



THE
PROPOSAL

ENEMIES TO LOVERS FAKE RELATIONSHIP ROMANCE

L. STEELE

THE PROPOSAL

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*For those who like
growly alphaholes
with heart*

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Isla

“Do you have any other word in your vocabulary except, ‘No’?” I curl my fingers around my cell phone and resist the urge to fling it at the head of the turdwart who glares at me down his patrician nose. Likely, his crown is so hard it would be my phone that’d crack and I can’t have that happening. Not when there’s less than a week to go till the ‘wedding of the century’. A wedding that will be more unique than any of the weddings that get featured in the top ten most spectacular weddings as compiled by tabloids or, indeed, influencers who are fond of compiling such lists.

And I am the creator of this event—a wedding I have been planning for the last three months. A wedding eagerly awaited by influencers, media personalities, and society darlings. A wedding that is going to put my fledgling wedding planning business on the freakin’ map. I’ve organized high profile weddings before but none of them match the interest generated around this one. It’s not just the money being spent on it but the fact that it involves one of the world’s most notorious bachelors, to the only daughter of a well-known industrialist. After this event, I’ll never have to scrounge around and beg for clients. After this mother-of-all-shindigs, I, Isla Bailey, will be the toast of every single bride-to-be and their mamas. The first port of call for any woman who is about to get hitched

and wants her marriage to be a once-in-a-lifetime affair. The kind that will make it to the gossip columns of *Hello!* and *OK!* The kind that will be featured in the society pages, from *The New York Times* to *The Times* and all the various wedding blogs and magazines in between. The kind that will change my life forever. Assuming I can figure out how to manage the piss-poor temperament of the bridegroom for said event.

“Forget I said that. I didn’t mean to lose my temper,” I say through gritted teeth.

The dickwaffle stares at me steadily.

Count back from ten, nine, eight—I draw in a deep steady breath—seven, six, five—I roll my shoulders to ease the cluster of pain that clings to my muscles like a weed to velvet. Four, three, two—I shove my anger down, deep down, into the pit of my stomach where a blaze erupts, then recedes. One. Calmness flows through my veins. I am a river of Zen contentment. A floating air bubble. A snowflake that drifts gently back to Earth. I paste a fake smile—which I hope looks genuine to this asshole— on my lips.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Kincaid. Please accept my apologies for my outburst.”

Mr. Stick—no, make that Log-stuck-up-his-arse—tips up his chin. “No.”

“Excuse me?”

“No. I have no other word in my vocabulary when it comes to any conversation with you.”

My jaw drops. No, literally, it hits the floor and I have to pull it back and plug it back into my face like one of those cartoon characters I watched growing up. Okay, maybe not ‘literally,’ but you know what I mean.

“Are you always such a twat? Can’t you at least be polite in conversation?” I huff.

“Do you want me to foot the bill for this clown show or do you want me to pretend I’m at a tea party?”

Clown show? He called all the hard work I've put into conceptualizing this ceremony—which is a piece of art, if I do say so myself—a clown show? If it's a clown show, that's only because he's a clown. Before I can throw my choice of insults at him and crash this business relationship into a pile of wreckage equal to the Titanic, I clamp my lips together.

He glares at me. I stare back. The silence between us stretches. His nostrils flare. The pulse beats at his temple. Those gray eyes of his turn colorless—pieces of glass that reflect my emotions back at me. And those lashes of his? Jesus Christ, he has such long curly eyelashes. Why is it that the more horrible examples of the male species are always blessed with above-par looks? Why does Mr. Born-with-a-gold-spoon-in-his-mouth have to look so gorgeous?

The clearing of a throat cuts through the space between us. After darting one last death-stare at douche-canoe, I turn to face the woman who's drawn abreast with the two of us.

“Umm, everything okay? Are you two fighting again?” Lila, my client and the bride-to-be at the ‘wedding of the century’ that I'm hoping to pull off, glances between us. She looks nervous and not just a little filled with apprehension. Truthfully, she has a right to that sentiment because things between me and her husband-to-be have recently deteriorated further. Liam Kincaid and I have never gotten along. We seemed to take an instant dislike to each other from the moment we met.

This has never happened to me before. I am a people person. I love talking to strangers and thrive on putting clients I meet for the first time at ease. And I love making the dreams of brides come true. I love taking care of them, soothing their worries, interpreting their visions, and watching the stars in their eyes when they walk down the aisle to meet their bridegrooms.

It's one of the reasons I became a wedding planner. The other being, it's the only profession that seemed to stick with me once I tried my hand at it. And considering this is the biggest project my fledgling wedding planning agency has taken on, it's doubly important for me to make the relationship

with my client work. Sure, Lila's my daily contact, but it's Liam-twatwarse-Kincaid who pays the bills. So, it's in my best interests to be polite with him... But try as I might, from the very first conversation we had, he's rubbed me the wrong way. I've never insulted one of my clients to their face—not until today—and that's regardless of the fact it might jeopardize this life-changing project. And that's something.

“Isla?” Lila prompts.

“I'm good. We were just, uh, discussing the size of the wedding cake.”

“Oh, but I thought we decided to go with the seven-layer one made with chocolate and bananas, with the candy on top.”

I wince. So does Liam. In this, I'm with the bastard, though I'll never let on. By the time the wedding cake is cut, most guests are tired or drunk. The only person who cares about cutting the cake is the bride, really.

Most bridegrooms, by that point in the ceremony, are ready to run screaming from the event, or they're happy to hunker down with their friends. And the romantic few are ready to whisk their brides away.

Liam, as far as I can tell, doesn't fall into any of these categories. Actually, he doesn't fit the role of bridegroom at all. I've never come across a man less interested in the ceremony. Most grooms, at least, pretend for the sake of their wives-to-be, and if they're footing the bill, ask some questions about the upcoming nuptials. Not Liam. Guess that's what happens when you have so much money you don't care how your other half-to-be is going to spend it.

“What do you think, Liam? You like chocolate banana cake, don't you?”

Liam's eyes glaze over at the question. It's as if he's already forgotten Lila's earlier description.

“She's talking about the wedding cake,” I murmur.

“I'm aware,” he snaps. But when he turns to Lila his features are soft, as is his voice. “Whatever you want.”

Lila giggles. “Oh, my, you’re so easy to be with, Liam.”

Really? If my bridegroom said that, I’d question the hell out of him to make sure he’d actually been listening. But hey, I’m not the one marrying Liam-McHandsome-but-wanker-disposition-Kincaid.

“Well then, I’m glad you could finally come for one of the wedding rehearsals.”

“I was here for the last one, which you, on the other hand, missed,” he reminds me in that hard voice that manages to be both velvety and sarcastic, at the same time.

Honestly, if I had the talent to sound like that, I’d have wrangled steeper discounts from my vendors. As it is, I’ve had to turn on the charm, and beg, plead and cajole my suppliers to ensure I can pull off this event in the little time I was given.

Don’t complain. Opportunities like this come along once in a lifetime, after all.

This time, it’s thanks to my friend Summer who’s married to Sinclair Sterling, one of the richest, most powerful men in the country and a friend of Liam’s.

When Lila approached me, she simply said that Liam had heard of me through Summer and Sinclair, and their word was good enough, so I was hired. I owe Summer, though she insists it’s my talent and hard work that secured this contract. Sure, I’ve pulled off some high-profile weddings, in record time, for some of my other friends who’ve married Sinclair’s friends, but it’s not just that which clinched this deal. It’s because Summer, and hence, Sinclair vouched for me.

That’s how things work in the circles I’ve hoped to break into. It’s all about who knows who. Summer’s marriage to Sinclair, and later my friend Amelie’s marriage to Weston, who is Liam’s brother, gave me access to the moneyed-class they’re connected to, which in turn, changed my prospects. It also means I’m dealing with entitled bastards like Liam effing Kincaid.

“What, no excuses?” He smirks.

I snap my shoulders back and tip up my chin. “I do believe our business here is concluded, Mr. Kincaid.” I turn to Lila, whom I have grown rather fond of in the last few months. “Should we complete the rest of our discussion another time?”

Isla

“Should I marry him? What do you think?”

Knew it. I knew I shouldn’t have accepted her invitation to a drink. After that conversation almost went south with Liam—and would have had I not managed to salvage it—I said my goodbyes and left.

Only an hour later, as I slid the key into the lock of my apartment door, my phone vibrated with Lila’s message. She wanted me to meet her for a drink. I almost messaged her to say I was too tired. But my sense of duty insisted I not turn her down. That, and the fact I genuinely like Lila. Her father might be on Forbes’ rich list, and she’s undeniably spoiled, but there’s also a hint of a lost child in her. Not to mention, a sense of playfulness about her that appealed to me at once. She’s also great fun to hang out with.

We get along so well together, and as we began to plan her wedding, we were in touch every day. Lately, it’s been almost every hour as we finalize the details of the nuptials. Despite my efforts to the contrary, at some point in the last few weeks, we crossed the line of a professional, work relationship and went straight into friend territory. And the tone of the text was that of a friend needing reassurance. Not to mention, part of the job of being a wedding planner is knowing when to be there to boost the bride’s confidence.

