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MAFIA
ROMANCE

MARRIAGE
OF SIN

BB HAMMEL

Marriage of Sin
An Arranged Marriage Mafia Romance

BB Hamel

Contents

[Get your free book!](#)

1. [Dara](#)
2. [Dara](#)
3. [Dara](#)
4. [Dara](#)
5. [Dara](#)
6. [Finn](#)
7. [Finn](#)
8. [Dara](#)
9. [Dara](#)
10. [Finn](#)
11. [Dara](#)
12. [Finn](#)
13. [Dara](#)
14. [Finn](#)
15. [Dara](#)
16. [Finn](#)
17. [Dara](#)
18. [Dara](#)
19. [Finn](#)
20. [Finn](#)
21. [Dara](#)
22. [Dara](#)
23. [Finn](#)
24. [Finn](#)
25. [Dara](#)
26. [Finn](#)
27. [Finn](#)
28. [Finn](#)
29. [Dara](#)
30. [Dara](#)
31. [Finn](#)
32. [Finn](#)
33. [Dara](#)
34. [Dara](#)
35. [Finn](#)
36. [Finn](#)
37. [Dara](#)
38. [Finn](#)
39. [Finn](#)

40. [Dara](#)
41. [Dara](#)
42. [Dara](#)
43. [Finn](#)
44. [Finn](#)
45. [Dara](#)
46. [Finn](#)
47. [Dara](#)
48. [Dara](#)
49. [Finn](#)
50. [Dara](#)

[Preview: Beautiful Corruption](#)
[Also by BB Hamel](#)

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Chapter 1

Dara

There is no way in the world I can face my bank account sober.

But I also need to make sure I can afford to drink before I go into this bar and drown all my problems in overpriced wine.

I take a deep breath as I thumb through my phone. Around me, traffic buzzes along Boylston Street in downtown Boston, kicking up fumes. Young couples sit outside of bars talking in the early evening shade cast by enormous office and apartment buildings, dads push strollers, old people walk dogs, and here I am a few blocks away from where I work sitting on a bench beside a scraggly tree about to find out just how bad my life's gotten.

Is this rock bottom? Let's find out.

I unlock my banking app, close my eyes, take a deep breath, and open them again.

Zero dollars stare back. Zero in checking, zero in savings.

My heart sinks into my feet. Zero, zero, zero. Nothing across the board. I knew it would be bad—but this is so much worse than I ever could've imagined.

“Lucas, you motherfucker,” I whisper, horror and anger warring against sorrow.

I really wish I bought that drink first.

But at least I didn't sit through the indignity of my card getting declined.

This wasn't how I thought today would end. I figured it wouldn't be great—getting woken up at six in the morning by my roommate and the man I thought I was going to marry, only to find out that they've been sleeping together behind my back, and oh, yeah, they're in love, that's not easy.

That was a pretty spectacularly horrendous way to start the day.

But it somehow took a nosedive at five-thirty when I was leaving the office, only to get a text.

Lucas: I'm so sorry about this morning.

Lucas: And I'm so sorry about the money and your things.

Lucas: It's just, I'm in love with Christine, but we're both broke. You'll be OK, right? You have that amazing job. You'll be fine.

I stared at my phone for the five-block walk to a local bar called Trevi's before I finally worked up the nerve to find out what he meant by *the money*.

Which is why I'm staring at a bunch of big, fat zeroes.

I open the messages app and start texting furiously.

Dara: You emptied my bank account???

Dara: And what do you mean my things????

Dara: Lucas, you piece of shit, what did you do???????

I'm in full-on panic mode. I knew Lucas was a monster, but I never imagined he would sink this low. When we met in school, he was a lovable dork, a guy that loved cheap beer, football, and bad horror movies. I fell for him when he rubbed my feet during a marathon of Halloween movies.

I thought he was the one. Lucas isn't anything exciting, but he's been dependable, always there for me, always asking how my day went, always offering those lovely foot rubs of his.

So what if there weren't fireworks? There weren't nuclear bombs? It was steady. Comfortable.

Now it's like my skin's been peeled off, leaving me raw.

I'm about to call my ex when I hear my name called out. I flinch, look up, and find my manager, Johnnie, standing a few feet away flanked by a couple of Patagonia Bros in matching vests I don't recognize.

"What are you doing all alone out here?" Johnnie asks, flashing me his patented Country Club Smile. He runs a hand through his wavy hair. "Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen you outside of work, Dar."

I grimace at the nickname. Nobody calls me Dar except for Lucas, even though I've asked him not to half a dozen times. "I was about to get a drink actually," I say quickly, glancing down at my phone. The screen remains dead and quiet. No reply from the piece of crap that ruined my life. I'm thinking about calling the police, about getting the FBI involved, but mostly about tracking him down myself and killing him with my bare hands.

But I know it won't help.

Because whether I catch Lucas and strangle the life from him or not, my heart's still broken.

And my bank account's still empty.

"You should come with me, Patagonia Bro 1, and Patagonia Bro 2 over to McNally's. Come on, Dar, you seem fun. Let's have a good time, yeah?"

He doesn't actually say *Patagonia Bro*, but I blank out their names on purpose. I don't have time for this, but Johnnie's my manager at a heavily male dominated accounting firm, which means I have to smile, bat my eyelashes, and play nice. Otherwise, they call me a bitch behind my back, and I don't get promotions or raises.

"Sorry, I'm meeting a friend," I lie, shifting uncomfortably. "Otherwise, I'd totally come."

"A guy friend?" Johnnie sits next to me while his Patagonia Cronies leer at me, both of them grinning, like this is totally normal behavior. Johnnie's breath reeks like liquor. Did he cut out early and start drinking or something? "What's his name? Actually, don't worry, it's fine. I just figured, you know, since there's a vibe here, it might be fun to explore it outside of a

professional setting.”

His eyes are glassy as he glances down at my tits. Yep, definitely shitfaced.

“I’m sorry,” I say, blinking rapidly. “A vibe? What are you talking about?”

“Ah, damn, don’t get all feminist on me, okay, Dar? It’s just, I notice the way you look at me when you come into my office. I notice the blouses with the top two buttons undone? You’re pretty hot, you know? A solid six, but you could be an eight if you worked out more. You wear some borderline inappropriate attire, but nobody cares because you have absolutely *fantastic* tits.”

I feel like my head’s about to explode.

Johnnie’s always been a prick. He’s one of those Nantucket Assholes with a trust fund the size of Georgia and a yacht to match. He only has this job because his uncle’s a founding partner. Johnnie’s got fewer brain cells than my bank account has dollars, which is still zero, by the way.

“There’s absolutely no vibe,” I say quickly, standing up. “And you have to be absolutely fucking batshit *insane* to talk about my clothes and my fucking tits right now.”

Under normal circumstances, I’d never talk to a vindictive little prick like Johnnie like that, but I’m way past my last nerve, basically working on reserve nerves at this point, and I’m lashing out.

Johnnie’s face falls. His Patagonia Cronies stare at him like they’re about to laugh—which makes his face turn a disturbing shade of pink.

“You fucking bitch,” he says, standing up to stare down at me. “You do realize I’m your manager, right?”

There it is. I was waiting for that. The threat in his tone is clear.

“I’m not in the mood for this,” I say, shaking my head. “Just leave me alone, okay? I’ll pretend you didn’t just say the most asinine, sexist thing in the world, and you can swallow your pride for once in your life.”

“Fuck that,” he says quietly. “You can’t talk to me that way.”

In all my time at Bankman Associates, I've held my tongue. I've kept my head down, smiled politely, nodded at inane comments, laughed at inappropriate jokes. I've done all the things women have to do in a toxic workplace environment. I've done it, because the job pays exceedingly well, and I was raised to value money more than anything else.

More than my own self-esteem, apparently.

But this is too far.

Ten hours ago, I had a boyfriend.

A nice boyfriend. Nothing spectacular, but still. A guy I thought was going to propose soon. We had plans, long-term plans. We were merging financial assets. I had a lot of hard-earned money saved in the bank, ready to be spent on a wedding, or a down payment for a house, or maybe on baby clothes and a crib.

Now, I'm twenty-four years old, and I have none of that.

Instead, a white-hot rage (admittedly pointless and impotent) burns in my belly.

I jab a finger at Johnnie. "Listen to me, you walking stock option. I need you to apologize right now. I need you to accept the consequences of your actions, because other people have feelings. You realize that, right? You can't go around saying whatever you want, fucking whatever moves, stealing whatever you need, throwing away whatever you don't care about, cheating on me with my fucking roommate, all because you're a selfish piece of fucking *trash*."

I'm projecting here.

A little bit, anyway.

Johnnie's gaze darkens. "You just crossed a line, Dar," he says through his teeth. "I don't know what's gotten into you, but you're *not* going to get away with embarrassing me in front of my bros."

He grabs my arm. I stare as his fingers dig into my flesh, biting down hard. I yelp, more from shock than from pain, but he doesn't let me go.

I start to freak out.

Johnnie's a big guy, easily over six feet. His Patagonia Cronies are also tall, both of them looking like they're from Abercrombie catalogues, like they're one step away from the polo club, and neither seem to mind that their friend is publicly manhandling a girl.

This is getting out of control very quickly.

At least until a shadow appears at Johnnie's side.

"You should let her go." The voice is low and resonant with malice.

A man's standing there. Stubble on his chin. Big hands balled into fists. A pristine suit, slim fitting.

I stare at the stranger, at the tall, broad, athletically built man, as a terrified pulse shivers down my spine.

He's handsome. Sinful, absurdly handsome. Like, beyond inappropriately handsome. Dark, wavy hair pushed back in a lazy sweep. High cheekbones, tanned skin, blue eyes like early morning frost. A reddish beard clings to his cheeks, trimmed, but somehow still unruly. He's in a suit, black and tailored to his muscular frame.

Holy hell, this guy is *hot*.

Stupidly hot. Like he's a very unnecessary distraction.

Johnnie's eyes bulge. For a second, I don't think he's going to release me. I imagine he'll use me as a human shield.

Instead, his grip slackens, then disappears. "Who the fuck are you?" Johnnie snaps.

The stranger looks at me for a beat before saying, "I'm her boyfriend."

Oh my god.

What the *hell* is this guy doing?

Chapter 2

Dara

Silence fills the void for a beat. Nobody speaks. The Patagonia Cronies back off, putting space between them and my psychotic manager.

Finally, Johnnie finds his voice. “You have a *boyfriend*?” He gapes at me like it’s a surprise.

As if he’d give a crap either way.

“Yes, I do,” I finally manage to say. If Johnnie weren’t such a selfish piece of trash, he might know that’s actually true—or at least it was until this morning. I glance at the stranger and a spike of pure excitement hits my core at the look he’s giving me. Like he can’t stop staring, and he likes what he’s seeing.

He licks his lips, head tilted to the side.

“I’m Finn,” he says quietly, almost like he’s saying it to me, but he quickly glances at Johnnie. “And you need to fuck off before I decide to make this a bigger deal than it already is.”

“I just—you can’t—I mean—” Johnnie sputters, shaking his head. But he takes another step away. “Dar, you and I will have a chat tomorrow morning about your behavior.”

“Oh, will you please go away, you absolute creep?” I say, finally out of patience. Yep, I’m getting fired.

I should try to smooth this over, but I can't debase myself in front of his hot stranger. My boyfriend, apparently. Finn. Big, strong, gorgeous Finn.

I'm going to pay for this tomorrow. Drunk or not, Johnnie isn't going to forget what happened here.

Johnnie shakes his head, rejoins his Patagonia Cronies, and the trio hurries down the block.

I watch them go, hands shaking. The stranger remains by my side, hovering close. Not touching me, but near enough that I'm intensely aware of his presence. I smell something musky and spicy, a heady, subtle cologne.

I feel brutalized. Why the fuck did that just happen? Johnnie's completely in the wrong—he can't talk to me that way. I'm *his* employee, he's supposed to be my manager, there are rules about this sort of stuff. I barely even stood up for myself.

But I know, deep down, this is going to blow back on me.

It makes me sick. Guys like Johnnie get away with everything, while girls like me end up with empty bank accounts.

"Thanks for that," I say, glancing at my temporary boyfriend. "Finn, right?"

He nods, frowning at me. "I take it you knew that guy?"

"He's my manager at work." I groan, rubbing my face. "I think I might be fucked."

"Sounds like you need to switch jobs." He continues staring, not looking away, not ashamed of his gaze. It's strange and intoxicating. I've never been approached by a handsome stranger like this before—then again, I've also never been assaulted by a work colleague in public before either, or been dumped, or had all my money stolen. It's a day for firsts.

"If I know Johnnie, I doubt I'll have much of a choice." I curse and look at my phone. Still no reply from my douchebag ex. "Look, I'm having a really, really bad day. I just want to go into that bar, get a drink, and try to forget my problems for a few hours. I really appreciate your help though."

I'm mentally counting all the cash in my clutch. It's enough for one, maybe

two glasses if they have something cheap-ish. And there's always my trusty credit card.

"Let me buy you that drink," Finn says quietly. "Just to make sure that asshole doesn't come back."

I hesitate, but the zeroes in my bank account make this decision easy. "Just one," I say, holding up a finger. "Since you're my boyfriend and all. But I've been aggressively hit on enough for one day."

His lips pull into a tight smile, the lines around his intensely blue eyes crinkling. It's a handsome smile, one I suspect he doesn't use all that often. "It's my pleasure to take care of you. I do enjoy spoiling my girl."

"That'd be a first for me," I say as we walk into Trevi's together. "My real boyfriend—my *ex*-boyfriend now—he was the cheapest guy I've ever met. Did you know you can rinse out plastic sandwich bags and reuse them at least two more times?"

"Sounds awful." Finn's hand finds the small of my back as he steers me through the post-work crowd toward the bar. He walks with confidence, heading straight through the crowd without cringing away from people. It helps that he's big, one of the biggest guys in the place.

I shiver, enjoying the feeling of his big palm against my body. Lucas never touched me like that. He was strictly anti-PDA. It's almost sad that this total stranger is touching me more in public than my actual boyfriend ever did.

We get stools side by side at the far end of the bar. He orders a whiskey and I ask for a gin and tonic. When the drinks arrive, he holds his up for a toast. "To being your boyfriend," he says. "I'll happily provide anything you need and more."

"Thanks," I say, blushing like crazy. "But apparently, all I need is a bodyguard and a new job." We touch glasses and drink.

I lean forward on the bar. Finn studies me for another second, swirling his whiskey. "You said you were having a bad day, even before that guy approached you," he says. "I could tell you weren't happy."

My eyebrows raise. "You were watching me?"

He hesitates. “I noticed you. I was on the phone across the street and saw you sitting there, looking like your world was ending. I asked myself, what’s an absolutely gorgeous girl like that looking so upset for?”

I let out a soft snort. “Is that some kind of line?”

“Not at all. It’s the truth.” He takes another drink. “I’m having a bad day myself. Maybe I’m on the lookout for it.”

“What’s going on with you?” I say, and quickly add, “You don’t have to tell me. I know it’s rude to ask, but misery and company and all that.”

“You’re my girlfriend. That’s what partners are for, right? Listening?” He leans forward like a heavy weight’s shoving down his shoulders. “Tomorrow, I’m getting engaged.”

My eyebrows slowly lift. “Uh... congratulations?”

He grunts, finishes his drink, signals for another. “Problem is, I’ve never met her before. I was told her name, her age, and that’s it. I’ll see her for the first time when we make it official.”

“That’s...” I trail off, not sure what to say. Finn is sinfully handsome, the kind of man any woman would gladly wrap her legs around. It’s hard to imagine this guy is having problems with women, much less needing someone else to pick his wife for him.

“It’s strange,” he says, speaking into his whiskey. “An arranged marriage. It’s old-fashioned, embarrassing, and frustrating. But I don’t have any other choice. In my family, the youngest does his duty, no questions asked.”

“I take it you’re the youngest.”

He nods. “And right now, my duty is to cement an alliance for my father.” He glances at me. “It’s all very complicated.”

“I’m sure it is,” I murmur, trying to imagine what he’s going through. “Do you want this? To get engaged, I mean.”

“If anyone else asked me that question, I’d say that I want to do anything for my family, including this. But since you’re my girlfriend...” He hesitates a moment, and his mask slips. Something deeply flawed, deeply pained shows

through his eyes. “No, Dara, I don’t want to get engaged to this girl, much less marry her.” He raises his new drink, smiling bitterly. “But I do what I must.”

“I’m sorry. I honestly can’t imagine that.” I hesitate, take a long drink, and clear my throat. “Actually, I sort of can. But in reverse? My boyfriend, a guy I thought was going to propose, dumped me this morning.”

“That’s rough. I’d never dump you before five in the evening, at least. That’s just common courtesy. Wait until after work.”

“Right? But it gets worse. He dumped me, while holding my roommate’s hand and explaining that he’d been cheating on me with her for the last three months. Her name’s Christine, by the way, and I hate her. Also, they’re moving to Mexico, getting married, having babies, and oh, yeah, he stole all my money.”

Finn’s eyes widen and he whistles. “You have to be kidding? He stole all your money? How’d he manage that?”

I groan, putting my face in my hands. “A month ago, he said we should start merging our accounts. You know, since we were going to take the next step in our relationship? Stupidly, I believed him, and gave him access to all my banking information.”

“Oh, shit,” Finn says, putting a hand on my leg. “Don’t blame yourself. The guy sounds like a full-on grifter scumbag.”

I lick my lips, looking at him. I like the weight of his hand on my leg. It’s suggestive, a little wrong, but it feels good. I scoot closer to him without thinking. “Hard not to blame myself. I mean, they’d been screwing around for *three months* and I never noticed.”

“If I ever meet this piece-of-shit ex of yours, I’ll hurt him for you. As your new boyfriend, it’s my duty to defend your honor.”

“While that’s extremely possessive, I accept.”

“What can I say? I’m protective of what’s mine.”

“And I’m yours?” My eyebrows arch.

His fingers dig in tighter. “Right now, you are.”

I lick my lips again, unable to help myself. My heart’s racing wildly. What the hell is going on right now? Are we flirting? Am I really flirting with a guy that’s getting engaged tomorrow when I was just dumped this morning?

I should finish my drink and get out of here. I need to head back to my apartment and take stock of the damage. I have a feeling Lucas stole more than my money.

But I can’t bring myself to leave. Not with Finn sitting so close.

“I probably should call the police,” I say, shaking my head. “That’s what a normal, rational person would do, right? But I bet he’s already halfway to Mexico.”

“Cops won’t do shit,” Finn says. His knee presses against mine and he gestures the bartender to get me another drink. “You might be able to see if your bank will cover you. Call it theft or something, but it’ll be tough to prove.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do.” I accept the second drink, sipping it slowly, feeling pleasantly tipsy. “I feel like my life’s ending.”

“I know what you mean. I feel like I’m walking to my own funeral tomorrow.”

“Getting engaged to this girl is that bad?”

He tilts his head to the side. “Imagine being told you have to spend your entire life with a stranger. Even if she ends up being okay, imagine having no control over your own choices. Try to picture how that might feel.”

I try and definitely don’t like it. “Fair point. But what kind of family do you have, if this is something you need to do?”

“A complicated one.” He doesn’t seem forthcoming so I don’t push him on the non-answer. “Truth is, what I want has always been secondary to what the family wants. Most of the time that’s okay. That’s how things work. But in this instance, I wish I had more of a say in my own life.” He grunts, smiling slight to himself. “I never talk about my life like this, you know. I must be

very fucking low if I'm spilling my guts to a stranger."

"Girlfriend," I remind him. "I'm sorry. I really am. If it helps, I feel like my life's ending too. I mean, I'm pretty sure Johnnie's going to fire me tomorrow, and I really can't afford to lose this job right now."

Finn grunts, throws back his drink, and puts the glass down. He shifts to face me, takes one of my hands in both of his, and stares me in the eye.

I sit there, staring back. Not sure what to say, heart racing, mouth watering. God, this man really is handsome. Gorgeous, actually, absurdly so. Perfect eyes, perfect lips. A growling voice, strong arms and hands. Whoever he's going to marry, she's a lucky woman.

Normally, he wouldn't be my type. A guy like this is nice to look at, but probably more trouble than he's worth.

But my normal type just stole all my money, so maybe I have bad taste.

"Since both of our lives are ending, how about this?" His voice sounds like velvet as he leans closer. I try not to breathe, try not to think, as his words wrap around my brain like silk. "There's a hotel two blocks over. I've stayed there before. I'll rent their most ludicrously expensive room, and we'll spend one last night before we're forced to face reality tomorrow morning. No strings attached. No past, no future. Just tonight. Just you and me. Just as boyfriend and girlfriend for a few hours."

My heart's going insane. Sweat beads my back. I want to fan myself. The way he's looking at me is laced with pure lust and desire.

I've never done this before. I met Lucas in college freshman year and we've been dating ever since. I thought he was the one and only.

Until he ripped out my heart and stole all my money.

Now, all I have is Finn. My fake boyfriend for one evening.

I should tell him no, go back to my apartment, and start getting my resume together.

Instead, I chew my lip, and slowly nod.

Looks like I really have gone totally insane.

“Just one night,” I say. “I can be your girlfriend for just one night.”

His eyes seem to sharpen and he licks his lips. He likes that. I can tell he likes it very much.

“Come on, girlfriend. If all we have is one night, I want to savor every single second I can.”

Chapter 3

Dara

Finn takes me from the bar, his hand wrapped around my waist protectively, and leads me to a nearby hotel as promised. It's called The Newcastle, a sleek and modern structure tucked between two office buildings with gleaming marble floors, smiling, beautiful staff members, and the sort of prices I couldn't afford even when I had money.

"Your room is ready, Mr. Crowley." The front desk girl beams at him like she'd love to throw her ovaries at him.

But Finn doesn't notice. "Thank you." He accepts the room keys. We ride the elevator together, Finn looking at me like he's mentally undressing me already, until we arrive at the top floor.

"Holy wow," I say as we step into the room.

It's like a palace: gorgeous carpets, modern furniture, a full bar, a jacuzzi in the bathroom, and a balcony that looks out over Boston.

Finn pops champagne. "To being your boyfriend," he says. "And to our upcoming funerals."

I toast and drink, grinning, dizzy with the lavishness. "You don't actually stay here often, do you?"

"Rarely. Only when I need to get away from my family. Which, now that I think about it, happens more than it should."

“You don’t get along with them?”

“That’s not it.” He steers me onto the balcony. We stand, looking out at the buildings, at the houses.

God, Lucas would’ve *never* given me something like this.

“What is it then?” I prompt, sensing that he needs to talk this out.

He hesitates like he’s not sure how to answer. But he says, “I love my family. I love my brothers, my father, my mother. The men we employ. Our business interests. Everything that comes along with being a Crowley. Only it’s that the pressure is constant. The politicking, the bickering, the backstabbing, the infighting, it’s never-ending. Sometimes, I need space to think my own damn thoughts without hearing my brothers sniping at everything I choose.”

I sip my champagne, my stomach doing twists. “What exactly do you do again?”

He stares at me, face blank. “I manage clubs.” He hands me a card. *Finn Crowley* is emblazoned at the top beneath a logo for something called *Club Hazard*. “Visit sometime. You might like it.”

I slip the card into my clutch. “I will. Thanks.”

He reaches out and touches my cheek. I let out a soft purr, surprising myself. I move closer to him, looking into his icy eyes, feeling suddenly shy.

I’ve never done this before. Coming home with a man. I’m not sure how it works. Do we just—start having sex? How do we transition from chatting to undressing? Even back in school, I was always the careful one, always home at a reasonable hour, always studying, always making sure nobody got too drunk. And if they did get too drunk, I was calling cabs, holding back hair, and tucking them into bed.

This is so beyond me right now.

But there’s something about this man. It’s the way he’s looking at me, like he knows what he wants and he’s not afraid to reach out and take it. Lucas was never like that—my ex couldn’t make a single decision without fretting over a thousand different likely outcomes.

Finn touched me in the bar without hesitating. He simply told me what he wanted, no mixing words, no backtracking or worrying. One night, nothing more. I like that. It feels good to be wanted, even if it won't last.

"You don't need to worry," he whispers, moving closer. The bubbles in the champagne must be getting to my head because I feel like I'm floating. "I'm not fragile. I don't think you are, either."

"No, I'm not." I lick my lips. "You don't have to worry about breaking me."

"Good." His mouth brushes my cheek. "I never tell people about my family. I never talk about my worries. Complaints are for the weak. Men like me, we solve problems, we don't let them fester. It feels good, talking to you."

"I'm glad I could be of service."

His smile is devilish and terrifying all at once. "I want to be of service to you now, Dara. What can I do for you?"

I finish my champagne. Right, okay, *this* is how we transition. He takes the glass and perches it on the railing. "I don't know," I whisper, shivering with anticipation. "I don't know what I need." Which is only half true.

What I *want* is this man's mouth on mine.

He pulls me against him. I let out a whimper, shocked at the way my body's reacting to him. He reaches down to my leg again. I'm in work attire—a simple blouse and a knee-length skirt. He pulls the hem up, running a hand over my thigh.

"You're stressed," he whispers in my ear. His hand moving higher. "You've been hurt. A man you trusted stole from you. He broke your heart. You need a release."

"Yes," I whisper, digging my fingers into his back. Fucking hell, he's right, I really need it.

"I can give that to you." His hand reaches the top of my tights and he slowly peels them down. "Do you want to shiver, Dara? Do you want to moan? I want to hear you make sounds you never dreamed you could make. I want to taste you come, Dara. Can you do that for me? Will you release for me?"

Holy shit.

The mouth on this guy.

I've *never* heard someone talk like that before in my life.

And I absolutely love it.

"Yes, please," I say, biting my lip to keep from making those sounds already.

He gets my tights down and his fingers graze over my panties. He growls, smiling as he pulls back. "You're soaking wet," he says. "You dirty girl. You want me to lick you clean, don't you? You really want to be my girlfriend tonight, don't you?"

"Please," I say, losing my mind, unable to take it anymore. "Finn, *please*. Just kiss me."

"Anything you want," he says.

And kisses me.

Chapter 4

Dara

His tongue is heaven, his lips like clouds. I tumble into that kiss, throwing myself into it, losing myself in his taste. All my anxieties, all my fears, I shove them away and embrace this moment, because there's only tonight with this man, only tonight and nothing more.

Tomorrow can be terrible. Tomorrow *will* be terrible.

But tonight, I can give myself over to sin and pleasure.

He tastes like grass and whiskey. His tongue invades mine, owning me, dominating me. He kisses like he wants to *fuck*, not make love, not hold each other in a sweet embrace, but filthy, animalistic, pure. He kisses like he wants to learn how to make me gasp, make my legs quiver, make my back arch, and he plans on tearing me to pieces.

I groan as he lowers me down into a chair on the balcony, drops to his knees, and takes off my tights.

“That’s a good girl,” he whispers as I raise my hips, helping him. I let out a little whimper of excitement at those words, *good girl*. God, I like that. Once my tights are on the ground, he hikes up my skirt, then unbuttons two more buttons on my blouse. He kisses my chest. “Look at you, lovely girl. A man could be very content spending his life with tits like these. If I were marrying you tomorrow, I wouldn’t mind one bit. Skin like this, hell, girl, I could marry you right now.”

He bites me above one breast then sucks hard enough to leave a mark.

“Finn,” I gasp, gripping his hair. “Easy.” Guess I’m leaving my blouse fully buttoned tomorrow.

“Just leaving something for you to remember me by,” he says, burying his mouth on mine.

While his fingers push my panties aside and explore my dripping pussy.

Fuck, it feels good. He rolls his fingers up and down my folds, touching every inch of me, before sinking them inside slowly. I groan, wiggling my hips, kissing him harder. He purrs right back, pulling his fingers out to tease my clit. I whimper into his mouth as bliss slams into my skull like a bull charging up my spine, ripping me to pieces.

“Finn,” I gasp when he pulls back to kiss my collarbone. His fingers slide into me, slick and soaking, as his thumb rubs against my clit.

“You’re dripping, love,” he groans, clearly liking it. “You’re soaking my palm. Your juices are covering my wrist. You’re a lovely little thing, aren’t you? And so fucking excited.”

“God, you’re filthy,” I gasp, back arching with delight.

“I say what I mean, love. Don’t forget it.” He drops down between my legs and spreads them wide. “Now, about that release.” He slips my panties off until I’m in only my skirt up around my waist and my half-undone blouse. He kisses my inner thigh, nibbling, teasing. “And about that taste.”

Then he rolls his tongue along my pussy, licking me gently at first.

Pleasure rocks into my hips. His tongue flattens as he works harder, licking faster. Sucking me, licking me, sucking me again. I moan, grabbing his hair hard.

God, I’ve never felt this way before.

Never in all my time with Lucas have I ever, *ever* felt this much pleasure.

Lucas was an in-and-out kind of guy. Minimal foreplay. Fast humping. Boom, finished. My pleasure was always secondary.

But this, this is sinful, this is sensual. The noises this man's making as he licks my dripping pussy are too much. He's enjoying himself, purring and growling. His tongue and lips smack together as he eats me, grunting like a starving bear. It's beautiful, those noises. His hands reach up, grabbing my breasts, teasing me, until I can't take it anymore. I grind my hips, moaning, back arching, legs shaking.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I gasp, vision narrowing. "Oh, fuck, Finn."

"Good girl," he says as his fingers slide inside of me. He licks my clit, fucking me deep. "Come for me, love. I want to taste it. Come on now, come for me, you good fucking girl."

"Oh my god, fuck," I gasp as he keeps going and I can't take it anymore.

I come for him, just the way he's asking. I come in a wave and he moans, eating me up, lapping my folds, licking my clit. I make these gasping shocked sounds, shaking, trembling as the orgasm leaves me shattered, dripping, blinking, ears ringing, and so freaking satisfied.

"There you go," he says, rocking back to his knees. I stare as he licks his fingers. "Lovely girl. I really should've made you my girlfriend sooner."

"I should've made you my boyfriend sooner too. Maybe getting dumped isn't so bad." I grin at him as he leans forward and kisses me. I taste myself on his tongue—salt, sweet, lust.

"Come on," he says, standing. "I'm not done with you."

He pours more champagne and leads me into the bedroom. He sits back, watching intently as I undress. When I'm completely naked, he finally stands and takes off his own clothes.

"You should know something about me," he says, staring into my eyes.

I'm trembling, more turned on than I've ever been.

"What's that?"

"I'm a visual man. I like to look, love. I don't want the lights down low. I'm not ashamed of myself. I'm not ashamed of fucking you. I don't want you hiding under sheets, trying to keep yourself from me. I want you all. Every

inch of you. Now, turn around.”

I chew my lip, but obey. Shivering with excitement. The way he speaks to me, tells me exactly what he wants, it’s intoxicating. I love how direct he’s being, but most of all, I love the way he’s looking at me body. I stand on my toes, showing him my ass.

“That’s a good girl,” he says.

When I turn around, his shirt’s off.

And holy wow, the man’s a specimen.

Cut chest, chiseled abs, like a sculptor went to town creating the ideal man. Tattoos cover his chest, disappearing down his arms. A Celtic cross, wolves, a sun and moon motif. Beautifully done artwork, worthy of a body like his.

“What else should I know about you?” I ask, coming closer to him. Walking on my toes still, trying to reach his height but failing miserably.

“I say what I mean. Like I think you have the most beautiful tits I’ve seen in a very long time. I love the taste of your pussy. I love the look in your eye, right now. Like you want to drop to your knees and swallow my cock.”

“Yes, please,” I say, smiling a little. “Can I be honest with you?”

“Absolutely.” He runs his fingers into my hair then grips tight. I gasp a little as he pulls and bends forward to kiss my nipples. “I expect my girlfriend to speak her mind.”

“I’ve never done this before. I mean, I’ve never gone home with a stranger. And honestly, I’m afraid, but I like it.”

“No reason to be afraid of me,” he whispers, tongue rolling around my nipples before he kisses me again. “I don’t want to hurt you tonight. Not unless you ask me to.”

I smile a little, licking my lips. “Do you do that? Hurt people, I mean?”

“Only if they deserve it.”

I reach down and unbuckle his belt. I help him get his pants and his underwear off. His cock is long and thick, twitching with his heartbeat,

covered in veins. Finn's massive, easily twice what Lucas ever was. And Finn's rock hard, clearly appreciating this moment as much as I am.

Finn sits on the end of the bed and I drop to my knees in front of him. I take him into my mouth, sucking tentatively at first, but warming up to my task. He moans as I do it, which makes me moan in return, my hand slipping between my legs. Shit, I really am soaking wet. His dick slides up and down between my lips as my spit covers his shaft. Normally, I'm shy and hesitant, but tonight I'm Finn's girl, and Finn's girl can be whatever she wants.

I let myself loose. I suck harder, spit rolling down to gather in my hand as I stroke. He groans his delight, pushing me down. "Deeper," he commands, and I let him slip into my throat.

I pull back, gasping, his eyes on fire. "I can't wait," he says, commanding now. "Ride me, Dara. I want to watch you ride me."

I straddle him, head buzzing. Somewhere in the back of my skull I'm thinking, maybe there should be protection involved here, but it's too late. I'm already arching my back and sliding down his shaft, his massive, bare cock filling me to the brim, and pleasure explodes through my skull as he kisses my lips, my neck, my nipples, sucking and licking me, hands exploring like he can't get enough of my body.

There go all my doubts, all my hesitation, all my everything.

There's only Finn between my legs.

I ride him, listening and obeying his commands. Speeding up, slowing down. He slaps my ass, does it again when he realizes that I like it. And finally, he pulls me onto the bed, pins me on my back, and fucks me like I need it.

Fucks me deep, fucks me hard. Fucks me like there's no tomorrow, because for this relationship, there isn't.

"Finn," I gasp, back arching. "Finn, fuck, I'm going to come again. I'm coming, fuck, I'm coming." The orgasm tears through me as he grunts, stiffening, and I feel him fill me. I feel him come deep between my legs in a dizzying rush of pure bliss.

We finish together in an explosion of bliss. I'm gasping for air, sweat

dripping down my body. Purring like a content cat.

“I know this is only for the night, but you are by *far* the best girlfriend I’ve ever had,” he says, kissing my shoulder, my neck. My core’s still twitching and my head’s still buzzing from the orgasm.

I grin at him and return his kisses. “I feel the same way. You’re much better than my ex. I can’t even remember his name.”

“Good. I’d like to fuck you until you can’t think of his face ever again.”

“That’s a deal.”

“And as for me, I’ll have the memory of you riding my cock to cherish on my wedding day.”

“That’s very bad of you.”

“I’m a very bad man, love.” He kisses me, brushes my hair aside, and holds me tight against his chest. “Now, I believe there’s a big shower and a lovely jacuzzi we can sample. Interested?”

“Very. If I don’t have to wear clothes tonight, that’d be a bonus.”

“Consider it done then.” He rolls me onto my stomach, squeezes my ass, and spanks it. “I’m far from finished with you, Dara, my lovely girlfriend. Now come on. I want to lick water off your perky little nipples.”

Who the hell is this guy?

This is easy, whatever this is, because there’s nothing else but the two of us. No baggage, no expectations, no lives. No tomorrow. There’s only us here in this room, enjoying sex and sin while we can.

Easy and simple.

But some voice in the back of my head knows it won’t last.

Nothing this good ever does.

Still, when he spanks me, I moan.

“Come on, love, I’m a lot of things, but I’m not patient,” he says.

I laugh as he drags me out of bed.

Chapter 5

Dara

He wakes early the next morning. His alarm goes off at five, tearing me from a very deep, very blissful sleep. A comfortable ache rests between my legs, and I stretch, letting out a little groan from deep in my throat. He kisses my hair, breathes me deep. “Morning,” he says. “Former girlfriend.”

“Morning, former boyfriend.” I blink up at him. Still incredibly handsome, even this early. “How are we awake already? Didn’t you keep me up until a couple hours ago?”

“I did, and I’m sorry, but I have to leave. The room’s paid for through today. Stay, relax, enjoy the spa if that’s your thing.”

“Oh. Right.” I sit up, clinging the sheet to my chest. I remember what he said the night before. *I want to see you.* But it’s like the magic’s worn off. “You’re leaving.”

“I am.” He gently pulls the sheet away. I try not to smile. Maybe there’s still a little magic left. “I meant it when I said I need to look at you. We’re not totally done yet.”

I lick my lips and nod when he kisses me. “What now then? You just go get engaged?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” He gets out of bed, still completely naked. And shockingly somewhat hard. He must’ve had nice dreams. He catches me looking and smiles. “No time for that, I’m afraid.”

“No, that’s okay, I didn’t mean—” I blush, feeling self-conscious.

But he laughs and kisses me. “I don’t think I’ve enjoyed a night like that before.”

“I definitely haven’t.”

“It’s a shame, really.” He hesitates, looking like he wants to say something else. But whatever it was, he leaves it hanging. “I’ll shower,” he says instead.

He’s not long in the bathroom. I stay in bed, squirming slightly as I think back to the night before. We were a little reckless—he came inside of me that first time, and neither of us bothered to mention protection, which must mean I’m way worse emotionally than I thought—but overall, he treated me like a princess.

Well, like a very filthy princess.

When he’s done in the shower, he dresses and stands beside the bed. He bends down and kisses me, looking at me for a long moment.

“This is goodbye then,” he says, touching my cheek. “I’m sorry, but I’m breaking up with you.”

I smile at him sadly. “Dumped twice two days. Not my best track record.”

“You’ll recover. A girl like you can have any man she wants.”

“What if she wants a man that’s getting engaged?”

His eyes sharpen with a bittersweet pain. “Sorry, love. Maybe not any man.” He kisses me again and walks to the door. “Stay. Sleep in. Enjoy yourself.”

“I wish I could, but I have work in a few hours.”

“Ah, right. The manager.” His eyebrows raise. “Still think he’ll fire you?”

“If I’m lucky,” I say, grinning.

“Goodbye, Dara.”

“Goodbye, Finn.”

He hesitates, looking at me for a long moment like he’s memorizing my face,

then disappears.

Leaving me alone in the hotel room with only the smell of his sex and the memory of his touch.

Chapter 6

Finn

“Well, bro, you look like shit.” Carson grins at me as I enter the Crowley mansion through the side door. My oldest brother is sitting in the breakfast nook with an espresso on the plate in front of him and a copy of the *New York Times* in both hands. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was some overprivileged, self-indulgent gentleman, not a back-alley bruiser with a taste for violence. “Stayed out all night on the eve of your engagement?”

“Something like that.” I walk over, grab the espresso off his plate, and down it. Black and bitter, just how I like it.

He scowls at me. “You’re late. Dad’s pissed.”

“He’ll survive. I’m here, aren’t I?” I sink down in the chair across from him. I keep thinking about Dara, about her kiss, her taste, those little whimpers and moans she made.

I’ve had women before. I can’t pretend like I’m some saint. Living hard and dangerously comes with being a Crowley, and I push those limits more than some of my brothers.

But Dara was the first woman to make me want to *stay*. To lie in bed with her, order breakfast, listen to her laugh, listen to her talk.

Fuck her again, obviously. Feel her lips wrapped around my cock. Watch her come, over and over.

God, I could do that for my whole life.

If I were getting engaged to *her*, I might not mind this so much.

Carson's face softens. "I know this isn't easy for you."

A rare display of empathy from my eldest brother. "I notice that Dad didn't make any of you get married."

Carson grunts. "You're the youngest."

"I'm aware of that."

"I'm the heir. Nolan's my second. Liam is—" Carson puts the paper down and rubs his face, leaving a small ink smear under his right eye. "Liam's Liam."

"Yeah, Liam is fucking Liam." Strange, psychotic Liam. My favorite brother, if I'm honest with myself, mostly because he leaves me alone and doesn't give a shit what anyone does.

"You're going to be fine." Carson drums his fingers on the table. "She's here too, you know."

My eyebrows raise. "Really? It's barely past eight. I thought I had at least an hour of Dad lecturing me on my responsibility toward the family before I met the girl."

The girl. Also known as my future wife.

"Got here ten minutes ago. You just missed her." He glances at me, a little smile on his face. He knows what I want to ask—but he's not going to say it outright.

"Did you—" I start to ask if he saw her, if she's pretty, but I stop myself from giving him the satisfaction of seeing me squirm. Despite everything, we're still brothers and deeply competitive. I steady myself, composing my face, forcing myself to take on an air of nonchalance. "Doesn't matter."

His expression softens as he picks his paper up again. "She's pretty," he says softly. I'm surprised by the gesture. I figured he'd let me sweat it out a little bit longer.

But it's what I really wanted to know.

Fine, fuck, it's shallow. I know, it's shallow. But I want to at least be somewhat attracted to the woman I'll spend the rest of my life with.

All that other shit? Personality, charm, compatibility? We can work on that. Looks generally don't change all that much.

I glance at him. "How pretty?"

"Pretty enough, you fucking shit." Carson rolls his eyes. "Go on, go to Dad's office and face the music. No use putting it off. You'll just make him madder."

"Where are the others?" I push my chair back and stand. "They're not here to play a funeral dirge for me?"

"Nolan's still out. Liam's gone being Liam. You got me for moral support, bro."

"You're doing such a good job at that."

He barks a laugh. "Don't tell me you're feeling sorry for yourself? You're cementing an important alliance for the family. That's no small thing."

I grunt in response, looking away. What's left unspoken is *you're doing something useful for a change.*

That's the way things are in the Crowley family.

