

THE RECKLESS UNION



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MONICA MURPHY

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CHAPTER ONE

Charlotte

I STARTLE AWAKE with a gasp, my eyelids heavy with fatigue when I barely crack them open to find I'm in an empty room. Taking in my surroundings, I note the cheap white blinds covering the single window, the bent ones letting in the waning sunlight from outside. I shift, tingles prickling along my legs. My feet. My lower half has fallen asleep, my butt killing me thanks to the hardwood floor I'm sitting on. Grimacing, I try to stretch my feet but the rope around my ankles cuts into my skin.

At least the tape isn't covering my mouth anymore, I think as I take a deep breath. I swear Seamus did that only for the photos he took on his phone. The minute he was finished, he tore the tape off my face with a gleeful expression, his eyes dancing when I yelped in pain.

The asshole.

I have no idea who he could've sent those photos to. My family? My parents wouldn't care. Not really. My brothers? They're both so busy working deals and conquering New York City, I doubt they'd notice text messages with photos. And Crew is at school, forgotten at Lancaster Prep. Mom forgets to check her phone most of the time and my father lets his messages pile up to an ungodly amount.

If he sent them to Perry, I know my husband would save me. My family might not care, but Perry... he does.

Or maybe Seamus didn't send those photos to anyone. Maybe he'll use them later. Or he took them for his own personal pleasure. I don't know. Worse, I don't understand him, or know what makes him tick.

Does he plan on keeping me forever?

A shiver steals through me at the thought.

If he sent those photos to my husband, Perry will kill him when he finds us. He hates Seamus with every fiber of his being, as well he should. And you know what?

I do, too.

Without warning, the door swings open and in walks Seamus. Larger than life, tall and imposing and so, so dark. Like an ominous cloud, filling up the space. He stands over me, his hands on his hips, his scowl aimed right at me. It slowly softens, until his lips are curved into the faintest smile.

“Don’t you look pretty all tied up.” That familiar Irish brogue washes over me and I’m immediately infuriated.

“My husband is going to kill you when he sees those photos you took of me,” I spit out at him.

I think of Perry and his smiling face. That look in his eyes he gets right before he kisses me. Will I ever see it again? Feel his lips on mine? Hear his laughter?

Seamus chuckles, like I amuse him. “Kill me? Please. He’s going to take one look at the security footage from your building and think you left with me. Willingly. He’s not looking for you. He thinks you’re cooperating with me—and trying to trick him with those photos.”

No. Perry would know I’d never leave with Seamus without a fight.

Wouldn’t he?

I think of the footage the cameras might’ve caught. How I’m walking through the lobby, turning to face Seamus. Did I look like I wanted to talk to him? I willingly sought him out. He held a gun to my side, but did anyone actually see it?

What if they didn’t?

“Why did you take those photos of me then?”

“Collateral.” His expression turns smug. “I might need to use them later.”

God, I hate this man. Everything that happened between us feels like a lifetime ago. Seeing Seamus the morning of my wedding had been a total shock to the system. Completely unexpected and downright surreal. How could he suddenly appear in front of me on my wedding day? What are the chances?

I’m realizing there’s no such thing as chance encounters.

“So you didn’t send them to Perry?”

“Oh, but I did.” He kneels in front of me, his grin almost feral. “He hasn’t come to your rescue yet though, has he? Guess he doesn’t care about you as much as you thought.”

Seamus rises to his full height, his gaze never straying from mine and I fight the panic that wants to sweep over me. Those photos, the film footage, my being with Seamus—none of that will matter to Perry. He’ll want to rescue me. It’s in his blood—always wanting to help, to rescue everyone in his family, and I’m a part of that now. I’m his wife. He’ll stand by me no matter what.

Even if it looks like you ran away with your former lover?

Swallowing hard, I try to push past the worry that’s making me doubt myself. Doubt Perry.

Doubt everyone.

“I’ll be back.” Seamus leaves the room before I can say anything else, slamming the door behind him and I fall back against the wall, stifling the cry that wants to escape.

Has Seamus gone mad? Seriously, what he’s doing isn’t normal. Or sane.

I’m worried for his mental state, which means I’m also worried about... me. My safety. How is this going to end? I doubt he’s going to let me go easily.

Frustrated, I squirm around, knocking my ankles together in the hopes my feet will wake up. The prickling sensation is excruciating, and it doesn’t help that my head still feels heavy. I wonder if Seamus drugged me with something. I don’t even remember.

Knowing him and how he’s been acting, he probably did.

The room grows darker as the sun sets and soon enough, it’s nighttime. My eyes adjust to the darkness and I press the back of my head against the wall, gazing up at the ceiling and the light fixture above me. At least he tied my hands in front of my body and not behind me, though maybe that was a stupid move. I could undo the rope when I’m positioned this way...

My chest tightens and I realize I might have to face the truth. Maybe Seamus is right. It doesn’t look like Perry’s coming to save me.

I’m going to have to save myself.

This is how Seamus finds me when he reenters the room. I don’t know how long I’ve been at it, or how many ways I’ve contorted my arms, hands

and fingers as I try to undo the complicated knots. Sweat dots my forehead and the skin at my wrists chafe thanks to the rough rope material.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asks, his accented voice calm. Like it’s no big deal he has his ex-lover tied up and locked away in a room God knows where.

I don’t look at him, forcing the wave of anger that floods me down so I don’t say something stupid and piss him off. I do straighten my body out though, trying for nonchalance.

No, you didn’t catch me trying to undo the rope. Why do you ask?

“I’m thirsty,” is what I say to him instead, which is the truth.

“I’ll bring you something to eat and drink later.”

“When?”

“Later,” he repeats, his voice firm. He shuts the door behind him and leans against it, contemplating me, crossing his arms in front of his chest. The way he studies me makes me want to squirm but I keep myself still. He remains quiet for so long I start to wonder if he’s going to say anything at all until finally, eight words slip from his lips. His tone low and almost menacing.

“What am I going to do with you?”

Terror filters through my blood, making me tense. There must be some sort of motive behind his snatching me out of the lobby at our building. I assume he has a plan. Who kidnaps someone without a plan?

Maybe he does.

I remain quiet until the silence becomes unbearable and I can’t take it any longer.

“What exactly do you mean?” I finally ask.

Seamus pushes away from the door and heads in my direction, crouching down in front of me, his gaze level with mine. “Are you mad at me?”

I blink at him, shocked by his question. Does he actually think I approve of him abducting me?

“Or are you angry? You look angry. You were always extra pretty when you were mad, Charlotte,” he continues, his voice low. God, I hate hearing him say my name in that accent I used to find so charming. “Did you know that? Not that you were ever that mad at me when we were together. Only at the end, when you found out...”

His voice trails and the pain at that memory pierces my heart, reminding

me how much his betrayal hurt me.

“Why did you do that?” I ask, my voice small. I sound pitiful, and I see the approval in his gaze. He wants to talk about our past, while that’s the last thing I want to do.

But maybe it’s the smart thing. I could convince him I want to be with him, and maybe that would lower his guard.

“Do what? Lie to you? Keep my girlfriend a secret?”

I glance down, wishing I could conjure up some tears. Men always fall for them, and I know for a fact Seamus does. I think he enjoyed seeing me as the broken little girl. “It hurt so badly, Seamus. And how I found out—”

“I didn’t want you to find out that way,” he rushes to say, his hand going to my knee. Unable to control myself, I flinch and he notices.

Of course he does.

His hand tightens on my knee and I glance over at him, my eyes welling with tears. “You hurt me.”

His expression tightens, his gaze flat. As if he has no emotion. Or he’s trying to keep them contained. “You ran away before I could fully explain.”

He’s right. I did run away. And I never went back. I couldn’t face the humiliation and besides...

My father wouldn’t let me.

“What could you say to explain yourself?” I ask. “It’s obvious what you did to me. To us.”

“I wasn’t in love with her,” he admits. “Not anymore. Not after us, and what we shared. I fell in love with—”

“Don’t say that,” I interrupt, not wanting to hear any declarations of love. He doesn’t mean it. He’s trying to convince me he’s a good guy, while I sit here tied up. The irony isn’t lost on me. “You don’t mean it.”

“You don’t know what I mean, or how I feel. You never gave me the chance to explain any of it. How sweet you were. How I fell under your spell. You were so naïve, so innocent. You soaked up every word I said to you, and I loved it. Those big blue eyes following me as I spoke in front of the class. As if you couldn’t get enough of me,” he says, his gaze distant, as if he’s lost in his memories.

I stroked his ego. That’s why he supposedly fell for me, but it doesn’t sound like love now. I didn’t know much about him beyond that he was from Ireland and passionate about classic European architecture. Oh, and that he

was older and seemed so wise and worldly. I was just as he described me—an innocent little girl who'd grown up sheltered her entire life. Given the opportunity to get out into the world, and I did the most impulsive, stupidest thing ever...

Had an affair with my professor.

I think of Perry and how he initially irritated me. His easygoing nature was an annoyance—until he won me over, slowly but surely. The more time we spent together, I discovered his protective nature, his intuitiveness when it came to my feelings. The spark I feel when he looks at me, touches me, kisses me...

That feels more like love.

“You still seem angry,” he observes, pulling me from my thoughts.

My gaze finds his once more and I give up all pretense. “I don't like living in the past. There's no point.”

“Miss your husband?” He lifts his brows.

I say nothing. Can only look away, trying to ease the tension in my jaw.

To admit any feelings for Perry to this man would be stupid. A huge error.

I need to keep everything I feel to myself.

“He's not who I would choose for you, Charlotte, if I had any say in the matter,” Seamus says. “He doesn't seem your type.”

I can't help but glare at him. I feel defensive when it comes to Perry.

“You don't know him.”

“Neither do you. You only just married the man. He's basically a stranger. Why does he care where you are, or who you're with? He's leaving you alone because he thinks you want to be with me.”

“He knows exactly how I feel about you,” I lie. “And how much I can't stand you.”

“Right.” Seamus laughs. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“We've grown close in a short amount of time.” I lift my chin, daring him to contradict what I'm saying.

“Please. Your relationship is based on nothing but sex,” Seamus continues.

“You know nothing about my relationship with my husband,” I spit out, on the defensive. How would he know? He doesn't have spies everywhere. Definitely not in Mexico.

“I know enough that you went for a joyride with him in his stupid classic car and he fucked you in a parking garage.” His smile grows, though his gaze is dark.

I blink at him, hating that he knows about that moment. It was special between Perry and me. Intimate.

Well. Not so much anymore.

“He’s just using you. Like every other man in your life.” Reaching out, he drifts his fingers across my hair. I flinch and duck, desperate to get away from his touch and he drops his hand. “Your father. Your brothers. Your husband and his brother. You’re just a pawn in their games. They don’t care about you.”

I’m about to protest but he keeps talking.

“Not like I do.” He grabs my chin, forcing me to look at him. “Right, Charlotte?”

Terror twists my stomach and I stare into those fathomless dark eyes. They see everything.

They see nothing.

I swallow hard and it’s painful, my throat is so dry. “What about—*her*?”

Seamus frowns, his fingers dropping from my face. “Who?”

“Your girlfriend.”

He rises back up, looming over me. “I already told you. We ended things a long time ago. I lost my job after what happened, you know.”

I blink up at him. “What are you talking about?”

“You returned to the States and your father got me fired.” His mouth firms into a straight line. “My girlfriend left me soon after. Everything I’d ever built in my life, destroyed by a few passionate months with a girl who ran away and never reached out to me again. Your father took everything away from me, Charlotte. My career. My relationship. My life. I returned home a broken man. Ashamed. What happened made me feel like a lecherous old man, even though you were eighteen and you knew better.”

Victim blaming. Nice. I was young, and he did take advantage of me.

“Next thing I know, I hear you’re getting married to a goddamned Constantine and I knew I had to steal you away from him. Just to throw a wrench in your family’s plans,” he says, glancing over at me. “So I did. And now here we are. Together again.”

His gaze seems to caress my face and I stiffen my body to contain the

shiver that wants to take over.

It's clear he's completely deranged. I don't bother saying anything because I don't think he's really paying attention to me in the moment.

He appears too caught up in his memories. Again.

"Your father thought he could end my career, and initially, I believed he did. But he was wrong. He didn't realize who I am, or how important I am to my hometown. My country. I went back feeling like a disgrace, but eventually they all lifted me up. I'm a professor at University College in Cork now. Did you know that, Charlotte?"

I shake my head, remaining mute.

"It's true. I thought I wanted something different, but in the end, I found success in my home country and I'm quite all right with that. Paris feels like a long time ago. My time with you, a dream."

More like a nightmare, but I don't bother correcting him.

"Now I want my true love by my side when I return home." He rises to his full height and heads for the door. I watch him go, my stomach curdling, my appetite disappearing at his words. "I know you probably believe my actions are rash, but when a man knows what he wants, he goes after it. And I've come after you, because you belong to me, whether your father likes it or not. No one looks at me the way you do, Charlotte. No one else has ever believed in me so strongly—until you."

"Seamus." I clear my throat when he jerks his gaze to mine. "I'm married to someone else—"

"That won't stop me. You were forced to marry him," he interrupts, his voice flat. "We'll get it annulled."

What? I don't want my marriage annulled.

"But—"

"You're not going back to him!" The roar of his words makes me recoil against the wall and we stare at each other, Seamus's dark eyes so cold.

The coldest stare I've ever seen.

"I'll bring you your dinner in a bit. Allow you a break. If you try to get away, try to harm me or yourself, I will *end* you, Charlotte. I don't care how much I love you. I won't tolerate insolent behavior."

He's gone before I can say anything, the slamming door almost a reprieve. I sag against the wall, tears suddenly streaming down my face and when I wipe at them with my bound hands, I scratch my cheek with the rope.

Of course I do.

Closing my eyes, I press my forehead into the wall, my thoughts flooded with images of Perry. He needs to find me, but does he actually care? I know we've grown closer, but I also frustrate him. Maybe he'll realize life is easier without the little wifey around. I'm a pain in his ass. A burden he didn't ask for—and now I've become an even bigger problem than he ever bargained for.

Seamus is also a Morelli. The Constantine family's biggest enemies. It might be easier for Perry and the rest of his family to leave me with Seamus because they don't want to deal with the Morellis. I wouldn't be surprised. I'm sure my own father feels the same way. Everyone does.

And the idea of that...

Devastates me.

Tears streaming down my face, I realize there isn't a single person in my life I can think of who would drop everything and come save me.

Looks like I need to figure out how to save myself.



CHAPTER TWO

Perry

“**Y**OU NEED TO quit pacing.”

The complaint from my little brother Keaton only makes me pace faster. “Helps me think.”

“You’re making my head spin,” he protests.

I come to a stop. “That’s great. Really feel bad for you. Hate that your head is spinning when my wife has been *kidnapped* by a *madman*.”

Keaton blinks up at me, shock etched into his features. He’s a good-looking kid. We share a few of the same features but he’s stockier. More muscular. All those years on a rugby field will do that to you.

“Sorry, man,” he mutters, appearing contrite.

I give him a quick nod, not saying anything. My baby bro may be bigger than me, but I’m so enraged right now, I know I could take him. If left unchecked, I could probably do serious damage.

All while pretending he’s Seamus McFuckit.

God, I could kill him. Worse, that’s my attitude right now. Fuck it. You wanna come for me? Come for me, not my wife. The moment I find his ass—and after I find Charlotte and know she’s safe—I’m killing him.

No one can stop me. It’s happening. I will destroy that threat once and for all.

“Hey, calm down.” This is from Winston, who puts himself in my way so I have no choice but to finally stop pacing.

We’re at the Constantine Compound. Winston called for all of the Constantine men to meet here and strategize our next move when it comes to Charlotte.

Yeah, that's what we're doing. Strategizing Charlotte's fucking kidnapping. Winston's treating it like a business meeting while all I can think about is my wife.

Is she hurt?

Is she safe?

Is she scared?

I can't stand the thoughts racing through my brain. There are worse ones. Darker ones.

Is she thrilled to be back with that asshole?

Has she been secretly in love with him all along?

Maybe it wasn't a kidnapping at all. Maybe she left me for... him.

I curl my hands into fists, ready to punch something.

Winston is my first target, but he'll punch back, so I don't even try.

"I can't calm down," I tell him, my voice tight, my jaw aching. "I don't know where she is."

"I thought you didn't give a shit about her," Keaton says from where he's perched on the edge of the couch.

"Keaton," Mother snaps. "Don't say that to your brother. This is his *wife* he's worried about."

All three of us swivel our heads in her direction. She's just entered the sitting room, looking regal with her head held high and her expression completely unreadable. Typical. The woman rarely shows emotion. I could learn a thing or two from her.

"Sorry," Keaton mutters again, barely looking at me.

"It's fine." I guess I can't blame him for thinking that way. This was a marriage in name only, and everyone in my family knew it. Of course, he'd think I didn't really care about Charlotte. It's only been a few months since we even met.

But she crawled under my skin at a rapid pace. Burrowed herself deep inside me, somewhere in the vicinity of my heart, and the damn thing feels like it's going to beat out of my chest every time I think about where she could be right now. And if she's okay. I hate the idea of her suffering.

I hate the idea of her being happy to get away from me even worse.

"Let's stop with the bullshit conversation and focus on what's actually happening," Winston says, his stern voice bringing everything into focus. "Myron is on the case."

The elderly investigator who does everything old school. How is that geezer going to help us? “Oh come on, Winny. You really think he’s going to track my wife down? We need to be out there looking for her instead of being holed up in here and waiting for that dick to send me another ominous text message with those fucking photos again. Or maybe he’ll send new ones.”

Those photos of Charlotte tore at my heart and filled me with fear. What if that asshole does something to her? Hurts her?

I can barely stand the thought.

“Photos that could’ve been staged.” Winston holds up his hand when I part my lips, ready to argue. “Hear me out. It’s a possibility.”

“No way,” I say vehemently.

“It’s possible. She didn’t take her phone with her when she went to meet with McTiernan. She told Jasper not to say anything to you about it—you said that yourself. You don’t really know her, Perry. And you don’t know much about her relationship with this guy either. Maybe she’s still in love with him.” Winston’s brows shoot up, the look on his face practically daring me to argue with him.

I hate the sudden doubt that creeps in. What if he’s right? Those photos could be fake. The two of them could be laughing about me at this very moment...

No. Fuck that. She couldn’t be so cruel.

“She would never do that to me,” I say with conviction I don’t exactly feel. “And why the hell aren’t we busting down the Morellis’ doors and demanding to know where she’s at?”

“None of his family is involved,” Winston says, sounding completely, frustratingly logical. “McTiernan is a lone wolf. The distant family relative from another country.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Mom retorts, coming to stand next to Winston, her gaze leveled on me. “They could do anything to harm our family. Letting the crazy cousin kidnap your wife makes complete sense.”

“I don’t know.” Winston’s voice is full of doubt. “This doesn’t have the Morelli signature to it.”

“What the hell do you mean?” I ask, needing an explanation. Needing someone to make sense of this entire situation, because right now, it boggles my mind.

I just want my wife back. Safe and protected in my arms, in our home.

With Jasper watching over her when I'm not around and Doja cuddled up on her lap.

Jasper. The poor old man was beside himself when I called. He knew something was up and was about to reach out to me when I spoke to him. He told me the entire story of a male visitor coming to see her in the lobby. How she went down there to speak with him and asked Jasper not to mention it to me.

Winston's right. That point was like a dagger to my heart. One I can't let go of.

Would she have kept it a secret if she hadn't left with him? Is he really holding her hostage or is it all staged, like Winston said? I hate these thoughts. That I doubt her.

I open up my text messages yet again and look at the photos I was sent. The terror in Charlotte's eyes. The agony. She looks so damn scared. Her mouth is taped up. Hell, the fucker held a gun to her head and she's crying.

It could be fake. I could be left to look like a fool, and I'd have no one to blame but myself. Oh, and my brother and mother for making me marry her in the first place.

Jesus.

"We have to do something about this." I shove my phone in my pocket and thrust both of my hands in my hair, pulling it away from my face. "I can't just stand here and wait for something to happen. We need to find her."

"I've called Bryant," Mother says, her voice calm.

"What?" I drop my hands. "What did you say to him? Ask him if he happens to know where my wife is?"

"Essentially." She shrugs. "He denied knowing anything about Charlotte. But I can sense when he's lying. I believe he's involved."

"I don't know—"

"Winston." He shuts up when she interrupts him. "They're involved."

"Are we really going to waste time arguing who's involved in this, or are we actually going to do something about it?" Keaton asks from where he's still sitting on the couch. "Let's go find your wife, Bro."

If I could hug my little brother for his sudden mood change, I so would. "I'm going to call her brothers."

Winston makes a face. "I don't know—"

"Grant Lancaster is very powerful." Mom nods. "I think that's a smart

idea.”

“I don’t have his number.” I dial our apartment house phone and Jasper answers on the first ring, sounding distraught. “I need Grant’s phone number.”

“Have you found her?” Jasper asks, sounding anxious.

The old man is terrified. He loves Charlotte and feels guilty over what happened, though I don’t blame him for it. How could I? He’s watched over her practically her entire life.

“No, not yet,” I bite out, hating the dread that consumes me. The more time that passes, the harder it will be to locate her. Every minute that ticks by is precious. “But I’m hoping Grant can help.”

“I’m sure he will. He and Charlotte aren’t particularly close, but he has many resources,” Jasper says. “Do you have a pen?”

“Write this number down for me,” I command Keaton, who opens up his notes app. “Give it to me, J.”

Jasper rattles off the number and I repeat it to Keaton, who gives me a thumbs-up when he’s done. “Thanks. I’ll call you if I need anything else.”

“Of course, sir. Please do keep me posted. I’m worried.” He hesitates and I swear he swallowed back a sob. “I feel responsible.”

“It’s not your fault,” I reassure him yet again. “She was going to see him whether you tried to stop her or not. She’s stubborn.”

“That she is, sir. You know, you could call her younger brother as well. Crew. He’s very close to Charlotte.”

“Isn’t he away at school?”

“Yes. But perhaps he could give some insight.”

I doubt that. The poor kid is in high school. What’s he going to know about Charlotte? And why worry him? I don’t want to bring her parents into this either. Her mom will freak and dear old Dad won’t give a shit. I’d rather deal with the ruthless Lancasters. The ones who know how to be quiet. The ones who can get the job done.

Like her older brothers.



CHAPTER THREE

Charlotte

SOMEHOW I FALL asleep again, slumped against the wall, my hands and ankles still bound. When I wake up, my mouth is dry and my stomach cramps. I'm hungry.

Oh, and I need to pee.

I realize there's someone in the darkened room, moving around. A hand slaps the wall, hitting the light switch and a dull golden light fills the room, making me wince.

Seamus is standing in front of me, his mouth turned downward in seeming disappointment.

"You look terrible."

I glare up at him, struggling to sit up. Not that he helps me. Why should he? "What do you expect? You kidnapped me and dragged me out of the lobby with a gun jabbed into my side."

I don't even mention that he's got me tied up like he's holding me for ransom—

Wait a minute.

"Did you ask my family for money? Are you holding me for ransom?"

Would my father even pay the ransom to get me back?

Probably not.

"That would be a waste of my breath." He slowly shakes his head. "And don't try and make this look like I'm holding you against your will. You left of your own accord."

I frown, trying to make sense of his words. His logic. Is he delusional? Does he really think I left with him because I wanted to? And now I'm lying

in an empty room tied up because this is how I want to spend my evening?

Has it really only been a few hours since I was last in my apartment, watching Doja play fetch? Feels like days ago. Weeks.

Maybe it really was only last night when Perry took me out in his Chevelle and we ate dinner at the diner after he fingered me to orgasm. And afterward, when we sat on top of the parking garage, the rain falling outside, wrapped up in each other in the front seat.

Now all of it has been tainted thanks to Seamus spying on us. The sick asshole.

When I don't say anything he shakes his head and reaches for me, his fingers coming around my arm. I jerk out of his hold, rolling away from him, groaning when the rope rubs against my ankles.

"You're being foolish," he chastises. "Let me help you stand. I'm going to feed you."

I glance over my shoulder at him, trying to ignore the hope lighting up inside of me. Despite everything, I'm hungry. And I need food to keep up my strength. "You are?"

Seamus nods. "As long as you cooperate, yes."

I let him grab hold of my arm again and pull me up to my feet, trying my best not to recoil from his touch. Having him so close is unsettling, and not in a good way. His familiar scent, the way he stands, the sound of his breathing. All of the memories come flooding back, one after another. I used to be completely enamored with this man. I believed he could do no wrong. He smiled at me, and it felt like sunlight. Warm and pure and giving me life.

Such a stupid girl I was. I wanted to believe so badly that he cared about me, I was blind to all the signs.

The signs that he was just using me.

He bends down as if he's kneeling at my feet, his fingers undoing the complicated knots with frustrating ease. This could be my moment where I make my escape. I could kick him in his stupid smug face, send him flying backwards and I would run. I would run fast and far.

He glances up at me, his dark gaze a warning, as if he can read my thoughts.

"Do something stupid and I'll tie you up even tighter."

I offer a nod as my answer and he pulls the rope off my ankles, which is utter relief. The skin where the rope rubbed stings, and when I rotate one

foot, then the other, they both ache from being bound for so long.

“Can you walk?” he asks once he’s standing at my side once more.

Nodding, I kept my head bent, not wanting to look at him.

“I’m going to take you to the kitchen,” he says, his fingers curling around my upper arm, gripping me tightly. “I’ll untie your hands when you’re in the chair so you can eat.”

Awareness at his words makes my skin tingle but I try my best not to react outwardly. Instead, I say nothing.

He’s quiet for a moment, and I can feel the tension rippling through him. “Don’t do anything you might regret.”

I nod again, my head still averted. Without warning he grabs hold of my chin with his other hand, forcing me to look at him. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I whisper, when I realize my nods aren’t a good enough answer for him.

“Good,” he whispers back, a faint smile curling his lips.

It’s hard to wrap my head around how attractive he is, and how captivated I was by him. Because I can’t deny it. Seamus McTiernan is a darkly handsome man. No wonder I fell for him.

But I’m not attracted to him any longer. Not at all. My heart...

Belongs to another.

“You’ve changed,” he tells me nonchalantly as we walk down a narrow hall. My gaze is everywhere, taking in my surroundings. It looks like I’m in a small apartment. A two-bedroom, two-bathroom unit, from what I’ve seen so far. There’s a small living room with a black leather couch and a big screen TV. Beyond that is a very small dining area with a small square table and two steel gray folding chairs. And then there’s the kitchen. It’s narrow, the wood cabinets a dark golden oak. Everything appears dated. Coming from another time, and there’s a musty scent lingering in the air.

As if the apartment has sat unused and locked up for a long time.

“Where are we?” I ask, knowing he won’t say.

Seamus chuckles. “If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

I’ve heard that saying before, but I never actually believed the person saying it, meant it.

Definitely believe Seamus though.

I decide to change the subject.

“What do you mean, I’ve changed?”

“You used to be so—agreeable.” He smiles, and I remember thinking how sweet he looked when he did that.

Now all I can think is how sinister his expression is.

“I’ve made you some soup,” he says before I can say anything else. He steers me into the kitchen, where I see the small pot on the stove, golden liquid within. “Chicken noodle.”

The scent wafting from the open pot has my stomach growling. “Smells good.”

“It should be ready.” His gaze finds mine. “Can I let you go and trust that you won’t run away from me?”

I’m conscious of the door being so close to where we’re standing, and I wonder what happened to that gun he had with him earlier. “I won’t,” I say. “But I do need to use the bathroom.”

“Wait until after you eat.”

The fact that he’s feeding me soup actually has me needing to go even worse. The thought of consuming all that liquid maybe, on my already burdened bladder?

“I really need to go now,” I tell him, pushing past the humiliation of talking about bodily functions.

Thank God I’m not on my period. Talk about a mess.

He studies me for a moment. “I want to trust you won’t do anything.”

I lift my hands out toward him. “I can’t use the bathroom without you untying my hands.”

“I could assist you.”

Absolutely not. “I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

His expression darkens. “I really don’t care what you think.”

Swallowing hard, I go quiet, pressing my thighs together. There is no way I can eat soup right now. If he doesn’t let me go to the bathroom soon, I’m going to pee my pants.

A ragged exhale leaves him and he shakes his head. “Fine. I’ll untie you.”

Relief floods me and I watch as he unravels the rope from my wrists. The moment it drops to the floor, I’m shaking my hands out. Rotating my wrists and stretching my fingers.

Yet again he grabs hold of my arm and practically drags me over to the bathroom.

“I’ll be at the door the entire time,” he tells me as he shoves me into the

tiny room. “Hurry up.”

My gaze meets his in the mirror’s reflection. “Aren’t you going to shut the door?”

He slowly shakes his head. “No.”

Asshole.

With a sigh I go to the toilet, relieved when he turns his back to me just as I’m about to pull down my sweats. Once I’ve handled my business, I wash my hands, glancing in the mirror to examine my face. There are little flakes of black beneath my eyes thanks to me crying off most of my mascara earlier but otherwise, I look fine. Hair is a little mussed.

Huh. You’d never know I’m currently being held against my will.

The moment the water shuts off, Seamus is in the bathroom, crowding me. “Let’s go.”

He doesn’t bother waiting for me to answer him. Instead, he grabs hold of my arm, squeezing so tight it hurts, and leads me toward the small table where I’m going to eat my meal. He shoves me into the folding chair, taking a step away to glare at me.

“Do not move from this spot.” He thrusts his finger in my face.

I stare at him, trying my best to keep my expression impassive. “I won’t.”

He keeps watching me and I return his glare, satisfied when he’s the one to look away first. He turns and goes to the kitchen, turning the burner off and grabbing a bowl from the cabinet. I watch him, my brain going a million miles a second as I try to figure out how to get out of this.

Away from him.

And back to my husband.

He pours me a glass of water. Grabs a box of saltine crackers. Opens a random drawer and selects a spoon out of it. An idea forms, and my stomach bounces with nerves as my gaze goes to the front door.

There are no complicated locks on it from what I can tell. Just a dead bolt and the simple lock in the doorknob. I’m really not that far from the door either. I could sprint to it in seconds, but I have to count on distracting Seamus long enough that he won’t lunge after me.

I have to surprise him.

Hurt him.

He’s taller and broader, but I’m younger and maybe even faster? I don’t remember him being into exercise or watching what he ate. While we were in

Paris together, he would eat whatever he wanted, patting his stomach after every meal and rambling on how he'd eventually need to stop eating so much with me. That I gave him a healthy appetite with all the sex we were having.

Ugh. Not like we did it that much but maybe for him, it was a lot.

“Here you go,” Seamus says, pulling me from my thoughts. I glance up to find him standing beside me, leaning down to set the steaming bowl of soup onto the table and directly in front of me. “Let me get you your spoon and crackers.”

He walks away before I can say anything and I stare at the golden liquid within the bowl. The wispy tendrils of steam wafting upward, warming my face. It's hot.

Really hot.

He returns in seconds, settling the spoon beside my bowl. Dropping the crackers on the table. “I'll get your water.”

Frowning, I watch him walk back into the tiny kitchen yet again, marveling at his lack of efficiency. A woman would've been capable of bringing everything at once to the table. It's as if the man can't multitask.

But that's okay. His stalling is allowing me to formulate my plan and work up the nerve to execute it. If it goes wrong, there will be hell to pay. If it goes right...

I'll be free.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, I reach for the bowl, my fingers curving around it lightly. This is it, I tell myself. My heart is in my throat, making it hard for me to breathe and my fingers are trembling.

I need to get a grip. Calm down. Remain steady.

Methodical.

“Here you go. Hurry up and eat.”

Seamus sets the water down on the table.

I swallow hard, glancing up at him.

Just before my hands curve around the smooth ceramic and I fling the entire bowl of soup at his face.



CHAPTER FOUR

Perry

“**Y**OU’RE A WORTHLESS husband with shit for brains,” Grant Lancaster spits out at me, his anger obvious thanks to the tone of his voice and the deadly scowl on his face.