So, despite my exhaustion and the strange sensation in my belly warning me I might be better off not turning up tonight, I came to the bar at the Dorchester, where she told me she was. Now, I pause with my tequila shot halfway to my mouth, and—fuck, fuckity fuck—I *know* for fact I should not have come.

Sure, I'm here to set her mind at ease, encourage her, and assure her that all is well; and if it were any other bride, I'd buoy up her spirits and tell her yes, she's absolutely making the right choice. But this is Lila. This is the woman I've come to consider a friend. And I don't lie to my friends.

"Isla?" Lila leans across the table. "What do you think?"

"Umm—" I raise the tequila glass to my mouth and down it. Then cough, and cough, until tears run down my cheeks.

"Oh gosh, here." She slides the beer bottle over to me, and I snatch it up and chug down half its contents. Not that it calms the burning sensation in my chest; which has nothing to do with how I'm going to answer this question, right? I place the bottle back on the table, making sure it's precisely on the circle of moisture left earlier.

"You okay?" She peers into my features. "Want some water?"

I wipe the tears off of my face. "I'm good." I clear my throat.

"Good." She smiles.

I try to match the curve of her lips, but the muscles of my face are frozen. *Don't ask me again, please don't ask me—*

"So, what do you think? Should I marry Liam?" Her tone is serious. The skin around her eyes stretch. She holds my gaze and oh, lord, she's not going to take silence for an answer. She wants me to give her my opinion. I've known it's wrong to overstep the boundaries of my professional relationship with Lila. But as much as I hate her husband-to-be, I've developed a wonderful friendship with her.

When she met Liam Kincaid and the two embarked on a whirlwind courtship culminating in Liam proposing to her, the society matrons, both in the UK and across the pond, sat up

and took notice. Plus, Lila's father gave the couple their blessing. After all, Liam is one of the most eligible bachelors in the world, one of the few who can meet him eye-to-eye and dollar-for-dollar.

Too bad, his attitude is better suited to a boorish oaf. I took an instant dislike to him as soon as he opened his mouth. He has his head stuck so far up his arse, he needs a pounding to shake it loose, and that might not even work. In fact, I hate the man so much, I almost declined their request to be the wedding planner on this gig—and that's saying something, considering this is the kind of project every single event manager in the world is salivating for. And I got it. And I intend to keep it.

“Umm, Lila... Not sure I'm the person you should be talking to about this.”

“You are *the* person I should be talking to about this,” she retorts.

“How so?” I narrow my gaze on her.

“My so-called ‘friends’” —she makes air quotes with her fingers— “are too overwhelmed by my money and my father's status to tell me what they really think. As for my family?” She cuts her palm through the air. “They don't care about my happiness. They simply want the family's status to be maintained. And Liam is a catch, from that point of view.”

“He's a catch from any point of view.” I look away.

“See? You couldn't even meet my gaze when you said it.” She juts out her chin.

I raise my hands. “Just trying to tell you what everyone thinks of him.”

“But that's not what you think of him.”

“Umm, no?” I rub the back of my neck. “But my opinion really isn't important here.”

“On the contrary...” She reaches over and grips my arm. “Your opinion is what matters most. Considering, you're the only one who doesn't give a damn about my wealth or status.”

“Not true—the reason this wedding is so important to me is because of your wealth and status.”

“That’s the actual event—” She flips her hair over her head. “But when it comes to me, although I’ve known you for a relatively short time, you’re the only one among all of my friends and family who really sees me.”

Her lips turn downward. So does my heart. Hell and damnation. Why do I have to be so outspoken with my opinions? Why can’t I have a filter and be discerning about what thoughts I choose to air and to whom?

“Also, you were the only one who was truthful when I asked your opinion about that truly horrendous wedding dress.”

“It was horrible.” I wince.

“Terrible.” She shudders. “And the most expensive of the lot. Just because it was a designer who would have immediately had me trending on social media, is no reason to wear a dress that makes me look like an upside-down cake.”

“Actually, a Victorian sponge cake,” I offer.

“Ugh!” She snatches up her still full tequila glass. “Also, Lila and Liam. What would our wedding hashtag sound like? #lilum?” She makes a face.

“You do have a point there,” I admit.

“Which is why I really need your opinion on this. And I honestly don’t want you to hold back. This is my life we’re talking about, after all.”

I know. And I like Lila. For all her moneyed upbringing, she’s surprisingly down-to-earth, intelligent, and shares the same quirky sense of humor I have. Which is why we hit it off so quickly. Which is why I know I don’t have any choice but to tell her the truth.

She tosses back her alcohol without even blinking, then slams it upside down on the table. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed how you’ve been going out of your way to avoid him.”

“I haven’t been avoiding him—”

“You made sure your assistant was the one to oversee the last wedding rehearsal.”

“Only because I was taking care of the wedding cake, and the wedding cake is very important.”

“You told me you would be there. Then, when I messaged you to say Liam was turning up for the rehearsal, you sent your assistant instead—without giving me a warning.”

I grimace. This is true. But the reason I didn't go is not that Liam was going to be there. At least, not completely. Okay, I m-a-y be stretching the truth here. I wasn't looking forward to seeing his sourpuss face, so yeah, maybe I decided to send my assistant instead.

My phone alarm buzzes. Shit, I need to take my supplements. It's okay to wash them down with alcohol, right? I'm sure it is. And if not, too bad. I'd better take them now while I still remember. I slide the bottle from my bag, shake out two of the pills, and gulp them down with the beer.

“Uh, what are you taking?” Lila's forehead crinkles.

“Vitamins, I forgot to take them earlier.”

Her frown deepens. “Vitamins? At this time of the day? Aren't you better off taking them in the morning?”

I place my beer glass on the table with a snap, then narrow my gaze on her. “I'm sorry I didn't make it to the last rehearsal but Jen, my assistant, is really good at what she does.”

It's a segue; one which Lila follows without question. “She is, but that's not the point.” Lila stabs her finger in my direction. “You know exactly what I'm talking about, so don't try to wriggle out of this.”

Or maybe it wasn't a good idea to lead her back to this topic of conversation. Although, considering that's why she called me here, it's a little hard to avoid. I lower my neck. *Shit, shit, shit*. How did I allow myself to be corralled into this situation? It's every wedding planner's nightmare come true.

On the one hand, I do consider Lila a friend. On the other? If I tell her the truth, will she back out of the marriage and

leave me with the reputation of a wedding planner whose wedding planning was canceled? It's an unspoken rule in wedding planning circles. If a wedding you're planning gets dropped, for whatever reason, the stigma of being unlucky sticks to the planner, and it's very difficult to shake off. Even more so when it's the "wedding of the century" that gets called off.

A bead of sweat slides down my back. I grab a paper napkin and mop my brow. "Uh, is it hot in here? Do you think they forgot to turn off the heating, even though the weather turned? Maybe I should ask the bar owner." I slide off the barstool, but Lila shoots out her hand and grabs mine. "We're at the Dorchester. Not bloody likely that they forgot to swap out the heating for the air-conditioning."

Busted! I hunch my shoulders.

"You're really going to make me say it?"

She nods.

"That's not playing fair, Lila. You're using our friendship to hold me hostage for my opinion."

"Damn right." She blinks rapidly. "Please, Isla, please tell me what you think. Should I go through with this marriage? Your thoughts on it would mean so much to me. I know you won't pay lip service, and you'll tell me the truth." Her chin wobbles.

My heart sinks into my stomach.

Oh shit, this is it. I don't have a choice. I'm going to have to tell her my true opinion, and then? Goodbye, 'wedding of the century'. Goodbye, financial solvency. Goodbye to making the list of top ten wedding planners in the world. Goodbye, fame. Hello, notoriety. Hello, failure. But at least, I'll be a good friend.

"Isla, please." She chews on her lower lip. "Tell me what I should do."

Liam

“Where is she?”

The receptionist gazes at me cow-eyed. Her lips move, but no words emerge. She clears her throat, glances sideways at the door to the side and behind her, then back at me.

“So, I take it she’s in there?” I brush past her, and she jumps to her feet. “Sir, y-y-you can’t go in there.”

“Watch me.” I glare at her.

She stammers, then gulps. Sweat beads her forehead. She shuffles back, and I stalk past her.

*Really, is there no one who can stand up to me? All of this scraping of chairs and fawning over me? It’s enough to drive a man to boredom. I need a challenge. So, when my ex-wife-to-be texted me to say she was calling off our wedding, I was pissed. But when she let it slip that her wedding planner was right—that she needs to marry for love, and not for some family obligation, rage gripped me. I squeezed my phone so hard the screen cracked. I almost hurled the device across the room. When I got a hold of myself, for the first time in a long time, a shiver of something like excitement passed through me. *Finally, fuck.**

That familiar pulse of adrenaline pulses through my veins. It’s a sensation I was familiar with in the early days of building my business.

After my father died and I took charge of the group of companies he'd run, I was filled with a sense of purpose; a one-directional focus to prove myself and nurture his legacy. To make my group of companies the leader, in its own right. To make so much money and amass so much power, I'd be a force to be reckoned with.

