandage that covers the cut on my neck. The nurse at the hospital didn't think it'd leave a bad scar. I don't care either way. I'm alive and with Win. That's all that matters to me.

Win doesn't put on a shirt much to my utter delight. We walk hand in hand downstairs to an apartment full of people. All Win's siblings—even the ones I haven't officially met. The two women, who I learn are Vivian and Elaine from a quick introduction, are flawless beauties like their mother—elegant but fierce and dressed in the most expensive clothes money can buy. The younger siblings are all wearing variations of something comfortable—Tinsley in a T-shirt dress, Keaton in basketball shorts and a Pembroke Rugby T-shirt, and Perry in a pair of plaid shorts that are probably supposed to be worn with a Polo or something but he's paired it with a white undershirt with a coffee stain on it.

"I have to eat breakfast while looking at that?" Vivian asks, waving a manicured hand at Winston's scabbed, naked chest. "Vomit."

He ignores her, abandoning me with his siblings, no doubt on a hunt for coffee. I curl up next to Perry on the sofa. His arm wraps around me and the tension in him bleeds away.

"You look like shit, Ash," he says. "Seriously. So bad."

Elaine smirks at his words but says nothing from where she's perched in a chair.

"Says the guy wearing an outfit that he looks like he pulled out of the dumpster behind Dillard's," I say back sweetly.

Keaton and Tinsley both laugh. Shrimp sings from the chandelier as though he's joining in. So cute.

"When's Mom supposed to be here?" Keaton asks as someone knocks. "Damn. Speak of the devil." He stands up

and saunters over to the door. Caroline breezes in, dressed in a tailored suit, wearing too-tall spiked heels, and hair smoothed to perfection. Her eyes find me and she actually winces.

Great. I really do look like shit.

"You should see the other guy," I joke, but then bite on my bottom lip because it's not that funny considering half of Nate will probably have to be pressure-washed off the sidewalk.

Caroline purses her lips, ignoring my words before turning to her older daughters. "Thank you for indulging me by agreeing to brunch here rather than at the house."

My thoughts trail off while everyone but me and Perry move into the dining room. He kisses the top of my head.

"Are you okay?" he asks. "If he wasn't already dead..."

I thought he and Keaton were going to lose their shit at the hospital last night. Perry was beyond enraged. I'd never seen him so furious. The triplets didn't count as siblings because they were too busy terrorizing me, but Perry and Keaton feel like brothers. They're protective when it counts.

"Stop kissing my girlfriend," Winston grumbles, looking beautiful and beat all to hell and pissed off. "Come on. Francis has brunch ready."

Perry laughs and then helps me to my feet. I walk over to Winston. He tucks me against his good side. We follow Perry into the dining room. A leaf and chairs have been added. In the center are the pink bird salt and pepper shakers.

"Interesting decoration choice," Winston grumbles.

"Shh," I whisper. "You'll offend the baby."

"Baby?" Tinsley chimes in.

"You're pregnant?" Keaton demands.

"No," Win clips out. "Jesus. Whose idea was it to move this brunch to my place?"

"Mine," his mother snips. "Can you put a shirt on, please?"

"No." He sits down and pulls me into his lap. "Any other requests?"

Caroline purses her lips together in obvious annoyance. She doesn't make any other demands as Francis bustles around dropping platters of breakfast foods onto the table. It's a bit chaotic as everyone makes their plates, but it almost feels normal. Like Team Constantine isn't always a bunch of perfect freaks. Sometimes they can be normal. Ish. They'll never really be normal.

Once everyone is eating, Caroline begins what feels like a breakfast meeting now rather than a family meal.

"I've spoken to Anthony this morning," she explains, "and he'll be representing you in court."

Yippee.

Just what I want to discuss when I've barely gotten anything in my stomach.

"For my grandmother's money?" I ask, offering Win a bite of my bacon since he's got his only free hand up the back of my shirt.

Caroline nods, her eyes narrowing when I yelp. I jerk my head to glower at Win who wears a smug grin. Fucker bit me.

"See if I feed you again, asshole," I mutter.

"If you two are done behaving like children," Caroline huffs, "I thought I'd give you an update this morning."

"On?" Win asks.

"Manda and Meredith."

Win and I both tense at the mention of their names, the night before crashing back over us. I shudder at the memory of hanging off the side of the damn building, but Win soothes away the tremors by stroking my bare back.