I glare at him, counting down before I actually respond. This asshole means business and whatever I say to him could set him off further.

Which right back at him because I’m on edge and about to lose it all over this dick who just so happens to be my wife’s oldest brother. My brother-in-law.

Welcome to the Lancaster family. Just love this bunch.

“Accusing this guy of being a terrible husband isn’t going to fix the problem,” Finn Lancaster says, his gaze quickly shifting to mine, a hint of apology there, which is surprising.

Both of them treated me like absolute shit at our engagement party and at least Grant is staying consistent. I can sense, though, that I might have an ally in Finn.

And I need an ally right now on the Lancaster side.

Desperately.

“I agree,” I say, hoping Finn can sense my gratitude. “You can insult me all you want later. After we’ve got Charlotte back.”

After *I’ve* got Charlotte back, is what I want to say. But I’m trying to gain their help and trust, so I can’t make it all about me and what I want.

But the ache in my chest hasn’t eased. It’s only intensified the longer I go without her, and not knowing if she’s all right. Is she safe? What if she’s hurt? What if that asshole did something to her?

I can't fathom the thought.

Worse, what if she's laughing with him right now? Thrilled that she got away from me and is now back in his arms? What if it's all a ruse to get away from me and our arrangement?

No. I don't believe it. Before he abducted her, things were good between us. And getting better.

Those same thoughts keep running through my head though, intensifying as time goes on. It's tearing me up inside, but I gotta keep my shit together.

For Charlotte.

Yet those darker thoughts won't fully leave my mind either. That she could've planned this with McAsshat just about kills me. I absently rub at my chest, trying to rid myself of the pain, but it's no use.

It's still there, a throbbing beat in my blood. My heart. My head. That constant reminder that I don't know where my wife is and there's a chance that she won't come ba—

Fuck. I can't even fully think it.

Grant sneers at me, his expression shifting when Winston walks into the room. We're all at Winston's place currently, where we asked to meet the Lancaster brothers and break the news to them about Charlotte's abduction. Upon discovery, they immediately agreed their parents shouldn't be involved—not yet.

"If it goes much longer and we still don't hear from her, we'll have to notify my father," Grant says, scowling at all of us though his gaze keeps returning to mine. I can see the blame there, and I want to tell him I get it. I blame myself just as much as he blames me, but I won't give him the satisfaction. "I have resources, and plenty of them. They'll be discreet. But our father has even more resources. He might be able to find her easier than I can."

Finn makes a scoffing noise. "Give me a break. You'll find her."

"I think I already might have," Winston announces.

All heads swivel in my brother's direction and I speak up first.

"What are you talking about?"

The expression on his face is nothing short of smug. "Myron believes he's located Seamus McTiernan. He's just discovered he recently leased an apartment in Bishop's Landing."

"Get the fuck out of here," is my immediate response. "That town is

crawling with Constantines.”

“And Morellis,” Winston reminds me. “I told you he was staying at their mansion when he first arrived.”

“Why didn’t he just continue staying there?” Finn asks.

“Difficult to bring the woman you just abducted to your cousin’s house, don’t you think? I don’t care how big his fucking mansion is. He would have to explain her presence eventually,” Winston retorts.

I rise to my feet, eager to put a plan into action. “Let’s go then. Let’s find her.”

“Easy brother,” Winston says, his voice gentling. “We can’t just approach this guy, balls to the wall. We have to strategize.”

His word of the day, I swear to fucking God. “Fuck strategizing. He has her. Let’s get her back.”

My phone dings and I check it to see it’s a text from the head of security at our building. Attached is a video.

The security footage from earlier this afternoon in the lobby.

My heart starts to race as I open up the video, waiting for it to load. “They just sent over security footage from our building.”

They all surround me, Winston on one side and Grant on the other, Finn trying to crowd his way in. We all stare at the footage, but nothing is happening so far.

No Charlotte in sight.

I slide my finger across the arrow, making the video speed up and when I finally spot her familiar blonde head, I let it run at normal speed, all the breath gathering in my throat as I watch her walk past the security desk. She’s fucking stunning, even in her black sweat suit and my eager gaze tracks her every movement as she turns around. The quick flicker of surprise in her expression before it smooths out and she smiles at Seamus McKidnapper.

“She knew she was meeting him?” Grant asks.

I nod. “According to Jasper, security called and said he was asking to speak with her.”

“I don’t like that.”

This comes from Winston and when I glance over at him, noting how his features tighten, his lips thinning into a straight line.

I know why he said it. I get it. I felt the same way.

Right now, watching this video, we’re going to find out exactly how this

went down.

They speak for a few minutes, Charlotte's expression fierce throughout the entire conversation, which is reassuring. I want to believe she didn't run away with him, but I still don't know.

Seamus steps closer to her, pulling something out of his pocket that looks suspiciously like a gun. He presses it against her side and all the color drains out of her face—even in black and white film, I can tell.

She's scared.

And I can't help it. I'm relieved. Despite Winston's suspicions, Charlotte didn't go with him willingly. Deep down I knew, but still.

It's hard not to feel conflicted, especially considering how our relationship started.

"That's a gun," Grant says, stating the obvious. "He walked her out of there with a gun at her side and no one even fucking noticed."

That he did, the bastard. If I could strangle him, I would. If that man was standing in front of me, I would probably kill him with my bare hands. I'm that angry. She's mine.

Charlotte *Constantine* belongs to me.

Seamus steers her around and escorts her out of the lobby, the two of them walking side by side, leaving through the double doors. One second, they're there and the next...

They're gone. Never to be seen again.

The video stops and a ragged exhale leaves me.

"I say we call the police," Grant suggests once the video is finished. "This is fucking crazy. We don't know where she's at, or what his mental state is. What if he's—hurt her? Or plans on it? Have we heard from him? Has he made any demands yet? Asked for money?"

"All I received were the photos. That's it," I remind Grant. "Maybe we should call the—"

"No. No cops should be involved. Then the media will find out and her kidnapping will be everywhere. All over gossip sites, the news—we can't risk it. And this isn't about money," Winston interrupts, scrubbing his hand along his jaw. "It's personal."

"Give me a break that this is some personal beef made up between two warring families. I don't fucking believe it." Out of nowhere Grant shoves at my shoulder, sending me stumbling back. "You versus the Morellis aren't

mobsters or whatever the fuck. That is some silly shit and somehow your stupid ass got my sister involved. She's not a pawn to be used in your fight. There's more to this than you're telling us."

"Tell that to your father," I shout, marching right up to him and thrusting my face in his. "He's the one who's been using her as a pawn ever since this entire plan was launched. He forced her to marry me."

"And who the fuck forced you to marry her?" he throws back at me.

I snap my lips shut, glaring. No one forced me. I did it of my own free will. I might've been against it at first, but eventually I got over it. Getting to know my future bride helped. My attraction toward her helped as well.

Not that I can admit any of that out loud, in front of her brothers. They don't want to hear it.

Grant's nostrils flare as he stares at me, his expression pure intimidation. I'm sure he's sent many a man scurrying away with their tails tucked between their legs with that look, but fuck it. I'm not scared. I'm not going to back down. He thinks he's got something to lose here? I do too.

"I don't think it has anything to do with Constantines versus Morellis and everything to do with her being the one who got away from him," Finn says, sounding logical as fuck.

We all turn to glare at him, Grant speaking first.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Finn shoves his hands into his pants' pockets. "They had a torrid affair in Paris, right?"

I hate hearing the words but damn it—

"Yes," I bite out.

"And then she found out he was a lying bastard who had a girlfriend. Charlotte was devastated and ran home a disgraced mess. Never to speak to him again. We know she was distraught. After she came back, she was never the same. She was always quiet, but she completely withdrew into herself. Maybe he was upset too. I've done a little investigating on this guy. He sort of dropped off the face of the earth after the incident with Charlotte happened."

I noticed that too, when I tried to dig up information on him. "He went back to Ireland. Where the girlfriend lived. His time in Paris was never supposed to be permanent, from what I could tell."

"Father had him fired," Grant admits. "He moved to Paris and took that

job on a permanent basis, trust me. He was fired and sent back to Ireland. The girlfriend dumped him soon after. I'm sure he views all the Lancasters as the ones who destroyed his life."

"What the hell? Who the fuck is this guy? And why did your father have him fired?" I feel like I'm completely in the dark. "Did Charlotte know about this?"

Grant shrugs. "Not sure. And our father had him fired because he ruined Charlotte's reputation. He might not think—much of our sister, but he would never allow someone to tarnish her image without punishment."

Unbelievable. No wonder the guy is unhinged. To McKidnapper, she looks like the one who ruined his life completely, even if she's not solely responsible.

"Well damn. I had no idea." Finn shrugs, sweeping his assessing gaze around the room. "Want my opinion? Y'all need to focus. We put all four of our heads together, we're definitely going to find her."

So easy for him to say.

"Finn, you have no idea what you're talking about," Grant says, his tone dismissive. Damn, he gives me serious Winston vibes. "We should call the police. I know a few detectives, have some connections. I could talk to them. Make sure they'd be discreet."

"No way," Winston says.

"Not yet," I agree, glancing over at Winston. "Myron send you that address?"

Winston nods.

I stand up taller, eager to get moving and make this happen. "Let's go."

"What the hell? Are you planning to storm Bishop's Landing?" Grant asks incredulously.

"Well... yeah." Of course. My wife is in danger. I have to find her.

And beg for her forgiveness after treating her so terribly. I didn't trust her when I should've, and that's on me.

Finn's gaze finds mine. "I'm down."

A weary sigh leaves Grant and he slowly shakes his head. "Fine. Let's go."



CHAPTER FIVE

Charlotte

SEAMUS SCREAMS THE moment the soup hits his face and I bolt past him, the cheap folding chair falling backwards with a clatter. The bowl lands on the floor with a loud thump, not even cracking and I kick it aside as I make my way toward the door.

It feels like everything is happening in slow motion. The soup flying. Me shooting out of the chair. The door that looked so close only a few seconds before now seems far away. As if I'll never get close enough to it in time.

“You fucking bitch!” he howls, as I dodge past him. He covers his face that's dripping with soup with his hands, as if he's trying to wipe it off. “Jesus Christ!”

My hands tremble as I quickly undo the locks. I've got the door open in seconds, slipping out of the apartment and running down the narrow hall, past the other closed doors with numbers on them. It looks like your average apartment building, the interior sparse and gloomy, though it doesn't necessarily look as old as I originally thought. Just extremely bland.

And cold. So, so cold.

I spot a door at the end of the hall with a sign indicating it's the stairwell and I push my way through it, running down the stairs so fast I almost trip over my own feet. My breaths are coming in ragged spurts to the point that I'm panting. My head throbs in time with my heart rate and I shake it once, trying to clear it.

I'm thirsty. Confused. Scared. Adrenaline pumps through my veins, spurring me on and when I reach the ground floor, there's a door that leads outside. I push through it, into the cooling fall night but I don't slow down.

There's no choice. I have to keep running.

I move through the parking lot and I spot the car Seamus drove in one of the spots. I keep running, grateful I wore my sweats today. Talk about easy movement. To anyone else I look like a woman out for a jog on a pleasant autumn evening.

Not a woman on a desperate run for her life.

Slowing down only a little, I dare to glance over my shoulder, relieved to see no one is there. No Seamus chasing after me. Gaining on me.

Maybe the soup burned his stupid handsome face. It was pretty damn hot. Or maybe it got into his eyes and he's having a hard time seeing. Looks like it was enough of a distraction to completely stall him which totally works in my favor.

This doesn't mean I'm in the clear yet though. I can't stop running or slow down. So I don't. I keep going and going, until I'm in a more populated area, though everywhere I look is unfamiliar. There's a café that appears closed. A couple of clothing shops that are closed as well. A deli is on one side of the street, and a convenience store on the other and when I glance through the convenience store's glass door, and I don't know why, but an uneasy feeling slips down my spine. The man standing behind the counter working the register catches my gaze, flashing me a leering smile.

I go with the deli instead.

The moment I walk in, I'm greeted with the scent of warm, fresh baking bread filling the air. A bell rings as the door slams shut and eighties hair metal plays somewhere on hidden speakers. There's a glass case full of various meats. An old-fashioned looking cash register sits on the counter and there are small tables and chairs filling the dining space, but no one sitting in them.

There doesn't seem to be anyone around at all.

I dart out of the way of the front glass door and stand next to a display rack full of a variety of chips, trying to take deep, cleansing breaths. My heart rate slowly settles back down to normal and I start pacing back and forth, waiting for someone to appear.

"Oh."

I turn at the sound of the deep gravelly voice, fear wrapping around my throat and choking me into silence.

There's a short, older man standing behind the counter, his thick brows

shooting up when he spots me. “I didn’t hear you come in. Are you wanting to place an order, honey?”

“Um.” My stomach chooses that moment to growl, but I have no money. No phone. No nothing. “I was wondering if I could—borrow your phone for a moment?”

He studies me, his dark brown eyes contemplating me carefully, as if he’s not sure what to think. I must look a mess. I’m frazzled and I run a shaky hand through my hair, smoothing it away from my face.

“Don’t you have one of those fancy smartphones?” He waves a hand at me.

“I—I lost it.” I smile but it feels false so I let it fade. “Please, sir. I need to make an important call. It’s an emergency.”

He makes a harrumphing noise. “I don’t give this sort of thing away for free, young lady. You kids are always coming in here and trying to take advantage of an old man. I don’t like it.”

The man is about to turn away and return to the back of the deli when I make a desperate sound. A cross between a yelp and a moan. He pauses, glancing at me over his shoulder and I hold up my left hand, showing him the giant diamond on my finger.

“Can I give you this as collateral? I just need to make one phone call, mister. Maybe two, if I can’t get ahold of them. That’s it. That’s all I want.” If he’ll let me hide out in here, I’ll do that too. It feels safe. Warm and inviting. I don’t want to go back outside. To be out there all alone leaves me completely vulnerable.

His eyes widen as I pull the diamond ring off my finger and hold it out toward him, my hand shaking. Slowly he turns to face me once again, a frown marring his weathered face. “I don’t want your ring, young lady.”

“Just—take it. Hold onto it while I make the call. Please, let me use your phone. Please.” I’m begging, but I don’t even care. I need that damn phone.

A sigh leaves him and he shakes his head. “Come on back here. The phone is hanging on the wall.” He waves at a very old looking phone and I push through the swinging half-door, offering my ring to him once again when I pause in front of the phone.

“Take this,” I tell him, my stomach growling again.

Loudly.

The man frowns. “You’re hungry.”

“I need to make a call first.”

“I’ll feed you. Make you a sandwich.” He seems glad to have something to do as he starts bustling about. “What sort of meat you want?”

“Turkey?” My stomach cramps so hard it hurts and I shove my wedding ring back on my finger. “Swiss cheese?”

He nods, pulling the glass door back and reaching into the display case. “I’ll make you a nice sandwich. You make your call. And I’m glad you put that ring back on your finger. I don’t need it.”

Relief makes my tense shoulders ease and I grab the phone, staring at the numbers for a moment, the dial tone droning in my ear.

Smartphones are amazing. Every little thing you could ever need is pretty much at your fingertips. But being so reliant on them means you don’t remember anyone’s number. Like my husband’s.

Frustration rippling through me, I dial the first number that comes to my mind. One of the very few I have memorized.

My brother Finn’s number.

He of course lets it go to voicemail because with my current luck, that’s just the way things work out. I’m watching the deli owner make me a sandwich, piling it high with turkey meat, swiss cheese and lettuce and onions and I settle the phone back into its cradle, the hunger hitting me so hard I swear I sway on my feet for a moment.

“You didn’t get through?” He glances over his shoulder, his bushy brows drawing together in concern. “You don’t look so good.”

“I’ll try again in a minute.” I offer him a faint smile, blinking hard when my vision goes blurry.

Right before it goes black.



“OH LOOK! SHE’S awake!”

An unfamiliar female voice keeps shouting and it makes me not want to wake up at all. Instead, I keep my eyes tightly closed, withholding the groan that wants to escape when someone jostles my body, searing pain crossing across the back of my head.

I’m on the floor, and I think I might’ve passed out? The deli was so warm, and I’m still inside—the unmistakable scent of baking bread still

lingers in the air—and I recognize the male voice speaking as who I assumed is the owner.

“Don’t move her, Martha. She took a hard fall.” His tone is chastising and the woman just makes a tsking noise at him in return.

“We can’t let her lay on the floor forever, Arthur. Customers will be here soon!”

I’m guessing Martha is his wife. And the fact that she’s more concerned over customers seeing me passed out on the floor versus my actual well-being is telling.

I don’t think she’s thrilled to find me like this.

I carefully crack open my eyes to find two faces hovered above me. The deli owner’s—Arthur. And a woman with dyed black hair and highly arched, matching black eyebrows drawn above her eyes. She leans back when our gazes meet, giving me breathing room.

“You okay, hon?” Her voice is gentle, and maybe I judged her too harshly.

It actually wouldn’t be good for business, to have a strange woman sprawled across the floor while people tried to order their sandwiches.

When I realize they’re waiting for my answer, I shrug one shoulder. “My head hurts.”

“You hit the floor pretty hard,” Arthur says. “You want help sitting up?”

I nod and he takes my hand, his weathered fingers curling around mine as he gently tugs me into the sitting position. I move slowly, reaching behind me to touch at my head, rubbing the spot where I feel a bump. “How long have I been out?”

“Only a couple of minutes, tops,” Martha says, her gaze going to Arthur’s. “Tell her what you did.”

My gaze switches between the both of them, curious. “What did you do, Arthur?”

He smiles at me. “Martha walked in right when you dropped and I went to the phone and hit the redial button.”

“Multiple times,” Martha adds.

“And the man you tried to call answered.”

Relief floods me and I almost slump back onto the floor again. “What did you tell him?”

“That I had a pretty blonde woman in a black sweat outfit passed out on

my deli floor.” His smile is small. “He cursed up a storm.”

“He’s my brother,” I admit, thinking that sounds just like Finn. They all curse when they’re mad. Happy. Whatever. “His number is the only one I could remember.”

“He said they would be here right away, once I gave them my address,” Arthur says.

They. I wonder if he’s with Perry. Does my husband even care that I went missing? He was supposed to come home early so I could make him ‘dinner,’ and instead I’m in a deli in Bishop’s Landing and oh my God...

“Have you ever seen a dark-haired man with an Irish accent come in here?” I ask Arthur.

“No, not that I can recall.” He sends a look to his wife, and I’m sure he must think I’m out of it for asking that. “Come on. Let’s get you on your feet.”

They stand on either side of me and haul me up to my feet and the moment I don’t need them holding me upright, Martha takes off toward the back.

“Getting you some aspirin, young lady! For that knockin’ your noggin took!” She pushes her way through the door that separates the deli from the actual kitchen, disappearing from view.

“Did my brother say when he would be here?” I ask Arthur, hating how anxious I suddenly feel. My gaze keeps drifting toward the deli entrance, worried that Seamus could walk in at any moment. He could easily overtake Arthur. And if he came with his gun, forget it.

“He said he was on his way.” Arthur takes a step closer, his voice lowering. “Are you okay? Is someone trying to—harm you?”

I stare into his kind brown eyes, so grateful I chose the deli over the convenience store across the street. “Can I hide out in the back until my brother shows up?”

“Of course you can.” I love that Arthur doesn’t ask me any questions. Just automatically says yes. “And you can eat your sandwich back there too.”

I’m so overwhelmed with gratitude I wrap him up in a bear hug, startling him. “Thank you,” I say, my voice muffled against his shoulder. “For helping me.”

He gives me a tentative pat on the back. “Come on. Let’s get you that sandwich.”



CHAPTER SIX

Perry

FINN'S PHONE KEEPS ringing.

And he keeps ignoring it, which annoys the hell out of me.
All of us really.

We got hung up at Winston's because Myron called right before we were supposed to leave, filling my brother in with all sorts of details. Which leaves me still pacing, my brain coming up with all sorts of ideas as to where Charlotte could be. I don't know why we're not already in a car and headed for Bishop's Landing.

We're wasting time. We need to get the fuck out of here.

Now.

For once in my life, I actually want to be in Bishop's Landing. I want to be on the streets, searching for her. For him. If I find him, he's dead.

It's that simple.

And that complicated too.

"Answer your goddamn phone," Grant demands after about the fifth call in a row, testy as usual.

At least I know the dude doesn't have a personal vendetta against me. He's that rude to everyone in his life, even his brother.

"It's just some random number I don't recognize," Finn says dismissively, not even glancing at his ringing phone.

"You should check," I say. They both swivel their heads in my direction in time with the last ring filling the air. "Considering the current circumstances, we should take all of our calls, random numbers or not."

"He has a point," Grant says, his tone reluctant.

I raise my brows, glancing over at Winston who has just entered the room, his expression grim. The moment he's about to open his mouth and say something, his phone rings again. Irritated, he glances at the screen. "It's Myron again. Be right back," he says, exiting the room.

Finn makes a face at my suggestion and as if on cue, his phone rings in his hand. He answers it immediately. "What."

I can hear a man's deep voice speaking and everything inside of me grows tight. Tighter. I start pacing the room, drawing closer and closer to Finn, but I can't hear exactly what the man is saying.

"What is she wearing?" Finn lifts his gaze to mine and I see it. I know who he's talking about.

Charlotte.

"Yeah. Okay. No, I appreciate you letting us know. I'm glad she's all right. Thank you for calling. We're on our way." Finn ends the call, his gaze sweeping over us. "That was Arthur Patroli. I think he has Charlotte."

"Who the hell is Arthur Patroli?" I demand. "And why does he have my wife?"

"I don't know. His explanation was kind of garbled. Said something about owning a deli in downtown Bishop's Landing and she walked into his restaurant. Said she tried to call my number right before she fainted."

I'm bolting for the door with no plan. I just know I need to go to her. Now. "Let's go get her."

"We'll follow you in a separate car," Grant says, heading straight for me. "Better to make a big presence when we arrive."

"Good call." Can't believe I just agreed with Grant Lancaster.

But I can't ponder on that. My wife has fainted in a deli somewhere in Bishop's Landing and I'm going to her. She needs me.

Winston chooses that moment to appear, a frown on his face. "Where are you fucks going now?"

"A man just called me and said a beautiful blonde woman wearing black sweats walked into his deli and asked to use his phone before she fainted," Finn explains.

"Why did he call you?" My brother's frown deepens.

"My number is the one she dialed. Maybe she has it memorized. I'd guess she doesn't have her phone on her." Finn shrugs.

"She left it at our apartment," I remind them.

“Not like he’d let her have her phone,” Winston adds.

“We’re going to the deli to get her,” I tell my brother. “She’s in Bishop’s Landing.”

“Makes sense,” Winston murmurs with a nod. “Since that’s where *he* is.”

“They’re taking their own car.” I wave a hand toward Charlotte’s brothers. “You want to ride with me?”

“I’ll stay here. Keep in touch with Myron. Let Mother know what’s going on. She keeps texting me. You know she’ll say the Morellis are involved, with Charlotte being in Bishop’s Landing.”

“Maybe she’s right.” I shrug, not really caring anymore.

“I don’t think she is. But we can discuss that another time.” Winston’s gaze meets mine and he inclines his head. “Go get your girl. And if Myron gives me any information in regards to Seamus’s location, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks, Winny. For all of your help.” Anticipation buzzes through my veins. I need to get out of here. I’m too eager to get to my wife and pull her into my arms. And never let her go.

Never let her out of my damn sight again.

I trust no one. Not even her brothers. The only way I’ll feel Charlotte is safe is if she’s with me.

“You okay to drive?” Grant asks me as we take the elevator to the parking garage. “I hear you can be—reckless behind the wheel.”

Grimacing, I avert my head so he can’t see my expression. Great. He probably did a little investigation into my background and learned of my street racing days. “That was a long time ago.”

“Just don’t do anything stupid,” Grant mutters.

I turn on him, hating how he talks to me like I’m a little kid. Reminds me of how Winston used to treat me—like I was a complete idiot who could barely function, which back then, was sort of the truth.

“You’ve got that oldest brother, complete asshole thing down pat, don’t you?” I taunt.

Finn makes an *ooooh* noise when Grant turns on me, his expression cold as ice. “What the hell did you just say to me?”

“You keep telling me what to do like you control me, when you don’t. I know how to drive. And I know how to treat Charlotte. She’s my wife. And right now, her safety is the most important thing to me. So don’t worry. I

won't drive recklessly, or do anything stupid. Not when my wife is in the car. Understood?"

Grant doesn't look away, and neither do I. The elevator comes to a stop, the doors sliding open revealing the parking garage and still neither of us move. Finn shoves into Grant first, causing him to look away from me, and I can't help the triumph slipping through me.

"You guys are ridiculous," Finn mutters as we split off in the parking garage. "See ya at the deli," he calls to me. "Already sent you the address."

My phone buzzes in my pocket, right on cue.

I say nothing. Just jog toward my Chevelle and hop into the driver's seat, pleased the engine starts with a satisfying roar. I'm guessing Grant drives a Mercedes. Something sleek and expensive and with a powerful engine. I'm sure he drives fast and takes corners with a quick flick of his wrist.

I do that too, but with my powerful V8 and loud muffler—and I can't forget the flashy orange paint. I not only want everyone to see me, I want them to hear me coming too.

Can't sneak up in the Chevelle, oh no. And that's okay. I want my wife to know I'm coming to her rescue. I want her to hear my engine and know it's me. Hell, I'd love it if the sound of my car pulling up to the curb made her pussy wet.

As long as that pussy gets wet for no one else but me, we're good.

◇ ◇ ◇

THE DRIVE TO Bishop's Landing takes way too damn long and I pulled ahead of the Lancasters in Grant's BMW—damn it I was close with my guess—long ago, when we were still in the city.

God knows where they're at now.

By the time I'm cruising the familiar streets, rain has started to fall. Within minutes, I'm pulling up to the curb in front of the deli, putting the car into park and shutting off the ignition, sitting there with my thoughts for a moment while I listen to the engine tick.

She might not be happy to see me, and I'm trying to prepare myself to be cool with it. Which is fine, I get it. We're not that close.

Though I thought we were getting closer...

Taking a deep breath, I climb out of the car and lock the door. Run a hand through my hair and tell myself not to appear too anxious.

Then I sprint toward the entrance and bust through the door as if I have no control over myself.

My gaze is everywhere, sweeping the interior of the small, dark deli. There's music playing—pretty sure it's Frank Sinatra—and there's a pair of older couples sitting at a table near the back, chatting while clutching half-eaten sandwiches in their hands. I search for the familiar blonde head, worry making my heart race when I don't spot her.

“Are you looking for someone?”

I turn to find a short, older man with a paunch and the thickest eyebrows I've ever seen standing behind the register, an inquisitive expression on his weathered face.

“I'm looking for my wife.” I take a step toward the counter, tempted to grab the old man by the front of his shirt and give him a shake. Demand to know where Charlotte is.

But I don't. I have more restraint than that, and from what I understand, this guy helped my wife and I'm forever grateful for that. Thank God Grant isn't here yet. He's so unpredictable I'm afraid he'd knock this poor old man out before he could even give us any solid answers.

The man's gaze turns skeptical. “What's your name?”

“Perry.”

His gaze narrows. “That's not her brother's name.”

“Like I just said, I'm not her brother.” I grip the edge of the counter, fighting the frustration rippling through me. “I'm her goddamn husband.”

The old man throws his head back and laughs while I stand there fuming.

“Ah, to be young again. Full of so much emotion all the time. Follow me. She's back here.” He waves a hand.

I follow him through a swinging door and into the back of the deli, my entire body becoming electrified. I know it's because I'm close to Charlotte. This is what happens to me every time we're in the same room, sharing the same air.

“Here she is,” the man says once we round a corner, a small table coming into view. An older woman with pitch black hair is sitting next to my blonde, beautiful wife. “Charlotte, you have a visitor.”

Charlotte lifts her head, her blue eyes meeting mine and she starts toward

me...

And then hesitates.

Holy shit. Why did she just do that? Is she mad at me? Pissed I only showed up now? What if she actually wanted to be with—

“I didn’t think you’d actually come for me,” she whispers, her eyes welling with unshed tears.

Her words, her sad voice, carve my heart into tiny pieces. My thoughts from only a moment ago disintegrate.

“I will always come for you,” I tell her fiercely, like a promise.

She’s on her feet in moments, throwing herself at me, her arms winding around my middle. She presses her face against my chest, her voice so muffled I can’t understand what she’s saying and I reach for her. Cupping her face with both of my hands, I tilt her head back so I can stare into her eyes.

Eyes that are nearly overflowing with tears.

As I watch her, I realize I’m at a complete loss for words, which never happens.

Ever.

Instead of saying something stupid or obvious, I go on pure instinct and lower my head, brushing her trembling lips with mine. The kiss is soft and sweet, and I try to silently communicate with her as I kiss her over and over again.

I missed you.

You scared me.

You belong to me.

She breaks away from me first, resting her hands on my chest, the tears falling down her cheeks. I gently brush them away with my thumbs before I haul her in close, curling one hand around the back of her head as I hold her to me. I close my eyes for a moment, trying to contain the swirl of emotions rising inside of me.

This girl... she’s become my everything. I can’t lose her again.

I can’t.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Charlotte

THE WORRY ON my husband's face when he first spotted me was immediately replaced with relief and I felt the same.

Exactly the same.

I knew when Arthur mentioned that my brother said "they" would be here soon that the possibility Finn would be with Perry was high. At least, I was hoping that would be the case. And for whatever reason my husband actually showed up first, my brothers nowhere in sight, which is probably a good thing.

It allows me this quiet moment with Perry first. My utter and complete relief at seeing him. Feeling his strong arms come around me, the solid weight of his body pressed to mine. His warm, soft lips finding mine, the utter relief I felt in his kiss. Since escaping Seamus, I never truly felt safe until Perry appeared and now I know everything's going to be all right.

Though he hasn't really said anything to me yet, which is odd. Perry is a talker.

Silence isn't his thing.

"We'll leave you two alone," Arthur says.

I lift my head to watch him and Martha exit the back room, and I'm grateful for the privacy. Maybe that's why Perry hasn't spoken yet. Maybe he wanted to keep whatever he has to say between us and no one else.

Once Arthur and Martha are gone though, my husband still remains quiet. I press my head against his chest once more, sniffing as I concentrate on the rapid pounding of his heart beneath my ear. I'm hyperaware of his hard, lean body. His fingers in my hair. His other hand resting on my hip. He's holding

me carefully, as if I'm fragile. Made of glass. I tighten my arms around his middle, wishing I could burrow myself into his body and never let go.

A ragged exhale leaves him and I wait for the words, but still they don't come. Why won't he talk to me? I need his reassurance. His care. Even possibly his...love.

Can he give that to me freely? Will he ever?

Suddenly all hell breaks loose.

"What the hell? Charlotte!"

We spring away from each other as my older brothers push their way into the back room, their matching expressions full of a mixture of rage and relief when they spot me. They both shove past Perry, Grant wrapping me up in a bear hug first, followed immediately by Finn.

I let them embrace me, in absolute shock. I think this is the most affection my brothers have shown me ever in my life.

"What happened to you? How did you get away from him? Did you call the cops just now? Please tell me you didn't call the cops." This is all from Grant, who's standing directly in front of me with his hands on his hips and a snarl on his face.

"Leave her alone," Perry snaps as he grabs my hand and pulls me back to his side. He slips his arm around my waist and holds me close. "She's been through enough. When she's ready to talk, she'll talk."

Grant's expression darkens. "We don't have time to waste. We need to find this asshole, and she can lead us back to him."

"Why does it matter if she called the cops or not?" asks Finn, looking confused. "I know Winston doesn't want us to, but shouldn't we get them in on this and let them handle it?"

"No," Grant and Perry both answer at the same time.

I rest my hand on my husband's chest, surprised he'd be in agreement with Grant. "Why not?"

"We'll handle this on our own," Perry bites out and despite everything that just happened to me, the traumatic afternoon and evening I've had with someone I used to think I loved, a chill still races down my spine at the dark tone in my husband's voice.