I tackled each business meeting with a zeal that none of my opponents were able to withstand. But with each passing year—as I crossed the benchmarks I'd set myself, as my bottom line grew healthier, my cash reserves engorged, and the people working for me began treating me with the kind of respect normally reserved for larger-than-life icons—some of that enthusiasm waned. Oh, I still wake up ready to give my best to my job every day, but the zest that once fired me up faded, leaving a sense of purposelessness behind.

The one thing that has kept me going is to lock down my legacy. To ensure the business I've built will finally be transferred to my name. For which my father informed me I would need to marry. Which is why, after much research, I tracked down Lila Kumar, wooed her, and proposed to her. And then, her meddling wedding planner came along and turned all of my plans upside down.

Now, that same sense of purpose grips me. That laser focus I've been lacking envelops me and fills my being. All of my senses sharpen as I shove the door of her office open and stalk in.

The scent envelops me first. The lush notes of violets and peaches. Evocative and fruity. Complex, yet with a core of mystery that begs to be unraveled. Huh? I'm not the kind to be affected by the scent of a woman, but this... Her scent... It's always chafed at my nerve endings. The hair on my forearms straightens.

My guts tie themselves up in knots, and my heart pounds in my chest. It's not comfortable. The kind of feeling I got the first time I went white-water rafting. A combination of nervousness and excitement as I faced my first rapids. A sensation that had since ebbed. One I'd been chasing ever

since, pushing myself to take on extreme sports. One I hadn't thought I'd find in the office of a wedding planner.

My feet thud on the wooden floor, and I get a good look at the space which is one-fourth the size of my own office. In the far corner is a bookcase packed with books. On the opposite side is a comfortable settee packed with cushions women seem to like so much. There's a colorful patchwork quilt thrown over it, and behind that, a window that looks onto the back of the adjacent office building. On the coffee table in front of the settee is a bowl with crystal-like objects that reflect the light from the floor lamps. There are paintings on the wall that depict scenes from beaches. No doubt, the kind she'd point to and sell the idea of a honeymoon to gullible brides. I suppose the entire space would appeal to women. With its mood lighting and homey feel, the space invites you to kick back, relax and pour out your problems. A ruse I'm not going to fall for.

"You!" I stab my finger in the direction of the woman seated behind the antique desk straight ahead. "Call Lila, right now, and tell her she needs to go through with the wedding. Tell her she can't back out. Tell her I'm the right choice for her."

She peers up at me from behind large, black horn-rimmed glasses perched on her nose. "No."

I blink. "Excuse me?"

She leans back in her chair. "I'm not going to do that."

"Why the hell not?"

"Are you the right choice for her?"

"Of course, I am." I glare at her.

Some of the color fades from her cheeks. She taps her pen on the table, then juts out her chin. "What makes you think you're the right choice of husband for her?"

"What makes you think I'm not?"

"Do you love her?"

"That's no one's problem except mine and hers."

“You don’t love her.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Excuse me?” She pushes the glasses further up her nose. “Are you seriously asking what loving the woman you’re going to marry has to do with actually marrying her?” Her voice pulses with fury.

“Yes, exactly. Why don’t you explain it to me?” The sarcasm in my tone is impossible to miss.

She stares at me from behind those large glasses that should make her look owlish and studious, but only add an edge of what I can only describe as quirky-sexiness. The few times I’ve met her before, she’s gotten on my nerves so much, I couldn’t wait to get the hell away from her. Now, giving her the full benefit of my attention, I realize, she’s actually quite striking. And the addition of those spectacles? Fuck me—I never thought I had a weakness for women wearing glasses. Maybe I was wrong. Or maybe it’s specifically this woman wearing glasses... Preferably only glasses and nothing else.

Hmm. Interesting. This reaction to her. It’s unwarranted and not something I planned for. I widen my stance, mainly to accommodate the thickness between my legs. An inconvenience... which perhaps I can use to my benefit? I drag my thumb under my lower lip.

Her gaze drops to my mouth, and if I’m not mistaken, her breath hitches. *Very interesting.* Has she always reacted to me like that in the past? Nope, I would’ve noticed. We’ve always tried to have as little as possible to do with each other. Like I said, interesting. And unusual.

“First,” —she drums her fingers on the table— “are you going to answer my question?”

I tilt my head, the makings of an idea buzzing through my synapses. I need a little time to flesh things out though. It’s the only reason I deign to answer her question which, let’s face it, I have no obligation to respond to. But for the moment, it’s in my interest to humor her and buy myself a little time.

“Lila and I are well-matched in every way. We come from good families—”

“You mean rich families?”

“That, too. Our families move in the same circles.”

“Don’t you mean boring country clubs?” she says in a voice that drips with distaste.

I frown. “Among other places. We have the pedigree, the bloodline, our backgrounds are congruent, and we’d be able to fold into an arrangement of coexistence with the least amount of disruption on either side.”

“Sounds like you’re arranging a merger.”

“A takeover, but what-fucking-ever.” I raise a shoulder.

Her scowl deepens. “This is how you approached the upcoming wedding... And you wonder why Lila left you?”

“I gave her the biggest ring money could buy—”

“You didn’t make an appearance at the engagement party.”

“I signed off on all the costs related to the upcoming nuptials—”

“Your own engagement party. You didn’t come to it. You left her alone to face her family and friends.” Her tone rises. Her cheeks are flushed. You’d think she was talking about her own wedding, not that of her friend. In fact, it’s more entertaining to talk to her than discuss business matters with my employees. *How interesting.*

“You also didn’t show up for most of the rehearsals.” She glowers.

“I did show up for the last one.”

“Not that it made any difference. You were either checking your watch and indicating that it was time for you to leave, or you were glowering at the plans being discussed.”

“I still agreed to that god-awful wedding cake, didn’t I?”

“On the other hand, it’s probably good you didn’t come for the previous rehearsals. If you had, Lila and I might have had

this conversation earlier—”

“Aha!” I straighten. “So, you confess that it’s because of you Lila walked away from this wedding.”

She tips her head back. “Hardly. It’s because of you.”

“So you say, but your guilt is written large on your face.”

“Guilt?” Her features flush. The color brings out the dewy hue of her skin, and the blue of her eyes deepens until they remind me of forget-me-nots. No, more like the royal blue of the ink that spilled onto my paper the first time I attempted to write with a fountain pen.

“The only person here who should feel guilty is you, for attempting to coerce an innocent, young woman into an arrangement that would have trapped her for life.”

Anger thuds at my temples. My pulse begins to race. “I never have to coerce women. And what you call being trapped is what most women call security. But clearly, you wouldn’t know that, considering” —I wave my hand in the air— “you prefer to run your kitchen-table business which, no doubt, barely makes ends meet.”

She loosens her grip on her pencil, and it falls to the table with a clatter. Sparks flash deep in her eyes.

You know what I said earlier about the royal blue? Strike that. There are flickers of silver hidden in the depths of her gaze. Flickers that blaze when she’s upset. How would it be to push her over the edge? To be at the receiving end of all that passion, that fervor, that ardor... that absolute avidness of existence when she’s one with the moment? How would it feel to rein in her spirit, absorb it, drink from it, revel in it, and use it to spark color into my life?

“Kitchen-table business?” She makes a growling sound under her breath. “You dare come into my office and insult my enterprise? The company I have grown all by myself—”

“And outside of your assistant” —I nod toward the door I came through— “you’re the sole employee, I take it?”

Her color deepens. “I work with a group of vendors—”

I scoff, “None of whom you could hold accountable when they don’t deliver.”

“—who have been carefully vetted to ensure that they always deliver,” she says at the same time. “Anyway, why do you care, since you don’t have a wedding to go to?”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” I peel back my lips. “I’m not going to be labeled as the joke of the century. Not after all the media has labelled it ‘the wedding of the century’.” I make air quotes with my fingers.

It was Isla’s idea to build up the wedding with the media. She also wanted to invite influencers from all walks of life to attend, but I have no interest in turning my nuptials into a circus. So, I vetoed the idea of journalists attending in person. I have, however, agreed to the event being recorded by professionals and exclusive clips being shared with the media and the influencers. This way, we’ll get the necessary PR coverage, without the media being physically present.

In all fairness, the publicity generated by the upcoming nuptials has already been beneficial. It’s not like I’ll ever tell her, but Isla was right to feed the public’s interest in the upcoming event. Apparently, not even the most hard-nosed investors can resist the warm, fuzzy feelings that a marriage invokes. And this can only help with the IPO I have planned for the most important company in my portfolio. “I have a lot riding on this wedding.”

“Too bad you don’t have a bride.”

“Ah,” —I smirk— “but I do.”

She scowls. “No, you don’t. Lila—”

“I’m not talking about her.”

“Then who are you talking about?”

“You.”

Isla

I stare, sure I haven't heard him correctly. "Eh? What are you talking about?" I shake my head as if that might clear it. "If this is some kind of joke—"

"Not a joke." He slides his hand into the pocket of his tailor-made slacks. "There's no way I'm not going ahead with that wedding. And I do need a bride. Ergo—" He tilts his head as if his words are self-explanatory.

"I'm afraid you're making no sense."

His lips twist. "Oh, you definitely need to be afraid, but of the repercussions from turning me down."