Carson and Nolan are in leadership. Liam's off doing whatever the fuck Liam wants, because he's strange, intense, obsessive, and probably an actual psychopath. That makes him useful in his own way.

Which leaves me. The youngest at twenty-eight. I have my businesses, my crews, my purpose. But as far as Dad and the rest of the family's concerned, that's all ancillary, all unimportant.

I lift my chin. Square my shoulders. Roll my hands into fists.

No sense in feeling sorry for myself.

Normally, I'd tuck all these negative thoughts into the back of my head, but today's a special case.

I'm getting engaged.

And fuck, do I wish I were back in bed with Dara.

Some small voice regrets what happened with her last night. Not because of *her*, but because tasting Dara was like getting a glimpse of what my life could be like if I were free to marry a woman I actually want.

It would've been better if I never found out.

Instead, now I have Dara in my head, and I don't know how I'll ever shake her.

I walk out of the breakfast room, through a series of back halls, nodding to the house staff as I go, until I stop outside of Dad's office. I take a couple breaths to steady myself, letting calm fall over me like a shroud.

I'm a Crowley. I can handle anything. I run my clubs, hurt my enemies, and don't take shit from anyone. I can marry this girl without complaint. I can do my duty for the family.

Even if I'd rather find Dara again, drag her into my apartment, and keep her there for the next six months. And even then, I doubt I'd get tired of her.

That won't ever happen. There's no reason to think about her anymore. What's done is done, and what will be, will be.

I'm a fucking Crowley.

I open the door and step inside.

Chapter 7

Finn

Dad's behind his desk at the far end of the room. He's a compact man, gray hair, clean-shaven today, in a black suit with a dark red tie. Orin Crowley's the boss of the Crowley family, the leader of our organization, and one of the most powerful men in the country.

Sitting in a chair to the side of his desk is a girl.

I stare at her for a long moment. Nothing else exists but her. She's got dark brown hair, big brown eyes. Mousy, tall and willowy, much too thin. I can't help but compare her to Dara. This girl's skinny where Dara's curvy, dark where Dara's light. Dara had lovely chestnut brown hair that fell in waves down to her shoulders. This girl has straight hair pulled back in an austere bun. Her cheekbones are high and her scowl says she's as excited for this as I am.

Dara was laughter and lightness and pleasure.

This girl's severe. Pretty, yes, but pretty the way a shiny steel pipe's pretty.

"There you are," Dad snaps, standing. "You're late. Finn, I want you to meet Clive McLaren and his daughter, Robin McLaren."

I almost didn't notice the man sitting next to her. Another typical Irishman: squat, pale, wrinkly, with salt-and-pepper hair and an easy smile.

"Good to meet you," Clive says, coming over. He shakes my hand with overblown enthusiasm. Landing a Crowley son for his daughter's probably

the victory of a lifetime for a guy like this. “It’s nice we finally see the man that’s going to marry my daughter, eh, Robin?”

The girl slowly gets to her feet. I walk past her father and stand in front of her, trying to get a feel for what she’s like. She’s gangly, all skin and bones. Dressed well enough, but the glare she gives me doesn’t inspire much hope.

In fact, I feel absolutely nothing looking at her.

The contrast is undeniable. With Dara, heat rolled down my skin even watching her from a distance. My first glance at that girl, sitting alone on a bench looking at her phone like it was delivering the worst news imaginable, sent shivers down my spine. I couldn’t look away; she was incredible. Dara was the sun, blinding and intense. She stole my attention like a black hole, sucking me in.

If Robin disappeared right now, I would barely notice.

“Nice to meet you,” Robin says, offering me her hand.

I shake it. Why the fuck not? Might as well try getting used to her. Unfortunately, her palm’s clammy and doesn’t fit right in my hand.

Not like Dara’s did.

“You two are officially engaged now,” Dad says, sealing the deal.

It’s an anticlimactic moment. Robin barely registers it in her face, just a slight upturn of her lips.

I drop Robin’s hand. “Just like that?” I ask, glancing at him. “No ceremony? No rings?”

“Here.” Dad holds up a box. “Give this to the girl.”

Robin looks disgusted by the whole charade, though her father’s beaming as I awkwardly shove an engagement diamond down her finger. I wonder where Dad got the ring, but it doesn’t matter. “There, now it’s real,” I say, more to myself than anyone.

“Real enough,” Robin murmurs. The first sign of life from her yet.

“Wonderful. Congratulations, you two.” Clive claps me on the back. I want

to break his neck. “This is just the beginning of our relationship, of course. The McLaren family hopes to work very closely with the Crowley organization. Your father and I have discussed the details.”

“I’m sure you have.” I glance at my old man. “Are we done here?”

Orin’s jaw works. He’s clearly pissed that I’m not playing the part of the politicking youngest son. He wants me to woo this old asshole, make him feel important, maybe sweep the daughter off her feet a little bit, all so we can get access to their drugs, their guns, and their political connections. McLaren has half a dozen cousins, and half of those have federal judgeships. The other half are good lawyers.

I’ll marry her. I’ll grit my teeth and even smile while I do it. But I won’t act like this is what I want behind closed doors.

“How about you give the girl a tour of the grounds while I speak with her father,” Dad says, glaring at me. “Since she’ll be your wife in a year’s time. You might as well get acquainted.”

“Works for me.” I offer her my arm. “Shall we?”

Robin accepts, looking like she’s putting her hand on garbage. “I’d be happy to.”

Doubt that.

“Wonderful. Wonderful! Don’t get a jump on the wedding night yet though, kids. We’ve got a long way until then, ha-ha!” Clive flops back down in his chair, beaming.

Robin grimaces, cheeks turning red.

I lead her from the room. Poor girl doesn’t need to be mortified more than necessary by her obnoxious father. We’re in this together now—might as well try making nice.

We head down the hall toward the breakfast nook. I figure Carson will help smooth this over, maybe play intermediary for a while until Robin gets more comfortable.

But she stops me in the hallway.

“I want to get something straight,” she says, staring at me with that frosty glare. “This is a business transaction. One that I’m not too fond of.”

I raise my eyebrows and lean against the wall, crossing my arms. I have to admit, I’m surprised. She doesn’t look like the type to have a spine, but maybe I misjudged her. “Then we can agree on something. Common ground is the basis of all lasting relationships.”

She grimaces. “I don’t want to joke.”

“All right then, what do you want to do?” I think of Dara and her banter. That easy laugh. That big smile.

Fuck, I have to stop. Dara’s gone. I’ll never see her again.

Robin is my future, for better or worse.

“I want to make things clear. You and I will have separate lives. You can take mistresses, so long as you’re discreet and you don’t embarrass me. I will do the same. We will sleep together to produce children, but no more than four. We will not share a bedroom. Hopefully, things can be cordial between us, but don’t expect me to be some love-stricken, doting wife. I don’t give a damn that you’re a Crowley.”

She stands there, hands on her hips, glaring at me.

I smile, but inside my stomach’s churning, because this is exactly how I hoped things *wouldn’t* go.

But Robin’s right. Whatever we might have, it’s never going to mean anything more than a convenient way for our two families to cement a long-lasting alliance, like we’re fucking European nobility. The situation makes me sick, but it’s one more grievance to add to the pile.

“That works for me,” I say curtly.

She sniffs, tilting her chin up. “Nothing personal. But I have a life. I’m not willing to give it up for you.”

“Good.” I turn my back on her. “How about you show yourself around? That way we know what to expect.”

“Happy to. Nice meeting you.”

“You too. No hard feelings, I hope.”

“None. Glad we cleared things up.” She shakes her head, turning her back.

I walk away, leaving her there alone in the hallway.

That girl’s my future. An actual stranger. And she hates me already.

Not that I much care what she thinks.

I pause when I’m alone, still in the hallways. I think about Dara, my eyes squeezed close. I’m tempted to call the hotel to see if she’s still in the room, but by now she’ll be at work, maybe getting fired. I wonder if she’s okay, if her manager let that whole mess go, or if he’s really as vindictive as she said.

I want her. I miss her. And I’ll never taste her again.

Ice Queen back there is all I’ll ever have, whether I like it or not.

“How’d things go?” Carson asks, looking surprised when I walk through the room, heading for the door.

“My fiancée and I have an understanding. She doesn’t give a fuck about me, and I don’t give a fuck about her. Everything’s great.”

Carson gives me a hard look as I shove outside, heading to my car and back into the city.

Chapter 8

Dara

HR calls right around the third time I catch myself daydreaming about Finn. I'm alone in my cubicle, listening to the sound of recycled air hum through the vent above my desk, trying to picture the exact feeling of Finn's tongue on my clit when my phone rings, ripping me back into the present.

I jump a little, stare at my phone, heart racing, trying to shove the image of Finn down between my legs from my mind. That's never going to happen again. Might as well accept it.

That man broke me in more ways than one.

"Hello?" I put on my most professional voice.

"Hi, ah, Dara Connell? This is Harry Frith down in Human Resources. We have, ah, John Adair here, and we wanted to have a conversation. Would you mind heading on over?"

I squeeze my eyes closed, stomach doing twists. I was waiting for this, but I didn't expect it to happen so fast. It's barely past ten and I've only been here for a couple hours. "Happy to. I'll be down shortly."

"Thank you very much."

I hang up, grab my cell, and shoot a text to my best friend.

Dara: It's happening!!! HR CALLED!!!

Kathryn: NO. He didn't. That's insane! He's the one that accosted you!

Dara: I know. I know!!! But you really think they're going to believe me?

Kathryn: You have to tell the truth, okay? Tell them exactly what happened. Don't let him bully you.

Kathryn: I'm serious, Dara.

Kathryn: Don't. Let. Him. Bully. You!

Kathryn: If you're going to get fired, at least get fired standing up for yourself.

I take a deep breath, nodding to myself. Kathryn's right—Johnnie's going to fuck me over, but I don't have to just go ahead and let him. I pull on a cardigan, making sure to cover myself up as much as I can. I hate him for it, but Johnnie's words about my workplace attire really got under my skin.

That's the problem with guys like him. I know Johnnie's a sexist little prick and what he says or thinks doesn't matter, but just him saying it out loud lodges in my brain whether I like it or not.

His shittiness infects me like a virus.

I stand, trying to psych myself up, trying to get a little mad.

But all my anger's gone.

I stand, staring at my blank computer screen. There's nothing in me right now, nothing but a vague memory of Finn and a deep, ugly bitterness.

After Finn left earlier this morning, I hurried out of there and back to my apartment.

I found it empty.

Not entirely—Lucas was kind enough to leave some of my clothes (*some*) and most of my toiletries. But everything else? All of it gone. Anything that could be taken was taken. I assume they sold most of it, or at least they tried to. Maybe they brought the dishes with them to Mexico or something. But it was all gone.

I'm too devastated to work up a rage anymore.

I spent the morning on the phone with the police. They promised to send someone out, but he didn't come in time, and I had to leave for work. Then I called Kathryn on my way and updated her, including every spicy detail with Finn—well, most of the details. I left out some key bits.

Like the unprotected sex.

She raged for me. God, Kathryn can really work herself up. I let her go on and on about how she always knew Lucas was a piece of shit (true, she told me once when him and I were on a break a couple years back), how she's going to hunt him down and strangle him, etc., etc. Basically, she vented all the feelings I should be screaming out into the universe.

Instead, I have nothing. Just numbness.

Which is arguably worse.

Now here I am, down in HR, sitting outside of Harry Frith's office waiting to get my head chopped off.

I don't know how I ended up in this place. My money stolen, my apartment cleaned out, my boyfriend gone. It's like the world's out to get me, and it's not holding back.

"Ms. Connell? Come on in." Harry Frith is a middle-aged man, soft and round, bald on top with wisps of brown on the temples. His glasses make his eyes look like saucers.

Johnnie's already there, sitting in a chair, not looking at me. I hesitate as Harry settles himself behind the desk, looking up at me with that owl-like stare, blinking slightly. "Go ahead and take a seat, Ms. Connell," he says.

But suddenly, I feel a spark of something. Not exactly anger, but indignation. An annoyance that I've been dragged into this mess when I'm the victim in this situation.

It's seeing Johnnie sitting there, not looking at me like a fucking coward, after what he did the night before. That stupid, selfish asshole, that little piece of trash. If Finn hadn't intervened, I don't know what he would've done.

And I'm the one about to get in trouble.

"I don't know what this man told you, Mr. Frith, but Johnnie assaulted me last night." I slam the words like a sledgehammer, doing my best to keep my pulse under control.

I can do this. Kathryn's right. Maybe I'm numb, but I can pretend to be her for a little while.

I can let her anger guide me.

Harry's mouth drops open in shock. Johnnie turns, staring at me, hands waving in the air like he's trying to stop what I'm about to say.

But fuck him. There's no stopping this. Fuck all the guys like him that think they can get away with hurting women. He wants to screw me over? He wants to spin the story so it sounds like I'm the real problem?

Well, to hell with that.

I spew it all out. The whole story. Starting with Johnnie approaching me, and ending with Finn stepping in to help. "If that nice man hadn't stopped by, I don't know what Johnnie would've done. I'm not sure what he told you, Mr. Frith, but Johnnie's a liar. He sexually assaulted me, made lewd comments about my workplace clothing, and I'm afraid he would've done worse if given the chance. If he tried to make me look like I'm at fault, he's only doing it to save his own cowardly skin."

Silence falls over the room. Johnnie's bright red with rage and shame, his jaw tight and working. Harry's completely pale, glancing from me to Johnnie and back again, looking like he's at a total loss.

"Ah, Ms. Connell?" Harry's voice is a squeak. "This was supposed to be a performance review. He didn't mention any, uh, allegations."

My body goes still. My heart nearly stops. My hands and feet feel like ice. All that anger? Yeah, that's gone. Back to being numb. "He... didn't?"

"No," Johnnie says through his teeth. "And my review was very positive." He stands suddenly. "Sorry, Harry, but can I talk to Dara in the hall for a second?"

“Uh, I don’t think, ah, it’s probably—”

But Jonnie’s already steering me out the door. I let him do it. I’m too mortified, too frozen to fight back.

“You weren’t trying to get me fired,” I whisper once we’re alone, the door slammed shut, Johnnie facing me with a vicious, hateful stare. “I thought—”

“No, you psycho,” he snaps quietly, leaning closer. “I know I fucked up last night. I was going to apologize to you by giving you a glowing performance review. Instead, you came in there guns blazing, and because of your big mouth, we’re both screwed. I swear to fucking god, now you really *are* done working here. You hear me? I’m going straight to my uncle. You’re fucking done.”

I take one step away, ears ringing. “But I thought—I figured you were—”
Shit, shit, shit. What the hell did I just do?

But no, fuck no, I did the right thing in there.

Even if Johnnie wanted to apologize, that doesn’t change anything. He really did assault me. He really did all those things.

The only problem is now he’s actually going to get me fired, whereas if I had kept my mouth shut, I might be getting a raise and a promotion right now.

God, this is disgusting. I feel absolutely filthy. This whole situation makes me absolutely sick. What a horrendous moral situation. Let my abuser get away with abuse, get money thrown in my face for my silence.

Absolutely horrifying.

Suddenly, some of that rage returns. I’m mortified, completely embarrassed, and all I want to do is get out of here.

I turn my back on him, head spinning. I need to leave, go back to my empty apartment, talk to the cops, sort my shit out. Let Johnnie do what he has to do. I said my piece to HR already.

“Where are you going?” he snaps. “We need to fix that in there. Hey, Dara, get the fuck over here! Where the fuck are you going?!”

I don't look back. I walk away, as fast as I can, too self-righteous to stop.

My body's fried. My nerves are shot.

I reached my limit. Here I am, I'm finished, totally finished. I can't keep fighting, not after the last couple of days.

Everything I had is gone, and now I'm going to lose this job for real, all because I couldn't keep my mouth shut. I should find some solace in that: at least I went down swinging. At least I did the right thing. At least I didn't take my abuser's bribe.

Maybe, if I was smart, I could've gone to HR privately without Johnnie right there in the room and made sure justice was served.

Instead, I made myself look unstable and guaranteed that he'd retaliate against me.

Johnnie will go running to his uncle, and all his problems will vanish.

While I'll be vilified. It'll be his word against mine with the weight of his Patagonia Cronies backing him up and the air of respectability he manages to cling onto by way of association with his uncle. Meanwhile, I'm just some girl working here.

This isn't fair. This is so stupid. I should stay, make sure Harry understands my accusations, make sure Johnnie doesn't wiggle his way out of this somehow.

But I've lost too much and I can't keep going.

I'm giving up. To hell with it.

I head back to my cubicle, defeated, at my lowest, pack my things, and get the hell out of there before they have the chance to make this hellish day even worse.

Chapter 9

Dara

Six Weeks Later

I puke my guts up for the third time this morning and that's when I know my life is really over.

"Are you okay in there?" Kathryn frets outside of the door. "You don't sound good."

"I'm fine," I croak, flushing my sick away. I lean back against the wall, a sheen of sweat on my forehead. "Really, I'm okay."

Except I'm not.

Because for the last few days, I've been throwing up first thing every morning, like clockwork, and my period's late.

Like two weeks late.

I've been deep in denial. So much has gone wrong this last month and a half that I couldn't bring myself to admit what's happening.

Except I must've known last week when I bought a batch of pregnancy tests on a whim. A little, *just in case* sort of contingency. Or so I thought at the time.

Now, it's obvious another part of me was trying to send the main, stupid part of me a message.

I crawl over to the sink, open the cabinet, and fish the pregnancy tests out. I stare at the box, barely able to read the words through the tears filling my eyes. I don't know how I ended up here in my best friend's bathroom, throwing up, wondering if I might be knocked up, no money to my name, no apartment, barely any stuff, but here I am.

I didn't think I could get any lower.

But apparently, I was wrong.

It took Johnnie a couple days to spin the story in his favor. I tried to fight back despite walking out of work that first day, but in the end, I got sacked and Johnnie got demoted. After losing that job, I had no choice but to give up my old apartment, since I had no money and no source of income anymore. Fortunately, Kathryn's letting me sleep on her couch until I get back on my feet. Which means daily, grueling job interviews, none of which have panned out so far.

Week after week of rejection.

Doesn't help that my last employer has nothing good to say about me.

"Pee on a stick," I whisper to myself as I rip open the packaging. "Simple, right? Easy. I can do it." I sit on the toilet, blinking back tears, and get to work.

It doesn't take long. Two minutes of staring in gut-wrenching anticipation until the little lines appear.

I read the instructions a dozen times, making sure it's right, and even take the second test to be sure.

Pee. Wait. Lines.

"Kathryn?" I stand in the bathroom door, tears rolling down my face, the tests held up.

She gapes in shock, hurries over, and takes them from me. "Oh, god, Dara," she says and pulls me into a rough hug.

I cry a lot. I'm not ashamed of it. I'm at my lowest, at my absolute worst, and now I'm finding out that I'm pregnant.

How did I let this happen? How could I have been so stupid?

I can't even take care of myself, much less a baby, but apparently there's one growing inside of me at the moment.

"I know what you want to ask," I say to her as we sit on the couch. I dab at my face with tissues, feeling like a kid. She called into work and took the day off, which makes me love her so much. I really don't deserve her. "I can tell you, I haven't been with anyone but Finn."

"You two used a condom though, right?" Kathryn chews on her nails. She's small, brown hair, big blue eyes. Every single guy in the world calls her *cute*, which drives her absolutely insane. She's a talented pianist, but right now she's working the front desk at a museum.

I stare at the floor and shake my head. "Slipped my mind."

"Dara," she groans. "Okay, okay, I won't chastise you. I know how bad things have been for you lately, and I guess you weren't thinking straight that night. Understandable, given the situation."

"I had just found out about the Lucas stuff. I met Finn like two minutes after seeing my bank account for the first time." I bury my face in my hands. "How could I have been so stupid?"

"You were emotional," Kathryn says, hugging me tight. "It's okay. We can handle this. I mean... do you want to... handle it?"

I shake my head, feeling a cold, black horror in my belly. "You mean, like, take care of it?" I whisper as though saying the word out loud will somehow make things worse.

"I'm just putting the option out there, sweetie."

I chew on my cheek, considering. I've thought about this before—I'm sure every woman has at some point—and I always assumed I'd never, ever get an abortion. I still feel that way, even now, even sitting on this couch with no prospects and a baby on the way.

Who the hell is going to hire me now?

"I can't," I whisper, which only makes me cry harder.

Kathryn's there for me. She makes some coffee, even makes me something to eat. I pick at the waffles and drink a little bit, since I think I'm not supposed to have too much caffeine. I need to find a doctor, start taking vitamins, all that stuff. Thank god I haven't been drinking lately. I haven't been able to afford it, and Kathryn doesn't keep anything in the apartment.

"What about the father?" she asks, cradling her mug in both hands. "The Finn guy. What do you know about him?"

"Not much," I admit. "We didn't go into details. He has a weird family. He's apparently engaged now."

"Oh, god, that's right. The arranged marriage." She wrinkles her nose. "Who the hell does that?"

"I don't know. He said his family is complicated, but—" I shrug, at a total loss. "All I have is a card."

Kathryn studies me, lips pressed together. I've known her since high school, and there's nobody in this world that understands me better than she does. I trust her with my heart and soul, and I'd do anything for her, even if I'm sort of a worthless sad sack right now.

One day, I'll repay her for all this kindness.

A thought that only makes me feel worse, since I don't know how that'll ever happen, considering my circumstances.

"Here's what you have to do," she says, talking very carefully, taking on that tone of hers when she's explaining something potentially dangerous. Which she does surprisingly often. For a girl that looks like she loves reading science textbooks, she does have a wild streak. "I don't endorse, like, trapping guys. But—"

"No, I can't," I say, shaking my head, already a mile ahead of her. "Kathryn. I just can't."

"Hear me out. You're not going to force him into anything, right? But you said the guy bought a beautiful suite, spent all this money like it was nothing, so he has to have some cash. And it's partially his fault you're in this mess."

I sniff, shaking my head. “I could’ve pushed for a condom.”

“Yeah, you’re right, and he could’ve just done the right thing and worn one from the start. You didn’t, he didn’t, and here you are. Why should you suffer alone for a mistake you both made together? Dara, the guy needs to know. He needs to help out. I’m not saying force him to be a dad or whatever, but reach out. See what he can do.”

“This is crazy,” I say, chewing on my cheek. I’ve thought about finding Finn a thousand times since that night, but I never imagined I might actually do it. What Kathryn’s saying makes sense, only the thought of hunting him down to tell him that he knocked me up is terrifying.

The guy’s engaged. What if he throws me out on the street?

Well, it can’t get any lower at least.

“I know, it’s really crazy.” Kathryn takes my hand in hers. “But, sweetie, you have no money, no job, no apartment, nothing coming in. Your parents aren’t helping out anytime soon. You can’t raise a baby in my living room, although I’ll let you try if that’s what it comes to. You need help. You need this guy.”

I take a deep breath, blinking back tears. “What if he doesn’t want to see me? He’s got a fiancée.”

“He doesn’t have to get involved with you, he just has to make sure his child isn’t growing up homeless. You’re reasonable. You won’t ask for more than what’s fair. Come on. We can do this. Go get that card.”

I hesitate, but I get up, rummage through my things, and find the clutch I used that night. The card’s still in there, jammed inside an old pack of gum.

“*Club Hazard*,” I read, raising my eyebrows as Kathryn types it into her phone.

“Huh, it’s not that far from here, actually. Looks like one of those upscale places that cater to rich kids on ecstasy.” She squints a little. “Holy shit. Is that him?”

I snatch the phone from her and sure enough, that’s Finn in one of the promotional pictures, sitting on a couch in what looks like the VIP lounge,

drinking a whiskey, smirking at the camera. “That’s him,” I confirm as memories from that night return. His chiseled abs. His mouth between my legs. “Are you sure about this?”

“Sure? Holy shit, Dara.” She grabs her phone back. “You didn’t tell me he looked like *this*. I mean, you said he was hot, but, wow. We should’ve hunted him down weeks ago.”

“Relax,” I say, smiling to myself. “He’s not *that* good looking.” Which is a total lie.

“Uh, yes, he is.” She shakes her head, laughing. “At least you know your kid’s going to be attractive.”

That makes my smile disappear. I can’t forget why we’re looking him up. It isn’t so I can have another good night, a night I desperately need—it’s so I can go tell him I’m pregnant and beg for his help.

So I can humiliate myself all over again.

This isn’t for me anymore. It’s for my unborn child.

“Nothing’s ever easy,” I whisper, tears coming again. I fight them away, determined to be strong, if not for myself, then at least for my future kid.

Kathryn’s right. I can’t raise a baby here, but I have nowhere else to go, and there’s no guarantee I can change my fortunes before I start to show. Once that happens, no employer’s going to hire me, no matter how illegal that might be.

I need Finn’s help. I don’t have to blow up his spot or ruin his life—I only need to tell him what’s going on and ask for his help.

A strange, tingling excitement roils in my guts. The sick part of this is I *want* to see him again. I want to hunt him down, hear his voice, feel his lips against my neck.

That isn’t going to happen, but I’m still so tempted.

“I’ll come with you,” Kathryn says. “We’ll go to the club tonight and see if we can find him. At the very least, we’ll scope the place out, okay? If he owns the place, or at least manages it, then they’ll know him. We can do

this.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We can do this.” I nod to her, feigning confidence I don’t feel.

Because with my track record, this is going to go very, very badly.

Chapter 10

Finn

“All right, bro, I’ve got to admit, the club’s really come along.” Carson grins at me over a glass of whiskey.

Nolan squeezes my shoulder. “He’s right, for once in his pathetic life. The place is looking good.”

I try not to let my pride show, but a warm glow builds in my chest. “Thanks, guys. Glad you could both be here.”

They salute me with their drinks, and I bask in the momentary praise.

Club Hazard is my baby. It’s the first place I opened when I went out on my own a decade ago, back when I was still a teenager. Hazard wasn’t always this nice—over the years, I’ve made incremental improvements, at least until two weeks ago when I had the entire place renovated.

Now it looks like what I’ve always had in my head. Upscale, attractive, chandeliers with fancy paintings and old-world wood. It’s like Versailles Palace mixed with a rave. There’s no dress code, but everyone looks like they’d never be caught dead walking around in jeans surrounded by crystal light fixtures and real gold trim.

“By the way, have you spoken to Dad lately?” Carson’s squinting at me as he lounges in the roped-off VIP area to the side of the DJ booth. “He was complaining again about your future wife’s family.”

“I haven’t heard anything about that.” I glance at Carson and he’s studying

me. Bastard probably knows I haven't said a word to Dad since I met Robin six weeks ago.

I've barely thought about her in the intervening weeks. Once I left the mansion, I drove back into the city and threw myself into work. I manage multiple bars, own multiple clubs, and have a few less-than-legal rackets on the side. All my income flows into the Crowley family coffers, and all my guys are technically members of the organization, but I keep my own little kingdom in Boston.

"Don't think you're getting out of it," Nolan says, grinning casually as he slings an arm across the back of the couch. "Dad's still hell-bent on making a real man of you."

"I guess that means you two are still boys." I smirk at him, head cocked. "Did you even hit puberty yet?"

"Careful," Nolan says, laughing. "We both know what'll happen if you start running your mouth."

"Go ahead, get up and try me," I say, my smile inching into anger.

"Cut it out," Carson says, glaring between us. We're competitive, but we haven't gotten into an actual fight since we were teenagers. Not that I'm against it—only that the Crowley family is supposed to be above petty bickering.

It's not. We just pretend we are.

"All I'm saying is Dad's not backing out of the deal no matter how much he complains about his new business partner." Nolan takes a long sip of his drink. "I know you're not happy about it, but you're doing the right thing."

I grunt at him, looking away, out toward the dance floors where happy young people writhe and twist and grind against each other. All under my roof.

"I'm aware of his expectations," I say, and they leave it at that.

After a few more minutes of chatting, I make sure they're set up with a bottle of good whiskey, tell one of my best waitresses to ensure they get whatever they want, also warn her not to let them grab her ass, and hurry to the bar.

My business partner, Genna, is sitting at the far end. She's on her phone, legs crossed, tapping away at some important email. I sidle up next to her, drop into the empty stool on her left, and signal for a drink. The bartender Adam nods and pours me two fingers of our best scotch.

"How are the asshole brothers?" Genna asks, glancing at me. "Still assholes?"

"Nothing ever changes," I say, leaning on my elbows.

She smiles tightly. "Did I ever tell you about the time Nolan tried to kiss me? I kneed him so hard in the balls, he sang like a bird for a week."

"You've told me," I say, but still crack a smile. "Several times."

"That story never gets old." She sighs and puts her phone down. "The grand reopening's going good. You should be happy."

I tilt my head side to the side. "I should be."

"So what's the fucking matter, huh?"

I laugh, glance at her, and shrug. There's no use hiding anything from Genna. I met her when I was sixteen years old—she's the daughter of a prominent captain in the Crowley organization. There once was talk of the two of us getting together, but that was quickly squashed when I realized I have the wrong parts between my legs.

We've been friends ever since. I brought her into the business as a partner when I opened the Hazard, and we've been working well on multiple different ventures for a long time. She's my best friend, my confidante, and my right-hand woman. Though technically not a part of the Crowley organization on account of the family's somewhat more traditionally sexist views on gender, I still count her as part of my crew.

"Honestly, Gen? I don't know what my problem is." I take a long sip and knock the glass against the bar. "Business is booming. The family is thriving. I even have a pretty new fiancée. Wherever the fuck she is."

Genna leans closer. "You've gotta get it together. You've been in a shit mood for weeks now. How long's it been?"

Six weeks. Six long, awful weeks. “Who knows,” I say.

“You need to get laid. Seriously, Finn, you’re a handsome guy in a club filled with young, horny women. Go fuck one of them. Put a smile on that pretty face of yours.” She pinches my cheek.

I swat her away. “You go fuck. Hell, you can pull girls easier than I can.” Which is true, Genna is gorgeous. Thick, wavy red hair, full lips, pale skin, bright green eyes, tall, fit, curvy. Obsessed with keeping her body in shape. Genna’s a fucking babe.

“True, but I’m not in the mood.” She sighs dramatically. “Come on, didn’t that fiancée of yours say it’s fine to fuck around on her? Go get your dick wet, my man. You’re bumming me out.”

“Seriously, Gen, sometimes I think you’re worse than my brothers.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m *honest*. They’re pigs. There’s a difference.” She turns so she’s facing out at the crowd, leaning back against the bar. Instantly, every man standing nearby looks over at her thighs as she crosses her legs, showing skin from beneath a tight skirt. Poor bastards, if only they knew. “There’s got to be someone good enough for Finn Crowley here tonight.”

“I doubt it.” I finish my scotch. I haven’t told Genna this, but I haven’t been with anyone since Dara. Not a single woman in six weeks, practically a record for me.

Six long, ugly weeks spent thinking about a girl I’ll never see again.

“I can’t keep dealing with your grumpy ass.” Genna bumps against my shoulder and nods. “How about that one? She’s really hot. I’m tempted myself, but she’s been staring at you ever since you sat down.”

“Not interested,” I say, not bothering to look. I gesture to Adam for another scotch.

“Seriously, she is *really* staring at you.” Genna leans forward. “Not even glancing at me. So I guess she’s straight. Lucky you. She’s a cute thing. Honey brown hair, big eyes, curvy in a really good way, with these heart-shaped lips—”

Slowly, I turn, heart hammering in my chest. Excitement and nerves cascade down my spine as I follow Genna's gaze.

It's Dara.

Standing maybe twenty feet away next to another girl, a mousy-looking girl, small and cute. I barely notice her. All I can do is stare at Dara, my Dara, the girl I've been obsessing over for six weeks.

The girl I can't let myself want.

Not now that I'm engaged.

But fuck, there she is.

"What's wrong? You look like you're about to have a stroke." Gen shoves my shoulder. "Seriously. Finn. Are you okay?"

"Fine," I say, standing. "I just need to, uh—"

But Dara's coming toward me. Our eyes lock, holding tight, and that night comes rushing back: her mouth on mine, her moans on my tongue, her writhing body close and warm. Her slick pussy, her gasps. Everything about her. From her laughter to her toes.

I'm aware of Genna watching. I'm aware of Adam dropping off another drink. I'm aware of Dara's friend waiting a few feet behind her, shooing her along.

But all I can see is Dara.

"Hey," she says once she's close enough. "Been a while."

"You found me." I nearly laugh at the absurdity.

"You gave me the card." She bites her lip, just like I remembered. "I need to talk to you."

"Do you two know each other?" Genna asks, leaning into the conversation.

And I'm abruptly ripped back into reality.

I blink a couple times, clear my throat, and gesture. "Gen, this is Dara. Dara,

this is Gen.”

“Oh.” Dara stares at her, eyes wide. “Uh, it’s nice to meet you. Um, maybe this was a bad idea—” She turns to run off.

But I step forward, catching her arm. “Gen’s my business partner,” I say smoothly.

“Also extremely gay, if that helps,” Genna says helpfully. “And, if Finn turns you down, available.”

I give her a hard look. “Not helpful.”

“Kidding!” Genna grins. “Nice to meet you, Dara.”

“Nice to meet you too.” Dara looks like she’s barely managing to hold back tears. “But, uh, Finn, I really, really need to talk to you.”

Worry knots my stomach. Did something bad happen with that Johnnie guy? Did he hurt her somehow, and she’s here looking for my help? Whatever it is, I’ll do what I can for her.

But I won’t let myself get involved.

It hits me, all at once, seeing Dara here in this club. She doesn’t belong in my world. She’s too good—too kind—too normal. She’s not hard like Genna or brutal like my brothers. Dara’s softness and warmth, she’s a gentle whisper on my neck.

I can’t drag her through this life. Not when I’m engaged to another woman.

No matter how badly I want to carry her off to my apartment and spend another incredible night between her legs, I won’t do it.

I won’t hurt her like that.

“Come on, maybe—” But I don’t get to finish.

Carson and Nolan come barreling out through the crowd. “Bro!” Carson says, grabbing my arm, his eyes shining with excitement. “Bro, you have to fucking see this. These girls came into the VIP area and started bragging about how much they can drink, one thing turned to another, they’re giving out body shots—”

“Carson,” I say through my teeth.

“They’re hot, bro,” Nolan says, laughing. “Well, one of them is. The other’s fine. But it’s hilarious, they’re like squirming around and laughing, bro, you got to see it.”

“Guys,” I say louder.

“Finn,” Dara says, tugging at my arm. “Really, can we talk?”

“You should go,” Genna says, eyebrows raised. “Hot girls? Body shots? If you’re not down, I’ll go for you.”

“Easy, Genna, I don’t want to get kicked in the nuts again,” Nolan says, glaring at her.

“Don’t try to kiss me.” She shrugs, smiling sweetly at him. “I’m just kidding around anyway. I have work to do, unlike you morons.”

“Finn,” Dara says again, whispering sharply. “Can we just—”

“Sorry, hold on.” I turn to my brothers. “I don’t know what you have going on in the lounge, but can you please cut the shit? It’s the reopening night. I *really* don’t want to put out any fires.”

“I know, but, bro—” Nolan starts.

“It’s so funny—” Carson adds.

Dara explodes. She grabs my arm, looking me in the eye, her face a mask of despair and desperation. “Finn!” she sounds, loud enough that everyone stares at her. “I’m pregnant.”

The world goes quiet. Nobody moves. Except for Dara’s friend, standing nearby with her face in her hands, shaking her head with a groan.

Chapter 11

Dara

Okay, that wasn't ideal.

I probably should've been a little more patient. Maybe waited until I was alone with Finn to tell him the biggest news of his life, instead of blurting it out in front of his two brothers (actual brothers or like BFF sort of bros? I'm not sure) and his extremely pretty business partner.

Now everyone's staring at me. I look back in panic and even Kathryn's got her face in her hands, shaking her head.

I really messed that one up.

But at least I have Finn's attention. He's staring at me with wide, intense eyes, his grip on my arm tightening. Everyone else seems to disappear—he looks only at me now.

"You're pregnant?" he asks, and I can barely hear him over the club music.

"Can we just go somewhere and talk?" I ask him, itching to get away from prying ears. "I'm sorry, I should've waited, it's just—"

He looks over his shoulder. "Gen, take care of whatever mess my brothers made. Carson and Nolan, you two didn't hear a fucking thing, understood?"

"Yeah, Finley, you got it," the tallest of the two brothers says. I didn't know Finn's full name was Finley.

Finn grimaces. “Just keep it together while I’m gone.” He turns back to me. “This way.”

He drags me through the club. I catch sight of Kathryn and she gives me a nod of encouragement. She’ll be okay, hopefully, probably.

Well, I should worry less about her and more about what Finn’s about to do with me.

His face is a dark mask of anger. He walks with purpose, parting through the crowd, bumping shoulders, barking sharp orders, cutting a swath through the packed space until we reach the back hallway. We bypass the bathroom line until he reaches an unmarked door with a numeric padlock. He types in a pin code and I’m rushed inside.

It’s an office. A nice office, too. Thick carpet, big desk, lots of drawers and shelves, and a bank of little security camera TVs, each showing a different part of the club. The noise is dulled in here. He walks to the desk, leaving me near the door, and turns to glare at me, arms crossed over his chest.

“Explain,” he says, looking at me with a sharp, angry stare.

This is a Finn I’ve never seen before.

The Finn I knew was easygoing, if a little grumpy. He was quick to flirt, to tease, to joke.

But this man is all business.

Not that I can blame him.

I take a deep breath and slowly let it out to calm myself. “I found out this morning. I mean, I’ve suspected for a couple weeks, but I took the tests, and —”

He holds up a hand. “I shouldn’t ask, since you’re here and all. But I have to anyway.”

“It’s yours,” I say quietly. “I haven’t been with anyone else.”

His jaw works. I expect him to curse me out, to call me names for spilling that information in front of his (actual) brothers, but instead, he cocks his

head. “I haven’t either.”

That’s not what I expected at all. My heartrate ticks up. “You haven’t... what?”

“Been with anyone else.” His jaw works more like he’s trying to grind his teeth to dust. “Fuck, Dara. You’re really pregnant with my baby?”

“I know it’s crazy.” I lean against the back of a chair. “Trust me, imagine how I’m feeling right now. I have no job, no apartment, I’m sleeping on Kathryn’s couch—”

His eyes widen, anger shivering up into his expression. “Slow down. You’re what?”

“Sleeping on Kathryn’s couch.” I sigh, shoulders slumping. “It’s a long story.”

“Sit down,” he says, practically growling at me, and drags me into a chair. “You’re pregnant with my baby, for god’s sake, don’t just stand there. Make yourself comfortable.”

“Right. Sorry.” I blink at him, confused by the angry tone contrasting his dotting words. “It’s been a rough few weeks.”

“Tell me what happened. Was it that Johnnie guy?”

I give him the full story, from my outburst at HR, to this morning’s pregnancy tests. When I’m done, he walks around his desk, grabs a bottle and a glass from his drawer, pours a drink, and throws it back. “Fuck,” he says. “That piece of shit got you fired.”

“I completely expected it. In some ways, I made it all a little bit worse.”

“Don’t you dare blame yourself,” he snaps at me. “You did nothing wrong.”

Again with that angry tone mixed with oddly kind words.

“Look, I’m not here to ruin your life, okay? I just thought you needed to know. I’m pregnant with your baby and I plan on keeping it. And I was hoping—” I stop, unable to get it out.

His eyebrows raise. “Hoping... for what?”

How am I supposed to say this?

Hoping you'd pony up and pay for my lifestyle? Hoping you'd buy me everything I need? Hoping you'd step up and be a man? I don't even know what I want from him, much less what I was *hoping* for.

But I have to say something.

"I was hoping... you'd be involved. Somehow."

I sink slightly back into my chair. God, why can't I have a spine for once and just tell him what I need?

His head cocks, considering. All the warmth I saw in his gaze when we first met eyes back in the main club room is gone.

For a second, back in the other room, there was real excitement in his expression, like he was overjoyed to see me.

He looked at me like he did that night. With need, with lust.

That look is very much gone now.

He clears his throat. "Fortunately for you, since you announced your pregnancy in front of my brothers, I have no choice but to do the right thing."

My stomach does flips. This is what I wanted—but why does he look like he's going to sink into the floor?

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"I'm not sure yet," he admits. "This is... I didn't expect this. But you're pregnant with my child. You're carrying my heir."

"Your heir?" My eyebrows shoot up. "Uh, that's a little bit intense."

"I told you, my family is complicated." He runs a hand through his wavy hair. "Shit, Dara. I wish you hadn't done that."

"You weren't listening to me, and I was panicking, and do you have any clue how hard it was for me to come find you tonight?"

"No, I don't, but it doesn't matter. What's done is done. Now we'll deal with

the fallout.”

“Fallout? I don’t understand.”

He rubs his temples. “Right now, my brothers are already scheming. They’re talking about how they’re going to use this information against me. I told you, my family is—”

“Complicated, yeah, I know.” I sit up straight, glaring right back. “Look, I came here to ask for help, okay? I don’t want to uproot your life. I just need you to pay your fair share. Not even forever, just for a little while, until I’m back on my feet. Just so your *heir* isn’t homeless.”

His face hardens. Something comes over him like a wave, and I’m afraid of the change in him. Like something dangerous crawls up from the depths of his guts.

“Tonight, you’re coming home with me, and I don’t want to hear you argue.”

Chapter 12

Finn

Dara's pregnant. With my child.