Handling this on our own could mean a myriad of things, and not a one of them good.

"It might be better to get the police involved," I tell him, my voice low.

“We should call them.”

His voice is flat. “No.”

Frustration ripples through my blood. He won’t even listen to me, and I’m the one who was kidnapped.

He’s just like all the men in my life. Treating me like a useless doll. Demanding I do this or that. Never allowing me to have a choice.

“Let’s get her home,” Finn suggests, changing the subject.

Grant shakes his head, his gaze finding mine. “Let’s try and figure out where that asshole is. Can you tell us what happened?”

Taking a deep breath, I give them a brief description of my escape. How I took advantage of the situation and flung soup in Seamus’s face, then ran out of the apartment and kept running until I arrived at the deli.

“Holy hell, Charlotte, really? You did all that?” I turn to look at Perry, noting the admiration in his expression. He reaches out, his fingers streaking across my cheek. “You’re so strong.”

“I didn’t think anyone was looking for me,” I admit.

His hand drops, the anguish on his face obvious and I immediately feel terrible for saying such a terrible thing, but...

It’s the truth.

“You think you could identify the apartment building you left?” Grant asks me.

“I can try.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t push her right—” Perry starts but Grant quiets him with a look.

“It’s now or never and you know it.” My brother’s voice is low and dark. Ominous.

Perry nods, glancing down at me. “Do you want to go look?”

“Not in your car,” Grant says, shaking his head. “That monstrosity is too loud.”

I almost want to laugh because my brother is right. I know Perry loves his Chevelle, but it is pretty loud.

“We can all go in the BMW,” Finn suggests, ever the peacemaker. He loves being a hard-ass most of the time, but I’ve noticed he tries to soften Grant up.

Much like Perry does for Winston.

I’m surprised he isn’t here. Glad for it though—all of that *alpha man*, I’m

in charge attitude is bad enough with the three men currently surrounding me. Winston would send it completely over the top.

“Come on.” Perry removes his arm from me but immediately takes my hand. “Let’s go.”

Within minutes we’re in Grant’s car, me sitting in the passenger seat as my brother drives slowly along the path I took. When he comes to a particular building with a parking lot next to it, I ask him to stop, staring at it in silence. My skin grows colder the longer I look at it, and I release a shaky breath.

“That’s it.” I point at the building. “That’s where I was.”

“Charlotte, damn girl. You ran like, a few miles,” Finn observes from the back seat. “At least five.”

I would’ve run twenty if I had to. I was desperate to get away from him.

Perry leans forward, until he’s in between the two front seats, his warm gaze on my face. “Should we go inside? Look for his apartment? You can say no, Charlotte.”

Grant literally growls, gripping the steering wheel.

“I—I don’t remember his apartment number,” I admit, which is true. Recalling I saw his vehicle when I left, I scan the parking lot, but the lot is mostly empty. “I don’t even think he’s there. His car was in the parking lot when I ran out, and now it’s gone.”

“What was he driving?”

“I think it was a Porsche. Definitely a small sports car. Black. A two-seater.”

Grant nods, his jaw tight as he watches the parking lot. “We could sit here and wait for him to return.”

“If he’s smart, he won’t return. Not tonight,” Perry points out.

“I just want to go home,” I admit, my voice small.

Grant glances over at me. “You want to go back to Mom and Dad’s?”

That sounds so downright... quaint, him calling our parents “Mom and Dad.” And it’s interesting that he assumes that’s what I consider home.

“No.” I shake my head, glancing over at Perry, who’s terribly close. His face is practically in mine and I can see the stubble lining his jaw. The exhaustion in his gaze. “I want to go back to our apartment.”

Perry nods once. “Let’s go back to the deli and I’ll take her home.”

“This is bullshit.” Grant slams his hand against the steering wheel,

making me jump. “Why would we leave now when we’re so close? You really just want him to get away with this shit, Constantine?”

“Fuck you,” Perry mutters. “The moment I see that McAsshole, you know I’ll kill him. And I’d rather take care of my traumatized wife tonight versus spending the rest of my life in jail for murder.”

My heart soars because I’m a complete idiot, but really. Hearing your husband admit he wants to kill the man who kidnapped you is actually kind of hot.

“Valid point,” Finn says, making Grant mumble a string of curse words before he shifts the car into drive and pulls back onto the road with screeching tires.

Men. They’re ridiculous.

We return to the deli and I go with Perry in his car. The drive back to our apartment is mostly silent. I’m not in the mood to talk and neither is Perry, I can tell. Though maybe it’s more that he doesn’t know what to say, versus wanting to say anything at all.

I get it. I do. What just happened to me, I can barely wrap my head around it. It’s almost as if it didn’t happen at all. The moment with Seamus in the lobby was just a dream.

More like a nightmare.

“Are you hungry?” he asks as we get closer to our apartment building.

I shake my head. “I had a sandwich at the deli.” I sit up straighter, realizing something. “I never said goodbye or thank you to Arthur and Martha.”

“Who?”

“The people who saved me.” My tone is solemn and I swallow down the burst of anxiety that flares. “We should go back.”

“You can call and thank them tomorrow,” Perry suggests.

“No. I need to tell them now. Turn around, Perry.”

“It’s late,” he says, his voice firm. “Tomorrow.”

“No!” I burst into tears, my entire body shaking. “Arthur saved my life. What if Seamus had found me after I ran away? What would he have done to me then?”

“Charlotte...”

“He’s completely unstable, you know.” I nod again and again when Perry glances over at me, trying to emphasize my point. “I don’t care what my

brothers say. We should call the police. They should be involved. We don't know what he might do to me. Or to you."

"Once they become involved, he'll be charged and most likely released. His family will find the best criminal lawyers in the state—because they have them all on retainer—and he'll get a slap on the wrist. They'll send his ass back to Ireland or wherever the hell he's from. The end. That's it." He sounds frustrated, and it hurts, knowing that what he says is most likely the truth.

A sob rises in my throat and I cover my face with my hands, crying noisily. I can barely handle the thought of what would've happened if Seamus caught me before I got to the deli. He would've been so furious, especially after I flung burning hot soup in his stupid face. The man claims he cares about me and wants me back, but he also said he wouldn't hesitate to end me if I did something to make him angry.

And I believed him. I still do.

"Babe." I drop my hands from my face and whip my head in Perry's direction, surprised he'd call me that. His expression is one of pure agony. "Please don't cry. You're breaking my heart right now."

I think of his tattoo. How he believed no one could break his heart. When he admitted to me he wasn't interested in love or any of the trappings that comes with it. Back then, I felt the same way.

The same exact way.

But I don't anymore. Not at all.

Thanks to my husband.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Perry

ALL I WANT to do is take care of Charlotte, but I don't know how.

Instead, I wait for her cues, watching her carefully as we walk through the lobby, her gaze zipping everywhere, as if she fully expects that jackass to jump out of a dark corner and snatch her from me. Thanks to the late hour, the lobby is quiet and empty. Only a single security guard is on shift and he nods at the both of us as we walk past the desk he sits behind, completely oblivious to the chaos from earlier.

Lucky guy.

The ride in the elevator is quiet. Charlotte's face is tear streaked, her eyes red and her cheeks blotchy and I'm tempted to yank her into my arms. Hold her close and whisper words of comfort to her, but I don't because what exactly would I say?

I'm at a complete loss, which is unlike me. I have something to say for every situation, but apparently, not this one.

We exit the elevator in silence and I unlock the apartment door. Doja comes running, a streak of furry black headed straight for her owner and Charlotte bends down to scoop the cat into her arms and hold her close.

"I missed you so much, Doja. I did," Charlotte coos. Doja's purring so loud she reminds me of the Chevelle's engine.

"Oh, Miss Charlotte. You're home."

We both glance up to find Jasper standing in the middle of the living room, his hand resting on his chest, over his heart. Looking ready to keel over in utter relief. They lock eyes and Charlotte bursts into tears, scurrying over

to him so he can hug both her and Doja close, offering comfort in murmured words and fatherly squeezes.

I watch them, still at a loss, envious of the easy relationship they share, which is ridiculous on my part. He's her butler and familiar to her, but he's also more than that. He's the parental figure she never really got from her actual father growing up. Jasper is the one man she could count on. The one who took care of her from a young age. Who watched over her and made sure she was always safe.

I bet he hates that she ran off to Paris and had such a disastrous experience with that McFucker. He might even hate that dude as much as I do. Jasper and I, we have a lot in common.

We always want the best for Charlotte.

"Shall I draw a bath for you?" Jasper asks her at one point, minutes after they've finally withdrawn from each other and she's still cuddling with Doja. I shake my head at him.

"I'll take care of her tonight. You go get some rest," I tell him.

Jasper sends me an appreciative look. "Thank you, sir, for finding her. I was worried. And guilt-ridden."

"Oh Jasper." Charlotte wraps him up in another hug, holding him close with Doja wedged between them before she releases him. "Don't feel guilty. I was the dumb one who went down to meet Seamus without my phone."

I visibly flinch at her saying his name out loud and it's as if she realizes it a second too late, her guilty glance flitting to mine before she looks away.

"And without me," Jasper reminds her.

That old softy would've tipped right over the moment McFartlick grabbed Charlotte but I just smile and humor him. I don't want him feeling guilty. It's not his fault Charlotte was abducted, even though he blames himself.

I take a lot of that blame too. I should've come home early. Why did I think Jasper could protect her? He's done a pretty solid job so far, but she's never dealt with a serious threat before.

And that asshole who used and abused her and fucking abducted her is a serious damn threat.

The moment Jasper leaves the room, Charlotte turns to face me, a little frown on her pretty face. "He feels guilty."

"He's felt guilty since the moment he called me and told me you were

gone,” I admit.

Her frown deepens. “He was the first one to tell you what happened?”

“Actually no. Your uh, ex, sent me text messages with photos when I was still at the office.” I grimace just remembering those photos, tamping down the fury that wants to rise.

I’m not going to turn into a raging dick. Not in front of Charlotte, at least. She needs to be taken care of. And I need to be calm for her. She’s been through enough.

“Oh right.” Her gaze goes distant for a moment, as if she’s remembering the moment and I wish I could wipe her brain of the memory. “The photos. You know they were just for show.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“He kept me tied up in an empty room, but the tape over my mouth was really only for those photos. I had no idea who he was sending them to. I figured you and maybe my parents.”

Ignoring what she said about being tied up in an empty room, I admit, “Your parents don’t know.”

“About what happened to me?”

I slowly shake my head.

“Oh.” She drops her gaze, her attention just for Doja, who suddenly starts squirming in her arms. She lets the cat go, and Doja darts off, hiding under the coffee table. “They probably wouldn’t have cared anyway.”

Her softly spoken words grip my heart in a stranglehold. It kills me how she believes her family doesn’t care about her. And maybe she’s right, though I witnessed how quickly Finn and Grant went into action when they found out their sister had been abducted. If they didn’t care, they wouldn’t have done anything.

They do care. I’m sure her mother does too. We didn’t tell her because we didn’t want to worry her.

“Did you really think I wasn’t going to look for you? That I wouldn’t move heaven and earth to find you?”

She shrugs one shoulder, her head still bent. “I didn’t know what to think. Our relationship hasn’t always been... stable.”

I’m incredulous—but not. She’s right. Our relationship has been unstable from the start, and I didn’t help matters when I didn’t trust her.

Well, I trust her now, and I need to make all of my wrongs right. I need

her forgiveness.

I just need Charlotte.

“We made that call, Charlotte, your brothers and I, not to tell your parents. We were trying to keep everything quiet. The less people that knew, the better. And none of us wanted to get the police involved either, which concerned Grant,” I explain.

And I definitely don’t want her feeling unloved. What happened to her has nothing to do with her parents.

“I still think the police should be involved. They should know a deranged man is on the loose,” she says. “He’s dangerous, Perry.”

I’m not worried about that asshole. Not at the moment. All I can think about is this woman. My wife.

“Your brothers and I will take care of it. And Winston. Hell, I should call him. Let him know I got you home and you’re safe.”

“Oh. Okay. I’ll go take a bath while you call him.” She starts for her bedroom and I stop her, my fingers curling around her arm, careful to keep my touch gentle, a thought occurring to me.

Did that asshole hurt her? Mark her? *Bruise* her? If there is one tiny scratch on her, I’m going to kill him. I’ll tear him apart with my bare hands.

“I’ll start your bath for you,” I offer, my voice low.

She visibly swallows. “Okay. I’d like that.”

I go into her bathroom and start the water, letting it run until it’s hot before I push the plug in and the tub starts to fill. My wife likes her baths steaming hot. Her skin is always flushed red when she gets out of the tub and sometimes, she soaks in there for so long, I worry she’s fallen asleep.

Sitting on the tub’s ledge, I add some fragrant bath oil and watch it bubble when the streaming water hits it. I’m feeling contemplative. Thankful the day ended like it has.

So damn thankful.

She enters the bathroom a few minutes later, clad in a pale pink terry cloth robe, her feet bare and her blonde hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun. She smiles when our gazes catch, and she waves a hand toward the filling tub.

“I can take over from here,” she offers, but I don’t say anything at first. I don’t move a muscle. I’m suddenly tense and she can sense it. “What’s wrong?”

I swallow hard, my throat thick with emotion. “Did he hurt you?”

Charlotte frowns, reaching for the cloth belt of her robe. “What do you mean?”

“*Him*. That—motherfucker.” It’s difficult to say his name out loud. To acknowledge his existence. “Did. He. *Hurt*. You?” I nod toward her robe. “Take it off.”

Her fingers curl around the ends of the belt. “Perry—”

I interrupt her. “Do it, Charlotte. I need to see you.”

Lifting her chin, she undoes the belt, pushing the robe away and revealing her naked body. My gaze roams, not sure where to settle first. Drinking in all that pale, creamy skin. So far, so good. She’s unmarked.

She shrugs the robe off so it falls to the floor and that’s when I see it. The bruises. Three of them on her upper right arm, in the shape of fingers. Where he gripped her. Forced her out of the lobby maybe. Or when he dragged her into his shitty apartment. Because come on, it can’t be that great, the apartment he held her captive in.

Know what else isn’t great? The fact that this asshole hurt my wife. Bruised her. He’s going to pay.

And it won’t be pretty.

“Come here,” I demand and she glides toward the tub, stopping directly in front of me. “He marked you.”

Blinking at me in surprise, she glances down at her body. “Where?”

I rise to my feet, towering over her, my fingers drifting across her upper arm where those fucking bruises are. “Here.”

She tilts her head toward her arm, watching me trace each bruise, the fury rising within me about to burst through. I swallow it down, my control on my anger hanging on by a thread. When I press a little harder, she hisses in a breath, and it kills me that I hurt her. “I’m going to kill him.”

Her head lifts, her eyes wide with fear. “Don’t say that. Please. Like I said earlier, we need to let the authorities handle this.”

“Nothing will happen to him if they get involved, Charlotte.” I shake my head, hating how bitter I sound. “Don’t bother arguing with me either, because you know it’s true.”

She rests her hands on my shoulders, her fingers squeezing, easing some of the tension there. “You’re tense.”

“No shit,” I mutter, then immediately shake my head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t

mean to snap at you.”

I’m sorry for a lot of other things. I feel like I let this woman down, and I hate that. I hate myself for not being there for her enough.

She’s mine to protect. Mine to watch over and care about. I need to get over my issues and focus on her. Fuck everything else.

Charlotte runs her hands down the front of my chest, and my body automatically responds, my skin growing warm. My muscles getting tight. “I don’t want to talk about him anymore.”

I watch her, overwhelmed with emotion for this woman. How she’s trying to ease my anger when she’s the one who was abducted by a crazed asshole. Reaching out, I rest my hands on her hips, caressing her silky-smooth skin. “You’re right. I don’t want to talk about him either. It’s a waste of breath.”

She nods, her gaze on my chest. “I’m so glad I’m home.”

My heart expands at her calling our place home. “I’m glad you’re home too. I missed you. Worried about you.” I lean in close, pressing my lips to her temple, breathing her in. Savoring the feeling of her in my arms. She scoots closer, resting her head on my chest for the briefest moment before she lifts away.

Her smile is small and she reaches for the loosened tie still around my neck. I never did change out of my suit. “Take a bath with me.”

I frown, glancing over at the mostly full tub. “We won’t both fit.”

“Yes, we will.” Her gaze is imploring. Nothing but big blue eyes eating me up, working her magic on me. “Please. I need you, Perry.”

How can I resist her when she says she needs me?

I can’t.

Within seconds, I’ve shed my clothes and she’s ordering me to step into the bath first. I lean against the back of the tub, spreading my legs so I can accommodate her and then she’s joining me, nestling her naked body flush against mine, her back to my front, her ass nudging against my cock, which is already at half-mast.

Yeah. Can’t think about doing anything like that tonight. She’s exhausted and traumatized and the last thing she’ll want is to have sex with her husband, even though I am her knight in shining armor.

Though maybe I’m not. Maybe I let her down and she’s disappointed I didn’t find her right away...

Charlotte reaches forward and turns off the water, a steady drip still

falling from the faucet as she leans back into me, her wiggling ass doing things to me that I try not to focus on.

“See? We fit.” Her tone is smug, with a hint of tiredness as she slowly rests her weight against me. “I knew we would.”

I press my legs inward so I’m completely surrounding her. My own little captive who can’t escape from my grip. “You scared the hell out of me, wife.”

I angle my head, just in time to witness her eyes falling shut, a soft sigh leaving her. “I’m sorry. I was stupid.”

Definitely wouldn’t call her stupid. Just—careless. Not that I would say it out loud.

“Don’t apologize. Though you should’ve had your phone.” My tone is firm.

Another sigh leaves her. “I know.”

“You also should’ve let Jasper accompany you to the lobby.”

Her eyes open and she tilts her head back, her gaze meeting mine. “I know that too. But let’s be real—Jasper isn’t much of a threat.”

“He might’ve been enough to deter that sleazebag from trying to make off with you.” I squeeze her tighter, careful not to hit the spot where her bruises are. “I can’t lose you like that again, wife.”

The admission leaves me feeling vulnerable and I swallow down the rest of the words I want to say to her.

Like how much she means to me. More than anyone else in the world.

We’re quiet, the only sound is the sloshing water as our bodies move and shift. I’m getting hotter thanks to the steam wafting upwards from the water and I rest my cheek against her soft hair, closing my eyes.

“Why?”

Her softly spoken question has my eyes cracking open. “Why what?”

“Why can’t you lose me?”

Carefully I lift my head away from her and run my fingers through her hair, letting the strands fall onto her shoulders, the ends trailing in the warm water. “It killed me, knowing you were with him.”

“Why?”

Damn it, she’s going to make me say it, isn’t she?

“Because I care about you, Charlotte.”

She faces straight ahead, her back still to me, bending her knees and

wrapping her arms around them. “Nothing about our relationship is normal, Perry. There is no reason for you to care about me or worry when I’ve been abducted by my former—lover.”

I slip my arms around her waist and pull her into me, the water splashing, my mouth at her ear when I murmur, “Don’t call him that.”

“It’s true. Calling him my ex-boyfriend sounds so... wrong. We weren’t ever together, not like that.”

I cup her breasts, running my thumbs over her hardening nipples. “I thought for a while maybe you went with him—willingly.”

She slowly shakes her head. “I would never do that.”

I’m quiet for a moment, considering what she said—and how quickly she said it. “Why?”

“Because I said vows to you and promised to be a faithful wife. I’m a lot of things, but I’m not a liar, Perry. We’re married. I won’t leave you for someone else. I—I care about you, too.” She hesitates and I swear I can feel her sadness. “I hate that he had me first.”

“But I’ll keep you forever.” The words fall from my mouth without thought and for a split second, I regret them.

Then again, I don’t. I mean what I say. I will keep her forever. That asshole can’t have her back, despite his trying. He’ll never try again. I won’t give him the chance.

I’ll chop off his hands and his dick if I have to.

“You don’t mean it,” Charlotte says, her voice so soft, I almost don’t hear her. “You’ll get tired of me, just like everyone else.”

My wife is having a serious pity party tonight but I can’t blame her. She’s been through some shit. Shit I should’ve protected her from. I failed her. I fucked up.

And that kills me.

“I won’t get tired of you.” I nuzzle the side of her head, my mouth at her ear. “Who else tolerates the Chevelle like you do?”

I run my lips down the length of her neck, noting the hitch in her breath when I hit a particular spot. The way she melts against me, tilting her head to the side to give me better access.

“How many girls have you fucked in the Chevelle?” she asks out of nowhere.

Everything within me stills, my mouth still pressed upon her skin.

Slowly, carefully, I push her hair out of the way, pressing my forehead against the back of her head and taking a deep breath. “You really want to know?”

Her body stiffens and she leans her head down, as if she’s trying to get away from me. “Maybe?”

I rub her nipple with my thumb, wishing I could put my mouth on her. Taste her warm, wet skin. “The answer might blow your mind.”

She nudges against me, as if she’s trying to buck me off of her. “You’re rude.”

I clamp my arms around her middle so she can’t slip away from me. “It’s zero, Charlotte. I haven’t fucked anyone else in the Chevelle. Until you.”

My wife freezes, turning her head so she can meet my gaze. “You’re serious?”

“Why would I lie to you?” I drop a kiss on her lips, not wanting to push. She responds, leaning into me and I break away first, trying to keep my head. “There’s something here. Between us. You feel it too.”

Charlotte blinks at my honest response. “Do you want to know what I thought about when I was tied up in that room?”

My skin feels like it could burst into flames at her mentioning being tied up. Alone in an empty room, waiting for that McFuckface to come back and do whatever he wanted to her. She must’ve been so damn scared. “What?” I ask, my throat scratchy. “Doja?”

Her eyes fill with tears and a soft laugh leaves her. “You. If I was ever going to see you again. Feel your arms around me. See you smile. Hear your laughter.”

My chest aches at her confession. “I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

She turns so she’s facing forward once more, pressing up against me once again and I can sense the tension ease out of her once again. I rest my hands just below her breasts, my fingers stroking her silky smooth skin. “That won’t work, Perry. You have to go to work. Live your life.”

“You’ll come with me to Halcyon.”

“And what would I do there? Bring Doja? We could become the Halcyon mascots,” she suggests.

“No.” I shake my head. “Doja stays home with Jasper. You come to work with me. Or I could work from home. Winston will accuse me of jacking off

all day, but fuck it. I'm not leaving you alone."

Charlotte drifts her fingers across my forearms, her long nails making my skin tingle. "I love how protective you are."

Doesn't feel like I was protective enough, but I'm going to make up for it. Nothing will happen to this woman again. Not with me by her side.

"I protect what's mine." I slide my hand down her belly, until I'm cupping her pussy, noting the heat emanating from her. The wetness. And I'm not talking from the bath water either. "You belong to me. This pussy is fucking mine. Do you understand?"

She's trembling, and I feel like an asshole. Did I scare her with the over-the-top possessiveness? The woman makes me feel like this. Like beating my chest and smashing that other jerk's face in, all while grabbing Charlotte by the hair and grunting, "Mine."

If I ever told her that, she'd probably kick me in the dick. And I'd probably deserve it.

She's quiet for so long I have to say something.

"Charlotte—"

"I understand," she says, interrupting me. She lifts her hips, causing my hand to sink deeper. Until my fingers are pushing between her folds. Her unspoken agreement urges me on and I stroke her. Softly at first.

Carefully.

"I was so scared," she whispers as she throws her head back onto my shoulder, exposing her elegant neck. "I thought no one was going to save me."

"You saved you," I remind her, dipping my head so I can press my mouth to her throat, her pulse throbbing beneath my lips. "You're your own hero, wife."

She angles her head so her gaze meets mine, her eyes wide and so damn serious. "No one ever believes in me. Or thinks I'm capable of taking care of myself. Until you."

"You're the strongest woman I know." I kiss her, my lips lingering on hers.

"Even stronger than your mother?" She smiles and I pull away slightly so I can look at her.

I've barely thought about my mother since Charlotte and I got married, and that's a freaking first. We used to talk on the phone a couple times a

week. I'd accompany her to lunch or dinner, and I'd always return to the compound for the weekend.

Well, mostly.

Now it's as if I've forgotten all about her, and while that makes me feel like a shit son, I can't focus on that right now. Not when I have my naked wife wrapped up in my arms while sharing a bath with her.

"I stand by my original statement," I say solemnly.

Charlotte's eyes sparkle with unshed tears. "I don't feel very strong right now, when all I want is for you to take care of me."

"Strong women need to be taken care of too." I reach toward the edge of the tub, where various bottles of shampoo, conditioner and bodywash sit. "Want me to wash your hair?"

"You'd do that for me?" She sounds shocked.

I would do anything for her. Just to make her feel safe. Just to see her smile. But I can't say that.

Not yet.



CHAPTER NINE

Charlotte

AFTER I DOUSE my hair with water until it's completely soaked, Perry starts to shampoo it, his fingers massaging my scalp. I tilt my head back and close my eyes, the tension melting from my body as he keeps rubbing, the shampoo frothing up. His hands slip around my head, his thumbs sliding down the back of my neck, pressing deep, rotating circles and I can't help it.

A moan leaves me.

"Sexy little wife," he murmurs. "Likes having her head massaged."

"Maybe you should wash my hair all the time," I suggest, keeping my eyes closed. His touch is making my entire body tingle, which I didn't expect, considering what I've gone through the last few hours.

But facing something awful also reminds you how good your life is, and how you should hold it close.

He grabs the cup I found earlier and starts to rinse the shampoo out of my hair. "We could probably work out a deal if that means we take a shower together every night."

I like the idea of that—far too much. Perry and I naked in my big shower—or his, since they basically match. Our hands wandering as we soap up each other's bodies. Touching, stroking, driving each other out of our minds.

The low throb between my legs intensifies.

I'm still thinking about what he admitted to me earlier—how I'm the only one he's been with in the Chevelle. That surprised me. From what I've seen, Perry had a reputation with the ladies. But maybe none of them were special enough to take in the Chevelle.

Until me.

It's probably silly to put so much importance on that little fact, but I can't help it. That car means a lot to him. Like it's his precious baby.

Perhaps I mean a lot to him too.

Keeping my head back and my eyes tightly closed, I sit still as Perry continuously pours water over my head, getting all the shampoo out. "You need to condition it too," I tell him.

I can tell he's checking out the various bottles before finding the matching conditioner. "So demanding, wife."

"I think you like it."

"I like everything about you."

The promise in his voice almost convinces me he's telling the truth. Why do I find it so hard to accept compliments? To believe that someone could actually care for me for who I am? Seamus did a number on me.

My father did too. Even my mother.

I am a product of my environment, and in my environment growing up, I was neglected. For too long, I've let that define me. Being with Perry—marrying him—has changed that. I no longer want to be known as the pathetic little rich girl who stays holed up in her bedroom day and night, scared to live her life.

Life is meant to be lived. Perry has shown me that. Even Seamus has too, not that I would admit that particular fact to my husband. Fighting for my life and taking risks is not something I would've ever imagined happening to me.

I've done both in the short span of a few hours. Now that I'm home and safe, naked in a bathtub with my husband, I feel...

Alive.

Energized.

Perry conditions just the ends, as I requested, before rinsing my hair one more time. I enjoy the warm water spilling over my hair. Down my bare back. His touch is comforting. Arousing. I'm tired, yet I want more. More from Perry.

Everything he's willing to give me, I'll take. Greedily.

"Ready to get out?" he says once he's finished.

Opening my eyes, I turn my head so our gazes can meet, and I take him in. His hair is damp. I study his various tattoos, the one just above his heart. Without warning I turn, the water splashing as I readjust myself so I'm in

front of him, bending my knees and straddling his lap. His expression is surprised, but I can tell he likes me like this.

His rising erection is more than a hint that he approves.

I run my hands across his smooth broad shoulders and he tilts his head back, his lids heavy as he watches me. “What are you doing?”

“Thanking you.” Leaning down, I kiss him, my tongue finding his. After one stroke, I pull away, smiling down at him. “For taking care of me.”

Perry slowly shakes his head. “What else am I supposed to do? You’re my wife. I take care of what’s mine. I told you this.”

“I like knowing I’m yours,” I whisper, tilting my hips forward, letting my pussy brush against his lower stomach. His eyes widen the slightest bit when I make contact. “Even though it should make me mad.”

He reaches around me, his fingers tangling in my wet hair, tugging gently on the ends. “What should make you mad?”

“How possessive you are. Goes against every feminist thought I’ve ever had.” I kiss him again, licking deep and he responds in kind, his tongue tangling with mine, a low murmur of approval sounding in his throat. I grind against him, wanting him to know what I really want and he tightens his hold on my hair, his other hand wandering. Searching. Making me shiver everywhere he touches.

“You can be a feminist and still like me claiming you.” He tugs hard on my hair, making me gasp and when he puts his mouth on my throat, his teeth nipping, I hiss out a breath. “You own me just as much as I own you, wife.”

A thrill zips through my blood at his words, making my core pulse and I wrap my arms around his shoulders, clutching him to me as I devour his mouth.

The kiss turns carnal in an instant, the water sloshing around us. Cocooning us. We kiss and kiss, my jaw aching, my entire body on fire for him and when I reach between us and grab hold of his cock, he groans.

“You’ve been through a lot,” he says in protest as I guide him home. “You sure you want to—”

I cut him off with my lips, sinking onto his erect cock at the same time, sliding down his shaft easily since I’m so wet. Until he’s fully inside of me, thick and pulsing, filling me completely.

The utter rightness I’m experiencing at having him buried deep is overwhelming and all I can do is clutch him for a moment. My face in his

neck, breathing in his familiar, delectable scent. I run my fingers across his back, readjusting my lower body, sending him somehow even further and now we're both moaning.

"Fuck, Charlotte," he chokes out when I begin to move. "You feel so damn good."

I don't respond. I'm too caught up in the slow drag of his cock within me as I ride him. How the head nudges a spot deep within me that has me seeing stars. It's too much. With Perry, it's always too much, and I get swept away. Every time I come down, my clit brushes against the base of his cock and oh God, that feels good too. Amazing. The water is splashing with my every bounce, falling over the edge of the tub and I don't even care.

A growl leaves him and he grabs hold of my waist, pinning me in place as he moves his hips, pushing inside of me again and again until I cry out, my thighs tightening as the orgasm washes over me out of nowhere. I close my eyes and hold him close, whimpering with his every thrust, until he's coming too.

Without a condom.

God, we're so stupid. But I sort of don't care. Would it be such a hardship, having Perry's baby?

No. It would not.

I can't even believe I just thought that.

We cling to each other as we both come down from our orgasms, the water growing cooler, until I'm shivering in Perry's arms. He brushes my hair away from my face, slipping his fingers beneath my chin to tip my head up so I have to look him in the eyes.

What I see there takes my breath away. So much emotion swirling in the blue depths, along with a hint of anger. Anger that's not aimed at me, I know that.

"No one is ever taking you away from me again. Do you hear me?" His voice is deep, reaching right into my heart and wrapping its tendrils around it, like he's never going to let it go.

My nod is slow, and I close my eyes when he touches the corner of my lips with his fingers. "I don't want to leave you, Perry."

"Damn straight." His voice is full of so much satisfaction, I can't help it.

I start to laugh.



AFTER PERRY HELPS me out of the bath and dries me off with a thick, warm towel, he leads me to the bedroom, pulling back the covers and ready to tuck me in when I stop him, my gaze imploring as I study him.

“Will you sleep with me?”

Nodding, he waves at the bed. “Get in.”

I do as he says, my limbs slow, my mind sleepy. He pulls the duvet up to my chin, brushing my hair back from my face as he studies me, not saying a thing.

Within seconds he’s in bed too. Reaching for me. I go easily into his arms, our legs tangling, my hand finding his chest so I can feel the steady thrum of his heart beneath my palm.

“We’ll talk about what happened tomorrow,” he says after a few minutes of silence. “When you feel better.”

“I already feel better.”

“After you get some sleep,” he amends.

Closing my eyes, I rest my head against his warm, solid chest. I could sleep peacefully like this every night. Why do we keep separate bedrooms again? I’m going to talk to him about that. Wouldn’t it be nice, sharing a bed with my husband all the time?

