

PRETEND  
EVER  
AFTER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SKYE WARREN

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# ONE FOR THE MONEY

SKYE WARREN



# ONE FOR THE MONEY

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Eva

**B**LACK TUXEDOS. GLITTERING gowns. Splashing champagne.

These things are common in my life. Mundane. I grew up under the glow of chandeliers. Laughter and conversation were my lullabies, the drifting up the spiral staircase to our bedrooms. I learned the plan: these events from my mother, the same way other daughters learn to bake or garden.

This particular gala benefits the Society for the Preservation of Orchids. Ironic, considering the number of orchids we had to kill to buy the elaborate sculpture in the foyer. My mother sits on the board. She cares about flowers.

She cares about connections.

It's the family business, really. Making deals in ballrooms.

My father waves me over to him. He's officially retired. Stepped down as CEO of Morelli Holdings. Replaced by my brother Lucian. Unofficially only stop working when he's six feet underground. It's just the way it's made.

"Hi, Dad." I give him a dutiful kiss on his cheek.

He pulls me close to his side. His mood is magnanimous. Probably because there's a congressman, a famous filmmaker, and an oil tycoon from Texas hanging on his every word. "This is my daughter, Eva. Have you ever heard of her? She's the one responsible for all this."

The group responds with enthusiastic praise.

"The arbor is absolutely inspired," the filmmaker says. "The way you used crepe paper to mimic the tree bark, the way the branches wind

you. It feels like you're walking through a real forest. If you ever want to set design, you have a place in L.A."

My father's hand tightens on my arm. "We could never let her go."

I manage a gracious smile. "High praise, indeed. But you're right. I never leave New York. It's home."

The oil tycoon winks. "That's right. I tried to lure her down to Unlimited barbecue and a swimming pool as big as a basketball court. It couldn't sway her."

My cheeks flush with old embarrassment. The man is handsome in a white-haired kind of way. Smart enough. And definitely rich enough. He didn't even bother asking me out. No, he went straight to my father and offered to buy me in a business deal.

As if I were a head of cattle.

I excuse myself and stride away, directing a server to refill their glasses and know what each of them likes to drink. I know where their vacation homes are and what racehorses they own. It's part of my role as hostess, to make everyone comfortable.

To make everyone comfortable except for me.

My face feels tight from smiling. My feet ache from running around the ballroom. I wore flats until the gala started, then I switched into heels, but it doesn't help. My calves are burning.

Since things are smooth in the ballroom, I swing through the kitchen. The head of the cooks is shouting obscenities at a server who dropped a tray of appetizers. Even I have to cringe at the loss. Each large white spoon contains a thin slice of Japanese Shorthorn Wagyu beef with caviar and mascarpone cream, topped with delicately sliced jalapeños, red onion, and Asian pear.

"Clean this up," I say to the server, mostly to get him away from the kitchen. Will he hire him again? Maybe not, but there's no point making a scene in the middle of service. Then I address the cook. "Do we have any more of that caviar?"

"Yes," he growls, still frustrated. "None of the beef."

"Serve it on crostini with crème fraîche."

"I don't serve boring food."

"You do unless you want the people to go home hungry."

He curses fluently but turns to prepare the tray. My work here is done. For now, anyway. I head back upstairs. On the way I pass the head of

it to do who looks harried.

“We’re out of champagne,” he says, panic in his voice.

“How is that possible?”

I could The top of his bald head shines with sweat. He used to be a top sor at a five-star hotel, but a few hundred of Bishop’s Landing’s elite Texas him to a nervous breakdown. “Some young men. They wanted the bot l courtbeer pong. Champagne pong, they called it.”

“And you gave it to them?”

enough, “Of course not.” He looks indignant. Then he sighs. “Mrs. Crocket gh. But after that vintage of Chardonnay she likes, and I went down to the win her and to get it. Then when I got back, two entire cases of champagne were g

I press two fingers to the middle of my forehead. No champagne aren’t careful, we’ll have a full-scale revolt on our hands. “We hav asses. I wine, right?”

homes “Plenty, madam.”

o make “The signature cocktail of the night is now a white wine s designed to celebrate both the simplicity and the depth of orchids. H bartenders offer it first. If we’re giving them something delicio und all sparkling, they should be content.”

t didn’t “And if someone requests champagne specifically?”

“There’s a couple bottles of Armand de Brignac in my father’s en. One Which I’ll have to replace before he notices it’s gone. He won’t app late of having his private stash picked over. Then again, he wouldn’t like to h ontains guests denied.

carpone That crisis averted, I continue working my way through the room.

ear. My mother waves me over. “There’s someone I want you to me om the says, and she’s already smiling. Which means he must be nearb ng him powerful.

ly more “Who?” I know the entire guest list for this event, which means everyone in the room. Maybe not personally, but I know their nam their net worth. Those are the main things that matter in high-society c

An older man waits near the balcony door. He wears the black well. He clearly works out. And if his hairline is receding, well, he can help that. He looks to be in his forties, maybe ten years older than s done. recognize him as being in the manufacturing industry. “You must rtender, Langley,” I say.

"I see my reputation precedes me," he says, laughing. "Call me Alex."  
"How long are you staying in New York?" I ask, being polite. He  
factories throughout the flyover states, but his home is in Chicago.  
Remember correctly.

"For a long time, perhaps. I'm thinking of moving to the East Coast."  
"Are you?" I say, my stomach sinking as I realize why my mother  
to introduce us. It's her attempt at matchmaking. The irony is that if I  
got married and started my own family, my mother would probably  
it asked nervous breakdown. My father would get arrested for being dru  
e cell disorderly. And my siblings would need something from me. Having  
one." smooths a lot of life's hard edges, but it doesn't blunt them complet  
e. If we still need someone to handle the details. To get my mother her Xanax.  
e white the lawyer. To de-escalate every situation. We need a manager. And  
Morelli family, ever since I turned fifteen, that's been me.

He gives me a vaguely paternal smile. "It's time for me to start a fa  
spritzer, *Not exactly subtle, Alex.* "I wish you luck, then."

"Eva planned this little gala," my mother says, breezing past  
us and comment. "She creates the most memorable displays. People talk about  
for months."

"The perfect hostess," he says, clearly approving.  
study." Bile rises in my throat. Now I know what a racehorse feels like w  
preciate being checked over. *Good teeth. A friendly disposition. Will look nice  
ave theyour carriage.*

"Speaking of hosting, I should check back in the kitchens."  
I make a break for it, but my mother catches up with me. She le  
et," she into an empty hallway and a darkened drawing room.  
y. And "Sit with me," she says. "I feel like we've been circling all  
haven't had a chance to really see you."

I know "I'm right here."  
ies and We *have* been circling all night. That's what we always do, me ma  
ircles. one side of the room while she manages the other. We even do it at  
tuxedo dinners, her with my father, me handling my brothers. We spend  
i hardly energy keeping the peace in the Morelli household.

1 me. I She hands me a glass filled with spritzer.

be Mr. "It's very good," she says.

She usually doesn't leave this long in the middle of a gala. "Can I

ex.” anything?”

le’s got “Langley is worth a nice seven billion.”

go if I “Mother.”

She adopts an innocent expression. “Do you *want* to marry someone poor?”

wanted “I don’t want to marry anyone. And definitely not Alex Langley.”

actually “His wife died five years ago. He’s been mourning her. Sweet, do you have a *think*?”

nk and “Then why are you trying to set us up?”

money “If you must know, he asked after you. He’s ready to start a family. We want someone mature, closer in age to him than the debutantes, but, to call beautiful. You fit the bill.”

l in the “How flattering.”

All of us wear masks. My mother is the exquisite beauty and family hostess. She lets the mask slip only rarely. I’ve only met the true Morelli a handful of times.

ast my This is one of those times.

ut them Her green eyes are an endless field. “Not flattering, Eva. No. Don’t go to men for flattery. Not if you want to be someone’s wife. Flattery is for girlfriends. Their mistresses. Their whores. Not the women by their side.”

hen it’s “Why would I want to be someone’s wife?”

*pulling* “Security. Connections. Children. The same reasons women have married for hundreds of years. Thousands of years, probably. I haven’t evolved that far.”

ads me “Then it won’t matter much if the evolutionary line ends with me.”

The wall goes back up. In the blink of an eye I’m looking at the expression of a society hostess, as remote and poised as anyone. I remember my mother. “You’ll want children eventually. All women do. Don’t wait too long.”

anaging I’ve heard that line before. There are arguments I could make. *family women want to be mothers. And that’s fine. Feminism is about letting women untold choose their own path.*

The words stick in my throat.

Not all women want to be mothers, but in my secret heart, I do.

“Is now really the time?” I ask, my words tight.

get you “You have to settle down at some point.”

“Why?”

“So you have your own home.”

“I’m not homeless, Mom.”

Someone “A real home, not a loft filled with knickknacks. A husband can get that.”

“This is the twenty-first century. And in case you haven’t noticed, I’m not you-loaded. I could buy a house if I wanted. I already own houses, actually

“Places,” she says. “Buildings. Not homes.”

“Because it doesn’t have a penis in it?”

Her eyelids flutter closed. “Eva Honorata Morelli.”

I look past her toward the large picture window. “The truth is that I don’t like children, but I’m not willing to live in a loveless marriage for that.

It’s beautiful out there. Green and maintained and lush. Beautiful to look at. The inside of the house is beautiful. Grand and a little intimidating.

It’s the kind of house I would preside over if I made a society marriage to someone like Langley.

Her tone is conciliatory. “There’s security for a woman in marriage. Don’t look for their freedom.”

“My relationship with your father is complicated. It doesn’t have the same way for you. The man I just introduced you to is a good man. You trust him.”

“I can’t trust anyone,” I say flatly. Because I can’t. Security? Accumulation in society? That’s not what you get when you go with a man. That’s not what you bet on. Ever.

My mother studies me, looking bemused. We’re close as far as mothers and daughters go, but I’ve never told her why I don’t trust men. And maybe telling her tonight.

The door to the sitting room opens.

A man stands there in a tux that speaks of wealth and a bearing that *Not all* his family has had it for generations. Privilege. Power. And enough *women* awareness to make it feel like an inside joke that you’re part of. I

Hughes was a few years behind me when I came up in society. We’re And everyone knows about them. The Hughes family is like the Kennedys—the Vanderbilts—steeped in luxury. Though we’ve never spoken for long.

Blonde hair gleams beneath the low lighting.

Hazel eyes twinkle with roguish charm.

“Finn Hughes,” my mother exclaims, her cheeks pinkening, her eyes going bright.

She lifts her glass just a little, and I wish I had a Diet Coke instead of a spritzer. I feel my own cheeks heating, but I don’t flutter my eyelashes, I’m my mother does. I don’t act surprised to see him, even though I have no idea what he’s doing here.

“Mrs. Morelli,” Finn says with a playful bow. He doesn’t need to be handsome or well-built. Not when he’s the oldest son of one of the most powerful families in the country. He’s painfully rich, but that doesn’t stop him from also being charming. It’s honestly annoying.

“I told you to call me Sarah,” my mother scolds, flirting with a man twice her age.

“Mrs. Morelli,” he says, refusing her with so much grace and respect that no one she can’t be offended. “It’s always a pleasure to see you again. I’ve been looking for your daughter.”

Excitement rushes through me like champagne, like caffeine. Me?

“Sophia’s not here,” my mother says.

She assumes a playboy like Finn Hughes, a man who could have whatever he wants, would want Sophia. She’s the wild child. The one who could go on adventures with him. And suddenly I feel old at the ripe old age of seventeen. I don’t go to exclusive night clubs. I don’t get into trouble, if I could just do what it.

Instead I help my mother plan her events and help my siblings in their other lives. I help and help and help, and it never seemed quite so deep until this moment.

My stomach sinks.

“I want Eva,” he says, glancing at me. That devilish glint in his eyes promises mischief. And maybe even danger. It promises something much more self-different than *help*. “We have plans.”

Phineas He’s lying, of course.

Though I don’t know why.

Maybe he just wants to save me from this awkward conversation or very maybe he really does need help—perhaps the lack of champagne has created chaos.

Sophia would be right for Finn. That’s assuming he’s ever looking for her.



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er eyes would such a man choose marriage? My mother was right about one

Marriage does have more benefits for the woman.

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settle down, which I doubt. Wealthy. Handsome. And far too charming. Why would such a man choose marriage? My mother was right about one thing. Marriage does have more benefits for the woman.

Men can do whatever they want.

Women like me? We have a ticking clock. There's only so long that I'll stay attractive to men like Langley. Only so long that I can have children. My heart squeezes thinking of all the years I've spent being helpful. Thinking of all the years I've spent trying to make sure that my family had what they needed. Paying attention to everything and everyone. Except myself.

And now it might be too late.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Finn

**W**E DON'T HAVE plans.

I made that up three minutes ago when I walked by and heard Morelli trying to set up her daughter with that older man from the gath couldn't leave her there alone.

Alex fucking Langley for Eva? He's ancient.

Maybe not that much older than her, not so much older that it would be a scandal, but he's old. And boring. He's searching for a mate the way you search for a mare for a stallion. For well-bred children. That's what these men want. A woman to bring them a drink at the end of the day, to be the hostess at parties like this one. Plan everything, so he never has to think about anything else. Everything, so he only has to glad-hand at galas.

I'm going to get her out of here.

Surprise flashes through Sarah Morelli's eyes.

I know what I look like to her. A catch. She's put me next to Lizzy at dinner parties, as if I might be interested in a child. We might be in the twenty-first century, but matches are still made. Arranged marriages are still made every day in families like ours.

No, thank you.

I won't be getting married. Ever.

And I'm not particularly interested in the Morellis. Except for Sarah. There's something about her that calls to me. The sense of innate sadness makes me want to cheer her up, which is something I can do—at least in a temporary way.

That's what I'm good for. Temporary.

“You didn’t tell me you had plans,” Sarah tells Eva, half scolding, half delighted smile on her face gives her away. It may surprise her, but nothing if not adaptable. Bagging a Hughes with any daughter would be a coup. “Where are you going?”

“Yes, Finn. Where are we going?” Eva asks, laughter in her voice.

I like this mischievous Eva better than the beleaguered one. Her dark eyes sparkle with silent challenge. It makes me hard beneath the thin wool tux. “It’s a surprise.”

“Indeed,” Sarah murmurs, glancing between the two of us.

Suspicious? Perhaps, but she’s not going to say no to me. Not that I’m persuasive or charming. She won’t say no because my family is the most wealthy and powerful in the country. I could be a bastard, and Sarah would still hand me her daughter on a silver platter.

Eva’s wine-red lips quirk in a half-smile. “As much fun as surprising me, I think I should stay here. After the champagne drought, who knows what might go wrong?”

“We ran out of champagne?” Sarah glances at her almost empty champagne glass. “Is that why we have a white wine spritzer as the signature cocktail? It’s delicious, but I don’t remember seeing it in the event planning events.” It’s time to issue my own subtle challenge to Eva Morelli. Enough with the event planning and the matchmaking. I’m strangled for air, and I’ve been here a few minutes.

It’s like she’s being buried alive with piles of money.

“I can’t tell you where we’re going,” I admit. “But I can tell you what we’ll be doing. We’re going to have a good time. Fun. You remember how to do that, don’t you?”

A delicate snort.

“So much fun you’ll lose track of time.”

“Promises, promises.”

“I don’t make promises I don’t keep,” I tell her, looking into her fathomless eyes. There’s not much I can offer this woman, but I can offer her this.

Eva’s expression flickers with wariness. And with curiosity.

Her mother looks scandalized by Eva’s reaction to me. In another moment she’ll open her mouth and demand that her daughter come with me. I don’t want Eva to come because her mother demands it. I want her to

ing. The because she chooses curiosity.

it she's No, I want her to come because she chooses me.

ld be a I lean against the doorframe as if I have all the time in the world.  
the opposite is true. "How about a bet? If you have a good time tonight  
I win. But if you, in your honest assessment, don't have a good time  
ark eyes win."

l of my "I'll win what, exactly?"

I reach into my pockets. A billfold. An old pocket watch. A handful  
of coins.

because The quarter flips off my thumb and across the room. I didn't get  
one of enough warning, but she captures it anyway. Delicate fingers smooth  
d Sarah the warm metal. "Twenty-five cents? I suppose I could add foam  
Starbucks order tomorrow."

ses can "Have a wonderful meal," Sarah Morelli says.

vs what Eva kisses her mother's cheek.

When she approaches me, her chin is high and her bearing regal  
t-empty there's a hint of vulnerability in her eyes. It's what pulls me to her. So  
gnature damn strong, holding up her entire family like Atlas holds the world. Eva  
n." rubs her shoulders at the end of the day?

n of the I offer her my arm, and she takes it. Very formal.

ve only There's nothing untoward about us. My body doesn't give a fuck  
reacts with a violent sense of victory. *Mine*, it says. The way her arm  
mine, the heat of her body—it's like she was made to stand at my side.

ou what Or maybe I was made to stand by hers.

how to Which is all just my body's way of telling me I'm down to fuck.

I don't think that's in the cards for me tonight, but I find I don't mind  
much. The challenge is more appealing. The challenge to make Eva  
have fun. I escort her out of the room. We're all the way down the hallway  
she starts second-guessing herself. I feel it enter her limbs like stiffness  
or dark, fear, even if she'd never admit it.

ffer her "We don't actually have to go anywhere," she murmurs, as if she's  
me off the hook. As if I should be relieved that I don't get to take her  
date.

second, "Chickening out already?" I ask.

o. But I Her glance is sharp. "Excuse me?"

o come "That's what this is, right? You're afraid I might actually make good

my promise. That you'd actually have a good time, while your family fend for themselves."

Really, Rose blooms on her cheeks. A deep breath draws my attention to the shadowed space between her breasts. Indignation looks sexy on her. "Come on, you my mother, I know that there weren't any real plans. You only said that to shock her. This is a game for you."

"A game?"

"A game," she says, "like everything else in your life. You have money and women and cars, and not a single problem that can't be solved for you to give her a check."

Anger blisters through my veins. Followed by grief. "If you say so to my mother, she's going to expect me to come up with fantastical tales to surprise her. I somehow managed to land with the charming and handsome Finn Hughes."

"You think I'm handsome?"

An exasperated laugh. "She thinks you're handsome. I think she's so annoying."

"You think I'm charming, for sure."

"And full of yourself."

I grin. "Come on, Morelli. Have a good time. I double-dog dare you to fuck. It's not your fault. She throws up her hands in the middle of the large, darkened hall. She can't even imagine leaving in the middle of a gala. What if something is wrong?"

"Let it burn. We've got plans."

She shakes her head, a half-smile on her face. It's not refusal. It's the kind of smile of a woman who's going to let me show her a good time. I take her hand. Morelli leads her away from the bright lights. We leave through a side exit. Gallen watches us from the crown of the house as we go down. My Bugatti is parked outside. Likewaiting there. I texted the valet before I even entered the drawing room.

She's already purring in the gravel drive.

"Your car is already waiting?" Eva says, a laugh in her voice.

"What? I don't do half-assed promises. I stole you away for the night. You're mine for the next five hours. What will I do with you? I have ideas. Lots of them. Hundreds of them." I sweep open the door and hold it for her.

Eva hesitates for a heartbeat. Then she lets me hand her into the driver's seat. "Where are we really going?" she says. "Somewhere in the city?"

has to “No, somewhere here.”

“Here as in Bishop’s Landing?” she says. Because, of course, Eva is here.

“Unlike She should know the places a person would go to have fun in Bishop’s Landing. And I don’t mean champagne fun, I mean alcohol fun. blackout-and-forget fun. Or at least the possibility of it. The possibility of bliss.

money “Yes,” I tell her.

led by a “Will you take me home afterward?”

“Back to your parents’ house?” I ask.

.” “I don’t live in the Morelli mansion,” she says.

is of this No, of course she doesn’t. She lives in the city, but you wouldn’t know how often she’s here. Eva is always at her mother’s society events.

She’s always everywhere her family is.

“I’ll take you home,” I promise, knowing, even as I say it, that I’m going to be able to drop her off at some ritzy loft in the city and drive home. I’ll be thinking of her straight through the next year, and maybe even that. I’ll keep thinking and thinking and thinking until the thoughts turn into something filthy and rough, because I felt her body against mine.

u.” It’s a short drive to the small downtown of Bishop’s Landing. I turn right at an Italian restaurant that serves thin-crust pizzas as big as their heads. I keep driving down the alley. Cars gleam in a neat row behind the businesses. Only one door has sound behind it.

During the day it’s an art gallery. Right now it’s something else entirely.

he look “Where are we?” she asks, whispering.

and and “The gallery. Don’t you recognize it?”

argoyles “Are we going to steal a painting?”

already “No, but I like the way you think. We can do that another night.” I hear a faint, sking sound when she tries to object. “But never fear. What we’re about to do is also illegal.”

Her eyes go wide in the dark. “Finn.”

one night. I like her saying my name in that urgent, breathy way.

ideas, of My body hardens. I’m having explicit ideas of ways I can take Eva to the alley. She’d probably like them, too. I’ve learned that high-society people enjoy a bit of roughness. They want something that silk sheets and hot baths can’t give them.

I knock on the door three times.

In the faint moonlight, Eva gazes up at me. She looks exhilarated  
alive, and breathtakingly beautiful. It makes me want to corrupt her in  
a way I can imagine.

I mean  
the possibility of

know it

and never  
go away.  
Even after  
I turn into

hook a  
table.  
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tirely.

make a  
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and in this  
women  
bubble



I knock on the door three times.

In the faint moonlight, Eva gazes up at me. She looks exhilarated, fully alive, and breathtakingly beautiful. It makes me want to corrupt her in every way I can imagine.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Eva

I'VE BEEN TO countless showings at this art gallery.

Apparently they deal in more than sculpture.

Clay pieces move across baize-covered tables. Alcohol flows free underground poker club is in full swing when we arrive.

“How come I never knew about this place?”

“Overprotective brothers,” Finn says with a shrug.

“Leo knows about this?” I ask, but then of course he does.

He knows everything that happens in Bishop's Landing and most that happen in New York City. It would have been just like him to come in his wild youth—and not tell me. His best friend. We're close, e siblings.

But I can't quite shake the protectiveness out of him. “I'm going him.”

A fight breaks out over a table. Playing cards fly. Men in suits brea

It's over in a flash, but I find myself behind Finn. Somehow, in the seconds, he put himself between me and danger. A shiver runs through delicious one. That fistfight was a reminder that this *is* illegal. But play not, Finn Hughes will protect me.

For this night only, he's mine.

“You okay?” he murmurs, his gaze assessing me, seeing if I'm out by the fight. *Chickening out already?* he asked before we le determined to prove him wrong.

I make a show of looking at a nonexistent watch. “I'm okay, but like you're on your way to losing twenty-five cold, hard cents in that b

“You don’t stand a chance, sweetheart.”

He leads me down a narrow staircase into an even darker room with fewer tables and a singer wearing a sparkling dress. The high roller room is of course a Hughes would be allowed into any room, but it’s interesting that they don’t even ask.

They know him by sight.

Glasses clink. Chips clack. Low laughter rolls beneath it all.

Finn puts down a small stack of hundreds.

It’s immediately replaced by chips.

He puts the entire stack in front of me.

I feel my eyes go wide. “This is too much.”

“I know what you’re worth, Morelli.”

It’s not that I’m a frugal person. I was raised in luxury, and I like the things. Money doesn’t impress me. That’s what comes from being raised as a heiress.

I wouldn’t blink an eye at an expensive dinner or some other purchase.

“Listen, I understand trading money for things. But I don’t understand gambling. It’s trading money for... what? Risk? The chance to win everything?”

“For fun, sweetheart. Don’t you ever pay for fun?”

A snort is not quite a ladylike answer. But it’s true. Even the money I spend on behalf of my family doesn’t feel recreational. No, it’s about status. And business.

I run my fingertip along the stack of clay chips.

It’s a lot of money to spend on fun. And maybe I don’t feel like I deserve it.

The dealer calls for the ante, and I push forward five hundred dollars worth of markers. That’s the entry amount. The minimum to play the game.

It makes my heart pound.

Or maybe it’s Finn, standing so close to my stool.

He’s only standing so close because the rest of the stools are five feet away. I’m sure. He’s only leaning near me so he can see the cards on the table. My heart beats faster, that’s only because it’s been so long since I’ve had a man brush my temple. Since I’ve felt a man against my back, intimate despite the public setting.

Cards are dealt.

I don't play at casinos, underground or otherwise, but I know the n, with The pairs and the straights and the flushes. Which is how I know the c om. Of my hand are a whole lot of nothing. Suddenly that five-hundred-dol g to me feels like a fortune. It feels like a loss.

Why did I think this would be a good idea?

Disappointment sinks in my gut.

Then a low voice murmurs in my ear. "Patience. Good things c those who wait."

My breath catches at the masculine purr. It feels like sex surround sensual cashmere that makes my eyes close. "I've been waiting a long

I'm not sure where the words come from. I didn't feel like I was v I'm not Aurora sleeping in a forest, dreaming of a kiss from ke nice Charming.

I have no interest in kisses.

And Finn Hughes is no Prince Charming.

He puts his hand on my hip. His thumb brushes my skin through erstand of my dress, back and forth, back and forth. It's startling. Intimate. It c to lose excused as a casual gesture between friends. The natural result o proximity. Almost.

Except that it's faintly possessive.

I don't feel like a possession to be bought and sold. I don't even f society. a head of cattle to be bargained for. No, I feel like a jewel. Somethin coveted.

Something to hold close so that no one else steals it.

He caresses me through the bids, through the flop and the turn car left with a single pair of eights. Not exactly auspicious, but bett l-dollar nothing.

The dealer waits for the round of bidding before the river.

This is the last card, the one that determines my hand for good.

So far none of the other players seem like they have incredible ca ill, I'm maybe they're hiding it well. Then again, two of the men seem en . If my with the women who surround them. Three women for two men. An a man's the men wear suits, the women wear barely-there dresses that are m almost glittering swimsuits. Not that I'm judging.

It just makes me feel old in my Dior ballgown.

It's not the ballgown. No, it's my actual age that makes me feel old

basics. Thirty-three is ancient for an unmarried woman in our social set.  
cards in We're waiting for the couple beside us to place their bet. They  
lar anteconfer over every decision, using the opportunity to feel each other up.

They look deeply in love. Or deeply in lust. I'm not sure I even know the difference.

I glance back at the man who watches me.

ome to His hazel eyes deepen to emerald as he looks back. "Go all in."

A startled laugh escapes me, but with our faces this close, my amusement dries up. It's replaced with whatever that couple has—not love, then. "time." I feel my body become liquid and heavy, as if I'm readying myself. I'm waiting in a room full of people, but my body doesn't care about that. It wants to talk to the Princeman. "You're insane."

"I'm interesting," he counters, his lip curling up.

"You're reckless."

"I'm interested," he says, and I know what he means. His tone is clear. His gaze does, too. He's interested in me, the same way the dealer would be interested in the woman he's practically fingering on the stool next to me. I'm close to the dealer. The dealer clears his throat so that they'll make their bid.

"You're young," I tell him, because it's the reason we can't be together.

Not the real reason, but one that's socially acceptable. I'm not some old, lonely, feel like a widow who has a fling with the pool boy. Men his age don't hook up with women my age.

"Bullshit," he says.

"How old are you?"

ds. I'm "Twenty-nine."

er than I scoff. "Young."

His smile turns a little sad. "Age isn't about how long you've lived."

"That's *exactly* what it's about."

"It's about experience." He leans close, so he can whisper. His lips brush the outer shell of my ear as he speaks, raising sparks of interest through my body. "And I think I have lots more experience than you. Don't underestimate me. I'll break you in slowly."

ore like "Break me *in*," I say, my voice too high. "Like I'm a horse."

"Don't be offended. My horses are thoroughbreds."

I know from society talk that Hughes racehorses are legendary. I didn't know how much of that legacy trickled down to Finn. E

apparently. "I'm not a thoroughbred."

have to "Ma'am," the dealer says, snagging my attention.

The couple made their decision. They're in.

ow the It's my turn. Two pair probably isn't enough to win this. But I'm  
one diamond away from a flush. On the off chance I get it, that could  
enough to win.

Or it might not be.

isement I don't like the uncertainty. It makes me nervous. Anxious.

Lust. I Or maybe that's the way Finn watches me. As if he wants to jump  
I'm in a point. That I'm staid, dependable Eva Morelli. That I wouldn't know  
ake this have fun if it kidnapped me and took me to an underground casino.

I push the piles of chips into the center.

A gasp sounds from the people around the table.

akes it "Fuck," Finn murmurs, his hand tightening on my hip. "That was s  
man isof their turn. The dealer brings the bet around again. Against my high  
is. only one man remains. An elderly gentleman who looks severe with a  
face.

ogether. He looks, in Finn's words, experienced. I don't think he'd stay in  
e aging poor hand.

up with Every muscle in my body clenches as I watch the dealer's hand.

He flips a card.

I blink, sure that I'm imagining it. An eight of diamonds sits on the  
fabric. Holy shit. I got the flush that I was hoping for, but even more  
that, I got a full house.

My fist shoots in the air. "Yes."

l." Immediately my cheeks heat at the unladylike action.

Finn releases a low chuckle.

s brush We're hardly being subtle, but it doesn't matter. There are already  
ough out thousand dollars in the pot. The older gentleman reveals a straight  
worry, rueful smile.

"Congratulations," he tells me in a gruff voice.

Excitement overtakes my good sense and my dignity. I throw my arms  
around Finn's neck, laughing. His eyes sparkle blue and green hues.  
But I you good things would come to those who wait," he says, his voice low  
enough, private. They aren't suggestive words, not really. But I feel the

suggestion throughout my body, at the tips of my breasts and between my legs. As if he's rewarding me after a long, tantric session.

"I'm thirty-three," I tell him, waiting for his shock, his stiffness.

m only     Dreading the way he'll have to force a smile.

ould be     He searches my eyes. "Do you think that matters to me?"

"You're a playboy. A rascal. You can have your pick of any woman inside this casino. And any woman outside of it. Why would you want more?"

"A rascal," he says, laughing. "Who says rascal anymore?"

prove a     Despite my embarrassment, despite my awkwardness, I find myself how to laughing with him. Laughing so hard tears prick my eyes. "See? I told you I'm an old grandma."

He shakes his head with silent humor before becoming serious again.

You're an incredibly sexy woman. A bombshell. A goddamn dream come true. You're so hot." man would want you, me included."

outside     I stop breathing for a ten count. "You do?"

h raise,     "Men must make passes at you all the time. Women, too."

a poker     A knot forms in my throat.

"But you don't believe them," he guesses. "You think they're after my money."

I force a shrug. "It's not unlikely. You know what I'm worth. So do other people. They want my money or even just my connections to my family. That's not why I don't pay attention when someone makes a pass at me."

e green     "Then why?"

re than     "Because I'm over love." The words come out fast and honest. I think of me, how much I liked the excitement. Winning. How much I wanted to win again. How much I enjoy having Finn's thumb brush my hip. "And that's the matter. And you know what? Yes. I'm done with fun. You don't have to judge me for that."

several     I pull away from the table, prepared to leave this place.

with a     Prepared to walk away from the best night I've had in weeks. Maybe years.

Some instinct has me looking back. I glance in time to see Finn playing with his armsentire stack of chips, both the ones we started with and the ones I won.

"I told the dealer. "Keep them," he says.

ow and     The dealer's eyes light up. "Sir."

erotic     Tears prick my eyes. I feel young and naive, even though I know

een my ludicrous. Like I really have been sleeping in a forest for a hundred  
And when awakened by Prince Charming, I discovered that he  
billionaire bachelor named Finn Hughes.

When I climb the stairs, there are more people in which to hide.

I plunge into the crowd, hoping he can't catch me.

woman "Maybe I can call an Uber. My driver would be faster, but I don't  
me?" anyone catching wind of this. Not my parents. My mother would be  
to know I spent the evening with Finn. It's more my overprotective brother  
myself who'd give me shit.

old you. A man stumbles into my path.

For a moment it seems like an accident. I even reach out, as if  
"Eva, steady him. He seems drunk. Then he turns his eyes on me, full of  
n. Any and I realize it wasn't an accident. He grabs my wrist and pulls me toward  
back wall. I fight him, but not hard enough. I'm still shocked  
happening.

"Come on, darling. I'll pay more than the house, and I'll be done  
too."

er your It takes me a long moment to realize he thinks I'm a prostitute. Are  
house escorts in addition to the cocktail waitresses?

lo other "Let go of me," I say, yanking, panicking.

ily. But Then there's a sharp sound, and I'm free.

." The man stumbles away, his back hitting the wall. He holds me  
protectively.

t scares Finn is in front of me. "You made a mistake. Apologize."

to do it "Fuck, I'm sorry. I didn't know she was paid for already."

sex, for "Apologize to the lady."

t get to Whatever he sees in Finn's eyes makes him flush. "I'm sorry, ma'am"

Months. After a long, tense moment, Finn nods. Men with bald heads and  
suits emerge from the crowd and drag the man out the back door. The  
have come when they heard a commotion, but they waited for Finn to  
what to do with the man.

ush the Would they have let Finn hurt him?

i, to the That's the power of the Hughes name. I shiver.

Finn is handsome and charming, but it would be a mistake  
underestimate him.

v that's He turns to me as the crowd returns to their games. "Are you okay?"



l years. “Yes,” I say, raising my chin so he believes me. The grip on my f  
was awill probably leave a bruise. But I have long-sleeved clothes to  
Having a childhood like mine made me tough enough to withstand  
random asshole.

He takes my arm in his, surprisingly gentle. Two fingers brush al  
’t wantskin that’s screaming in pain right now. It was crushed and twisted  
thrilledman’s fist. “I should find him and kill him for you.”

brothers Another shiver runs through me. “Please. I have enough testoste  
deal with between my father and my brothers.”

Finn lifts my arm and lowers his head. He places a featherlight kis  
to helpplace where a yellow-blue bruise will be tomorrow. “I’m sorry I didn’  
nterest,you sooner.”

ard the My throat closes. A violent man couldn’t shake me, but kindness c  
this is *So this is what it feels like to be taken care of.*  
Strange. Scary. Addictive.

e faster, “Time to pack up,” someone shouts, and then there’s melee.

Finn drags me against his body, shielding me from the crush. The  
re there shove chips into pockets and purses. The dealers slam a lid on the  
banks in what appears to be a practiced move. It’s happening so fas  
barely take it in.

“What’s happening?” I ask.

his arm The commotion swallows my words, but Finn sees them on my lip  
cops are coming,” he says. “Someone called in a raid. We’ve got to go

im.”

d black

ey must

decide

ake to

?”

“Yes,” I say, raising my chin so he believes me. The grip on my forearm will probably leave a bruise. But I have long-sleeved clothes to hide it. Having a childhood like mine made me tough enough to withstand some random asshole.

He takes my arm in his, surprisingly gentle. Two fingers brush along the skin that’s screaming in pain right now. It was crushed and twisted in that man’s fist. “I should find him and kill him for you.”

Another shiver runs through me. “Please. I have enough testosterone to deal with between my father and my brothers.”

Finn lifts my arm and lowers his head. He places a featherlight kiss on the place where a yellow-blue bruise will be tomorrow. “I’m sorry I didn’t get to you sooner.”

My throat closes. A violent man couldn’t shake me, but kindness can.

*So this is what it feels like to be taken care of.*

Strange. Scary. Addictive.

“Time to pack up,” someone shouts, and then there’s melee.

Finn drags me against his body, shielding me from the crush. The players shove chips into pockets and purses. The dealers slam a lid on the table’s banks in what appears to be a practiced move. It’s happening so fast I can barely take it in.

“What’s happening?” I ask.

The commotion swallows my words, but Finn sees them on my lips. “The cops are coming,” he says. “Someone called in a raid. We’ve got to go.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Finn

**I** HALF-CARRY EVA Morelli out the back door.

If she berated me the whole way, I wouldn't blame her. Instead she laughs. It's a wild laugh. A sexy laugh. The kind you make when diving off a high cliff.

We're in my car and peeling away from the parking lot as sirens come into view. Blue and red lights bounce off bricks. They aren't a patrons. The real goal of these raids is to catch the mysterious Miss woman who owns the underground casino.

It still wouldn't be good to get caught in their net.

Eva Morelli in city lockup? It would be a travesty, but she doesn't seem worried. Or pissed that I gave her such a close call. Instead she's exhilarated.

*This.*

This is what she'd look like when she's seconds from coming, her face flushed, her eyes sparkling, her hand tight on my arm. I don't know if she even realizes she's still touching me. It's like she's holding on for dear life and fuck, it feels good.

Then her smile dims. "No one will get hurt, will they?"

Such a caretaker.

If I told her people might get hurt, she'd probably demand I turn around.

"Those are some of the wealthiest people in the world. The cops are going to risk getting slapped with major lawsuits. They'll be careful if they get caught... which might not even happen. Raids aren't common, but

happen enough that people know the drill.”

“Okay.” She sits back in the low-slung bucket seat. Her hands go to her cheeks, as if checking that she’s still intact. “Okay,” she says again.

“Underground gambling. Running from the cops. You’re a regular player.” She gives a delicate snort. “For two hours, maybe.”

“For two hours, so far,” I amend. “The night isn’t over yet.”

One eyebrow rises. “Haven’t you ever heard of quitting while you’re ahead?”

“That’s not how I play, Eva. I’d rather double down.”

That earns me an eye roll. “You’re such a smooth talker.”

“Do you prefer it rough?” I ask, my tone innocent.

She gives me a glare across the stick shift that I assume is supposed to be intimidating. I just find it sexy. I want her to look at me that way whenever you’re riding me. I want her to challenge me to make her come while she’s on top. Best not to.

God, victory will be sweet.

Except I’m not going to make her come.

She’s not going to ride me.

Not tonight. And probably not ever if she knows what’s good for her. I’m just as well that she’s not known for one-night stands. That way I won’t look tempted.

*Right, Hughes. Keep telling yourself that.*

Eva Morelli isn’t the kind of woman you fuck and walk away from. She’s the kind of woman you keep.

And me? I’m a Hughes. Whether we love them or not, we sure as hell leave them.

One way or the other.

It takes her a couple blocks to realize we’re heading north instead of south. Her gaze goes to me. “Your house?”

Something pangs in my heart. My house. She’s not asking if she can take a tour of the Hughes estate. She’s asking whether I’m going to take her.

I don’t take women to my home.

The idea of Eva there makes my chest feel tight.

“My yacht.”

A smile twitches her lips. “Your yacht.”

“Surely you’ve heard of them. Your family owns several.”

to her “Is this how you impress the ladies?”

“I don’t need a large boat to impress the ladies. I already have rebel.” large—”

“Thank you, Mr. Hughes. That will be all.”

“I was going to say very large jet skis,” I say, all innocence. “Thou you’re appreciate the way you got all hot schoolteacher on me. All pr commanding. It will be that much more fun when I finally bend you c desk.”

A gasp. And then a laugh. “You *are* a rascal.”

“That might be the right word,” I admit. “Even if it is a hundre ed to beold.”

ile she “Along with rogue.”

ries her “Scoundrel.”

“Ne’er do well.”

“I do certain things very well, actually.”

She gives me a reluctant grin. Then her eyes go wide. “That’s your

“I told you it was a yacht.”

her. It’s “That’s not a yacht. It’s a freaking cruise ship.”

on’t be She exaggerates. A little bit. It’s a custom-built superyacht w pools, a hot tub, a glass bottom, an IMAX theater, and a crew of They’re not here. The boat is quiet on the water as I hand Eva out of th

l. “Not that one,” I tell her, leading her past the craft used for event fifty-foot bluewater sailing yacht. It’s the one I take when I want as hell peaceful ride through the ocean. It also offers some of the best views stars in Bishop’s Landing.

I climb aboard and then help her make the hop to the deck.

of east. She wobbles a little in my arms, and my hands immediately go her waist. I steady her in a split second, but I hold her for several he s going after that. Her eyelashes brush her cheeks. Demure? Nervous? Th seduce glances at me, and I see something else entirely.

A fiery passion that’s been banked for years.

Heat rushes through my body in implicit answer.

I force myself to let her go, except for a loose link of our hands. T isn’t in motion, but it sways gently. I don’t want her tumbling over t lead her to the back, where a platform can be used for board

sunbathing.

I throw down a couple of outdoor pillows, making us a nest.

a very Then I pull her down with me.

After an initial stiffness, she relaxes against my side. I'm stretched flat on the deck, my arm around her. My gaze is on the sky, instead of the water. Somehow that makes this moment feel more intimate. I run my hand and fingertips down her arm, teasing out more goosebumps.

over the "Beautiful," she says, looking at the stars.

When you lie down like this, you feel insignificant. That's what it's about. Like I'm a speck of cosmic dust. Like the fate of my entire life and years as well as several thousand other families, doesn't rest on my shoulder.

I look down at Eva's face in profile—her strong brow, her slightly upturned nose, her full lips. Her black silky hair tickles my nose. "Beautiful," I murmur in agreement.

Her dark gaze meets mine. "Thank you for tonight."

"For almost getting you arrested?"

s?" "For taking pity on me. I know that's why you did it."

I don't pretend not to understand. "Alex fucking Langley."

She makes a face. "I mean, he's nice. But going to my mom instead of with two of them, the whole arranged-match thing...I hate it. I'm sure you must get it twenty, too."

ie car. "Something like that."

s to the There's a ticking clock where I'm concerned.

a long, *Get married while you still can*, my mother implies with every breath of the chick she introduces me to. I've already told her I'm not getting married.

And I'm sure as hell not having children. Not ever.

I wouldn't do that to them.

around "At least he's honest about what he wants. In a way that's better than someone asking me out and charming me as if they want...you know, a real relationship."

"What's wrong with being charming?"

"I don't like charming men," she says, earnest.

It makes me grin. "Everyone likes charming men."

he boat "I want a real relationship with you," I say, my voice low in the stern of the boat. I confess.

ling or Her eyes are as luminous as the night sky. "Do you?"

The words are hard to get out. "I can't have it."

Because of my family's secrets.

I don't get that with anyone. Especially not a woman like her.

Hurt ricochets through her eyes. She gives a short nod that doesn't hide the pain.

I've never been tempted to tell anyone before, but part of me wants that now. *It's not you, it's me. It's not you, it's my family. It's not your modern-day curse.*

"Do you know any of them?" she says, gesturing upward. "The star family, "A sailor has to know. That bright spot right there? That isn't s. That's Jupiter."

faintly She squints.

"And to the right... there's the Lion. And the one right above it Denebola. It's bigger and brighter than the sun. And it's the tail star Like your brother."

"Like my brother," she repeats, her words slow and thoughtful going to have so many questions when my mom tells everyone that I gala with you."

"Tell him to mind his own business."

She laughs a little. "No one tells Leo Morelli what to do."

Everyone knows the Morelli brothers are overprotective bastards. makes their sisters off-limits unless you're willing to run the gauntlet wouldn't let that stop me. I have my own reasons for keeping this society "Besides, Sarah Morelli isn't going to tell anyone about one little joyride. "Oh, she's already told everyone at the gala. I'm sure."

I wince, acknowledging she's probably right. Which means my will hear about it. She's no fan of the Morellis, but she's desperate enough than want me married and producing offspring that she'd probably accept it.

"I'll set her straight," Eva says, as if offering reassurance.

As if I'm so intent on bachelorhood that I'd be offended at a rumor. know my theory on this. Double down. Convince her we flew to Vegas eloped."

"Don't," she says, laughing. "She'll start naming our children."

The idea of children makes my smile fade. "Does it matter?"

Eva looks uncertain. "What?"

"What she thinks? Does it matter? Let her believe what she wants."

“Finn.”

“I mean it.” I lift up on an elbow, resting her head on my forearm. My hands aren’t touching anywhere beneath the belt, but it’s still a sexual position. I don’t quite know how I’d look down at her if I was thrusting inside her, making her gasp. I’d lean down and nip her sensitive throat. I’d make her gasp and beg me to do it. No, I won’t do any of that. “We can pretend.”

“What?”

“Let her think we’re dating. If she thinks you’re already seeing someone else, she won’t push you to marry Alex fucking Langley. Or anyone else. You’re a star for a while.”

“She wouldn’t keep it a secret. She’d tell absolutely everyone. Even in Bishop’s Landing, everyone in New York, maybe everyone in the world; that’s why she’s here.”

“But it’s not real.”

“Who cares what people think? It will get her off your back.”

“He’s the queen. She looks back at the stars. Her profile makes her look regal. And it would get your parents off your back, too, right? It works both ways.”

“Right,” I say, though I don’t care as much what my mother says.

Nothing, absolutely no amount of coaxing or browbeating, would convince me to marry. It’s not just a personal preference. It’s a question of ethics. I’d never saddle a woman with someone like me.

Then she turns to look at me. Her expression steals my breath away. “She’s stunning. She’s always looked this way, hasn’t she? At balls and

At charity dinners. She’s always been an untouchable goddess, only I can touch her right now.

For as long as we’re fake dating, I’ll get to keep touching her.

“Okay,” she says, her tone resolute.

“Okay?”

“I’ll pretend to date you.”

“Thank God,” I say, and then I can’t help it. I kiss her. It starts with a brush of lips. It turns into more. I nibble her full lips, and she opens her mouth. A gasp. A question and answer. A seeking and a solace. She smells so good. I want to inhale her again and again, until my lungs are full, until she pleases every part of my being.

I want to take the kiss deeper. To explore her fully.



Instead I force myself to pull back. “To seal the agreement,” I manage in a hoarse voice.

Her lids are still heavy, her dark eyes hazy with pleasure. After a moment they clear. She searches my expression for something, I don’t know what—and—what she finds, but it makes her nod.

Then she pulls me down for another kiss. Her lips are so welcoming. They promise comfort at the end of a hard day. They fit like poetry written on concrete, incongruous beauty in a harsh, barren landscape. At least she’s the one who takes the kiss deeper. Her tongue darts out, curious and a little playful. And I reward her with a gentle, explicit suck. *This is exactly what everyone wants to do to your clit*, I say with touch instead of words. *You taste so good.*

I’m struck with the thought that I might not be able to stop.

That I might be out here on the deck of my boat for the rest of my life, kissing Eva Morelli. Even when the sun rises, even when it sets again. Like when fall comes, even when the boat sails away for some vacation or business trip, I would still be here kissing her.

Everyone else can handle their own shit.

It’s an absurd notion. I have too much to do. I have responsibilities. My family depends on me. The company depends on me. The secrets of the industry depend on me.

And if I waited here long enough, if I kissed her for long enough, she would know.

That is the problem with forever.

I already know how it ends.

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Instead I force myself to pull back. “To seal the agreement,” I manage in a hoarse voice.

Her lids are still heavy, her dark eyes hazy with pleasure. After a long moment they clear. She searches my expression for something. I don’t know what she finds, but it makes her nod.

Then she pulls me down for another kiss. Her lips are soft and welcoming. They promise comfort at the end of a hard day. They feel like poetry written on concrete, incongruous beauty in a harsh, barren landscape. She’s the one who takes the kiss deeper. Her tongue darts out, curious. A little playful. And I reward her with a gentle, explicit suck. *This is what I want to do to your clit*, I say with touch instead of words. *You taste so fucking good.*

I’m struck with the thought that I might not be able to stop.

That I might be out here on the deck of my boat for the rest of eternity, kissing Eva Morelli. Even when the sun rises, even when it sets again, even when fall comes, even when the boat sails away for some vacation or other, I might still be here kissing her.

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It’s an absurd notion. I have too much to do. I have responsibilities. My family depends on me. The company depends on me. The secrets definitely depend on me.

And if I waited here long enough, if I kissed her for long enough, she would know.

That is the problem with forever.

I already know how it ends.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Eva

**S**OMEONE'S KNOCKING ON the door.

That's the only thought that enters my deep sleep. I pull a pillow c head, wanting to prolong the dream. To remain in the place when Hughes kissed me and kissed me until I was nothing but an exposed n need.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

The doorman would only let up someone in my family.

And if they're showing up at—I squint at the alarm clock—six morning, that means they need help. That thought propels me into a throw on a silk robe over my nightgown and pad to the door.

My eyesight is still a little fuzzy, but I recognize my sister thro peephole.

I open the door. “What’s wrong?”

My youngest sister looks pale and worried. “*Eva.*”

She throws herself at me, and I catch her in my arms. I haven't h like this since she was a child, and I was comforting her after a nig “Lizzy. What on earth?”

She pulls away and seems to notice my state of undress. “Did I wa up? Oh my God. I did. I'll go. I can come back later.”

“Don't even think about it.” I guide her to the settee. My loft is eclectic, something that drives my mother insane. There are jewel to interesting textures. The occasional stamp of whimsy. All of it superfluous now. I sit down beside her and hold her hands. “Now what's going on.”

She looks absolutely stricken. “Don’t freak out.”

Of course my immediate reaction is to freak out. Internally. But I have a lot of practice with a poker face. Not the kind you use in an underground casino. The kind you use when your family is coming apart at the seams and you’re the only one who can hold them together.

“Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out. Okay? I promise.”

“I think I might be pregnant.”

The words come out garbled. *I think I might be pregnant.*

They take a moment to fully understand. I can feel the blood draining from my face, but I maintain my poise.

“Have you taken a test?” I manage to ask.

“No, but I’m late. My period, I mean. It usually shows up like clockwork, but it’s been six days, and there’s been no sign of it. I don’t know what to do.”

Six days late. Not a good sign for someone who’s regular. Not pregnant, either. It might be a false alarm. “I’m glad you came to me to take a test, and then we’ll know for sure.”

“But what if...”

“We’ll figure it out,” I remind her. “I promise.”

A discordant cheerful ring comes from my bedroom. My phone.

This is more important than any phone call except... what if someone else in my family needs me? It’s still early to be calling about nothing.

“Stay here,” I say, squeezing Lizzy’s hand. “I’ll be right back, and we’ll do this together.”

I dash into my bedroom, already thinking about where I can find a pregnancy test. There are none in my loft, that’s for sure. Maybe I can ask the concierge. It’s a full-service condo, so they’ll bring me groceries or lattes.

Or pregnancy tests, most likely.

I dig through the clutch I used last night. My hand lands on something foreign. I pull out a handful of heavy, round poker chips. They must have fallen inside during play. Or maybe Finn slipped them inside. It brings me back to the night before into crystal-clear focus.

Not a dream, then.

Am I really fake dating Finn Hughes?

I dig through the chips until I find it: the quarter he gave me. *If you*

*a good time tonight, then I win. But if you, in your honest assessment have a good time, you win.*

ground Now I owe him twenty-five cents.

ms and My mom's frozen smiling face appears on my phone.

"Hey."

"I can't believe you didn't text me, at least. How did it go?"

"How did what go?" I peek back into the living room. Lizzy tw  
hands together. I wish I could offer her more reassurance, but fuck. I  
in from she's pregnant, this is going to be a shitshow. My parents will lo  
Catholic minds. My brothers will probably start a war with whoe  
father is. This is about to be a circus.

orkwork, "Your *plans*," my mother says, impatient. "Your plans with Finn I  
what to I can't imagine why you didn't tell me about them. And why you ma  
search the mansion for you."

roof of *He wasn't really searching for me.*

. We'll The words are on the tip of my tongue.

*He only took pity on me because you wanted me to marry Alex Lan*  
I could explain to Finn that our little game of pretend was a ba  
after all.

And then I'd have no excuse to see him again.

omeone No excuse to kiss him again.

"It was a fun date," I say, my heart pounding.

nd then "A date?" My mother sounds like she's about to blast into orbit. "I  
sure. The way he looked at you... but of course he did. You're be  
find aAccomplished. And way too good for Alex Langley. A Hughes, Eva.  
can call wonderful."

roceries "We're just seeing each other," I add hastily. "It probably won't tu  
anything."

"If you play your cards right, it can turn into everything."

nething I glance down at the quarter in my hand. "I'm serious. We're to  
st havebut in a very shallow, non-commitment, Tinder-hookup kind of way."

ngs the She ignores this, of course. "You only have to keep him en  
through the courtship. Compliment him. Please him. Make him fee  
big, strong man."

"Gross, Mom."

ou have "At least until you get a ring on your finger."

t, don't "I can't imagine why I've resisted marriage so far."

"You have to bring him to dinner."

"Maybe. Mom, I have to go. There's a... thing I have to do." I  
with finding a pregnancy test for my baby sister. And ending with  
sure Finn is still in agreement about the fake dating. Last night still  
like a faraway fever dream.

ists her I force my way off the phone and call down to concierge.

Fuck. If A few tense minutes later there's a knock at the door. Goddamn  
se their oldest concierge. He gives me a kind look and an unmarked pap  
ver the "Thank you," I say, handing over a tip.

"Any time, Ms. Morelli."

Hughes. As soon as the door is closed, Lizzy traps herself inside the ba  
ide him with the box.

Five minutes pass. "Liz?"

Her shout comes through the door. "It says I have to wait!"

Another ten minutes pass. "Lizzy?"

gley. "Not yet!"

id idea, "Lisbetta Anne-Marie Morelli, open this door."

Her voice is muffled this time. And thick with misery. "It's unlock

I open the door to find her sitting on the floor, her back to the w  
head in her hands. "I can't look at it. I'm going to throw up."

I pick up the little test, not caring that my sister peed on it a few  
wasn't ago. There's only one line. My heart thuds. I read the instructions  
beautiful twice, three times. Just to be sure.

That's There would be two lines if she were pregnant.

No lines if the test were broken.

rn into One line means she's definitely not pregnant. *Oh, thank God.* That  
I want to say out loud. Instead I force myself to say a calm,  
nonjudgmental, "Negative."

gether, "Are you sure?" Then my sister jumps up. She does the same thin  
reading the little instruction packet to be sure. "Oh my God. It's negat  
thralled my *God.*"

I like a Then she bursts into tears.

I guide her back to the settee, where I comfort her until her  
wrenching sobs turn into little whimpers. Then I guide her gently i  
guest bedroom, where I tuck her in a ridiculous amount of blankets. I

the sound machine and set the fan to high. I make sure the drapes are tight so that no morning light can seep in. Then I look down at her. Starting already sleeping. There are faint shadows under her eyes. How much making has she lost worrying about this? I lean down to give her forehead a pat. I seem to know she's technically an adult now, but I can't help treating her like a precocious little girl from years ago.

Part of me wants to wake her up and demand to know who had stolen her bag.

The more sane part of me knows that she already has four overprotective brothers. She doesn't also need an overprotective sister. There's a reason I came to me. Because she knew that somehow I would keep a cool head in a storm.

I return to the living room and stand there for probably far too long. It's been a strange twelve hours.

Another knock at the door. "You've got to be kidding me," I mutter.

It's my brother Leo, the one closest to me in age, standing in the doorway with a curious expression on his face. With black hair and dark eyes, quintessential Morelli. All of us got that from our father. My mother's hair and green eyes stand out whenever she's in a family photo. Though I've never seen the shape of her eyes in my brother.

He's dressed for the office. "Hey."

I lead him into the kitchen and start coffee. That's for him. I pre-emptively add a dash of caffeine in the form of Diet Coke. He goes to my fridge and pulls out a can of Diet Coke—once, which he hands to me the moment I turn away from the coffee.

"Don't make too much noise. Lizzy's here."

He glances toward the bedroom. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I say, because he doesn't need to know about the pre-emptive strategy session. It's true that we share pretty much everything. We also came to this arrangement to protect the other siblings from our dad's drunken rages. If Lizzy were actually pregnant, this would turn into a strategy session. But since she's not, I did, negative, he doesn't need to know.

ive. Oh The heart palpitations alone cannot be safe.

He looks skeptical. "She slept over?"

"If you must know, she was worried about starting college. She had a heart-over and had a little emotional breakdown, and I put her to bed."

nto my "Damn it. Does she need a tutor? A pep talk? Does she need—"

turn on "All she needs is a good day's sleep. Shouldn't you be at work?"

closed now?" Or at home. Ever since his marriage he's been pretty much g  
: She's his wife, Haley's, side. Finding out she's pregnant only made him te  
h sleep more clingy. I don't know how she deals with him.

kiss. I "I'll be at work soon enough. And I need you to come to the off  
like the week. I have papers that need your signature."

I crack open the Diet Coke. It's cold, bubbly, and most impo  
ex with reliable. "You know, you should give Haley my seat on the advisory  
She's your wife."

etective "I want *you* on the advisory board. That's why you're on it."

son she "But Haley—"

d. "Haley wants to write stories. She has no interest in my business."

}. "Who said I had any interest in it?"

r. "Please. You love giving endowments to God knows who."

r. "You would know who if you bothered to read my quarterly report

allway "I do read them, sister mine. Which is how I know you can read a l

, he's asheet and manage a high-stakes project better than anyone on my payr

er's red This is an old argument. I've done work for Leo, before the fou

gh I can was up and running. And I was fine with inheriting Leo's business w

wasn't married. It's more than inheritance. I would be the acting C

would have been an extension of my work for the family. But now th

refer my married, he has his own beautiful family. His own heirs. "How's H

t a can, haven't texted her in a few days."

"Tired." For a split second, worry crosses his face. Then it's gone,

slipped it into his pocket like a wallet. Out of sight. "Uncomfortable. /

still has two months to go."

gnancy "You never got back to me about the menu."

ogether "That's because her taste changes every single day. Yesterday she

y were peaches. Only peaches. God forgive the chef who tried to give her a

it was and blueberry cobbler. You would have thought blueberries were pois

"Then it's all the more important that I have a list of what she

eat."

"Then I get a text on the way here." He pulls out his phone, beca

e came brother isn't above a little theater. He reads off the screen. "*What's th*

*with the melty cheese?* This was before seven a.m. So I ask if she

fondue, which I thought was a reasonable guess."

k right I nod, unable to hold back my smile. "Of course it was."



cluded to “No, she says. The one with the melted cheese on top. So I  
n times Croque Monsieur. Rarebit. French onion soup. I must have named fifty  
with melted cheese on top.”

ice this “Was it nachos?”

“How the hell did you figure it out?”

rtantly, “Sympathy hormones,” I say with a light laugh. “I’m just thinkin  
board. what I’d want if I were super pregnant. And I can probably serve na  
the baby shower.”

“Don’t bother. I had the executive chef of Merida make her someth  
lunch.”

“The man has Michelin stars, Leo.”

“And he was happy to make a pregnant woman something she crav  
was especially happy when he saw the generous investment I made  
s.” restaurant.”

balance My brother’s love for his wife is over the top, which is beautiful to  
oll.” Terrifying to experience. Risky. Dangerous, when you’re a teena  
ndation caught in a game with a much older man. I shake away my past. “  
/hen he taking good care of her.”

CEO. It He looks pensive. “I hope so.”

at he’s “She’s lucky to have you.”

laley? I He gives me a pointed look. “I heard you went out with Finn Hug  
night.”

as if he “Mom exaggerates. You know that.”

And she “I didn’t hear it from Mom. I heard it from a friend. Someone who  
an underground casino, who thought he saw my sister. No, I told hi  
sister would never go to an illegal club that got raided by the police.”

wanted My cheeks heat. “Don’t freak out,” I say, echoing Lizzy’s words.

a peach He gives me a dire expression. “Eva.”

on.” “Finn and I hung out. It was no big deal. Really.”

likes to “He’s a player.”

“You think I don’t know that? He’s a good time. I’m not ex  
use my anything different. But you should know something. We might be...  
at thing dating.”

means A slow blink. “Come again?”

“We might be *pretending* that we’re *dating*.”

“I might be having a stroke. Are you dating Finn Hughes or not?”

tell her I roll my eyes. “It’s a fake thing, just to get Mom off my back about things Langley.”

“What about Langley?”

“She tried to set me up with him. Apparently he’s done mourning his wife and ready to find a new baby-making machine. And like she says about not getting any younger.”

His expression turns dark. “I’ll talk to her.”

“No, don’t. I can handle her. And this whole Finn thing should get me going for my back for a while anyway. I’ll let her dream about wedding colors while before we break up.”

“Daphne’s wedding colors aren’t enough?”

“Nothing’s enough for Mom.”

“Christ.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“Are you okay, Eva? Seriously?”

I swallow around the knot in my throat. Leo knows what I was like. You’re the lowest. He knows about the heartbreak. About the way it swallows you whole. I lived in a state of waking slumber for a long time after that.

You could say that I was still in it when I was at the gala last night. And I was woken with a kiss.

That’s the last

she was in  
him. My

expecting  
pretend

I roll my eyes. “It’s a fake thing, just to get Mom off my back about Alex Langley.”

“What about Langley?”

“She tried to set me up with him. Apparently he’s done mourning his late wife and ready to find a new baby-making machine. And like she said, I’m not getting any younger.”

His expression turns dark. “I’ll talk to her.”

“No, don’t. I can handle her. And this whole Finn thing should get her off my back for a while anyway. I’ll let her dream about wedding colors for a while before we break up.”

“Daphne’s wedding colors aren’t enough?”

“Nothing’s enough for Mom.”

“Christ.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“Are you okay, Eva? Seriously?”

I swallow around the knot in my throat. Leo knows what I was like at my lowest. He knows about the heartbreak. About the way it swallowed me whole. I lived in a state of waking slumber for a long time after that.

You could say that I was still in it when I was at the gala last night.

And I was woken with a kiss.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Finn

**E**SCAPE SOUNDS LIKE Eva Morelli laughing with joy when she gets home.

Reality sounds like dishes clanging in the kitchen and indistinct yelling. I drop my coat and my briefcase right there in the foyer and stride through the sounds.

My father stands in the middle of a disaster, arguing with a nurse about what he'll eat. The nurse deals with him patiently and faintly pleading. A mustache must have been going on for a while. A questionable splat of red on the wall is probably the remains of spaghetti sauce.

An onion is half chopped on the butcher block counter. A puddle of oil lounges in an empty skillet. Eggs roll, still complete in their shells, onto the floor. Somehow they didn't crack when they fell. A minor miracle.

My father loved to cook. I suppose that shouldn't be in the past tense. He still loves to cook. And I would be happy to let him, if he could be careful with knives and hot metal.

"Dad," I say, coming to hold his shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"She keeps giving me dinner. It's breakfast time. I tried to tell her."

We don't argue with him about the time. It won't convince him. There's no point. If he doesn't want spaghetti, he doesn't have to eat it. "Would you like to eat?"

"An omelet. I can make it. I can make it myself." He tries to pull me toward the half-chopped onion. "You have to tell that woman I can make an omelet, for God's sake."

Jennifer Brown has been one of his nurses for years. He can't remember

her name. Someday he won't remember my name, either. She turns her back, wiping a perfectly clean counter from far away. She's giving us privacy, she's also staying nearby in case I need help. For the most part I deal with my father when I'm home. Occasionally, if he fights long and hard, I have to hit him. It's for his own safety.

"I can make you an omelet," I say, my tone gentle.

We learned early about sundowning. It's when an older person becomes confused and argumentative at night. "You're a good boy, but you couldn't toast."

My laugh is soft and soundless. It's true that I'm not much of a cook, but I've picked up a few basic skills in the years since I've been a boy, though not as good as a full-grown man. Jennifer can make you an omelet. She does it the way you like, not too fluffy.

He gives her a suspicious look. "Why is she here? Where's Geneva?"

A knot forms in my throat. He asks after her every day. There's no answer, but I've tried them all. "She's out right now. A gala. Would you like Jennifer to make you an omelet? I see onions there. What else? Carrots? Cheese? Spinach?"

"I can make it," he insists.

"Dad."

"Why doesn't anyone trust me? I'm the master of my own home, and I'm a grown man, aren't I? How dare you tell me what to do. I'll ground you for the week. If I were your father I'd turn you around and spank your bottom bloody."

"Dad, stop."

"Stop telling me what to do!"

He yanks away with sudden force, and I let him go. It's always a struggle, how hard to hold him. It's cruel to treat him as a prisoner, but it's necessary, and I let him hurt himself.

"What's that?" The area between those is a large expanse of gray.

It seems to take him by surprise, the fact that he's in midflight.

He stumbles back. *Crack*. An egg turns to mush beneath his bare foot.

He looks down, confused. "Why are there eggs on the floor?"

Jennifer sweeps back in. My father allows her to guide him to the kitchen. She fusses over him, and he turns passive as she cleans the egg off his face.

I grab a box of mix from the pantry. "Pancakes."

er back, My father blinks. “Pancakes?”  
icy, but “I can make pancakes, at the very least. They won’t be too burned.  
with my “Geneva likes them that way.”  
to stop My mother does prefer pancakes well done. At least, she did bef  
stopped eating carbs. She loved when the butter turned crisp at the  
Dad used to give her a hard time about it, but of course he’d cook th  
on getsway she liked.  
ild burn He’d tease her about it, back when there was still laughter in this h  
The mix is the easy kind. I only need to add water. When the pan i  
ok. I’vepour the lumpy batter in the center and wait for little bubbles to rise  
. “Thentop.  
ice and “What do you want to drink?” Jennifer asks.  
There’s no frustration in her voice. She’s a wonderful caregiver. :  
i?” Patient. And most important for this position, discreet. I don’t fee  
io goodbecause she’s paid a lot of money to do it. That, along w  
rou likererecommendation, allowed her to purchase one of the smaller homes  
heddarwest end of Bishop’s Landing. Her salary put her two sons through Ha  
Not bad for a single mom who went to night school to become a nu  
“Orange juice?” she suggests. “Or how about a glass of milk?”  
both going along with the morning routine, because it’s easier than a  
ren’t I?There’s only one tough thing about mornings—  
ught to “I want coffee.”  
id whip “Mr. Hughes,” she says, soothing.  
“No, make it a flat white. I need a pick-me-up to face the day.”  
Even if it were morning, we wouldn’t give him coffee. And defini  
espresso. Caffeine makes him more querulous. We don’t even keep a  
truggle,in the house. If I want to drink coffee, I do it at the office so he doesn’t  
igent to I slide a plate with two pancakes toward him. “Extra syrup. The w  
like it.”  
He frowns down at the plate. Then he looks outside, where it’s sha  
Like the dawn, I suppose, but there’s a heavier quality to it that sp  
not. evening in summer.  
“What time is it, Phineas?” he demands, his eyes huge, sorrowful.  
e chair. “It’s morning, Dad,” I say, handing him the syrup pitcher. It’s an  
foot. piece from the eighteen hundreds, ceramic with a profusion of red and  
flowers hand-painted across. We once had a set of two. A memory cc

me—Dad throwing the other one. A crash of white ceramic and bowl  
” against the wall, right where the spaghetti Jennifer cooked remains.

“What do you have planned today?” I ask.

ore she “A lot of meetings.” He sighs. “I swear some days are all meetin  
edges.no work.”

em the He starts listing names, but they’re not anyone who works at the  
company now. They’re not his business partners from the present. The  
ouse. old business partners from twenty years ago, when he was a young m  
is hot, I starting out. His first business partners.

e to the Some of them are friends he has at the golf club.

“That sounds good, Dad. Real good.”

“I might sign a deal. Now that’s a good meeting, when you sign  
Skilled.Ink on paper. Makes the world go round, son.”

I guilty This is the game that I play with my father. It’s the act we repeat o  
ith myover again. He tells me about a fictional life, and I pretend it’s real.  
on thehis doctors told me to do that early on. I was trying to tell my dad th  
rward. Trying to make him understand.

irse. The doctor took me aside and said, “Don’t. It’s stressful for you,  
We’re stressful for him. Whatever he says, agree with it.”

rguing. I had been upset. “So I should pretend?”

“It’s not really pretending, because it’s real for him,” she said.

“Where are the properties?” I ask him now.

He proceeds to tell me about a new development near the Palis  
small collection of private homes. “Not as lucrative as condos, of cour  
tely notthey’ll keep the view clean.”

Keurig Dad cares about things like clean views. And clean air. It’s a f  
t see. noblesse oblige for him. Despite his rigorous work schedule and his  
ay you commitments, every few weekends we’d go down to Bear Mountair  
take a dusty Range Rover and fishing poles as props. *These people dep*  
dowed.you, he’d say, gesturing to the families packed in the public parks. *Eve*  
eaks of*than the politicians they vote for. It’s not only our employees who*  
*Hughes Industries. The entire economy depends on what we do.*

Then we’d return home to the billion-dollar Hughes estate.

antique “I have to check on a few things,” I tell him. “Will you be all right’

orange “Of course.” He waves me off. “Go finish your homework.”

omes to I was only eight years old when we’d have those talks, but he had

ld paintearily. Because that's what the disease does. Even then it was eating  
his brain.

By the time I was sixteen I was running Hughes Industries.  
gs, and I manage the empire my father's father passed down to him.  
And I do it well.

family It's not pride that makes me say that. There's proof. There are pro  
y're allexpanding companies. Mergers. Celebrations. Retirement parties  
an, justconference room. It doesn't really matter if I would have wanted som  
different. I've been groomed for this role since I was in preschool. Eve  
my father knew what his fate would be.

He knew that he'd forget everything.  
a deal. His knowledge of business. The company of friends. His wife.  
them, gone by the time he was thirty. Oh, he's still the CEO publicly.  
ver andworks from home. I'm the one who goes into the office. I have access  
One ofof our email addresses. I can forge his signature as well as mine. I bri  
e facts.into the office every six months to shake hands and wave, as proof of l

That same fate awaits me. Early onset dementia has run in the far  
and it'sgenerations. Awareness of my downfall is never far from my mind.

Of course, I wasn't only taught to run the business.  
I was taught that I needed to marry and produce an heir. Someone  
could train from their toddler years to take over the Hughes empi  
entire extended family depends on it. Tens of thousands of employees  
ades, aon it. The economy depends on it.

rse. But Except I refuse.

I'm not going to saddle any woman with my ticking time bomb of  
form ofI'm not going to bring another soul into this world with disease embe  
s socialtheir body. It ends with me. No, I'll raise my brother. That's the only  
i. We'dI'll leave behind. The family, the employees, the economy—they'll  
end onfend for themselves.

on more I'm not going to force someone else to maintain the charade tha  
rely onlife.

It's all fake, which is perfect for me.  
I have a hundred things to do for Hughes Industries tonight before  
?" bed. Another hundred things to do starting tomorrow at 5 am. But a  
think about is Eva Morelli.

to start She is beautiful with those sad eyes and tragic secrets.



away at *I don't like charming men.*

What is she hiding? I have no right to ask, not with my own secrets

It doesn't take me long to find her email address. It was already  
inbox, tacked on to a group message from last year to the dono  
Bishop's Landing fundraiser. Someone forgot to put them in BCC.

fits and  
in the *Eva,*

nothing *You. Me. Dinner tomorrow night at 8 o'clock.*

en then, *-Finn*

I'm already knee deep in a balance sheet when I get a ding on my p

All of  
He just *Finn,*

to both *I wasn't sure you were serious about fake dating.*

ng him  
ife. *-Eva*

nily for I answer.

*Eva,*

e who I *The first rule of fake dating is you don't put it in writing.*

re. Our *Also: dead serious.*

depend *-Finn*

*P.S. Tell your mother.*

a brain.  
dded in  
· legacy  
have to

t is my

I go to  
ll I can

*I don't like charming men.*

What is she hiding? I have no right to ask, not with my own secrets.

It doesn't take me long to find her email address. It was already in my inbox, tacked on to a group message from last year to the donors of a Bishop's Landing fundraiser. Someone forgot to put them in BCC.

*Eva,*

*You. Me. Dinner tomorrow night at 8 o'clock.*

*–Finn*

I'm already knee deep in a balance sheet when I get a ding on my phone.

*Finn,*

*I wasn't sure you were serious about fake dating.*

*–Eva*

I answer.

*Eva,*

*The first rule of fake dating is you don't put it in writing.*

*Also: dead serious.*

*–Finn*

*P.S. Tell your mother.*



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Eva

**T**ECHNICALLY SPEAKING, I have a job.

I'm the Director of the Morelli Fund, an organization dedicated to families. You wouldn't think it was a full-time job to give away millions of dollars every year, but it is. In the wrong hands that money would be lost or worse, embezzled. Finding organizations with both the integrity and the framework in place to make use of the money takes time.

And despite taking care of my parents and my siblings, despite the parties and the dinner parties and the brunches, despite the merciless whirl of my life, I have time.

Finn said he knows what I'm worth. It's not a small number. Most of my money comes from my parents in a trust that pays out annually.

More money than I could ever spend.

Then there's the property. Leo gave me a deed for my nineteenth birthday. It was a rundown duplex, but the start of an empire. He wanted to build it himself, not relying on family money. He gives me property every year.

For my thirty-third birthday he gifted me a cottage in Vail.

The word *cottage* is a joke. It has an infinity pool and stunning panoramic views. Nestled on top of its own little mountain, it's worth a cool four million dollars.

I could sell some of the properties, of course. But I don't. They have sentimental value. Some, like the condo in Reykjavík and the villa on the Amalfi coast, I rent out using a management service. Others, like the cottage in Vail, I keep for personal use.

But my loft in New York City came from a different place. I inherited it when I was nine years old.

My great-aunt was what they called an Original. She was vivacious and unpredictable. I admired her from the time I was born. In a family that valued appearances and morality, she was a breath of fresh air. I would run through her penthouse in Tribeca whenever we visited. Mom would admonish me to be careful. “Don’t break the art,” she said, giving a sideways glance at a white ceramic statue of nymphs cavorting through reeds. It took place beneath a chandelier made of origami cranes. Priceless ornaments nestled among handmade and thrift shop finds. Nothing was labeled. Most of it was strange. And everything was interesting.

When she passed away of cancer, I was heartbroken.

Her loft became my haven.

I maintain my old bedroom in my parents’ house. There’s a designated suite for me in Leo’s mansion, but this has been my true home since I was a child. It’s where I spend most of my time, even where I do

most of my work. The fund has official space within Morelli Holdings, but it’s easier and less intimidating for people to meet with me at home.

Today that includes a pitch from a charity that helps LGBTQ+ youth who are in crisis. Of course the cause is worthy. That’s how they got the appointment with me. My job is to make sure they have the structure and place to provide care. They’ve come with a PowerPoint and a glossy plan for how they can spend five million dollars in the next three years.

I narrow my eyes at the final estimates. “What about infrastructure costs?”

The director of the charity frowns down at her chart. “I’m sure you’ve covered in the startup analysis. Or maybe somewhere else.”

“I want to see confirmation of that. And a breakdown of that section.”

“Of course, Ms. Morelli. Thank you so much for the opportunity. I’m so grateful for the chance to speak with you. We hope you’ll consider it.”

I stand and shake hands with her before escorting her out.

My phone rings. Half my mind is still on the pitch I just saw. It’s about the cause, but I saw the panic in the director’s eyes. They may not have infrastructure. Which might make the entire budget unworkable.

In any event, it illustrates that they aren’t ready for a donation of that size. It might like this break my heart, but we won’t turn them down entirely. Instead,

arrange a smaller donation, something manageable for them.

Which also means we'll be able to help more charities.

ous and I don't give a fuck if Morelli Holdings only donates so that they'  
valuedtax write-off. We do real good in the world at the fund.

through My mind is still on the projections when my phone rings. "Hello?"  
n me to "Ms. Morelli," comes a smooth voice over the phone.

ce to a I feel my cheeks grow warm. "Mr. Hughes."

ride of "It occurred to me this morning that we had skipped a few ste  
ntal artunderground casino is all well and good, but what happened to t  
Much ofwoman out to dinner?"

"Is that an invitation?"

A low laugh answers me. "Is that a yes?"

It's been a long time since I've flirted like this. And the last time  
even afurtive, tinged with guilt and shame and eventually heartache, that  
e homelittle resemblance to this.

lo most "I thought you might be tired of me," I say lightly.

but it's "Never. And besides, if we're going to pull off this fake relations  
need to be believable. We can cover the basics tonight, like that movie  
ith whoCard."

got an "My favorite color is a deep, emerald green."

ures in "I sleep on the left side of the bed."

printed "There's an old scar on my left knee from when I fell out of a tr  
father grounded Leo for a month for making that rope ladder."

tructure "The only food I'm allergic to is chamomile, something I fou  
during an unfortunate visit to a Michelin-starred restaurant whc  
e that'schamomile panna cotta."

My heart feels full with the momentum of the moment. "So wo  
n." date be a pretend date or a real date?"

. We're "A pretend date," he answers promptly, which makes my stomac  
us." even though I should know better. "But it has to appear like a real date

That's how I find myself agonizing over my dress the next evening  
a great It shouldn't matter, but it does. He's twenty-nine years old. I'm  
cludedolder than him. I don't want to dress like someone his mother wo  
Not tofriends with. I shove aside a conservative Dior dress that would look a  
. Timesat any charity board meeting. Then again, I don't want to appear li  
ead I'lltrying too hard to appear young. I push past a skintight black dress.

This isn't even a real date.

*Ridiculous, Morelli. Get a grip.*

ll get a     This isn't a real date, so I don't have to worry about impressing a  
That's the magic of a fake relationship. There's no sex, no expectations, no  
tender kisses beneath the stars, most likely. That makes me sad. My  
don't have to choose between them. Maybe, if Finn is amenable, we  
kiss again during this fake relationship.

ps. An     I flip across to one dress and the next. Nothing works.

aking a     Nothing, nothing, nothing.

The doorbell rings. I go and open it and find my sister, Sophia, standing  
outside, her arms stuffed with fabric. "Don't despair, sweet sister. I'm  
save you."

was so     "Who even told you?"

it bore     "Mom's telling the whole city, naturally."

Part of me wants to tell her the truth. *This isn't a real date. It's p*

Then again, the more people who know about it, the more risk there is of  
hip, wediscovery. And Sophia isn't precisely known for discretion.

Green     Another part of me wants to know what it would be like to have a  
date. Even if it's only pretend, it will have to look real. Maybe it will  
feel real.

"My closet looks like a bomb went off."

ee. My     She pushes sunglasses up on top of her head. "Let's get to work."

I step back. "Thank you for saving me."

nd out     "Nooo problem," she says in a singsong voice.

made     Sophia loves fashion. She knows all the designers in New York City  
some in Paris. Which means she also has access to their samples, if she  
uld thenicely.

One after another, she arranges the dresses on the bed. "Try them on, then  
h sink, first."

."     I go with it into the bathroom and come out a moment later, wearing  
scarlet. "This is way too short."

already     "Turn around," she says. I do, but I can practically feel it rolling  
ould beass.

at home     "I can't wear this."

ike I'm     "You look great in it," she says. "But if you think it's too short, I'll  
one."

We go through two more before I find it. The gold wrap dress accentuates my curves rather than hiding them. I stand in front of the mirror, turning this way and that.

Mom says, "A power dress," Sophia says with satisfaction.

Maybe I could dress." "Yes," I say, looking at how lush my ass looks right now. "It is a power dress."

She claps her hands. "He's going to freaking die when he sees you."

I give her an impulsive hug. "Thank you for this, sister mine. Seriously."

"Hey. Of course. You do enough for me. For all of us. And it's a rare waiting when you actually need or want my help. I was happy to do it."

here to A rare day when you actually need or want my help. I hadn't realized I'd been so resistant to help. Maybe I do need to get better about accepting support instead of always giving it.

Well, let's not go that far.

pretend. But the dress is beautiful.

re is of The doorbell rings, and Sophia goes to answer it.

She comes back with Mama.

is a real The scent of Chanel N°5 hits me before she does. Then I'm wrapped in silk-covered arms, with air kisses on either side of my cheeks. "I had you."

"It's not prom."

"It's not every day one of your daughters goes on a date with a Harvard guy."

Fake date, I hear in my head. It's only a fake date. There's no real me to feel so out of my depth with it. It is fake. It just has to look real. I go to a real restaurant and eat real food. We might have a real kiss at the end of this night.

"Let me look at you," she says, standing back. "Sophia dressed you like this. You have an eye, darling. She looks ravishing. I wouldn't have picked her, but look at her. She's stunning. He won't know what to think."

my face I've never heard so many kind words from my mother, one after another. Oh, she loves her children in her own distracted way. But a long marriage and a grueling social status have always taken precedence over my life.

"Thanks, Mom."

try this I feel almost embarrassed at how much I like myself in this dress.

"There's one more thing," Sophia says.

ess that One more thing turns out to be a bloodred lipstick. She wipes off mirror, had before and replaces it with a bold, sensual color. It makes n worldly and brave.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask, even though I can’t change it. I power even look away. That’s how impressive the woman standing in front of mirror looks. It’s only a pretend situation, like the date itself, but .” moment it doesn’t matter.

usly.” When we come out of the bathroom, my mother claps. “Perfect are day Eva. You and I have never talked about this before, but if he asks to c coffee after the date—”

zed that “Mom.”

cepting “Are you going to tell her about the birds and the bees?” Sophia looking delighted.

“She has to know,” my mother says.

“I’m thirty-three years old.”

“There’s no need to be embarrassed,” she says, her tone sc “You’ve never been interested in boys. In fact, your father won’t pped in perhaps you were interested in women.”

l to see Pain forces my eyes closed. If only they knew that I lost my v when I was nineteen. I gave more than my innocence to that man. “I sex before.”

ghes.” “Oh.” My mother blinks.

ison for “Please don’t look so shocked.”

l. We’ll “This is fascinating,” Sophia says, eyes bright with humor.

the end “I don’t understand why you aren’t having this conversation with say, pointing at a sister who’s having way too much fun with this.

u? You “Everyone knows Sophia’s had sex.” My mother.

it off a “Does the scarlet letter on my clothes give it away?” Sophia asks.

I hold up my hands before my family drives me insane. “Listen, fter the had sex. Which is great, but more importantly, I will *not* be having s oveless Finn Hughes. And more important than that, if I was going to have : in her wouldn’t talk to you about it.”

“Men like lingerie,” my mother says, not even remotely deterred.

“I really don’t want to hear this.”

“You can’t wear it at the restaurant, obviously. But when you bri back up here, you can say you’re going to slip into something



“What comfortable.”

“This sounds like porn,” I say.

“Bad porn,” Sophia says, wincing.

As if to punctuate that proclamation, the doorbell rings.

Finn looks incredible in his suit. He greets me warmly before turning to my mother. “Mrs. Morelli. Sophia. I didn’t know you would be here.”

“We just dropped by to see our lovely Eva,” she says, as if it’s no big deal. “And she told us she had plans with you. Again.”

“I do seem to be monopolizing her company. But what good comes of that?” He grins at me, as if he knows that my sister came here to dress up like a bird and that my mother came here to talk about the birds and the bees. And somehow, it’s all a joke that we’re in on together.

He has that effect.

It’s not embarrassing, in this moment. It’s effervescent. Like life is a drink.

“We’re going to the new Italian restaurant on the Upper East Side,” she says, giving her a lopsided smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll have her home by curfew.”

“Don’t worry about that.” Somehow the cheeks of this fifty-something-year-old woman turn red. As if she’s remembering our conversation about porn. “I’m sure whatever time you two kids get to bed will be fine.”

The word *bed* hangs in the air between us.

Sophia’s eyes twinkle with barely suppressed glee.

We go outside to where Finn’s car is waiting. He hands me a black Lamborghini. I admire the twinkle of the gold fabric in the moonlight. “I’ll be right back,” he says, returning to his seat and gliding onto the road.

“How many cars do you have?” I ask.

“A few.”

“One for every day of the month?”

“Not quite that many. Although if I count the cars at other properties,” she says, that makes me laugh. “So you like cars.”

“I like speed,” he says. “Cars. And horses.”

“Thoroughbreds. I remember.”

“Well, did we pull it off? Did your family believe it?”

“Oh, they believed it. They believed it a little too well. If you’re not being careful, my mother is going to find a way to trap you in a real relationship.”

“A shotgun wedding?”

“You’d have to get me pregnant for that.”

“We’d have to have sex for that.”

“Which isn’t happening,” I say, feeling prickly from the conversation about lingerie. And porn. “Not because I’m a virgin, though. I’ve had sex before.”

He does this soundless laugh. “Good to know.”

“You’re mocking me.”

“You’re a thirty-three-year-old woman. Of course you’ve had sex. I’ve had it sex. I’m not one of those uptight assholes who can’t stand to be compared to other men.”

“Lots is a little much.”

“But don’t worry. I’m not afraid of competition. When you screw me, my name it won’t be because I was first. It will be because I was best.”

Heat kindles between my legs, which is strange, because I don’t like cocky bastards. Or maybe I do. The man I loved before wasn’t like this. “I’m humble. I’d been so dazzled by him in the beginning. His interest in me was special, as if we shared something.”

He looked at me like I was the only woman in the world.

It was only later that I realized he could give that look to many women.

He was a charming man. A seducer. A much older version of the man I loved. Which is the reason this fake relationship doesn’t have a chance of working for real, even if we wanted it to. Men like that have no reason not to screw into a woman. Not when every woman is willing.

Of course there was a dark side to Lane.

He turned possessive toward the end. He called it love, though I’m not sure if he even believed that. There was an obsessive tinge, though I followed me to college when I tried to leave him. He only wanted to screw me, but he ended up ensnaring us both.

“...”

“I’m not  
in a relationship.”

“You’d have to get me pregnant for that.”

“We’d have to have sex for that.”

“Which isn’t happening,” I say, feeling prickly from the conversation about lingerie. And porn. “Not because I’m a virgin, though. I’ve had sex before.”

He does this soundless laugh. “Good to know.”

“You’re mocking me.”

“You’re a thirty-three-year-old woman. Of course you’ve had sex. Lots of sex. I’m not one of those uptight assholes who can’t stand to be compared to other men.”

“*Lots* is a little much.”

“But don’t worry. I’m not afraid of competition. When you scream my name it won’t be because I was first. It will be because I was best.”

Heat kindles between my legs, which is strange, because I don’t like cocky bastards. Or maybe I do. The man I loved before wasn’t exactly humble. I’d been so dazzled by him in the beginning. His interest in me felt special, as if we shared something.

He looked at me like I was the only woman in the world.

It was only later that I realized he could give that look to many women.

He was a charming man. A seducer. A much older version of Finn. Which is the reason this fake relationship doesn’t have a chance of working for real, even if we wanted it to. Men like that have no reason not to stray. Not when every woman is willing.

Of course there was a dark side to Lane.

He turned possessive toward the end. He called it love, though I’m not sure if he even believed that. There was an obsessive tinge, though. He followed me to college when I tried to leave him. He only wanted to use me, but he ended up ensnaring us both.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Finn

**I**'VE IMAGINED HAVING sex with Eva Morelli plenty of times.

What man hasn't? She's a beautiful woman.

But I've never thought about who she does have sex with. Presumably she dates—real dates, not pretend dates. *I don't like charming men.* Presumably she isn't interested in a relationship, presumably she has hookups, sometimes. Pretty much everyone single pairs up after those glamorous parties and galas. She might be too busy when she plans them for her parents and her brothers, but she attends them, too.

There's always Tinder, though I can't imagine her showing up to a party right or left. I can't imagine mere mortals having a chance with her like a goddess. Like you'd visit her at a temple, arms full with precious offerings.

"So who was the lucky guy?" I ask, being a nosy fucking bastard, the one who took Eva Morelli's virginity. Someone from high school, maybe?

Even in the darkened car I can see her cheeks flush. "Does it matter to you?"  
I have a feeling it does. There's an extra heaviness in the air. It makes me even more curious. There's never been gossip about her. Not that I remember.

Never that casual conversation that haunts her siblings and cousins. *you hear? Sophia Morelli is dating a DJ who lives in Los Angeles. Tiebreaker: she's fucking a secret Constantine bastard. Selene was caught in the locker room of the 49ers with one of the players.*

No one in our circle can escape the gossip, but somehow Eva has.

Which means she either lives like a monk, or she's been with people

demand extreme discretion. Some politician, perhaps. Visiting royal out of the question.

“Come on,” I say, coaxing. “You can trust me. I won’t tell anyone.

“I know you won’t tell anyone,” she says, laughing a little dissipates some of the old grief in the air. “Because I’m not going to anything.”

She would need discretion if the person were married.

That would explain the absolute silence.

If the relationship continued, it would also explain why she was a fake relationship.

I’m not judging Eva. I’m not even judging this random person, who they are. We’re well past the times of Bridgerton, but in our social world people still make marriages based on money and connections. That’s probably why we can’t seem to find any love. That’s probably why we can’t seem to find any love.

Even if “Where are we going?” she asks as I take a turn away from the East Side restaurant I told her mother about. It’s a very nice restaurant, the kind that Eva Morelli can go whenever she wants. She can go there whenever she wants, but it’s not what she needs.

She needs excitement, like the underground casino.

She needs... Finn Hughes. Not the real Finn Hughes, buried under a mountain of secrets and grief. The surface-level version. The illusion of a carefree, easygoing player. The man who can flirt with the mother and father in the same night.

“The I drive through Chinatown and over the Brooklyn Bridge.

“/be.” Curiosity brightens her dark eyes.

“r?” Our destination is an abandoned warehouse park on Columbia. It’s somewhere she would have been before, with its rusted doors and concrete. Some of these buildings actually hold crates full of imported goods. Some of them deal drugs. One is a club that favors lo-fi music and opium. A few are just empty. *Did one?* Well, it’s arguably the worst one.