I scowl. "This entire conversation is fascinating but as you can see" —I gesture to the computer in front of me— "I have *miles to go and promises to keep.*"

"Quoting Frost won't change the fact that you're going to be marrying me in" —he pulls back his coat sleeve, exposing a watch that I have no doubt cost more than the annual rent of my office, and which is nestled amidst a smattering of dark hair on his thick wrist— "exactly forty hours."

A shiver of something—excitement, apprehension, nervousness, disbelief... maybe all of the above—ripples under my skin.

"I think you'd better leave."

“I think *you’d* better start making preparations to make things up to me.” Bastard’s grin widens. He’s enjoying himself at my expense, no doubt about it.

Anger bubbles up, and I tamp it down. I can’t afford to lose my temper. Liam Stick-in-the-mud Kincaid may not be utilizing my services any longer, but he’s one of the most powerful men on this continent—in the world, even—and the last thing I want is to make an enemy of him. I curl my fingers into fists, draw in a breath, then another. When I finally speak, my tone is even. “What things? I don’t have anything to make up to you.”

“Oh, but you do. It’s because of you my bride decided to jilt me at the altar—”

“You didn’t reach the altar,” I point out.

“Semantics—”

“Are everything.” I allow myself a small, tight smile. I’m not going to let this gazillionaire-McGrumpy walk all over me. I have a couple of weddings to plan right after this one. They are nowhere near as high profile as Lila’s but they’ll keep me busy for a while. All the more reason to get this stuck up wanker out of here.

“Which is why I can’t marry you.”

His eyes darken further. “Sure you can.”

“I can’t, I’m already married.”

He lowers his gaze to my left hand before I have a chance to cover it. *Shit, shit, shit.*

“So, you’re not only a bad friend, but you’re also a bad liar.”

I shoot up to my feet. “I’m not a bad friend. I’m a good friend. The kind who dared to tell Lila exactly what she needed to hear when no one else had the guts to tell her the truth.”

“You ruined her life.”

“I gave her a chance to live life on her own terms, and I’m not a liar.”

He smirks. “You lied that you were married.”

“I am married.”

“You’re not wearing a ring.”

“Plenty of married women don’t wear rings.”

His smile grows broader, and it’s not a nice one. My stomach churns. Why do I get the feeling that I’ve walked into a trap?

He leans forward on the balls of his feet. “Isla Wilson, twenty-five, university dropout. Mother and brother live in Lymington. You had a happy childhood... until your father died of a heart attack when you were eighteen. A fact that made you decide to drop out of college and travel the world.”

“That’s very presumptuous of you to think one was linked to the other.”

“Doesn’t take much to join the dots.”

“Go on,” I say slowly.

“You tried your hand at being a tie-dye designer—”

“I like colors.”

“A diving instructor—”

“I like the colors of fishes underwater.” I raise a shoulder.

“A beekeeper.”

“I like the color of—”

“Bees?” He smirks.

“I was going to say honey, but yeah, sure, bees, too.”

“A professional bridesmaid?” He arches an eyebrow.

“Weddings can be very colorful, you know? Also, you’ll be surprised how lucrative a job it is. Also—” I frown. “How do you know all this?”

“It’s on your bio on your website,” he points out.

Of course, it is.

“I also had you investigated.”

I gape at him. “You had me investigated?”

“You didn’t think I’d allow you to plan my wedding without making sure your background was acceptable? Which also means, I know you’re not married.”

I plant my hands on my hips. “And I intend to stay that way. I’m focused on building my career and my company—”

“And there won’t be much of that left, considering I’ll personally make sure you never work in this country or on this continent—or in fact, organize any wedding anywhere in the world—again.”

My heart flips up into my throat, and my pulse begins to race. “You wouldn’t do that.”

“Try me.” He reaches over, picks up the pencil I was using earlier, then twirls it between his fingers.

I try to focus on the action, but the scene in front of my eyes blurs. I blink away the hot tears that have accumulated in my eyes and set my jaw. “You’re blackmailing me.”

He raises his gaze skyward. “Finally, she gets it.”

“So, if I don’t marry you, you’ll destroy my career and my reputation?”

He lowers the pencil to the table. “You’ll pose as my wife. Put up a united front with me to my family. Convince them and my friends how much you love me. Also, you need to produce an heir—”

What the—? I shake my head. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on. Back up. What do you mean, ‘an heir’?” I make air quotes with my fingers.

“I need to be married and have a child before I can get ownership of my business.”

“You talk like this is a stipulation of some kind...”

He shuffles his feet. For the first time since he prowled into my office, he seems less than confident. In fact, he looks downright pissed. “My father’s will says, unless I marry and produce an heir by the time I’m forty, I won’t inherit my company or get access to my trust fund.”

“I see.” I lean back in my seat. “So, this is why you proposed to Lila and hustled her into marrying you.”

“If by that you mean I courted her—”

“You used your charisma to unduly influence her.”

“—I wooed her, took her on dates, to dinners, even the blasted opera, then bought her the biggest engagement ring I could lay my hands on.”

“You mean that tasteless hunk of stone on her finger?” I cover my mouth and cough. “No wonder it was so easy to convince her to walk away from you.”

His jaw tics. A nerve pops at his temple. He looks about ready to burst out of his uber-fitted suit. Oh, goodie. At least I got a rise out of him. That has to count for something, eh?

“That tasteless hunk of stone cost close to a million dollars,” he says through gritted teeth.

“Money isn’t everything,” I announce in a prim voice.

“You certainly weren’t complaining when you chose the most expensive venue possible for the wedding.”

I straighten my spine. “If you mean the All Villa in Bali, that was Lila’s choice. She wanted to get married in Bali, you know.”

“And, no doubt you jumped at the idea, considering you get a fifteen percent commission on the entire cost of the wedding.”

“Hey, you get what you pay for. I’ve been busting my ass for the past few months to get this event organized. Do you even know what an impossible task I’ve pulled off? I’ve managed to get all of the preparations completed in eight weeks. Eight bloody weeks. That’s just forty-two days. It

normally takes close to a year to organize a ceremony of this scale. And I pulled it off in less than one-fourth that time.”

“Good, so it won’t be a problem to flip things around to accommodate yourself as the bride, too.”

“I never said I was going to marry you.”

“Haven’t you been listening to anything I’ve been saying?” His features grow even harder. Grays and greens shoot through the blue of his eyes until the color resembles that of a gathering storm. “If it’s custody of the child you’re worried about, once you deliver the child, we will separate. There’ll be a prenup, of course, but I’ll make sure you’re reimbursed for your time.” He says all of this in a voice so casual, he might as well be asking about the weather. No, strike that. I’ve heard people speak with more emotion about the weather changes in London than he has about his entire crazy-ass idea.

I curl my fingers into fists and resist the urge to leap up screaming. *Won’t do to lose it. Need to keep my cool. Need to make him see just how crazy this entire conversation is.* “Have you even heard yourself? We barely know each other, and now you’re saying you want me to marry you—instead of the woman the world thinks you’re going to marry. Not only that, you want me to produce a child, and then you’ll divorce me?”

“We’ll co-parent and have equal rights to the child.” He raises his arms in a conciliatory gesture. “I’m not the kind who’ll keep a mother away from her child.”

“Of course not,” I scoff. “But you’re the kind who’d force a woman to marry him.”

“Fake marry.”

“Doesn’t seem fake when we’re supposed to produce an heir,” I protest.

“There are ways of doing it without my having to touch you. Unless,” he looks me up and down and a calculating look comes into his eyes, “unless you prefer it to be done the old-fashioned way. In which case, I might oblige you. If you ask me nicely, that is.”

My head spins. My heart seems to have taken up permanent residence in my throat. My stomach feels like a twister has become entangled inside.

“You’re not making any sense. You can’t walk in and threaten me into marrying you, then announce you need me to produce a child for you, in the same breath.”

His grin widens. “I just did.”

“There’s still time.” I raise my hands. “Walk away now, and I’ll forget any of this happened. In fact, I won’t even go to the media with news of how you intimidated me.”

“You’re not going to do that.”

“Oh, yeah?” I snap back my shoulders. “And why is that?”

“Because when you marry me, even though the marriage is fake, no one else will know. To the outside world, you’ll be the wife of Liam Kincaid, which means, doors will automatically open for you. Your past transgressions—”

“Transgressions?” I shout.

“Transgressions” —he firms his lips— “will be forgotten. Socialites and influencers will queue up to patronize your services. You’ll run the most successful wedding planning outfit in this country, if not all of the continent.”

I blink. Now that he mentions it... It’s true. Once I hitch my star to the Liam Kincaid reputation, it’ll be easy sailing. Everyone will want a piece of my wedding planning company. I’ll have more projects than I can handle.

“Your showpieces will, of course, be your own wedding. You can give it any twist you like; make it the kind of wedding you’ve always imagined for yourself.”

“For myself?”

“You must have thought about how you’d like to get married.” He glances at his watch and straightens. “Well, this is your chance to execute it. Use it to show the world and all the headline seekers exactly how it should be done.”

“S-o-o-o, I can do anything I want for my wedding ceremony?” I pluck at the rubber band around my wrist.

“Yes.”

“The budget?”