I think so.

“I don’t want to sleep,” I tell him, though I don’t mean it. I would love to fall asleep. “Take care of me, Perry.”

His fingers are in my hair, smoothing it back, and I nuzzle closer to him, sighing.

“What do you need, wife?”

“You,” I whisper. “Just... show me you care.”

Show me that I matter. That you missed me. That you want no one else but me.

He proceeds to do exactly that, pushing me so I’m lying on my back, his hands wandering everywhere, his mouth following. He kisses me across my chest, my breasts. His mouth wrapping around my nipples, sucking. Licking. My skin grows hot and I kick the duvet away, the cool air washing over me, making me shiver.

Allowing me to watch.

I thrust my fingers into his hair, guiding him downward as he drags his mouth across my stomach. Drops a single kiss on one hip bone. Then the other. Driving me out of my mind so that I'm restless. Aching. Wanting him in a particular spot.

He teases me. His warm, damp lips press into my inner thighs, tickling the sensitive skin, making me giggle. The giggle turns into a moan when his mouth finds the very heart of me, his tongue searching, lips sucking. A single finger slips inside of me, thrusting deep and I arch into his mouth, seeking more.

Wanting it all.

After everything I've gone through today, I'm sure he thinks I wouldn't want this. But I do. I need him so badly. Reminding me that he wants me too.

That we're in this together.

Letting go of his hair, I reach for him, and as if he knows, his hand brushes mine, our fingers interlocking. He clutches my hand as he feasts on me, his tongue and lips destroying me as every heavy second passes and just when I'm about to come, he pulls away.

Frustration ripples just beneath my skin and I lie there, panting.

"Tell me no one else makes you feel like this," he demands.

I crack my eyes open to find him watching me. His lips are shiny, as is the lower half of his face and I realize he's coated with my juices.

That's really hot.

"Charlotte." His fingers tighten around mine. "Tell me."

"No one else makes me feel like this," I say automatically.

The look of pure satisfaction on his face is one I've never seen before—and it's hot too. I can't deny it. "No one else can make you come like this."

I shake my head frantically, about to crawl out of my skin with need. "No one makes me come like you do, Perry."

He dips his head, his tongue sneaking out for a lick and I watch him, breathless as he slowly circles my clit with the tip of his tongue. "I really did think you ran away with him."

"What? N-no." I'm still shaking my head, moaning when he lets go of my hand and spreads my legs open even wider, his touch rough, though I can take it. "I would never do that."

"I know that now." He lifts completely away from me, sliding up my body so his face is in mine. "I trust you, Charlotte."

My heart swells and I reach for his face, my fingers sliding down his cheeks before I lift my head, brushing his mouth with mine. I can taste myself and I lick at his lips, wanting him to know it doesn't bother me. Whatever we do, I enjoy. He has to know this. "I love that you trust me," I whisper against his lips. "Can I trust you?"

"I'd burn down the whole fucking world to keep you safe," he murmurs against my mouth, just before he nips at my lower lip. "That asshole is going to pay."

Something niggles at me with his statement. Perry wanting to destroy Seamus is more about him, and not so much about me.

I want to forget this entire ordeal ever happened.

"Don't talk about him." I kiss Perry again, tugging on his body so he's sprawled on top of me. I want him inside of me. I want to forget.

I just want to feel.

Him.

And nothing else.



CHAPTER TEN

Perry

I LEAVE CHARLOTTE sleeping peacefully in bed the next morning, quietly closing the door. Nearly jumping out of my skin when I spot Jasper lingering at the end of the hall, Doja winding her sleek black body around his shins.

Thank Christ I slipped on a pair of boxer briefs before I left the room so Jasper doesn't have to see me naked.

"Good morning, Mr. Constantine. How is Miss Charlotte doing today? Does she need anything? Is she hungry? Should I make breakfast for the both of you?" he asks me, wringing his hands together.

Slowly I shake my head as I walk toward him, rubbing the back of my neck. We were up half the night fucking, and I'm exhausted. No way am I going into work today. Besides, I can't leave her alone. Hell no. What if McTitface shows up? He's unhinged. I have no idea what he might do to her—not that I'd let him get close to her like that ever again. "She's sleeping. I think she needs as much rest as possible."

"Of course, sir. I think that's an excellent idea." Jasper nods, glancing down at Doja, as do I. She meows at us, squinting her golden eyes. "This one is acting nervous."

"Maybe she misses Charlotte." I think every one of us standing in this hall missed her.

"I'm sure she does. Well, she can greet her once Miss Charlotte wakes up." Jasper flits his gaze to me. "And perhaps you should get dressed, sir? Are you going into work?"

"No way," is my automatic response. "I'm staying home with my wife today."

The look of approval on Jasper's face can't be denied. "Very good, sir. Would you care for some breakfast?"

"I'll eat with my wife." I glance over my shoulder at her closed bedroom door and the urge to check on her is overwhelming, even though I was with her only minutes ago. "Take it easy this morning, J. I'll let you know when we're ready to eat."

"Of course." He nods and bends down, scooping Doja into his arms. "Would you care to take the cat to her?"

"Yeah. Actually, I will." I pluck Doja from his arms and cuddle her close, pleased when she starts purring. I was never a cat person until Doja. She's kind of snotty, but when she's in an affectionate mood, I like it.

I sneak back into Charlotte's room, carefully shutting the door behind me. Doja squirms in my arms and jumps out of them onto the bed when I get closer. The cat marches right up to her owner, meowing softly before she rubs her head against the side of Charlotte's face.

Reminding me of a freaking princess in a fairy tale, my wife awakens slowly. Probably due to all the head butts and constant purring from the cat. Charlotte's eyes flutter open and she smiles when she sees Doja in her face. A little squeal leaves her and she hauls Doja close, giving her a smacking kiss on top of her head. A giggle escapes her when Doja meows again, rubbing against her cheek.

"I didn't mean for her to wake you up," I say.

Charlotte's gaze finds mine, her cheeks turning the faintest shade of pink. "Oh. It's okay." She rubs underneath Doja's chin, her attention solely focused on her cat, instead of me.

As if I might what... make her uncomfortable?

Well, fuck that.

I approach the bed, throw back the covers and crawl back underneath them, pulling the duvet over me before I slide in behind my wife, slinging my arm around her middle, splaying my fingers across her bare stomach. "Did you sleep well?"

She nods, her back to me, her head slightly bent. "Did you stay all night with me?"

"I did." Doja crawls over Charlotte, seeking my attention. I give it to her, of course, petting her silky fur. "Does that bother you?"

"Not at all." She leans into me, her lush body fitting perfectly next to

mine. "I don't want to get out of bed yet."

"Then don't." I kiss the side of her neck, breathing her in. I love her smell. Can't get enough of it. My hands begin to explore, streaking my fingers over her hips and she nudges against me.

Somewhere a phone rings and I realize it's mine.

"Should you get that?" Charlotte asks after the third ring.

"I don't want to get out of bed," I tell her, repeating her own words back to her.

Her ass rubs against my front, rousing my dick. "Stay with me then."

The phone stops ringing, only to start back up again.

I cup her breasts, noting her hard nipples. Her tits are a perfect handful. I can't get enough of them. "Bet it's my brother."

"Or one of mine," she adds.

Don't want to talk to any of those assholes this morning, or even think about them. I'd rather not discuss what happened yesterday just yet. I'd prefer to act like it never happened.

Though I can't avoid it. Something needs to be done, and soon.

I'd just rather savor my wife a little while longer before we both have to face reality once again.

I'm essentially mauling my responsive wife, Doja is frustrated with us and sitting on the foot of the bed when there's a light knock on the door.

Blowing out an exasperated breath, I call out, "What is it, Jasper?"

"Sir, you have a call." He pauses for only a second. "From Mr. Lancaster."

"I win," Charlotte whispers. "Told you it was my brother."

"Which one?" I ask as I slide my hand down her stomach, heading for the promised land.

"Reginald, sir. Miss Charlotte's father."

My hand pauses in its journey and we both go still, Charlotte glancing over her shoulder to stare at me with wide, slightly terrified eyes.

"Tell him I'll call him back," I say, my gaze never straying from my wife's.

"He said it was urgent." Another hesitation. "He would like to speak with you now, sir. I already tried to tell him you were busy."

"Damn it," I mutter, letting go of Charlotte and sliding out of bed. I glance around the bedroom, realizing I've got nothing in here to slip on.

“Give me a minute,” I yell to Jasper. “Tell him I’ll be right there.”

“Very well, sir.”

Charlotte sits up, the duvet bunched at her waist, her upper half on full display, which is the wrong call because damn, all I want to do is slip back into bed and suck on her nipples for fifteen minutes straight. Until she’s gasping and so wet, it takes nothing for me to slide inside of her and fuck her to oblivion.

Yeah. Not going to happen right now, thanks to her fucking father.

“What do you think my father wants?” she asks.

If one of her brothers told him about the abduction, I’m going to lose my shit. Why cause trouble when she’s home and safe?

Can’t say that to Charlotte, though.

“I don’t know. To give me shit?” I run a hand through my hair before resting both hands on my hips. “I need to throw some clothes on.”

She frowns. “Why?”

“Really don’t want to take a call with your father in my briefs with a hard-on.” I glance down at myself, noting the semi I’m still sporting.

She covers her mouth, muffling her laughter. At least she seems happy despite what happened yesterday. My girl seems to bounce back quickly.

My gaze goes to her arm and the bruises there. They look worse in the morning light, which infuriates the shit out of me. I get close enough to that asshole, and there’s going to be hell to pay.

“He’d make it deflate, trust me,” she says, and now it’s my turn to chuckle.

I leave her room and go into mine, grabbing a pair of sweats and slipping into them before I pull on a T-shirt. The moment I’m in the living room, Jasper is heading for me, a cordless landline phone in his hands, a solemn expression on his face as he hands it over.

“Good morning, Mr. Lancaster,” I say automatically.

“What the fuck is going on, Constantine? I just received a text message with a photo of my daughter bound and her mouth covered in tape. Has someone *kidnapped* her, and you didn’t think to tell me about it? Where the hell is she?”

This is how Reggie greets me, his booming voice making me wince. At least he’s upset about it. I know Charlotte figured he wouldn’t care.

“When did you receive the photos, sir?” Fury ripples through me. “How

often do you check your damn phone?” According to Grant, not very much.

“Why does that matter? Tell me what’s going on. Now!”

“Charlotte is fine. She’s safe. She’s with me right now,” I try to reassure him, but he speaks right over me.

“What the hell kind of sick trick is this then? What’s going on? And don’t lie to me, son.” His voice is firm. As if I’m an idiot and would lie to this man.

I’m not freaking stupid.

“Are you available to meet sometime today? It’s probably better if I explain everything in person,” I say.

“Only if Charlotte is with you. I want to see her. Make sure she’s all right.” His voice is gruff, and for a minute I’m tempted to yell at his ass, just like he’s screaming at me. Call him out for his bogus behavior.

Where was he before, when she needed him? From what she’s told me, I don’t think this man has shown up for his daughter the entirety of her life. And when he does, he berates her, makes her feel like absolute shit and even hurts her. Mentally and physically.

Just like McAbductor. Funny, how those bruises he gave her are almost identical to the ones her goddamn father gave her right before our engagement party.

“You suddenly care now, huh?” The words leave me before I can stop them, and once they’re out there, I don’t give a shit.

Fuck it. He needs to know how I feel. There’s nothing he can do to change the fact that I’m now his son-in-law. Does he really think he can make my life miserable? I’ve dealt with shit my entire life. Fucked-up family dynamics don’t scare me. I come from one. I’m used to it.

“What did you just say to me?” Reggie asks incredulously. I’m guessing not many people call this man out for his shit. Someone has to do it.

Guess it’s me.

“You heard me.” I grip the phone tight, my heart pounding. I want to tell him, *come for me, bro*, but I keep my mouth shut.

He’s quiet for so long I figured he hung up the phone. But then I hear his ragged breathing, and I can tell he’s pissed.

Good. So am I.

“How dare you say that to me. You just waltz into her life unexpectedly and act like you know my daughter. Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Her husband,” I say firmly. “And you’re the one who arranged for me to

‘waltz’ into her life in the first place, so that’s on you.”

He’s speechless. Blustering. It should give me satisfaction that I stumped the old man, but it doesn’t. All I feel is angry. Defensive.

Sad for my wife, that this asshole is her dad.

“You’re coming to my office now,” he finally says, once he’s found his voice. “And you’re bringing my daughter with you.”

“Fuck off,” I say, before I drop the phone back into the receiver, turning to find Jasper standing there with a shocked expression on his face, his mouth formed into a little O.

“You heard that?”

Jasper nods. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“If he calls back, tell him we’re not interested in talking to him.” I start to walk away, pausing when I hear Jasper say my name. I glance over my shoulder to find him watching me. “Yes?”

His lips curve into a small smile. “Thank you for protecting Miss Charlotte, sir. And for bringing her home.”

“I didn’t protect her well enough, J,” I tell him, remorse socking me in the gut, as usual.

His smile fades. “I didn’t either, sir. But she’s still here with us.”

“That she is.” I head for her bedroom, murmuring to myself, “That she is.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Charlotte

THE DREAM IS recurring, happening almost nightly now. I'm running along the sidewalk, the deli up ahead and I know Arthur and Martha are inside, waiting for me. Ready to rescue me yet again. My chest aches from breathing so hard and when I spot Arthur standing in the open doorway of his shop, I wave my hand at him, trying to call out his name.

But nothing comes out. I have no voice. And when I feel hands grab hold of my hair, yanking me backwards, I stumble to the ground, Seamus climbing on top of me. Straddling me, thrusting his face in mine.

"Little bitch," he mutters, his dark eyes blazing with anger. "Think you can get away from me?"

Struggling, I part my lips, a silent scream leaving me and that's when I always wake up.

Actually screaming.

It's been two weeks since the incident, as I like to call it, and I'm having daily nightmares. It's awful, but Perry is always right there with me. He pulls me into his arms every single time I wake up, holding me close and whispering words of reassurance.

You're safe. You're okay. You're with me. I've got you.

I always cling to him, the tears falling, my entire body wracked with shivers. The fear I feel every time I wake up from this dream is...

Devastating.

Since it happened, Perry is overprotective to the point of being almost smothering, but I don't mind. I want him by my side. Watching over me. Checking in on me. He's currently working from home, something his

brother reluctantly allowed him to do. Jasper hovers all the time as well, always trying to get me to eat but I'm never hungry.

I don't know what's wrong with me. Perry says I'm traumatized from being abducted and that it's expected. While I know he's right, I also think it's more than that. Physically, I don't feel well. I'm tired. Emotionally drained. I want to sleep all the time, and the thought of eating makes me want to vomit. And when I do run to the bathroom to throw up, nothing really comes out because I'm not eating.

It's a horrible cycle.

I woke up this morning to an empty bed. Perry has converted his bedroom—we share mine now—into his temporary office and I can hear him talking on the phone from across the hall, even though my door is shut. I lie there and listen to him, appreciating the sound of his deep, sexy voice, how he's putting on the charm for someone they're trying to make a deal with. I don't even fully understand what they do at Halcyon, but Winston calls Perry, *the cleaner*. Meaning he cleans up all the messes by making promises in that smooth voice of his, convincing them to agree that it wasn't so bad and no, they're definitely not backing out of the deal.

His skills are impressive. I should know. He convinces me to do all sorts of things on a nightly basis, trying to wear me out with lots of sex before I fall into blissful, dreamless sleep.

At first.

The nightmares don't stop though, no matter how hard I try to make them disappear.

I'm lying there, about to reach over to the nightstand so I can grab my phone, when a wave of nausea hits me so strongly, I stumble out of bed, almost falling to the floor. I make it to the connecting bathroom just in time, throwing up nothing but bile.

Once I'm finished, I collapse onto the cool marble floor, pressing my heated face against it and closing my eyes. I think the trauma over everything has made me sick. I'm so tired of feeling like this. Sick all the time. Sick over Seamus and what he did to me. Sick that my father has basically cut me completely out of his life—and convinced my mother to do the same. While I have Perry and Jasper and my brothers, who have really come through since the incident, I don't have the support of my parents at all. Ever since Perry talked to my father that one day, we haven't heard from them since.

I never really did have their support, so I don't know why I'm so heartbroken over it. Maybe because it all feels so final? It's ridiculous to think like this. I have money thanks to my trust fund. I have security thanks to my marriage with Perry, and it's not like I'm not in contact with family members. All three of my brothers love and support me. They've really come through since everything that happened, though Crew was always there for me.

"Charlotte? Where are you?"

My eyes flash open when I hear Perry call my name and I scramble up off the floor, smoothing my hair away from my face before I flush the toilet. "Give me a minute," I call, thankful that I closed the bathroom door behind me when I ran in here earlier. At least my husband didn't find me sprawled across the floor like I'd passed out.

I've been keeping the nausea a secret from Perry, and I don't know why. Maybe because he'd force me to see a doctor, and I'm not ready to talk about what's going on with me to a stranger yet. The last time I went to a doctor, it was to my pediatrician. It's been a while since I've sought medical help.

I hurriedly wash my hands and gargle mouthwash before I exit the bathroom, smiling at my husband, who immediately frowns.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." My smile is so wide, the corners of my mouth tremble. I let it relax. "Why?"

"You look like you've been crying." He waves a hand at my face and I realize my eyes must be blood shot thanks to vomiting earlier. I always cry a little when I throw up. It's awful.

"I haven't been," I reassure him.

His intense gaze sweeps over me, and the disbelief is there, written all over his face. He takes a step closer, reaching for my hand, enclosing it in his own. "Your fingers are like ice."

"I just washed my hands."

"Did you fall back asleep?" His voice lowers and he pulls me even closer. "Did you have another bad dream?"

"No." I shake my head, letting him pull me into his arms. It's the place where I feel the safest and if I had my choice, I would spend every single day in Perry's arms, whiling the hours away.

But that's not actually living a normal life. He has things to do. A job to

go to every day. And I need something too. I want to go back to school. I've been entertaining the idea for a while, even before we were married, but now after everything that happened, I'm terrified to go onto campus alone.

Without protection. Without Perry by my side.

I'm being ridiculous.

"You're shaking, baby." He tucks me into his chest and I lie there, breathing in his scent, absorbing his warmth. He's firm and strong and he's all mine and I've become this burden of a woman.

No. Not a woman. I feel like a scared little girl, and I hate it. It doesn't matter that I took charge of my own fate and threw burning hot soup in Seamus's face before I made my escape. Perry always tells me I'm such a badass for doing that, and I want to believe him.

I do.

But it's like my mind won't let me. My parents' abandonment hurts too damn much on top of it all. I'd think I'd be used to it by now. This sort of thing has gone on my entire life, but no.

It still hurts. I do what they want. I get married to the man they—my father—chose for me, and he's still not satisfied.

Nothing I do is right. I'm a failure.

I am.

The tears flow freely, soaking the front of Perry's button up shirt. I'm sure he can feel them, but he doesn't say anything. Just holds me close and keeps his mouth pressed to my forehead, offering up all that comfort he's so good at delivering.

"I need to get over this," I finally say after a few minutes of feeling sorry for myself.

"It's only been a few weeks," he reminds me, which feels like it's been too long for me to wallow in my misery already. "Give yourself some time."

"I'm tired of feeling scared all the time. Or feeling sorry for myself. I'm over it." I pull away slightly so I can look him in the eyes. His gaze is full of concern, and I wonder if he ever regrets marrying me. He definitely didn't sign up for this. "I want to be stronger."

"You already are strong. I've told you before you're the strongest woman I know," he reassures me.

Pretty lies, all of the words he says. Delivered with a smooth tone and a kind smile. He knows how to sweet talk people. He does it for a living. Fairly

certain that's what he's doing to me right now.

"I should take a shower."

"Didn't you just take one last night?" His brows lower.

"I feel gross." I shrug one shoulder.

"You hungry? Want to eat something?" He's as bad as Jasper, always trying to feed me. I'm surprised they haven't taught Doja how to bring a bag of crackers to me yet.

"No." I shake my head, offering him a weak smile. "I'll take a shower first. Then I'll try and eat."

He tightens his grip on me when I try to make my escape. "You're worrying me, Charlotte. You never eat."

"I'm not very hungry," I admit, my voice small.

"You've lost weight. You look thinner," he says.

Perry doesn't mean this as a compliment either. His voice is laced with concern.

"I haven't had much of an appetite lately," I admit.

He presses his lips together, and I can tell he wants to say something, but decides against it. Is he disappointed in me? Does he regret marrying me? With my behavior lately, I wouldn't be surprised. "Take your shower. I have a call in five, but it's a short one. Then we can eat together."

Code for him watching me while I eat to make sure I consume something. "Sure. Okay."

I withdraw from him but he grabs my hand, pulling me back in for a gentle kiss. I may be depressed, but the sex between us is still good, if not a little excessive. Not that I'm complaining but wow, we do it a lot. I didn't know it could feel like this with someone. So all-consuming and leaving me feeling needy and restless.

"I hate seeing you sad," he whispers against my lips before he kisses me again. "Did you ever look into seeing a therapist?"

I shake my head. "I don't know if I'm ready to tell anyone else what happened to me yet."

He says nothing to that, changing the subject. "Maybe we should go out of town this weekend. Just the two of us."

I rest my hand on his chest, dragging my index finger down, along the buttons of his shirt. "Isn't it Thanksgiving Thursday?"

"Oh wait. You're right. My mother has called me multiple times, trying to

get me to confirm we'll be there for the holiday.”

“Why haven't you told her yes? Not like my parents want me over.” Last I heard, they're spending the holiday in St. Barts, according to Finn.

“Charlotte...” His voice drifts and I slowly withdraw from his hold, walking backward toward the bathroom.

“What? It's true. Go take your call. You're going to be late.” I smile brightly at him before I shut myself away in the bathroom, leaning heavily against the door and closing my eyes, taking a deep breath.

I can't wallow in my misery any longer. Things need to return to normal. Perry should be back in the office. I should figure out my next step with my life. Go to college maybe?

I'm not sure, but I do know one thing.

I hate myself for acting so weak. I need to be stronger for Perry.

For myself.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Perry

THE MONDAY AFTER Thanksgiving and I'm back in the office. In person.

I didn't want to go, but Charlotte basically forced me. I think she conspired with Winston on Thanksgiving, because I caught them in an intense conversation at one point, their heads bent together, their gazes serious as Winston explained something to her in low tones. I tried to spy on them but of course, my wife noticed me and called me out.

She never would tell me what she talked about with Winston, but the next thing I knew, I had the entire family on my ass about how I needed to get back to work and not stay holed up in the apartment forever.

"You can't be on a year-long honeymoon," Keaton had said, and I knew he was just giving me a hard time, but he also knows what happened to Charlotte.

And how we kept it quiet.

Not many people know that Seamus abducted her, and of course, her father never mentioned it because talk about bad press. Lancasters hate that sort of thing. Turns out, so do Constantines.

Such a bunch of shit.

I played nice and agreed with everyone that I should return to the office. Charlotte beamed like a proud wife, though I'm thinking she just wants me out of her hair. I'm like a watchdog, always chasing after her, making sure she's eating right and sleeping well and that she's not too sad. She won't talk about what happened to her, not anymore, and I swear she's keeping it all bottled up inside and it's eating at her.

It's the only part of her that's eating, considering how thin she is. I watched her at Thanksgiving. She picked at her plate, moving food around and not really eating any of it. No one else caught on, but I did. I saw it.

When it comes to Charlotte, I notice every little thing.

I tried to talk to her about it later that night, but she shut me up by shoving her hand down the front of my jeans and next thing I knew, she had my dick out and her lips wrapped around it. I'm not going to argue when my wife willingly gives me a blow job. I forget everything when she's touching me, and she knows it.

I dump all my stuff at my desk before I storm into Winston's office, noting the way he leans back in his chair, resting his loosely clutched hands on his chest as he contemplates me.

"Been waiting for you to come barreling in here," he drawls as I slam the door shut.

I fall into the chair across from his desk, glaring at him. "I don't barrel."

"Hate to say it, but you just did." He's quiet for a moment and so am I, stewing in my thoughts before he finally asks, "What's your problem?"

"Something's wrong with my wife, and I don't know how to fix it."

"What's going on between you two? Seemed perfectly lovey-dovey last Thursday." Winston makes a face. He's not into public displays of affection, though Ash has turned him around on that subject.

Somewhat.

"Our sex life is good. I know she doesn't hate me. She just acts so... numb all the time. As if she feels nothing. She won't eat. She's having nightmares." I pause, scrubbing my hand across my jaw. "I suggested she go to therapy, but she said she doesn't trust anyone enough to share her story with."

"I suppose I don't blame her," Winston says, not helping my cause whatsoever. "It's hard to open up."

"I think I'm the only Constantine who has no problems expressing his feelings," I mutter. "All the rest of you are ridiculous."

"I'm not too sure about that. Does Charlotte know how you feel about her?" Winston raises a brow.

I hesitate with my answer. I haven't told her so much in words, but can't she tell? Don't I show her how much I care?

"I'm guessing that's a no," he says wryly. "You can't expect her to *know*

how you feel. Women get all twisted up, trying to figure us out. You have to tell her.”

“She twists me up too, you know,” I mutter.

Am I in love with her? I don’t know. I’ve never been in love with a woman before. I definitely care about her. Feel possessive about her. In fact, that reminds me of a certain McDickhead...

“Heard anything about you know who?” I ask, changing the subject. I don’t want to talk about my feelings for Charlotte. I have a hard enough time trying to process them on my own. I don’t want to examine them with my hard-ass brother.

“Not a single thing. I still follow up with Myron once a week. He lost complete sight of him right after it happened,” Winston reminds me, not that I need it. “He up and disappeared. I wonder if he went back to Ireland. Myron thinks he’s there, but nothing has popped up. No credit card receipts, no plane tickets, no visuals on random surveillance video. And he’s not in Bishop’s Landing. He would’ve been spotted by now.”

“Maybe my wife scared him off. She probably fucked him up when she threw soup at face,” I suggest, still marveling she even did that.

Charlotte is more kick-ass than she realizes.

“Maybe.” I can hear the amusement in my brother’s voice, which doesn’t help my mood.

“And if he dares to show his face around here, he needs to be prepared for me to kill him,” I mutter, staring off into the distance.

An aggravated sigh leaves my brother and I angle my head in his direction, our gazes locking. “What?”

“You’re being irrational with the murderous comments. You can’t kill him. I don’t care if you want to, you can’t.” Winston sits up straight, resting his arms on top of his desk. “I’ve had a few ugly—run-ins in the past. You’ve seen how well those worked out.”

“You left evidence,” I say, thinking of the triplets and how close he came to offing them. “Those fuckers should’ve died that night.”

“And then there would’ve been hell to pay. I’d end up in jail. Prison. I don’t care how excellent our lawyers are, or the lack of evidence the prosecution would’ve come up with, I probably would’ve gone down.” He levels his thunderous gaze upon me. “You’re more reckless than me and you

know it. Marriage has not settled you down. If anything, it's only fired you up."

I should be insulted, but I'm not. I feel the same way. Thinking of anyone putting their hands on my wife sends rage blazing through my blood, and I've never been the type to get angry about anything. I guess that's my BC era.

Before Charlotte.

"Charlotte says my rage is more about me than what happened to her," I admit. When she said that to me, I immediately felt terrible.

Hasn't stopped my anger though. Not a damn bit.

"She's probably right," Winston says.

Great. That doesn't make me feel any better.

Clenching my hands into fists, I lightly bang them on the chair arms. "You can't stop me if I find him and you're not around."

"You probably won't find him." Winston says it with so much finality I'm immediately filled with resentment. Makes me want to prove him wrong. "He's a ghost. It's as if he didn't even exist. I'm guessing he went through some sort of identity transformation."

"Like what, Witness Protection?"

"More like Morelli protection," Winston says, making me roll my eyes. Fucking Morellis. "Ash mentioned something to me. Something that she observed."

I frown at his quick subject change. "About what?"

"About Charlotte."

Now it's my turn to sit up straighter, hating the way my stomach churns at the serious expression on my brother's face. "What did Ash say about my wife?"

"She chatted with Charlotte quite a bit on Thanksgiving. I like that they're becoming closer."

I wave a hand, indicating he needs to keep talking. "Go on."

"I guess Charlotte told her that she hasn't been feeling well. Extremely tired, despite getting plenty of rest. Loss of appetite. She even mentioned—throwing up a few times." The pointed look he sends me is almost polarizing. As in, I feel pinned in place. "Ever consider your wife could be... pregnant?"

I blink at him, trying to digest the word. *Pregnant?*

Charlotte?

"No way..." I snap my lips shut, thinking of the few times we've had sex

without protection.

Okay, the many times. I'm a careless asshole who can't control himself around the woman he married. So sue me.

Meaning, it's definitely possible.

"It's none of my damn business, but do you wear a condom? She on some sort of birth control?" Winston asks.

"Yeah." I nod, not wanting to admit that sometimes I get caught up in the moment and slip right inside of her welcoming body. There is nothing better than fucking my woman with nothing between us. Just skin on skin.

"It's not always foolproof," he says.

"No, it's not." I imagine her pregnant. Her belly swelling with my baby. Her face turning round, her cheeks rosy as she waddles all over the place, blaming me for her condition, but always good-naturedly. She would be a beautiful pregnant woman. I can envision it now...

I have no idea what it's like to be pregnant, nor have I spent much time with pregnant ladies, but I've watched movies. I've seen what happens.

Holy. Shit.

"You should talk to her once in a while instead of fucking her all the time. See if she could be," Winston suggests, his tone dry.

I slowly shake my head, trying to comprehend the seriousness of this. The joy bubbling inside of me.

A baby. A pretty little blonde baby girl who looks just like her mama but is devilish like her daddy.

Shit.

We're young, we've only been together a couple of months, tops, but we can handle it. Right? And we definitely don't have the most conventional marriage going on, but our mothers would be happy as shit. Even if Charlotte's mom isn't talking to her currently.

I scowl. The Lancasters drive me out of my ever lovin' mind sometimes.

"Well damn. You actually look excited by the possibility that you're going to be a daddy," Winston says, his voice full of disbelief.

My gaze cuts to his. "Would it be so bad, having a baby?"

Winston shudders, as if what I just said he found completely distasteful. "Trust me. You're not ready. You don't even like children."

"I'd like them if they're mine," I point out.

He scowls. "Having a child isn't easy. Especially when they're infants.

They're so damn needy, too squirmy and they cry all the time. And when they're not crying, they're eating. And when they're not eating, they're shitting themselves. No thanks."

I burst out laughing. "That's only for a short amount of time. You get to cuddle them and wrap them up in blankets. Make them wear silly hats. You pat their backs and make them burp. Might be fun."

"Or they spit up on you and ruin your fifteen-thousand-dollar suit," Winston mutters, glancing down at himself and brushing a piece of invisible lint from his lapel.

I'm sure he speaks from experience.

"Mom will be thrilled."

"What? That her golden child is giving her a golden grandchild? She might revert and shit her pants with joy," Winston says.

I send him a look. "That's disgusting."

He shrugs. "Wouldn't be surprised. Anyway, I think you need to have a nice little chat with wifey. That could be the reason for her mood swings and the lack of appetite."

That reminds me of what he said earlier. "I didn't even know she was throwing up. She never told me."

She hid that from me, and I don't like it.

"Ash mentioned when Charlotte made that confession, she immediately acted like she regretted it. I'm sure she knew Ash would tell me, and I would tell you."

"But why wouldn't she tell me?"

"Maybe she didn't want you to worry, and that's why she didn't mention it. You have been acting extremely protective of her since—the incident," Winston points out.

What the actual fuck? Winston makes it sound so casual. Like she got lost when she went to the supermarket.

"Of course I've been overprotective of her." I rise to my feet, ready to bolt. "That asshole *kidnapped* my wife and God knows what he planned to do to her. I'm sure he wasn't going to just let her go and hope we would all forget about it."