*Ernan is* I park the car, and a man jogs over wearing a white polo shirt and dark slacks. “Sir.”

“Take good care of her,” I say, handing over my keys. A couple hundred dollar bills passed from me to him ensures my car won’t get stolen while we’re inside.

“Where are we?” Eva whispers.

ty isn't     Excitement tinges her voice, reminding me of other times she  
              sound this way. Breathy and curious. How she would feel underne:  
"             moaning my name. I force the idea away because there's also a note  
e. ThatProbably because it sounds like there's a riot happening inside the b  
tell youThe metal walls shiver in constant strain. The noise, and maybe e  
              bodies inside, push against it. They threaten collapse.

              I take her hand. "Somewhere fun. You liked that last time. I thoug  
try it again."

nts this     "Are we going to play poker?"

              "No, but we're going to gamble."

whoever     She glances around, where all other pads are dark. "My security  
sphere,have a fit."

doesn't     *Not safe. You're not safe for her.* "We can leave if you want to. I  
              the hostess would give me a table if I showed up without a reservati  
: Upperwent out a couple times six months ago."

ant, the     Eva shakes her head, laughing. My words had loosened her a  
eneverwhich is what I hoped they'd do. "So she'll give you a table with  
              woman? Are you really that good?"

              Surprise races through me. Followed by lust. She clammed up  
r layersasked who took her virginity. I thought she'd retreat completely, but h  
arming,is making innuendo. "Better, sweetheart."

ick the     "I'm almost tempted to watch you try."

              "And I'm almost tempted to take you back to the car, spread you  
              the goddamn sunroof, and lick your pussy so well you see stars. Th  
              you'd know for damn sure how good I really am. But I promised I  
It's notyou home by curfew, and if I start now I won't stop until morning."

broken     She stares at me, lips parted in shock, eyes dark with arousal.

s. Some     Fuck, she's beautiful.

and this     My cock throbs, but I force it down and nod at the bouncer. He op  
              door, unleashing a whirl of sound and lights. We head inside to the b  
d blackkid who's perhaps thirteen at most, with uneven complexion and  
              eyes. At night he helps Old Max run the books. During the day, he ru  
undred-curve in math for a New York State public school.

olen or     "Name," he says.

              It doesn't matter that I've known the kid since he was four ye  
Charles won the city's Mathathon, sponsored by a youth charity t

would Hughes family supports. At the last charity picnic, he called me Uncle  
ath me, None of that matters here.

of fear. “Finn Galileo Hughes.”

uilding. He writes it down.

ven the “Galileo?” Eva asks, laughing.

“It’s really my middle name.” Though that’s not why I said it. I see  
ht we’d amuse her for the brief, glittering moment we share. It’s like a bubble  
on the air. A perfect sphere that can only end one way—in destruction.

“Bet,” Charles says.

I hand him a stack of hundred-dollar bills.

r would Nimble fingers fly through the bills, checking for more than  
denominations. The texture, the weight, the ink. He can spot a fake  
’m sure than a Fed. “Ten thousand,” he says, confirming the amount. “Your pic  
on. We

“Who do you think?” I ask Eva, pulling her close.

“I don’t even know who’s fighting.”

anxiety, I show her a picture on my phone, which shows two snarling, n  
another fighters facing off. Matthew Thorn is the incumbent. Roth Wagner  
newcomer. “Come on, Eva. I have ten thousand dollars riding on  
when I decision.”

ere she “This doesn’t tell me anything,” she cries. “They both look scary.”

“What are the odds?” I ask Charles, who rattles them off without gl  
at the screen.

out on “Seven point five to one, favoring Thorn.”

at way “What’ll it be, beautiful?”

’d have “Are they really going to hurt each other?”

“It’s a fight to the death, Eva. And the clock is ticking.”

“Wagner,” she says on a hard exhale.

Of course. It’s very much like Eva Morelli to go for the underdog.  
ens the Does she even realize how rare that is? Especially for people fr  
ookie, asphere. We understand the privilege of money, how having some I  
shrewd having more. We understand the power of the incumbent. Eva knows  
ins the but she has something else. She has hope.

Charles enters the bet and turns to the next person in line.

ars old. With a light touch at the small of her back, I point Eva toward the s  
“I still have your quarter,” she says. “From before.”

hat the “Keep it,” I tell her, rubbing my hand over the small of her back

le Finn. this small touch feels important to me, almost vital. “Double or nothing

“They aren’t really going to hurt each other, are they?”

“Maybe.” Our relationship is fake, but when it’s just the two of us  
going to be real with her. Honest with her. “Maybe not. But either way  
chose to be in that ring. You don’t stumble into it. You work your way  
aid it to for years.”

floating “Why?” she asks, sounding genuinely curious.

I shrug. “Some of them like to fight. Anger in physical form. Some  
them are focused on power. A few look at it like an art form. Technique  
form and even elegance.”

ian the “Is that why you come here? For the elegance?”

e better There’s an open spot on the steel bleachers, and I guide her there.  
ck?” definitely well dressed for the event, but we’re not the only ones in  
wear. We’re not the only ones who ditched comfort for excitement. “  
here to entertain beautiful women.”

nuscled “And that works for you, does it?”

r is the “Absolutely. Something about watching two men beat each other  
n your pulp makes women hot. It’s positively bloodthirsty.”

“Don’t get your hopes up that it’ll work this time. I’m expecting  
horrified.”

lancing A cry goes up from the crowd as Thorn is introduced. He enters the  
with all the swagger and pride of a born performer. The fact that he poses  
with his fists is beside the point. Another roar as Wagner enters the ring.  
He looks fierce and determined.

He knows he’s expected to lose tonight.

I don’t make my living by throwing punches, but I know something  
facing long odds. I know about hurtling toward pain and humiliation  
way to stop. You face it with your head held high, because that’s all you  
om our left.

eads to “Thorn looks... mad.”

it, too, He does look mad. Even more than the usual posturing. I wonder  
there’s some personal beef between them. That doesn’t bode well for the  
thousand dollars. Thorn already has the advantage, and if he brings  
seats. game, Wagner will go down.

The bell rings.

κ. Even Nervousness races through her body. I feel it like electricity where



g.” her skin. The first punch is thrown, and she burrows close to my body. opportunistic bastard, so I tuck her tight against my side, her soft breasts? I’m against my hard chest, her hair like sleek night.

ay they The boxers dance around each other.

ly there A punch. A dodge. They circle each other again.

They’re learning each other, the same way Eva and I learn each other’s bodies in constant conversation. *Do you like that? Yes, more.* I stroke her back with my thumb.

que and Thorn rushes in, secure in his past victories.

Wagner was clearly prepared and fights back with vicious precision.

The long, powerful exchange brings the entire warehouse to its feet. We’re Eva jumps up, stepping onto the rattling metal bleacher in order to shove the tall men in front of us.

‘I come “Is he hurt?” she demands as Wagner staggers back. He touches his head to the ground, but he’s standing again, back in fighting stance before he can advance.

r into a It’s a solid match, but Thorn clearly has the advantage. He has more weight, more muscle, more experience. He’s not as fast, but the blows he lands send Wagner reeling.

In a burst of speed, Wagner strikes, throwing Thorn against the ropes. The crowd erupts.

erforms “Yes,” Eva shouts, jumping and clapping.

uilding. Her hesitation about the brutality evaporates in the face of excitement. She’s one with the crowd now, cheering for her favorite, shouting encouragement when he’s hit.

g about A one-two punch, and then Wagner is on the ground.

with no The ref steps in to start counting, but the fighter staggers to his feet. You haven’t looking steady, though. The fighters dance around each other, but the clearer one is fading.

Thorn pummels Wagner, relentless, stone-cold.

nder if There’s a reason he’s the returning champion.

hat ten- Eva tightens her grip on my arm so hard her knuckles turn white. “

s his A “Yeah?” I ask, my lips on her temple.

We have to be this close because it’s loud in here. She won’t let go otherwise. And we have to be this close because she’s clinging to me. I touch her excitement and fear.

I'm an  
sts lush

Mostly we have to be this close because it feels so damn good to h  
“You were joking about the fight to the death, right?” she asks.

“The ref will stop it if he goes too far.” The word *ref* is a lofty t  
what the man in the ring actually is. His only job is to keep them from  
each other.

her, our  
her hip

And to count down at the end.

Wagner throws a hard jab, and Thorn's body recoils from impact.  
Eva gasps. This is not a choreographed fight routine. This  
something for television. It's real. Fists crack against flesh. They tack  
n. other, use vicious holds that wouldn't be allowed in any of the real  
t. Even matches.

ee over  
ne kneegolden lights in her dark eyes. I feel the shock in the crowd. Then eve  
e Thornshouting.

She's shouting in the following moments.

I should be watching the fight, too. But I'm watching her. Surprise  
ne kneegolden lights in her dark eyes. I feel the shock in the crowd. Then eve  
e Thornshouting.

“He's coming back,” she says. Though I can only tell becau  
s more looking at her lips. The crowd consumes her voice. Something  
ows he happening in the ring, but I don't care. I'm mesmerized by her exciter  
almost looks like arousal. This is how she'd be when I'm thrusting ins  
es. when she's begging me to go harder, faster, deeper. Then I'd cha  
angle. I'd press that spot inside her with my cock. I'd rub my thumb c  
clit. Her head would fall back. Her eyes would close. Bliss would o  
tement. that beautiful face.

houting  
et. He's

Her shining gaze sweeps back to me. “He's coming back,” she say:  
To hell with the boxing match.

A roar goes up around us. The bell clangs.  
Someone has won the match, but I don't care who. I pull Eva cl  
but it's kiss her. It starts off hard and demanding, a possessive press of lip  
thousand dollars is riding on that bet, but it's not more important th  
Not more important than this.

I lick at the seam of her lips, and she parts them with a surprise  
Finn?” Did she think she was safe from me? Did she think she was safe as  
we were watching boxing or playing poker? I want her too badly for  
ear me deepen the kiss, and she responds with a sweet submission that ma  
in both hard as stone.

Male calculation takes over. How quickly can I get inside her? Is t

old her empty closet somewhere in this warehouse? Can we make it to the  
park somewhere private?

erm for A nip at her bottom lip is a promise—a promise unfulfilled.

killi She pulls back, her cheeks flushed with arousal, her eyes bright  
surprise.

Her shock checks me. She didn't expect us to kiss, because we  
really dating. This is a wild night out for a woman who specifically  
is not interest in relationships. That's why she needs to get her mom off her  
back. That's why she needs this fake relationship.

Desire leaks from her expression, replaced with slight embarrassment.  
Eva Morelli doesn't kiss passionately in the middle of a crowd.

Except she did, with me. It makes me want to kiss her again, to prove  
myself.

Someone jostles her from the back. I catch her body securely  
mine, but it's enough to shatter the moment. The shouts of the crowd  
use I'm over us. Wagner is doing a bloodied and bruised victory lap around  
the ring. While we were kissing, he won.

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She pulls back, her cheeks flushed with arousal, her eyes bright with surprise.

Her shock checks me. She didn't expect us to kiss, because we aren't really dating. This is a wild night out for a woman who specifically has no interest in relationships. That's why she needs to get her mom off her back. That's why she needs this fake relationship.

Desire leaks from her expression, replaced with slight embarrassment.

Eva Morelli doesn't kiss passionately in the middle of a crowd.

Except she did, with me. It makes me want to kiss her again, to prove the point.

Someone jostles her from the back. I catch her body securely against mine, but it's enough to shatter the moment. The shouts of the crowd pour over us. Wagner is doing a bloodied and bruised victory lap around the outside of the ring. While we were kissing, he won.



## CHAPTER NINE

### Eva

**A**DRENALINE RUNS THROUGH my veins, making me feel shaky and overt

Adrenaline from the fight.

Adrenaline from the kiss.

Finn held me as if the world were ending, as if the cacophony surrounded us was an apocalypse, as if that was our last chance.

It strikes me now, as I look at his hard-set profile, that he often has that intensity to his actions, as if he knows there's a ticking clock counting down his time.

"Why do you come here?" I ask.

After crowding the bookie for their winnings, people jammed through the parking lot to get out of here. Rather than fight the rush, Finn led me on a walk away from the warehouses, down to the dark, gravel beach. If you take a boat and followed the coast long enough, you'd eventually reach the place where he keeps his boats. There are no boats here, though. No yachts, no cute little seafood shanties and gift shops. This isn't precisely a good town. It isn't a safe part of town, but somehow I feel safe with Finn.

That's probably a mistake.

The intensity of the kiss proved there's something deeper inside that grief, maybe even an anger, that he keeps behind a thick screen of charming, playful insouciance.

"Because it's a good time," he says lightly, but I can tell now it's a

"It is a good time. In fact now I owe you fifty cents." But I'm coming to know him better. Spending time together, even in a fake relation:

giving me insights into the man behind the quirked half-smile. “There’s more to it than that, though. I think you seek out places like this because you—”

His eyebrows raise. “Because I what?”

“Because you want to experience everything while you can.” The words tumble out of me. My intuition is sure that’s the case, though I don’t know why he would be worried about time.

He’s young, and more than that, he has the entire world in front of him.

“Is it because of work?” I ask, because I’ve heard rumors.

Everyone’s heard the rumors.

He gives me a sideways glance. “What about work?”

“Your parents’ expectations that you take over the company, that you perform, that you live up to the family name.” I wave my hand to encourage him. “I didn’t have that pressure growing up, but I saw it in my brothers.”

That earns me an indelicate snort.

“What?” I ask.

“You didn’t have pressure growing up? The way I see it, you had the most pressure. You were the one everyone leaned on when they needed help. I’m guessing you were the one who woke up early to help the family and stayed up late to help the family some more.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Yeah, the difference is I get paid for my work.”

I slide a little, my heels slippery over loose gravel. Finn holds me until we find better ground. “You know what this is? Deflection. You don’t want to talk about your family, so you’re bringing up my family.”

He laughs, though it’s a little taut. This isn’t the charming, happy face of lucky Finn Hughes that most of the world sees. This is someone carrying the weight of the world. “Fine. Yes, it’s work. Yes, it’s family. Yes, it’s my parents’ expectations. Happy?”

“Yes,” I say, which doesn’t make any sense. I’m not happy that he’s hurting, but... “At least it’s what you’re really thinking. What you’re really feeling.”

He stops walking and turns to look at me. “Meaning what?”

“Meaning...” I can be outspoken sometimes. It’s not a quality that I’m proud of, or so my mother tells me. Which normally I don’t

I think fuck about. But Finn... the truth is, I want him to like me. Does that make me weak? Or does it simply make me human?

“Don’t pull your punches now, Morelli,” he says, faintly mocking.

I think of Wagner fighting against the odds in that warehouse. The word had been deafening, but I hadn’t heard a thing once Finn kissed me. Not that fake relationship? It’s how you deal with the world. All those smug jokes and sports cars.”

him. He puts a hand to his chest. “Leave the cars out of this.”

“There’s so much more to you than that.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I do.”

That you He laughs in that soundless way he has. “That’s wishful thinking, Morelli. I’m exactly as shallow as I seem. Not like you. You’re so deep. I could lose myself in you.”

*Why are you in a rush?* I want to ask him. *Why does every kiss feel like the last one?* But that would expose me as much as him. That would show how desperately I want him to kiss me again. He sees it anyway. Without me saying the words, he sees it.

He backs me up against a railing, and it doesn’t feel altogether stupid. The kiss is typically hard. It’s not a tame kiss. It’s a filthy one. As filthy as the kiss in the warehouse we were in. When Finn pulls back, he’s breathing hard, just an inch away.

“I could lose myself in you,” he says again, sounding uncharacteristically steady and angry. “But I can’t keep my hands off you. Is that fake?”

It doesn’t feel fake at all. He tastes so good. He’s kissing me to the bone, almost, as if he knows that I can take it. And why couldn’t I? I’m not a copy-go-girl. I’m a grown woman. I’ve seen what the world has to offer and I’m not going to tell about it. The way he kisses me now is not particularly careful. But it’s not that he touches me isn’t careful, either. It’s not the way he would have kissed me if he were polite and cautious, if he’d taken me to that restaurant.

This is wild like the fight, and I realize he’s feeling an adrenaline rush. I thought he was used to those places. I thought it wouldn’t have any effect on him, but his eyes sparkle with challenge. His eyes are also dark. He wants to do other things he wants to do to me. He kisses down the side of my neck. Then he returns to my mouth, like he can’t bear to stay away. His hands move under my dress. I have a fleeting moment of fear. If anyone sees me I

make me with my dress hitching up inch, by inch, by inch, then what? But who see? No one from Bishop's Landing would ever come here. And if they would just believe the lie of our relationship.

cheers No one is here at all. There's no one to see us out here on this wharf. "This is so I let it happen. I know this is supposed to be fake. I know, I know, I know. But right now I only want to feel. And what I want to feel is Finn Hughes."

He touches me everywhere. His hands come up to the sides of my breasts. They delve back beneath my dress. They skim down my hemline. He touches me when he reaches my breasts. He's as wild as those fighters in this ring. And it surprises me, exhilarates me. I feel just as much adrenaline now as I did when I realized Wagner was going to win. Finn is fighting now, but I don't know whether he's fighting for me or fighting to hold himself back.

deep I His hands go beneath my skirt, and I wonder if he'll do it. If he'll touch me down to the dock and fuck me here in public in front of anyone who might feel like walking by. It should embarrass me, it should make me recoil, it should make me push him away, insist that he stop, but I don't. I don't even think I should. Even stop him if he took it that far. I think it might happen. That's how drunk on him, how lost I feel on him.

ready and That would be an escape. No one could deny it. Public sex. Where does that come from? What has this come to? I want everything.

only an "Maybe we could go..." I say, breathless. It turns into a moan when he finds my nipple. When he pinches it between two fingers. My head falls back in wordless pleasure.

I meant to say, *Go back to my place. Get a hotel room, any private room, because I want everything from him. I want everything with him, but I'm fragile, won't have time in public.*

lived to That seems to be a recurring theme with Finn.

the way Why is he running out of time?

sed me, His phone rings. I feel it before he notices. It's buzzing in his pocket. A minute, he's still kissing me, his tongue hot on mine, his hands around the back of my neck. I'm grinding shamelessly against him. I want to feel that mechanical vibration.

work with "Finn," I gasp.

back and His whole body goes stiff. "Fuck," he mutters and reaches for his pocket.

love up "Hughes," he says, his hand still on my neck.

like this A woman's voice comes over the line. I can't make out the words.



It would sound urgent. And I can see the tension cross his face. The excitement they did, the fight, the arousal from kissing me, goes out of his face. "I'll be there," he says, and then he shoves it back into his pocket.

He tugs my dress back into place, his expression distracted.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Nothing," he says, but it's a blatant lie. We're back to pretending we have to get home."

"Can I help?"

He doesn't seem to hear the question as he tugs me back along the water's edge toward the warehouse. He still helps me over the loose gravel but he's solicitous but efficient, and I sense the urgency in his actions. It rickles, a shiver run down my spine.

"Finn. What happened?" I ask when we're inside the car.

He looks at me as if he's remembering I'm here for the first time. "I'd make a cab for you," he says. Then he seems to realize that we're at this warehouse in a seedy part of town. "A limo. Fuck," he says again. "I'll take you to my place. Then I'll send you home with our driver."

"Okay," I say, because I don't want him to worry about me.

Once he has a plan, he's all motion again. He's getting us into the limo, pulling us out of the spot, steering us to the city at the very edge of the neighborhood.

He runs a yellow light, then nearly misses a red.

Something's wrong. I can tell that from the set of his jaw, from the worried frantic look in his eyes. He shouldn't have to plan one more thing right now. Not a car, not sending me home. If something has happened to his dad, I can help. I can at least be there with him. Sometimes that's all I can do for another person.

"I'm going in the house with you," I say, taking over.

It's what I've always done. If something's wrong, I help fix it. Like when I was a kid, I do it morning and night for my family. Which means I can help when I know.

Finn gives me a bemused look. "No, you're not."

He's not sure of me. And why would he be? Our relationship is shallow. I don't know anything about him other than his good family name. Other than he's fun at parties. Other than my mother likes him. "Let me help," I say, but it gently.

nt from He shakes his head, but it's not really a refusal.

oe right I recognize the look because I've seen it in my brother Leo. In m  
brothers. Even my father. It's the look of a man stretched beyo  
capability. Rare but made even more acute by how infrequently it happ  
*No one can help.* That's what the little shake of his head means.

ling. "I He pulls his car past the front drive into a smaller, private area tha  
into the back of the house. He turns the engine off with a jerk of hi  
leaving the keys in the ignition. I follow. He doesn't try to stop me. V  
ong the toward the house.

gravel. "You shouldn't—" He cuts himself off.

nakes a "Don't worry about me," I tell him, squeezing his hand gently. I  
his hand and looks at where it's linked in mine, as if surprised to find  
touching me.

'I'll get Finn is worried. And there's a frantic energy coming from the hous  
rehouse I let calm settle over me.

back to This is what I do for my family. It isn't always about running  
champagne in the middle of a party. Or even a possibly pregnant sist  
sometimes it's been worse. There are dark things in my family:  
the car, Violence. Pain. I helped my mother clean up broken glass from my  
e speedrages. I found my brother at the darkest moment of both of our liv  
metallic taste of adrenaline floods my tongue. It's a comforting t  
familiar taste. I learned early how to handle a scary situation. It's wh  
om the best.

e thing We step into a foyer that's beautiful but smaller, as if this is a s  
ed with residence than the main house. I don't have time to take in the spare,  
all you medical look of the space. My attention is captured by an older man  
and white striped pajamas, barefoot, his brown hair standing up at the  
look of pure panic on his face.

ke Finn "Stop," he yells. "Let me go. I'm calling the police."

elp him "Dad," Finn says, approaching him, his voice low but commanding  
*Dad.* The family resemblance wasn't immediately clear. His fathe  
is contorted in fury and fear, his hair a dark bronze instead of Finn's  
fake. His stature frail next to his son's vitality. Though now that I know I ca  
ier than in his eyes. His are more filmy, but they have the same shape as Finn  
' I say, same shape as the eyes I looked into under the moonlight.

"They're holding me hostage," he says, his voice strained and v

hoarse.

“Okay,” Finn says, sounding not particularly shocked. The resignation makes it sound like he’s heard this complaint before. “But shouldn’t you be in bed right now?”

“I’m not tired,” he says, sounding like a toddler who’s missed his nap and wants to go to work. Why can’t I go to work? Bellows needs me. He checks his hand, watches the markets, but he needs nudging. And that bastard Van Kemp needs to be watched. An eagle eye for property, but the mind of a game player. Awareness rushes over me like cold rain.

I didn’t know what to make of Finn’s father’s claim that he was a liftsheld hostage. Was he ill? Was it temporary? He didn’t mean it literally, did he? Two harried women in blue scrubs stand back, present but allowing me to handle the situation.

It’s clear this has played out in the Hughes home before.

Many times, probably.

I might still wonder, except I recognize the name Van Kempt. The name was a real estate tycoon before his untimely death this summer. I know his past worked his way up through the ranks at Hughes Industries before breaking out on his own. I know this because where powerful men work is the theater. The every ball and gala and masquerade that I attend.

He had his own company, Van Kempt Industries, for years.

And a well-known feud with the powerful Hughes family, to my detriment.

Why does Finn’s father think Van Kempt will be at the office?

He wouldn’t. Not unless he was still living in the past.

“I don’t like the food,” he says, a little calmer now. “They’re trying to feed me, and I don’t want it. I want to go out. Sushi. Curry. Something with flavor.”

“I’ll order you some California rolls. Tomorrow.”

“I want it now.”

“Most places are closed. It’s the middle of the night.”

“No, it’s not.” Confusion passes over the older man’s face. “The confusion started.”

Finn’s mouth is a grim line. His voice is patient. “It’s nighttime.”

You just woke up from a bad dream. We’ve gotta get you back in bed.

“I’m not going,” he says, his chin in a stubborn lift. I recognize

movement, too. It's the same confidence that Finn displays when I checked notes. Though Finn usually backs it up with charm. His father looks like you bedigging his heels in.

"Dad." Finn doesn't raise his voice. He doesn't seem annoyed. nap. "I No, he seems weary. The man who escorted me to an underground boxing match was full of life. This version of Finn looks like he's been here for centuries.

bler." "Mr. Hughes," I say in a quiet voice, stepping forward.

I don't know whether Finn will want me to say anything. Maybe I should prefer I make myself scarce or pretend I wasn't seeing this, but it's not really, did DNA. I have to try and help if I can. I don't know anything about the thing Finn Hughes's condition, but I know something about defusing a tense situation.

He looks at me with a blank expression. "Who are you?"

I offer him a smile. "I'm Eva Morelli. A friend of your son's."

he man "Morelli," he mutters, his eyes growing vague as he searches his memory. "I think you've met my father," I offer. "Bryant Morelli."

He had Awareness sharpens in those light brown eyes, and for a second I catch a glimpse of how Daniel Hughes must have looked during his prime. "A bastard through and through."

"Dad," Finn says, his voice sharp.

"Don't worry," I say with a small laugh. "Even he wouldn't deny it to his father." "Shame about that sister of his."

Sorrow washes over me. My aunt Gwen was the only girl with a bunch of competitive, arrogant brothers. They grew up strict Catholics, and when Gwen rebelled she was cast out. She ended up dying when I was very young. "I wish I'd gotten to meet her."

"You look like her," he says. "Beautiful."

The words make my chest feel tight. "Thank you."

He glances at Finn, then back at me. "Are you dating him?"

A note of tension runs through me. We're fake dating in a pretty subtle way. If this man had actually been at an office recently, if he had attended a society event, if he'd glanced at some of the gossip TikTokers, he would already know we were together.

e, Dad. This situation is different. That much is clear.

"Then again, wasn't tonight a real date? It felt real, even if it was just pretend."

challenge “Yes, sir.”

like he’s He grunts. “Good. About time that boy settled down.”

“We aren’t getting married, Dad.” Finn’s voice is still taut, but there’s a note of humor underneath. An inside joke. A hint of the playful Finn from the groundwell.

even tired “Well, why the hell not? She’s got good child-bearing hips.”

My cheeks flame. “I’m not interested in marriage, Mr. Hughes.”

He studies me. “Had your heart broken, hmm?”

like he’d “Dad.”

it in my “What? I know a thing or two about heartbreak.”

like the elder “There are other reasons not to get married.”

reaction. “Everyone wants love. It’s the one human constant.” Shrewd eyes study me. “No, you haven’t had your heart broken. You’ve had it shattered. You know why you aren’t interested in marrying Finn, even though he’s a handsome, hardworking, strapping young man.”

I fail to repress a smile.

like I have a “Okay, Dad. We’re really going back to bed now.”

like I do. “Yes, rather than arguing again, the elder Mr. Hughes allows himself to stroll down the hallway, one of his nurses in tow. I can hear him speaking to his son. “Don’t let this one get away, Phineas. She’s better than a rascal I’ve ever seen. She deserves. Better put a ring on her finger. Soon.”

I watch them go, my smile fading, a bittersweet knot in my stomach. Daniel Hughes has been the head of the large extended family for decades. He’s also the CEO of Hughes Industries. He’s responsible for billions of dollars and the livelihood of thousands of people. But he isn’t going to work in his office. It doesn’t look like he can.

Which means someone else is acting as the CEO.

I’m guessing that someone is Finn Hughes. The carefree playboy who was just that... an act. He’s the one handling everything, managing the company, a public international corporation and an apparently sick father without anyone else even pretending to be acknowledging.

like I’d have

like I as only

“Yes, sir.”

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“What? I know a thing or two about heartbreak.”

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“Okay, Dad. We’re really going back to bed now.”

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Which means someone else is acting as the CEO.

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## CHAPTER TEN

### Finn

**“P**HINEAS,” DAD SAYS, stopping in the hallway.

An oriental rug follows the long hallway, down many doors.

“What is it?” I ask, still bemused by the conversation that took place in the foyer. *No, you haven’t had your heart broken. You’ve had it shattered. Is it true?* She hadn’t denied it.

“Which one is mine?”

The question snaps me back to reality. A reality where my father can’t remember which room is his bedroom, the same place he’s slept for the last forty years. “At the end,” I say gently, leading him by the elbow toward the apartment that’s his.

“You really should marry that girl,” my father says.

“I know, Dad.” It’s easier not to argue. Not about the time of day he comes home, or about whether he sends emails at the office. Not even about whether I should marry Eva Morelli. That will never happen. Not only because she’s heart is shattered.

“It’s time to do your duty. We need a Hughes child to man the ship.”

That’s the reason I won’t ever marry. Because no one deserves to be shackled with knowledge of their own doom. I won’t have children even if the Hughes curse, as my mother calls it, ends with me. “I know, Dad.”

I help him back into bed, and the nurse gives me a grateful smile and sits back down in the corner. He needs constant supervision due to his tendency to wander. I nod back my gratitude, for handling my father’s nightmare until I could get home.

My father grasps my wrist, hard, capturing my attention. “I’m not

There's not much time. Look at you. You'll start forgetting things and it takes you quickly after that. Better do it while you can."

I don't blame my parents for their choices, but they aren't mine. I don't worry, Dad. Everything will be fine. You just get some sleep. You wake up fresh tomorrow."

"I have a meeting, bright and early. Board meeting."

"Okay," I say, though there's no board meeting. Only a breakfast of oatmeal with special vitamins added, since he usually doesn't eat anything but bland food, the doctors insist. Spicy food interferes with his digestion and gives him a stomachache, but when he's hurting, he doesn't know what he's doing. There's no cause and effect in his mind. The meal is long forgotten. So I have to make these decisions for him. The doctors explained that to me in simple terms, as if they were discussing the diet of my horses rather than my father.

One of these days I'm going to bring home an entire feast of curry. Outside his room I stop and take a deep breath. Close my eyes. Count to twenty.

Christ. What a mess.

I return back to the foyer, but it's empty. Heading deeper into the house, I pass open doors leading to the drawing room, the formal living room, and finally find her in my father's office, sitting behind the desk.

Apparently we're going to talk about it.

Which means I need a drink.

I head over to my father's sideboard and pour a drink—because I'm a gentleman, one for the lady and one for myself. Three fingers. Then I slide hers over. "Scotch neat," I tell her, before throwing it back in a long, hard swallow.

She takes a sip and then coughs. "It's strong."

"It's forty years old. And brewed by distant relatives of the Hughsons. They told me they have a distillery in the Outer Hebrides. Fifty percent of the Scotch comes from Crown Hotels," I say, referring to a large chain of luxury hotels that spans the globe.

I'm not sure why I point that out.

Except I do know why.

So that she'll understand the importance of keeping this secret.

She draws her finger around the slender ring of the glass. It draws my gaze, because I'm a man. I want that finger stroking down my chest. I



soon. It touching my cock. Her eyes are dark and fathomless. *Everyone wants it's the one human constant.*

“Don’t Silence. She’s patient. I’m learning that about her.  
nt to be “Less than thirty people in the world know about it,” I say, propp  
hip on the desk. Might as well face a problem head-on. “Half of those  
are family. The other half are under strict nondisclosure agreement  
fast of would bankrupt them if they broke it.”

enough. “How?” she asks, sounding faintly impressed.

stion. It It’s a good question. “Have you ever heard of the Hughes curse?”

w why. “I thought that was an old wives’ tale. And I thought it was about—

o I have “Their marriages.” He gives a rough laugh, a sound of acce  
in calm “People sense that something’s wrong, but they assume that beca  
’ather. business keeps running, keeps profiting, keeps growing, that it’s only  
their family life.”

ount to “Because *you* keep it running.”

So she’s figured that part out already. This is the problem with  
women. “Early onset dementia. Devastating for anyone, really. Bu  
rouse, I there’s billions of dollars on the line? It becomes one of the best g  
n. And secrets in the world.”

“Why keep it a secret? If people knew you were running the co  
they would trust you. Considering your quarterly stock market  
business is booming.”

e I’m a “You’ve been reading my quarterly reports?”

I cross “I am a stockholder,” she says. “And I think they would trust you.”

ig mine “They would trust me, but for how long? They trusted my fath  
How would they know when my mind starts to go? How would they  
what I’m forgetting as I sign billion-dollar contracts? I would be thro  
es, I’m tomorrow, and that’s when the chaos would start.”

ir sales She’s quiet, and I know she’s seeing it. The distrust, the factions, i  
/ hotels—they’re massive. Many levels deep. They would explode if everyone

“Do you have it?” she asks, her voice matter of fact, as if she k  
couldn’t have accepted pity.

“Not yet.”

“Then how do you know you’re going to get it?”

aws my “The main Hughes branch has only had sons for the past five gene  
want it And every single one of us has the curse. That’s what we call it, ever

ts love.house.”

“If it got out—”

“It wouldn’t be us who suffered. We have enough money stashed a  
ing mylast lifetimes. It’s everyone around us who would be hurt. They  
peopleeverything. Most of their money isn’t liquid. It’s stocks. Real esta  
nts thatvalue would plummet if we lost trust. We have tens of thousa  
employees who depend on Hughes Industries for their paychecks.”

“So... what? You’re expected to sacrifice your life for them?”

She sounds indignant on my behalf. It makes me smile, which is  
—” thing when it comes to this topic. “It’s not such a great sacrifice. You’  
ptance.my cars. I have a good life. One many men would trade for. I underst  
use theprivilege. Just as I understand that I only have it for a few more year  
y abouteverything—the memories, the knowledge—will fade away.”

“Finn.”

“Don’t feel sorry for me, Eva.”

1 smart “Excuse me if I don’t believe in generational curses and old wives  
t whenMaybe you’ll get it, but it’s not a guarantee. This is why you’re like th  
guardedit?”

“Like what?” I ask, wariness tightening my stomach.

mpany, “Like you need to live and laugh and... and *kiss me*, because the  
report,tomorrow.”

“There *is* no tomorrow. I don’t say that for your pity. I don’t ev  
anything about it. I’ve known it since I was old enough to talk. My d  
, even fifty, but he’s been gone for a long time. I have maybe a dec  
er, too.before it starts, if I’m lucky.”

y know “And then what? Are you going to train another generation c  
own outHughes sons?”

“Don’t start. My dad is bad enough.”

the fear “Then why—”

e knew. “Because I promised him. I promised him when I was seven ye  
nows Ithat I would take over Hughes Industries. That I would keep his con  
secret, no matter what the cost. No matter how he might argue with m  
And the peace I felt in him after that promise... it was real, Eva. He b  
me, so I have to do this.”

rations. A pause. “I understand.”

1 in the Of course Eva Morelli understands about family obligations. “Bu

as hell don't have to continue the cycle. My father didn't teach me do  
He spent our time together showing me all the companies, all the inc  
away to that would fall if Hughes Industry faltered. He didn't teach me ch  
'd lo setaught me international contract law. He didn't play baseball with  
te. The taught me how to forge his signature."

inds of Her eyes darken, and I know she's finally understanding how de  
secret lies.

"My brother will take over. He already has the Power of A  
s a rare documents to all of our properties, our bank accounts, our corporatio  
ve se can take over as soon as I show the first signs, whether I agree or no  
and my after that... after that, Eva, it's in God's hands."

s. Then "Because you're not having children."

I hesitate. This is one of the reasons my relationship with Eva can  
be more than pretend. She comes from a large family. She may s  
doesn't want marriage, but I heard the way she talked about children v  
s' tales. mother. If she does marry, I think she'll want kids. I can never give he  
at, isn't could never have children, because I would love them. And how c  
sentence people you love to a lifetime of fear? How can you mak  
promise to lock you up, to tie you down—anything if it means keepin  
re's nose secret?

They would watch me deteriorate before their eyes.  
ven feel I'd be saddling them with more than the curse. I'd be saddling the  
ad isn't my care.

ade left "When he was thirty-six years old he had his first episode. He d  
one of the Hughes offices in Queens and started ranting because he  
of little recognize anyone there. They had to call the cops. We hushed everyth  
People were happy to believe he was an angry drunk. They expect that  
men, anyway. It was safer to believe that than realize he wasn't really

Her eyes are dark with sorrow. "God, Finn."

ars old "I was sixteen. After driving him home, I pulled out my set of Po  
dition a Attorney documents and used them ever since. That's what he asked  
ie later. do."

elieved "He had no idea what it would cost you."

"Christ, Eva. My suit costs two thousand dollars. My shoes  
three."

t I sure "You're rich. I get it. It's not only money that makes a life worth

minoes. Finn. Did he know how much it would hurt you to hide him away?  
industries maintain separate lives? To split yourself into two halves so he could s  
ess. He pride?”

me. He She stands, revealing her curvy body in that incredible wrap dre  
made me hard when I first saw her, which was awkward with her mot  
dep this sister standing there. *She's got good child-bearing hips.* I don't  
anything about that, but I do know I want to hold her hips while she ri  
attorney guiding her into the right rhythm, watching her breasts move, seeing  
ons. He on her face. She circles the desk so she's facing me, and I set down the  
ot. And Nothing separates us but a few inches and a handful of luxury fabri  
Oh, and the weight of both our family obligations.

She stands close enough that I can see the gold flecks in her dar  
n never I'm not sure what she's going to do. Call a cab and leave? Annou  
say she Hughes family secret on national news? She wouldn't sell the sec  
with her money, but she might do it as a public service announcement, if she b  
r that. I that it should be shared.

can you Then again, she might do none of that.

re them She might strip.

ing your I'm really hoping she strips.

Instead she leans close. Her arms slide around me. Her head rests  
chest. The pressure feels indescribable. It's like sexual pleasure but a  
m with times more acute. A hug. That's what she's giving me right now. A ge  
hug. I've had sex, of course. Meaningless, physical sex with all k  
rove to filthy acts, but not this.

re didn't When's the last time anyone hugged me?

ing up. I can't even remember.

of rich  
there.”

ower of  
l me to

another

living,

Finn. Did he know how much it would hurt you to hide him away? To maintain separate lives? To split yourself into two halves so he could save his pride?”

She stands, revealing her curvy body in that incredible wrap dress. She made me hard when I first saw her, which was awkward with her mother and sister standing there. *She's got good child-bearing hips.* I don't know anything about that, but I do know I want to hold her hips while she rides me, guiding her into the right rhythm, watching her breasts move, seeing ecstasy on her face. She circles the desk so she's facing me, and I set down the drink.

Nothing separates us but a few inches and a handful of luxury fabrics.

Oh, and the weight of both our family obligations.

She stands close enough that I can see the gold flecks in her dark eyes. I'm not sure what she's going to do. Call a cab and leave? Announce the Hughes family secret on national news? She wouldn't sell the secret for money, but she might do it as a public service announcement, if she believed that it should be shared.

Then again, she might do none of that.

She might strip.

I'm really hoping she strips.

Instead she leans close. Her arms slide around me. Her head rests on my chest. The pressure feels indescribable. It's like sexual pleasure but a million times more acute. A hug. That's what she's giving me right now. A goddamn hug. I've had sex, of course. Meaningless, physical sex with all kinds of filthy acts, but not this.

When's the last time anyone hugged me?

I can't even remember.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### Eva

**M**Y HEART SQUEEZES for how alone he's been.

Nothing is more isolating than a secret. I know that from experience at least I shared my shame with my brother. We took care of each other and me. He knows about my pain. I know about his. It created a deep bond between siblings.

"Where is your brother?"

"Hemingway is at boarding school. It's easier that way."

"Easier for who?"

"He likes it there. They play lacrosse and eat ratatouille for lunch."

I smile at the description of what I'm sure is a very expensive boarding school. Lisbetta graduated from a girls-only version, Worthington Academy this spring. "Where's your mother?"

Finn looks away. "She's in Vail," he says after a long moment.

"She's skiing?"

"I doubt it. But she enjoys the view."

"She's separated from your father, then?"

He gives me a hard look. "They had an arranged marriage. My father knew the details of the curse before they married. They married for three reasons. Money. Security. Children. It was my father's unfortunate luck that he fell in love with his wife."

My stomach turns. "No."

"She had... some affection for him, maybe. Not love. It didn't work. There's no way you can have a marriage with someone who can't recognize who you are."

“He misses her.”

“She stayed after the first episode. And the second. And the third. The decline started slow and then hit him like a freight train. The last time I saw him, he was ranting about the temperature of his paella. He was eating cereal. He threw it across the kitchen. Rare marble was covered in Fruit Loops. Milk splashed on her Dior pantsuit. It was too much for her. Now she travels to our many properties. Some outside the country. Some in New York City. But never here in Bishop’s Landing. She hasn’t stepped on this estate for over a decade.”

Bile rises in my throat. “What about your brother? What about your mother?”  
“I’m an adult now.”

My relationship with Sarah Morelli is complicated, but we’re still close, but can’t imagine only seeing my mother when we arrange a lunch date. The Morelli family, for all its many flaws, is apparently tighter knit than any other bond. “And your brother?”

“He visits her sometimes. I do, too.”

He stiffened when I first hugged him, as if maybe he didn’t want to be touched. Didn’t want my comfort. But after a moment of frozen shock, he relaxed and circled me. They rest casually around my shoulders. His thumb brushes the small of my back. It’s a small gesture that I’m not even sure he’s aware of. Whenever we’re touching, even if it’s innocent, he’s caressing me.

There’s still tension in his body.

He’s waiting for me to judge him. To condemn him.

To leave him the same way his mother left his father. That certainty is etched in his bones. I can feel it in the loose clasp he has on me, the almost imperceptible way he looks into my eyes. Every second with Finn has felt like the seconds before a goodbye.

There’s a knot in my throat. Uncertainty.

Whatever I say next matters to this man. The carefree facade has disappeared. Whether it will be there tomorrow morning, I don’t know. In this moment, it’s gone. I can see the real Finn Hughes—a strong, loyal man. A man who is hurting.

He’s grieving the ongoing loss of his father.

He’s grieving the loss of his own identity and memories.

My father would probably say something about God’s will. My mother would think the temporary pleasures were worth the long-term pain.

Leo? He'd probably believe in the curse wholeheartedly. It has the  
rd. The punishment that works for him.

me she "You're a good man," I tell him, reaching up to kiss him on the che  
; eating Surprise crosses his expression before he masks it in that c  
i soggy insouciance. "Is this your version of *it's not you, it's me?*?"

for her. "I'm not going anywhere. You're stuck with this fake girlfriend."

come in Amusement lightens those hazel eyes. "Is that so?"

ed foot "Listen, I know you told me your deep, dark secret, but honestly?  
going to have to work harder than that if you want to horrify me. I've  
?" too long in the upper crust. Every family has secrets."

close. I Something flashes in his eyes. Recognition. "Like your father?"  
te. The Shame heats my cheeks.

He came upon us at a party once. Intervened, actually.

Finn's. Finn saw my father's hand around my wrist. He saw the crushing  
used. It left a bruise the next day. Not the first one, which I'm su  
realized, the same way I recognized the frequency of the scene in his fi

ant my My father is a powerful man. A smart man. And fundamentally, a  
his armsman. Most of the world never sees that part of him. In public he's b  
hes the cruel and charismatic. At home he's strict. He only gets violent w  
vare of drinks.

I know it's not my fault that he does that. Intellectually, I know.  
psychology of kids who've been hit is encoded early on in our I  
doesn't flip when we turn eighteen.

nty lies My father isn't allowed to hurt me anymore.

wistful I grew up, moved out, and stood up for myself. That too-firm gri  
weetest party is rare these days, but it still felt more familiar to me than a ki  
used to violence. Not love. Even in my romantic life, I'm used to b  
Not devotion.

ropped. "It's not exactly a secret," I say, because many people know. Eve  
ient it's suspect. Like Finn said about his father's breakdown in Queens,  
i who's expect wealthy, powerful men to be borderline alcoholic and moc  
abusive. It's part of their privilege.

A sigh warms the top of my head. "I'm supposed to ask you to  
Nondisclosure Agreement. I have a lawyer on speed dial for just s  
mother occasion. There's a lot of money in it for you, I should tell you. Don't  
n. And the first offer."



ring of “Unfortunately for your family lawyers, I’m a wealthy woman.”

“That usually doesn’t stop people from wanting more money.”

ek. That makes me laugh. “I’ll sign your papers for free, Phineas  
arefreeHughes.”

He leans back. “I should never have said it in front of you.”

“Your middle name? I already knew it.”

Brown eyebrows rise in question.

You’re “The quarterly investor’s reports,” I remind him. They’re signed v  
re livedfull name. As the Chief Financial Officer, it’s not strange for Finn to w  
reports. He’s in the perfect position to know about the financial health  
corporation. And they assume that since his father’s still the CE  
directives and vision for the company come from him.

Now, of course, I know that isn’t true.

grip he Finn studies me so closely that it makes me feel exposed. “I know  
re Finnwealthy. And strong. And independent. But I’d like to help you if you  
oyer. is still hurting you. It was never okay, not even once. I’d like to kick h  
brokenyou’ll let me.”

y turns What a strange idea, having this man at my command.

hen he Like I’m a princess, and he’s a knight that I can send on a quest.

“I had a privileged childhood,” I said. “The best of everything.”

But the “Not the best dad.”

ives. It “No,” I say softly, unable to refute the fact. “I’m not sure he’d de  
either.”

“I’d like to kill him for sure,” he says, and it sounds strangely  
p at theromantic. That’s the last coherent thought I have before he leans clc  
iss. I’m lips brush mine.

etrayal. It’s not the same wild, desperate kiss that we shared before.

As soon as our lips touch, a sigh escapes me. This momen  
n moreconnection we never could have had on that dark, rocky waterfront. N  
peopleall the secrets between us. The walls have come down now. In a ten  
leratelytruce, there are no defenses. Nothing hiding the dark pleasure in h  
when he pauses to look at me. Nothing stopping my surrender when h  
sign adown to nip at my bottom lip. I moan both the pleasure and pain.

such an I let myself be open with a man only once. Trusting with a ma  
t acceptonce.

It brought devastation to me. I promised myself never to do it again

the hell am I supposed to do with this trust I feel for Finn? I don't like  
I'm powerless to resist. *Powerless like you were before*, a voice in my  
Galileo reminds me. *Blinded by love*.

Except I'm not in love with Finn Hughes.

That's the difference. That's why I can turn the kiss around, become  
aggressor, nip his bottom lip and revel in the pleased groan he releases  
hands tighten on my body, pulling me close. I'm a curvy woman  
with his particularly slender. He makes me feel like I'm delicate. His hands  
write the body with hunger and more than a little awe.

One of the "You're fucking beautiful," he murmurs against my lips.

Oh, the words strike a chord inside me, like a pluck of the piano's  
strings. I've been a help to my parents. A caregiver for my younger sister.  
A friend to Leo.

But you're But it's been so long since I've been a lover to anyone.

My father Long enough that it feels new when he rubs me against his erection  
his ass if hard length presses into my stomach, and I gasp. My thighs press to  
instinctive and seeking. It feels bigger than I remember a cock being, but  
again, I only ever saw one.

He flips our positions, so that I'm the one leaning against the desk.

This way he towers over me. Strong hands set my hips onto the  
Papers flutter to the ground around us. Nondisclosure agreements, privacy  
that, Power of Attorney documents. There must be a million paperwork reams  
of their family curse.

almost Neither of us care about that in the moment.

use. His Now I understand why he's so desperate to experience everything.

I feel the same urgency when I spread my legs. It pulls the silk  
dress higher up my thighs. He glances down at me and groans. The faint  
is any panties matches the dress. "It should be illegal, how incredible you  
lot with A pleased blush steals over me. It's nice to drive a man like this, so  
temporary experienced, someone almost jaded, to this kind of desperation. But  
his eyes enough. As long as he has words to charm me, I'm still not seeing  
he leans him. The true Finn.

His caress steals up my bare thigh and around my hip. Along the  
an only my body, almost ticklish if I weren't already shaking with anticipation  
his large palm cups my breast, and I let out a shaky breath. He holds  
1. What weight in his hand. His thumb brushes the tip. My nipple hardens thro

His caress steals up my bare thigh and around my hip. Along the  
an only my body, almost ticklish if I weren't already shaking with anticipation  
his large palm cups my breast, and I let out a shaky breath. He holds  
1. What weight in his hand. His thumb brushes the tip. My nipple hardens thro

the fabric of the dress and my lace bra.

my head “Eva.”

I’m in such a dreamy state, I can barely focus. He has to say my name again before I force myself to concentrate. Of course he doesn’t make any sense. He still molds his hand to my breast, warm and sure and possessive. “You’re wrong?” I ask, my voice hazy.

him. Not “Did someone break your heart?”

I stiffen, but it doesn’t do anything to dampen my arousal. “Finn.”  
“I don’t want to hurt you.”

A fist around my heart. That’s why he’s hesitating. My heart and secrets already have been broken once. He doesn’t want to risk it. Specifically, he doesn’t want me to get the wrong idea about this encounter. He might kiss me and touch me. He might even fuck me, but it’s not going to change our relationship from fake to real. “You can’t hurt me.”

me. The “It’s a lie, but he doesn’t realize it. Or he can’t wait any longer.”

together, He pulls the dress down, along with the lace, revealing my bare skin. My skin looks very pale in the dim light of the office, my nipple a dark red. “Someone should lock you up,” he mutters, still talking about his secret. It makes me smile, even in the midst of hurricane level passion. He sounds almost annoyed that I’m sexy.

obably. He presses a trail of feather-light kisses across my jaw. Down my neck. Across the cushion of my breast. His lips close over my nipple, and I breathe a breath at the heat. Arousal arcs through my body. It centers at my clit. I want him inside me.

No, that would be too intimate.

of my “My body doesn’t care. It wants everything.”

abric of I lean in and kiss the side of his neck.

look.” He shudders as if it’s been a long time since anyone kissed him. “Maybe it has. Maybe all the lovers he has in the city, and in all those clubs and in all those illegal poker rooms, haven’t been enough. I want the real Finn, not just Finn, the man who smiled at a poker table, but Finn, the man who comforts his father, the one who’s secretly running an empire, the one who hasn’t said a word to anyone except for nurses and doctors.”

n. Then “And now I’m one of them. That’s real enough.”

olds the I reach and fumble at his jacket. He helps me, shrugging it off. Though I can’t work on the buttons of his dress shirt. My fingers feel useless and

onslaught of pleasure. He moves to my other breast, taking his time, me as if I'm the finest wine.

y name I'm like the casino and the underground fight club, I realize it easy. experience he indulges in while he still can. He returns to my neck, 'What's head falls back. His mouth lingers on a place behind my ear, one that my breath catch. One that makes my thighs tighten around his leg. "Please," I whimper, though I'm not sure what I'm asking for.

The truth is that even though he's younger than me, he has more experience. Exactly like he told me. The truth is that I've had my heart might broken. The truth is that I'm terrified that it's going to happen again, and really, he time I'm not sure I would recover.

kiss me "Shh," he murmurs, soothing me, running his hands over my face. Maybe he sensed my sudden panic. "My sweet girl. Let me take care of you. I'll make you feel good."

I pluck at the thin fabric of his dress shirt. "Finn."

breast. He yanks his shirt off, not bothering with the rest of the buttons. Buttons hit the desk and the wooden floor in small pings. An undershirt falls over my shoulder. I move his head.

on, that Then he's bared to me.

I always knew that he was broad shouldered and tightly built. Parity neck. knew, in an abstract way, that he would look as beautiful without clothes as he does with them. But I had no idea. None. Muscles lay over each other in a masculine symphony. Springy hair covers a broad, strong chest.

God, I don't want to compare them. But I can't help it.

Lane Constantine was much older than me when we had our affair. I was only nineteen years old. He was forty-six at the time. He kept in shape. His body was mature. Finn looks like a statue of a Greek god come to life in this way. I'm greedy for more. My hands run up his abs to his chest.

se fight "I'm not going to tell anyone," I say, stroking muscles that are rock hard. He grits his teeth. His nostrils flare. It's like stroking a bull, one hand on his shoulder, the other on his hip. He manholding completely still. "Good. Why are we talking about that right now?" "Because I'm going to sign your NDA." I don't do it with a pen. I use a paper. And I sure as hell don't accept hush money. No, I draw my right hand across his chest. My fingers graze his abs. I use my full name, then I usually sign. *Eva Honorata Morelli*.

der the "Fuck," he says.

tasting Then I lean forward and lick one flat nipple.

He mutters his appreciation in a way I find too charming for  
ze. An “Lock you up and throw away the key. That’s the only thing for you.  
and mygoing to start a riot.”

It makes Despite the heavy desire drenching my body, I find enough  
in hips.possession to give him a haughty look. There’s power in making a man  
you. “You’re the only man here.”

It’s more “You think I’m not going to walk all over this?” he says, the back  
of my heartfingers brushing the insides of my thighs. Then he reaches my sex. I  
and this the thin gusset of my panties, and I hiss out a breath. “You think I  
going to wreck this?”

It’s your body. “I think you could try,” I manage in a pert voice.

of you. Challenge lights those hazel eyes. And pleasure. “Mouthy.”

“You like it.”

“I’m fucking dying for it,” he says, dropping to kneel by the desk.  
I hear breath catches. Everything that happened years ago felt shocking  
and virt goes illicit. Now I know that it was relatively tame. We never did that  
example. I’m nervous, suddenly. I don’t know how I’ll taste. I don’t know  
he’ll like it. I don’t know—

It’s out of me He pushes aside the silk of my panties. His mouth presses my pussy  
and his tongue does something slick and hot, and then my eyes are rolling to the  
back of my head. A keening sound escapes me. He finds my clit with un-  
precision, and I jerk my knees together. It’s too much. Too intimate. Too  
Strong hands hold my thighs apart, helpless for his invasion.

It’s not that I was Then he slides his tongue in a circular motion. Suction makes my lips  
tremble, but off the desk. I reach down to grasp his hair in my hands. I need some  
ground me, to connect me to this man. I tighten my grip so he knows  
sweet agony he’s causing me.

It’s so hard. He chuckles against my sensitive flesh. “Patience, sweetheart.”

It’s not who’s “Go to hell,” I gasp out as he slides his tongue from bottom to top.

How? “Working on it,” he murmured against my clit.

When and The vibration sends pleasure spiraling through my body.

It’s the same in There are papers beneath my head. They rasp against my hair, so that  
the way I yet unmistakable. More documents, probably. Contracts. Obligations.

None of that matters right now.

He works my clit until I’m just about to come. And then he slows c

the crucial point. The first time I think he doesn't know. The second words, too. The third time I realize he's doing it on purpose.

You're "Bastard," I say on a low moan.

He stands, his expression hard with passion. I've never seen his self-handsome features so severe. I've never seen his eyes so dark. Hunger and want, what's making him this way. Need.

Two fingers slip inside me, and I rock my hips, begging and words of his. Desire rises heavy in the air, but there's something else, too. Something sweet. Like the scent of honeysuckle on a humid summer night. The way he rubs me, like the flicker of fireflies. A memory that's all too fleeting. That's how he makes me come, with his fingers inside me, his thumb on my clit, the moment slips away no matter how hard I try to hold on.

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the crucial point. The first time I think he doesn't know. The second time, too. The third time I realize he's doing it on purpose.

"Bastard," I say on a low moan.

He stands, his expression hard with passion. I've never seen his handsome features so severe. I've never seen his eyes so dark. Hunger. That's what's making him this way. Need.

Two fingers slip inside me, and I rock my hips, begging and wordless.

Desire rises heavy in the air, but there's something else, too. Something sweet. Like the scent of honeysuckle on a humid summer night. The distant flicker of fireflies. A memory that's all too fleeting. That's how he makes me come, with his fingers inside me, his thumb on my clit, the moment slipping away no matter how hard I try to hold on.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Finn

**I**'M ANSWERING AN email from the VP of Product when my secretary comes in. She stands at the door to my office, a stack of folders in her arms. The odd expression on her face.

“Yeah?” I say, still distracted by this earnings projection.

“Your brother’s here.”

My brother. I close the email. It’s going to have to wait. “Send him.”

There’s no point in wondering what happened. I know what this is.

From the expression on Hemingway’s face, my suspicions are confirmed. He’s been kicked out of Pembroke Prep. Again. He strolls into the office with his hands in his pockets. “Hey, big brother.”

“Hem,” I say, my voice even.

He drops into a chair across from my desk and kicks his feet into the opposite one. “Don’t give me that look. The one that says: *I’m not angry and disappointed.*”

My eyebrows rise. “Should I be angry?”

He grins. “Definitely not.”

“Why don’t you tell me what you did and I’ll decide?”

He drops his head back, and from this weird angle I can see a resemblance to our father. I know I sounded bitter to Eva, bitching about the future. It’s not mine that bothers me. It’s my brother. My father was interested in raising me as his heir. My mother checked out at the first symptoms grew intense. There weren’t any parents left for Hemingway, so I had to step in, and I’ve done a fairly shitty job, considering he keeps getting expelled.



“Who was it this time?” I ask, resigned.

“I don’t know why you assume I got into a fight with someone.”

“Why *would* I assume that?”

“I mean, yes. I often get into fights, but that’s not why I got expelled time.”

I give him a hard look and wait for the reason. He doesn’t have bruises on his face, which is odd. Usually, when they kick him out, he has a black eye.

The other kid always gets worse, but they’ll get in a few hits. I’m partially, that’s what Hemingway likes about it. Something real is happening to him, a physical sensation he can react to, instead of the hollow emptiness of knocks and distress. At least that’s how I would feel about it.

There’s an  
He sighs. “I got caught doing something against the rules.”

“Drugs?”

“Do we really have to talk about this?”

“Yes, we really do.”

in.”  
“It wasn’t drugs. I was caught having sex in the bathroom.”

about.  
*Fuck.* My stomach clenches. I should have had the sex talk. I’m likely correct, always too late. I scrub a hand over my face. “I’m failing you, Hemingway.”

room,  
“No, you’re not.” He sounds indignant. “Me having sex had nothing to do with you.”

Except it does. I should have known. I should have steered him away from this somehow. Physical fights only work for so long because you don’t know about sex. And once you do, well, you open up a lot of opportunities.

“Did you use protection?”

My brother rolls his eyes. “I’m seventeen years old. That’s like, biologically ancient. Do you really want to sit here and explain the birds and the bees?”

see the  
out my  
er was  
eighteen yet.  
“Did you use protection?” I demand, my gut turning to stone, because he didn’t, if he put someone else at risk, then it’s on me. He’s never

fter his  
ay. I’ve  
getting  
His brain isn’t fully developed. It would be my fault.

He gives me a goading smile. “Why do you care?”

“Because it’s important,” I tell him. “You know why. When you have unprotected sex, you can get someone pregnant. Do you want to put a curse on someone else?”

Hemingway looks away, his mouth twisted into a scowl.

He stares out my office window and his anger comes across the desk in a wave of frustration. He came here directly from school. He's still wearing the uniform. They sent him straight to me, because where else would he go if all of us are prisoners here. Not in the office, but in our own bodies. Our minds are all we have left. We both know how this will end.

It's got a long history. We saw our grandfather decline in what was basically a private, luxury prison. And we see what's happening to our father. That's what's happening around the corner for us. Maybe I could have accepted it with grace if it had just been me. Knowing that it's going to happen to Hemingway, knowing that I can't do anything to stop it, fills me with hollow rage.

"There's no chance of him getting pregnant."

My brother's words hang in the air a second before they register. I know what to do.

I guess this is how my brother comes out to me. I weigh my words carefully, not wanting to fuck this up. Lord knows we have enough bullshit to deal with already. So I do what guys have done from the beginning of time: I turn something serious into a joke. "The bathroom? You couldn't wait? If you were in your dorm room, like every other prep school kid?"

Hemingway snorts a laugh. "Fuck you."

The tension passes, and I let out a sigh of relief. Relatively painless, I suppose. For me, anyway. I'm glad there wasn't a risk of pregnancy, at least for now. "You should still use protection, you know."

"Oh my God."

"It's true."

"We covered this in health class."

Hell. I do need to have the sex talk with him, but the corner office at Hughes Industries isn't the place for it. "I'll call the tutor," I say, resigning myself to the standard procedure for when Hemingway has been kicked out of the office.

A tutor will help him keep up with his academics so he doesn't even get behind. Hemingway studies like the serious student that he usually isn't. When a few weeks have passed, I go back to Pembroke Prep and reprimand him. Which mostly means that I promise he'll never do it again. The headmaster and I both know I'm lying.

Then I make a sizable donation to the school, and we're done.

It's always going to work out in our favor, right up until the moment it doesn't.

“Are you all right?” I ask my brother, my voice brisk. “Do you ask, his anything? Are you hungry?” It can’t have been a comfortable moment in my life. I remember the caught having sex in a school bathroom. There would be some adrenaline. Both after that, some residual shakiness, even though Hemingway is playing on his own cool.

“I thought I would head home,” he says, his voice hesitant. It’s a curious question, so he knows what to expect. Has dad had good days or bad days lurking in the shadows?

“He’s getting worse,” I say, my voice rough.

I don’t want to admit it, but he’ll find out soon anyway.

I remember Eva in my father’s office. I remember her dark eyes looking up at me, her mouth on my skin. I remember the way I needed so badly to escape into her body.

Where is Hemingway supposed to escape?

With some kid from Pembroke Prep, apparently.

At first I drew lines in the sand. I thought this was the worst it could get. Then it got worse. I thought the nurses were bad. Then my father had a stroke. He was unable to eat by himself for months. It was unrelated to dementia but made it infinitely worse. He didn’t understand the limitations. He fought them. That’s when I understood the line in the sand kept getting drawn. Feeding tubes and morphine drips and diapers. Everything is at least on a table. And dignity? That’s long gone.

No one will see me like that, except for my brother. Definitely not a poor woman trapped in a loveless, arranged marriage. And sure as I can remember Eva Morelli.

I want her to remember me the way I was in the office.

Even though I’ll eventually forget.

Hemingway stands up. “Do you want me to make dinner?”

My brother is a surprisingly good cook. He could probably pass for a professional chef if he stopped getting into fights or fucking in bathrooms. And “That depends. Are you going to make me Kraft cheese slices again?”

An eye roll. “They were yellow bell peppers, asshole.”

This is how brothers bond with each other—by talking shit. He makes some fancy dish that involved yellow bell peppers cut into insane thin slices sitting in a tangy sauce. It tasted delicious but it looked rather like cheap cheese when arranged in a square.

“Then there was the caviar.”

ou need “Seaweed caviar.”

getting “Seaweed caviar,” I say, my nose crinkling as I remember. Unl  
enalineyellow bell pepper dish, the seaweed caviar did not taste delicious. I  
ying itlike... well, seaweed. My brother likes to experiment with food. Son  
that works out great. Sometimes not so much.

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in court. “He. Burned. Spaghetti. How do you even do that without a  
trying?”

looking “It wasn’t burned. It was just a little... dry.”

adly to “And brown.”

“Only on the edges.”

Hemingway stands up and stretches. “Whatever I make, you’ll ea  
you’ll like it.”

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a small His expression turns serious. “I know, Finn. Nothing spicy.”

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“Seaweed caviar.”

“Seaweed caviar,” I say, my nose crinkling as I remember. Unlike the yellow bell pepper dish, the seaweed caviar did not taste delicious. It tasted like... well, seaweed. My brother likes to experiment with food. Sometimes that works out great. Sometimes not so much.

“Am I seriously taking shit from a guy who burned spaghetti?” my brother asks an imaginary audience. He gestures to me, as if he were a lawyer in court. “He. Burned. Spaghetti. How do you even do that without actively trying?”

“It wasn’t burned. It was just a little... dry.”

“And brown.”

“Only on the edges.”

Hemingway stands up and stretches. “Whatever I make, you’ll eat it and you’ll like it.”

“Nothing spicy.”

His expression turns serious. “I know, Finn. Nothing spicy.”

A million acknowledgments were in his eyes. It wasn’t just about making bland food for our dad. It was about staying grounded. About remembering where we came from... and where we’re going. Make food while you can. Fuck while you can. Get expelled while you can, because someday soon you may not even remember your own name.

*I’m failing you, Hem.*



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### Eva

**I**MAGINE A GLADIATOR ring in ancient Rome. The weapons. The blood. The stray lion.

That is what a family dinner at the Morelli mansion is like.

You wouldn't think that charity foundations could have emergencies. We got a call from an organization we've supported for years. They had an opportunity to get refugees out of a war-torn country, and we had to act quickly to vet their new efforts.

Nothing like transferring a few million dollars in a rush to get you pumping.

My phone vibrates. I glance down. A text from the organizer: *Wheel*

Relief floods my chest. I'd seen the manifest of high-value targets were slated for evacuation, including women and children. At least they were safe. It feels like a drop in the bucket compared to the suffering in the And jarring as the limo pulls into the long drive.

Luxury pervades the grounds, even outside, where perfectly trimmed green topiaries rise from two-hundred-pound sculpted pots. The limo rolls over the fine gravel. Not ordinary gravel. This was specially imported from Italy for its particular red-brown color.

There's always a duality to my work at the foundation.

I can make a big impact with our wealth, but no matter how much we give away, we live a privileged life. Right now children have only the clothes on their backs with them. We have a mansion with more rooms than we ever use. I'm not sure I've even been in all of them.

The Morelli mansion has been in our family for generations. My

grandfather purchased the land and built a more modest home. The grandfather tore it down and had the mansion built in its place, not spending a penny on it. The facade looms large for any visitor, the large, dark front porch encompassing your view. It blocks out the very sun. Inside, every square inch has gold plating and hand-carved molding. Solid wood furniture and comfortable nooks inside, leather armchairs with chess pieces. Expensive bookshelves with volumes in every language. A massive globe inlaid with ivory and diamonds.

My driver opens the door for me.

I take a deep breath and pause before stepping out. I am one of the gladiators, after all. And I'm late. I recognize Lucian and Tiernan and the Emerson's. The limo Sophia used to get here would be moved out of the garage just like this one will be. Leo's car is missing.

I speed dial him.

He picks up right away. "She's not feeling well."

He means Haley. Worry tightens my throat. "Do you need me to come over?"

"I already called the doctor. He swears she's fine. And I threaten to sue if I'm pretty sure he's telling the truth. But that's why I couldn't come to dinner."

"What's going on with her?"

"She had some strange pains and tension. She thought it was labor."

"It's too soon."

"I know." His voice is grim. A premature birth would be risky. Letting Haley to an extreme. If anything goes wrong, I don't know what will happen to my brother. Nothing good.

"You have to go to dinner, though. I need you to cover for me."

Which means I have to lie. If our parents knew there were issues, they would descend with unwelcome help, my father with outdated advice, my mother with essential oils. "No problem," I say, my heart clenching. "I'll be updated."

He promises that he'll text me and hangs up.

One of the expansive front doors already stands open. A member of the staff holds it for me under the watchful eye of Trix, who's been the family's housekeeper for years.

I nod a greeting to them both.

ie. My Her real name is Tricia Goodman, but Sophia nicknamed her Tri-  
aring ashe was a kid. She had a lisp and couldn't pronounce her name correc-  
ont of itthe kids took to it. Only my mother continues to call her Tricia. A  
re inchfather doesn't address her at all.

creates She manages the maids, the cooks, the groundspeople. There are  
pansivecommanders who could learn a thing or two from her strict leac-  
id withThere's never a speck of dust here. The decadent flower arrangeme-  
always blooming.

No, only the people who live here are a mess.

of the There are multiple places to eat in the mansion. The staff kitch-  
's cars.family kitchen. The regular dining room. There's even a breakfast roo-  
f sight,family dinners take place somewhere else—in the formal dining ro-  
expansive room that's more like a grand hall.

Despite the brocade chairs and heavy drapes, our voices echoed.

That was before.

o come Before Lucian married a Constantine. Before Leo found love.

Tiernan stopped being so damn surly and surprised us all by settling  
ed him,Even Daphne fell in love with a reclusive art collector, though we  
t makekeeping an eye on that guy. If he makes her cry, my brothers are g-  
twist his balls until they pop.

They'd have to get in line behind me.

” Now there are way more people. Enough to fill the space wi-  
teasing chatter instead of the stifling chill between my parents. Enc-  
o lovesmake the room feel almost, *almost* loving.

would Let's not go too far, though. We are Morellis, after all.

I wave hello to everyone, my brothers and their wives. Daph-  
Emerson. Sophia's wearing a shiny silver dress with angles, her hair  
es theyhigh ponytail. The outfit would look silly on most people, but on  
ice, myeffortlessly cool. She pats a seat next to her, between her and my mo-

“Keepthe safety zone, but I give her a slight shake of my head. She rolls h-  
Instead I cross the room, kissing cheeks and giving hugs as I go. I ci-  
father at the head of the table, giving him a kiss on the forehead  
r of thecontinuing.

ie head I choose a seat in the middle of the table.

There's a reason I sit here instead of on either side with my p-  
Because it's easiest to be the referee from here. As a bonus I get to :



x when Lizzy and ask her about whether she's gotten her period. I tried texti  
tly. All she's given me radio silence since that morning.

and my I reach for the back of an empty chair, surprised when the dinin  
staff, a young man whose name is Mike, clears his throat. A faint blush  
e Army his cheeks.

lership. He reaches for the one beside it. "Ms. Morelli?"

ents are "That one's taken," Sophia says, her eyes twinkling.

I glance back in confusion. "By who?"

The only Morelli missing from the group is my brother, Carte  
ien, the away on some geological expedition or whatever he does when h  
m. Our teaching at Oxford. He isn't due back in the United States until D  
om, an wedding next month.

Sometimes my father will invite one of his friends.

Or my mother would invite someone intending to set me up.

My eyes narrow. If that's what happened, I'm not going to stand  
Before I'm fake dating Finn Hughes for a reason. My mother should know  
; down. than to invite Alex Langley or whatever other older, plain, boring ger  
're still she wants me to marry.

oing to "Hello, sweetheart." The voice comes from behind me.

I whirl and find Finn standing there. He looks impossibly ha  
standing in the doorway in black slacks and a light blue shirt, the  
th soft, rolled up. His hair is just the slightest bit wrinkled. It's a different Finn  
ough to saw at the underground fighting ring. And the handful of other dates  
been on: a Sunday morning farmer's market, Daphne's art show, a  
Parkers' fiftieth anniversary ball. Different from the quiet, frustrated  
ne and saw the night I met his father.

up in a This is a domestic Finn, I realize. The one that comes home from  
her it's every day, a little tired but still with that irrepressible charm. His haz  
om. It's sparkle at me. It always feels like we share some secret, even though  
er eyes. I'm the one who's been left in the dark.

rcle my When I look back, my mother has stood to join us. "Darling,  
before you'd be pleased to have your boyfriend visit us. So I called him, and c  
imagine? He was free."

He was probably *not* free.

parents. No, he was probably coerced by my marriage-minded mother.

sit with I'm sorry, I try to communicate with my eyes.

ing, but His gaze just reflects amusement at the situation. Of course he would show it if he had to leave work early for this. Actually, he's probably going to room his father's side. Guilt rises like bile in my throat. Or maybe he would have been with a woman. Or a man. Finn has liked both men and women for years.

I don't believe he'd lie to a woman, but he could have sex with her. After all, we're only fake dating.

"Mom, he doesn't need to spend time with the family."

"Nonsense," she says. "He needs to eat anyway. And besides, you're right. He's said I want to spend time with your boyfriend. It's been so long since we've not been serious about anyone."

Daphne's A flush burns my cheeks. *Please kill me.*

"Happy to be here," Finn says, smoothing everything over.

Usually that's my job.

I turn, almost blindly, and find the empty seat I'm supposed to use for it, puts me next to Finn Hughes. In the center of the table, it feels like I've better standing together in a spotlight. Sophia gives me a look that says she's a gentleman warn me, but I didn't listen.

That's what I get for letting my defenses down in the gladiator ring.

"We don't have to wait for Leo," I say, because dinner would be some other way. There are two chairs on my mom's side waiting for her. I see sleeves. Haley. "He had a meeting come up that he couldn't put off. He's going to be in the office until midnight, he said."

As we've Concern crosses my sister Daphne's expression. She recognizes a look and the My mother does not. She snaps her fingers to indicate that the server should bring Finn I begin.

Several people in black slacks and white shirts come to pour wine. The server works to serve the appetizers, a high-end surf-and-turf offering with fresh lobster. I see Kobe beef seared in truffle oil. Clearly my mother spared no expense on this clearly meal. The last time I saw her serve this particular dish, we had

Ambassador from Argentina at our table.

I knew Apparently Finn Hughes ranks as high as foreign royalty.

can you "Sorry about this," I murmur once people start eating.

He pops a seared duck crostini in his mouth. "This is delicious. In fact, it's better than anything I've had over anytime. Besides," he says, lowering his voice. "This is part of the show, right?"

Yes, it's part of the show.

ouldn't The show where I'm fun and young and sexy enough to be Finn H  
leaving girlfriend.

ld have Not reality. Which would be funny if it weren't so sad.

rever. "Part of the show," I murmur in agreement.

. He leans close enough that I can see the deep green in his hazel  
"Besides, I wanted to come. I'm looking forward to seeing you in  
natural element."

r father "It's not that interesting," I assure him.

nce you "I doubt that."

I'm distracted from that cryptic comment when I hear Sophia'  
rising at the end of the table. Her expression tells me that Mom has  
criticizing her again. My sister loves avant-garde art and nightclubs that  
fifty-dollar cocktails. It's harmless, really. But my mother acts like m  
e. That is about to become a stripper for five-dollar tips.

e we're "Mom," I say to distract her. "When did you invite Finn? You cou  
tried to told me."

She waves her hand, and out of the corner of my eye, I see S  
s. expression of relief. "It was a last-minute thing," she says, lying thro  
it start teeth, because the next course is fatty tuna and caviar, which is probal  
im and hundred dollars a plate. "You know I love seeing my children, but  
ing to be with Carter gone. I thought Finn could fill the empty place."

"Does anyone actually know where he's gone?" Daphne asks.

ie. "The Republic of the Congo," Tiernan says in his low rumble.

ers can "He mentioned something about Thailand," Elaine says, glancing  
husband, my brother Lucian. He shrugs, clearly more interested in ga  
ine and his wife than speculating about his brother's whereabouts. He was p  
ster and the meanest of all the Morellis, even including my father, before  
for this tamed him.

ad the Lizzy snorts. "The last time I asked him where he was going  
thirty-minute lecture about this endangered deciduous shrub that's only  
in a particular five-hundred square miles in Siberia."

My father claps his hand on the table. "I don't know why my sor  
vite me go off chasing endangered panda bears when we have a company to ru  
of there in New York City."

"It was a shrub," Lizzy says, somewhat mulish.

"Actually, panda bears aren't endangered anymore." My brother

Hughes's Bianca, wears an earnest expression. Her love for the environment comes often. "There are over eighteen hundred of them living in the wild through conservation programs in China."

"Carter is a professor at Oxford," Sophia says, scrolling on her phone. "Probably booking luxury villas in all the places we're mentioning. What do you get to have adventures? I thought they were supposed to wear tweed jackets and have gray hair."

"Put your phone away at the table," my mother tells her.

"Didn't your aunt have a panda?" Emerson asks, his expression thoughtful.

Finn winces. "I was hoping no one remembered that."

"It made quite a stir in the rare collectibles community."

"Your aunt had a panda?" I ask, afraid to hear it will be a bad thing. I'm not passionate about the environment the way Bianca is. I still don't like hunting for sport. Especially when it comes to non-endangered species.

He sighs. "She was having a midlife crisis. She read something about a woman who captured the first baby panda and brought it to America. She decided to try it herself. I found out when an alt-PETA group decided to break into Hughes Industries at night to express their displeasure."

"I'll never get the grass stains out of the upholstery."

"What happened to the baby panda?" Bianca demands to know.

"It was returned safely," he assures them.

Bianca still looks suspicious, but the conversation moves to Daphne's wedding, something that my mother never tires of talking about. My father is only interested in the guest list. He wants the most prestigious people to attend. Daphne is fighting for it to stay small, but it definitely runs the risk of turning into a circus.

"Or a gladiator ring, as it were."

"How was it returned?" I ask, my voice low.

A soft laugh. "Yes, I had a baby panda in my Lamborghini. No, it didn't fit in the baby seat. Nor was it precisely a baby. It tried humping me right while I was driving through New Jersey."

"Oh my God."

"I surrendered it at the Central Park Zoo, along with a very large couple's wife, keep the animal safe until it could be returned to its home in nature."

mes up “It’s official. Your family is actually more wild than mine.”

anks to “You didn’t think it was possible, did you?”

Looking around at all the people I love, I huff a laugh. “No, not really.”  
phone, Daphne’s voice rises. She tries to assert herself, but she’s a people-  
hy doesat heart. She’s always struggled with disobeying our parents. Incipie  
eed andthicken her voice. “I said we weren’t inviting more than five h  
people.”

My mother does her magic hand waving thing. “That was an estim  
ression “It was a limit,” Emerson says, his voice hard as steel. He’s obsess  
my sister, which is a point in his favor. But he wouldn’t hesitate to  
fight to defend her. Daphne is near tears, and this particular gladiator  
about to draw blood if I don’t stop it.

hide or “Seems to me that since we’re paying for this,” my dad says, “we  
is, but I decide.”

t-quite- “We’re paying for it,” Emerson says, as if it’s final.

No one tells my dad what to do. Especially not a man who  
out thiskidnapped my sister barely six months ago. Sure, he gave her back, but  
a. Andleaves him on thin ice. I’ve spent enough time at his modern beachfront  
ided toto get to know him. To trust him. Leo makes a point of having Emers  
It tookDaphne over to his house for dinner on a regular basis for the same

But over the past six months, other members of my family have con  
locking her up in the Morelli mansion until she recovers from Sto  
Syndrome.

aphne’s “Dad,” I say, my voice loud but calm. “Did you get my email ab  
ather isfoundation’s upcoming gala? I need you to give the keynote addre  
ople toyear.”

risk of “Make Lucian do it,” Sophia says. “He’s the one who runs  
Holdings.”

“Thanks for volunteering me,” Lucian says.

The two siblings have a long-standing history of needling each  
t didn’tUnfortunately, that also raises the tension in the room. After a power s  
my legat Morelli Holdings, my father lost his position as CEO to his olde  
He’s never really accepted it.

My father stands up, looking fierce. “We are giving you our dau  
heck tohand in marriage,” he says to Emerson LeBlanc. “One would think you  
be grateful.”

Emerson leans back, unbothered by my father's aggression. People underestimate him because he's an art collector, but he had a hard childhood. It taught him to be strong in the face of bullies, even rich ones.

"You can't give me what's already mine," he says.

Shit.

I stand up and put my hands out. "Listen."

Even Tiernan looks pissed at Emerson now, which isn't a good state. I had a falling out with my father, but the truth is, he can't so easily shed his position as his watchdog. And who knows what Lucian would do if he started broke out. He'd be a wild card.

My father growls something that should not be repeated in company, and Emerson gets to his feet.

Daphne gives me a panicked look.

*Fuck.*

"I have an announcement to make," I say, loud enough that the limo driver stops to look at me. I take a deep breath, the same way I did when I exited the limo. This family is crazy and a little bit violent, but they're at home. "An important one."

And I have the next ten seconds to think of something.

There is no actual announcement. It's just that they were going to consider me and I'm the person who breaks up the fights. The person who stops the fight from happening. The person who diffuses a thousand different situations in my family. Which means I need to think of something big enough to protect them from punching each other about Daphne's wedding.

"We're engaged," Finn says, standing up, his hand going around my waist.

Stunned, I let him pull me close to his side.

My brothers look pissed. My dad looks genuinely shocked. My mother is about to swoon.

Silence lands in the dining room for a taut few seconds—one, two,

And then all hell breaks loose.

Best son.

Fighter's

you might

Emerson leans back, unbothered by my father's aggression. People may underestimate him because he's an art collector, but he had a hard childhood. It taught him to be strong in the face of bullies, even rich ones.

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My father growls something that should not be repeated in polite company, and Emerson gets to his feet.

Daphne gives me a panicked look.

*Fuck.*

"I have an announcement to make," I say, loud enough that the whole room stops to look at me. I take a deep breath, the same way I did before I exited the limo. This family is crazy and a little bit violent, but they're mine. "An important one."

And I have the next ten seconds to think of something.

There is no actual announcement. It's just that they were going to fight, and I'm the person who breaks up the fights. The person who stops them from happening. The person who diffuses a thousand different situations in my family. Which means I need to think of something big enough to distract them from punching each other about Daphne's wedding.

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Silence lands in the dining room for a taut few seconds—*one, two, three.*

And then all hell breaks loose.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### Finn

**I** FINALLY TAKE Eva to the fancy restaurant on the Upper East Side.

No illegal poker club. No underground boxing match. I did consider taking her to a drag race, but I decided to mix things up. Candlelight Wagyu steak will keep her on her toes. The maître d' escorts us to the best seat in the house.

People glance at us on our way to our seats.

That's the reason why people come to this restaurant. The gourmet food and the Michelin-starred chef? They're like popcorn at a movie. Someone is probably tweeting about us right now. A blurry side shadow walking will make its way onto TikTok.

That's what it means to be a Hughes dating a Morelli in New York. Of course we're not fake dating anymore.

We're fake engaged, which Eva is not happy about.

She barely said two words to me the rest of dinner. Her response to my invitation was pleasant but not particularly enthusiastic. I'm sure we'll talk about it.

A waiter comes over, all ingratiating solicitude.

Her expression is carefully blank as she examines the wine menu. "2016 Produttori del Barbaresco," she says, handing him the heavy bound list.

"Scotch," I tell him. "Neat."

I don't usually drink it before dinner, but there's a cool reserve that makes me think I'm going to need it. There's at least a fifty-percent chance that she's going to tell me she's done. Done with playing p



Done with the fake dates. I know I shouldn't care. We mostly did it to mother off her back, though being spared some of my mother's prodding has been nice. She doesn't live in the country, most of the time, but she conveys plenty of mom guilt about my lack of progeny. I shouldn't care. She wants to stop fake dating me, but the thought of it makes my lead sink in my stomach.

The waiter bows slightly and leaves us.

A tense minute follows.

"What the hell were you thinking?" she finally says.

"You're welcome," I say, mostly because I know it will annoy her. I don't know why I'd want to annoy her, except anything is better than my cool indifferent mask. And it is a mask. I know it is. We may be fake, but the connection between us isn't fake.

"You know my mother has calls out to a hundred wedding venues, the best *Ouch*. "We can say I want a long engagement."

"Florists. Cakes. The entire thing is already crazy for Daphne. My father called me twenty times today before I got here, asking for my favorite colors."

"Tell her my father is withholding his approval on the match."

"So my father can get offended and show up at the Hughes estate to thank you."

"Listen, Eva. I'm sorry. I don't know why I said it. Well, yes, I do it because you were trying so hard to protect Sophia from your mother, to protect Daphne from your father. And then you were trying to protect your father from Emerson." My voice must have risen, because someone at another table looks over at me. I'm not yelling, but I'm sure as hell not to let Eva turn herself inside out trying to please her unpleasable

"And I was tired of watching it happen. You're protecting everyone. The protecting you?"

She stares at me, her mouth open. I half expect her to slap me for her out like this. For calling her family out. She's nothing if not loyal to them.

Instead her dark eyes soften. "You were trying to protect me?"

Exasperation makes my laugh sharp. "Eva Honorata Morelli. You're the strongest, smartest, most beautiful woman I've ever met. And you let your family walk all over you. Grown men and women who can't last a

get hernight without you coming in to save them. It makes me want to take  
ling hasaway and chain you to a beach chair until you relax and forge  
can stilleveryone else.”

if Eva Her lips quirk. “You remember my middle name.”

in my I laugh, though there’s not much humor in it. “You don’t want  
about this.”

“Yes, I do.”

“You wrote your name across my chest with your finger. I’m g  
remember that night for the rest of my life.” I shake my head. “No. Of  
her. I won’t. Someday I won’t remember you at all, which is a goddamn  
ian thatYour naked body is a work of art.”

dating, Sadness clouds her face, and I regret my words. It’s just so str  
have someone who knows my secret. It made me relax. But of course,  
right?”a reason it’s a secret. Because it makes people uncomfortable. Eva  
sweet and pure to judge me for it, but the truth is, she doesn’t like it an  
motherthan the rest of the world would.

winter It’s called the Hughes curse for a reason. It’s my cross to bear. Not  
She sighs. “You’re right. Sometimes I do go a little too far trying  
the peace.”

te? No, I still remember the way her father gripped her arm at a party lo  
his anger thick in the room. They thought they were alone. The skin  
). I saidhis fingers had turned white. I interrupted them. “You did more than k  
r and topeace. You were abused.”

ct your Something fierce flashes through her eyes. “That was one time.”

ie from I give her a look that calls bullshit. Loyalty is admirable, but I kr  
it goingtruth.

family. She looks away first. “Families are complicated. I thoug  
Who’sunderstood that.”

“My relationship with both my parents is complicated, but I can t  
callingthat neither of them has ever hurt me. Well, I suppose that’s not strict  
oyal toMy father has been known to fight during his worst hours, but when l  
that he’s not in his right mind.”

“My father wasn’t in his right mind either,” she says, her voice qui  
are the Christ. She’s enabling them. I can’t blame her, because I’ve se  
et yourintensely she loves them. It’s in her nature to protect them, even if the  
a single deserve it.

you far     *The same way she protects you,* a small voice says inside me.

t about     I push that idea away. I'm not hurting her.

*Aren't you?*

The waiter comes back with our drinks and takes our order.

to talk     When he leaves we sit in a silence that's actually quite comfortable. She looks beautiful. That's what keeps distracting me. Everything about her is flawless. Everything about her is queen-like. We might be fake engaging if I were ever going to marry, if I had to choose someone, I would choose someone like Eva. No, not someone like her. Just her. This is a shame. Incredible woman who drives me insane with lust.

As I study her, I notice a faint sadness in her eyes.

ange to     “What's wrong?”

there's     She gives me an arch look. “Nothing.”

is too     “Don't tempt me, sweetheart. If I have to coax the truth out of you in front of all these witnesses, I have no problem doing it.”

Her cheeks turn pink. “I'm a little worried.”

hers.     “About?”

to keep     “About Haley. She's pregnant, and she keeps having these contractions. The doctors say it's normal, but my brother is so worried about it. I reach across the table and take her hand. “Can I help?”

around     Her eyes meet mine. “You are helping, just by listening. I can't tell anyone else in the family, because they'd only worry. Or worse, descend on their house. Leo is always overprotective, but in his current state, he probably get arrested.”

ow the     “I'm sorry.”

ht you     “I mean of course I'm worried about the baby. And Haley, who you care about now. But I'm more worried about my brother. Leo has been through so much already. And he loves Haley beyond what can be heard. I can't tell you anything happens to her...”

ly true.     I wait a moment, but she doesn't finish the sentence. “We don't want you to stay here, sweetheart. I can take you home or to Leo's place or—”

et.     “No,” she says, a faint pleading note in her voice. “I want this. I want to see you. Show me what it would be like to have a real date with Finn Hughes.”

en how     “So the other dates weren't real?”

y don't     “They were,” she says with a soft smile. “In a way they're the best things I've ever done. But I like this too. Both sides of you.”

“Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?”

“Maybe. If Dr. Jekyll were a billionaire who was too handsome  
own good. And if Mr. Hyde were secretly strong and grieving and lone

“I feel like that story wouldn’t make a great musical.”

le. She “No,” she says. “But it makes a great man.”

t her is Warmth suffuses my chest. Goddamn. This woman really she  
ged, but illegal. Not only because she’s sexy, but because she’s the real deal. I  
d want me. I’m fake. Pretend. Temporary. Every second that I spend with h  
pecific, one step closer to the end.

Oh, everyone knows we’re not promised a long and healthy life.

We can live with that uncertainty.

Unfortunately, my fate isn’t uncertain. I know exactly how it’s g  
play out. And I watched my mother lose affection for my father as he  
you in and babbled and essentially turned back into a child. I watched my fa  
his lucid moments, ask for her.

I lie, of course. *She’s shopping. She’s at the spa.* Anything but th  
which is that she hasn’t been in this house for years. In a matter of hou  
e false forgotten about her again.

.” It’s a strange blessing.

I raise my hand to call the waiter over. “Put a hold on the foie g  
n’t tell the risotto. We’re having dessert first. One of everything. And I ex  
end on least one thing to be on fire.”

te he’d She smiles, like I hoped she would.

Christ.

I could spend a lifetime with this woman.

I really The only problem is, I don’t have a lifetime left to live.

is been “Tell me something about you,” she says after eating a bite of ch  
althy. If cream and caramelized banana. “I know about the casino and the

Do you spend all your time seeking out illegal activity or do you hav  
have to hobbies?”

“Horses,” I tell her. “I breed them. Race them.”

Need it. A small notch forms between her eyes. “I remember seeing sor  
about that. An article somewhere. That you were the youngest owner  
the Kentucky Derby.”

realist “It’s not precisely an achievement, owning them. It’s the jockey th  
the work. And mostly the horse. You don’t make them race, you know

want it. The real champions want to push the limits of what they can for hislike human athletes do.”

ely.” “Ah,” she says in a knowing tone.

“Ah, what?”