My head's spinning. I feel like she kicked me in the face, over and over again. I'm assaulted by conflicting emotions: joy, horror, excitement, anger. I'm worried about what Carson and Nolan are going to do with this information. I'm pissed off that Dara blurted it out in front of everyone, including Genna, though I probably would've told her anyway.

Most of all, I'm enraged that this girl is pregnant with my child and she's sleeping on her friend's couch.

There's no fucking way the mother of my child will sleep on a fucking couch.

"I'm sorry, what?" she says as I stand.

I pull out my phone and shoot Genna a quick text.

Finn: Everything's good. I'm heading out. Damage control with my brothers, please?

Genna: I need details about this, Finn.

Genna: Seriously. Details.

Genna: But I'll see what I can do about the assholes.

I shove my phone away. "You're coming home with me."

“Finn, wait, I didn’t come here for—” She’s blushing, practically purple.

I know what she’s thinking about. The last night we spent together.

I can’t help but chuckle. “I’m not taking you home to fuck you. Although if you want—”

“No,” she says, a little too forcefully. “No, I’m sorry, I just—I can’t get involved like that. I just came here to tell you about the baby and ask for your help.”

“And this is how I’ll help. You’re coming home with me tonight. You’re sleeping in a proper bed. In the morning, we’ll sort out what to do with you next.” I walk around the desk and stand in front of her. “You’re carrying my child now, Dara, and there’s no fucking way I’ll ever let you be homeless. From now on, I will take care of you.”

Whether you like it or not.

She blinks up at me a few times.

Then sets her jaw.

“I want your *help*,” she says, speaking quietly. “I don’t want you to dictate my life. Do you understand the difference?”

“Nothing is free, Dara. There are always strings.” I hold out my hand. “Are you coming? Or are you going to try to figure out this whole raise-a-baby thing on your own?”

Her eyes flash with anger. She doesn’t like my demanding, intense tone, not that I can blame her. But I’m too rattled to be gentle right now.

It’s unfair. I know I’m being a bastard. But this is my child we’re talking about, and Dara did make my life infinitely harder by telling me in front of my brothers. I’m angry, and yes, I’m being a little more controlling than I should.

But fuck. She’s pregnant. The girl I’ve been obsessing about is *pregnant*.

My life is going to blow up into a million little pieces.

It’s one thing to have an affair—it’s another to knock a girl up.

She has no clue what she just did.

“Fine,” she says through her teeth, accepting my offer. She stands, glaring at me. “But just to be clear, I’m only coming with you so we can discuss this further. I’m not agreeing to anything.”

“It doesn’t matter what you want anymore, Dara. You’re pregnant with a Crowley baby. That means you’re in the family now, whether you like it or not.”

That pisses her off. I catch a moment of regret in her expression. “I came here for support, not for you to start acting like a possessive prick. I don’t need that in my life right now.”

“You came here for my *financial* support. Don’t pretend otherwise.” I meet her glare with my own. “You want my money. Fine, I can’t blame you, why go through this alone? But if you want my money, you’ll need to follow my rules. That’s the deal.”

Her jaw works as tears fill her eyes.

Ah, fucking god damn it, Finn.

Why am I being such a bastard?

I can’t make a damn pregnant girl cry.

I soften a bit and move closer. “We’ll talk about what happens from here, all right? Back at my place, somewhere private. I’ll take care of you from now on, okay? We’ll figure out how.”

That seems to help. She nods, gathering herself, wiping her face. “It’s fine. Let’s get out of here, but I just need to tell Kathryn really quick.” She shoots off a few quick texts before we walk out into the back hall together.

I call a car as I lead her to the emergency back exit. We step out into the night, into an empty alley alongside the club. She walks close to me, little Dara, beautiful fucking Dara. What am I doing right now, bringing her home to my apartment?

If I were smart, I’d send her back to her place, wherever she’s been staying. I should write her a fat check—a *very* fat check—and keep the money flowing

so she never has to worry about that again. I could easily make sure she is taken care of financially and my child never wants for anything.

If I were smart, I wouldn't get involved.

My father is going to murder me. Getting Dara pregnant the night before I got engaged was just about the worst possible thing I could do.

Dad is not a forgiving man, not even to his sons.

Particularly not to his sons.

When he finds out, there will be hell to pay. My engagement with Robin might be in jeopardy, which means Dad's precious little business arrangement with the McLaren family might fall through, and if that happens —

Fuck. One thing at a time.

No matter what, this baby is my priority. If I learned anything from Dad, it's that family is the most important thing in the world, even when it's a pain in the fucking ass.

I will take care of Dara, even if it means fucking over everyone else, because that child is my priority.

But if that happens, how are we going to survive?

I can't withstand the full might of the Crowley organization, and Dad's a vindictive little bastard.

Thousands of worries assault me as we get into the car. She's quiet, nervous, fidgeting with her jeans and the hem of her shirt. I keep glancing at her, feeling that rush of desire run down my spine.

Just as fucking beautiful as the first time I met her.

But I can tell I'm already messing things up between us. I roll the privacy screen up before turning toward her as the car drives to my house. "You need to understand something," I say, voice as gentle as I can make it. She stiffens, glancing at me, face frozen. "In my family, babies and marriage are taken very seriously. It's almost... sacrosanct. Family is the most important thing in

the world to my father. Family, and honoring your word. I made a promise to marry Robin—”

“I don’t expect you to break things off with her,” she says quickly. And adds: “Robin’s a pretty name.”

“Robin is meaningless,” I say, though I shouldn’t. It might give her hope. I push on anyway. “I promised I’d marry her, but now that you’re here and carrying my baby, that makes things *very* complicated. I just need you to know that I’m not angry with you for coming here and telling me the truth. I’m happy you did.”

“Really?” She smiles slightly. That’s the smile I’ve been dying to see for weeks. “Doesn’t seem like it.”

“You made my life a thousand times harder than it already was, love,” I say, the little term of endearment rolling off my tongue. Dara squirms slightly as if she doesn’t like hearing it. “But I’m a man of my word, and I take care of my family. You are family now.”

“I guess I’m not sure how I feel about that. I still don’t know what you do for a living.”

I smile slightly, turning to look out at the city.

How do I explain my family to her?

There are a thousand ways: we’re gangsters, we’re thugs, we buy politicians and unions, we own half the city of Boston, and a quarter of Philadelphia, and big chunks of New York. We’re a force on the East Coast, and we rival any crime organization in the world.

She’ll find all that out in time.

For now, I gesture at the window. “Most of the buildings out there? We own them in some capacity. Boston is our city.”

Her eyes widen. She tries to speak, but can’t find words.

Not that I blame her.

Dara has no clue how hard her life just became.

Chapter 13

Dara

I stand outside of a beautiful Victorian brick-front house across from Boston Commons. The car drives away as Finn walks up the stoop and begins unlocking the front door.

“You live *here*?” I gape around me, genuinely in shock. “These houses must be worth—”

“Millions,” he says, sounding distracted. “Come inside.”

“Shouldn’t you live in some condo or something? Why the heck do you live in a multi-million-dollar house all alone?”

“Condos are for frat boys and men with bad taste. Come *inside* already, and I’ll give you the damn tour.”

I follow him in, closing the door behind me. An automatic lock thunks shut, making me jump. What sort of guy has security like that? And does this mean I can’t get out, even if I wanted to?

No time to think too much. He’s already walking inside, gesturing vaguely.

It’s almost exactly what I pictured. Polished, gleaming, dark hard wood, walls painted in neutral tones, oil paintings on the walls, and original details like a banister that must be at least a hundred years old.

Everything else is completely modern. All new kitchen, all new living room, the place expanded and improved. I stare at everything like a newborn kitten

seeing the world for the first time as he lazily points out details.

“How long have you lived here?” I ask.

He considers for a moment. “About six years now. I bought it a few years after my first successful club opened. Since then, I’ve opened six more, plus a string of bars and restaurants.”

“Who the hell *are* you?” I stare at him, not sure what to think. This man is insanely wealthy—anyone that lives in a house like this has to be—but the idea that he’d own multiple successful properties is absurd, especially in a town like Boston, and I’ve never even heard his name before.

“Finn Crowley,” he says, looking away. “Come on. I’ll show you to your room.”

I hesitate as he heads back to the stairs. “Wait a second, hold on. We haven’t even talked about what we’re doing back here.”

“I told you, you’re staying the night. I’m not going to let the mother of my future child sleep on a couch ever again. I have a spare room with its own bathroom, so you don’t have to worry about anything.”

I let out a laugh. A spare room in this place? It’s probably nicer than anything I’ve ever slept in before.

This house, it screams luxury. Everything about it oozes money and power. I knew Finn was connected, but this is too much, I feel too dizzy, and the way he’s talking about me and the baby is only making things more difficult.

“Can you slow down?” I say, leaning up against the wall to steady myself. “I just wanted to talk to you, I didn’t think you’d drag me back to your place.”

But Finn’s by my side instantly. “Are you okay? Do you need some water? You should sit down, I don’t want you to—”

“I’m fine,” I say, shrugging him off. He glares at me, jaw working, and it takes a beat to notice my hands still on his chest. I hold them there, feeling his heart race beneath my palm, before I yank them back. “You’re just speeding along, not really listening to me at all, and I haven’t even agreed to anything yet.”

He visibly gathers himself. “Let me ask you something. If you had the choice, would you rather sleep in a bed tonight or on a couch?”

“Depends where the bed’s located. If it’s near you—” I raise my eyebrows, fighting back a smile.

“If it’s near *me*, you’d be crawling under the sheets and begging me to spoon you.”

“Please. We both know you’re the little spoon in this relationship.”

Some of his anger bleeds away. “Doubtful. I’m big spoon, always. Just come with me, okay? Let me show you the guest suite and you can decide what you want to do. If you don’t like it, you can go back to your friend’s little apartment.”

“Guest... suite? Sure, okay, of course it’s a *suite*.”

He laughs to himself as he heads upstairs. I curse quietly, but follow, unable to help myself. I’m too damn curious, and he’s too damn bossy.

The room is about as lavish as I expected. A small sitting area bleeds into a master-sized bedroom. There’s plenty of space, including a full, beautifully remodeled bathroom and a massive walk-in closet with nothing but spare sheets and such folded and tucked neatly away.

“Nobody ever uses this,” he says with a shrug as he gets out linens, towels, and pillows from the top shelves. “There are extra toothbrushes and stuff in the bathroom, use whatever you want.” He pauses, leaning against the frame of the closet door. “Still want to go sleep on that couch?”

I groan as I sit on the end of the obscenely comfortable queen-sized bed. “It’s not even a nice couch,” I complain. “It’s like trying to pass out on rocks. I don’t know what she’s got in those cushions, but I swear, they’re filled with pebbles.”

He laughs and walks over, slowly sitting beside me. I test the bed some more, bouncing up and down, trying not to look at him. My palms are sweaty and I’m weirdly nervous.

Am I really going to stay here tonight? I don’t want this to turn into another

tryst—that one night was complicated enough, and now that I’m pregnant with his baby, I figure I need to start placing boundaries, or else this guy is going to steamroll me. I already feel him doing it.

Finn’s clearly a man used to getting his way.

I am *not* having sex with him tonight—or ever again. That one time was mistake enough; I need to be more careful moving forward.

This guy is the father of my child, whether I like it or not.

But even just sleeping here feels like crossing a line. It’s the way he talks about me, like he’s going to control everything I do from now on.

He calls it *taking care of me*, but it sounds more like making sure I obey his commands.

“I’ll send someone to your friend’s apartment to gather your things,” he says, voice softer now, like he’s finally too tired to be pissed at me.

“You have people?”

“I have a lot of people.” He glances over, trying not to smile. “I run a kind of crew.”

I snort-laugh. It’s not cute, but I’m too blown away by this whole thing to care. “Crew? Are you joking?”

“I wish I were, but no, I’m not. Tell me your friend’s address.”

“I should text her first, let her know someone’s stopping by.” I take out my phone and dash off a few messages to Kathryn letting her know where I am and what’s going on.

“From here on out, I need to do damage control,” he says like he’s only halfway talking to me. “I have to make sure Carson and Nolan don’t fuck me over by spinning this story to my father before I have a chance to come up with a plan. I need to figure out how this is going to affect my engagement with Robin. And I need to decide what I’m going to do with you.”

“Do with me? I already told you—”

He holds up a hand, rubbing his face. “And I already told you. I’m not just

giving you money and sending you on your way. That's my baby too."

I take a deep breath. He doesn't seem to get it, but I'm not going to win this argument, not right now. I followed him to his house, now I'm stuck here, at least for tonight. "We'll figure it out tomorrow, okay?"

"Fine." He nods at my phone. "What'd she say?"

I give him Kathryn's address. "She's worried about me, that's all."

"Understandable." He walks into the other room. I hear him make a quick phone call, talking in a low tone. When he comes back, he lingers in the door, watching me. "I know what you're thinking. Strange man, strange house. You're worried, aren't you?"

"Can you blame me? We had a one-night stand and now I'm in your *guest suite*, pregnant with your baby, and you're talking about taking care of me. I'm a little freaked out."

He takes a step closer. "You need to understand something, Dara. No matter what, I'm going to protect you."

"From *what*?" I ask, bewildered. Why's this guy talking like there are assassins on our doorstep?

His jaw works for a moment, but he only shakes his head, turning away. "We'll talk in the morning. I'll be back in a little while with your things. Good night."

I open my mouth to tell him to stay. We have so much to discuss—his fiancée, the baby, the future—but I'm exhausted and I don't think I'm going to make any headway right now. Better to sleep on it, wake up refreshed, and make better decisions in the morning.

He walks off, the door shutting quietly, leaving me alone in the room trying to make sense of how in the hell I got here.

Chapter 14

Finn

I pour myself a massive whiskey and sit out on the back balcony, looking out across an alley. Genna picks up her phone on the third ring. “I was wondering when I’d hear from you,” she says.

It’s quiet in the background, wherever she is. “Left the club?”

“Stayed long enough to pester the boys. Carson says he’ll keep his mouth shut for a while, but he wants to talk. Nolan seemed angry, but he also agreed not to say anything right away.”

“That’s good.” I lean my head back against the chair. “Fuck, Gen. I’m in deep shit now.”

“Yes, you absolutely are.” She’s quiet for a moment. “You two seemed like you have a spark.”

“Something like that.” I squeeze my eyes shut, thinking about Dara back in my guest suite, all alone, lying in bed. I want nothing more than to get in there, crawl into bed, rub her back, whisper in her ear that everything will be okay. “I mentioned taking care of her. I said I’d keep her safe, and she asked me who I need to protect her from. I didn’t have the heart to say.”

“Your own family. What a fucking mess.” Genna lets out a bitter laugh. She has a complicated relationship with the Crowley organization, just like I do. It’s something we have in common. “You know I’ll help however I can, right?”

“I know that. Right now, I just need to figure out what I’m going to do about her.”

“If you like her, and she’s carrying your baby—” She trails off into silence.

I grunt at the part left unspoken. “I’m engaged, remember?”

“Engagements are easy to break off.” She clears her throat, sounding uncomfortable. “There’s always the other option. You know—”

“I am *not* going to ask her to get an abortion,” I say, anger rolling through my chest.

“Honestly, I’m relieved to hear you say that. I’m just putting the option out there. I don’t think that’s something you need to do, but maybe she wants to hear that from you. Maybe she’s looking for permission.”

“No,” I say more forcefully than I should. Genna’s just trying to help. “Even if that’s something she wants, I won’t allow it.”

“Okay, okay, fuck, when did you transform into an aggressive papa bear? It’s cute, but also annoying.”

I take a long drink. “My father is going to be homicidal when he finds out. The McLaren family doesn’t have our clout or our street power, but they do have top-level connections, all the way up to fucking Congress. If McLaren is angry enough, he can make our lives very difficult. Which means the shit will roll downhill, right onto me.”

“Then don’t break off the engagement. You said Robin was amenable to an open arrangement.”

“She practically insisted on it.”

“Tell her the truth and be up front about it. Maybe don’t mention you got Dara pregnant the night before you met her, but make it clear you knocked the girl up *before* anything was official. Tell her this kid won’t change things. You don’t have to blow everything up.”

I tilt my head to the side, looking up at the sky. Genna’s right, I don’t have to ruin the engagement if I talk with Robin first. I can be open and honest about everything, and hell, maybe she’ll even understand. It’s not like she gives a

fuck about me—so long as I promise that I will make her kids the priority, maybe she'll accept this.

But how can I live with that ugly compromise?

Dara would be the other woman.

My child with her would always be secondary in my life, if I even get to spend any time with them. Dara will be pushed aside, provided-for financially, but never a part of my life.

I'll never see them.

And for some reason, the idea pisses me off.

“You know what's fucked?” I say, musing to myself. “That doesn't sound appealing.”

“Be rational here, Finn. If you ruin this engagement, you'll bring down the heat from both your father and her father. Everyone will be livid. You will suffer.”

“All very true.”

“But you should ask yourself another question: what do you really want? When you think about the next ten years, do you see yourself with Robin? Raising babies with her?”

I clench my jaw. What do I see when I close my eyes?

I only see Dara.

Ever since I slept with her, it's only been Dara.

But just because the sex was incredible and we had one amazing night together, doesn't mean I should destroy my life for her.

I barely know the girl, but I do know what I'd get with Robin.

It might be a cold, uncomfortable relationship, a loveless one where we're more partners than anything else, but at least it would further my family's goals.

Dropping everything for Dara is the height of selfishness.

“I have to think about it,” I say after a long pause.

“Yeah, I bet you have a lot of thinking to do. Just, do me a favor, think with your head and not with your dick, all right?”

“My dick is smart enough to handle this.”

She groans. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Thanks for talking to me. See you later.”

“Good luck. I don’t envy you right now, Finn.”

I hang up the phone and stay on the balcony drinking until the doorbell rings. It’s one of my young soldiers, a kid named Shane. I take the duffel bag he offers, slip him some cash, and head back upstairs to the guest suite. I pause only to grab her a bottle of water from the minifridge in my room.

The light are out. I sneak inside, moving quietly. I place the duffel on a chair and the water on the nightstand. As I turn to go, she stirs, her hair falling away from her face.

I stare down at her, my eyes adjusting to the dark.

Fuck, she looks so beautiful, wrapped up in the sheets, clearly so exhausted she was able to pass out in her clothes. The poor girl has to be going through hell right now—she lost her job, lost her apartment, and now she’s pregnant with my child.

Her lips move as if she’s saying something in her sleep. I can’t make out any words, but I stare at that mouth, and slowly a decision crystallizes in my mind.

Where do I see myself in ten years? Who am I with and what am I doing?

I can’t begin to imagine, but I know the path I have to take.

Chapter 15

Dara

I wake up in a strange room, find a bottle of water on my nightstand and a duffel bag full of clothes and toiletries, and proceed to puke in a very nice toilet.

“God damn it,” I groan as the morning sickness ebbs slightly.

The door to the suite jostles and opens. “Dara?” Finn’s voice, concerned. “Hey, Dara, are you—” He appears in the bathroom door, storming in like he’s ready to fight a war for me, and his eyes go wide as he stares at disgusting, sweaty me, clutching the toilet like I’m making sweet love to it.

I flush. “I’m fine,” I manage. “Morning sickness. I’m okay.”

His panicked expression softens. “What can I do for you?”

“Bring that water over here, please.”

He grabs the bottle and hands it over. “What else? Are you cold? Do you want a blanket?”

“No, please, it’ll pass. Just—just let me get this over with in privacy, please.” I’m mortified that he’s standing there, looking at me as I hug the toilet bowl, but I feel another wave coming and I do *not* want him to be here for this.

“Dara—”

“Get *out*,” I snap, about to blow.

He grunts, leaves, and I barely hold back until I hear the door shut.

God, what a fucking nightmare.

I finish up and the sickness wanes enough that I can shower and put on clean clothes. I find a text from Kathryn making sure I'm okay.

Dara: Well, I puked in front of him. Or almost did. Pretty sure he heard me screeching like a dying raptor though. He came in while I was having my normal session.

Kathryn: Are you okay? What did he say?

Dara: Looked terrified, honestly. Wanted to help. But I don't want him to remember me as a disgusting puke monster so I yelled at him until he went away.

Kathryn: You're carrying his child. In his eyes, you're nothing but a glowing princess.

Dara: Yeah, glowing, because whatever I spewed out of me earlier is like radioactive or something.

Kathryn: TMI, hon. I love you. Are you sure you're okay? I'm not sure how I feel about you staying with this guy. I can be there in ten seconds if you say the word.

Dara: I'm fine. Just figuring things out. Go to work, I'll keep in touch.

But am I okay? I'm honestly not sure. I brush my teeth, try to do something with my hair, mostly fail, and end up putting it in a messy bun because nothing else works. I drift from the suite into the hall and follow the smell of coffee to the kitchen.

He's sipping from a white mug, leaning against a counter, wearing black joggers and a tight black t-shirt that hugs his muscular chest. I stand there staring at him as the lovely early morning sunlight slants in through his house's big windows, making him look like a freaking god.

I almost forgot how attractive this man is.

It's *supremely* unfair, given that I'm trying my best not to feel charmed by all

this luxury.

Except his scowl from last night remains like a mask, which helps with the whole liking him thing. “You okay?” he asks.

“I’m fine. Can I have some of that coffee?” I sit on a stool at the island, trying to regain some of my ladylike composure, whatever there is left of that. “The morning sickness comes and goes. I’m used to it.” Well, not really, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“Every day?” he asks, getting me a cup. “How do you take the coffee?”

“Fill it halfway, please, with a little milk. Not too much,” I say, accepting a half-full mug. “And yeah, every morning, like clockwork. Sometimes one round, sometimes more than one. Today you got to witness a two-fer.”

“Lucky me,” he murmurs. “I’ll speak with your doctor and see what we can do to ease your discomfort.”

“It’s morning sickness. Unless it gets really bad, I’m pretty sure I have to gut it out and get through it. Besides, I don’t have a doctor yet.”

He looks horrified for a moment before his expression hardens. “You’ll see the Crowley family physician this afternoon then.”

“Sorry, the what now?”

“We have a family physician. His name is Dr. Bard and—”

I hold up a hand. “How rich are you, exactly?”

His face falls into a smug smile. “Very.”

“Yeah, no kidding. This house, a *family physician*, property all over the city... are you like Boston royalty?”

He pauses for a moment like he’s considering that. “More or less, we’re something like that.”

“I was joking. Seriously, who are you people?”

He comes around the island, pulls a stool close to mine, and sits. I’m intensely aware of his proximity. “My family runs the largest criminal

organization on the East Coast.”

My jaw drops open. His face is completely serious, and if anyone else said that to me, I’d assume they were joking.

But he spoke like it’s the plain truth.

And it makes sense.

The clubs, the cash, the *crew*. The people doing his bidding late at night.

All of this screams either extremely old-world money or something very shady.

“Right, okay, criminal organization.” My hands are shaking as I take a sip. “Which makes you, what? A mafia guy or whatever?”

His nose scrunches. “*Mafia* is for the Italians. We are Irish. We run a criminal organization called the Crowley family. My brothers and I are all captains within the hierarchy, along with several other prominent, powerful individuals. Each of us has our own lieutenants, soldiers, and associates to manage, along with businesses to run and rackets to control.”

“Like a freaking movie,” I whisper, trying not to laugh out of sheer insanity.

“Exactly.” He tilts his head, studying me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Nope. Not at all.” I take another sip of coffee. “Definitely not okay. But I think I’m so numb that it’s not really hitting me.”

“Good. Because I have more news.” He shifts closer, puts a hand on my leg. I blink at his fingers lying gently on my bare skin, right beneath the hem of my comfortable shorts. “We’re getting married.”

I jerk back, eyes bulging, and nearly knock over my mug. He catches it before it spills on the floor.

“We’re *what* now?” I swat his hand away, leaping to my feet to put space between us.

“Married. You know, when a man loves a woman, or in this case when a man can sexually satisfy a woman multiple times per night—”

“No, don’t start playing all nice and flirting with me after dropping something like that.”

“I’m not flirting. Merely speaking truth. How many times was it?”

“You’re trying to soften me up. Stop talking about orgasms.”

“I’m only getting a feel for my future wife.”

“*Finn*,” I say between my teeth. “I am absolutely *not* going to marry you.” I cross my arms, trying to seem bigger than I am, but I’m very aware of this massive criminal and the automatic lock on the front door. I couldn’t run if I wanted to. “Coming here was a mistake, okay? I’m only in a bad spot and I thought you could help me, but clearly, I was wrong and this is *way* more than I wanted. Let’s just pretend like I never came here, okay? Great, it was nice seeing you again.”

He doesn’t move, only stares at me with that piercing expression. The strange gold around his irises seems to glitter in the morning sunlight. I wish I could look away, but god, the man is gorgeous, and he’s looking at me like he’s about to get up, shove me against the wall, and kiss every inch of my body.

Maybe I’m projecting a bit.

I’m on the verge of a full-on panic attack, which doesn’t help with my morning sickness, but this man is absolutely crazy if he thinks we’re going from strangers to married.

I am *not* a part of his world. I’m not going to put his ring on my finger just because he shoved a baby in my belly.

This is the modern freaking world. I have choices. I don’t have to get shackled to some guy because I’m pregnant out of wedlock. Nobody’s going to stone me or throw me out of the village or toss me in a river to drown.

All I wanted was some help. Not a freaking husband.

“This makes sense,” he says, his voice a purr, his lips turned into a crooked smile as he watches me. At least he doesn’t get up and come closer. “I don’t want to marry Robin. I never did, not from the start, but I was willing to do my duty for my family. And because I had no other prospects. But then you

come strolling along, carrying my child.”

“Didn’t you say ending your engagement would be really, really bad?” I wave my hands in the air. “I’m not about to start some, like, mob war or whatever.”

“This is going to be bad no matter what, but I also told you that *family* is extremely important to my father, and children are about the biggest deal possible. If I marry you before anyone can stop me, they’ll have to accept you and my child into the organization, into the family, and once that happens, you’ll be set for life. You and my child.” He slowly stands, staring into my eyes. I back up until I bump into the wall, my heart racing into my throat.

“I don’t want to marry you,” I whisper. Although the idea of making sure my child is provided for feels tempting, the price is too high.

“But you do want to make sure our child has every opportunity in the world, don’t you? It’s one thing to provide money, but there’s so much more my family can do. There’s education, connections, friendships, partnerships, everything that comes with being a Crowley.”

“Houses across the street from Boston Commons?” I ask, blinking rapidly, head dizzy.

“Exactly,” he says, coming closer and closer. I want to scream, run away, but there’s something in the way he’s taking, in the way he’s looking at me, that keeps me pinned. “Once you’re my wife, I can protect you for real. Even if my father is angry, he would never hurt his daughter-in-law. But if you were simply a mistress I knocked up?” He tilts his head to the side, considering, and leaves the rest unspoken. “This is how I’ll protect you. This is how I’ll make sure our child is given everything in life. And in exchange, you’ll help me get out of an engagement I loathe. This is the way out for both of us.”

I let it sink in. He stops a few feet away, not close enough to touch me, but near enough that I’m aware of his body, of the way he holds his posture, so upright and intimidating. The man’s sculpted, cut from a cloth meant for gods and kings.

Here I am, a nothing girl from a nothing family, struggling to keep my head

afloat.

He's offering me a way out.

Wealth, money, power.

All I need to do is shackle myself to a stranger.

Dive head-first into murky, shallow, shark-infested waters and pray I don't get ripped to shreds.

"I can't," I say, my voice a squeak. "I can't just—I can't just *marry you*."

"You can. And you should. But take the afternoon to think about my offer. This will change your life, Dara. It will set our child up for a future you could never dream of. All you need to do is marry me."

"Why would you want this? Why go from marrying one stranger to marrying another?" My pulse races as sweat beads my back. The thought of being his wife. Of sleeping in the same bed as him. Of being close to him, day after day. It's terrible in how addictive it feels.

"Think about that night we spent together. I'll never have chemistry like that with Robin McLaren. But with you?"

"Don't pretend like this is about that night. This is about... getting what you want."

"Who says I can't want you too?"

I lick my lips, looking away. Images of that night flash in my mind. His mouth between my legs. His cock in my throat. Coming, over and over, legs shaking, moans ripping from my clenched teeth. "I have to think, okay?"

"Looks like you already are. Imagining how it would feel to be my wife?"

"More like trying to think of a way out of this mess."

"Please, you could do a lot worse than me."

"Somehow, I doubt that." I shake my head, slipping away toward the hall. "I'm going for a walk."

“By all means. But don’t go too far.”

“Why? Going to hunt me down?”

“Yes,” he says, and I believe him.

What did I get myself into? What nightmare is this? A man like that should never even look my way, but now—

He wants to make me his wife.

And that scares me just as much as it sends a jolt of excitement into my core.

Chapter 16

Finn

“Judge Mattingly? This is Finn Crowley, how are you?” I stand on my balcony, phone pressed to my ear.

Mattingly does not sound happy. It’s never a good thing when a Crowley calls. “Hello, Finn, I hope everything is going well.”

“I’m reaching out because I need a wedding license.”

Mattingly is quiet for a long moment. He’s a Crowley judge, meaning he takes the envelopes stuffed with cash without question, and occasionally does the family favors. However, normally these calls come from my father, and I can tell it makes him uncomfortable speaking to me instead.

“Well, those are simple enough, if you go to the courthouse—”

“I need one today. I need it made official by this evening.”

He clears his throat. “There are waits. Legally mandated—”

“Backdate the paperwork as necessary. I can count on you, right, judge? I’ll bring my future wife to your office this evening at five.”

“I, ah, I have court, but—”

“I’ll see you then.” I hang up before he can make more excuses.

I pace back and forth, head running through all the reasons why this is a bad idea, but unable to stop myself. Last night, when I saw her lying in bed, lips

moving, mumbling to herself in her sleep, she looked so fucking beautiful and vulnerable, and I made up my mind on the spot.

In ten years, I see myself with Dara, raising our child together.

I don't love the girl.

I'm not even sure I like her.

She's beautiful, yes, and I'm physically attracted to her, absolutely, but she's not the kind of girl I pictured would become my wife. She's not a part of our world, not used to the pressures of being a Crowley.

She's not stone cold, like Robin.

But that's also what attracts me to her. She's not the normal kind of woman that would want to be a part of this lifestyle, and there's some voice in my head that thinks it would be good for me, having her around. Good for her too. At least financially.

If I'm doing this, I have to do it the right way. I can't just marry Dara and blow everything up, even if that's what I want to do.

Instead, I have one more call before I can push ahead.

Robin's phone rings a few times. I'm worried she won't answer until the line clicks alive and her voice comes through. "Finley," she says, using my real name, which pisses me off. "I didn't expect you to ever actually call. I figured we wouldn't speak until our wedding day." She pauses. "I preferred it that way."

"Where are you right now?" I say, practically growling at her.

"Home, at my father's place. I'm having a tennis lesson." That explains the thumping sound in the background. "Why do you ask?"

I grit my teeth. Her father's place is two hours away. I don't have time to go meet her in person. "How badly did you want to get married?"

She laughs lightly. "On a scale of one to ten? Ten being ecstatic? Negative fifty thousand. No offense."

"None taken. How upset would you be if our engagement fell through?"

She pauses for a long time. I almost think she's gone, except I can still hear someone whacking tennis balls in the background. "I wouldn't be personally upset," she says finally. "Although my father will be, and I suspect your father will be as well. What are you up to, Finley?"

"Stop calling me that," I say, grimacing at my own weakness. Snapping at her right now isn't going to help, and it doesn't matter what she calls me.

"You're in trouble, aren't you? You're about to do something stupid." She sounds delighted. "I'm happy it's you, you know, fucking this up. Instead of me."

"Glad I can be of service then."

"What's the plan? Making a big scene? Some prepared speech?"

"Something like that. Look, I just called out of courtesy, all right? You'll hear about it all soon enough, I'm sure. I just didn't—" I stop myself, gritting my teeth.

"You didn't want to hurt me," she says softly. "Well, I guess you're not a complete piece of shit after all. Maybe you would've made a decent husband, but I suppose we'll never find out. Good luck with whatever you're doing, Finn. Really, I mean it. Go with my blessing."

"Thanks, Robin."

She hangs up. I slump forward, leaning against the railing, staring down at my hands.

What the fuck am I doing right now?

I'm ruining my life, that's what I'm doing, but I wasn't lying to Dara. Marrying her is the best way to keep her safe, even if it's the goddamn nuclear option. At least our child will be a Crowley, whatever that means once this is all done with, assuming my father doesn't simply murder us both.

I'm reasonably sure he won't. Mom would be livid.

One more call to make. There's no turning back, not after speaking with the judge and with Robin. Everything is in motion, chugging along now, whether this is a good idea or not.

Shane answers instantly. “Sir?”

“Where is she?”

“In the park, sir, sitting at a bench. She’s just been walking around aimlessly. Sir.”

I cringe at the whole *sir* shit, but don’t correct him. Let the kid learn respect the hard way. “Send me your location.”

“Will do, but, uh—oh, shit, I think she spotted me. She’s staring right at me.” His voice drops softer. “She’s getting up. She’s coming over. Oh, no, she looks really mad.”

I grin huge. “Don’t tell me the girl made you, Shane.”

“I’m sorry, sir, I won’t let it happen again, I just—”

“Send me your location. I’ll be there shortly.” I hang up the phone, grinning to myself.

Looks like Dara can handle herself.

I text the family jeweler and make sure he’s ready to see me before heading out.

Chapter 17

Dara

“Don’t tell me he sent you to stalk me,” I say, glaring at the young man trying to hide behind a tree.

He comes out, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. “I’m sorry, miss, but —”

I hold up both my hands. “Oh, my god, please don’t call me *miss*. I’m Dara. Who are you?”

“Shane,” he says, glancing from side to side like he’s afraid someone might catch us talking. “And he only sent me to make sure you were safe, mi— sorry, uh, Dara.”

“Right, of course he did.” I glare at Shane a moment longer. He’s younger than I am, no older than nineteen or twenty. Pale, tall, thin, with freckles and shaggy brown hair. For a second, I’m tempted to send him away, but I doubt he’d even listen, and besides, this might be an opportunity. “Why don’t you walk with me, Shane?”

His eyes widen. “He, uh, didn’t say anything about, uh—”

“Come on, then, keep up. You think he’d be happy if you didn’t listen to me?” I have no clue, to be totally honest, but Shane considers for only a beat before falling in beside me.

Boston Commons isn’t too crowded. It’s a nice afternoon and there are people out lying on blankets, sitting on benches, talking in groups, jogging

the paths, and all I want to do is get lost among them.

I keep thinking about Finn, about what he said back at his place, and trying to decide what in the world I'm going to do about him.

I was born with nothing. My dad worked in an automotive factory in our small Iowa town, and when they move it to Mexico, he got into roofing. Mom was a daycare teacher, which meant she brought home every single disease imaginable, and barely made eleven dollars an hour.

The life Finn leads, the world he's from, the pure *wealth* that man's involved in, that's something I could only ever dream about.

And I want it for my child.

It seems crazy not to do this. Finn's offering me a life of comfort in exchange for almost nothing. All I'd have to do is smile, play wife, and raise our child—which is what I planned on doing anyway, minus the wife and smiling bit.

Except I know what happens to people that don't love each other, but insist on staying married anyway. I've watched it for years now, as fight after fight slowly eats at them, slowly crows them.

"Let me ask you something, Shane." I glance at my young companion. He looks supremely uncomfortable. Good. "What do you think about your boss?"

"Finn?" His eyes widen. "He's one of the best in the city."

"One of the best *what* exactly?"

"Crew chiefs." He cocks his head, squinting at me. "How much do you know about him?"

"I know he's a Crowley and he runs crews. And apparently you're part of their organization."

"Finn's the youngest crew chief in the city, and in the Crowley family, that's a huge deal."

"But what's he like?" I press. "Is he fair? Good to work for?"

"Demanding," he says, looking out across the trees. "But, yeah, I'd say he's

fair. He asks more of himself than he does of anyone else. I'm lucky he took me under his wing."

"Lucky," I say softly, marveling at this young kid thinking he's *lucky* for getting to work with a gangster. "Come on, Shane. Paint me a picture here."

His face contorts like he's trying to think in the middle of a hailstorm. But finally, he says, "Finn's a good leader. He's the first one in and the last one out, and he makes sure everyone gets a fair cut. He sometimes has a short temper, but the guys he beats down always deserve it. Anyway, I'm happy I work for him. I'm pretty sure that if he hadn't taken an interest in me then I'd be either dead or in jail." He stops walking and faces me with an intense expression. "I'm only telling you this because in all the time I've worked for him, Finn's never shown any interest in a woman before, much less assigned me to one for guard duty."

"Could've assigned someone else," I say, head cocked.

"Maybe. But I doubt it. What are you to him, anyway?"

"I'm not sure yet." I turn away, walking on. Shane shadows me before reaching my side again.

I keep thinking about what he said as we go on in silence. How Finn's fair. First in, last out. But also, those words *beats down* float through it all, and the violence it implies.

That's not the sort of life I'm used to.

My parents might despise each other, but there's never been any violence.

Still, he's never assigned a guard to a woman before—which probably means I'm the only girl he's gotten pregnant.

God, I don't know what to think.

Shane interrupts my thoughts as we pause near a fountain. "Sorry, Dara, but I should get going."

I blink at him in surprise. "Why? Did he call?"

"Actually, he's right over there." Shane nods over to a bench on the other

side of the fountain. “He’s been waiting.”

“You steered me here.” I gape at him in surprise. “You devious little bastard.”

He grins, shrugging. “What can I say? I’m not as helpless as I appear. Anyway, good luck with whatever you two are doing.” He turns and walks off, moving with big, loping strides.

I face Finn, teeth gritting together. I didn’t want to see him, not for a little longer still. I don’t have an answer for him, and I’m not sure I’ll have one at least for another few hours, or days, or weeks—but there’s no avoiding this.

He stands as I approach. I stare at his hands, at his chest, up to his lips, and wonder how I ever thought I could avoid this forever. My heart’s racing, my stomach feels sick.

“Dara,” he says, gesturing for me to come closer. “We need to talk.”

“I’m not ready,” I blurt out. “Your little crony was following me around, and I haven’t been able to think.”

“Sorry, love,” he says quietly, steering me so I’m in front of the fountain. I feel the faint spray of the mist against my side. “But you’re out of time. You need to choose.”

“Choose? Right now? I don’t understand.”

He holds onto my hand and drops to one knee.

“What are you doing?” I ask, on the edge of real panic.

He reaches into his pocket and takes out a small ring box.

My eyes go wide. “Finn. Seriously. What are you doing?”

“Dara Connell.” He stares into my eyes as he opens the box. A gorgeous, glittering diamond stares out at me. “Will you marry me?”

Chapter 18

Dara

A thousand replies flit through my mind all at once.

I could kick the ring into the water and run. I could scream for help. I could throw myself into his arms, sobbing and begging him to keep me forever. I could do some version of all three, which wouldn't be very elegant, but still.

But only one reply comes to mind.

“Maybe,” I say.

The surprise on his face feels delicious. “Maybe?” he asks, eyebrows arched.

“Under one condition.” I stare down at him, hands trembling. “You need to swear that no matter what, our baby will be your priority. Girl or boy, no matter who they end up being, you will love them. This might be your only child.”

A sly smile slips onto his face. “I have a feeling we’ll make some more.”

“Finn. I’m not joking.”

“I know you’re not.” He stands, still holding my hands, and takes the ring from the box. “I swear it, Dara. We’re doing this for the child. Whatever happens with us, the baby will be our priority, from here on out.”

I chew the inside of my cheek. Can I really do this? Can I marry this man, this gangster? This man seems the epitome of class and wealth on the outside,

but under the surface, violence and danger lurk like predators. I got a hint of it, talking to Shane back there, and other hints before, when he mentioned keeping me safe.

Protecting me implies protecting me *from* something.

But it isn't about me anymore. It's about my child and giving them the best shot at having a life.

I won't get attached to this man. I won't let myself end up like my parents—so deeply in love when they were younger, but ground down by life, smashed into pieces by circumstances, and so deeply bitter that everything is tainted, including whatever feelings they might've had for each other at one point.

I'll keep my distance and focus on my baby. Finn doesn't matter—he's a means to an end.

“All right, I'll marry you.”

“I hoped you'd say that.” He slips the ring on my finger. Surprisingly—it fits. “Ah, I really do have a good eye.”

I stare at the diamond. It's simple, one rock with several smaller stones haloed around it, but the main gem is absolutely gorgeous, glittering in the sunlight, catching and cutting the light, casting it in all directions. It's dazzling, a good metaphor for Finn himself, but it's also hard and cold and meaningless.

“What now?” I ask, bewildered by my own choices, overwhelmed by what this is going to mean for us.

“Now you get changed into something nice and we head over to the courthouse.”

“Aren't there waiting lists? Appointments?”

He clicks his tongue, smiling. “Love, I'm a Crowley. My name opens doors.”

“Ah, so rich and so modest.”

“Honest, more like, but that's okay. You'll understand what it means to be a part of my family soon.”

“That sounds pretty damn ominous.”

“That’s because it is.” He takes my hand and squeezes it. “You don’t have to worry though. In a few hours, you’ll be my wife, and your new life can begin.”

He leads me away from the fountain, back toward his house, and I’m not sure if I’m rushing headlong into a fire or tumbling down a frozen glacier, but either way, I’m headed toward something terrifying.

Chapter 19

Finn

My breath catches in my throat as Dara comes into the kitchen.