I'm headed for Winston's office door, ready to leave when he calls to me, "Perry, come on—"

"No." I whirl on him, jabbing my index finger in his direction. "You can't

tell me not to be upset. You can tell me not to do stuff that'll hurt the family image if the press got wind of it, but give me a break, don't forget you lost your fucking mind when those triplets threatened Ash. When the Morellis did. When anyone did. Hell, you were ready to bust my face in when you thought I was flirting with her, and I'm your fucking brother. I feel the same exact way about Charlotte that you feel about Ash. The same way. Knowing that he touched a single hair on her head, that he grabbed her tight enough that he bruised her—" A ragged breath leaves me and I shake my head. "He's fucked. You know this."

Winston's expression is solemn as he watches me. "You're right. He is fucked."

The tension slips from my body at his admission. I'm glad he agrees with me. I was starting to go a little crazy, dealing with my emotions when it comes to Charlotte.

"Have you told your wife you're in love with her yet?"

I gape at him. "What the hell?"

"You don't feel that way about a woman unless you're in love with her. I know, I know, it's hard to wrap your brain around," he says when I start to protest. "I'm not one to express my feelings of love." Winston sneers. Pretty sure he hates admitting he has any emotion that's not related to anger. "I don't feel anything most of the time—with the exception of Ash. I think you might be dealing with the same... issues."

"I'm not in love with her," I say automatically, turning on my heel and making my escape from my brother's office.

"Liar!" he calls after me.

But I ignore him.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Charlotte

IT WAS DIFFICULT, convincing my husband to return to the office, but necessary. Perry is not made to work from home.

And Perry is also a hovering, overattentive husband who sort of drove me crazy after a while.

The moment he left for work earlier, I remained in bed for most of the morning, doing a little research on my phone. With Perry now gone all day, I'm going to concentrate on myself and look into taking some college courses online. It's still hard for me to leave the apartment for any length of time. I get too worked up, too anxious.

I thought about looking into architecture again, but looking over the class requirements, all I could think of was Seamus, so that won't work.

I've decided to look into interior design courses instead.

Once I've sent an email to a counselor asking to schedule an appointment, I finally request Jasper to bring me a late breakfast, which he gleefully delivers to me on a tray.

The man was ecstatic I actually requested something to eat, which hasn't happened in a while. I only wanted bland wheat toast—almost burnt to a crisp and with light butter—and sliced strawberries. That's all my stomach could take. He tried to convince me to have some Greek yogurt but just thinking of the creamy substance made me want to hurl.

Hard pass on that.

After I finally climbed out of bed, I took a shower. Sat out on the balcony and absorbed the late fall afternoon sun. The weather keeps tricking us. Rain.

Sunny. Sunny. Rain. Soon enough it will be winter and nothing but stormy gray skies and snow, so I have to take advantage where I can.

“I must say, you look lovely this afternoon, Miss Charlotte,” Jasper announces when he joins me on the terrace, delivering a cup of tea.

I tip my head back and stare up at the blue sky, noting the dots of fluffy white clouds. “It’s the sunshine. It’s adding color back into my skin.”

“I think someone is feeling a little freer than usual.”

Glancing over at him, I squint my eyes. “Are you onto me, Jasper?”

“I know you’ve grown to care for your husband. I approve of him as well. But he’s been so terribly—worried about you as of late,” Jasper says, as diplomatic as always.

“He worries too much,” I say, leaning my head back once again and closing my eyes. “He needed to go back to the office.”

Yet, I miss him. I can’t wait to tell him I looked into college courses. He’ll be proud of me. Maybe I should try and look into getting a therapist too. I shouldn’t hold on to all of this trauma. It’s not helping me get over it—I need someone to talk to about it, and that can’t be Perry all the time.

My entire life froze after I escaped from Seamus, and I hate it. It shouldn’t be like this. I just got married—yes, to a man I don’t even know, but that’s beside the point—I should be in wedding bliss. Going out and having fun with my husband. Making new friends.

I frown. There’s a problem. I don’t have any friends. Not really. Most of the ones I had in school are busy going to college. I’m the first one of the bunch to get married, and while a few of them were at my wedding, for the most part I don’t stay in contact with anyone besides through social media.

I can think of one person I’d enjoy spending more time with though...

Grabbing my phone from the side table by my chair, I bring up my text messages and scroll until I find her name.

Tinsley. My new sister-in-law.

Me: Hi! We should try and get together for lunch this week, if you have time.

We talked about it at Thanksgiving. Ash was there too, but she works at Halcyon so she wouldn’t be able to make it until the weekend.

Right now, I want to pick Tinsley’s brain. Try to find out more about my husband. What was he like when he was younger? A teenager? I bet he was

just as charming. Maybe a little more reckless. I'm sure he was a lot of fun. He still is.

Unless he's mad. Then he's just ferocious. And sexy.

Ugh. So damn sexy...

My phone dings and I check it.

Tinsley: Hey! I would love to. My week is pretty busy, but maybe next Monday? What do you think?

Me: That sounds great.

Tinsley: We could Christmas shop after! Unless you don't like shopping.

I don't always enjoy shopping while my mother would take gold if it was an Olympic sport, but I would shop with Tinsley.

Me: I don't mind shopping and I do need to Christmas shop.

What would I even get Perry? I have no idea. Tinsley might know though...

Tinsley: Yay! It'll be fun! I'll text you as we get closer, or you can text me. Whoever reaches out first. 😊

Me: Sounds good. Looking forward to it.

Tinsley: Me too!

With a smile on my face, I set my phone onto the table next to my chair, then grab my cup of tea and take a sip. For the first time since everything happened with Seamus, I feel calm.

Happy.

"The tea is delicious," I say to Jasper, who's taken over the role of hovering. He doesn't hang as close as my husband, and he's using cleaning up around the terrace as an excuse, but I know what he's doing. "Thank you for bringing it out to me."

"It's green tea, Miss Charlotte. Should help with your upset stomach," he answers, his back to me.

I frown. How did he know my stomach was upset? I've tried to keep that quiet. It's obvious to both of the men in this household that I'm not eating

nearly as much, and I've kept the vomiting, almost, daily part to myself.

Yet here's Jasper, yet again on to me.

"You know, you shouldn't call me Miss Charlotte anymore, since I'm married now, Jasper," I tell him.

He turns to face me, his expression one of pure horror. I'm sure he didn't realize his faux pas until now. "You're correct—Mrs. Constantine."

I grimace. "That's so formal."

"That's how I should address you. Or ma'am." He stands up taller, clutching his hands behind his back.

"I'm only twenty. You can't call me ma'am," I say irritably, taking another sip of tea.

"It's what's proper."

"Well, proper can suck it." I laugh at Jasper's wide eyes. "You've known me since I was a child. I barely remember life without you in it. Can't you just call me Charlotte?"

"It's too informal, too intimate..."

"I consider you a family member, Jasper. Call me Charlotte," I say firmly.

He studies me for a moment before he nods once, his expression somber. "Very well, Charlotte. I must say, you're rather—feisty this afternoon."

"I'm feeling better," I tell him, and I mean it.

I'm feeling better than ever. It was nice to get that off my chest about Jasper calling me Miss Charlotte. I need to be honest with my husband as well.

There are a few things I need to tell him. Starting tonight. Over dinner. Grabbing my phone yet again, I send Perry a quick text.

Me: Let's go out to dinner tonight.

He responds almost immediately.

Perry: You sure you're okay to go out?

A sigh leaves me. This man.

Me: I need to be around people. Around YOU. Out of this apartment.

It takes him a few minutes to respond and I start to grow antsy. I drain my cup. Idly scroll through social media. Nearly jump out of my skin when my phone dings.

Perry: I'll pick you up in the Chevelle at 7.

Relief floods me at his response.

Me: Perfect. Where are you taking me?

Perry: It's a surprise.

Me: How should I dress?

Perry: Wear something short and sexy.

A smile curls my lips. He's sounding like my old husband right now. And I like it.



I SPENT THE rest of the afternoon getting ready for my date with Perry. I found a dress in my closet that I purchased during our engagement that I never wore. It's a deep, vivid pink, almost fuchsia with a tie fabric belt and long sleeves. It covers me almost entirely, except my legs.

And Perry is a leg man.

I curl my hair and apply my makeup carefully. Spritz myself in my favorite perfume then immediately regret it. What if I'm wearing too much? What if I'm making a big deal out of nothing?

I shove all of my insecure feelings into the darkest corners of my brain. I need to stop doubting myself all the time, but old habits are hard to break. The majority of my life, I've thought this way and it's gotten me nowhere.

I'm sick of it. Before Seamus forced me out of the lobby with a gun jabbed into my side, I was gaining more confidence. Feeling assured in my position as Perry's wife. I lost that.

Tonight, I'm ready to reclaim that version of myself.

A little before seven, I receive a text from my husband.

Perry: Meet me downstairs. I'm parked at the curb, right in front of the building. Have Jasper go with you.

I want to protest, but don't. He's justified in still being worried about my safety. I'm worried too.

Me: Will do!

"Jasper," I call as I exit my bedroom. "Can you accompany me down to the lobby?"

Jasper appears out of nowhere, as he's wont to do. "Where are you going? Oh, that's right. Dinner with Mr. Constantine, correct?"

Nodding, I grab my small purse and shove my phone inside. "He's here, ready to pick me up."

"Let's go then."

We ride down in the elevator together, making small talk, though I wonder if Jasper can tell I'm nervous. More like I'm excited. Ready to get out and do something normal, like put on a pretty dress and go out to dinner with my handsome husband.

Once we leave the elevator I'm walking quickly through the mostly empty lobby of our building, smiling and nodding at the security guard sitting behind the desk as I walk by. Jasper's hurried steps sound behind me and I think yet again how much of a non-threat my sweet, older butler is. If Seamus were to magically appear, he could knock Jasper over with a poke of his finger.

Glancing around the lobby, I look for a sneaky dark-haired Irishman lurking in the shadows, but I don't spot any.

Thank goodness.

The moment I'm outside, I regret not wearing a coat since the wind is chilly. But that would cover up the goodness that is my dress, and I want to see Perry's initial reaction when he first spots me. Giddy, I run the last few steps to the waiting Chevelle, throwing open the passenger side door and bending down so I can meet Perry's gaze.

"Thanks, Jasper!" my husband yells, his gaze on me and nothing else. His eyes practically smolder as he takes me in, annoyance flitting across his face, which has me frowning in confusion. "Get in. Now."

I scramble into my seat, slamming the heavy door before I turn to glare at him. “What’s wrong?”

“You were bent over and probably showing the entire night shift your ass,” he mutters irritably. “That skirt is too damn short.”

Glancing down at my exposed legs, I swallow hard, trying to fight the disappointment that wants to consume me. “You don’t like my dress?”

“I like it too damn much. That’s the problem. Look at you.” His fingers slip under my chin and he turns my head so I have to face him. “Sexy as fuck, wife. I don’t want anyone seeing that pretty ass of yours.”

This sort of talk shouldn’t make me feel all warm and gooey inside, but it does. Oh God, it really does.

“That ass belongs to me,” he continues, dipping his head to deliver a quick, tongue-filled kiss before he’s pulling away from me, one hand on the steering wheel, the other on the gear shift. “Get your seat belt on. We’re going for a ride.”

I do as he says, scrambling to pull my seat belt on, my heart pounding with excitement.

It’s going to be a good night.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Perry

THERE GOES MY wife, killing me yet again with one of those dresses that appears proper at first glance, yet is anything but. Covered everywhere but those damn legs of hers. I can't stop looking at them as I drive, completely distracted by how smooth and shiny they look. Did she put something on them? Baby oil or some shit? They're so damn long and she keeps moving them. Like she's restless.

I'll give her restless. If she doesn't watch it, I'm going to pull over into a random parking garage like last time we were in the Chevelle and fuck her senseless. Make us late for our dinner reservation, not that I give a shit. The last thing I have on my mind right now is food.

But damn, should I watch it, considering she might be pregnant with my baby? I don't want to hurt her or our future kid. And how do I even bring that up? Over dinner, after they serve us our drinks but before we get our salads?

Hey, baby, word on the street is you're pregnant. Is it true?

That is the wrong way to approach it. I'm not stupid.

What if she plans on telling me about the pregnancy tonight? Nice little dinner. Pretty dress. Long, sexy legs as a distraction and then bam. We're gonna have a baby.

Doesn't seem like a bad way to tell me.

Maybe she's nervous—too scared to tell me, which I don't want her to be. But I get it. This is a big moment. Something that will change our lives forever. Something I never expected this early in the game.

I know things have been a little off between us, but we need to get back on track. I was reluctant earlier when she suggested we should go out to

dinner tonight, but I realized pretty quickly my wife needs to get back to the land of the living. And I need to support her in her endeavor.

So here I am, driving through the city streets, headed for a restaurant that Winston recommended that costs more than some people's monthly salary for two meals, but I don't give a fuck. My wife deserves whatever she wants. I want to be the one to put a smile on her face tonight. And not through just sex either.

It goes beyond that for me.

For us.

By the time we're finally at the restaurant, I've got my secret sexual thoughts under control and I'm tossing my car keys at the valet, whose eyes are wide as he takes in my orange Chevelle, the slick paint gleaming beneath the lights. Another valet opens the car door for my wife and when his gaze drops to her legs as she steps out of the car, I almost lose it.

"Hey," I snap at him, his gaze jumping to mine, full of guilt. "Eyes up here, buddy."

"Perry," Charlotte admonishes as I make my way toward her and take her arm, steering her toward the restaurant entrance. "Stop scaring everyone. He wasn't doing anything wrong."

"Staring at your legs is wrong in my book," I mutter, nudging the dick standing nearby out of my way so I can hold the door open for my wife. She walks inside and I follow after her. "It's obvious we're together."

"I don't think he was checking me out," she says airily, though I note the way her eyes dance.

Pretty sure she's having fun with this. Torturing me.

"Uh-huh." Tamping my jealousy down, I smile at the hostess, who's a gorgeous redhead with dark brown eyes that skim over me appreciatively. "Reservation for two at seven-thirty. Constantine."

"Oh yes. Here you are." She glances up from the computer screen she just scanned, barely looking at my wife. The hostess's attention is all for me. "I'll escort you to your table. Follow me."

Charlotte grabs my hand as we enter the restaurant, the two of us walking side by side, following the hostess as she leads us to our table. "She was checking you out."

"No. Really?" It's my turn to tease her and she knows it. "See? That's how I felt outside with the valet."

“There’s nothing wrong with looking,” she says with a careless shrug of her shoulder.

“Right. Anyone touches you, babe, and I’m going caveman on them. Just watch me.” I yank her closer, whispering in her ear, “Don’t forget who you belong to.”

“Trust me, I don’t. You won’t let me,” she says, sounding breathless.

“Damn straight.”

I glance around the restaurant, not surprised at all to see some of the men sitting at the tables watching my wife walk by with interest flaring in their eyes. I glare at every single one of them, pleased to find each one looking away first. By the time we’re seated and the hostess leaves us with our menus, I’m satisfied that not a single dude is staring in our table’s direction.

Good. They need to back the fuck off.

My wife is completely oblivious, cracking open her menu to study the offerings within. “There aren’t any prices on anything,” she observes.

“This place costs a fortune.” I try not to sweat at the lack of prices. This type of shit used to not matter to me. When I was younger, I spent our family’s money carelessly, not giving a damn how much anything cost. Always secure that whatever I wanted would be covered by the Constantine fortune.

Such douchey behavior. No wonder Winston couldn’t stand me.

I’ve changed. I appreciate the value of a dollar, and while I’m still secure with our family’s money, at least I’m earning my own now—and doing a decent job of it, too. And don’t get me started on the Lancaster wealth. I won’t even touch Charlotte’s money. She can keep that to herself. I’m not a mooch, despite what her father might think of me.

“What made you want to come here?” she asks.

I glance up just in time to catch her sink her teeth into her lower lip as she contemplates the menu.

My entire body reacts, specifically my dick.

“Winston recommended the place.” I shift in my seat, regretting my choices.

I probably should’ve pulled into a random parking garage and fucked her like I did that one night. Having her ride me in my favorite ride is an extremely fond memory. One I like to think about almost daily.

“Figures,” she says with a small smile, her gaze returning to the menu.

A brilliant idea hits me and I decide to test it out. “You going to order a drink?”

She glances up, our gazes meeting, her brows drawn together. “I’m not old enough yet.”

“So? No one is going to card you in this place.” I shrug, waiting.

If she refuses, she’s pregnant. If she says yes, then maybe she’s not.

Or she doesn’t know she’s having a baby...

Shit, I don’t know what to think.

“Maybe a glass of wine then.” She pauses. “Are you going to drink?”

I shake my head in answer. If I could, I’d get sloshed because damn. The pressure of the last few weeks is seeping out of my body, leaving me ready to drown my lingering troubles in alcohol.

But I’m driving, so I have to be responsible.

Our server shows up and I order a bottle of wine for the both of us. The server doesn’t bother asking if we’re of age or for our IDs and I smile at Charlotte once he’s gone, feeling smug.

“See, you can drink up tonight.” I pause, hoping I’m not too obvious. “If you want.”

“I don’t know. I’ll probably just get sleepy. Wine makes me tired. I’d rather focus on tonight and enjoy it as much as possible. Spending the evening with my handsome husband.” She smiles at me and it’s like a zinger aimed straight at my heart.

I even rub my chest because damn. She looks so sweet and beautiful. Her hair shines beneath the restaurant’s gentle lights, and I can smell her. A light, floral scent that makes me want to strip her slowly. See if she smells that good everywhere.

“You’re staring, Perry,” she says after a few seconds of silence.

I shake myself from my Charlotte-induced stupor, reaching across the table to drift my fingers across the top of her hand. “What are we doing?”

Her frown is back, her lips pursed. “What do you mean?”

“The two of us. In this marriage. This relationship. It’s feeling real, wife.”

She ducks her head, smiling down at her lap for a moment, and I wish I knew what was going on in that pretty head of hers.

“Does it feel real to you?” I ask when she still hasn’t said anything.

The server shows up at that precise moment with our wine, pouring each of us a glass and I tamp down my irritation. I keep my gaze on Charlotte the

entire time the server is talking, trying to silently communicate with her that I meant what I said. Our marriage feels real. Too real sometimes. Downright overwhelming, to the point that my feelings for her make my chest ache and my head hurt. I can't stop thinking about her. Worrying about her. Wandering what she's doing. What she's thinking. How she's feeling.

Does she care about me like I care about her? Or is this all one-sided?

I don't think it is, but damn. I don't know. I'm an idiot when it comes to this shit. Relationships. I've avoided them like the plague ever since I first became aware of the opposite sex and I'm completely inexperienced and unsure. I wish I had half of Winston's confidence. That motherfucker struts into a room as if he owns it. Hell, so does my baby brother. And while I've had moments of confidence when it comes to my marriage, they're always fleeting.

Well, fuck it. It's time to put everything on the line and see if wifey feels the same way I feel about her.

The moment the server is gone after I order the six-course meal for the both of us, I grab my wineglass and lift it up in a toast, ignoring the fact that I'm still waiting for her answer. "To marriage. To wedded bliss. To us."

She lifts her glass, her eyes wide, her lush lips parted as I hold my glass out toward hers. She taps her glass to mine, the light tinging sound it makes at first contact making me smile. "To us," she murmurs before she takes the tiniest sip.

Hmmm.

Winston didn't lie—the food is delicious. We're first served a chilled soup, followed by a truffle salad with a lemony vinaigrette. The next course is caviar on thin squares of toast, which Charlotte doesn't want to eat.

"The smell makes me want to gag," she murmurs, pushing her plate toward mine, which I gladly take.

Hmmm again.

The entrées start next. Yellowfin tuna with avocado and ginger dressing. Norwegian king crab and rice. A steamed black sea bass, which Charlotte seems to like the best so far. By the time the beef tenderloin course arrives, she's leaning back in her chair, shaking her head. "I'm stuffed."

I take a bite, the beef melting in my mouth. Damn, that's good. "There's still dessert," I remind her after I swallow.

Charlotte shakes her head. "I don't know if I can manage it."

“Oh come on. You’ve done pretty well so far.”

She smiles, resting her hand over her flat belly and all the air sticks in my throat, thinking this is it. The moment where she tells me she’s going to have a baby. My gaze flits to her wineglass, which is still mostly full and has sat untouched the entirety of the meal. I’ve only had one glass myself, sticking mostly to water thanks to me driving, meaning that very expensive bottle of wine I bought has mostly gone to waste.

Worth it to watch Charlotte eat and smile though.

“We keep eating like this, I’ll gain weight,” she says.

“You could stand to gain a few pounds,” I say, hating how her smile fades. “You haven’t been eating much lately.”

And she’s lost weight. It’s obvious. Not that I care what she weighs because the woman is sexy as fuck, but to see her go through this the last few weeks has been...

Concerning.

“I know.” Her tone is solemn. “I haven’t been feeling that well.”

That’s it. That’s all she says. Nothing else about impending babies or pregnancy or morning sickness or whatever else is associated with being pregnant. I’m dying for some confirmation here, but I’m also starting to wonder if she’s not aware of the fact that she could be pregnant.

“You seem to be feeling better tonight,” I tell her, my voice low, my gaze sweeping over her. “That dress...”

“I bought it after we got engaged and never had a chance to wear it,” she admits.

“I like it.” My gaze lingers on her chest, wondering what she’s got on under there. A lacy bra? Something sheer? Maybe nothing at all? Her tits aren’t that big, though they’re a perfect handful. “A lot.”

Her cheeks turn the faintest pink. “Sometimes I wonder if I showed up wearing a plastic bag if you’d still compliment me.”

“I would,” I say without hesitation. “Wearing a bag, a box, a dress, sweats, nothing at all. You’re gorgeous, wife.”

“You’re not so bad yourself, husband.” Her smile is faint and she reaches for her wineglass, bringing it to her mouth and taking a normal sip.

Or maybe it wasn’t so normal. Maybe it was small...

Huh. That wasn’t much confirmation. I don’t think she believes she’s pregnant. Or she doesn’t know. Or she flat out isn’t.

The disappointment that hits me is almost laughable. I should be relieved. Am I ready for a kid with a woman I just married? Hell no. We're young. As Charlotte just so thankfully reminded me, she's not even old enough to drink legally yet.

We're not ready for babies. Fuck that.

"I have a question," I say after our server leaves with some of our discarded plates, promising dessert is coming next.

"What is it?" Charlotte asks.

"I've been wondering all night..." My voice drifts and she tilts her head, frowning.

"Wondering what?"

I remain silent for a moment, letting the suspense build before I finally ask, "What do you have on underneath that dress?"



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Charlotte

OH THIS MAN. He is so flirtatious. Charming. Sexy.

And all mine.

I never did answer his earlier question. If our relationship felt real to me. It seemed too scary, too overwhelming to answer him at the time.

So I didn't.

This question though? I'll definitely answer, and tease him much like he's teasing me.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I reach for my wineglass again, forgetting all about my earlier complaint that wine makes me sleepy. It usually does, but there's a buzz in the air, and a matching buzz just beneath my skin that's making me ultra-aware of my husband. The tension growing between us.

I think he feels it too.

"I would," he says, his deep voice settling in between my legs, making me throb. "Like to know."

"Maybe we should skip dessert," I suggest.

"But I hear it's the best part of the meal."

He smiles and it's devastating to see. Devastating in the best way.

"I'm sure it's amazing but..." I let my voice drift, smiling in return and squirming in my seat.

"Are you offering yourself up as dessert?" He lifts a brow.

Yes, I think. Yes, I will.

"Is that what you want?"

"I'll take you however I can get you, wife. Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. Dessert. Whenever you'll have me," he says.

Oookay. I need more wine. Blindly I reach for my glass, taking another gulp, the alcohol warm as I feel it course through my blood. “Don’t you need to pay?”

“I’ve got cash.” He starts to reach for his wallet when the server appears, setting our dessert plates in front of us. “Can you bring us the check, please?” Perry asks the server, his darkened gaze never leaving mine.

The man bows. “Of course, sir. I’ll be right back.”

“Guess we’re stuck eating dessert,” I tell Perry when the server leaves, my gaze on my plate. There’s a beautifully cut strawberry sitting on top of a cream-colored, dainty cake, all of it lightly drizzled with what looks like a caramel sauce. I grab my spoon and cut a slice, slipping it into my mouth and moaning with pleasure when the flavor bursts on my tongue. “Oh, this is good.”

“Yeah?”

I glance up at the hoarse sound of his voice, finding him watching me intently. I cut into the dessert with my spoon and offer it to him, even though he has his own dish sitting in front of him.

I want to feed him.

He grabs hold of my hand, pulling it closer. His touch gentle as he circles his fingers around my wrist, guiding the spoon to his mouth. His gaze never strays from mine as he wraps his lips around the spoon, a low, rumbling hum sounding from deep in his chest.

Oh. Pretty sure my thong is damp just from the look in his eyes. The sound he just made.

“Delicious,” he agrees once he leans back in his chair, his lips curled in a devious smile. “Not as good as you, though.”

“Perry...” I start, my voice dying when something catches my eye.

A man.

Standing on the other side of the room, near the entrance, as if he’s waiting for a table. I swear it’s *him*.

Seamus.

My heart falls. My head grows light.

“Charlotte.” Perry’s firm voice pulls my attention back to him, my heart beating rapidly. “Are you all right?”

I can’t tell him. I won’t. It’ll ruin the entire night, and that’s the last thing I want. I smile at him, though it feels forced so I let it drop. “I’m fine. Why

do you ask?”

I slide my spoon through the dessert, my hand shaking and I take a deep breath, trying to calm my suddenly frazzled nerves.

“You turned as white as a ghost.” He glances over his shoulder, as if trying to see what I just saw. How does he know? Does he understand me that well? “Did you see something?” he asks once he’s facing me again.

“No, not at all.” I shake my head, marveling at how calm I sound. I’m proud of myself. “My stomach kind of turned. That’s all.”

“Not enjoying the dessert?” His gaze is sharp and he doesn’t wait for my answer. “Be honest, Charlotte.”

I ignore the last comment. “The dessert is amazing.” I take another bite, but it feels like I’m eating sawdust so I choke it down, then take a drink from my water glass.

My gaze returns to the spot where I thought I saw Seamus when the server shows up with the check and Perry pays it, but no one is there. No tall, dark and mysterious man with Seamus’s black hair and soul. It was just a figment of my overactive imagination. He’s long gone.

A sigh leaves through me and I drop my silverware. “I thought I saw him.”

“What?” He glances over his shoulder before returning his attention to me. “He’s not there, babe. He wouldn’t dare follow us and show up in the restaurant out of nowhere. He’s long gone. I’ve already told you this.”

Perry has reassured me more than once that he wouldn’t stick around here and I believe him.

I do.

I refuse to let that man ruin my evening. He’s not even here. He just pops up in my brain every once in a while, reminding me of what he did. What he could’ve done to me.

And I hate it. I hate him.

With every fiber of my being.

“Ready to go?” Perry asks as he puts his wallet away.

“Please,” I say, noting how desperate I sound, but I don’t care.

I want out of here.

Perry guides me through the crowded restaurant, his hand at my lower back, his touch burning through the silky fabric of my dress. I’m hyperaware of his closeness. The way he moves, his scent, his warmth. There’s a short

hallway near the front entrance that I assume leads to the restrooms and I grab hold of Perry's hand, pulling him toward the women's room.

"Where are we going?" he asks, sounding confused.

"Follow me," I say assuredly, not quite sure of what I'm doing yet, but knowing that I need him.

I want to feel him touch me. Hold me. His mouth on mine. His hands in my hair. His hands beneath my dress. My hands slipping into the front of his boxer briefs. I'm filled with the sudden, downright frantic need to have him inside of me. Fucking me. Reminding me who I belong to.

Him.

Thankfully, the bathroom is empty and I tug him into the larger stall at the end of the row, farthest from the door. The moment we're locked inside Perry is on me, his hands resting on my hips, his mouth finding mine. I give in to his kiss, parting my lips, moaning when his tongue strokes mine. Yes, we haven't really slowed down on the sex part of our relationship, but it was starting to feel the same. Always in a bed. Perry always careful, as if I'm made of glass and he doesn't want to break me. I want something new.

Exciting.

A little bit dangerous.

All I can hear is the sound of our lips connecting. Our heavy breaths. Clothes rustling, his hands gathering the fabric of my skirt higher. Higher still. Until his palms are on my bare ass, kneading my skin, fingers teasing the thin fabric nestled between my butt cheeks.

He breaks the kiss first, his mouth sliding down the length of my neck, his teeth nibbling, making me hiss. When he licks me just behind my ear, a shiver steals through me, and I whimper.

"You want me to fuck you in this bathroom?" he whispers, his fingers skimming up and down my ass. "Is that why you dragged me in here?"

"I just wanted to feel you," I admit. "That's all."

"I feel you," he murmurs, his mouth drifting across my jaw, until it's hovering above my own. "I feel you all over me, wife. You live in me, even when we're not together."

My heart trips over itself at his words. Why does he have to go and say something as romantic as that?

There are so many things that I want to do and say to this man, and they all collect in my mind, one on top of the other. Overwhelming me to the point

that I can't speak. All I can do is show him how I feel.

I clasp his face in my hands, bringing it close to mine, staring at him for a moment. His classically handsome features. The lush mouth and sharp cheekbones. The square jaw shadowed with the faintest stubble that prickles beneath my palms. He leans into me, his lips barely brushing mine and my entire body tingles at that initial contact.

Oh, I could drown in him. Does he realize this? Does he understand the power he has over me?

"I don't want to fuck you in a bathroom stall," he murmurs against my mouth, just before he tugs on my lower lip with his teeth. "Let's get out of here."

"Kiss me first," I demand, sliding my hands into his hair. "Please."

He does as I request, deepening the kiss within seconds of our mouths making contact. Tongues tangling, hands wandering, low moans sounding from the both of us. Someone enters the bathroom but I don't even care. I'm too caught up in the taste of my husband. The feel of him. His hard body pressed to mine. His growing erection nudging against my stomach. He wants me. It's as if he always wants me.

I feel the same exact way.

The moment we hear another person walk into the bathroom and enter a stall, Perry goes into action. Grabbing my hand, we leave our stall, hurriedly sneaking out of the bathroom and exiting the restaurant without a backward glance. He approaches the valet, handing him his ticket and the guy takes off in search of my husband's car.

We wait on the sidewalk, the wind even chillier than before and Perry slings his arm around my shoulders, pulling me in close to him. I wrap my arm around his front, absorbing his warmth, tucking my head into his chest, savoring the feel of him.

"You're cold." He kisses the top of my head. "Should've worn a coat."

"And ruin the effect of my dress? Totally worth it to freeze a little." I glance up at him, smiling.

He presses his mouth to my forehead and I close my eyes for a second, savoring this moment. The sweetness of it. How it feels so... right between us.

I don't want to forget this.

Ever.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Perry

MY DEMANDING WIFE requests I take us back to the same parking garage where we had sex in the front seat of the Chevelle. The last night that things felt normal between us. Before McAssdick had to come along and ruin everything.

The garage is mostly empty and I drive until we're on the very top level, the wind knocking against the car once I park it, which says a lot since this thing is a steel beast. In tandem we undo our seat belts and I glance over at Charlotte to find her leaning against the seat, her eyes closed, her head tilted back, exposing the elegant line of her throat. Large, thin gold hoops hang from her ears, the only jewelry she has on besides the diamond on her finger.

I think about other jewels I could give her. More diamonds? Maybe she likes other stones. Emeralds? Sapphires? Rubies? Whatever she wants, I'd make it happen.

"You're staring at me," she says, her eyes still closed.

"How do you know?" I reach for her, tugging on the cloth belt at the front of her dress, untying it slowly.

"I can feel your eyes on me." She smiles. "It's a fake belt."

"Damn." I finish untying it anyway. "How do I get you out of this dress?"

"You want to strip me? I thought you could just flip my skirt up and..."

I pause, waiting for her to continue, but she doesn't. "And...?"

Her eyes crack open. "You know."