“It’s another one of your risky things. Like gambling.”

ould be “There’s definitely a gambling element to horse racing. And Not likemade me a lot of money. But the truth is, I feel a connection to the horer, I’munderstanding.”

“You like to be ridden?” A moment after the words are out, sh pink.

I’m a gentleman enough to ignore it. Barely. “The horses are bre oing tochampions. They enjoy it, but they were also made that way. They can drooledit.”

ther, in She frowns. “Is that how you feel? That you were... bred?”

My voice drops. I’m aware that people are around us, even thou; e truth,can’t really hear. “I know I was bred. That’s why my parents got n urs he’sSomeone had to carry on the family name.”

“You have the horses at your estate?”

“There’s not enough room for them. We have a property upstate ras andwhen I can, which never seems like enough. Especially now that Hem spect atis home.”

“Your brother?”

I make a face. “He got expelled.”

“Oh no.”

“He was having sex in the bathroom. I feel... pretty useless, act should have had the birds and the bees talk with him years ago. And n ocolatesexual orientation talk. And a gender identity talk, maybe. I don’t ever boxing.I’m failing him.”

re other Sympathy crosses her face. “I feel the same way.” Her voice

“Lizzy thought she might be pregnant. She took the test at my loft. Ne thank God. She’s supposed to start college in the fall. She has a lo nethingbefore she’s ready for kids.”

to win I stare at her, surprised that I never put it together before. “We same.”

at does “What?”

v. They “You and I. Both of us are raising our siblings.”

do, just Awareness raises her brow. "You're right."

"Though you have quite a few more than I do."

No fucking wonder I was drawn to her. She's beautiful and perfect the same as me. We share an experience that's shaped us. That conversation remains while we finish the dessert and finally get our entrée they've conversation turns a little lighter, but it never becomes completely j ses. An There's a new gravity between us, pulling and pulling.

When we're done I help her stand and lead her out of the restaurant ie turns A man approaches me, his expression intent, and I force myself flinch. I try to offer a handshake, but he pulls me in for a hug. He'd to be father's friend. No, scratch that. He's my father's *best* friend, which n n't help that much worse.

Which is why I've been very careful not to make close friends.

"How's Dan?" he asks, trying to mask his hurt and not be irgh they competent at it. "I've missed him at the country club. Other guys married about him."

"He's fine," I say. "Private. You know how it is."

"Right. Right. When does he want to meet up for golf? You'll p . I visit message along, won't you? Tell him to give me a call. Or email."

ingway "I'm sure he'll appreciate the invitation, but he's pretty busy lately

A resigned smile. He thinks he did something to piss my father that maybe my father and him were never friends, that he just imagine I know because I feel that way too, sometimes. When my father remember something, when he seems so sure that it's twenty years ago ually. I mindfuck, this disease. On my father and everyone else.

maybe a

I know.

drops.

negative,

it to do

are the

Awareness raises her brow. “You’re right.”

“Though you have quite a few more than I do.”

No fucking wonder I was drawn to her. She’s beautiful and perfect and... the same as me. We share an experience that’s shaped us. That connection remains while we finish the dessert and finally get our entrées. Our conversation turns a little lighter, but it never becomes completely playful. There’s a new gravity between us, pulling and pulling.

When we’re done I help her stand and lead her out of the restaurant.

A man approaches me, his expression intent, and I force myself not to flinch. I try to offer a handshake, but he pulls me in for a hug. He’s my father’s friend. No, scratch that. He’s my father’s *best* friend, which makes it that much worse.

Which is why I’ve been very careful not to make close friends.

“How’s Dan?” he asks, trying to mask his hurt and not being very competent at it. “I’ve missed him at the country club. Other guys ask me about him.”

“He’s fine,” I say. “Private. You know how it is.”

“Right. Right. When does he want to meet up for golf? You’ll pass the message along, won’t you? Tell him to give me a call. Or email.”

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate the invitation, but he’s pretty busy lately.”

A resigned smile. He thinks he did something to piss my father off. Or that maybe my father and him were never friends, that he just imagined it all. I know because I feel that way too, sometimes. When my father doesn’t remember something, when he seems so sure that it’s twenty years ago. It’s a mindfuck, this disease. On my father and everyone else.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### Eva

**F**INN'S QUIET WHEN the valet brings his car around.

No wonder why. Those comments from his father's friend had to have been most people couldn't see it. His mask was firmly in place—the easy humor. But I saw underneath. Maybe once he dropped the mask it left him a little vulnerable. Only to me, though. Even my own body reacted at the man's clear confusion. He didn't understand why his golf partner disappeared, and nothing Finn said would fix that.

Except the truth.

Though I'm starting to understand why the Hughes family has kept this secret. I'm not sure the world really wants the truth. What would have he'd told that man that his father might not even remember how to play golf? He would get pity, at best. And suspicion, like he said, that he would fall to the same disease.

My family has other secrets. Worse secrets, really.

I have things I'll never tell Finn Hughes, which isn't fair. I know my darkest parts, but he doesn't know mine. It makes us uneven. It makes me a coward.

He pulls up in front of the building and gets out to open my door for me. I know what I should do. I should go upstairs. Leave him here. Let him go back to his family...

"Do you want to come upstairs?"

He nods, wordless.

He's quiet again on the way up and I realize this is different. This is different from when he came here before to get me for our date. /



simmers in the air. Anticipation as well. Are we going to have sex? what people do, right? When they invite a man upstairs after dinner? how dating works, I think. I wouldn't know, because I've barely ever I've only had sex with one man, and that was done in furtive, secret mo

Having a man follow me up the stairs to my loft is new.

And so I feel shy when I open the door to my home.

The walls are painted various jewel tones—navy blue and emerald and aubergine. That was how my grandmother did it, each area theme space. Ornate antique furniture covers every inch of the walls, each su in its way. An antique TV has been hollowed out and now serves as a liquor cabinet. Paintings and quilts cover the walls. Chandeliers hang the high ceilings, along with a four-foot-tall stained-glass whale.

urt. Ironically the strangeness of it all makes it feel safe and comfortable.

charm It's a place where the decor is so bizarre that you can feel free e mask,yourself. Nothing you do or say will be more strange than some of the r tensedhere. There's a pink lacquer statue of a dog next to a miniature lil ner had classic books printed in one-inch volumes. A neon sign proclaiming c

*MARTINIS* was possibly stolen from some unsuspecting club years ago.

I moved in the second I turned eighteen. And sure, I could have c pt theirthe decoration. My mother practically begs me to do it every time she ppen iflove it, though.

y golf? My main addition is the terrariums.

all prey I probably should have warned him about those.

He might think it's weird. Well, that's because it *is* weird.

Like a magnet, he's drawn to one despite all the other things to l ow hisThis one is small enough to hold in one hand, perfectly round, pack es me a moss and stones and a small porcelain figurine of a realistic-looking T

his tiny hand is the stem of a single orchid, which blooms white, r or me. I outside the round opening of the terrarium. It reminds me of the orchid aim getgala for the Society for the Preservation of Orchids.

It's quirky and irreverent.

In other words, it fits into the vibe of the loft perfectly.

He glances back, his lips quirked. "You made this?"

This is "It's kind of a hobby."

Arousal Unerring, he wanders over to another one. This one's larger and

That's more like a fairy garden, with a small cottage and a wooden bridge  
That's babbling brook made out of moss.

dated. "That's reindeer lichen," I offer, babbling in my nervousness.  
meetings supposed to give him a tour? A coffee? I have no idea about the after  
customs. Or maybe I'm supposed to 'slip into something more comfy  
and come back in lingerie. It would help if I owned lingerie. "My  
d green Carter brought it back from northern Canada. He said it's green w  
d to the fresh, but it turns blue when it's dry."

prising Somehow when he looks back at me, he's close. Close enough fo  
lighted feel the warmth of his body. Close enough to turn flushed under his  
g from regard.

"You're nervous," he murmurs. Not a question.

le. "No. Maybe."

e to be He puts his hand on the side of my neck. His thumb brushes m  
e pieces point. I can feel it, a little too fast. My breath sounds loud between u  
brary—"don't have to do anything," he says. "We can just have a glass of w  
IGARS & maybe I can leave, if you want me to."

He can leave. If I want him to. The meaning of words is slow to r  
hanged My mind feels weighted down with desire. Like I'm made of silk-thin  
visits. I and the desire is dew. Do I want him to leave? That's the safest thing  
for both of us. Do I want to talk and open a bottle of wine? Also s  
that's not what I want. There are Alex Langleys of the world if I want  
I'm with *Finn Hughes*, the playboy billionaire. Other women would  
be with him, even if it was only for a night. This has nothing to do wit  
look at women.

ed with Me.

-rex. In I would love to be with him, only for a night.

eaching "Stay," I say. "Make me forget."

ls at the *Make me forget about Haley and Leo and their baby. Make me for  
I'm me and you're you. Make me forget that this is only pretend.*

He drops his head but doesn't kiss me. His lips are inches from m  
he doesn't take that last extra millimeter. He's waiting, I realize. Fo  
kiss him. He's too good to take me, if I might have doubts. If I might  
later.

themed I'm sure I will regret it, but those regrets will keep me warm wh  
gone.

over a I push up on my toes in my heels. My lips meet his in a clumsy, t  
way. He doesn't seem to mind, kissing me back, pulling me closer. It'  
Am I unleashed something inside him. That one atom of space—it was pern  
-dinner Not only for sex but this other side of him. Raw and blunt, his tongue  
ortable' my mouth with the same rhythm that he'd use to fuck me.

brother It's a promise. A warning.

hen it's When we were in his house, he licked me between my legs the san  
He fucked me with his tongue until I climaxed harder than I thought p  
r me to I didn't even know my legs could shake like that. My time with Lane  
intense million years away. I don't remember much about the orgasms,  
probably says everything about them.

It hadn't really been about the sex for me. It had been love.

The opposite of this situation.

y pulse This has nothing to do with real emotion. It's only sexual pleasure  
is. "We already know he can give me that. He deserves it, too. That night he di  
ine. Or me return the favor. Still shocked by the evening and disconcerted  
orgasm, I'd let him pack me into a limo with a driver and send me hon

register. That was his home. His domain.

petals, This is mine.

g to do, I sink down to my knees and look up at him.

afe, but He sucks in a breath. "Eva. You don't have to do this."

safety. Except he wants me to. The desire burns in his hazel eyes. And  
love to more, I want to do this. It makes me feel powerful, that I have someth  
th other man wants. He has everything, almost. This is a gift. I unbuckle his t  
open his pants. He lets me do it, not moving to help, only watching b  
slitted eyes.

I kiss the tip of his cock. It's slick against my lips. I feel unacco  
innocent right now, which is strange. I've done this before. But one  
*get that* not a large set of references. And I'd been young and foolish bac  
Prettier, too. I don't think I'd ever had any real skill in this area. It had  
ine, but been my enthusiasm he appreciated.

r me to "Lick," Finn says, the green of his eyes turning deeper.

regret it I obey him, licking around the head, tasting his desire. It's easy as  
he gives me commands. As long as he looks down at me like he's g  
en he's devour me. He stands tall and strong. It's a powerful position, him we  
dress shirt and slacks, completely clothed except for the long, hard col

so-hardhis cock. My thighs press together, seeking friction.

's like I "How is it going to feel in your mouth?" he asks, stroking my  
mission."Hot. Warm. Wet. I'm going to have to focus not to come down your t  
lapping My eyes burn with an emotion I can't name. Arousal is part of  
there's more.

He continues, clearly not expecting me to talk when I'm busy lick  
ne way.underside of his cock. "You'd take it, wouldn't you? If I wanted to pa  
ossible.with come. If I wanted you to swallow it down. You'd be a good girl  
feels awouldn't you?"

which I nod, wordless, overcome by sensation.

"Take me in your mouth," he says. "As far as you can go."

I lean forward to suck him deep. The large head hits the back  
throat, and I cough. My eyes water. My mascara might be runni  
e. And embarrassing, really. I'm thirty-three years old. I should know how to  
idn't letcock, shouldn't I?

by the He doesn't look disappointed, though. He looks like a king accept  
ie. service he deserves. "Don't stop," he says. "Try again. You've got it.  
my good girl."

My sex throbs under his praise.

"Enough," he says, stopping me. His cock is still hard and slick w  
pulls me to my feet. "I'm not coming in your mouth. Not before I get  
what'syour pussy."

ing this The words make my breath catch. I want that, too.

elt and Before I can register what's happening he lifts me in his arms.

etween He finds my bedroom and tips me onto the bed.

Then he's on top of me. Almost feral.

untably "It's going to be more than once," he says, and I don't know wh  
man istalking about at first. I'm too busy watching him. He drags himself av  
k then.strips off his clothes.

mostly Holy shit, he's absolutely beautiful. He's beautiful in clothes, but  
them he's stunning. It makes me lose my breath. I'm suddenly n  
suddenly a little shy, but I can't bring myself to hide from him. I don  
long asto.

oing to When he's naked, he positions himself between my thighs.

aring a I hold my breath, wondering if he'll speak to me now. If he'll pra  
umn oflike he did before. His eyes meet mine. And I understand that there wi

praise right now.

temple. We're beyond that. Past words.

throat." He's entered a space of pure, desperate need.

it, but Without a sound I put my palm on his cheek. Permission and plea.

*Take what you need. I want to fulfill you.*

ing the With a groan, he pushes into me, not particularly gentle. It feels to

int youHe's using me, fucking me, escaping into me. I find it unbearably hot.

for me,make some sound against his chest because he pulls back, kissing me a

"More," he demands, rolling over and pulling me on top of him.

He's still feral this way. Still in control even though I'm on top.

I truly have no choice but to take what he gives me, to let him do v

of mywants, to surrender to his thrusts. I don't have to think about it. I don

ng. It'sto worry. I don't have to manage. His hands and body and mind do th

suck aI'm something to be used. I'm begging by the time he grunts beneath r

Climax rains over me like meteors, bright and fiery, des

ting theeverything in its path. Every thought, every worry. I'm pure li

There'spleasure as he fucks into me once, twice, three more times, his boc

against mine, locked tight for the final throes of orgasm.

Then I collapse on top of him. Beside him.

when he I'm breathing hard. My mind wants to drift off to sleep, but I c

to feelthat. There's a man in my bed. Does he leave now? Do I invite him t

over? I have no idea. Sophia really needs to write a guidebook for

like me.

His large hand covers my breast. He strokes my nipple idly, casual

if we have all the time in the world. Except we just had sex. I look

and he's gazing back, his expression almost predatory. "Are we doi

at he'sagain?"

vay and "I had to get it out of my system," he says. And it's not the cruel jo

someone can make it into when they pretend that fucking you once is e

without"Hard and fast and a little rough. Now I can do this." He kisses dc

ervous,front of my body, and I am lost. How could I ever have survived anyc

it wantbut Finn Hughes? He makes me feel alive. I'm so full of pleasure t

hard to contain in my body. He kisses down between my legs and w

buries himself there, I find myself gripping the covers, pressing my lip

aise me But then for what? It's my loft. I'm at home. There's nothing to hid

ll be no And in fact, there's nothing I *can* hide.

He's too close. He can see everything. He can taste everything, does. I'm out of practice, but that's because I haven't had sex with since Lane. He loomed so large in my memory. Even after he broke up, I assumed no one would ever compare.

I couldn't imagine someone like Finn.

So good. Athletic. Adventurous. He seems like he could do this forever. He . I must like he could go on and on all night—and what can I say? This is again. I wanted. I never admitted it out loud, even to myself. But this is what my secret heart always wanted.

Someone who would not be unable to tear themselves away.

Someone who would choose me over everything.

What he  
I't have  
the work.  
me.  
destroying  
limitless  
try hard

can't do  
to sleep  
women

ally. As  
at him,  
ing this

like that  
enough.  
own the  
one else  
that it's  
when he  
is shut.  
be here.

He's too close. He can see everything. He can taste everything, and he does. I'm out of practice, but that's because I haven't had sex with anyone since Lane. He loomed so large in my memory. Even after he broke my heart I assumed no one would ever compare.

I couldn't imagine someone like Finn.

Athletic. Adventurous. He seems like he could do this forever. He seems like he could go on and on all night—and what can I say? This is what I wanted. I never admitted it out loud, even to myself. But this is what my secret heart always wanted.

Someone who would not be unable to tear themselves away.

Someone who would choose me over everything.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### Finn

**I** WAKE UP comfortable, which is a problem.

I normally wake up with a thousand things on my mind already. My list haunts my dreams. My dad, my brother, the company. The list of responsibilities. The list of my failures. But this morning as I come out of bed, I'm comfortable. A lazy kind of comfort.

My eyes stay closed, because I want to preserve the feeling.

Maybe it's a dream.

Then I feel her. The warmth across my chest. The faint silky strands of hair tickling my nose. An intense case of morning wood. Last night she came back to me with a rush of wild emotion. I enjoy sex as much as any man, but that was something different. It was uncontrollable, as if lust made my muscles move.

It drove me instead of logic, which is terrifying.

Part of me wants to gently move her aside, to slip out before she wakes up. That would be the cowardly route. The other part of me wants to order a full brunch on DoorDash and spend the day in bed with her. The warring impulses make my heart pound.

I couldn't keep myself away from her last night. I fucked her in several different ways, several different times, until finally she could take no more. She lay there, limp and sated, while I came for the last time. Then I crawled next to her, where I stayed until morning.

Sunlight peeks around the edges of a thick curtain.

I'm fucked. I knew I shouldn't have come up here last night. I know the right answer was to say no, to go back home and manage my house, to



life, and my family the way I always do. I knew and I did it anyway. What the fuck am I becoming? I'm good at making these kinds of decisions. I'm good at knowing when I've reached my limit. I know how long I can be away from home. I calculate it down to the second. I know how long I can lose myself to drinks or games or people. I'm always back on time.

I'm past my limit with Eva.

Far past it, in fact. I have to admit that it feels good.

I anticipated that once I fucked her, the insane lust I feel around her would cool. Judging by the steel bar that is my cock right now, that's not going to happen. She's soft and warm in her sleep. I want to slip inside her before she's even awake, to feel her slick and swollen around my cock and rub her clit with my fingers so the first thing she knows on awakening is only me.

There's another impulse inside me. One that says she's at peace and I shouldn't do anything to disturb her. I've never been a man that does anything for my own pleasure. She would enjoy it, too. So why can't I make myself do it for her up? Even as I burn for a touch of her velvety skin.

Christ. I'm well and truly fucked.

Eventually she stirs. Her body shifts in subtle ways until she becomes completely still.

She's remembering last night.

"Good morning," I say, my voice still scratchy with sleep.

She gives me a cautious, doe-eyed glance. "Good morning."

Now that she's awake, I give in to the urge to touch her. To caress her. I run my hand up and down her arm. "I didn't mean to spend the night."

Embarrassment crosses her expression. "I'm sorry. I don't know the proper morning after etiquette. Am I supposed to make you coffee? Or let you shower. The other way while you get dressed?"

Fuck, she's so sweet. And strangely innocent. The world knows several names for Morelli as an incredibly smart and competent woman. This is a secret name for her. One only I get to see... for right now, anyway. Nothing lasts forever. Definitely not me. "You don't have to do a damn thing. But I can get you a drink. Your hair if you want."

"I'd like it if you stayed," she says, sounding almost shy. "This is my first time. Then I'll stay."

She snuggles closer to me, curving her body against mine. The feel of her breasts makes my cock throb. I want to push her back and spread her legs.

Who the—

m good No. I force myself to wait, to revel in this different sort of intimacy from my world. And if I had to guess, rare in hers as well. It makes me myself in about her sexual history. It's taboo to ask, but the speculation doesn't

She seemed hesitant last night. Not only because we were taking this to a new level, but also as if she wasn't used to sex. Maybe she hasn't had it often.

and her Maybe it's been a while. She could have even been a virgin, she would have said that isn't tight.

side her "Did I hurt you?" I ask, my voice low.

to rub Tension runs through her body. I stroke down her side, onto her back, to her orgasm.

and I Maybe I was too rough with her. She could be sore.

to deny Lord knows I had no control. No restraint.

lf wake "You didn't hurt me, but... it's been a while."

I force my voice to remain casual. "How long?"

"Fourteen years."

comes *Holy shit.* I'm propped on my elbow before I can stop myself, I look down at her. So much for sounding casual. "Are you fucking serious?"

"Yes." She blushes. "It doesn't matter. Why are you upset?"

"I'm not upset." I run a hand through my hair and tug. Hell. Maybe I am upset. "It's just that you should have told me. I would have been more honest with you. I would have—"

"I didn't want you to be more gentle with me. I liked the way you were with me."

ow the Her soft admission makes my cock throb. It reminds me that I have a good view of her beautiful breasts, full and plush with dark tips. Desires

hard at my control. It would be so easy to have her right now. A distraction from what I really want to know. "Why, Eva?"

side of beautiful, passionate, and very active in Bishop's Landing. How is it possible for one person to be so beautiful, so sexy, and so available to everyone else's pleasure forever. one can get you into their beds?"

t out of She looks away, leaving me her profile. "Your father was right, and he did have my heart broken. No, he said it was shattered. And it's true."

ice." I turn her chin back to me. "Who was it? And can I kill him?"

A pained laugh. "You can't. He's already dead."

l of her Her words slam into me. I almost lose my breath. Is that why she's been single all this time? Been abstinent for fourteen years? Because she

love and tragically lost him? It makes my chest feel tight to imagine. Rarely. Even as I licked her pretty sex, even as I fucked her curiously she saw stars, she loved a dead man.

“I can’t stop.” “I’m sorry,” I manage to say.

“It’s not like that,” she says, looking up at me. Her eyes have turned all that paler brown in the morning light. Or maybe it’s that she’s baring her teeth right now that makes it seem that way. As if I’m looking past her dead face and into the heart of her. “I’m not still in love with him, but I wish I could shrug it off as childish infatuation, but if it had been that, I would have gotten over it. No. This was real, foolish, unthinkable, impulsive, lower-stupid love.”

“What makes it stupid?” I ask softly.

I’m not against love. In fact, I want it. I want to experience it the way as everyone else, with all the doubt, all the uncertainty. I don’t want to know that I’ll lose it by forgetting it ever happened. I don’t want to sacrifice with a childlike husband who screams at her when he gets confused and angry. It’s a sorry fate to face alone, but I won’t take her down with me.

And considering how loyal she is to her family, if I *did* marry her father, she’d probably stay with me to the bitter end. It’s sad that my mother and my father, but there’s a kind of mercy in it, too. At least her memories of me are mostly from the past, when he was really himself. Eva would be gentle herself to her husband through sickness as in health.

“It was Lane Constantine.”

Christ. Lane Constantine was married, though he was known for a very few affairs. And it would have been normal for him to have younger women as his mistresses, but still. Eva was so much younger than he was. “How did you react?” I say, struggling to contain my anger. If Lane weren’t dead, I would definitely punch him for taking advantage of her.

“Nineteen,” she says, almost defensively.

Defending Lane fucking Constantine, as if that makes it okay. He was okay? I have been in his mid-forties by then. And she had been raised so sheltered. Catholic.

That’s not the worst part.

The worst part is that everyone knows he was mortal enemies with my father’s best friend, Morellis. It’s made for some creative guest lists and seating charts at family events. We’re connected to the Constantines via my mother, Genevieve.

ine hersister Caroline married Lane.

so hard We're also friends with the Morellis.

We don't pick sides in their little feud. With our power and fortune don't have to.

urned a Then Lucian Morelli hooked up with Elaine Constantine.

secrets Leo married Haley Constantine.

efenses There's enough of a connection that the feud has cooled... for once. Ione time, though, it was vicious. And Lane Constantine fucked his e I coulddaughter. That's cold, even for ruthless billionaires. "Did he... hurt yoossible, "No," she says quickly. "Nothing like that. At least not during...: swept me off my feet, actually. I believed him when he said he loved wanted to leave his wife. I thought we could have some kind of faie sameending."

want to My stomach knots. "That fucker."

ldle her Her laugh ends on an abrupt sob. "I thought we were like Romit night.Juliet, from two warring families, and we would find a way to be toget

"That story is a tragedy."

for real, "Yes," she says with a soft sigh. "Yes, I figured that one out tl er's leftway."

of him "Plus Romeo wasn't twenty five years older than Juliet."

d chain She flinches. "Twenty-seven, actually."

I drop my head against her breastbone. She's so goddamn sexy. my cock is going to get so hard it breaks right off. But I can't force m havingseduce her. This is a different kind of seduction, one where I lure info men asout of her. It's somehow more important than sex. "I'm afraid to asl ow oldhow did it end?"

already "We were together for nine months. We had fancy hotel sui champagne. Sneaking around. I thought it was romantic." A caustic la was stupid. He took me on trips outside the city. My parents thought e wouldnew internship. It seemed so real."

ered, so *It seemed so real.* Unlike what she has now.

I roll back onto my back and pull her against me.

She sighs with apparent relief. "And then I realized he was using m

with the "How?"

Hughes "Like I said, I fell in terrible love. Enough that I told my best frien va. Herit. My best friend, who was my brother. Leo told me that he'd had a

with Caroline. And that Lane was only using me as revenge.”

“Isn’t he younger than you?”

me, we She nods, averting her eyes. “I think Caroline was just using him back at Bryant. We became pawns in the fight between our parents.”

Fuck. “I’m sorry.”

“I confronted Lane.”

ow. At “Did he admit it?”

nemy’s A small shiver runs through her. Old pain. “Yes, but he said it c  
u?” along the way. Somehow he ended up falling for me for real. At leas  
sex. Hewhat he said. Maybe he was lying about that, too, but looking back, I  
me andbelieve it.”

iry-tale “You still stopped seeing him, though.”

“Of course. I couldn’t allow them to use me to get back at Leo.”

Naturally she was more worried about her sibling than herse  
leo andcourse.”

her.” “He kept calling, though. I think the connection was real between  
it would always be tainted by how it started. He followed me to my  
he hardclass one time. Leo found out and put a stop to it. I don’t even know  
did, but Lane never talked to me again.”

“Did you grieve when he died?” Every cell in my body rejects this

“It was years later, but I guess... yes. I cried. It’s not that I wanted  
I swearback together with him. Or even that I still loved him. Love fades  
yself towhile. It was more like crying for me, for my brother, for the fact that  
mationof us could trust people. That was before he met Haley, though. She c  
k but...everything for him.”

My heart clenches at the reminder of Haley with her false conti  
tes andand her husband’s worry. “That will happen for you,” I say, a knot  
ugh. “Ithroat. Of course I want her to be happy. To have a long, fu  
I had arelationship with a man who doesn’t forget his own name. “You  
someone, and it will change everything for you. You’ll love again. At  
a family.”

She glances up at me, her eyes clouded with some emotion I can’t  
ie.” “If you believe in second chances for me, why not you? You can hav  
things, too.”

d about I don’t bother trying to convince her. There’s no time for that. No  
n affaireither.

We only have right now.

Her breasts finally capture my attention, and I nuzzle the gentle skin to get Fuck, she's soft. I kiss a path around the outside curve and under, making her squirm, reveling in her panting breaths. When I close my mouth around her nipple, she moans her pleasure.

"Please," she whimpers.

Hunger rages inside me, an inferno through a field of gasoline. I've changed holding back ever since I woke up. That's over now. I'll kiss her pretty, but that's later. I'll make her come again and again, later. I'll spend time on fucking her, because now I need to be inside her.

I spread her legs, but she puts a hand out to stop me. She stammers in an adorable way. "Shouldn't we be using a condom? I guess you're right. I've had sex with a lot of people. I didn't even think of it earlier."

Of course. "Of course. Every muscle in my body locks up. No. No.

"What the fuck?" I say. "How did we not use one?"

us, but Except I know the answer. I was crazed with lust. "I didn't think of it," she admits, looking guilty, as if it's somehow her fault that I fucked her without protection.

*I thought you could use protection this time.* Because I didn't use protection that night. That's never happened before. I always use a condom. Even though I know how to be safe these days, but I'm extra careful. It's not just because I accidentally knocked someone up.

neither It's about creating a life that has my cursed genes.

changed If the disease only stripped years out of my life, that would be one thing.

It does more than that. It will take my dignity. It's taken my father's confidence. He's a prisoner in his own mind. I swore a long time ago that I would never let my power be used against someone.

filling Which means using a condom like it's a religion.

'll find Last night Eva became my religion.

and have I push out of bed, away from her, away from the weakness she created in me. My clothes are strewn around the room. I pick them up without a word. Part of me recognizes that I'm acting abrupt. Surly, even though she doesn't deserve this behavior from me, but I feel too jittery inside to care.

"I don't suppose you're on birth control," I say, not facing her.

point, "No." Her voice has cooled fifteen degrees. "I didn't need to be."

She wouldn't have needed it, not after being celibate for over a decade.

I'm the one who's been having sex. I know enough to use protection. "Listen," she says, and I look back to see her sitting up in bed. Underneath, the white sheet pulled up over her breasts, as if she needs a shield. A mouth needs protection from me. "I'm sure it's fine. It was only one time."

I give her a dark look.

"A few times," she amends.

I kept her up half the night, taking her again and again. "I'll send you a morning-after pill."

Her cheeks turn pink. "I'm sure I can find one on my own."

"And you can take a pregnancy test... I don't know when the test is working." I know exactly fuck-all about pregnancy. "We'll figure this out."

She stands, and all the uncertainty is gone. The pain, the grief from the past? Gone. She's draped in a white sheet, looking like a goddess. Her shoulders are back, her chin held high. Her black hair spills around her shoulders.

Roman sculptors would beg to use her as their model.

"I'll be the one to figure this out," she says. "Which will probably be nothing at all. But either way, you're absolved. Released. So you can go home looking like someone shot you."

She crosses the room with the bearing of a queen.

"Eva." It occurs to me that I may have been intense in my reaction. People forget condoms sometimes. It's fine. Nothing happens. Like she said it was only once. I probably could have asked her to take a morning-after pill without stomping around like an asshole.

Too late. The bathroom door closes in my face. I hear the sound of a shower being turned on. Steam begins pouring from the bottom of the bathroom door. She isn't coming back out anytime soon. And she sure as hell isn't inviting me to join her.

I'm pretty sure that was an invitation for me to fuck right off.

She eats in the kitchen. Her hand is jerky. She says she'll stop it.

decade.

I'm the one who's been having sex. I know enough to use protection. "Fuck."

"Listen," she says, and I look back to see her sitting up in bed. She has the white sheet pulled up over her breasts, as if she needs a shield. As if she needs protection from me. "I'm sure it's fine. It was only one time."

I give her a dark look.

"A few times," she amends.

I kept her up half the night, taking her again and again. "I'll send you a morning-after pill."

Her cheeks turn pink. "I'm sure I can find one on my own."

"And you can take a pregnancy test... I don't know when they start working." I know exactly fuck-all about pregnancy. "We'll figure this out."

She stands, and all the uncertainty is gone. The pain, the grief from her past? Gone. She's draped in a white sheet, looking like a goddess. Her shoulders are back, her chin held high. Her black hair spills around her bare shoulders.

Roman sculptors would beg to use her as their model.

"I'll be the one to figure this out," she says. "Which will probably be nothing at all. But either way, you're absolved. Released. So you can stop looking like someone shot you."

She crosses the room with the bearing of a queen.

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I'm pretty sure that was an invitation for me to fuck right off.





## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Finn,*

*I got your delivery, and I've taken it.*

*–Eva*

*Eva,*

*I'm sorry I lost my shit. Please forgive me.*

*–Finn*

*P.S. Let's go out tonight.*

*Finn,*

*Will you keep it wrapped up?*

*–Eva*

*Eva,*

*Yes, both my cock and my issues.*

*–Finn*

*Finn,*

*Come over.*

*–Eva*

*P.S. I'm holding this quarter from our bet hostage.*





## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### Eva

**L**EO'S HOUSE LOOKS like a castle, with rolling hills and a stone facade are even turrets. I arrive a few hours before the party armed with decorations and a large amount of cupcakes that are filled with colored frosting. Only Leo, Haley, and myself know the gender of the baby. It will be a surprise to everyone else when they bite into the cupcakes that are filled with little books made out of fondant. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. *Giving Tree*. *Goodnight Moon*. Books you read to children. Books I know Haley will read to their baby.

And in the middle there's pink frosting, to indicate a girl.

The house is already decked with balloon sculptures. The artist has been here for hours working on her installations, which feature pieces from the same books. A green and red caterpillar, a cow jumping over the moon.

I wave at her briefly before heading to the kitchen. Leo's regular crew is handling the hors d'oeuvres, but I want to make sure they're doing okay.

And then I hear my mother's voice. Crap. She must have shown up.

I take a hard left turn into the sitting area, where I find my mother talking off with Leo.

"We have to cancel," he's saying. "She's tired. She won't admit it, but she can tell."

"Everyone's already coming," my mother says, her voice shrill in a way that heralds a Category 5 hurricane. "My sister. Anita Barclay. Rose O'Connors."

"Then tell them not to come."

"It's too late for that," my mother says, half pleading. "We're going."

look ridiculous if we cancel now.”

Leo looks incensed. “So you’re more concerned with appearance than the health of your first grandchild? Jesus fucking Christ, Mother.”

“Leo,” I say, my voice sharp enough for him to notice.

His dark glance communicates everything about the situation: frustration, his impatience. His fear for the wife and unborn child he loves. “What?”

“I need to speak with you. Privately. *Now.*”

He reluctantly steps into another room with me. “I know you’re the resident peacemaker, but don’t tell me you’re buying that bullshit.”

“It’s your job to help our mother remain the social butterfly of Bishop’s Lane. No matter how much guilt she lays on you.”

The venom in his face takes me aback. “Leo. It’s me.”

So far he glares at me for another few seconds before dropping his head. “Jesus.”

I approach him carefully and offer a small hug.

He squeezes me back, fierce and hard. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

It was easier to survive the gladiator arena that was the Morelli household if you had backup. So we formed little allegiances. Me and Leo. Lucas and Sophia. Carter and Daphne. Tiernan was the odd man out, because of the way our father raised him. And Lisbetta was still too young for most of it. I’ve never seen me at my worst. He saw my devastation after things ended with the others. And I witnessed him in his darkest hour.

“I’m afraid,” Leo mutters, his voice low and hoarse.

“What’s happening? Can you tell me?”

“Nothing. Everything. I don’t fucking know. Haley says she’s finally seeing the way she looks at me. I don’t think she’d really tell me if she’s worried now. She thinks I’m being over the top, but what the hell else am I supposed to do?”

It’s not a good thing if Haley feels like she needs to hide the situation from him. It means she could be very worried. It also means that she’s being... overbearing. It’s not that his concern is unfounded. It’s just that he approaches everything like his own personal crusade. If she’s unwilling to needs support and love and care—not him starting World War III with our mother.

“Listen,” I say. “I’ll cancel the baby shower. I’ll handle everything upstairs and rest. Everyone will understand.”

He paces away. “No. Haley said she wants the baby shower.”

I wait, knowing he’ll arrive there in his own sweet time. Rushion—his won’t help. “I promise no one will blame you if you cancel. I’ll be here. Mom loves Mom.”

A hard breath. “Fine. We’re having it. But she remains seated through the time. Nothing that forces her on her feet. Nothing that might stress her. And no opening presents. The last thing she needs is to get everyone’s attention on her.”

“Done,” I say, my voice calm.

This is part of event planning. It’s not all about food and drink and decorations. It’s about managing people under stress. Leo was always ready to threaten to cancel the baby shower. And I was always going to wait. My mother should know that by now. Then again, she’s never understood children. It’s something that frustrates her, and sometimes, in her sorrow, pains her.

He gives me a hard look. “How’s the engagement going?”

We talked on the phone after the infamous Morelli family dinner was dismissed. That was two weeks ago. Two weeks of my family hounding me to set a wedding date. Or a huge engagement party, at the very least. Leo says it’s fake, but he’s worried about it.

That makes two of us.

When does this end? That question haunts me, along with the realization that I don’t want it to end. Since that first night, Finn has spent almost every night at my loft, in my bed. First he takes me somewhere interesting, but not far from the city. Then we go back to my place. He’s shown me new heights of pleasure, things I didn’t even think were possible.

And every night since then he’s worn a condom.

He did end up sending a morning-after pill to my place, which I took. It’s almost a religion to him. And I understand why. We aren’t really engaged. We aren’t really together. It’s fake, and I need to remember that no matter how good it feels. No matter how intimate it feels in the moment, she holds each other after sex.

He’s always gone in the morning.

I wave my hand. “Don’t think about that right now. We’re going

ing. You a nice, relaxed afternoon with friends and talk about fun baby stuff.”

“Since when are the O’Connors friends? Mother hates them.”

“She envies them, brother mine.”

ng him He shakes his head. “I know I’m being overbearing, but if a handle happens to Haley…”

I don’t give him platitudes. *Nothing will happen. Women have e entire every day. It’s totally natural.* Because I can’t guarantee it will t er out. Complications happen every day, too. When you’ve seen the darker s germs life, you understand that. Even an upbringing sparkling with diamonds shield us from that.

The next hour goes by in a whirlwind of preparation.

iks and Then the guests start arriving.

s going Lisbetta, Sophia, and Bianca arrive together, bearing oversized pa t it out. bags. I’m going to guess they hit the Disney store. Emerson brings l ood her himself, promising to pick her up when she texts. My mother gre private friends when they arrive. They drink mimosas and reminisce about the children.

Elaine also shows up with a slim envelope, which I suspect that he something outrageous. Like buying a star for the child so that when g me to exploration becomes common, she’ll already have real estate. She bri know sister, Vivian Constantine.

I’m not *quite* used to having Constantines around, but it’s only fair

This is Haley’s baby shower. She should have people from her fam

lization However, I can’t shake the hollow feeling when I greet Vivian.

st every I’ve gotten used to Elaine. I see her as a three-dimensional perso g in the my brother’s wife. But I don’t know much about Vivian, besides the f sexual she’s with the State Department. Something to do with the consulates, I don’t know what.

And, of course, she’s Lane’s daughter.

ok. It doesn’t escape my notice that we’re the same age. I knew it bef t really an abstract level, but we never spent time with the Constantines back hat. No had seemed far away and irrelevant to our love.

ents we She’s completely nice when we talk, which shouldn’t be a surprise

I’m the one with the problem. She doesn’t know why my h pounding and my palms feel sweaty. That’s my own tell-tale heart pc to have under the floorboards. I wasn’t the only person Lane had an affair w

that doesn't stop me from feeling shame. I was too young and didn't understand the ripple effects. And I was too gullible to believe him when he said it was something special between us.

Nothing     Haley's sister Petra arrives with a toddler in tow, apologizing for a moment with the nanny. "It's no problem at all," I say, smiling at a bashful little girl with blond curls. "There's no shortage of laps for him to sit on."

Everything fine.     Harlow is there, along with a few of Haley's friends from college. On the other side of the room, the expectant mother can indulge, and a few games. As promised, Daphne holds court from the formal living room, always seated, with Haley on her left and Leo on her right side in case she needs something.

Leo glowers from the corner, clearly unconcerned with our 'nephew's' antics. He's a bit of a stunner, but not as gifted as he seems.

Daphne     "Ambrose is here," he says when I try to nudge him from the table. "Ambrose is here," he says when I try to nudge him from the table. Haley's nephew was finally coaxed from his mother's arms. He wanders around the room, looking for his own space after Sophia some time ago. Knowing my sister, she's probably teaching him how to swear.

Leo holds     "Ambrose also isn't potty trained yet."  
a little space     But I let my brother stay. Better that he keeps an eye on her.  
for her     She looks fine but tired. That's normal, isn't it? I hope so. I make sure Daphne keeps a glass of ice water nearby. Haley doesn't touch it, but she encourages her to stay hydrated. I'm not a doctor, but that just seems like a good idea.  
family.     Then it's time for the gender reveal.

Everyone is passed a cupcake on delicate china.  
Leo. And     "Three," I say, holding up my cupcake. "Two. One."  
the fact that     Muffled exclamations follow as the guests see the pink filling through their mouths full of cupcake. Haley smiles in that serene way she's found since she was pregnant. She's always been a wise, steady presence, but pregnancy has taken her zen state to a new level. She accepts the congratulations and the advice in good humor.

then. It     Afterward, I shoo my sister Daphne away and take her place at the head of the table.  
Haley.     "Okay," I say, my voice private. "Tell me the truth. Are you exhausted? You can go upstairs now. Leo would be only too happy to see you up there himself."

Leo's     "No," she says, a hint of panic in her voice. "I can't survive a minute in that bedroom. There's no breathing room. I can't even breathe."

without Leo offering me eyedrops or a cold compress or a heated blanket when he says, “Leo thinks you’re understating it, though.”

Guilt crosses her expression. “Maybe I am, a little. But we’re not doing what the doctors told us to do. Having him worry more isn’t getting little boy help.”

The cupcake I ate sits heavy and wrong. Probably because I was too full to eat anything else. An empty stomach and sugar don’t mix. “I don’t want to intrude on your privacy, but what if I were to move in? That way I can help, Haley distract Leo and give you some rest.”

A faint smile. “The last thing you need is to spend more time making Leo. Or any of the Morellis. You deserve some time for yourself. Another woman adds with a sparkle in her blue eyes, “you must have found enough to love with Finn Hughes.”

My stomach flip flops. It *really* didn’t like that cupcake. “Leo told me it was fake.” Her voice drops to a whisper. “That it’s fake? Yeah.”

It’s a big secret, but I didn’t really expect Leo to keep it from her. They share everything. And it’s a relief now to not have to hide anything from someone else. “I’m driving my sisters insane because I don’t want to talk about it, but I don’t know what to say. There’s not going to be white flowers and cake, and I can’t lie to them about it.”

“The whole relationship is a lie,” she says, gentle but firm.

“It seemed harmless,” I confess. “Something to make my mother look better—looking for ready-made families for me—comes pre-built with a husband, children and three charity board positions.”

Sympathy crosses Haley’s face. “You should tell her to go to hell.” Hearing those words come from her mouth, when she’s usually so kind makes me laugh. “Both our families have matriarchs,” I say, referring to the dragon of a woman that is Caroline Constantine. “And you cross them at your own peril.”

“Eva, Sarah isn’t the matriarch of this family any more than Brian is. You’re the CEO of Morelli Holdings. You manage your parents’ house. You’re not tired? The kids go to her when they need advice. I mean, you’re even next in line to carry Leo’s company.”

“I’ve *told* him we’re not doing that. Not once he married you.”

“It’s okay,” she assures me. “I’m going to have my hands full with baby for a long time. And the truth is, I’m just not that interested in Leo.”



ket.” estate. Either way I’ll be taken care of. That’s not the point, though. Th  
is that *you* are the matriarch of the family. You’re the cornerstone.  
already depend on you.”

going to My heart thumps at the compliment. “That’s sweet.”

“It’s true,” she says, handing me her glass of ice water. She blinks  
so busy bit, as if she’s looking into the sun, though it’s not too bright in here  
want to have a favor to ask.”

I could “Anything.” My stomach threatens to eject the cupcake. Come to t  
it, I’ve been nauseous lately. I used to have protein shakes in the morn  
aning now I can barely stand the sight of them. What is going on with me?

id,” she “Don’t let Leo drive,” she says. “He’s not going to be thinking stra

o fall in “Don’t let Leo drive where?”

That’s when Haley closes her eyes and faints.

you?”

is wife.  
le from  
to talk  
wedding

m stop  
and and

,  
o sweet,  
g to the  
at your

ryant is  
the one  
e to run

vith the  
in real

estate. Either way I'll be taken care of. That's not the point, though. The point is that *you* are the matriarch of the family. You're the cornerstone. We all depend on you."

My heart thumps at the compliment. "That's sweet."

"It's true," she says, handing me her glass of ice water. She blinks a little bit, as if she's looking into the sun, though it's not too bright in here. "I do have a favor to ask."

"Anything." My stomach threatens to eject the cupcake. Come to think of it, I've been nauseous lately. I used to have protein shakes in the morning, but now I can barely stand the sight of them. What is going on with me?

"Don't let Leo drive," she says. "He's not going to be thinking straight."

"Don't let Leo drive where?"

That's when Haley closes her eyes and faints.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### Finn

I'M NOT USUALLY the type to rattle around my house. There's something that needs to be done at Hughes Industries. Or someone family who needs or wants me to step in, like the situation with my a the panda.

Somehow I find myself thumbing through volumes in the library, p them back when they're not what I'm looking for. What am I looking f I find is poetry.

*Because I could not stop for Death –*

*He kindly stopped for me –*

My grandfather was determined to avoid his fate. It didn't help.

My father was more philosophical about it. He collected poe books and art about death, as if it was a test he studied for. The textb that course fill these shelves.

As for me, I never thought to avoid it. Or accept it with open arms.

Instead I found solace in knowing that I would be alone at the e one else would watch me disintegrate. No one else would mourn.

Hemingway saunters into the room, still a little gangly as he gro his height. He was an oops baby. My father had good days and bad da mother still lived in this house at the time, though he already had nur staff. She would absent herself when he turned manic and fretful.

My little brother was conceived on a good day, presumably.

My mom tried to stay after that, for the baby. She made it a few ye

Dad got worse and worse. Throwing things. Shouting. Someti forgot who she was. Once he thought she was his nurse. Those w

hardest times.

Eventually she left to save her own sanity.

Hemingway throws himself into the heavy leather armchair across the room, making it rock. That's what he does now. He throws himself into the furniture instead of sitting. If my mother were around she would probably correct him. My father would say something about how a gentleman behaves. They aren't here, though. It's only me, and I remain quiet.

"Emily Dickinson," he says, reading from the volume I'm holding. It's a language arts project about her. We had to analyze three poems, which were mostly about animals. Birds. Frogs. The occasional fly. Then we had to write a poem in her style about a topic that interests us. So I did one about my PlayStation.

"I didn't see that." I get regular reports from his teachers about his academic progress, as well as samples of his work. Not everything, though. If I'd have to call the dean and change that.

He lifts his hand to the distant horizon like a Shakespearean poet. "All speaks."

*I saw a world, in my head  
And on the TV screen  
It sang a song of violence—  
Blood no one had to clean*

ms and  
ooks of

"You wrote that? It's actually good. And insightful."

"Always with the note of surprise," he says with an exaggerated sigh.

"I'm mostly surprised you have a PlayStation. Didn't you lose your electronics privileges after the last time you were expelled?"

"I didn't come here to be interrogated," he says. "I came here to interrogate you. What's this about you and Eva Morelli? You're engaged."

Christ. "I'm sorry. I should have told you about it."

"Ya think? I'm not even sure the engagement is legal if I haven't read the contract. Isn't she supposed to ask for your father's hand in marriage? Since Dad won't do it, I'll stand in. I have lots of questions to ask her."

"Very funny. And engagements *aren't* legal."

"Engagements are the path to legality, my friend. Marriage is forever. Marriage is not forever. It's until I turn into a pumpkin. Then there's no more."

an intelligent, generous, loving woman trapped with me. “My relationship with Eva is...complicated.”

“That’s what you call fuck buddies, Finn. Not your fiancée.”

I groan at the reminder that I need to have an apparently very long conversation about the birds and the bees with him. Since when does he use the term *buddies*? He’s growing up too fast at that boarding school. He didn’t go, but Mom thought it would be best. She said that growing up around a Jew would be too depressing.

She doesn’t think I should live with him either.

The nurses handle his main care. The bathing and feeding. They take him out for walks for exercise. Sometimes they read to him or help with puzzles.

It doesn’t matter that I’m here most evenings. Or that I come home early to soothe him when he’s in distress. But I can’t help but think that if there’s a chance that he’s in there, if there’s a part of him that’s glad I’m here, that it’s worth it. It doesn’t escape my notice that I’m denying myself the comfort I give him. There’s some irony in that, I suppose.

“You know my feelings about marriage,” I say.

Hemingway nods.

“And my feelings on children.”

“Mhmmm,” he says, drawing out the sound. Waiting for an explanation.

“My ideas about those things haven’t changed.”

“This is going to be a real surprise to the woman you proposed to.”

It’s impossible to explain what came over me at the Morelli dinner. She was standing in the intersection of their lives, keeping them from imploding. And I couldn’t take it. I needed them to leave her alone. Or better yet, focus on what they could do for her. So I’d made a lie. It was impulsive. Stupid. And strangely addictive.

Some perverse impulse inside me likes the lie.

“It’s fake,” I admit, blowing out a breath. “A fake relationship. No engagement. A way to get her family off her back. We enjoy each other’s company. We respect each other. But we aren’t really dating. And the deal can’t be we aren’t really engaged.”

“Wow.”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone.”

“Who would I tell? My friends are back at Pembroke Prep.”

There’s bitterness in his voice.

relationship Perhaps I've been expecting Hemingway to fend for himself during my absence. I check in on him a few times a day, and I've been working to get home more to be accessible, but that's not the same thing as parenting. I hate to talk, not the same thing as guidance. All the more reason not to become a man. *fuck* I'm already a shitty older brother.

want to I've been distracted by Eva Morelli.

and my I set the book of poetry aside. "I can make a call to the dean. He's on his heels because he's a..." A homophobic asshole, to be specific. "I had the sex in the bathroom that bothers him as much as that it was between me and the daily boys. "I'll make him see reason."

Maybe Money or threats. Those are the two things that make the world go round. "Or," I say, keeping my tone casual. "Maybe you could move here's at home."

when it's His eyebrows lift. "Really?"

the same "Only if you want to. I know it's probably more fun hanging out with the boys your own age rather than me and dad. Our idea of a good time is a meatloaf night."

He frowns. Looks away. Hesitates.

His nervousness shimmers in the air.

attention. "Hem?"

"I really want to live at home." The words spill out in a rush, as if they've been pent up too long. "Everyone else does. They just drive in every day. Only family only like forty-five minutes."

in each "I hadn't realized it bothered you."

he fuck He looks at me like I'm insane. "The only other kids who have to live up there are like foreign royalty, where their parents want them educated in the states but they have to stay in their home country. Or because their families want them. That's what people assume about me."

A fake *Fuck*. "That's not why you're boarding there."

other's An eye roll. "Because I'll be depressed if I live with my dad. The truth is can't I live with her and travel the country, if she's that concerned about me? The actor in the new Batman movie, his kid goes to Pembroke, and she travels to remote work when they travel."

It's a good point. "Okay. You can come back and live here if you want. I'll handle Mom."

Now I sound like Eva, handling the family. It's true, though. So

ing this has to. Maybe that's why I understand her so well. I know how responsible from drives you. Which sounds like a good thing, until you forget to eat or sleep. That's live your own life.

father. He grins. "Great."

It does feel surprisingly great, knowing he'll live here now. "Great"

"Now tell me the truth... you and this Morelli chick. Are you digging protection?" He uses a low, imperious tone that I assume is what I see. It's not like when I asked him the same question.

When two Which is painful, because of course I didn't use protection the first time. Stupid of me. Impossibly stupid. I've used a condom every time after that. I'm around. but I can hardly judge him for losing his head, since I did, too. "First time. Her name is Eva Morelli. You may call her Eva or Ms. Morelli, but I call her the Morelli chick. Secondly, none of your business."

"Then why is it *your* business if I use protection?"

but with "Where did you hear about it, anyway?"

time is "Someone sent me a post on Instagram. Apparently you're an influencer's soulmate and she wants to, and I quote, *cut a bitch* for you fall in love. She was mostly joking, but she had enough violence in her eyes that I wouldn't trust Ms. Eva Morelli alone with her."

It's not ideal that social media has picked this up. We asked the family to keep it quiet, but it was only a matter of time before it got out. "If you can't lay. It sasks you anything—"

"Don't comment. I've been a Hughes my whole life, you know. It's the drill."

on board "Right." I run a hand over my face. "Listen, I don't have a date tonight in the States"

"Is she getting tired of you already?" he asks with exaggerated sympathy.

ies hate Actually, she had a baby shower this afternoon. No men allowed. I probably run late, and she'll be tired after. Which makes me feel stressed. Itchy. I've gotten used to spending time with Eva. And spending part of the night in her bed. "Why don't we have a movie night?"

out me? "You and me?"

she gets "Sure," I say. "We could see if Dad's up to it."

"I want popcorn."

u want. "I'm sure the chef can work something up."

A lopsided smile. "So, like a regular family movie night?"

someone "As regular as the Hughes ever get."

visibility We head down the hall into the east wing, which is where my father sleeps. He has a set of apartments with connecting rooms for his nurses. Even the carpet is soft and spare here. It used to be decorated like the rest of the house, but most of the things have been removed. Vases when he knocked them over. Paintings when he tore one apart. A ten-thousand-dollar Rembrandt.

1 using His nurse smiles when we enter, but it's not the good kind of smile. It's the smile that says she's already feeling sympathy for what we'll face for him.

st time. I nod a greeting. "How's he doing?"

er that, "Reactive, unfortunately. He's been a little emotional."

t of all, Which means outbursts, probably. Yelling. Throwing things. A lot of that. Tonight may not be in the cards. I step through the open threshold to an area that contains a large TV. He's sitting in the middle of a couch, leaning forward, watching the screen while tear tracks glisten on his cheeks. What the hell? I come around to see what he's watching.

re this *Fuck*. It's a video from my birthday party.

making I don't even know how old I was. Seven? Eight?

e in her Dad set up an elaborate slip-and-slide system throughout the yard. He didn't stop moaning about the divots in the lawn for weeks, but it was worth it. In the video, children run through sprinklers and send their little bodies hurtling over plastic. I remember the crinkly feel of it, slick from the water hoses. I remember the scent of wet grass and the mud caked on my shoes. I know when I slid past the end. I remember laughing until my sides hurt.

Dad took lots of videos when we were younger.

ight." They were like the poetry. Preparations for when he changed.

mpathy. Memories for when he forgot.

. It will The camera turns shaky, and then it's pointing at me. I'm grinning broadly, missing a tooth. "Your turn," I tell the camera. "Dad, come on. You probably wouldn't do it if you would."

There's a faceless laugh. "Give me a minute, son. I have to do something before I absolutely destroy the grounds. I'm going to be in the doghouse for a long time."

My mother comes into view, looking torn between anger and laughter. "I'm not letting you in the house if you go down that slip and slide. You have to sleep in the gatehouse with the hounds."

The view shifts wildly, flashing briefly on a tableau of tables covered



er lives. food and balloon arches with people milling around. Then it jerks again, everythingtime pointing at grass. "Are you sure?" Dad murmurs in a playful tone. "One I'm in the gatehouse, I can't make it up to you."

n over. There's feminine laughter.

The screen goes black.

ile. It's I turn around in time to see the remote sailing in my direction. I catch it before it hits me in the face. "Dad," I say, my voice thick from the memory

From the happiness I witnessed. Would they have done it again if they knew how it turned out? It doesn't matter. We don't get choices like that. We get do-overs.

movie "Get out," he says, his expression dark. "Get the fuck out of here."

is sitting Shit. It's one of *those* evenings. Movie night slips away.

leaning He storms me, and I block him so that he can't touch Hemingway. That the wings wilds and connects with the side of my jaw. Fuck. That might

Which will be fun to explain to people. "Dad, calm down. Nothing is wrong. You're safe. It's me."

"You." Foaming spittle forms at the sides of his mouth. "You. As a father. Mom supposed to know who you are. Well, I don't. You're a stranger. What is worth hell are you, and where is my family?"

bodies "I'm your family," I say, my voice gentle.

e many It doesn't help. He fights harder, though I'm not even sure what he wants. To get past me? To hurt me? "Where's my wife? Geneva? *Geneva*? Where's my son? Where's Finn?"

"I'm Finn, Dad. I'm right here."

He glances back at the TV wildly. "No, that's Finn. That's my son.

I glance to where Hemingway stands, stricken. "Go on. I'll continue with a little bit."

omised "Where is she?" my dad says, sounding broken. "Is she dead? Just tell me. Please. Are my wife and son dead? Am I in an insane asylum? Is anything hell?"

se for a Despair clangs like a church bell. *Is this hell?*

Maybe it is. No one would choose to live like this.

ughter. "She's not dead," I manage to say. "Neither is dead. They're both healthy. The reason why you can't see Geneva is because... I know you're separated."

ered in Shock. Hurt. Anger. "You're lying to me. You're a liar, and

ain, thisholding me prisoner. I won't stand for it. Geneva," he shouts. "Are you  
one. "IfCan you hear me?"

"Mr. Hughes," Hemingway says, pushing past me. "I'm here  
interview. Your secretary said you could see me now. I appreci  
opportunity."

catch it My father looks bewildered for a moment.

mories. He looks down, as if surprised to find his hands grabbing me. He r  
y knewme by small degrees, finally stepping back. "An interview? At my  
'e don'tThis is highly unusual."

Hem gives his signature smile. "I'm an unusual candidate."

"Yes," my father mutters. "Well, if my secretary sent you over, it i  
important."

ay. He Together we move my father into a different room, the black s  
bruise.distant memory. "Thank you," I mutter to Hemingway. "And sorry  
wrong.movie night."

"No problem. You know, I think it's easier for me. This person is t  
s if I'mDaniel Hughes I've ever known. That guy behind the video camera?  
Who theeven met him." He glances back at me. "You better put some ice  
while I talk about my five-year plan. If it makes you too ugly, Eva  
won't want to look at you."

e wants.

Where's

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holding me prisoner. I won't stand for it. Geneva," he shouts. "Are you okay? Can you hear me?"

"Mr. Hughes," Hemingway says, pushing past me. "I'm here for an interview. Your secretary said you could see me now. I appreciate the opportunity."

My father looks bewildered for a moment.

He looks down, as if surprised to find his hands grabbing me. He releases me by small degrees, finally stepping back. "An interview? At my home? This is highly unusual."

Hem gives his signature smile. "I'm an unusual candidate."

"Yes," my father mutters. "Well, if my secretary sent you over, it must be important."

Together we move my father into a different room, the black screen a distant memory. "Thank you," I mutter to Hemingway. "And sorry about movie night."

"No problem. You know, I think it's easier for me. This person is the only Daniel Hughes I've ever known. That guy behind the video camera? I never even met him." He glances back at me. "You better put some ice on that while I talk about my five-year plan. If it makes you too ugly, Eva Morelli won't want to look at you."



## CHAPTER TWENTY

### Eva

**T**HE HUGHES ESTATE can fit both the Morelli and Constantine estates.

That's in line with how much money and power they have as we drive doesn't even go up to the front door. Instead I enter a circular driveway that opens up to a heavily landscaped courtyard. Gazebos and old-fashioned lampposts lead the way to a grand mansion. Two curved stone staircases on either side lead up to a space with marble floors encircled by Corinthian columns.

Above the ceiling is more railings, where people can look down at the parties.

A chandelier hangs in the center, alight at all hours.

It was a spontaneous decision to come here. I stand outside a massive double door that is twice as tall as me. It takes a lot to intimidate Morelli, but this has done it. It's like a palace. When Finn brought me here before, we came in the back way. A family entrance.

The front is designed to emphasize their position to visitors.

Why did I come here? This is Finn's home. This is where he takes his father. Where his brother is staying after getting expelled.

I'm an intruder.

If I had any doubts about whether Finn wants something longer with me, a true relationship, they were dashed when I saw how he reacted to the missing condom. It was more than concern. It was a deep, agitated reaction. He doesn't see a future with me.

Our engagement isn't real. I don't belong here.

I'm turning to leave when the door opens. A man stands there. I recognize

his clothes and his bearing, even if we've never met before.

"Miss Morelli," he says in a solicitous voice that contains a faint accent. "Won't you come in?"

He probably saw me on the Nest cam or something. No doubt security and cameras all over the grounds. Heavily encrypted, of course. Secure.

Their secrets need to be protected.

"I came to see if Finn is at home. Or if he's busy."

"Please come in," he says, holding the door open. "I'll take you to

I remain on the expansive front patio, even though I'm being  
"You know what? He might be busy. I didn't call ahead. Maybe you check before I just—"

all. The "Eva?" Finn comes down one of two large staircases, looking  
ive that handsome it stops my heart. His hair is ruffled. He wears a dark blue  
shioned and slacks that's casual for a man usually in suits. He looks tired, but  
ases on only adds to his realness.

erinthian This is a flesh-and-blood man. Not a dream.

"I'm sorry," I say, flustered. "It's just that I—"

n from He reaches me, concern in his expression. "Is everything okay?"

I look down and realize that I'm still wearing a ruffled lavender  
bought it specifically for Haley's baby shower. Which feels like a  
set of years ago. I packed Leo into the ambulance, making the EMTs sweat  
and stab him no matter how intensely he acted. Then I piled into an SUV  
and here sisters to go to the hospital.

It took a few hours for them to run every test in existence.

care of I'm pretty sure Leo thought of a few more just to drive them insane  
She fainted, the doctors said. Relatively normal. At least that's what  
tried to tell us. Haley is officially on bed-rest, which means she's  
trapped in that bedroom. Though the doctors aren't particularly worried  
lasting can't walk around if she might faint.

acted to The fall could hurt her.

l regret. Leo didn't accept the explanation of *relatively normal*. He then  
the head of Obstetrics for the entire hospital group fly to New York  
Emerson came to pick up Daphne. Lucian took Elaine away. Sople  
cognize Lizzy were each driven home.

I remained until the end, escorting them back home, smoothly

Leo's sharp words with the hospital staff and driver. I kept him from English completely when we arrived at the house and his deepest fears overw him. Hospitals. Pain. Death. Haley was tucked into bed, Leo in a chair there's her, his eyes rimmed red, his expression grim as he stared at his wife. e. Verytime I left.

Somehow I didn't drive back to my loft.

I ended up here.

The fear of that moment, of watching Haley sink into a faint, him." knowing how she or the baby would be, comes to me in a rush. I ha strange.strong for Leo, for my family. That's over now. The facade drops. ' u couldroom for my emotions with Finn. I can be vulnerable here. I can be sa

It comes upon me all at once. I break into uncontrollable, messy sobs. ing so Strong arms surround me. I recognize them as Finn's. sweater I have the strange thought that I would always recognize them, bec out that how safe he makes me feel. Except *always* doesn't last forever. Which me cry harder.

He half-carries me across the stone and down a few steps. I'm a crossing an open space. A few more stairs, and then Finn sits.

I'm wrapped in his lap, being held, his lips pressing in an unendi dress. I against my temple. I let all of my fear come out in those cries—not c millionmy niece and Haley and Leo, but for my entire family. For everyone r not to about, when it feels like they're always on the brink of breaking. L with my look away, if I blink, they'll come undone.

I'm the one coming undone.

Slowly the sobs taper off, leaving only shudders.

e. We're still outside. I can smell the salt scent of the water. The i at they estate backs up to Stony Cove beach, where the earth comes to eally is Mountain and ocean and land interlace their fingers. It gives us priv ied, she feels like we're in our own world.

"Tell me what happened," he murmurs.

"Nothing," I say, my voice thick. "She's okay. Haley's okay. The insisted okay." The words are more than conversation. They're a prayer.

k City. "Okay," he says, his voice still calm and soothing. "That's good."

ia and I let out a deep breath. "She collapsed at the baby shower. Sor about how the hormones released in the body during pregnancy re ig over blood vessels. Low blood pressure means less oxygen to the brain.

osing itfainted.”

helmed He rubs my back in calming circles. “Did she get hurt?”

beside “I caught her. She was dead weight in my arms. I had her on the  
, by thebefore Leo got to me.” A soft laugh. “I think he broke the light and  
barrier doing it. Apparently the biggest thing to worry about is bei  
from the fall, so they put her on bed-rest.”

“I’m sorry. Can I do anything to help?”

of not I lean my head against him, and he tucks me under his neck. “You  
d to besee me at my worst. Things going wrong. Breaking down. Crying.”

There’s “I see you at your best,” he says softly. “Every time.”

fe here. My heart squeezes. “I know she’s okay. My brain knows it, but m  
can’t seem to—”

“Of course not,” he says, his voice low and calmly reas  
ause of“Adrenaline flooded your system, helping you handle it. For hours. A  
i makesit wears off you need rest.”

I sigh. “I should probably call my mother and give her an update. I  
ware ofto her when Haley was discharged from the hospital, but I should still-

“Can you send her a text?”

ng kiss “Well, I suppose. But she already knows all the information. She  
only forwant to decompress. Talk it out until she feels better.”

e I care Silence from Finn.

ike if I Then: “You need to feel better, Eva.”

I stiffen. “They’re my family. This is a crisis.”

“Earlier was a crisis. This is you serving as the emotional regul  
every person in your family. If your mother is stressed, that’s fine. I  
Hughething happened. Let her be stressed.”

ogether. “I should be there for her.”

vacy. It “Will she be there for you? Or does it always go one way?”

Indignance rises. “I know the Morelli family is messed up. I know  
broken and toxic and a million other things, but they’re mine. I love  
baby isand they love me.”

“They love what you do for them.”

That’s it. I stand up, even though it hurts to leave the warm comfor  
nethingarms. And I face him in my rumpled lavender baby shower dress. “  
lax theone to talk. You’re sacrificing your entire life to your family. And I  
So sheyour family. That I could understand. You’re sacrificing everything

secret your family keeps.”

“Eva.”

“You’re just as bad as me. Admit it.”

“It’s not the same.”

“It’s worse, actually.”

“It’s the Hughes curse. I was raised to do this.”

“Phineas Galileo Hughes, your family doesn’t have a lock on curse  
always He pauses. “I like my name on your tongue.”

I glare at him, because I’m still not over it. He gives everything  
family and then tries to argue when I want to do the same. Both of  
my heartour families like they’re terrariums, ecosystems that only exist because  
keeping them together.

“It makes me hard,” he says, tracing two fingers down my thigh  
and once the silk fabric of the dress. “But I never got to sign it on your naked body  
the way you did on mine.”

Sensation runs through me, hot and electric. “I’m still mad at you.”  
—” His lips quirk. He’s still the playful Finn I knew all this time, but

more gravity in his eyes now. More awareness of the pull between  
us. “You’ll forgive me, though.”

“Are you so sure of yourself?”

“When are you going to see it?” He pulls me by the backs of my  
until I’m standing in front of him. He’s still sitting on the wooden sea  
gazebo, in those damned casual clothes, a navy sweater that confo  
rator for broad shoulders and muscled arms. “I’m not sure of myself, sweethe  
A scary sure of you. You’re too damned loyal for your own good.”

He says it in a rueful way, as if it’s a weakness.

I have something to say to that, an argument to make, but it flies  
my head as soon as his hand slips beneath my dress. Up and up to v  
we’re lavender garter belt holds up my hose. My breath catches when he  
e them, the inside of my leg.

Something dark on his jaw catches my attention. I reach out at  
short, not wanting to hurt him. “Did something happen? Did you ge  
t of his fight?”

“You’re A short laugh. “Something like that.”

not just “Finn?”

to the “It was a rough night,” he admits. “Dad only got to bed an ho



Hemingway helped. A lot. We both collapsed when it was over.”

Dismay makes me frown. “And then I came here to dump my feelings on you.”

Two fingers hook into the hem of my panties. “I want your feelings.”

“You must be tired. You—”

“Not too tired for this,” he says, tugging my panties down.

“I step out of them without even thinking, as if we’ve been doing this forever, him undressing me in a moonlit gazebo, his hazel eyes daring me to his you sure?”

He lifts my leg and puts my foot on his cock, which is hard and thick beneath his slacks. “Does this feel like I’m sure?”

My toes wriggle, and he grunts.

“Fuck,” he mutters, then moves my foot to the bench beside him. I push it down to the slatted floor, so he’s looking up at my dress from underneath. His face inches away from my sex. My breath catches. He’s too close, too intimate. I feel shy. I try to pull away, but strong hands haul me back there’s knead my ass, a little too rough. It’s perfect.

Both of us ran an emotional gauntlet today.

Physical touch feels like a balm. The harder the better. Make me feel it. Make it hurt.

He kisses a line along the inside of my thigh, and I whimper. No. Not here. I’m standing with one foot on the floor of the gazebo, the other on the bench. Completely exposed to his hands. His mouth. He presses a hard kiss to my pussy, and I sob. It’s like crash landing on earth after you’d never come home. It’s pain and relief together. My hips rock in an ancient motion, riding his tongue.

He builds me up to the breaking point and then stops.

It’s cruel.

“Please, Finn.”

“You beg so pretty,” he says, his voice low. “Do it again.”

“Please make me come,” I say, desperate, my voice echoing off the walls. His tongue circles my clit, and I come with violent shudders and cries. I would fall to the ground if he didn’t hold me up. He moves me as if I weigh nothing. He turns me around so I’m facing the bench. I reach out and hold the railing. Wood grain imprints onto my skin. He pushes my hips until I’m standing. I hear behind me the tear of a condom wrapper.

now he's safe. We won't lose our minds again. Even in the middle of a hurricane, we're protected. Then he plunges inside me, and I cry out.

"Yes. More. Please."

"That's right," he says in a growl. "Eva Morelli, who handles everyone and everyone. Eva Morelli, the queen of goddamn Bishop's Landing here you are getting railed. You love it, don't you? My cock inside your pussy's sucking me like a goddamn mouth."

"Are you?" I whimper. "Finn."

"You know who makes you feel this good. It's me, isn't it? It's me robbing me."

Then he comes, his fingers tightening painfully on my hips, a roar in my ear. The pulse of his cock inside me pushes me over the edge, and I lose myself. He slips free, falling, even as I cling to the gazebo's railing, losing myself in a rapture that shouldn't be real.

use, too

k. They

feel it.

No. Yes.

on the

d, open

fearing

k in an

e water.

. hoarse

my body

kindly I

lifts my

r. Even

now he's safe. We won't lose our minds again. Even in the middle of a hurricane, we're protected. Then he plunges inside me, and I cry out.

"Yes. More. Please."

"That's right," he says in a growl. "Eva Morelli, who handles everything and everyone. Eva Morelli, the queen of goddamn Bishop's Landing. And here you are getting railed. You love it, don't you? My cock inside you? Your pussy's sucking me like a goddamn mouth."

I whimper. "Finn."

"You know who makes you feel this good. It's me, isn't it? It's always me."

Then he comes, his fingers tightening painfully on my hips, a roar behind me. The pulse of his cock inside me pushes me over the edge, and I cry out, free falling, even as I cling to the gazebo's railing, losing myself in the rapture that shouldn't be real.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### Finn

I'VE SLEPT WITH Eva in her bed plenty of times, though I don't usually head home when the first rays of summer sun peek over skyscrapers so I can be home before Hemingway wakes up. I've never up with her here, though.

And somehow, it feels more real.

Visiting her loft is like being a tourist in a beautiful foreign country. I could enjoy my time and then return, leaving it behind. This is in the house where I've lived my entire life.

The same house where I plan to die.

I pull her closer as if it can keep time from taking her away. She'll stay either way. That much I'm sure about. I can keep this fake now, and then walk away. Or I can wait until the bitter end.

I can make her feed me and bathe me. I can make her a shell of her former self, and then, only to save what's left of herself, would she leave.

Actually, seeing how she is with her family, she wouldn't even leave then.

I'd take her down with me.

I would steal her future the same way the curse stole mine.

"Finally awake," she says, her breath stirring the hair on my chest.

"How long have you been up?"

"Not a long time, but I didn't want to move. This felt too good. I want to move to get up, pulling away from me before I can stop her. "Though I can get out of here, if you want. Before Hemingway sees me."

“No, I—” I sit up, capturing her hand. “I told him about us. I told him I was not real.”

Some emotion crosses her face, but it’s gone before I can grab it.

“He found out about the engagement on Instagram some time ago. I know. Embarrassment flickers through me. I’m the one who made the lie. I couldn’t even follow through. “He’s had an unsteady family life. I want him to think I’d really have gotten engaged without him having you.”

A flush touches her cheek. She’s turned away from me, so I can’t see the expanse of her back, the slender column of her arm, the dark tip of her breast. Her black hair spills around her like a veil, shielding her.

But I can see it anyway, despite her hair and her poise.

I’m hurting her.

Every time I say that our relationship is fake or that our engagement is pretend, it hurts her. She always looks away so I can’t see it in her eyes. I can’t see it now. It’s in the angle of her head, the heaviness of her heart. I worried about hurting her in some distant future, but it’s happening now. It’s already here.

“We’re a hashtag,” she says.

“A what?” I ask blankly, still stunned from my realization.

“It’s a mashup of our names. #Finneva.”

“Christ.”

“There’s also a TikTok sound.”

“Listen, Eva. I know I’m the one who sprung this engagement on you. I’m finally And the one who came up with the whole idea of fake dating in the first place. And I want you to know that—”

My phone rings with a tune that jolts me. There are only a few people who can make that sound, and they’re all my father’s nurses and staff. I hit *answer*, and a breathless voice says, “Mr. Hughes? I’m sorry to bother you, but—”

In the background I can hear yelling.

I’m out of the bed in seconds, reaching for my slacks from last night. I grab a fresh white T-shirt. “Coming,” I say before ending the call. “I’m sorry. I have to go. There’s—”

Eva’s already rummaged through my drawers. She comes up with a pair of boxer briefs and another white T-shirt like mine. “Let’s go.”

him it's "Stay here."

"I'm coming with you. Don't worry about me."

Without arguing further, I turn and head down the hallway.

How." Whatever is happening right now, she shouldn't see it. Then  
e, but I doesn't she already know the worst of me? Then again, maybe she c  
I didn't Maybe she's romanticized it into something it's not. She doesn't know  
ng me the way fear and paranoia can take hold of him. They make him lash o  
nurse was punched in the face. He tore her cornea and fractured her  
only see That's when we moved to two nurses per shift, minimum, at all times.  
of her their jobs is to protect the other person. They have strict orders  
whatever's necessary to defend themselves, even if it harms my f  
won't let him hurt another person.

She doesn't know about the time he smeared his shit into the wa  
ment is Or the time he pulled out his own breathing tube before the nurse  
s, but I sedate him. He may have the reasoning skills of a child, but he has th  
I was of an adult. We can't restrain him. It's considered inhuman  
g rights sometimes...

Sometimes even existing in his state is inhumane.

We reach the apartments to find both nurses struggling with him.

The irony is that he loses sensation in his extremities. Which m  
literally feels less pain. That makes him impossibly strong, even as he  
himself.

I rush past them and take him into my arms. It's a delicate b  
on you, keeping him from hurting himself while also keeping him from lau  
he first himself into the room. Or at one of the nurses. I have the briefest fea

Eva. She won't know to defend herself from him. But I manage to g  
callers onto his bed.

support I'm still holding his arms, waiting to see if he'll fight me. I look  
sorry to eyes, hoping he can see me past the fever-bright fear. "Dad. *Dad*. It's  
Finn."

His familiar brown eyes are cloudy. "Who?"

ght and "It's Finn. Phineas. I'm your son. Remember?"

sorry. I "I don't—" His eyebrows draw together. "Do I know you?"

I swallow hard around a knot in my throat. It's not the first time he  
a pair gotten confused, but it's hard to face after the raw emotion of my nig  
Eva. My defenses are down. "You taught me how to hit a baseball. A

apart a computer. And fly an RC plane, even though we lost three of them in the ocean.”

He looks bewildered. And sad. “I’m sorry, young man. I don’t want to do that again, you.”

It doesn’t. Sorrow rises like a tidal wave. It pricks the backs of my eyes.

“That’s okay,” Eva says, coming forward. She looks adorably tousled. On a large white T-shirt, only the bottoms of my briefs visible from beneath her nose. “I’ll tell you about him.”

Part of “You will?”

She sits on the edge of the bed and takes his hand in hers. It’s a gnarled hand. Not arthritic. No age spots. He isn’t old enough for that. Just a regular male hand made more frail because he doesn’t like to see a doctor. Doctors tweak his diet daily to try and pack more calories in. I worry about a moment that he’ll lash out, but he seems calm enough. And curious.

“Phineas Galileo Hughes,” she says as if she’s telling a story that happened a long, long time ago. And I suppose it does. “Phineas is a name on the other side, I believe. An uncle.”

“He was a pirate,” I offer, my voice husky.

She glances back, a half-smile on her face. “A pirate?”

“A privateer during the Revolution, technically. There are rumors that he once injured a mapmaker.”

“You named him after a pirate and an astronomer,” she tells my father, who looks bemused but seems to be settling into this conversation. When I mention that the thought of him spiraling is long forgotten under the sweetness of Eva’s presence, she says, “Which means, I think, that you wanted him to have adventures. And to get him up at the stars.”

I find myself captured by the sight of her, earnest and true. She looks into his more than calm eyes. She’s calmed me. I never really thought about my father. It’s his name, aside from the fact that there were heavy expectations. And I remember that I got into fights over my middle name in boarding school. I didn’t know that my father could have wanted me to sail the seas.

“They go together,” I say softly. “Sailing and the stars.”

She glances back and smiles. “You do enjoy breaking the rules.”

“Hey,” I say, gently chiding. “I’m a very upstanding person.”

“Okay, *Phineas*,” she says, teasing. She turns back to my father. “I’ve seen you do things that are dangerous. Fast cars and illegal betting.”

them in underground boxing matches.”

“And dangerous women,” I say, my voice low.

t know “And thoroughbred horses who win races.”

“Though not precisely in that order.”

“He does those things because he’s running out of time. At least he led in a he is. And he’s so determined to experience everything, like maybe eat its leave it behind. Like if he’s felt every emotion, every risk, every thrill accept it when it’s time to go.”

My throat closes. She has me figured out.

s not a *You’re sacrificing your entire life to your family. And not just that. It’s family. That I could understand. You’re sacrificing everything to the that. They your family keeps.*

y for a Is it true? Maybe.

It’s more than a wish, though. My father made me promise. It was starts a when I was six, seven, eight years old. It was later, when he would sit Hughes lucid moments. He would find me in the middle of the night, wake and make me swear not to tell anyone. Ever.

The poetry didn’t help him then.

All the risks I take now won’t help me later.

ors of a “Are you afraid?” The question comes from my father. At first he’s asking Eva, but his questioning gaze is on me.

father, “Maybe,” I say, answering honestly. I put my arm around Eva’s shoulder whatever “Sometimes it does feel like I’m running out of time, and I don’t know the presence. right way to handle that. I don’t know how to face it without letting to look knowledge change me. How do you walk into battle without armor?”

’s done “It can change you,” my father says. “It can change you for the better. I shake my head. Not a refusal. I don’t even know what better out my mean.

the fact “Kinder,” my father says, seeing the confusion on my face. I can tell realize his expression that he still doesn’t recognize me. I’m not his son right

I’m a stranger to him, just like this version of him is a stranger to me. I

maybe it’s not. I’ve gotten to know this person for years. Maybe some this version recognizes me. “It can make you kinder. More loving giving. What’s the point of holding back if you’re going to lose it all

er. “He end?”

ing and It sounds so reasonable when he says it, but he doesn’t even know



we're talking about. I look deeper into his eyes, as if I can find my  
looking back at me. Instead it's this other person, the only one  
Hemingway ever met.

"He is kind," Eva says, still holding my father's hand. She looks  
at me, as she speaks. "And loving. And giving. He's a good man, you  
know. A great one."

My father's cloudy brown eyes struggle to focus.

His eyelids droop.

The nurse steps forward with another blanket.

Eva stands back to allow her space. My father's hand slips out of  
mine. I take Eva and pull her into my side. "Thank you," I say, my voice thick

"You're welcome." She hesitates like she wants to say more. Then  
she speaks in a rush. "Finn, it doesn't have to end this way. With you alone  
in this room."

So we're really going to do this. "Of course I wouldn't be in this  
room. He'll be here. I'll be in my own rooms. See, most likely he'll still be  
here when I lose my grip on reality. It's only our brains that give up in our  
lives. Not our bodies. We live a long time this way."

"Good," she says fiercely. "Do you think I'd want you to pass away  
just because you have an illness?"

"Why wouldn't you? I want it. Every man in my family has had to  
carry that stone." Even my father had done that. Not all of the poems involved  
a nice carriage ride with Death. Some were about suffering and the way  
of the Suicide.

Eva's eyes go wide. "That's not funny, Finn."

"I'm not joking, Eva."

Her eyes fill with tears. "Please don't."

"I'm still here," I say, my tone caustic as I spread my arms wide  
in a ironic showman. "In all my glory. Stockholders everywhere are safe  
and sound now as I'm alive."

Her dark eyes shimmer. "I know I'm not supposed to care about  
any of this, but the truth is that I love you."

Brittle silence follows the declaration.

My father slumbers peacefully on the bed. The nurse has stepped  
back to give us privacy. We're standing in what will be my future prison. She  
smiles at me when she said I see myself here.

7 father     “I’m twenty-nine,” I say, my voice low. “My dad’s first episode?  
ne     that thirty-six. That’s in seven years.”

              “Then give me seven years,” she whispers. “Or even less than that  
at him, me seven months. Let me earn your trust. I won’t abandon you, Finn  
our son. matter what.”

              It’s a gut punch.

*I won’t abandon you, Finn.*

              Of course she won’t. She’s loyal down to her core.

*No matter what.*

hers. I     Even if it breaks her.

.             She won’t leave me...unless I make her.

en she     “I’m sorry if you thought this could be more,” I say, my voice  
one and tried to be clear that it was fake. That it could never be real between us

              She flinches, and I feel like a bastard.

s room.     Because I am a bastard.

be alive    I run a hand over my face. “It’s not you. God, Eva. You’re so str  
thirties. beautiful. So generous. If it were anyone, it would be you. But I can’t–

              “You can if you want to.”

y early     Of course Eva Honorata Morelli would call me out on my bullshit.

              “You’re a grown man,” she says. “An impossibly competent,  
o weigh powerful man who’s choosing to live alone so you don’t have to be  
olved about it doesn’t work like that. You’ve already put yourself in that roo  
ay out. him. You’ve already isolated yourself.”

              “That’s my choice,” I say, my voice hoarse.

              It’s a choice I made years ago.

              Before her.

              And it will remain my choice long after she’s gone.

de. The     She hesitates like she wants to argue with me. Eva doesn’t give up  
as long She’s not used to failing when she puts her mind to something.

              Which will only get worse the longer this goes on.

ut you.     I have to end it.

              “You already fell for me.” My tone is cold. “And that’s the dang  
can’t get back all the love you spend on other people. It’s impossible.  
outside made another mistake, Eva. I’ll forgive you for it. The question is v  
he was you’ll forgive yourself.”

              She takes in a little breath. She’s not the one who needs forgiveness

He was me. I never should have agreed to this. I never should have let things  
far. And they have gone so far. She's seen my father. She's seen our  
it. Give She's slept in my bed. I can feel walls going up around my heart in  
inn. No attempt to protect me. It won't.

This will all come back to haunt me. It's already haunting me.  
haunted man while I'm still alive. A cursed man. That's what it is  
under a curse. You never know when it might strike. So you might as  
it come down on you. Take it before it can take you.

"I don't want it back," Eva says, but her voice trembles. She  
moved away. And I wonder if that's because she can't or because  
frozen here with hurt. If she wishes more than anything that she'  
low. "I come here, that she'd never come with me after the gala for the Soc  
." the Preservation of Orchids, that she'd never met me at all.

"You think you love me? No. You don't even *like* me. You do  
charming men, remember? And that's the one thing I am: charming."  
ong. So Her eyes are impossibly black. Darker than night. They should be  
—" but somehow I can see the pain inside. I can see the old heartbreak I  
up to hurt her. Lane Constantine was the charming man she learned  
trust. I brought it up to push her away, but I have to make sure she  
strong, comes back.

afraid, I look Eva Morelli directly in her beautiful, dark, sad eyes, the or  
m with thought about for months. The ones I want to think about forever. "It  
sweetheart. We had a good time, but that's all this ever was. I wish  
say I'll miss you, but the truth is that I won't. In a few short years,  
even remember you existed."

o easily.

er. You  
You've  
whether

ess. It's

me. I never should have agreed to this. I never should have let things get this far. And they have gone so far. She's seen my father. She's seen our house. She's slept in my bed. I can feel walls going up around my heart in a futile attempt to protect me. It won't.

This will all come back to haunt me. It's already haunting me. I am a haunted man while I'm still alive. A cursed man. That's what it is to live under a curse. You never know when it might strike. So you might as well let it come down on you. Take it before it can take you.

"I don't want it back," Eva says, but her voice trembles. She hasn't moved away. And I wonder if that's because she can't or because she's frozen here with hurt. If she wishes more than anything that she'd never come here, that she'd never come with me after the gala for the Society for the Preservation of Orchids, that she'd never met me at all.

"You think you love me? No. You don't even *like* me. You don't like charming men, remember? And that's the one thing I am: charming."

Her eyes are impossibly black. Darker than night. They should be opaque, but somehow I can see the pain inside. I can see the old heartbreak I brought up to hurt her. Lane Constantine was the charming man she learned not to trust. I brought it up to push her away, but I have to make sure she never comes back.

I look Eva Morelli directly in her beautiful, dark, sad eyes, the ones I've thought about for months. The ones I want to think about forever. "It's over, sweetheart. We had a good time, but that's all this ever was. I wish I could say I'll miss you, but the truth is that I won't. In a few short years, I won't even remember you existed."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### Eva

**T**HIS IS THE worst I've ever felt.

Heartbroken. Worn out. Slightly hungover, even though we didn't drink last night. Maybe it's just an emotional hangover, but it feels as if I've had anything.

*Damn it. It was good to be in his bed.*

*Better to be in his arms.*

*And the best thing in the world to be there for him when he needed me.*

*Now all I can hear is his voice. It's over, sweetheart. We had a good time but that's all this ever was. I wish I could say I'll miss you, but the truth is that I won't. In a few short years, I won't even remember you existed.*

I feel worse than I did fourteen years ago. In my youth I believed I had found love, but it wasn't real. It was infatuation and perhaps even a little daddy issues. Now I'm older. I can tell the difference between what I want and what's love.

*What I feel for Finn Hughes is love.*

*That doesn't go away no matter how badly he hurt me.*

The farther my driver gets from the Hughes estate, the worse I feel. I'm not prone to getting carsick. Now every turn makes me queasy. My stomach threatens to revolt, though I didn't eat breakfast. What the hell?

*I crack one of the windows and breathe cool, fresh air.*

*My stomach calms a little, but I'm still heavy with other emotions.*

My lavender clutch contains my cell phone and my credit cards. I'm now short by twenty-five cents. I left the quarter on his bedside table. The original quarter that he tossed to me in a bet.

*I suppose I could add foam to my Starbucks order tomorrow.*  
There won't be any foam for me. It wasn't a good time, after all.  
It's heartbreak, but something else.

Dread.

Some detail I'm missing.

Which is out of character. I don't miss details. Things don't just  
mind. I suppose in all the chaos around the fake engagement and the  
shower, something *could* have. An appointment? A meeting I've sched  
the next fifteen minutes?

I fumble for my phone.

The sensation sets in. I'm late for something. But there's nothing  
calendar for today.

't drink It would be normal to curl up and sob about what Finn did.

real as Heartbreak hurts, but this is...

More.

It feels like my loft is getting caught in a tornado. All my great  
antiques smashing to the floor. It feels huge and uncontrollable. Not  
l me. emotions normally are. Except when it's that time of the month.

od time, Except...

truth is When it's that time of the month.

My hand freezes on the phone.

was in A notification from my period tracker app pops up.

e bit of Has your period started yet? Don't forget to log it. :)  
t's fake

Ha.

No. That's not happening. It can't be happening, because Finn Hu  
the only person I've had sex with in over a decade, and Finn Hugh  
ael. I'm going to have children. We slipped up one time with the condom, bu  
tomach the morning-after pill. We used each other for what we needed, and no  
done with me. It doesn't matter how real it got.

*You can't get back all the love you spend on other people. It's imp*

*You've made another mistake, Eva. I'll forgive you for it. The que*  
But it's *whether you'll forgive yourself.*

le. The Okay.

Now I'm going to throw up.

I'm barely holding it together by the time I'm dropped off at my building. Outdoor air restores me, at least a little. I'm no longer in imminent danger of being sick on the sidewalk.

I go through the lobby of the building like a ghost, nodding at the doorman and accepting a nod from security. The dread doesn't lift as I slip my elevator. Or even when I step into my loft. My private place since I was a baby. My haven.

When the door is closed behind me, my eyes land on the settee. What I said to Lizzy? *We'll take a test, and then we'll know for sure.*

Right.

That's all there is to it.

Take a test. Know for sure.

I can't do anything until I have more information. It will probably be negative, anyway. And then I'll just go from there. Like I always do.

Luckily, the tests come two to a box, so I don't have to make another appointment. Aunt's down.

It's waiting there, vaguely accusatory, in my bathroom cupboard. A pregnancy test on a stick is really not the way I thought I'd process Finn breaking up with me. I've done less dignified things in my life, but those were for other people, not for me.

The instructions say to wait for three minutes.

Lizzy couldn't look at the test, but I can't look away. There's no one to knock on the door and read the results for me.

*It's not you. God, Eva. You're so strong. So beautiful. So generous. If anyone were anyone, it would be you. But I can't—*

It doesn't take three minutes.

The second line appears right away.

When the timer on my phone rings, it's a dark, inescapable pink.

I'm pregnant with Finn's baby.