She's wearing a simple white floral dress. It's not what I'd picture a traditional bride would wear, but she looks absolutely radiant with her hair down, her eyelashes long and dark, her lips pink, a little tugging at the corners. The top's low, but still tasteful, and the skirt barely brushes her knees. Heels round it out, adding a couple inches to her height, though she's still petite.

"What do you think? It's the best I could do last minute."

"You look incredible," I say, coming toward her. I'm somewhat more formally dressed in a dark suit, though it's a normal outfit for me. "Honestly, it's perfect."

She grins at me. "You really like it?" She does a little twirl. "Can't keep your eyes off me?"

"Makes me look forward to the wedding night."

Her cheeks flush. "There won't *be* a wedding night. Separate beds, remember?"

I make a soft growl in the back of my throat. "You're going to be my wife. You really think I'm going to let you out of my sight for one second? Especially after looking like that?"

She licks her lips. “Easy, boy. You haven’t locked this down just yet.”

“But I’m going to.” I walk toward her, hands sweating with excitement. “Are you really trying to pretend like you’re going to fight me on this? You really think you want to sleep anywhere but by my side?”

“I think you need to remember—” She jabs a finger in my chest as I get close. “This isn’t real. I’m not your actual wife. And this is all about the baby.” She digs her finger in tighter. “We need boundaries.”

“Boundaries? What are those? All I see is a beautiful woman wearing my ring.”

Her smile brightens as she shakes her head, moving away from me, putting space between us. I want to crush that space, drag her against me, press my lips against her chest. Kiss her hard, mark her, make her mine. Fuck, what is this girl doing to me?

“Calm down, big guy. I’ve been thinking. If we’re going to make this work, I need to be sure you’re not going to come barging into the bathroom every time I’m taking a shower.”

“You think I’m a teenage boy or something? Can’t resist the temptation of a naked woman?”

She covers her mouth, eyes scrunched up. “I think you’re staring at me right now like you want to ravish me, and I’m fully dressed.”

“Maybe you’re projecting.” Although she’s totally right.

“Doubt it. Look, before we go to the judge, promise you’re not going to jump my bones the second we get back.”

“Jump... your bones?” I shake my head, blowing out a breath. “That is the least sexy phrase I’ve ever heard.”

“Right, sorry. Promise you won’t try to mosey on down to bang town. How’s that?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “You’re really killing the vibe.”

“There is no vibe. That’s the whole point.”

“Denial is a river in Africa.”

“What?” She waves that away. “Stop it, okay? I’m being serious. I won’t deny there’s an attraction between us—”

“A very *strong* attraction,” I snarl at her, smirking like mad. “One you very much feel.”

“I never denied it.” She glares at me now. “But until everything between us is settled, we’re not acting on it. Okay? And even if we *do* act on it, this is a business partnership, and the business is raising our baby. Understood?”

“What you’re saying is once my family has gotten over everything, I get to fuck you as often as I want? I get to drag my tongue along your pussy until —”

“Nope,” she says, waving her arms. “Don’t you dare start talking dirty to me.”

“What? Me, talk dirty?” I grin, looking innocent. “I’m just describing how you’ll sit on my face, moving your hips in circles as my mouth and lips suck and lick your lovely pussy, my fingers grabbing your ass—”

“Finley!” She snaps my real name at me like a whip. “Cut it out, you jackass.”

I grind my teeth together. “Where’d you hear that name?”

She tilts her chin up. “I googled you.”

“You... googled me.”

“Yes, dickhead. I’m about to marry you, for fuck’s sake, so I typed your name into freaking google. There’s some really interesting stuff out there about your family.”

“The internet is a cesspool.” I glance away, working my jaw. “At least it got my name right.”

“Don’t worry about the internet. I don’t believe any of it.” She comes toward me again and puts a hand on my arm. “Look, can you just behave? No more dirty talk. No more flirting. Just—think of me like you think of Genna.”

“Genna’s into women, she doesn’t make eye contact with me while she sucks my—”

“*Finn*,” she says, pinching my arm.

“Fine, fuck, I’ll stop.” Even though that’s going to take all my goddamn willpower. “But we need to go. I told the judge we’d be there at five.”

She hesitates, glancing at the clock. It’s four-forty, giving us plenty of time to make the ten-minute drive and navigate the courthouse.

Her face pales slightly. She looks down at her ring, drifting away from me toward the island. I know what she’s thinking—this is a huge step.

It’s a huge step for me, too.

Except there’s no hesitation, no second-guessing, no worries. We’re about to blow up my life spectacularly, but for some reason, the thought of being Dara’s husband doesn’t scare me the way it fucking freaked me out when I pictured Robin at my side.

There was no spark with Robin. No banter, no joy. Just a cold, emotionless, business-like acceptance.

With Dara, it’s all heat and excitement.

A heat that might get us strangled in our beds, but still.

“Are you ready?” I ask, softening my tone.

She squares her shoulders, nodding once. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Don’t sound too excited.” I offer her my arm. “Right this way, my fiancée.”

She laughs quietly, accepting. “I guess I am your fiancée, aren’t I? What a short engagement.”

“How will your parents react to the news?”

“I don’t think they’ll care. I mean, we’re not very close anymore.” She looks away and seems like she wants to say more, but shrugs. “You don’t have to worry about it.”

There's clearly more going on, but I don't push. No need to dredge up bad shit right before we get married.

I lead her from the house, down to the waiting car, and open the back door for her. She climbs inside and I hesitate, looking back at my house.

My last moments as a single man.

Well, fuck it, being single was always overrated. "The courthouse," I tell the driver.

Chapter 20

Finn

When the driver drops us off, Carson comes walking out from the shadows beside the courthouse entrance.

“What the fuck?” I ask softly, moving toward him. Dara comes with me, but I hold a hand out. “Stay here. I’ll deal with this.”

“Are you sure?” she sounds worried. “He doesn’t look happy.”

“He shouldn’t be here at all, but it’s fine, just wait until I wave you over.”

I leave her behind. Carson’s standing on the steps, glaring at me like he wants to drive a dagger through my eye. Not that I can blame him—I’m about to make a lot of waves, and he’s going to have to deal with Dad’s shit mood.

“Brother,” I say in greeting. “So nice of you to show up, although I don’t recall sending out any invitations.”

“What the *fuck* are you thinking, Finn?” His eyes narrow, his body tense with rage. “Don’t try to make jokes. I’m not in a goddamn joking mood. What the fuck are you doing? With that girl?” He waves a hand at Dara.

An angry wave washes over me. “Leave her out of this,” I say, voice lowered. “What are you doing here, Carson?”

“Judge Mattingly called me. Apparently, you freaked him out and he wanted to make sure that he wasn’t going against family policy by complying with your request.”

I grind my teeth. That traitor fucking judge. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him that you’re a Crowley, and what you say goes.”

I blink at him, some of my anger draining. “Why?”

“Because I’m not stupid enough to get in the way of this, but come on, Finn, what the fuck? You’re lucky Mattingly called me and not Dad.”

Lucky is not the word I’d use. Frustrating, annoying, those are closer to how I feel. Fucking Carson.

“Dad would’ve understood. He *will* understand.” I think. Probably. Not that it matters—there’s no going back from this.

“Dad is going to gut you, asshole. This little rebellion is going to cause everyone a lot of headaches, assuming Dad doesn’t kill you and your girl on the spot.”

“I won’t let him touch her,” I say, surprised by my own anger.

Carson laughs, shaking his head. “She’s really pregnant, huh?” He softens somewhat, looking back at her. “Pretty too. Do you get along?”

“Yeah, we do.” I follow his gaze. She’s watching us, looking uncomfortable down on the sidewalk. “She’s carrying my child, Carson. My actual child. I could marry Robin and maybe she’d give me babies, but maybe not. How am I supposed to turn my back on my actual child for some hypothetical ones?”

“You’re supposed to do your duty,” he says without malice. “But I understand why you feel that way.”

“Dad will understand. He won’t be happy, but he’ll come around.”

“We’ll see.” Caron steps down to stand beside me. “I’m not going to stop you. That’s not why I came. I just wanted to say think about this before you go through with it.”

“I’ve thought. I know what’s going to happen.” I keep on staring at Dara and she smiles at me, looking nervous, arms hugging herself, head tilted to the side. God, she’s lovely, absolutely fucking beautiful. It strikes me, how badly I want to walk down there and kiss her. Something simple, something

normal. I want to hold her, pull her close, feel her warmth.

“Then good luck.” Carson squeezes my shoulder. “I won’t tell Dad. I didn’t even tell Nolan.”

I smirk at him. “That’s like keeping a secret from yourself.”

“Nolan’s a prick. But, yeah, I know. You fucking owe me.”

“We’ll see about that.”

He shakes his head, walking past me, down the steps toward Dara. “Anyway, keep my name out of this, all right? I don’t need to get dragged down into this shitstorm with you.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Carson reaches the bottom and says something to Dara. She smiles at him, tilts her head to the side, says something back. Carson laughs and walks off, shaking his head.

She comes up to meet me a moment later.

“What’d he say?” I ask.

“He said, ‘Are you sure you want to marry an idiot like that? You could do better.’”

I sigh and rub my face. “And how’d you reply to that?”

“I told him I’m just as stupid, apparently. He laughed.”

“Charming.” I turn toward the entrance. “Last chance to run off. Although I will chase you and drag you back.”

“You couldn’t.”

“I could and I would.”

She steps up to my side and slips her hand into mine. Her palm’s warm and damp. I can feel her nerves as I squeeze gently.

“Then let’s skip the dramatics and get this over with, okay?” She stares straight ahead as we walk into the courthouse together.

Chapter 21

Dara

Kathryn walks with me out into the back yard, her eyes wide, looking about as overwhelmed as I felt the night before when Finn showed me his place for the first time. “Is this for real?” she whispers, taking my hand, staring at the ring. “Did you really marry the guy?”

“I really married the guy. Or we stood in front of a judge, signed some paperwork, and drove back here. Apparently, that’s the same thing.”

She looks extremely worried as she holds my hand in both of hers. “Hon, I wanted you to get some child support, not pledge your freaking life to the guy.”

“I know,” I say, smiling because what else can I do? I just made an insane decision. “But I think this is going to be good. Long-term, anyway. For the baby.”

“What about for you?” She pulls me close. “Let’s get out of here. We can sell the ring, make a few million, and disappear to Europe for a while.”

“I don’t want my baby to grow up speaking French.”

“How about German?”

I roll my eyes. “Ugliest language in the world.”

“Dutch then?”

“Sorry, German is second ugliest. Dutch would be first.”

She laughs and hugs me. “I’m worried, Dara. This isn’t like you.”

“It’s really not,” I agree, hugging her back. “But it’s happening.”

“I always thought I was the impulsive, crazy one.” She steps back, looking around the immaculate yard. “Then again, looking at all this, I’m wondering if he’s got a brother I could marry.”

“Three, actually.” Finn steps out the sliding door with Genna in tow. “Well, two really. Liam would rather cut off your toes and keep you in the freezer than marry you.”

Kathryn shoots me a look, eyes wide. *Toe Killer*, she mouths, and I wave her away as I walk up to greet Genna.

“Nice to meet you,” she says. “Well, again, sort of.”

“Finn’s talked about you. Well, sort of.”

She grins, glancing at him. “This is weird. I mean, we can all agree that it’s weird, right?”

A strange sense of relief floods me as I laugh. It’s only the four of us here celebrating this insane marriage, but Genna’s right, it’s extremely weird.

Finn glares at her. “Can you keep your opinions to yourself for once in your life?”

“Nope,” she says, turning back to me. “What do you want to know about your husband?”

“How long have you known him?”

“Oh, sweets, I’ve known him for much too long.” She steers me over to the outdoor seating area, gesturing for Kathryn to join us, and glances over her shoulder. “Darling, Finn, could you get us some refreshments? Wine for the ladies, please?”

“Water for me,” I say quickly. “On account of the pregnant.”

“You’re going to tell them stories about me,” Finn says, glaring at Genna. “I

shouldn't have invited you."

"Finn, I am your oldest friend and business partner. It is my duty to embarrass you on your wedding day. Now, run along."

"God fucking damn it," he mutters, storming into the house.

I laugh, looking at Genna like she's a goddess. "How did you just talk to him like that? And make him actually listen?"

"Years of conditioning." She sighs, sitting back. "I met Finn when we were young. You should've seen him back then. All knees and elbows. I wasn't much better, but still. We've been friends since grade school, and he hasn't been able to shake me since."

Genna proceeds to tell us some funny stories about Finn as a kid. Harmless stuff about school pranks, sports teams, rivalries, that sort of stuff. When he returns with drinks, he slides into the chair next to mine, his knee brushing up against my thigh.

Strangely, the stories humanize him. Before this, he was some mysterious gangster, but meeting Genna and hearing about the time he meant to dump water on his coach, but accidentally dumped it all over the principal of their prep school instead, makes him seem like a real person and now some mythical gangster asshole.

"You should've seen Dara back in the day," Kathryn says, grinning viciously. I shake my head, trying to make her stop, but she barrels forward. "Total band geek. Big glasses, straight bangs—"

"Band geek?" Finn raises his eyebrows. "What did you play?"

"Clarinet. I was awful."

"She was awful," Kathryn confirms.

"Finn played guitar," Genna says, eyes lighting up. "He wrote this song—"

"Okay, that's enough," Finn says, leaning forward. "I think you've told enough mortifying stories for one night."

"You wrote a song?" I nudge him, grinning. "I want to hear it. Was it a love

song?”

“Genna, I am going to strangle you,” he says, rubbing his forehead.

“I have a recording, I’ll send it to you later.” She winks at me, shrugging when Finn threatens to throw her off the roof.

Genna tells a few more stories, and Kathryn adds a few of her own, and although it’s meant to be embarrassing, I actually like hearing about the good old days a little bit, even though the good old days weren’t all that long ago.

Finn puts a stop to the reminiscing eventually.

“I’d like to propose a toast,” he says, holding up his glass of whiskey. “To marriage and a baby.”

“Here’s to that,” Genna says.

Kathryn shoots me a look, but she goes along with it. After, we sit and chat a little bit, Genna doing most of the talking while directing some questions toward me, we break up and head inside. I’m about to walk them to the door when the buzzer rings. Finn brushes past, checks the monitor, and curses.

“My brothers are here.” He looks back, directly at me. For a second, I think he’s going to tell me to hide, or he’s not going to let them inside.

Instead, Genna groans. “Great, the asshole twins are here. I guess the party’s over.”

“Are these the single ones?” Kathryn asks.

I nudge her. “Simmer down.”

“Just saying,” she says, shrugging.

Carson and Nolan come inside, both of them toting sour looks. Carson congratulates me and even kisses my cheek. “I suppose we’re family now,” he says. “I don’t hold it against you, you know.”

“Uh, thank you.”

“I do,” Nolan says, looking as though he wants to charge me like a bull.

Finn stands beside me protectively. “If you two came here to start shit, I’ll throw you both out.”

“Like to see you try,” Nolan snaps, glaring. “You did something stupid as fuck together, Finn. How could you do this? Seriously?”

“Enough,” Carson says, holding up a hand to calm his brother down.

The mood in the room shifts. Genna’s standing stiffly, glaring at the brothers. Finn looks like he wants to stab them both in the throat. Kathryn seems uncomfortable, a little afraid, though she’s staring at them with a thirsty look. Freaking Kathryn.

I’m afraid. I can’t pretend like I’m not. But this is what I signed up for. I knew my relationship with Finn—whatever that relationship actually is—would cause a lot of problems for his family. I knew there’d be confrontation.

I just didn’t know it would happen on my wedding night.

“I’m going to ask you both to leave now,” Finn says, moving forward.

“That’s fine.” Carson puts a hand on Nolan’s arm, drawing him back. “We only came to say congratulations. And to warn you.”

“Warn me?” Finn cocks his head. “You about to make a threat?”

“No, you stubborn asshole,” Nolan snaps. “Dad’s going to find out sooner or later. There are already fucking rumors.”

With that, Finn’s demeanor changes.

His aggression leaks away. He stares at his brothers, hands working, opening and closing into fists. I glance at Genna, and she’s pale like she’s even more terrified than he is.

I’m not sure how I feel. I figured it would happen sooner or later, and since I don’t know Finn’s Dad at all, I’m not sure how bad this is supposed to be. He’s going to hear it sooner or later.

“We’ll go see him tomorrow,” Finn says after a silence. “I’ll get it straightened out. I’ll tell him before someone else does.”

“That’s a good idea,” Carson says. “You’ve been warned. We’ll leave you all

to celebrate. Nolan, come on.”

Nolan hesitates, staring hate at Finn, before shaking his head and following Carson out the door.

Once they’re gone, Finn deflates. “How the fuck are people talking already?”

“Want me to find out?” Genna touches his arm. I feel a sudden pang of jealousy, but why the hell would I be jealous? They’re close friends, and besides, Genna’s not into guys.

It isn’t a romantic jealousy. It’s more about their intimacy, their friendship. I’ll never have a history like that with Finn, or at least I won’t for a long time. We’re husband and wife, but really, I don’t know anything about the guy, and he doesn’t know me.

In some ways, that’s exciting. It’s a blank slate.

But it’s also terrifying, and I’m jealous that Genna has it with him.

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll deal with it.”

She nods, lets him go, and comes over to give me a hug. “Night’s over,” she murmurs. “Good meeting you.”

“I should go too then.” Kathryn hugs me tightly. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. I’ll text you.” I hold onto her longer than I normally would, and when she breaks apart, I feel extremely alone.

She smiles at me before following Genna outside.

Leaving me with Finn.

He’s staring out at the back door, not really seeing anything. I want to go to him, comfort him, do something to ease this tension. But the moment I move, his eyes snap to me, and narrow in a strange, intense glare.

“It’s late and you’re pregnant. You need rest.”

“Finn, if you need to talk—”

“Let’s go to bed.” He turns away, toward the steps.

I hesitate. I don't know if he means bed in separate rooms or bed together, or what, but the tension of his shoulders suggests he doesn't want to be alone tonight.

And I don't either.

Weirdly, those stories Genna told made me want to know him more.

"All right, let's go," I say, slipping my hand through his arm.

There's a moment of surprise, but then his knowing smile drive me absolutely fucking crazy. I bat him away, jaw working, and he laughs.

"Did you just swat at me like an unruly puppy?"

"Only because you were humping my leg like one."

He barks another laugh, but this time, he grabs my hand, pulling me into him. I let out a soft yelp, staring up into his face.

"You'll know it when I'm coming on to you, love," he says, and a shiver runs down my spine at that word.

We're much closer than I'd like, but at least he seems calmer now. "No sex, remember?"

"Maybe," he murmurs. "But I think you should sleep with me tonight. We're husband and wife now, aren't we? Might as well try to get used to each other."

"Can you keep your hands to yourself?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"Finn."

"Yes, love, I'll keep my hands to myself, at least until you beg me not to."

I groan, rolling my eyes, but I let him pull me upstairs and toward his room.

Chapter 22

Dara

Finn's room is twice the size of my own. There's a sitting room, except this one's complete with big television, leather couch, a record player, and racks of music, movies, and shows. He gestures at the setup dismissively. "Never use it," he mutters. "Not enough time. Make yourself comfortable."

I hesitate near the couch as he disappears back into the bedroom. A moment later, he returns wearing loose sweats and a t-shirt, looking at me like he wants to bend me over the couch and spank my butt raw.

Which wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

"Maybe this is a bad idea," I say, looking toward the door.

"It's our wedding night. I'm not going to stand here and act like we're going to live like husband and wife for the rest of our lives, but for tonight, I want to start our relationship off right."

I hesitate. It's a surprisingly reasonable idea. I mean, in theory, we're going to be spending a very long time together—we might as well try to get along.

"Do you snore?"

His eyebrows raise. "I snore like a motorcycle backfiring."

"Move in your sleep?"

"Like a barrel tumbling down Niagara falls."

I sigh, rubbing my forehead. “You’re not selling this whole sleeping together idea.”

He comes closer, staring at me with those hard eyes of his. “I’m not trying to sell you anything. For one night, I want you in my bed, acting like my wife. That’s all I ask.”

I have a thousand reasons why this is a dumb idea, the biggest being, I’m terrified I’m going to let this guy put his hands on me.

No, scratch that—I’m terrified because I *know* I’m going to let him.

But maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe we can get this intimacy out of our system, get a feel for what it’s like to be sleeping together, and maybe we’ll decide it’s not all that great.

I mean, it could work out for the best, right?

He really might snore and thrash, and that’ll cure me of any desire to be anywhere near this guy’s bedroom.

Except that’s a dangerous gamble.

Because it might easily break the other way, and I’ll never want to be anywhere else *but* in his bed.

“Fine,” I say after a short, tense silence. “One night. We’ll do this once, get it out of our system and then—”

“And then you can retreat to the guest room and hide from me.” He turns, walking back into the bedroom.

“I am not hiding.” I follow him, annoyed. “You’re crazy if you think—”

But the words die in my throat.

His bedroom is gorgeous. *Lavish* is the wrong word. Everything’s a shade of black or gray with several bits of beige and brown thrown in the mix. Recessed lighting, modern furniture, and a bed that looks like a family of seven could easily fit with room to spare. A laugh spills from my throat as I shake my head, pointing. “What the hell is *that* monstrosity?”

He grins, sitting on the edge. “It’s called an Alaskan King.”

“I didn’t know they made bed that big.”

“I like to have plenty of space.”

“For what?” My eyes widen. “Are you having weird orgies in here or something?”

“No weird orgies,” he says, though the look on his face doesn’t exactly make me feel better. “There’s some clothing for you in the bathroom. Get changed, do your night-time routine, and get in here. I’m waiting.”

“You’re being bossy as hell, you know that, right? What if I’m not ready for sleep?”

He reaches over and presses a button on the nightstand. Heavy shades descend over the big windows. The lighting dims slowly down to a dull glow. The space transforms into sleep mode with a smooth, oiled glide, and I swear the sound of birds and crickets chirping softly filters in through speakers hidden in the walls.

“Get going,” he commands.

I sigh and do as he asks, not in the mood to argue. Besides, I do want to experience that absurd bed, if it can even be called a bed at that size.

I put on a tank top and some shorts. He must’ve pilfered these from my room earlier. I wash my face, floss, brush, do that whole thing, before finally slipping under the covers. “Finn? Where are—”

He appears toward the middle of the bed. So about fifty feet away. “Come on, don’t be shy.” He stretches out and taps another button.

The dim lights fade to nothing until it’s pitch black. “Dark,” I murmur.

“How about this?” Another button tap and a soft murmur groans in the roof as a skylight opens up, revealing thick glass staring up at the beautiful night sky.

I blink at the moon and the stars in total shock.

It’s beautiful. Obscenely expensive, but beautiful in a way I never pictured. It’s like the stars are right there, barely ten feet away as I lie against pillows

softer than sunlight. I reach a hand out like I could pluck the moon from the ceiling as something rustles to my left.

“Sometimes, when I can’t sleep, I look at the stars.” Finn presses his side against mine, his sudden touch like a comet streaking through the clear night.

“I never took you as the type to stare up at the stars.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me. For whatever reason, thinking about how far away they are, how much nothing is out there, it calms me down.”

I make a face. “That’s honestly insane. Most people feel tiny and insignificant.”

“But that’s what I like.”

I turn to look at the set of his jaw, at his defined features, his handsome lips and nose. He’s staring straight up, straight at the stars, and I’m tempted to reach out and touch his cheek, but I keep my hands to myself. I’m not going to instigate things if I can avoid it.

“Why do you like it?” I press, unable to help myself.

He tilts his head, looking at me. “I’m a Crowley,” he says, as if that explains anything. “My whole life, I’ve been told how important I am. How important my family is. Sometimes, I want to look at the stars and realize how small everything is, how insignificant compared to all that, and it helps shut my brain down for a while.”

“Can I be honest with you?”

He inclines his head. “Please. You’re my wife now.”

“It’s hard for me to imagine you feeling stressed. I mean, obviously I believe it, but you have *so much*. All this money, all this comfort, it’s like... I grew up with nothing. If I had this? If my parents did?”

He’s quiet for a moment. “I understand what you’re saying, but it isn’t the wealth that makes my life complicated. It’s my family, it’s what’s expected of me. I understand that might be hard to accept.”

“No, it’s not, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to suggest your problems aren’t real or

valid.” I chew my lip, cursing at myself. I shouldn’t have said that—he was opening up and I stomped all over him. I reach out on impulse, touching his chest. “I want to hear more.”

He looks at me, eyes grazing down to my lips, before he takes my hand—and pulls me close against him. I let out a surprised breath as I end up with an arm over his chest, my cheek against his collarbone, and his other hand in my hair, gently pulling my chin back until my lips are inches from his.

“You’ll understand soon, love,” he whispers, voice a husky rasp. “I do have a lot, but there’s also a lot counting on me, and sometimes I wish I could just be a regular man, free to make my own choices.”

“What would you choose, if you could?” My heart’s racing, fast enough to match his own pace. I feel his pulse pounding underneath me.

“I’d choose you,” he says, mouth coming toward mine. “I’d choose to have something that feels good for once in my life.”

“Didn’t you already?” I blink rapidly, head a dizzy mess of anticipation.

But he pauses. His lips brush mine. I release a soft whimper, needing him to move just a little bit closer, to finish this kiss, or to start it all the way. This half thing we’re doing, this nearness, it’s driving me wild.

“I don’t know what you are yet, love,” he murmurs, and god, I’m aching, actually aching for him to touch me. “But for a little while, we can pretend.”

I shift up, unable to take it anymore, and press my lips hard against his.

The trigger pulled, he takes control, driving the kiss deeper, his mouth opening, his tongue invading my lips, as a moan escapes my throat.

Chapter 23

Finn

The girl doesn't understand, but she will.

Fuck, she'll get it soon, but I wish I could shield her from that. I wish I could protect her from so much, from my family, from their expectations, from everything they'll want from her.

Except it's not possible, not after today, not after the decision I made.

She's my wife. My woman, my future, and she's carrying my child.

Which means she's a Crowley, and everything that comes with it.

I kiss her hard, my wife, tasting her just this one night. I know it can't be like this all the time—that's not part of our arrangement—but god, she tastes good. Her whimpers, her moans, every little movement of her hips and mouth, it makes my heart slam in my chest as excitement courses down my veins. Fuck, I've never wanted someone like this before, with every inch of my skin, like my fingertips yearn for her as much as my tongue does, as much as my cock does.

I roll over, pinning her down on her back. She's soft, pliant, beautiful, and I kiss down her throat to her chest. I hike up her top, cupping her breasts, licking her nipples, biting down hard enough to make her gasp.

"Easy," she moans. "Don't hurt me."

"A little pain's a good thing," I say, kissing her hard, biting again. Leaving

my mark, making sure my claim's staked. Fuck, what am I doing? Really treating her like she's mine?

"Says the guy doing all the hurting." She wiggles as I go lower, her hands twisting into my hair. "Is this how you imagined you'd treat your wife?"

"Ideally," I purr, pulling down her shorts, lavishing more kisses on her inner thigh, breathing in her scent. "What's the point of another body in bed if you're not going to enjoy it?"

"That's... a really weird way to put it," she says and sucks in a surprised, happy breath as I push her panties away, revealing her pink, lovely pussy, glistening in the starlight.

"So wet for me," I whisper, cock pounding with excitement. "Fucking gorgeous." I want to spoil her with praise. "You want me to lick you, don't you?"

"Yes, please," she says, licking her lips, cheeks burning bright red.

I roll a finger down the length of her, gathering her wetness before putting it in my mouth. "Are you getting shy on me?"

"I just—I don't—" She writhes some more as I kiss around her gorgeous little pussy.

"Relax, beautiful. I'll do all the work tonight."

"That doesn't seem fair."

"What's fair got to do with anything? I want you to come. I want your first experience of being my wife to be a good one. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes," she whispers, staring into my eyes. "Fuck, yes."

"Good girl." I lick her pussy, slowly at first, with a flat tongue. "Very good girl. Mmm, you taste lovely, beautiful." More praise, more licking. I suck her clit until she gasps in shock then slide two fingers deep inside.

Her low moans are all the feedback I need.

I keep going, finding what she likes by careful teasing. I nibble and lick, suck and fuck her with my fingers, until she's panting, her hips gyrating, getting

lost as I keep going. She's dripping down my beard and soaking the sheets, and fuck, I don't think I've been with a woman like this before. She's so wet, so vocal about what feels good, even though she's not really saying a word—only whining, whimpering, moaning and groaning, and the noises are so fucking sinful, so fucking devilish, that they're driving me to absolute insanity.

I keep going. Faster, slow. Teasing, fucking, licking. "You bastard," she says, her breasts shaking with each gasping breath. "You're going to break me, Finn, god, stop teasing."

"You want to come, love?" I slide my fingers in deeper, shift up, and kiss her, make her taste herself on my tongue as I curl my fingertips against her. "You really want to come?"

"If you don't get me off, I swear I'll explode."

I grin, bite her lower lip, and give her what she wants.

I lick her clit, sucking it as I fuck her with my fingers. She's sweating, shaking, as the orgasm builds and builds. I'm relentless now, no more teasing, no more fucking with her, nothing but pure pleasure, pure bliss. It's erotic, it's carnal and lewd, those gorgeous little pleasure sounds she's making. I keep going, eating her, loving her, until finally, she tips over that edge into ecstasy, her legs shaking, her thighs threatening to suffocate me, and I don't stop until she's stretched out on her back, breathing hard, staring up at the stars like her face is about to melt away.

"That's my good girl," I whisper, kissing her breasts, her neck, her mouth. "Lovely, good girl. You taste wonderful, and god, those sounds. Perfectly obscene."

She turns even pinker. "I get a little loud."

"I love it," I say earnestly. "Don't ever change."

She gazes at me for a long moment before brushing her knuckles across my cheek. "This is how it is, right? Man and wife?"

"Crowleys don't do divorce." She looks away, eyes narrowed. I'm not sure what she's thinking, but I can tell that was the wrong thing to say. I gently

guide her face back to mine. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing. Really, it’s fine. I think this is just a lot, is all.”

“You’re realizing that just now? The post-orgasm clarity must be strong with you.”

She grins, pushing me back. “Don’t be a prick.”

“Come here.” I gently get her shorts back on, tossing the panties onto the floor, before wrapping my arms around her. “Let me hold you for a while.”

“Can you leave the ceiling open? I like the idea of sleeping under the stars.”

“I’d sleep anywhere with you, love,” I whisper, not sure what’s making me say it. Maybe the taste of her on my tongue, the echo of her moans in my head.

Or the smell of her every time I take a breath.

I close my eyes, holding her in my arms, my wife, wondering if this really will be only for tonight.

Chapter 24

Finn

I'm dressed and showered before the sun rises. I leave Dara a note on the nightstand, letting her know that I'll be working all day, and that she has free rein of the house. I text Shane to make sure he can keep an eye on her while I'm busy before heading out.

I walk to the office. I like the fresh air in Boston Commons. I like stopping for a coffee at a food truck where the guy calls me *boss*. I like feeling normal for ten minutes as I walk, similar to the feeling I told Dara about last night, until I reach the unmarked black door with the state-of-the-art security system panel on the side. I type in the passcode, the door thunks open, and I head up to the space I rent above a deli, barely more than two big rooms and a bathroom.

My desk is in the back. I take a seat, sighing as I lean my head against the chair. My father, my brothers, they have offices in skyrises, offices filled with little worker drones in their business casual outfits with their pitches, their meetings, their water cooler conversations. Me, though, I want to be closer to the action, closer to street level. I spend most of my time in my clubs and restaurants anyway—this office is more like a meeting space, empty the majority of the day as I do my rounds, check on my guys, my crew, my employees.

Genna shows up not long after me, looking fresh as always. She slumps down in the chair across from my desk, tosses the paper over, and gives me a hard look. "Well?" she asks, eyebrows raised.

I sip my coffee. “Well, what?”

“Don’t play coy, bastard. Did you two sleep together or what?”

I tilt my head. “Not really.”

Her eyes narrow. “Not... really?”

“I ate her out until she was screaming my name.” A bit of an exaggeration, but not too wrong.

She crosses her arms, eyebrows quirked. “Really? That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“That’s practically... gentlemanly, coming from you.”

“She’s my *wife*, I’m going to treat her right.”

Genna rolls her eyes, face hardening. “What’s it mean though? Did she sleep over?”

“She did, yes. I wanted to start our marriage off the right way.”

“By eating her out.” She sighs, rubbing her face. “Did you open the ceiling?”

I hesitate, looking away. “Yes.”

“God, you’re unbelievable.” Genna laughs, stretching her legs. “Well, did she like it at least?”

“Loved it, I think.” I glare at her. “Why is this so funny?”

“It’s just funny, is all. How many women have you let sleep in that big bed of yours? How many have you shown that skylight to?”

“You know how many.”

“Exactly.” He leans forward. “None.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is you’re getting intimate with her. I only know about that fucking weird skylight and that huge bed because you showed me one time when you were drunk. You *never* bring women home. It’s always their place or a hotel.

Except for her.”

“She’s my wife. Am I supposed to rent the penthouse just to get her off?”

“No, that’s not what I mean.” She softens a touch. “I’m just worried about you, is all. This whole thing seems really complicated and I’m not sure either of you really know what you’re doing.”

“We’re fine.” I say it sharper than I should, trying to end this miserable conversation. But Genna’s not bothered by my tone.

“You might be, but what about her? Is she going to catch feelings? Are you going to? What happens when Papa Crowley brings the hammer down and really fucks shit up? I don’t think you two will be snuggling under the stars and licking each other’s privates then.”

I rub between my eyes. “Can you not call it *licking each other’s privates* ever again, please? You’re seriously going to ruin all future erections.”

“I’m serious, Finn. Do you like the girl? I mean, really like her?”

“Yes,” I say, but hesitate. “And no.”

“That, right there, is a bad answer.” She points at me. “Get your shit together.”

I stand, turning my back on Genna, trying not to get pissed. She’s right to push me like this—I’ve been having the same thoughts, the same worries. I want to get closer to Dara, but where’s the line? At what point have I gone too far, and is there too far now that we’re married?

“She’s not from our world,” I say, staring out the window as the city wakes up down below us. “How am I supposed to protect her? And our child?”

“You’re supposed to be her husband.” Genna drums her fingernails on the arm of the chair. “What else can you do? I’m just saying, don’t get her hopes up is all, especially not if you plan on fucking her over in the end.”

“I don’t plan on fucking her over,” I say, turning back to give Genna a hard stare. “She’s my wife.”

“Good. I like her.” Genna stands. “Not being from our world is a good thing,

by the way. You're not going to corrupt her."

"You sure about that?"

Genna waves me off as she leaves my office. I watch her go, frustrated.

After last night, I'd been having good feelings toward this whole marriage thing. Yes, it's complicated, and yes, it's going to get worse once I speak with my father, but for now it feels good.

Last night was simple. A woman in my bed, the stars in the sky, her taste on my tongue. Her moans, her heavy breathing. That's all I need sometimes, only her physical body, and her laughter, and her groans, and all those little noises. Her hands on my chest. Her gaze in mine.

Except Genna's got to go and be all fucking practical.

My phone rings as I settle back behind my desk. I grimace, pull it out, and glare at Carson's name. Seems like everyone wants to keep me from getting damn work done.

"Brother," I say, answering. "I'm shocked you're not still in bed nursing a hangover."

"Don't be a prick," Carson grumbles. "How's the wife?"

"The wife is happy. How's being my favorite eldest brother?"

"Shitty. Nolan's on the war path. Thinks you're a damn traitor."

"Nolan needs to learn to worry about his own business." I clench my jaw, making a mental note of this.

"I just wanted to warn you. You can't keep ducking father forever. You need to talk to him."

"I'll do it soon."

"That's not good enough." Some rustles on his side of the line. "Finn, you've always been a pain in the ass, but you've also always done the right thing. Dad knows it, I know it. We all understand how hard it must be, getting engaged to a woman you don't know. But blowing it all up like this? Fuck, man."

“Did you just call to lecture me again?”

He lets out a breath. “No, I didn’t. I called to say tell Dad today. Tell him right now. Get it over with.”

“I’ll tell him soon.”

“It’ll hurt less coming from you. But hell, you’re going to do whatever the fuck you want anyway, right? Good luck with that.”

He hangs up. I toss my phone onto the chair Genna was sitting in a second ago, anger rolling down my spine.

Carson’s not wrong. I need to tell Dad, get it over with. Genna’s not wrong either. I need to decide what I want out of this relationship before I end up hurting Dara by mistake.

Except nothing’s easy.

I want to keep this marriage a secret for another day or two. I want to enjoy this peaceful time with Dara before the family starts making demands of us. I want to know her, really know her, not just with my tongue and my hands.

Only I’m not sure how I can do that with the family inserting itself into our lives.

One more phone call. I grab it from the floor, find Dara’s name, and tap it roughly. It rings a few times, but finally, my wife answers, sounding sleepy. “Hello? Finn?”

“Sorry to wake you,” I say, some of my tension easing away at the sound of her voice.

“No, it’s fine, I should get up anyway. Where are you?”

“I’m at my office.”

“Oh. I didn’t know you left.”

“I got up early and figured you needed to sleep. You’re pregnant, you need rest.”

“Right. Pregnant.” She sighs heavily. “I have T-minus five minutes before

the puke fest begins.”

I grimace. “We’ll take you to see a doctor tomorrow. I’ll set the appointment when we’re off this call.”

“Okay,” she says, yawning.

“Listen, I called to say, there’s a credit card in my nightstand. It’s a black Amex. Grab it, get Kathryn to take a day off work, and buy yourself whatever you want.”

She’s quiet for a second. “Is this some kind of bribe?”

“Consider it a thank you for last night.”

She chuckles gently. “And I didn’t even do any work.”

“I still had fun.”

“I’m not sure I want to take a sex bribe.”

“Then just take some money from your husband, all right? You could use a new wardrobe. Go nuts. Buy whatever.”

And do it soon, before life gets harder.

“Well, if you insist,” she says, her voice sounding adorably sexy still thick with sleep. “I’m getting off the phone now. I feel it coming.”

“Want me to come home?”

“No. That’s sweet, but seriously, no. I’ll see you later.”

“Take the card. Enjoy yourself.”

“Bye.” She hangs up with a click.

I stare at the dead screen for a moment, picturing her still in bed, hair messy, looking beautiful and half-awake.

Too bad she’s probably hugging the toilet by now, poor girl.

I have to tell my dad what I did, but at least she can have one more day before we’re lined up against the wall and executed.

Chapter 25

Dara

“Do I have this to look forward to?” Kathryn asks as we stroll through Copley Place, a high-end shopping mall. “Are we going to skip work more often now that you’re married?”

“Well, you’ll have to skip work. I don’t know if I’m going to get a job at all.” I pause outside of Fendi, frowning at the intimidating storefront. I’ve never gone inside of a place like that, much less bothered to stop and stare, but now Finn’s credit card is like a weight in my pocket.

I could afford that store. The thought is strange, almost foreign.

If I wanted something in there, I could buy it without a second thought.

“You’re not working?” Kathryn sounds honestly surprised. “You don’t strike me as the trophy wife type.”

I jab her with my elbow. “I am *not* a trophy wife, but I have a baby coming, and apparently Finn has plenty of money—” I take a deep breath, turning away. No matter how rich he might be, I can’t bring myself to spend lavishly. I don’t belong in a place like that. “Besides, if it was hard to find work before, imagine how hard it’ll be when I’m showing.”

Kathryn takes my arm, walking close as we move on. “Still, you’re going back to work eventually, right? You always said you didn’t want to be a stay-at-home mom.”

I tilt my head from side to side. “I honestly don’t know what our relationship

is going to look like. And I said all that back before I got pregnant. Things are different now.”

She scowls slightly. “Different now? Come on, you haven’t changed all that much in the last few days. You haven’t talked about what your life’s going to look like?”

“I mean—” I hesitate, looking away, feeling foolish. The practical stuff hasn’t come up yet. “No, we haven’t. Everything’s happening so fast, we haven’t actually sat down and gone over what we want out of all this.”

“Girl, I knew you lost your mind, but now I’m pretty sure someone killed the Dara I used to know and replaced her with an alien. Seriously, since when did you not plan, at least a little bit?”

She’s got a point. Ever since I was little, I’ve always been a planner. I kept a diary for years, but it was really a bunch of to-do lists strung together with the occasional entry about my feelings. Which were very intense for a twelve-year-old.

Now it’s like I’m so swept up in this relationship that I haven’t stopped to actually consider what it’ll look like in a year or two or ten.

Or what I really *want* any of this to look like.

“The baby’s the priority,” I say as we come down the escalator toward the bottom level. “I guess it doesn’t matter what we decide on, so long as the baby’s taken care of.”

“You have to think about yourself, at least a little bit.” Kathryn steers me over to an open bench and we sit together as people stream past. “At some point, the baby won’t be a baby anymore, and then what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” I say, starting from shift side to side, feeling defensive and frustrated. “What does the wife of a criminal do? Go shopping? Try not to get killed or arrested?” I feel spinny and dumb for not at least thinking about this at some point.

“Dara,” she says softly, putting her hand on my knee to steady me, staring into my face. “I’m being serious. What do you want with your life?”

I take a deep breath, tilting my chin up, staring toward the ceiling. I've been so busy trying to survive that I haven't considered there might be more than worrying about where my next meal's coming from and how I'm going to provide basic necessities.