“Unlimited. I’ll need to sign off on the bills, but nothing is too good for my bride. Whatever you want, you can have it.”

I squeeze my fingers together. Surely, I’m not considering this. I’m not actually thinking of going through with this insane proposal of his. On the other hand, if I do, I’ll have everything I want. The wedding of my dreams, the chance to prove a point to all the naysayers who thought I’d never make it, and a resounding ‘fuck you’ to all my competition. Hell, there won’t be competition. I’ll wipe them off the map with this showpiece of a wedding. No one will ever question my competency again. And I’ll have enough clients to keep me going for years. Even after I divorce him, it won’t make a dent in my reputation.

“Well?” He scowls. “What’s it gonna be?”

I pluck at the rubber band with more intensity. “So, I can transform it into the wedding of my dreams, the kind that’ll make every media outlet, gossip magazine, and wedding blog sit up and take notice?”

“Do you not understand English? Or have you not been listening to me?”

I straighten in my seat. “I heard you the first time,” I say in a low voice.

“Good, so what’s your answer?”

Liam

“You what?” Declan Beauchamp gapes at me. We struck up a friendship at Oxford and have been close ever since. We’re seated at a table at the 7A Club, an elite new establishment owned by JJ Kane and Sinclair Sterling. All new applicants to the club must be recommended by one of the existing members and ratified by the board, to which I belong. It’s prime space in the heart of the city, and while the amenities are top-notch, it’s the connections I’ve made here already, including investing in the hottest start-up to come out of Silicon Valley, which promise to make the club a resource to be reckoned with. Now, I straighten in my seat and fix Declan with a glare, “I asked her to marry me.”

“Didn’t you propose to Lila a few months ago? And aren’t you getting married in less than two days?” Hunter Whittington, my classmate from Oxford, slides into the seat between me and Declan.

“He’s not talking about Lila,” Declan murmurs.

“Who’re we talking about, then?” Adrian Sovrano, the only one among us four whose day-to-day job involves close connections with the other side of the law, stalks over to us.

“Aren’t you needed in Sicily for whatever it is the *Cosa Nostra*’s planning next?” I scowl.

“Turns out, CN Enterprises has considerable interests in London, and with the rest of my brothers taking a back seat to focus on their families, I’ve been chosen to stay on here and manage things.”

“CN Enterprises, huh? Could the legal face of the *Cosa Nostra* businesses have a more obvious name?” Declan smirks.

“Obvious only if you know the connection.” Adrian reaches for the snifter of Macallan and pours himself a healthy tumblerful. “And if you do, you know better than to talk about it.”

I glance between Adrian and Hunter. “Speaking of, should the two of you risk being seen in each other’s company?”

“This is the only place where someone like Hunter can relax and not worry about the media getting wind of who he’s socializing with.” JJ Kane walks over to stand next to Declan. “Everything about 7A Club is a secret, including who the board consists of or, for that matter, who the members are.” He raises a cigar to his lips and puffs.

“You do have a propensity to pop up like a bad rash. “I roll my shoulders. “Shouldn’t you be planning your own wedding instead?”

JJ laughs. “I’d take offense to your digging into my personal life, only—”

“You’re in too good a mood to do so.” I survey his features. “In fact, contentment wafts off you in waves, old man. So much so, you’re positively glowing.” I wrinkle my nose.

“I’d say you’re jealous, but considering your own nuptials are but a few days away, I’m sure you’ll soon be basking in the afterglow of marital bliss yourself.” JJ smiles expansively.

I wince, then catch myself, but not before Declan narrows his gaze on me. Bastard may be the current most in-demand heart-throb in LA, but he’s always had the sharpest of observational skills. He’s a few years younger than me and Hunter, but his IQ, as well as his emotional intelligence, have

always exceeded his years. Combine that with his handsome looks, and it's no wonder he's so quickly climbed the ranks of tinsel town.

“Word is, you're in line for the role of the next James Bond.” Not that I give a whit, but it's one way to shift the focus of this discussion from my upcoming nuptials.

“I'm too young for the role.” Declan raises his snifter of whiskey to his mouth. “And you know better than trying to distract me from the more interesting topic of who you're marrying.”

“I take it you're not marrying Lila Kumar?” JJ tilts his head.

“So, you're aware that he's marrying the only daughter of one of the richest men on the continent?” Adrian leans forward in his seat.

“I was privy to a very interesting conversation where the bride-to-be canceled,” JJ tries and fails to conceal the look of mirth on his face, “via a text message, I might add.”

“Ouch, that sounds brutal, ol' chap. How are you holding up?” Hunter's voice is threaded with a genuine note of concern.

“Considering he's here having a drink with the lads, I think it's safe to say he's not suffering from a broken heart,” Adrian draws.

“Wait. Stop.” I hold up my hand. “Thanks for the update, JJ. I'll be first in line to celebrate when it's your turn to tie the knot.”

“I'd do so in a heartbeat, but Lena prefers that we wait. And while I'm not getting any younger, what the lady wants, she gets.” JJ's features soften. Poor sucker's hopelessly head-over-heels for his woman. I've seen them together and Lena, too, has eyes only for him. They are so well-matched; it's positively sickening seeing them together. Luckily, I'm not one of those bastards who's going to fall for the romantic notion of true love anytime soon. In fact, that's the reason I've delayed getting married—until I couldn't anymore. If not for

the fact my father's will stipulates that I marry and reproduce before my fortieth birthday, I wouldn't have proposed to Lila, either. Perhaps my father had an inkling that would be the case. Which is why the old bastard demanded it. Whatever the case, I'm going to make sure I don't fall for a woman.

That's why I'd decided on the wedding planner. She's too feisty, too opinionated, too independent. And we can't stand each other. We barely managed the entire conversation yesterday without coming to blows. It's a good indication that there'll never be an iota of sentiment between us. She'll keep hating my guts. I'll keep hating her sass. A match made in heaven, for the short amount of time necessary to marry her and produce an offspring.

After which, I'll ensure she has enough payments coming to her in alimony so she and the kid will never want for anything. I'll also make sure the obligations laid out in my father's will are met. I'll finally inherit the rights to the group of companies I've worked so hard to build and get access to my trust fund. Not that I need the trust fund. I made sure to invest the substantial money I earned over the years as CEO of my father's company, so I'm wealthy in my own right, but it's the principal of the thing that matters. I pumped my lifeblood into the company which, by all rights, belongs to me. And the money in the trust is mine, and I'll finally have access to it. Plus, she'll establish a positive reputation for her company. It's a win-win situation for all concerned.

"It's you who'll be tying the knot first." JJ's voice cuts through my thoughts. "How did you convince your wedding planner to step in for the bride though?"

"The wedding planner?" Declan exclaims.

"You're marrying the wedding planner?" Hunter arches an eyebrow.

"Makes sense, I suppose. If the bride doesn't turn up, have the wedding planner stand in for her instead." Adrian nods.

I narrow my gaze on JJ, suspicious of how he knows so much. "Good guess. I might jump to the assumption you have

eyes on me, but you wouldn't be so stupid as to do that now, would you?"

JJ chuckles. "I'd say that not much happens in this town without my knowledge, but in this particular case, it was a logical conclusion to draw. I was there when you received said text message from your bride-to-be, and stomped off in search of the wedding planner who you were going to teach a lesson for having broken up your wedding."

"And you jumped to the conclusion that she was going to stand in for the bride?"

"Let's just say, something about the way you spoke about her told me your relationship with her—"

"I don't have one."

"—was more complicated than you gave it credit for."

"Nothing complicated. I had a proposal. She accepted it. We have a deal in place; both parties win."

"Hmm." Declan scratches his jaw. "This entire thing seems rather convoluted. Why not simply hire an actress to stand in for the part?"

"Because it has to be her." I set my jaw.

Adrian and Hunter exchange looks.

"Why does it have to be her?" Hunter finally asks. His voice is soft as if he's patronizing me. As if, if he were to ask me a particularly convoluted question, I might lose my shit. Which, I confess, I may have come close to doing when I was talking to that annoying woman yesterday. But I got my way in the end, didn't I? Everything is set and on track. I've never been closer to claiming my inheritance. So why am I so stressed?

I take a deep breath, then square my shoulders. "She's the only one I have enough of a hold over to ensure that all of the clauses in my father's will are met."

"Hmm." Declan scratches his jaw. "You mean—" He hesitates. "Nah, it can't be, can it?"

JJ regards him with a considering look. “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“What are you both thinking?” Adrian glances between them.

I turn on Hunter. “You’re the only one who hasn’t speculated as to what they’re thinking. Care to give me your opinion, as well?”

Hunter smirks. “Oh, I know what they’re thinking.”

“Fuck you,” I say without heat. “Because the three of us” —I glance at Hunter, then at Declan— “belonged to the same fraternity... I know you guys would never betray me. And that old man, Kane” —I jerk my chin in JJ’s direction— “has too much riding on the 7A Club to ever share anything outside these walls. Not to mention, Adrian comes from the *Cosa Nostra*, so he knows the cost of revealing a secret is worse than death. Plus, I don’t think he cares one way or the other who I’m marrying.”

“I don’t,” Adrian confirms.