*Fuck.*

possible.  
stion is

✧ ✧ ✧

I'm barely holding it together by the time I'm dropped off at my building. Outdoor air restores me, at least a little. I'm no longer in imminent danger of being sick on the sidewalk.

I go through the lobby of the building like a ghost, nodding at the doorman and accepting a nod from security. The dread doesn't lift in the elevator. Or even when I step into my loft. My private place since I was nine. My haven.

When the door is closed behind me, my eyes land on the settee. What is it I said to Lizzy? *We'll take a test, and then we'll know for sure.*

Right.

That's all there is to it.

Take a test. Know for sure.

I can't do anything until I have more information. It will probably be negative, anyway. And then I'll just go from there. Like I always do.

Luckily, the tests come two to a box, so I don't have to make another call down.

It's waiting there, vaguely accusatory, in my bathroom cupboard. Peeing on a stick is really not the way I thought I'd process Finn breaking up with me. I've done less dignified things in my life, but those were for other people, not for me.

The instructions say to wait for three minutes.

Lizzy couldn't look at the test, but I can't look away. There's nobody to knock on the door and read the results for me.

*It's not you. God, Eva. You're so strong. So beautiful. So generous. If it were anyone, it would be you. But I can't—*

It doesn't take three minutes.

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I'm pregnant with Finn's baby.

*Fuck.*

◇ ◇ ◇



# TWO FOR THE SHOW

SKYE WARREN

# TWO FOR THE SHOW

SKYE WARREN



## CHAPTER ONE

### Eva

**A** WEDDING RECEPTION at the Met:

1. Stunning, eight-foot-high floral arrangements,
2. Priceless, world-class art,
3. And me, pregnant with Finn Hughes's baby.

Nobody knows. Not my family. Not Finn. Not a single person in the room has any idea that I'm carrying the baby of a man whose last words to me were *I wish I could say I'll miss you, but the truth is that I won't. In a few short years, I won't even remember you existed.*

What am I supposed to do with that?

Aside from keeping Daphne and Emerson's reception on track.

My sister's wedding is the perfect distraction. I'm working with a James Beard award-winning chef for the canapés and booking the world-renowned violinist Samantha Brooks for the ceremony. Which means I don't have time to wonder about the small life growing inside me.

The Met is the perfect compromise to keep the peace with my parents. We had close family and friends only for the ceremony at Leo's church, but a large, lavish reception at the Met.

Emerson even went so far as to get baptized ahead of the wedding. I'm not sure if he meant it as an olive branch to the family for kidnapping Leo or a symbol of his obsession.

Probably the latter.

Regardless of the reason, my parents seem to accept Emerson the way his brothers do, too.

Which is a good thing. Peace is a transient thing in the Morelli

I've learned to embrace it when it comes, even if it's fleeting. So I don't  
worry about how my parents will freak out when they find out that I'm pregnant.  
And that the engagement with Finn Hughes is broken.

I don't think about the fact that I'll be the one to ruin the peace.  
I think about the fact that I'll have to tell them I'm pregnant.

And I don't think about how upset everyone will be.

We're almost at the finish line. Being the maid of honor makes  
everything easier, ironically. Plus, I could watch over everybody from  
the front of the church and make sure no scuffles broke out.

I could look at my family's faces and wonder if they'll all smile  
when they hear the news.

I was the one to coordinate the timing between the ceremony and  
reception with the wedding planner, leaving plenty of buffer time for  
the outside the church. It allowed me to get here first to make sure everything  
was perfect.

in this And, for the millionth time today, I wonder what I'm going to do.  
words to Finn would want to know that I'm pregnant with his baby. Somehow  
in a few both forgot to use a condom. And for whatever reason, Plan B didn't  
work.  
An ironic twist of fate. Somewhere a stork is laughing.

This is happening.

Finn would want to know, but he doesn't actually want a baby.

James He was as clear as the crystal on the guest tables that he never wanted  
a child.

He *refused* to have a child, actually. Finn has valid reasons for  
not  
wouldn't dream of trying to convince him that his family's inherited  
wealth  
parents was nothing.

And But now the baby isn't a hypothetical. He or she is going to be a  
real child. And no child of mine is going to feel the pain of being un-  
wanted.  
No child of mine is a mistake.

Daphne The baby's barely the size of a pea, but my protectiveness feels as  
sharp  
as any of the cutlery gleaming near artfully folded napkins. I won't let  
myself  
hurt the child by forcing us to stay separate *or* forcing us to stay close  
together.  
to see the depth of his disinterest.

Right on schedule, my family starts arriving at the reception.

family. Leo and Haley are first. They compromised on her bed rest situation  
and  
agreed that Haley could go about her day normally, albeit while sitting  
in a  
wheelchair.

't thinking on the couch.

pregnant. Haley agreed to let Leo carry her everywhere.

It's a classic Leo compromise, if you think about it.

I don't There's no classic Finn compromise. Not on this issue. I'll have to do this all on my own, for me and the baby.

I could lie to him. He might prefer it, actually.

makes I could announce that our engagement is off. Start rumors in Boston from the Landing that I'm seeing someone. Or several someones. Maybe I

pretend to sleep with a different man every night, the same way Finn would pretend to sleep with a different woman every night.

Then a few months down the road, I can tell everyone I'm pregnant and then refuse to name the father.

photos The problem with that option is that Finn knows me. He got under my skin. He'd suspect that I didn't find a rebound guy to sleep with, but I had twenty rebound guys. He would eventually know it was his child. He doesn't he have a right to know? Even if he doesn't want it. Even if I know, we hurt him to know.

to work. My dad strides in through the gallery door, Mom close on his heels. He looks critically over the reception space and barks at a passing waiter for a drink.

"Dinner doesn't start for forty minutes," Mom points out in a cool voice.

wanted a "Good thing I'm not a lightweight," Dad growls. "Don't manage my expectations."

"As if anyone could," she answers with a light party laugh.

that. I The show has officially begun.

illness I station myself near the entrance to the gallery. More guests are arriving, filling the space with warm chatter.

our very "We're having a polite conversation." Tiernan's low voice cuts through the air. He takes the door ahead of him. It's growly and menacing, which is normal for a man who's been in the industry for as long as he is. "I take it you've never been part of one before."

is sharp "I take it you never learned to fuck off before."

let Finn My disaster alarms go off. The target of Tiernan's sarcasm is Emory's brother, Will Leblanc. Will looks coldly murderous. Tiernan's disgust is palpable.

His girlfriend, Bianca, gives me big, worried eyes.

"Tiernan!" I approach my brother with a big, bright smile. "Go on. Leo drink."

ting or He opens his mouth as if to argue, but Bianca speaks first. "That is

great idea. It looks beautiful in here, by the way! I especially like hydrangeas. I've never seen them so big before."

Will hangs back, bristling. I put a hand on his elbow. He's not my brother-in-law. I don't know him that well, but he seems like a decent guy. "Don't mind Tiernan. Emotional days make him grumpy."

"Would a fistfight make him feel better? I wouldn't mind punching a bishop's ass." "At least wait until after she throws the bouquet."

I could have said anything. He snorts, his expression clearing. "Only because you asked. I appreciate everything you've done to smooth the way for Emerson. Your family is exactly..."

ant and "Nice? Sane? Decent?"

"I was going to say *welcoming*," Will says, humor dancing in his hazel eyes.

rich less I like talking to Will. It's easier, at the moment, to talk to someone I know that well. Talking to my sisters, my brothers, my parents is easier because of the secret I'm keeping. Because of how badly I want to tell the truth. Well, maybe not my parents. But Daphne, definitely. And my siblings. I want their support right now, but I don't feel like I can have it for a while. Keeping secrets is nothing new to me. I'm even used to living with a broken heart.

tone. *It's over, sweetheart. We had a good time, but that's all this ever was.*

ie." Finn called what we had a fling. He chose words that he knew were deep. He was an asshole on purpose. I understood that, but the words still hurt me. Since that night I've come up with a thousand comebacks that will arrive, destroy him.

It's a good thing he's not here.

through Why would he be? A person like Finn wouldn't need to attend in person. "Even if we weren't fake dating, he'd have to send a gift from Daphne's Emerson's Crate & Barrel registry."

In fact, I'm sure that's exactly what he did.

erson's The room doesn't have space for him, anyway. I took him out of the seating arrangement and removed his preferences from the chef's list.

He was going to choose the vegetarian option.

have a *Really?* I said when I asked him. *You don't want Wagyu beef prepared by a team of chefs with a collective twenty Michelin stars?*

is such a Finn had laughter in his eyes. *Anyone can cook beef, Morelli. The*

...ve the will make serious magic with plants.

My father makes a speech to a crowd of people who are very newsworthy in their dinner. It's short, but in the middle he pauses. I have enough champagne glass I haven't sipped from to my chest.

I'm not the only one to notice the pause. My mother watches him, "gazing at him." eyed, from her place at his side. An unruly, uneven part of me hopes he'll cause some trouble.

...preciate Not really, of course. Not on Daphne's day.

...ly isn't I just want something to take the edge off. I'm cycling between an heartbroken and coolly focused every two minutes. If my father der reception, it'll take all my concentration.

...is blue- My father clears his throat and raises his glass. He could say anything. Something cutting. Something cruel. "I wish you the best. I don't want everything, Daphne. To a long and happy life."

...is hard I sigh in relief as everyone claps.

...ill them Well, the wedding crisis was averted. My pregnancy crisis remains

...y other Except...it's not a crisis. I want the baby. The baby is mine. I'm going to have a baby.

...with a Deciding what to tell Finn and when? That's the crisis.

...was. I suppose it's only a matter of choosing the method of communication. A letter seems...overly formal. A text message would seem like a crucial cut. Maybe I can send a carrier pigeon?

...still cut Calling him is probably the right thing to do, but I don't want to have a shutdown. I don't want to hear him say that he doesn't want this baby. I will have nothing to do with it. I'd rather get there first.

I'd rather tell him that I'm handling it on my own and that he doesn't need to be involved. That I don't want him involved, and I won't let him have the baby.

*You don't like charming men, remember? And that's the one thing I don't like about charming.*

...of the He wasn't charming when he broke up with me.

I still can't bring myself to feel okay with preemptively kicking him out of the baby's life. Finn was cruel. That doesn't mean I have to be. I'm not scared by Finn doesn't deserve the baby, the baby deserves a father. And the truth is, I know that Finn would be a great father. He's funny and patient and so

...ose two Except for when he broke up with me.

That knifelike protectiveness surges up again. I'll be polite since I'm the happily father of my child, but I won't be weak. I won't be small and heartbroken the way I was after Lane.

Emerson's brother Sinclair pats him on the shoulder on his way to the stage, hawk-his speech. His work as an investigative journalist and extreme sports photographer keeps him busy. We've chatted a couple of times at Emerson's house. I've read a few of his long form pieces, and they're very good.

I wonder if he'll be as eloquent in person. He lifts the mic and clears his throat. Murmurs in the room die down. Sinclair nods toward Emerson. His blue eyes look emotional, though his voice is steady. "Hey, Em."

"Hey," Emerson says from his spot at the sweetheart table with Iphigeneia. This gets a laugh from the guests.

"I'm going to talk about you to all these people, if that's okay." Emerson takes Daphne's hand and gestures at Sinclair to continue. "Great." Sinclair sticks his other hand in his pocket. "For those who don't know, my name is Sinclair. I'm Emerson's older brother. Since you're here, I'm betting you know that Emerson has occasionally dabbled in acting."

Another laugh goes up. "Ever since I've known him, my brother has always been the person who seeks out beauty. You could put him on the ugliest street in Brooklyn, and he'd notice that the raindrops there reflected all the colors of the neon lights. He'd tell you to look closer until you could see it."

Emerson stares at his brother like he's never heard anything so inaccurate about himself. Or maybe so accurate.

"Emerson sees beauty everywhere he goes, and maybe that's why he's particular about what he wants. You can't impress this guy with running fast or being *mill pretty*. You need to be fucking breathtaking to steal his heart. One person has ever done that, and that's Daphne."

Daphne blushes. One of Emerson's hands is in both of hers. "That's how I'd hold Finn's hand if he wanted a baby. Even if God, it would be so much easier if he just...wanted a baby. If he just wanted a family."

If he just wanted me. My throat closes. I was foolish to fall for Finn Hughes, but I'm not



ie's theridiculous to wish I'd stolen his heart, too.

ken the "Here's how I know they're perfect for each other," Sinclair say  
fact about Emerson: he surfs every day, all year. Daphne, I'm sorry  
o makehas terrible balance. But she goes with him anyway."

ortsman Someone at one of the middle tables says *aww*.

se. I've "No, you don't understand." Sinclair holds up a hand. "This wo  
terrified of decent-sized waves. One day this summer I watched her  
all the way back to the shore. She was still out there on Emerson's boa  
off, andhim."

igh his Warm applause. Daphne leans in and kisses Emerson's cheek. I  
pause to look out over the tables.

Daphne. Finn stands at the entrance to the gallery.

My heart stops.

*He came.*

Anger stomps down on that thought like a pointed high heel. How  
o don'tcome here? How dare he show up like nothing happened? Like  
u're all*something* to each other?

the art We're not. We're nothing.

He wears a tux that looks incredible on him. It emphasizes his  
shoulders and his lean hips. A few women notice him, too. It's hard  
kind ofIt's like a young Brad Pitt just walked into the room. Even silent he ra  
cornerpresence. He inclines his head at me, a tacit greeting.

olors of I'm the first to look away.

Sinclair continues his speech. "Look. Love is scary as hell. I'm p  
ccurateyou, Em, for having the courage to love Daphne more than you've eve  
anything else. And Daphne, I think you'd agree with me that E  
he's sodeserves the world. So congratulations on being absolutely everyt  
-of-the-him." He raises his champagne glass. "To love and bravery."

nly one Daphne has tears of joy in her eyes.

I have tears in my eyes, too. Sinclair's speech moved me to pis:  
heartbroken tears that I won't let fall. Not in front of Finn freaking Hu;

I can feel his eyes on me as I watch Daphne dab at her eyes with a  
he justlaughing at the same time. As Emerson leans in to kiss her, not see  
care about the five hundred guests. As another happily ever after begi  
in front of me while my heart breaks again.

outright

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to say,

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ns right



## CHAPTER TWO

### Finn

**I** DIDN'T COME here to get sucker-punched by a wedding toast.

I probably deserve it. It feels wrong and intrusive to be here. Eva agreed to fake a relationship, but showing up at her sister's wedding reception strikes me as dishonest given that I was supposed to be home. And given the way I spoke to her.

*It's over, sweetheart.*

I'd made up my mind not to come; then at the last minute I got up and drove here.

I feel like an asshole, looking at Eva. And I also feel like I've come home. Like I can finally breathe again now that I'm in the same room as the hundred people have taken over a section of the Met. She's across the room. It's still better than being without her.

Eva faces forward, not looking at me. Her brothers are getting up to give their speeches. Leo gets choked up in the middle of his and abandons the speech. He finishes by handing Emerson an envelope and giving a toast to her.

Carter takes the microphone from Leo and pats his shoulder. "We're not going to forget what we've just seen," he intones, and then he tells me about how Daphne started out sketching and drawing and painting even though she could see or imagine. He'd study science, and she'd study the way she took her years of careful study to find her true obsession, but she never gave up. "And now you found him," Carter says. "I always knew you would."

Frankly, it's awful. The little hints of their family life make me feel like I'm miles away. I want her so much that it hurts.

For sex purposes, obviously. And also for this life that she has.

family is overbearing and dysfunctional and intense. Sometimes I think I need to learn some goddamn boundaries. But they belong to Eva, and she's a part of them, too. I want to be by her side when she's in the thick of it.

*I won't abandon you. No matter what.*

That's what she said to me. And what did I do? I broke up with her. I threw her out.

Daphne and Emerson rise from their table.

It's time for cake.

I hang back until they've cut a slim piece from a cake subtly decorated with an ocean theme. Even at a distance, I know Eva had something to do with it. Ivory fondant gives the impression of light coming through a fine spray of edible pearls curves down one side.

Daphne and I The photographer swoops in to capture the moment. Then waiters are moving around the wedding among the tables, and I make my approach.

Emerson plus Daphne's smile gets wider when she sees me. "Finn! Hi!"

"Congratulations, Daphne. Emerson." I shake his hand. "Best wishes for the reception."

Daphne dressed "I'm so glad you could make it." Daphne clasps her hands in front of her.

"Eva said you weren't going to be able to come. Is your dad feeling better?"  
Eva come "I hope he is," Eva says from directly at my side. Her mouth is smiling, but her dark eyes are sharp. She could make the accusation in a room now. *You shouldn't be here.*

"Much better." By this point in my life, the lie is automatic. The things I do underneath it are not. They're a goddamn mess. Eva covered for me after I was a bastard to her. "I'll let him know you were thinking of him."

"Is there anything I can get for you?" Eva's tone is distant, as if I'm just another one of the guests. Death by a thousand cuts. "If you're hungry, we have a dinner plate brought out."

Everything I give her a classic Finn Hughes smile. "I'm here to celebrate and join the company. Don't worry about me."

Emerson gave "Oh, I wouldn't." Eva laughs, but she doesn't take her eyes off me. "Is there any pain or hatred glittering there? It reminds me of a broken champagne glass."

I closer "We all know that's not true. You're the best hostess of our time. You're an expert in worrying about party guests and making everything perfect."

Emerson as. Her "Some things are beyond even me."

"I doubt that."

nk they “Well, don’t.” Eva’s tone is as light and steely as barbed wire. “I h  
id she’s limits like everybody else.”

Daphne’s beaming, hardly paying attention to our conversati  
husband, on the other hand, sees everything. His eyes move between  
ith her. Eva with sharp intensity. I don’t love the feeling that he knows exact  
he’s looking at.

Torture, in the middle of a wedding reception.

But his face stays calm. If he’s noticed and understood the  
esigned between us, he doesn’t say a word about it.

g to do “Eva.” Daphne leans toward her. “Do you think—” Someon  
ater. A Daphne’s name from a nearby table. “I’ll ask you later. It was really ;  
see you, Finn. Don’t forget to dance with Eva, okay?”

fan out Daphne and Emerson are pulled away, leaving me with Eva.

It’s hell to be this close to her and not kiss her. It’s hell to know t  
isn’t fixable. It’s hell to know I can’t leave. Not until I’ve tried.

eaufiful She takes a tiny step closer and lifts her chin. “I’m sorry.” The apc  
frosty. I’m probably imagining the layer of warmth underneath. “I  
of her. know what else to say.”

tter?” About my father being ill. It’s technically true. The irony is not  
oft with me that she’s apologizing when I was the asshole, even if she’s beir  
m right and polite.

I know I should leave her alone. I can’t bring myself to leave.

feelings I wave off her apology. “How have you been?”

e, even Dark eyes skim over my face, and Eva purses her lips. There’s no  
n.” of flirtation between us now. The night I stole her from the Morelli M  
’m just we were a team. It was us against the world. Now there’s an ache in m  
y, I can like my heart has been stabbed, repeatedly, with one of the dinner fork

“I’ve been well, Finn. Thanks.”

d enjoy It’s so dismissive it kills me. More than dismissive. This is  
avoidance from Eva Morelli. She’s probably still pissed at me.

ne. Is it That’s fair.

lass. “Any plans for the holidays?”

me. An Eva looks away, holding her champagne glass close to her body. ‘  
about an inch in the glass. She doesn’t take a sip. “I’d imagine we’ll h  
usual get-togethers.”

“I’m available to help with the mince pies.” I’ll never forget worki

ave myher in the big kitchen at the Morelli Mansion. She wouldn't sto  
everything was perfect. I just wanted an excuse to be near her.

m. Her She gives a short, shallow laugh. "We'll have that under co  
me and wouldn't want you to lose any sleep over it. You should enjoy the holi  
ly whatthe fullest."

Elsewhere, she means. Not at the gala hosted by her family. Not w.

This is more than Eva being distant. She's being...cagey. Vague  
tensiondetails. Making a point of discouraging me from coming anywhere clo

Is she dating someone else?

ie calls Jealousy rises. It's ridiculous for me to be jealous, but I am. I sa  
good toLangley among the guests. That was probably Sarah Morelli's doing  
not interested in him.

But the fact is, someday she *will* be with someone. And I'll l  
hat thiswatch.

I'll have to watch her be conspiratorial with him and familiar w  
ology isand happy with him.

I didn't I'll have to watch until I don't.

"The champagne's flowing freely tonight. You must have figure  
lost onway to make sure you never run out."

ig terse Her eyes come back to mine, and there it is. The sparkle I saw t  
the night I asked her out. The heat. And yes, the happiness. It's gon  
instant, but I saw it.

I can feel it between us. It's like a physical pull. I want to take h  
currentand tug her out of the Met and into my car. Maybe if I went through th  
ansion,we took that night, found her someplace illicit and hidden to take l  
y chestcould get that feeling back.

s. Because it was building. It was becoming something stroi  
unshakable and goddamn delicious.

; polite "Finn." Sarah Morelli sweeps in, obvious delight on her face. "W  
so sorry to hear your father wasn't feeling well. I trust he recovered, if  
here?"

"Yes, absolutely." I lean down to kiss her cheek. "He insisted that  
There's tonight. *You don't let a woman like Sarah Morelli down*, he said."

ave the Sarah laughs, dismissing this with a wave even as her face flush  
course you're here for Eva. Breathtaking, isn't it? I think she's surpas  
ng withat hosting events."

up until Sarah. “She could only do that because she learned from the best.” I  
Sarah. “One detail got overlooked, though. She hasn’t asked me to dance  
control. I “Eva, you must. This is the best wedding of the season. Let’s toast  
days to then you’ll take your fiancée to the dance floor.”

“Oh, no thank you, Mama.”

with her. Sarah rolls her eyes, smiling. “You and your newfound sobriety.  
on the right to relax a little once the speeches are over, Eva.”

se. Sobriety?

Eva hasn’t taken a single sip of her champagne. Awareness washes  
with Alex across the back of my neck like a woman blowing on a pair of dice.

Evil. Eva’s Something else is going on here.

The music kicks up in volume. Eva hands off her champagne glass  
to Sarah like she’s been caught out with it. “I like this song,” she says, bright  
and cheery and fake. “You’re right. We should dance.”

with him She takes my hand and pulls me onto the dance floor.

Eva Morelli is hiding something.

Whether that’s a new boyfriend, I haven’t the faintest clue. All I know  
is that I’m being led onto the dance floor for a reason.

I know it, but I don’t make any move to stop her. It feels too good  
to have my hand in hers. It’s a balm to put my hand on her waist  
and pull her close.

It feels too good.

Her hand “I know you’re doing this to distract me,” I murmur against her temple.

She steps Eva curls her fingers through mine, finding the beat of the song.  
“Working?”

“Yes.”

Laughing and

They were

because you’re

I come

Yes. “Of

used me

“She could only do that because she learned from the best.” I wink at Sarah. “One detail got overlooked, though. She hasn’t asked me to dance.”

“Eva, you must. This is the best wedding of the season. Let’s toast, and then you’ll take your fiancée to the dance floor.”

“Oh, no thank you, Mama.”

Sarah rolls her eyes, smiling. “You and your newfound sobriety. It’s all right to relax a little once the speeches are over, Eva.”

Sobriety?

Eva hasn’t taken a single sip of her champagne. Awareness whispers across the back of my neck like a woman blowing on a pair of dice.

Something else is going on here.

The music kicks up in volume. Eva hands off her champagne glass to Sarah like she’s been caught out with it. “I like this song,” she says, her tone bright and cheery and fake. “You’re right. We should dance.”

She takes my hand and pulls me onto the dance floor.

Eva Morelli is hiding something.

Whether that’s a new boyfriend, I haven’t the faintest clue. All I know is that I’m being led onto the dance floor for a reason.

I know it, but I don’t make any move to stop her. It feels too damned good to have my hand in hers. It’s a balm to put my hand on her waist and pull her close.

It feels too good.

“I know you’re doing this to distract me,” I murmur against her temple.

Eva curls her fingers through mine, finding the beat of the song. “Is it working?”

“Yes.”





## CHAPTER THREE

### Eva

**F**INN HAD NO REASON to be suspicious before. He does now.

Turning down the toast was a very smooth move. He knows how to distract him, and letting me do it.

I'm letting him pull me close as the music gets louder. My cheeks are red-hot with anger and a touch of panic. His hands at my waist steady me.

It's a real dilemma, because I don't want him to back away. I've let him stay close to me. Being close to him. The masculine scent of him.

And I can't believe he'd show up here.

*You've made another mistake, Eva. I'll forgive you for it. The question is whether you'll forgive yourself.*

I told Finn Hughes the secret I've kept from almost everyone, and now it's against me. I want to drag him out of the Met by his collar and shout words back at him through a megaphone.

I can't. Distractions only work if you commit to following through.

He tugs me closer, moving with the beat. I could end it now. Tell him I'm pregnant, in that clipped, icy tone that I'm pregnant with his baby, I'm keeping it, and leave me the hell alone.

It would create a black hole in the middle of Daphne's wedding day. He would be shocked and hurt, and even if he managed to leave quietly, I know what I'd done.

*So what?* A tiny voice whispers in the back of my mind. *He hurt you.*

I straighten in Finn's arms so I can see his eyes. He searches my face, looking for something. Answers, probably. Or forgiveness.

He's not getting either one.

“How is Hemingway doing?”

Finn gives me a shallow nod, his expression clearing. He takes his responsibilities seriously. I can't fault him for that. My heart squeezes, I'm using a question about his family to hide another kind of responsibility. One he doesn't know he has.

And one I have every right to hide. His gorgeous face isn't going me into anything.

We turn, gliding through the other couples. “Hemingway has settled in at home with us. He's doing virtual school for the rest of the a trial run.”

“How did that go over with your parents?”

Finn huffs a breath. “My mother threw an absolute fit.”

As I'm “She doesn't agree with the living situation?”

“She has some real concerns.”

Asks feel “Isn't she traveling most of the time?” That's the reason Hemingway me. at boarding school, and the reason Finn is the one in charge of his education. missed Finn's mother is away, and his father is also away, albeit not physically.

“Some of them are the same concerns I have. Attending online means Hemingway's going to miss out on socialization. I'm worried he's get depressed, being around our dad instead of kids his age.” Finn's mouth into a determined line. “It's what he wants, though. I owe him he used to run.”

At those “Then I'm sure it'll all turn out.”

“He might not tell me if it doesn't.”

“Why wouldn't he?”

Lim in a A shrug. “Because he already admitted that he wants it. Even he can't realize it's awful, he might not say anything. Sunk-cost fallacy.”

“Doesn't seem very likely to me.”

By Finn Finn's eyebrows draw together. Screw him for being so hopeful I would this conversation. “Doesn't it?”

On first, an edge. I watch the words land. *Your brother has you, and you're awful* my face, The corners of his mouth turn down. “That's right.”

I wish I had him, in spite of myself. I wish he could want me that way instead of being so obstinate. “And how are you? How is the ch Finn Hughes doing?”

This time, a little breath goes out of him.

family You think you love me? No. You don't even like me. You do  
, guilty. charming men, remember?

family "Just fine." His easy tone is proof that he's lying. "I'm busy runn  
company. Busy being head of the family. Same as always."

to guilt Same as always, except everything is different now. Just how diff  
haven't told him.

fficially His hand tightens on my waist. Finn's eyes linger on mine.  
year as intimate communication. I can feel all the conflicts he's facing in the  
moves. Tension, from worrying about his family and himself.

Maybe even guilt, from the way things ended between us.

And desire.

His touch is a potent reminder of how good we were together. I  
was alone with Finn, the rest of the world didn't weigh so much. My  
ray was felt alive and alight for the first time in so long.

ication. I could lose myself in him.

y. I won't let that happen. I'm not going to give in.

school His masculine scent fills my next breath, and I lose the battle with  
e could Memories of his naked body over mine collide with me at the sam  
sets his Heat rushes to my cheek and my nipples tighten under my dress.

n a trial Finn's eyes darken.

He notices.

One breath, and we're not just dancing. Not anymore. He's mov  
body sensually against his.

He's having a reaction, too. I can feel how hard he is.

n if he How much he wants me.

It's hot, and it hurts. The heat between us is a siren song. It ma  
want to lean into it, into him, and I do.

I about I've been longing for this contact from the second I left his house.

He didn't have to come here tonight. Now that he has, I'm going t  
it with him what he was missing. I want him to feel as lonely and bereft as I  
ful. not kind, but it's true.

Finn lets out a harsh breath and allows himself to pull me clo  
ie same shudders when my hips make contact with his cock, gritting his teeth  
arming it. We're riding the line of *very inappropriate for a wedding recepti*  
basically sex on the dance floor.

That was when we were at our best. When we were fucking each other and  
*n't like* When everything seemed like it could be a wonderful, secret game. *A*  
one.

ing the Now it's a fight. I want to prove I don't need him. He wants to prove  
I don't know what.

erent, I He's handsome. A confident dancer. I feel sensual in his arms. With  
him feels like a warm, physical weight. If things hadn't ended between  
It's an could run away together. Not to an illicit poker club, but at least to  
way healcove. Somewhere we could put our hands on each other in private.

Except it's not how it used to be. I feel bruised, and he's wary. The  
of his arms has been transformed into pure tension.

Does it have to be *this* hard? Honestly, I'd hoped it wouldn't be  
When I smell so good. Breathing him in only makes me want him more.

y body Fake dating used to be fun and sexy. Now it's painful. We're  
sister's wedding, surrounded by people on the dance floor, and none of  
know how jagged and complicated our relationship has become.

Well, Emerson seems to know. I saw the way he looked between  
myself. one advantage is that I don't think he cares. To him, we're just another  
e time. of art. Daphne, though? It nearly killed me to see her so happy for me  
I'm raging at him on the inside.

I want to hurt him and dismiss him. And I want to take him somewhere  
private and tear off his clothes.

ing my He lets out a breath near my temple. "You feel good."

"Oh?" My arms settle on his shoulders. It's difficult to think in  
heat. "Is that why you decided to show up?" I sound more acerbic  
planned.

kes me "I don't know." Finn smiles, and it breaks my heart. "One minute I  
home. The next I was putting on my tux. Then I was here. There wasn't  
conscious thought involved. And with you this close, I don't know how  
o show could be."

do. It's The beat of the song gets heavier. For a few moments, I let it happen  
myself forget. The reception. The guests. The secrets. It all disappears.  
ser. He moves with him.

to hide There are so many layers of movement. Each one reminds me of  
on. It's was like when we could be together. *Alone* together. Understanding  
other.

another. “Finn, I—”

happy Abruptly, the song ends. A cheer goes up. Then laughter. The transition right into a wild rendition of the Chicken Dance.

ve... “Jesus,” Finn says, under his breath. He keeps his hands firmly waist and guides me to the side of the floor. We duck people’s ar Vantingelbows.

us, we My skin tingles from how close he is. From how close I came to l a darkout that I’m pregnant.

On the other side of the dance floor, Leo and Haley stand close to e safetyHe’s at her back, his arms reaching forward to support her belly. She while they watch the other people dance, swaying slightly. My chest e. FinnJealousy and happiness war with each other. I’m never going to ha with Finn.

at my In the opposite corner, Daphne glows. She and Emerson stand of of themside of an artist they hired to paint a scene from their wedding in re:

Her eyes are huge and bright. *It’s beautiful*, he says to her, but anyc us. Thesee that no painting will ever be more beautiful than Daphne. Not to hi

er piece “How did all the planning go?” Finn asks. He’s been following n e whenaround the room.

“It was a nightmare.”

neplace “Really?”

“Yes. It was far less complicated than I wanted it to be. Daphne easy bride.”

all this Finn’s eyes narrow. “*Less* complicated? You think it should hav : than Imore of your time?”

“I like a challenge, now and then.”

l was at His jaw works. He didn’t really have the right to make comment ’t muchmy family before. Now that we’re not together, he certainly doesn’t. I

w therebe much longer until that family includes our child, and he sure as he comment on that. Not unless he’s going to say that he’s changed his m

en. I let “I think Daphne will be relieved when it’s over.”

s, and I Hazel eyes return to mine. “Is that how you’ll feel after your wedd

The question is so loaded I feel it in my bones. Finn put the s vhat heemphasis on *your*. We weren’t actually engaged. It was all pretend. / ig eachthinking of a wedding that’s mine and not Finn’s too feels wrong.

“I don’t know.” I smooth my hair. “I imagine I’ll feel relieved, but

sad that it's over. I know she'll be glad she doesn't have to argue with guests and Dad anymore. Not until there's a baby shower, anyway."

His face darkens at the memory of the last baby shower, but Finn says nothing.

For a guy who dismissed me in the cruelest way possible, he's obviously struggling. Walking a fine line between not wanting to upset me and wanting me to be upset.

In reality, it's both of us. I'm not sure how he's going to take this together. I don't want to upset him. And I don't want him to be upset.

The question of who has the right to upset the other person is well beyond us now.

A new song starts. More guests move around us. Finn pulls me aside to keep me out of their way, as if he doesn't want anything else to happen to them.

At one of the nearby tables, a baby cries.

The sound cuts straight to the quick. I turn my head without thinking. I'm sure the baby is fine. Safe with its parents. But it tugs at my heart.

I drop my hand to my belly without thinking. I know the baby is just fine at this point. I know it can't be comforted by my touch or anything else. It doesn't know that somewhere, another child is crying.

*I'll fix it, I think.*

And then—

Shit.

I move my hand away, as casually as possible, and face Finn.

His eyes are wide with shock. With horror. He saw what I did. He's looking at my waist, so he felt me turn. Felt me respond to that cry.

They go down to my belly and come back up to my face.

"Finn. Listen to me."

"Eva." He steels himself. "What the fuck?"

and

ing?"

lightest

And yet

t a little

sad that it's over. I know she'll be glad she doesn't have to argue with Mom and Dad anymore. Not until there's a baby shower, anyway."

His face darkens at the memory of the last baby shower, but Finn doesn't say anything.

For a guy who dismissed me in the cruelest way possible, he's obviously struggling. Walking a fine line between not wanting to upset me and not wanting me to be upset.

In reality, it's both of us. I'm not sure how he's going to take this news. I don't want to upset him. And I don't want him to be upset.

The question of who has the right to upset the other person is well behind us now.

A new song starts. More guests move around us. Finn pulls me into his side to keep me out of their way, as if he doesn't want anything else to touch me.

At one of the nearby tables, a baby cries.

The sound cuts straight to the quick. I turn my head without thinking. I'm sure the baby is fine. Safe with its parents. But it tugs at my heart.

I drop my hand to my belly without thinking. I know the baby is mainly just cells at this point. I know it can't be comforted by my touch, or by anything else. It doesn't know that somewhere, another child is crying.

*I'll fix it, I think.*

And then—

Shit.

I move my hand away, as casually as possible, and face Finn.

His eyes are wide with shock. With horror. He saw what I did. His hand is at my waist, so he felt me turn. Felt me respond to that cry.

They go down to my belly and come back up to my face.

"Finn. Listen to me."

"Eva." He steels himself. "What the fuck?"



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Finn

**I** MEAN THOSE words with every scrap of my soul. What the fuck. What the fuck.

Eva cannot be pregnant.

A suggestion presents itself. *It's not yours. She's pregnant with a man's baby. It's fast, but it's not impossible.*

I know it's not true. I know how carefully she tried to protect her heart. She doesn't just jump into bed with anyone. It was a miracle she let me stay at her parents' house with me at all. Every second Eva Morelli gave to me was a gift after how devastated she was about Lane.

And I threw it back in her face, like a complete bastard. I sent her where presumably she discovered...this.

I didn't do this. I can't have done this. We cannot have done this together.

Getting a woman pregnant is one thing I swore I'd never do. Not while I'm married? Having a family? Never. And not for my own sake, but theirs.

Well, I'm not avoidant like Eva. I don't sweep things under the rug. I don't hide the truth from myself. Not ever.

"Finn." Her hand grips my elbow.

I saw the way her face changed when that baby cried. I saw her fingertips brushed her belly, which is still flat.

*No.*

I tuck her hand into my elbow and propel her away from the dance floor. I'm gentle but firm. We're going to talk about this. We're going to get to the bottom of how exactly this happened.

"Finn, stop." There's a note of panic in her voice. She was trying



this from me. I was right. She was acting strange earlier. Being avoided because she's angry with me...or not *just* because she's angry. It's become the...

I can't even think the word.

Not now. Not in front of all these people.

"Eva," someone calls.

I don't know who it is. One of her mother's thousand friend acquaintances. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters except getting to where I can have a real conversation with Eva about the disaster that's to decimate our lives.

She waves, tugging at my arms. "An issue with the dessert table that they give them a little laugh, as if to say *weddings, right?* "I'll be back in minutes."

Whoever it is seems to believe her. No footsteps follow after *another* problem with the dessert table. Jesus. This is the end of the world, and I'm smoothly making up excuses about frosted cookies and macarons.

broken She's covering for me because I'm steering her out of here like a man she left I know I am, but I can't stop.

There are so many people here. They form a crowd, even in the space. Impossible to see the paintings on the walls at the Met. We turn home, after corner until we're in a relatively secluded gallery.

It's not secluded enough. I can still hear the music from David's wedding. Still hear the chatter of voices. It'll have to be enough.

Getting A painting of a mother with her young daughter stares at us from the wall. They're peaceful together. Happy. The mother is bent over her sewing machine. Her daughter leans in close.

I take her shoulders and line her up in front of it. "Eva."

"What."

ow her "Eva."

"Is there something you want to tell me?"

She lifts her chin, her eyes flashing. Eva doesn't look the least bit intimidated. She's all Morelli intimidation and scorn. "Absolutely not."

I swear to fucking God, I'm at the end of my rope. The very end.

There it goes. But Eva's being mulish. I can see it in the set of her beautiful stubborn mouth.

"Eva."

int. Not     Nothing.

ause of     Words aren't enough for all the fear and anger of this moment. I  
between us, along with our past. We have a past now, Eva and me.  
under each other's skin.

God, I wanted her. From the moment I saw her in that room, I want  
I want her now.

nds or     I miss her like hell, and this thing she's not telling me? It doesn't  
a place how much I ache for her.

s about     I lean in for a kiss.

Eva turns her head away.

e." Eva     It's a cold shock. I should have expected it.

n a few     Her throat tenses with every breath she takes. Being shut out like  
hurts like knowing your own expiration date. My lungs momentarily  
us. A working, but I need air to keep fighting with her. I'll go down fighting  
id she's

"Come on, Morelli. You weren't this shy on the dance floor."

anic.     "I don't want anything to do with you." So simple. So precise. Eva  
gives the Morelli brothers credit for being sharp as knives, but Eva's  
one between my ribs. I saw it coming. I didn't stop it.

ie large     "So you're pissed at me. That's not a reason to lie."

corner     She turns to look at me, keeping her head against the wall. "It's  
sweetheart."

aphne's     I know I put the weapon in her hands, but *goddamn*. I trap her  
instinct. Eva glares at me, breathing hard. It's not over. That's the arg  
ie wall. "You don't want to kiss me? I want to kiss you."

ng, and     Her mouth becomes a thin, angry line, but she doesn't move. It's  
invitation.

But it's not a refusal.

I press my advantage and kiss her despite the fury in her eyes.

*There*, a voice says. *There*. She tastes soft and good and melts like  
like I didn't break up with her like an asshole. Like I didn't cross even  
fragile we'd drawn in the sand.

Eva's body moves into mine just like it did on the dance floor  
. Look, sweet and sensual and a queen, all at once. Her arms slide around me  
beautiful, Her hips press into mine. Her back meets the wall beside that painting  
mother with her child.

There's no father in the painting.

I drown that thought in her kiss. Lose myself in it. I lick her and let it hum with a thorough concentration, as if we have all the time in the world. We got reception can end, for all I care. Museum staff can usher people out at the end of the night.

She nuzzles her. Eva makes a frustrated sound against my mouth. I recognize it. I've spent enough hours in her bed to know that it means she wants more.

I can't stop. I want more, too, and I'm going to have it. I came to this reception, I pulled her into this gallery, and I'm going to give her what we both want.

I let myself sink deeper into her mouth. Into the even pressure of her lips against mine. The tiny rolls and bucks of her hips, even for a kiss.

Eva wants me to fuck her. She's practically begging now, with every little move she makes and every sound.

I stop. I nuzzle the side of her neck. Nip at the lobe of her ear. Make her moan.

This is simple cause and effect. This stretch of skin, here, makes her hum.

This tug of her lip draws out a sound. It's everything.

Everybody. I kiss her harder, exploring her. Memorizing her. I won't forget this. I slipped and don't know how I could. It's the taste of perfection. It's the taste of home.

It's her.

It's over, I lean down close to her ear. "Eva."

"I hate you."

Her chin on my shoulder. "I don't hate you. I want you."

Argument. One sharp breath, and she breaks down.

Her first sob is just the beginning. Eva keeps them quiet, so that they don't bother anyone else, but they shake her entire body.

Fuck.

It's true.

I knew it was. I knew from the moment I saw her fingertips touch my neck. I knew it would be messy. But somehow I thought it might be something else. Somehow I had every line of hope.

Eva remains stiff and upright until I gather her into my arms, hold her. She's tight. Her shoulders shake. I run my hands up and down her back, slide my hands down her neck, her while my own pain breaks over me.

End of a dream. I didn't want this to be true. I didn't want this to happen to her. This

Eva sobs is just a precursor. That's all having a baby with me can ever be. It's devastating.

bite her She's pregnant with my baby.

ld. The I never wanted this. Not just for me, but for Eva. She deserves a l  
the end of happiness, and instead she has a ticking clock.

My throat closes. Eva's still crying. I hope she doesn't notice th  
re spent temporarily lost the ability to say a damn thing. I just learned ab  
pregnancy a few minutes ago, and already it's a knife in my heart. .  
ption, *I baby*, a voice cries from somewhere deep down. *Not my son. Not my ci*  
nt. I can't do this here. Not at the fucking Met. Not at a wedding rece

er body can't.

I kiss Eva through her tears. It's a salty, desperate kiss, and Eva  
n everyher arms around my neck and kisses me back. Her shoulder bun  
painting of the mother and daughter.

shiver. I'm hard at the touch of her lips. My body wants Eva more than  
lips roll. ever want grief.

*I want Eva more.*

t this. I And...I need her. I've been miserable since I sent her out of my  
eat and Even animals know when their pair is gone. Horses sure as hell know.

Sex isn't a solution. It's the only thing we have. We're still ali  
aware enough to have it.

Her dress doesn't fight me when I push it up to her hips. Slide her  
to the side. I barely get my zipper undone before she's begging wor  
into my mouth and trying to climb me.

I'm a gentleman. I hold her up against the wall. I thrust in slow.

at they Eva's wet.

That's the goddamn miracle of humanity, isn't it? That she can sti  
to fuck me after what I've done to her. After what I've done to both of

*What I've done* disappears into her slick heat. It disappears into  
uch herher up against the wall. She clenches around me, her body getting  
, I heldFingernails test the skin near my collar, searching for more. She gets  
crescents dig in under my shirt.

ling her I'm not sure which of us is trying to fuck the other one harder. Eva  
rushing herself down over me. I'm frantic to fuck into her. With my hands sup  
her ass I can feel every move she makes.

he way It's wonderful.

er be— Eva's a rose pushing up through a crack in the sidewalk. Us, tog  
we're safe harbor when a storm's coming in over the ocean. It doesn't

that the storm is here already. It doesn't matter that we made it ourselv  
lifetime

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that the storm is here already. It doesn't matter that we made it ourselves.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Eva

**F**INN KISSES THE side of my neck, hot and expert. That's the playboy I'm lightheaded from sobbing while we fuck up against a wall in the M I don't care that it's wrong. I don't care that we both have reputa protect. I've spent my life keeping my family from imploding, and rig I don't care.

The confident playboy disappears. Finn drops his head onto my s and fucks me like it's the only way he can stay alive.

I feel that way, too.

It's ironic, isn't it? We don't have to worry now. He doesn't l fumble for a condom because I'm already pregnant with his baby. Hi nightmare has already come true. It's alive, right in front of him.

He changes the angle of my hips, and the contact with my clit away every coherent thought. Finn grunts when I start to come. He h down against him. Harder than before. He makes a sound of pure relief:

"Feels good," he mumbles against my jaw.

I turn my head and kiss him.

Yes. It does. It feels good to have him lose himself inside me. It does.

Maybe it'll be okay. Maybe this nightmare is almost over. We chance. That's all we've ever needed.

Hope rises like champagne bubbles as the moment comes dow sounds of Daphne's reception filter into the gallery. Finn's tensior back into his body. I wish he'd let it go. Turn into the good man he wa up until the last moment. Turn back into the Finn Hughes I fell for.

We untangle ourselves from each other, and from the wall. I rearrange my dress. He unbuttons his jacket, smooths his shirt, and re-buttons it.

Both of us step away from the wall and face the art. Where's the father? Is the child in this painting? Is he in the next room? At work?

Is he dead?

Or is the painting from his perspective? Is he meant to be the one looking at his wife and their child?

I've seen a print of this painting before. Almost everyone has. I've never thought about it quite like this. I've never had the original hanging on the wall nearby while I have an emotional breakdown in the arms of one of my friends.

I could keep sobbing. Lately, I seem to be an endless well of tears. Instead, I take deep, even breaths and pat at my hair. I put my thoughts in order the way I rearranged my dress.

Finn slides his hands into his pockets. He hasn't taken a step away from me, but there's a new distance between us.

My stomach sinks. "Finn."

He gives a quick shake of his head, like he's been lost in thought. "Marry, of course."

It's a slap in the face. I jerk back from the impact and the pain doesn't notice. He's not even looking at me. He scans the painting of the mother and daughter for another beat, then turns absently toward me.

"Finn."

"We'll make the announcement next month. It won't be too close to Daphne's wedding, but it'll leave us time to marry before the birth."

Anger floods back in. It could light this gallery on fire. "Ideally I'm showing, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"So you're planning on a short engagement."

"Obviously." Finn's brow furrows, like I'm being deliberately obtuse. Another slap in the face. How could he think this was the right way to communicate. How could he think I would want this? "As far as everyone knows I'm already engaged, so a relatively hasty wedding wouldn't be out of line."

"Excellent plan. Did you have a venue in mind?"

"Your family's church, I would guess."

"You're not Catholic."



nge my Finn waves this off. “You are. And I’m sure there are things to b  
Permission from the priest or whatever.”

ather of “My father will be thrilled.”

Either he doesn’t notice my brittle tone or doesn’t care that I’m  
back the urge to slap *him* until he comes to his senses. I wouldn’t actu  
viewer,that, but the moment calls for something dramatic.

Instead, I double down on icy composure. It’s served me very wel  
but I’vepast. A voice whispers that it won’t serve me well now, but it’s too la  
ng on acommitted to being angry. I can’t help being hurt. Every word out  
re Finnmouth hurts more.

“That’s an advantage, then. I wouldn’t want him to make  
f tears.difficult.”

its back “My mother will be beside herself.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Finn says.

ay from “She’ll be so happy. Four weddings in one year? That means s  
four chances to be the center of attention.”

“I’m happy to let her be the center of attention. I’m sure she’ll wa  
“We’llinvolved in the planning.”

“Oh, I’m *absolutely* sure. You’ll be the one to break the news  
n. Finnthen?”

; of the “Whatever makes the transition the smoothest.”

The *transition*. Like he’s moving me to another branch of his co  
Like he’s suggesting in the most callous way that our fake engagem  
lose tointo a real one.

My hurt is folding into white-hot rage. I’ve known for a long ti  
beforemen aren’t to be trusted. Rich men and Constantines in particular. I’n  
at myself for allowing even a second of false hope, but I’m furious w  
for letting me lead him down this path.

A better woman would put a stop to it. Would plant her feet and r  
ise. It’seyebrows and say *are you serious right now?* She would mal  
do this?understand how awful he was being.

, we’re Except I want him to see it for himself.

.” I won’t accept anything less.

“What about the honeymoon?”

The corner of Finn’s mouth turns down. “I can’t be away from my  
for very long. Paris for a week. I have a place in the Virgin

is done. Something for the *Sunday Styles* section in the Times. We'll keep it simple.

"Simple, but backed up by photo evidence."

"That's right."

holding I let out a disbelieving laugh. "What will your mother think?"

really do "She'll be..." Finn actually thinks about it for several moments.

be pleased I've decided to settle down. She thinks it's time I stoppe  
ll in theout and fucking around."

ate. I'm "You've certainly done that."

t of his "Yeah. I guess so."

"Any thoughts on the guest list?"

things Finn shakes his head. "We'll have to walk the line on that one  
people's expectations for what a Hughes wedding should be with  
damn thing getting out of control."

"And what about your Dad?"

he gets He blinks, like I'm the one who's gone too far. Finn has no idea.

burns in the middle of my chest. Anger that hardly seems to belong t  
nt to bedon't get pissed and have outbursts. That's never been a tool in my ar  
don't know that I've ever been angry like this.

to her, "What about my Dad?"

"Will he be able to attend the ceremony? If he's going to, we'll  
design it around his abilities. And the reception..." I purse my lips ar  
mpany. at a spot above Finn's head. "Daphne and Emerson barely got away w  
ent turnhundred people at the reception. A Hughes wedding, though...that's  
fifty minimum."

me that "Eva, this—"

n angry "You'll have to make some decisions if you're going to get the o  
ith himyou want. You know better than I do what your Dad is capable of. I h  
feeling it's one thing or another. Either he'll be able to attend the cer  
aise heror he'll be able to make a speech at the reception."

ce him "There's time to figure that out."

"Did you like the food tonight?"

Finn's eyes narrow. "I didn't eat."

"Oh, right. You came late. Is the catering something you wanted  
handle?"

y father He's silent for a moment that hangs and drags. It twists itself t  
Islands. with the pain in my heart. "You don't have to handle any of it. We

ple.” married at the courthouse, for all I care.”

I laugh like he’s made a real joke. “A courthouse wouldn’t be enough for the press releases. Be serious, Finn.”

“I *am* serious. We can decide all of this later.”

“She’ll “That’s just not how events like this go. It’s possible to throw together a wedding in a short period of time, but not ideal. And it’s not like what you and Haley got married. You’re Finn Hughes, remember?”

“For now,” he shoots back. “And it’s a wedding, not a trade negotiation. It can be as simple as getting a license.”

“You’ve got it all figured out, then.” *This* is what he’s decided, for himself. A fake date is one thing. A fake relationship. A fake engagement. But a fake marriage? One that has no real love in it, only duty?

That’s what Finn is offering. He’s going to put a ring on my finger and push me away. He’ll keep me in a separate wing of his house, in a separate wing of his *life*, and hold me at arm’s length while he waits for the future. I think is inevitable.

That’s not what I want from Finn. I might’ve told myself that, but I don’t want something fake. That’s never what I wanted, even when I knew I was hurt.

“Eva.” *He* sounds hurt now, and it’s bullshit. I’m not the one who should stare him. He hurt me. He stood here in this art gallery and did it again and again. “It’ll be easier once we’re married.”

“There’s just one problem.” I draw myself up to my full height and cross my arms over my chest. I’m not just protecting myself. I’m protecting a piece of Finn, too.

It gives me a warm, glowing feeling to think of protecting our child when I’m mad as hell because Finn is doing this to me now. Standing here like what we had didn’t matter. Standing here like he can offer me a imitation of a marriage and have that be enough.

“What’s that?” Finn asks. His eyes go dark, like he’s replaying the conversation to find some detail he missed.

“You never asked me to marry you.” His eyes widen. “You never told me to And I will never, ever say yes.”

I turn my back on him and walk away.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### Finn

**I** AM A fool in every possible way.

I'm a fool for going to that wedding reception instead of just going to Eva's apartment and begging for forgiveness. I'm a fool for announcing to her that we'd get married. As if Eva Morelli, a queen, would agree to my pathetic offer. *No one tells Leo Morelli what to do*, she said to me, once in a while. Well, nobody tells Eva Morelli what to do, either.

At least they don't stare at a painting and announce she'll marry them. "You look like you chewed up a lemon." Hemingway leans against the doorway to the den, surveying me with raised eyebrows.

"Thanks."

"That was code for *what made you look like you chewed up a Finn?* Bad night out on the town?"

"Yes. I had a horrendous night."

"One of my friends texted me to say that you had a fight with Eva at her sister's wedding."

My God. It's never going to end, is it?

*Oh, it will. Before you want it to.* The matter-of-fact voice in my head won't shut the hell up.

"We didn't. We had a discussion."

"Something go wrong with your fake engagement?"

"Jesus, Hem. Keep your voice down."

"Sorry." Now he uses an exaggerated whisper. "I meant, it's something went wrong with your fake engagement. Do you want to talk about it?"

I flip the laptop in front of me closed. I've been trying to work since this morning, when I woke up in a rage at myself. I took a rage-shower, dressed, and I've been rage-working for the better part of two hours.

I don't have the words to tell Hemingway exactly how this went. I'll look like a giant fucking hypocrite. Worse, I have no plan. My plan is to marry her. Eva stomped that under her high heel.

"I can't talk about it yet," I admit. "I don't know how to explain this. I'm too pissed off."

He gives me big eyes now. "At her?"

"At myself."

"Well." Hemingway straightens up. "You should call her instead of sitting here looking like that. It'll be better if you're on the same side."

going to "How do you know we're not?"

coming to "Because of your face."

to my "Jesus Christ."

be upon "Also, it's time for breakfast. Are you coming?"

"Fine."

em. There is relative peace in the kitchen. Hemingway gives me a thumbs up from his seat at the table. Jennifer's sliding eggs onto plates.

"This is just how I like them," my father says. I take a seat on his side. At least he's having a good morning.

lemon, "Finn had a bad night last night," Hemingway announces.

I give him a death glare.

Morelli "A bad night?" My dad looks at me over his glasses. "Don't overindulge at one of your parties?"

"Yes, that's exactly it."

In a way, Hemingway is right. I overindulged in Eva. I touched her. I kissed her and fucked her in an art gallery. I said yet another damn-foolish thing to her. *And* I didn't follow her when she turned on her heel and left.

"Orange juice," my father says. He reaches out with his fork and tongs. "That'll help."

"Will it?"

s clear "It's good for hangovers."

to talk Hemingway grins at me, the little asshole. "That's what I've heard. Orange juice is great for hangovers."

"You know what else is great for hangovers? Silence."

ce early Hemingway pretends to zip his lips, then attacks his eggs and toast, rage-three of us eat in a quiet that could be companionable if I weren't so pissed.

It's seeping out of me and into the rest of them.

wrong. It hasn't been more than five minutes when Hemingway stands up and washes his plate away. "That was great. I have homework. See you Dad."

it. I'm "Let me know if you need me to look it over," Dad says.

"You know I will, Dad." Hemingway smiles from the kitchen doorway and then he's gone.

My eggs and toast are tasteless. I keep eating them anyway. Instead of making herself busy at the sink, I can tell she's taking care to give us a look while she watches over my dad.

"So." Dad doesn't seem to mind his eggs. Not at all. "Long night, though."  
"Yes."

Normally, I'd tell him a story. Keep him engaged as long as I can. I have it in me right now.

He waits. I can feel his eyes on me. "A party got out of hand, is that all?" I rub a hand over my face. "There wasn't any party, Dad. Hemingway was joking. I just didn't get much sleep."

is other "Something on your mind?"

"No."

If I'm going to tell him, I want him to understand. I know that's not possible. It pisses me off that the world could be so cruel. It enrages me because you haven't made it any better by existing.

"Sometimes I feel better if I just talk it out."

"There's really nothing to say."

her and He finishes his toast and leans back in his chair, a glass of orange juice in his hand. "Does it have to do with one of your friends?"

"Does *what* have to do with one of my friends?"

aps my He raises his eyebrows at me, looking so much like Hemingway that my chest clenches. "Your lack of sleep. Your bad night."

"What's on your schedule today, Dad?"

"Phineas."

rd, too. "Any meetings? Are you going to play golf?"

I'm an asshole. I don't just feel like one. I am the physical embodiment of a fucking prick. I can't help being angry with him, even knowing that

ist. The mostly myself I want to throttle. I can't help wanting more time. I can't help wanting more than I can get.

"I'm not too interested in my schedule. I'm interested in you." He takes a sip of orange juice.

Later, "I'm really fine."

"Finn, as long as I've known you, you've never been so angry at me."

"I'm not—" I stab my fork too hard into the scrambled eggs and the egg whites scrape on the plate. "I'm not angry at the eggs."

He's lucid for now, but time is short. It's short for everything. Short to figure out what to do with Eva. Short to figure out how to protect the privacy from something I can't protect it from.

It's short, but it's so goddamn long. She's going to have to spend the rest of her life without me. Or worse, years caring for me *and* a child.

I don't want that for Eva. If she has a son—if she has *my* son—the son I don't want. That's the rest of her life. Gone with a snap of my fingers.

If I wasn't here, then none of it would have happened. It goes far beyond asking her on a date with me at the Morelli Mansion. We'd have to spend the next few years to stop all this.

"Tell me what's bothering you."

I breathe out some of the fiery hurt in my chest. Toss the fork on the tablecloth. My dad's looking at me, his expression calm. I hate it. I hate that these moments with him are all we have left. He won't even remember that IThere's no point in asking the question. There's no point in having a conversation at all.

"Why?" So much for not asking. "Why did you even *have* children if you knew how it would end?"

He blinks at me.

I've gone too far. Asked him a question that's beyond him to answer. Anyway, it's too late. Hemingway and I are here, like it or not. I open my mouth to take it back, but I'm too choked up. By everything. By the fact that a baby is going to be born who has to suffer what I suffered. By the fact that my own father might not know what the hell I'm talking about.

"Well, Finn." He sets his orange juice on the tablecloth and drags his fingertips next to it. "Children are a sign of hope."

"Even if it's hopeless?"

He shrugs. There's a flash of confusion in his eyes. I don't know



It doesn't help means he's lost track of the conversation or if he just doesn't understand where I'm coming from.

It takes a But then...

"I would make the argument that nothing's ever hopeless so long as you're alive."

"No?" "No? What if it's our destiny to lose everything? That seems hopeless."

"Oh, come now. Destiny is about hope, too."

"And what if it's not? What if your destiny is hopelessness? What if you don't know you can't change anything?"

"That can't be." A sparkle comes to his eyes. "You can't know your destiny until you've reached it. A person's fate can change any time."

"I'm talking about kids, Dad. About having children even in the future you don't want."

"Do you have proof?"

"Of the future?"

"Yes. He's sitting right in front of me. I can't avoid becoming him. In more than a decade, I'll be headed firmly down that path. I don't say that out of fear."

"Aha. You *don't*. Because you can't. Nobody knows what the future will bring."

"Didn't you?"

"Of course not. I had no idea how wonderful you'd be." He laughs, but he can't take it. I can't. The wash of feeling. The way my mind ticks and turns, hearing this genuine laughter. I won't hear it many more times. "I know quite a bit about business. Not so much about children. I was terrified when I learned what you were on your way."

"That I wouldn't be what you expected?"

"That I wouldn't be what you needed." He purses his lips. "I should have said that. Children are about hope. Hope that the future will be what you need. Open my eyes, of course. But the hope that they'll forgive you your mistakes and that you'll learn to rise to the occasion. You're a step ahead of me."

"How's that?"

"You've always been pragmatic, Phineas. You know we're all the same in the end."

"Are we?"

"Everybody is born." He traces a line on the tablecloth. "Everybody has a chance to change if it one day."

erstand “How is that hopeful?”

“It’s hopeful because everything happens while you’re alive. Always known you’d only be here a little while. Always understood that as we’re lifted his hands in front of him and makes two fists. “You’ve always taken me by the throat because of it.”

ess.” “Are you sure I wasn’t just a hopeless asshole?”

“Look. Life is between you and God. A deal’s not done until both of you have signed on the dotted line. It’s not over until it’s over. There’s still hope.”

ow the Maybe he’s right. Maybe I’ve always known too much. Maybe I denied myself hope because I was so bent on certainty.

ace of a I told myself I was taking as much as I could from life, but none of what I wanted. All those people, all those hookups, all those parties—they don’t want any of them. They were only cheap, shallow replacements for what I really want.

In less Eva. Always Eva.

t loud. She’s beautiful and strong and so fucking competent she makes other women weep. Most of them couldn’t handle her. They don’t like someone smarter than them. I’m not afraid of it.

It makes me want her even more.

s, and I “I like this toast,” he says.

off his “What?”

it about “The toast. It’s good.” Dad looks me in the eye, and I laugh. This is a kind of absurd thing he used to say when I was upset about something as a child. When I thought something was the end of the world. But Dad understood that the end of the world was already happening. “But you can’t stand by what, Phineas?”

orthy of “Tell me.”

es. And “It’s better with more butter and jam. You can swear up and down that you love toast even if it’s just dry bread, but that’s just denying the truth. It’s better with jam. Speaking of—” He takes a spoon from a small dish in the center of the table and puts jam on his remaining piece of toast. “This is the better. Where do we get this jam, anyway? It’s the best I’ve tasted.”

“Jennifer makes it at home, actually.” It’s one of her hobbies. The jam jar never disappears in the fridge every couple of weeks. Blackberry. Raspberry. Particularly piquant gooseberry.

“Now.” My dad takes a bite, and his eyes flutter closed. “Something’s bothering you. Are you going to tell me what it is?” He  
ken life

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erry. A

“Now.” My dad takes a bite, and his eyes flutter closed. “Something was bothering you. Are you going to tell me what it is?”



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Eva

**N**OW THAT THE news is out to Finn, there's nothing to do but throw into work.

Am I avoiding the problem? Absolutely not. There is no problem. My idea of an acceptable solution is to get real-married and live sad, s--- lives. He won't even think about the baby.

The end.

There is not another person on earth I can talk to about this. No one. I didn't want to tell any of my family before I told Finn. Leo doesn't know.

It feels wrong. I don't like having to walk around with this secret hidden from myself. But I don't want to give them this story, either. That Finn offered to make the engagement real, to actually marry me, and I turned him down.

I can picture my mother's polite, horrified expression. I can picture my father's fury. Daphne's concern. Sophia's raised eyebrows.

And then...what?

A notification pops up on my screen.

Apparently I've been invited to a meeting with a possible donor. A five-minute meeting. Five minutes from now, at the end of the day.

These meetings happen semi-frequently. Our family is the primary benefactor to the Morelli Fund, but we occasionally have other benefactors. Voluntary friends of the family or business partners of my father or my brothers. I've had a few wealthy recluses approach us who have a specific project in mind but need someone to steward it.

It's a funny quirk of my job that it takes so much work to give

money. You can't just throw it at people, otherwise it goes to waste.

I accept the meeting.

What else am I going to do, anyway? I could go visit Leo and I could have dinner with Daphne and Emerson. I could even text Sophia

But it's getting harder and harder to stop myself from telling them from giving myself away.

I'm not making any big announcements to anyone in the family because they can all be reassured of a plan moving forward. They won't be reassured by the fact that I'm keeping the baby.

I can handle the details of caring for my child. I have no doubt about it. As for handling the fallout of a broken heart...

Myself They're not going to be convinced. I'm just not capable of sustaining the fiction of a happy marriage for the rest of my life if none of it is real.

Finn's Also, I have to break it to Leo in a way that convinces him not to separate from Finn.

I stand up from my desk and stretch. This isn't exactly how I'd feel before a meeting with a possible donor. It's almost six o'clock yet. My makeup has worn off. My shirt is ruffled, somehow.

It's even Maybe I should have gone into the offices at Morelli Holdings. I've spent a lot of time making my office at home beautiful and comfortable over the years. Now it feels closed, almost oppressive. Every piece in this room was chosen by a woman who was heartbroken, yes, but who didn't think the situation would get any worse. She did not think the situation would be Leo's complicated by the arrival of Finn Hughes.

She was wrong.

My secretary steps into the room. Ryan has been with me for two years. He's very competent. I'm accidentally scowling at him when he enters the room. "Ms. Morelli, the donor is here—are you sure you want to go with the meeting?"

My donor I rearrange my face into a socially acceptable expression. "Yes, please. Thank you very much."

We've "Okay." He steps out of my office, reappearing a moment later in the hallway.

With *Finn*, following close behind him.

I'm away I am...dumbfounded. Ryan doesn't know what to do with that. He's standing between me and Finn.

“We’re good for the day, Ryan,” I say. “You can head out evening. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Finn steps back to let Ryan leave. Then he bustles into my office a binder in the center of the desk, like he’s setting up for a pitch meeting. Or “What the hell are you doing?”

Finn extends his hand to me. “Finn Hughes. I’m here to discuss a potential donation to the Morelli Fund.”

I shake his hand because this is so bizarre and so *wrong*. “I’d discuss you leaving my office. Immediately.”

Finn sits. He looks up at me, eyes wide with hope and resignation sit, too.

“Before I go, there’s a particular project I want the Morelli Fund to fund.”

“Again, I don’t see how—”

“It’s for the Dementia Foundation.”

Oh God. Here I was, all set to be steely and unforgiving. But with hazel eyes looking into mine with despair covered in a thin layer of sweat, I can’t quite follow through on kicking him out.

I’ll have to get used to it eventually.

I fold my hands on the desk. “You’re fully capable of starting your own foundation.”

Finn flips past the first few pages of his hard-copy presentation and the cover opens. There, in plain, printed text, is the proposed structure of the project as directed by the Morelli Fund.

He glances at it, then back at me. “I don’t want my own foundation for years. His voice is so low, and so rough with regret, that I make fists under the desk instead of reaching for him. My hurt and anger are like a knot in my heart. The longing, though? That’s worse. It’s a thousand extra pounds spilled into one of my terrariums. The balance is all off.

And I can see that longing reflected in Finn’s eyes. His hand flexes under the desk, his fist closing tight and opening again.

“Have you seen a doctor?” he asks.

“The baby is none of your concern. Neither is my pregnancy. That happens when you tell someone they were a *good time*, but it’s over.”

His mouth tightens. This is not part of his pitch. Not even in the room where we’re supposed to be discussing. But it’s been so heavy to keep

for themself. To just...wake up with it every day. Go to sleep with it every r

All I want him to say is that he wants this baby with me. I kn  
nd puts impossible.

ig. Finn's hand flexes on his pitch binder. "Your pregnancy is a con  
me, Eva. And so are you."

scuss a "I can handle making an appointment."

"But you haven't made one yet?"

like to "No," I admit.

Finn glances at the presentation, then back at me. He's the acting (   
, until IHughes Industries. He knows better than to derail philanthropic m  
with personal, emotional bullshit. "When did you find out?"

to work "An hour after you broke up with me."

He blows out a breath. "I'm sorry."

"It's none of your business."

"Eva."

l Finn's "Oh—did you want more details? Here's how it went, Finn.  
hope, Itwenty-four pregnancy tests and then shut down emotionally. I'm  
denial. And I'm still pissed at you."

"I'm sorry." The corners of Finn's mouth turn down. The skin aro  
ng andeyes is tight. He means this apology. "That I made you feel like yc  
alone. This child is our responsibility. Together."

d holds Ugh. That's the thing. I don't want to be his responsibility. I wan  
e of *themore*.

A bolt of understanding shoots through me.

l." This is why Sophia gets so frustrated with me for never needing h  
ider theinsisting on this one-sided duty, where I give, and nobody can give  
aroundme. It's a strangely fresh perspective. I've never allowed myself to be  
pebblesother side. Now that Finn's turned it on me...

"Seriously, Finn. Why are you here? To ask me about a doctor? I'  
s on thedoctor. Don't worry about it."

"I *am* worried about it. Also, I wanted to ask you to reconsi  
proposal."

's what It didn't take him long, did it? I'm pissed again. My expression dro  
a Morelli glare. Not appropriate for a potential donor meeting, but it  
ealm ofwhat he has to say?

o this to "There was no proposal. There was an edict from King Hughes."



right. He takes his hand from the proposal deck. “Do you want me to ask  
ow it’s “That’s beside the fact that I would say no.”

Another shadow across the hazel of his eyes. “Do you want me to l  
icern to It wouldn’t hurt. “No. I want you to leave.”

Finn glares back at me. “Do you want me to get on one knee in t  
everyone in Bishop’s Landing?”

“Now you’re just mocking me.” Also, yes. Yes, I want that very  
I’ve never wanted it with anyone else, but I want everyone to know h  
CEO ofme. I don’t want some bullshit fake proposal. I want the real thing, and  
eetingseveryone to see it.

He sighs. “You know that getting married is what’s best for the chi  
“Why?” I fire the question at him like a demand. It *is* a demand.

can have a father, or so he can join the Hughes cult of secrets? I’m no  
that. I’m not raising a child in a home where he knows he’s not wanted

Finn scowls, leaning back an inch like he can make this less pa  
I tookthere’s more space between us. He looks young and pissed and pas  
still inAnd he looks tired beyond his years.

He doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t refute the argument that he  
und hiswant this baby. I don’t even expect him to.

u were I sit up straight. Regain control. “I need time to think.”

“No.”

it to be “You need to respect my boundaries, Finn. If there’s any chanc  
working this out, you have to.”

“Do you want to work it out?”

ier. For “Honestly? I don’t know. We might both be better off going our s  
back toways.”

e on the He closes the cover of the presentation and stands. “I’m leaving th  
deck here for you to read. Please get in touch when you’re finished.  
’ll see ato talk to you about it.”

There’s so much more he wants to say. It’s written all over his face  
der myevery tense line of his body.

Is he searching for the right words, too? Part of me wants to t  
ops intothere’s nothing he can do to make it up to me. And part of me wants  
f *this* isoff this argument right now.

*I don’t want to marry you out of obligation. If you think of me tha  
can’t. If you think of the baby that way, I can’t. I know you’re afraid.*

?” *you didn’t think of me as a duty before. Don’t start now. Please.*

None of it is prepared half as well as his pitch deck or even r  
beg?” attempts at a decent terrarium. The words are a clump of broken ca  
ferns that don’t match. I can’t hand him my broken heart and say *her*  
front of *Doesn’t it make sense? Ask me to marry you like you love me. I kn*  
*love me. I thought you loved me.*

r much. It’s not getting any better. I have the distinct sense that I’m running  
e lovestime.

I I want Finn looks at me for another long moment. It’s painful at my very  
be on the opposite side of the desk from him. To be on opposite sides  
ld.” argument. We should be on the same team. If nothing else, we sh  
“So hefacing this together.

it doing What do I have to do? Get naked? Take him to bed? How do w  
l.” this?

inful if How do I let *him* solve this?

sionate. He takes one step away from my desk, and I have the urge to cha  
To shout after him. Even to scream. That’s how much I want him to st  
doesn’tthe one who told him I wouldn’t abandon him. I said it without conc  
meant it.

But I know better than to give in to that feeling. I know better tha  
myself be beholden to it.

e of us I’ve made that mistake before, and I’m not going to do it again.

“Finn,” I call.

It’s too late. He doesn’t come back.

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is pitch

I’d like

e and in

ell him

i to call

t way, I

I know

*you didn't think of me as a duty before. Don't start now. Please.*

None of it is prepared half as well as his pitch deck or even my first attempts at a decent terrarium. The words are a clump of broken cacti and ferns that don't match. I can't hand him my broken heart and say *here, look. Doesn't it make sense? Ask me to marry you like you love me. I know you love me. I thought you loved me.*

It's not getting any better. I have the distinct sense that I'm running out of time.

Finn looks at me for another long moment. It's painful at my very core to be on the opposite side of the desk from him. To be on opposite sides of this argument. We should be on the same team. If nothing else, we should be facing this together.

What do I have to do? Get naked? Take him to bed? How do we solve this?

How do I let *him* solve this?

He takes one step away from my desk, and I have the urge to chase him. To shout after him. Even to scream. That's how much I want him to stay. I'm the one who told him I wouldn't abandon him. I said it without condition. I meant it.

But I know better than to give in to that feeling. I know better than to let myself be beholden to it.

I've made that mistake before, and I'm not going to do it again.

"Finn," I call.

It's too late. He doesn't come back.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Eva

**W**HEN MY APARTMENT is empty for the evening, I stride out of my office as a high-powered CEO leaving her Manhattan high rise and proceed directly to the bathroom to run a bath.

There's conflicting evidence about how much caffeine is too much to have when you're pregnant, but I don't want to take the risk. Even though my craving for Diet Coke has reached monstrous proportions. I can't have either, but I need something to take the edge off the pitch deck.

That's how I end up with a can of sparkling blackberry water.

I take an ice-cold can with me when the bath is finished running. A shelf at the side of my soaking tub has a circular indentation for drinks.

The warm water feels good. I don't turn it to scalding like I usually do because I read it's not good for the baby. It's strange how much being pregnant changes everything. And nothing. I'm expected to go about my day like I always do. Meanwhile, everything's changing. I'm tired in strange ways. My stomach feels nauseous one minute and ravenous the next. I'm exhausted, and after five minutes later I can't imagine sleeping.

Floating in the tub with the icy metal of the can in my palm helps.

I'm not going to look at the pitch deck tonight.

I move it to the corner of my desk the next morning. No in-person meetings on my schedule for today. Paperwork. Emails. I studiously ignore the pitch deck.

At five, I leave the office. I take the pitch with me, though.

If I'm going to read it, it's going to be on my own time. Not because my rival tries to hijack my position at the Morelli Fund to get an in.

I change out of the outfit I wore to work. Wash my face. Pat it dry.

Then I take the pitch to a sitting room that now doubles as a work room.

This is where I keep all my supplies for making terrariums. I don't have a typical craft shelf to store them. The jars of materials are in a one-of-a-kind piece in the shape of an octagon. Irregular shelves make a pattern that becomes more intentional the farther away you stand.

I start on a new terrarium.

New bowl. New layer of pebbles. New dirt.

I'm picturing something simple, but beautiful. I've done a sunken lighthouse, a castle. This one is going to feature a fairy house carved out of a mushroom.

It's cute and whimsical. It might seem silly to some people, but life needs a little whimsy.

The pitch deck waits for me, patient but stalwart. Unrelenting.

It's a formal business deck with black plastic binding and a clear cover.

"What's the purpose of you?" I ask the deck conversationally. "What's the wine, just send me an email? Or better yet, why not just tell me what he's thinking?"

What's the point of a deck?"

I work on the terrarium, pressing down the bottom layer with my fingertips. Working a tiny cactus into a spot near the center. Its flower has

not bloomed yet. It's hiding in a furl of pale green, but I know it's there. In a week there will be bright pink petals, their silkiness a contrast to the cactus spines.

"How long do I put off reading you, hmm? A day? A week?"

The pitch deck doesn't answer.

The silence seems more and more accusatory.

It's been another twenty minutes when I finish with the first phase of the terrarium, straighten up from the worktable, and brush off my hands.

Fine. I'll read it. But only because I'm good and ready. Not because I'm on fire with curiosity. Not because it's burning my lungs. I angle the deck to the corner of the table, slide the terrarium out of the way, and pull the deck to the front of me.

"Let's see what's here."

The cover opens to reveal the title page. Neat. A clear font. A simple design. *Hughes-Morelli Joint Venture*.

My throat closes. I clear it and turn to the next page, tipping it so

read.

room. It's a proposal. An *actual* proposal.

't use a *Proposal*, reads the top header.

;-a-kind And under that:

t seems *A Proposal by Phineas Hughes to Eva Morelli, regarding the conti  
of marriage.*

ship, a There's a paragraph of text making it explicitly clear that the proj  
out of a meant as a supplementary document to provide context to the larger q  
at hand.

I think The first sub-heading reads: *Advantages*.  
Then there's a bulleted list.

over. ATTRACTION: According to societal standards of beauty, he's at l  
an eight. Maybe even a nine when it's gray sweatpants season. /  
Why not he promises to give you two orgasms for every one of his.  
inking?

ith my NETWORK: A relationship via marriage with him will include acces  
r hasn't a wide range of social connections that would benefit the Mo  
Fund and family.

re. In a COMMITMENT: He has years of experience managing far  
actus's commitments and relationships. Colloquially, this is known as be  
"ride or die."

e of the I burst out laughing, which immediately turns into a sob.  
This is Finn, baring himself on literal paper.  
The fourth bullet point:

use I'm FAMILY: Son of Geneva Roosevelt and Daniel Hughes. Good pare  
lamp at both still living. One brother, Hemingway Hughes—a captiva  
deck in conversationalist, if a bit of a rascal.

le title. CONNECTION: Deep interest in Eva Morelli. Companionship woul  
mutually beneficial.

o I can *Please continue reading for a discussion of risks.*

It's an interesting choice, because a risk isn't the opposite advantage. It's not a weakness or a failing. It's something that might be wrong in some future, hypothetical space.

A risk might not happen.

ract            GENETICS: Genetic condition has a significant impact on both parties in a Hughes marriage.

proposal is    PLAYBOY: His number is high, so to speak. This didn't seem to be a question dealbreaker before.

DANGER: Prone to adrenaline-seeking behaviors. Colloquially known as YOLO.

east            I laugh again. Hot tears run down my cheeks. I can hear his wry tone. And he were in the room.

ATTACHMENT: He cares about you too much. It's a problem.

s to            Holding back my tears is a fool's errand. I've been crying a lot lately. Between that and the morning sickness, I'm a completely dysfunctional person. A watering pot, basically. My emotions are more intense than they've ever been. Is that because I'm pregnant? Or is that because I'm in love with him?

nily            Part of me wants to call Finn right now and accept the proposal... I'm not sure a pitch deck can really count as a marriage proposal, but I'm not sure I can't. Even if he doesn't love me, he can be kind. We'll have this child together either way. Maybe marriage to him is the best option.

The problem is that I wouldn't stop loving him.

nts,            It would break my heart to live with that distance between us every day. I can't keep battering myself against it. His will is too strong. I'm not up broken, the way I was after Lane.

ting            It felt so real, like I was in love. Only later did I wonder why I'd thought I could love a man so much older than me. What did we have in common? Those logical questions didn't bother me at the time. My nineteen-year-old self was willing to believe in an unlikely fairy tale.

I be            Then, when I told Leo about my feelings for Lane, he confessed. He confessed that it was Caroline who'd hurt him, and that his p

of an injuries hadn't been the worst of it. That he believed it was the only  
ight go Lane pursued me. By then, Lane had fallen for me. He didn't acc  
breakup easily. But by then I saw who he really was. I saw who I rea  
—a pawn in the game of an older man.

s in I cried every day for a month. I swore I'd never be so broken again  
Through my tears, I read the next part of Finn's proposal.

oe a *I accept your decision regarding the issue of marriage. A partners  
only makes sense if both parties benefit. If you feel the advanta  
outweigh the risks, then I would be honored to become your husband*

own How am I supposed to live with this proposal in my head? Ho  
supposed to walk around every day knowing that Finn sat down and a  
himself with clear eyes? He offered himself to me in this busine  
ne as if format because he knew it would make me laugh. And maybe it was t  
way for him to present it to me calmly, without breaking down.

I might break down, too, if I knew I only had seven years left.

at more Morelli Fund, benefiting the Dementia Foundation. It involves rese  
ifferent new treatments and preventative strategies.

they've  
? *Such medical innovations may help future generations of Hughes.  
though unlikely that even with help, doctors would find a cure in  
can it? generation. Basing a life around the possibility of a cure would  
ogether indulging in false hope.*

I flip the cover of the proposal closed.

7 single for sure.”  
ll wind That's how he thinks about hope. That it's false. “You don't kn

ought I worst-case scenario. I can see the wisdom in that kind of planning for  
mmon? situations.

Not this one.

ear-old It would make a wedding feel like a funeral. It would turn every  
into a cruel joke.

hysical I won't participate in making a joke out of Finn Hughes. I won't h  
lead a sham life while his heart breaks more with every day that passes



reason The baby won't understand Finn's emotional distance. The baby  
rept theknow that it comes from fear and grief and guilt. Can he overcome  
lly washings for our child?

Can he overcome them for me?

l. "Nobody knows what's going to happen." I'm stern with the propo  
way I should have been stern with Finn before. "You can't make me  
the worst before it's here. I won't do it. I want to be *happy* wi  
*ship*  
*iges*  
*nd.* goddamn it. This baby deserves to be happy. And loved."

I pick up my phone, thumbs flying over the screen before I c  
myself.

w am I *Eva: I've reviewed your proposal.*  
ssessed

ess-deal *Finn: And?*

he only *Eva: You need to get some things straight.*

*Finn: Like what?*

with the *Like the fact that I'm in love with you. Like the fact that I want*  
arching *you into a happy ending, despite your best efforts to end in tragedy. I*  
*fact that you're breaking my heart.*

*It's* My phone rings in my hand.

*this* "What do I need to get straight?" Finn's voice is guarded. Care  
*l be* sounds as tired as I feel. As heartsick as I feel. And still hopeful, despi  
he wrote in the letter.

*He doesn't want to create false hope.*

It's too late. I have every kind of hope, even the false kind.

ow that "Maybe I don't have time to discuss it," I say, stalling for time.

"Humor me."

on the Humoring Finn Hughes means buying into the idea that he is doon  
lots ofidea that we're both doomed. The idea that our child is doomed  
cornerstone of his proposal, in fact. One of his *risks*. He has a limited  
of time, and I don't want to believe that.

r dream I've always been the levelheaded one. I'm the daughter who  
things. Love isn't something that can be handled. It can't be boxed off  
elp himfits neatly in the guest wing of the Hughes estate.

s. His words come back to me.

7 won't     *It's for the Dementia Foundation.*

e those     Finn's not just clarifying his personal proposal in this pitch deck suggesting we work together to change things for the child. Even that me as fatalistic. *It's too late for him.*

osal the     How would I manage this project, this sadness, without any hope  
: acceptman I love?

th you,     "It's a great proposal. Perfect. But you're missing the point. You want the baby."

an stop     "That's not the important point."

              "That's the *only* point."

              The phone rings again. Since I'm already on a call with Finn, it's incessant beeping. I pull it away from my face. Leo's name is on the Relief fills me, because I don't want to talk to Finn right now. I can you know what? He doesn't deserve an answer right away. If he had down on one knee, then I would have answered him right away. Ins presented me with a pitch deck. So maybe I'll respond the same way. memo on corporate letterhead.

to drag     "My brother's calling. I have to go."

like the     "Eva, wait—"

              I hang up. Finn can wait until I'm good and ready. I swipe at my eye clear my throat while the call connects. I don't want Leo to know  
ful. He     crying. "Hey. What's—"

te what     "It's happening." Leo's voice is shaking. Terse chatter rises background. A car door slams. "Haley's in labor. You have to come. you."

ied, the  
. It's a  
amount

handles  
until it

*It's for the Dementia Foundation.*

Finn's not just clarifying his personal proposal in this pitch deck. He's suggesting we work together to change things for the child. Even that strikes me as fatalistic. *It's too late for him.*

How would I manage this project, this sadness, without any hope for the man I love?

"It's a great proposal. Perfect. But you're missing the point. You don't want the baby."

"That's not the important point."

"That's the *only* point."

The phone rings again. Since I'm already on a call with Finn, it's just an incessant beeping. I pull it away from my face. Leo's name is on the screen. Relief fills me, because I don't want to talk to Finn right now. I can't. And you know what? He doesn't deserve an answer right away. If he had gotten down on one knee, then I would have answered him right away. Instead he presented me with a pitch deck. So maybe I'll respond the same way, with a memo on corporate letterhead.

"My brother's calling. I have to go."

"Eva, wait—"

I hang up. Finn can wait until I'm good and ready. I swipe at my eyes and clear my throat while the call connects. I don't want Leo to know I was crying. "Hey. What's—"

"It's happening." Leo's voice is shaking. Terse chatter rises in the background. A car door slams. "Haley's in labor. You have to come. I need you."



## CHAPTER NINE

### Eva

**G**ETTING TO THE hospital involves a flurry of activity.

I summon my driver and notify my security team. The oversized blouse and shorts I wore for working on a terrarium won't work. I change into black slacks, structured but comfortable. A black sleeveless top and a sweater, tucked over the top of my purse.

I'm not sure how long I'll be there. I can almost guarantee that I'll have to step in at some point. If I do—*when* I do—I'll look every inch the intimidating Morelli princess.

It's too early for Haley to be in labor by several weeks.

The date gives me a sick feeling in my stomach, but I push it away.

Babies come early all the time. There is no need to panic. And if there *was* a need, I can't. Not right now. My brother needs me. My sister-in-law needs me. My little niece needs me. I call ahead to the hospital. They tell me I'm on my way. A pleasant-sounding woman answers the phone and lets them know that my brother and his wife will be arriving shortly.

It's a courtesy. Leo can be disruptive at the best of times. From the moment he sounded on the phone, it's not the best of times.

It's certain to be very tense at the hospital.

It could even be an emergency.

*Eva: I'm on my way.*

*Leo: Ten minutes.*

The plan has been in place since early on in Haley's pregnancy. In the course of the pregnancy, everyone's top priority is keeping her and the baby safe and

The fact that it's all being set into motion earlier than expected won't that.

It will, however, change things for Leo.

There are reasons I've been his emergency contact for more than 10 years. Reasons why there's paperwork on file at every local hospital for permission for me to be with him regardless of any policies for visit visiting hours.

One of those reasons is that my brother, the infamous Beast of B Landing, has the worst white-coat syndrome of anyone on earth.

His blood pressure skyrockets at the sight of a medical building. In many, many appointments with him, watching him get more and more snappish and unreasonable. Then, once we've walked out: *I couldn't say a damn thing they said. My heart was pounding in my ears.*

quickly  
ess top.

*Finn: I hope everything's okay.*

I know I should shut him out. Keep him at arm's length. But I'll need to be focused on staying calm to do it.

*Eva: Haley's gone into labor. It's early and seems sudden, so I'm not sure if there will be complications. I'm arriving at the hospital now.*

even if

*Finn: Is there anything you need?*

ster-in-  
l to tell  
ie. I let  
he way  
*For you to understand that I love you. For you to understand that I can't freeze out our baby. I won't even give you the chance.*

I don't get the chance to send a response. My driver pulls up to the hospital's emergency entrance and another text arrives.

he way

*Leo: They took her away.*

Shit.

My driver hands off the keys to the valet and comes with me to the building. A nurse is waiting to take us to the OB wing. Two of Leo's friends are waiting outside the doors wearing grim expressions.

I go through and find two more nurses speaking in hushed tones in the nurses' station, stealing glances at a door across the way.

icy. Of  
happy.

Not a great sign.

change When my brother is most afraid, he doubles down on being in control. I'm not sure it's a winning strategy at the moment.

I follow the sound of his voice to a room marked *TRIAGE* and find half our arguing with a nurse, his face pale. He's standing up too tall and too giving. Half a step, and he'd be looming over her.

ors and "—understand. This wasn't the plan. How long are you going to keep from my wife?"

ishop's "It depends on the procedure to—"

"How long *exactly*?"

I've sat "Leo." I step into the room and go to his side, giving the nurse a smile. A line appears on her forehead. I'd be wary if I were her, to hear a name is Eva. I'll be staying as a support person. What's the situation, Haley?"

"Tell her," barks Leo.

The nurse doesn't flinch. "Haley is being prepped for a C-section. I'm too urgent, but she'll be able to be awake during the procedure. No one can enter the operating room until her spinal block has been placed."

No wonder he can't hear. They wheeled his heart into another room. I'll be are currently putting a needle into her spine.

Leo's vibrating with fury. That's what it looks like to everyone anyway. But his fear has always looked like anger. He cultivated that purpose.

hat you It works on other people. Not so much on me.

o at the "What are the next steps?" I ask the nurse, a hand on his elbow. "I'm going to completely lose his shit, it's best that nobody else is in the room."

"You'll wait here until I come back with scrubs. When it's time, I'll escort you to the operating room."

Leo glares at her until she's gone, his dark eyes murderous.

I rub at his arm. "You have to calm down."

nto the "This is because of me." He looks down at me, the nurse forgotten, terrified red spreading across his cheeks. "I made this happen."

people "Leo. What?"

s at the "I had a dream last night that something went wrong with the baby's her cord. And when we got here, they took one look at that monitor and the fucking thing might be wrapped around her neck. Then they took

control them. What if this was because of me?"

"It wasn't you," I soothe. "It was just a—a coincidental dream and Leo think about it anymore. We're just going to wait for the nurse to bring tense scrubs, and I'll walk down there with you. How's Haley?"

"I don't know. I can't see her." He grits his teeth. "I barely had deep metal talk to her."

"The doctors here are good. Remember? You interviewed most of them. You can trust these people."

"The way you could trust Finn?" He's scowling now, eyes narrowed to a small dark. I know that look. He's hunting for a problem he can solve. By force. "My necessary."

Leo with "We don't need to talk about Finn right now."

"Yes, we do." He's insistent, tone sharp. "You're sad. You've been sad for days. What did that motherfucker do to you?"

Leo. It is "Nothing."

Leo enters He paces away, stabbing a finger in my direction. "Don't lie to me. Don't hurt you. I want to know what he did. I want to know why you've been so goddamn sad. Don't bother pretending you're not."

"Jesus. I'm thirty-three. Calm down."