Now that I'm Finn's wife, I can start breathing again. The only problem is, I feel directionless.

"What if I don't figure it out right now?" I ask, glancing at her. "What if I just... live in the moment? For a while, anyway."

"You could do that." Her lips press together. "I just worry he's going to steamroll you and it'll become more about what he wants and less about what you need."

"That might happen, but I'm not sure."

"Do you trust him?"

I let out an undignified snort-laugh. "God, no." But then I consider for a moment. "Well, a little bit. At least, not completely."

"That's good then. You have a base to build on. Do you... like him?"

"There's some... there-there." I try not to smile.

She grins. "Lots of there-there, I bet."

"We have a spark. I can't pretend like we don't. Only he seems hell-bent on keeping feelings out of this."

Except is he? Last night he dragged me into his bed with him and got me off while I stared up at the stars. That didn't seem very business-like.

"If you feel the spark, he feels it too." She leans closer. "Could be it that you have a crush on your husband?"

I glare at her. "How dare you make such an accusation."

"Ooooh, you totally do."

"Disgusting. I'd never."

“You want to kiss your husband. Sleep in the same bed as him. Let him do some extremely nasty and potentially illegal acts—”

“You have an immoral mind and I will not deign to acknowledge it.” I tilt my chin up. “What we do in private is *completely* legal. In most states anyway.”

She laughs and leans her head on my shoulder. “I’m just worried about you, is all. I want you to make sure *you’re* taken care of, not taken advantage of. I don’t want you to end up as this guy’s glorified live-in nanny taking care of the babies while he’s out, like, running clubs with his hot lesbian best friend and cheating on you all over town.”

“He doesn’t seem like the cheating type,” I say quietly, thinking about how he called his fiancée before proposing to me. He didn’t need to do that—their relationship was never real—but he did it anyway because he’s a decent person.

Decent enough, anyway, for a mobster.

She waves that off. “Either way. You like him, I’m sure he likes you. I think that if you really want to see where this can go, then you let it happen. You know what I mean? Be up front about what you need, don’t let him push you around, but don’t fight it, either.”

“I’ll try to be more demanding, it’s just hard.”

“I know, but try anyway. You’re not used to big, strong, bossy gangsters, but it’s time to push back.”

“Fine, I’m spineless, okay? I’ll do better. How did this conversation turn into you calling me a coward again?”

She laughs. “All right, enough of this.” Kathryn pats my knee again and stands. “You have the rich guy’s credit card right? Let’s go use it.”

“I don’t know.” I squirm a little. “I’m not sure I feel right buying stuff.”

“Didn’t he tell you to get an all new wardrobe? Not a few pairs of shoes, not a couple blouses, but an entirely new wardrobe.” She taps my shoulder. “Spine, remember?”

“Yes, but—”

“Let’s take the man at his word and get shopping.” She holds out a hand. “Come on. You want to do this, right?”

I hesitate, smiling to myself.

Do I want to do this? Do I want to take Finn’s money and dig myself deeper into his world? I feel like I’m the one taking advantage of him somehow, even though he offered without me ever asking.

That’s the poor girl still locked in the back of my head. I remember the days where my family had to scrimp and save for everything, clip coupons, buy dented cans, dig for change in pants pockets, all that stuff. I remember the stress, the anger that spending extra money brought out in my parents. And I remember the resentment they felt toward each other as every day brought new stresses and new problems.

I don’t want that relationship. Even if what I have with Finn ends up all business, I want things to be cordial between us at the very least. Maybe we don’t end up deeply in love, but at least we can be friends.

Money makes things harder.

Although usually it’s when people don’t have money, and it seems like Finn has plenty.

“Well, when you put it that way,” I say, taking Kathryn’s hand. “You know how I feel about needless spending.”

“You let me worry about the cost, okay? Just sit back, relax, point at the most expensive things you can find, and I’ll do all the swiping.”

“You’re such a wonderful help,” I say with a dramatic sweep of my arm. “What ever would I do without you?”

“Be homeless,” she says, grinning.

We walk arm in arm up the escalator and into Fendi.

Chapter 26

Finn

I order a car that night to take us out to the Crowley family mansion.

Dara's quiet beside me, wearing a new cream blouse and a pair of dark slacks. She looks gorgeous with her hair down, her lips pink and her eyes bright, staring out at the night as we wind our way from the city toward the affluent suburbs.

Without thinking, I put my hand on her thigh, which makes her flinch.

But she doesn't knock it away.

"I need you to know something," I say, looking at her, holding her gaze. I hit the button to raise the privacy screen, blocking out the driver. "No matter what happens, I'm on your side. Do you understand?"

"How bad is this going to be?" She tilts toward me, eyes wide.

A fair question. I tighten my grip, digging my fingers into her slightly, before shaking my head. "I don't know," I admit. "But it won't be good."

"Your father—your family—you're all, uh, you know, criminals, right?" She hesitates, picking her words carefully. "Does that mean violence is a possibility?"

I smile tightly. "If I were anyone else in the organization, then yes, my father wouldn't hesitate to kill me. Disobedience and betrayal are the two greatest crimes we can commit."

She pales. “But since you’re his son, you’re safe?”

“Mostly.” I don’t mention that there are things he could do which are worse than killing me. “You don’t have to stress. I promise, no matter what, I’m going to take care of you. We’re married, and I don’t plan on going back on that commitment. Besides, I have contingency plans.”

Dozens of them. From running to Mexico to bribing him with work.

But she doesn’t seem reassured. “Even if he threatens to kill you? Or me?”

My eyes narrow. “He won’t, and if he does, I’ll make sure he never follows through.”

She doesn’t look convinced, not that I can blame her, but she doesn’t press the issue. We finish the car ride in silence, switching from busy city streets to winding rural ones flanked by massive trees as the twilight turns to early evening and the sun sinks down beneath the horizon.

The car pulls down a short path before stopping at a gate. We’re buzzed through, and Dara leans forward as the house comes into sight.

I’m used to this by now, but it’s interesting to watch Dara experience the Crowley mansion for the first time.

It’s an enormous Victorian structure with a fully stone facade and a gray slate roof. Multiple peaks, chimneys, dozens of windows, and more than one door stretch out across the front wall, with more disappearing around the side toward the back. The grass is manicured, the bushes trimmed to tiny little perfect globes, and the trees are pointed like picture-book drawings.

“Did you grow up here?” she asks, blinking rapidly.

“I did,” I confirm, smiling to myself, though I don’t have too many good memories from my childhood. “The house felt like it went on forever. I explored the grounds with my brothers, ran through streams, climbed trees. Except my room was always freezing in the winter and stifling in the summer. Sometimes it felt like too much space to get lost in.”

Easy to hide from adults. Easier for adults to forget you ever existed. For a little kid, that was hard to understand.

“I can’t even imagine.” She laughs bitterly. “Your garage is bigger than my childhood home.” She nods toward one of the outbuildings. “I bet it’s nicer too.”

“The Crowley family has been involved in Boston for a very long time,” I say, though I sense her tension.

Fortunately, the car parks, giving me an excuse to end this conversation. I’m comfortable with money and power, but I don’t like the way she looks at me whenever we talk about how much I have.

I get out and open the door for her. Dara remains tight at my elbow as we head up to the house. I start angling toward the side family entrance, but a staff member flags me down up at the top of the main stairwell. She’s young, a girl I don’t recognize, and gestures for us to follow. “Good evening, Mr. Crowley,” she says as we join her at the top. She opens the massive guest entryway with a flourish.

I hold back my annoyance. I haven’t come through this door in years. It flows into a massive foyer with a crystal chandelier and old wooden stairs polished to a beautiful gleam. Flowers, oil paintings, and heavy, blood-red rugs complete the over-the-top presentation meant to impress guests.

Family doesn’t come through this door.

What does it mean that my father set up this little display?

Dara looks awed.

“Ostentatious,” I whisper, steering her away from the staff toward a side hall. Dad might want to flex a little bit, but I don’t have to play along. “That entry is meant to make people think we’re richer than the Vatican.”

“Are you?” she asks, staring at me like she’s seeing a new man.

“The family might be,” I admit, my hand on her lower back. “But I’m not my family. I earn my own income.”

“Why?” she asks, letting out a sharp, crazed laugh. “If I had all this—” She leaves the rest unsaid.

When we’re alone, I stop her, pushing her up against a wall. She sucks in a

surprised breath. I hold her there, staring into her face. “Listen to me, Dara. This house means nothing. The money means nothing. The power means nothing. My father is just a man. Do you understand me?”

“I’m sorry, but, uh, this money and power stuff means *a lot*. I grew up in a two-bedroom. I ate expired meat at least once a month. The carpets in here are probably worth more than my parents made in their entire lives. If we had even a tiny portion of your wealth, our lives would’ve been so different. So much easier.”

“Once you start thinking that way, they’ve won.” I tilt her chin, getting closer. “You’re smart. You’re beautiful. Don’t let my father get in your head. You can handle this.”

She licks her lips. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yes,” I say and kiss her.

I’m not sure why I do it. Maybe it’s to force her to start thinking more clearly, or maybe it’s because I want to.

Either way, her lips part, and her tongue touches mine as the kiss deepens, her taste flooding my mouth.

I grip her hips tightly. I want to hold her here, tasting her, kissing her for hours. My pulse doubles and a purr runs through my throat at the thought of pulling her into one of the dozens of empty rooms and having my way with her.

This is my wife, my girl, the mother of my child.

This is the woman I’m supposed to be with—so why does it feel like I’m breaking all the rules?

This is *right*. This feels too good to be wrong.

But I force myself to end the kiss before really getting what I want.

She stares at me with a mixture of desire and fear, that perfect place where lust rests.

“You’re gorgeous,” I say, touching her chin. “You can do this. Just stay close

to me, okay?”

“Okay,” she answers, sounding breathless.

I turn, taking her hand in mine, and lead her to my father’s study.

Chapter 27

Finn

Dara holds my arm tightly, but she keeps her chin raised like she's a royal daughter walking through court.

I couldn't be prouder of her in this moment.

My father calls out as soon as we knock. I catch a glimpse of a staff member standing nearby, the same girl from the front door, which means she warned him of our arrival.

Why the hell did we come in through the guest entry? Why are we being treated like he knew Dara was on the way? I only told him that I was coming for dinner and wanted to speak before everyone sat down to eat. There shouldn't be anything out of the ordinary here.

Except I feel the tension the moment we step into his lavish room. It's half executive suite, half blue-blood library. A crackling fire in the hearth, an elk head above the mantle. Leather-bound books, expensive hardwoods, a full display of rare liquors. Then there's the desk: huge, carved from a single solid piece of redwood tree, one of the last ancient behemoths felled before they were protected.

Father's sitting behind that desk with a glass of whiskey in front of him, his shirtsleeves rolled up, glaring at me with a hard stare. Mom's standing slightly behind him and to the left, smiling a tight smile like she's not sure if she's happy or if she's ready to start screaming.

They fucking know.

“Close the door,” Dad says, practically barking at me.

I obey, letting it shut with a soft click. I take Dara by the arm and lead her to stand in front of the desk while my parents remain staring at us, my mother’s smile plastered on, my father’s scowl deepening.

“Dad, Mom,” I say, looking at them in turn. “I want to introduce—”

Dad cuts me off. “I know who she is,” he says with a snarl. “How the fuck could you, Finn? How could you disobey me, betray your family, and embarrass yourself like this, after everything I’ve done for you? For *this*?” His face gets progressively redder as his tone rises. He gestures at Dara like she’s a cheap piece of furniture.

Dara squeezes my hand. I feel her wilt beneath the onslaught of my father’s contempt. *Be strong.*

I squeeze back tightly, stepping forward to put her slightly behind me. “How did you find out?” I ask, keeping my voice as level as I can, but I’m trembling with rage. “Was it Nolan?”

“Nolan?” Dad’s face contorts. “He knows and didn’t tell me? You assholes are all fucked, do you hear me?” He slams his fists on the desk, standing. “The girl called me. Robin, your actual fiancée. She called and told me about your plan.”

I stare at him in surprise. Robin told him? What the hell was she thinking? I don’t understand and I can’t begin to guess at her intentions, and frankly, it doesn’t even matter.

I have to deal with the problem in front of me.

“It’s not a plan,” I say, glancing at Dara. “We’re married. It’s done.”

“Like hell you are,” Dad growls. “Marriages can be ended almost as easily as lives. I don’t know who this girl is, but you’ll take her back to where you found her, propose to Robin again, and maybe we can forget you ever made this foolish mistake.”

“No,” I say, working my jaw. “Dara’s pregnant with my child.”

That surprises him. He knew about the engagement, but not about the baby. Dad sinks back into his seat, looking stunned for a moment.

I glance from him to my mother, and she's only looking at me with a fierce consideration. Mom's always been hard to read in situations like this.

Where Dad leads with anger, Mom leads with stone-cold logic.

It makes her terrifying.

"You got the girl fucking *pregnant*," Dad says with a groan. "What were you thinking, son? Don't you know anything about a fucking condom?"

"It clearly wasn't planned, and I'm not going to turn my back on her. She's carrying my child—"

"Are you sure it's yours?" he says, glaring at me. "Who is this girl, anyway? Some stranger? You dug up some club rat and stuck her with a kid? Who knows how many other men she's sleeping with. You foolish boy, you fucked one of your club whores—"

"Watch your mouth," I say, stepping forward, rage flaring in my chest like a lightning bolt, almost dragging Dara along with me. "You will *not* talk about my wife like that."

His eyes bug out. "Are you trying to get yourself killed right now? Do you have any idea what's happening here? You're not in any position to make threats, you stupid boy. I should beat some sense into you right here and now."

I glare at him, seething, rage flowing down my spine. I'm dimly aware of reacting exactly like he does—skipping over thoughtful consideration and going right to rage.

I can't help myself. Hearing him talk about Dara like that, like she's some club rat I dragged off the dance floor and impregnated—

Fuck, it makes my skin crawl.

For her part, Mom's stone-faced and dead silent. She's pale, her hand's trembling, and there's a sheen of sweat on her upper lip. I can tell she's terrified but holding it back.

I take a breath to gather myself before squaring my shoulders. “You always talk about how important family is,” I say, trying to steady my tone, and mostly failing. “Dara is family now. She’s carrying my heir. I understand I fucked up your alliance—”

“You fucked up more than an alliance. McLaren was our ticket to certain important senators, men that can help make our lives easier. I’m inches away from getting legislation passed that’ll ban assault rifles, and once that happens, our family will suddenly become one of the biggest suppliers of illegal guns in the country. All I need is McLaren to ensure it’s a done deal. Except you fucked us.”

My mouth opens. I can barely understand what I’m hearing.

It’s not even about an alliance—it’s about a vote.

A single fucking piece of legislation.

My father was going to saddle me with some strange girl all to get assault rifles banned.

All so he could increase his illegal weapon sales.

This was for the family’s bottom-fucking-line.

Fuck, it’s devious, but it’s also infuriating.

“None of that matters,” I say through my teeth. “Dara is my wife. She’s expecting my child. Carson or Nolan can marry Robin. Hell, give her to Liam for all I care. I’m finished.”

Dad leans back, crossing his arms over his chest. His face falls into a mask of pure derision. “You’re right, Finley. You *are* finished.” His words hang for a moment. “From here on out, you’re excommunicated. You’re finished in the Crowley family. All your accounts will be closed. You will be cut off from our money, our influence, and our power. You will be blacklisted in Boston and wherever else we hold sway. Your name will be like ash in the mouths of anyone stupid enough to speak it. I will ruin your men, your crew, and your friends. Including that pretty little best friend of yours. I like Genna, she has bigger balls than you do, but I will make her suffer just to cause you more pain. You want to turn your back on me? Then we turn our backs on you.”

Father stands, pointing one gnarled finger at me. “From here on out, you are no longer a Crowley.”

Chapter 28

Finn

His words linger between us like cracking flame.

Excommunicated.

I knew I might be cut off from Crowley funds. I figured I'd be punished, relegated to the margins of the family, even treated something like a pariah.

I can deal with losing the money. I will survive without the prestige.

But to be thrown out completely? To be blackballed?

This won't only affect me. It'll hurt Genna, my crew, Dara, my baby. My clubs and restaurants will wither and die. I won't be able to find work anywhere on the East Coast, and I'll be lucky to build a new life out west. The Crowley name is powerful, even thousands of miles away.

This isn't only about hurting me—it's about hurting the people I care for.

That's the real punishment.

The sick bastard.

Bitterness fills my mouth. Bile floats into my throat. My future's turning black and dying in front of me.

All for Dara. All for the baby.

And the sick part? I don't regret it. Even now, facing my own doom and the

pain of all my friends, I wouldn't make any other decision.

Because this is *right*.

"Now, Orin, that might be a little... extreme." Mother speaks for the first time. She puts her hand on Dad's shoulder as he slowly sinks back into his chair.

"Extreme? The boy's lucky I'm not killing him on the spot," he says, making a disgusted face.

"I agree that Finley's decision here is lacking in judgment, but this situation can be salvaged. What did Robin say when she spoke to you earlier?"

Dad's jaw works. "She said her father is still amenable to a deal. Assuming Finley is willing to make things right."

Something in me thaws as I start to understand the dynamic at play.

Robin didn't call to rat me out—she called to smooth things over.

Only she didn't realize I hadn't spoken to my father yet.

She must've broken the news on her own, spun it in such a way that it didn't cause her father to go completely berserk, and even reached out to make sure I didn't end up with a bullet in my head.

That lovely girl. I remind myself to send her a gift someday when this is over.

Mom says, "Instead of kicking our son out of the family, why don't we give him and his new wife a chance?" Mom tilts her head and steps forward. "Finley, most of what your father said is more or less correct. You never should have married this girl without our consent, much less broken off an important match we spent months brokering. However, what's done is done, and if you're set on being that girl's husband then I won't try to pry you away. Lord knows you're as stubborn as your father."

"Don't compare me to the traitor, dear," Dad murmurs.

Mother smiles, rubbing his back. "What do you say, Finley? Are you willing to do what's necessary to make this right?"

I glance back at Dara. She's looking at me through a mask of anxiety.

What would happen if I said no?

If I broke ties with them completely and started over?

I have money saved—substantial money, enough to last us for a very long time if we lived modestly.

We could find other jobs. I could become a normal man, a normal husband. Hell, we might even be able to make each other happy.

But that life isn't for me.

I won't turn my back on Genna or on my crew. Too many people rely on me, too many lives are at stake here.

I look back to my mother. "What can I do?"

"Go speak to Robin and her father in the next few days. Apologize, grovel if you have to, and hear what they have to say. Set aside your pride, Finley. I suspect you'll have more than a few errands to run."

"And then?" I ask, gesturing back at Dara. "I don't plan on ending this marriage."

"If you do all that then we'll talk," Dad says firmly. "Assuming our vote goes the way we want it to."

Mother jabs him with her finger. "If he does all that, we'll be willing to forgive him, and welcome his wife into the family."

I take a breath. This is our chance. My mother's giving me one shot to fix my mistakes. If I can make it happen, I'll save my career, save Genna's career, and make sure my wife and my soldiers are all safe.

Or I could throw it all away, take my new, beautiful wife, and disappear to some pretty tropical island.

"I'll speak to Robin and her father," I say quietly. "I'll set things right."

"I knew you'd make the right choice." Mom comes around the desk and squeezes my arms. I stare at her as she kisses both of my cheeks, and a strange realization bubbles up from my depths.

It's always been her.

Dad's the face of the family. He might even make most of the decisions.

But the big moves? The deep, clever moves?

They're always my mother.

And she's going to twist this situation to her benefit somehow.

Only I have to make sure I'm not left out when that happens.

Mother turns from me and looks at Dara for the first time. Her smile is bright, her head tilted to the side.

"And as for you, dear, I know you must be terrified right now, but really, we're not so bad. Finley must've warned you."

"He did," Dara says, sounding like a balloon deflating.

"Then you'll be okay. Listen to my son." She turns and walks back to the desk. "Now, both of you, let's call it a night, shall we? I'm worried that if you stay for dinner, my husband will try to stab you with a bread knife."

"I'd go straight for the gun, dear," Dad says, grinning like a wolf.

I steer Dara away from them, heading to the door. Before we can leave, Mom calls out, "Make it right, Finley."

I nod once as I exit the study.

In the hall, Dara takes several deep breaths. "How screwed are we?" she asks. "And how close did we just come to getting murdered?"

"Very. To both questions." I pull her along behind me. "But at least now we have a shot."

However unlikely it may be.

Chapter 29

Dara

Finn's parents are *terrifying*.

His father is this compact little Irishman, all fire and brimstone, but his mother's arguably worse. The moment she spoke, it was like frost fell from the ceiling, icing up everyone around her.

Including me. I felt like I couldn't move when she turned her eyes in my direction.

I kind of liked her, honestly.

That's a good role model all women should strive to emulate. Even if she does want to kill me.

"Do you mind if I drink?" Finn asks, already pouring himself a scotch.

"Only if I can have one too." When he gives me a look, I smile weakly. "I'm kidding. Your parents scared the crap out of me." I lounge back on his couch, safe in his apartment. Though I don't know if I'll ever feel truly safe again, not after that display.

It was about as bad as I expected. His father's insults didn't hurt me—the man doesn't know me at all—but the threats really cut into my core.

The way he casually talked about ruining Genna and all the men that work for Finn.

The idea that I'd be the reason for so many people getting hurt, maybe killed—it lingers like bile in my throat.

Finn sits next to me, our knees touching. "That went about as well as it could have," he says.

"Really?" I stare at him like he's gone insane, because I'm pretty sure he has. "Your parents tried to ruin you."

"Threatened to," he corrects, sipping his drink. "Robin saved our asses, as it turns out."

"Oh, yeah, right, that's better." I groan, tilting my head back. "What did I marry into?"

"I warned you." He nudges against me. "Come on. We're okay."

"How? You heard your dad in there. He hates me."

"His opinion doesn't matter. Only mine does."

"His opinion can literally end lives." I give him a look. "And your mother matters."

"Well. Her too." He sips his drink again. "She offered us a way to save face. If I can smooth this over with McLaren and make sure Dad still gets his vote, everything will be okay."

"Short of sacrificing one of your brothers, how's that going to happen?"

"No clue," he admits. "But that's a problem for another day." He finishes his drink and puts it down on the coffee table before shifting to look at me. "Now, you went shopping earlier. How did that go?"

I laugh, unable to help myself. The absurdity of the transition is too much. "I don't want to talk about clothes, Finn."

"I do. Tell me what you bought. Anything worth putting on you then peeling off again?"

"Quit it. Your parents want to murder us." I stand, pacing away, heart beating fast.

I keep thinking about what Kathryn said to me earlier, about how I've barely thought about myself in all this.

How she's completely right.

"Not murder. Just ruin financially. Listen, if it comes to that, I have plenty saved up in accounts they can't touch. We'll have to move somewhere else, start over, but we'll be okay. I'll take care of you, I swear it."

"Why are you doing this?" I ask, throwing my hands in the air. "You're risking everything you have for me and I don't know why. You could just write me a check every year, make sure I'm comfortable, make sure our child's taken care of. You don't need to end your life for this." I gesture between us.

He's quiet for a moment before he leans forward, elbows on his knees, looking more tired than I've ever seen. His gaze is hard when he looks up. "All my life, I've done what they asked. I've given them everything. I've been loyal, never complained, killed myself to bring power to the family. They rewarded that by forcing me into a match I didn't want, all for some miniscule benefit. All for the damn bottom line. You are worth the risk to me because you're a choice I'm making for myself." He stands, slowly gathering himself.

"What about me?" I ask in a quiet voice. "How do I fit into all this?"

He tilts his head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what *am* I to you? What are we even doing here, me and you? Aside from blowing everything up and getting ourselves murdered."

"You're my wife. You're the mother of my kid."

My hands ball into fists in frustration. "I mean, what will it be like, living with you and your family? They hate me, Finn, and that's never going to change." I feel so stupid. I should've seen this coming sooner, when he tried to warn me, but getting a vision of it like that, really seeing the looks on their faces—it hammered home that I'd always be the *other woman*, the club rat, even if that's not how it happened and not what I am.

"They won't matter." He comes toward me. "You and I matter. We'll make

our own family. You'll rarely see them if that's what it comes to."

I smile tightly at him. "Now you're just flirting with me again."

"A little bit."

"I'm scared, okay? I'm just scared. I tried to prepare myself, but that was too much."

"The guest entrance got to you, didn't it?"

I tug at my hair. "The crystal chandelier really got in my head." Which is actually half true.

It's one thing to be told they have money and power—it's another to see all its glittering, priceless glory.

"You can't let them intimidate you." He stops in front of me, puts his hands on my hips. "That's what they want, Dara. They want to make you feel like you're nothing, even if you're something. They want to make you feel small."

"But I *am* nothing. No, don't argue, just listen." I wrap my arms around his neck, breathing slowly to stop myself from crying. "I grew up poor, Finn. We had nothing. We had less than nothing. I wore the same white sneakers to school for five years until they were basically brown and only bought a new pair because my feet got so big my toe broke through one afternoon. I always smelled like a thrift store. My parents argued constantly over money, and they hated each other more and more every year. It was a deep, ugly resentment, and a big part of that stemmed from never having enough. My father bounced around, working construction, and my mom had to take all sorts of part-time work to make ends meet, and they just *despised* each other. Those were really bad years, and I worked my ass off to get into college so I could get out of that house. It was bad, and I don't want that with you. I don't want that for anyone. But I *am* from nothing, compared to your family."

He takes a deep breath, holding me tighter, staring at me with that absurdly sexy glare, like he can't decide if he wants to argue or if he wants to strip me naked and spank me.

"It's all a show," he says quietly, leaning closer. "Yes, my parents love each

other, but it's all wrapped up in money, power, and status. Their relationship may seem nice on the outside, but underneath the smiling, it's *deeply* strange."

"I'll never feel like I'm a part of your life." I blink rapidly, losing my fight to the tears and hating myself for crying. "Why are we even pretending? You know they'll never accept this."

"They don't have to." He wipes a finger across my cheek. "I accept you."

"Oh, great, thanks."

He grins. "I'm fantastic. That should be enough."

"You're fine." I lean forward, putting my face against his chest, squeezing my eyes shut for a moment. I push the tears away. "I don't want to be the one that ruins all those lives. Genna's a decent person, you know?"

"Genna's fine." He tilts my chin, looks into my eyes. "I won't let them get hurt. I'll go to Robin tomorrow, speak with her father, smooth things over. As for my family, we'll figure out how you'll fit into all that. But no matter what, you are the priority, you and the baby. Do you understand?"

I chew my cheek. I wish I could believe him. I wish I could see past that lavish entryway, past all that money, that wealth and power, past the pure loathing and disgust in his father's eyes.

That man will always look at me like that no matter what I do, even if Finn's mother accepts me into the family.

I'll always be the girl that ruined his plans.

The classless poor girl that's not good enough to be with his son.

"I just don't want to ruin your life either," I whisper.

He shakes his head. "You're not. I've made a lot of business deals in my time, but this is by far the most satisfying."

I laugh, unable to help it. "Right, I forgot. This is a business deal. I should've pushed for a written contract."

"You got one. It's called a marriage license." He brushes his lips against my

neck. I shiver at the pleasure of it. “I don’t want you to cry, Dara. I don’t want you to be upset, not when I’m going to fix things.”

“I just feel so small.”

“You’re not small, not to me.” His lips move up my chin. “I knew it the second I saw you sitting on that bench looking at your phone like your life was ending.”

“What did you know?”

His mouth kisses the corner of mine. “That you were worth approaching. That you were worth pursuing.”

“And now? Was it really worth it?”

“More than worth it.”

He kisses me. I melt into that kiss, desperate to feel better, desperate to feel anything but this aching hole in my chest where his father ripped out all my self-esteem.

This is so damn complicated. I don’t know if we’re together, or if we’re just in this to take care of the baby, or if neither of us really understands what’s happening.

To make it worse, his family would be happy to see me dead.

Except there’s one simple thing I can’t deny.

Every time he kisses me, I love it.

I wish I could pretend like there isn’t this insane draw, but it’s here, right here, when his mouth presses to mine. God, it tastes good, it feels good, and he makes me feel wanted more than I’ve ever been wanted before.

Like we’re just people—family, money, power, all of that aside—just people.

“Dara,” he whispers, breaking away by an inch. He reaches up and unbuttons my shirt. “No matter what happens, we have this.” He leans forward, kissing my collarbone.

I let out a soft moan. “We have you unbuttoning my blouse?”

“We have the way it feels when I do this.” He removes each button, kissing me as he does it. “We have your lips, your moans. My hands on your skin. Forget about everything else.”

“I have to admit, you’re extremely persuasive.”

“That’s my finest quality.” He finishes my buttons, pushing my blouse open, and kisses the tops of my breasts back up to my neck.

“Actually, I think *this* is your finest quality.” I reach down between his legs, running my palm up along his stiffening cock.

He groans, grinning. “You filthy girl. That was a very dirty joke.”

“I know,” I whisper, standing on my toes as I stroke him through his dress slacks. “But I also kind of mean it.”

He buries my mouth with his.

Chapter 30

Dara

My blouse comes off. My bra quickly follows. His lips kiss and suck my nipples as he drags me to the couch, forcing me to straddle him. I gasp as he pulls my hands back, leaning them on his knees, shifting forward to kiss his lips up my stomach, to my nipples, finally to my mouth.

He pulls my hair, dragging me forward again.

I grip the back of the couch, moving my hips, his cock stiffening between my legs.

“There’s something nice about wanting to fuck my wife more than anything else in the world,” he whispers, smirking a bit.

“I think there’s a compliment somewhere in there.”

“I mean it. I never thought I’d actually *want* the woman I married. I thought I’d be in some loveless, sexless relationship, and yet—”

He pulls my hair again. I gasp as he reaches down to unbutton my pants.

“And yet you can’t keep your hands off me,” I say, letting out a low moan as he kisses my neck softly.

“Exactly,” he murmurs.

“So much for keeping this an arrangement.”

“That’s the fucked-up part.” He pulls my hair again, gentler this time, staring

into my eyes as he slides one hand down the front of my panties, cupping my warm pussy. I lift up slightly, giving him some room, purring with ecstasy as he touches me. “Now that I *want* it to be an arrangement, I can’t seem to keep things professional.”

“That’s because you have no willpower.”

“I have plenty of willpower. Only it’s been turned to the dark side.” His fingers curl, teasing me.

“And I’m the dark side now?”

“Love, you’re the death of me.” He turns and pins me down on the couch, peeling off my pants.

I lick my lips, staring at him. “Maybe not the best choice of words, considering the meeting we just had,” I whisper.

His smile is sultry and sexy. “Here, let me make it up to you.” He kisses up my inner thighs until he reaches my panties.

I dig my fingers into his hair as he peels my panties aside, licking me, flicking his tongue along my folds. He spreads me, sucking and rolling his mouth along my clit. I arch my back, cursing as pleasure burrows into my skull.

“That’ll definitely make me forgive,” I moan, pulling his hair. “But forget? You’ll have to work harder.”

He smirks as he sinks his fingers inside of me. “Are you sure? Should I say something hurtful, just so I can apologize some more?”

“Mmm, fuck, how about you stop teasing and make me come?”

“Oh, you’re a demanding one tonight,” he says, his eyes shining with excitement. “I like it.”

“Should I be pushier? Do you like it when I tell you what I want?”

“I love it,” he says, voice husky.

I take a breath, gasp as his fingers find a perfect spot, and shimmy my hips. I’ve never talked dirty before, but Finn’s confidence unlocks something

inside of me.

“I like it when you lick me,” I say, feeling shy, but pressing past it.

“Like this?” He starts lapping at me softly.

“But higher,” I moan, clenching my jaw. “Oh, fuck, yes, like that. I like when you lick with the tip of your tongue, right there, in little circles—*fuck*, yes, okay, that’s it. Keep doing that.”

His fingers slide in and out as he obeys my commands and I feel filthy, strong, in control, and beautiful as he does what I tell him. I’ve never been so vocal in all my life—the thought of actually telling a man what feels good has felt too embarrassing to ever try—but this is right. This is *good*.

Fucking hell, it’s *really* good.

“What else?” he purrs. “Come on, love. Tell me to do something to you.”

“Fingers deeper,” I groan. “Suck my clit. Yes, *fuck*, like that. Fuck me with your fingers, faster, god damn it, I’m so wet right now.”

Confidence blooms along with my ecstasy.

“You’re dripping down my palm,” he confirms.

“Keep going. Don’t talk. Just lick and suck me and fuck me with those fingers. Yes, yes, don’t you fucking stop, you asshole.”

I’m practically screaming, definitely cursing too much, but my head’s going to explode as every muscle in my body tenses into an incredible, ear-splitting, leg-shattering, back-breaking orgasm.

I come hard in waves as he doesn’t stop, not for a second. I come and come, moaning, whispering his name, until I can’t take it anymore and drag his mouth away from my quivering pussy.

He pulls back, kissing me, holding me against him.

“Good girl,” he says, nibbling my lower lip. “You’re such a good girl. You okay?”

“More than okay,” I say, blinking. “Finn. I want something from you.”

His eyebrows raise. “Yes, love?”

“I want you to fuck me.”

His face turns serious. “You want me to fuck you?”

“Please,” I whisper, a tingling running down into my core. “I need you to fuck me, Finn.”

He cups my chin. “I’d never say no to you.”

Slowly, he peels my panties off, then undresses himself. I watch, shivering with delight and excitement. I’m tempted to touch myself, but I’m not that comfortable with myself, not yet anyway. Once he’s naked, I straddle him, kissing him slowly as he rubs my pussy, making sure I’m nice and wet, then rubs the tip of his cock against me, stroking himself, getting his shaft soaked with my juices.

“Are you sure?” I ask him, suddenly doubting myself. “This isn’t going to make everything more complicated?”

His eyes flash. “I’ve never wanted someone more than I want you.” He grips my hips and guides me down.

His cock fills me as I slide back. I gasp, back arching. Fuck, I forget how big he is, how it spreads me open. I stay there for a moment, getting used to him, kissing his lips and whimpering, but slowly I start to move again.

Riding, sliding, up and down.

Slick and lovely. Sweat drips down my back. We go slow. He kisses my lips, lavishing praise on me.

“You feel so fucking good, love,” he murmurs, grabbing my hips and holding me down, keeping inside of me. “This is what I need, right here. You and me.”

“You and me,” I echo and start to move faster.

Bliss rattles into my bones. He kisses every inch he can reach, from my lips to my breasts, sucking my nipples as I go up and down then grind myself against him.

I moan, more vocal than I've ever been, and just as I can't take it anymore, he turns and holds me down against the couch, taking control.

He rips into me, staring into my eyes, forehead pressed to mine. I gasp, grinding into him, our hips hitting that perfect rhythm. The only sound is our moans as we crescendo together, building higher and higher.

I've never felt so connected with another human before in my life, never gotten on a roll like this before, and as I come, I feel him stiffen too, our orgasms mingling, building on each other until I burst, breaking into pieces, coming with his name on my lips.

As we finish, he lies on the couch with me, both of us breathing hard.

I'm so spent I could sleep right here, my arm across him, my head on his chest. His heart's fast and steady, and he absently twirls a strand of my hair around one finger.

"I'll be honest, I didn't expect that," I whisper, kissing his chin. "But I'm happy."

"I'm happy too." He sits up slightly. "Sleep in bed with me again tonight."

My eyebrows raise. "What happened to walls and boundaries and all that stuff?"

"Fuck them. I don't give a damn. I want you in bed with me."

"Are you going to let me sleep?"

"Eventually."

I laugh, kissing him. "All right, fine, you convinced me."

"Didn't have to work hard at it."

I pat his chest. "You already did the hard work."

Chapter 31

Finn

I decide to leave Dara at home as I drive out to the McLaren house. I figure it'd be a bad look, parading the girl I ruined everything for around in front of them.

But I miss her. Strangely, improbably, I miss her.

On the drive, I call Genna to distract myself. "You should've seen the look on my dad's face."

"I'm guessing he wasn't happy."

"That's an understatement. I kind of thought he might get up and murder us both."

Genna laughs. "That was probably an option."

"Probably," I mutter. "But the worst thing in all this is I keep wanting Dara to sleep in my bed."

"Uh, how's that a bad thing again? Your pretty, pregnant wife *should* be sleeping in your bed."

"When we started this, I had this idea that we'd keep our relationship, you know, *professional*. She's staying in the guest suite. We'd keep a cordial distance."

I can hear Genna's eyes rolling over the phone. "Have I ever told you that

you're a stupid man?"

"It was a practical idea. I don't want her to get hurt."

"Do you plan on hurting her?"

"No, of course not, but it's just—"

"It's just what?" She lets out a long sigh. "Look, I've known you a long time, Finn. You're a good man even if you're stubborn. But you *are* stubborn. Don't let yourself ruin a good thing."

"I'm not ruining anything." I work my jaw, annoyed at this conversation's turn. I want Genna to tell me I'm doing all the right things—but I also want her to be honest with me.

"I'm just saying, if you want the girl then let yourself go for it. Stop holding back just because you're afraid."

"It's more than that." I stare out the windshield, shifting in my seat. "Let's say we give this thing a real try, and it doesn't work out. I don't know why, but something goes wrong and we fuck it up. What do we do then? We're in this for the kid, so it's not like we'll get divorced and move on. We'll be stuck in this awkward mess trying to push through a failed relationship."

"All relationships are risky. You can't go around refusing to get involved just because it might not be perfect. Nothing's ever perfect. You have to work for it and you have to want it."

"This is different. We're having a kid together and we're already married, which means we're starting in a really weird place."

"So what? Life's weird. Deal with it."

I grind my teeth. Genna can be so damn flippant sometimes. "Dara's a nice person. No, listen, she's a *good* person. You know how my family is, and if I get close to her, I'm going to corrupt her, and I don't want that to happen."

"Oh, right, so everyone you get near ends up *corrupted*, just like me, huh?" She barks a laugh. "Get over yourself."

"You are corrupted, you selfish asshole, and we're not together," I grumble.

“But I mean it, you know how my family is. My parents already don’t like her. Nolan and Carson will always hold a grudge. Liam’s still Liam. What’ll happen five years from now? Ten years?”

“Nobody knows, but you also can’t torture yourself wondering. Just be happy for once in your damn life and stop overthinking everything.”

Genna’s right, despite being abrasive about it, and I know she’s right, but that doesn’t make it easy. Keeping things cordial and professional with Dara is a way to protect her from the seedier, more dangerous aspects of my life, but I feel those walls crumbling rapidly every time we’re around each other.

It’s undeniable, this thing between us, but I’m afraid it’ll fuck everything up. I want this baby to have a good life, and I’d rather raise him or her with a close friend than a woman I fell for but ruined everything with because our feelings got involved in a complicated situation. It would be easier if we could divorce ourselves from this, look at it like a partnership, and remain in neutral terms.

Instead, we’re fucking. And it’s really good.

I pull up to the McLaren house after a long drive. Their place is nice—large, expansive, but not as lavish as the Crowley mansion. I park near a row of sports cars and get out, stretching my legs, when a woman in a simple white tennis dress comes out the front door, shading her eyes.

“Finley Crowley?” she asks, walking toward me.

“Finn,” I say.

She smiles. “I’m Tessa McLaren, Robin’s mother.” She shakes my hand. Tessa’s got thick, dark hair, and is significantly younger than her husband, though still in her late forties. But she does remind me a lot of her daughter. “Come out back, Robin’s waiting.”

“I apologize for dropping in like this.”

“No apologies necessary. We were expecting you.” She takes me around the side of the house and through a gate. “You should’ve seen how happy Robin was after you called and broke things off with her. I know, it’s strange, but she was so liberated. I’ll be honest, the arranged marriage thing, I didn’t

really like it, but my husband insisted.”

“Robin’s a very smart woman,” I say, keeping my tone level. “I’m sure she’ll find a good match when she’s ready.”

“She absolutely will.” Tessa stops and faces me before we leave the shadows of the foliage beside the house. “Since you did that favor for my daughter, I’ll do this favor for you. My husband is angry. He’s very, very angry, and he doesn’t plan on letting you off the hook anytime soon.”

My stomach drops. “What does he want?”

“I’m not sure. I think he mostly wants to humiliate you and your father. He feels slighted, like he wasn’t good enough for your family. He’s going through this little apology charade, but he doesn’t plan on ever forgiving you.”

I take a step back, shoulders slumping. “Which means I’m screwed.”

She holds up a finger, grinning. “Actually, no. Like you said, Robin’s a very smart girl. She has an idea about what you can do. I’m telling you all this so you’ll listen to her.”

I nod slowly. “I will then. Thank you.”

“Good. Well, good luck.” She turns and strides off.

I watch her go, feeling an ugly twist in my stomach.

McLaren wants to string me along. He wants to make me dance for him, all for his own sick pleasure, to help ease his wounded pride. If that was what it took to make things right, I’d do it for Dara, for the baby, for Genna and my crew. But if he thinks I’ll bow and scrape and beg, but get nothing in return, the man doesn’t know me, and he sure as fuck doesn’t understand the Crowleys.

I head into the back yard. On the right is a large patio with furniture. There’s a pool, a manicured yard, and tennis courts down a short slope.

Robin’s lying on a chair next to the water. She sits up on an elbow as I approach, wearing a dark blue bathing suit, a grin on her face. She looks ten years younger and a dozen times prettier than last we met. Probably because

she's not staring at me like she wants to rip my spine out.