“Either way, it’s not a big fucking deal.” I roll my shoulders to relieve the twinge that seems to have settled in there since my conversation with the irritating wedding planner yesterday.

“You mean you have to produce an offspring?” Declan murmurs.

Hunter chuckles.

JJ’s smirk widens.

Adrian grabs a cigar and snips off the end. Then he lights it up and hands it over to me. “Double congratulations are in order then?”

“Shut the fuck up.” Nevertheless, I accept the cigar and jam it between my lips. It’s only the question of an heir. The issue of my issue. One I intend to fulfill. And thanks to technology, I won’t have to touch that infuriating woman. I simply have to donate my sperm and use her as the receptacle.

With the help of the best doctors I have on standby, I'll deliver on my father's requirements in no time.

Hunter pulls out his snow-white handkerchief and snaps it out before holding it out to me.

"The fuck is that for?" I growl.

"You're sweating, ol' chap."

"Am not." I glower at him and begrudgingly accept the piece of cloth to mop my brow.

"Not to worry, ol' chap. This will all be over very soon, and you'll have a wife on one arm and a bonny wee babe in the other," JJ offers.

The pain in my shoulder intensifies. I draw in a breath, and my lungs burn. "Fuck this shit." I thrust the handkerchief in Hunter's direction, then jump to my feet. "I gotta go see a man about a dog."

A few minutes later, I stare at my reflection in the mirror in the gents' room. Am I nervous about the upcoming nuptials? No, I'm not. Why should I be? I have nothing to lose. I hold all the cards in this transaction. I hold the power. All she has to do is turn up, get married, then get impregnated. And she'll go through with it because she needs this as much as I do, for different reasons, of course. But I saw how her eyes lit up when I laid out the benefits of marrying me. It always boils down to the same thing.

My money and the power I wield influence people so much, they can no longer see me. I am the means to an end. I learned that early on, with the few relationships I allowed myself to indulge in. I also learned that I could remove myself from the equation.

As long as the benefits from my wealth are there for the taking, I—the person—no longer count. Whether it's related to business or in my private life, it's what I can bring to the table that sways people. Which is exactly what I've been building

toward for most of my life. So why should this transaction with her be any different? It's perfect, actually. I am the conclusion of my own making. The net result of my negotiations. The summary of a business deal I structured, leveraged, and delivered, with a massive profit margin. So why does it feel so wrong? So empty? Why do I feel discombobulated?

The door opens behind me. I hear footsteps before Hunter steps up to the urinal in the far corner. By the time he walks over to the sink next to mine, I've washed my hands and dried them.

"It's okay to have second thoughts about your wedding," he murmurs as he holds his hands under the stream of water.

"I'm not having second thoughts." *I can't afford to have second thoughts.* I've planned it all out to the last detail. Sure, the face of the bride I'm going to marry is different. So what? The finale of this story will be the same.

"So why is your face pale?" He reaches for a paper towel, and the tap turns off automatically.

"Must be the dim lighting in here."

"Hmm." He dries his hands and tosses the piece of paper into the receptacle. "My first day in Oxford, you saved my ass from being toast when I was a scrawny freshman."

"Only because I was feeling charitable that day. I'd have done the same if you'd been a dog."

He laughs. "So generous with your comparisons."

I blow out a breath. "Okay, that was unwarranted."

"See, this is what I mean. You like to be seen as an unfeeling gazillionaire, and trust me, I get it. I need to keep up a front when it comes to my profession, too, but I know there's something more in there. And it's okay to share with friends. We're in your corner, man."

I rub the back of my neck. "We done?"

"Sure." He bumps his fist into my shoulder. "We still on for taking the flight to wherever it is you're getting married?"

“It’s on an island near Italy—destination wedding and all that.”

“Right. It should be fun, huh? All your friends and family traveling on the flight you’ve booked, and staying under one roof? Imagine that.”

A shudder runs down my spine. “Now that you mention it, there’s something I need to change.”

Isla

“No, absolutely not. I am not leaving a day earlier with you. I am not changing my plans at this stage. I’ve set up all of my meetings and all of my appointments with various vendors on that day, I can’t just up and leave.”

It’s been less than twenty-four hours since Mr. Grumpy McHotpants stomped into my office and announced I’m going to marry him. After he left, I stayed rooted in my seat, not sure what to make of it. I was supposed to meet my friends for dinner but bailed. My message stating this in our shared Sisterhood-of-the-Seven group chat, so called because it consists of the wives of the Seven—of which I am now an honorary member—was met with cries of disappointment.

Why is it called the Seven? Because it includes the Seven—so called because there are seven of them, including Liam’s brother Weston—who, together, run 7A, the most successful financial services company in the country. It also includes the better halves of the Seven Sovranos who constituted the *Cosa Nostra*, who have now gone legal.

All have had one hell of a journey to get their happily-ever-afters. Liam isn’t one of either of the Seven, but he seems to have been adopted into their fold, just like I have been by their women. It helps that I was already friends with most of them before they got married. And because most of them are attached and I was the only single one... They loved to hear

about my exploits on the dating scene—of which there’s been woefully very little to report lately, considering I’ve been sinking all of my time into this wedding.

Into *my* wedding, as it now stands. The realization sank in. My stomach churned, and the contents of my stomach threatened to boil up. At which point, I reached for the bottle of tequila I keep hidden in the bottom drawer of my desk, and knocked back a few mouthfuls. It helped, to the extent that a pleasant glow invaded my extremities. My assistant had already left, so I locked my office, indulged myself with a cab, and went home.

Swigging more tequila throughout my bubble bath didn’t help much, except to render me drunk enough to crawl into bed and sleep soundly through the night. I woke up with a slight hangover to find the group chat blowing up with questions about where I was. I ignored all of them and managed to shower and have breakfast, by which time, the headache had receded. That’s when a text message came through from him.

Unknown number: **My office. 9 a.m.**

Of course, I knew who it was. Who else would summon me in that imperious tone of voice? Which hadn’t stopped me from replying: **Who dis?**

Unknown number: **Don’t be late.**

Ugh! Who puts a full stop at the end of their text messages? Mr. Curmudgeon McHotpants is who.

I squeezed my fingers around my phone so hard, I still have the marks on the palm of my hand to show for it. I almost flung the phone out the window... But then, it started buzzing

with responses from the vendors I contacted yesterday, when I was still in the throes of planning Lila's wedding.

That's when the enormity of the task in front of me sank in. I still have to carry this wedding over the finish line—only this time, as the bride. To say I hyperventilated at that realization is putting it mildly.

To be honest, it helped that it was already eight-thirty a.m. and I had to be somewhere at nine. It meant I could postpone the rest of my nervous breakdown. I took the tube to the office address texted to me by his assistant. Of course, he'd have his assistant do that. He couldn't stoop so low as to do it himself.

I reached the office with five minutes to spare, then loitered in the lobby until it was ten past. Only then, I approached the reception and was escorted to the elevator set aside from the rest. There, the security person waved the keycard and pressed the button for the top floor where *his* office is located. Now, I scowl at the asshole who's seated opposite me at his desk in his office in a chrome and steel tower in the heart of London's business district.

In truth, I'm thankful he opted to have this meeting in these surroundings and not a bar or, god forbid, his home. Of course, I'm going to have to move in there as soon as we returned from the wedding—as he already informed me—but this means I don't have to survey something as intimate as his house until later. For that, I'm grateful.

I informed him I hadn't yet made up my mind about his proposal. He pretended not to hear me as he pushed a sheaf of papers in my direction. "Everything I said is in there. You might want to have your own lawyer take a look at it before you sign it."

I ignore the papers. "Did you hear what I said?"

"Did *you* hear what *I* just said?" He glares back at me.

We hold each other's gaze for a beat. He has little creases that radiate out from the corners of his eyes. His cheekbones are so sharp, so perfectly sculpted, I would surely get a paper cut if I brushed my fingers across them. As for his jaw? It's

square and rigid, with the hint of a dent in the chin. I mean, come on. Does he have to have that slight dent in his chin? Could the man be any better looking in any way? And his hair... Don't get me started on that. Those thick, dark strands of his that are slicked back from his face. I touch my own mane that I like to wear about my shoulders. I'm going to have to put it up for the wedding, and then, likely, I'll have to share a room with him after we're married. Nope, no way.

"I'm not sleeping with you," I burst out.

He arches an eyebrow.

"I'm also not going to sleep in the same bed as you."

"We're going to have to pretend to consummate the wedding—"

"In the privacy of our home, where no one will know if we have separate bedrooms."

"Do you think I'm tempted to touch you? Let me clear up any confusion, once and for all. I have no interest in you, except for the fact that you're going to be my employee until such a time that you deliver the baby."

He says 'the baby' in the same tone of voice as one would say, remember to pick up the dry cleaning.

"So, I was right." I tip up my chin. "You're an asshole."

He shrugs. "Do you want to get your lawyers to check the papers before you sign them? Or you can sign them as-is. I don't care either way."

I squeeze my fingers around the arms of the chair I'm seated in. It's a comfortable chair, actually. No doubt, he wants to lull whoever he's meeting into a false sense of security. But he doesn't fool me. Nope. N-a-h, I know exactly the kind of man he is. Someone who will reach his goals, no matter who he has to hurt or what he has to sacrifice along the way. Well, he picked the wrong woman this time.