Leo else, Leo laughs, and the sound tells me exactly how hard he's spiraling. His idea is basically unhinged from fear. "No, I don't think I will. I think I'll be like I should have killed Lane."

"Leo." It's ice water and adrenaline to hear him say that. The thought of Leo If he's dredge up old memories filtered through shock and pain. I'm not aware of crossing the room to him. Only that I've taken his face in my hands and Leo, I'll give him a desperate shake. It's over the top. I don't care. The thought screams to death. "Don't say that."

His teeth scrape together. Leo's been taller than me and stronger than me for years, but right now, he's on the verge of breaking down. Fixated on revenge, arevenge is the only way he can think to regain control. It's a fire light in his eyes behind a sheen of furious tears.

But he can't say that. Not here.

Leo. With "Because after Lane Constantine died, the cops learned I'd had a conversation and said with him. That made me a suspect. Leo's reputation as my ultra-pro-violent brother made him one, too. We were both questioned."

Neither of us had alibis for that night. Secretly, I've always suspec

Leo might have been the one to murder Lane. Sometimes, I think he suspects me. Don't suspects me.

In the end, it doesn't matter if one of us was the killer. I would not let him go to prison for Lane's death, and he would never let that happen to me. Still, the past is in the room with us now. Again. And if I let my attention, if he goes down that path, he'll lose it.

"You're holding your breath." I don't think he knows. "You'd feel it if you let it out."

"That fucker," he says, his voice rough, "messed you up for life."

"I'm not messed up."

He widens his eyes, and from this close, I can see the accusation in his worry. His fear. Those memories feel like a crowd in this silly room with Haley's hospital bag abandoned on the floor. New memories. All of them include Finn.

"Well, I went and broke my own rule." I meant to sound definitive. He dismissive, but my voice breaks instead. "I fell in love, and—"

The first sob catches me off guard.

Leo curses under his breath and breaks my grip on his face. Then he wraps his arms around me. He runs one palm up and down my back. "He's worthy of you, sister mine. No man is. We're fucking barbarians. All cill him I'm overwhelmed by sadness and longing and missing Finn, but

Leo is calmer now. This is how it works. Only one of us can freak out at wordstime.

Finn apologized for making me feel alone, but I don't have to be.

"I need you to know something," I say into his shirt. "This is, like, the best time to tell you. I realize that. But—"

"I already know he broke your heart."

"Yeah. The thing is, I'm pregnant."

Leo's hands go to my shoulders. He pushes me back a little so he can get a clear view of my face. I'm a mess. Hot tears. A runny nose. Every Morelli princess. "What?"

"I'm pregnant. With Finn's baby. So it's worse than him breaking my heart. And you really can't kill him, Leo. You can't even joke about it. Protective,

"You're pregnant." To my shock, Leo's entire face lights up. "Are you going to have the baby?"

I can't help but smile back, even while I'm still sobbing. "Yeah."



secretly “Christ, Eva, that’s great news. That’s what you’ve always wanted  
“I never told you I wanted a baby.”

ever let He crushes me to him again. “Do you think you had to tell me? You  
to me. I haven’t known you all my life?”

ose his “Finn *broke up* with me. And then he proposed. And we’re still  
engaged. It’s a fucking disaster.”

l better “We’ll figure it out.”

“You *cannot* kill him.”

“I won’t kill him. Not unless he fucks up again.”

“There are a lot of other people to be worried about. Mom and I  
n there, going to lose their minds unless I can solve this. And Finn—” I can’t b  
/ triage explain the whole situation with Finn right now. And frankly, I shou  
ies pile only wanted to calm Leo down, not do a full debriefing on Finn F

“Things are *really* complicated with Finn.”

ant and I don’t blame Finn for how complicated it is. Not really. I wish h  
things from my perspective, but his fears are valid.

“It’ll be okay. I promise.” The nurse re-enters the room, and Leo  
ie foldspales. “I promise,” he says again.

wasn’t My heart breaks. I wipe my tears and compose myself. *I promis  
of us.”* while his wife is in surgery and his baby is coming early and no one c  
at least can ever guarantee that things will turn out.

out at a The nurse hands over the scrubs. I take Leo’s overshirt and give hi  
piece one by one. His hands are shaking too badly to pull on the surgic  
so I do it for him.

not the “She’s ready,” the nurse says. “Come this way.”

I pick up Haley’s bag from the floor, tuck Leo’s shirt into it, and  
catch up with them.

“What’s the situation inside the OR?” Somebody has to ask the qu  
can get That person is me. Leo can’t go in blind.

inch a “Haley’s had the spinal block. It went well. She’s comfortable, ,  
surgical team is just waiting for the father to get started.”

ing my The nurse turns a corner. Another one. There are more stark whit  
” back here. Fewer neutrals.

‘You’re She stops in front of a doorway marked *OPERATING ROOM.  
ENVIRONMENT.* “Ready?”

.” Leo looks at me, steeling himself. “It’ll be okay?”  
This time, he’s asking.  
ou think “I promise.” I mean it for both of us. If everything else goes to hel  
find a way out again. “I’ll be here when you get back.”  
ll fake-

Dad are  
begin to  
ldn’t. I  
Hughes.

ie’d see

’s face

e, even  
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m each  
cal cap,

l jog to

estion.

and the

e walls

*STERILE*

Leo looks at me, steeling himself. “It’ll be okay?”

This time, he’s asking.

“I promise.” I mean it for both of us. If everything else goes to hell, we’ll find a way out again. “I’ll be here when you get back.”



## CHAPTER TEN

### Finn

**T**HE WOMAN BEHIND the reception desk at the emergency department looks at me with undisguised skepticism. She has brown hair in a large ponytail and wears scrubs with Smurfs on them. Those things might have made her seem more approachable, but the tiredness in her eyes said she'd worked a long shift. And the hard set of her mouth made it clear she had no interest in who I was.

"Sir, I can't allow unapproved visitors into the emergency department. You need to go into the OB wing. It's a question of privacy. And security. I'm sure you understand—"

"Finn."

She blinks. "Excuse me?"

"My name is Finn Hughes, but you can call me Finn."

I see the flash of recognition in her eyes. "Mr. Hughes...Finn...I can't even confirm that Mrs. Morelli is a patient here. It's not that I don't want to help you, but there are rules."

It takes effort to force the patented Finn Hughes charm. "Listen, Mrs. Morelli, she's a patient here. I'm a friend of the family. A close friend of the family. And I won't go past the waiting room."

"Mr. Hughes, I'm so sorry—" She falls silent as I take out my phone and show her a few things on the screen, and scroll. Then I turn it towards her. "That's that?"

"Twenty million dollars, last year alone."

"What?"

"That's how much Hughes Industries donated to this hospital. It means I'm invested in the longevity of this healthcare facility. As a

donor, I'd like to tour the waiting room."

Her shoulders stiffen. "A tour can be scheduled at a later time, if—"

"I want to tour it now. Send security with me, if you want. I know you're the Morellis' people."

There are four armed guards in the waiting area of the emergency department. It seemed like the fastest way to get to Eva. Now I'm stonewalled by a very competent nurse. Normally I would respect that, but nothing about this is normal. My future family is at stake.

"Sir. Mr. Hughes. I cannot just—"

"When I have the new OB wing built, I'll name it after you." I see her nametag. "*Cathy*. The Cathy Rosel Obstetrics Wing." A flush darkens her cheeks. "The hospital won't pay a dime. I'm not trying to cause any trouble. I'm a friend of the family."

A heavy silence.

Then: "You need to follow the signs to the OB department. Do not go past the family waiting area, Mr. Hughes. If you do, I'll have you escorted out by security."

I grace her with my best Finn Hughes smile. "The Cathy Rosel Obstetrics Wing. I'll have my people on it by the end of the evening."

The guards don't stop me. They let me go past, following the signs into the hospital. *Fuck this*, my pounding heart says. *Fuck not being a father*. That was so difficult because I'm not Eva's husband. I'm not for her. I can't

But I don't care. I don't care if she has thoughts about the proposal. I don't care if she's pissed at me. I don't care if she stays that way for the rest of her life.

Here's what I know. I wasn't there for her when she discovered she was pregnant. I still feel like a fucking asshole that she was alone for that.

I'm not going to let it happen again. Not this time. All through our relationship, I kept making the argument that Eva should do less for her family. I should have been doing more for her.

So to hell with staying away.

The signs lead me down several hallways, each quieter than the last. I reach a nurses' station.

Which "I'm here for Haley Morelli."

I'm here for Eva, who is here for Haley. It's true, in a way.

The nurse points. "Other end of the wing."

Of course. Most hospitals have areas designated for VIP patients, who require more privacy. More security. There's an entirely separate waiting room, a guard posted outside the door.

The sight of Eva in that waiting room stops me in my tracks. She's dressed in soft, black clothes. Her hair is swept back in a neat ponytail. She looks fragile but strong with her hands on her sister Daphne's shoulders. Daphne's husband stands at her side, his brow furrowed. It looks like he just arrived.

Eva murmurs something to Daphne, then gives her a quick hug. Daphne and Emerson choose a seat. Daphne reaches out and squeezes her other sister's hand—Sophia. At the side of the room, the brother who used to be a doctor, Iscar, Tiernan, waits with his arm around a woman. He lifts his chin and responds to someone across the way.

"I don't know. Ten minutes?"

Lucian, the oldest Morelli son, paces into view, his wife Elaine at his side. "It feels longer than that."

They disappear again as Tiernan says *sure as fuck does*.

Bryant and Sarah enter the room, the youngest Morelli with them. Bryant pats her hair, looking frazzled. Bryant reaches for Eva almost absentmindedly, pulling her into his arms while she speaks to them in a low voice.

It stops my heart. A genuine hug from Bryant Morelli is something I've never had. Enough. But...they're all here. All of the Morellis, I think. Except for the brother who lives overseas, Carter.

They look...normal.

Like a regular family, despite all the money and power.

And Eva in the middle of it, keeping everyone calm.

They need her.

I need her.

Needing her is all I'm thinking about as my feet carry me in. I need her for her. In whatever way I can.

I'm expecting a fuss when I cross the threshold. The guards confront me. Eva, raising her chin and banishing me from the room with an imperious expression.

Except she's turned her attention to another person in the room. Constantine is here with his son, Cash.

"I'm not sure she'll be able to find us," Phillip says. "Petra mi

People know this wing.”

separate Petra. Haley’s older sister.

“If she has any trouble, we’ll send someone to get her. Okay? We’ll send  
a text away.”

at twist. Phillip sees me first. His eyebrows go up, as if he’s trying to peek at  
’s face. We’ve met many times at Constantine events. “Oh,” he says, after  
they’ve “Finn’s here.”

Eva turns her head.

3. Then My breath feels tight in my lungs. Tension pulls through the air. I  
zes hergo to her, but I know I have to let her come to me.

with the She pats Phillip’s hand one more time, and Cash tugs at his elbow  
in and sit down, Dad.”

Then Eva’s walking toward me. I’d deserve to get kicked out. I  
deserve any harsh words she wanted to say.

3. at his Our eyes lock.

I can’t predict what she’ll do, so I let it go. She’s close. Closer still  
for her to speak to the guards. I wait for her to snap at me.

1. Sarah Instead, she tucks herself into my chest, her arms sliding around  
ly, then waist.

Nothing has ever felt so right as closing my arms around her.

locking I can’t breathe. My heart aches. My lungs hurt. *I missed you so much*  
for the words don’t make it past the lump in my throat. It’s not about me, a  
It’s not about how much I want her and how sorry I am that I fucked up.

I hold her without saying a word, rubbing her back as she trembles  
not going to cry. Not when other people need her to be steady. But I can  
how worried she is. I can feel, from her head to her toes, how much she  
her family.

How much she could love me.

3. d to be We don’t need to speak. I can tell from the expression on her face—  
of their faces—that the birth didn’t go as planned. That they’re all anx-  
verging their brother. Their son. His wife. The baby.

with an This is what I should have done all along. I should have stood by her  
Held her in my arms.

Phillip Eva breathes deep. The tension in the room is palpable. Sarah hovers  
a set of chairs, staring at the door into the patient wing. Bryant shows  
ght no hands in his pockets and stands back near the wall. Lucian confers with

in a low voice, then goes back to his wife.

Daphne traces a pattern on the back of Emerson's hand. Sophia and I are only sitting close together, whispering. Cash and Phillip Constantine keep starting a conversation, but it trails off.

Face me. It takes another minute for Eva to straighten up. When she does, she notices. She comes over to us, her face set. "Hello, Finn. Thank you for being here."

"Mrs. Morelli." I put a hand on her shoulder. "Does anyone want anything? Food? Coffee?"

The corners of her mouth turn down. "News. But I don't think you should. Let's get that for us."

Phillip Constantine approaches next and sticks out his hand to shake mine. "Good to see you, Finn. It's been..." He drops his hand, glancing toward the door. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"How are things with your inventions?" Phillip was always the least interested in conventional business. I wait. Constantine brother with the least interest in conventional business. I understand, it caused some tension over the years.

and my "Oh." He runs a hand through his hair. "They're fine. Just fine."

"I'm sure we'll hear something soon," Eva says.

He opens his mouth, then closes it again, settling for a nod. Then he turns to Cash.

anyway. "I'm so sorry." Everyone picks up their heads at the woman's presence.

Haley's sister, Petra, rushes into the room, her eyes wide. "The nurse says Eva's gone for the day, and my husband—" She bites her lip at the mention of my husband. "I got here as soon as I could. How is Haley?"

"We'll find out any minute. Can I get you something to drink?" Eva reaches her arm through Petra's and guides her over to where Cash and Phillip are waiting.

—on all Everyone settles again. Eva steps into the next room—a kitchen. She returns a minute later with a can of Coke, which she gives to Phillip. He holds it in his hand but doesn't open it.

er side. "I'm worried about her," he says to the can.

"We're all worried, Dad." Cash puts a hand on his arm. "But she'll be okay. She's in good hands. That's what all the nurses keep telling me, right?"

with him "Right," Eva agrees.



I've only been here a few minutes, but I'm already feeling the effect of Lizzy's wait. The air in the waiting room seems thin. It wouldn't be right starting ourselves in conversation. There's nothing to do but watch the security camera feeds.

Sarah My heartbeat *thuds*.

The only person who doesn't seem impatient, not at all, is Daphne's husband, Emerson. Daphne taps a foot on the floor. She holds his hand, her thumb tracing circles on his skin. How is he so calm, pretending to be calm. I want this situation to have a happy ending. For Leo, of course, but also for Eva.

And if it's not a happy ending, I want to help her through whatever shake.

I just need to know.

All my life, I've been filled with certainty. I knew, without a shadow of doubt, that my mind would betray me long before my body gave out. I'd become a burden on my caretakers. I knew I'd be hidden from the world while Hemingway did his best with Hughes Industries.

I thought that covered everything. Nothing else could matter in the end.

But it does.

Jesus, it does.

I'm about to flag down the nearest nurse and demand an update on my mind that I'm not family, when voices lift on the other side of the door and get louder, approaching fast. Sarah grips Bryant's arm. Daphne gets up from her seat. Eva steps close to me, her breathing shallow.

The door to the patient wing swings open to reveal a doctor with a white coat over her blue scrubs. "—a few checks, but those can wait until a few minutes. You can do skin-to-skin in the recovery suite until the surgery is finished with Haley."

She holds the door open, and Leo steps through. He's dressed in a white coat and there are tears in his eyes.

He has a tiny, *tiny* baby in his arms.

Nobody moves.

Leo clears his throat. "Haley's going to be okay. They're stitching her up right now. It went really well. Also, the baby is born."

Relief explodes over the room. Daphne shrieks. More than a few

fects of clap. Bryant makes the sign of the cross. Eva squeezes me tight around to lose waist. Everyone converges on Leo and the new baby, holding their hands tickback just far enough to give them both a little breathing room.

Eva pulls me closer to the clutch of her family, rising on tiptoe to baby's face.

aphne's I'm...choked up.

and, the It's such a warm, human sensation that I feel a little drunk. n? I'm relieved for this baby and her mother and for Leo and Eva and *all* of r Haley that, for the first time, I get it.

I get why you'd have a child despite the fear. I still wouldn't change comes Not for myself. But it's happening. Eva's pregnant, the baby is *ours*, and okay with it.

She's beaming, and her happiness for her brother chokes me up again. "Congratulations," I say to Leo over the press. Sarah leans in, I knew touching the baby's cheek, the fold of her tiny, pink hat. "I don't know the world you're holding it together. I'm going to be a wreck when our baby is born."

Leo winces.

face of The next second, my own words reach me.

Sarah freezes over her new granddaughter, her eyes wide.

Daphne speaks first. "Eva, you're *pregnant*?"

Then all hell breaks loose.

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Eva pulls me closer to the clutch of her family, rising on tiptoe to see the baby's face.

I'm...choked up.

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I get why you'd have a child despite the fear. I still wouldn't choose it. Not for myself. But it's happening. Eva's pregnant, the baby is *ours*, and I'm okay with it.

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"Congratulations," I say to Leo over the press. Sarah leans in, gently touching the baby's cheek, the fold of her tiny, pink hat. "I don't know how you're holding it together. I'm going to be a wreck when our baby is born."

Leo winces.

The next second, my own words reach me.

Sarah freezes over her new granddaughter, her eyes wide.

Daphne speaks first. "Eva, you're *pregnant*?"

Then all hell breaks loose.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### Eva

**H**ALEY RECLINES ON a mountain of pillows in her hospital bed, smiling at her new baby daughter. Her hair came out black, like a true Morell: a miniature of her father, lying perfect in her mother's arms. Leo walked from the side of the bed, reverent. In awe of his newborn. In awe of his  
Finally, a moment of peace.

There were questions after Finn's comment. A cascade of them that abruptly cut off by Lucian, terse, saying *this baby was just born*.

The attention focused back on Leo and his newborn. He met me over their heads and gave me a look that said *is this guy serious?*

Shortly after, he was whisked back to the recovery room. I found him there twenty minutes later. The rest of the family had been ushered out on promises of pictures and updates.

Leo was sitting in the room's rocking chair, his dress shirt unbuttoned. He'd taken off his T-shirt. The new baby dozed on his chest under a blanket printed with dinosaurs. I expected him to make a comment about how Finn had royally fucked up *that* announcement, but instead he said, *It'll be okay. I promise*.

We sat there for another hour, him doing skin-to-skin with the baby they brought Haley back. She was desperate to see both of them. Leo took a tactful thirty minutes to break the news.

Haley's been quiet since. Understandable, since she had to figure out how to nurse. A lactation consultant bustled in and helped her position the baby. I think it's going okay.

The deep concentration slowly fades from Haley's face. She looks

from the baby and into Leo's eyes. "Would you give us a few minutes?"

He brushes a lock of hair away from her cheek. "No."

"Leo. I need some girl time. Go find something to eat. Stretch your

My brother smiles at her quiet insistence, then leans down to kiss of the baby's head. He kisses Haley's cheek. Then he drags out his de by fluffing her pillows and making sure Haley has the call button nurse, her phone, and an extra blanket.

"I love you," he says from the side of the bed.

"I love *you*." Haley smiles at him until he leans down and kis again. Her eyes follow him as he leaves. Then, with a little sigh, she l me. "I cannot *believe* you didn't tell me. Seriously. I'm kind of pissed.

g down My cheeks heat. "I know. I'm sorry. I just...I didn't believe it my i. She's a while there."

atches Haley looks back down at the baby. She's a tiny, perfect thing. "I l s wife. idea if I'm doing this right," she murmurs.

"She looks happy. I'm not an expert, but I think you're doing great

hat was She focuses back on me, her expression cautious. "Are you upset b you aren't married?"

ry eyes "Yes. No." I push my hair out of my face and lean back in the l chair. "I mean...I was raised with traditional values. We all were. I nd himjust assumed that if I got pregnant, I would be married. I assumed ut withcreating a family, instead of..."

Instead of negotiating a business proposal. Instead of dwelling on t on butinstead of the hope of a new life.

s chest Haley's eyes glisten with a sheen of tears. "Does Finn...not w mmentbaby?"

thead he "Finn..." This moment seems extremely high-stakes. Finn's not h every word matters. "I don't want to bad-mouth him. I'm just not sure y, untilhow to explain the way he reacted."

waited My brother's wife presses a knuckle to the corner of her eyes. "Yo try."

out how *Careful, careful.* "He didn't plan on having a child, so I think he w baby. Iwas pretty shocked. And his family history gives him some good rea be concerned. He's acting reasonably from his point of view. He's tr ooks upoffer me everything he can. His name. His money. Security."

Haley's eyebrows pull together. "But?"

?” “But he wants to maintain an emotional distance. An emotional wall was up front about it from the very first night. And...he ended things like legs.” realized I was pregnant. He told me it was over and basically kicked me out of the top of his house. I was the one who hoped for more.”

parture “You weren’t the only one.”

for the I raise my eyebrows at her. “Yes, I was.”

Those blue eyes flick toward the ceiling, but she’s not mocking me. “I’ve seen the two of you, Eva. You can swear up and down that it was all a mistake. You were the fool who fell in love, but Finn did, too.”

looks at “And how would you know that?”

” “Because I’ve seen a man in love before.”

self for “What, your sister’s husband?”

This time, Haley gives me a *look*, a shadow flickering over her eyes. My sister has what is essentially an arranged marriage. I’m not sure they’ve been in love. I’m talking about Leo, obviously.”

.” “Obviously,” I echo. But a man in love wouldn’t have freaked out because of Finn did. A man in love wouldn’t have been so cold. “But Leo never

” “Told me it was over and kicked me out of his house? Yes, he did.”

hospital “He did *not*.”

always “Daphne didn’t tell you? She was there.”

I’d be Oh, I am going to have a *stern* discussion with both Leo *and* I. “She was vague about the details. I just knew that you had gone home. In the end, Leo was...”

” “Beside himself. Because he was in love with me. And maybe Finn isn’t in love with you, but I don’t buy it. I think he is. But mostly, I’m having a hard time with you. I wish you’d have told me. I want to be there for you, Eva. You’re here, but there for me. It’s a two-way street.”

exactly The baby stirs, one fist popping up in an uncoordinated stretch. She looks at her eyes. I hold my breath, waiting for her raspy cry. But then her eyes close, and she drifts to sleep.

We both admire her in silence for a little while.

was...he “How was it? The birth, I mean.”

sons to Haley lets out a long breath and meets my eyes. “It was scary, but it wasn’t. I didn’t expect for labor to come on so fast. All the books would be gradual, but it wasn’t. And it *hurt*.” Her eyes get huge. “I know. Then we got here...”

fall. He She looks down at her daughter, and my heart squeezes.

before I “We got here, and things seemed okay. One minute, it was fine. Th  
me outthere were, like, six people in the room. I had to sign a paper in the mi  
a contraction. And I just—I wanted to cry.” Haley laughs. “I held it to  
though. I thought Leo was going to chase us down the hall to the op  
room if I shed even a single tear.”

3. “I’ve “Yeah. I think he would have.”

lie and “It was...not good, being in there alone. I hated it. And the pain  
much worse once I wasn’t with him. But everyone was kind. Once  
numb, it wasn’t so bad. Then they let Leo come in, and then it was  
was good.”

A tear slips down her cheek. Haley’s chin quivers.

es. “My “It’s okay. Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

ve ever “I had hoped—” Haley breaks off, her voice thick. “I had hoped to  
to deliver her the way I imagined. I don’t know. Maybe it would hav  
out theworse. But I didn’t even get to try.”

ver—” I take her hand and squeeze it. “I’m proud of you.”

” “Me too. I think I’m just still coming to terms with it. I’m so gla  
okay.” More tears spill over, and Haley laughs. “I was more worrie  
her than anything.”

Daphne. “I’m so happy you’re both here. I can’t—” I have to fan at my ow  
ne, and “I’m so glad everything’s okay, Haley.”

We both end up staring at the baby again.

m’s not I can’t believe how much I love my new niece. Of course I expe  
ppy forlove her, but this feeling? *This*? I would kill for her. Die for her. An  
ve beentwo hours old.

Haley’s puffy from surgery. Her hair is in a slightly disheveled bur  
e opensclearly exhausted, but when she strokes her baby’s cheek, her face  
es closewith love. I feel indescribably lucky to be able to sit in the glow of it.

Which is why it might be worth it.

Even if Finn never sees my point of view, and even if he never  
around, our baby could be absolutely worth it. He can try to stay emo  
y,” sheseparate, if that’s truly what he wants.

said it In that case, I wouldn’t have *everything* that Haley does. But I’d st  
l mean, the love of my child. And I’d love him to the moon and back.

“I guess it’s probably time,” Haley says.

“For me to go?”

She meets my eyes with a bright, teary smile. “No. Not unless you  
middle of the night. I think it’s time to tell you the news.”

“Is there...more news? Other than that she’s born?” My family  
eratingreeling from Finn’s big pregnancy announcement. If any other born  
land tonight, I’ll be forced to lie down.

I feel Leo enter the room behind me.

“It’s okay,” Haley says. “We’ll talk more later.”

“Did you tell her?” Leo comes to the side of the bed and slides on  
okay. It Haley, wrapping his arm carefully around her. He touches the baby  
with the pad of his finger.

“Tell me what?” My mind spins a hundred possible scenarios. So  
they’ve discovered about the baby now that she’s born. Something to  
just—the family. His house? I’m hazy with the emotion of the day. I was *ter*  
ve been can admit it now that the uncertainty has passed.

“We chose her name.” Leo traces a path down the baby’s blanke  
tiny hand. It opens at his touch, and then her fist is wrapped tightly aro  
d she’s finger.

“You did?”

This scene is going to break my heart into a million pieces. It’s too  
n eyes, and I want it for myself too much. At the same time, I’m overwhelmed  
for them. Real joy.

“Her first name is Abigail.” Haley’s voice is soft. Shy.

“*Abigail*.” I reach out and adjust her tiny pink cap. “I love it. W  
d she’s call her Abby?”

“Leo’s been doing that for weeks. He practices calling for her  
n. She’s nobody’s at the house.”

Leo doesn’t bother to look sheepish. “I did. But now she’s here.  
real thing.”

“It’s absolutely beautiful. Just like her.” I can’t keep the smile  
comes face. “Does she have a middle name?”

“Eva,” Leo says.

I look up at him, my fingertip on Abby’s cheek. His eyes have  
ill have seen. “Yes?”

“Her middle name is Eva,” Haley says. “After you.”



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## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Finn

**I** HAVE TO tell Hemingway that Eva's pregnant.

It's the number-one item on my agenda, aside from figuring out of my life.

After the hospital, I go home and toss and turn in my bed. Dre conversation makes for excellent sleep and an even better day at the By five o'clock I'm overcompensating for how tired and surly I feel, exaggerated politeness onto my staff until my secretary grits her teeth.

When I get home, I brace myself. If my father's having a bad day, sure I have the emotional fortitude to handle him and Hemingway at th time.

But...

It's quiet.

No excuses left now.

I've spent years making sure Hemingway knew about safe sex. I make him understand that children were a terrible risk. Which is makes perfect sense that I'm the one who fucked up.

I can't let him hear through the grapevine like the engagement.

That was fake, anyway. This is real.

Fifteen minutes to change out of my work clothes and wash the da the shower. Then I go find him.

He's in the den, fingers flying over the keyboard of his laptop.

"Hem."

He glances up at me. "Hey." More typing. He pulls the laptop coffee table and into his lap. "I heard you rush out of here last nigh

was that about?”

“I went to be with Eva.” It’s a relief to sit down on the couch across from him. Less of a relief to be hovering at the margins of this conversation. My niece was born.”

“Is she okay?” Hem peers at me over the screen.

“She was a bit early, from what I can tell. It was tense for a while.”

“But she’s good now?”

“Yeah. Ten fingers, ten toes.”

Hemingway makes a short sound of agreement and types some more. “God, I hate this. I hate it almost as much as being apart from you. Dragging my feet won’t make it any easier. There’s a lot of hard work involved with someone who used to live for pleasure. Was it a hollow sort of pleasure? Sure, but it was better than pain. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

My brother groans, his hands going still. “Please, for the love of God, let it not be more safe sex talk.”

“Oh, it is.”

He flips the laptop shut. “Are you serious? I know about condoms.”

We’ve been over this. And over this. I’m going to wrap myself in at least seven rubbers and an umbrella before I have sex.”

“It’s not about condoms, specifically. It is about babies, though.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

I glare at him. “Language.”

He raises an eyebrow.

“Fine.” I hold up both hands. “Listen. Eva’s pregnant.”

Hemingway cocks his head to the side. “What?”

“She’s pregnant.”

“Eva Morelli?”

“Yes.”

“Did she... cheat on you?”

My heart squeezes again. “She’s pregnant with my baby.”

Hemingway lets out a breath. He looks down at the floor for a moment, then back up at me. “Holy shit. I don’t even know what to say to you...angry about it?”

“I’m not angry, but I’m not fine either.” It’s not my best moment, but I bite my teeth to stop my emotions from pouring out all over my little brother. “Useless. They’re already here. I never wanted this. I was trying to

future child my fate, and it's happening anyway. "If I had to nail  
ss from single overriding emotion, I guess I'd say I'm fucking terrified."

n. "Her "Language."

"I didn't use a condom."

There's no judgment in his brown eyes. They remind me of our f  
, "Why?"

"Because I lose my head when I'm around her."

"Do you love her?"

re. I love her, which is why I have to get her away from me. It's w  
m Eva. done my whole life—kept my distance so that I don't hurt anyone  
shit for become a husk of a human. "Yes."

easeure? Hemingway clasps his hands in front of him. "I'm scared, too."

." My voice is hoarse. "Of what?"

Christ, "Of becoming like Dad. Obviously. That shit is scary. It's not g  
matter how you look at it."

I'm completely out of my depth here. Never once in my life did  
s, Finn. I'd have to parent Hemingway about the impending birth of my child.  
twenty-the fatalistic shit I'm used to saying sticks in my throat. "According  
we have some hope as long as we're still alive."

"I'm also afraid of becoming like you."

"Ouch."

"You seem so happy on the outside. Everyone believes it, but  
better."

"I know how hypocritical this is. I'm the one who's been drilling  
your head to use a condom, to hold yourself back. I'm the one who  
this up."

Hemingway leans heavily against the back of the couch and stares  
window. He's within his rights to be pissed at me. For years, if he  
Forever.

But when he speaks, his tone is thoughtful. "It's not that I didn't s  
several point. About not getting married and not having kids. About not carry  
ay. Are the Hughes curse."

He meets my eyes without flinching.

gritting In a blink, he's grown up. That's how it feels. Hemingway has  
her. It's like a kid to me all his life, but he's growing up. Time passes with  
spare a permission. "But?"

down a He shrugs. "But it was more because I looked up to you, not because  
was what I wanted. Secretly, I've always wanted it. The house with the  
fence. The two point five kids."

"Hemingway."

ather's. "The thing is, Finn, I'm not selfless like you." He cracks a smile that  
to the quick. "I'm selfish. I want a family, even if it ends badly."

This is what Dad was talking about. *This*.

Hope blazes in Hemingway's eyes. He might have moved home  
that I've recently, but he's seen the things that influenced my decision. My  
when Brother is refusing to give up.

"I want you to have those things, too."

Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm the one who's been selfish. I've been  
miserably with happiness and hope, always holding it up in front of Hemingway  
good and saying, *you can never have this. Ever. It was decided before you  
born.*

I think Maybe that's what I've been telling myself.

But all He's skeptical. "Eva got pregnant, so you changed your mind  
to Dad, everything?"

"Not about everything, but I want you to be happy. I've always  
that."

"Yeah, but I always knew how you defined happiness. The parties  
I know yachts and fucking random people. I want what you have with  
family."

g it into The family I got in spite of what a bastard I've been. She thinks  
fucked want the baby. She thinks I don't want *her*, but the truth is, I want  
much. Who am I to sit here and tell Hemingway whether to have  
out the What gave me the right? "I'm sorry I ever tried to convince you  
wants. Hemingway peers at me. "So are you happy? Or are you freaking  
c

"I'm..." I can't say *happy*. "I know what's coming for me."

ee your He's silent, watching me. "Do you, though?"

ying on A laugh escapes. "That's the curse, Hem. There's no way it can  
broken. It's coming for me. And no matter how much I hate it, it's  
for you. The only thing we get to decide is what we do in the few years  
seemed have left."

out my "You could be wrong, you know."

I sigh. "Hem."

cause it “I’m serious. I know how smart you are. How you brought  
e picketIndustries to new heights. How you manage a million different things  
the secret in the age of social media. I know you’re smart, but Finn, you  
freaking stupid sometimes.”

hat cuts “No, no. Don’t hold back. Tell me what you really think.”

“Because no matter how smart you are, you can’t tell the future.  
can.”

re only We’ll have to agree to disagree on that one. I know the future, be  
youngercan read the past. It’s like watching a row of dominoes fall, one by one  
know what’s going to happen to the last domino.

Not because you have a crystal ball.

fucking You know because it’s physics. It’s science. It’s cause and effect.

ingway I don’t want to argue with Hemingway, though. And I don’t want  
u werethe reason he doesn’t have a family, if that’s what he wants. So I swallow  
arguments of logic and science. I search for something I could say, so  
to show him that we’re not enemies, even if we don’t agree.

I about “I’m trying to make a better future,” I say, finally.

Not exactly an enthusiastic promise, but it’s the truth.

wanted Even without believing it’s possible, I’ve kept fighting for Hemin  
health. And now I’ll keep fighting for the baby’s health. I’ll keep doing  
and themoney and supporting research. I’ll keep pushing science along like S  
Eva. Awith his goddamn boulder up a hill, knowing it’ll roll back down.

Hemingway stands, and I’m not sure what he’s doing until the morning  
I don’toffers me his hand and pulls me up from the couch. Then he throws his  
em tooaround me. “Congratulations, asshole,” he says into my ear. “I hope  
children?don’t fuck it up, because this is more than you deserve.”

ise.” I already *have* fucked it up. But I don’t say that to Hemingway.

out?” “What’s more than you deserve?” Our mother’s voice startles us both.

We both turn to watch her breeze in, fixing her hair as she comes.

Geneva Hughes has white-blond hair and blue eyes and innate charm  
ever beShe looks like she could be an old Hollywood actress with high cheekbones  
comingand a tulle gown. She sweeps across the den and kisses my cheeks  
ears weHemingway’s, smelling faintly of ocean spray.

The last time I saw her, I visited her home in Prague to break the news  
that I was letting Hem come home from boarding school. She didn’t  
She thought he should live apart from my father, the same way she lived

Hughes from him.

to keep     She can't stand the heartbreak of seeing him broken, and she thi  
ou're so can't stand it either.

          But I *can* stand the pain. The realization hits me like an eighteen w  
          I stand the pain so my father doesn't have to face this alone.  
No one makes me wonder why I've been pushing Eva away. Maybe life is  
          a journey through heartache. It's coming for me anyway. I can't es  
because I That's the irony. Pushing Eva away hasn't made me avoid it. It's still h  
ie. You     Maybe the pain is worth it.

          Hemingway pushes a hand through his hair. "Hey, Mom."

          "Is someone going to tell me what's going on?" My mother swe  
          hands around the room. It's like she just stepped out to look at her flo  
it to be the garden. She has the air of a person who's been gone for a few hour  
low my few years. It feels, somehow, like she belongs here rather than her h  
ne way vacation homes around the world.

          My brother points at me. "He knocked up Eva Morelli."

          "Phineas. Is he joking?"

          I'm going to punch him. "No. He's not."

gway's     A slow nod. "This explains the engagement. The number of text  
onating my God. Everyone angling for information. Everyone trying to  
isyphus invitation to the wedding. I just smile and pretend to be mysterious, w  
          truth is I don't even know if *I'll* be invited to the wedding."

          I feel the smallest twinge of guilt. My mother wasn't included in p  
is arms for the engagement because no one was. It was supposed to end b  
pe you became anything real.

          Now there's a baby on the way. My baby.

          "I'm sorry."

oth.        "No phone call. No text. Not even an email. I don't know where  
          supposed to find out. How are kids sharing information these days?  
arisma. have a TikTok account?"

          I deserve that. "I should have told you. Is that why you came?"

k, then     "What is your new daughter-in-law like?" they ask. Oh, yes, of  
          we've met, I say. But it's been almost a decade. I remember a serious  
ie newswoman with dark eyes. Obedient. So busy managing her parents  
          like it. doubted she had any room for being a child. You have that in cor  
es apart suppose."

My heart squeezes. She was serious, wasn't she? I was so busy  
nks wefun that I barely noticed. Like Hemingway said, I defined happy  
parties and yachts and fucking random people. "Of course you've met  
heeler. "What does she look like now? *Beautiful*, I say. Because I can find  
Which photos from the society websites as well as anyone. What does she c  
s just *ashe's so accomplished. Very philanthropic. She manages the Morelli*  
cape it. My mother's voice has become shrill. "It's on their Wikipedia page."  
ere. "I should have told you."

"Tell me now, Phineas. Why Eva? Why a Morelli?"

Christ. The Morelli family has been in a longstanding feud w  
eps her Constantines. For decades. And Caroline Constantine is my au  
wers in mother's sister. "They've repaired the rift between the families."  
s, not a She waves this away. "I've heard those rumors. I know about th  
undred Morelli-Constantine children being born. I don't know why Carol  
allowed it. It's not going to end well."

"The Hughes are Switzerland in that feud, anyway," I say, this tir  
a hint of warning.

As head of the family I have this power—even over my moth  
s I get, would prefer that the Hughes family get involved, that we officially si  
get an the Constantines. That would only make us smaller. The Hughes fa  
hen the above the feud. My father saw the wisdom of that.

She gives me a dark look. "Still, a Morelli? My God. They're  
lanning Catholic."

efore it That makes me smile. I wonder if Eva wants me to convert. Prol  
imagine myself in swim trunks and a baby pool getting baptized. Th  
smile fades. That's assuming I can repair things between us. That's as  
I even want to. Looking at my mother reminds me of why I might n  
e I waste. It's one thing to accept my own pain. It's another to inflict it on se  
Do you else.

"Though I suppose with a baby on the way, there's no choic  
mother continues. "At least she'll be an obedient daughter-in-law."

course I can't help it. I snort. "*Obedient* is not a word I'd use to describe E

s young My mother's expression turns grave. "Does she know?"

that I "She does."

mon, I "I suppose she thinks marrying a Hughes is worth it."

"She doesn't need money. Or power. She's already rich and power



having “It would be better if she did need those things. It would be better if she only cared about the Hughes name, because that’s all she’ll have of me.”  
Eva.” curse takes you.”

and some My throat feels tight. “Right.”

lo? Oh, “I’d like to meet her. She should know what she’s getting into.”

Fund.” I can just imagine that. “The timing isn’t good right now.”

“She should know how it feels to watch the man you love waste a lifetime on nothing.”

“Geneva!” My father comes in through the door, wearing his pajamas with the hair askew. He looks like a tired, faded version of himself, except for his eyes. In his eyes there’s only delight. He recognizes her. Fuck, he recognizes her.

There was only a fifty-percent chance of that happening. And why are we little even wandering around the house? “I’ve been looking everywhere for her. There was only a fifty-percent chance of that happening. And why are we little even wandering around the house? “I’ve been looking everywhere for her. There was only a fifty-percent chance of that happening. And why are we little even wandering around the house?”

To her credit, she doesn’t miss a beat. She kisses Dad’s cheek and gives him a quick, gentle hug. She could have come home from one of her meetings with days. “Hello, Daniel. I’m right here.”

“And looking absolutely radiant. Where have you been?”

er. She “Oh, out and about.” She manages a breezy smile, but I can see the strain underneath. I see the pain underneath. The same way Hemingway saw the pain underneath my playboy façade. The Hughes aren’t that great at hiding a little bit of shopping. I visited a friend. Am I in time for dinner?”

re so... I clear my throat. I never expected to see both of my parents in the dining room again. It’s bittersweet, this moment. Because it can’t last. “It should be a good day. I’m ready now, actually.”

hen my “Let’s not keep it waiting.” Dad escorts Mom out of the dining room, leaving me summing up the day. “Let’s not keep it waiting.” Dad escorts Mom out of the dining room, leaving me summing up the day.

ot want She smiles at him, though I can see the sorrow in her eyes. “Home one day?”

“Busy. Very busy. It’s going to be one of our best quarters ever,” my father grins at her, a ghost of the competent mogul he once was. “There’s a trend that’s going to change the world. Something called social media. It’s not a fad, but I already know it’s going to be huge.”

Hemingway and I trail behind them as they go to the kitchen. From a vantage point, I can see my mom turn her head. This is ostensibly to look at the other rooms we’re passing. I catch the corners of her mouth turning up and the quiver in her chin. It’s hidden when she faces my father again.

r if she “It sounds wonderful.”

nce the He keeps up his chatter while we take our seats at the table.

We have a small staff for the size of the house.

Only one chef, one housekeeper, and one groundskeeper.

The less people here, the less people who need to know our secret of my father’s evening nurses is here. Jennifer hovers at a respectful distance, allowing us privacy while also being nearby in case my father needs assistance. Half of the time, he refuses to eat. *I’m not hungry*, he says, his time, he beams down at braised chicken and green beans with a side of carrots and proclaims it *wonderful*.

I can feel the seconds ticking away, closer and closer to evening as the sun sets.

Dad makes it through dinner. Through dessert. I manage to hold his attention with a story about one of my racehorses, texted to me from an old stable trainer at our property upstate.

He laughs about Pegasus Gold’s thirst for victory on the racetrack, but when I see the first shadow of confusion in his eyes.

Hemingway sees it, too. He stiffens in his seat.

“Where...” Dad’s forehead wrinkles. “Where is the coffee? We need it.” “Have coffee with dessert.”

“I gave it up,” my mother answers. “I get heartburn if I have it after the same in the afternoon.”

“We’re okay without coffee, Dad. It’ll keep me up all night. And we’re all done eating, so—”

“I’m fine,” my mother says. “We always have coffee. I had the cook brew a pot. What’s taking so long? Geneva doesn’t like to wait around at the table.”

“I’m fine, Daniel. Really.” My mom pats his hand.

He frowns at her touch, following her fingertips up her arm to her shoulder.

He’s glaring by the time he meets her eyes. “Who the hell are you?”

“Daniel.” She keeps her voice very, very calm. “It’s me. Your wife.”

“Don’t lie to me.” Spots of color appear high on his cheeks. “I’m married, and I’d know, wouldn’t I? I’ve never seen you before. What are you doing in my house?”

“Dad.” His eyes dart toward mine. “Mom came over to have dinner with us.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Where is she?”

“Daniel—”

He shoots out of his chair, knocking it over in the process. “You my wife. *She* is not my wife. Who let you in here?”

“Dad, it’s okay.” Hemingway stands up and moves around the table. One of the table. He’s in Dad’s range before I can warn him back. “*Dad.*” In a distance, My father rounds on Hemingway, his body rotating into the slap. His hand is needsclawed before it reaches the side of Hemingway’s head and makes contact. This contact.

Hemingway jerks back, clapping his hand to his head. “I’m okay. My cheek is bright red. “Finn. I’m fine.”

My pulse pounds like Dad hit me instead, over and over. Adrenaline clarifies my horror and doubles it. I know what I’m watching. I’m watching my son grab his own side of his head, blinking, bewildered. I’m watching Eva try to intervene.

I’m almost there, I’m *almost* there, but my mother is in the way. “That’s Don’t touch him.”

He lunges for her. Their limbs get tangled. I see his fist in her hair. I see his terrified fury in his brown eyes.

I shove myself between my parents. Dad’s efforts make it hard to unhook his hands from my mother’s hair. She steps back, then back again. He’s yelling, eyes wide with distress. “Who let a stranger in your house?”

“Dad. *Dad.* It’s okay. I know her.” He’s doing his best to reach me. I don’t know what the hell he’s planning. My heart races. Jennifer King appears at the dining room door. If he won’t listen to me, she’s next. She pulls her phone from her pocket and sends a text. The second nurse will have to help if neither of us is enough. “She’s not a stranger.”

“I don’t know her, Phineas. She’s an imposter. Take her away. My mother will leave.”

“Okay, Dad. Okay. Calm down. *Please.*”

He struggles, but the fight leaves him. Jennifer approaches and places a gentle hand on his arm. “Mr. Hughes, I made some herbal tea. Would you like some? I could put on *Jeopardy* in the living room.”

“Fine.” He pushes away from me, getting distance. I stay where I am in case he makes a final attempt. “That’s fine. I don’t want to mix categories.”

“Good timing, then. You haven’t.” Jennifer takes his arm. “It starts are not minutes.”

It starts whenever she plays the recorded episodes.  
er side I keep my eyes on them while they leave.

Then I go to my brother and put an arm around his shoulders. T  
It turns head to see if Dad left any marks. There are thin, red scratches at his  
audible but nothing deep.

“I’m sorry, Hem. I should have intervened earlier.”  
y.” His “It’s really fine. He didn’t hurt me.”

Mom approaches, taking her turn at inspecting Hemingway’s wound  
again, holds still for her until she releases him. Does she feel as guilty as I do  
ng. I’m The tremble in her voice says yes. “I’ll take my usual suite, if th  
o at the right, Finn.”

ne. “Of course, Mom.”

Daniel. The heavy quiet in the dining room steals my breath.

This kind of evening is why I decided never to have children. It’s  
air and reminder of what Eva faces if I allow her to stay with me. I don’t know  
can let her do it.

order to And I don’t think I can stop her.

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Jennifer  
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“Good timing, then. You haven’t.” Jennifer takes his arm. “It starts in two minutes.”

It starts whenever she plays the recorded episodes.

I keep my eyes on them while they leave.

Then I go to my brother and put an arm around his shoulders. Turn his head to see if Dad left any marks. There are thin, red scratches at his temple, but nothing deep.

“I’m sorry, Hem. I should have intervened earlier.”

“It’s really fine. He didn’t hurt me.”

Mom approaches, taking her turn at inspecting Hemingway’s wounds. He holds still for her until she releases him. Does she feel as guilty as I do?

The tremble in her voice says yes. “I’ll take my usual suite, if that’s all right, Finn.”

“Of course, Mom.”

The heavy quiet in the dining room steals my breath.

This kind of evening is why I decided never to have children. It’s a stark reminder of what Eva faces if I allow her to stay with me. I don’t know how I can let her do it.

And I don’t think I can stop her.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### Eva

**E**VEN FILLING OUT the forms at the doctor's office feels surprisingly emotional.

Age? 33.

Is this your first pregnancy? *Yes.*

Any family history of miscarriages, low birth weight, etc? *My mother had three miscarriages.*

Apparently, miscarriages are common. So common that many don't know they've had one. It seems like a small miracle that I'm pregnant at all, given that.

I work my way through the pages, feeling faintly ill. Morning sickness is probably there. There's a packet of Club crackers in my purse now. I slip on one and eat it, but the sensation doesn't go away.

I'm nervous. That's what this is.

I'm sure of the baby. I *want* the baby. But the form seems like a checklist of all the ways that this might not be ideal. I know the doctors just want as much information as possible. I also know that a perfectly normal pregnancy can still end in an urgent C-section, like it did for Haley.

I take the clipboard with the completed forms back to the receptionist. I'm just sinking into my seat when the outer door opens, letting in a blast of warm air.

It's not another woman here for an appointment.

It's Finn.

He's dressed in a dark suit that's custom tailored to his muscles. My heart flushes at the sight of him. A suit and tie is nothing special. It's very

would wear any day at the office.

Except he's not at the office.

He takes the seat next to me. The flush turns hot and indignant relieved.

Finn nods at me. "Morelli."

"Morelli? Oh my God. How did you know I was here?"

Finn pats my hand as if I have gone slightly 'round the bend. 'spies all throughout this city."

It's impossible to express how badly I want to hold his hand, but I fold mine in my lap, instead. I'm self contained. No man is an isla this woman? She is. "That's stalkerish."

risingly "Well, you didn't marry me, so this is how it has to be." He flash smile. *I'm interested*. I can almost hear his voice the way it was in the club. Hot. Smooth. Neither of us was forcing anything. "I'm not v away."

her had "Listen, I was going to tell you the results."

"Now you don't have to, because I'm here." I move to turn a women collect myself, but Finn puts a hand on my arm. "We haven't had a ch regnant talk about what happened."

"Nothing happened."

ckness, "I told your entire family that you're pregnant, and the baby is min

one out "They'd have found out sooner or later." Would they have freal quite so much? Probably not. But what's done is done. The cat is, as th out of the bag. "Why are you here?"

catalog A hint of his usual charming grin lifts the corner of his mout want as disappears. "Do you think I only show up for your brother's bab gnancy yours? Not ours?"

n desk, you there." My heart twists. "But this is—this is just confirmation , reath of baby you don't want."

"My feelings about the baby—" Another patient exits the office. eyes stay on mine as she goes past. "My feelings about the baby won' my support for you. Or for the child."

Iy body "Finn."

what he "You're right. I didn't plan on this. I didn't want this to happen. I here for the baby."

“And for me?”

“I’m going to take care of you, Eva.”

and... Duty. Responsibility. One thing I know about Finn Hughes is that he’s a man of honor. He’ll take care of what he feels he should, regardless of whether he wants to. “Because you have to.”

“Because any half-decent man would take care of his child and his wife. I’m the mother of his child. That includes attending your doctor appointments. You’ll let me.”

do not. He’s so careful to put the baby between us. I’m no longer Eva Morelli, but a desirable woman. I’m the mother of his child. It’s a position of honor, a position of intimacy.

es me a On some level I know it’s a good thing that he’s willing to step up and take care of a child he didn’t initially want. He’s a good man, though he probably wouldn’t like me to point it out.

On the other hand, I can’t help but yearn for having him in a domestic capacity. Not only as the father of my child, but as my life partner. I want him to be my husband.

The door to the patient area opens. A red-haired woman in sleep scrubs steps out. “Eva Morelli?”

Finn stands at the same time I do, putting his hand on the small of my back, as casual as any husband protecting his pregnant wife. The challenge in his hazel eyes. And in the quirk of his lips. *Kick me or else, they say, now. Otherwise, I’m going with you.*

I’m too nervous to argue right now. I want him to be here too much to demand that he leave.

Not It’s his baby, too. Our baby.

The air between us heats. Finn is perfectly composed, his hands in his pockets.

“Come on, let’s go.” I let a note of impatience show in my voice as I look at the one who made us stand there for an extra thirty seconds.

Finn follows me through the softly swinging door. He hangs back a moment, then steps onto a scale in a discreet alcove. The nurse in pink scrubs shows me to a comfortable room done up in warm neutrals. An ultrasound machine is in one corner. I take the soft, sterile sheet she offers me and nod along with her instructions.

“The doctor will be back in a minute.” She leaves with a bright smile.



I go to the low padded bench across the room from the exam table and unzip my slacks.

“Do you...want me to turn around?” Finn asks.

“Are you afraid to see me half-naked?” I’ve been through this every year since I was sixteen. The difference is that there wasn’t a bandage and the work of fifteen seconds to strip off my pants and panties and fold them onto the bench. I whirl the sheet around my waist as a final step. “The decent.”

I turn to face Finn and find him staring, his eyes hot with longing. “This isn’t sexy, Finn.”

“No, of course not.” He clears his throat and we change places. Finn steps next to my clothes on the bench. I take my place on the exam table.

My heart pounds.

Finn opens his mouth, but he’s interrupted by a brisk knock on the door. The doctor enters with the pink-scrubbed nurse. There’s a review of my medical history. Confirmation of the details I wrote on the form. And then the doctor is explaining the *kind* of ultrasound they’ll do because it’s so important for the pregnancy. Finn’s eyes go from their faces to the wand at the side of the ultrasound machine.

“Is that—”

“Safe for the baby? Of course.” The doctor continues without missing a beat. She pulls up a stool. The nurse dims the light and moves the ultrasound monitor so I can see it if I look up.

“Who did you bring with you today?” Her voice is softer now than when she got a hand under the sheet and a wand entering my body.

“This is Finn Hughes. He’s the—the father.”

A kind smile. “Dad, if you want to come to Eva’s other side, you’re more than able to see, too.”

Finn gets up from his seat, his face set. He comes to the side of the exam table. *I won’t abandon you, Finn.* I can taste the words now. Letting him know that while I of this moment feels like keeping that promise, even if I’m not obliged to keep it anymore.

Even if the tension between us is so thick I can hardly breathe.

I reach for his hand in the glow of the ultrasound machine and thread my fingers through his.

He holds on tight.

ble and We're both transfixed by the image on the screen. An oblong  
black veers from side to side as the doctor moves the wand.

And there, near the edge—

routine "That's the fetus. Let me check to make sure there are no roommat  
by. It's Finn's hand clamps down on mine. Twins were never included  
hem onthoughts about *the baby*.

re. I'm The wand moves. The doctor searches.

"One for the money," she says with a low laugh, and I feel Finn's  
go out of him. His grip on my hand relents. No twins. "But not two  
show. Now I need to get some measurements."

inn sits The doctor taps at a keyboard below the monitor. The number of  
and days of the baby's life appears on the screen. Lines cross the tiny  
the black space.

ie door. The doctor turns a switch on the keyboard, and the room is filled v  
of myrapid *whoosh-thud* of a heartbeat. "The heart tones sound normal. F  
hen theEverything looks good here. We've got a few weeks to go until the  
early infinished developing."

e of the I can't stop staring. The baby is barely baby-shaped yet. I can jus  
out the curl of a head. A printer *whirrs*. The lights go back up. Finn h  
sit. The nurse steps out, and the doctor rolls her stool to the counter a  
issing anotes to my file.

around She smiles at me again, her gaze assessing. "You're about seven  
along. We'll want you back at ten weeks to check your progress.  
at she'smeantime..." A pamphlet appears, tugged out of a holder on the cou

"Here's a list of foods you'll want to minimize from your diet, espec  
the first trimester. Have you already started taking prenatal vitamins?"

ou'll be "No. I'll do that. Is there a brand you recommend?"

table. "Many of my patients have good luck with these." The doctor add  
to the pamphlet, then hands it to me along with the ultrasound pictur  
be partstruck by the image of the baby all over again.

gated to She outlines the appointment schedule. The twenty-four hour  
Writes her personal cell phone number on the pamphlet next  
recommendation for prenatal vitamins.

ead my "We'll be with you every step of the way. And you should know  
that I research and recommend the most up-to-date best practices, bu  
of the more common pregnancy advice is a holdover from the ni

pool offifties. If you want clarification on anything, please ask.”

“That sounds good. I don’t really want pregnancy tips from the fifth

She laughs. “What else would you like to talk about today?”  
es.” “When can we find out the sex of the baby?”

in my The doctor nods. “Some couples choose to wait until the twenty  
anatomy scan, but—”

“It’s a boy.” Finn’s voice startles me. Both of his hands are shoved  
s breathhis pockets. All his charm is hidden behind an angry scowl. A boy v  
for theHughes curse. He doesn’t say it out loud.

He doesn’t have to. I hear it loud and clear. “Finn.”

weeks “At your next appointment, we can do a blood draw and run a  
bean intest. We need time for the concentration of fetal DNA to reach viable

So that’s...three or four weeks from now, plus a week for processing,  
with thehow soon you can find out the gender.”

Healthy. “We already know it’s a boy. What more is the test going to tell  
heart isFinn’s sharp now.

“Genetic testing tells us whether the fetus might have certain disorders  
st make “Like what?”

elps me She lists a bunch of things that sound terrifying. I don’t want my  
nd addshave any of those things. Maybe I understand Finn better now that I f

fear. Because this? This is only about the tiny possibility of disease  
t weekspotential. Finn believes the Hughes curse is a certainty.

In the “These things are unlikely,” she says. “But some parents like to know  
ntertop. “What does it mean if the test is positive?”

ially in “It’s not a certainty. These are only genetic markers. But if the risk  
elevated, we can decide to do a diagnostic screening. That can be  
more invasive.”

s a note He frowns. “What the fuck does that mean?”

es. I’m “Finn.”

“I want to know what it means.”

hotline. “This is why I didn’t want to bring you.”

to her The doctor folds her hands in her lap. “For diagnostic screening  
need cells from the fetus or the placenta or both. The procedure is re  
w, Eva,low risk, but we still wait for something to appear on genetic testing  
it some we do it.”

neteen- “And what would that change? If you found something, we would

able to fix it, would we?"

ies." "No, there are very few treatments we can begin while the fetus is in the uterus. The tests are an option if the two of you would like more information about the baby. They're not mandatory. I want you to understand that it's your choice as parents to have these screenings done."

"Great. Excellent. It's all pointless, then."

red into "Mr. Hughes." Somehow, this woman has managed to soften even the most hardened doctor. "I know this can be scary to think about. I don't like to alarm parents, but I like you to be informed."

"I want to know," I say, because it's true.

genetic Finn gives me a dark look that says, *We already know the fetal chromosome levels.*

. That's "Most likely the tests will come back negative. But if they don't, we'll allow you to research the possibility of the condition before he or she is born."

"Or terminate the pregnancy." Finn's words echo in the small office. The fluorescent lights suddenly feel too bright. The hum of the ultrasound machine feels like a roar. "That's why people have those tests done, right? So they know whether to have an abortion?"

feel this "Sometimes," the doctor says. "Sometimes they do wish to terminate. But it's very unlikely that anything would show up. And again, we don't have to do anything."

ow." "Which way is better, doctor? Should we let someone suffer or just plug?"

isks are I don't know whether to rage at Finn or hug him. He's being a complete asshole.

He's spiraling, right in front of me.

The doctor doesn't look fazed. I'm guessing Finn isn't the first expectant father to have a meltdown at one of these appointments, but that doesn't make it better. "That's not an easy question. And it's not mine to answer, at least not for this pregnancy. It's about your personal beliefs. And I think we'd value."

latively "You know what I value?" he says. "Ignorance. It's bliss. That's what I value before they say, isn't it? Information is overrated. Does anyone actually feel better seeing a positive result? That's bullshit. They don't. They always feel worse. The only reason to take the test is because you're hoping it's negative."

I'm stricken, because he's right. Sometimes information is overabundant. Like the Hughes curse. It makes Finn sure of what will happen. Information maybe, maybe not. Either way, he's refusing to live a normal life. If he knew his destiny, if he was ignorant of the curse, he could love me. He could marry me. He could dream of a future. That's a hard truth to face.

"You're right," I tell him, my voice tight. "I don't want the test anymore. I want to know."

"Will that make it better?" He barks a laugh. "You know what? It's for the best that I don't attend any more of these appointments. I'll go to the experts. You have everything figured out."

"Finn." I reach for his hand, and he pulls himself out of reach.

"No, Eva. I'm not going to ruin this for you. You should have explained the pregnancy you want. The happy little doctor appointments and the little ultrasounds."

A fake pregnancy. That's what he means. The baby is real, but the doctor's pregnancy where there's no future illness looming over us? That doesn't work for Finn.

I'm covered by a sheet, but I'm not going to shrink from this. "I want to be here, Finn. As the father of this child. As the man I love. But I don't want to be here like this."

"Like what?"

"Angry."

"That's who I am underneath all the bullshit. That's who I am when I'm not wearing a tux and drinking champagne at a society event. Angry. Sorry if you didn't know that before I fucked you."

The doctor turns to me, her expression gentle. "Do you want me to tell him to leave? Because I can."

Tears sting my eyes. "No, please. I'm so sorry. He's just upset. He doesn't give us a moment."

She gives him a severe look. "I'm going to be right outside. Hold on. You need me."

Then she's gone, leaving a vacuum where the only calm in the room has been. Finn's gone off the deep end, and me? My heart is breaking. I'll take a better deep breath.

Finn's caught in the endless loop of his fears, and I'm not sure I can help him the way out.

errated. I'm not entirely sure there *is* a way out.

it true? His hopelessness is seeping into me, moment by moment.

e didn't But—no. I refuse to feel hopeless about my child. About *our* child. I could refuse.

A man broke me years ago. I won't let it happen again.

I don't He's the one who speaks first. "You're getting a raw deal with me. You know it. You know it. Now the doctor knows it, too. I don't have a choice. Maybebut I did warn you."

ll leave *That's who I am underneath all the bullshit. That's who I am when I'm not wearing a tux and drinking champagne at a society event. Anger. Sorry if you didn't know that before I fucked you.*

ctly the I think I did know. Not at the beginning, when he took me out to see the city. Not happy from my mother's machinations. Not then. But later, I started to see the world through Finn

Finn underneath. I saw him, and it made me want him even more. I want the fantasy want the uncomplicated, shallow playboy. I want the grieving man instead of the one who doesn't exist. I don't know how to reach him. The Hughes curse stands between us.

"Do you want an abortion?" I ask, my voice hoarse. I don't know what you give it to him. I don't think I can, but I have to know if it's what he wants. Even if it feels like being flayed open with knives.

He curses and paces away from me—once, twice. That's as far as he goes in the small examination room.

"No." Finn doesn't look at me. He's facing the door, but I can hear him. I'm loud and clear. "If I believed it was better to pull the plug, if that's what you want. If my beliefs and my values really were, I would have killed myself a long time ago. If I thought it was better to avoid it, I'd already be gone."

e to ask My throat is too tight to speak. This means he's thought about it.

It means he considered it, with that casual Finn recklessness. Is that all? Please the underground gambling and fights are really about? About risking a life? About not valuing a life?

r if you About ending his life before he gets to the curse?

I can't imagine him gone. It hurts that he even once thought about ending his life. That he felt that kind of pain. I want to comfort him, even though I know he's not there. I take a deep breath and decided to stay.

Now I understand better how much this is costing him.

in show He decided to live, but only under those narrow parameters. Only as a playboy.

“I’ll tell the doctor to come back in,” he says, and walks out of the

child. I

, Eva. I  
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“I’ll tell the doctor to come back in,” he says, and walks out of the room.





## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### Finn

**M**Y OFFICE AT Hughes Industries is the set for the greatest performance of my lifetime.

A custom Eames executive chair cushions my ass while I swivel to read hard copy paperwork and my keyboard, pretending that my mind is completely absorbed in my work.

In other words, pretending to be normal.

This is my whole life. The expensive chair. A brand-new, top-of-the-line computer. Emails landing in my inbox every second. Contracts and reports and personnel.

Really, it's marking days on the calendar and *pretending*.

It's been this way for years. When my dad started to decline, I increased my time in the office. I tried to keep it gradual so that people wouldn't ask too many questions. I kept his visits more regular. Then, as the years wore on, I spaced them out. Pushed the boundary by a week here. Two weeks there.

I'll have to tell Hemingway how to do this. How to make it seem like he didn't just disappear.

I even start to type it out in an email, then delete it.

I'm not sending my brother a fucking memo on how to orchestrate my slow fade from the company. I'll talk to him about it in person. Later.

For now, it's another day on the job. A normal one. It's never been normal, though. Most of the C-Suite executives are older guys. I'm the only one out. I'm too young, not even thirty. I don't fit the profile of a CEO of a conglomerate this large.

And yet I am the boss, in all but the official title.

I'm a good boss, too. Hughes Industries regularly evaluates the culture and employee satisfaction. The people who work for me describe me as kind, fair, and professional.

I'm none of those things today. I feel like a racehorse who's snapped and run away from his trainer. From his life.

I feel like screaming.

*That* would be a performance. Stalking through the office. Ripping papers. Taking people by the shirt and demanding to know how they're doing with the future hanging over them like a boulder.

I didn't sleep well enough to sustain it. I'm not that person, anyone who doesn't have a legendary temper. If I did, I'd keep it buried down deep. The price of amen can't afford to call attention to their personalities like that. It would make it more noticeable when I started to change.

Instead, I type out email responses and send them. I review reports and company documents.

All of this is shit I could do in my sleep. Things I *have* done while half-awake from being up with my dad or being out all night.

The pretending is harder today. Eva's appointment is like a rock in my chest. I feel hobbled by the memory.

I lost it in there.

It was supposed to be a happy moment, and I couldn't stand it. No one is better at pretending than I am, but with Eva gazing at the little bean on the monitor and everyone cooing over a doomed child, I couldn't.

And she didn't understand. Eva Morelli is a fighter to the core. She's not going to give up just because the facts are against her.

It's not a kind thought to have. I wouldn't have it except my head is throbbing and Eva is pregnant and I am a disaster.

I know that tens of thousands of people depend on Hughes Industries. I know that the business we conduct has a meaningful impact on their lives.

In the end, it's a joke. Working for Hughes Industries can't save me. Being rich as hell can't save me. It won't be much longer until this is the odd part. Until it's Hemingway's turn in this office.

Knuckles rap at the doorframe. "Come on in."

"Am I interrupting?" Kevin is one of the C-Suite guys. Older than me, but like all the other ones. A father.

"Not at all. What can I do for you?"

company Kevin takes the seat across from me. “I wanted to ask if you’re  
tribe me okay, Mr. Hughes. You’ve been quieter than usual today.”

Finn, I want to say. *Just call me Finn, for Christ’s sake.* I don’t  
finally be Mr. Hughes yet. I don’t want to be at the end of my life.

“Yes, of course. I’m doing well.”

I can tell from his nod that Kevin doesn’t believe me. “My door’s  
being up open if you want to run anything by me.”

they live “Thank you.” I wait long enough that it sounds genuine. “Did a  
else come up?”

anyway. I “I wanted to let you know I’ll be out early on Friday.”

Hughes This man doesn’t have to run his personal time by me, and we bot  
uld only it. “Something special happening?”

“My youngest is graduating from college. Sarah.” Kevin pulls  
s. I sign wallet and shows me a photo of a girl with curly hair and his eyes. ‘  
proud of her. It’s the best day of my life when my kids graduate.”

while I’m “Oh, yeah?”

“Those years of school feel so long, and then they’re gone in the l  
c in my eye. All the homework and arguments and sports practices—” He

“It all led up to this. Friday’s going to be one of my most amazing da  
father.”

body is My stomach sinks. “She’ll be off to her new life, then?”

on the “God, yes. And she’s so ready. Sarah was so cautious and quiet a  
Now she’s come into her own. That’s the reward. Seeing her so happy  
ie’s not the hard times worth it.”

I won’t see the reward of raising a child.

head is If I’m lucky, I’ll be aware enough to witness half of his childhood.

The appropriate thing to do is to congratulate Kevin again and  
stries. Inote to send a card for his daughter. My chest is so tight with grief  
ves. takes all my focus to keep sitting at my desk.

e them. It’s simple. Jesus. *Congratulations. See you on Monday.*

all falls Stand up. Shake his hand.

“Would you do it all again?” I can’t stop asking this question an  
than I can stop feeling like shit about the appointment. “If you knew i  
can me, end badly?”

Kevin’s brow furrows. “Do you mean with her career? Visual a  
what I would have chosen for her, but that part isn’t up to me.”

e doing Visual arts. My child—my son, I’m sure the baby is my son—wants the chance to become an actor or an artist. He’ll have to be prepared to want to take Hemingway’s place at Hughes Industries. I’ll never have the chance that he won’t be successful at experimental art or music or film. He has no choice but to be good at *this*.

always At pretending.

“I mean everything. Not just her career.”

nothing Kevin looks me in the eye. He’s seriously considering his answer, Then, finally:

“Yes.”

h know Is it everyone else in the world? Would they all take the chance? A only one who’s selfish enough or self-aware enough to want to avoid his pain.

“I’m so “Really?”

He spreads his palms flat on the desk.

“Well, look.” Kevin uses a calm, sincere tone. It’s the way I wish my father could speak to me all the time. “We don’t get to know the laughs. That’s not how it works.”

ays as a Okay. I *am* the only one. I’ve been saying it over and over, and he believes me.

Maybe I’m already losing my mind.

s a girl. “I’m sure it’ll turn out great for Sarah.” I stand up and offer Kevin my hand. We shake. The pleasantries on his way out float over my head.

I could put in another hour of performing normalcy, but I don’t sit at my desk. Wandering down to the trading floor seems like a better idea. Noisier, with more adrenaline. The guys down here are young and stupid. They can’t see the finish line looming up ahead.

That it It’s a floor packed with wealthy, smart professionals, which means some of the society people I’ve partied with are here. They’re my brothers, still dudes, well after college.

“Finn, my dude.” A guy named Zach slaps me on the shoulder as the crowd gathers. Familiar faces. Ones I don’t care about at all. “What would you be? Too busy dating Eva Morelli to come see us?”

He smirks, and I lose my grip on the jovial boss persona. “Don’t mess with his name.”

Four other guys have closed in, and they all lean back. An un-

It hasn't cooled the air. Zach exchanges a glance with one of his buddies who raises his eyebrows.

"It's good to see you." Matt's going to single-handedly smooth them out. "Hey, since you're down here—we're going to party on one of the guys' yachts over in Bishop's Landing tonight. You should come."

And look at my sailboat, waiting there at the dock, empty? That's where I took Eva after the poker club. That's where I wanted her in my arms. I think I almost lost my mind. "No, thanks."

Zach scoffs. "You used to be a good time. What happened?"

I glare at him. He's an asshole. He doesn't know anything.

And I'm making it worse, because I *know* that. I know that Zach's doing all right. I can see from the set of his jaw that he realizes he's up with his boss.

"He's settling down," one of the other guys pipes up. "You're er, right, Finn? He's probably going to have a shit ton of babies."

They all laugh.

It's a good joke, isn't it? Me, settling down and having babies, ruining Eva's life. Me, with seven years left to go on the clock before nobody *me* anymore.

Matt steps in and puts a hand on my shoulder. "Come on. C'mon. Hurrah? It'll be fun."

Zach echoes him, and then they press in. *One last time. One more time, Finn.*

It hurts. I'm facing down years of *last times*. I'll never attend another baby appointment with Eva. That was one of them, and it's gone.

"You know what? Fuck it. I'll go."

They all cheer.

*One last hurrah.*

till frat

a small  
re have

say her

ncertain

tension cools the air. Zach exchanges a glance with one of his buddies Matt, who raises his eyebrows.

“It’s good to see you.” Matt’s going to single-handedly smooth this over, isn’t he? “Hey, since you’re down here—we’re going to party on one of the guy’s yachts over in Bishop’s Landing tonight. You should come.”

And look at my sailboat, waiting there at the dock, empty? That’s where I took Eva after the poker club. That’s where I wanted her in my arms so much I almost lost my mind. “No, thanks.”

Zach scoffs. “You used to be a good time. What happened?”

I glare at him. He’s an asshole. He doesn’t know anything.

And I’m making it worse, because I *know* that. I know that Zach’s family is doing all right. I can see from the set of his jaw that he realizes he’s fucked up with his boss.

“He’s settling down,” one of the other guys pipes up. “You’re engaged, right, Finn? He’s probably going to have a shit ton of babies.”

They all laugh.

It’s a good joke, isn’t it? Me, settling down and having babies. Me, ruining Eva’s life. Me, with seven years left to go on the clock before I’m not *me* anymore.

Matt steps in and puts a hand on my shoulder. “Come on. One last hurrah? It’ll be fun.”

Zach echoes him, and then they press in. *One last time. One more time, Finn.*

It hurts. I’m facing down years of *last times*. I’ll never attend another first baby appointment with Eva. That was one of them, and it’s gone.

“You know what? Fuck it. I’ll go.”

They all cheer.

*One last hurrah.*



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### Finn

**T**HE WAVES IN the bay by Bishop's Landing are choppy tonight. The waves crash against the dock pilings and the side of the yacht.

Nobody hears them now.

Lights blaze from all the windows, casting a drunken glow on the water. That's all I'd see if I looked out.

I stopped looking hours ago.

Music blares from a set of speakers behind the fully stocked bar. I took one shot when I first arrived. Didn't need any more.

Zach slaps my shoulder, harder this time. He's drunk as hell and is beating me at pool.

"You're shit-faced," I shout at him over the music. "How the hell do you keep winning?"

"I'm an expert at pool," he shouts back. Whisky spills over the top of my glass.

Women in short dresses circle us, leaning in to show off their cleavage. It's wall-to-wall rich assholes in here. Pure debauchery.

None of it touches me.

It's a feat, because this place is packed with people. They sprawl over the available furniture. Most of them are high or drunk or fucking.

I don't want to fuck someone in one of the staterooms, or on the leather sofa, like the couple going at it now. I don't want to get high. I don't want to jump off the side of the yacht into black water.

It's hot and loud and exactly the kind of scene I spent years seeking. I've drowned myself in these places before. Escaped from my head.

I lose another three hundred dollars to Zach.

He gets pulled away by two women and replaced by a guy I don't know. He takes Zach's pool cue, bets me four hundred, and we play.

Can't keep my mind on the shots. There are too many bodies in the room. Too much heat. It's a large yacht, though not as big as mine. Still not a

It's not safe.

The guys were right. I'm not a good time anymore, and it's becoming an emergency on the yacht, but if there is, there's going to be a crush of people. Somebody could get hurt.

They're already in danger from the sheer amount of drugs and alcohol. An overdose isn't out of the question. And nobody's looking out for anyone other at this point in the evening. People will take advantage.

Another game of pool. Another loss. Six hundred this time. At least a thousand dollars of my money is in other people's pockets.

It was always this dangerous.

The realization comes on slow.

I was in danger at these parties, too. I was in danger when I drove cars without any regard for the speed limit. I was in danger every time I visited the underground casino.

It didn't matter.

My future trapped me, but it also *freed* me. I could take any risk I wanted. I could sit at the illegal poker table until the cops were bursting through the door. I could go to illicit boxing matches on nights when the crowd was bloodthirsty and out of line. I could drive as fast as I wanted, turning off headlights to speed through black nights.

Because it would be almost a blessing if I died that way. *Any way, any time.* I end on all the ugly, lonely end.

"I might have a death wish," I muse to the guys at the pool table.

One of them blinks at me. "You're just terrible at pool."

I'm not even trying. Am I trying in my life, or am I just pretending? Either way, Eva doesn't need me. She's a better parent than ten thousand other men and women put together.

In fact, she has everything. Wealth. Ability. A sound mind.



*Finn: I'm sorry.*

t know.

She doesn't answer my text.

e room.

I abandon the pool table and push into the crowd. Eddies of people  
me in to dance. My body moves mindlessly, swaying for long enough  
they spit me back out again. None of them smell right. None of them  
None of them is the brave, beautiful Eva Morelli, who deserves so  
cause I more than I can give her.

ll be an

Half of me is searching for her on the yacht. I reach for her in every  
clutch of people, my palms looking for the particular curve of her hair  
people. fall of her black hair. *I won't abandon you, Finn. Not for anything.*

lcohol.

"I'm nothing but pain."

or each

"You're *hot*." A blonde woman looms in close, a strobe light flashing  
her face, champagne spilling from her glass. "Let's find someplace where  
ast two can be alone."

I laugh at her, and she ignores me.

I didn't want Eva to ignore me. I wanted her to look at me with  
huge, dark eyes and never stop.

ve fast

Well, I should have been careful what I wished for. She saw my  
time I playboy shell. Oh, she loved visiting the underground poker club. Even  
rush from betting on an underdog. But she knew. She saw what I was  
to hide.

wanted.

That I'll break her heart every day until I'm dead.

ugh the

"Finn," someone calls.

vd was

Yes, I proposed. But it wasn't real. It wasn't how she wanted it to  
out the proposal hurt her as much as telling her I didn't care. The truth is that  
really want it. I don't want her shackled to me by a wedding band.  
, before want her to see me drooling and senseless and afraid.

Fuck, I'm so scared.

ending?

It's a broken champagne glass through my heart. Jagged glass.  
hand to my chest and stumble out onto the deck of the yacht. Cool  
air makes it easier to breathe, but what's the point?

nd men

What good does it do anyone, least of all me?

Eva doesn't have to go down like this. She can be like my mother  
when she left. I won't pretend it didn't. I spent a long time raging at  
only in my thoughts. She found some happiness for herself, though

peace. That's not on offer at home. Daniel Hughes doesn't know who we are more often than not. He doesn't know who we are. His confusion makes me violent and unpredictable.

An image flashes into my mind. Eva, stoic despite her fear, her mouth set in a firm line as she tries to fend me off. A boy with her hair, my eyes hanging back, watching his father attack his mother. I barely work to imagine it. I saw it happen at my own dinner table.

I could be sick.

Still no answer.

No son of Eva's would let her face me alone. He'd be part of her too, for as long as she was in her right mind. And she has a family who fuck off to Switzerland at the first sign of trouble. The Morellis have problems. They sure as hell do. They're all wrapped up in each other. Demanding too much from one another. Running hot.

*I won't abandon you, Finn. Not for anything.*

She learned that loyalty from somewhere. I wish it could have been me and not from surviving the tyrant reign of Bryant Morelli. But she knows it before she could give it to me.

Try to give it to me. I can't accept. It'd be the same thing as locking a hand around her ankle and pulling her underwater. It would be okay in a few years early. It would be a goddamn tragedy for Eva to spend a day less on earth.

I barely had anything to drink but somehow I've ended up at the table with my stomach in knots.

She doesn't know what she's asking me to do. She has no idea how I feel to deal with my diapers and watch me stop loving her.

*You wouldn't ever stop.*

"You're full of shit." The voice in my head doesn't know. Does my mother still love my mother? Sure. For thirty seconds a day, when he forgets to look at her. I put a hand on his shoulder. Soon it'll be twenty seconds a day, then ten, then none.

Somebody runs into me.

*Eva: I know.*

Zach, with three of the guys from the office. He slings an arm around her, if she's not seasick. "There's no fucking way you're seasick. We'll get you some medicine."

o he is, even moving. Did you have too much fun?”

akes him “Way too much.” I’m basically sober at this point. Doesn’t matter  
like hell. Goose bumps pull at my arm hairs.

orgeous “Wanna have some more?” His mouth is a white cut in the nig  
air and party’s all over the deck. Two guys collide with the railing further dow  
have too of them is trying to fuck the other one. His pants are in the way.

“You want to win more of my money at the pool table?”

“Hell no. Let’s race the boats to the north side.”

It’s a bad idea under any circumstance. The north point of B  
family, Landing is rocky as hell and takes concentration to navigate when it’  
o won’t daylight. It’s the middle of the goddamn night.

ve their But my mind latches on to the word *race*. It sounds like reckless  
i other, and it feels like an adrenaline rush. It *is* an adrenaline rush. Clears my

“You’re too drunk to race.”

Zach shakes his head. “I’m not. I sobered up. And I need to w  
en from some of this energy.”

had to The rest of the guys behind him lean in, buzzing with antic  
They’re wearing drunk, wide grins. They want me to go with them.

ing my I used to chase this feeling every night. It was the only way I cou  
f I died alive. It was the only way to flirt with death. That’s what I was doing,  
a single I? Flirting with the idea of being dead. Giving it a kiss on the cheek, e  
couldn’t go quite yet. A final thrill. A *last hurrah*. Then darkness.

railing, It sounds so good.

“Why the hell not? I’ll even take my boat.”

ow it’ll Zach thrusts both fists in the air and cheers. Then they’re pushing t  
the party, getting off the yacht, sprinting down the docks. We end u  
more people by the time we’re at the sailboats.

y father I corral four of them into a ragtag crew and climb onto the deck  
that she fifty-foot bluewater sailing yacht.

My feet land in the spot where I held Eva in my arms. She looke  
the stars. *Beautiful*.

I was looking at her. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. *Beautiful*, I  
To hell with the stars. All I wanted was to drink her in. *We can pre*  
suggested.

und my She could pretend to be mine.  
e’re not

I was fooling myself. I never wanted to pretend. I wanted it to be r

it couldn't be. My life is a sham that will end in more secrecy and shar  
r. I feel But damn it, *she* was real.

The other guys are getting themselves together. Two of them are  
ht. Thedock, yelling at Zach and throwing lines onto the boat.

vn. One "We're not letting those bastards win."

"Hell, no," one of my guys shouts. At least one of them has sailed  
I lose myself in getting the boat ready to go. Getting it safely out of th  
so we can rush toward a rocky, dangerous turn. It's easier than thin  
ishop's show I've disappointed Eva. It's easier by *far* than thinking about be  
s broadmy father. The moments when he recognizes my mother again hurt the

All anyone wants is for those times to last, and they never do.  
s speed My mainsail swings into place and the wind catches it. Somebody  
head. a *whoop*. We're rushing through pitch-black water. Lights from the  
and the party yacht ripple on the surface and fall behind us.

ork off "Faster. *Shit*." One of the guys wraps his arm around my shoul  
points. "They're getting away from us."

ipation. They're drunk, and they're not being careful.

I'm done being careful, too.

uld feel "Not for long," I tell him.

wasn't I'm going to die on the boat that I first kissed Eva Morelli on. I'll  
ven if Ithe boat where I held her and asked her to pretend with me. Where I  
over my heart before I knew what I was doing.

What a way to go.

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d up at

'd said.  
*etend*, I

eal, and

it couldn't be. My life is a sham that will end in more secrecy and shame.

But damn it, *she* was real.

The other guys are getting themselves together. Two of them are on the dock, yelling at Zach and throwing lines onto the boat.

"We're not letting those bastards win."

"Hell, no," one of my guys shouts. At least one of them has sailed before. I lose myself in getting the boat ready to go. Getting it safely out of the docks so we can rush toward a rocky, dangerous turn. It's easier than thinking of how I've disappointed Eva. It's easier by *far* than thinking about becoming my father. The moments when he recognizes my mother again hurt the worst. All anyone wants is for those times to last, and they never do.

My mainsail swings into place and the wind catches it. Somebody lets out a *whoop*. We're rushing through pitch-black water. Lights from the marina and the party yacht ripple on the surface and fall behind us.

"Faster. *Shit*." One of the guys wraps his arm around my shoulder and points. "They're getting away from us."

They're drunk, and they're not being careful.

I'm done being careful, too.

"Not for long," I tell him.

I'm going to die on the boat that I first kissed Eva Morelli on. I'll die on the boat where I held her and asked her to pretend with me. Where I handed over my heart before I knew what I was doing.

What a way to go.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### Finn

**S**URPRISE—I'M NOT DEAD.

What I am is cold and wet and miserable. Lockup at the B Landing police station blows just as much as any other jail. Funny they haven't added any ritzy touches. It's cinder blocks and a hard metal bed me.

The boat race did not end in the pleasant darkness I was going for. I didn't even crash my boat. I'm a competent sailor.

Zach and the rest of the guys weren't. They were drunk and his useless, and they ran into the rocks halfway through the turn. The boat over. My sober, fully clothed ass jumped in to pull them out before drowned.

A capsized sailboat and a bunch of guys shouting at each other middle of the night were enough commotion to summon the coast. They zoomed into the situation on their rescue boat and started a people.

Some of the men scattered. I could've run, but I stayed to make sure were all alive. Nine of us went out and all nine came back. Zach inh much water that they took him to the back of an ambulance to paramedics look him over. Everybody else was fine. Just drunk. About of us got arrested in the end, including me.

The wet clothes are making my skin crawl. There's nothing in the cell to dry off with. I've created a puddle of ocean water around my shoes.

This is not one of my finer moments in life.

I'm in lockup, which is the perfect time to realize that I want to

father. I want the baby. Is it selfish to want a baby who's cursed? Is it selfish to wish the baby had never come at all? It doesn't matter, at least not to me. The morality of it. It doesn't matter, because either way I want the baby. It took getting thrown in jail to realize it.

Heavy footsteps come down the hall. Keys rattle in the lock. The door slams with a screech.

"What were you thinking, Phineas?" Hemingway saunters into the room with a stern expression on his face. He's doing an impression of me. It would be funny if I weren't so miserable. "It's dangerous to sail at night. And ill-considered if you're under the influence."

I rub my frozen hands over my face. It doesn't help. "I wasn't under the influence."

The bishop's eyes narrow. "He arches an eyebrow at me. "Is that what the breathalyzer will say about that?" "Shut the hell up, Hem. And yes. That's what it said."

"You know we have to discuss this, Finn. This behavior is reckless. You could have been hurt."

"Please. I wasn't hurt. This is funny, but—"

"I'm *worried* about you." The corner of his mouth twitches. He's walking a fine line between humor and sincerity. My brother's probably relishing the fact that I'm the one who fucked up this time. "Running afoul of the authorities isn't like you. If you need to talk, I'm here."

I can't even muster a glare. "At least you came alone."

"At least our mother isn't here with us."

"No, I didn't. I'm seventeen. Nobody was going to let me bail you out."

"Jesus fucking Christ, Hemingway, tell me you did *not* bring Mom here." He gives me a slow shake of his head. "Nope."

Quick footsteps echo down the hall, and Eva steps into view. Her hair is pulled back. She's turned. "Yes, thank you." She's talking to one of the cops, presumably the one who arrested me. She breathes. She's beautiful. A queen, even at three in the morning in dark clothes. Her purse in her hand.

She turns to look at me, and I want to slide down to the floor and disappear.

I'm a grown man, so I sit up straight and meet her eyes.

Eva lets out a breath, her mouth a soft curve. I'm sure Hemingway would be proud of me. An irritated flush to her cheeks would be a good thing. I'd deserve it. I'd deserve a terse, thin-lipped greeting. I'd deserve to

Or is it tell me off.

ways. Eva Honorata Morelli is always going to be more than I deserve. She takes in my wet clothes and disheveled hair with an even gaze. Complicated, not pity.

he bars “I’m sure you’re ready to get out of here.” The smile she offers rings in her tone. It says *we’re in this together*. Embarrassed heat fills my chest in the cell, forcing a deeper breath in my soaked shirt.

ould be What a fucking situation to be in. My shame burrows itself deep into my legal, if too late, and I’m too tired, to belabor this by telling her all the reasons I should have let me rot in this holding cell until morning.

ider the I get up from the bench. Hemingway leaves first. Eva waits by the door of the cell until I’m through. I collect a manila envelope with my wallet and keys from the cops at the desk.

ss. You too blame the closed-throat, tight-chest sensation on the awful experience of having to exist in wet clothes. That’s not it. Of course it’s not. It’s Eva ushering me and Hemingway to the curb of the sidewalk. Her driver is walking a black SUV.

ing the Hemingway climbs into the third row.

of the “Here.” Eva’s holding out a blanket to me. “I thought this might be useful to have.”

*You’re nice to have. You’re so nice that I fucked this up.*

“Thank you.”

out.” Quiet wraps us up like that blanket on the ride back to the Hughes Hotel.

.” Hemingway disappears inside as soon as we arrive. I turn to close the door behind Eva and find her leaning in to speak to the driver.

head is “What are you doing?”

oly. My She stands tall and gives him a wave. The SUV pulls away, and Eva looks sleek, my arm. “You need a shower and dry clothes.”

“I can handle that by myself.”

or and Eva purses her lips, reaching ahead to open the front door. “I’ve thought about it, and I don’t care. I’m coming in with you.”

“I’m fine.”

vay got “You’ve been in jail. And you’re shivering.”

normal. I hadn’t noticed. Now that Eva’s pointed it out, I feel the tremors ripple through my limbs like the chop on the water.



At the door to my bedroom, I stop and face her. “You’ve done  
ve. Shet tonight, Eva. You should go home. Don’t start this now.”

passion, “Don’t start what?”

“Don’t start taking care of me like I deserve it.”

atches She considers me, her eyes luminous in the dim hallway. Then she  
r lungs, and goes through the door without another word.

I can’t breathe. My ribs can’t decide whether to squeeze the air ou  
er. It slung or rattle around like a racehorse with a broken leg. A dull thro  
ons shetemples feels like a hangover.

Eva’s the one to start the shower. She takes the blanket from my cl  
door offists and tosses it into my hamper. Her fingers fly over the buttons  
let and shirt. It hits the floor with a wet *slap*, followed by my undershirt. M

My pants. Everything joins the pile.

. I want I step into the shower with aching guilt pinching at my neck and n  
ence of and everywhere. “I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

’s Eva, The shower closes with a near-silent *swoosh* across the tile.

waits in There’s a pause, but the bathroom door doesn’t open. Clothes  
floor, nearly soundless. Then the shower door opens again.

Eva lays her hand on my elbow.

be nice My chest collapses. I turn into her arms, pulling her close. My col  
have to be torture on her soft, warm skin, but Eva loops her hands aro  
back of my neck and pulls me into a kiss.

The hobbling fear that drove me to that party, that made me r  
Estate. sailboat, explodes.

he door Eva holds tighter. I lift her from the floor and pin her to the wal  
shower. She melts into me as if I’m not a cold, despairing fool. Her fo  
rests hot against my shoulder. Then her teeth dig in.

va takes I drag my mouth along the side of her neck. What was I thinking,  
in that goddamn boat? What was I thinking, not doing this every secon

Eva lifts my chin and kisses me. My hips rock into her  
thought permission. Her wet heat banishes the rest of the cold from my muscl  
responds to my grunt by taking me deeper, and then we’re together.

We’re together.

She’s here.

moving She wouldn’t leave.

I let my hands roam over her body. We haven’t had enough ti

enough every curve is familiar to me. Welcoming. Like coming home.

With my lips on her skin, *home* doesn't feel like prison. It does like resignation. It's right.