"Well, well," she says, flipping up her sunglasses. "Finn Crowley, the man that owes me his life."

I laugh and take the chair beside her. "Robin McLaren. The girl that should be thankful I decided to dump her ass."

She grins huge. "The sweetest breakup I've ever gone through. Here to ask for my father's forgiveness?"

"I am," I confirm, glancing toward the house, then out toward the tennis courts. "Except your mother intercepted me and brought me to you instead."

Robin slumps back onto the chair. "That's because my father plans on fucking with you," she says, stifling a yawn. "I'm pretty sure he wants to make your life hell and still never forgive you."

"Your mother thinks you have a way out of this for me."

"And she's correct." Robin glances at me over the rim of her sunglasses. "How about owing me another massive favor? Huh, Crowley?"

"Robin, if you can help fix this fucked-up mess I've stumbled into, I'll happily give you anything you want."

"Perfect," she says, sitting back. "Because my favors are *very* expensive."

Chapter 32

Finn

I follow Robin into the house. It reminds me of the Crowley mansion, except on a smaller scale: built with old-world charm but laced through with modern conveniences. It isn't quite so lavish, not as large or as absurd, but it's still the sort of home meant to exude wealth and power in a way that most people only dream about.

"Dad's in his office, probably sharpening his knives," Robin says as she adjusts her cover-up and pulls on a pair of shorts she has lying over a kitchen chair. "Did I mention the vintage sword collection?"

"You left that small detail out."

"Dad has this theory about business. He thinks it's the most similar thing a modern man can get to classic, hand-to-hand warfare." She rolls her eyes. "I think, you know, actual *war* is probably closer. Also, that's the furthest thing from original."

"He's welcome to spend a few week on my turf when the local gangs start acting up if he's interested in violence."

"No, I think Dad prefers reading about it." She leads me through a series of halls until we reach the front of the house. Her father's study is right next to the front entryway past a pair of large wooden double-doors.

I gawk at the sheer number of weapons hanging on the walls. Basket-hilt rapiers, massive German two-handers, dozens of katanas and wakizashi, and

more weapons I can't even name, and I loved watching *Game of Thrones*.

"Robin, you brought him. How nice." Clive McLaren sits behind a desk similar to my father's, though this one is more modern. Just as Robin predicted, he's busy polishing the blade of a wicked-looking sword, a curved scimitar that looks like it's an actual antique.

"You knew he was coming," Robin says sweetly, approaching his desk.

He scowls at me and lowers the blade. "Your father might have mentioned something about you begging for my forgiveness." With a practiced jerk, he sheathes the weapon, sliding it home with a satisfying click.

The Clive I remember from my meeting with him back in the Crowley mansion was a simpering little weakling, but this man seems much more in control on his own home turf. Probably because he thinks I'm about to get down on my knees and treat him like a king. Too bad there's no way in hell that's going to happen.

I underestimated him once, and I won't make that mistake again.

"Sir, I'm here to discuss the broken agreement between our families." I stand with my back straight, my hands clasped. "I understand it caused you some problems—"

"Problems?" Clive sneers like a cartoon villain. "I had a contract with your father, but you went and ripped it all up. I knew you Crowley boys thought you were too good for my Robin—"

"Dad," she says, a sharp warning on his tone.

He slams his hand on the desk. "But nobody is too good for the McLaren family."

Well, that's definitely not true.

I let a beat pass before answering. "I would've been lucky to marry your daughter," I say, glancing at her. She's beaming in return. "Robin's a very smart and capable woman, and our families would have been a good match, but fate intervened. My wife is pregnant."

Clive's jaw ticks. "You knocked her up, huh? That's why you put a ring on

her finger?”

I nod slowly. I definitely don't like this man's tone, but I have to bear it. For now at least. “Yes, I got my wife pregnant. I understand you're upset, but please speak about the mother of my child with some respect.”

He looks like she wants to rip the sword free and run me through with it, but before he can make a fool of himself, Robin steps forward.

“Dad, I have a proposal to make.”

“Haven't we already established that proposals are meaningless with these people?” he says through his teeth. But when Robin laughs at his joke, his face softens. So this man has a soft spot for his daughter. “All right, let me hear it.”

“I know you wanted certain things from the Crowley family. I think you can still achieve those goals.”

“What sort of *goals* are you thinking, daughter?”

“Your birthday is coming up,” she says brightly. “Sixty-five, right? I think you should have your party at Finn's club. What's the place called, Finn?”

“I have several,” I say smoothly. There's no way a fucking birthday party is going to fix all this, and I'm bracing myself for the real hit.

“The good one,” Robin says, snapping her finger. “Havoc? Harness?”

“Hazard,” I correct gently.

“That's the one.” She nods to herself. “Hazard has been a huge earner for a while now, and word is that the whole place was recently renovated. It's all upscale now.”

“Get to the point,” Clive says, leaning back and crossing his arms.

“Okay, here's the point. We have your party at Hazard, invite all the big, fancy people you want to impress, and at the end of the night we reveal the real gift. And it is...” She pauses for effect. “The club itself!”

I stare at her, mouth open. Clive's face screws up in confusion.

“Sorry, you want to give him my club?” I cut in before she can go on. It feels like she just offered to sell my own flesh and blood. I’d rather cut out a kidney than give this pathetic weakling my Hazard.

She nods happily like this is totally reasonable. “It’s *exactly* what you need, Dad. You’re always saying you want to diversify into entertainment and hospitality, right? Hazard is popular, it’s prestigious, and it’s already established. It’ll be the perfect starting point for your new empire.”

Clive strokes his chin thoughtfully. “It’s not a bad idea.”

“I never agreed to this,” I say, my voice a low growl. “Hazard is my baby.”

“You have a new, actual baby coming that you should focus on,” Robin says lightly. She’s got a fucking point, but still. “What do you say, Dad? He gives you his favorite club, you let all this go?”

Clive considers. I want to walk over to the desk and pound his face until it’s nothing but blood and sinew. This spineless cocksucker doesn’t deserve Hazard—he doesn’t deserve anything of mine. I built what I own with my two hands, Genna and I together, and now Robin wants me to give away a piece of that.

Without consulting with my business partner. Which will be a problem.

“I want more,” Clive says, grinning as he stares at me. “Two more clubs and a restaurant. That ought to cover it.”

“Dad,” Robin says, rolling her eyes, but she spreads her hands in a *what-can-you-do* gesture.

“Absolutely not,” I say firmly. “I haven’t even agreed to *one* club.”

“I want Hazard and two more, plus a decent restaurant, all for my birthday. I want you to sign their ownership over to me in front of the entire room filled with politicians and businessmen. After that, we’ll call things even.” He looks so smug I could light his face on fire.

This is insane. My clubs, my restaurants, they’re my entire life. I worked hard to create them, to market them, to grow them to what they are now, and this man wants me to hand over my blood, sweat, and tears to him.

To make it all worse, he wants me to do it in public.

It's mortifying.

The fucking shit stain wants to embarrass me, and by extension, my whole family.

I can't let that happen.

Except... I remember what I told Dara. The promise I made to her.

She's going to be my priority from now on.

Not my family, not my clubs, and not my own ego.

Businesses rise and fall, but Dara and my child will be with me for the rest of my life.

And they have to take precedent over anything else.

It burns me to agree to these terms. The thought of giving this man my livelihood makes me want to be sick. Not to mention Genna's going to murder me, or she's going to try at least once.

It makes me want to beat McLaren within an inch of his life.

But instead, I think of Dara. I think of her pregnant, giving birth, the baby, everything we'll go through together.

I think of my men, and even Genna. It's better to lose some clubs than to lose absolutely everything.

Slowly, I nod my head, clenching my jaw so tight I think I might crack a tooth.

"Wonderful," Robin says, sounding much too happy. "Since we're all in agreement, let's make it official." She grabs a piece of paper and a pen from her father's desk and begins to write out a contract. "I'll keep it simple since I don't feel like being here all day doing this thing longhand."

"My daughter has legal training," Clive says proudly.

I don't give a fuck.

I say nothing, not trusting myself to speak.

Robin finishes with a flourish, passes it to her father for a cursory inspection, and he signs. She then gives it to me.

I read through the terms, feeling like ants are crawling through my veins, but the contract is fair and accurate to what we just discussed. Hazard, plus two more clubs of my choosing, and a restaurant at least four years old and profitable. I know just the one.

I sign and shove the paper back at her.

Robin accepts.

“There, we’re all set. So now, Dad, I’ll get to work planning your birthday with Finn—”

“I’m not planning anything,” I say with a snarl.

“It’s your club we’re using,” she reminds me brightly before looking back at her father. “If you need anything, you can run it through me, but don’t worry. I know exactly who to invite.”

Clive stands and comes around his desk. He hugs his daughter and kisses her cheek. “It’s going to be the best birthday ever,” he says, glowing with pride.

“I hope so.” She pats his back. “Now, we’ll leave you to your little swords. I’m so happy we could come to this agreement.” With that, Robin sweeps me out of his office and back out into the entry hall.

I turn on her, barely restraining my anger. “You could’ve warned me you were going to do that.”

“And give you the chance to say no? Sorry, but I couldn’t risk it. I knew he’d like that solution, and I knew you’d hate it, which is why I said nothing until you were standing face to face.”

“Are you sure this is going to be enough? Your father’s actually going to let his little grudge go if I hand over some properties?”

“Lucrative properties,” she points out, “and yes, I believe he will. My father’s been trying to get into your industry for a long time. If there’s one thing he

loves more than his own pride, it's winning at business, and I'd say that deal in there was a *massive* win."

I turn to the door, burning with anger, but I hold it back, reminding myself that Robin's saving me a lot of time and trouble. Money, property, none of it fucking matters. Not even the face I'll lose handing it over to him in public.

This is about Dara. This is about the baby.

"Send word to my staff at the Hazard. They'll get the process started."

"Ah, uh, bad news on that front. His birthday is next week."

I let out a grunt. "Of course it is."

"Cheer up, it'll be fun. I, you, and maybe your wife can all work together to make this happen."

I rub my forehead. "I can't wait."

"That's the spirit." She slaps my back. "Anyway, talk to you soon, all right? I'd better go make copies of this contract before Daddy dearest decides he wants to fleece you for more." She disappears down the hall, leaving me alone.

I hesitate before opening the door. Giving up property isn't the end of the world, and I'll survive the hit to my ego.

I just hope Genna doesn't kill me when she finds out.

Chapter 33

Dara

“I am going to rip your stupid little face off,” Genna snarls at Finn. She leaps up from her spot at the bar of Hazard and actually tries to punch him in the face. He dodges back, slapping her fist to the side.

“It was the only way,” he says, glaring at her. “Don’t get started on me, damn it. We’ll find a new club.”

“Do they always do this?” I ask the bartender as he busies himself cutting limes.

He shrugs. “They never actually hit each other. Well, not usually.”

“You stupid asshole.” Genna stands there, seething, and has to visibly compose herself.

“It was the only way,” he says, not sounding happy.

“You’re lucky we have other businesses,” she snaps and storms away.

I watch her go, sipping my virgin gin and tonic. Finn sits beside me, leaning on his elbow, rubbing his face. “She is *not* going to get over this anytime soon.”

I rub his back. “I’m sorry. Seriously, I’m really sorry, I feel like it’s my fault.”

He waves that off. “Robin’s father was going to stick the knife in no matter

what. All things considered, this isn't so bad."

"It's a little bit weird that we're planning the guy's birthday party." I bump my shoulder against his arm. "And it's even weirder that your former fiancée is working with you."

He glances at me, a little sparkle in his eye. "Are you jealous?"

"No, not at all. You left her for me, remember?"

"Oh, I remember." He leans to the side, studying me with that cocky smirk. "You *are* jealous."

"Don't be a prick." I finish my tonic water and turn my back to the bar, crossing my legs.

I am a little bit jealous.

Not *a lot* jealous, since he's doing all of this for me to begin with, but there's still a stupid part of my brain that's jabbering about how Robin's so rich and sophisticated and definitely a better match for him than I could ever be.

I need that dumb part of my head to be quiet.

"It'll be fine, you don't have to worry. Robin has no interest in me and I have no interest in her." He gets up and puts an arm around my waist protectively. "She's going to be here soon, so please, be nice."

"I'm always nice." I glare at him. "You be nice."

"There you go, that's the spirit."

I shrug away from him. "It's fine, okay? I'm not going to get all jealous and weird on you."

"I'd kind of like it if you did."

"That's extremely weird."

"I *like* that you want to possess me." He laughs softly and catches my wrist before I can walk away. "Just admit you're a tiny bit jealous."

"Okay, fine, I'm a tiny bit jealous. Are you happy? She's the one your family

wanted you to marry.”

“That’s what you don’t understand.” He touches my chin and leans in to kiss me. “My family doesn’t matter.”

Before I can respond, a brunette woman comes striding through the club in a pair of oversized black sunglasses, a Chanel bag under her arm, a pair of designer heels clacking away.

“There you are,” she says, taking the sunglasses off. “Some bored-looking little boy at the front tried to send me away. I think his name was Shane?” She stops and looks at me, a little surprise in her face, before her expression turns to a knowing grin. “That makes sense.”

“Sorry, what?” I ask, bewildered.

Finn rubs his face. “Robin, this is Dara. Dara, this is Robin.”

“Nice to meet you,” she says, hands on her hips. “She’s pretty, Finn. Now I get why you knocked her up.”

“Uh, thanks?” I look at him, not sure how to react to this.

“It’s a compliment,” he assures me. “I think.”

“We need to get down to work.” Robin tosses her bag on the bar and snaps at the bartender. “White wine. Big glass. It’s on the house.”

The bartender looks as overwhelmed as I feel, but after a nod from Finn, he starts pouring, only stopping when he reaches the top of the glass.

“How many people does your dad want to invite?” Finn asks, sitting down next to her.

Robin sips off the top of the wine before taking out a thick, black, leather-bound notebook, flipping through pages. Sticky notes and scraps poke out all over the place like she shoved random pieces of paper inside with zero organization. It makes my head hurt.

“At least two hundred,” she says, tapping her chin. “Maybe more if the French delegation is in town, which I believe they are.”

“Two hundred, and we’re supposed to have this done by next week.” Finn’s

seething. “How the fuck do you expect me to get something like that together on no notice at all?”

“Use your industry contacts. You’re a *Crowley*, for fuck’s sake. Spend money!”

Finn lets out a low, steadying breath. “Let’s say I can pull it together, which I can even though I very much *don’t* want to, what happens if it’s not up to his standards?”

“It will be,” Robin says, putting a hand on his arm.

I stare at that arm. I stare at that arm.

And the jealousy starts screaming in my head all over again.

God, what’s wrong with me? This is so stupid. Finn’s putting himself out there to help me, and even Robin’s pitching in. All of this is for me, and here I am, feeling like a classless little child while Finn and Robin talk to each other, barely paying attention to me.

I don’t know anything about running big parties. I don’t know any *French delegations*, much less important business people. I don’t have a black book filled with powerful names and numbers.

Robin does. That’s what Finn needs.

Instead, he’s got me, a girl from a little West Virginia town that barely escaped her family alive.

I feel so inadequate.

But I lift my chin and push my feelings away as hard as I can.

I need to be strong for Finn. I can’t make this process any harder than it’s already going to be, otherwise I’m only going to make his life that much more miserable.

If I want this to succeed, and I really do, then it’s time to grow up.

“Dara, do me a favor,” Finn says, turning away from Robin for a moment. “Find Genna for me and tell her the club’s closed next Friday. Tell her to get the Crowley captains to make an appearance. Clive will love that.”

“Right. Genna. Closed. Captains.” I glance at Robin. “You two are good?”

“We’re good,” Finn murmurs, already turning back to her as they start discussing a page in her notebook filled with scrawled names.

I turn away from them.

Chin up, head high, no pity parties today.

I march off to do my job without looking back, not even once, which feels like a win.

Chapter 34

Dara

The next week is spent either at home in Finn's apartment or in Club Hazard during the day when it's empty save for Robin, Genna, a team of vendors, several guys from Finn's crew including Shane, and little old me.

The jealousy fades. It doesn't disappear—I can't help but think that Robin would've made such a good wife for a guy like Finn—but it eases enough that it doesn't bother me when they get lost in talking about people and things I've never even heard of before.

It helps that every night I end up in Finn's bed with his arms wrapped around my body, his insatiable hands and mouth exploring me in ways I've never been explored before.

On Thursday evening, the day before the party, I lounge upstairs in the VIP area with Finn while his guys and Robin put the finishing touches on the space. I have my feet in his lap and he's staring down at the commotion, his face unreadable.

"Looks like you pulled it together," I say softly, leaning forward to touch his cheek.

"Barely," he says, turning to me, forcing a smile. "But it's happening either way."

"You're not happy."

"I'm happy you're going to be safe. That should be enough."

“What’s bothering you?”

He hesitates, but his shoulders slump slightly as he leans toward me. “You know, all my life, I’ve been telling myself a story. In that story, I’m not only a Crowley, but a man with his own wants, and dreams, and desires. A man that can build whatever he wants with his own two hands. Now looking around, it’s so obvious how much help I’ve had.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

His head tilts side to side. “I don’t know,” he admits. “I wanted to think that I’ve been successful in business because I am who I am and not because of my family name. Now I wonder.”

“Can’t it be both?” I shift so I’m sitting right next to him, leaning against his chest. “There are a lot of people out there with good family names, but you’re the one with the string of successful clubs. You should be proud of that.”

“I am, which is why I hate the idea of giving them away.”

“You don’t have to, you know. We can find some other way.”

He wraps an arm around me. “No, we can’t, and it’s okay. I’ve made my peace with it.” He takes a deep breath. “Now, let me ask you something. Are you still jealous of Robin?”

I laugh, pushing him back, and he’s grinning. “Yes and no,” I admit. “In some ways, yes, because she really is the sort of girl you probably thought you’d end up with.”

He inclines his head. “I won’t deny it.”

“But in other ways, not at all. She’s clearly not interested and neither are you.”

“Also very true.”

“It’s just my insecurities. I wish I could be strong and not let any of this stuff get to me, but your family is impressive and it’s just—”

He touches my cheek. “I’ll keep saying it until you hear me, love. My family doesn’t matter.”

“But they do.” I put my hand over his. “That’s why we’re doing all this, right?”

“Throwing a birthday party for an old man, you mean? Yes, pretty much.”

I snort-laugh. “God, that’s what this is, right? An old man’s birthday party.”

“Complete with cake and sparkly hats. Damn, did you blow up the balloons?”

“No balloons. I don’t want anyone getting hurt trying to pop them.”

“Safety first. I respect that.” He leans forward and kisses me gently. “Can I tell you something?”

“Please do.”

“This last week has been one of the happiest weeks of my life.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Seriously? You’ve been spending most your time planning this wreck of a party. How are you going to pretend like you’re happy about that?”

“The party planning has been miserable,” he admits, but he’s still staring at me. “It’s the other stuff I love. It’s coming home to you, kissing you, cooking for you, taking you to bed. You realize that we’ve been acting like...” He trails off, licking his lips.

“Like we’re together,” I finish for him. “Yeah, I noticed.”

“We haven’t talked about it.” He brushes a knuckle across my cheek. “Is it okay? Is it good?”

“I think it’s good,” I whisper, heart racing. “It feels good, doesn’t it? Kathryn keeps telling me that I can let myself enjoy this, you know, being with you, and I’ve been trying to take her advice.”

He laughs and kisses me. “Genna’s been telling me the same thing.”

I smile at the thought of our best friends giving us essentially the exact same advice. “We’re pretty obvious, aren’t we?”

“Yes, we are. But I don’t give a damn. I like this too much to care about anything else right now.”

“I like this too,” I say, kissing him, running my fingers through his hair, feeling that buzzy little spike in my stomach when he gives me that deep, piercing look of his. “I still have, uh, concerns, but I’m not letting them rule me.”

“Concerns?”

“Like we *still* haven’t discussed how our life is going to look. Will I go back to work? Do I even need to?”

“You don’t,” he says with a shrug. “But you also can if you want.”

“You’re not the stay-at-home wife sort of guy? You don’t think I need to be in high heels with dinner on the table at seven?”

“I would *love* to come home to you in high heels, but we can save the cooking for a personal chef.”

I grin at him, batting at his chest. “I’m being serious.”

“I expect you to be loyal to me. I expect you to be the best mother you know how to be, with the understanding that we’re all flawed and trying to figure it out. Beyond that, I don’t care what you do, Dara, so long as you’re happy.”

Relief floods over me. I’d been so worried that he would be some crazy controlling mobster asshole, but I don’t even know why that kept crossing my mind. Finn is possessive of me, and he definitely gets jealous, but he seems open to letting me do whatever so long as I’m not in danger. Why did I think our life would be any different?

“I’m happy to hear you say that,” I admit, kissing him again. This time, I hold the kiss a little longer.

“Easy, girl,” he whispers, voice husky with desire. “Can’t start doing that right now, unless you’d like to retire to my office. The door locks.”

“A locking door, you say? How fancy. You know how to romance a lady.”

“I am truly a gentleman.”

I lean my head against his for a moment. “How about you take me home? Let’s have dinner together and spend the night in bed.”

“That’s exactly how I’d like to prepare for tomorrow.”

“We’ll face it together, Finn.” I squeeze his hand tightly. “Me and you, I promise.”

“I promise,” he echoes, squeezing back.

Chapter 35

Finn

The old fucker's birthday party is a banger.

He doesn't deserve it.

But Robin put most of it together, using my money, manpower, and contacts, of course. "No expenses spared," she says to me as we stand near the entrance watching as guests stream into the club. She's in a chic black dress, looking formal, like she was born to play the hostess role.

"Yes, I'm aware, I saw my credit card statement."

"Oh, don't act like it matters to you, Crowley." She punches my arm playfully. "This is great. Seriously, Dad looks happy."

I follow her gaze. Her father's standing with a group of other old white guys, business magnates or politicians, hard to say, all of them drinking good whiskey and laughing at something, their faces flushed red from alcohol and high blood pressure.

"He fucking better be." I lean closer to her. "Have you spoken to him? Will our deal hold up?"

"It'll hold up," she assures me, patting my arm. "Just play nice, make the silly little announcement, and eat your discomfort. Then it'll all be over. Got it?"

"Whatever you say." I scan the crowd until I spot Dara standing near the bar

with Kathryn and Genna. Shane's lurking nearby, playing security. "I'd better go make sure my wife's having a nice time. If you'll excuse me?"

"Good luck," she says happily before walking off to greet more guests.

The Hazard is the perfect place for a party like this, especially after the renovation. It drips class and wealth, and the rich people love the contrast between the expensive-looking chandeliers and the more club-friendly bar area.

I sidle up next to Dara, putting a hand on her lower back. "Ladies. Having a good time?"

"This fucking blows," Genna says, drunk already, not that I can blame her. She's losing one of her favorite clubs over nothing, at least from her perspective. She put in as much work as I did over the years, only to see it all evaporate. "But yeah, it's fine. Open bar rules."

"It's always open for you," I point out. "You own it."

"It's really nice in here," Kathryn says before Genna can shoot back. "Thanks for letting me come."

"We're happy to have you anytime," I say as I bend down to kiss Dara's cheek.

She beams at me. "Genna's going to stab you in the throat. She said so."

"Five times," Kathryn adds, looking a little nervous. "I kind of think she's going to really try it."

"I'm gonna stab you in the neck, you turkey-brained fuckface," Genna slurs. "That's six now. And you better believe I'll do it."

"Okay, you need to take it easy," I say, removing the drink from her hand. "I assumed Robin's dad would break a hip tonight, but it's looking like it might be you getting injured instead."

"Prick," she mutters. "But yeah, you're not wrong. I am really fucking drunk." She jabs a finger in my face. "Keep me away from knives if you value your throat."

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I murmur, patting her shoulder. She glares miserably at me, leaning forward to put her head in her hands.

Kathryn gets Genna some water as Dara takes my arm. I lead her into the crowd. “How many of these people do you know?” she asks.

“Most of them,” I admit, feeling guilty about Genna, but already thinking of ways I can make this up to her. “They’re the kind of people my father makes sure I’m at least aware of.”

“Must be hard.” She moves to bite her thumbnail, a nervous gesture, but stops herself. “Are you going to be okay? You know, the big hand-off?”

I glare off into the crowd. “I’ll survive. It’s ritual humiliation, but Robin promised to make it as painless as possible.”

“She’s a good one,” Dara says, nodding to herself.

“I take it you’ve come around.” I grin at her, leaning down to kiss her cheek. “Left all that jealousy behind?”

“I never disliked her,” she protests. But she lets me kiss her again. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter now.”

“No, it doesn’t. Now, come on, let’s mingle and make some political contacts so I can at least say this night wasn’t a complete waste.”

“Lead on, boss.”

“Oh, I like that.” I pinch her ass and she laughs, swatting at my hand.

It feels good, showing Dara off. She looks incredible in a form-fitting dress that hugs her curves, chosen because she claims it’s one of the last times she’ll ever get to wear something like it. She’s wrong, but I know better than to argue. Dara’s going to look beautiful no matter what—six months pregnant, two hours post-baby, whatever, whenever, and I feel proud to introduce her to the Boston elite.

She does wonderfully, laughing at jokes, making graceful comments, greeting people with genuine warmth. It’s like she’d been trained for this from birth like half the women in here.

Dara thinks she doesn't belong, but that's only because she can't see herself clearly.

From my perspective, she glows, she floats, like she's drifting over clouds. Her voice sends tingles of excitement down my spine and the way she clutches my arm makes me stand up just a little bit straighter, makes it easier to meet the haughty, judgmental stares from all the elites assholes around us. She's clever and she's funny, and I find myself having a good time at a shitty rich-guy birthday party for the first time in my entire life, not because of the crowd, but because of her.

An hour of tooth-pulling small talk follows. Everyone wants to shake my hand and meet Dara. It'd be flattering if I didn't know the gossip: a man like myself marrying a woman out of the blue after breaking an arrangement is almost unheard of. It must've shocked the chattering, pearl-clutching monied elite, the poor darlings.

At least I have my wife, hanging on my arm, smoothing things over.

Fuck. *My wife*. How bizarre.

I'm almost used to introducing her that way by the time Robin takes the stage.

We're joined by Kathryn, but Genna's nowhere to be seen. Kathryn assures me she got shoved into a cab by one of my guys and escorted back to her apartment. That's for the best—I'm pretty sure Genna planned on making this hand-off harder than it needed to be.

"Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen," Robin says, tapping the microphone. A little feedback screeches out over the crowd. She grimaces, looking apologetic. "Ladies and gentleman, if I can have a moment? I'd like to wish my father a very special, very happy birthday. You know, the McLaren family has never been sentimental about things, but I can't help but feel a sense of pride up here, pride at how my father's grown the family business, pride at being a part of his empire, and pride at the generosity and kindness of everyone in this room."

"She's laying it on thick," Dara whispers, his mouth brushing my ear.

I smile at her as a thrill spikes into my guts. "It's part of her charm."

Dara rolls her eyes, grinning back, but her smile fades. She leans closer as Robin continues to talk about loyalty, family, all that bullshit. Kathryn hangs nearby, looking uncomfortable and out of place, not that I can blame her.

“Hey, listen,” Dara whispers, her breath warm against my neck. “It isn’t too late to back out of this deal. If you can’t do it, if you want to turn around and walk out of here, I’m with you. Finn, you don’t have to do this if you really don’t want to.”

A spark bursts up into my chest. Fuck, this girl is something else, it’s like she can read my damn mind. She didn’t need to say that, but I believe her—if I decided to leave the city, to run away, she’d stick by my side through it all.

“You’re ride or die, aren’t you?” I murmur, smirking.

“Loyal to the death.”

I put my hand on the small of her back. “Imagine how much worse this would be if I went back on not one, but two contracts with McLaren,” I say, kissing her cheek. “It’s nice of you to say that, but I’m doing this.”

She nods, looking uncertain. “You’ll be fine then. Don’t be nervous.”

“I don’t get nervous.”

“Tell that to your face.”

“My face is well aware of how I’m feeling, and trust me, it isn’t nervous. If anything, I’m barely holding back my rage over this whole farce.”

She takes my hand and squeezes it. Applause breaks out over something Robin said. “Want me to come on stage with you?” Dara asks.

“No,” I say, kissing her one more time. “Anyway, it’s time.”

A moment later, Robin gestures over toward me. “And now, as the final surprise of the night, I’d like to call our esteemed host, Finley Crowley, up here to say a few words. Finn, if you wouldn’t mind?”

More applause. I kiss Dara before walking to the stage, leaving my wife alone with Kathryn.

I’ve been managing a crew of hardened thieves and killers for years, I’ve

been in highly sensitive business meetings, I've done hard things under immense pressure, but this right here, getting up in front of these people only to debase myself, this is one of the most difficult things I've ever done.

I'm not sure I could handle it if it weren't for Dara, standing right up front, smiling at me. I catch her eye as I join Robin and she nods once.

I take the mic and survey the room. Dozens of faces stare back, the elite, the powerful, and it strikes me suddenly how they're all people—they're only *people*, flesh and blood, bags of skin and bone, just like me.

"I had a speech prepared about bringing families together, but I think I'm going to skip it," I say to some scattered, awkward laughter. "As you all know by now, Robin and I were engaged, but I recently broke our engagement to marry my lovely wife, Dara." More stunned, strained silence. It seems nobody expected me to actually *talk* about the obvious. Robin's smile is plastered on her face but she's giving me a look like *what the fuck are you doing, bro*. But these people all know what happened, so why try to hide it and pretend like this is something that it's not?

Better to face it with my head up.

I continue, looking across the assembled rich and powerful. "As of today, I'm making Clive McLaren the owner of Club Hazard along with several of my other properties. I'm giving him this birthday gift as a way to ease tensions, but also as a way to own up to my faults. People are imperfect, ladies and gentlemen. People err, and in doing so, they're presented with a choice. Live up to those mistakes or fail to own them and let the mistakes own you instead. I choose to accept my imperfections. I'm happy to say that Robin would've made a lovely wife, and I hope she makes an even better club owner. So please, folks, raise your glasses to the McLarens. Happy Birthday, Clive. May this gesture bring our families closer together after all."

There's scattered applause until Robin takes the mic. "Here, here," she says, beaming. "Isn't that generous of him, ladies and gentlemen?"

The applause gets louder as I walk off the stage.

Clive stands waiting in the wings, looking sour. As I approach and stick out my hand, he takes it, leaning in close.

“You were supposed to say a whole thing about how I deserve this and how sorry you are. Instead, what the fuck was that?”

“That was me not being ashamed of what I’ve done. We’re even now, McLaren.”

“I never got my apology. You were supposed to grovel, you ungrateful bastard.”

I tighten my grip on his bony hand. “There was no fucking *apology* clause. Get up there and smile, you old piece of shit.”

I brush past him, find Dara, and drag her away. Kathryn skitters after us, looking confused.

I feel the eyes and hear the whispers, but I’m finished with all that.

“Where are we going?” Dara asks, looking a little panicked.

“Home,” I say. “I’ll have my driver take Kathryn back to her place as well. I think Robin can handle the rest of the night. I want to talk to you.”

“Talk?” she asks, eyebrows raised.

I glance at her and my lips turn into a devilish smile. “Among other things.”

Chapter 36

Finn

Dara collapses back on the bed, breathing hard. I lean against the pillows, grinning, staring at her sweat-slick body as she crawls over and opens her mouth, taking my hard cock between her lips.

I groan as she sucks me. I watch her back, her hair, the curve of her hips, the swell of her thighs. I can't get enough of this girl, the way she moves, the way she whimpers as she takes me deeper into her throat like she's unable to stop herself from gagging on my width.

I can't imagine living without this, without her. Listening to her happy moans, watching her body tense and shake as she comes, exploring every inch of her skin—I don't know how it happened, but now she's a part of me, a part of my life.

I keep thinking about what tomorrow's going to look like, and I keep seeing her by my side earlier tonight at Hazard, surrounded by people that hate us, those judgmental, sniveling rich pricks, and she was smiling and glowing, moving through the room like she was born to do it.

I'm proud to call her my wife. It's incredible, but it's true.

She strokes me fast as I pull her up and kiss her. "I need you, Dara," I whisper. "Fuck, I need you, love."

"You have me." She moves back down, licking me, sucking me, and I come in her mouth, groaning the whole time.

We fall into bed together. She snuggles up close and I hold her tight, hugging her like I'll never get another chance.

Except I just gave up my clubs to make sure I won't ever have to let her go.

"I think that was the *among other things* portion of the night," she murmurs, kissing my chest.

I run my fingers through her hair. "For now."

"Don't tease me," she says, shivering. "Are you always like this?"

"More or less. I'm a man of appetites."

"I see that. I'm not sure if I'm excited or terrified."

"I think you're both, which is exactly what I want."

She snorts and bites my shoulder. "All right, asshole. What did you want to talk about?"

I reach around and squeeze her ass before kissing her neck and pulling her closer again. It feels good, holding her like this, feeling her warmth. "Maybe now isn't the moment."

"Actually, now you'd better say it."

Doubt plagues me, but I push it away. I've been mulling this over and I know it's right, even if it's going to complicate this tenuous relationship we've built.

"I've been thinking about us. You asked me the other day what I see with you and how you'll fit into my life."

She looks up at me, chewing on her lip. "Yeah, I did. And do you know?"

"I want you to be happy, Dara. If you want to go back to work, we'll make sure you get a job worthy of you. If you want to stay home with the kids, that's fine too."

"Kids? Plural? As far as I know, we're only having one."

"For now," I say, grinning.

She rolls her eyes. “Who said anything about more?”

“I did, just now.” I kiss her gently. “Because I’ve been thinking.”

“I see that. You’ve been thinking *a lot* apparently.” She pushes me playfully. “Did I give you the impression that I wanted more babies with you?”

“At the rate we’re fucking, it’s bound to happen.”

“Fair point.” She leans back against the pillow, studying me with a thoughtful smile. “You really want more kids?”

“I want a family,” I say, only now realizing how true that is. Hearing the words out loud makes everything else seem so trivial and obvious.

“Hard to be a family if we’re just—” She shrugs, gesturing between us.

“What if we weren’t?” I ask quietly.

“Weren’t... what?” She sits up on one elbow.

“If we weren’t only business.” I reach out to stroke her cheek. “What if we gave this a real try?”

She hesitates, not speaking. I let those words hang between us, tasting how they feel and growing more confident by the moment.

I don’t know what she’s thinking or what she’s feeling, but I’m sure this is what I want, even if it’s a huge risk.

Bringing her into my life, deeper into my family, that might end in tragedy.

Nothing is for certain in my world, not when the stakes are so high.

It won’t be easy for her, trying to do this the right way, to make it real, but I’m beyond sure she can handle it, especially after watching her move so effortlessly through a crowd of billionaires tonight like it was nothing.

My parents are probably always going to hate her—especially my father—but she can handle that too.

She’s so much stronger than she realizes, but I can see it, and it’s going to be my job as her husband to make sure she figures it out for herself.

“You want to be my partner?” she asks, tone gentle. “Like, for real? Not for some baby deal?”

“I want to drop the pretext that we’re anything but married and together.”

“Pretext?”

“You’ve been sleeping in my bed every night. We’ve been fucking—”

“Because *you* can’t keep your hands off me.”

“No argument here.” I touch her cheek again to underscore it. “But I think it’s time I said out loud that I want this. I want you, Dara, for real, not as some business thing, not because it’s convenient, but because it’s you.”

She stares at me, blinking slowly—then lunges forward and kisses me.

I grunt, rolling onto my back. She practically attacks me, kissing hard, laughing a little as she does it. I kiss her back, not sure what the fuck is happening right now, but not minding it one bit.

She pulls away, grinning huge. “You’re sure?” she asks, breathless.

“I’m sure. What are you—”

She doesn’t let me finish, only kisses me again. No words are spoken, no agreements made, no promises or deals, but I know as well as she does what her kisses mean.

We’re doing this.

No more halfway, no more flirting with the idea.

She’s my wife for real. She’s my wife in a way Robin never would have been.

With Dara, the spark is real, and it burns through me in waves.

Finally, we break off the kiss. I hold her against my chest, hugging her tight. “I want it too, by the way,” she says, looking up into my eyes, smiling huge. “I’ve been wanting it. I just—I didn’t know how to say it.”

“I didn’t either, but this is right, isn’t it? I know how I feel when I’m with

you, and it feels good. Better than I've ever felt."

"I'm the same way. This has got to be the luckiest fake marriage imaginable, right? To actually like each other?"

"More than like, love," I say, touching her lips with mine.

"More than like," she echoes.

I hold her tight, my wife, feeling a rush of joy I've never experienced before.

Chapter 37

Dara

I sit at the kitchen island feeling floaty and happy as Finn cooks breakfast. I sip some coffee—just a little bit—and watch him work, smiling to myself.

I can't help but reflect back on the last few days, how we've gone from lust to something more, how he's opened up to me in ways I never imagined he could, and I've embraced being his wife like it's the role I've always wanted to play.

This fits. It feels right. Sitting here in the kitchen while he hums to himself, staring at his sexy arms, at the way his t-shirt clings to his muscular chest, at his arms and his shoulders, trying to imagine a better life—and failing, because there is nothing better for me now.

For so long, I was afraid to do *more*, but Finn made me want in ways I never dreamed of.

“What's wrong?” he asks, passing me a plate of pancakes with a side of bacon, as requested. For some reason I've been craving both and today seems to be a lull in my morning sickness. “You're staring at me like I'm about to implode.”

“I was just thinking, that's all. Still amazed that a gangster knows his way around a kitchen.”

“I'm a mobster, not an animal. Besides, it's just pancakes and bacon.” He walks around the island and kisses me. “What do you think? Would you like

it if we made this a weekend morning tradition?”

“Absolutely,” I say, grinning at him. “I’d love it if my attractive husband made me food, although it’d be nice if you could wear something a little skimpier next time.”

“How dare you. I’m not an object for your sexual gratification.”

“Aw, honey, don’t be cross.” I pinch his rock-hard butt. “You’re a sweetie.”

He laughs, tugging my hair gently and burying my mouth with his. I hold that kiss, beaming inwardly, loving his attention and his taste, loving that this man is mine—he’s all mine—and I’m all his.

He says, “Just think, the senate’s voting later, and once that’s over, we can stop worrying so much about everything.” He sits down next to me, leaning his elbows on the table. “My father will be pacified and we can focus on getting ready for the baby.”

“Speaking of which, we should turn that spare bedroom into a nursery.” I raise my eyebrows. “Unless you had other plans?”

“Already ahead of you. I contacted my interior designer, and she agreed to get started right away.”

I roll my eyes. “Are you serious? I think we can handle decorating for our own child.”

“If that’s what you want.” He shrugs as if it doesn’t matter to him. “I want to make your life as easy as possible.”

“There’s easy and then there’s absurd. I’ll handle the room.”

He leans forward and kisses me on the cheek. “Yes, love.”

I catch him before he can move back. “Say that again.”

“Love,” he whispers, kissing me slowly and deeply.

One kiss turns into two kisses, which inevitably leads to us tumbling back into bed together, breakfast forgotten. When we finally come up for air, sated and sweaty, we’ve lost a couple hours, although it doesn’t seem to matter to him at all. Finn seems so much more relaxed today, like the weight of the last

few weeks is suddenly lifted from his shoulders.

Now that we're doing this for real.

We take a bath together. He tells me stories about his childhood rivalries and fights with his brothers, and I talk about high school and college, which eventually leads to the ugly tale of Lucas.

Finn scowls. "I still can't imagine a man that would sit across from you with his mistress and still have the nerve to drain your bank account."

"He wasn't always like that," I say, stretching my neck, feeling content for the first time in a while. It's easier not to hate Lucas now that I have Finn, but I'd be crazy to say there's no resentment. "Back before the homewrecker, he was an honest, dependable guy."

"Some men have no self-control."

My eyebrows raise. "And you do? You can't keep your hands off me."

"That's true," he admits. "But I'd never treat you the way that piece of shit did. If you want, I can have him tracked down and beaten to within an inch of his life. Or just beyond. Your call."

I snort, shaking my head. "I believe you'd really do it."

He's not smiling. "I would."

"Lucas dug his grave, let him go roll around in it." I lean my head on Finn's shoulder. "I'm not interested in revisiting that nightmare."

"That's good to know." He puts his arm across my shoulders. "There's so much I want to show you. I'll have to take you to the beach house soon. I think you'll love it. We can spend a few weeks there this summer."

"You can get away for a few weeks?"

"For you, I'll make it happen."

I grin at him, not sure how we managed to find ourselves here, but I'm practically floating with how happy he's making me.

After another round of him exploring every inch of my body in the bathtub,

his phone starts ringing out in the other room. He ignores it at first, but it keeps on ringing, insistent and shrill.

“That’s Genna’s tone,” he says with a frown, climbing out. “Do you mind?” He checks his watch and grimaces. “Ah, shit, we missed the vote. It happened a half hour ago.”

“No, it’s fine, go get it.” I lounge in the tub. “I’m going to rinse off and I’ll come out to meet you soon.”

“Don’t bother getting too clean,” he says with a grin.

“Don’t be gross,” I answer with a happy sigh.

Finn disappears into the other room. I close my eyes, leaning back against the edge, my neck supported by a blow-up pillow. I’ve got that fuzzy feeling in my hands and toes, the one where I’m buzzing with contentment, like I’ve slept in late on a lazy Sunday morning and I don’t want to get out of bed.