"I am not Lila. I'm not going to let you push me around."

"Oh?" He turns to the computer in front of him and proceeds to scan whatever is written on the screen.

“I already told you I haven’t agreed to this arrangement.”

“And you and I both know you’re going to. I suggest you put aside your vacillations and focus on planning the wedding, which you now have precisely ” —he looks at his watch— “three days to plan.”

“Three?” I shriek. “Six days. I have six days. That’s one-hundred and forty-four hours, asshole.”

He laughs. The bastard actually laughs at me. “Just testing you.” He smirks.

Jerk! I draw in another breath and shove the anger deep down into my stomach. Pain flashes in my guts, then fades away.

“I assume you still want to go ahead with that circus you’ve planned?”

Circus? He called the work I’ve put into planning the most epic ‘wedding of the century’ a circus? Bastard. I squeeze my fingers together, then set my lips. “It’s not a circus, you clown. It’s a gorgeous destination wedding. Also, you told me I could plan the event however I want. My dream wedding, remember?”

“How can I forget?” he says in a tone that implies the exact opposite. Then, as if it’s an afterthought, he adds, “Of course, I could always change my mind, and we could elope.”

“What?” My heart slams into my ribcage. My pulse buzzes like a dragonfly caught in a net. “All the preparations are made. Influencers and the press are expecting exclusives from us. The event plans are in full swing... We can’t elope. That would—”

“Unless you sign off on this contract...”

I draw myself up to my full height. “Are you coercing me?”

“I’m simply stating a fact.”

“You’re a son of a bitch.”

“And your future husband.” His grin widens.

“Fuck you.”

“Not unless you ask me nicely.”

Anger swells in my chest. My pulse rate speeds up. I so want to take that contract and tear it up, but I can't. And he knows it. Oh, I'd so love to turn the tables on him. One day, it'll be me holding all the cards, and then... We'll see how he feels.

I lean over, grab one of his pens, then pull the contract over and initial it. “There.” I throw the pen down on the table. It bounces off, hits the floor, and rolls toward the wall.

I glance up to find his jaw hard, nostrils flared. A vein pops at his temple. He's pissed. Oh, good. A dull thud of satisfaction coils in my chest.

“Pick it up,” he says in a soft voice.

“No.”

His gaze narrows. “What did you say?” Anger and a strange sort of excitement emanate from him. His eyes gleam. Color flushes his features. If I didn't know him better, I'd say he was excited. What am I thinking? I don't know him at all. Maybe he *is* excited. The hairs on my forearms rise. I take a step back, then jut out my chin.

“I said no. Pick it up yourself, asshole.”

“Don't call me that.”

“Why shouldn't I? You've been behaving like a dickhead from the moment I met you. I never understood what Lila saw in you. I'm glad she's rid of you.”

“But you're not.” He rises slowly to his feet and keeps rising and rising.

I have to tilt my head back to meet his gaze. Shoot. I forgot how tall... how big this man is. His shoulders are so massive, they block the view of the windows behind him.

“Pick. Up. The. Pen,” he says through gritted teeth.

“And if I don't?”

He stretches out his arm, pulls at his cuff, then the other. Then he lowers his hands to his sides and fixes me with a glare. “No one says no to me. No one.”

I snort. “I just did, in case you didn’t notice.”

“Oh, I did notice.” He prowls out from behind his desk toward me.

My knees tremble, and I half-angle my body away from him. I dart my gaze toward the door and he clicks his tongue. “I wouldn’t if I were you.”

“You don’t scare me, douchenozzle.”

He blinks, seeming to be momentarily taken aback. “Did you take a course in cheap insults?”

“No, I merely spend time in the company of normal people, the kind you’ll never know because you spend all your time in this ivory tower cut off from the real world.”

“The kind of world I inhabit teaches me all kinds of skills, little bunny.” He takes another step forward, and I sidle back.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Afraid it’s a name that’s going to suit you when you—”

I turn around and make a run for the door, then yelp when strong fingers clamp around my wrist. I’m turned around and yanked forward. I fall against that massive chest of his. Bergamot and mint and something musky—the scent of him envelopes me. I bury my nose in his shirt, draw in a deep breath, and my head spins.

Then, just as suddenly, I’m free. I stumble back, but he doesn’t right me. I glance up to find he’s staring down at me with an inscrutable look on his face.

“Better not start something you can’t finish,” he snaps. He steps back, and the air rushes between us.

I draw in a huge lungful of air, already missing his scent, the warmth of his body, the feel of those rock-hard abs under my palms.

He slides into his chair and turns to his screen again.

Guess I'm dismissed then.

I turn to leave, and his voice stops me. "Oh, and I'll pick you up at 5 o'clock this evening."

I spin around. "What do you mean?"

"You're going to meet my family."

"M-meet your family?"

"My mother, actually. You didn't think I was going to spring the surprise of a new bride on her at my wedding, did you?"

Yes, that's exactly what I thought.

"I... I can't make it tonight. I need to work on the remaining preparations."

"Hire additional people. There's no way you can get everything accomplished on your own with such tight deadlines."

"I don't allow just anyone to work on my projects."

"Surely, you must have worked with reliable vendors in the past? Get more of them on board. God knows, I'm paying enough for the blasted event."

"If attending your own wedding is such a chore, why don't you cancel it?"

"And rob you of the chance to stage the 'wedding of the century'?" He smirks, then tilts his head. "Of course, we could elope—"

"Not a chance. The press and influencers are expecting exclusives. To cancel it at this stage would be disastrous and ___"

His grin widens. I squeeze my lips together. Damn, I fell for his stupid-ass comments again.

"We'll need to do another rehearsal."

Instantly, the smile is wiped off his face. "No bloody way."

"Yes, bloody way. There's a new bride on the block, buster. Hence, we need to rehearse again."

He squares his shoulders. “No fucking way am I walking down an aisle again—unless it’s the actual aisle.”

“And even then, it’s not the actual aisle,” I mumble under my breath.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.” I cough. “It’s not recommended to go into the wedding cold, without rehearsing it at least once.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

Liam

“So let me get this right, you and Lila are not getting married, but you and” —my mother turns to my fake wife-to-be— “I’m sorry, what’s your name, dear?”

“Isla.” She holds out her hand. “Isla Bailey.”

“Isla.” My mother shakes her hand briefly, then pulls back. “You and Isla are getting married?”

We’re seated at the dining table in my mother’s house.

“Lila and I decided we weren’t suited for each other, after all. Plus, as soon as I saw Isla, I knew she was the one,” I murmur.

My mother frowns. “So, while you were still with Lila, you were attracted to Isla?”

I hesitate. “I never should have proposed to Lila. I was marrying her for all the wrong reasons. Luckily, Lila realized it first and called off the wedding.”

My mother’s eyebrows shoot up.

“And you accepted it?”

“I knew she was right. It was the correct thing to do.”

“Hmph.” My mother firms her lips.

I asked Isla to join me tonight for dinner with my mother because I wanted to see how she would handle it. Also, I wanted to test her. I didn't think the person who'd be on trial would be me. I forgot how smart my mother is. She may not interfere with my life, but she knows me well. She knows how I hate being told 'no'. Seems I'm going to have to convince her it was all for a good reason.

I allow my expression to soften with what I hope is a sentiment as close to love as possible. "From the moment I set eyes on Isla, it was like a thunderbolt. Now I know what the poets meant and what the philosophers hinted at. For the first time, I understand what it means to wake up in the morning and think of another person before yourself. "

Isla's lips part. She holds my gaze, and for a second, something shifts in their depths. Apparently, I've done a good enough job with my words for her to almost believe me. Then she seems to catch herself and scowls at me. She's wearing a pale blue dress that picks out the color of her eyes, molds to her figure, and falls to below her knees. A dress with a high collar and long sleeves that I had sent to her place with a note that said: *Wear this.*

I expected her to protest, but to my surprise, when I rang the doorbell to her apartment, she opened it dressed in the clothes I'd sent her. It didn't stop her from complaining about the fact that the dress covers too much and she's seen nuns dressed more provocatively. It gave me pause as I thought, *did I choose this dress to ensure my wife-to-be would be covered up from the eyes of the outside world?* Of course, we're going to meet my mother, so I wanted her to be dressed appropriately. Yes, that's all it is. Also, if I'm being honest, I enjoyed the brief altercation with her in the car on the way here.

Now, I tip up my lips. "We knew we were meant for each other from the moment we met. Isn't that right, precious? " I reach across the table and take her hand.

She stamps the heel of her Ferragamos—which I also bought for her—into my foot.

Pain shoots up my calf. I manage to keep the wince of discomfort away from my features.

My mother looks from me to Isla. The expression on her face indicates she's dubious. She needs to buy it, though. If she doesn't, how are we going to convince the entire world watching the event that we're truly in love? Same way I was going to do it with Lila, I guess. Except, I actually liked *her*.