Hot water rushes down my skin and want burns through me like a  
ie turns Eva's pleasure in human form. I glutted myself on superficial pleasure  
long, and for what?

t of my Fucking her, and being warmed through, loosens a knot at the base  
o at my throat. I nip the curve of her shoulder. Lick her there. My chest is g  
burst if I don't speak. I have no control over what comes out.

lenched *I'm not raising a child in a home where he knows he's not wanted.*

of my "I can't do it."

ly belt. Eva pulls my face to hers and kisses me. Every stroke pushes  
breath out of her. It's too late to shut me up. The dam's broken.

ry back "I can't want it," I murmur into her mouth. It's the wrong time to  
this. The wrong time to confess anything. She's clenching around n  
face is flushed with pleasure and heat. "I can't, Eva. I'm so sorry.  
hit the scared."

She kisses me harder, throwing herself into it. I've just admi  
unbearable thing to her. I've proven that my proposal is bullshit. Non  
d hands advantages as a man make up for this failing. Eva rolls her hips agains  
und the Her fingernails dig in to my shoulders. Her eyes close. I don't know h  
can come at a time like this. I don't know how I'm about to follow her

ace the Eva tips her forehead against mine. Her breath is a soft curl over r  
"It's okay. It's going to be okay. Don't let go of me."

l of the That's the last thing she says before pleasure overtakes her.

rehead I don't let go.

getting

d?

without

es. She

ne, but

every curve is familiar to me. Welcoming. Like coming home.

With my lips on her skin, *home* doesn't feel like prison. It doesn't feel like resignation. It's right.

Hot water rushes down my skin and want burns through me like a fever. Eva's pleasure in human form. I gluttoned myself on superficial pleasures for so long, and for what?

Fucking her, and being warmed through, loosens a knot at the base of my throat. I nip the curve of her shoulder. Lick her there. My chest is going to burst if I don't speak. I have no control over what comes out.

*I'm not raising a child in a home where he knows he's not wanted.*

"I can't do it."

Eva pulls my face to hers and kisses me. Every stroke pushes a half-breath out of her. It's too late to shut me up. The dam's broken.

"I can't want it," I murmur into her mouth. It's the wrong time to tell her this. The wrong time to confess anything. She's clenching around me. Her face is flushed with pleasure and heat. "I can't, Eva. I'm so sorry. I'm so scared."

She kisses me harder, throwing herself into it. I've just admitted an unbearable thing to her. I've proven that my proposal is bullshit. None of my advantages as a man make up for this failing. Eva rolls her hips against mine. Her fingernails dig in to my shoulders. Her eyes close. I don't know how she can come at a time like this. I don't know how I'm about to follow her over.

Eva tips her forehead against mine. Her breath is a soft curl over my lips. "It's okay. It's going to be okay. Don't let go of me."

That's the last thing she says before pleasure overtakes her.

I don't let go.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### Eva

**I** COULDN'T LEAVE him alone.

Finn was not okay at the appointment. The way he behaved was unacceptable. I know that. And it's not that I've forgiven him for his behavior about the baby. It's not that I'm planning to give up on protecting our child from a lifetime of hurt.

Sometimes a person is an asshole. And they still need my help.

That's my specialty, coming from the Morelli family.

I wake up in his bed, piled under soft blankets.

From the even sound of his breathing, Finn's still asleep. I probably would be, too, if it weren't for the pinch of hunger in my belly. It makes perfect sense that I also feel queasy and unsettled. It'll go away once I eat something to eat. Another amazing quirk of being pregnant.

Sliding out from the covers doesn't wake him. Finn's sprawled on his side, propped up on one pillow, looking as young as I've ever seen him. My heart tugs toward him, and I have a strong urge to tuck him in tighter. He's already covered.

The instinct to protect him makes a certain kind of sense.

As hurt as I've been, and as angry as I've been, I know what I'm capable of. At. Finn's not the first man I've ever seen at his limit. I know he's up against the wall emotionally.

I padded into the bathroom and brushed my teeth. When Hemingway called me last night, I got up and went. A boat accident? Finn in jail? There are a lot of things you set aside your arguments for.

And when I saw him on that metal bench, wet and absolutely miserable, I couldn't leave him.

The cruel irony of all of this is that I still love him. I'm not sure I stop.

He's still asleep when I pull on a pair of his sleep pants and sleeved shirt, smooth my hair, and close his bedroom door gently behind me.

I need to find something to eat. The fact that I stayed over and slept with him might be awkward, but food is a necessity if I want to avoid throwing up. It's not how I prefer to start the day.

It's early, but I'm prepared to find Finn's brother in the kitchen. I'm also prepared to find his father with one or two of his nurses.

I'm *not* prepared to find his mother.

Geneva Hughes sits in the breakfast nook, morning sun slanting across her face. A book is open in front of her. She looks glamorous in a silk robe as she cradles a teacup in her hands. Steam rises over the rim.

Hemingway told me she was here, almost in passing. He hadn't wanted to involve her in the jail situation. My pulse speeds up anyway. She's a Roosevelt now, but she was a Roosevelt. Just like her sister, Caroline, is a Constantine now. I know some of the deepest, darkest secrets of this woman's sister.

Their genetics have clearly contributed to the iconic Constantine look. Caroline and Geneva who have white-blonde hair. They have the probably aquiline nose, which I've seen on several of Caroline's children. Geneva looks up from her book, and I discover she has the same icy blue eyes we've had with Caroline.

There's something different about her expression. I can't quite put my finger on what it is.

A lack of loathing, perhaps.

"Good morning." She gives me a gentle smile. "You're Eva."

My manners kick into gear, and I cross the room and offer her my hand. "And you're Finn's mother. Mrs. Hughes. Geneva. It's a pleasure to meet you again."

Her hand is soft and cool, like her laugh. "No need for white lies. It's eight a.m. I know our families are cordial, but Caroline hasn't made any nice things. Would you like some coffee? Tea?"

"Tea, please. But I meant it." Geneva's already gliding across the room. She opens a cupboard and pulls out the accouterments for a cup of loose leaf tea. "I'm glad to meet another member of Finn's family."

She arches an eyebrow at me, her hands moving over the infuser. I

'll everof hot water waits on the stove. "My sister's family."

"We can't help who we're born to. I understand it's pretty much t  
a long-of the draw."

nd me. Her mouth quirks. "I can see why he likes you."

pt with We take places across from one another in the breakfast nook.  
ring up.outside the realm of possibility that I'd sit down and have tea with C

Constantine's sister, but then again, her daughters were at Haley'  
m evenshower.

Which makes me think of my own potential baby shower. My mot  
Geneva Hughes making small talk. Me, graciously accepting gifts  
nto thenext phase of life, which may or may not actually include Finn.

s a cup I sip my tea. The light flavor settles my stomach. "I'm fond of him

"I'd hope so, given that you slept over." Before I can muster a re  
anted toGeneva waves a hand. "I don't mind if he brings his lovers to the h  
Hughesyou want to have meaningless sex, that's fine. Just don't be seriou  
stantinehim."

r. It's far too late for that. I'm not sure what Finn's mother know  
ok. It'sprobably knows about the engagement, since all of Bishop's Landin  
e sameHer comment tells me she doesn't have any idea about the baby.

Geneva In the silence, she studies my face. "Ah. It's clear Finn's told yo  
eyes ashis situation."

"Yes. He shared that with me."

put my "He's a good man."

I wrap both hands around the teacup. The warmth reminds me  
shower last night. Finn's face buried in my neck. *I can't do it, Eva.  
sorry. I'm so scared.*

y hand. "He is." That's the truth. All I can say, really.

o meet "He's a good man now. He won't always be that way. I hope he w  
about the timeline."

; before "I've met the older Mr. Hughes. I have some idea of what Finn th  
it easy.coming."

"I mean this kindly, Eva. He doesn't have the first clue of what it's  
e space.watch your husband disappear before your eyes. Worse, actual  
ose-leafbecomes a stranger. A stranger who you've had sex with. A strang  
you've had children with. A stranger who doesn't even recognize you.

A kettle I don't want to know. I want to cling to hope.

Doing that would make me a coward.

he luck “Then tell me what it’s like.”

“It’s bloody and violent and heartbreaking. You end up changing a man’s diapers. You find him wandering outside, lost, in soiled clothes. It feels like a man who would never raise a hand to you slaps you across the face. Caroline forgets she ever loved you. He forgets he knew you at all.”

’s baby I make a sound of pained sympathy.

“These things start early for the Hughes men.” Polite concern enters her voice. It reminds me of her sister until I meet her eyes and find sadness for the “I think you’re trying to warn me away, Mrs. Hughes.”

“I’m not trying to warn you. I’m telling you that you should cut and run, too.” The directness of her gaze is as sharp as her words. The blunt response sends a shock through my chest. We’re talking about her son. “I’m suggesting that I leave him?”

“Yes. You don’t need the money. The best thing you can do for yourself and for the baby is to separate yourself from this situation as soon as possible. She has legal documents drawn up that give you full custody and control of your child. You’ll need ironclad protection, and you can get it if you leave early enough. Go, Eva. And don’t look back.”

A numb sensation spreads over my face. This isn’t the conversation I expected to have at the Hughes’s breakfast nook with hot tea warming my hands. Some motherly prodding, maybe. A little light disapproval that I’d been here last night.

Nope. She’s telling me to wholesale abandon her son.

“To spare myself from seeing him...decline?”

“Not to spare yourself. To save yourself. The Hughes legacy is not the money or the company or the social status. It’s this secret. And if you leave, it’ll kill you.”

“You’re still here, aren’t you, Mom?” Finn’s voice, casual and charming, stops my heart.

His mother’s eyes slide over to him. Judging by her reddened cheeks, she didn’t know he was there. I’m bruised for both of them. For the motherly. He feels she has to protect other people from her son, and for the son who has to protect her from the naked truth from his mother.

” Finn straightens up, sticks his hands in his pockets, and crosses the kitchen. He woke up and came to find me. He’s all sweatpants and

and bedhead, and I've still never seen anyone as breathtaking.

Or anyone as determined.

ing the He slides in next to me, the heat of his body meeting mine. I'd feel  
thes. Awas in his bed again, protected by the sheets, except my face is on f  
ace. Hemy morning sickness is back in full force.

"Eva."

I tear my eyes from the tea cooling in the cup and meet his.

ges her There's no self-conscious tilt to his mouth or embarrassed glanc  
s there. mother. Finn looks at me like I'm the only person in the world he  
possibly speak to. There's a knot in my throat. What did he think abo  
d run." suggestion? Did the idea of it hurt him? I don't want that, but I ha  
impactmore the idea that he might have liked the idea. That it would be a r  
'You'rehim if I did that.

"I heard the option she laid out for you. If you really want that  
yourselflife, we can walk out of here and get on the phone with the lawyers. I  
ossible.any document you ask me to. I'll make sure you and the baby are pr  
ntrol offor, and I'll give up my rights. I'll bow out."

ou start Finn got his voice from his father, but he got his calm, assured c  
from Geneva. He's as matter-of-fact as she was.

sation I Almost as matter of fact. An emotion struggles under the surface  
ing mywords. He's keeping it in check.

t I slept A memory flashes. His face, filled with relief, when Leo ca  
holding his new baby, safe and sound. Another: Finn in the waiting r  
the doctor's office, explaining in the same level tone that he would ta  
of me no matter what his feelings were. Another: the distress on his f  
sn't thein the light of the ultrasound machine. He wasn't hiding behind cha  
u don'tdistance then.

"But?"

arming, Finn takes my hand, right there on top of the table. "But I don  
that."

eks, she Oh God, I don't want it either. Geneva's suggestion felt callc  
ier whohorrifying. I understand she's trying to spare me from her own pa  
o heardgoing forward with that plan would be worse than turning my back o

I'd be turning my back on myself. I don't give up on the people I lov  
ses thewhen it's hard. Even when it's awful. Even when it seems like the  
T-shirtlight at the end of the tunnel.



“I thought you didn’t want the baby.”

“I was wrong.” Finn shakes his head like even the memory of  
el like *I wanting* can be shaken out. “I want the baby. I want this baby. *Our*  
fire and want to watch him grow up. I want to teach him how to be a man in w  
time I have left. I want him, Eva. And I’m sorry for making you doubt

My throat is tight. I’ve wanted these words from him so muc  
craved them. I thought that if Finn changed his mind, if he wanted thi  
e at his I’d have everything.

e could But it’s not everything, is it? It’s not the only thing.

out that Does he want me, too?

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relief to

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n Finn.  
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re’s no

“I thought you didn’t want the baby.”

“I was wrong.” Finn shakes his head like even the memory of his *not wanting* can be shaken out. “I want the baby. I want this baby. *Our* baby. I want to watch him grow up. I want to teach him how to be a man in whatever time I have left. I want him, Eva. And I’m sorry for making you doubt that.”

My throat is tight. I’ve wanted these words from him so much. I’ve craved them. I thought that if Finn changed his mind, if he wanted this baby, I’d have everything.

But it’s not everything, is it? It’s not the only thing.

Does he want me, too?



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### Finn

**M**ONEY CAN BUY a person out of many, many things.

It can't get me out of shareholder meetings.

The C-Suite begins preparing for them months in advance. We're in a constant state of research, discussion, and presentations. These meetings are the price we pay for being given frankly outrageous tax breaks from the government. They've been the bane of my existence since I signed my Power of Attorney documents at the age of sixteen.

Nobody needs the CEO to weigh in on the minutiae of the day-to-day when we have to tell our shareholders how things are going at our various Industries that people notice my dad's absence the most.

This round of presentations happens in the big meeting room—that fits the entire executive team. One of our rising stars in accounting is giving a fast-paced presentation on the large screen. I have to admire how deliberate he is. The men at the meeting table seem largely forgotten, including me.

“—opportunities for reinvestment. There's enough capital per share available wise that we should take the temperature of the shareholders to see whether they'd prefer stock buybacks, or—”

The CFO is a razor-sharp man named Alex Wong. He raises a hand and asks, “Shawn. What's Mr. Hughes's opinion on next moves? Can you get him on Zoom?”

He directs his question to me. The rest of their heads swivel to watch me. *Mr. Hughes* in question is obviously my father.

“I can tell you,” I say, my voice easy. “We talked about it last night at the dinner table. He's not concerned with shareholder opinions. It's just g

lead to a scattershot approach. No, what they want, what they need, what they expect from your leadership. That's why we're going to set an aggressive reinvestment plan.

There's a pause. Wong studies me. "I have a few questions for him about the particulars."

I don't give the awkward silence a chance to breathe. "Fine by me. I'll send it to him in an email."

I'll be the one to get the email. I'll be the one to answer it on my father's behalf. It's the way of the world until Hemingway takes over.

Shawn the accountant moves to continue. Heads turn back to him.

"No, I'm sorry." Wong looks me in the eye so pointedly that I know I should rather be looking anywhere else. "I don't appreciate working my ass off for a guy who can't even be bothered to show up to the office."

"This isn't about him," I say, because I'm prepared for comments like this. "Hughes Industries is bigger than one man. My father oversees the company's strategy. He isn't here to babysit executives."

My C-Suite is exchanging *many* wide-eyed, furtive looks across the table. This is an uncomfortable turn in the tide. They don't normally look at me for so many rounds.

One of them throws one of those looks to Wong. I can see the corner of Hughes' mouth straighten his back. He won't raise his voice, but pushing the issue like this is a challenge all by itself.

"No, it *is* about him. It's strange that we haven't seen him in so long. How long gives what, five months? Isn't that what we figured out, Barry? We counted on him to be here."

Barry, an older man with set wrinkles that never seem to change, looks at me. "Five and a half. We used to see him every quarter."

"We used to see him every *day*." This from Nila Kabir, who's been at Hughes Industries even longer than Barry. Christ, this is devolving into a need to put a stop to it.

"One day." Barry shrugs. He keeps his hands open. Always has.

From the other side of the table, a woman named Susan leans forward. "There's no tactful way to say this, Mr. Hughes, but is the elder son still Hughes...even alive?"

Bitter irritation leaves an unpleasant aftertaste on my tongue.

It's time to parade my father through the office again. We do it every few months like clockwork.

eed, is It's always risky. Sometimes necessary.

lan." With every month that passes, it becomes more unavoidable. It's n about the old days, when Grandpa Hughes could stop by the office for a wav smile, then disappear for another six months. Vague excuses worke e. Send then. If I said my dad was on an extended trip to Europe, for instance, would start looking for proof.

father's In the days of social media, it is strange for someone to be entirely Even someone my dad's age, who was born well before Mark Zuc was a twinkle in the universe's eye.

ow he'd I'm going to put her in her place, because that's what everyone's off for a for. That's what they need to feel secure—that they're under strong leac But in the end, they'll win.

nts like I'll drag my father through here, risking a major episode, to pro global alive.

I glare at her. "Did you see an obituary, Ms. Dixon? Did you att e table. funeral? Did the Dow Jones take a dive? Did the entirety of ang on Industries roll to a halt while I wasn't looking?"

She looks abashed. "No, sir."

courage I spread my hands flat on the desk and put on a smile that says I'll e this is them, but I'm a bit pressed for time. "My father is alive and well, tha for asking. He'll be in, of course. And he'll be thrilled to know that ng. It's, more concerned over his health than the goddamn investment strategy. it out." There's murmured assent around the table. It doesn't make me fee e, nods. better. A handshake will head off this line of thinking for now. It won again. My dad just won't be stable enough.

en with It's time. Hell, I should have made this move months ago. It was ; fast. I thinking on my part. I hoped we'd be able to get by on a few more y quarterly visits.

options Neither of us has that kind of time. If I push this even another year that much closer to my own expiration date. Hemingway needs ha orward. experience running the company. I can't bring him in without ler Mr. suspicion unless I'm the CEO.

Sweat prickles at my collar. My shirt feels as tight as our timeli only have seven years, we're behind schedule.

very six Shawn launches back into his presentations. People tap on scree take notes on legal pads. For the moment, they're not watching me.

It's time for me to officially transition from acting CEO to CEO. Not liketime, really. It's better for everyone if my dad enters real retirement. Making the decision feels like jumping off my sailboat into cold water and backclears my head and pumps adrenaline into my system. I'd like to walk people settle for picking up a pen and scrawling some notes on the pad in front of me.

In a way, I'm rescuing both me and my dad from a midnight crash kerbergrocks. I'm pulling him out before he goes down in a public wreck.

And I'm giving myself as much time as possible to avoid a similar waitingAs CEO, I can put policies in place that will make it easier for Hemingway to replace me. We can cut down on the time he'll need to spend coordinating my visits to the office.

But that's not what makes my heart race with anticipation and pride. relief.

It's that I can stop pretending.

No more signing emails with my dad's name. No more built-in deadlines give the impression that he's being consulted. No more office visits.

One more office visit.

My breath catches in my lungs, sticking until it burns. I always know you arrive at this decision someday. I didn't know I'd feel...

*Grief* about it.

I put a hand on the front of my jacket and focus on the presentation. I spent most of my life preparing for this. Daniel Hughes was the one who started the process. His position as CEO hasn't only been part of the struggle put on for the employees and shareholders. It's been a sign of hope.

Mine.

I told myself that I was pragmatic. That I don't sweep things under the rug. Ironic to discover it wasn't true.

Keeping up appearances with my dad as CEO was a front, but it cost me something I'd never admit to anyone—I hoped he'd prove himself by raising

I hoped that somehow, we'd be able to fight off his decline. Slowly, as long as he was CEO, I could tell myself that it wasn't so bad. As long as I could shake hands at the office, it couldn't possibly be as terrible as I feared.

Taking his place means accepting where he's at, and it hurts.

One more office visit. One last hurrah.

O. Past     It's the right thing to do. It's not fair to put the stress of the visits  
              Not in the state that he's in. I'd just hoped this day wouldn't actually c  
vater. It     I'd *hoped*.

it off. I     That's a move straight out of Eva Morelli's playbook.

front of     Maybe we're not so different after all.

              The painful pinch in my lungs subsides. Shawn's presentation fad  
i on theinto view. Clarity returns, along with excitement. With purpose. I  
              going to pretend anymore. I'm not going to wait. Living at the mercy  
lar fate.disease has been a crushing weight.

gway to     It's gone. For a little while, it's gone.

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It's the right thing to do. It's not fair to put the stress of the visits on him. Not in the state that he's in. I'd just hoped this day wouldn't actually come.

I'd *hoped*.

That's a move straight out of Eva Morelli's playbook.

Maybe we're not so different after all.

The painful pinch in my lungs subsides. Shawn's presentation fades back into view. Clarity returns, along with excitement. With purpose. I'm not going to pretend anymore. I'm not going to wait. Living at the mercy of this disease has been a crushing weight.

It's gone. For a little while, it's gone.

But I'll owe Eva for that forever.





## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### Eva

**N**OBODY CAN RESIST the new baby.

I get a front-row seat to the incredible pull Abby has on just everyone in the family, including me. She's three days old when she comes home from the hospital, and four days old when Leo sends me a card asking if I can move things around on my schedule and come over.

Haley's sister, Petra, does the same thing. The difference is that she has a toddler of her own and a husband who doesn't seem to like it when she's out of the house.

The day Geneva Hughes tells me to *cut and run*, I get a text ten minutes after leaving the Hughes estate. "Change of plans," I tell my driver. "I'm going to Leo's."

Gerard meets me at the front door with tight lines of worry around his eyes. "They're upstairs, Eva."

In the bedroom, Haley leans against a stack of pillows, Abby in her arms, and tears running down her cheeks. An anxious, exhausted Leo sits on the edge of the bed, smoothing her hair and agreeing with everything she says.

He looks at me, his eyes shadowed with dark circles. That's all it takes.

"I hope my room is ready," I announce, as brightly and softly as possible. This is a joke. My room at Leo's is always ready. He has the sheets replaced and the space dusted and cleaned every week, regardless of whether I'm there or not. I go to kiss Haley on the cheek and Abby on the top of her head. "I'm too lonely in the city."

Haley turns her huge blue eyes on me. Her chin dimples. "My room couldn't stay," she manages. "And my mom..."

Her mom has been gone for a long time.

I sit down next to Leo and take Haley's hand. "I don't have anything to be. Now—does anything sound good to you? Something to eat? A movie to watch? Want to tell me every single detail of how weird and painful little bit awful this is?"

Haley's laugh sounds like a sob. "No. I'm so happy. It's just everything hurts and my body feels like someone else's and I don't know what I'm doing."

Later, when Haley's napping, Leo tells me that she ugly-sobbed when Petra left. He holds Abby close, curled on his chest. "She wants a woman to talk to. She loves Mrs. Page, but I pay her to be here. It's not the same."

"What about you? Are you surviving?"

He rubs gently at Abby's back. "I'm up all night checking to see if she's still breathing."

I stay.

The first thing I do is take over scheduling. I let it be known in the office that anyone who wants to visit or check in or request photos should call me first.

They *all* want to come over.

I arrange small groups. Low-pressure visits. My parents and I arrive with a box that turns out to contain Leo's baby blanket. Daphne shows me a photo of our dad holding Abby. She's wrapped in the soft blue cloth with his bunny pattern.

"Look," she whispers, showing me the photo on the screen of her phone. It takes my breath away. In the photo, Dad's looking down at Abby and the rest of the world doesn't exist. I've only ever seen that expression on my father's face in some of the oldest family pictures.

Our mom holds Abby like an invisible timer is counting down and she doesn't want it to end. Daphne beams at the baby, telling her about the colors and explaining what an easel is. "Daphne," she says, her voice is musical. "I'm Daphne. What if you learned to say my name first?"

In the long, quiet stretches between visitors, I help Haley. Leo takes semi-regular excuses to go pretend to work in his office so we can talk. My sister never gone for long.

"This is so much harder than I thought it would be," Haley admits in the morning.

“Taking care of her?”

ere else “No. Abby’s perfect. It’s existing that’s hard. Sometimes I feel l  
a movienever be able to sit up by myself again.”

il and a “You will,” I promise her.

“Oh, look.” Haley’s voice goes high and awed. “She’s yawning. Is  
ist thatthe cutest thing you’ve ever seen?”

t know “She’s a miracle.”

Haley’s painkillers from the surgery make her tired. Her eyel  
d whendrooping when Leo asks her if there’s anything she wants. Anything at  
oman to Abby’s just finished nursing, and Haley lets her head fall back  
.” pillows. “I want a nap. Do you want to hold her, Eva?”

“Literally always.” I take the warm, sleepy bundle from Haley’s ar  
if she’s stuck her against my chest. “We won’t go far.”

Haley’s breathing deep by the time Leo and I reach the bedroom d  
closes it behind us, and his shoulders drop down. “She’s better. Right?  
: family “A little bit better every day.”

text me Leo keeps his hand on my arm all the way down the stairs. I’m c  
precious cargo, after all. We don’t have to discuss where we’re goi  
den is everyone’s favorite room in the house. That’s because I g  
Daphnedesigners precise instructions for the sofas. More comfortable fu  
takes adoesn’t exist.

with its We sit on the one facing the courtyard window. Leo hesitates for  
second before he rests against the cushions and stretches his legs out  
Nikon. mine on the ottoman. I pat Abby’s back. I’ve made it a point to le  
by as iffavorite rhythm. At least, I hope I have.

on my One of the birds that lives in Leo’s courtyard lands on the sill and  
its head. It gives the glass a light, friendly tap.

and she “She’s sleeping,” Leo says. “Don’t you dare wake her up.”

it paint The bird fluffs its wings and flies away.

ow and “Do you think babies like to swim?” He glances at Abby, who v  
woken by the bird. “I do own a heated pool. And the weather’s still nic  
makes “I think babies like to be held in warm water. Swimming, I’m not  
k. He’s about.”

He rearranges his feet on the ottoman. Cloud shadows dapple the s  
uits onein his courtyard. The baby sleeps. Even the sound of her breat  
unbearably adorable.

I wonder if Finn will sit with me like this, with our baby asleep like I'll arms, or if he'll try to keep his distance. *I want the baby* doesn't mean *you*.

"You should just tell me what happened instead of brooding," Leo  
n't that "I'm not brooding."

"One corner of your mouth frowns when you're thinking about something that bothers you. Something like...I don't know. Finn Hughes? You kids aren't told me how he proposed."

I let out a sigh. "With a pitch deck."

"Pardon?" Leo's the picture of *what the fuck, Eva?*

"Well, technically, he tried to tell me we were going to get married at Daphne's reception. Then, when I refused, he put together a pitch deck. It was essentially a business proposal. He didn't mean it."

"So you refused again."

I turn my body so I can glare at him without disturbing Abby. "I'm not judging me for turning him down."

"I would never do that." The surprise in Leo's eyes is instantly refreshing. His sincerity. "Of course, you don't have to marry him. You're extremely rich and extremely capable of doing whatever you want. It's a little annoying, actually. I'm only good at real estate. You're good at everything."

I scoff at him. "But you think marrying him wouldn't be the worst idea." Leo's bird lands on the windowsill again. "Being married would have its next to advantages. Society is old school and puritanical and so are our parents. He wouldn't judge you for considering it, even if he did somehow think it appropriate to give you a pitch deck instead of a ring."

Abby takes a deep breath, and a heavy feeling sinks deeper into my bones. Being pregnant is tiring. So is keeping secrets. It's almost easier to carry them with someone else, and ironically harder *not* to tell her.

"There's something else."

"What?"

He shifts, putting his arm across the back of the couch and a bare inch of distance between us so we can see each other's faces. The way he looks at me says he's already trying to figure out what it is.

"Well...I have to swear you to secrecy."

Leo's eyes widen in teasing shock. "Again? My previous vows were binding in perpetuity."

in my “I’m serious.”

I want “I’m serious. I would never give up your secrets.”

“This one’s not exactly mine.”

says. He sobers, his eyes traveling down to the baby. “Is it Hughes?”

“The men in his family deal with early-onset dementia.”

nothing Leo tilts his chin. “How early?”

ou still “Their thirties.”

He looks out the window, and I can see the calculations flashing  
eyes. “Hughes Industries is a family company. Daniel Hughes is in his  
isn’t he? Younger than Dad. And Finn—”

ried at “They’ve been hiding it. Finn had Power of Attorney documen  
deck. It would install him as acting CEO at the first sign of trouble. He took  
Hughes Industries when he was sixteen.”

Leo’s eyes come back to mine. “Shit. *Shit.*” His mouth drops open  
You are closes again. “How could they have kept such a massive secret  
everyone while he’s still the CEO?”

replaced “The same way we did. By sticking to our story and making sure  
nobody saw what we wanted them to see.”

noying, My brother blinks, and his eyes slide to the corner of the room. I  
distant for a few heartbeats. Then a shudder moves through his body,  
thing.” shaken himself out of the memories.

have its “Is it bad?”

rents. I Geneva’s words replay in my mind. *It’s bloody and violent  
it was heartbreaking.* Daniel Hughes, shouting, distressed. Finn’s face paling  
docks when the call about his father came in.

nto my “Yeah.” A knot settles in my throat. “And he’s sure the baby is going  
always be a boy. He’s certain he’ll have the same disease. Which means  
I Leo. concern now, too.”

Leo leans against the couch and runs a hand through his hair. The  
fluffs its feathers in the corner of the window. It taps again. *I’m still here  
it more still here. I’m still here.*

studies I don’t have to spell it out for him. He’s already running the scene  
his head. Another quick breath. Leo puts his arm around my shoulder  
careful not to jostle the baby.

ow was “We’ll solve this. We have to.” It’s final. *We have to.*

“Yeah. I think so, too. But the Hughes have ridiculous amounts of

They could buy and sell entire pharmaceutical companies, and they solved it.” Hopelessness I don’t want to feel closes around my heart.

Leo runs his palm up and down my arm. “The Hughes have always money. They didn’t have you.”

“I’m not a miracle worker.”

“That’s not true, and you know it. You’re the one who found my shirt.”

All of Leo’s undershirts and sheets and even his rash guard in his swimming are made with the softest pima cotton available in the world in the fifties, “All I found was the farmer.”

“In the middle of nowhere. In *Peru*.”

That’s true. A tiny farm that’s contracted with me from now until forever to overpay them three times their operating costs for their exclusivity.

“The shirts were simple. Not easy, but simple.”

“It took you a year, Eva. You could have given up after the first twenty options didn’t work. Or even the first twenty.”

I tried thirty other suppliers across the United States, Australia, and America before I found the farmer in Peru. A fourth-generation tailor in New York City produces all the finished items in addition to fitting Leo’s suits.

They’re “It wasn’t an option to stop looking. You needed them.”

“Yes.” Leo can’t deny it. He put his hands over his face and cried when the first good sample shirt came in. That’s how relieved he was, after so much pain he’d been in. “And my point is, you could have taken the loss.”

“And let you keep suffering? No.” If the solution existed on the planet, it was going to find it. Or invent it. A long line of doctors hadn’t been able to help.

In the end, it was a matter of hunting down the correct raw material. I couldn’t ever give up on you.”

Not even in his worst pain and despair. That year was awful. Every fabric blend I tried was unbearable on his skin. We used different treatments and different manufacturing processes. Nothing worked until I found the right solution.

It must be equally unbearable to live in Finn’s head. The curse causes pain, and if our child is a boy, it’ll hurt him, too.

Fixing their suffering won’t be as simple as finding the right fiber this time.

“I’ve never known you to give up on anyone you love, sister mine.

“This might be beyond me. It’s medical science, not fabric.” My sister

haven'tis an empty pit. "And it's so hopeless. It's how he's lived for so long, afraid to disappoint him."

ays had "You won't. You couldn't. We'll solve it together. I'll help you first hot tears slide down my cheeks. I wipe them away before they can get on Abby. Leo pulls me close, and I let my head rest on his side. "Don't worry." it in. Tears don't mean you're giving up. They mean you're gathering strength to begin."

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is an empty pit. “And it’s so hopeless. It’s how he’s lived for so long. I’m afraid to disappoint him.”

“You won’t. You couldn’t. We’ll solve it together. I’ll help you.” The first hot tears slide down my cheeks. I wipe them away before they can land on Abby. Leo pulls me close, and I let my head rest on his side. “Don’t keep it in. Tears don’t mean you’re giving up. They mean you’re gathering the strength to begin.”





## CHAPTER TWENTY

### Finn

**I** DON'T JUST owe Eva Morelli for giving me a family and showing me that life doesn't have to be bleak and empty.

I'm also hopelessly in love with her.

I walked out of that meeting and went to meet with the family for a moment.

Admitting it to myself had the same shocking quality as admitting I was going to spend the rest of my life with her. It was a moment of time to become the CEO of Hughes Industries. A few moments will pass then—*oh my God. I'm in love with her.*

I'm in love with her.

And every second I don't tell her is wasted time. I'll never get it back.

The ring arrives at the Hughes estate. It's exactly what I chose for her.

It's not enough.

Eva would say that wasn't true, but I know better. She wants to be with me. She wants to be loved. I can give that to her. I'm going to go to her.

I text her from the Hughes Industries headquarters as soon as I've sent my secretary home for the day.

*Finn: Do you have plans for the evening?*

*Eva: Why? Did you have something in mind?*

*Finn: If you're free to meet with me, I do.*

*Eva: I could be free.*

I pull up in front of her apartment building a short while later.

*Finn: I'm here.*

No reply. Then she steps into view on the sidewalk. It doesn't look like she came from inside.

I climb out and offer her my hand. "I hope you didn't rush home for dinner."

Eva tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. "Leo swore they'd be okay."

She's been at her brother's house, helping to take care of the newborn and her parents. It kept Eva busy. It gave me time to come to my senses about how much I want her in my life.

About how much I want her, period.

"So." She's so beautiful like this. Always. I barely have any sense left. I dress because her face is so striking. "What did you have in mind?"

I stick my hand in my pocket and take out the quarter. It's a perfect coin. The coin turns over in the air on its way to Eva's palms.

"How about a bet?"

Her smile lights up her face. The sun's already setting, and its light reflects in her dark eyes. "What do I get if I win? Foam on my Starbucks order?"

"Come with me and find out."

She sits in the passenger seat and talks to me on the way out of town. I'm about to leap out of my skin from nerves and anticipation, but her hand soothes me. *You wouldn't believe how good a newborn baby smells.* She's just this little squishy bundle. Yesterday, she tried to lift up her head. *She was so proud. It was incredible.*

Eva gets quieter at the city limits of Bishop's Landing. She's silent. I pull the car into a spot near the docks.

I can't read her expression. She looks out at the bluewater sailing yachts. It's like she's anything like me, a montage of that first night is playing in her head. I feel just like I do now. Desperately glad to be near her. Overwhelmed with hope.

I go around to her door and offer her my hand.

Eva takes it.

She sticks close as we approach the yacht and lets me steady her during the transition from dock to boat.

Then we're standing on the deck, right where we started.

I had a proposal for her then, too. A fake relationship. I offered

fling. A distraction. And she became the only reality I want.

We've already made a new future together. I want to be part of it.  
look like her to be everything.

The first stars of the evening are appearing over the last of the s  
or me." breathe in the moment. I want to remember this for as long as I ca  
:" fading summer air. Eva's hand in mine. The stars, coming back aga  
w baby like they promised.

oddamn The two of us, together, facing the future.

Then I turn her to face me. Drink her in with as much attention as  
the sunset. I want to remember this, too. The flush in her cheeks. He  
e of her hair stirring in the breeze. The soft set of her lips. I run my thumb o  
corner of her mouth.

ect flip. "Since the moment I saw you in your parents' house, I've been tr  
convince myself not to love you." Eva's lips part as if to interrupt. "I  
is important. I really tried. I fed myself every justification for why I c  
embers be with you. I explained it to myself a hundred different ways. At le  
arbucks times a day, I convinced myself that you'd be better off taking your c  
with anybody else."

*Memorize her. Don't forget.*

he city. "But in the end, none of those reasons changed the fact that I lo  
or voice That I'm in love with you. I can't stop loving you. It's hopeless. For  
, Finn, time, everything seemed that way. I told myself there was no point in  
head. I attached. I told myself that it was wrong, in fact, to let anyone get c  
me. I wouldn't be able to give them the time they needed."

it when Eva leans her cheek into my palm.

"But then I saw you standing there with your mother, and I couldn  
racht. If you. I should have taken it as a sign that I'd never be able to walk awa  
head. I could I? You're beautiful and strong and you had something I desp  
ed with needed."

"What was it?"

"Hope."

"God, Finn. You break my heart, you know that?"

during "And you break mine. You didn't want to accept my fatalistic bu  
told you I had seven years, and what did you say? You said—*give m  
years. Give me seven months.*"

d her a "I would have taken anything you'd give me."

Past tense. She's speaking in the past tense. "You were telling me I wasn't worth it, even if I didn't have a decade to spend with you. I was a fool, but I couldn't hear it then. I couldn't accept your love then."

unset. I Her dark eyes shimmer with tears. "What about now?"

an. The My chest feels overfull. What happens next matters too much, but I can't look away from it. I won't avoid it. The fall is coming either way, I'm going to soar on the way down.

"There's nothing I want more in the world. I don't want to spend the rest of my life counting the days. I want to spend every day looking at you. Loving you. Letting you love me back, for exactly as long as we have."

ver the I get down on one knee, and a tear falls down Eva's cheek.

Her hand is in mine, warm and soft. It's home.

ying to *Remember. Remember. Remember.* I want to remember this even if I have early-onset dementia, even when I'm babbling and out of my mind. It feels impossible that I could forget.

east ten "I should have done this the first time I brought you here. I want to know I should have known it then, how dangerous you were to me. I shouldn't have wasted the second trying to convince myself otherwise." I pull the box from my pocket and press it into her palm. "I love you, Eva Honorata Morelli. I want to spend the rest of my life to you. Will you be my wife?"

a long She swallows hard, more tears shining in her eyes. "That's what I've been getting want?"

close to "If all you were willing to offer me was scraps, then I'd happily take those. And that's all I deserve. I know that, too. But I desperately want to marry you."

't leave "Yes," she whispers. "Yes. I will. I'll marry you."

y. How I'm quick to take her into my arms and kiss her, but she's already crying. Happy tears. Eva wipes them away while I open the ring box. She gasps at the sight and starts to cry again.

Her hand trembles when she holds it out to me.

"This is one of the greatest honors of my life," I tell her. *Remember this.* Then I slip the ring onto her finger. It's an antique in the Hughes collection. Priceless, but it means nothing without the warmth of her body. *Remember this. I'll never let it go. Don't forget.*

There's a moment of stillness. We both look at the ring. A tangible promise of a real relationship. Nothing fake about it. Nothing pretend. I

the transient. This ring means forever.

fool. I Then her arms go around my neck and her mouth is on mine and she says yes, she said yes, she loves me.

I need her so much. Her need matches mine. I take her down to the deck. I won't let blankets stretched across the deck and prop myself over her and let her see me but I'm looking.

*Remember.*

my life I wanted this that first night, too.

ing you. "I remember you like this," Eva breathes. "You were over me. You were surrounded by stars, but I couldn't see them. I could only see you. Nothing but you."

"I'm never going to forget you like this, Eva. I swear to God."

when I She's beautiful in the warmth of the sunset. My ring on her finger. It's baby in her belly. She's going to be my wife. There's nothing that could be better than this.

ed to. I "You look so happy," she murmurs, tracing a finger over my cheek. I tasted a "Not the way you were before, though. Not laughing or teasing or checking pockets the panties off women everywhere. That seemed happy, but underneath it was like something else. Something manic."

"That wasn't real. This is. This is true happiness, darling."

at you *My wife.*

Then I can't stand to be separated from her. Not for another moment. I pull her out of her clothes. Eva does the same to me. She pulls me down and I want to be with her.

I'm free to feel her skin against mine. Free to press kisses on her neck, collarbone, and lower. This is what I wanted to do that first night. I was crying. I worship her, and I didn't. I held back. I told myself it could wait.

gasps at I'm never going to do that again.

I kiss her everywhere I can reach while she arches underneath me. Memorizing project is more important than memorizing all her soft places. All her secrets. And Eva shivers under my touch, begging, and when I push myself inside her she cries out.

remember, I don't care. Let everyone hear how much she loves this. How much she loves me.

the sign For the first time, there's no fear between us. I feel like a different person. Not the one I was always meant to be. I've spent years searching for

of peace, and I've found it.

she said     Eva holds me close and lets me watch her take her pleasure in me.

It's a gorgeous sight. She shakes out her heat over me.

so thick     "Let me see you," she demands, her voice sweet. Her hands on my  
myself keep me in view. "God, Finn. You're everything I need. It was so  
pretend I didn't want you."

"Don't pretend, Eva. Tell me every day. I'm going to insist on it."

I don't have to hold myself back. I let my pleasure have its way with  
you were pulsing inside her. Eva's body moves with mine like she's meant for me  
in my eyes.     *She is.*

She rolls us over before I've finished and the sway of her hips keeps  
hard. So hard that I have no choice but to come for her again. Eva breathes  
her. Ourself on my chest, holding on with her nails, and takes every last  
would be pleasure she can find.

When it releases us, she leans down to kiss the fingernail marks she  
on my backbone.     "Don't kiss them too much."

harming     "Why?"

and it felt     "Because I want them to stay forever."

"Oh, I doubt they will. But I can always make new ones."

I catch her chin in my hands and pull her close so I can see this wonderful  
promise, on her lips. "Always?"

ment. I     "Always." It's a promise and a declaration of wild, untamable  
honor overgoing to feel that with her. I'm going to feel everything with her. Not  
but I

I think the curse is broken. Not because I really think I'll make it to the  
to her forty with my mind intact. But because I'm willing to live as if I  
wanted to happen, if it means having even a few years with Eva. I'll give her  
years. Or maybe only seven months. And when I'm lost to the world,  
leave her in mind, if not in body, she'll forgive me.

me. No     "Kiss me again," I murmur.

curves.     Eva leans down, her hair falling over my face, and gives me just  
her, she wants.

She gives me so much more.

much she

person  
a sense

of peace, and I've found it.

Eva holds me close and lets me watch her take her pleasure in my body. It's a gorgeous sight. She shakes out her heat over me.

"Let me see you," she demands, her voice sweet. Her hands on my face keep me in view. "God, Finn. You're everything I need. It was so hard to pretend I didn't want you."

"Don't pretend, Eva. Tell me every day. I'm going to insist on it."

I don't have to hold myself back. I let my pleasure have its way until I'm pulsing inside her. Eva's body moves with mine like she's meant for me.

*She is.*

She rolls us over before I've finished and the sway of her hips keeps me hard. So hard that I have no choice but to come for her again. Eva balances herself on my chest, holding on with her nails, and takes every last bit of pleasure she can find.

When it releases us, she leans down to kiss the fingernail marks she left.

"Don't kiss them too much."

"Why?"

"Because I want them to stay forever."

"Oh, I doubt they will. But I can always make new ones."

I catch her chin in my hands and pull her close so I can see this word, this promise, on her lips. "Always?"

"Always." It's a promise and a declaration of wild, untamable hope. I'm going to feel that with her. I'm going to feel everything with her. Not because I think the curse is broken. Not because I really think I'll make it to the age of forty with my mind intact. But because I'm willing to live as if it could happen, if it means having even a few years with Eva. I'll give her seven years. Or maybe only seven months. And when I'm lost to the world, when I leave her in mind, if not in body, she'll forgive me.

"Kiss me again," I murmur.

Eva leans down, her hair falling over my face, and gives me just what I want.

She gives me so much more.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### Finn

**T**HERE'S ONE FINAL step to take before my life with Eva begins—my last meeting at Hughes Industries. His official goodbye. His retirement public at least.

I plan it carefully, the way I've done everything carefully for years, though all I want to think about is my ring on Eva's finger and the future we have together.

I'm finished putting a number of years on it.

I'm not naïve enough to forget the past, but I don't have to let it define everything.

My dad sits quietly in the second row of the SUV, reading a well-worn copy of *Time* magazine. It's from the last year he worked, truly a relic. Sometimes he slips back into a childhood state. Other times he knows he's in the present. But mostly he lives in that last year forever. He likes the magazines. They feel new to him, even if they're a decade old.

The driver up front has the music on low. An hour from now, I'll be the new CEO of Hughes Industries. I can focus on his care without forcing him to visit as a charade.

"How are you feeling about going into the office?"

"Hmm?" He doesn't look up from his magazine.

"Some of the high-performers at Hughes Industries are waiting at headquarters to congratulate you on a job well done. They've arranged a cake, and they'd like to shake your hand."

"Oh, I'm sure I can give them that." His smile is an echo of the one he used to wear in the office before his episodes began. My dad loved hi



He liked the energy of the company. That's been hard for him to live with but he chose this isolated existence.

He chose it back when he was still coherent enough to make choices.

Of course I've watched him age at home. The wrinkles and gray hair come over time, as he wears pajamas and comfortable clothes around the house. Clothes he can't hurt himself in.

The changes are more marked when he's in a suit.

He still looked like a virile, active, middle-aged man when the car arrived at his home. His mind was gone, but his body looked strong. Now his body looks old. He looks old.

"We'll head up to the meeting room first thing. I'll be right there with you. Don't worry about remembering everybody's names. Don't worry about anything."

Dad raises his eyebrows. "You nervous, Phineas?"

Even "Of course not."

ture we "Good. I know every person there. That's the mark of a leader, you know. It's not just about clocking in and out. Not about paperwork. It's about people. You have to know what makes them tick. I know where every person in that office was born. Who their family is. What they want most in life."

My stomach is in knots when the SUV pulls up to the curb outside the headquarters. Dad abandons his magazine on the seat and hops out of the car. The confidence in his stride looks real.

s we're It is real.

reading He thinks he's going to work. His mind has slipped back into that familiar pattern.

l be the "Keep up, Phineas," he calls, though I'm right beside him. "Lots of things today."

I force a laugh. "We're having a light day. Only a celebration."

"Sure, sure. Then I'll need to spend some time at my desk. Mr. O'clock gets testy if he's kept waiting. We don't get days off, Phineas, when our employees are hard at work. It's important to set a good example. We're only as strong as our weakest link."

*This is a mistake*, a small voice whispers in the back of my mind as I get attached to the idea of this fictional workday. It's anyone's work, whether he'll forget it once we get to the retirement celebration or not, down on the three o'clock meeting that doesn't exist.

without, He steps into the elevator. If I'm going to stop it, now's the time.  
the tip of my tongue to remember another meeting we need to  
es. elsewhere and take him home.

air have Dad puts his hand out to block the elevator door. "Can't kee  
and the waiting, Son."

I follow him in.

The retirement party is made up of a carefully curated group of att  
urse hit All the C-Suite members. CIO, CMO, CFO. An endless alphabet o  
doesn't There are also the most dedicated administrative assistants. Manag  
members of other departments who've had personal experience worki  
re with Dad or who've helped push the company forward in a big way.

y about I spot Kevin in the crowd. Kevin, whose youngest daughter gra  
from college. My father would have known a detail like that. N  
wouldn't even know Kevin's name.

Everyone breaks into applause as Dad and I step into the spaciou  
I know. on the executive level.

s about Confusion flashes through his dark eyes, but he covers it with  
person "Please. That's enough. Thank you, everyone. You're the ones who m  
fe." possible."

side the I put a hand on his arm and raise my voice. "My father, Daniel Hu  
into the the reason we're here. The work we've done at Hughes Industr  
changed lives all over the world, but none of it would have been p  
without his vision, his work ethic, his knowledge. He taught me  
he old, means to stay committed to a cause that matters, and I can say wi  
doubt that our work matters."

s to do The CFO comes forward and places a box in my hand.

"Dad, on behalf of everyone at Hughes Industries, I'd like to tha  
for everything you did for us. Your performance set a high bar. I think  
y three all agree that nobody deserves to enjoy retirement more than you." I e  
as. No him and press the box into his hand. "Something to remember us by."

ample. Warm applause fills the room. My dad grins down at the box and  
away the sheen from his eyes. "This is too much. I haven't even  
. Dad's started."

s guess The people nearest to us laugh.

double A frown tugs at the corner of his mouth. He wasn't joking  
wondering why they're laughing.

It's on "You did an incredible job, Dad," I say, trying to wrest his attention away.

"That's right," the CIO says, a middle-aged woman who was just a pusher when dad was still himself. She offers his hand for my dad to

"It was an honor to work with you, Mr. Hughes. I hope you give retirement all as well. I'm talking beach vacations and the best golf in the weekendes. My dad clasps his hand. He doesn't recognize her. His smile is to f them. It's not real. "I will."

ers and He turns away from the conversation and is faced with another hand extended.

I hold my breath.

aduated "Congratulations, Mr. Hughes. Wishing you the best. We'll meet you here around the office."

My dad's muscle memory seems to take over. He shakes the man's hand "You won't have time to miss me. I need to get back upstairs after the

"You're a company man at heart, aren't you?" I put my hand on his shoulder and give the man a grin. He smiles back, accepting the joke.

ake this "Always have been," Dad says. "Always will be."

Everyone wants to say a few words, so they step forward in turn. I wish we could have had this party before his mind began to deteriorate. My regret is an ache clamped around my chest like my dad's hand around the box. He deserved to be recognized for his work, for real. The secret was keeping that from him.

thout a The box holds a gold watch. He hasn't opened the top. I'm not sure I'm aware of holding it.

A woman from the marketing department takes his elbow and guides him to the cake. Dad exclaims over it, but when she tries to give him a slice, he shakes his head. "I won't be sharp for my three o'clock meeting. I'm full of sugar."

"You sure, Dad? You only have one retirement party."

I blinks Fifteen minutes. That's how long it'll take everybody else to shut up if nobody starts a long conversation.

Fifteen minutes, and I can breathe again.

The well-wishes keep coming.

3. He's *I bet you're looking forward to your golden years.*

*Take advantage of your newfound free time and travel. I hear*

attentionmagic.

*Play as much golf as you want. You deserve it. If you ever need see a pencil to drive the cart—*

o shake. “I’ll give you a call,” Dad promises.

irement He won’t.

orld.” *I’ve always looked up to you, Mr. Hughes.*

o wide. *My father’s proud that I work for a company like yours. I’m glad I have a chance to shake your hand.*

person, “I’d be nothing without my team,” Dad says over another handshake. “The team is down to me, Hemingway, and his nurses now. “It’s hard work, but it’s worth it.”

iss you The man he’s speaking to blinks, but doesn’t ask Dad to clarify.

Time to wrap things up.

s hand. I put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s about time we headed out, Dad. It’s your party.” you think?”

on his He nods, turning toward me. I open my mouth to say our goodbyes.

They don’t make it out, because the CFO angles in and shakes my hand. Alex Wong doesn’t miss a thing, which is why it’s great to have that role. It’s also the reason why I want to keep him far away from my priorate.father.

und the They’ve only ever met at fake, staged meetings like this one, on the way out. We shake hands and waved as he did a walkthrough under my supervision.

he’s conversed with my father over email plenty of times, in depth. I know he’s that discussed confidential, complex financial matters.

“Mr. Hughes. Before you go, I wanted to get your take on our reinvestment strategy for next quarter. Seems important that we’re all on the first same page.”

eting if “We are. Of course we are. That’s what makes us an effective team.”

“I’m in total agreement. The specific strategy, though. I sent you my thoughts, but I know you disagree on the dividends. We’ve gone back and forth a few times, but I thought maybe we could talk in person.”

Dad frowns, pulling slightly away. He clutches the watch box with his hands.

“I can take it from here, Dad.” I meet the CFO’s eyes. “We’ll discuss the strategy next week. I’m the CEO starting at the open of business on Monday.”

“Of course. I mean no disrespect. Your leadership isn’t in question.” Wong refocuses on my dad. “It’s just that your father has one of the most brilliant financial minds I’ve ever had the pleasure of working with. Even though we only talk over email, I’ve learned so much.”

“What happens at the open of business?” It’s as if Dad has completely forgotten about Alex Wong. “Phineas. Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Wong’s brow furrows. “Sir?”  
“What’s happening Monday?” he demands.  
“Dad, let’s talk about this outside.”

Wong glances at me, suspicious now. I want to cover his mouth with my hand. I want to drag him out of here by his collar. “Didn’t you sign that? The board voted on it. Unanimous agreement. You voted by proxy. Don’t you saying that you don’t know?”

“Young man.” My dad’s face is flushing. “I have been the head of this company for ten years.”

My dad’s *Fuck.*  
“Dad, we should go. Everybody needs to get back to work. You need to cancel all my appointments on your schedule.”

“Ten years?” Wong repeats.  
Other people are beginning to listen in. He’s been the official CEO of Hughes Industries for more than three decades, not one. This is going to be a long night.  
“Ten years?” Wong repeats.

“That’s right. And I have no plans to step down. I’ll be in my office on Monday. If you’ve got a problem, you can bring it directly to me. Meet me on the appointment with my secretary.”

The silence in the room is as thick as the tension.  
“I’ll be in my office on Monday. If you’ve got a problem, you can bring it directly to me. Meet me on the appointment with my secretary.”  
I keep a calm smile firmly in place. “He’s having cold feet at the moment. You my minute. The prospect of all those beach vacations and endless golf courses and don’t appeal to someone as industrious as my dad.”

There’s confusion in everyone’s eyes.  
They’re wondering if it’s a power struggle. And it is, but not a simple power struggle between father and son. It’s a power struggle between the old guard and the new guard.  
“Ten years?” Wong repeats.

And right now, as sweat beads on my forehead, the curse is winning.  
My father meets my eyes. “What’s going on? Where’s Geneva?”

estion.”am I?”

he best “He’s not feeling well,” I tell everyone. “I should have reschedu  
ugh weparty. I’m sorry. It’s my fault.”

“Mr. Hughes—”

mpletely Dad whips his head toward Wong. He takes a shaky breath and the  
: tellingback.

“Why does it say *retirement* on the sign?” He glances down, discov  
box in his hands, and hurls it to the floor like it burned him. “I’m not r  
I’m not old enough for that. I have work to do. I wasn’t finished. W  
my secretary?” His eyes search the room. “Where is my *office*?”

with my “What’s going on here?” Wong asks. “Is this some kind of episode

off on Yes. That’s what I’ll say. I’ll pretend to be shocked and horrified.

xy. Are I don’t have to pretend to be worried sick.

But then...

of this “I just dealt with this with my Dad.” A woman’s voice. “Alzheim  
dementia. Mr. Hughes—”

She tries to move forward, but my dad startles back.

’ve got “How long has he been like this?” The CFO asks, his voice sha  
blame. “How long, Finn?”

He’s still thinking this is some kind of hostile takeover.

CEO of He has no idea that my dad wanted this. He asked for it to happ  
off theway to preserve his dignity, but it’s not working. *It’s not working.*

“I’m late for my meeting,” my father snaps. His eyes pass over  
ffice onI’m one of the strangers in the crowd. “I don’t know who the hell you  
fake anare. My son is supposed to be here. *Phineas*. Where the hell is he? W  
*you people do with him?*”

the last  
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g.  
Where

am I?”

“He’s not feeling well,” I tell everyone. “I should have rescheduled the party. I’m sorry. It’s my fault.”

“Mr. Hughes—”

Dad whips his head toward Wong. He takes a shaky breath and then steps back.

“Why does it say *retirement* on the sign?” He glances down, discovers the box in his hands, and hurls it to the floor like it burned him. “I’m not retiring. I’m not old enough for that. I have work to do. I wasn’t finished. Where is my secretary?” His eyes search the room. “Where is my *office*?”

“What’s going on here?” Wong asks. “Is this some kind of episode?”

Yes. That’s what I’ll say. I’ll pretend to be shocked and horrified.

I don’t have to pretend to be worried sick.

But then...

“I just dealt with this with my Dad.” A woman’s voice. “Alzheimer’s. Or dementia. Mr. Hughes—”

She tries to move forward, but my dad startles back.

“How long has he been like this?” The CFO asks, his voice sharp with blame. “How long, Finn?”

He’s still thinking this is some kind of hostile takeover.

He has no idea that my dad wanted this. He asked for it to happen this way to preserve his dignity, but it’s not working. *It’s not working.*

“I’m late for my meeting,” my father snaps. His eyes pass over me like I’m one of the strangers in the crowd. “I don’t know who the hell you people are. My son is supposed to be here. *Phineas*. Where the hell is he? *What did you people do with him?*”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### Eva

**T**HE DIRECTOR OF the charity benefiting LGBTQ+ youth faces me across the desk, her chin held high, expression stoic. Her eyes reveal the truth: she badly wants this grant. And I want to give it to her. I always did, even though I've seen too many millions squandered in administrative costs and never-finished projects to hand it out without due diligence.

I flip the last page on her completely reworked presentation and meet her eyes.

This is one of the best moments in my job. Telling people we're a change agent that can help change their lives. And the lives of so many more people that the help.

Even sweeter that I get to do it with Finn's ring on my finger.

"I'm impressed. You brought me all the information I asked for and more." I rise from my seat and offer her my hand. "I'm looking for you to be working together on your project."

She clasps my hand, no longer attempting to hide her nerves. "God, thank you. This is amazing. You have no idea how much this means to us."

"Thank you. It's your work that made the difference here."

"I—" She releases my hand and covers her mouth. "I don't want to be rude, but I have to tell my team."

"Go," I say with a laugh. "You deserve a celebratory phone call."

The director heads out of my office, through the waiting area, and down the main corridor at Morelli Holdings. I'm glad we held the meeting here, a grander space than my office at home, and she deserves to feel like she won't



Except she didn't win it. She earned it.

I'm still basking in her joy when Leo sticks his head in the door ready?"

"I was born ready."

The reason I held the meeting in the official Morelli Fund of because there's one other item on my agenda for the day—a meeting v brothers.

Lucian's the CEO of Morelli Holdings. The Morelli Fund is an arm family company, and I manage a growing amount of charitable do every year. Leo's operations at his real estate firm, the Morelli P Group, are entirely his own, but the legal structure makes his bus oross my subsidiary of Morelli Holdings.

th. She Together, the three of us are in charge of the family's busine before, philanthropic interests. We have regular meetings to keep each other u sts and This is Leo's first trip back to the city after Abby's birth. He desc to me as a *test run*. He'll still be on paternity leave for at least the n meet her months.

"How's Haley? How's my favorite niece?" I ask him on the wa about to Lucian's office.

charity "Petra came to be with Haley while I'm at the meeting. Everyo happy when I left. Abby slept for four straight hours last night, so Hale new lease on life."

nd then I nudge him with my elbow. "What about you?"

ward to "I've already texted her three times asking for pictures. Do you what she said?" Leo pulls out his phone and reads off the screen. ' Oh my

only going to be gone a few hours, and then you can hold her the res leans to day and night. I promise, she's fine!!!" He gives me wide, skeptic

"Can you believe that? My own wife."

"You're too much."

it to be "I'm your favorite person, sister mine."

"You're up there." We go into Lucian's office and take seats at his

He looks at us with narrowed eyes, his desk phone pressed to into the "No. Stop talking. My next meeting is here. I'll send you an emai are. It's phone clatters into its cradle.

big. "That was a little rude, Lucian," I point out.

"You know what's rude? Having to hear about Finn's proposal fr

asshole.” He inclines his head at Leo, who rolls his eyes.

“You were there when we announced our engagement. Do not think it’s ridiculous.”

His dark eyes glitter. I never told Lucian the engagement was outside of me and Finn, only Haley and Leo knew.

I might have been wrong. Lucian doesn’t miss much.

“Ah, but you didn’t have a ring. Odd that Hughes would wait so long to get down on one knee on some rickety dock and put it on your finger.”

“He got down on one knee on his sailing yacht, for the record.”

“And you didn’t so much as send me a text. Let’s see it.” Lucian reaches up, and I have no idea why.

“See what?”

“The *ring*, Eva. Let us see.”

“I’ve already seen it,” Leo teases. “You should have been more persistent.”

“Shut your mouth, brother mine. I’m not above shutting it for you.”

A strange, pleased warmth suffuses me. I’m often at the center of family, but I’m not usually the center of attention. I’m not sure I ever allowed myself to imagine showing off my new engagement ring. Certainly not to Lucian.

I get up anyway, unable to stop myself from smiling, my eyes heavy with happy tears. Leo stands up, too. I extend my hand over Lucian’s desk and he takes it carefully in both of his and examines the ring. Leo leans over and looks, too, though of course he was one of the first people to see.

“You’re kidding,” Lucian says, looking at the ring. “Hughes offered to buy me a ring, anything I wanted. This one is beautiful, and it has a history and family.”

“Do you like it?” Lucian asks softly. My chest goes tight. He’s trying to be hard. It’s so unlike the Lucian I used to know as a child.

“I love it.”

“What about Hughes?” He looks into my eyes, my hand still in his. “Do you love him, too?”

I can only nod.

“Good. That makes things easier for me.”

“Because you don’t have to kill him?”

“Exactly.”

“The two of you have to stop threatening people with murder.”  
Lucian laughs, and the three of us take our seats. “You should be  
you have brothers who would kill for you. Some people aren’t so  
is fake. Now. Tell me the top-line items from the Morelli Fund.”

Honestly, I couldn’t have imagined a meeting like this before Luci  
over as CEO. Our father used an iron-fist style of management. I  
long to Lucian butted heads over how to run the company, and they kept eve  
at a distance. Lucian was always cold. Always kept himself apart, eve  
we were kids.

Lucian’s trying something different. He insists it’s about making th  
money, but I suspect that falling in love with Elaine gave him a cha  
heart. He’s not nearly such an aloof bastard anymore. I think part of h  
afraid that the rest of us wouldn’t accept him back into the fold. Silly.  
Morelli. There’s no keeping him out. The meetings are just one of th  
he shows up for us now.

The meeting runs long. It’s just past five when the three of  
of the Lucian’s office and make our way to the main entrance of Morelli Hol  
allowed “Elaine wants to come see the baby,” Lucian says. “Is she fi  
not to evening?”

“You could at least pretend to care that I still exist.” Leo’s tone is  
ot with little sarcastic.

ask. He “Oh, but I do. Elaine’s the one who wants to coo at the baby. I  
ver and bait you into a fistfight.”

“Jesus Christ.” Leo gazes at the ceiling, then laughs. “If you co  
id. Finn dinner, I should ask Daphne and Emerson.” He looks at me, consi  
full of “What about you and Finn? Do you have plans?”

“I don’t know. I can find out.” I’m giddy at the prospect of findi  
ing so It’s just a tentative dinner invitation to Leo’s, but it feels like a gift.  
about everybody else?”

“Depends on how Haley feels. I can invite Sophia and Tiernan an  
s. “You if she’s up to a circus.”

“It can be a *calm* circus.” We reach the big front doors.

He snorts. “Sure.”

“I’m going to text Finn right now.” I rest my hand on the push l  
slip my phone out of my purse. Leo puts his hand on the frame abov  
and the door opens. I take a step onto the sidewalk, tapping at the scr

would be nice if—”

grateful “Ms. Morelli!” The shout is loud and close. My body jolts fr  
lucky. volume. “Ms. Morelli, do you have anything to say about the  
conspiracy?”

an took Paparazzi crowd in, filling the sidewalk. I can’t see my SUV ov  
He andheads, or my security.

rybody A hand comes down on my shoulder. Leo’s. It holds me in plac  
n whenboth my brothers launch themselves in front of me. I take a step back  
the glassed-in doors.

re most “Step away,” Lucian snaps, voice icy. “She doesn’t have a comm  
ange of Leo shoves his open palms in the direction of the photographers,  
im wasthem back. They keep surging forward as he snarls at them, a vicious  
He’s aon his face.

re ways “What the fuck do you think you’re doing? No, please, take anothe  
I’ll consider you a threat to my sister’s life if you move one more inch.  
us exit The cameras don’t stop flashing. Security has arrived, but they’re  
dings. outside of the crush, having to shove their way through. I’m in the onl  
ree thispocket of space behind Leo and Lucian.

They keep repeating that we have no comment. The questions dor  
s only aSome of them are aimed at my brothers.

“Did you know your fiancé was covering up his father’s dementi  
want toOver here. How much did the rest of the family know about this? Is  
Holdings involved? Eva. This way. Were you helping him to hide it?  
ome forengagement a plot to distract the public from the conspiracy?”

idering. My face feels bloodless and numb. Two minutes ago, we were  
dinner plans. I was so happy. I was going to find out if Finn was free.  
ng out. He’s not going to be free now that the news is out.

“What I don’t have any idea how it happened. I can hardly breathe.

Our respective security teams converge, finally surrounding us  
d Lizzymake a path through the rowdy clutch of shouting men and wom  
telephoto lenses. Someone opens the back door of my SUV and I cl  
Leo stands in front of it, blocking me from the photographers. Lucian  
next to him.

bar and One of the agents moves to shut the door behind me.

e mine, He’s not quite fast enough.

een. “It A final shouted question breaks through:

“What about your baby? Does your baby have the disease, too?”

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Hughes

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“What about your baby? Does your baby have the disease, too?”



# THREE TO GET READY

SKYE WARREN

# THREE TO GET READY

SKYE WARREN





## PROLOGUE

### Geneva, many years ago

**T**HE KNOCK CAME a few minutes before six, a furtive rap of knuckles.

Her sister would be first to the bottom of the stairs. She was always on time. Geneva was second, but always on time.

No one wanted to face dinner with her father when he was angry. She had reached a very good part of her book, and so she kept reading a few paragraphs. Another sentence. A final word. Each one dropped like a stone into her open palms.

This was her way out of the house. She didn't sneak out at night. Caroline or even dream about going to college. She existed in the pages of the book.

She had another few minutes to spare, at least thirty seconds, when the roar of an engine at the front of the house caught her attention. She closed the book and ran to the window to see her brother step out of an Aston Martin and toss his keys in his hand.

Oh no. Every muscle in her body warned her not to go downstairs. Nothing good would happen.

She had no choice. A quick glance at the clock showed the minute hand pointing almost to the top, the second tick, tick, ticking away around the circle.

A quick glance in the mirror showed that her hair had come undone from the plait she'd used earlier. Her father would definitely notice.

Or maybe he wouldn't now that Geoffrey was home.

She sprinted downstairs following the curve of cold marble steps, faster than the rasp of all of a sudden carpet and landed in her spot next

sister. They both stood waiting outside the dining room where they could enter until they had passed inspection.

Already the sound of male voices arguing could be heard from the study.

Apparently, Geoffrey had wasted no time in finding their father.

She couldn't make out the words, only the angry timbre. Her father's commanding. Her brother's arguing. It was enough to make the wood paneling shiver around her.

She glanced at Caroline, who was staring resolutely ahead.

"Why did he come back?" her sister whispered.

"The same reason he always comes back," Geneva said. "Because of money."

As first. Papa liked them to be very still, even though it was hard. Her legs wanted to jiggle. Her gaze wanted to wander. She wasn't supposed to do that.

But she was supposed to stand like a statue.

Papa swept into the hallway, his heels hitting the marble hard. He was swinging at his sides. He usually frowned, but he wore an even deeper frown.

Geneva forced her face not to show anything. No fear. That would only make it worse.

Benedict James Roosevelt III liked fear a little too much.

She knew that was wrong, the same way she knew that gravity couldn't be changed. Nothing she did was going to change it. The only thing she could do was learn how to use it.

Martin Her father always started with Caroline. She was two years older, but he didn't think that was really why. He started with her sister because she was perfect. There wasn't a strand of blonde hair out of place in her braids, and her shoes were extra shiny.

Even so, he gave her a severe look. "What's your name?"

"Caroline May Roosevelt, sir."

"And what does that mean? Your grandmother's name, on my mother's side. Your father's name, on the other side. Your last name. Well, that's just something borrowed from me, isn't it?"

Sometimes Papa did this. He asked questions that you aren't supposed to answer. I never knew for sure when it's happening, but Caroline always answered.

She looked straight ahead without speaking.

It was the right answer. Father's eyes glowed with approval. "Y

ould notsum of your parts, girl. Which means you have intelligence. Si  
Beauty.”

Papa’s “Yes, sir.”

She didn’t say thank you, because he wasn’t complimenting h  
really.

father’s He was complimenting himself.

l panels His gray eyes narrowed at Geneva, as if he could hear her thought  
quickly looked ahead again, at the tiny crack in the paint she often  
mark the time. It was interesting, that crack. Interesting that a fault  
exist in her father’s perfect life.

e he ran It made her wonder what would happen if someone were to put p  
on the crack.

wanted Would it break?

hough. “There are two parents,” he said. “Not one. Which means you hav  
qualities. Worse qualities. Such as? Would you care to tell me what th  
d, fistsCaroline?”

: scowl. Her sister said nothing, even though it felt like this was a questi  
y makeneeded an answer.

“I can,” Geneva said, to cover up the silence.

Papa stepped in front of her, eyebrow raised. “Tell me.”

existed. “We’re weak,” she said, as if reciting a poem. “And romantic. And

do was He stared at her for a long moment. He might backhand her. It f  
that kind of moment. Then suddenly he smiled. Or what passed for a s  
but shethis man. A slight, almost cruel curve of his thin lips. “That’s right, Ge

she was She flushed under the approval, even though she shouldn’t care.

id. Her Sometimes she hated her father, but she always loved him.

She said the words that had been drilled into her. “We must pus  
our baser natures in order to fulfill our role in the world.”

His mouth formed a hard line again. “That’s right. Which i  
side. Akeeping your hair neat and tidy.” He reached up to tug—hard—on h  
ng youShe winced. His hand remained at her temple. He brushed his thumb c  
forehead.

osed to It was the most he’d touched her in years.

rs did. “You are growing up,” he murmured under his breath.

A chill ran down her back. She forced herself to stay very still.

ou’re a He pulled back. Not to hit her. He did the almost-smile again. “Y

strength. sit at my right hand today, Geneva. A special for you.”

Geneva ducked her head as they went into the dining room. The p  
honor normally went to Caroline. She met her sister’s eyes briefly. She  
er. Not recognize the expression that Caroline had. It wasn’t jealousy or anger  
concern, she realized.

Her heart thudded against her chest. She looked down, half expect  
its. She see the heavy beat against the fabric of her dress. But there was nothi  
used to outward signs as she sat across from her brother, their father at the  
t could the table.

Caroline sat on her brother’s other side, diagonal.

pressure It would have been better if that’s all there was. If there were or  
people sitting at the long table. But there, on the end, always sat the n  
of her mother. She was almost a real presence. They never even loo  
re other that direction, as if she might see.

hey are, She didn’t agree with her father about a lot of things, but she ag  
one thing: her mother was weak. If Geneva had a family, if she had cl  
ion that she would never abandon them. Not even for love. That was for sure.

Geoffrey scarfed down the filet mignon, which was made rare, t  
her father preferred. Her sister had cooked the steaks. Geneva had  
charge of the mashed potatoes.

l soft.” She nudged the pink slab on her plate.

felt like “So,” her brother said, eyeing her. “Do they have a nanny or somet  
mile on “They attend school. Surely you remember it, from before you c  
neva.” out.”

An eye roll. “I mean when they’re not at school. Who takes  
them?”

h aside “They take care of themselves,” her father said, his voice tight. “T  
not silly little children who need to be coddled. They are young wom  
ncludes understand their place in the world, who understand their responsibiliti

er hair. Her brother snorted. “Isn’t Geneva eight years old?”

ver her “I’m ten,” I said, offended.

“Your sister Caroline has breasts now. Or haven’t you noticed?”

Geoffrey made a face. “No, I haven’t fucking noticed.”

“Watch your mouth, young man. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, as  
a woman knows her place. Her breasts are for feeding her children.”

ou can “This family is so fucked up,” Geoffrey said.

Her father slammed his fist on the table, making Geneva jump. She placed her gaze on the plate of red meat, ignoring the churning in her stomach. She didn't even glance at her sister in her far-away seat. This close, she could feel his rage. It was waves in an ocean.

"This family," her father said, "is not a right. It's a privilege. Operating to you enjoy when you're over in California with your whores and your cheating. No

head of "It's called a startup, Dad."

"It's a sinkhole, judging from the money I'm pouring into it."

"Personal computing is going to be the future."

Her father waved a hand. "A bunch of foolishness. Made by a bunch of fools."

memory Geoffrey looked away, his jaw clenching.

looked in "Stand up," her father said, gesturing at her.

Geneva pushed back her chair and stood, hiding her tremble. "Yes,

agreed to "State your purpose, loud enough so your brother can hear."

children, "My purpose is to marry well and have children."

Geoffrey didn't even look at her. He didn't look at her father, the way "Christ. You have them trained like little wind-up dolls. It isn't right. It's been in being in this big house with just the two of them. They need a—"

"A what? A mother? They have a mother, for all the good she did. Do you see her out there in California? Do you see her fucking her boyfriend?"

dropped "Yeah, Dad." Geoffrey's voice is brittle. "We see each other all the time and laugh about what a loser you are for getting left behind."

care of Her father's hand shot out. He slapped her brother across the face.

Geoffrey continued facing down as red bloomed on his cheek. They are breathing hard. That was his only movement.

men who "Don't think you can disrespect me, boy. I don't care how old you are." You will obey me under this roof." He takes a bite of steak. "Now, want to talk about your sisters? Or do you want to beg me for the check?"

Her brother was silent in the long seconds that followed, his answer. He wanted the check.

long as Papa gave a satisfied grunt. "Girls, you're dismissed."

I wasted no time carrying my plate to the kitchen, but even so managed to reach the stairs first. When we got upstairs, I passed my room and found

he kept her into hers. I shut the door behind us, holding my breath until the  
ch. She turned all the way.

age like Caroline tossed herself on the bed, letting her head fall over the side  
looked different upside down. "I can't wait until we get out of here."

me that With her body flat on the bed, I could see that my father was right.  
lugs." My sister had gotten breasts.

"I can't wait until we get out of here," I say.

She turned right side up, leaning her elbows on the comforter. "So  
get married and have babies," she says on an eye roll. "Because that's  
much of we're good for."

Her sister had other plans. Bigger plans. She wanted to go to college.  
Papa wouldn't make that easy. She had some ideas about that, but I  
like her. I'm just trying to survive long enough to get out of here.

...sir?" I plopped beside her on the bed. "I want to have my own house.  
family, too."

"No way. I don't want more of this."

either. "It doesn't have to be like that," I said. "It doesn't have to be like  
ht, your parent's marriage. You'll see. If you fall in love, it doesn't have to hurt  
makes everything better."

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her into hers. I shut the door behind us, holding my breath until the knob turned all the way.

Caroline tossed herself on the bed, letting her head fall over the side. She looked different upside down. “I can’t wait until we get out of here.”

With her body flat on the bed, I could see that my father was right.

My sister had gotten breasts.

“I can’t wait until we get out of here,” I say.

She turned right side up, leaning her elbows on the comforter. “So we can get married and have babies,” she says on an eye roll. “Because that’s all we’re good for.”

Her sister had other plans. Bigger plans. She wanted to go to college, but Papa wouldn’t make that easy. She had some ideas about that, but I’m not like her. I’m just trying to survive long enough to get out of here.

I plopped beside her on the bed. “I want to have my own house. And a family, too.”

“No way. I don’t want more of this.”

“It doesn’t have to be like that,” I said. “It doesn’t have to be like our parent’s marriage. You’ll see. If you fall in love, it doesn’t have to hurt. Love makes everything better.”



## CHAPTER ONE

### Eva

**I**'M AT THE eye of the hurricane. It's strangely peaceful, watching everything swirl around me. Peaceful as long as I don't acknowledge the wreck the storm makes of my life.

It's not my family who's making a mess, though.

Not this time.

They're trying to help, but there's no fixing this.

"We bombard them with lawsuits," my brother Leo's saying. "So they can't make a single move, can't write a single word, can't put a single photo."

"I don't know," Sophia says, looking at her phone. "Eva looks good in these photos. She's giving young Elizabeth Taylor hounded press outside a glamorous old world movie premiere vibes."

"Thanks," I say, my tone dry.

It doesn't seem to register in the conversation.

That's the way it's been since this little family meeting started.

"Leverage," Lucian says. "We apply leverage in the right places. Force on very specific pressure points. That's how we get this done. Otherwise why have I spent most of my life acquiring sensitive information on powerful people?"

"I thought it was like a hobby," Sophia says.

Lucian gives her a smirk.

"As much as I appreciate a little well-placed leverage," my father Morelli says, "there are too many players to keep this quiet. The bars are already open."



“Which is why I think we should all go home and have a good sleep,” I say, even though no one’s listening to me. “The PR disaster will be there in the morning.”

“We have to act now,” my mother says, proving that at least someone is hearing me, even if she isn’t respecting my wishes. Her hands wring together in the very picture of maternal panic. “Before it gets any more out of control. Before this turns into an international scandal.”

“The Hughes family is worth a couple hundred billion dollars, Mr. Leo doesn’t pull any punches. But then he never does. “It’s already an international scandal.”

There’s something almost nostalgic about this war room. I preside over everyone’s fair share of them, but usually it was my parents or my siblings who were the subject of scandal. I can reminisce on the times when I was the one standing, the one pacing, the one making decisions. Now I’m seated on a couch while Leo paces. He’s the default next leader now that I’m the cause of the drama. Or more specifically, my fiancé is the cause.

I touch the diamond on my fourth finger, turning the ring around and around. It’s a heavy piece. A family heirloom. A symbol of the wealth and power that has passed down through the Hughes family secrets.

And the way I’m now bound to them as well.

“I don’t know why we don’t just stick with no comment,” I say. “I’ll go through a thousand possible statements, but that always ends up being the best.”

“Listen,” Lucian says. “Elaine has barred me from murdering anyone these days, but I feel sure she’d make an exception for this situation. For me.”

Bryant snorts. “A Constantine.”

Lucian’s dark eyes flash. “She’s a Morelli now.”

My father’s eyebrows rise in silent challenge. It’s an old argument though. One without teeth considering there’s now a grandchild with Constantine blood. And my father, for all his terrible actions, is a decent grandfather. He swaddles his granddaughter in a muslin

decorated with stars and moons. And now he’ll have another grandchild.

I press a hand to my stomach, where I still can’t feel anything.

No bump. No telltale kicks.

There’s the morning sickness, though. Plenty of that.

night's "We do need to worry about the Constantines," my mother says in a soft voice. It quiets the rest of the family. "One in particular. Finn's mother."

Geneva, is a Hughes now, but she was a Constantine before that. A friend of mine knows that after a decades-long stretch of travel she's back at home. She's here together with the Hughes estate right now, advising Finn."

of hand. Sophia shifts, looking uncomfortable. "That did occur to me."

"What occurred to you?" I ask.

tother." The room grows quiet.

ready and I look around the room at my family. Many of my siblings have moved out, but the room is empty of them for various reasons. Mostly related to being overchildren and the fact that it's almost midnight. Bryant and Sarah Morelli were eight children. Lucian, Leo, Sophia, and I are present. Lisbetta is listening from outside the door, banished because she's the youngest. I'm not sure where Tiernan is, and based on some of his past activities, I'm not sure I want to know.

Carter is overseas, like he usually is. And for some, he's been out of communication. That's been worrying Leo, though he doesn't like to say he's concerned for our brother.

It's my father who breaks the taut silence. "They're referring to the possibility that Hughes disavows responsibility for the child."

We can I sit up straighter. "Excuse me?"

being Sophia gives an apologetic grimace. "If there really is a Hughes curse, the fact that there's a child would only add fodder for the tabloids."

anyone "There is no Hughes curse," I say.

I'll call No one meets my eyes. Not even Leo, the traitor.

"I'm serious. It's science, not some mystical malediction."

Sarah Morelli sighs. "You know I've always liked Phineas. I'm not the one who urged you to go out with him that night at the gala. Now I regret it, but I don't know what it's brought down on us."

d with "It's not your fault, Mom."

pretty The door opens. Tiernan sweeps in, wearing a suit and looking a little bit forbidding as usual with his scar and his scowl. "I've discovered the lead. A server at the sandwich shop Eva frequents was suspected based on her switch from deli meat to a vegetarian diet. I've speculated to a friend, who works for an online magazine called Gossip Girl, that she might have some information."

Lucian shakes his head. "We were felled by deli meat. It's a sad

ys, herthe Morellis.”

mother, “The friend, who attends NYU as a Communications major, tailed  
nd youthe Women’s Hospital where she had her prenatal appointment. When  
she’s atFinn enter, he suspected they were there for a pregnancy. He later ve  
with a nurse who works for the doctor’s office.”

“Thank you,” Bryant says, his voice grave.

Tiernan nods. I suppose I should have guessed that he was out ga  
information at the behest of our father. That was his role for yea  
narried, father’s own live-in muscle, with a loyalty that surpassed even bloc  
to theirloyalty of a bastard trying to prove himself. Since then he’s broker  
lli havebecome his own man, but old habits die hard.

stening “Surprisingly thorough journalism for GossipGuy,” Sophia say  
ot sureimpressed.”

I want Lucian gives her a dark look. “We’ll get the nurse fired, obviously  
license revoked. I know I’m in the minority with physical threats, but  
out ofsuit at least.”

o show “I’ll handle the journalist,” Leo says with a dark smile.

“Absolutely not.” I stand up. “There will be no retribution for this.”

to the “Eva,” Leo says, protest plain in his eyes.

“I’m serious. This has gone far enough. Our response? It’s no co

We could hire the most expensive public relations expert in the wor  
rse, thewe have done that, in the past. The same people who advised the Ke  
And guess what the answer is? A hundred thousand dollars later,  
down to no comment.”

“We should at least get her fired,” Leo says, looking frustrated.

I stand up, ready to end this evening. “It’s sweet that you all gathe  
the oneme, that you want to protect me, but I don’t need protecting. I’m fine.”  
t. Lookhand to my stomach. “And my baby is fine, free from any fake family  
That’s the most important thing. Right?”

“Of course,” my mother says, but there’s still worry in her gree  
king asHer red hair and fair skin reflect her Irish heritage. She’s the only o  
ak,” hedoesn’t have the Morelli black hair and dark eyes in the room.

ents for “What good would it do to take vengeance on some poor deli work  
an. She “Vengeance is its own reward.” This from Lucian.

pGuy.” “Well, I refuse. And I insist that none of you do it either.” I take  
day forbreath. “And as for Finn, I’m one hundred percent sure that he’s g

claim the baby. He has his faults, but he takes care of his responsibilities. I sweep from the room following that statement, startling Liza. She saw me stumble backward, her cheeks red from getting caught. "Eva," she said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," I murmur. "But you should go to bed."

Leo follows me into the hallway, closing the door on the lingering conversation in the drawing room. "Scram," he tells our youngest sisters, my youngest without affection. He waits until she rolls her eyes and heads upstairs. "Speaking again. "Are you so sure of Hughes?"

"Yes."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"I'm not sure."

His expression darkens. "And he ghosted you?"

"He didn't ghost me. It's only been a few hours since the news of a civil war. He's probably busy. You know, salvaging the stock and reputation of a massive global corporation. Protecting his brother and parents from the war. You know, small little errands."

"You should be the most important thing in his life."

"He has a lot of responsibilities. And like I said, he takes them seriously."

"I would let everything burn for Haley."

That makes me smile. "But here you are, at one a.m., at your parents' mansion, to help your sister in this hellfire broth she's found herself in."

"That's different. She's safe at home with our child. And our sister's team."

"Finn knows I can take care of myself."

"That's not the point. You shouldn't have to."

"Let's argue gender norms another day, brother mine." The truth is, I made me uncomfortable that Finn hasn't texted me back. Not because he's afraid of me, but because I'm worried about him. This secret has been the scaffolding of his life for so long. I've been trained for it. Almost brainwashed into it. What is he feeling now that the secret has been destroyed? "Besides, where's Daphne? I'm surprised she hasn't texted me."

Leo looks away, seeming guilty. "I haven't told her."

"Oh. But you called everyone else here."

He sighs. "She's married to Emerson. And Emerson's brother Wil-

es.” for Hughes.”

zy who     Outrage makes my throat tight. “So what? She’s a Morelli. She  
: gasps.never do or say anything to harm me, Leo. You should know better  
that.”

“Stand down,” he says, his voice dry. “It’s not that I question  
um ofloyalty. I knew she would do anything for this family. I also knew s  
ter, notinvited to a cookout on the beach with her husband’s brother tonig  
; beforementioned it in a text when she invited Haley to join them. I didn’t w  
to feel like she had to choose.”

“She would have chosen us,” I say, challenge in my voice.

“I know,” he says with a sigh. “But for just one more night she  
have to.”

“Daphne’s a grown woman.”

broke.     “I know that.” A longer sigh. “Maybe I’m still coming to terms with  
on of a     It will probably be a lifelong struggle. It’s not ordinary  
e press.protectiveness that guides him. Leo and I stood in for our parents wh  
were trapped in their cycle of drama and abuse. We raised our y  
siblings, and it’s hard to let go of that mantle.

m very     “Everything is going to be okay,” I say.

My brother smiles, a little sad. “You were always the one who  
together. The one who fixed everything. It kills me that I can’t fix  
parents’ you.”

.”     “Nothing is broken,” I say, though it feels like a lie on my tongue  
securityand I are stronger than ever. This won’t change anything.”

He shakes his head. “I wish I could believe you.”

I wish that, too. “Trust me.”

s it has     “Finn better do right by you, or else I will lift Elaine’s murder ban.  
: I wantthe gold and diamonds on the ring. It loops around my finger, prope  
d aboutmy thumb. “But more importantly, it won’t be necessary. Finn Hugh  
He wascome out on top.”

hat it’s     I know how Leo thinks, how he works.

exted.”     For him, love is a massive, violent act. It’s burning the world down

With me and Finn, it’s quieter. It’s different, even if I wish it m  
louder.

I works     I get into the black Suburban with a member of close securit

professional driver takes me back into the city, to my loft in Tribeca. /  
wouldentire time, my phone is silent.

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No texts.

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professional driver takes me back into the city, to my loft in Tribeca. And the entire time, my phone is silent.

No calls from Finn.

No texts.

Nothing.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Finn

*WHY DOES IT say retirement on the sign? I'm not retiring. I'm not old for that. I have work to do. I wasn't finished. Where is my secretary? is my office?*

The CEO suite at the top of the Hughes Tower is designed to impress at least for a visitor. Only once you spend more time there would you learn about the back rooms—the lounge area, the restroom with shower, the bedroom to grab a few hours of sleep when pulling an all-nighter. There's even a small workout room with weights and a Peloton for the CEO to get a sweat without his subordinates looking on.

What is the reason for the elaborate, luxurious suite?

Convenience, certainly. A busy CEO of a multi-billion-dollar conglomerate doesn't have time for a commute. Or even a trip down the elevators to the company gym on the 11th floor.

There's another reason. It's not a good look for the CEO to be seen puffing alongside his workers. It might be democratic, but a corporation isn't a democracy.

It's a dictatorship. A benevolent one, sure. But a dictatorship nonetheless.

That's never been clearer than right now, as we discuss the fate of the company—its divisions, its subsidiaries, its hundreds of thousands of employees—from the top floor.

My father sits behind his desk, sorting through papers that my secretary found from somewhere. The discard bin next to the copy machine, positioned

He studies a graph, his brow furrowed. He's still wearing his suit



earlier today. From his retirement party. Well, he's fully retired now.

No chance of coming back from that.

*What's going on here? Is this some kind of episode?*

*I just dealt with this with my Dad. Alzheimer's. Or dementia.*

*How long has he been like this? How long, Finn?*

My secretary was already aware of the situation. She's one of the thirty people—lawyers, doctors, nurses, and family members who know about the situation. She patiently hands him sheets, some of which he signs and hands back.

"Thank you, Ilsa," I say quietly.

She gives me a gentle smile. "It's all right, Mr. Hughes. People are a bit confused right now, but you've always shepherded us well. Everyone will remember that."

I wish I had her faith. Or maybe I don't.

As awful as this disaster is, there's a terrible relief as well.

That I don't have to hide any longer.

The hum of conversation rises to a fever pitch, and I turn away from the group. There's a moment of silence.

I should be with Eva.

That certainty sits in my bones. I should be with her, helping her through this, or at least sitting with her in silence if I can't make it better. I need space for this. For her, and also for me. She's where I belong, my true home. Except that I can't.

I'm supposed to be this other person, this crisis-managing CEO.

Seated at a small conference table are five people, all people who have been involved about the situation before today. The company's head of counsel

Moreland, holds court. She's relatively young for her position, at forty, but ambitious and highly competent. I promoted her a few years ago. Her family lawyer, Douglas Karl, is an older man with white hair and a neatly trimmed white beard. He was hired by my father, which means his job was to wait for an information leak.

"We always knew this would happen," Karl says. "Eventually."

"There are protections in place." This from Moreland. "I've possibly spoken with the FTC, but we have a bigger problem. A much bigger problem than legal."

"The court of public opinion," says Caitlyn Laurie.

She's one of life's great ironies. A more brusque and occasionally outright rude person you'll never meet, but somehow she excels at her job as the Chief Communications Officer. She knows what the public is thinking before they do. And she has a fantastic sense of how to deal with them in order to get the goodwill and support we want.

Which means that if she's worried, we're in big trouble.

I should be fully focused on this, but my heart beats a different sort of rhythm. I force myself to put my phone in my pocket, silent after the flood of notifications—stockholders, press, and reporters all clamoring for a response—and force myself to focus.

I'm used to denying myself what I really want, anyway.

Laurie continues, "If we had controlled the flow of information, we would have had a chance in hell. Now anything we say is going to look like a lack of control. Which it is."