Leaning in until my face is in hers, I ask, "You know what, exactly? I want to hear you say it, Charlotte. Tell me what you want."

"You," she whispers, those big blue eyes meeting mine.

“What do you want me to do to you?” I let my hand drift down the middle of her, breezing right between her legs. There and gone in seconds, until my fingers are flirting with the hem of her dress, brushing the tops of her bare thighs.

“Touch me.”

My fingers pause in their exploration. “Where?”

A needy sound leaves her and I smile like the dick I am. But damn, it’s fun making my wife squirm.

“You know where,” she says, mild annoyance in her tone.

“Tell me.” I slide my fingers beneath the skirt of her dress. “Show me.”

“Exactly where you’re going,” she says, dropping her head to watch me. When I brush the front of her panties, a soft hiss leaves her. “Yes. There.”

I keep my touch featherlight, exerting just enough pressure so that she can feel me and want more. Back and forth I stroke the dampening sheer fabric. The heat of her radiates, tempting me to slip a single finger inside her and test just how wet she is, but I keep myself restrained.

“You like that?” I ask, my gaze locked on her pretty face.

Her eyes find mine, hazy and full of desire. “Yes.”

“Is it enough?”

She shakes her head.

“You want more?”

Charlotte nods. “Yes.” She sinks her teeth into her lower lip, her expression coy. I don’t even think she means to look like that. It just comes naturally to her and fuck, it drives me out of my mind.

I press a little harder, causing her eyelids to flicker and her lips to part. I run my finger up and down, watching her, noting the way her breath accelerates. She spreads her legs wider, the scent of her pussy mingling with her perfume and I breathe deep, savoring the smell.

“So pretty, wife,” I murmur, shoving her skirt up with my free hand so I can really see her. Her panties are a nude color, completely sheer and soaked. Unable to resist, I slip a finger beneath the fabric, encountering nothing but creamy wet heat.

A groan leaves her and she arches into my hand, seeking more. I give it to her, rubbing her clit. Searching her folds. Sliding a single finger inside her welcoming body. Then another. Slowly fucking her, my thumb nudging against her clit, the slick sounds filling the close confines of my car.

“Perry,” she bites out when I add another finger, stretching her. Filling her. Her hips move in time with my thrusting fingers, her clit swelling as I continue rubbing it and I’m tempted to toss her into the back seat of the car and eat that pretty little pussy until she comes against my lips.

So I do.

When I withdraw my hand she moans in frustration, then yelps when I grab her as if she weighs nothing and toss her onto the back seat. I scramble after her, readjusting her body so she’s sprawled across the back seat and I reach for her hips, shoving the skirt back up and yanking off her panties so frantically, I feel the fabric rip beneath my grip.

“Oh God,” she gasps as I pull them from her legs, tossing the ruined panties over my shoulder. “You ripped them.”

“I’ll buy you another pair,” I promise, my gaze zeroing in on her pussy, her legs falling open so she’s on complete display. It’s plump and glistening and my mouth literally waters to taste her.

Bending over her, I drop a kiss on her lower belly, noting how her skin trembles beneath my lips. I move lower, her hand coming to rest on top of my head just as I press my mouth to her wet, hot flesh. Her sweetness coats my lips, my tongue and I lick her eagerly, my tongue everywhere as she wiggles beneath me, as if she’s trying to get away.

I clamp my hands on her hips, keeping her still as I eat at her flesh like I’m starving. I devour her, my lips and tongue everywhere, touching every part of her. Both of her hands are in my hair now, holding me close as she grinds her cunt against my face and I suck on her clit, fluttering my tongue on the pulsing nub of flesh. Trying to drive her out of her mind.

It works. She’s coming in an instant, my name falling from her lips as she cries out. I don’t let up on her, concentrating all of my efforts on her clit until eventually she’s trying to shove me away, as if she can’t take it anymore.

Removing myself from her, I lean back against the door, watching her as she tries to compose herself. She’s fucking beautiful, lying there with her legs sprawled and her dress bunched at her waist. Her head thrown back against the seat, her eyes closed, her hair a mess.

I’m half tempted to take a photo with my phone, but she’d probably kick my ass.

Reaching into my pocket, I whip my phone out anyway and open up the camera, taking a quick photo.

Then another one.

“Perry.” Her eyes blaze open, her brows lowered. “Did you just take my picture?”

Nodding, I pull up the last photo I took and stare at it for a moment, then show it to her. “Look at you.”

She grabs the phone, studying the image, her lips pressed together, her cheeks still flushed from the orgasm I just gave her. “Oh.”

“Oh what?” I maneuver myself so I’m sitting next to her, the both of us now staring at my phone. “You’re beautiful.”

Her gaze lifts to mine. “Is that how you see me?”

“As my beautiful wife? Yes. Everything about you is beautiful. Inside and out.” I kiss her cheek. She turns to face me fully and I steal a kiss from her lips and she doesn’t let me leave. She keeps kissing me, her tongue licking at my lips, circling around my tongue, until she finally pulls away, her pupils large as she stares at me.

“I can taste myself,” she whispers. “Is that what it’s like? Going down on me?”

“Better,” I whisper back, a choked sound leaving me when her hand finds my dick, her fingers stroking over the fabric of my trousers. “You’re fucking delicious.”

Her smile is small just before she attacks me and at one point I hear my phone fall to the floorboard with a solid thud, but I don’t care. I’m too enraptured with this woman who is making quick work of my zipper, her hand diving inside, fingers curling around my cock as she starts to stroke. I move away from her so I can lean against the door once more and stretch my legs out and she follows me, shoving at my pants and my boxer briefs until they’re bunched around my knees and she’s bent over me, her mouth so close to the head of my dick it’s as if I can already feel those hot, lush lips of hers around me, sucking me deep.

“Maybe I should take photos of you,” she suggests, her gaze flicking up to mine.

“Go for it,” I tell her, amazed at how normal I sound. Like I’m not about to have my cock sucked by the most beautiful woman in the world. “We can start a scrapbook.”

“A sex scrapbook?” She lifts a brow. “I don’t think we’ll be printing these photos out anytime soon, Perry.”

“Maybe just a private file in the cloud then,” I say, sucking in a breath when I feel her breath waft across the head. Fuck, I could probably come just from her breathing. What kind of weak asshole am I?

“You’re dirty, husband,” she murmurs, her gaze fixated on my cock.

I grip the base, practically shoving it in her face. “Suck it, wife.”

She does as I request, her lips enveloping just the head, her tongue teasing the flared ridge as she lifts her gaze to mine. I watch her, all the air leaving my lungs as I take in the visual of my wife sliding her mouth down the full length of me, taking as much of me as she can. Her mouth is like a fucking vacuum, her cheeks hollowing as she sucks, her tongue licking.

“Fuck,” I groan, unable to look away as she slides those lips up and down, her hand shoving mine away so she can grip the base herself. She strokes and sucks, her gaze finally falling away from mine so she can concentrate on her task at hand but I can’t look away.

I’m too lost watching her. I’m enjoying the fuck out of this, that’s a given, but she’s enjoying herself too. I can tell, by the way she puts her all into it. Her hand squeezing, her lips and tongue working, soft moans falling from her. Humming noises when I’m deep in her mouth that vibrate against my dick.

I’m going to come.

“Baby,” I murmur in warning but it’s as if she doesn’t hear me. She keeps going, too into it to stop and I give her one last warning. “I’m gonna come.”

She nods her encouragement, increasing her pace and within seconds I’m blasting into her mouth and she swallows down the initial spurt, pulling her mouth off of me as her fingers continue to squeeze and stroke. Another trickle of semen leaves me, sliding down the length of my cock, coating her fingers and it doesn’t make her pause in her actions. She keeps going, until I finally release a shuddering exhale, indicating that I’m fucking spent.

Spent as fuck.

Whatever.

Charlotte removes her hand from my cock and brings her fingers to her mouth, giving them a tentative lick before I grab her wrist. Bring her hand to my mouth so I can suck her index finger between my lips.

“Is that what it’s like?” I ask when I pull her finger from my mouth, repeating her earlier words to me. “Sucking me off?”

Her eyes sparkle and she nods, shoving her fingers back into my mouth

so I can give them another lick. "It's even better."

I pull her to me and she removes her fingers from my lips at the last second, my mouth crashing down on hers. I kiss her thoroughly, pulling away when I feel my cock start to come back to life. "We should go home."

She frowns. "You don't want to have sex?"

"What do you call what we just did?" I ask.

"Um, third base?"

I laugh. Kiss her again before I gently shove her away and reach down to yank my pants and boxer briefs back up. "I don't know if you've ever let me get to third base before."

"We've hung out on third base before," she says dryly as she tugs her dress back into place.

"Not like that, wife. Let's go home. Where I can fuck you properly on a bed."

She makes a face. "We always fuck on a bed."

My entire body goes hot at her saying the word fuck in that cultured voice of hers. "Where else do you suggest we fuck then?"

"I don't know. The kitchen counter? The couch? The hallway? The shower?"

I note all of her suggestions for later. I will fuck her in every single one of those places if that's what she wants. "Jasper will lose his shit if he ever finds out."

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him," she says before she crawls over into the passenger side seat. Glancing over her shoulder, she studies me, her eyes dancing. "Come on. Let's go home so you can fuck me against the refrigerator."

Chuckling, I open the back door and get out of the car like a civilized person before I climb back in, settling behind the steering wheel. "Sounds like a plan to me."



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Charlotte

THINGS BETWEEN US finally shifted back to the way they were before Seamus abducted me. In fact, it's better than ever for my husband and I. Our dinner date was like a breakthrough moment for our relationship.

It's not like I've forgotten what happened—how could I? But I realized I can't stress over it all the time. I'm safe and secure in our apartment, with my husband by my side. Jasper is always there. We have extra security in place. If Seamus tried to get to me again, he'd have an extremely difficult challenge ahead of him.

Thank God.

This entire past week with Perry has felt like a dream. He'd come home early from work and take me to dinner. Or we would order in and spend the entire night in bed. Watching movies on my laptop or getting lost in each other.

Mostly getting lost in each other.

The man has magic hands. A talented mouth. Sweet yet dirty words that set me on fire and make me want him to the point of complete agony. My body aches when he's so close and my heart aches when he's too far.

Sometimes, I feel like what Perry and I have is almost too good to be true. We're too happy, which means something awful is going to happen. Nothing good comes to my life for long. I've experienced heartache far too much in my young life, and I should've known it couldn't be like this forever.

Or could it? I'm still not sure.

The weekend was perfection because we spent it together. Monday dawned bright and cold, a winter chill in the air, freezing everything and

covering the city in a sparkling white frost. I watch Perry get ready for work from my spot in bed, the covers tucked around me since I'm naked.

"You should stay home," I say, forgetting all about my wanting him out of my hair only a week ago. "It's too cold outside to go to work."

He's standing in front of the dresser, staring at his reflection in the mirror as he fixes his tie. "It's definitely not too cold."

"I think it is." When he glances over at me, I mock pout. "What? I don't want you to leave."

Forgetting all about his tie, he strides toward the bed, pushing his face in mine. "Be honest. You just want to use my body all day."

Smiling, I grab hold of his tie and yank on it so he collapses on top of me. "You're so smart. You've got me all figured out."

His mouth is hungry when it meets mine and I respond in kind, sliding my hands down his back, untucking his perfectly pressed button up shirt and ruining his look in a matter of seconds. He doesn't seem to care.

Thank God.

At one point he shoves the blankets away from me and I'm lying naked beneath his fully clothed body. I wind my legs around his hips, rubbing myself against his hardening erection. "You're making a mess of me," he murmurs against my lips.

"Sorry." I don't mean my apology at all. I'm greedy and selfish when it comes to this man. I want him all the time. He's become all I think about. Everything I could ever want.

He lifts his head away from mine, his gaze serious. "You feeling okay this morning?"

I've had a couple mornings of nausea, but I get over it fast. The exhaustion is mostly gone. Somewhat. Maybe because now I sleep good at night, secure while wrapped up in my husband's arms.

"I'm fine." I touch his face. Streak my fingers down his smooth cheek. Reach for the front of his shirt so I can loosen his tie. "I think you're going to be late to work."

He studies me, his gaze lingering on my face before it sweeps the length of my body slowly. But he doesn't say a single word.

Nervous laughter leaves me. "What?"

His hand finds my stomach and he rests it there for a brief moment, just before he kisses me thoroughly. Leaving me breathless as he murmurs

against my lips, “Do you think you’re pregnant?”

I go completely still, now actually out of breath. I shove at his shoulders so he has no choice but to meet my gaze and I notice the hopeful expression on his face.

As if he’s not objecting to the possibility of me being pregnant.

“Well?” he asks when I still haven’t said anything.

“I-I don’t know.” I swallow hard, my voice shaky. “I haven’t really thought about it.”

“I have,” he says without hesitation, his gaze skimming over my face. “You haven’t been feeling well. I hear you’ve thrown up a few times.”

I frown, wondering where he heard that.

And then I remember I told Ash at Thanksgiving. Who probably proceeded to tell Winston and Winston told Perry. Meaning he’s been holding onto this for a while now, and never mentioned it to me.

Hmm. My husband can keep a secret when he wants.

“I just figured it was due to stress because of what happened,” I tell him, my fingers working the buttons on his shirt, slowly undoing them, revealing all that smooth skin beneath. The tattoos. The heavy silver necklace is still around his neck, despite no one being able to see it. My rebellious, sexy husband, I think as I trace my finger along the chain.

“You should probably take a test,” he says, delivering the sweetest kiss ever upon my lips. I immediately want another one. “What if you are?”

“I’m sure I’m not,” I say automatically, frowning as I think of all the times we’ve had sex, especially recently, with no condom. I should probably go on birth control. I keep meaning to, but maybe...

Huh.

Maybe it’s not necessary?

A flare of panic rises up inside of me and I suck in a breath, the sound getting Perry’s attention.

“What?” He strokes the side of my face, his voice low and comforting. “What’s wrong?”

“Having a baby, that’s...” Terrifying. Exciting. Nerve-wracking. Awful. Wonderful.

All of the emotions swirl within me and a wave of nausea hits, making me close my eyes as I try to will it away.

“You’re just a baby yourself,” he murmurs. “But I think you’ll make a

terrific mother.”

A smile curls my lips despite the war currently occurring deep within me. “Oh, and you’re so much older and wiser than me.”

“I’ve got a few years on you.” He kisses me before I can argue further and I lose myself in the minty fresh taste of him. The kiss is long and tongue-filled, making me forget my troubles and that wave of nausea that threatened only moments before.

He reaches between us, undoing his belt. I help him along, until his erection is in my hands and I’m guiding him inside of me. He’s fully clothed, fucking me hard, murmuring all sorts of sexy things in my ear that makes my pussy clench around him tightly, the orgasm already hovering just in the distance.

“Don’t forget,” he says as I cling to his broad shoulders helplessly, “who this pussy belongs to.”

“You,” I answer, squeezing my thighs around his hips, sending him deeper.

Perry presses his forehead to mine, sliding almost all the way out of my body before he pushes back inside. A shuddery moan leaves me as he strokes me deep and I keep my eyes closed, though I can feel his gaze on me.

Always watching.

“Open your eyes.” When I do, I see the unmistakable pleasure glimmering in his gaze and my heart soars. “Feels so good fucking you. You take it so well, baby.”

A swell of emotion fills me and I lift my head, my lips seeking his. His compliments, his approval, just does something to me. I had no idea I would turn into this kind of woman who got off on hearing her husband murmur, *good girl* as he fucks her.

But I have. My entire body tenses in wait for those exact words to fall from his lips and I think he knows it.

That’s why he holds back. Saves it until I really deserve it.

I clench my inner walls around his shaft, squeezing him inside of me and he smiles, an achy groan sounding from deep in his chest. “Trying to pull it out of me?”

Nodding, I do it again, my hands finding his ass and pressing hard, pushing him as deep as I can get him.

“Such a good girl,” he whispers, making me tremble. “Always takes it so

well.”

I do. I take it from him every single time and it always feels so good. I had no idea it could be like this.

Perry comes first, and I don't even mind. My own orgasm hits me next, small yet powerful, leaving me shuddering beneath him, softly moaning as he pushes inside of me again and again. Hard and harder, until I feel that blast of semen fill me and he falls on top of me, careful not to exert his full weight.

“Fuck, Charlotte,” he murmurs, kissing my neck. These are some of my favorite moments with my husband. After we have sex, when he's soft and vulnerable and our bodies are still connected. “You feel so damn good. About make it impossible for me to leave.”

“Then don't,” I say, kissing him.

He cuddles with me for only a few minutes before he reluctantly pulls away, sliding off the bed and heading for the connecting bathroom. I hear him turn on the water. The shuffle of clothing as he puts himself back together and eventually, he returns to the mirror, studying himself. “I should probably change.”

A sigh leaves me when I notice the wet spot on the front of his pants. “I guess I did mess you up.”

He glances over his shoulder, grinning at me. “You did. But I don't mind.”

I wish I could capture this moment. The way he's looking at me. His gaze heavy with emotion. Love? Perhaps.

I think I'm falling in love with him.

No, wait.

There's no thinking involved. I just know.

I'm in love with him. I'm in love with my husband.

Remaining in bed while he hurriedly changes his clothes, I eagerly accept his goodbye kiss. “Get a pregnancy test,” he tells me. “Have one delivered. You can take it tonight after I get home. Or you can take it before I get home. Whenever you want.”

Oh God, that's right. He thinks I'm pregnant. Well...

Frowning, I try to think back to the last time I had my period and I don't remember.

Oops.

“Have a good day,” he murmurs after he kisses me, his deep voice pulling

me from my thoughts. “You have plans?”

“Lunch with your sister,” I tell him, distracted by the possibility that I am most definitely pregnant. “And maybe some shopping afterward.”

“Have fun,” he says, pulling away so he can smile down at me. “Tell Tins I said hi.”

“I will.” I smile at him, wondering if I’m smiling at the father of my future child. “Bye.”



I STOP AT a nearby drugstore and pick up a pregnancy test, stashing it in my bag before I climb into the hired car I use whenever I have to go somewhere and head for the restaurant where I’m meeting Tinsley at. My thoughts are preoccupied with visions of sweet cherub babies and me getting fat. Perry cuddling our newborn child with blonde hair and big blue eyes. I don’t know why, but I can only envision him with a baby girl. A sweet little cooing infant who stares at her daddy as if he’s the best thing she’s ever seen.

I feel you girl, I mentally say to my imaginary baby. I feel the same way about him.

By the time I’m entering the busy restaurant, I’m a bundle of excited nerves, grateful when Tinsley spots me first and practically runs toward me, wrapping me up in a big hug and squeezing me close.

“You look so good,” she tells me as she withdraws, grabbing hold of my hands and shaking them lightly. “I swear, you’re glowing!”

That only confirms my earlier suspicions of being pregnant. Pregnant women *glow*.

Of course, so do women who just had passionate sex with their husband and made him late to work, so there is that to consider.

We’re seated immediately and we both order strawberry lemonades as we check over the menu, making small talk. I’m not that hungry and decide to have a fall-themed salad with grilled chicken, dried cranberries and a balsamic dressing while Tinsley orders a cheeseburger with fries.

“You made me feel a little guilty with your choice, but screw it,” she says after the server takes our order and menus. “I’m in the mood for something bad for me.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” I reassure her, momentarily regretting my choices.

A cheeseburger and fries sounds delicious. And if I’m pregnant, what does it matter if I eat something like that every once in a while?

Really, why does it matter at all? We should all be able to indulge here and there, whenever we want.

Tinsley smiles, leaning across the table. “How’s married life with my brother, hmm?”

This is where it gets tricky. I don’t want to share too intimate details with her. I view her as a friend, but come on. Perry is her brother. If I say something bad—not that I have anything bad to say at the moment—she might report back to him. And if I say something too, ahem, raunchy, she won’t want to hear it.

Because he is her brother. The last thing I want to know are sexual details involving any of my brothers.

Gross.

“It’s good,” I say, remaining neutral. “We’re getting along well.”

Understatement of the year.

“I’m so glad,” she says, looking pleased, even by my simple response. “Perry is a great guy. You two seem happy together.”

We do? I was quiet at Thanksgiving. Even a little distant. Not that I meant to be. I was still dealing with my recent trauma, and not feeling that great either. “We’ve gotten used to each other pretty quickly.”

That’s not a lie. As time goes on, we do get along better and better, and I’m used to having him in my life. Perry is fun. Sweet. Easy to talk to. Sexy. Really good at the sex thing.

Really good.

Actually, I can’t imagine him not being a part of my life.

And I don’t want to either.

I watch as Tinsley checks her phone, her expression changing as she reads whatever text message or notification she was just sent. She lifts her gaze to mine, her eyes full of apology. “I think a guest is going to drop in on our lunch.”

I frown, my mind awl with the guest possibilities. “Who?”

“My mother.”



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Charlotte

MINUTES AFTER TINSLEY'S announcement, Caroline Constantine enters the restaurant, and like magic, things happen. People stare at her as if she's a celebrity while the employees surround her. Someone takes her coat. The hostess leads her to our table. The server is waiting for her, eager to take her drink order. By the time the three of us are left alone at our table, I'm watching my mother-in-law in wonder.

I forgot how much influence she has. The Constantine family is a formidable bunch, and their matriarch is the most formidable of them all, with Winston a very close second. Most people tremble in their presence, unsure of how they're going to react or what they might say.

Not me. I'm a Lancaster. In status, our family is higher on the social ladder. All of that generational, old money wealth is hard to rise above. In our intimate circles, Lancasters conquer all. Constantines are new money.

But Caroline Constantine is a bit of a legend, and at this particular restaurant, they know it.

"Such a fuss," Tinsley says to her mother, shaking her head.

Caroline leans over to drop a kiss on my cheek and give me a one-armed side hug before she settles into the booth seat next to her daughter. "You know I don't ask for that kind of treatment."

"Please. You love it," Tinsley teases, glancing over at me. "She'll pretend it's too much, but if they completely ignored her, she'd be angry."

"That is not true," Caroline admonishes, then immediately laughs. "Actually, it is true."

All I can do is smile. My mother-in-law loves attention, while I prefer to hide in the shadows. I always have, even when I was a kid. Out of the four of us, I was the quiet one. The one who didn't want to be noticed. I preferred it that way.

Until I didn't. And then attention only got me in trouble.

Not anymore though. I bask in Perry's adoration.

"Did you already order?" Caroline asks once she's settled, reaching for Tinsley's glass of water and taking a quick sip.

"Yes," Tinsley answers. "But I know the waiter will rush back to take your order, so hold tight."

Caroline contemplates me, her gaze assessing as it roves over my face before dropping. As if she's trying to examine me with her eyes. "You look well. Better than you did at Thanksgiving."

Tinsley jabs Caroline in the side with her elbow. "Mother! Stop being mean."

"What? It's the truth. I was worried for you, Charlotte. You were so pale and thin. Now you're practically glowing." Her tone is full of approval.

There's that glowing word again. I totally agree. I feel like I'm glowing. And at Thanksgiving, I did look pale and thin. Caroline isn't trying to be hurtful. She's just stating facts.

"After what happened..." I let my voice drift and both Tinsley and Caroline give me sympathetic looks. "I had a difficult time bouncing back."

"Perry is very patient," Caroline says. "I'm sure he took good care of you during your time of need."

"He did," I say.

"Most likely to the point of hovering a bit too much," she continues.

I can't help but smile. "He was... overbearing sometimes."

"The Constantine men can be."

The server arrives and takes Caroline's order before leaving us alone once again.

"Tell me, darling. I'm curious." Caroline leans back against the seat, her lips curled into a small smile. "How long were you involved with Seamus McTiernan?"

I go quiet. So does Tinsley. I don't want to talk about my ex-lover with my mother-in-law, but I'm sure Caroline isn't going to give me much of a choice in avoiding the conversation.

“Not very long,” I finally say.

“Mother,” Tinsley says in warning, sending me a sympathetic look.

“What exactly does that mean? A couple of days? Weeks? Months?” Caroline’s brows shoot up as she waits for my reply.

I’m going to have to choose my words carefully. I don’t want to say the wrong thing, or give too much information. This is a topic my husband and I don’t discuss often. And when we do, he doesn’t want to hear the dirty details.

“A few months, if that,” I answer. “He was my professor. I was part of a study abroad program in Paris. He taught a class on the history of French architecture—specifically Parisian architecture.”

“Oh, do you want to be an architect?” Tinsley asks, most likely trying to change the subject.

“I still don’t know what I want to be. I definitely didn’t know then either.” I shrug, faintly embarrassed. I was raised not to worry about my future or a career. I’d make someone a great wife and mother someday. That’s all I amounted to with my family—specifically my father. He didn’t understand why I wanted to study French architecture and at the time, I didn’t really know why either.

I was just looking for something—anything—that piqued my interest.

“You’re still young,” Caroline says. “You don’t need to decide yet.”

“I’ve considered going to college. Applying to NYU or Columbia maybe? I’m not sure yet.” My goals sound so high, even to me. Could I get in? I have no idea. My grades were good in school, but I couldn’t wait to graduate. Even if I got into a college, would I enjoy it?

I’m not sure.

“You should,” Tinsley says. “Maybe you could figure out what you want to be then.”

“I don’t know about that.” The doubt in Caroline’s voice is obvious. “I thought we’d already figured out what you’re going to do with your life. What you’re going to be.” She pauses for only a moment. “You’re a Constantine now, and with that comes responsibilities. It’s practically a full-time job.”

“Doing what?” I ask, seriously confused.

“We’re a part of society, and we need to make appearances. Not only on your husband’s arm, but on your own as well. You should get involved with

various charities. Sponsor some luncheons. Support Perry and Halcyon and the things he believes in,” Caroline explains. “Plus, there’s the future to think of—such as becoming a mother to my grandchildren.”

“Mom.” Tinsley rolls her eyes. “Not every life decision someone makes revolves around you.”

“Well, plenty of them do, and when it comes to Charlotte’s current choices, they affect me. Eventually.” Caroline’s penetrating gaze makes me feel like she can see inside of my brain, and I don’t like it. Not one bit. “Nothing happened between you two when you ran off with Seamus? He’s a very handsome man. Persuasive, I’ve heard. Quite charming.”

Tinsley’s face turns so red I’m afraid she’s going to stroke out. I might be internally screaming, but hopefully Caroline doesn’t notice. I keep my composure, my voice calm when I answer.

“He was rather... persuasive when I first met him,” I admit. “But he’s firmly in my past. I’ve changed. He doesn’t hold me enthralled like he used to.”

Caroline’s smile is serene. “Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

Her line of questioning makes me think she wanted to trap me into admitting I still have a thing for Seamus.

“And I suppose babies are on the horizon.” I take a deep breath, exhaling loudly. I don’t want to speak for Perry over something we haven’t thoroughly discussed, but I also want to appease his mother. “Not sure when though.”

“You’re both still young. You have time. And you were only just married.” Caroline inclines her head toward me. “I’ve noticed he’s quite taken with you already, which is surprising.”

I try not to be offended by her remark, but her words still sting. “Why is it surprising?”

“He was so resistant to marrying you at first, when he’s usually cooperative. He always does what I ask.”

A soft moan leaves Tinsley and I glance over at her in time to see her shaking her head, her expression pained.

I don’t think she approves of her mother’s line of questioning.

“You were asking him to change the course of his life forever,” I point out. “I’m not surprised he was resistant. I was too. I didn’t want to marry him.”

“What changed your mind, hmmm? I’m curious.”

Telling her the truth could be potentially damaging. I wanted to escape my house. Get away from my father once and for all. Perry was willing to help me. He showed kindness when everyone else treated me as if my feelings didn't matter.

And that touched me. Despite not being interested and telling myself getting married was a bad move, I did it anyway, and now I don't have any regrets.

Not a one.

"Perry did," I say, which is the truth. "He grew on me."

I can tell Caroline is pleased with my answer. "He's a good boy, my son."

"He loves you."

"And he's grown to care for you," she returns. "I didn't have much faith in your union, I must admit."

I'm not surprised, but I don't say that out loud.

"The two of you have proven me wrong, and I like that." She narrows her eyes, watching me carefully. "If I was a betting woman I would say you're pregnant, from that rosy glow I see on your cheeks, but I don't want to speak out of turn."

Tinsley bursts out laughing. "When do you ever care if you're speaking out of turn? You open your mouth and say the wrong thing all of the time."

"I do not," Caroline says, sounding offended.

"You do." Tinsley glances over at me. "Help me out here, Charlotte."

"No way." I shake my head, smiling. "I'm not getting involved in this argument."

"She's a smart girl," Caroline says. "And if you want to remain smart, Charlotte, take heed of these words: remain loyal to my son, and you won't have any problems. When Perry loves, he loves hard. I don't want to see you hurt him."

Wait a second. Is she threatening me? Does she know something I don't?

"I take my marriage vows very seriously," I tell her, my gaze never leaving Caroline's. "I plan on being a loyal wife to your son for the rest of my days, as long as he'll have me."

Her smile is small, her blue eyes, so like Perry's, sparkling with pleasure. "Perfect. I'm glad we understand then."

"We do," I say firmly.

The server arrives at our table with our lunches and the subject is

changed, but I can't help but think of what Caroline said about Perry. That when he loves, he loves hard.

And I want that. I want to be loved and cherished by Perry. I want to belong to him, and to his family. I can be a Constantine.

Just watch me.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Perry

I'M ON THE phone, my gaze stuck on the clock and wishing I could get the hell out of here when my brother bursts into my office without knocking and immediately starts talking.

“We found him,” Winston announces, his expression grim.

I sit up, covering the phone to glare at him. “I’m on the phone.”

“Get the fuck off. Now. We found *him*,” he repeats. “Seamus McTiernan. Myron tracked him down.”

“Wait a minute.” I hold up my index finger, returning my attention to the financial investor I’ve currently got on the phone. “Hey, something came up. Can I call you back? Okay, thanks. Yes. Sounds good.”

I hang up the phone, devoting my full attention to Winston, who is currently pacing in front of my desk. “Start at the beginning. Myron found McDicklick?”

Winston pauses, rearing his head back at my insult. “Huh. Creative, I’ll give you that. Yes, he found *McDicklick*, as you call him. You’ll never believe where that motherfucker’s at.”

“Manhattan,” I toss out there because come on. That makes the most sense. Why run away when you can hide in plain sight? Isn’t that how the old saying goes? Or something like that?

“Close.” He pauses for effect. “Brooklyn.”

I actually hate that I was right. Knowing he’s been so close the entire time makes my blood boil. I clench my hands into fists, wishing the asshole was in my office as we speak so I could sock him in his stupid face.

“I assume Myron is tailing him and we know where he’s at this exact moment.” I reach for my phone, about to text my wife but I reconsider it.

No need to freak her out.

Not yet.

“Yeah.” The irritated look on my brother’s face is obvious. “And that’s where the problem comes in.”

Frowning, I lift my gaze to Winston’s. “What do you mean, problem?”

“One of Myron’s guys was following him—and then lost him. Here. As in, he seemed to be heading straight for our building.”

“What the hell? Why? To confront us? *Me?*” I shake my head, glancing toward the window, out at the city spread before us. “Please. I wish he’d show his face.”

“What, so you could destroy it?” He shakes his head. Rubs his chin. “Truthfully, I wouldn’t mind a go at him either.”

My brother may treat me like shit sometimes and we argue on occasion, but he’s always, without a doubt, got my back.

“Exactly.” I turn to face Winston once more. “I hate that he’s in Manhattan. And that your old man detective’s employee is so inept that he lost his ass. What the fuck is up with that?”

“I told Myron to fire the son of a bitch, but he said he couldn’t. He explained to me that the guy who lost him is his son.” Winston’s expression is grim.

Shit. That family tie is hard to break.

I should know. Every time I’ve screwed up and given my brother a chance to fire me, he never does. Though I haven’t done something like that in a long time.

“He needs to hire someone else then,” I mutter, reaching for my phone, ready once again to warn Charlotte, but maybe I should tell it to her face instead. She doesn’t need to be sitting at home stressing about this. “I should leave. Go home to Charlotte and tell her that asshole is trying to come around here.”