We should’ve made this decision a long time ago, from the freaking start.

There’s muffled talk. His tone sounds strained and he’s pacing back and forth across the doorway. Finn only paces when he’s upset. I sit up, frowning as Finn’s voice grows louder. I can hear the tension in his voice. He curses sharply then speaks too quietly for me to hear, but I’m already starting to feel a sudden pit of horrible dread open in my stomach.

I climb out of the tub, grab a towel, and wrap it around myself as Finn appears in the bathroom door.

He looks pale, his eyes haunted. “The vote,” he says.

“What?” My hands grip my towel tightly. My heart’s racing. “I thought things were okay.”

“He swore to me. We had a fucking deal—” His teeth clamp down. “We have to go see my father.”

“Finn? What happened?”

“The vote failed.” He turns away. “Something went seriously *fucking* wrong.”

Chapter 38

Finn

For nearly twelve hours, my life was good.

I have a wife that I adore. I have a future I actually want. I'm planning vacations, trips abroad, thinking about baby names, picturing long walks through Boston Commons with my family. I'm thinking about movie premieres, charity galas, potluck fucking dinners, all the shit I have to put up with as a Crowley, but all made easier with Dara on my arm.

I was happy.

For once in my life, I was happy.

Now, as the driver speeds toward the Crowley mansion, all that joy turns to an inescapable horror.

McLaren lied to me. He fucking played me. I try calling him, but the bastard doesn't pick up. I try him over and over until my calls go straight to voicemail. The old piece of shit probably blocked me. I want to crack my phone in half, but instead, I pull up Robin's number, Dara watching me anxiously the whole time.

Robin picks up right away, like she was waiting for this. Like she's eager for it. "Hello, Finn, how are you?"

"You lied to me," I say, tone a snarl.

"I'm sorry?" She sounds chipper, the same voice she used with her father

back in his office: placating, playful, way too confident. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“The vote was today. Guess what happened?”

“Oh, dear, did something go wrong?” I can see the grin on her face. “Huh, that’s so strange.”

“What the *fuck* did you do, Robin?”

“Well, don’t get cross with me, but apparently my father didn’t like your apology. And honestly, Finn, can you blame him? You got up there and instead of bowing and begging like we all wanted, you kept your chin up and acted as though you have a spine. It was a lovely moment for you, but Daddy didn’t like that at all.”

“He tanked the vote because I didn’t say *sorry* the way he wanted me to?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“We had a fucking deal.” I’m gripping the phone so hard I feel its metal frame creak. “We had a goddamn contract.”

“There was nothing in it about the vote, silly, only about his forgiveness. And Daddy truly does forgive you.” She sounds like she’s talking to a two-year-old.

I sit back, staring straight ahead. I see how she maneuvered me into this now—how she took control as if she was on my side, as if she wanted to help me from the start.

It was a game. Maybe not the engagement, but the moment I broke things off, she started scheming to get one over on me, possibly alongside her family.

“You fucked me.” I’m almost impressed, if I’m honest. Except I also want to murder her.

“Well, you helped with that one, darling. I don’t like being passed over, much less embarrassed. Think about that the next time you look at your pretty little wife. Assuming she survives much longer. Anyways, it was lovely chatting, but I have a tennis lesson. Bye, Finn.”

She hangs up. I stare at the phone, mind working furiously.

Robin dragged me into this trap, and now I'm stuck dealing with the fallout.

I should've been smarter. I shouldn't have trusted Robin from the start—I knew she was clever and ruthless. She made that clear the first time we met. But I wanted Dara so badly that I was willing to accept any help that came my way, even if that help was from a venomous and very aggressive snake.

“Finn?” Dara puts a hand on my arm. “Are you okay?”

I turn to her, take two deep breaths, and force myself to calm down. “We’ll be okay. I just have to figure this out.”

“What happened?”

I give her the quick version. “The whole thing was about revenge from the start.”

Dara looks pale. “What are you going to do?”

“Speak with my father. I think you should stay in the car for this.” The driver winds up toward the house and parks out front.

“Are you sure?” She doesn't look eager to come inside though.

“Stay.” I put my hand on her thigh. “No matter what, I meant what I said last night. Do you believe me?”

“I believe you, but—”

“I’ll make this right. Just stay here.”

I get out of the car and leave her behind. She'll be safe in the car—or at least, safe-ish.

I lean into the driver's window. “If anyone tries to come near the car, turn around and drive back into the city.”

“Understood.” The driver nods to me. He's one of my loyal guys, and I hope that loyalty holds in case my father decides he wants to punish my wife.

The walk into my childhood home feels like I'm heading to my own

execution. By now, my father would've heard about the failed vote, and he's probably been calling every single person even tangentially involved in politics to chew them out. He'll be at peak rage, ready to make someone suffer.

The house is quiet. No staff's around, which is odd. I take the back halls toward Dad's study, but before I can reach the doors, I'm intercepted by Carson coming the opposite direction.

He looks exhausted. "He's going to kill you." No hello, no preamble. Straight to the fucking point.

I grab his forearm. "I did what they asked, and they still fucked me."

"The McLarens are dead to us too. They'll get what they deserve." Red rings his eyes. "I was up all night trying to whip the goddamn vote and this shit still happened. We lost it by one fucking person."

"How mad is he?"

"Livid. I haven't seen him like this in a very long time." Carson's eyes dart to the study doors. "I wouldn't go in if I were you."

"I have to. Listen, Dara's outside in the car. Can you keep an eye on her for me?"

Carson hesitates. "I don't know—"

"I love the girl, okay?" I grab him by the shoulder and pull him close. "I love her, Carson, and I'm not letting her go."

He must see how much I mean it in my eyes. I glare at him, not willing to let go until he says he'll make sure Dara's safe while I deal with this. Eventually, he nods.

"All right," he says with a deep sigh. "I'll check on her."

"Thank you." I release him. "This was never my plan. I tried to fix things, but the McLarens were never going to let me."

"I know, bro," Carson says, shaking his head. "But it still happened."

He walks off. I take a moment to compose myself before shoving my way

into the study.

Chapter 39

Finn

Fathers stares at me from behind his desk. An empty whiskey glass sits at his elbow; his shirt's open at the throat and his sleeves are rolled to his elbow. His hair's in disarray from anxiously pulling at it, a gesture that used to scare the hell out of me as a kid. Whenever Dad was combing his fingers through his hair over and over, that meant I was going to get hit. Sometimes with a belt, sometimes with his fist. Always until I bled.

I stand in front of his desk. He doesn't say a word, only tilts his head to the side as he takes a cigarette from his desk and lights it. Smoke blooms around him as he sits back. "I quit this shit ten years ago," he rasps, taking another drag. "And I still think about having a smoke every day."

"Why do you have a pack if you quit?"

"I made Mickey give me his." He gestures in the air. Mickey's one of the guards. "I didn't think I'd actually smoke them until you showed up. Now I can't help myself. Might as well get fucking cancer, considering the kind of sons I have."

"They lied to me," I say, keeping my back straight. I won't let him bait me into anger.

My father has a presence. It's like he can suck the light from a room with a gesture. I've heard the soldiers describe him as a monster behind his back, not because of his temper, but because of the way he draws every eye nearby and effortlessly directs the emotional tenor of a room. I've seen him whip a

group into a frenzy and terrify hardened criminals with nothing more than his voice. I've seen him silence powerful businessmen with only a shake of his head.

Now he turns all that weight onto me.

But this is my father. I've been dealing with his disappointment for years now, and I won't let him break me.

"You should have done better," he says, exhaling more smoke.

"I had a deal with McLaren. I gave him everything he wanted, and in exchange, he was supposed to *forgive* me. Now he's saying that never included the vote."

"Did it?" Dad asks, glaring. "Did it include the vote?"

I work my jaw. "It was implied."

"God damn it, Finn."

"I can fix this. Give me time to come up with a solution. At the very least, I'm going to make that Clive piece of shit suffer for humiliating the family. Give me time."

"For you to do what? Start a street war with a politically connected man? You going to break into his house and cut his throat? You gonna kill his daughter?"

"Yes," I say and mean it.

"Then you're stupider than I thought. You know why I wanted to work with McLaren?" Dad leans forward, stubbing out the cigarette. "Because McLaren's got friends. I can't just take what he has because there are people loyal to him for some fucking reason. I needed his fucking help, and you know how I feel about needing anyone but myself."

"I can fix this," I repeat.

"There's no fixing anything." Dad stands, leaning forward on his hands. "That wife of yours is finished. I want her out of this family. File for divorce, send her somewhere else, and make sure she never speaks a word about our

organization ever again. Unless she disappears, I will make sure she's dead before she ever pushes that fucking baby from her poisoned body."

My hands shake with rage. "Don't talk about my wife and my child that way."

"You're lucky I'm not killing you both on the spot," Dad snarls at me, pointing a finger toward my face. "You are on probation. All decisions will be run through me for the foreseeable future. Your crew is mine now, Finn, because I can't trust you to make the right call. You fucked up, and now you're done."

I take a step back. "You're making a mistake," I say slowly. "My men won't accept this."

"They know where the real power comes from." My father sits back down slowly. "The girl disappears. You will divorce her. I'll find you a new match, and you'd better hope you learned your lesson. This is *fucking* embarrassing, Finn, and the Crowley family cannot *ever* be embarrassed. Do you understand me? We cannot look weak."

I turn from him, head spinning. Send her away? Make Dara disappear? I can't do it, not after we decided to give our relationship a real chance.

But what other choice do I have? Run with her somewhere my father can't touch us? It's possible, but that would expose my soldiers and everyone I care about here to my father's revenge. He'll hurt them, possibly kill them. I don't even want to guess what he'd do to Genna.

"Do you hear me?" Dad shouts at me as I leave. I'm running possibilities, but none of them are good. Keep Dara here and she'll basically be stuck inside, never able to leave for fear of my father trying to hurt her. Send her away and she might be safe, but that will kill me in ways I don't think I'll ever recover from.

There's no good scenario.

"You'd better send her the fuck away!" Dad shouts as I walk down the hallway, feeling numb.

I drift outside. I can't stomach losing Dara, but I can't risk keeping her here,

either. I'm fucked, no matter what I do.

Carson's leaning against a pillar out front. "You look about how I expected," he says. "What'd he say?"

"Thanks for keeping an eye on her," I mutter at him as I pass.

Carson only watches me as I approach the car, feeling like my limbs are lead.

Dara opens the door. She steps out, looking terrified as she runs to meet me, her hands outstretched like she wants me to take her into my arms.

And I need it.

I want to pull her close and hold her tight, but I stop before I can touch her.

I stop and it breaks my fucking heart.

"Wait," I say and she skids to a halt, her face falling.

She must see it in my expression.

The horrible decision I just made.

Like a knife in my own guts.

"What happened?" she asks. "What did he say?"

"You need to leave town." I take out my wallet as a plan crystallizes.

"Leave town?" She sounds terrified. "Finn, what's going on?"

"Take this." I shove all my cash at her, nearly five hundred, plus my black Amex. "Do you have somewhere you can go? If not, find a random town as far from here as you can get and stay at a hotel. Use the cash. Try not to move around too much. I'll find you."

"Finn, I don't understand."

I step to her, grabbing her arms, and forcing the money and the credit card into her palm. "Take this, god damn it. I'll tell the driver to get you straight to the airport. Buy new clothes at the terminal or wherever you end up."

"This is insane. Why are you doing this?" She's struggling against tears.

I take a beat. She's terrified right now and I'm not making anything better by rushing her. But I also don't want to wait too long, or else I might change my mind, and that would only hurt her more.

"My father wants you gone," I say, speaking softly. "He wants me to divorce you."

"Divorce? Gone?"

I shake my head. "I'm not going to do any of that. I made a vow, Dara, and I swear I won't turn my back on it."

She blinks back tears. "You won't?"

"Fuck that and fuck him. You're *my wife*, Dara, and that isn't going to change. I need you to go somewhere safe, somewhere you can lie low while I fix this. I swear, I'm not sending you away forever, but you might not hear from me for a few weeks. Can you handle that?"

"I don't know," she whispers.

Her honesty breaks my heart all over again.

"I know you're scared, but it's okay. I promise, I'm doing what's best for us right now. Leave town, go somewhere safe. Don't contact me. If you do, they might be able to find you. Wait for me to send someone. Do you understand?"

"I don't want to do this," she says, holding my hands, her fingers trembling. "I want to stay with you."

"You can't, not right now. Please, Dara, get in the car and drive. Just trust me. Can you trust me?"

She stares into my eyes. I can see all the doubt, all the fear. This is what I wanted to protect her from by keeping her at a distance, but it's too late—we made our choice, we got married, and we both decided to catch feelings.

There's no turning back.

"I can do it," she says, straightening up. "If this is what you think is best, I can handle it."

Dara, my wife, my good fucking girl.

“Lie low. Don’t contact me. Just keep waiting. I promise, I’ll come for you. I won’t forget, no matter how long it takes.”

“I believe you.” She holds my hands for another few seconds before finally tearing herself away.

Pride blossoms in my chest, pride at how she’s stepping up and doing the hard thing, but pain strikes that feeling down as she gets into the car.

I tell the driver what to do. He nods, rolls up the window, and pulls the car around.

I watch them go, catching sight of Dara in the back seat staring back at me, her hand on the window.

“It’s for the best,” Carson says from the steps. “Better alive than dead.”

He’s wrong. This isn’t for the best.

But for now, I have some murder to commit.

Chapter 40

Dara

I step out of the cab at my childhood home and stare at the crumbling house.

The shutters are off-kilter. The grass is too long. My dad's car looks like it hasn't been washed in years and definitely hasn't been updated since I left home. I slowly approach, sweat pooling under my arms. It's an average neighborhood and most folks work hard to pay their mortgages around here, but most of the other houses are much better maintained than my parents' place. It breaks my heart, to see it like this.

I didn't want to come back here, but I didn't know where else to go.

I'm nervous as I stand out front. I called ahead and told my dad that I was coming, but even still, I feel like I'm a total stranger. I haven't seen them in person in a couple of years now and only spoken to them on the phone on holidays. The thought of going inside that house repulses me, back into that nest of quiet resentment, but I force myself to knock and wait for them to answer.

My mom appears, looking surprised to see me. She's holding a glass of wine and wearing sweats. Gray streaks her hair. More gray than the last time I saw her. "Dara," she says. "What are you doing home?"

"Dad didn't tell you?" Of course he didn't. They never communicated when I was younger, but it must've only gotten worse.

“He didn’t mention it,” she says, tone vague as if that’s totally normal, and gestures for me to come inside. “It’s so good to see you. This is unexpected, but it’s great.”

The house is exactly like I remember with only small changes, like a new TV, some new pictures on the walls, but otherwise it’s the same couch, the same chair, the same kitchen. Mom sits me down at the table and drifts around, looking for something to feed me, sounding awkward.

I realize with a start that she doesn’t know about the baby. She doesn’t know that I’m married to Finn.

Mom doesn’t know anything about my life and hasn’t for a long time.

We’re almost strangers.

“What brought you home for this surprise visit?” she asks, sitting down across from me after accepting that there’s no food in the house.

“I told Dad, I was hoping I could stay here for a few days. While I get back on my feet. I’ve been through some... some hard stuff. I won’t be here for very long.”

“Oh, uh, yeah, of course you can stay,” Mom says, not sounding excited about it at all, but she manages to pat my hand. A very motherly gesture, at least coming from her. “We cleaned out your bedroom, but you’re welcome to the guest room.”

“Thanks.” I sit back, feeling so awkward I could shatter. “Lucas dumped me.”

“Oh.” She frowns for a second, clearly trying to remember who he is. “Right, the boyfriend. I’m sorry.”

“But I got married.”

“Oh.” Her eyebrows raise as she glances at my hand—and her jaw drops.

Shit. I forgot about the diamond.

I hold it up, grinning sheepishly. I’m willing to bet she’s never seen a ring like it in person before. “His name’s Finn.”

“Wow, that’s beautiful,” she says, reaching out to touch the diamond, but stopping short. “You’re married. To a man that can afford this. Wow, that’s just... that’s amazing. But where is he?”

“Back in Boston. I left him there. We had some problems, and I just—”

Instantly, Mom sits up straight, staring at me with narrowed eyes. “Did you come here to get away from him?” She tilts her head, more awake and intense than I’ve seen her in a very long time.

“No, it’s not like that, it’s more—his family.”

She nod sharply. “Marriage is *hard*, Dara. Marriage is really hard.” She glances toward the kitchen door. “You can stay as long as you like. Stay until you’ve worked things out with your husband.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I feel a lump in my throat. She’s agreeing so readily because she knows what it’s like to be in a difficult marriage. This is the first time I feel like my mother understands me and actually gives a damn about my life, and it really kills me that we’ve come to this.

She reaches out and takes my hands again, squeezing tighter this time, with more confidence. “Your father’s upstairs watching baseball. You should go say hello.”

“Yeah, I will.” I hold her hands for another second, wanting so desperately to have a good relationship with my mother.

But eventually, she lets me go, stands up, and putters around some more. She puts dishes away, sips her wine, and I drift from the kitchen.

Back home. Back into the silences. The long, lingering resentment, the bitterness, the anger. They’ll never acknowledge it. God, my mother looks older than I remember, and I wonder with horror if this is what will happen to me and Finn one day, if we’re destined to this domestic decay.

Or if we’ll never get a chance to find out.

I miss him so much already.



“What’s it like, being home?” Kathryn’s voice sounds tired.

“Not great,” I admit. “Mom and Dad still barely talk to each other. Mom didn’t even know I was coming because Dad never mentioned it.”

“God, that’s awful.”

“I know. I want to say I’m used to it, but I’m kind of still not. They’re my parents, you know? I want to think they love each other, but I’m pretty sure they’re together because neither of them wants to be alone at this point. I don’t think I’ve seen them say more than two words to each other in the last week.”

Kathryn sighs. “I’m sorry. I really am. Have you heard from, you know?”

I grimace. She avoids saying his name like it’ll summon the plague. “He told me not to contact him and I haven’t heard anything yet.”

“How are you dealing with that?”

“I don’t know. It’s really hard. I keep thinking he forgot about me, but it’s only been a week, right? Things couldn’t have changed that much in a week.”

“There’s no way he forgot about you.” She tries to sound strong and I love her for it. “He said he’ll fix it, so he’ll fix it.”

“I have to keep on believing, otherwise I’m stuck here forever.”

“At least you have his Amex.”

“Good point.” I glance at the closet full of brand-new clothes. Another new wardrobe. “I’m getting kind of tired of replacing all my stuff though.”

“Liar. You love it.”

“Okay, yeah, I mean, the mall is the only halfway decent place in this town.”

“Go buy me some stuff. There’s a Fendi, right?”

“Not exactly. I think there’s a guy selling bootleg Fendi from his car, though.”

“Close enough.”

I laugh, grinning to myself. Talking to Kathryn on the phone’s the only thing keeping me sane. Without her, I think I would’ve lost it completely already.

We chat some more about what she’s been up to, but I hear the doorbell ring downstairs. It’s a little past eight at night and there shouldn’t be anyone showing up right now. “Hey, I should go, I’ve got to get the door. I’ll talk to you later okay?”

“Love you,” she says. “You’re doing great. Just keep it up.”

“Will do. Love you too.” I hang up and head down the steps, humming to myself. Dad’s sitting in front of the TV drinking a beer and squinting at a baseball game. “How many of those do they play?” I ask him.

“A lot,” he grunts through his bushy gray beard. “Who’s that, anyway?”

“Don’t know,” I say, tugging open the door. “Let’s find—” I turn and my jaw drops open. I try to make a noise, but I’m too stunned to form words.

“Hey, Dar,” Lucas says, scratching at the back of his head sheepishly. “I guess I’m the last person you wanted to see, huh?”

Chapter 41

Dara

“**L**ucas?” I say through my teeth. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

He grimaces. “I know it’s weird, but can we talk for a minute? I have a lot of explaining to do.”

“No fucking—” I glance back at my dad. He’s frowning at me, concerned, but too lazy to get up and come over. I lower my voice. “Come on.” I shove Lucas back, step out onto the front porch, and slam the door. “Sit down.” I point at a pair of chairs tucked to the side.

Right now, I’m channeling my inner Finn, pretending like I’m big and bad and bossy. It helps that I’m feeling very murder-y at the moment.

Lucas slumps into a chair with a groan.

I remain glaring down at him, arms crossed over my chest.

He looks terrible. His hair’s buzzed short and he’s got huge bags under his eyes. His clothes are dirty and sweaty, like he’s been wearing them for days straight. I glance past him toward the driveway, but there’s no car, and I have no clue how he got here.

My mind’s racing. Why would Lucas show up at my parents’ house now of all times, and how the hell did he even know I was here? Worry races down my spine and mixes with suspicion as a strange sense of danger wells up from my stomach.

I jab an elbow at him. “This isn’t some kind of assassination or something insane like that, is it? Are you working for Finn’s dad now?”

Lucas’s eyes go wide. “Assassination? Finn? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Don’t lie to me. You ruined my life once already, I won’t hesitate to return the favor, you skinny asshole.”

He shakes his head rapidly. “Dar, I have no clue who you’re talking about.”

I let out a long breath, deflating somewhat. “Then how the hell did you know I was here?”

“I asked Kathryn,” he admits, glancing away. “Don’t be mad at her.”

I take a step back, feeling betrayed. I am going to have a big, long talk to her about boundaries and safety when this is over. “Why the hell would she tell you where I am, much less even bother *talking* to you?”

“Because I’m here to try to make things right.”

I let that sink in. It’s surprising. I expected him to disappear forever, too ashamed of his shitty behavior to ever come back.

Lucas can’t even glance in my direction, and he seems more defeated than I’ve ever seen before. He was never a tough guy, never the sort to slam on the horn when cut off in traffic or the type to call out a line cutter, but he did have at least some quiet dignity. He always said pride came from helping others. Although apparently, he decided that also meant helping himself to my fucking bank account.

But now he’s looking like he wants to wrap himself up in a cocoon and disappear from the world.

“What happened to you?” I ask finally, curiosity overwhelming my anger. “Where’s Christine? I thought the two of you were running away to engage in marital bliss.”

“She left me,” he says, somehow managing to fold into himself even more. “Took everything and left me alone in Mexico. I don’t even speak Spanish. It took me a week just to get back over the freaking border. Got robbed twice

on the way.”

“Huh,” I say, arching an eyebrow. I try to muster some empathy, but nope, totally fresh out. “Fucking sucks, right?”

“Yeah.” He leans his head back and sighs. “I really fucked up, Dar.”

“I know you did.” I tap my foot on the porch. “Why’d you do it?”

He’s quiet for a few seconds before answering. “All my life, I never took a risk. You know me, Mr. Dependable, right?” He smiles at the old nickname. I don’t share his fond feelings. If anything, I’m resisting the very powerful urge to toss him off this porch into the sticker bushes growing in the flowerbeds. I guess my dad’s hatred of gardening is good for something. Lucas continues: “That’s me in a nutshell. Nothing exciting, nothing flashy, but I was always there when people needed me. Then Christine came on to me one night when we were drunk and you were passed out—”

I hold up a hand, trying not to puke. “Spare me the fucking details,” I say, rubbing my temple. “Also, you’re gross.”

“I know,” he says. “But she was exciting. She made me feel like a *man*, you know what I mean?”

“I know you were never a man and you still aren’t.” I glare at him. “Get to the point.”

“Christine made me feel like I could be more than Mr. Dependable. We kept sleeping together, and I knew it was so fucked up, but the thrill—”

“Seriously, Lucas, I don’t want to hear how cheating on me was thrilling, you asshole.”

“Right. Right. Okay.” He takes a deep breath. “Anyway, she came up with this plan, and I thought, yeah, let’s do it, let’s live a little bit. Maybe you’d get hurt, but you always land on your feet. You’re amazing. I guess I didn’t think about how badly we’d be hurting you.”

“You didn’t think that dumping me for my roommate and draining my bank account wouldn’t hurt me... because I land on my feet.” I stare at him for an agonizingly long moment. “You must be the stupidest man alive, Lucas.”

He winces but doesn't disagree. "As it turns out, Christine's plan is also Christine's move. I drained our joint account, and the moment I gave her access to mine, she drained my accounts and disappeared."

I whistle, actually kind of impressed. Christine was always quiet, kept to herself, cleaned up her dishes. She was a good roommate. I didn't know her that well—I found her through Craigslist, of all places—but things were fine between us. I guess she ended up being crazy after all. Serves Lucas right, the dick.

"That's a long con to make a few thousand dollars," I muse.

"I know, right? It's not like you were rich."

"I was doing pretty good though." I glare at him hard. "And anyway, I'm rich now." I hold up my hand with the engagement ring. "I guess you're right about landing on my feet."

He curses, staring. "Is that thing real?"

"Don't be a dick."

"I just mean, that's worth more money than I've ever seen in my entire life, I bet."

"Double that."

"Good for you," he says, smiling a little. He seems to relax. "You always were a survivor, right?"

"Don't you *dare* say that shit to me," I say, taking a step forward. "You ruined my life, Lucas. Because of you, I got into an altercation with Johnnie from work and ended up fired. My entire world crumbled, and oh, yeah, I got pregnant by a stranger, who is now my husband—"

"You're pregnant?" He leans back, looking shocked.

"Yes," I say softer. "Things are hard for me, okay? Kathryn shouldn't have sent you here."

He stews in that for a moment before straightening. He reaches into his pocket and takes out a thick, white envelope, thrusting it at me. "Here. Take

this.”

I hesitate, but accept it. Inside, it’s stuffed with cash. “What the hell?”

“That’s everything I had left of the money I stole from you. I’m going to make payments until we’re equal, starting tonight. I’m going back to being Mr. Dependable. It’s a little less than five hundred, but I’m going to get a job, and I’ll make it right.”

I stare at the money. Some other time and some other world, this cash might’ve meant something to me, but right now I have an Amex with unlimited spending and a rich husband.

But the gesture’s actually kind of nice. Lucas is clearly at rock bottom himself right now, and I bet this money means a lot to him. I shake my head and hand it back. “I don’t want it.”

“Dar—”

“Take the fucking cash, okay, Lucas? Before I grind it in the garbage disposal instead.” I don’t know why I’m taking pity on him. It’s not like he deserves it.

He takes the envelope, looking sheepish. “I’m still going to pay you back, I swear.”

“Don’t bother. I don’t want you to ever think you can make up for what you did to me.” I turn my back on him. “We’re not even. We never will be. But I don’t hate you. I just pity you now. If you really want to do the right thing, get up, walk away, and never look back. Just think the next time you’re going to steal from someone, okay?”

I don’t know why, but I feel strangely better. I hadn’t thought much about Lucas since getting involved with Finn, but seeing my ex like this is cathartic. The asshole clearly got a taste of his own medicine.

But more than that, I’m not holding on to him. Seeing Lucas again doesn’t make me miss my old life, back before things completely fell apart. I don’t miss Mr. Dependable or my old job or my old apartment.

I just miss Finn even more than I thought I would.

“I can do that,” he says softly.

“You should go now,” I say, leaning against the railing. “And don’t come back, okay? Don’t look me up. Don’t contact Kathryn. Just stay away.”

He slowly stands. “Are you sure? Dar, I mean it, I can get you that money.”

“You never will.” I jerk my head toward the street. “Please, go. And Lucas? If I hear you’re anywhere near Boston ever again, I’ll make sure my husband buries you. Or I’ll do it myself. I haven’t decided yet.”

He blanches. “Right, okay. No Boston. I got it.”

“Now get out of here.”

He walks down the stairs, toward the driveway, and stops, looking back. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“I’m nowhere near okay,” I murmur as he continues on, hands shoved in his pockets and his shoulders rounded, staring down at the ground.

I stay on the porch for another few seconds, thinking about Finn, wishing he was here more than anything in the world, when a black SUV comes rolling toward the house. I frown as it pulls over, forcing Lucas to scurry out of the way.

The engine dies, the door opens, and Genna steps out.

She surveys my childhood home, hands on her hips, eyebrows scrunched down, before she spots me. I stare back in shock as she raises a hand.

“Hey,” she says, waving. “This town is a real shithole, you know that?”

Chapter 42

Dara

Genna groans as she sits on the same chair as Lucas. “Who was that homeless guy?” she asks, squinting toward his retreating form. “You get a lot of drifters around here?”

“That was my ex, Lucas.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “The one you hate?”

“The very same. Apparently, the girl he left me for stole all his money and ran off.”

“Well, fancy that,” she says, grinning. “Did you rub it in his face?”

I hesitate then shake my head. “Not worth it. He came crawling back to apologize. Even offered me some money.”

“You’re a bigger gal than me. I would’ve torn his asshole into pieces.”

I grimace at the image and actually believe she means it literally. “Genna, what the hell are you doing here?”

She shrugs as I take the chair next to her. Excitement bubbles through my guts as I lean toward her. I’ve been craving contact from someone back in Boston, and Genna’s the only person closer to Finn than I am.

“He sent me,” she says, not elaborating on who she means by *he* but we both know. “Things were getting a little heated back home so he thought I’d be

safer here.” She rolls her eyes. “This place looks like I’m going to get stabbed by a meth head. No offense.”

“Sounds like him. How is he? Is everything okay? What’s happening?”

She clears her throat, looking away. “He’s okay. Everything’s... well, everything’s everything.”

“That is the least helpful thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“Yeah, I know.” She closes her eyes. “He asked me not to go into detail.”

“How about we pretend like you tried really, really hard, but I kept pushing and pushing and finally tricked it out of you?”

She stretches her legs and sighs. “Honestly, it’s not all that complicated. Finn is currently waging a war of revenge against everyone that wronged him. No big deal. Just a touch of murder.”

I blink rapidly. “Excuse me?”

“Here’s the thing about your husband.” She leans toward me, eyebrows raised. “He has a temper.”

“I noticed that.”

“And sometimes, he can get a little violent.”

“I... assumed that.”

“He’s turning that temper and that violence against you-know-who.” She waggles her eyebrows. “Anyway, it’s all very exciting, except it’s not and now here I am.”

I let that sink in. Finn’s starting a war against the McLaren family—but what does that mean? They don’t have any soldiers. It’s only Clive, his wife, and his daughter, plus whatever staff they have on hand. That’s not the same as going up against a rival gang or something. What’s Finn thinking?

I wish I were there so badly it hurts. I want to hear his voice, feel his palms on my skin, taste his lips against mine. I want him to cook me breakfast, tuck me in at night, and wash my back in the shower.

It's startling how I've gotten used to him bossing me around, and how much I've grown to love it.

Which makes me lean toward Genna. I grab her hand, squeezing. She looks somewhat bewildered—I get the sense she's not good with emotions. “We were taking it seriously. He and I.”

She softens slightly. “He mentioned that.”

“I wanted to give it a shot.” I fight back the lump in my throat, refusing to cry. That'd only freak poor Genna out even more. “I mean, I still do, but it's kind of hard when I haven't heard from him in days.”

“He's okay, seriously, Finn's way stronger than you probably realize.”

“I know that.” I hold her hand tighter. “I'm just afraid. Not for me, but for him.”

“Don't be. He'll get out of this.” She grins and pats the back of my hand. “Meanwhile, we get to spend a lovely vacation in the middle of—” She hesitates, smile slipping. “Where the hell are we again?”

I laugh, unable to help myself. Genna looks so out of place in my little small Iowa town, so chic and beautiful, but I love her so fiercely in this moment and I'm so happy she's here.

“Do you want to stay here? With me and my family, I mean. We have a room —”

“No, thanks,” she says quickly, pulling her hand away. “That's a super nice offer, but, uh, I found an adequate hotel, and this trip is on Finn's dime, so I'm going to enjoy myself.” She hesitates. “Can I enjoy myself? Here, I mean? You know, am I going to get stoned as a witch if I look at a woman the wrong way?”

“No,” I say, laughing softly, but my laughter dies down after I consider for a second. “Well, maybe.”

“Great.” Genna sighs. “I miss Boston already.”

“Cheer up. We have mini golf!”

She groans and puts her face in her hands.

I happily tell her all about the competing gas stations, the three restaurants, the movie theater that hasn't been updated in thirty years, and the mall, which also hasn't been updated in thirty years. She shifts deeper and deeper into her seat. By the time I'm done, she's basically a puddle on the floor.

"He wanted me to pass a message along," Genna says as she stands and stretches, getting ready to head out. "Don't take this the wrong way, okay? Because I definitely don't want to do this, but he insisted."

"Uh, okay."

She pulls me to my feet and hugs me. I'm startled for a second. She hugs me tight, and once I settle into her embrace, my eyes closed, I can pretend it's Finn's arms wrapped around me—except Finn doesn't smell like strawberries, and he doesn't have big, soft boobs, and his hair isn't huge. But it's close.

"There. Don't get any ideas." She pats my cheek fondly. "I am never, ever going to hug you again. Now, I'm off to the lovely Days Inn where I am booked into their finest suite. Here's hoping I don't see any roaches." She crosses her fingers, looking miserable.

"Genna." I pull her back and hug her again. "I'm happy you're here."

"That makes one of us." She extracts herself. "But seriously, Finn's going to be okay. You know that, right? There aren't many people I know who are half as resourceful as him. And besides, I'm pretty sure the guy's in love with you. He's going to burn the city to ashes to get you back."

"Really?" I ask, biting my lip. "You think he's in love with me?"

She rolls her eyes. "Oh, stop it, this isn't high school. Maybe think about, you know, communicating with the guy." She hops off the steps and heads back toward her rented SUV. "I'm picking you up tomorrow and we're going to the mall." She groans, shaking her head. "I already hate it here."

"See you then!" I wave, beaming, excited to have a friend.

Finn's coming for me. Sooner or later, he's coming, but first he's got some

fires to light.

Chapter 43

Finn

I sit in the back seat of my town car watching the McLaren house from halfway down the block. My driver stares forward from behind dark sunglasses, a small box with a long antenna and a single switch held in his hand.

We don't speak. There's nothing to say. Anger pushes me forward, and revenge has forced my hand.

Father hasn't spoken to me since I went to see him after the vote, and that's more than fine by me.

"Coming within range," my driver says. He's a middle-aged man named Franklin with a thick Irish accent.

"How close?"

"Fifty meters, maybe a bit more." He frowns as the receiver in his hand begins to beep slowly. "We can go any time."

I lean back in my seat and wait.

Anticipation can sometimes feel better than the payoff itself.

There aren't a lot of options left for me now. I can roll over and beg for my father's forgiveness, or possibly even grovel at Clive's feet, but I'd rather jump off a bridge than debase myself like that.

I've done enough politicking to last a fucking lifetime.

Instead, when I stepped back and really thought about how to handle this, only one solution made any sense.

I decided to do what I do best.

"You know, Franklin, my family has a reputation." I stare out the window toward the McLaren family's driveway. "We're thought of as very rich and very powerful. We're seen as just another bunch of billionaires running the city. But that's not right, is it?"

"You are rich and powerful, far as I know," he says, glancing into the rear view. The receiver beeps faster.

"But that's not what we *are*. My father's father's father built our organization on the street, and we still operate there. My crews run corners, they steal and cheat and scam, they have protection and gambling rackets. They engaged in crime, Franklin, as do all my brothers, as does my father. That is what the Crowley family is. We've gotten too obsessed with politics and business and we've forgotten what makes us strong."

"What's that, sir?" Franklin squints as a sleek, silver Jaguar slowly rolls down the driveway and turns onto the street, coming toward us. I can just barely make out two people inside, one driving, the other in the back seat.

"Violence." I lean forward, heart racing with excitement. "Hit the button, please."

Franklin flips the switch.

For a moment, nothing happens.

Then McLaren's Jaguar erupts in a massive mountain of flames. The car bursts into pieces, steel and plastic shattering and scattering all over the street as the smoke rises into the air in a thick, black plume. The shockwave hits a moment later, rocking our car, setting off alarms all along the block. The flames spout huge and bright into the sky, an inferno of death and horror, and I smile.

Nobody could've survived that.

I smile, head ringing with excitement.

Good old Franklin. His father was in the IRA back in the day, and there aren't many people alive as good at planting car bombs as they were. Fortunately, Franklin picked up some things from his old man.

“Sir?” he asks, looking back at me. “Should we go?”

“Not yet. I have a call to make.” I take out my phone and dial. It rings and rings until a man answers, sounding annoyed.

“Finn Crowley. Why are you calling me on my personal phone in the middle of the day? I was in a meeting.”

I smile to myself, noting how he still left that meeting and took my call.

“Chief Cross. Thank you for answering. I have some very bad news for you.”

The chief of the Boston Police Department does not sound happy. “What did you do now?”

“Clive McLaren's vehicle just exploded. It's a shame, really. I told him not to drive that silly English car, but he simply wouldn't listen. That's why I stick with the Germans. They never go boom.”

Chief Cross is quiet for a moment. “And do you have any involvement with this accident?”

“I do not,” I say simply. “And your next envelope will be three times its normal size to prove it.”

He lets out a long, exhausted sigh. “Fuck you, Crowley.”

“Pleasure as always, Chief. Say hello to the wife and kids.”

I hang up. Chief Cross will be livid for a little while, but he'll get over it. The envelopes of cash, they're mostly for show—though he never refuses them. At this point, we have so much blackmail on that man, he practically has to dance whenever we tell him to.

There are limits, of course. If I had gunned McLaren down on a busy street, that might've caused some problems. Bystanders and all that. But this, where it could plausibly be ruled an accident?

This I can get away with.

“Sir?” Franklin asks, sounding worried as sirens blare nearby.

“Take me around the block and call Shane. I have another visit to make before we’re finished here.”

Franklin grunts, puts the car in drive, turns around, and heads in the opposite direction.

I look back, smiling at the thick, black gusts of smoke spiraling into the air.

Chapter 44

Finn

I stretch my legs out, waiting.

Her room is nice. Bigger than I expected. Tastefully decorated. Not many personal touches—no pictures, no notes, nothing like that—but I still get a sense for her.

She likes order. She likes control. Her makeup is neatly put away and organized by type and color. Her bed is crisply made, though that could be the maids. Everything about her space screams of a woman that appreciates comfort and wealth, but needs them to be tamed to her will.

The door opens and Robin steps inside.

She doesn't notice me. That's the thing with familiarity. I'm practically invisible because she's so used to her room being one way, she can't imagine me in this place. Her brain refuses to process me, skips right over my presence, fills me in with the usual gap in the chair beside her bed.

I watch her snap on a light, humming to herself, skin flushed and sweaty from her tennis lesson. She disappears into her bathroom, the door shutting, the shower turning on. I make myself comfortable.

Eventually, she comes out in shorts and an old t-shirt, humming once again, looking happy as can be. She turns toward her nightstand, and finally, that's when she spots me.

She goes still, her mouth opening, jaw working, trying to find words as she

holds her hands up in the air, her fingers working as if she's trying to type something on her phone.

"Hello, Robin."

"Finn, what the fuck—" But her words are cut off as Shane steps out from the closet, walks up behind her, and shoves a rag over her face.

She struggles, fighting him, but Shane's strong. He might be inexperienced, but the kid's got guts, I'll give him that.

Her screams are muffled as Shane forces her down to her knees.

"Don't make this hard," I say, standing. I pull the gun from its holster at my side and approach. Her eyes go wide. "Let me ask you something. Did you hear that big boom earlier?"

She nods, looking frantic.

I lean forward, smiling, delighted. "That was the sound of your father's car exploding. With him in it, of course."

She shakes her head, not believing me. I stand back, studying the girl I nearly married. Not to my taste. Not at all.

"Shane, let her go. Robin, if you scream, I'll skip this conversation and go right to killing you."

Shane steps back, bringing the rag with him.

Robin struggles to her feet, breathing hard, staring at me with sheer terror. I hold the gun, aimed at her face. My finger on the trigger.

"I don't believe you," she whispers hoarsely.

"That's okay. You will soon." I step closer. "Back on your knees."

"Finn," she says, voice squeaking. "Please—"

"Get. On. Your. Knees."

Slowly, she sinks down, trembling. "You don't have to do this. We can come to an agreement. I can help you. Please, if you just listen—"

“Open your mouth.”

She reels back. “Excuse me?”

I reach forward lightning fast and grab her jaw, squeezing it hard, forcing her lips apart. “Open. Now.”

When she obeys, I shove the gun barrel hard between her lips. It scrapes, chipping one tooth. She groans in pain, but I grab the back of her head, keeping her in place.

“That’s better,” I murmur. “Now, I have your attention. Your father is dead. The chief of police is busy spinning a story about engine failure. My involvement will never become public. Do you understand? Nod yes.”

She nods, shaking under my grip.

“Good. Now. My father’s little law failed by a single vote. Do you know the senator that turned against it?”

She nods again.

“You’re going to call him and beg him to change his mind. You’re going to tell him that it was your father’s dying wish. You’re going to sound emotional and convincing. If you don’t, I’ll kill you.”

Tears streak down her face and she nods.

“You’re doing great, Robin. Once that’s finished, you’re going to console your mother. You’re going to bury your father. And you will never, ever get involved in politics again. If you do, I will find you, and I will do to you what I did to your father. Nod now, please.”

She nods, blinking as the tears keep falling.

“Wonderful. Do you want me to remove the gun from your mouth?”

She nods quickly.

“If you scream, you die. Are you ready to make the call?”

She groans, but nods.

“Lovely. Shane? Her phone?”

He produces it and I hand it over to her. She’s sobbing as she unlocks it, flips through her contacts, and finds the proper number.