"Go on," Win growls.

Last night, Meredith left since the police had nothing to hold her on. I'd been more concerned about getting to the hospital, but Win was pissed they let her walk free. Had he not been injured, he would have probably done more to stop it.

Luckily, his mother is a viper.

When she's striking out at someone else—an enemy—it's kind of nice to have her on your side. She definitely gets shit done.

"They've both been arrested." Caroline smiles the kind of smile queens do when they're telling their minions to behead someone. "Embezzlement charges are the least of their worries at this point. I made sure to send the NYPD every piece of evidence we've uncovered so far. Harold and Anthony are working on the rest. We're going to make them wish they'd never heard our name, much less tried to steal from it."

"What about my dad?"

Caroline's stare loses some of the hard edge as she studies the way I absently feed Winston more bacon. "He's chosen his side."

Manda's.

"Oh." I drop my stare down to the plate of food, my stomach roiling violently. "You spoke to him, then?"

"He's relieved you're alive, but he believes you're in the wrong for wanting to take what's rightfully yours. He doesn't think your inheritance was a gambling chip to be used by Manda and rather rudely told me he'd fight tooth and nail to not only obtain that money, but to also use it to sue us once he got her out of jail."

Elaine laughs and Keaton snorts.

"He won't win," Perry states.

"Captain Obvious," Vivian says. "Of course he won't."

I chew on my bottom lip, no longer interested in breakfast. Did I really think Dad would choose me? He's been choosing her pretty much from day one. Weak for allowing her to manipulate him. One day he'll realize the error of his ways, but it'll be too late. His actions—and inactions—nearly got his daughter killed. And right now he's backing the woman who's partly responsible.

"Don't worry," Caroline says as she lifts her cup of tea. "You're on the right side. For now."

Her impassive features would be unreadable to most, but I've spent quite some time learning Winston's every facial tic. In her expression, she's telling me she'll accept me being on their side, but if I screw up, she'll happily crush me beneath her heel.

I smile at her because they can't get rid of me now. "Team Constantine forever."

Perry holds up his fist and I bump it with my cast. Caroline grimaces as she reads Win's Sharpie handiwork on my cast.

"You like poking at her," Winston accuses when the talking starts back up again and I'm no longer the focus. "I thought you were trying not to die."

"She makes it too easy."

"Definitely trying to die."

"I thought about having us all matching Team Constantine shirts made. She'd love it, am I right?"

"Close your bratty mouth, Cinderelliott, or I'm going to drag you into your old bedroom and find a way to do it for you."

"You can't make me suck your dick with your family having breakfast right down the hall."

Blue eyes dark with challenge bore into me. "Watch me."

"You wouldn't."

"You have three seconds to get into that bedroom."

"Or what?"

"Or," he rumbles, his strong fingers caressing my hip, "I'll push you to your knees right here. That'll get them out of my fucking house."

We have a silent standoff, neither of us budging, but when I realize he's actually serious, I bolt from the dining room without so much as a goodbye.

My villainous prince stalks after me.

In this fairy tale, he catches his princess and does very, very filthy things to her.



Winston

A few months later...

AFFORDABLE HOUSING.

The thought strikes me and I almost laugh at the idea of it. Almost. Nothing is laughable when it comes to the Morellis, but seeing the building Leo wanted so badly, that's located in the heart of an area they mostly own, get turned into apartments that people can actually afford is almost too good to pass up.

The media will see my efforts as a way to help the community.

The enemy will see it as a giant "fuck you."

I quickly fire off an email to get the ball rolling and then call Deborah into my office. She scurries in, eager to please.

"Yes, sir?"

"I thought I asked you to send Ash in."

Her features pinch and she huffs. "She vanished. One minute she was in her office on the phone and the next she was gone. Perry says he doesn't know where she went, but I know he's lying."

I swear to fucking God most of my day is spent breaking up squabbles between Perry and Ash against my secretary.

"Hmm." I grab my keys and stalk out of my office, Deborah trailing behind. "I'll be out for the rest of the day."