She knows as well as I do why we never came out with a statement. In fact she even supported the idea, knowing the backlash would be inevitable.

"What do you recommend now?" I ask, my voice even.

She sighs. "We claim that he had sporadic episodes. Rare episodes. Emphasis on rare. And that he made arrangements to step down as soon as we knew, et cetera, et cetera. That you've been beside him at the helm."

"That won't be enough to allay fears." That's Moreland.

Karl shakes his head. "He's still younger than most senators. If they're going to doubt him, they would have to doubt everyone in charge."

"It's easier when they have a face to blame."

Everyone looks at me, because I'm the face to blame. Somehow, despite only doing what my father demanded, despite holding the company together for over a decade, despite higher profits and bonuses than ever before. Ouris my fault.

Laurie studies me, her shrewd eyes narrowed. "Naturally the largest primary major deals will be recast with this information. That new development in Tokyo. The launch of the home automation brand. The acquisition of the venture capital fund."

"Summit," I say. "The owner, Will Leblanc, has some trouble with corporate life. He's used to being in charge and hasn't figured out how to make a difference here. Yet. It's common to have an adjustment period, sure he'd come around, but it could be a problem."

sionally “You think he’s going to challenge the acquisition?” Moreland asks.  
r job as “I would be surprised if he didn’t call his lawyer before he l  
hinkingbuilding.”

hem in He was at the retirement party. He had a front-row seat to the dram

He’s also the brother-in-law of Eva, though I’m not supposed  
thinking about her. She’s what I really want, my greatest desire, w  
ig. *Eva*, proof that I can’t have her. Didn’t I learn that lesson from my father?  
ie floodhe show me how it would end?

a quote, *I’m late for my meeting. I don’t know who the hell you people are.*  
*is supposed to be here. Phineas. Where the hell is he? What did you*  
*do with him?*

e might “Fuck,” Laurie says.

damage “But we’re covered,” Karl argues. “Any agreement Phineas broke  
signed is binding. He’s had Power of Attorney since he was a teenager  
ent. In “That’s precisely the kind of conspiracy theory bullshit that w  
table. want to have to tell the public,” Laurie says, her voice grim.

Moreland shifts, uncomfortable. “We’d win in a court of law, but  
isodes.with Laurie. If it gets that far, we’re already screwed. Discovery alone  
m as hebe a bloodbath.

Laurie snorts. “And a deposition? Where opposing counsel is all  
ask any questions that are even remotely relevant? We’re going to get  
they’rewithout lube.”

“I would say Leblanc has enough grounds to bring it to trial.”

“Which means that even if the verdict goes in our favor, we’re fi  
despiteLaurie raises her eyebrows in cool challenge. “Do you think you ca  
orationLeblanc in line?”

er, this Maybe. I could probably handle someone like him—half temp  
ambition.

I thought he could be a huge asset to Hughes Financial Services  
nent inthink so, but first he would have to figure out how to work within th  
of thatsystem. He’d gone from being a lone cowboy to working in a massive

A learning curve was natural. Assuming he wanted to learn.

This situation is infinitely more complicated, though.

Because he’s family. Sort of.

His brother is married to Daphne Morelli, the younger sister o  
Which means any conflict between us can get personal, real fast. What

s. puts pressure on his brother to make the deal go away? What if this s left the puts strain between Eva and her sister?

Eva's going to be punished enough, being with a man like me.

ia. "What if we don't argue with Leblanc?" I offer, as casual as l to beplaying devil's advocate. "What if we give him back Summit the sar hich iswe found them?"

' Didn't "And validate every doubt in the public's mind about this con leadership? Absolutely fucking not. We keep them at all costs."

*My son* There's murmuring of agreement around the table.

*people* I push away from the table and stand at the floor-to-ceiling wi where dusk has already settled over the city. This is a real dumpster f like Karl said, we always knew it would come to this. Secrets have a red andcoming out.

:" Even if it wasn't happening now, they would know eventually. O e don'tcurse took me. Once the curse takes Hemingway. Without heirs the cc would pass out of our family's hands. And eventually someone I agreewhisper.

e would Whispers become shouts.

Press has been camped outside the Hughes Tower for hours. I i owed tothey'll be there for days, for weeks. Even months. The story is worth i fucked a snapshot of me looking harried. Or worse, a photo of my father. I back where he's now coloring on a graph of the Hughes stock values this angle the drawing looks like an elephant.

ucked." A whisper of anger moves through me.

m keep The truth is that I'm pissed. I'm pissed that my father made a decisions, back when I was still a child. I'm pissed that he extracte er, halfpromises that I'm honor-bound to keep, when I was too young t understand the implications.

s. I still The anger is pointless, of course. It's pointless toward a man his newcurrently drawing a pink elephant and a blue palm tree and a green s ranch. dry erase markers.

My phone vibrates. I look down and open the messages on my pho  
Are you okay?

Eva has sent me a handful of texts since the news broke, mostly a of Eva.I'm okay and if there's anything she can do. She's a better woman : if Willdeserve, but somehow she's mine.

situation Unless she leaves you, the same way your mother left your father.

I wouldn't blame her, though. It would be easier if she did. The caregiver is thankless, the embodiment of constant grief. Then again, if I'm know with my mind is different from what I yearn for with my heart.

ne way And what I yearn for is... a future.

A future with Eva and the unborn child she carries.

pany's No, I'm not okay. But I don't want to tell her and make her worry promised myself that I wouldn't lie to her. That's the one thing she's c my fiancée. The truth.

indows, "At least they're only looking as far as Daniel." Laurie speaks fire, but group, but I can hear her from here. "If we can portray Phineas as a way of enough leader, we can look forward to a short, intense firestorm follo relative peace. And he has the reputation and good business sense t nce the people confident in his abilities."

ompany "No one will know about the curse." This from Karl, who sounds h would "And now that Phineas has a child coming, we'll be able to seamless it to the next generation."

Seamless. That's one word for it, the sleepless nights, the weigh magineworld on my shoulders when I should have been more focused on mak it. Even with a cheerleader.

glance Of course, I do have an heir. The beautiful Eva Morelli carri s. From around inside her. He'll no doubt be afflicted by the same curse, despi she thinks and hopes. But no matter what I won't raise him the way raised. "He'll be free to choose his profession," I say to the room ll the returning. It's a promise to them as well as to me. And Eva. "Free to cho d the life. Free to choose his secrets, without worrying about keeping mine."

o fully There's a knock on the door.

The temperature of the room noticeably cools. Everyone here w who's into the situation. Whoever's coming now? Probably wasn't, which un with they're experiencing the same shock and anger that everyone is.

Moreland calls for the person to enter.

ne. Alex Wong enters. He's been my CIO, the newest member of the C And the most hotheaded. Just what this party needs. He surveys th skinning if with an accusatory look. "I see who should be named on the lawsuit than I you are complicit."

The accusation makes the room feel electric.

“This is a private meeting,” Moreland says, her voice businesslike. Wong snorts. “I’m here in my official capacity as Chief Information Officer. Trust me, I’ve considered resigning. I’ve written the draft resignation letter, but... for reasons beyond my comprehension, I’m still here. It means I have to do my fiduciary duty.”

Laurie gives him a dark look. “Which is?”

“To make sure you’ve seen what’s on the news.”

Moreland waves her hand. “What do you think we’ve been discussing?”

“Not about Hughes.” Wong meets my gaze, looking angry but conflicted. “Not about Daniel Hughes, the former CEO of Hughes Industries. This is about Phineas.”

There’s a collective silent shock. Fuck.

“What about me?” I manage to ask, sounding unconcerned.

Wong takes a deep breath. “They’re saying that Daniel’s condition is hereditary. That you have it, too. That your grandfather did, too. Sorry, but you’ve been handcalled the Hughes curse.”

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## CHAPTER THREE

### Finn

**T**HERE'S A PARTICULAR quiet at four in the morning.

Even the nightclub scene sleeps now.

Everyone has made their way into their beds—or into someone's bed.

An eerie dark hangs above the skyscrapers. A few intrepid reporters camped behind the Hughes building. They rush out of their folding chairs, vans, cameras flashing in my rearview mirror.

And then nothing.

It's too late for most people. Too early for just about everyone.

Somewhere, surely, bakers make bread. Housekeepers fold sheets, and doctors tend to the sick. But they are absent from the streets. I pass by black windows. The streets are slick with rain I don't remember falling maybe that's just dew. The same drops that would have dotted blades of grass, had there been any greenery in sight. Instead it coats concrete and glass. It makes the road glitter in my headlights.

I don't really have a plan when I leave Hughes Industries.

Generally speaking I should probably go home. Dad is asleep. He has been sending me text updates since I brought him home this afternoon. I'd hated leaving him, but the office was in an uproar. They needed my leadership.

Unfortunately, they were stuck with me.

I didn't want to be there any more than they wanted me there, but I had to play our parts. That's the irony of a birthright. It's a gift. I can't turn down.



No doubt my mother has waited up for me.

Hemingway, too.

I should go home to reassure them... of what? That the fallout will be a huge fucking deal? I can't do that. It would be a lie, because it's not a deal.

And you know what? It should be.

We lied.

Why shouldn't we take responsibility for that?

Why shouldn't we apologize?

That's what we teach children, as young as kindergarten and preschool: you lie, say you're sorry. If you make a mistake, apologize.

Then we grow up, and every word has to be parsed by the legal department.

Someone else's Not to mention Public Relations.

Every move we make is about image. The bullshit about shareholders and employers is just a modern-day version of noblesse oblige.

The reality is simpler.

We covered up the Hughes curse to hide our own shame.

To cower from our own mortality.

Well, here it is. I'm driving through the streets of New York City. Bugatti. No lawyers. No C-level executives. Not even family with me.

If I were to die now, I'd die alone.

My hands turn the steering wheel. I glide forward and brake at red lights and stop at red lights, but it doesn't take me out to Bishop's Landing. Instead I stop in Tribeca, in the garage of an old building. The doorman gives me a nod.

There's no flash of recognition. No glee that he'll have a story to tell. No satisfaction at seeing someone powerful brought low. Which probably means he didn't have a chance to watch the news before he hit the night

evening. I use the key that Eva gave me to let myself in, feeling like a thief who needed a criminal. A fucking imposter. That's what I am, pretending to be a man who deserves a woman like her.

Moonlight through the tall windows makes exaggerated shadows on her elaborate décor. Her aunt's décor. Most people would accept that you would have a million-dollar loft as inheritance. And most people would have redecorated by now. I don't even think it's her taste, but she keeps it this way to preserve her aunt's legacy.

Birthright. It comes in many forms: money or property or secrets.  
And we're stuck with it, whether we like it or not.

ouldn't The pungent scent of soil emanates from a corner table. A terrarium  
is a bigblown glass jar is in the middle of assembly, with little piles of gravel  
out beside a bowl of moss. A pastel-colored gnome waits patient  
placement.

Eva can't help taking care of everything and everyone.

It's her strength.

And her weakness.

chool. If Even her hobbies are about creating sanctuary.

I leave my briefcase, my wallet, and my keys beside the gnome.

e legal Her bedroom is in the back, away from the windows. Bric-a-brac on  
walls form a room, but they don't reach the ceiling of the loft. In  
bedroom, there are no decorations. No polka dot giraffes and retr  
lers and signs. Only a bed with white sheets.

A wild spill of black hair is a sharp contrast against the silk.

It makes my chest squeeze.

I undress down to my briefs and climb into bed, pulling her warm  
close. She shifts, drowsy, murmuring something. "Shh," I say, my voi  
ity in a "Keep sleeping."

now. For a moment, it works.

She rests in my arms, sleepy and still. I breathe her in. But it can  
all the Nothing ever does. She stretches, her body lithe against mine. Her  
end up womanly scent makes my cock hard, but it's more than that. It ma  
e a chest feel full. What kind of emotion is that? Love?

o tell or She gives a slow, drowsy blink. "Finn?"

oly just "I'm sorry."

it shift. "Don't... be." She turns in my embrace, her movements languid  
hief. "Are you okay? I called you, but you didn't answer."

an who "I'm a bastard." She must have been afraid when the reporters c  
her outside her work. Anyone would have been. The fact that she's  
s from strong enough to face down the fucking paparazzi doesn't me  
a two-acceptable.

corated I want to rage at them for even speaking to her, for upsetting her.

ay. She I want to rage at her, but somehow we're in this polite, c  
conversation.

She sits up. Her face is completely in shadow. I can only guess her expression. I can only imagine her beautiful eyes and gorgeous hair. I can't see her hair and the curve of her waist. "Phineas Galileo Hughes was so worried about you. How dare you keep me waiting? I almost came to your office."

"You and half the employees at Hughes Industries. There would have been a line."

"It wouldn't have stopped me."

A faint smile touches my lips. It probably wouldn't have stopped me. And I would have paid a lot of money to see Eva Morelli take on Alexander and Caitlyn Laurie. It would almost be worth it, but I can't let her fight covered battles.

Bad enough that she's been injured because of them.

My smile fades. "I'm sorry. I could leave. Say the word, and I'll go." Her arms tighten around me. "Don't."

"Then at least we can talk about this." Even though for me, there's nothing to discuss. Our ending was written in the stars a long time ago. I'll give her this, because it's the only thing I can. She can rail at me all day long. It isn't what you signed up for."

She pulls back. Her eyes are dark pools of liquid, deeper than the night sky. "This is exactly what I signed up for. The hard times along with the good times. What do you think marriage is?"

"We aren't married yet."

"A technicality."

"An important one when it comes to spousal privilege."

She grows still. "It won't come to a court trial."

"There are people already calling the attorney general and FTC. Are you want one?"

"They can keep waiting," she says, as fierce as a lioness. "You didn't do anything illegal. Or anything unethical, for that matter. You have a right to your privacy. So does your father, especially when it comes to his medical condition. How am I the only one who's heard of HIPPA?"

I would have loved to see her face off against Heidi Moreland. The outcome of the case doesn't matter. Or whether there even is a case. As long as the public sees the Hughes family as tainted, shares will fall. They can't have."

at her “Yes,” she says, her voice dry. “Your net worth fell a few billion  
smile today. But don’t worry, darling. I have enough money to keep you  
ighes. I and Bugattis.”

showed I smile in the darkness. The Hughes fortune may have lost a few  
but we have several more billion in less liquid assets. Which mean  
ld have afford my own Bugattis, but I still wouldn’t mind being kept by this  
“Should I have dinner on the table when you get home? Maybe I can  
bake.”

ed her. “I do love a devil’s food cake.”

Wong “I know.”

ght my She gives a feminine snort. “How?”

“It was served as the Morelli Christmas Gala cake a few years ago.

“Two years ago,” she says, sounding confused. “Why would yo  
).” remember that?”

“Normally you don’t eat much at the galas. You’re always busy v  
there’s the room, smiling and laughing and talking to people. Making them  
go. But home, which is quite a feat in the gilded ballroom in the mansion. If yo  
: “This take a slice of cake off a tray, it’s to hand it to someone’s great aunt. I  
night you had not one but two slices.”

ie earth She pulls all the way back, almost sitting up. “How would you  
with the that?”

“Because I was there. I noticed you. I always noticed you.”

Incredulous. “Why?”

Now I’m the one incredulous. I lift myself on my elbow. “What  
do you mean—why? Because you’re fucking gorgeous. And I’m a ma

“But you never acted like you were interested in me.”

l. They I fall back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. “Because it could n  
anywhere.”

dn’t do She brings my hand to her stomach, which is still almost flat. I  
right to thumb over lace, enthralled by the warmth of her. The miracle of her.  
nedical out you were wrong.”

“Turns out I was wrong,” I agree softly, wrapping my hand arou  
l. “The waist and pulling her until she’s straddling me. The ends of her lo  
As soon tickle my chest. I reach behind her neck and tug. Then her lips are on  
already should surrender this moment, but even now, underneath her, I take  
claim her with my lips, my tongue, my teeth.

dollars     *I was wrong when I thought I couldn't have you.*

in suits     *I was wrong when I thought I could ever give you up.*

Lying to the press. Keeping my family secrets. Running a billion-dollar company. I did those things for my father. And for his own sake I can't take responsibility, which involved pretending for the sake of the stock market. None of that was for me, but this? Now?

learn to     This kiss is entirely selfish. I touch my lips to hers because I can. I want her. Because she tastes like memory, and I never want to forget.

“Finn,” she says, pulling back to look at me. “Are you okay? Really?”

I touch two fingers to the side of her neck. And then lower, my hand running between her breasts. Down to her stomach, which feels almost as if it ever was.

you even     Barely even a bump, but somewhere inside her is a child. Our child. “Of course I am.”

working     “Finn,” she says, exasperated, annoyed. Good. She should see how I feel about the bastard she has in me. She should leave me, the way my own mother told me to.

you even     “Rough day at the office,” I say, my tone saying *business as usual*.

But that     “I care about you.”

“You care about me,” I ask, gently mocking. “Because you’re a little wife. Dutiful. Pliant.” As if to underscore that fact I reach between her legs. No panties. She’s warm. Wet. I was teasing her, perhaps, but it’s the truth. “I want to take it out on you, and you don’t mind. Do you?”

She melts beneath my touch, spreading her legs so I can reach her. What did I do to deserve her? That’s simple. Nothing. Eva isn’t the woman a man could earn. She’s a gift.

“Shh,” she says. “It’s okay. I’m here. I’m yours.”

ever go     That’s when I realize I’m making sounds. Rough sounds. Groans against her, pushing my cock against her thigh. Grunts, like a cavewoman. Tearing into her nightgown like an animal. And what’s worse, I can’t stop. I used to be a polished, inquisitive lover. All that’s gone is the veneer, stripped away.

and her     All that’s left is pure, stark need.

ng hair  
mine. I  
over. I

*I was wrong when I thought I couldn't have you.*

*I was wrong when I thought I could ever give you up.*

Lying to the press. Keeping my family secrets. Running Hughes Industries. I did those things for my father. And for his own form of responsibility, which involved pretending for the sake of the stock market. None of that was for me, but this? Now?

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That’s when I realize I’m making sounds. Rough sounds. Groans as I rut against her, pushing my cock against her thigh. Grunts, like a fucking caveman. Tearing into her nightgown like an animal. And what’s worse, I can’t stop. I used to be a polished, inquisitive lover. All that’s gone. The veneer, stripped away.

All that’s left is pure, stark need.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Finn

I SHOULD CONTINUE the politeness the way it started, all solicitous and quiet concern. I should do that but something in me is fracturing. I am even gentle as I flip her over so that she's hugging the plush mattress.

Her plump ass rises in a sight that's both erotic and profound.

Usually I like her facing me. I like her touching me.

But the way I'm feeling right now, I want her to lie submissive and mount her. I push her legs further apart with my knees. My hands are on her hips, holding her steady.

She grips the sheet, her knuckles white from how tight she's holding it.

From this angle I can only see a heavy fall of dark hair and the bare curve of her profile.

Part of me misses the eye contact, but maybe I need her turned away from me to see how roughly I'm going to use her. Maybe I can't let her see me losing control.

My cock notches against her sex.

I should make sure she's more ready. With my hands. With my mouth. Normally I'd do that, but right now I can't wait. I slide home. Her muscles clench around my cock. She gasps as her entire body stiffens.

In apology I reach beneath her and find her clit.

"Finn."

It's almost enough. Almost enough to hold myself inside her, to keep thrusting, without fucking. Letting the sweet pulses of her climax carry me. Orgasm runs through her like an electric current. She collapses against me, trapping my hand. So I keep toying with that pearl. She jerks in

Too sensitive. Well, too fucking bad.

“Sorry,” I say, though there’s no remorse in my voice. No r anywhere in my body. It would be physically impossible to wish for a but this, her pussy warm and welcoming and tight. “This is what you up for, remember? To have me.” I push against her, making her gas hold.” A pinch of her clit has her clenching around me, a velvet fist.

“Please,” she says, begging.

It’s not entirely clear whether she’s begging me to make her come Or whether she’s begging me to stop. I’m afraid to ask for clarif because I’m not sure I could stop. The basest part of me has take Mine, it says.

ess and I bite down where her neck meets her shoulder. She bucks bene l’m not but it doesn’t dislodge my cock. I’m too deep inside her now. I never leave.

“Please,” she gasps out. “Please. More.”

I drop my forehead to her back. “You’re a goddamn miracle.”

while I She pushes her ass back, tempting me. “It hurts.”  
: on her It hurts. In my chest, mostly. In my cock, too. I reach down fa where my body joins hers. I force two fingers inside her pussy, ever ig on. cock remains lodged inside her. It’s an incredibly tight fit, my cock a est hintfingers. Enough that she pants as I stretch her sensitive skin, but ev she doesn’t push me away. It strikes me that she would let me do anyt ay—for her. I could tie her up. I could share her. I could make her my ke this, plaything, but here’s the irony. My deepest fantasy is to make her my v

The heel of my palm pushes on her clit. My fingertips brush ag sensitive place inside her. She comes in a hard shudder and keening s mouth. hold her tight through the waves, gritting my teeth against the need to r inner Then she collapses again.

I pull out, my cock still hard and glistening with desire.

Fuck, it’s hard to leave that warmth.

The only way I can do it is because I know I’ll come back. Al without That’s how long I plan to use this woman. That’s how long I’m g ess me. make her do her wifely duty, even though we aren’t really married ye inst the her over, revealing glorious breasts made glistening with exertion. F protest. are splayed in satiated abandon. If only I was done with her. If only.

“Finn,” she says, breathless and tragic.



We should talk about what happened.

emorse As if I'd waste time on empty words and broken promises, with nothing could have this.

signed I take my cock into my fist, stroking slow and long, reminding sp. "To that I have a long time. Not forever. God, not that. But I have hours and

And maybe tomorrow. How many tomorrows after that? It doesn't good to dwell. "Here," I say, touching her flushed and swollen pussy. e again. what I want to do next. Taste you. Make you moan. Feel you come ication, tongue. I especially want the part where you squirm away because n over. much, but I don't let you."

Her cheeks flush. "But I already came."

ath me, That makes me laugh, though it sounds faintly despairing. "This i want to you, sweetheart. I thought you'd figure that out. This is for me, taste hearing you beg. And then? Hmm. If I make you come again... and a and again... you'll beg for me to stop, won't you? You'll need a mo breathe, so I think I'll use that time to fuck those pretty breasts."

Her eyes are wide. I'm not usually so crude. Experimental, sure. I rther to But always with care and respect and a measure of restraint. There's s i as my holding me back now.

nd two I pinch her nipple between my thumb and forefinger. "You'll let en then that, won't you? You'll let me straddle you and push my big, throbbi hing to between your breasts, you'll let me press them together so you can tak sexual heaven, won't you?"

wife. She looks at me with those gorgeous doe eyes, flustered and tur gainst a "Yes. Maybe."

ound. I My smile feels cruel. "Let's find out how you feel about it."

come. I push between her legs and find her wet. It's incriminating, that want. She's so slick for the idea of my cock between her breasts. ' something demeaning about using her that way, but there's sor powerless, too. As if I can't even hold myself back from rutting agai l night. Like her breasts are my sexual lodestone.

oing to "Eva Honorata Morelli," I say, half taunting, half reverent. "I thi t. I turn love this."

ler legs I press my face against her sex, breathing her in. Woman. Spice.

A long lick from the bottom to the top. She squirms right off the be God, this is fun. Not in the charming way of illegal gambling o

underground fights. Those are thrills. This is a bone-deep satisfaction when I worry at her clit with my tongue. She bucks away from me, but I've planned for that. I have my forearm over her, keeping her pinned, holding myself steady for my licks.

tonight. I make her come once and then twice.

do any I make her come a third time, while she fills the room with her cries. "That's And then I'm climbing over her, straddling her. Pushing myself on my back between her breasts. Tweaking her nipples so her eyes glaze over. It's too late for one stroke, two, and then I'm coming in long white ropes across her perfectly pale skin, a slash of cum across her plump red lips.

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I make her come once and then twice.

I make her come a third time, while she fills the room with her cries.

And then I'm climbing over her, straddling her. Pushing my cock between her breasts. Tweaking her nipples so her eyes glaze over. It only takes one stroke, two, and then I'm coming in long white ropes across her perfectly pale skin, a slash of cum across her plump red lips.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Eva

**I** WAKE UP full of contentment.

There are a million reasons to be worried right now, from the PR to the financial ramifications with Hughes Industries. But I can't be too worried with the abrasions from Finn's scruff still stinging my breasts.

I'm warmed by him, both inside and out. Sated. Replete.

There's a new coolness. That's what wakes me.

Finn's body had wrapped around me for a deep slumber, but now I feel only the cool silkiness of the sheets. What the hell? With my eyes still closed, I reach out my hand. Groping fingers touch the still-warm bed. I peek my eyes open.

Finn sits at the edge, revealing the hard line of his back.

It's a relaxed position, the kind someone might use to ponder the world, but nothing about him is relaxed. Every muscle looks taut. The air crackles with tension. It was more than the temperature that woke me. It was his presence.

He'd been different last night, more raw. More himself, I think.

Our sex has always felt incredible, but it was also... considerate. Gentle. Feminist sex. What happened last night was filthy. I lost count of the number of times he woke me up and all the ways he used me. I'm sure he used me in secret places.

"Hey," I say, my voice a little hoarse.

He looks back, hazel eyes dark. "Go back to sleep."

I glance at the clock. Five o'clock in the morning. "Come with me."

A suggestion of a smile. "Can't."

"Duty calls?"

“Something like that.”

“You should let my family help. They’ve weathered scandal.”

“Not like this.”

No, not like this. Our companies are privately held, for one thing we don’t have shareholders to answer to. The Morellis also have a reputation for scandal, so it’s easy enough to handle one more. The Hughes family is held in respect as above reproach. They’re more than economic leaders. They’re moral leaders, which makes the fall that much further.

Part of me wants to soothe him however I can, but I also know better than to offer false platitudes. People are freaking out, and it’s only going to get worse. Everyone will want a piece of him. The media. His enemies. Even his friends.

disaster He runs a hand through his hair. “I failed him.”

so upset “Your father?”

“This was what he asked of me. What I promised him. That I would protect the world from knowing his secret, and now... And now there’s no way to bottle it back up.”

there’s My heart thuds at the thought of a little boy tasked with such a closed promise. Like Atlas, carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, one eye legacy was both a gift and a millstone. “Maybe... maybe it’s a good idea. Maybe you can set down the promise now.”

His shoulders twitch as if he’s testing the weight on them. “And it doesn’t matter because he won’t know the difference? But I know the difference.”

crackles It would matter to an honorable man. That’s Finn. “People can make mistakes.”

A snort.

Playful “I don’t mean you. I mean him. He shouldn’t have asked that of you.”

of the Finn shook his head, not allowing me to absolve him of guilt. “You’re going to be hell to pay the next few months. And he’s not going to take the brunt of it. You are.”

I sit up in bed, pulling the lace-edged sheets to cover my breasts. “Fine.”

” His gaze dips low. Desire flushes his cheeks. “You’re strong enough to take whatever I give you, aren’t you?” he asks, his voice gone thick.

“Is that what last night was? Some kind of test?”

Erotic memories hover in the air between us, a sensual specter. It

me blush even as he holds my direct gaze. “No, sweetheart. I’m done like I can walk away from this.”

My heart squeezes in both pleasure and pain.

ng. We He may be staying with me, but part of him still resists it. He gives precedence to the Hughes curse than I do, but at least he’s here. I suppose I can have for now. And for as long as we have. I’ll show him that I’ll prove the curse wrong, day by day.

“Come back to bed,” I say.

ter than His gaze darkens. “I’d love to, but we have a big meeting at six.”  
; to get I groan. “I have a busy day at the fund, too. Oh, remember to bring a tux for the Morelli Fund Gala. It’s black tie, naturally.”

He leans across the bed and kisses me. It starts off small and quick, turns long. And marauding, his lips moving over my cheek and down my neck until I’m breathing hard. He pulls back and looks me in the eye. “I’ll keep talking, if we’re seen together.”

way to They would do more than talk.

The press will shout questions as we go inside. Most people will be looking for a big but some may take surreptitious photos and videos while we’re eating. His anonymous waitress or busboy will end up giving a quote to the press, speculating that we were worried or fighting.

“Let them talk,” I say, lifting my chin.

doesn’t “Fuck,” he mutters, kissing me again.

ce.” “What?” I ask, panting against his lips.

1 make “I really do have to go, or I would show you what I think of that by my defiance.”

u.” My body pulses with reminders, pleasantly tired muscles ready to go again. “Go to your meeting, then. Show them who’s boss, Phineas. There’s Hughes.”

ear the “The gala is about celebrating you,” he says. “I don’t want to go away from that.”

s. “I’m “Listen. We tried it your way. Or more specifically, your father’s way didn’t work. Now let’s try it the Morelli way. Brazen it out. Show them that I don’t care.”

There’s uncertainty, but he nods. “Fine, then. A tux. The gala.”

“Really?” I can’t hide my surprise.

1 makes He turns back. “You didn’t think I’d come?”

e acting     “I didn’t think you’d let me help. You’re always so self-contained that you can handle anything. Even when you told me about the case it was only information. You didn’t really let me in. But I can help. I want to be more

es more     A pause. Then a nod. “Okay, we brazen it out.”

e that’s     I flop back onto the mattress while he stands up. There’s one more thing it can’t do: sleep in my future before I have to get dressed. But first I get to see a show of Finn’s bare, muscular backside. He’s lean and hard packed, muscle and tightly-leashed energy.

                  Control matters more to him than brute strength.

ng your     He stretches in the orange-tinged dawn, unselfconscious.

                  A few steps across hardwood floors.

sting. It     Then he opens a connecting door, steps out of the room, and comes down behind him.

‘People     I stare at the door, stunned. A myriad of emotions run through me, more alarming than the last. Surprise. Fear. Grief. This isn’t the first time he’s slept over at my loft. There’s a routine. When he gets up from the bed, the first place he goes is the bathroom. Or maybe, at a stretch, if he forgets to bring a briefcase, which contains his change of clothes, in the living room, past the TMZ, the tall dividing wall.

                  Instead he stepped into my closet.

                  There’s nothing but a jumble of clothes in there, ballgowns and pajamas and workout clothes. No room at all for even a spare drawer for his clothes. Which means there’s no reason for him to step inside. He didn’t hesitate, beautiful or hesitantly, either. Not like someone exploring or hunting for something new. He walked in decisively, as if it was the bathroom. As if he had been one hundred percent sure it was the bathroom.

Galileo     It’s a mistake anyone could make.

                  It doesn’t mean anything. It certainly doesn’t mean that the Hughes is distracting, that the disease is happening and happening now. It doesn’t mean that I’m losing him.

way. It     There’s a beat of ringing awareness.

them we     Then the door opens, more slowly this time.

                  Finn steps out, his expression severe. And resigned.

                  It scares me more than the mistake, that resignation. If he believes it’s as good as true. “Finn,” I say, my voice unsteady. “Let’s talk about it.”  
                  “‘There’s nothing to talk about.’”

ned, so “Yes, there is. It doesn’t mean anything.”

urse, it “All right,” he says, too readily.

nt to.” “I’m serious. You’ve been here... what? A couple dozen times?

like you need to have the floor plan memorized. Not to mention it’s fi  
re hourNot exactly a time known for the best focus. Plus you have a lot c  
joy themind right now.”

full of His lips curve without humor. “Who are you trying to convince, Eva  
I subside, not sure of the answer. “Oh God,” I whisper.

He crosses the room and gives me a kiss, this one so different fr  
others. He doesn’t kiss me on the lips or brush his mouth along m  
Instead he kisses my forehead. It’s acceptance, that kiss. Accepta  
loses itsomething that I can’t even name.

But he has no such hesitation.

ie, each “If it’s now, then it’s now,” he says, his tone gentle. “If it’s later, t  
st timelater. I’m not going to count. And I’m sure as hell not going to get wo  
bed theevery time I make a misstep.”

got his “No?” I ask, because I feel pretty worked up myself.

around “I’d rather enjoy my time, Eva. With you.”

You’re mine now, for as long as we have.

The truth is, I hadn’t really believed in the Hughes curse. It sound  
antsuitsan urban legend. How could the line always produce boys? Surely sor

Finn’sHughes girl had once been born, even if it wasn’t on the right side  
r’t do itsheets. And how could every single one have the disease? Genetic  
ng in aabout chances, not about guarantees. We couldn’t know for sure th  
he waswould get early-onset dementia. We couldn’t know that the unbor

inside my stomach, the one currently the size of a tennis ball, woul

That glimmer of hope had been enough for me. I could have built a  
s cursethat glimmer. And I had.

’t mean But now it felt more real.

It felt like a third person in the room, living and breathing. Direct  
course of our lives. Taking him from me even as he stood in the room  
and powerful.

“This is okay,” I say, throwing the sheet off. Heading into the  
it, thenIgnoring the fact that it’s on a different wall entirely than the bathroom  
t this.” Pretending not to notice that it’s painted with pink and white polka do  
a glossy pink lion door knocker on it. It looks nothing like the



wrapped door to the bathroom. My great aunt had not put a lot of subtlety. I threw open the door and grabbed a power suit from the rack. It's not "Eva." His voice held a gentle warning. I've a.m. It's possible I was freaking out. "This is fine. Because you know you do? I solve problems for my family. I do it all the time. I've done it as I can remember. And I'm going to solve this, because you're my pa?" now."

I press my palms to my stomach. I'm as naked as Finn, and suddenly I know why some ancient warriors fought naked. I'm stronger like they neck with any fabric or metal armor. Terrified and terrifying at the same time. A mother bear whose cub has just been threatened.

"Don't get your hopes up," he says softly. "If this could be solved with money, we'd have done it by now. Millions spent on research. Billions when it hasn't helped."

"How is that possible?" I ask, half angry, half despairing.

"Some problems can't be solved."

I could see that he believed it. Forbearance was written into the lines of his strong, handsome body. He made a glorious sacrifice on the altar of responsible capitalism, but I refused to let him go. And I had no such doubts about the limitations of my problem-solving abilities. I had kept my family safe from murdering each other a thousand times over. I'd saved my siblings from jail and violence and public condemnation. I had put the Morelli name on hospitals and public parks and libraries, using our power to move mountains. I would solve this problem, too.

One pernicious disease.

One family curse.

One heartbeat to the next, praying it's long enough.

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I could see that he believed it. Forbearance was written into the lines of his strong, handsome body. He made a glorious sacrifice on the altar of responsible capitalism, but I refused to let him go. And I had no such belief about the limitations of my problem-solving abilities. I had kept my parents from murdering each other a thousand times over. I’d saved my siblings from jail and violence and public condemnation. I had put the Morelli name on hospitals and public parks and libraries, using our power to move mountains.

I would solve this problem, too.

One pernicious disease.

One family curse.

One heartbeat to the next, praying it’s long enough.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Finn

**I**'M WEARING MY best suit. It's priceless, quite literally.

It was made by a famous designer who mostly serves as a figurehead now, with legions of designer underlings who actually create each suit in his style.

"*Bellissimo,*" he said when I visited his Mediterranean villa. "*Il tuo è bellissimo.*"

"*Grazie.*"

He appraised me in a thorough and mostly asexual way, his hands cataloging every measurement. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to wear a bespoke suit. I went on a few dates with his daughter, in between business meetings. The real estate investor I was courting for the Hughes expansion into China was American-born, but she spent most of her time on the island of Crete. Stunning blue ocean and pebbled beaches.

It had been a complicated existence, half playboy, half CEO.

It was a role built to satisfy the curiosity of spectators. I was respected enough to run the business, but I got into the tabloids enough to prove I was getting mentorship from my father. After all, he wouldn't hand over the reins without oversight. Not Daniel Hughes, devoted company man. I played the role of capitalist heir to the hilt.

And then the mask was ripped away.

I fought it, but I can't help but be relieved that it's happened.

It was inevitable, really. The only surprising thing is that it took this long. I'm in my office, waiting. Waiting. Waiting for the right moment to strike an angry mob. In this case an angry mob of other suit-wearing men.

women. They're gathering downstairs, right below me. The executives and senior VPs are filing into leather swivel chairs around a gleaming cherry-wood table.

It won't be like before, in my office. That had been tense, but even there wanted a resolution. The people downstairs? Some of them want that. That's what feels fair. And I would give it to them, if it was only me and them. But it's more. It's always been about more. My father. My grandfather. Hemingway. The rest of the Hughes.

Every employee in the building and around the world.

And now Eva. Our child. It's about them now, too.

I'm standing at the floor-to-ceiling windows, looking out over Manhattan.

All I want to do is be with Eva. Have I lost my drive? My will to lead?

Are you a company?

Did I only ever do it for my father?

As if she senses my indecision, my phone vibrates. It's Eva.

"You holding up?" she asks.

Not really. "It's just another day at the office."

"Bullshit," she says softly, the coarse word sounding elegant in her

eyes. "They're going to skin me alive," I say, rueful. "No one would

go forward to it, but it needs to be done in order to move forward."

"What are you going to say to them?"

"Honestly? I'm thinking they're owed an apology."

"An apology? Now *that's* bullshit."

A reluctant smile curves my lips. "If only you were in the room."

"I will be," she says. "In spirit. Pretend I'm there, giving them the

responsibility. I gave more bonuses and commissions than your father ever did. People

love that. I rich under your leadership, and you know what else? They enjoyed the

money. Don't apologize for that."

I sigh. "The money doesn't seem to matter."

"Money always matters."

"Spoken like a Morelli," I say, gently teasing.

"No," she says. "Spoken like a soon-to-be Hughes."

"Well, the Hugheses aren't big on second chances."

"I like second chances, but that's not what this is. Where was the

chance? You never got to be a regular CEO. You were always doing

what everyone else wanted. Your father. The board. The employees. And

C-level they're mad about it. What would you do if it wasn't about the curse  
around would you do if you were just leading the company?"

"It's too much of a stretch," I admit quietly. "It's never been about  
everyone. "Listen," she says, her voice serious. "I know things seem bad now  
but blood. they're going to get better. Once they're over the surprise, and the  
at stake. they're going to remember how great of a leader you've been. They're  
mother. to remember who's been signing their paychecks. And most of all,  
going to remember who's been steady as a rock."

I knew they were angry, but I didn't think about the fear.

But it's real. It's brutal. I had so much fear for my father, even in  
Manhattan. that I was losing him. I was never able to really accept it, even as it had  
run this. It didn't occur to me that it's what the stockholders and executives are  
too. They're having to confront my father's mortality. The nature of  
frailty. We aren't immortal. We're infinitely breakable. And here is  
who had such money and such power. If even he could be broken, who  
does anyone have?

Fear explains some of the anger, but it won't make it easier to face  
my voice. "Love you," I murmur.

She'd look "Love you," she says, then her voice turns hard. "Now, go give  
hell."

I head downstairs, knowing that they're all assembled.

Alex Wong stands at the head of the table. He goes quiet as I step  
forward, which probably means he was stirring up trouble. We have a brief star  
which ends with him taking a seat along the wall. It's a win, albeit  
small. You one.

Everyone got Eva was right.

It's our jobs. This meeting isn't about apologies or second chances.

It's about leadership.

"Thank you for coming," I say. "This is a tough time in Hughes In  
history, and I'm here to listen to you. To answer you. To do my best  
to address your concerns."

I recognize every face in this room. I know they're names, their  
from college, their retirement portfolios. I've played ball with their c  
he first and sat in quiet vigil during illness. Maybe they won't remember thos  
big what. Or maybe they won't matter enough, but they matter to me. That's  
and now something, those memories. Knowing that I could help, if only in small

? What “But what I’m not going to be is your punching bag.”

This makes people exchange glances.

that.” “You want one of those, head to the boxing ring. I’m not going to apologize to you for my father’s illness. Or even for keeping it a secret. Everything we did was legal, and more importantly in my view, we believe it was right. That decision paid for your yacht,” I say to the first. “And for your daughter to go to Duke,” I say to another. “And for your son to get a prosthetic when he came home from active duty.”

There’s a murmur through the room. Some agreement, some disagreement, some saying that I bring up good points. Others say it’s distracting from the main issues.

facing, “So ask your questions,” I say. “Tell me your concerns. Let’s face it, we’re all human together. I’m here for that and for those hard conversations. I’m here for what a manas it takes.”

at hope There’s a stool, and I prop myself on it. I’m serious about staying as long as it takes. I can’t offer them an apology, but I can give them my undivided attention. A hand goes up at the back of the room. Jordan Beaty. A good question. A little timid. Which means the question will be a soft one. “Will you be the CEO of Hughes Industries?”

“Absolutely,” I say. “Next question.”

Annalise Jacobs negotiates leases valued in the millions. “Do you want to remain the CEO of Hughes Industries?”

edown, That makes me crack a smile. Trust her to get to the heart of the issue. She was born for this position. Trained for it. Everything in my life led to this moment, so who would I be without it? I’ve wondered about it. I wonder if I said I hadn’t.”

“We’re all wondering about it.” A mutter from Wong.

I ignore it. “My father taught me that the life of a leader is one of sacrifice. I don’t sit in the office upstairs because I need more money.” There’s a nervous laugh around the room, acknowledging that I’m one of the wealthiest men in the world. “I do it because my father instilled in me the values of Hughes Industries. Loyalty. Responsibility.”

children “What about your responsibilities to your employees?”

parts. I turn to Wong. “What about them?”

s worth “You abandoned us.”

I ways. With only a slightly exaggerated motion I look around. “I’m here

I?”

His expression turns dark. “This is only an empty gesture. It isn’t r  
oing to A soft laugh escapes me. “What’s real, then? The words we see  
secret.email? The digital signatures we put on contracts? Those things aren  
elievedreal than this. Fifty people in a room, all of us worried. It takes on a li  
ead ofown, fear. We think we can fight it, but it’s like fighting air. Because  
And forright about one thing. The words don’t matter. Actions do.”

Wong scoffs.

people Will Leblanc has been sitting in the back of the room. Eva’s bro  
the reallaw. Which means that when we marry, he’ll be family, too.

He stands up. “We can’t trust anything you say.”

ie them “Bullshit.”

as long The word rings across the massive conference space. I recogn  
voice, even though I can’t credit it. I can’t believe that my father is her  
as longis he dressed in a triple-breasted suit with antique gold buttons and t  
dividedloafers? Except for thinning hair and slight shadows under his eyes, h  
od man.almost the same as when he last stood in this room.

remain His eyes are completely clear.

He spares me only a brief glance before coming to stand besi  
“Bullshit,” he repeats, more softly this time. He doesn’t need to spea  
want tothough. They’re all leaning forward to catch his every word. I  
charisma, this man. Natural leadership. “You can’t trust him? When  
sues. “Iseven years old he broke a priceless vase at a friend’s house. He cou  
to thiskept it a secret, but he came into the room calmly, set down the larges  
ould beand swore he would cut their grass until the vase was paid for. As  
know he still goes there every two weeks with his Weedwacker. It wa  
Dynasty.”

service. There are a few laughs. He’s funny. Somehow, I’d almost forgot  
s a fewabout my father. I’d lived with the childlike stand-in for so long t  
of thestrange to see him act normal.

me the Hemingway came in behind him.

I dip my head and speak low. “What the hell is going on?”

My brother shrugs. “He woke up like this. And he insisted on  
once he found out what you were doing. I figured it might help.”

It might help, or it might blow up in our faces. Either way, I’m gla  
, aren’tto see my father like this, even if it only lasts for a few hours. O

minutes.

deal.” It’s as much a reunion for me as it is for the others in the room. And over though I saw my father at dinner last night. Or I saw the version of him that’s not more he is mostly now.

fe of it My father stares down everyone in the room. Even Wong squirms in your chair. “I gave this company, I gave you the best years of my life. A hell of a lot of them. And I gave you my son, a smart, competent leader who actually managed to raise our profit margin. Something I wouldn’t have thought possible, because they weren’t too shabby under me either. So what do you object to? Do you want to give back the bonuses and stock options in a show of righteous indignation?”

Silence in the room. You can hear, albeit faintly, the whoosh of air from the ceiling fans below. Downstairs the streets are seething with exhaust air and busy traffic. How up here it’s cool and silent.

disseminated “No,” my father says, glancing at me. “I gave you Phineas Galileo Hughes, the best CEO that Hughes Industries has ever seen. He wants to buy this town hall so he can make you feel better about it, as if he’s the one who’s disloyal here.”

de me. Phineas Galileo Hughes. You named him after a pirate astronomer. I know, I know, loud, astronomer, Eva once told him, even though he wasn’t lucid at the time. He has which means, I think, that you wanted him to have adventures. And he was up at the stars.

ld have Some of the people are shamefaced.

t piece, Some are still angry, but they’re holding their tongues.

far as I I can’t quite agree with my father’s hard line. He comes from a different generation. But I appreciate the support. And it appears to be working. Dad steps outside, and Hemingway and I follow him. He looked smug and confident inside, but now that he’s here I can see a thin sweat break out on his forehead. “Get me home, Finn,” he mutters.

“I’ll take care of him,” Hemingway says quickly. “The car is down here waiting.”

I clap my father on the shoulder, my throat tight. He’s already coming away in front of my eyes, the moment of lucidity fleeting. “Good to see you, Pops. I love you.”

d. Glad “You too,” he says, his eyes already fogging up again.

r a few I stare after him for too long a beat, emotion thick in my chest. I



ever see my father these days, the real him. The good days come less a  
n, even often. And I sure as hell never expected to see him walk in here. Not  
him that at the faux retirement party, where he thought it was thirty years ago. I  
version of Daniel Hughes was every inch the leader.

s in his This was his true retirement party.

a whole He didn't need balloons and a cake. He needed to give his m  
ler who orders.

't have And I need to give mine.

Is that Later I'll be able to sort through my emotions at seeing my fat  
options way, at hearing him talk about me as his successor with such pride. L

be able to sit with both the pleasure and the ache of knowing it wil  
e traffichappen again. Grief.

people. For now, I turn to the assembled group. "You heard the man. Tim  
to work."

Galileo  
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ever see my father these days, the real him. The good days come less and less often. And I sure as hell never expected to see him walk in here. Not before, at the faux retirement party, where he thought it was thirty years ago. No, this version of Daniel Hughes was every inch the leader.

This was his true retirement party.

He didn't need balloons and a cake. He needed to give his marching orders.

And I need to give mine.

Later I'll be able to sort through my emotions at seeing my father that way, at hearing him talk about me as his successor with such pride. Later I'll be able to sit with both the pleasure and the ache of knowing it will never happen again. Grief.

For now, I turn to the assembled group. "You heard the man. Time to go to work."



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Eva

**T**HE MORELLI FUND has poured millions of dollars into the community risk teens and literacy. Health care for women. We're focused on making a difference here in New York state, but we support endeavors all over the country. All over the world.

Each one comes with heartbreaking stories of people who weren't in time.

And inspirational stories of survival that bring tears to my eyes.

Each cause matters, but none has ever been more personal than this.

We're seated in our conference room, but unlike regular conference rooms this one has plush chairs and a large TV that acts as our screen. There's soft yellow lighting and a series of paintings made by kids at Children's Hospital framed on the wall.

When Leo first commissioned the building for us, he designed a conference table and chairs and fancy screen that slid down from the ceiling with a whir. But I realized quickly that some of the directors of children's hospitals, particularly the small ones, the ones most in need of funds, were intimidated by the room. They felt their pictures and documents weren't good enough because they weren't some super-slicked slide deck created by a professional consultant who was paid hundreds of dollars per hour. So I changed it.

*Draw something that you want to see when you get well and leave.*

That's what the nurse told the kids when they made these.

A horse galloping around a corral.

A litter of puppies chasing a ball.

A family at a picnic.

Hope. That's what they drew. The most innocent, pure form of hope. That's what I need right now. Desperately.

Hope that I can find a solution for the problem I need fixed. I know that Finn Hughes will live a long and happy life. And that I will, too.

"We'll figure this out," Leo murmurs, sensing my tension.

He can always sense it. I make a noncommittal sound. There's pretending with him. Of course we will. I'm sure of it. I'm not v Those would be lies, and he would know.

"You've trained your whole life for this," he says, and I laugh.

That's true enough.

ity—at— Saving people. Rescuing them. Whether it's a teen on the streets asking a Morelli Fund or my father on a bender after seeing Caroline, I have ver the lifetime out of helping solve things. But now would be the worst time and that steals my breath.

helped There's a knock and my assistant director, Stella, comes in, smiling leads in an older man with gray hair and a young woman who has the of a doctor. I'm not sure what the bearing of a doctor is, precisely, a s one. godly confidence that doesn't appear overinflated. This is someone wh ference in life and death every day, who doles it out.

screen. The man turns out to be the manager of their facility, while the d s at the the head researcher on the team. They're partnered with Cornell but funded from multiple sources.

regular Including the Morelli Fund, if this meeting goes well.

ceiling There are other research organizations on dementia. Bigger ones rarities, with more equipped labs and more research papers credited to their sci ndated I'll meet with them, too, but I have a gut feeling about this one.

enough I shake hands with them. So does Leo.

a grant He doesn't usually sit in on my meetings. He's here for moral supp up.

here. Stella opens the meeting, providing a smooth introduction to the Fund with a little self-gratuitous celebration. "The Morelli far responsible for helping thousands of people here in the city and t They're a true treasure to the community."

Leo gives me a wry look, which I ignore.

"However," she says, "even with their resources, we have to ma decisions. Whatever comes of this meeting, whether we can support

whether we can't, we want you to succeed. Our decision isn't only based on the merit of your cause, or even your abilities, but also where we feel we can provide the most value."

It's a let-down speech, designed to make them feel better, because we can't give to every cause. And we won't. I'm not going to hedge our bets by putting a little bit of money into every single dementia organization. No one would feel safer, but it would be worse.

No, I'm going to back the organization that has the most promise and the full might and fortune of the Morelli Fund. I'll pour my own money into it. And the Hughes, who already donate a significant amount to the largest advocacy group.

I don't want platitudes.

I don't even want promises.

I want results.

They open with a relatively standard fare for these kinds of things as she estimated six million Americans are currently living with dementia and bearing who don't know about it. The signs and a person's natural reluctance to admit the effects make it difficult to diagnose. And even harder to treat. The doctor is forthright and smart, which I like, but it's the man, the Man.

Operations for the research facility, who really surprises me.

"Alzheimer's is a broken record," he says, "playing the same song over and over. It's a cacophony so loud and jarring that it makes you feel like you're going insane. It's a ticking clock, an incessant chime. It's an infinite number of sounds, all of them lonely."

"You sound like you're speaking from experience," I say.

He glances at the doctor, as if he's trying to keep his mouth shut.

I don't want that. "How do you know that?"

His name is Alistair. "My father suffered from it, and we tried every treatment. We went from doctor to doctor, all around the country, all over the world. We tried regular medicine and holistic treatments. Acupuncture, you name it."

Leo sits forward, putting his elbows on his knees. "And?"

"Some of it worked. Some of it didn't." He pauses. "Some of it got worse."

The doctor gives him a severe look, as if in warning. "We have a regimen for studies, naturally," she says, turning to face me. "What

used on with his father wasn't part of that. Let me tell you about a new treatment that we've been testing."

"The one on injectable soluble amyloid beta proteins? I read that in your research journal where it was published. That's how I found you guys. I bet you'd like to hear about his experiences."

n. That After a long pause the doctor reluctantly nods. "It's not scientifically verified."

with the Leo gestures to the older man who's been sitting there quietly, serenely. "This man's father seems to be living proof. Isn't that scientific to the doctor? "Science isn't only about results," the doctor says. "There are anomalies and outliers. We're looking for repeatability. And a high rate."

"One man doesn't count," I say softly, "except to that man's family."

ings. An The man gives me a faint smile. "Precisely."

, many "What did you find?" Leo asks, curious.

to share "There's a new treatment from a doctor in Sweden that shows promise, but he doesn't have the funding—not only funding. He doesn't have certification or even the ability to manage studies of this magnitude.

people he's treating with his approach toward inflammation of the brain, showing incredible results. My father started having clearer days."

you're "Why isn't everyone talking about this?"

number "Sometimes the side effects would be worse than the disease. They're terrible. Migraines so severe he couldn't stand up. Vertigo. Blood in the stool. Blacking out."

"Shit." This from Leo.

The doctor nods. "That's a major problem when it comes to testing

l every "Tolerating the treatment," I say, having heard some of that before. "It comes to acupuncture and herbs. That was before I even knew about acupuncture side effects.

"It's not easy," Alistair admits. "In fact it's hard as hell."

The doctor continues. "It takes over your life, some of these treatments. Which would be hard for most people to accept. And on top of that, we don't have enough studies to even prove that it works. Convincing people to try it strictly is hard."

he did I lean forward. "What would it take to make those studies happen?"

reatment “There’s a number of roadblocks. Operational ones. Logistical ones. Scientific ones. It’s not only the funding we’d need.”

t in the “Listen,” I say, “I like science. I believe in it, obviously. That’s why I want to be there, talking to you. But I also believe in miracles. And magic comes in unexpected places. We aren’t going to turn away from what might be the most important lead because it’s hard.”

The woman nods. “We research at the lab. We have a few test cases. Almost there’s another problem we face when it comes to these sorts of tests. Time?”

million That’s the one thing we don’t have.

success My baby may benefit from this, but Finn? God, he’s so young and it’s hard to imagine him being an invalid. I think of the way he walked and his into the closet, so sure of it and so wrong. Was it a random mistake? Or does it herald disaster? There’s no way to know except to wait. There’s no way to know except to watch more grains fall to the bottom of the hourglass. We’re running out of time.

romise, I put a hand on my stomach, which has only the faintest bump.

ave the This baby should know his father, not as an empty body.

But the As Finn, the man I love.

rain are Alistair makes a wide gesture. “It’s easy to say you’d do anything better, but I watched the results of that ravage my father’s body. Every day his mind was clear, he struggled with the side effects, some coming in short term, some of them long. The truth is, even finding people for the stool can be hard, because some people don’t want treatment.”

“I understand that, and I’m not judging it. People have to do what for their lives.” One of the projects we fund is a hospice for those who don’t want to pursue chemotherapy but are rejected by their families. Chemotherapy is fucking brutal, and depending on the stage of cancer, doesn’t even have a high success rate. Sometimes it’s harder for the families to give up when it’s the patient’s choice for treatment. The irony isn’t lost on me. Surely some people want this treatment. Surely some would choose treatments meant not getting dementia.”

we don’t The doctor hesitates. “The truth is, I don’t think it would be enough to even be clear, I think it will help. In fact that much has already been proven only slows the progression.”

” A cure would be better, but it’s not required.

l ones. Even more time... that would be enough.

“It sounds absolutely fucking insane, but that’s not necessarily why I’m doing this. The same methods haven’t been working out particularly well. Why not try something from what you pitched in the proposal?”

She glances at Alistair with significance. They can feel the tension in the room building. “No,” she says carefully. “We asked for a study, but something more manageable and with higher predictable success. It does involve a distillation of the rehmannia root. We need to confirm the correlation between inflammation reduction and disease severity.”

That’s important but too small to make a difference for Finn.

It’s a stepping stone, and he needs the entire path.

“To test what she’s talking about,” Alistair says, “we would need to work with doctors here in the states as well as the FDA to prove that it’s safe.”

“Excuse me,” I murmur, turning blindly to get up. I go to stand by the window, looking out over the landscape of New York City. Finn is out there, facing down angry stockholders. He’s fighting that battle so I can fight mine.

Leo joins me at the window. “This feels big.”

“It feels huge, but I don’t know. The scope of the studies suggests...”

“We can fund it.”

“It might not be soon enough,” I whisper.

He takes my hand and squeezes. “We’ll get through this, sister. You’ll make it happen. I have faith in you. Sometimes my faith in even myself, even God, has been shaken, but I’ve never lost faith in you. You’ll save him. Now you’ll save him.”

Maybe I should accept Finn’s illness. Maybe I should say goodbye to him. But he wants that from me, but I can’t. And maybe it’s not even a choice, if it’s acting from habit and fear.

And love.

Like everyone else.

But it



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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Finn

**T**HE VAULTED ENTRANCE hall has been festooned with orbs made of gold and matte black. They're a startling contrast to the white marble that makes up the Waldorf Astoria ballroom. A chandelier with a thousand lights hangs from the middle, reflecting a thousand points of light throughout the room.

The colorful fabric of the women's dresses reflect the shimmering light from the chandelier above. Men's suits are crisp and tailored, their ties matching their wives' sharp eyeliner. The ballroom is filled with a thousand people in expensive clothing, but none of them hold a candle to the woman on my arm.

Eva wears a flapper dress that shows off her incredible toned legs. Her arms are wrapped around me, but I have to put on a public face in front of these people. They're staring at us, especially with all the press. So I steal her away into a dark corner and put my hands on the flowy fabric. It looks like silk or chiffon, with beadwork that accentuates her curves. It's the kind of dress that I want to leave on so that it reflects the light when she's inside her, thrusting, working away at her, my cock snug in her warm center.

"Stop looking at me like that," she murmurs, a flush on her cheeks and cheekbones.

"Then stop looking so goddamn sexy."

We're still standing in the entrance, so I let my hand slip lower on her back to brush her ass. This woman has a body that doesn't quit. It's hell to take out in public, especially when the men look at her. Mine. I want to get them to avert their eyes, which is... strange. Amusing. Not...

unpleasant. I've never felt jealousy before.

I feel like a caveman, which is ironic since I'm wearing a tuxedo and a hundred-thousand-dollar watch.

Eva leans toward me, her breasts warm against my arm. "Be yourself," she whispers in my ear. Her voice is a pleasant purr that I find irresistible. "If you keep looking at me like that, my nipples are going to get hard, and then everyone will see through the fabric of this shirt. I'm not wearing a bra."

I groan. "You're torturing me."

She laughs softly.

"I will behave," I say, my voice grim, "but only because this is the only way to honor you."

"It's honoring the Morelli Fund."

"You are the Morelli Fund."

She shakes her head, brushing off the praise. The Morellis get a lot of their positive press from the fund. The charitable family. The good family. It wouldn't even exist if it weren't for her. And it sure as hell wouldn't give so much and be so effective. I'm proud as hell of what she's accomplished. What she continues to accomplish.

"I wouldn't even have come if not for that," I say. "They're all for me to get confused and jump into the champagne fountain thinking I want a pool."

"Well, it probably would be refreshing," Eva says, going for a joke.

I can't see the worry in her luminous dark eyes. They're framed by long, dark lashes. The dark irises seem to change colors, sometimes to chocolate. Other times, like now, a mysterious midnight. No matter the color, they always make me feel like I'm being drawn in. Like I'm drowning in a warm, pleasure-filled sea.

She's not really worried that I'm going to skinny dip in the champagne fountain, but she's remembering the morning when I walked into the pool.

Was it a blip of dementia? Or was it simply a man exhausted and out of his mind? There's no way to know, of course.

And it doesn't matter, in the end.

Whatever will happen will happen. I learned that early.

We move through the crowd, smiling at the right moments, laughing at the right times. I know how to work a crowd, and this crowd is ripe for the taking.

worked. All of them want a glimpse of the now-infamous Finn Hugo and they can pass on to their friends or whatever journalist they have on dial. It would be easy to be cynical, but Eva keeps me sane. She's a Behavelight of authentic caring in a sea of shallow, grasping ambition. I feel like There's hunger in this room, despite the surface-level reason. Roles are event. Charity. Giving. And yet I can smell the greed, the amount of dress moving in the room. It's a heavy perfume scent, almost sickly sweetness. And familiar.

I grew up mired in this scent.

A hint of perfume, a hint of aftershave, a hint of alcohol.

Right is The clink of wine glasses against crystal underlays the background conversation.

All the Morellis are in attendance, including the patriarch Bryant and wife Sarah. The former gives me a dark look. Like any man, he knows most of the thoughts I have for his daughter are filthy. And he wants better for her. Generous can agree on that much, but hell if I'll give her up.

As hell "Evening," he says, reaching out a hand.

At she's We shake.

Dimly I hear Eva's mother chatting to her about celebrities who are waiting up.

Fig it's a "Sir," I say, my voice low enough to be private even in a sea of

This is the first time I've spoken with him since the news broke. "I don't have words for me."

I'm edged by Bryant gives me a narrow-eyed look. "I have more than words. First

a deep "While I think you're due to take a swing, for a couple of reasons, give me color, you to wait until the evening is over, so we don't ruin it for Eva." And Bryant never turned a fist on his daughter, I'll make sure it's the last thing I

does. I still remember the time I walked in on them at a Christmas party. My hand tight around her wrist. It left a red mark.

Closest. He glances at her. "She's already had to deal with too much."

Stressed A string quartet in the corner strikes up a slow, drowsy song. "For it's worth, I love her. And I'll do everything in my power to make this right for her."

"Would you?"

Nothing at "Yes."

He to be He gives me a grim look. "People say they'll do anything for love."

ies that once the costs start racking up, they're gone. It didn't work out, they s  
n speedgrew apart. That's what people say these days. They don't know abo  
a bright love, lasting love."

It's strange to hear this man, this man with a renowned temp  
for the disdain for all things emotional, talk about real love. Especially beca  
money marriage is known to be a society match, arranged by their parents. D  
in its end up falling in love? They seem distant.

Maybe he's talking about someone else.

I'm not sure how to feel about Bryant Morelli and his cryptic con

He was a cruel father, occasionally abusive, sometimes cruel,  
uzz of manipulative. But Eva loves him. He'll be my child's grandfather. Ca  
be peace after so much violence? Is his concern for his daughter genui  
and his, I owe it to him, and to her, to address it.

ows the "I have a lot of flaws," I say, choosing my words with care. "I w  
ier. We wish myself on anyone, but one of my strengths is that I keep my pr

No matter what."

He grunts.

"And if you want proof of that, this entire scandal will work. My  
showed extracted that promise from me when I was five years old—before  
really understood it. When I got older, when I was seven years old, te  
people old. When I was sixteen years old I begged him to let me take it back,  
magin refused. A man keeps his promises, he said. And I agree."

"You weren't a man," he says. "You were a child."  
ts."

I'd ask "Close enough when you're a Hughes. We grow up fast."  
"Because you don't have long," he says with a nod of h  
id if he understanding. There's no sympathy in his gaze, which I apprecia  
he ever aren't men to be pitied, either of us.

erty, his "When Eva and I get married, I'll take that promise just as se  
There will never be another woman for me. And I'll let no other ma  
her. Forever means forever."

or what For a moment he's silent, processing my sincerity. Then he snort  
s easier Hugheses were always a bunch of pansies."

That makes me laugh, because it's the side of Bryant Morelli t  
used to. Irreverent. Cold. But for just a moment I saw a glimpse of a  
self he keeps hidden. I give Sarah Morelli outrageous commere  
ve, but flirtation, which makes her smile and blush, before stealing Eva away.

ay. We The room is alive with conversations, the quiet hum of power  
out realmaking deals over cocktails and clinking wine glasses. We stop and  
with her sister Sophia and wave to her brother Lucian. Her other sibli  
er and here, too, but we don't see them.

use his We shake hands with some of the most powerful and influential pe  
id they the city. And in the world. Most of them already know me. And they  
know Eva.

They praise her work, which just makes her demure. She speaks at  
ments.causes, skillfully praising and charming even the most tight-fi  
always billionnaires until they promise to fund a new hospital wing or a youth c  
in there Hours pass, and I wish I could leave.

ne? If it The air is thick with the sounds of conversation. My feet sink i  
plush carpet beneath. Sweat beads down my back. I can feel people's  
ouldn't me, can almost hear their thoughts...

omises. *Is Finn Hughes losing his mind like his father did?*

*Is the family hiding more than a disease?*

*Can we trust them to hold up the economy?*

7 father Beneath the high vault of a glass dome we mingle until the hou  
I even late.

n years Around us people dance a waltz on a white stone-and-mosaic prom  
, but he White-aproned servers bring wine to people who sit and eat at tl  
tables. There are more of those cracked gold globes here. They flash  
dark light, as though beneath a brilliant and unsteady falling star.

A woman whose glasses look about an inch thick corners Eva,  
rusque about a few millions dollars that she'd like to use to put her husband'  
ite. We on something grand. Something everyone will still have to s  
generations to come.

riously. They're looking for immortality, these people.

n touch And I can't blame them. I would be one of them, if there'd been ev  
a chance.

s. "The I'd take a lifetime with Eva if I could.

*It didn't work out, they say. We grew apart.*

hat I'm There's a single pinpoint of light against the backdrop of this disea  
deeper that's that I know the value of time. A month. A day. A single second  
its and can look at Eva, give her a smile that's full of sensual knowledge, wa  
get flustered as she talks to the older woman. This second? It's wort

player than a thousand empty lifetimes.

I speak With Eva still distracted, I'm introduced by an acquaintance to some people I haven't met before. A doctor. A brain surgeon, actually. Dr. Jenika who seems nice enough, and an older gentleman next to her. They're both talking to me, both seeming excited, about some project they're already funded through the Morelli Fund. I give them an encouraging smile and ask a few polite questions, though I don't know the details.

About the "It was more than we dared to ask for," Dr. Faulk says.

sted of "Eva is always generous," I say.

center. "It's more than generosity, I would say." This from the older gentleman named something that starts with an A. Aiden? Asher? He told me when we were introduced a few minutes ago, but now I can't remember exactly what his eyes were on was.

Am I forgetting because of early-onset dementia?

Or because I've just met a few hundred people?

Most of my mind is already working on undressing Eva. I thought I'd keep the dress on her, but now I'm thinking it would be better off. I want her to grow naked and wearing only the gold beaded high-heeled shoes she has on ones with the red bottoms. I want her on all fours, facing away from me, her beautiful curved ass high in the air.

he long "In this case, I hope you don't mind me saying, it's personal."

I stare at the man. "Alistair," I say suddenly, as the name comes to me.

"That's right," he says with a genial smile. "I bet you meet some interesting talking people at these things. I'm Alistair Thomas of the Tuffin Institute."

His name Suspicion builds in the back of my head. "The Tuffin Institute is where they study and research brain diseases. I've heard something about it. From where? For what? "Isn't that for the study of brain diseases?"

"We focus on dementia. And once this study begins, it will change the way we play the game."

"I see."

The man is looking at me like a fellow prisoner, as if he knows exactly what I'm feeling. Except how can he? The woman is looking at me like I'm a specimen in a petri dish.

where I Fuck fuck fuck.

itch her "If you'll excuse me..." I let the words trail off as I take my leave.

h more Blindly I take Eva's hand, dragging her away from the woman.

already monopolized too much of her time. I've been wanting to leave Igala, but I don't head toward the stairs. Instead I aim for the back. . . Faulkner. A dark room. A private moment between me and the woman by startmade me her personal lost cause.

getting  
I'd ask a

gentleman  
when we  
what it

right I'd  
want her  
on, the  
ne, that

me.  
so many

is." I've  
study of

change the

exactly  
because I'm a

who's



already monopolized too much of her time. I've been wanting to leave the gala, but I don't head toward the stairs. Instead I aim for the back. A quiet space. A dark room. A private moment between me and the woman who's made me her personal lost cause.



## CHAPTER NINE

### Eva

**H**E TAKES ME through the kitchens. Guests aren't allowed back here, one stops us. No one would stop Finn Hughes. Even if they don't recognize him, it's in his bearing. The way he walks, like a man who knows he belongs in any room.

The front of the hotel is glittering and gorgeous.

In the back it's bustling with activity. Concrete walls hold rows of office appliances. He keeps going, my hand linked in his, past a row of office cardboard furniture and the colorful, cheap knickknacks that decorate them. Then we're back in the front of the hotel again, but on the other side are ballrooms that aren't currently in use. It's quiet. Dark. The room is probably thirty thousand square feet. It's a place for wedding receptions and meetings. And right now, it's a place for us.

He faces me, his expression grim. "When were you going to tell me about Dr. Faulk?"

"You met her?"

"Dr. Faulk of the Tuffin Institute for Brain Health."

He doesn't seem mad, exactly.

He doesn't seem pleased, either.

Which isn't a surprise. The truth is that I wasn't planning on telling you because he's not the only one who gets to keep secrets for the greater good. "We give money to lots of charities. I didn't know you wanted an item on the list."

He gives me a sardonic look. "And this was a random donation?"

"No," I murmur. "Nothing about it was random."

He turns away, staring at a blank concrete wall. "Damn it, Eva."

"You're mad because you think I'm interfering."

"No." He swings back to face me, his expression blistering intensity. "I'm worried because you're building up false hope, and going to be even more disappointed when it doesn't work."

Tears prick my eyes. "Why does hope have to be false?"

"Because we've been down this path. The Tuffin Institute is a recipient of our grants a few years back. They're one of the more... excellent research facilities."

I lift my chin. "I think they're credible."

"Did they feed you some line about curing it?"

but no "No. They were... refreshingly honest. Even if some of what they recognize hurt. They said there's a promising new treatment, but it has serious effects. Part of the study will be understanding how widespread those are, and if they can be managed."

"There's no cure for dementia, Eva."

of silver "What about slowing it down?"

es with A low growl. "It will only make it harder if you won't accept the cure.

e them. "And I think it will only make it harder if you do accept it."

le, near He reaches up, and I can't help it. He's a large, strong man bristling with frustration. My history tells me what will happen, instinct kicking in but I can temper it with reason. I flinch, as if he's going to hit me. He free hands about hand poised in the air where he was going to brush my cheek. An astounded expression is replaced by fury.

"I should have given him a beating," he growls, speaking of my father.

ng him, It's something of an open secret that Bryant Morelli, a man of belligerence and temper, has occasionally struck his children. He's better about it. Mostly because Leo got old enough to fight back, protected all of us. He's also gotten a little calmer in his old age, but it doesn't erase the past. "What were you two talking about, anyway?"

r good. "Ironically, I think he wanted assurance that I would treat you right."

emized Warmth wars with confusion. "He's a complicated man."

He shakes his head, his hazel eyes never leaving mine. "Men are All of us. As long as you know what makes us tick."

"What makes you tick?" I whisper.

"You." He takes a step closer, crowding me while being careful to

me that I could escape him if I wanted to. He's commanding and ob  
this man, but never violent.

in its     He would never raise his hand to me.  
you're     Or our child.

I know that as truly as I know the sun will rise tomorrow.

And yet... with the dementia, he might lash out. He might become  
vas theand lash out, the way his father has before. It reminds me of the s  
centricJekyll and Hyde. Maybe every man has two sides to him, one hidden  
emerges unexpectedly.

"Me," I say, looking up at him.

In the shadows he looks impossibly handsome. "I don't want to h  
ey saidmore than I have to."

us side    The statement resonates with truth. And with irony, because  
effectsdefinitely hurt me. Maybe every husband will, though. There's no way  
a life, all the way to the very end, without experiencing some pair  
Grief.

Saying goodbye will never be easy, not where love is involved.  
urse."     "Have you heard of the Terminal Project?" I ask.

A pause. He nods.

ng with    "It's where the families won't accept a cancer patient's choice  
before Iexperience chemo and all the terrible side effects. It allows them a p  
zes, hissplace to spend the rest of their time."

onished    "Why are you telling me this?"

her.        "Because I know the irony of what I'm doing here. I support that  
nan ofsomething different here."

gotten     "Which is what?"

and he     "The only reason you accept your illness is because you believe  
out thatno alternative. You're not choosing between chemo and hospice.  
throwing up your hands."

t."         "Where is the treatment, Eva? It doesn't exist. Hell, until a few year  
they were damn sure dementia was caused by plaque in the brain. We  
simple.all our money into studying that plaque, because the doctors were s  
sure."

Unfortunately I read about that. It feels a little like a conspiracy  
o showexcept it's true. And tragic. A little secret keeping and a lot of despera

obstinate, the medical community to pursue that line of research for literally decades. Only recently did they reveal that some people with plaque don't get dementia. There's no correlation. Now they think it's a protein, but Finelli is entirely wrong. It's still a guess. An unproven theory, which is why we have to support people who are developing new strategies.

violent "They have results that are incredible."

story of "A fluke. Or a lie." A humorless smile. "People lie sometimes."

until it He's accepted me and this baby with grace, but only because he's resigned to his fate. We're like his version of a hospice. We're the place he's going to rest before he loses himself.

hurt you He doesn't think he has a choice.

I'm determined to give him one. "Listen, I know your family works with a world-renowned doctor... but only one, right? You couldn't go knocking on the door of every dementia specialist in the country, because it would be a loss. I risked the big secret."

"We donate huge amounts of money to research for a cure."

"That's not the same thing as asking for a personalized treatment plan."

He shakes his head. "It's not going to help."

"Why does it matter?" I ask. "So what if I'm wrong? So what if I put a lot of money into the research and it doesn't pan out? We have enough money to try. You're not going to dream of it being different. You're going to imagine and insist and eventually, eventually when you realize it's not going to happen, you'll resent me."

there's I shake my head, bewildered. "No, I won't."

"I watched it happen," he says, a little too loud.

A hard swallow. "You mean your mother."

there's "She loved him. And she insisted the curse wasn't real. It was just a coincidence. You're pretending, because he never presented symptoms. Until he did. A few years ago, at a party here. She pretended it wasn't happening. At least until the major episodes started. Then she hated him."

poured "What do you want me to do? Lock you up in an asylum because you forgot where the bathroom was? Anyone could make that mistake."

"It would be better than denial."

theory, I shake my head; this time I'm the one who doesn't break eye contact. "I'm not denying that it's happening. That's the opposite of what I'm

ecades. I'm recognizing there's a problem, and I'm going out to fix it. If you  
't have a wife who waves sadly as you sail off into the sunset, then you pic  
n isn't wrong woman. I'm too damn selfish for that."

ve need He stares at me, breathing hard. Slowly, the hint of a smile brea  
the reach of a single sunray through a storm. "Selfish, are you? Yes  
how everyone describes Eva Honorata Morelli. She's always taking  
giving, never taking care of everyone."

se he's "I'm not giving you up," I warn, trying to sound stern.

ice he's "Is it because of the sex?" he asks, almost conversationally. His h  
against my waist, pressing me flush against the cool wall. I lean back,  
desperate for that wash of relief. And then it's too cold. Too flat. To  
ks with when I prefer the scorching hot strength of him in front of me. Instea  
locking forward—trapped, trapped, trapped. "Is it the orgasms I can give yo  
ld have way you melt on my tongue? Is it the way you gasp and cry and beg?"

I've lost my breath. I have only sensation. I pull it into my lur  
pleasure and the pain. I let it nourish me, like a hard spring rain or  
lan." earth.

He leans close, close enough that I can only see shadowed an  
I pour becomes a feeling. Heat. Safety. And a piquant sense of danger. Th  
y." prowling male has been challenged, and he's going to make me regi  
t really the best possible way.

oing to My hips push forward, almost on their own. His breath catches.

won't "I'm not the only one who gasps," I manage to say. I'm halfw  
Almost entirely gone, but I have to challenge him back. He needs  
think. I need it, too.

I don't decide to rub against him like a cat. It happens. It happ  
same way I open my mouth and press it to his hard jaw. Even freshly  
easy to I can feel the faint backward bristle on my sensitive lips. It raises ever  
rgotten ending through my body in quiescent waves.

ning, at His large hand cradles my breast. I can feel the tiny beads on the  
as if they're imprints of his fingerprints. Like he's left his mark on r  
ise you nipples feel tight and aching. None of my bras would work with thi  
but without it my breasts have been rubbed against silk all night  
Shifting, shifting. Making themselves ready for Finn to expose the  
contact, press starved, open kisses. A nip, and then I'm whimpering.

doing. He laughs, an unholy sound in the dark. "Tell me again how self

wanted are.”

“I want—I want—” I can’t finish the sentence. Maybe it’s because too many things. Or maybe it’s because he’s found a rhythm, the heaviness of his erection against my clit. The feel of the beads on the fabric becomes that kind of sensual massage, sharpening the sensations to the point of pain, never

“Tell me,” he says, inherent threat in his voice.

Threat that he won’t follow through. That he’ll stop.

I manage to find some words, a jumble of them. A pile. “More. More. More.”

“Good girl,” he murmurs, reaching down to pull up the dress. It gives me a hard access, along with a cool ruffle of air against my stomach. My matching thong, really, so the line wouldn’t show in the dress—could you? The dress with a snap of expensive fabric. “I’ll give you what you need, you self.

I’ll take care of you. Let go, sweetheart. Let go.”

His fingers find my clit. He makes me ready until I’m mindless. He humps his hand. Sending a long line of arousal down the inside of my thigh.

Then there’s a break. The cut of a circuit. He pulls away long enough to free himself.

He turns me around, so I’m facing the walls. His hands enclose my ass from the back, placing them on the concrete. It feels like dust-covered skin. Like I could slip, if I don’t dig in my nails. His hands are sure as they grip my ass.

A pause. I can feel the weight of his gaze on my ass.

He covers me with his body.

“I wish I could memorize this,” he says, murmuring in my ear.

Anyone could say it. It wouldn’t be foreboding. Anyone could say it’s not anyone who presses his cock inside me. It’s Finn. It’s the man fucking me as if we only have hours left instead of days, instead of a lifetime.

My dress, tight like a corset and

wish you

are.”

“I want—I want—” I can’t finish the sentence. Maybe it’s because I want too many things. Or maybe it’s because he’s found a rhythm, the heavy ridge of his erection against my clit. The feel of the beads on the fabric becomes a kind of sensual massage, sharpening the sensations to the point of pain.

“Tell me,” he says, inherent threat in his voice.

Threat that he won’t follow through. That he’ll stop.

I manage to find some words, a jumble of them. A pile. “More. Please. Yes.”

“Good girl,” he murmurs, reaching down to pull up the dress. It gives him access, along with a cool ruffle of air against my stomach. My matching gold panties—a thong, really, so the line wouldn’t show in the dress—come off with a snap of expensive fabric. “I’ll give you what you need, you selfish girl. I’ll take care of you. Let go, sweetheart. Let go.”

His fingers find my clit. He makes me ready until I’m mindless. Begging. Humping his hand. Sending a long line of arousal down the inside of my thigh.

Then there’s a break. The cut of a circuit. He pulls away long enough to free himself.

He turns me around, so I’m facing the walls. His hands enclose mine from the back, placing them on the concrete. It feels like dust-covered gloss. Like I could slip, if I don’t dig in my nails. His hands are sure as they lift my ass.

A pause. I can feel the weight of his gaze on my ass.

He covers me with his body.

“I wish I could memorize this,” he says, murmuring in my ear.

Anyone could say it. It wouldn’t be foreboding. Anyone could say it, but it’s not anyone who presses his cock inside me. It’s Finn. It’s the man I love, fucking me as if we only have hours left instead of days, instead of years. Instead of a lifetime.





## CHAPTER TEN

### Finn

**I**N THE AFTERMATH, sweat dries on my body, leaving me cold. Straightening our clothes, I take off my jacket and put it around her shoulders. It makes her look small and vulnerable, the tux from my larger body on her slender frame.

She looks dazed and sex-drenched. There's no way I'm taking her through the ballroom or even the kitchens. No other man gets to see her like this, orgasm softening her fierceness until she's pouring out, radiating a glow. I'll have to find some other, smaller exit and have the driver wait for me there.

I press a kiss to her forehead, feeling protective. "You okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because I used you hard."

She gives me a dreamy smile. "No, I'm the one who used you."

I manage a mocking glance. "That's right. Because you're so selfish."

She's the least selfish person I've ever met in my life. It's not obvious things, her leadership at the Morelli Fund. Hell, its very existence is only because of her. It's also the way she loves, so completely. Irrevocable. It's tragic, really.

Selfish. Ha.

I'll give her a million orgasms. She'll store them like raindrops, creating a whole lake of memories to swim in, when I become too childlike to function.

She sighs and leans against me, resting her head on my chest. "I love you, Phineas Galileo Hughes."

"And I love you, Eva..." I pause and shake my head, as if clearing my mind.

cobwebs. “I love you, too, Eva...” I falter. How can I not know it Morelli.”

“You know my middle name,” she whispers.

“Of course I do. It’s...”

My mind is a blank slate. What’s her middle name? I know it. I know it. “I remembered the names of a hundred acquaintances and connections out there. I don’t even give a fuck about them, but I remember their names. Which horses they back. Their trips to Wimbledon hunting lodges in the wilds of Quebec.”

“It... it doesn’t matter,” she says. “My middle name is—”

“No. Don’t tell me. I know it. Of course I know it. I love you. After carrying our child. We’re going to get married. Of course I know your middle name is.”

Her eyes are dark pools, glinting tears. “Finn.”

“You wrote it across my chest. I remember the feel of your fingers backtracing through my chest hair, the sensation that made my cock like remember the warmth of your body that night. So of course I remember, a soft letters it spelled.”

She’s silent in her grief now, unable to pretend.

I’m the one pretending now.

I pace away from her and put a hand on the wall. It’s coming to me now the name will slip off my tongue. Eva Something Morelli could it be? Eva Michelle Morelli. Eva Renee Morelli. Eva Lucinda Morelli. They’re all just random hollow sounds. They could be right, and I might even know, though most likely they’re wrong. Names I’ve heard before I ever met her.

“I know every company in the S&P 500. I’ve met most of their executives, teams, at some point or another. I have a standing monthly lunch with the CEO of Nvidia. I play golf with the President of Berkshire Hathaway. I have a couple of different corporate spies on the payroll at Meta and Microsoft, and I know all of their names.”

“Are you really supposed to be admitting that?”

It’s an opening, I can tell. The perfect opportunity for me to joke how she must be familiar with the white collar warfare of corporate espionage, considering her father and her brothers do it all the time. I want that opening on purpose, but I can’t take it. I can’t turn the conversation

“Eva away from her middle name.

Trying to think of it just makes it harder.

It keeps slipping away, like trying to catch a breeze.

“Pi,” I say, my voice rough.

have to “Pie?”

society “I can recite pi to a hundred digits. Three point one four one five n  
mbered six five three five eight nine seven nine two three eight four six.” I sp  
. Their the rest of the recitation, instead continuing in my head. Eight nine sev  
three two three... I know them. They’re correct. Somehow I know it’  
not just a random jumble.

You’re So why can’t I remember her middle name?

at your “It’s Honorata,” she blurts out, her voice trembling and loud.  
She’s afraid, and I can’t even console her. This is happening.

What a hell it is for a man not to be able to protect his woma  
ingertiphimself.

hard. I “Honorata,” I say, tasting the syllables. “Eva Honorata Morelli.”

er what Now that the name hangs in the air, I remember it. It was right afte  
her everything—the Hughes curse, my inevitable end, the promise I’  
to my father.

She hadn’t believed it.

ie. Any *Excuse me if I don’t believe in generational curses and old wives’ i*  
i. What Then she’d returned the secret-sharing with a gift of her middle  
Morelli. That night she’d written it across my skin, branded me in a way t  
ght not irrevocable. I was hers. And she was mine. Forever, forever. That’s  
efore—felt like, but that feeling was a lie.

This is the truth, this cold, clinking certainty.

ecutive It’s happening.

ite with The curse is happening right now. I can’t stop it. That doctor outsi  
away. IFaulk. And the man with her. What was his name? They work at the  
d Tesla Institute, I know that much. His name had started with A. Anthony.

No, it had been Alistair. An old-world name.

They can’t save me. No matter what happens next, no matter the o  
e about of the study and how much money and support the Morelli Fund give  
rporate it’s too fucking late.

She left A hand on my arm. Eva looks lost and fragile. Alone.

ersation Because she is alone.

This will be a marriage of one person, and she's finally seeing that  
"Please," she says, her voice thick with tears. "Don't let this  
everything. Don't let this make you lose hope. You can forget a nar  
can walk into the wrong room. It doesn't have to mean anything if yo  
let it."

ine two      That's where she's right.

are her      Because this changes nothing.

en nine      Not for me. I always knew how it would end.

's right;      It's also where she's wrong.

"I haven't lost hope, Eva Honorata Morelli," I say, taking her in m  
"I've gained it. I believe you'll solve this—with time. You'll break th  
Afraid. Not with me, but with our child, and that is the greatest gift you cou  
me."

in from

er I told  
d made

*tales.*  
e name.  
hat felt  
what it

de? Dr.  
: Tuffin  
Archer.

utcome  
s them,

This will be a marriage of one person, and she's finally seeing that.

"Please," she says, her voice thick with tears. "Don't let this change everything. Don't let this make you lose hope. You can forget a name. You can walk into the wrong room. It doesn't have to mean anything if you don't let it."

That's where she's right.

Because this changes nothing.

Not for me. I always knew how it would end.

It's also where she's wrong.

"I haven't lost hope, Eva Honorata Morelli," I say, taking her in my arms. "I've gained it. I believe you'll solve this—with time. You'll break the curse. Not with me, but with our child, and that is the greatest gift you could give me."



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### Eva

**T**HE OFFICE IS beautiful and upscale, the kind of place where Katy Pe Beyoncé have their children. I started at a more ordinary doctor's office after the nurse spilled the news to a reporter, I had to find someplace. Someplace with an ironclad NDA.

The first place had taupe walls and magazines spread out on the table. They had posters of childbirth information with a splash of flora.

In contrast, I walk into a bohemian paradise with low, wide chairs of teak and flax cushioning. The wall is painted a pleasing mix of green and deep teal. Low lighting made by paper lanterns strung up in purposeful randomness.

It looks like someone's stylish, comfortable living room.

Or maybe a coffee shop.

The expansive beverage offerings don't hurt with that. The complicated espresso machine that the secretary knows how to use for patients, along with tall containers of ice water with strawberries and mint mixed in, which pours from an antique gold spout.

Little jars contain nuts and granola in case we're hungry while we wait. I'm not hungry, though. Or thirsty.

I'm tense, because things have been subdued between me and Finn. He didn't talk much when we got back from the charity gala. He slept in his office. He was even more solicitous than usual, taking care of me with a deliberate gentleness—as if I needed it.

Maybe I did need it.

The sex at the gala had been scorching hot. Incredible. And heartb

by the end, when he couldn't remember my middle name. I couldn't  
off the way I could the closet thing at my loft. We've talked about our  
names before, early and relatively often. He's whispered it at tenderly  
moments, not even pausing to think, as if it were second nature. As if  
a prayer. And then last night? Nothing.

Could it be a random thing?

Of course. We'll never know. There's no way to know.

So here we are, living in a grim new reality. No, that's not quite true  
always been his reality. His parents told him how it would end from the  
he was a toddler. The only person surprised by the dangerous fragility  
hope? Me.

Sorry and "I'm so sorry," the nurse says with an apologetic smile. Instead  
ice, but usual scrubs made in bright colors, she's wearing a beige fitted blouse  
ce else. looks more stylish than most clothes. Only the matching beige pants  
fitting with a slight flare, make it clear that it's a uniform. "Dr. Hoffman  
coffee a delivery early this morning, and it's a long labor. We could reschedule  
l art. we could fit you in with one of our other doctors?"

She made "Oh, no problem," I say, stalling as I try to think of the answer.  
I like the things I love about Dr. Hoffman is that she insists on attending every  
leaving, of her patient's births. I heard from my cousin that it's not always true.  
She saw her first OB-GYN for the full nine months. Then when she went into  
labor at 1 a.m. it was some random doctor at the hospital who delivered  
child. One who wasn't familiar with her birth plan and didn't care. Over  
there's a kept ordering interventions even though her labor was progressing fine  
for the her second child she'd opted for a midwife and a home birth.

And basil I'm not quite brave enough to go for that, but I am nervous about venturing  
with new people. Then again, it's only one visit. And if I'm going to  
wait. that a doctor drop everything to attend my birth, it only makes sense  
sometimes she'd be unavailable for my appointments, too.

Ann. We What finally decides me, though, is the rigamarole required to get in  
t at my Building security needed to be alerted. Finn's security team had handled  
me with with Leo looking over his shoulder, metaphorically speaking. We'd  
special permission for a guard to accompany us. Our only concession  
he's standing outside, in the hallway, looking conspicuous as hell, as if  
reaching guarding a private poker game instead of a doctor's office.

I really want to know the gender of the baby, and I don't want to

laugh it do all this again in a few days. Only to discover that she's attending middle delivery.

sensual "I'll see whoever's available," I say, nodding.

it were "Are you sure?" Finn asks, his voice low.

"Of course it's fine," I say, overly bright. I don't want him to worry.

"That's wonderful," the nurse says, giving a bright smile and a wink. "You'll adore Dr. Walker. All of his patients do. He has a way with ladies."

he time "Oh." I blink, uncertain what to think about a man doing my exam of only ever had women gynecologists. Maybe I'm traditional that way.

I think it's wrong for other people, of course. I'm just not that comfortable with strange men. Especially older men, where they're in a position of power and prominence. It reminds me too much of my first relationship.

s, form Then again, he's a professional.

man had I'm overthinking this.

dule or I follow the nurse down the hallway, feeling Finn's hand on my back.

One of She shows us into the exam room, which looks more like a massage room at a high-end spa. There's an antique divider for me to change behind, a white robe to wear during the exam, and a beige-sheet-covered table.

ent into Only the stirrups give away its purpose.

red her Finn takes a seat in the armchair for that purpose, and I go behind the divider to undress. Then he's standing again as I hop onto the seat, alone. A gentleman, helping me onto the stool so I can hop up. It's always a weird position, this. Like being on stage. Which would be nerve-wracking in any situation, but being on stage without panties? With a stranger? I never request Hoffman. She's always kind and frank and slightly funny, so it puts me at ease.