I need to protect her. Watch over her and never let her out of my sight.

“She’s not home,” Winston says nonchalantly.

I push away from my desk and stand, grabbing my phone and shoving it into my pocket, irritated at Winston’s response. “And how the hell do you know where my wife is?”

“She’s with our sister, that’s how I know. And our mother,” Winston mutters, shaking his head. “I’ve got security on all three of them. They had lunch, and now they’re shopping. With two guards following their every step.”

Charlotte did mention she was going shopping with my sister today, and like the ass I am, I completely forgot. “Mom is with them too?”

Winston nods. “She crashed their party. Called me when she was headed to the restaurant.”

“How did she—” I clamp my lips shut, not bothering to finish my question. I’d rather not know how she figured out Tins and Charlotte were together. “You sent security to follow them then?”

“Fuck yes, I did. The moment I got off the phone with Myron after he told me about McTiernan, I called them in. You’d do it for Ash if you found something out before I did,” Winston says with a shrug.

True. He’s right. But he always finds out stuff first. I never do.

“Thanks for watching out for her,” I say gruffly, meaning my wife. “I don’t trust that asshole.”

“Neither do I. He might do just about anything to get close to her,” Winston says grimly. “Maybe even hurt our mother or sister.”

I clench my hands into fists. “I hate him.”

“I know.” Winston pauses. “Don’t tell her about this.”

“Don’t tell who? My wife?” I don’t want to keep secrets from her. She’d be pissed if she found out, and I want us to be open with each other. “I have to, Winny. She deserves to know.”

“Sometimes what we don’t know can protect us. Why scare her?”

“Maybe now is when we call in the authorities,” I suggest.

“And let them turn this into a complete fiasco? Give McTiernan a leg up so he goes into hiding? I don’t think so.” Winston shakes his head.

I think of all the murderous plans I had for Seamus McTiernan—that is the first time in a while that I’ve thought of his entire name without turning it into a derogatory insult—and I don’t know what I would want to do first.

“If I caught him myself, I might want to kill him,” I say.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did.” Winston shrugs.

I gape at him, shocked he’s going along with me. “You were the one who said I couldn’t murder anyone. You didn’t want to see me end up in jail.”

“Still don’t want to see that, but is it really necessary to bring the police

in? They will only make things messy. And you seem a little more under control when it comes to this asshole. You'll show restraint. At first."

At first. Until we take him somewhere more private, more remote.

And then I'll shoot the fucker right between the eyes. Or bash his head in with a club. Maybe I should stab him in the chest, right where his heart should be? Choke him out?

The possibilities are truly endless, and every single one of them appeals. I'm anxious to take him out once and for all.

Looking forward to having the chance.

Though that's not what Charlotte wants. I hate that Winston asked me not to tell her about McTiernan. She deserves to know what's happening...

"You should go. Be at the apartment when your wife gets home," Winston encourages, his voice pulling me from my thoughts.

"Yeah, I'm out of here." I'm about to pass my brother by as I exit the office when I pause right in front of him, giving in to my impulses.

I hug my brother.

"Thank you, Winny," I tell him. "For watching out for my girl."

He slaps me on the back then pushes me away. "I'm putting an extra security watch at your building. I don't trust that motherfucker."

I grin at him, pleased that he would do that for us. "Me either. Though I dare that ass to try and walk into my house. I'll fuck him up."

"In front of your wife and the overprotective butler? I'd love to see you try."

Shit. He's kind of got me there.

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BY THE TIME I'm entering the apartment, relief smacks me square in the chest when I spot my wife sitting on the floor, petting Doja who's sitting in front of her.

"You're a good girl, right? Such a good, pretty girl," Charlotte croons, rubbing the cat under her chin. Doja is purring so loud I can hear the low hum. It's a nice sound.

And a nice sight. One I'd love coming home to every night—my beautiful wife safe and secure, spending time with her cat.

Leaning against the wall, I cross my arms and study them, wondering if she can sense I'm in the room with her. I always seem to feel her presence when she shares the same space with me.

Can she feel me?

"Why aren't you saying anything?" she finally asks, her back to me.

There's my answer. She does sense me.

"I like watching you with Doja."

Charlotte glances over her shoulder, frowning. "What's wrong?"

"What do you mean?" I push away from the wall and approach her. "Why do you ask?"

"You look upset." She turns, keeping her focus on the cat. "You sound it too."

My wife is too perceptive. "Rough day. Found out a few things."

"Like what?"

I decide to join her on the floor, sitting across from her with Doja in between us. The cat rubs her face against my knee and I scratch the top of her head. "Hard to explain."

"Really?" Her gaze finds mine, skepticism in her tone. "I'm a smart person, Perry. I can understand plenty of things."

I want to tell her so damn bad. Fuck Winston's warning. He might keep things from Ash, but I refuse to keep anything from Charlotte.

"I never said you weren't smart." I'm startled when Doja walks onto my lap and curls up, her eyes falling closed. Funny how I used to think I hated cats. "The private detective found him. He's here. First spotted in Brooklyn. Was making his way to the Halcyon building when they lost him."

I don't need to explain who *he* is. As my wife just said, she's smart. She understands plenty of things.

"They lost him?" Charlotte sounds as disgusted as I feel. "Did Winston fire them?"

I chuckle. "Guess it was the detective's son who lost him. Hard to fire your family."

"True that," she says with a sigh. She finally lifts her gaze to mine, and I get lost in her pretty blue eyes for a moment. "I spent the afternoon with your mother and sister."

That snaps me back to reality. "I heard."

She frowns. "How did you hear?"

“Winston put security on all three of you the moment he found out you were together.”

“Oh.”

“There will be extra security tailing you from now on until they find him,” I say, my voice firm. I don’t want her to argue with me. It’s going to happen whether she likes it or not. “We’ve got two guys at the front door right now. Both are around six-foot-five and weigh two-fifty.”

Her lips curl into the smallest smile. “Wow. I’m impressed.”

“This isn’t a laughing matter, Charlotte.” Her smile fades. “He’s not going to stop trying to get to you. Something needs to be done.”

“What exactly are you suggesting should be done?” she asks carefully.

I avert my head, wishing I could tell her the truth. That I want to strangle this motherfucker with my bare hands.

Actually, she knows that’s my truth. I just hate bringing it up in front of her all the time.

“Perry.” I turn to look at her when she says my name. “What exactly do you think should be done about Seamus?”

“Don’t say his name,” I bite out. It enrages me, the sound of her voice saying that asshole’s name. I want him banished from her memories. I want him gone.

For good.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Charlotte

I'M NERVOUS, AND have been since I took that test earlier. Perry's mood isn't helping matters either. I want to work up the nerve to tell him about it, but he seems too angry to hear me.

He has every right to be angry, though. He hates Seamus and knowing that he was in the vicinity of Halcyon earlier has set Perry off.

Sets me off too. He's back. Maybe he never really left, which is horrible to contemplate. I feel more secure, knowing that extra security has been put in place, but still.

It's nerve-wracking, the thought of Seamus lurking around. Watching us. What if Perry tries to hurt him—or something worse? What if Seamus tries to hurt Perry?

What if Perry tries to kill him?

I can't stand the thought of him being arrested, not when there's so much on the line. I can't lose him. I need him now more than ever.

A shiver moves through me and I try to tamp it down, but Perry notices.

He always notices.

“Hey, come here.” He removes Doja from his lap, who yowls in protest before running away, and he pulls me into his arms, holding me in his lap instead.

I curl up into him, my head pressed against his chest, his steady heartbeat calming my anxiousness. I grip his shoulder and turn my face more into his shirt, breathing in his scent. Sitting like this, absorbing his strength, gives me so much comfort, I feel overwhelmed.

Close to crying.

A tear slips out, sliding down my cheek. Uh-oh.

Guess I actually am crying.

“Hey.” Perry slips his finger beneath my chin, tipping my face up so I have no choice but to look at him. “Why are you crying? Don’t worry, wife. I won’t let that fucker get close to you ever again. He’ll have to kill me first.”

Oh the tears really start streaming down my cheeks now. Why did he have to go and say something like that?

“Charlotte, come on. Don’t cry.” He sounds in agony as he pulls me in so my head is pressed against his shoulder. I turn so I can brush a kiss to his neck. “Your tears fucking kill me, baby.”

Him using the word baby for some reason makes everything ten times worse, and I can’t help it...

I start sobbing.

He holds me for a while and lets me cry, my tears soaking the front of his dress shirt, but he doesn’t seem to mind. I cling to him, my mind awl with all the things. Having lunch with his mother was tough. Shopping with her even tougher. She’d throw out a sly not-quite-an-insult here and there. Passive-aggressive behavior has never been something I enjoy—who does?—and Caroline Constantine is an expert at it.

I begged off shopping less than two hours after we started. On the ride home, Tinsley sent me an apologetic text, saying we needed to get together another time, just the two of us. I responded quickly, agreeing with her, but I don’t know.

Pretty sure I’ll stick to online shopping only for Christmas. That excursion was just exhausting.

Perry rubs my back, his touch gentle. Comforting. My sobbing starts to subside, until I’m sitting there sniffing, pulling away slightly so I can wipe my tears away with my fingers.

“I know it’s upsetting to hear he’s still around, looking for you,” Perry finally says. “But I’m here, and I’ll always be here, Charlotte. I’m going to protect you no matter what. You’re the most important thing in my life and I’ve told you this before, but it needs to be said again. I protect what’s mine. No matter what.”

Lifting my head, our gazes meet, and I say the first thing that comes to my mind.

“I’m pregnant.” *And I’m terrified you’re going to do something stupid if*

you run into Seamus.

But I don't say that last sentence. Now is not the time.

He blinks, his lips parting as if he's going to say something but nothing comes out. He just stares at me, as if he can't quite believe what I just said.

"Did you hear me?"

Slowly he nods, his arm tightening around me as he swallows hard. "Are you sure?"

"I took a test right when I came home."

"And it took you this long to say something?"

"You had a few things to say first." A sigh leaves me and I touch his cheek, the stubble lining it prickling my palm. "We're going to have a baby, Perry. We're going to be parents."

We stare at each other for a long, quiet moment, absorbing what I just said.

"Are you upset over it?" he asks carefully, his gaze searching. "Is that why you were crying so hard just now?"

Am I upset? I don't know. More like I'm just... overwhelmed. A lot has happened these last few months, and it's happened so quickly. Engaged. Married. Angry sex. Passionate sex. A baby on the way.

From the outside I'm guessing we look like the picture-perfect couple, and there are things I'm happy about with my marriage to Perry. He's kind. Funny. Sexy. Sweet. But nothing about our relationship is normal.

I didn't even know this guy six months ago. Now he's my husband and the father of our future baby.

"There's been so much that's happened," I finally say. "Today has been... exhausting."

He tucks me closer, his mouth at my forehead as he murmurs, "Let me take care of you."

"You always take care of me, Perry," I whisper, closing my eyes. "Everyone does. I can take care of myself too, you know."

"I know you can." He grabs hold of my shoulders, pulling away so he can stare into my eyes. His expression is deadly serious. Probably the most intense I've ever seen him. He's giving me serious Winston vibes right now, which is a little eerie, not going to lie. "I've told you this before too, but you're so fucking strong, Charlotte. And you're going to be a fantastic

mother. I know you will. You're smart and compassionate and protective. Our baby is going to be so damn lucky to have you as a mom."

The tears turn back on, just like that. His sweet words mean so much.

"Just—promise me you won't do anything stupid," I tell him in between my sniffles. "Please, Perry. If you find Seamus, don't let your anger blind you. Call the police. I can't lose you. Not now, with a baby on the way. I need you."

He hesitates, and I shake my head, trying to fight off the disappointment. I need to know I matter. I need to know he'll do anything to protect me and our baby. Even if that means he has to let Seamus slip through his fingers.

"I don't know if I can promise that," he finally says.

A ragged sigh leaves me and I pull away to glare at him. "You're being selfish."

"I'm being protective," he corrects, annoying me further. "He doesn't deserve to live, not after what he did to you."

"You're willing to throw everything we've built aside to destroy him and feed your ego. That's it. This isn't about me, or the baby." My voice rises. "If it was about me, about us, you'd do what I'd ask."

"Come on, Charlotte. You have to know I've fallen in—"

I press my fingers against his lips to prevent him from saying it. "Think about what you're going to say. Make sure you really mean it, and that you're not like my parents. They love me out of obligation. Because I'm their daughter. And they only approve of me when I'm the proper reflection of them. I don't need that kind of love in my life—I have enough of it. I want real, everlasting love, Perry. I want you to forget about yourself and your needs, and think about me. Just me. And our child. I want to matter to you, like you matter to me."

He stares at me, anger flickering in his gaze. The truth hurts, and while I'm not trying to make him mad, I need him to see what I want.

I need him to see how I feel. I will set aside all of my fears and assumptions to prove my love for him. I'm willing to put him first.

Is he willing to do the same for me?

A male someone clears his throat and we both turn our heads to find Jasper standing behind the couch, an uncomfortable expression on his face as he clutches his hands behind his back. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to know if there's anything you might need before I retire for the evening."

“We’re good, J,” my husband answers for the both of us. “Should let you know there’s a couple of security guards at the door right now. They’ll be there for a while, I’m thinking.”

“Very well, sir. Have a nice evening.” Jasper bows before he turns on his heel and exits the room, Doja getting up and following after him.

“He’s a good dude, your Jasper,” Perry says, glancing down at me, all the anger that was in his gaze earlier gone. “You okay?”

I nod, closing my eyes when he kisses my forehead yet again, his lips lingering. I suppose we’re going to pretend I never said all that only a few minutes before. “Are *you* okay? I just gave you some major, life-changing news.”

When he pulls away, I notice the corner of his mouth lifts up in a faint smile. “I already had my suspicions.”

Right. He definitely did. “This morning... how did you know?”

“After you told Ash you weren’t feeling great at Thanksgiving, she expressed her concerns for you to Winston, and they wondered if you could be pregnant. Winston asked me if it was a possibility,” he explains.

Oh great. My health has become the family gossip. “And what did you tell him?”

“I said the possibility was there. We’ve been careless with birth control,” he reminds me.

We definitely have. In Mexico, I got mad over it. Eventually, I sort of forgot, too caught up in my need for this man.

That’s how I always feel about him. Too caught up. Making me forget... everything. But him. And me. Together.

I like that about him. About us.

“Our mothers will be happy,” I say.

“Did you tell my mom? When you were with her this afternoon?”

I slowly shake my head. “No. I didn’t even officially know I was until an hour ago. Even if I did, I wouldn’t tell her first. I’d want you to know, since this is our baby.”

His smile is slow, the glow in his eyes intensifying. “You’re pregnant.”

“Yeah.” My smile matches his. “I am.”

“Fucking unbelievable. I’m going to be a dad.” He raises his voice. “I’m going to be a father!”

I laugh at his excitement. “Are you happy?”

He basically dumps me off of his lap and stands up, then bends down to grab me, holding me in his arms as he starts for the hallway that leads to the bedroom.

We've given up on all pretenses of having separate rooms. He stays in mine almost all of the time now. Only going into his when he needs something out of the closet or dresser.

"What are you doing?" I loop my arms around his neck, clinging tightly. Though I'm not worried he's going to drop me. He has a firm hold.

"Taking you to bed and stripping you naked," he murmurs, bending down to drop a kiss on my smiling lips. "We should have sex. To commemorate this moment."

I laugh, trying to ignore the niggling worry in the back of my brain. That we've already forgotten something major.

Like the fact that Seamus is still out there. Still lurking around. Still hoping to get at me. Or even at my husband.

Or our child.

And Perry still believes he has to take care of him his way, and damn the consequences.

Now that I'm pregnant, I have even more to lose. If that means I need to remain a hermit in our apartment until Seamus is found, then so be it. I'll do what it takes to keep our baby safe.

But what about Perry? He'll still have to go to work. Seamus was headed for Halcyon before they lost him. What did he have planned?

What did he want to do?



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Perry

I KEEP MY baby news to myself, wanting to savor it for a few days with just my wife before we let the whole world know. It's kind of exciting, having a secret that only Charlotte and I share.

And I'm not keeping it a secret because I'm ashamed of the fact that we're having a baby, or that I want to keep it from my family for whatever reason. That's not the case. People are going to be happy. My mother is going to be beside herself at the news of another grandchild. My siblings—specifically my brothers—are going to think I've lost my damn mind that I'm this excited about being a dad at such a young age.

I think of my own father, and how I wish he was still alive so he could see me now. Not like my old man ever considered me a major fuck-up, but my parents put their all into Winston and blew me off as the second son with no responsibilities. I fell into that role perfectly. The good time guy with no worries, even as a kid.

It's a shame my father never got to see me grow up into the man I am now. Working at the business he started, side by side with my older brother, who respects me. I worked damn hard to gain that respect too. I earned it.

I've earned a lot of things. Instead of just going through life with no plan, I was thrust into a marriage that I first believed I didn't want.

Turns out I didn't mind that either.

Didn't mind. Two words that don't even come close to describe my feelings for Charlotte. That woman belongs to me. With me. She makes me feel territorial. Possessive. I look at her and immediately want to touch her.

We're in a room together with other people and I want to put my hands on her, making my claim. Letting everyone know that she belongs to me.

I'm in love with her. I have to be, and I tried to tell her, but she wouldn't let me that night, when she announced her pregnancy. She said some tough things—things that made me angry, but I've turned her words over and over in my mind ever since she said them, and I've come to realize she's right.

I hate McPrickface with everything I've got, but I can't let my anger destroy what I've got with Charlotte. When he's found—and he will be—I'll let the authorities take care of him.

No matter how badly I want to finish him off.

We haven't discussed that conversation again, but I'm going to tell her how I really feel about her soon. Maybe even later tonight.

It's a Saturday night and we're getting ready for the annual winter holiday party at Halcyon. All employees and family are invited. Hell, Winston even invited Charlotte's family and the majority of them are coming, save for her youngest brother who's still in school.

Her parents are showing up, which is major. Something I warned my wife about a few days ago, after Winston's assistant let me know that they RSVP'd. I'm not about to let her come upon her parents at the party unprepared. I'm not that cruel.

I'm standing in front of the mirror in my rarely-used bedroom, buttoning up my light gray dress shirt when my wife strides into the room.

"I have a tie for you to wear. It matches my dress," she announces as she heads toward me.

My gaze snags on her in the mirror and I swear to God, my heart fucking stops. She's absolutely stunning in a red strapless dress. It molds to her body perfectly, showing off her smooth skin and of course, the skirt is short. I can't stop looking at her legs.

"What the hell are you wearing?" I practically growl.

She stands next to me at the dresser, checking herself out in the mirror, her eyes wide and full of mock innocence. "You don't like it?"

I realize the fabric is covered entirely with red sequins, and they catch the light with her every movement. Even when she's breathing, they twinkle and shine. Her tits look barely restrained, as if they'll pop out at any moment and I turn to face her, really taking her in.

"I love it," I admit gruffly. "That dress should be illegal."

“I’m too exposed, aren’t I?” She faces the mirror, her bottom lip caught between her teeth as she contemplates the dress. “I don’t normally go for strapless, but I was feeling daring. Maybe it’s too much.”

It’s definitely too much, but I don’t say that, because she’s insecure and I want my wife to feel strong.

Beautiful.

“It’s not too much.” I move to stand behind her, watching as she sets the tie she was holding on top of the dresser. I rest my hands on her silky-smooth shoulders, caressing her there. She tilts her head to the side, watching me touch her. “You look fucking gorgeous.”

“Is it too sexy?” The question is laden with worry.

“So fucking sexy,” I say, letting my approval shine. I lean in, brushing her golden hair to the side so I can press my lips against her neck. “I’ll be proud to walk into the party tonight with you by my side.”

Her smile is faint as I wrap my arm around her middle, and she settles her hand over mine. “I figured this could be my last hurrah before I get fat with a baby.”

“You’ll never be fat.” I lift away from her neck to kiss her temple, careful not to mess with her hair. “You’ll be full of my baby.”

Those possessive feelings wash over me, the same ones that always do when I’m with my wife. Can’t wait to see her belly grow with our child. I’m going to be proud as hell, walking around with her on my arm, knowing I’m the one who did that to her.

“Such a caveman,” she murmurs, studying our reflection. “You put that tie on and we’ll match perfectly.”

“We match pretty well already.” I can’t wait to show her off tonight. To our employees, our business associates, our families. Celebrating our year, and the holiday season. It’s the one party Winston goes all out for and he spares no expense.

Helps that it’s our mother’s favorite party as well and she pushes Winston to spend *all* the money to ensure it’s a lavish affair.

Charlotte eventually pulls out of my embrace and reaches for the tie, turning to face me. “Want me to put it on?” She raises her brows.

“Please.”

I like it when my wife makes a fuss over me. She loops the tie around my neck, tucking it under my collar and tugging so the ends are even before she

starts to put it together. I lift my chin, giving her room as I smile down at her. When she's finished, she steps away, looking pleased with the results.

"You look good."

"So do you."

I'm filled with the sudden urge to bail on the party. Keep her at home, where she's safe. She's laid low the last couple of weeks because of McStalker and lucky for him, he hasn't come back around. Yet again, he's gone off the grid like a ghost. I don't know who's protecting that asshole, but it's working. We've not had a single sighting since the time Myron's inept son spotted him near the Halcyon building and promptly lost his ass.

Wait, I lied. We know who's protecting him—the Morellis. I wanted to march into the Morelli mansion last week and demand to know where he's at, but Winston wouldn't let me.

More like he talked me out of it, but the plan still lingers in my brain, just dying to turn it into reality.

Then I look at my sweet, pretty wife who's goddamn radiant tonight, I might add, and I realize I don't want to do anything to put her—us—at risk. I want her safe.

I need to stay safe too. For Charlotte.

"Are we ready to go?" she asks, her sweet voice knocking me from my thoughts.

"Yeah." I snag her hand, pulling her in for a quick kiss. "Let's do this."



THE PARTY IS in full swing by the time we enter the ballroom of the hotel where we hold the annual party. There's a woman sitting behind a piano on a small stage playing Christmas music, the gentle tinkling pleasant among the dull roar of the chatting crowd. New York's wealthiest elite are in this room. If a bomb went off right now, many of the titans of Wall Street, real estate investors and various politicians would be erased from the planet.

I smile at a local senator and pause when he asks to meet my wife. I introduce him to Charlotte, hating the way the asshole leers at her, and steer her away from him as quickly as I can.

"You don't like him?" Charlotte asks as we move through the crowd.

I pluck a glass of champagne from a passing server's tray, taking a healthy sip. "He was staring at your tits."

She glances down at herself, tugging on the front of her dress to try and cover them. "I should've worn something else."

"No. You look stunning." I rest my hand at the small of her back, leading her toward some coworkers who are currently clustered together. "I'm the jealous fuck who doesn't want anyone looking at you so that's on me."

Her smile is giant as I introduce her to my employees—most of them I consider my friends. They're all friendly and not a one of them stare at my wife's chest so they all passed the test.

Lucky fuckers.

It goes on like this for hours. Lots of smiling and introductions and plenty of hand shaking. We eat some food—a few appetizers that make me hungry for something more substantial. We speak to my mother, who watches Charlotte with an extra sharp gleam in her eye.

"You two seem well," she says to me at one point, while I'm shoving a stuffed mushroom into my mouth. "Your wife is glowing with vitality."

I almost choke on my food, grimacing as I force it down before I drink from my champagne glass. "She's looking extra beautiful tonight," I rasp in agreement.

Her shrewd gaze meets mine. "She's not drinking."

My mother is too smart for her own damn good. "She's not twenty-one yet."

"That hasn't stopped her before." She studies me for a moment, not saying a word and out of habit, I start to squirm. "There's something you're not telling me."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I say, keeping my expression neutral.

The silence between us grows and I almost want Charlotte to come save me, but she's too busy talking to my sisters. Besides, Mom would turn her appraising gaze on my wife and get our little secret out of her. I can't risk it.

"I'll wait for the announcement at Christmas," Mother finally declares, leaning in to brush a quick kiss to my cheek. "Congratulations, darling."

I watch her walk away, exhaling loudly before I take yet another big swig of my champagne.

Probably should slow down, but fuck it. Haven't gotten this drunk in a

while and we're at a private party. I won't get shit-faced, but I can let loose. Have a little fun.

"So is it true?"

I turn to find Ash standing in front of me, wearing a sleek black dress with her hair up. She has completely transformed into the perfect, elegant Constantine wife, and it's a good look for her.

"Is what true?"

"That you're going to be a daddy." Her eyes fill with a devilish sparkle and I almost choke on my champagne.

"Shh." I glance around the room, but no one is paying any attention to us. "Who told you that?"

"I told Winston that at Thanksgiving, and I know he mentioned it to you. Has it been confirmed yet?" She lifts a delicate brow, waiting for my answer.

What is with these Constantine women? They know everything.

It's fucking scary.

"Yeah. Okay. It's true. But we haven't told anyone yet, so keep it quiet." I point at her. "You can't even tell Winston."

Ash's mouth pops open. "What? I tell him everything."

"Not this. You're keeping it a secret. Until Christmas. Then we'll make our reveal." Before she can protest, I take off, moving through the crowd, stopping to chat with various people I know, which is a lot. Winston will be making a speech soon, and I'll have to go up there with him, along with our mother.

This is the first time I'll have to make a speech as well and I'm a little nervous. Should probably lay off the champagne now. I discard the half full glass on a table and catch Winston's eye, who waves me over.

"Speech is happening in ten minutes," he tells me once I'm standing next to him. "Are you ready?"

I salute him, something I haven't done in a while, and blame it on the alcohol. "Yes, sir."

He glares at me. "This isn't a joke. You're representing the company and our family. Maybe you're not ready to make this speech."

I stand up taller, getting pissed. "I'm more than ready. And I've been practicing the damn speech I wrote for weeks. I could probably recite it in my sleep."

The approval on Winston's face is immediate. "Okay then. Good to

know. Meet me on the right side of the stage in ten minutes.”

“Got it.” I nod, then make my way to the men’s room.

I need to take a piss.

After I handle my business and wash my hands, I’m about to leave the bathroom and go in search of more of those appetizers when the door swings open.

And in walks Seamus McFuckinAsshole.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Charlotte

“**C**HARLOTTE, YOU LOOK beautiful. Married life must be treating you well,” Grant greets me, pressing a polite kiss to my cheek as I murmur thank you before he turns to the beautiful, dark-haired woman standing by his side. “Alyssa, this is my sister, Charlotte.”

Alyssa sticks her hand out for me to shake, a pleasant smile on her face. “It’s a pleasure. Grant speaks so highly of you.”

“He does?” I laugh when my brother scowls. “It’s nice to meet you, Alyssa. Are you two...”

I wave a hand between them, causing Alyssa to send a questioning glance in my oldest brother’s direction.

“Fucking? Yes,” Grant mutters.

Alyssa slaps him in the chest, glaring at him before she returns her attention to me. “Excuse his rude behavior. And yes. We’re—together.”

Well, well, well. My brother has sworn since I was like... ten that he would never settle down with a woman. Our parent’s marriage discouraged all of us from seeking long-term relationships.

But here’s Grant, settling in with a woman. A woman who’s not afraid to say her mind either, which I like. Probably what he needs too.

“Congratulations,” I tell Alyssa with a laugh. “He’s a difficult one to pin down.”

She laughs as well, the sound pleasant. “I can’t argue with that.”

Ooh, I like her.

Grant aims his nearly permanent scowl in my direction. “Stop trying to lure her to your side. She’s mine.”

“I’m not trying to steal your girlfriend, Grant.” His forehead creases at my use of the word girlfriend. Oh, this is fun. “I’m just trying to be honest with her.”

“She knows what I’m about.” He slips his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to him. A very public claiming, which I find interesting. Reminds me of my husband. “And she hasn’t run away yet.”

“Takes a lot more to make me run away.” Alyssa glances around the crowded room before her gaze returns to mine. “This is a wonderful party. Thank you for inviting us.”

“Oh, you’re welcome. I’m glad you could make it. It’s my first year attending as well,” I admit. “My husband and I were only just married.”

“I heard. Congratulations,” Alyssa offers with a warm smile.

“Thank you.” I glance over at Grant, who’s nodding his greeting at a man passing by. I’m sure there are plenty of people here tonight my family knows. “Where’s Finn?”

“Somewhere around. I saw him a few minutes ago. Crew couldn’t make it. He’s stuck at school. Studying for finals,” Grant explains. “He’ll be home for Christmas though.”

My heart pangs at hearing his name. I can’t wait to see my baby brother. I miss him terribly.

“Saw our parents when we first arrived.” Grant actually mock shudders. “Got away from them as quickly as possible.”

I’m surprised by my brother’s honesty, especially in front of his new girlfriend. We don’t ever really talk about our parents, and how they did a number on all of us.

“I haven’t spoken to them in quite a while,” I admit. “Not since…” My voice drifts and my gaze cuts to Alyssa.

“She knows,” Grant says quietly. “I told her. You can trust her with anything Charlotte. Alyssa won’t say a word.”

“Besides, I signed an NDA.” Alyssa’s expression is somber and I stare at her in shock.

Grant practically growls. “My God, woman. She’s teasing you, Charlotte. I would never have her do that.”

Nervous laughter escapes me and Alyssa reaches out, grabbing one of my hands.

“I’m sorry. The conversation was feeling so serious, but that was

probably inappropriate. Please forgive me,” Alyssa says somberly.

“It was actually funny—and it wouldn’t surprise me in the least if Grant had his previous girlfriends sign an NDA before actually becoming involved with them. Sounds like something he would do,” I tease.

“It’s not right, that they haven’t spoken to you,” Grant says, steering the conversation back to the original topic. “And it’s not your fault, what that man did to you.”

“Ah, but it is. Don’t you see? I got involved with him in the first place, and came back from Paris an absolute disgrace.” I slowly shake my head. “They blame me for getting abducted. What that could’ve done to the family name if it ever gets out.”

“That’s just terrible,” Alyssa says, shaking her head. “How is it your fault that you were abducted?”

“Since you’re not a member of our family, you shall never know what it’s like, being a Lancaster. Having the bloodline,” a familiar male voice says from behind me.

I briefly close my eyes, bracing myself. It’s my father. When I open my eyes, I see Grant glaring at him, clenching his jaw, his mouth thinned into a straight line.

Turning, I smile at my father, who doesn’t react. My mother is standing right next to him, her arm curled through his. A united front always for the public—when they actually go out in public together, which is a rare occasion.

“Charlotte. I’m not sure if red is your color,” Mother says, her eyes wide as she takes me in, her upper lip faintly curling.

I fight the crashing disappointment from her words and can only nod, pasting on a polite smile.

“Jesus Christ, would it kill you to offer up a compliment to the girl every once in a while?” Grant says, his voice full of disgust.

Alyssa doesn’t chastise him for saying it either.

“Where’s your husband?” Father asks me, his voice gruff. “Want to thank him for the invite.”

I glance around the room, searching for his familiar dark blond head, but he’s nowhere to be found. “I’m not sure. Probably talking to someone. Being the perfect host.”

“Isn’t this more his brother’s business?” Mother asks.

“Perry has taken on a bigger role at Halcyon,” I say, feeling defensive. Love how she writes both of us off. “And he’ll most likely get a promotion at the beginning of the year.”

No one says anything until Grant finally opens his mouth.

“Good for him.”

My parents just stare blankly at me.

Funny how enthusiastic my mother was before. Pushing and encouraging me to marry Perry. Excited over the dress fittings and the planning. She put the entire wedding together for me while I walked around in a daze, in total shock over marrying a complete stranger. She wept at our wedding. Told me I was making the right choice and was a beautiful bride.

The moment the most recent incident happened with Seamus, my father expressed his disgust and she sided with him. That was it. Case closed.

And now here I stand with my parents, the both of them watching me as if I’m a stranger. I should be used to this, but it still hurts.

Tremendously.

“Ah, look. It’s a cluster of Lancasters.”