She grumbles about having to reschedule my afternoon appointments while I lock my door. Ignoring her bitching, I

stride into Nate's old office that now belongs to my brother. Perry sits at the desk, brows furrowed and pounding away on his computer. He doesn't see me right away, so I take a second to watch him. Ever since the shit went down with Nate, Perry has stepped up more than ever. I could have lost a huge part of my company because Nate was so involved. Rather than feeling the hit like I thought I would, Perry has worked his ass off to make sure we don't.

"Have you seen the brat?" I ask, strolling into his office.

He abandons glaring at his computer to flash me an impish grin. "Nope."

"Liar."

"Fine. Maybe."

"Don't you two get tired of playing childish games all damn day?"

"Actually," Perry says, scratching at his scruffy beard that needs tending to, "we don't. Kind of breaks up the monotony of it all."

"Where did she go, dumbass?"

"She told me to tell you she definitely wasn't going to the whore apartment and that you shouldn't bring her a gyro with no onions."

"Text her and tell her to be waiting naked for me."

"Dude. No." He makes a face. "Seriously."

I laugh and send her that very text. Her response is immediate.

Ash: Should I tell Danny Boy to stay or go?

Me: So help me if Daniel is in the whore apartment with you...

Ash: Who else is going to help me study for my macroeconomics quiz?

Me: Tell Daniel I don't pay him to tutor you. I pay him to cart you around town since you can't manage to not play bumper cars with

the Escalade.

Ash: That was ONE time.

Me: Twice. Both times you managed to hit THREE cars.

Ash: The first time was your fault though.

Me: You were still behind the wheel.

Ash: The first time they deserved it.

The triplets deserved everything they got. I sometimes wonder how they're liking their new life with the Morelli rats and what they think about their mother sitting in jail awaiting trial. Then I remember I don't fucking care.

Baron, so far, is technically innocent—or just really damn stupid in my opinion—because Ulrich hasn't found anything that indicates he was in on their scheme. He is, however, sticking with his bitch wife rather than his daughter. The evidence of Manda attempting to defraud Ash of her inheritance is damning. That, coupled with all of the botched surgeries that are clear evidence of retaliation against women who criticized or mocked her in the past, Manda is looking at hard prison time.

Meredith will take the fall for all the embezzlement from Halcyon as Nate's lover and accomplice. I'll make sure she spends just as much time in prison as her wicked bestie. It's Nate who got off easy. What he did to Ash still makes me see red sometimes and I have occasional nightmares of where they fall and I don't catch her.

Ash sends me some shrugging emojis that shakes me from my inner thoughts.

Me: Yes, they deserved it, but the minivan, cab, and Mercedes Benz did not deserve it. The guy driving the minivan was a priest.

Ash: Those curse words he flung at me were not very godly...

We continue our ribbing through text as I leave Halcyon, drive across town to the gyro shop, and eventually make it to the whore apartment that Her Royal Highness insists on keeping for "when I annoy her."

By the time I make it to her apartment on the twelfth floor, I'm damn near desperate to see her. All this time I thought I'd get bored of her. That we were nothing but a transaction. That she was nothing more than a toy that would lose its thrill.

I was wrong.

Ash is sexy and funny and insane.

Plus, I love her bird.

I unlock the door and step inside. Ash is no longer wearing the tempting dress she had on earlier at the office but has changed into black yoga pants and a fitted white top. She's actually studying and her books are spread all over her desk. Thankfully, despite her teasing, Daniel isn't here.

"I should fire you," I complain as I lock the door behind me. "You only work when you feel like it."

She waves her middle finger at me, not bothering to look my way. I walk over to her and drop the bag of food in front of her.

"Oh my God," she groans, choosing to tear into the bag rather than acknowledge me. "Have I ever told you I love you?"

"Only every time I bring you food."

Which is always.

That's all she does these days.

Eat and eat and eat.

"Stop judging me," she grumbles as she devours her gyro. "I'm eating for two and it's all your fault."

I lift a brow at her. "My fault? You were supposed to get on birth control."

"I did!"

"And stay on it."

"You can't blame this on me," she argues. "You didn't even give it a chance to work before you were filling me up with your super sperm. Now your mom is really going to hate me."

Mother only pretends to hate Ash.

The monthly spa dates and shopping trips they seem to squeeze in makes that pretty obvious.

We haven't told anyone yet that Ash is pregnant. Not even Perry. She's done a pretty good job of hiding her little baby bump, but now that we're entering the second trimester, she's beginning to show.