Then again, Dr. Walker works with her. They probably have good bedside manners. And the nurse had seemed to think I'd like this guy.

ed that, Not that it really matters.

needed It's only one visit.

is that "Hello, hello," says a man with a booming voice and a bright, confident smile. Veneers, definitely. He's handsome, with a bearing that

he knows it. "So lovely to meet you, Ms. Morelli. I took the liberty of reviewing your chart, and I'm honored that I get to do the gender reveal. Yes? No?"



another want to find out the sex of the baby?”

“Yes,” I say, laughing a little, nervous.

There’s something a little... surface about this guy, but I don’t make it a thing. Despite the strange anxiety bumping away in the pit of my stomach. Or maybe that’s the baby. Right now he or she is the simple playful banana, according to the app that I use to track the progress.

The doctor claps his hands together, making me jump. “Absolutely with the is going to be fun. Relax,” he says, noticing my tension. “This won’t be a problem. I’ve got it.”

I don’t He puts a hand on my knee, as if comforting me.

comfortable I don’t like it.

But beside me, I feel Finn tense. Maybe someone else couldn’t feel it, but I definitely couldn’t see it. His handsome face looks expressionless compared to his usual charm it’s a stark contrast. The last thing I need is an argument to break out before I find out the gender.

“Let’s get started,” I say.

“Eager girl,” the doctor says with a chuckle, and Finn’s eyes narrow.

My fiancé stands, appearing somehow more imposing. “Dr. Walker, please.”

“Walker.”

“Whatever. Please show my fiancée the respect any patient deserves.”

Even though the doctor is taller, Finn is more fierce. More determined. More real, in every way. It infuses the room. It’s like watching two men stare each other off, ears down, teeth bared, hair bristling.

As I watch, Dr. Walker becomes visibly smaller. He clears his throat and ducks under the rolling stool, cowed. “Yes, of course. My apologies for my casual manner.”

The physical exam happens in a brusque, professional manner. There’s nothing suggestive about the way he touches me. It’s about the same as Hoffman, if a little less gentle. “Everything looks good here,” he says.

He pulls off a glove with a loud *snap*. “Now I’ll send the ultrasound technician in. And once she’s done, we’ll go over the results.”

overly

says he

viewing

do? We

want to find out the sex of the baby?”

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Eva

**A**S SOON AS he leaves the room, I let out a breath of relief.

“I should have rescheduled,” Finn says on a growl.

“No,” I say, putting a hand on his arm. “There was no need for th  
it wasn’t your decision to make. It was mine. I’m the pregnant lady her

“That’s why I kept my mouth shut, but now I regret it. The g  
prick.”

I don’t really disagree, though he did nothing directly wrong. It’  
feeling, but I learned to follow my feelings a long time ago. I shou  
spoken up, or at least allowed Finn to advocate for me. I’m so used t  
the strong one, the fixer. I’m so used to solving everyone else’s proble  
keeping my mouth shut when I have one of my own. Having someone  
side, an ally, a soon-to-be husband, is still a new idea.

“Let’s not think about him,” I say. “I’m so excited about the ultraso  
He doesn’t respond, and I know why.

“Come on,” I say, gently cajoling. “We don’t know what the ge  
not really.”

A dark glance. “We do.”

Because part of the Hughes curse is that the main line can only p  
boys. Supposedly. It seems like a bit of folklore. Even if early-onset de  
runs in the family, even if boys are genetically more likely, it doesn’  
that a girl is impossible.

Not that I’d mind a boy.

In fact I’d love to hold a miniature Finn, with dark blond hair an  
eyes, with an irreverent grin and a thirst for adventure. He’d be handfu

would love it, love him, just as much as I'd love a girl.

It's not that I'd mind a boy. It's just that, a little bit, it would be a confirmation of the Hughes curse. As if it would prove the inevitability of their disease. As if it's some supernatural hex, rather than a happenstance of genetics.

If it was a girl, I think Finn would believe the curse was broken.

And that would be powerful.

The ultrasound tech is a bubbly young woman named Halsey. "I have a special relation to the singer, my friends call me Hals, and you can, too!" She guides me through the process of the ultrasound with the patience and consideration I expect from Dr. Hoffman.

"Now if it's a boy, we'll be able to tell," Hals says, "on account of the knickknack, but a girl, there's more of a chance for error, since it might be a trick of the position."

"Got it," I say, tensing as she puts the gel on my stomach. It's a little of a guy's which I appreciate, but still an uneasy sensation. "Knickknack? That's not one."

Hals giggles. "I make up a new term every time I do the ultrasound. It's a whiz bang. The thingamajig. The green eggs and ham."

That makes me laugh, despite myself. "The green eggs and ham?"

Even Finn quirks a smile. "The pocket watch," he suggests.

"The orange peel," I say, making them both laugh.

"Please no," Finn says, teasing. "I can live with an orange, but not an orange peel."

"I'm going to use that one next time," Hals says cheerfully.

She takes a little time setting up the machine. There's white and black movement on the screen, broad strokes, unintelligible, at least to me.

she settles around a few particular black and white blobs. The sound of a heartbeat fills the room, and I meet Finn's warm gaze.

"That's him," he says, sounding reverent.

"Or her," I say.

It doesn't matter. I keep repeating that to myself, but I'm not going to believe it. Without the curse, either a boy or a girl would be lovely. I'd like to believe it would be so great if a girl could definitively break the curse, if Finn would, but I believe in that.

"Let's see if we can find that orange peel," Hals says, her eyes tra

the screen as her hand moves the wand expertly through the gel on my  
stomach. It could be a bump.

She squints and leans closer to the screen. “Aha! There it is.”

“It’s a boy?” I ask, breathless and jittery.

“It’s a boy,” she says, beaming. She proceeds to point out a few  
white areas—a leg, a stomach, and a very small speck of white  
that apparently is his orange peel. None of it really looks like a baby,  
but my, “no heartbeat thrumming through the room proves it is.

A boy.

I love everything about a boy. Trains, planes, and automobiles.

and tumble. A puppy as a sidekick as they have adventures outside  
the door. I’ve already envision him building forts in the backyard. Or maybe he’ll be  
content with softer pursuits. Playing make believe with legos and helping to  
prepare pretend food in the kitchen and drawing stories on the walls.

I’ll love him however he is, but...

It does feel, despite my best efforts, like a confirmation.

That the Hughes curse is real.

I believe in magic, I told the people from the Tuffin Institute. I believe  
in miracles. Not because I’m anti-science. Not even because I’m religious  
though I attend mass with Leo often. It’s because there are things that  
science doesn’t yet explain. There *is* a reason, we just haven’t figured it out yet  
if this is like that? What if the curse—the steady stream of boys who  
do not survive the inevitable and quick descent into dementia—is inescapable?

*Thump, thump, thump.*

This baby doesn’t know about the curse.

He might not even be affected by it... but he probably is.

I can’t deny that any longer. Whether it’s ordinary genetics having  
run its course or something more esoteric, it’s feeling more and more likely.

With Finn forgetting my middle name.

With the baby being a boy.

With the pounding in my chest.

Hals holds the ultrasound wand steady as she clicks on the other  
side of the machine. Little cross hatches and lines are drawn across the white  
screen, along with measurements.

There’s a movement inside. Not a movement made by me.  
A movement made by her. I can’t even feel it inside my tummy, but I can

my baby in the ultrasound, the flutter and shift of the baby. A tiny being who can't  
cry or speak. A boy who's reliant on me fully.

Will he be afraid when he finds out about the curse?

Will he resent me for bringing him into the world?

7 of the I've never considered an abortion for him, and I'm not consid  
ite that now, but it still makes me wonder. The way Finn talks about it, some  
but the wonder if he'd rather his parents made a different choice. The idea  
anathema to my very being. No matter how badly things got at home  
when my heart broke from the betrayal of Lane Constantine, I value  
Rough above everything. Even pain. Even heartache. Even dementia, if  
e. I can't think of it.

e a boy That was before I knew about it, though.

o make Before I'd really understood or thought deeply about what it means  
Becoming a child when everyone else stays an adult.

Being dependent on your family for getting dressed, for bathing, for  
the bathroom.

*Alzheimer's is a broken record, playing the same song on repeat. I  
believe in cacophony so loud and jarring that it makes you feel like you're  
religiously insane. It's a ticking clock, an incessant chime. It's an infinite nur  
science sounds, all of them lonely.*

t. What That's the ending I've consigned this baby to live.

ys, the The baby moves again, innocent and contented in my womb.

He doesn't know.

He isn't afraid, because he doesn't know.

*Thump, thump, thump.*

His heartbeat sounds strong. Hopeful.

ing their Except I'm not hopeful anymore. I'm heartbroken.

All of it comes together in a blinding, grievous panic: the complex  
ethics of procreation, the primal certainty that I'll lose the people I love  
most. The knowledge that I'm not enough, I'm never enough to save  
from the very worst.

end of Fear drenches me, leaving me cold and sweaty at the same time.

e blobs, My breath comes faster and faster, and then not at all. I gasp out  
feels like I'm strangling. The baby. Finn. My parents. My brother.

Not as sisters. Finn's father and brother. His mother. Everyone who re  
in see it Hughes Industries. Everyone we've ever helped with the Morelli Fu

an't see everyone we *could* help in some distant future. All of them slipping through my fingers; I can't catch them. I can't help them. I can't save them.

I can't even save myself.

That's the shameful truth.

ering it "Are you okay?" Halsey's voice comes from far away.

ometimes I "Eva." It's Finn. Steady, calm, strong Finn. He's been dealing with fear since he was five years old—and it wasn't only about himself. His brother, even.

ied life Tears leak down my cheeks. It isn't a heavy gust of a cry, but a delicate

I had "I'm going to get Dr. Walker."

"No," Finn says. "Don't. Give us a few minutes alone."

My stomach is wiped free of the goop and my robe readjusts, trembling. Dimly I'm aware of Finn's hands on me, gentle and careful. Patient, as well. He rubs slow circles around my back, leaning me forward using I'm not reclined and feeling helpless.

I press my hands to my face, which feels abnormally hot.

t. *It's a* "Take a deep breath."

going I focus on Finn's voice.

nber of "Good. Another."

He coaxes me back to awareness, where every muscle feels like it's been wrung out. "I'm sorry," I mumble. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize. Anyone would be upset."

He knows. He knows why I had a panic attack so soon after learning baby's a boy. It's confirmation of a reality that he's always known as I doesn't say, *I told you so*. Phineas Hughes would never be so crass. one who thinks it. He told me so.

He knew.

licated I'm the one who's been spinning stories in my head.

ove the When I was pursued by a married man who told me all sorts of lies re themselves said his marriage was a sham, that he'd leave his wife for me. That he me. And I was so used to taking care of everyone, my family, my siblings even as a child, I took care of them—that the idea of having an powerful man shelter me felt almost addictive.

ers and I could be excused, I suppose, for being young and foolish in the face of a far more experienced lover. One well-versed in the lies of seduction.

nd, and It never should have happened again, though.

through I spun fairy tales in the clouds, and somehow, somehow, I've  
again.

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I spun fairy tales in the clouds, and somehow, somehow, I've done it again.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### Finn

**A**S SOON AS we arrive home, I know something's wrong.

There are a couple of extra cars pulled in the circular drive. In particular, the black Lexus with the New Jersey plates belongs to Dr. Rani, my father's primary physician. He comes once a week to see how he's doing on his routine visits where nothing much changes. Those visits happen on Wednesday mornings, not on Friday in the late evening.

Eva senses my mood. "What's going on?"

"It's Dad."

That's all I have to say. She's quiet and quick as she follows me into the house. I don't bother parking in the garage; it's quicker to go in this way.

We decided not to stay at her loft tonight because the doctor's office is closer to Bishop's Landing. And I don't have to go into the office tomorrow. Plus, I've been spending less time with my father.

He has Hemingway and my mother now, but it's not the same.

Now it might be too late.

We're at the front door when we hear the strident whine of an ambulance. It turns the corner, and my heartbeat races. What the hell happened?

"Go," Eva says, her expression calm and competent. "I'll direct you inside."

I don't even have time for thanks. I run through the house and take the back stairs two at a time. And find absolute chaos. The doctor is the center of two of his nurses. They surround his bed, doing something I don't immediately recognize, adjusting and fussing.

Along with my mother, crying.

It's Hemingway who's clear eyed enough to answer me.

"He fell," he says, his voice grim. "Doctor says he might have something."

"Fuck." He might have broken several somethings. "Where?"

A pause. Then, "The gazebo outside."

"What the fuck was he doing there?"

"I don't know." Hemingway raises his chin, as if facing down a squad. "It's my fault, though. I should have known something was off at dinner. He kept talking about sailing and the water and the feel of the Don't blame Mom."

I look at our mother, who's sitting in an armchair with a slight expression and tears tracking down her cheeks. Most people assume it's a typical society marriage gone stale, since she travels the world in a never-ending tour.

I know different.

Because I saw how they were before. In love.

True fucking love, for all the good it did them.

That's why I avoided real relationships before Eva. Not because I believe in them. It was because I knew the paradise that could be lost.

"Why would I blame her?" I ask, forcing myself to some semblance of calm.

"She was—" He looks away, as if unable to finish.

A cold feeling runs through me. "She was what?"

"She was sleeping in his room, okay? She dismissed the nurse. I was having a lucid moment at the dinner table. They talked about the water used to go sailing." The tips of Hemingway's ears turn pink. "And then he kissed. I... immediately left."

Hell. A moment of lucidity. Ironic that it should have been the catalyst for their disaster.

Hemingway blushing about our mother's show of affection is so adorable.

Our family isn't normal.

I never blamed her for leaving Dad. It would be like living in Annapolis for their temperate summers. They were nice for the handful of days it lasted, and pure hell the rest. Sometimes, in my darker moments, I blame her for leaving Hemingway. And me.

But this? Fuck.

broken I make my way over to my father. He's incoherent, mumbling something about water and moonlight. He doesn't appear to be in pain, but that's more scary. The nurse stands aside to allow me in. The usually unflappable Dr. Ranier looks distressed.

"I had to sedate him," he says.

a firing "That's why he doesn't seem like he's in pain."

during "No, it's... I'm concerned about his state of mind. They say they breeze him still trying to get up to go sailing. That he fought them as they tried to get him inside."

rattled Fear makes my blood freeze. What if he'd made it to the water? I think they're dead right now. He would have drowned. Even if muscle memory had kicked in and he remembered how to swim, he couldn't have swam forever. I mention that it's cold outside.

He bats at the nurse's hands ineffectually, trying to get up.

"Dad," I say, leaning over him. "It's me. Finn. Phineas."

"Want to go sailing, Finny boy. Want to sail around the cape around here? I didn't again."

"We will, Dad. Promise. Just focus on getting better."

ance of "Feel fine," he mumbles, his eyes hazy.

There's a commotion behind me as the paramedics come in. I move out of the way along with everyone else. Dr. Ranier passes on the salient information—the nature of his fall, his current health condition, the medications he's on. I'm useless in this tableau.

ay they "Why didn't you call me?" I ask Hemingway.

en they He shakes his head. "There was no time. And I thought—"

"You didn't want to bother me."

ause of "I knew you were at the doctor's office with Eva. And you could have done anything here. We could have loaded him into the ambulance. I was planning to drive to the hospital behind him and then text you when you got home."

"God fucking damn it, Hemingway."

He throws up his hands. "What could you have done if you were tactical? Not that you could have driven home any faster in the middle of rush hour. So... what? You would have just worried and freaked out while in traffic?"

blamed "That's my *right*."

"Well, it doesn't seem very useful. Or safe."

“I want to know when something happens to him. I need to be informed. I can’t—”

“Finn.” He puts his hands on my shoulders, squaring off with me, looking intense. “I know you’re used to shouldering everything in this house, but I’m older now. Grown. You were the same age I am right now when I took over Hughes Industries.”

Eva appears at the top of the stairs as a whirl of the ambulance keys found from outside. She looks calm and resolute. This is a woman who has had to get entirely too much experience handling emergencies. Fucking unfair that I’m marrying into a family with more of them.

“Christ. I’m sorry I snapped,” I say to Hemingway. “I still don’t know what I kicked but I hear what you’re saying. Mostly I’m just worried and taking it out on you like an asshole.”

He gives me a firm nod. “I’m going to drive Mom to the hospital. I can take Eva. That way if we need to bring them back early we’ll have cars.”

He heads downstairs to pull the car around from the garage.

Eva joins me, leaning into my side with gentle support.

“When the hell did he become an adult?” I say, staring after him.

A soft smile. “He makes a good one.”

Yeah, he managed some pretty clear thinking for a disaster.

And he even managed me and my temper.

Eva isn’t the only person in the room here with too much experience handling them.

“We’re going to follow them to the hospital,” I tell her, placing a quick kiss on her forehead. “Thank you for this. For everything. I just need a minute.”

I go to my mother and crouch in front of her.

Slowly, slowly, she focuses on me. “Finn?”

“Yeah, Mom.” My voice is hoarse. “You okay?”

Her head shakes slowly, but the desolate expression in her eyes says it all. “Some people wish, you know. They pray. They want one more day with the people they loved, but I know better. One day is worse than nothing. They want to see him back and then lose him again.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

med. I “You don’t have to apologize.”

Her lower lip trembles. “Yes. I do. For tonight and for every night  
his blue this one, not being here, making you bear the weight of this. For fa  
family, love with him in the first place. For making you and Hemingway l  
then you curse. God, you must hate me.”

I glance back at Eva.

icks off It’s the same fear she had at the doctor’s office, that the baby is a n

o’s had A year ago I would have agreed with her.

at she’s Now, I’m not so sure.

That small bump? Those black and white shadows? The steady rhy  
like it, his heart? I already love him, this tiny, unnamed child.

out on And how can you regret love? You can’t.

Not really.

al. You You can run from it.

ive two You can hide.

God knows I tried both of those things.

You can fight all you want, but love has its way.

And in the end, it’s worth living for.

It’s the only thing that is.

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“You don’t have to apologize.”

Her lower lip trembles. “Yes. I do. For tonight and for every night before this one, not being here, making you bear the weight of this. For falling in love with him in the first place. For making you and Hemingway live this curse. God, you must hate me.”

I glance back at Eva.

It’s the same fear she had at the doctor’s office, that the baby is a mistake.

A year ago I would have agreed with her.

Now, I’m not so sure.

That small bump? Those black and white shadows? The steady rhythm of his heart? I already love him, this tiny, unnamed child.

And how can you regret love? You can’t.

Not really.

You can run from it.

You can hide.

God knows I tried both of those things.

You can fight all you want, but love has its way.

And in the end, it’s worth living for.

It’s the only thing that is.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### Eva

**M**Y FINGERS ENTWINE with Finn's as we hurry through the white automatic doors into the antiseptic-scented lobby. It's full. Every seat and waiting area taken, with many people setup along the wall. A few people in wheelchairs that appear to be provided by the hospital, thick blue plastic piping with a handle on the back like it's a shopping cart.

Another man has a more traditional wheelchair, presumably his own. He has two amputated legs. There's no one around him, no wife or child coming to see him, and he's shouting. The people seated around him seem oblivious. Presumably it's been happening for some time.

One mother has created makeshift sleeping bags for her two children in a corner.

Half of the people are coughing.

Someone holds a bloodied bandage to their temple.

There's only one receptionist for a waiting area that must hold a hundred people.

It's such a contrast to the gynecologist's office I was in only hours ago.

Of course, some of that is due to the fact that it was for regular care whereas this is for emergencies. An ER is bound to be more busy and chaotic, and more depressing than a regular doctor's office. But it's more than that. It's about class differences. And for some people, an emergency room trip is the only time they ever see a doctor.

At the desk, a nurse directs us through the wide double doors.

She presses a button, which causes them to open, and we walk through. Because Finn's father's fall was serious enough to warrant immediate surgery.



care, bypassing the line ahead of all these people? Maybe so. I've heard that can be absolutely terrible for older people. And emergency rooms are a triage system, with the most severe cases treated first, regardless of the order in which you arrive.

Then again, it could be that he's getting better care because of who he is. Because of the zip code where the ambulance picked him up.

Either way, we're shown into a deeper waiting area, this one slightly more crowded. This one doesn't appear to have patients, only waiting area members like us.

"Will you be okay?" Finn asks.

I reach up on my tiptoes and kiss his cheek. "Of course."

He leaves to go find more information about his father's condition. And probably do some more of that Finn Hughes magic, such as making sure they call in the best surgeon. Also to get security, because the stakes are high. There are people in the world who would try to capitalize on this information.

Pictures of one of the wealthiest men in America on a stretcher would be worth a lot of money.

Hemingway settles near the window, looking out over a small courtyard with trees and cobblestone. Geneva sits in one of the chairs, looking shocked. I order some coffee from the vending machine, waiting until it sends a small stream of brown liquid into a Styrofoam cup.

I offer it to her, but she shakes her head no.

So I take a sip and immediately regret it, coughing.

That makes a smile ghost her lips.

I sit down next to her, wondering if I can possibly offer comfort to a woman. Wondering if she even wants me to try. We aren't friends. We could even be enemies. After all, her sister is Caroline Constantine, wife to the man I had an affair with years ago.

Though I don't know if she knows that.

I'm also marrying her son against her advice.

And pregnant out of wedlock. Perhaps not that shocking in this day and age, especially considering we're engaged, but the Hughes are an old-money family. Established and highborn and well-mannered. I'm also a couple years older than Finn.

"I love him, you know."

"Finn?"

ard falls “Daniel. But yes, I love Finn, too. Daniel was so proud when  
run onborn. He was so happy to have a son, even knowing what would bec  
of thehim. It didn’t seem to bother him, keeping the curse going.”

I make a small sound, almost involuntary.

he is. She shakes her head, as if mystified. “And I thought... God, I don’t  
what I thought. It almost seemed like our love could conquer anything.

ly less Half wondering if she’ll rebuff me, I reach over to take her hand.

family Her eyes meet mine, and then she squeezes. “I appreciate what  
doing with Finn, you know. Even though I said you should leave, I  
mean it.” A chagrined smile. “Well, I did mean it. I thought you cou  
yourself, but I see the way you look at him. You already loved him  
then. It was too late. By the time you’re in love it’s too late.”

making “Too late for what?” I find myself asking.

ad truth I should probably keep my mouth shut, considering this woman  
s event.my mother-in-law. The grandmother of my child. Considering she’s  
sell forwith grief and fear right now, but I can’t stay quiet. Not when she  
lamenting something that most people wish they could experience.  
urtyardand blind dates and a thousand other ways that people struggle  
g shell-connection. She had it. For however short of a time, it was hers.

while it “Would you go back and undo it all, if you could? Take away you  
your happiness? Take away your sons? Erase them from the earth?”

Her eyebrows rise. Her lips purse, and she reminds me of her  
Caroline, of the severe look she gets before delivering a cutting  
setdown. Then she shakes her head, as if losing her will to fight. “I w  
to thistake it back, not a single second. That doesn’t make it any easier to be  
e mightlong, slow descent into death. I experience the grieving process ag  
he managain. Every year. Every month. And ten times tonight.”

I swallow hard. “I’m sorry.”

Our hands are still linked, and she squeezes. “You’re good for Fir  
stronger than I ever was. Strong enough to bear the weight of the  
moderncurse, if anyone is.”

-money “Strong enough to break it?”

le years She gives a soft, unsteady laugh. “If anyone can, darling, it’s you.”  
“But you don’t believe it will happen.”

A pause. “No. I’ve lived too long under its shadow to imagine a  
without it, but maybe that’s why we have children. Maybe that’s v

he was bring them into this world, full of chaos and violence, full of tragedy, but some of them can imagine something better.”

’t know  
.”

you’re  
I didn’t  
could save  
me, even

will be  
dealing  
and keeps  
Tinder  
to find

our love,

my sister,  
public  
couldn’t  
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in. And  
Hughes

a world  
why we

bring them into this world, full of chaos and violence, full of tragedy, because they can imagine something better.”



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### Finn

**M**ERCY HOSPITAL'S BEST surgeon on call, Neha Khan, smells faintly of beer and French fries. A pub on Friday night, I'm assuming. She's wearing fresh scrubs and a severe expression as she talks to the nurse. My father is being prepped for the operation room. Dr. Khan is on her way inside when she's going to talk to me first.

"You're the son," she asks, washing her hands and arms until they turn red in a big industrial sink. "And rich. The hospital administrator called me to himself."

"What's happening with my father?"

She spouts off some medical speak with words like *femoral neck fracture* and *pinning*.

"Tell it to me like I'm not a doctor."

"He broke his hip, Mr. Hughes. In multiple places. That's a serious injury. And the sooner I get in there, the sooner I can work on it. Best case scenario, I reconstruct the bones using plates and screws."

"And worst case?"

"Worst case we're looking at a hip replacement."

"What does that mean? Recovery-wise?"

"You're looking at a long road, Mr. Hughes. It's not like breaking a leg when you're a kid. The hip? It's at the core of the body. Right now we're focused on repairing his hip, but even if we're successful, it will be a long road. Some doctors won't tell you the truth, but I'd rather the family be prepared. Fifty percent of people who go through this die within six months."

The news hits me like a physical blow.

I've been so fucking worried about his memory loss, about grievous mental part of him. And now I might lose the physical part, too. "I can't talk to him."

"Unless you know how to use a scalpel, you're no use to him."

"Humor me."

She stops what she's doing and looks at me. "You're not used to being told no, are you?"

"Not when it's about my family."

A nod. "Then scrub in. If you're going to keep talking, you're going to have to come inside the operating room. And in order to do that, I need you to be sterile."

A few minutes later I'm wearing a blue covering over my clothes and a green scrub cap on my hair. It occurs to me that I look like a father in a delivery room.

This isn't a delivery room.

It's not about bringing a new life into the room. It's about saving one.

She nods toward the bed in the center of the room. "You have examined him in minutes."

Lights are shining on him, overbright in an already well-lit room, making him seem like he's glowing. I stand by his head. His eyelids are revealing hazel eyes like my own.

"Hi, Dad."

"Finny boy." His voice is raspy and slow. They've given him better than Dr. Ranier. It's taken away that edge of anxiety. Now his hands rest on his side. He looks at me with a serene expression.

I'm not sure he knows what's happening to him.

It's probably better that he doesn't.

"You remember your promise, don't you?"

My throat burns. "Yeah."

A small spark of awareness lights in his eyes. As if he's really looking back at me, the same way he did many years ago. Daniel is a hard business man. Loyal husband. Caring father. "You kept it?"

I take his hand, which feels papery and cold, and link our fingers together. "Promise."

A nod, and then he closes his eyes.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### Finn, many years ago

**W**ATER SLAPS AGAINST the hull with more strength than you'd expect to have.

It's different than when you're sailing at twenty knots. The bow bounces through the waves. Even when it's choppy water, when it feels like going to bounce right off the deck, there's a certain rhythm to it. *Thud thud*. Fast, almost like bullets in an action movie, one right after the other.

But when the boat stands still, the ocean bats it around in an uneven way like a cat playing with a mouse. It rocks me this way and that, and my legs, as Daddy calls them, go away.

I stagger across the deck and sit down on the blanket.

Daddy's already there, leaning back, hands behind his head.

He's watching the stars, so I try to watch them, too, even though they aren't as exciting as the satellite TV that could play inside the cockpit. That's why we come out here at night. A boat ride can be a lot of different things. First thing in the morning for some fishing. Snorkeling in the afternoon. Or just all of them, even this one, the one where we lie down and look at the stars because it's just me and him.

"Canis Major," he says.

That's an easy one, because it has the brightest star. I point. "There's the dog." "Gemini."

I find Castor and Pollux, the two bright ones. They're supposed to be twins, which I think is mostly because people didn't have satellite TV back then. "There."

"Aries," he says, and I look for the ram that doesn't look anything like



ram.

It looks like a bend. A boomerang, maybe. Sometimes Mom comes up with these, and she lets me make up my own constellations, but Daddy likes the real ones. I point. "There."

A grunt that means *correct*. "And what did the ram do that was so special?"

"It made the Golden Fleece."

"Which is...?"

"Only for kings. Jason had to find the Golden Fleece to claim his father's throne."

"He didn't do it alone, did he?"

"He was helped by Medea, his wife."

"Good," he says, sounding pleased with me.

I smile even though he can't see me. Or maybe because he can't see me. When he's proud of me it doesn't matter as much that we eat canned tuna fish for dinner or that I'm always so sleepy the next morning. I'd give up a thousand nighttime boat rides.

"You know why I named you Galileo, right, Finny boy?"

"He was an astronomer."

"That's right. He discovered that the world went around the sun, not the other way around. But people didn't like that. The church in particular. They wanted to believe what they wanted to believe, and they threatened to kill him if he spoke the truth. They put him in jail and threatened to kill him if he spoke the truth. That's speaking the truth."

I shiver as the night air brushes over my face. "The church?"

"They were the people in power back then, but it's the same now. People in charge who don't want to know the truth. He had to recant. He means to take it back. He had to lie and say that the earth didn't revolve around the sun in order to live."

I'm silent, because I don't know the right answer. This isn't one of those constellation stories like Jason and the Argonauts that I've memorized.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" Daddy asks.

Disappointment makes my stomach hurt. "No."

"The lie? That was his Golden Fleece. That's what he needed to get to a rightful place." He laughs, but it doesn't sound like his other laughs. "The Golden Fleece isn't money or power or

truth. It's a lie."

mes on He turns to face me, his eyes dark in the night.

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People say lying is wrong, but they don't know about the Golden  
was so You're going to have to lie to take your rightful place. Say you under  
Promise me you'll do it."

"I promise," I say, too fast because I don't really know what  
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Maybe it won't ever be. Hell, it will change you, too. You'll want  
things different."

"No, I won't. I promise."

He looks at me again, considering.

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of tuna "You'll lie when you have to," he says, "to save your own life. And  
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Fear makes my heart beat faster. It *thud thud thuds* in an uneven rhythm  
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He takes his pinky—bigger than mine—and we shake that way.

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"That's

or even

truth. It's a lie."

He turns to face me, his eyes dark in the night.

"There will come a time when you need to lie, Finny boy. Understand? People say lying is wrong, but they don't know about the Golden Fleece. You're going to have to lie to take your rightful place. Say you understand. Promise me you'll do it."

"I promise," I say, too fast because I don't really know what I'm promising.

He sighs. "The world is changing, but not fast enough. Not far enough. Maybe it won't ever be. Hell, it will change you, too. You'll want to do things different."

"No, I won't. I promise."

He looks at me again, considering.

"Pinky promise," I say, holding out my pinky.

"You'll lie when you have to," he says, "to save your own life. And mine. Won't you?"

Fear makes my heart beat faster. It *thud thud thuds* in an uneven rhythm, just like the waves that slap the hull. "Pinky promise."

He takes his pinky—bigger than mine—and we shake that way.

Then he's proud again. He doesn't say it, but I can see it in his face.

He lies back down on the blanket, and I do, too.

"Orion," he says, and I point.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### Eva

**I**'M STILL SITTING with Geneva Hughes, holding hands. She talks occasionally, telling me about her husband—before she lost him. That she sounds. But it's less bitter now than it was when I first met her at the Hughes mansion. More wistful.

Like the time he'd ordered a hot air balloon for their anniversary. The company had flown it right into their expansive backyard all glimmering, itchy heat. Being a typical man, she said, he'd insisted he could fly the thing with minimal instructions.

That's how they ended up heading into the sea with no idea how to get back down.

It had taken a rescue balloon to get them back down.

Which should have been annoying. Proof that men were too stubborn for their own good, but instead Geneva had found it exhilarating. She'd leaned over the side of the thick basket, letting the wind whip around her. It didn't matter where they were going, she said, when they were that high in the air. It didn't matter if they'd ever even land.

That's what love does to you, she said, sounding rueful.

Now she's quiet, staring into blank space, probably reliving memories.

Hemingway can't seem to sit down, so he's taken to pacing the hallway. Occasionally he passes by and gives us updates on what he calls the best romance between Exam Rooms 5 and 6, where a woman shouted, "Do you know the muffin man?" like the scene in the movie *Shrek*, and the man in the hall had yelled, "The muffin man?" To which the woman had yelled

in perfect angst, “The muffin man!”

There’s movement in the hallway.

It’s not Hemingway, though.

Finn appears wearing his regular clothes, a business suit that he put on for the office this morning, before he left early for the OB-GYN appointment. And for some reason, he also has a green cap tied around his head. His eyes, those beautiful hazel eyes—sometimes soulful, sometimes playful, now filled with a new height of intensity.

Did something happen? He doesn’t look sad, precisely, but he doesn’t look relieved, either. Is the news about his father bad? Is he in bad condition? Or worse, has he... died? Anything seems possible with this primal energy in the room. It pulses with life and death knowledge. It’s how Geneva hasn’t seen him. He’s standing outside her field of vision, unmoving.

I squeeze her hand. “I’ll go look around for some better coffee,” I say. I’m not sure why I lie, except that if the worst has happened, I want to give her the extra moments of peace. Well, not peace precisely. I’ve experienced complete loss, either.

She nods absently and lets go of my hand.

I circle her and meet Finn in the hallway.

Without a word he wraps his arms around me, holding me tight. I try to hold myself to be held; I hold him back, just as hard. There’s no room for air in my lungs, but that doesn’t matter as much as this embrace. Nothing else matters as much as this embrace.

Then he’s stalking down the hall, pulling me alongside him, his hands off the ground around my waist. He’s a man on a mission, and my breathless, half-asked questions don’t land. *What’s happening? Is Daniel okay? Are they still operating on him?*

No answer.

Which probably means something bad, so I don’t push for a response. We go down an echoing staircase and push through a heavy glass door. Then we’re in the courtyard I saw from upstairs with its manicured lawns and oak trees and cobblestone. Concrete benches provide rest for the physically weary, including some nurses and doctors in scrubs. They’re tired and back weary, including patients and families of patients.

There are only a few people here now, bowing to the cold and dark

Through the windows someone plays a piano.

I do a double take. No, the piano looks like a regular grand piano and glossy, but it has some kind of mechanism that plays itself. The keys on the pedals are moving, even though no one sits at the bench. Unless, of course, the hospital is haunted.

And his—Which, of course it would be. I'm not sure why they always are—haunted houses, when what's really going to be haunted is a hospital where people die every day.

doesn't Then Finn is turning me, grasping me, kissing me like I've never been kissed before.

with the We've had a thousand kisses.

Slow ones like a lazy summer day, sweet with honey and tangy lemonade.

Desperate ones when we're both hungry for each other.

say. Powerful ones that turn my soul inside out.

want to This feels different in some indefinable way, like he's trying to do something. But not something. It's a language, this kiss—his fierce marauding, hands covering my face, hard body pressing me into an ancient oak. Was it here before the hospital, this tree? It feels thick behind me, while Finn becomes hard and thick in front of me, his erection pressing into my stomach. It does not allow sexual, though. At least not the intent of the kiss; it's more of a side effect.

or air in Then he pulls back, breath billowing in and out of him.

matters It occurs to me distantly that people can see us. Not only the guy sitting on the bench in the corner or the woman sipping a steaming cup of Starbucks in front of a memorial garden. The people inside the building, too. They formed a look down on us from three sides. For two people fiercely protective of their privacy it should be important, but it isn't.

Everyone else has stopped mattering.

ise. "Finn," I say, putting a shaking hand on his cheek. "Tell me what happened."

is door. "What happened is that I... that he..." He stops. Swallows. Tries a few more words but keeps my promise, Eva, and maybe it was right. Maybe it was wrong, but it's done. It's over.

ie soul- For a terrible, vibrating second, I think he means our relationship—engagement, fake and real and everything in between. *It's over.* My head stops.

Then he continues. “Whatever debt I owed to my father, it’s done. Done, black and white. It wasn’t only the secret, you see? I couldn’t be honest with my eyes and while it hung over me.” A hollow laugh. “I couldn’t even be honest with myself. I was so fucking angry at him for making me live this that I can’t admit I wanted it. Wanted it so fucking bad.”

I shake my head, not really following, but understanding the in-between where I’m feeling it. Blood pumps through my veins at lightning speed. Time is running down. “You want it?”

“Yeah,” he breathes. “Every last moment. The good times with the laughter and the sex and the feeling like my heart is going to break apart and come down with how big it seems. And the bad ones, too. The fear and the dread like the dread. The certainty that it will go away one day, because it will, of course it will. It’s not even about the curse. It’s about life. We all have a secret expiration date, and it’s never pretty. Whether it’s a curse—crash or a heart attack.”

“Or a fall on a gazebo floor,” I whisper.

Finn presses his forehead to mine. “He’s in surgery. His chances of making it through the surgery are good, but after—after they’re... well, it’s hard and fucking terrible.”

My heart clenches. “I’m so sorry.”

“It hurt more than I thought it would. For so long I’ve thought... I thought he was there. He’s not really there, the father that carried me around on his shoulders. He’s not inside, or when he is, it’s gone so fast, like quicksand, in a trick of the light. And if he’s not really there, I don’t have anything to say. What can I do?”

It’s more complicated than that. It always has been. And while I don’t have long experience with this particular form of complicated, I know it in other ways. Loving my father despite the fact that he slapped me across the face when I was fifteen. Loving my mother even though she never gave me enough maternal warmth to light a matchstick.

Life didn’t give us easy. I’m not sure it really gives anyone easy.

That feels like a mirage. An untruth.

A lie, even, the same way they accuse the Hugheses of lying in the newspaper articles.

Love doesn’t fix everything, but it makes it worth fixing. “Finn.”

“I’m sorry.”

Paid in anyone's trust with feelings for you could, for even one second, be temporary. Our relationship couldn't have been never, ever fake."

Tears prick my eyes, making his handsome face turn blurry. "I know intensity, "You're too patient, but that's what love is, right? Patient and kind and slow." "But not easy," I say, my throat thick with emotion.

"No." He shakes his head. "Not easy. And harder for you than I think. You're strong enough to handle it, though. I think that's why my ribs when I asked you to leave the gala with me that first night, when I told you to get on the boat. Some part of me knew you were strong enough to handle it. Of course, to handle me, to handle the fucking Hughes curse."

I have a laugh, water and uneven. "Thought you just liked the way I looked in that dress."

"Like a handful," he says, heated. "Like two handfuls."

"You didn't have sex with me, then."

"I wanted to. Wanted to drag you down to the berth, to make you feel they'd regain and again until you were too addicted to how I made you feel to leave."

That makes me blush, despite the fact that he eventually did just that. "Or maybe because of it."

"It was my idea for a fake relationship," he says. "Because even if I was lying to myself, I couldn't stand the thought of watching you wallow in grief. It was the only way I could think to keep you—with secrets and promises and half measures."

"You have me," I say, feeling fierce, my voice thick.

"I'm keeping you."

He tilts my head up for a kiss that steals my breath. It leaves my head weak, but I'm supported by this big tree. This legacy of a tree. And by his strong hands. The past and the future. None of it promised forever. Just temporary. This kiss. This breath. This body.

Only love really lasts.

"I love you," I say between biting, panting kisses.

He groans against my lips. "Love you. Love you. Fucking love you."

I moan as he hitches me higher against the tree, pressing his chest between my legs.



“I’m not promising you forever,” he gasps out, grinding and grinding against my “No one can. I’m promising you now. This moment and the next. Even in this relationship I am. Everything I will be.”

“Yes,” I cry, as he pushes me closer to orgasm. It’s too fast for me to reach climax. He’s barely even touched me, but the emotional poignance of the moment translates into strokes on my clit. I’m already vibrating, with one leg around his waist to get closer.

“Yours,” he grounds out. “I’m yours.”

And then I’m flying, breaking into a thousand splintered pieces, for a moment I see the courtyard, the muted piano still playing Beethoven without anyone on the bench, the night sky dark above the city.

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my knees  
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It’s all

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“I’m not promising you forever,” he gasps out, grinding and grinding. “No one can. I’m promising you now. This moment and the next. Everything I am. Everything I will be.”

“Yes,” I cry, as he pushes me closer to orgasm. It’s too fast for me to climax. He’s barely even touched me, but the emotional poignance of the emotion translates into strokes on my clit. I’m already vibrating, wrapping one leg around his waist to get closer.

“Yours,” he grounds out. “I’m yours.”

And then I’m flying, breaking into a thousand splintered pieces, pleasure turning me into a bursting star, leaving me floating in the dark, still courtyard, the muted piano still playing Beethoven without anyone on the bench, the night sky dark above the city.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### Finn

**W**HEN WE GET back to the waiting area, Hemingway's waiting for tops of his ears are pink, the same way they were when he talked about parents sleeping together.

I'm assuming that means he saw Eva and me in the courtyard.

Probably a few people did. It was dark, but still bright enough to see.  
"Any news?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Not about Dad."

That makes my eyebrows rise. "Then about what?"

He doesn't say anything, just hands us his phone. A video plays, shaky and dark on the screen, but it comes into focus. The courtyard. The tree. Me and Eva, embracing and kissing and talking in an intense, intimate conversation.

"Send it to Douglas," I say, referring to Douglas Karl, our family lawyer. He handles a lot of things for the Hughes family, including estate matters and relatives. This won't be the first quasi sex tape he's gotten taken down, but that we were actually having sex. Close, though.

"Already did," Hem says.

"Let me see." Eva takes the phone and watches, her expression revealing much. Then suddenly she laughs, the sound like a burst of rain on parched earth. "Send those takedown notices if you really want them. You can barely see anything. Just two people in love, and why are we trying to hide that?"

"Eva." She orgasms in that video. That part is not clear enough to see, but I can tell. I know the exact moment her body shudders in my ho-

whimpered in my ear. The video is taken from maybe one story above, blocked by the branches of the tree.

“Leo will throw a fit. So will my dad.” She throws up her hand and looks at us. We’re in the hospital because your dad fell. That’s what’s about. I’m not worried about a video where I’m being kissed by the father of my child. Like, yes, he’s a great kisser. I’ll go on national TV and tell everyone that, if they really want to know.”

Hell. She’s right. I care about what the public thinks... because my dad did.

The truth is, they can go to hell.

I take her into my arms, this time in more of a G-rated hold, even though there’s no one else in the hallway. “You’re wonderful, you know that’s our surprise. A revelation.”

“God,” she says, teasing. “I hope no one hears you praise me.”

I lean down and whisper exactly what I think about her breasts. How delicious they are, how delicious they taste, how sweetly they bounce. I’m thrusting inside her—because I can. Fuck the public. Fuck the stockholders. Fuck everyone who’s watching our family like we’re the high-society car crash, snapping photos instead of offering a hand.

It’s This is my woman.

The oak My fiancée. Soon to be my wife.

private “Does Mom know?” I ask, rueful as I imagine her reaction.

Hemingway looks faintly mystified, the same way he does when I ask him to study chemistry. “She did the same thing as Eva. She laughed and extended makes his voice into a falsetto. “*This is what people find scandalous, not days? Back in my day, we had real scandals.*”

A few years ago she would have sent me an email reprimand for something like this.

ion not Then again, a few years ago, she wouldn’t even have been in the state.

spring She’s changed. I’ve changed, too.

t, but... And Dad? Well, Dad. He’s loved, and respected, and even, sometimes trying the general public, feared. What more can a man ask for, if this is really to be the end?

see, but We take our seats. Mom returns with some Starbucks contraband, which isn’t sold in the hospital. “I also found this,” she says, holding up a bottle of Bailey’s Irish Cream.

e, half-      Eva shakes her head no but accepts the latte gratefully.  
                  I only want black coffee. So it's only the underage Hemingway  
 s. "But with our mother, who have a liberal splash of the sweet, milky liqueur  
 t I care paper cups.  
 ather of      Mom downs a double espresso in a single shot. "I needed that."  
 and tell      Hemingway takes a sip and coughs. "What exactly is this?"  
                  I smirk. "Can't handle it?"  
 y father      "I mean the alcohol is fine. Espresso, though."  
                  "Pansy," I say, not without affection.  
                  "What? I'm just an innocent child, being corrupted into the v  
 though caffeine."

that? A      I snort a laugh. This is... nice. Something I never thought I'd say  
                  sitting in a waiting area outside an operating room, waiting for news  
 father's surgery.

ts, how      Like we're a family.  
 e when      Because, I suppose, we are again.  
 ick the      Eva did that for us.  
 ie latest      The surgery was supposed to last three hours, but it goes for five.  
                  probably not a good sign, but I need to have faith in the doctors. And  
 father. And in the universe, which would be ludicrous if Eva hadn't  
 me how to hope again.

Finally the doctor comes out, her dark hair askew from being un  
 helped cap for so long, her eyes wild—as if she's just hiked through the wil  
 d." He back to civilization. We gather around her, Eva at my side. Hemingwa  
 is these hands with Mom.

"I won't lie," Dr. Khan says, "It was a tough surgery. It was a bac  
 a video but we were able to reconstruct it. We had to make larger incisions  
 would want, but it was better than having to do a hip replacement.  
 ate.      recovery now, and you'll be able to see him soon.

"Thank God," Eva murmurs.

mes, by      Mom asks about the recovery process, which sounds long and pain  
 y going      "The risk for someone at his age with his surgery is high. The r  
                  months will be important. We'll watch closely for any sign of infec  
 since it well as depression, which are risk factors. The good news is, though, th  
 otte of in strong health."

I open my mouth to object, but the doctor sees it and shakes her he

“Heart disease, a history of strokes, diabetes. Those are the cor-  
s, alongthat would make this situation more severe. The dementia—” She pat  
in theirif to acknowledge the public referendum on medical privacy that  
happening around his disease. “It probably won’t make the recovery  
In fact there’s a chance it will make it easier.”

“Who knew?” Hemingway says. “There’s actually an upside.”

A few hours later we’re able to see my father—one at a time.

I find him in a recovery room where a nurse still watches his vitals  
machine and another does something with bandages in the corr  
says ofprivacy, but I think I’m done with that. Not because I’m going to  
naked through Wall Street, but because I’m going to stop pretendi  
y about hiding problems makes them better.

s of my “Hello,” he says without recognition. “Are you a doctor?”

“No.” I’m too choked up to say more, especially when I see him al  
alert. I used to want more than that, I used to want him to recognize  
be himself—the self that I recognized as my father. But now that I’ve  
lost him, I realize how precious it is to have him. Not only his body, a  
That’s an empty husk. This other person that I’ve gotten to know over the p  
l in my years. Curious and innocent and... usually kind.

taught He looks down at my suit, which is now irredeemably rumblec  
here to collect my payment for all this?” he asks, waving his hand  
ider themachinery he’s hooked up to.

derness I shake my head, unable to speak.

y holds There’s a blank, pleasant expression on his face, and I realize  
missing.

l break, Ambition. Determination. That strive for something more.

s than I Or as they’d talk about it on TikTok—hustle.

He’s in We’re never really happy, are we? Human beings, I mean.

When we have more money, we want more. When we have great  
want more. (Case in point: the way I yearn for Eva with every breath.)

ful. we’re well rested, we have the urge to be productive so we’ll be tired a  
next six People say that if they only had a million dollars they’d be hap  
tion as studies, as well as my experience living among the rich and powerful  
at he’s York City, prove that isn’t true. Because once we have a million, v  
spending it. Then we want even more.

ad. Even a billionaire like Daniel Hughes had felt the drive. The

ditions responsibility to his employees and stockholders. The need to train his  
uses, as The requirement of secrecy.

's been And now, with all of that gone, he's... happier.

worse. Maybe there is an upside. As insane as that sounds to me, maybe that  
"Then who are you?" he asks.

*Your son.* Except somehow, that's not even right. When he's  
father, I'm not his son. I'm something else, though. Someone who still  
from a him. "Your old friend," I say, my voice hoarse. "I'm your friend corner  
ier. No check on you."

o streak A smile breaks out on his face, as if that explains everything.  
ng like suppose it does. "Well, I'm feeling fine. Don't even have any pain in  
even though they said it's broken."

"That's probably the great drugs they have you on," I say, going  
ive and humor.

me. To "Then everyone should be on these," he says earnestly. "All the  
almost feel great."

is if it's I speak with him for another few moments. Then Hemingway goes  
ast few Even Eva wants a moment with him. She laughs and tells me he thought  
was a nurse. She got him another pillow, not minding in the least.

l. "You Then it's my mother's turn.

l at the She's been quiet this whole time, subdued.

I'd thought she might not even want to go in, but she stands.

"Mom," I say quietly. "He's not—"

what's *He's not himself.*

That's what I was going to say. He's not himself, but that's not quite  
He's a new self. He's someone, even if he's not the Daniel Hughes I  
I wanted.

"It's okay," she says, sounding determined and... loving. "I don't  
sex, we talk to him. Not really. I just want to sit with him. Until they kick me  
) When sit with him."

again. And I watch her go into the recovery room with her head held high  
copy but Providing comfort to him. Accepting the peace that's available.

in New My heart squeezes. He may not be the man she married, but he's  
ve starts she loves.

e fierce

is sons.

ere is.

not my  
ll loves  
ning to

And I  
my hip,

ing for

time. I

goes in.  
ght she

ite true.  
thought

need to  
out, I'll

l.

s a man





## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### Eva

**S**OMETHING STRANGE HAPPENS.

I would have expected news of Daniel Hughes's fall and serious injury to foment the public panic into new heights. Instead, the video of us in the courtyard of the hospital resurrects the social media campaign that had started with our fake relationship.

#Finneva trends higher than it ever has, not as an example of people doing wrong, but instead as a testament to love blooming in unexpected places.

"They're just like us," one TikToker says.

Which is mostly true.

We cling to each other in dark moments. We comfort each other with words and touch and even laughter. We love, because in the end it's the only thing worth a damn.

Then again, in some ways we're different.

Like the fact that Finn donated a new wing to the hospital, complete with funding for an even larger serenity garden. People need medical care to survive, but they need solace, too. Rather than stamping it with the hospital name, he named it after the doctor who operated on him. They break ground on the Khan Building six months after the surgery.

My sister Sophia says she isn't surprised by the reversal of opinion, but then she's the most social media savvy out of all of us. My mother shakes her head, still not quite understanding the way opinion spreads like wildfire, before magazines can even print it.

We're sitting in the same room where we were when Finn first said

away.

Then it had been a refuge during the gala for the Society Preservation of Orchids.

Now it's a large dressing room as Sophia measures me.

I'm standing on a footstool which serves as a makeshift pedestal with my hands raised so that my sister can move around me with efficient motions.

"Hmm," she says.

I laugh. "That's not what any woman wants to hear when she's measured."

"It's not the measurement that's tricky," she says, her voice muffled as she tries to guess what the measurement will be. "How much do you exercise after the baby is born? Are we talking like a cute postpartum surgery or Katie Holmes running a marathon?"

s in the

"Let's go with a cute bump. No marathons for me."

started

"Okay," she says. "That makes it easier."

wealthy

My mother sighs. "If you got married *before* the baby..."

unlikely

"We've been over this. I want to get married after. That way we'll have more time to plan it. And the baby will get to attend the wedding."

more time

"People will talk."

"People always talk. About everything. Literally."

using

Sophia peeks around me. "To be fair, the baby would still get to attend the wedding if you get married while you're pregnant. But everything would sound muffled through the amniotic fluid."

he only

My mother shudders. "Must you be vulgar, Sophia?"

I grin. "You had eight children, Mom."

te with

"I've blocked out the memories," she informs me. "Especially the last one."

care to

"Well, I'm looking forward to it. Even if I am terrified."

Hughes

"You'll be great," Sophia murmurs.

ground

"Thanks, Sis." I smile down at her. "Now, are you done measuring me?"

public

"In a minute." She looks excited. "Wait, does this mean I get to choose the dress for the baby, too? It will be *so cute*. I'll need to research baby clothing." I'm a little hesitant. It was one thing to ask my sister to make me a wedding dress. I told her she could go as wild and avant-garde as her heart desired, which she of course took as a challenge. But to my surprise she was going with white.

us. My

spreads

tole me

she was

going

with

white.

*That's the only thing traditional about it, she'd warned.*

for the I haven't seen the sketches yet, but we have time.

I'm less sure about her making something for the baby.

"It's a boy," I say, doubtfully. "Do you know how to make suits?"

tal, my "Of course I can make suits. But it's not like a baby needs to  
ons. necktie. Boys wear christening gowns, after all. Wait, is your baby g  
be Catholic? Is he going to get baptized? Okay, I'm going to  
s being christening gown *and* a wedding suit for him."

"I love that you love him."

ed. "It's She glances at my stomach with affection. "Of course I do. I'm g  
plan to be the best aunt in the world. The one who gives him a fake ID and  
n bump drugs for him."

I put my hands around my stomach in a protective stance wh  
mother gasps.

That only makes Sophia laugh. "You guys are so easy to tease."

The door to the sitting room opens.

'll have A man stands there in a tux that speaks of wealth and a bearing th  
his family has had it for generations. Privilege. Power. And enoug  
awareness to make it feel like an inside joke that you're part of.

Phineas Hughes looks the same as he did before, handsome and ch  
attend if as hell.

nuffled Blond hair gleams beneath the low lighting.

Hazel eyes twinkle with roguish charm.

"Finn Hughes," my mother exclaims, her cheeks pinkening, h  
going bright. Doesn't matter how many times she sees him or how c  
births." his flirtatious compliments are, she still blushes whenever he enters the

"Mrs. Morelli," he says with a playful bow, just like he did at the g  
year.

ring or "I told you to call me Sarah," she says, "especially now that  
family."

lesign a "Mrs. Morelli," he says, refusing her with so much grace and resp  
thes." she can't be offended. "It's always a pleasure to see you again.  
ny own looking for your daughter."

er heart Excitement rushes through me like champagne, like caffeine.

she said Because no matter how long we've been together, I blush, too.

He's too handsome for his own good.

“I want Eva,” he says, glancing at me. That devilish glint in his eyes promises escape from the prodding of a measuring tape. “We have plans.”

“You didn’t tell me you had plans,” my mother says. “Where are you going?”

I grin, because this is just like before. And yet completely different. Because I know him now, the way a man can know a woman. I see the desire. “Yes, Finn. Where are we going?”

Hazel eyes accept my challenge. “It’s a surprise.”

“Indeed,” Sarah murmurs, glancing between the two of us. “They’re going to have sex,” Sophia tells her mother, who gives her a scolding glance.

“Sophia,” she says, reprimanding.

Sophia gently tosses the measuring tape in her box and jots down something in the notebook. “Well, far be it for me to cockblock. Have fun with your crazy kids. Be sure to use protection—oh wait, I guess it’s too late for that. Then go bareback for all I care.”

“Sophia Morelli!”

“Come on,” I tell Finn, grabbing his hand. “Let’s go before Mom finds us.”

He takes my hand and leads me out of the room. Out to the car in the driveway of the Morelli mansion. “How about a bet?” he asks as he hands me inside the car. “If you can make me come by the time we get to your loft, I win. And if you can’t, then you win.”

“What do I win?” I ask, my body already strumming with desire.

He reaches into his pockets. A quarter flips toward me, and I catch it between both hands. “Twenty-five cents? I suppose I could add foam in the room. Starbucks order tomorrow.”

His hand tilts my face up, and then he’s kissing me, holding me on his back. “You could, but I’ll let you in on a secret... you won’t win.”

ect that

I came

“I want Eva,” he says, glancing at me. That devilish glint in his eyes promises escape from the prodding of a measuring tape. “We have plans.”

“You didn’t tell me you had plans,” my mother says. “Where are you going?”

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“They’re going to have sex,” Sophia tells her mother, who gives her a chiding glance.

“Sophia,” she says, reprimanding.

Sophia gently tosses the measuring tape in her box and jots down one last thing in the notebook. “Well, far be it for me to cockblock. Have fun, you crazy kids. Be sure to use protection—oh wait, I guess it’s too late for that. Then go bareback for all I care.”

“Sophia Morelli!”

“Come on,” I tell Finn, grabbing his hand. “Let’s go before Mom faints.”

He takes my hand and leads me out of the room. Out to the car in front of the Morelli mansion. “How about a bet?” he asks as he hands me inside. “If I can make you come by the time we get to your loft, I win. And if you don’t come, then you win.”

“What do I win?” I ask, my body already strumming with desire.

He reaches into his pockets. A quarter flips toward me, and I catch it between both hands. “Twenty-five cents? I suppose I could add foam to my Starbucks order tomorrow.”

His hand tilts my face up, and then he’s kissing me, holding me open for a sensual assault, promising things he’ll do with his hands during the drive. “You could, but I’ll let you in on a secret... you won’t win.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY

### Finn

**I** STAND BEFORE an audience of hundreds of press members and photographers, Eva standing by my side with her head held high. I feel the gravity of the moment, the weight of all the eyes upon us, and I am determined to make my mark.

I clear my throat and adjust the microphone, then begin to speak.

“I’m here today to make an announcement,” I say, my voice coming out clear and strong, despite the implications of what I’m saying, despite the tremble of caution. That caution will probably always be there, but my decision is stronger. “I have early-onset dementia, like my father before me. And like his father before him.”

The room is silent, all eyes on me, no shouted questions.

They’re shocked into silence.

Not because I have dementia, of course. Everyone knows it’s her. It’s been the subject of much discussion, whether or not I’m affected, and when it will happen. The shock is that I’m admitting it with cameras on me.

“Those of you with experience with dementia know how painful it is for the families. That’s also true for the larger Hughes Industries family, stockholders and employees who are impacted by what we do here. That’s why I’m choosing honesty. People have a right to privacy. They have a right to illness and weakness and a thousand other things, but I’m choosing honesty for you. Because I want to manage it together. Not hide it in the shadows. Not run from it. Not pretend it isn’t happening.”

Now there’s a burst of questions, reporters shouting.

It's enough to cause a hitch in my breath, but I also feel a s  
rightness in my chest. Eva looks serious, her eyes luminous with l  
pride.

"The truth is," I say, letting them quiet down so they can hear m  
CEO may suffer from dementia. Or depression or anxiety. Or cance  
thousand other things that may impact their work. I'm not promising i  
affect me. What I'm promising is that I'm going to work hard to  
oversight and checks so that it never negatively impacts Hughes Indust

I pause and look into the crowd.

Every eye is upon me, and I can feel their anticipation.

"This isn't about curing every disease. This is about living with  
rs andLife isn't over because someone might get early-onset dementia." I rea  
feel theand Eva takes my hand. "Someone I love taught me that. And we're g  
nd I'mget through this... together."

With that, the room erupts. There are shouts of approval and cl

And more questions, though it's impossible to make them out o  
ing outclapping. I can feel the energy of hundreds of journalists and photograp  
he faint It's hard to believe that they're applauding for honesty.

but my I step back, yielding the floor to Caitlyn Laurie, our  
ore me.communications officer, who will field the rest of the questions. I tak  
hands in mine and look deep into her dark eyes. We've come so far to  
and now we're on the brink of something even bigger.

A smile tugs at my lips. "Let's do this. Together."

editary. She nods, her eyes shining with love and admiration, and then I t  
too. Orinto my arms for a fierce embrace. I'm supposed to be the one with  
trainedhere. The CEO. The heir. The billionaire. But she's the one who n  
possible, as we face an unknown future.

can be Photographers snap pictures of us, but I don't give a damn.

ily, the I turn to them and smile. Eva waves.

hich is We aren't hiding from the light anymore.

a right

g to tell

ns. Not



OF COURSE I can't simply drive away from Hughes Industries after that.

Everyone wants to talk, and I'm going to stay as late as necessary t  
sure they have their chance. My assurances, for whatever they're wor

well of I'm surprised to find out, they're worth a lot. I'm even more surprised  
ve and number of people who come to me with stories.

Of parents with dementia and grief beyond words.

e, "any Of secret treatments for cancer and diabetes, executives who were  
r. Or ato share the news for fear that they would get fired. Even if it's n  
it won't sometimes the world isn't fair.

set up They come to me with hesitant hope, one after the other, a steady  
tries." in my office.

By the end of the day, I'm exhausted.

I come back on Saturday to deal with any stragglers.

n them. I'm even in the office on Sunday, but by now it's almost empty.

ach out, Everyone has somehow, though I never expected it, moved on.

going to What Eva said, about people needing time to grieve is happening. I  
remembering who signs their paychecks and why they like it. And  
apping, getting over the secrets. Because no matter that I shared the truth in th  
ver the conference, the reality is that they won't be privy to every detail of my  
phers. or any of the executive's lives.

The process is not complete, but it's in progress.

chief Of course, the harder part is still to come.

e Eva's I was serious about setting up those checks and balances, setting u  
together, kind of test, perhaps every morning, so that I can affirm to myself that  
to lead. Maybe I'll even do it at home with Eva and call in sick if I do  
them.

ake her I'm still working out the details with Dr. Faulk.

power It will be an ongoing task, though.

akes it A moving target.

I sigh.

Difficult, sure. But we don't shy away from things because they're

The building is always open on Sundays in case people need to g  
done, but it's mostly empty. I waved to a couple people on the way  
lights are off to save power when no one's in a particular department.  
golden light illuminates the area, giving it an almost ethereal atmo  
though it were in suspense. Waiting, perhaps.

A voice comes: "Hey."

o make I look up and there's Will Leblanc. Eva's brother-in-law. A  
th. And previous owner of Summit, a venture capital company we acquired



l by the before the news broke. He's young and ambitious. He reminds me of  
if I had built something from the ground up.

Hungry.

e afraid He looks hungry now, though not particularly angry.

ot fair, "Leblanc," I say.

"Hughes."

stream "What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you." Without waiting for an invite, he comes i  
office and sits down in one of the chairs. He makes a show of acting  
when this visit is anything but.

"You could've made an appointment with my secretary. And I  
your lawyer." Because I know why he's here. To fight to take Summ  
They're To undo the merger. Which will be an absolute fucking mess. Not the  
they're either Hughes Industries or Summit.

ie press But his lawyer has probably advised him that we'll give in without  
y life—to avoid the bad publicity. Even if our legal rights are ironclad.

His lawyer is wrong.

Let them come.

"I could have, but I remember us having this great conversation  
p some you said..." He glances at the ceiling, thinking of the words. "*I'm no  
: I'm fit to screw anyone over. Especially someone who's like family.*"

n't pass Hell. "I did say that."

"Did you mean it?"

"I didn't lie."

He gives me a look. "Don't fuck around. Did you mean it?"

"Yeah. I meant it."

"Then we can work on similar terms. I don't try to screw peopl  
hard. either, especially people who are like family, or who are actually  
et workfamily. And, yes, I give my brothers shit all the time, because that  
in. The brothers are for. Especially when they're telling you the things yo  
A soft, want to hear. Hard truths."

here as It sounds like he wants to stick around. That's unexpected. "Hard  
Like what?"

"First off, you look like hell."

nd the I snort. "Thanks."

shortly "You've got bags under your eyes and you're in here alone on a 9

myself, sighing like you just figured out that your plan backfired on you.”

My eyes narrow. I want Summit to stick around, and in fact enforce a very legal contract, but I’m not going to take shit from him. ‘

“Which part of what I said isn’t true?”

“You don’t have any right to decide if my choices backfired. You had an idea what I was trying to do, you sanctimonious ass.”

“And you have no right to forge your dad’s signature on any contracts and agreements, including when you acquired a company casual, someone who is like family. You could have run the company on your own.”

You had the legal standing to do it, but you didn’t want people to know you brought wasn’t involved.”

it back. There was no forging, actually, but I don’t bother explaining how best for down. Not if he’s going to start off with accusations. “Get out of my office.”

“Or else you’ll punch me? If that’s how you want to have a fight conversation, then let’s go down to the warehouse and get in the ring. The floor’s softer. It’ll hurt less when I kick your ass.”

I stare at him, deliberating. I’ve seen him fight at the underground ring, so I already know he’d kick my ass. This isn’t about a physical fight where though. It’s a fight of will. Of determination. I could fire this man for that, but I don’t want to. I don’t want to lose the business. I don’t want to try to keep his business, too.

But hell, I appreciate honesty.

And like he said, he’s family. I let out a short laugh. Which turns into a longer laugh. He thinks he nailed me. “Oh, fuck. You don’t have any right to—”

“I saw your dad at the retirement party. Even if he did sign the documents himself, he wasn’t in any state to be agreeing to the terms on being handed over, Hughes Industries. And I know for a fact that you didn’t force him to sign anything in my name.”

’s what “How?” I shake my head, half-mocking. “How do you know that?”  
u don’t “Because that’s not the kind of man you are.”

It’s not the kind of man I’d be, if things were up to me. If I could have made the decisions as a real CEO, the way Eva suggested. My father would have done things done that way. He wanted to sign documents where he was out in front. “What kind of man am I, then?”

“The kind that protects his dad at all costs. And I mean every day, Sunday, cost. You were never going to stress him out by forcing a pen into his hand.”

and you'd be damned if you took anybody else down with you. That's wouldyou went wrong, just so you know."

"Will." I don't bother correcting him, because he really doesn't know w like to be born into this particular legacy. No one does, but I'r have nodefending my choices. "Tell me more about running a multibillion international corporation."

number of "Fair," he says, conceding the point. "You're the one with the r y fromcompany, not me. But we can still trade stories. My mom walked out ar own.dad when I was two, and up until a week ago, I thought she was dead now heout she's not."

That's not what I was expecting to hear.

it went He tells me more about his upbringing, which included an abusive fface." who not only hit them but locked them in closets. What the fuck. Th ve thisthough, is that he understands family. And hard decisions. And loyalty ig. The And he's choosing this.

That's what it comes down to. He's choosing Hughes Industries.

boxing I sigh. "Are you sure you want to do that for me?"  
il fight, "It's not for you. It's for the money. I'm just kidding. I want a high he waychallenge, not a bunch of boring corporate bullshit. And I'm n interested in watching you get screwed over. You're like family. Speal you should be with yours, not sitting in here worrying yourself to deat s into awe call it a day. And Monday morning? We hit them with everyth y proofhave. Together. Deal?"

He holds out his hand.

uments After a long moment, I take it. Because I can accept the help of half ofwho understands loyalty. I'll even win over Alex Wong to my si to signrebuild Hughes Industries, not because it's broken, but because it w being run under my father's reign. That's what no one understands, rea ' was running the company, because he taught me to run it exactly I wanted. But now? Now I'm going to run it as the true CEO, a real lead

ld have And it's time to get to work.  
wanted  
it of his

fucking  
s hand,

and you'd be damned if you took anybody else down with you. That's where you went wrong, just so you know."

I don't bother correcting him, because he really doesn't know what it's like to be born into this particular legacy. No one does, but I'm done defending my choices. "Tell me more about running a multibillion-dollar international corporation."

"Fair," he says, conceding the point. "You're the one with the massive company, not me. But we can still trade stories. My mom walked out on my dad when I was two, and up until a week ago, I thought she was dead. Turns out she's not."

That's not what I was expecting to hear.

He tells me more about his upbringing, which included an abusive father who not only hit them but locked them in closets. What the fuck. The point, though, is that he understands family. And hard decisions. And loyalty.

And he's choosing this.

That's what it comes down to. He's choosing Hughes Industries.

I sigh. "Are you sure you want to do that for me?"

"It's not for you. It's for the money. I'm just kidding. I want a high-stakes challenge, not a bunch of boring corporate bullshit. And I'm not that interested in watching you get screwed over. You're like family. Speaking of, you should be with yours, not sitting in here worrying yourself to death. I say we call it a day. And Monday morning? We hit them with everything we have. Together. Deal?"

He holds out his hand.

After a long moment, I take it. Because I can accept the help of a man who understands loyalty. I'll even win over Alex Wong to my side. I'll rebuild Hughes Industries, not because it's broken, but because it was still being run under my father's reign. That's what no one understands, really. He *was* running the company, because he taught me to run it exactly how he wanted. But now? Now I'm going to run it as the true CEO, a real leader.

And it's time to get to work.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### Eva

**T**HERE'S A MOMENT during childbirth when I'm sure that I can't continue. "No," I gasp, hair stamped to my face with sweat, arms shaking with strain. "I can't. I have to get off this ride, Finn. *I need to get off.*"

"You're doing great," Dr. Hoffman says, gently encouraging.

"Can we have a minute?" Finn asks the doctor. When she's gone I look back to me, his hazel eyes glow a brilliant green. "Sweetheart. What's done?"

I can only speak through gritted teeth. "He can't come out. He can't."

Finn puts his face close to mine. "You're beautiful and strong. You can do this, sweetheart. I know you can. I believe in you."

Tears run down my cheeks. "I don't believe in myself."

A handsome half-smile from the man in the darkly lit room. "That's why you keep me around. I see the real you. And you're like a goddess now."

It's hard to imagine, I'm feeling far from a goddess.

I'm sweaty and tired, my voice hoarse from grunting through contractions. White walls were supposed to be like a cocoon. Classical music over the speakers was supposed to be soothing. All of it felt immediate and sharp as nails on a chalkboard. My birth plan has gone to hell.

Another contraction hits like a tsunami, and I let out a scream.

Dr. Hoffman is back in the room. "It's time. I need you to push."

I'm too tired to push, but I can't seem to help it. The pushing takes over my body, until I feel like I'm going to turn myself inside out. I gasp and strain. It feels impossible, what's happening. Like fitting a water

through a wedding ring.

Pain, blinding. A strange sensation. Bursting.

Someone shouting. It's me.

And then the garbled cry of a baby.

Intense relief overtakes my body, a physical sensation so strong it wips my breath away. And then he's in my arms, his face wiped clean, the top of his head still coated in nourishing, bloody liquid. "He's here," I say, laughing in a giddy way. "Oh, Finn. He's beautiful."

He puts his arms around both of us. I look into Finn's eyes and see nothing but joy and love radiating from them. I feel so completely embraced. The little one in my arms feels like a miracle.

ue. Finn looks choked up, his eyes red. "My God."

ing with "What's his name?" I ask, because we've been unable to choose.

"Daniel," he says, swallowing hard. "After my father. He would be happy to know it... and I think maybe he will know."

ne turns "Daniel," I say, smoothing my trembling hand over his head.

ave I Finn looks down at us with deep tenderness. Our love has grown stronger over the course of labor. "And then for our next children, we'll use the other names."

ou can "I'm never going through that again," I say, and he laughs softly.

Outside the room, our families are waiting. The Morellis and the Fennells.

They gathered one by one during the delivery—first Leo and his wife and then Sophia. My parents came next. Then Tiernan. And Lucian. Everyone is staying at home watching the kids.

And now they're waiting for a chance to see this child.

I feel a sense of joy and gratitude for this miracle that he's already loved.

I music "Do we have to let them in?" he asks, rueful.

ely like "Only for a few minutes."

Leo peeks his head in. "Hey, sister mine."

"Hey," I say with a gentle smile.

That appears to be all the permission they need. He comes in, the rest of the family swarming in after him. They exclaim over the baby and order things—food, drinks, cocaine. That last one was Sophia. I find myself surrounded by love, joy, and excitement.

I feel so blessed to have such perfection in my arms.

The days that follow will be filled with sleepless nights, I know, but tender moments. And pure, undiluted joy as we celebrate the birth of our baby.

Geneva and Hemingway come in, much more civilized and sophisticated compared to my family.

The rest of the family is in a state of confusion. My mother-in-law coos over the tiny boy. “Daniel?” she asks, her face trembling when Finn tells her what we named him. “He’ll love that. He’ll love that.”

I remember her telling me how Daniel Hughes was so proud when he was born.

And I see the same pride in Finn’s eyes.

“Are you going to give my brother hell?” Hemingway asks, peering at the tiny scrunched up face. “Because I support that wholeheartedly.”

The baby’s tiny cries fill the room.

Finn gives his brother a look.

“Someone’s hungry,” I say, “I think. I’m still getting the hang of this.”

Finn gently but firmly shepherds everyone back out of the hospital room.

I show the baby how to latch on, using the nurse’s instructions. The baby’s gentle suckling fills the room. My love for him seems to know no bounds.

Even knowing what the future may hold doesn’t scare me.

The challenges we face will bring us closer.

We share an unbreakable bond that will only get stronger. I look forward to countless moments of laughter, hugs, and kisses. With Daniel. And with Finn.

Ready so

rest of  
ffer her  
myself

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### Finn

**E**VA WANTS TO have the wedding at the Hughes mansion, which once strikes me as odd, but of course I tell her yes. Now I understand why so strange. We've kept the secret for so long that the house has become a mausoleum. A nursing home with a member of one. It doesn't even feel like my house, really. I never invited over friends. It felt almost strange to have Eva, so vibrant and full of life, to live here.

The wedding is the perfect turning point for the mansion.

It becomes more than walls keeping in secrets.

It becomes a home.

Already my mother has moved back, officially. She still keeps a spare room from my father, but she spends a lot of time with him. And Hem lives here. I asked Eva if she minded... after all, living with your mother isn't something most people enjoy. But she said she loved being part of the family. And besides, she said, referring to her aunt's busy loft, she would not go to a crowded living space. She'd find the mansion too empty otherwise.

She brought her terrariums, naturally.

And a few of the pieces from her loft, including a pink and purple statue that's as tall as she is and a neon sign of the face of the statue blowing bubble gum.

Now the air is thick with anticipation as hundreds of guests gather on the lawn of the estate. Columns are decorated with a wealth of orchids. The carpet had been sprinkled with petals, giving the entire area a feeling of warmth and happiness.

At the center of the gazebo, I nervously await the bride.

I didn't expect the nerves to come. I suppose I'm the cliché of a  
after all. It's not like I'm getting cold feet. If Eva didn't come out, I'  
after her.

We're getting married today, come hell or high water.

I want her as my wife. I want to be married. So why the he  
nervous?

Nervous that she'll change her mind?

Maybe.

Nervous that I won't be the husband she deserves?

Definitely.

Some of that comes from the Hughes curse, but it also comes from  
iginally her. Admiring her. Knowing that she deserves the very best. But I s  
it was the fact that I'm worrying about being a good enough husband is a goc  
e like a I'll figure it out.

eel like She's worth that and much more.

o bring I'm wearing a tux with a gold cummerbund and a single pink or  
the pocket. Gold and pink are the colors of the wedding, with ribbo  
flowers and swaths of fabric turning the lawn into a magical place. Th  
a sea of faces in front of me, but I'm only waiting for one particular fa  
surrounded by my family and closest friends, but I need Eva.

eparate The music starts, and the crowd watches as the bridesmai  
ingwaygroomsmen walk through first. Some of my buddies from my younger  
in-lawsdays. Along with Hemingway and Sophia, our best man and maid of  
aroundSophia carries Daniel in her arms, who's sleeping through the whole  
as usedIt's past his naptime, and he was getting cranky during the prep.  
a. moment we thought we'd leave him upstairs where my dad can watc  
the window.

giraffe *Don't worry*, Eva had said with a laugh, still wearing a white slip, l  
f Davidin hair rollers. *Everyone can wait until he's good and ready for this v  
to start.*

r on the And then the music changes.

ds. The Eva appears, her dress made of flowy material that loops her. It se  
ling ofdefy gravity, like white froth on the tips of ocean waves. It's pure whi  
gold-tinted sparkles, as if dotted with actual stars. It's voluminous  
skirts but slender at the bodice, ending with two ropes of the delicat  
fabric that hold up around her neck. She looks... perfect.

groom, Naturally, she holds a bouquet of pink orchids.  
d go in A wave of emotion washes over me.  
There's a slight blush on her cheeks as she walks down the aisle.  
Bryant Morelli walks by her side as they make the long-ish trek do  
ll am Iwhite aisle runner that's been placed over the green grass.  
Every cell in my body urges me to go to her. Be with her. Hold  
ignored those impulses when I stood in that meeting months ago, liste  
Caitlyn Laurie and Heidi Moreland debate my fate. That had been the  
call, so I don't listen to it now, either.  
Restraint has no place in my life.  
i loving Waiting doesn't hold any meaning.  
uppose, So I stride down the white aisle with its pink orchid petals and mee  
d sign. the back, where the seats end. Bryant looks surprised and vaguely ar  
People murmur and turn in their seats, surprised that I'm breaking prot  
I hold out a hand. "Let's get married, darling."  
orchid in Eva's eyes twinkle with joy. She's always liked my spontaneity  
ons and please."  
ere are "Don't give a damn if I look eager," I murmur, escorting her the  
ice. I'mthe way down the aisle. "Because I am. Ready for you to be my wife."  
I can see the love in her eyes. "I'm ready, too."  
ds and This isn't a moment I dreamed of when I was younger, because  
, wilderbelieved it would happen. And yet now it feels inevitable. How could  
honor.wanted to miss this? I didn't know. I didn't know how pure and cl  
e thing.love would feel, removing every ounce of doubt.  
. For a As we reach the end of the aisle, our eyes meet. A jolt of elec  
th fromcourses through my body. I reach for her hands. She squeezes a  
warmth and love envelop me. I bend down to kiss her, softly, gently,  
her hairbreak in protocol since I'm supposed to do it later.  
wedding "I'd better get a move on," the officiant says, making everyone  
"These two look like they're just about done waiting."  
The ceremony is beautiful.  
eems to "I now pronounce you man and wife."  
ite with The guests let out a collective sigh as I take her in my arms aga  
s in thetime for a thorough, sensual kiss. And there, surrounded by five hun  
e whiteour closest family and friends, I make her my wife. We're finally  
together.

Then we turn to face everyone. I hold up our entwined hands in a cheer, and everyone claps. I look out at the crowd with a wave of g and happiness.

own the We promised to love each other until the end of time.

And I'm determined to keep that promise, no matter what it takes.

d her. I Eva looks up at me and gives me a knowing smile.

ning to She understands how deeply my devotion runs. We're now husband and wife, ready to start the rest of our lives together. As the music begins and the crowd cheers, we walk hand in hand, ready to begin the journey of our entire lives.

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Then we turn to face everyone. I hold up our entwined hands in a victory cheer, and everyone claps. I look out at the crowd with a wave of gratitude and happiness.

We promised to love each other until the end of time.

And I'm determined to keep that promise, no matter what it takes.

Eva looks up at me and gives me a knowing smile.

She understands how deeply my devotion runs. We're now husband and wife, ready to start the rest of our lives together. As the music begins to play and the crowd cheers, we walk hand in hand, ready to begin the journey of our entire lives.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### Daniel Hughes

**T**HERE'S MUSIC PLAYING.

Something soft and calming as he stares at the night sky. I recognize the stars. Denebola and Orion and Ursa Major. A sailor know. Does that mean he's a sailor? The music plays softly, like lapping, lapping, an aqueous tinkle.

Faintly he can see the outline of boats, like charcoal drawn on dark Shadows.

Two dimensional shapes instead of actual things.

The lawn looks real enough, a pale snake of pathways between dark that he somehow knows contain colorful flowers.

A big white rectangle is the top of a tent.

He has the memory that it contains people and laughter and music—but he's not sure when that would have happened.

It's empty now.

A woman comes to stand beside him. Beautiful, with long dark lashes and red lips. A gorgeous woman. He knows her from somewhere he can't remember.

It seems impossible that he could have forgotten a face like hers.

She looks at him and smiles. "He did it, Daniel. He got married though he swore that he wouldn't. Thank God they didn't take my advice."

"Who got married?"

"Phineas Galileo Hughes. I wanted to name him Daniel, after you think it's right that he has his own name. He chose his own path."

Daniel. His name is Daniel. He wants to ask why she would

someone after him, but it feels like the wrong question, like it might make his smile go away. Instead, he asks, "How was the wedding?"

"Stunning, but you can see for yourself."

She pulls out a phone with a big screen that lights up when she moves her finger across it. Photographs appear on the screen of a handsome young man with a beautiful, dark-haired bride. There are orchids everywhere, white and pink.

As she moves her finger in graceful strokes, more photos appear...

Groups of smiling people in tuxedos and dresses.

A three-tiered wedding cake with orchid petals.

A baby wearing a tiny suit sleeping in someone's arms.

He studies the pictures, looking for someone he recognizes.

He can't see anything.

Disappointment sounds like a heavy drum.

"It's okay," she says, patient, as if she understands, but how can she understand when he doesn't even understand?

How can she understand when he doesn't even understand?

Everyone in the photos are wearing beautiful clothes. Expensive designer clothes, though he isn't sure how he'd know the difference.

The woman standing next to him wears a dress that glitters with pale pink sequins.

It makes her blonde hair shine even more somehow.

He looks down. He's wearing pajamas.

Somewhere in the house a baby cries. And then it's quiet again, but the quiet feels ominous now. Who is he? Where is he? He doesn't know.

Panic makes his heart beat faster. "Who are you?"

She doesn't seem surprised by the question. She comes to stand in front of him and gently links their hands together.

They fit. That's what he thinks as he looks down at their hands. His are weathered, hers manicured with nails painted rose gold. Their hands fit together.

"Someone who loves you," she says. "That's what matters."

He looks at her face, both familiar and unfamiliar.

She's both beloved and a stranger to him.

There's music playing, though. Something sweet, like heartache. "I love you, too."

Tears appear in her blue eyes, reflecting back stars. "It's true, a

ake herDaniel. For a while I forgot, but it's true. Love makes everything bette

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Daniel. For a while I forgot, but it's true. Love makes everything better.”



## EPILOGUE

### Eva, many years later

**I**'M TRYING NOT to act like it's a big deal.

Even though... it is a big deal.

A wedding anniversary would be important to anyone. And a h forgetting it would normally be grounds for frustration. This isn't a situation, though. Dementia treatments have made it so he almost ne flare-ups, but it's always a possibility. No cure is one hundred perfect.

The hurt that I'm feeling is totally irrational. At least that's whi myself.

Finn came downstairs wearing a polo shirt and jeans, whistling, about going to the park to throw the ball around with Danny. I'm sittir holding onto my coffee cup like it's going to shatter if I don't keep it t with my bare hands.

"Finn?" I say, my voice wavery. "It's not a regular day."

He turns to me, moving slow, as if it pains him. "It's not?"

"It's our wedding anniversary."

"Today?"

"Yes."

"How many years?"

My throat feels tight. "Five."

"Hell," he says.

"It's okay," I say. "Don't feel bad. I know you didn't mean anytl it."

In fact, in a way it would be easier to handle if I thought it w

regular forgetfulness. Instead I have to worry whether it's an episode I have to write it down in the notebook and bring it up with Dr. Faulk. C isn't a big deal... but a wedding anniversary is big.

He's looking away, and I can't imagine his expression. Worry? Shit?

I stand up and go to him, putting my arms around his lean waist. W looks down at me his expression is carefully blank—but it's blankness. A pretense, when he normally doesn't do that anymore. “I'm angry,” I say. “Not about buying a present or anything like that. I've never even have said anything, but I just want to spend the day with you.”

“Well,” he says, choosing his words carefully, “I suppose you can come to the park with us. Hang out while we throw around a ball.”

The park. Throwing a baseball. Not exactly a romantic dinner, but it sounds like heaven anyway. Spending time with the guys in my life—my husband and of them.

normal Besides, I can text Soph on the way and see if she can babysit if I never has OpenTable probably has something available, even at the last minute.

percent We'll still have that anniversary dinner.

We pile into the car—me, Finn, and Daniel. Danny still has to sit at I tell booster seat, which he's not particularly pleased about. And Leo but we put him into the car seat. The trunk is overflowing with baseballs, talking bouncy balls, and bubbles for the park.

ing here, Except when we pull up I realize there's no need for them.

together Because the park has been turned into an entire freaking carnival.

A big pink tent stands at the center with a crowd of people. Behind it can see multiple large bounce houses, a climbing wall, a stand of popcorn and funnel cakes and other treats. A huge banner across the top of the tent says *Happy 5th Anniversary!*

“Oh my God,” I say, barely able to breathe. “You bastard.”

“Mommy said a bad word,” Hemingway says, and Daniel shushes.

“You bastard,” I whisper, but it's lost all the heat. There are tears in my eyes.

“I did promise you fun all those years ago,” he says, taking my hand and driving by across the console. “As if I knew the meaning of the word, but I didn't know what it would be like to have you as my wife. As the mother of my children. Happy anniversary, sweetheart.”

And then he kisses me.

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Thank you for reading Finn and Eva's emotional roller coaster of a story. I hope you loved this incredibly powerful billionaire love story. Ann Warren is offering an exclusive bonus epilogue if you want to see more of this happy couple...

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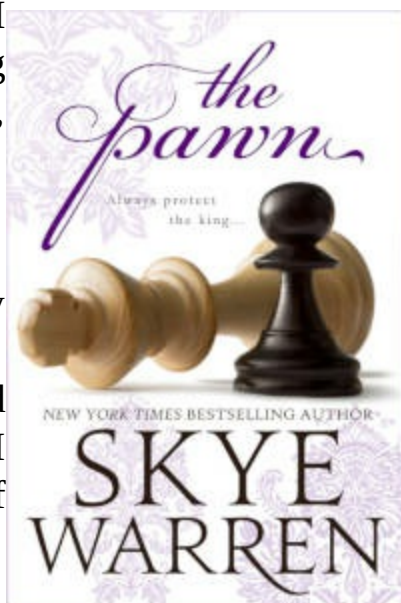
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*“Wickedly brilliant, dark and addictive!”*

– Jodi Ellen Malpas, #1 New York Times bestselling author

***The price of survival...***

Gabriel Miller swept into my life like a storm. He tore down my father with cold retribution, leaving him penniless in a hospital bed. I came to a private all-girl's college to take care of the family I have left.

There's one way to save our house, or the only one I have left of value.

My virginity.

***A forbidden auction...***

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***A forbidden auction...***

Gabriel appears at every turn. He seems to take pleasure in watching me fall. Other times he's the only kindness in a brutal underworld.

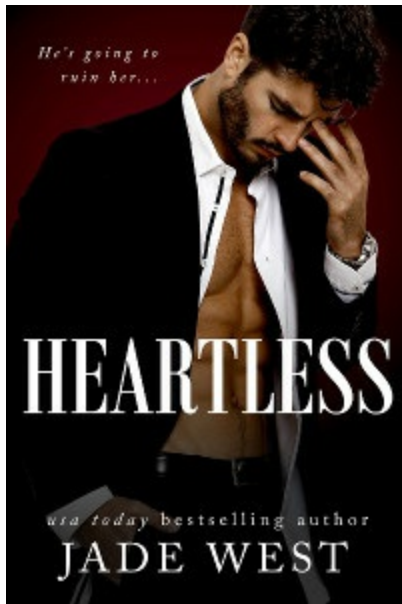
Except he's playing a deeper game than I know. Every move brings us together, every secret rips us apart. And when the final piece is played, only one of us can be left standing.

[One click THE PAWN now >](#)

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The warring Morelli and Constantine families have enough bad blood to fill an ocean, and their brand new stories will be told by your favorite dark romance authors.

*Meet the oldest Morelli brother in his own star-crossed story...*



I've known all my life that the Constantine deserved to be wiped from the face of the earth, leaving only a smoking crater left where their mansion once stood. That's my plan until I see her. A woman in gold with the sinful curves and blonde curls.

[READ HEARTLESS >](#)

In a single moment, she becomes my obsession. Elaine Constantine will be mine. A slow destruction is only my beginning.

My will to dominate her runs as deep as the hate I have for her last name. No matter how beautifully she bends beneath my hands, I'll leave her shattered, a bro

for her cruel family.

*Winston Constantine is the head of the Constantine family. He's got his people bowing to his will. Money can buy anything. And anyone. In Ash Elliot, his new maid.*

But love can have deadly consequences when it comes from a Constantine. At the stroke of midnight, that choice may be lost for both of them.

[READ STROKE OF MIDNIGHT >](#)

“Brilliant storytelling packed with a powerful emotional punch, I haven't been so invested in a book in years since I've been so invested in

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*Ready for more bad boys, more drama, and more heat? The Const have a resident fixer. The man they call when they need someone per in a violent fashion. Ronan was danger and beauty, murder and mercy*

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book. Erotic romance at its finest!”

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Rachel Van Dy

“Stroke of Midnight is by far the hottest b I’ve read in a very long time! Wins Constantine is a dirty talking alpha v makes no apologies for going after what wants.”

– USA Today bestselling author Jenika Sr

Outside a glittering party, I saw a man in th I didn’t know then that he was an assassin man. A mercenary. Ronan radiated dang beauty. Mercy and mystery.

I wanted him, but I was already prom another man. Ronan might be the on murdered him. But two warring families w blood. I don’t know where to turn.

In a mad world of luxury and secrets, I only one I can trust.

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## ABOUT SKYE WARREN

Skye Warren is the New York Times bestselling author of danger romance with over two million copies sold. Her books have been featured in Jezebel, BuzzFeed, USA Today Happily Ever After, Glamour, and Teen Magazine. She makes her home in Texas with her loving family and pack of dogs.

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Skye Warren is the New York Times bestselling author of dangerous romance with over two million copies sold. Her books have been featured in Jezebel, BuzzFeed, USA Today Happily Ever After, Glamour, and Elle Magazine. She makes her home in Texas with her loving family and wild pack of dogs.

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