Caroline approaches, pulling each of my parents into a hug. Even Grant, who goes reluctantly before he introduces her to Alyssa. We all make small talk, my parents saying more to my mother-in-law than they bothered saying to me and I can’t help but stand there, clutching my glass of water so tightly I feel like it might shatter at any moment.

Where is Perry? I could really use his support.

“What are you drinking?” Caroline asks me.

“Water.” I take a sip, my throat suddenly dry. What does it matter, what I’m drinking?

“Hmm.” Her smile is knowing, as if she’s in on my secret, and I remember what she said to me when we went shopping a few weeks ago. “Do your parents know?”

“Know what?” my father asks flatly.

Caroline smirks before she announces, “I’m fairly certain Charlotte is pregnant.”

My mother gasps. Grant’s mouth hangs open. Alyssa’s face is full of sympathy—I’m sure at Caroline putting me on blast—and my father says the worst thing of all.

“Huh. Are we sure your son is the father?”

My cheeks are so hot, they feel as if they could catch fire. Swallowing back all the insults I want to spew, I whisper, “Excuse me.”

Before I dash away from them, my vision blurry with tears.

How dare he say such a thing? Why would he think it’s not Perry’s child? I cannot believe he said that.

I just... I can’t.

But then again, I can.

He probably suspects I went back to Seamus of my own free will, which hurts. Though I suppose if he doesn’t know the full story, and is looking at it from the outside, I can almost see how he’d assume such a thing.

Doesn’t he know me though? Understand how I operate? It’s so incredibly painful that he would think such a terrible thing about his only daughter. He has no faith in me. I’m nothing but a stupid girl who finds herself in trouble everywhere she turns.

That’s what he thinks, at least. But no more. I am not that girl. I’m a married woman with a husband who supports me and a baby on the way. I’m confident in my position as Perry’s wife and mother of his future child.

I wish my parents could see that. And believe in me.

I find a quiet corner behind a towering Christmas tree twinkling with white lights and take a deep breath, trying to compose myself. I would kill for one of those glasses of champagne they’re passing around like candy right now, but I can’t drink any alcohol. I don’t want to hurt the baby.

Perry’s baby.

That I even have to clarify that in my own thoughts is mortifying.

Blinking, I carefully dab at my eyes with my fingertips so I don’t ruin my makeup. Releasing another shuddering breath, I try to calm my racing heart, resting my hand on my chest and swallowing hard. If Perry were here, he’d know what to do, what to say to calm me down. He’d probably want to insult my father and defend me in an argument, so for missing out on that, I’m glad he’s not here. We don’t need to cause any family drama at the holiday party.

But I need him.

Desperately.

“Excuse me.” Winston’s voice suddenly comes over the speakers and everyone’s head swivels in the direction of the tiny stage, where Winston is currently standing next to the piano, a spotlight shone upon his golden head,

his hair gleaming in the light. He's scowling out at the audience, his gaze searching as he scans the room and I wonder who he's looking for.

When I spot Caroline joining her son on stage, I realize my husband isn't standing next to him, which was the original plan for tonight. Both brothers were going to make a speech, while their mother looked on proudly. Perry has been practicing his speech for weeks.

I glance around, hoping to find him but he's nowhere in sight.

And that's not like him.

He wouldn't ditch Winston. This night—this speech was important to him.

Winston's gaze finds mine and he sends me a questioning look. I can only shrug at him in return, my head swiveling left, then right.

Still no Perry.

"I was hoping my brother would join us, but it looks as if he's preoccupied. Most likely making a business deal in the bathroom," Winston says to tepid laughter.

Huh. Maybe that is where he's at. He did drink an abundance of champagne earlier this evening.

Pushing my way through the crowd, I head for the restrooms, in search of my husband. If I get to him in time, I'm sure he'll be able to make his speech and no one would be the wiser that he almost missed it.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Perry

NORMALLY I'D RELISH finding myself in this situation. Ready to head back out, only for my archnemesis, my biggest enemy to stroll into the bathroom like no big shit. As if he belongs here. I'd sling an endless string of insults at him and sock him square in the fucking jaw, sending him to the ground. His head would bounce off the cold tile floor and I'd jump on top of him, grab the front of his shirt and slam the back of his head into the floor again.

And again.

I'd take great pleasure in bringing this asshole pain. I'd probably take even greater pleasure in ending his life, knowing he'd never be a problem in our lives again.

None of that happens though. Not when the guy I hate more than anyone else in the entire fucking world is standing in front of me with a gun clutched in his right hand, that very hand twitching nervously, his finger resting on the trigger.

Fuck me.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I ask, my voice calm yet edged with steel.

Seamus grins and it's downright maniacal, I swear. Straight out of a horror movie. "I was invited."

"Bullshit."

"Watch your mouth." He rubs the outside of his thigh with the barrel of the gun and I promise myself right then that my eyes can never leave it. "You Constantines are so damn stupid, with all of your extra security you put into

place. Yet all a person has to do is say, 'I'm here for the Halcyon party,' and they let any old loser in."

I remain quiet while Seamus laughs, the sound grating and I consider lunging for him. Knocking the gun out of his hand. Would I be fast enough? I'm younger. Probably quicker too. But all it would take is his finger pulling the trigger and he could get me.

Can't risk it. I'm about to be a father. I need to stay alive for my baby's sake.

And my wife's.

We both remain quiet until I can't take it anymore. I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin.

"What do you want?" I bite out.

"Your wife. She belonged to me first, you know." His gaze turns distant as I assume his memories of the time he spent with Charlotte hit him. I try to ignore his use of the words, she belonged to me first.

Well she belongs to me now, asshole.

"You were merely assigned her," he continues. "While she chose me."

How the hell does he know this? That our marriage wasn't real at first? Who told him? A Morelli? Hell, did Charlotte tell him?

No way. She wouldn't do that.

"Your relationship is meaningless." His dark gaze alights on me, his focus returning. "She may have married you, but she doesn't actually care about you. It's in name only."

I consider telling him it's changed, but I can't let on that she means something to me. That would be a mistake.

"She willingly left with me that day, you know," he continues, his smile cruel when he aims it at me.

I make a dismissive noise. "Bullshit. You *terrify* her, you psychotic asshole. She would never leave with you willingly."

He blinks at me, appearing confused. What, is he shocked I would defend her? I'm not like her family, who have such little faith in Charlotte. I know her, better than anyone else.

Better than him, that's for damn sure.

"You just don't like losing," I toss out at him.

His face turns red, his eyes blazing with fury. "You're damn right I don't like losing. I love that girl. We were ripped apart by her father. He *destroyed*

me. I lost my job. My career. I went home to nothing and had to start over. All thanks to Reginald Lancaster. Then he just gives his only daughter away to you, when you've done nothing to deserve her. Nothing."

Wait a minute—so his real beef is with my father-in-law? You don't cross a Lancaster. They're all ruthless, and they learned it from their father.

I may be reckless, but I'm ruthless too. Especially when it comes to the woman I love.

And I love her. She's going to have my child. We're going to be a family. I'll be damned if I let anyone—especially this asshole—get in the way of that.

"He's here you know," I say, my tone nonchalant. Like we're just two friends hanging out in the bathroom, having a conversation.

And where the hell are any of our guests? Why aren't they coming in here to take a piss, for Christ's sake?

Seamus frowns. "Who's here?"

"The man who destroyed your life." I pause. "Reginald Lancaster."

"He's here?" When I nod, he continues, "At your party?"

"Yes. And I agree with you." This isn't a lie. "He's an asshole."

"He deserves to be destroyed," Seamus says enthusiastically. "I want to be the one who makes him take his last breath."

Well shit. Good ol' Seamus sounds serious. "I'll take you to him."

He frowns, his dark brows drawing together. "You want to help me? Why would you do that?"

"I don't like him either." I take a step forward. Then another. "He doesn't deserve to be alive."

Forgive me for saying such a thing out loud, because I don't know if I mean it. He's an asshole who's put his hands on my wife, but he is her father. I know Charlotte's feelings for him are confusing.

Seamus's entire demeanor eases, the gun hanging from his fingers loosely. "If you're trying to use reverse psychology on me, it's not working."

I come to a stop, my gaze still on the gun. I'm closer now. I could definitely take him. "I'm not trying shit with you. I actually agree, as much as I hate to admit it. Old man Lancaster is a horrible human being. He destroys lives on a daily basis and doesn't give a damn about who he hurts."

"You marrying Charlotte destroyed me as well," Seamus admits, his voice rough. "Her father did that on purpose, marrying her off to anyone else

but me. I'd written him endless emails. Letters. He never responded to me."

That's a new factoid. "What do you mean, you've written him?"

"I begged for his forgiveness. I told him I loved his daughter with every cell in my body. That I wanted to make things right between us." A desperate edge fills Seamus's voice, and his eyes are shiny. Almost as if he might start crying. "But he didn't respond. I tried to write to Charlotte too, but the letters were all returned."

Who writes letters? Why didn't he just try and call her from a burner phone?

"Her father kept me from her, and then gave her away to someone else. Someone who doesn't even know her. You." His fingers tighten around the gun and he raises his arm, aiming it straight at me. "First, I need to destroy you. And then I'll take out her father. Only then can Charlotte and I be together."

I don't even think. It's as if every rational thought I've ever had leaves me as I jump toward him, my hands out, knocking the gun from his grip. It drops to the floor with a heavy clank, skidding across the tile and Seamus falls to his knees, scrambling to retrieve it.

I drop on top of him, pinning him beneath me, my hands everywhere as I try to grab hold of his wrists. He struggles beneath me, his feet grappling, his upper torso bucking in a desperate attempt to hurl me off of him.

Fuck that.

Pressing my knees to the floor, I rise up, straddling him, my fist finding his jaw. A groan leaves him when I make contact and I do it again.

Then again.

Until it's all I can do. I'm hitting him repeatedly, blood streaming from his mouth. His nose. His eyes begin to swell. He's pleading with me to stop.

And still I hit him.

Every blow is for the fear he caused my wife. What he did to her, he can never redeem himself for. She may never recover from the trauma he put her through, but I will do my best to make sure she never feels unsafe again. I will protect her from evil.

Especially the evil this man perpetrates.

"What the fuck? Perry!"

The door swings open, but I don't look up. I'm too intent on destroying this motherfucker. All the fight has left him. He doesn't move. He's not even

groaning anymore, and I know if I don't stop now, I'm going to kill him.

Hesitating, I think of Charlotte, and what she's said to me. How I can't take any risks when it comes to Seamus. I need to be there for her.

And our child.

Hands grab at the back of my suit jacket, slipping under my armpits before yanking me off of Seamus McFuckedup. I roar my disapproval, struggling to get out of their grip when I realize it's Finn Lancaster who pulled me off of him.

"Calm down, bro," he says as he pushes me away from Seamus. So hard I run straight into the wall with a thud. "Fuck, you messed him up."

I lean against the wall, breathing hard, my vision blurry and stained with red. "I want to kill him."

"Clearly." Finn kicks at Seamus's shins, making the man groan in agony. "But you don't want to go down for murder."

"I don't care what I go down for," I mutter, though I don't mean a word of it.

Not really.

If I'm in jail, then I can't see my baby be born. I can't watch my baby grow. I can't make more babies with my wife, and create a life with her that's worth living.

That's the only reason I don't return to Seamus and finish the job.

The only one.

Finn flies into action, locking the bathroom door before he pulls out his phone and calls someone. From his low murmurs, I figure out he's talking to Grant, and I watch him as I try and calm my racing heart. My pounding head.

"He's coming right now," Finn says once he ends the call. "He's grabbing Winston first."

Swallowing hard, I check the time on my phone, remembering the speech I was supposed to give. I bet my brother is pissed at me.

I kind of don't give a shit, considering I had another problem to take care of.

Within minutes there's a rapid knock on the door, the unmistakable sound of both Grant and Winston's deep voices coming from the other side. Finn lets them in, the both of them stopping short in front of the crumpled waste of a man lying on the floor.

Winston's gaze finds mine first. "What the hell happened?"

I wave a hand at Seamus. “He said you invited him.”

For once in my life, I think I completely shocked my big brother. He’s speechless.

“Is this the asshole who kidnapped my sister?” Grant asks, his voice dark. His expression, menacing. His teeth are clenched so tight, I’m surprised he can speak.

“Yes,” I bite out.

Grant marches over to Seamus, standing above him for a moment, his hands on his hips as he studies him for a moment. He glances at each of us before he leans over and spits on him.

Right on his face.

Seamus groans, rolling over on his side and Grant nudges him with his foot, a sneer on his face.

Satisfaction curls through my blood and I realize in that moment, I like Grant Lancaster.

A lot.

“What do you want to do with him?” Winston makes a disgusted face as he contemplates Seamus.

I study Seamus as well, curled into a crumpled little ball on the floor. “We should do what my wife has wanted from the very beginning.” I meet Winston’s gaze. “Call the cops.”

“Is this why you didn’t show up for the speech?” Winston asks me.

Nodding, I wipe the back of my hand across my mouth, surprised to see blood streaking across my skin. He must’ve got in a few hits. I didn’t even realize. “Sorry about that.”

“You were taking care of business,” Winston says. “Totally understandable.”

I can hear the respect in my brother’s voice and damn, that means a lot. It’s something I’ve sought for pretty much my entire life. My brother’s respect and admiration. I wanted to be just like him growing up, and even though I know we’re two completely different people, I’ve learned something tonight.

We’re both Constantines to our very core.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Charlotte

I'M IN A constant state of worry as I move through the crowded room in search of my husband. I never did make it to the bathrooms. I was stopped by one person. Then another. Until it felt rude, that I was trying to leave while Winston was giving his speech. And I'm not a rude person.

So I stayed and listened to it, silently fuming over my husband's absence. He's a grown man. He knew when he was supposed to give his speech. How dare he not show up and support his brother?

The worry hit me once Winston was finished. It truly isn't like Perry to just disappear during an important part of the evening. His brother and the business mean more to him than most anything else. He would be here.

Something is wrong.

Where could he have gone?

Determined, I finally manage to leave the ballroom to go in search of my husband when Finn miraculously appears, a serious expression on his face as he reaches for me. He grabs hold of my shoulders, stopping me.

"I need to find Perry," I say, trying to jerk out of his hold. I hate how worried I sound.

"I know where he's at."

I blink up at him. "What? Take me to him."

"I don't know—"

"Take me to my husband," I interrupt. "I mean it, Finn. I need to see him. Now."

A ragged exhale leaves him and then he leads me to a short corridor where the bathrooms are, and when I spot my husband leaning against the

wall with Winston standing in front of him, I swear my knees buckle in gratitude.

“Perry!” The relief that sweeps through me is almost overwhelming when he lifts his head, his beloved blue eyes meeting mine.

I pull out of Finn’s grip and run toward my husband, nearly knocking him over when I throw myself at him. He wraps his arms around my waist and holds me close while I rain kisses all over his face, pulling away when he winces.

“You’re hurt.” I study his face, noting the bruise blooming on the side of his jaw. The cut on his lower lip. He looks like he’s been in a fight. “What happened to you?”

“Your husband had a little altercation just now,” Winston says as he approaches. “Don’t worry. The police have been called.”

“Who did you fight with?” I ask Perry.

His expression is grim as he admits, “Seamus.”

My lips part, but no sound comes out. Seamus was here? At the party? And he fought with my husband?

“He had a gun,” Perry continues. “He wanted to kill me. And your father.”

“What?” The word is a breathless gasp and before I can say anything else, Perry pulls me back into him, my face pressed against his chest. I try to process what he just said, barely listening to what the men are talking about.

The cops and Seamus and the gun and how terrible the security was. How easily he got into the party. How he wanted to kill my father for ruining his life. How he tried to get in contact with me right after I left Paris, but my father prevented him from doing so.

Seamus sounds as if he was deranged.

“You hurt him?” I ask when our brothers enter the bathroom, leaving us alone. They won’t let Perry go in with them, which I’m okay with.

I need him to stay here with me.

Perry nods, gently brushing the hair away from my face. I notice his red and ravaged knuckles and wonder what Seamus must look like. “He was going to kill me. He had a gun. I knew I had to fight for my life. It was either him or me.”

“Oh, Perry.” The tears start to fall, which is something I’ve noticed comes far too easily lately. I blame my chaotic hormones. “I’m so sorry.”

He frowns. “Why are you apologizing?”

“It’s all my fault.” My voice catches on a sob and I turn into a blubbering mess. “The only reason he wanted to kill you is because of me. I’ve brought nothing but trouble into your life since I walked into it.”

“That’s not true.” He grasps either side of my face, his touch firm as he tilts my head back, forcing me to stare into his eyes. “You brought me so much more than that. You brought me light. You brought me laughter. You brought me sexual frustration and lust and so much more. You showed me what it’s like to connect with a woman at the deepest level. You brought me Jasper and Doja—” A watery laugh leaves me. “—and you brought me... you. You brought me love, Charlotte. You brought me a baby. *Our* baby.”

I gape at him, overwhelmed by his sweet words. The earnest expression on his battered face, his raw and broken hands cradling my cheeks as if I’m his entire world. Maybe I am. “What are you saying?” I whisper.

“I’m saying that I’m in love with you, wife.” He leans in, pressing his forehead to mine, his gaze never straying. “I love you.”

Oh. I’m shaking. Overwhelmed by my feelings for this man who has grown to mean so much to me in such a short amount of time.

“I love you too,” I admit, my voice soft, my heart swelling. “So much.”

His smile is faint, his eyes glowing as he dips his head, his mouth finding mine in the sweetest, softest kiss. “I would do anything for you, Charlotte Constantine. Anything to protect you. To prove to you that you’re mine. I hope you know that.”

“I do. I do. I love you, Perry.” He kisses me, swallowing my words, my emotions. Until we feel so completely entwined, I don’t know where I end and he begins.

I’ve never felt so connected to a person before. Just as I’m his, Perry is mine. I belong to him.

And he belongs to me. With me.

“Hey lovebirds.” That sardonic tone can only belong to my brother, Grant. “Hate to break up your meaningful moment, but the cops have just arrived. And shit is about to get chaotic.”

Grant isn’t lying. Within seconds, there are police everywhere, not doing a great job of being discreet even though Winston asked them not to disrupt the party, which is still carrying on in the nearby ballroom. But anyone who’s spilled out of the room can see the police swarming the vicinity. Two of them

pull Perry away from me to question him and Finn stands with me, going into protective older brother mode, which I appreciate.

I don't want to talk to anyone. I don't even want them to see me.

Paramedics arrive on the scene a few minutes later, heading straight into the bathroom so they can assess the damage. I turn to Finn the moment they disappear, concern filling me.

"Do you think Perry will get in trouble?" If he's arrested, I don't know what I'll do.

Finn slowly shakes his head. "He was defending himself. Seamus McTiernan was a known threat. Perry had to do what he could to fight for his life. The man brought a gun to a fist fight. He had the advantage from the start. Your husband did what he had to do."

I nod, my gaze stuck on the bathroom door. Police are in there too, and God knows what they're seeing, or what they're saying. Is Seamus coherent enough to tell them what happened? Is he making up lies to make Perry look like the bad guy?

Such a terrifying night, and I'm worried over everything that happened, yet I still can't believe what Perry said to me—but then again, I can. We've grown so close in only a few months, and I'm still in awe of the fact that he loves me.

I love him too. So much. No other man understands me like my husband. He believes in me, and I believe in him too.

Our marriage may have started out a lie, but it's turned into something real and beautiful.

"Hey." Grant approaches, his stride brisk. "Get her out of here. They're about to escort Seamus out of the bathroom."

"Is he able to walk on his own?" I ask, not out of concern for Seamus, but for my husband.

The worse off Seamus is, the worse the police might be questioning Perry.

"Barely," Grant admits. "They're putting him on a stretcher. The paramedics are taking him to a hospital to have him thoroughly checked out. He might be admitted for the evening so they can keep watch on him, but the moment he's deemed healthy enough to be discharged, they're arresting him. He'll be under police watch while in the hospital."

Thank God. He deserves to be arrested and thrown in jail for what he's

done. “Okay.” I nod. “What they really need to do is send him back to Ireland.”

“Seamus might have to do time here first. Then they’ll send him back. Or maybe they’ll deport him and wash their hands of him. I don’t know,” Grant says, his voice serious. “He would’ve taken you, you know. His plan was to eliminate everyone who kept him from you. Your husband and our father were blocking his way.”

A shudder moves through me and I rest a hand over my stomach almost protectively. “I think he’s mentally ill. I hope he gets help.”

I mean what I say. I want him to heal—far, far away, in Ireland. Our relationship wasn’t even that meaningful. Based on a crush that turned into a quick affair before I found out what he did to me. He still won’t take responsibility for that. He ruined everything.

I truly believe Seamus McTiernan just wants what he can’t have.

“Hey.” I turn to find my husband standing behind me and I go to him, everything inside of me going calm when he wraps his arms around me and holds me close. “Come with me. I don’t want McAsshole to see your pretty face.”

Perry pulls me into an empty conference room, the door quietly closing, shrouding us in darkness. He reaches for me once more and I go to him, clinging tightly, never wanting to let him go.

“What did the police say?” I ask, afraid of his answer.

“They just questioned me about what happened and I told them the truth. The gun was right there, lying on the floor. They bagged it for evidence.”

A shiver moves through me at the mention of a gun. “What if he would’ve shot you?”

“Oh trust me, wife. I thought about that. I decided to take the risk anyway.” I glance up at him, barely able to see his handsome features because of the dark room, but I can still make out his eyes. And how they’re gleaming at me. “You took a risk too, that day you hurled soup in his face. It paid off. So did mine.”

“I love you, Perry.” I do. So much. How lucky am I to have this man in my life? Wanting to be with me, take care of me, protect me.

“I love you, Charlotte.” He kisses me, his warm lips and seeking tongue making me melt. “You’re the most important thing in my life. You and our baby.”

He rests his hand on my stomach, caressing me there and I can't help it.
I start to cry yet again.

"Aw, wife. Not the tears." He sounds in complete misery and I laugh.
While still crying.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, shaking my head. God, I'm a blubbering mess. "I
can't help it. My hormones are out of whack."

"That's okay, baby." He rubs his hand up and down my back in comfort.
"I got you."

I know he does.

That's what I'm counting on.



EPILOGUE

Perry

I LEAN AGAINST the doorjamb, slipping my hands in my pockets as Doja winds her way around my legs, meowing at me in warning. She's rather overprotective of this room—and who it belongs to. She even hissed at Charlotte's father when he tried to enter earlier.

Luckily enough, I witnessed the moment and thought it was pretty damn hilarious, though I did my best not to laugh out loud. Jasper struggled as well, though he kept his expression neutral the entire time.

I saw the joy dancing in his gaze, though. Pretty sure he doesn't miss working at the Lancaster residence.

Charlotte sits in a rocking chair in our baby's nursery, cradling our son to her breast. He eats noisily, his rosebud lips tugging on her nipple. Reed is a greedy little thing, waving his little hand in the air in almost triumph as he feasts. My wife reaches out, tracing his tiny fist with her index finger, her gaze thoughtful.

"You're staring," she says, though she's not even looking at me. She's mentioned that before a time or two, since we first were forced together, and I wonder if I'll ever get over how entranced I am by my wife.

Probably not.

And I'm okay with that too.

"Can't help it. You're beautiful."

She finally glances in my direction, disbelief in her eyes. "Please. I'm up half the night and have dark circles beneath my eyes to prove it. I have spit up on my shirt. My hair is a mess. I can't remember the last time I took a shower, which is gross, but my memory is also fuzzy so for all I know, I

showered a few hours ago? I'm not sure. Oh, plus I'm sleep-deprived and I'm starving. Like all the time."

My wife rambles when she's tired, and it's adorable.

Charlotte glances down at the baby she's cradling, her hand smoothing over the downy softness that is our son's head. "He's sweet though, right?"

"He's as sweet as you." I push away from the doorframe and fully enter the nursery, my gaze on my son. "Finish feeding him and I'll take over."

"What, really? You will?" Her gaze meets mine, her blue eyes wide. She sounds so hopeful. Looks it too.

We had some of her family over earlier, allowing them a glimpse of our son. Her parents came, as well as her brothers and their significant others. Well, not Finn. He's out of the country currently, doing God knows what.

I don't bother asking. He's the wild card of this particular Lancaster bunch.

I tolerated her parents. Their lack of love for their only daughter frustrates me, and the only reason they're coming around is to see the baby. Do they deserve to be in our son's life? My wife says yes, because everyone should get a second chance, according to her.

Whatever. I think her parents are on their fiftieth chance but I don't remind my wife of that little fact.

"Definitely." Nodding, I go to the chair and kneel in front of it, nudging my wife's hand out of the way so I can smooth my own hand over my son's golden hair. "You deserve a break, wife."

"You've been working hard too," she reminds me, and I can hear the guilt tinge her voice.

Nope. She can't feel guilty for taking my offered help. She needs to know she's not in this parenting thing alone. I'm not like her father who ignores the kids. And we're not like her parents either, hiring a nanny to take care of our son.

Charlotte wanted to be hands-on with him. She told me that from the start and I agreed with her. I know it's hard and I was right there with her the first six weeks before I had to go back to work. Taking care of a demanding infant day in and day out is a slog. Overwhelming.

But my wife is up to the task. I'll be right there with her, standing by her side, helping out where I can.

"And you pushed a baby out of your body only a couple of months ago.

It's the least I can do." I watch my son's mouth tug and pull on my wife's nipple and I shake my head. He's ferocious. A Constantine through and through, with Lancaster blood flowing through him too.

He's going to be someone to contend with someday. I can already tell.

Charlotte smiles down at me, her gaze soft. Like she can't believe I'm here, offering my help. Offering my love. "What did I do to deserve you?"

"You didn't like me at first," I remind her. I like to think back on those early days, when we didn't like each other, yet the attraction was still there. Frustrating us both. We've come a long way. "At all."

"I didn't trust you." Her eyes narrow. "You didn't trust me either."

"True. And now look at us." I stroke my son's head and he pulls away from his mother's breast, his big blue eyes staring up at me. I smile at him and I swear to God, he smiles back.

Or maybe it's just gas. I'm not sure. But I'm taking it as a sign that my son knows what's up. That I'm his dad.

My chest swells with pride. Still wild to think we made this little human being, Charlotte and I.

Once Reed has finished feeding, Charlotte starts to burp him but I interrupt the process, taking him from her along with a burp rag, which I drape over my shoulder.

Can't have him messing up the ten-thousand-dollar suit, you know.

I walk him around the bedroom, patting his back, his little body wiggling against mine, his head bobbing.

"You really don't mind?" Charlotte asks when she stands, stretching her arms above her head. Her body has bounced back pretty quickly after pregnancy, but she's also gained some curves that I can't help but admire and appreciate.

Seeing her like this, even when she's feeling low and out of sorts, has me lusting after her. When do I not want her? I miss having sex with my wife, but I have to be patient. Considerate. Her body has just performed a miracle, and while her labor experience was relatively easy, it still did a number on her body and even her mental state.

But considering everything, she's doing well. She's open with me about her feelings, and I'm there for her every chance I get.

We make a good team, my wife and I.

"I don't mind." Reed chooses that moment to burp—really loudly—and

the both of us laugh. Doja runs into the bedroom, meowing, her gaze narrowing as she studies me. Deeming me not a threat, she turns and trots out of the bedroom, resuming her spot guarding the door, I assume. “See?” I smile down at our son, who seems pleased that he just burped. Probably feels better after that. Poor little dude can sometimes get full of gas. “I can handle it.”

“Okay.” The relieved smile on Charlotte’s face makes it worth it to me that I made this offer. And when she walks over to me to press a kiss to my cheek and murmur, “Thank you,” my heart pangs.

It’s never felt so full.

I think of everything we’ve been through, and how we made it despite all the odds stacked against us. McJailbird got deported back to Ireland and there’s a no contact order in place, so I’m feeling pretty confident he’ll never come near my wife again.

If he even tries, he won’t survive. I guarantee it.

Charlotte has made wary peace with her parents, though they’re not close, which is fine with the both of us. Her brothers spend a lot more time with her, which I like. I’ve come around.

The Lancasters are still feral wolves, but I can deal with them. They’re a lot like us Constantines.

Life is good. I have no complaints. How can I? I’m married to a beautiful woman I love with my entire soul and we have a son. Work is going well. I’m VP of Operations at Halcyon and while it’s a lot of stress, I can handle it. I’m an integral part of the family business. No longer the careless fuck-up I used to be, that’s for damn sure.

I’m a husband and a dad, for Christ’s sake. I had to step up.

The moment she’s gone, I tuck my son into my hands and hold him in front of me. His eyes are wide and unblinking as he stares up at me and I can’t help but smile at him.

“What’s up little man? How’s life? You liking it out here in the cold, cruel world?”

He yawns his answer.

“It’s not cold and cruel here though. You got a mama who loves you. And your daddy does too. Doja the cat will protect you with her life, and scratch out the eyes of anyone who’s a threat.” I bring him close to my face so I can whisper in his ear, “Like your Grandfather Lancaster.”

A fussy little noise leaves him, making me chuckle.

“And then there’s Jasper, who’ll attend to your every need. Grandma Caroline always wants to hold you. She’s greedy, like you are. Your uncle Winston doesn’t seem to particularly care for you, but don’t be offended. You’re too little still. Just wait. He’ll come around.”

Charlotte peeks her head around the doorframe, a smile on her face when our gazes meet. “What are you telling our son?”

“You spying on me?” I meet her gaze, raising a brow.

“You started talking to him before I even fully left the nursery. I had to stick around and hear what you said.” She reenters the room, and her face says it all.

She loves seeing me with our son. Just like I love seeing her with him too.

“I was just giving him the scoop. Letting him know he’s loved. By all of us.” I smile down at him.

“You want to hear something funny?” When I nod, she continues, “While I was pregnant, I could only imagine you with a girl. I was surprised when we found out we were having a boy. I thought for sure it would be a daughter.”

“I’d like a daughter. One that looks just like you.” I smile. “We’ll have to try again. Eventually.”

“A long time from now,” she adds.

“Not too long though. I want them to be close. That way they’ll take care of each other.” I glance down at our son before I return my gaze to my wife.

“I love you, Perry,” she whispers, and when I return my gaze to hers, I see that her eyes are welling with tears. “You’re the best dad. The best husband. Despite what your brother says.”

A chuckle leaves me as I think of Winston griping about me. But all thoughts of my brother fade the longer I watch my wife.

Damn. Those tears are such a killer. But I know she’s not sad. She’s overwhelmed.

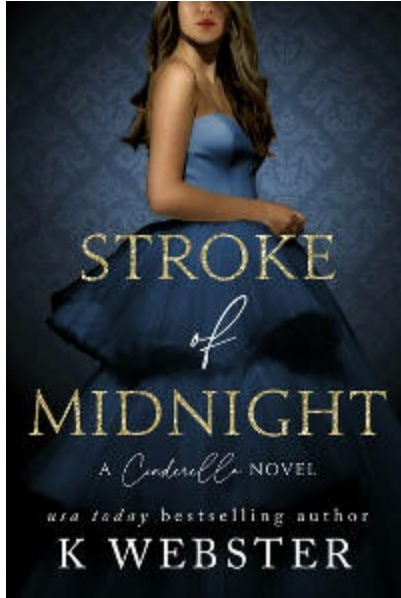
Overwhelmingly happy.

“I love you too, baby.” I turn my attention to her, cradling my son close to my chest as I circle my other arm around my wife’s shoulders and tuck her into my side. “You don’t even know how much.”

“Oh trust me,” she says on a sigh, her smile all for me. “I know.”



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Monica Murphy is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of the One Week Girlfriend series, the Billionaire Bachelors and The Rules series. Her books have been translated in almost a dozen languages and has sold over one million copies worldwide. She is both a traditionally published author and an independently published author. She writes new adult, young adult and contemporary romance. She is also USA Today bestselling romance author Karen Erickson.

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A diamond ring with a large, brilliant-cut stone lies next to its open, round case. A plume of white smoke rises from the case, filling the upper portion of the frame. The background is solid black.

THE RECKLESS UNION

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MONICA MURPHY