While Ash continues to bitch per usual and wolf down her gyro, I kneel down next to her to rub her stomach. At one time, I never saw kids in my future. But, the moment Ash tearfully thrust a positive pregnancy test at me this summer, I knew without a doubt I wanted them. With her. The girl makes me a greedy bastard because I want everything with her.

"Is he moving yet?"

"I felt a flutter but I don't know if it's him." She polishes off the rest of her gyro and then leans in to kiss me. "Shouldn't you be working?"

"Shouldn't you?" I taunt, but I'm only joking with her. She's taking a full course load at NYU and still insists on coming in to work some. It's like now that she's fucking loaded after finally obtaining her inheritance, she's decided to work her ass off.

"My boyfriend-slash-boss is kind of an asshole. I like to sneak away to my apartment to see my lover. He's sweet and brings me food. Oh, and I'm carrying his baby. Shh, don't tell my boyfriend."

I stand up and scoop her out of her desk chair. She grins at me as I carry her to the bed. I'm gentle when I lay her down because she has my kid growing in her, but then I yank off her tight clothes to get to her soft skin underneath. Once she's naked, I loom over her, admiring her perfect body. Her tits are sensitive but getting big and her stomach is so fucking cute.

"Winston Constantine," she gasps out. "Look at you. Sooo obsessed with me."

Ignoring her, I yank off my suit jacket, wincing slightly from the lingering soreness that I'm still dealing with from my injury this summer that thankfully ended up not needing surgery. I toss it away and then tug at the knot on my tie.

"Touch yourself, Cinderelliott. I didn't come all this way to watch you lie there like a lazy ass."

She flips me off but then takes that same finger to tease at her clit, luring me in like a fucking demon. I can't get my clothes off fast enough, eager to be inside her.

"I'll let you say filthy, rude things to me while you fuck me if we can get ice cream after this."

I shed the rest of my clothes and pounce on her. "Deal, my little fuck toy." I smack her hand away to take over rubbing her pretty pussy. "This needy clit belongs to me. I paid for it long ago. You say girlfriend, I say whore."

Her fingers thread into my hair and she pulls me to her for a kiss. I coax moans out of her with each rub against her clit. She squirms, trying to spread her legs to urge me inside of her.

"Greedy fucking girl." I deny her what she wants, whispering kisses over her parted lips. "Your pussy is so wet. Probably from dreaming about me calling you names like slut and come gobbler."

She snorts out a laugh. "Win!"

I bite her lip. "Hmm?"

"You're so nasty."

Any other words she tries to speak are stolen when I pinch her clit and roll it between my fingers. It only takes a few times of this before she's jolting with an orgasm. I waste no time jerking her thighs apart and lining the tip of my cock against her slickness. She screams when I drive into her with a hard thrust. I fuck her hard—much longer than forty goddamn seconds, thank you very much—until she's a trembling mess beneath me. With a contented sigh, I release inside her, filling her with hot come. I don't slide out of her but instead rest on my elbows on either side of her face so I can look at her.

"Do I make you happy, Win?"

I lift a brow. "Fishing for compliments. So unattractive."

"Liar. It's one of the things you love about me."

"Happy? Hmm. Maybe just fine. I feel fine."

She smacks me. "I hate you."

"Not when I give you flowery words," I taunt. "Yes, beautiful girl. You make me so fucking happy. I can't live without you. You're my everything."

Her hazel eyes twinkle with mirth. "Keep going."

"That'll cost you."

Her grin is devilish. "I can afford it."

"So fucking cocky, Cinderelliott."

This girl changes me—warms frigid parts of me I didn't know existed—and I'm not even mad about it.

"You, old man, taught me everything I know."

I kiss her hard and then spend the rest of the afternoon teaching her a few things she *doesn't* know yet.

I think they call this a filthy fucking happily ever after.



Winston

Seven and a half years later...

Team Constantine.

That's what Ash calls us when she's trying to round us up to get out of the house or to get our group to cooperate. Like our own little family cheerleader. Of course, our team sucks. Lane is particular as fuck and can't ever seem to get his backpack organized just the way he likes it which nearly always makes us run late. He's the most neurotic kid you'll ever meet. Noelle—or No-No as we like to call her—is a monster. Three and a holy fucking terror. Even the baby, Tuck, nine months old, is better behaved than his sister. Whenever it's time to leave to go to the Constantine Compound or our house here in the Hamptons or anywhere for that fucking matter where we have to pack, it's a goddamn zoo.