I pull the gun back.

She gasps, breathing hard, crying for real now. I give her a moment to compose herself—really, it’s pathetic the way she’s sobbing, as if she didn’t fucking deserve this—and I stand back as she does as instructed.

I have to admit, despite her terror, Robin’s a wonderful actress. It makes me feel better for having fallen prey to her bullshit earlier. She charms the senator, spins a story about how important the vote was to her father, and leaves with a promise that he’ll reconsider his position. When it’s done, she slumps to the floor.

“Will you leave me alone now?” she asks, curling into the fetal position. “Please, Finn? Can you just leave me alone?”

I crouch down beside her.

“Here’s the problem. You forgot who we are. If only you could’ve made yourself remember. We aren’t the country club assholes you’ve spent your life running circles around.” I kick her in the chest, knocking her across the floor, then step over her prostrate body. “Now, you better hope I never hear your name ever again. Good luck with the funeral.”

Shane falls into line behind me and we leave.

Chapter 45

Dara

I spend the next few days delighting in showing Genna around town. We spend a few miserable hours at the only cafe with decent coffee (“Tastes like bitter horse piss, except that’s an insult to horses.”) and a few lovely lunches in the mall food court (“I’d rather slurp up my own puke than eat this microwaved offal.”) and more than one late-night movie at the three-screen cinema on the edge of town (“Popcorn’s not bad actually.”).

She hates it and I can’t get enough of driving her insane. But as the days pass, I keep thinking about Finn, about what he’s doing back in Boston, until one morning Genna turns up at the house and ushers me into the kitchen.

“Sit down. This is news. Big news.” She shoves her phone into my hands. “Good morning, Jeff.”

“Good morning, Genna.” Dad frowns at her as he stirs milk into his coffee. “Since when did you call me Jeff?”

“Since always,” she says, nudging me with her toe. “Read that.”

Dad shuffles out of the kitchen, muttering to himself.

I stare at the screen. It’s a news article about a mysterious automobile accident. Apparently, some high-end Jaguar exploded when the driver used the wrong fuel, killing both him and the owner—a man named Clive McLaren.

I look up, eyes going wide.

“Yep,” Genna says grinning so big it looks like her face might crack in half. “I know.”

“Finn?”

“Well, don’t say it out loud.” She leans closer, swatting at me, and grabs my shoulders. “But fuck, yes, of course it was Finn.”

My head’s reeling. “How? What? Why?”

She snatches her phone back, cackling. “I told you he was going on a quest for righteous revenge. That’s our boy. Always with the casual murder.”

I shush her, glancing back to where my father’s sitting in his customary spot staring at the TV. My shock turns to fear and suddenly I picture Finn behind bars. “Should we be worried? I mean, he’s going to be the prime suspect, right?”

“Here’s the thing about Finn and his family. They own the cops.”

I give her a look. “That’s not actually a thing.” I hesitate. “Is it?”

“Definitely a thing,” she says, nodding sagely. “You’d be shocked at how much of a thing it is.”

I stand and start pacing. I knew what Finn was—rich, connected, mafia—but he seemed more like a businessman than a killer.

Now, looking back, I can see how I misunderstood.

His family wraps itself in legitimacy. They have so much money, it must be easy to make it seem as though they’re regular old rich folks. Except Finn’s not regular, far from regular, and he tried to get me to understand it over and over.

Now, it’s so obvious, it makes me want to scream.

Finn’s a killer and always was.

That way he’d been behaving? That was him doing his best to seem normal.

This is the real Finn.

“What now?” I ask, forcing myself not to tremble.

Does this change how I feel?

“Now we keep on waiting.” Genna looks at her nails smugly. “But I suspect he’ll be here soon.”

I chew on my cheek, tugging at my hair. “Now I’m not sure if I want him to come pick me up or not.”

Genna’s eyes snap up, narrowing. “You’re not getting cold feet, are you?”

“I didn’t know he’s actually commit—” I stop myself, glancing at the kitchen door, and mouth *murder*.

Genna rolls her eyes. “Not the first time, hon.”

“Don’t be so cavalier.”

“McLaren deserved it. The old asshole knew what he was getting into when he decided to mess with Finn. Are you really upset about this?”

I lean against the counter, trying to assess how I feel, thinking back to being with Finn, to how it was when we were together.

To the promises we made. To his mouth against mine.

And I don’t feel sorry that McLaren’s dead. I pity his family, in the same way I pitied Lucas, but I wouldn’t go back and save his life if I could.

Just like I’m happy Lucas got a taste of his own assholishness.

A terrible understanding washes over me.

I overlooked so much. Finn is cold, a killer, a monster wearing a lovely suit, a predator hiding in plain sight, stalking through the world, taking what he wants with his stately bearing.

And I fell for it.

I fell hard for that ruthless bastard.

“You know what’s sick?” I ask quietly, forcing myself to stay calm. “I don’t think I am. Shocked, but not upset.”

“There you go,” Genna says, nodding like that’s a completely normal reaction.

“I think I need a therapist.”

“Nah, you’re good.” She hops to her feet. “Come on, let’s go to the mall.”

“I thought you said the mall smells like the underside of a public bus.”

“I said the mall smells like an abandoned shoe store. The movie theater smells like the bus.”

“Gotcha. Okay, well, let me grab my stuff.”

She stands as I go to move past her, putting a hand on my arm. “It’ll be okay,” she says quietly. “Really. Finn can handle this.”

“I hope you’re right.”

She shrugs, still smirking like she knows something I don’t.



That night, Genna’s sitting on the couch drinking a beer with my dad, yelling at baseball on TV. I do my best to ignore them both. My mother’s upstairs, blaring some Bravo reality show reunion while she does yoga. I’m caught in the middle obsessively reading articles about McLaren’s death, none of which come close to suggesting it was a murder.

Which it obviously was.

I mean, what kind of fuel can make a car literally explode? I saw the pictures—that level of destruction isn’t the sort of thing that happens to normal engine failure.

And yet nobody in the media is suggesting it was anything other than a freak accident.

Something happens on the TV, and both Genna and my dad start shouting.

Genna and my father seem to be getting along rather well, or at least she likes that he plies her with beer and doesn't mind her cursing, and she seems to appreciate the fact that he doesn't speak, like, ever. I'm anxious, shifting back and forth in my seat, which is when the bang at the door makes me leap to my feet like someone put a gun to my head.

"Who's that?" I ask, looking around, picturing the FBI and the CIA.

"Why don't you check?" Genna says, head tilted.

Dad grunts.

I walk over, hands shaking. I think about Lucas, wondering if he's back for more punishment.

Instead, I open the door, and it's him.

Finn stands there. Wearing a dark suit and slacks, no jacket, his white dress shirt unbuttoned at the throat to show off his chest, his sleeves rolled to the elbow to show off his vein-riddled forearms. I take a step back in surprise. The man's a specimen, a prowling jungle cat, a bundle of power and intensity, and when he steps into my meager, tiny childhood home, it's like an alien's come down from another dimension, glowing with an infernal light, bestial and beautiful all at once.

My breath catches in my throat.

"Hey, Finn," Genna says. "Took you fucking long enough. Thanks for the beer." She slugs the rest and hops to her feet.

"I need a second with my wife." Finn hasn't stopped looking at me and I can't tear my eyes away.

This man murdered Clive McLaren. He probably did even worse since we've been apart.

And now all I want to do is throw myself at him.

"I missed you," I say, whispering.

"I missed you too, love." He steps closer. "Are you okay?"

“I’m fine. Genna’s been keeping me company.”

“She hasn’t been too much?”

I tilt my head. “She’s always too much.”

“Hey,” she complains.

Finn touches my cheek, ignoring her. “God, I missed you so much.”

And he kisses me.

It’s like waking from a nightmare into the most perfect dream. When his lips press to mine, my spine ignites with excitement, pleasure rocking down into my core, desire spilling over like I’m overflowing with it. I whimper into his mouth, hugging myself against his body, desperate to feel every inch of him.

He purrs, content and dripping lust. His tongue laps against mine, his lips are soft and firm, his hand digs into my hair possessively. Controlling, taking, owning. I give myself to him, feeling all my pent-up fear and anxiety fade away under his touch.

“I’m here to bring you home, love,” he whispers, forehead pressed to mine.

I shiver, grinning like an idiot. “I can’t wait.”

My father takes this opportunity to clear his throat. “Uh, Dara? Are you gonna introduce me?”

I jump, yelping in surprise. I completely forgot he was in the room. Embarrassed, I make the introductions. Finn shakes my father’s hand, and my father even looks a little abashed by the whole situation.

My mother comes down. She fawns over Finn, acting like she’s in the presence of royalty. Shane comes in and discreetly begins packing my things with Genna’s help.

“We’ll come visit again, or maybe you two can fly out to Boston,” Finn says when we’re at the door. “I’d love to get to know my in-laws better.”

Mom beams. “We’d enjoy that.”

Dad grunts.

“Well, Mom, Dad, thanks for letting me stay.” I hug them quickly.

If they think this is weird, neither of them say so.

Mom squeezes my hand and looks like she shrinks back into herself as I follow Finn through the door, down the porch, and toward his waiting black town car.

“I know that was hard,” he says, getting me into the back and buckling me in. He keeps a hand on my thigh like he can’t stop touching me, even with Genna chattering away up front, badgering Shane to tell her everything that’s been happening. “But you’re coming back with me now, wife, and I won’t ever let you go again.”

“But what about your parents? And the vote? And McLaren—Finn, did you...?” I trail off, unable to say it.

He tilts his head, staring at me with that smoldering intensity. “You should choose now. Do you want to know the ugly details? Do you want all the truth, or would you rather remain blissfully ignorant?”

I shake my head. “Tell me.”

“I blew McLaren’s car to pieces and shoved a gun in Robin’s mouth.”

I lean back, eyes going wide. “You did *what* to Robin?”

“Chipped her tooth on the way in.” He smiles to himself. “She called the senator that lost us the vote and pleaded with him to change his mind. Seems as though he’s going to and there will be one more vote.”

Genna whistles. “Good move.”

“Thank you.” Finn’s staring at me. The car starts moving down the street. “Are you scared?” he asks.

I nod once. “Yes.”

“You don’t have to be afraid of me.” He’s speaking like I’m a cat about to bolt.

But that’s not it. “I’m afraid... but I’m afraid *for* you.”

His head tilts. “For me?”

“You killed someone. You put a gun in Robin’s mouth. That opens you up to problems in the future, doesn’t it? What if Robin tells someone? What if—” I don’t even know what if, but a thousand terrible scenarios all course through my brain.

He takes my hands in his, looking happier than I’ve ever seen him. “You’re worried about me, but you don’t have to be. Let me do all the worrying.”

“That’s not really how relationships work, Finn.”

“But that’s how I work.”

“Right, fine, I’ll shut down my brain. You can do with me as you please, like a doll.”

His eyebrows raise. “Tempting.”

“Asshole.” I lean forward and kiss him. “I care about you, okay? We *just* agreed to take us seriously. I don’t want to do long distance and have to visit you in prison.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“You better not.”

He hugs me tight. I catch Genna’s look in the rearview mirror—her eyes are rolling and she looks thoroughly disgusted.

Not that I can blame her. This is a truly gross display of emotions, but I can’t help myself. I feel wound up, so tightly charged, and I need to release myself somehow.

Back at the airport, he skips the normal terminal and heads toward the private planes.

Chapter 46

Finn

I feast on Dara during the flight home. Shane and Genna put on headphones and sit up front.

I shut the privacy curtain, pin my wife down on the fold-out bed, and slip two fingers deep inside her while I suck her clit hard.

She comes once, twice, and finally lays there, sated and sweaty and grinning like an idiot.

“I *really* missed you,” she says, laughing and stretching. “Also, private planes are awesome.”

“I missed you too.” I pull her into my lap. She wiggles her hips.

“Still hard?” she asks, eyebrows raised.

“For now.” My thumb grazes her low lip. She takes it into her mouth and sucks, lightly licking the tip. “We need to talk first.”

“About what?” She reaches down between her legs and slowly strokes my cock.

Fuck, that feels good. “When we land, we’re heading straight to see my mother.” She pauses. I grip her wrist. “Don’t fucking stop,” I growl.

She keeps going. “Why are we doing that?”

“McLaren’s dead. The vote’s going to happen again. But I need to make sure

we're all good with the family. It'll help if you're by my side." I close my eyes, grunting as she shimmies back onto all fours, pulling down my pants.

"Whatever you need," she says, licking the tip of my cock, rolling her tongue around the clit and sucking on the precum. "I'll give you whatever you need."

"Good fucking girl," I purr as she begins to suck my cock, head bobbing nice and fast. I moan, watching her pretty lips spread wide, listen to her gag, and come on her tongue like heaven. "Good fucking wife," I whisper.



The entire east wing of the Crowley mansion is my mother's domain. I take Dara in through the side entrance, this time being careful to avoid the staff. I don't want my father to know that my wife's back on my arm. Dara's looking nervous, but she's dressed in dark clothes like she's in mourning.

We find my mother sitting in her lounge drinking wine and chatting on the phone. When I appear in the doorway, she glances over, frowns slightly, notices Dara on my arm, and sighs. "I'll call you later, Janey. Yes, yes, you too." She hangs up and slowly stands.

My mother is a stately woman. That's not an insult. She's beautiful and full of life, the sort of person that can command attention with nothing more than a flip of her hair. She belongs in staterooms, negotiating with ambassadors and charming prime ministers. My mother is the real force behind the Crowley family's slow transition from street thugs to titans of industry. Though our industry happens to be crime.

"Mother," I say, stepping forward. "Dara and I are here to speak with you."

"I was wondering when you'd show up." She glances at my wife. "Hello, dear, it's nice to see you again."

"You too," Dara says, sounding meek.

I frown slightly, annoyed by the effect my mother has on people. "We need

to talk about my future in this family.”

Mother gestures for us to enter. She pours wine, something my father would never do, and sits down at an antique round table she imported from London. “I spoke with Chief Cross earlier today. He’s very unhappy.”

“Cross is always pissed,” I say, taking Dara’s hand in mine protectively. “More importantly, he always obeys.”

Mom’s lips purse. “Yes, well, in this case you’re lucky, but we both know his good will only goes so far. You used a lot.”

“Necessarily so.”

“McLaren didn’t need to die. There were other ways.”

I lean forward. “Mother, this town needed to remember why we rule them. McLaren embarrassed me. He embarrassed you and father and everyone in the Crowley organization. That could not stand.”

Mother looks unhappy. “There were still other ways.”

“No,” I say firmly. “There were not.”

We stare each other down. My mother is not the type of woman to blink first, and I’m a stubborn primate. Fortunately, Dara breaks the tension.

“Mrs. Crowley? I just wanted to say that I’m happy to be back in Boston, and I hope we can have a good relationship moving forward.”

Mother glances at Dara. “Molly, dear. Call me Molly. And I suppose we could have a good relationship, assuming my son doesn’t do anything else to jeopardize the family.”

“I solved our problems,” I snarl at her but force myself to take a breath. I close my eyes, do a breathing exercise, and open them again. “But I understand your position and will hold back the next time I decide to murder a rival.”

Mother sips her wine. “Then we’re all in agreement.”

“There’s still the problem of Dad,” I say pointedly.

“Let me handle your father.”

“Probation is over, and I will not divorce Dara.” I hold my mother’s stare. “She’d be the mother of my child. I’m not going to turn my back on her.”

Mother lets out a breath. “Fine, but only because I know you’ll keep fighting this until your dying day.”

“We have your blessing then?” Nervous energy pours through me. I expected this, but even still, getting my mother on board will be huge.

She leans back and turns her gaze on Dara. “You, dear. Why did you marry my son?”

Dara doesn’t miss a beat. “Money,” she says.

Mother’s eyes widen. I groan, putting my face in my hands. Why the fuck did she just say that?

But she continues. “At least, that’s how it started.” She puts her hand on mine. “I was at rock bottom. I found out that I’m pregnant with your son’s child. And when he made his offer, I just... I said yes, because I felt like I had no other choice. But now I can see there are always choices, and I choose to stay with him. I *want* to be with him. I just needed time to figure it out.”

Mom’s face softens. “You turned that answer around.”

“I want to be honest with you, Molly. I really mean it when I say that I want a good relationship with you.”

“I’d like that too.” Mom looks at me. “I bless your union. Though again, you’d do it anyway, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, but your support makes it easier.” I stand, move around the table, and kiss her cheek. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She waves her hands at us. “Now go, I have calls to make, and I need to go speak with your father before he gets so angry his heart explodes.”

I take Dara’s hand and lead her away from mother’s lounge as quickly as I can. Once we’re safely in the hall, I push her up against the wall and kiss her,

unable to wait.

She kisses me back, grinning like she's sparkling. "Did that go well?"

"Better than it should have."

"Are we going to get murdered?"

"Probably not."

"Ah, you know just what to say."

I kiss her gently. "Come on, love, I have one more surprise for you."

"What is it?"

"A *surprise*." I drag her along behind me, smiling like the madman I am.

Chapter 47

Dara

Finn leads me into the house, up the stairs, and to the guest suite. “What’s so urgent you need to yank my wrist out of the socket?” I say as I struggle to keep up with his long strides.

“While you were away, I had some improvements made.” He gestures toward the suite. “Go ahead. Take a look.”

I hesitate. “I’m not about to find some kinky sexy dungeon, am I?”

“Would that be so bad?”

“Actually, no,” I admit.

“Sorry to disappoint then, but I have other space for that.”

“Don’t tease me.”

“Stop talking and go look in the room.”

I gently slap his shoulder before stepping past him and into the suite. I stand on the threshold, staring inside, my mouth falling open.

It’s been gutted. The furniture’s all gone, the floors have been refinished, and the decorations are missing. The fireplace is currently in the process of being converted to—something, I can’t even tell, but something with lots of soft foam.

And sitting at the far side is a crib.

I drift toward it, my hands trembling.

“I didn’t do too much,” he says, watching me from the door as I stand beside the crib. It’s white, plain, with a mattress at the bottom and a light blue sheet. “I know you wanted to decorate yourself, but I got the process started.”

“Finn,” I say, trying not to cry. “You did this?”

“Myself, actually. Didn’t even hire someone.” He smirks at the look on my face. “What?”

“I’m in disbelief, is all.”

“Shane helped a little,” he admits. “The fireplace was his doing.”

“What *is* happening there?”

“Babyproofing.”

“Ah, makes sense.” I chew my lip before a giddy laugh bursts from my chest. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“But I did.” He steps into the room. “This is going to be our nursery. Our child is going to grow up in this room. And maybe one day... siblings. In all the other rooms.”

“How many bedrooms are there again?” I ask in a hushed voice.

“Plenty.” He comes to me and takes me in his arms. “What do you say, love? We’re starting a family, right?”

“I thought you’ve had enough of family.”

“This is the good kind.” He kisses me neck. “Say you’ll give me as many babies as I want.”

I groan. “Finn, please.”

“Say it, love.”

“I’m not a baby-making machine.”

“We definitely disagree there.” He grabs my ass roughly. “Say it, love.”

“Finn.” I’m blushing like crazy. I get on my toes and kiss his lips gently. “We’ll see.”

“Say it.” His hand fists into my hair, gripping tight. “Say you’ll give me what I want.” His lips kiss my neck as his other hand moves up my blouse, unbuttoning it, then caressing my breasts. He thumbs a stiff nipple through the fabric. “Tell me you’ll let me fuck you again and again, coming deep between your lovely legs, making you scream each and every time, until this house overflows with babies.”

“I’m not super into the overflowing with babies part, but I like all the rest.”

“Say it,” he whispers, biting my earlobe.

I shiver with pleasure. “How many exactly?”

“As many as I want.”

I close my eyes. He pushes me against the wall and kisses my chest, my breasts, unhooking my bra to lick my nipples, sucking hard.

“Fuck,” I moan. “I’ll give you as many as you want, Finn. I swear, as many as you want.”

His eyes burn with a sudden intense delight. He drops to his knees, pulling off my jeans, kissing my inner thigh. I pull his hair, whimpering, feeling overwhelmed and dizzy with need as he licks my pussy over my panties.

“Wet,” he murmurs. “Wet and delicious. Love, you like it when I talk about fucking you until you’re nice and pregnant, don’t you?”

“I like the fucking part,” I admit.

He laughs, pushing my panties aside, and feasts. Tongue flat, lapping me hard. I groan, head thrown back as he takes me. I grip hard, thinking about this house full of laughter, full of children running around, full of Finn and me and all the love that we can make. I come on his mouth, come hard on his beard, twitching like I’ve lost my mind.

He turns me around, hands behind my back. “I like the fucking part more than you’ll ever know,” he murmurs. I feel his cock press against my soaking wet pussy, sliding up and down, gathering up my soaking moisture on his

shaft. “Lovely girl. My beautiful wife.” He presses into me and I gasp, head back, his mouth on my throat. I forgot how big he was, how thick he was, how he stretched me as he slipped deeper.

God, it feels so good, my brain sparkling with intensity and need as he fucks me hard, his hands teasing my breast.

“Say you’ll have my children,” he says as he rips into me. “Say it again.”

“Fuck, Finn,” I moan. “I’ll have your children. As many as you want. All of your children.”

He growls, kissing me over my neck, as his thumb strokes my clit while his cock slams in and out, slipping and sliding into my soaking pussy. My husband owns me, dominates me, fucks me like I’m his and only his, and I come again in a screaming, shivering delight, which throws him over the edge. I feel him fill me with a snarl of pleasure, both of us dizzy and stupid with joy.

When he’s done, he turns me around and leans his forehead against mine. We stand there holding each other, Finn mostly supporting my weight since I feel like I’ve been fucked into a coma.

“I love you,” he says, biting my lip. “I love you, Dara.”

I blink at him in shock. Hearing him say those words—hearing him speak them out loud—it’s almost more than I can handle.

But then the last week rushes back. My parents in their sad house, their angry relationship, the bitterness.

Contrasted against this thing I have with Finn, this fire and brimstone, this joy and gorgeous pain.

This is the love I want. This is the love I choose.

“I love you too,” I say.

He grunts as if I’ve punched him in the guts and holds me even tighter.

“Finn,” I say, gasping. “You’re crushing me.”

“Shush now,” he says. “Busy loving you.”

“Finn!”

“Fine,” he says, relaxing his grip. But he doesn’t let go. “I want to make a life with you, Dara. I want you by my side. Imagine what we’ll do.”

“I’m guessing a lot of sex. Maybe some more murder.”

“Pretty much.”

I laugh, biting his shoulder, and hold him as hard as I can.

Chapter 48

Dara

Six months pass in a flash. Finn's father won't speak to us, but he also doesn't try to chase us out of town, and he doesn't stop Finn from running his crews.

It takes six months for the senate to get their shit together. I navigate my preggo belly and collapse into a chair with a groan, head tilted back, as Finn sits beside me and rubs my shoulders. C-SPAN's on the TV in the Crowley mansion's rec room. Carson and Nolan are playing pool, chatting with each other amiably, pretending not to be extremely competitive while also trying as hard as they can to destroy the other. Genna's drinking gin with Kathryn at the bar.

"This has to be the most boring, most important thing ever," I say as Finn puts an arm around me. "Are they voting? Why are they just walking around like that?"

"They're voting. See the count at the bottom?"

I grunt and push him. "I'm not blind. I'm just annoyed."

"The senate likes to take its sweet time. Makes them feel important." Finn kisses my cheek. "Do you need anything? Something to drink? I can rub your feet if you'd like."

"My god," Genna says, staring up at the ceiling. "This man once threatened to cut out my tongue for asking him to share his lighter with me. Now he's

offering foot rubs.”

“It’s sweet,” Kathryn says. “He’s doting.”

“He’s pathetic.” Genna throws back her drink. “But it’s kind of sweet too, I guess.”

I kiss Finn’s cheek. “You’re a good husband. But no, I’m fine for now, thank you.”

“Offers all stand.” He beams at me, tosses a glare at Genna, then joins her at the bar.

“Hey, Dara, your guy just voted.” Carson gestures at the TV. “The one that screwed you guys before.”

“Did he make the right choice?” I ask, eyebrows raised.

Carson nods. “No need for you to prepare the car bombs.”

“Lucky man,” I say, hands on my belly. “Otherwise, I’d have to, I don’t know, waddle over there and yell at him.”

Carson laughs and slaps Nolan on the shoulder. “Your shot, asshole.”

“Fucker,” Nolan mutters. He winks at me and gets back to the game.

I sit back and enjoy the friendly chatter. While Finn’s father hasn’t warmed up, at least Carson and Nolan are friendly now. We have dinner with them almost once every week, which is surprising—I got the sense that the boys weren’t close. But I think Finn’s really trying to make himself a part of the family again, especially with the baby on the way.

I also met Liam three months back, the elusive other brother. He gave me one strange look, nodded to himself, and said, “She’ll do.” That’s all, nothing else. Finn steered me away after that.

An hour passes, and another. Finn makes good on that foot rub promise. Around midnight, the final votes come through, and a sigh of relief passes through the room.

There’s no big celebration. Nolan and Carson slap Finn’s back, shake his hands, and head out. Genna, slightly drunk by now, punches him in the

shoulder. “There ya go, ya fucker,” she says, beaming. “Knew ya could do it.”

“I’ll take her home,” Kathryn says, laughing as Genna stumbles slightly. “I’ll also dump some cold water on her head.”

“Hey!”

“Congrats,” Kathryn says, steering Genna to the door.

Once the room’s cleared out, Finn sits beside me on a couch near the TV. C-SPAN shows a bunch of tired old people milling about, shaking hands, posing for pictures. I lean my head on his shoulder.

“Now what?” I ask, genuinely curious. “Your dad got his law. Does that mean he’ll talk to us?”

“Probably not,” Finn admits. “But it’s a step in the right direction.”

“Do you care if he does? I mean, things have been good. Do you really care if he never talks to you again?”

Finn’s face tightens. “Yes. I do.”

“Why?”

He doesn’t answer right away. But finally, he says, “Because he’s my father. Despite everything, that means something.”

“I know what you mean.” I sigh, closing my eyes. “Are we going to fuck our kids up the same way our parents fucked us up?”

“I’ll try not to.”

“But probably will anyway.” I tilt my chin toward him and get a kiss in return. “We can still try though.”

He hugs me tighter and I sink against him like drifting into a warm bath.

Chapter 49

Finn

I hold the tiny, squirming baby in my arms. He coos against my bare chest, staring up at me with his strangely dark blue eyes. Cillian snuggles, lips moving. “He’s got my father’s nose,” I say as something deep inside my body shifts like the thick crack of an ice shelf dropping into black ocean. My center moves. “He’s got your smile.”

“He’s got your bad attitude,” Dara says from the hospital bed, sighing.

Cillian Crowley was born three hours ago, and my life changed forever the moment he came into the world. Dara, my beautiful Dara, she gave birth to my child like a champion. I don’t think I’ve ever loved a person as much as I love her in this moment, and I don’t think I’ll ever come back down from the high I feel holding my child in my arms.

I shift closer to her bed. “Think this skin to skin is doing anything?”

“Who knows,” she says, grinning. “But I love that you’re doing it.”

“I’d do anything for my boy and my wife,” I say, meaning it.

“I know you would.”

I hold Cillian for a while longer, at least until he gets fussy. If I could feed the boy myself, I’d gladly hold him forever. Instead, I help Dara sit up, help her get herself into position, and the boy latches with no problems. I watch her from across the room, the light coming in through the window illuminating her hair. We’re in a suite in the best hospital in Boston, basically a hotel

room, but we could be in a sewer and Dara would still glow.

How it came to this, I'll never understand. From spotting her on the street, to thinking she was beautiful and wanting to bring her home, to needing to keep her more than I've ever needed something before.

Now, our baby, our little Cillian boy. So tiny, still marked by his birth, still beautiful.

There's a knock on the door and a nurse pokes her head in. "Ah, Mr. Crowley, you have a visitor. Is it a good time?"

I look to Dara. She nods, still exhausted from the birth. "I think we're ready."

"Are you sure?" I hold up a hand to still the nurse. "Once we open the floodgates, they won't ever close again. Maybe we can have another hour just to ourselves?"

She beams at me. "I love you so much for saying that, but we both know your parents will murder us if we don't let them in."

"That's unfortunately a little too literal." I nod to the nurse. "Give her ten minutes to finish then let them in."

The nurse disappears back to the waiting room.

I walk to Dara's side, watching my son feed, and feeling a swell of incredible pride. She leans against me, and together, we don't say a word. There's nothing to say—the child is all we need.

It's strange how such a small thing can warp me in such an enormous way.

After a little while, Cillian finishes, and a few minutes later the doors open. I expect my mother along with my brothers, but instead, only my father enters the room.

Dara sits very still. Father's dressed formally in slacks and a button-down. He seems older, his hair grayer, walking with a slight limp. I haven't seen him in months—we've avoided the mansion as much as we could, only going there to visit with my mother, never to see my old man. I run my businesses, control my crew, and pay my dues to the family, but I'm left alone otherwise.

Father's face is tense. He stares at Dara then at the child. He takes a step forward. "I heard it was a boy," he says.

"Cillian." Dara moves so he can see my boy's face. "Do you want to hold him?"

A sudden sharp anger rips into me. I want to tell her to stop—this man can't touch my child. This bastard, this asshole, this psychotic monster.

But Dad nods, his face softening. "Please. I haven't held a baby in—well, it's been a long time."

Dara shifts Cillian. I take him, cradling him in my arms, and walk him over. "Got him?"

Dad takes him, supporting the head, marveling at his grandson. "He's beautiful," Dad says.

Most of my anger drains away. Dad's looking at Cillian the same way I look at my boy, with pure love and devotion.

"He's perfect," I agree.

Father stands in silence, bouncing Cillian, making soft cooing sounds.

Until the doors open, and everyone else floods in.

Mother, Carson, Nolan, Liam, Kathryn, and Genna all pile inside. Dad hands Cillian off reluctantly to Mom and the pair of them congratulate Dara and me—though I didn't have anything to do with it. Meanwhile, Genna and Kathryn sit with Dara, chatting with her about the experience.

"No way in hell am I going to push one of those out my cooch," Genna says, glaring at Cillian. "He is cute though."

"Ah, come on, Genna," Carson says, grinning at her. "You just need the right man."

"Say that again and I'll make sure your manhood ends up flushed down the toilet."

Carson barks a laugh, delighted.

I stand beside my wife, surveying our friends and family, the people we love most in this entire world, as they gravitate around our child. Even Liam shakes my hands and nods, which is about as friendly as he ever gets.

“Why don’t you come to Sunday dinner in a week or two,” Dad says, standing stiffly by my side. “Bring the boy.”

“We can do that,” I say, eyebrows raised. “Are you sure?”

“We’ll discuss business then.” He hesitates. “But I’m happy you two are happy.”

I exchange a look with Dara. That was like watching a pig fly.

Mother kisses my cheek and whispers, “Looks like the baby changed everything. I knew it would. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

I hold Dara’s hand as the visits continue, the baby being passed around, and for the first time in my life, I feel warmth.

Real, true warmth.

Chapter 50

Dara

Cillian shuffles toward me on his hands and knees, crawling along like a maniac. “Easy there,” I say, laughing as he makes some grunting happy noises. I help him stand, holding his hands, and we walk together. He takes hesitant little steps, but at one year old, he’s so close to walking. “You can slow down, you know,” I whisper to him. “No need to hurry. We’ve got your whole life.”

He beams at me, my beautiful boy.

“What’s going on in here?” Finn appears at the door. Cillian makes a little squealing sound, this adorable thing he does whenever his father comes into the room, and immediately drops down to all fours. He crawls over like a maniac and Finn scoops him up. “My lovely boy and my lovely wife.”

“How was work?” I ask, standing to give him a kiss.

“Work was work and now I’m home.” The same thing he says every time. “How are my two favorite people in the world doing?”

“Thriving,” I say, my traditional response.

He sits with us in the playroom on the padded floor, rolling a ball with Cillian, making silly faces, tickling his boy and crawling around on the floor. It’s incredible, the change in him, how he went from cold-blooded mobster to a dad over the course of days. He’s still the insatiable Finn I fell in love with, but there’s something new in him now, something I never imagined I’d see.

Softness. Love. Growth.

The nanny, Sara, takes over and I join Finn in the kitchen. He pours wine and we talk about our days for real. Slowly, he drifts over toward me, like my gravity pulls him closer and closer, and I end up sitting in his lap on the couch, his lips on my neck.

“Father says he wants to expand. He’s thinking about Chicago.”

“Aren’t there families there already?” I ask, frowning.

“He doesn’t give a damn, but yes, there are.”

“It’ll be violent.”

“Yes, wife, it will be.” He beams at me. “Got a problem with that?”

“Weirdly, no.” I kiss him. “How’s Genna?”

“Busy. Ever since she opened her own club, she’s been pushing for another location.”

“Animal,” I say, grinning as he pulls me down for another long kiss.

“And as for you,” he murmurs, hands exploring my body.

“Easy there.” I slap him away. “I wanted to talk to you about something and I need you to save all this—” I gesture at him vaguely. “—for later.”

“All right, love,” he says with a big sigh. “What’s so important you’re making me keep my hands to myself?”

“Another baby.”

His eyes widen. “Now you want to talk about it?”

“You’ve been bugging me about it for months,” I say, shaking my head. “I wasn’t ready, but Cillian turned one yesterday, and now—” I lean down and run my fingers through his hair. “I want another baby. I already miss it.”

“You miss waking up in the middle of the night to do feedings?”

“Well—”

“And the crying? The fucking crying?”

“I don’t miss that.”

“What do you miss, exactly?”

I hesitate, not sure how to explain it, but I try. “I miss the possibility. I miss... I miss the growth. All the newness. Yes, I know, the first few months are really hard, but that’s why we have money.”

“Good point,” he says, tilting his head. “I do know what you mean though. And you know how I feel about this.”

“More babies,” I say, nodding solemnly. “As many as you want. And how many is that, exactly?”

“We’ll see,” he murmurs. “More than two, I can promise you that.”

I sign happily. “Insatiable.”

“You know me.” He squeezes my ass. “Does this mean I can start coming between those lovely thighs of yours again?”

“Fortunately, yes.”

“Good girl.” He gently grips my hair. “Shall we start?”

“Finn!”

“Cillian’s with Sara. I think we’re free for another couple hours.” He stands, lifting me like I’m nothing. “I want to use every spare second.”

“I didn’t mean we’d start right *now*.”

“You should’ve been more specific then. It’s much too late to stop.” He kisses me deep and slow. “I’ve already made up my mind and you know how I get.”

“You’re one stubborn man.”

“Especially when it comes to you.”

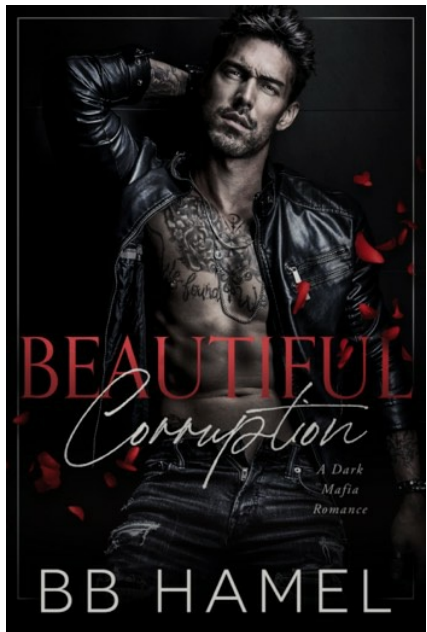
I laugh as he carries me up to our bedroom.

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Preview: Beautiful Corruption



Chapter One: Brice

Seven Years Ago

Today would be perfect if it weren't for Carmine Scavo. He's looking at me like he wants to kill me or kiss me or both and probably in that order.

I refuse to let him get to me. The afternoon light feels like candy on my skin. It's the kind of day that makes getting a sunburn sound like a good idea. The baseball field on the edge of campus is packed with spectators drinking cold beer from coolers. I kick infield dirt and fidget with my glove, not really sure what I'm doing, but happy to be doing anything as the breeze blows through my carefully braided hair and my meticulously white outfit.

I'm not very athletic, but the mysterious and exclusive Atlas Student Organization arranged a series of softball games between the various undergraduate clubs to help local low-income families afford diapers and baby food and stuff like that. Since it's a good cause, I signed up with the drama club and agreed to play second base, even though I have no clue how.

At least I was good at selling tickets and managed to bring in the most money of anyone else, and I heard Laurie Middleton bought ten dozen with her own

cash.

“Look alive, Brice,” Robyn says from over at shortstop, or at least I think that’s shortstop. She jogs over as Sara stretches on the pitcher’s mound and the new batter gets in some practice swings. “You’ve got a man on first and he’s looking at you like he wants to rip your head off.”

I glance over again and Carmine Scavo’s staring back at me with those handsome dark eyes of his. Carmine’s big, muscular, covered in tattoos, and looks like a model as sweat glistens on his skin. He’s one of the Atlas members and I’ve avoided him for the past two years, but I always catch him around at the various parties and functions, sometimes staring at me with a creepy intensity. We’ve never spoken, but I’ve heard rumors: connected, dangerous, deadly, scary. He’s handsome, but terrifying, and I do my best to keep my distance.

There are two worlds at Blackwoods: the upper-crust elite, born with silver spoons, blue-blooded, trust-fund babies, that sort of thing, and then there are the scions of dark money, the sons of mafia dons, the children of dictators. I’m from the former, and Carmine’s from the latter, and I do my best to keep my distance from men like him.

Grandpa warned me once on the eve of my freshman year: *There are people at Blackwoods you’d better not meet. Be careful of them, Brice.*

Sara shoots us a look as she pounds the ball into her glove. “Quit chatting, you two,” she says sharply and cracks her neck. “I’m going to strike this fucker out.”

Robyn laughs, punches my arm a little bit too hard, and jogs back to her spot as Sara goes into her windup. The batter, a big handsome guy named Evander Kazan, smirks at Sara like he wants to pummel her to death. And he probably does. He’s another one of those guys I do my best not to mingle with.

Sara’s first pitch is a ball. I glance over and Carmine’s still staring at me. He has a small lead off the bag and doesn’t seem particularly interested in what’s happening. His eyes don’t stray from mine when I meet his gaze and a chill runs down my spine. Most people would turn away when they get caught looking like that, but it only seems to embolden Carmine. What the heck is with this guy? He tilts his head, a little smile on his lips. Sara pitches again,

another ball. I try not to glance at Carmine, but I can't help myself. He's terrifying and magnetic and everything I'm supposed to avoid.

The next time I turn my head, he gives me a small wave.

I wave back, feeling like an idiot.

He mouths to me, *Having fun?* His eyebrows raise.

I sense a strange tingle in my stomach. It's the same feeling I got when I did one of those shark-cage dives with my grandpa a few years back when I was in high school, like there's something big in the water, and it's hungry. I shake my head and look away, trying not to smile, as Sara grunts and releases a wicked pitch right at Evander.

But the big guy swings. He misses, but he must've screwed up the catcher, because the ball glances off her glove and careens toward the backstop. The crowd erupts with shouts and I barely have time to move over to second base, ready to catch the throw to try to stop Carmine from stealing, my heart racing, Robyn yelling something, the crowd screaming and screaming, and when I look up, he's coming for me.

Six-foot-three, covered in muscles, and barreling down like a locomotive.

I don't move, too stunned to do anything but stare at him, at the muscles in his arms and chest and the way he's smiling, the way he's absolutely freaking *grinning* like a madman, and it happens so fast.

One second, he's sprinting to second base and I'm in the way, and the next he's slamming into me like he's playing football, and the world goes upside down as I smash into the ground with Carmine on top of me.

I don't hear anything, only the steady thud of my heart and a high-pitched ringing. I have a headache suddenly, and lights bloom at the corners of my eyes. I have no clue what's happening or how we got here, but I can't seem to move. Carmine's on top of me, breathing deeply. His heavy, bulky body holds me down on the infield, and I squirm to try to get out of the dirt, afraid that it'll stain my clothes and ruin my hair. I smell his sweat, sharp and acidic, and the minty tang of his breath as his lips move against my neck.

His hands come up my flanks and I don't know why but I'm breathing fast as

his right palm takes hold of the side of my face, and he shoves my other cheek into the dirt, grinding my face into the sandy soil.

I sputter in shock, try to struggle, wriggling and pushing, but he pins me down and shoves my face harder. I feel the dirt grains in my cheek, in the corner of my mouth, on my tongue, god, it's in my *freaking mouth*, in my hair and the corner of my eye, and I groan in disbelief and disgust and overwhelming revulsion.

“There you go,” he whispers softly, eyes so wide they look white as I panic and try to get away, but he's too freaking strong. “God, you're so much prettier with a little dirt on you, you filthy fucking girl.”

I nearly scream, but hands grab him a moment later and haul him away, and Robyn's there and Sara's there, and they want to make sure I'm okay, but all I can do is try to clean the grime off my face, No matter how many times I wipe, I can't seem to make it go away. Tears well up in my eyes, not because I'm hurt, although my back aches and my head's a little dizzy, but because I feel so disgusting, so freaking contaminated and messy, and I can't stand it.

His voice echoes in my mind. Nobody's ever, *ever* spoken to me like that before. *Filthy fucking girl.*

I shove my friends away, crying like an idiot, mortified. All I can see is Carmine grinning at me as people shout angrily at him, but he doesn't seem to mind, not one bit.

He's too busy staring at me.

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