"Okay, who wants a snack, Team Constantine?" Ash says from the middle of the towel she's laid out on the sand. "Mommy brought applesauce."

Lane, ever the serious one and who lives to please his mother, says, "I love applesauce."

No-No, however, screeches in indignation, "No apposauce! Gummy beaws!"

This sets Tuck off, who needs a fucking nap probably more than his sister, and he starts to bellow, fat crocodile tears rolling down his chubby cheeks.

"You made the baby cry," Lane chides his little sister, his blue eyes glinting angrily. "Bad girl."

She raises her hand like she's going to smack the shit out of him. I snag her up before she can make impact and tug her into my arms. Her brown pigtails are curly, and her hazel eyes are filled with fire.

Just like her damn mother.

Which is why I get stuck dealing with her.

"We don't hit," I explain, my voice stern as I settle her in my lap.

The ocean air today is salty and the waves are mild. It's a perfect, sunny beach day. Even when everyone is fighting and crying, it's still perfect to me.

Noelle scrunches her nose at me. "Wane is bad. Not me!"

"No one is bad." I kiss her forehead. "Tell Lane you're sorry and I'll give you a present."

Her cheesy grin makes my heart melt. "I sowwy, Wane. I wuv you."

"It's okay, sissy," Lane says back because he's a good boy. "I love you too."

"I did it, Daddy." Noelle holds out her cute little hand, waiting for a treat.

Ash smirks at me but is busy trying to feed Tuck a bite of applesauce. My wife—yeah, she's locked in forever—thinks I spoil the kids. As if she has room to talk. She's just as spoiled.

I reach into one of the bags we brought down from the house to the beach and fish out the gummy bears. Noelle is all grins as I hand her a red gummy bear. Lane watches me with a serious expression that always kills me. The kid is so damn adorable but he's going to get ulcers one day if he doesn't relax.

I toss him one and it bounces off his forehead making him giggle. Tuck makes a go to grab it, but Lane is quicker. Noelle has already demolished her gummy bear and is holding out her hand for another.

"Who do you love?" I ask, holding the red bear up and not giving it to her yet.

"Mommy!"

Ash snorts out a laugh. "That's right! Love you too, baby girl!"

Noelle grins at me and I give her the stupid gummy bear.

"Who else?" I urge, brows lifted.

"Uncle Peewee!"

Not Daddy. Her uncle Perry. Fucking wonderful.

"Who else?" I growl, playfully tugging at her pigtail.

She wriggles and her eyes get wide. "Gwamma!"

"Give up," Ash says, giggling. "She can go all day. I bet she loves all the seagulls more than you too."

"Seaguhs!"

"Thanks for that, brat." I glower at Ash. "You'll pay for that later."

When the kids are sleeping and the nanny takes over for the night, I'll tie Ash to the bed and spank her round ass. Knock her up again while I'm at it too. She said Tuck was the last one, but we both know she'll give me as many babies as I want. And I'm a greedy man.

Noelle's tiny hands grab on to my hair, yanking me to her.

"No-No wuvs Daddy!"

I kiss her now-sticky face. "That's right. Daddy loves you too, No-No. And Lane and Tuck and Mommy."

"And gummy beaws!"

"Those too."

We spend the next half hour playing in the sand and waves. The kids' laughter is better than anything on this earth I've decided. Better than my new Lambo. A million times better than the swanky private jet Halcyon purchased last year. Way

better than the house we're having built that rivals Mother's compound. Their laughter is worth more to me than any sum of money or any material thing I can dream up. Their laughter is priceless.

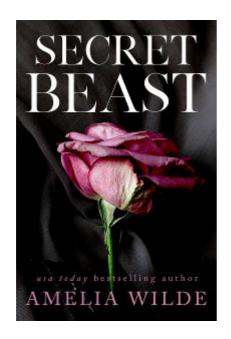
"Look, Tuck," Ash says from beside me, a soft smile on her face. "Daddy has hearts in his eyes again."

I skim my gaze from my fussy baby boy to my hyperactive little girl to my serious son. And then I find my stare on my wife's perfect plump lips that'll be swallowing my dick later.

"Yeah, Cinderelliott, I guess I do."

* * *

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