I watch Isla from under lowered eyelids. What's she going to say? Is she going to play along and convince my mother or—her expression softens. Her eyes shine, color flushes her cheeks, and I watch as she swallows. "It's true," her voice trembles. "From the moment I saw Liam, it was like my life had been turned upside down. I knew I had to be with him. It was like I had no choice." I glare at her, but she continues, "Now I know what I've been waiting for. Now I know what all those love songs were written about. I've planned so many weddings, but I've never wanted to get married myself. Not until I met him." She turns her gaze on me. "Liam Kincaid, you swept me away with your tenderness, your sensitivity, your patience."

Her lips tremble.

Patience? Ha! I would swear those words are said in sarcasm, except the expression on her features belongs to a woman who only has eyes for the man she loves. I almost believe she means everything she said... Just like I meant every one of my words.

"It's been you all along; only you." She looks between my eyes. Her blue eyes turn dark until they resemble the sky before a downpour. Specks of silver flash deep inside like lightning. She turns her palm up, and I wrap my fingers about hers. Soft, slim, fragile. Like the most delicate of flowers. Pink blushes her cheeks. Her lips part. I lean in closer until my breath mingles with hers.

She holds my gaze for a second more, then turns toward my mother. "So you see, what we have here is a once-in-a-lifetime kind of love. I understand we didn't find each other in

the most conventional of ways, but I can assure you, what we have is genuine.”

The spell breaks. I blink and think, damn, she’s good. I almost believed her myself. My mother’s expression has thawed, too.

I bring Isla’s fingers to my lips and brush them over her knuckles.

Her breath hitches. I sense the tension vibrating off of her body. I transfer her hand to my other palm and wrap my arm around her. “It’s only after I met Isla that I realized how deep, how overpowering, how truly all-consuming a sensation love is. When I’m not with Isla, I can’t wait to see her. To hear her voice. To make her laugh. To see her smile. To watch her eyes light up when I surprise her.”

Her pupils dilate.

“And when she’s not with me, every part of me misses her. I want to take care of her, protect her, cherish her.”

Her lips part. She melts into me, and that’s when I straighten and tip my chin in my mother’s direction. “So you see, our feelings are real and mutual. It’s just taken us a while to acknowledge it.”

My mother’s features are positively melting. Her eyes glimmer. She sniffs, then brings her handkerchief to her face and dabs under her eyes. “Oh, it’s so moving to hear about two people who are so in love and looking forward to starting their new life together. You make a really good couple. And I have to admit, the chemistry between the two of you is something.”

I allow myself the satisfaction of a smile.

“I couldn’t be happier. We’re so looking forward to getting married, aren’t we, pumpkin?” I press a kiss to Isla’s hair. She looks up at me with an adoring look in her eyes. Something hot squeezes my chest.

“Only you don’t fool me.”

Isla and I stare at each other, then as one, we whip our heads toward her.

“Excuse me?” I say through gritted teeth.

My mother pats her lips, then drops her handkerchief on the table. “I understand why you decided to go with a marriage of convenience.”

I open my mouth to speak, but she raises her hand.

“I really do, Liam. I was against your father putting that clause in his will requiring you to get married and produce an heir before you could claim your inheritance. I fought him on it, but he refused to budge. Perhaps he had an inkling that it was the only way you would marry and settle down, and he wanted only the best for his children.” She places the tips of her fingers together on the table. “So, I don’t hold it against you, but the two of you need to figure out a way to convince the rest of the world about it because right now, the animosity between the two of you is so evident, it’s practically turning the air blue.”

“I—” I shake my head. I’m seldom rendered speechless, but I can always count on my mother to throw a curveball. It’s why she’s still the president of our company and sits in on board meetings. Nothing escapes her eagle eyes, after all.

The silence stretches. What am I supposed to say to that? Not only was I trying to pull a fast one over my mother, I thought I’d get away with it. I haven’t felt this tongue-tied since she caught me watching porn on my father’s laptop when I was thirteen.

“You’re right.” Isla’s voice cuts through the space. “It’s a marriage of convenience, and the two of us have some serious work to do on it before we can convince the rest of the world it’s not.”

I glare at her, and she merely raises her hands. “It’s true, and you know it. This was a bad idea; we won’t be able to convince anyone of the legitimacy of the relationship. No doubt, it looks strange that you swapped one bride for another. And... I really feel bad about stepping into Lila’s shoes. She’s my friend. She’s going to think I had this in mind all along when I told her she shouldn’t marry you.”

“You told her she shouldn’t marry Liam?” My mother’s brow arches.

“Ah—” Isla coughs. “Lila met me the day before yesterday and asked me if it was a good idea for her to marry Liam. I... Well, I couldn’t lie to her. She’s my friend, after all. So, I told her she should follow her instincts.”

“And she walked out on Liam.”

“It would seem that way, yes.” Isla wriggles around in her seat. “I honestly didn’t think she’d walk out on the wedding. Not when it was so close. I really feel guilty about it.”

“Seems one of you had the guts to face the truth, at least.” My mother looks at Isla with something like admiration on her features. “It takes guts to do what you did, young lady. I take it, you knew it was possible you’d be left without having a wedding to arrange at all?”

Isla hunches her shoulders. “I didn’t think it would be my own wedding I’d have to organize instead.”

“Is he compensating you well for your role in this charade?”

“Mother,” I say in a warning voice.

She waves a hand in the air. “Don’t interfere when it’s us women speaking.”

Fuck! That’s all I need, my mother taking a keen interest in a cause means she never leaves anything halfway, and right now that project is my wedding. I’d set out to come up with a scenario that would convince the world. I didn’t think I would be the one in the hot seat instead.

“You could, of course, use me to spin this,” my mother murmurs.

“Eh?” I stare at her blankly.

Isla leans forward in her chair. “That’s an interesting thought. Who better than the mother of the bridegroom to give her blessing for this event?”

“Even better when the mother of the bride is also by her side,” my ma retorts.

Isla is already shaking her head. “Oh, no, no, no, that is a bad idea. I can’t tell my mother I’m involved in a fake marriage scenario, especially if... I mean, *when* I get pregnant later—”

“Which I assume is going to be by artificial means?” my mother interjects.

Once more, I gape at her. “You’re taking this rather well.” I scowl.

“I might be of a different generation, but I’ve kept up with the times.” My mother smiles serenely. “I understand how these things work nowadays. And if this is the only way I’m going to get a grandchild from you, then I can’t complain, can I?”

“Uh, I don’t think my mother is going to take this all that well.” Isla reaches for her glass of wine and drains half of it. “I’d rather not tell her the truth, to be honest.”

My mother tilts her head. “So, you’d let your mother believe that—”

“Yeah, that we’re in love and if... *when* I get pregnant, that it’s a child conceived in the natural way, yeah,” —she places the glass of wine on the table, then leans forward again—
“Mrs. Kincaid.”

“Call me Rosie, please.”

“Rosie, it’s awfully sporting of you to understand our situation, but I can assure you, my mother would not understand why we’re doing this. All she’ll remember is that the relationship is fake, and she won’t be able to keep it a secret. It won’t be long before my entire extended family is aware of it, too, and from there... It’s a short jump to the media.”

My mother frowns. “I understand what you’re saying, but I still think we need to have your mother involved for when we speak to the press.”

“Oh, god.” Isla presses the heels of her hands to her eyes and mutters, “This can’t be happening to me. Please, someone, pinch me.”

I reach over and pinch her arm, and she yelps, then lowers her hands to the table. “That hurt.”

“Good,” I growl. *Now she knows how I feel...*

“What are we going to do?” Her mouth droops. Her eyes wear a pleading look. Damn, she’s adorable when she’s all frustrated. “Liam?” she murmurs.

I reach over and place my hand over hers. She stiffens but doesn’t pull her palm away.

“I think I know a way out.” I turn to my mother. “But we need your help.”

Isla

“Why did I agree to this?” I moan. I glance sideways at the asshole who hasn’t spoken a word to me since I slid into the passenger seat of his car. He picked me up late this afternoon so he could drive me to my mom’s home in Lymington. He hasn’t spoken a word to me since. Instead, he tuned the radio station to a news channel. Probably wants to keep track of his investments, I guess. I decided not to speak a word to him either. I focused on answering the many emails and text messages I’d received from the various vendors. I still have a wedding to organize.

Luckily, the press hasn’t picked up on the change of brides, but that could change at any time. We need to be prepared, and we haven’t yet discussed the strategy of how we’re going to break the news to the press. To be honest, I’ve been putting it off. As long as we don’t tell the press, it’s not real, right? But we’re going to tell my mother first and...

Oh, god, I’m so not looking forward to that. I’ve tried not to say a word either since we left, but that was nearly two hours ago. As we turn off the highway toward the city, my pulse begins to race. Sweat beads my palms.

“Did you hear me?” I huff.

Liam keeps his gaze trained forward as he flips on the indicator. The muscles of his forearms flex, and a pulse throbs

to life between my legs. The sluttiest thing a man can do is have the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to show off those veined forearms—the way Liam has his right now. I squeeze my thighs together. Why do I find everything about this man so sexy? His fingers are thick and end in blunt fingernails, and the tendons under his skin flex as he steers the car. My mouth dries. How annoying. I don't find him hot. Not at all.

“Liam, I don't think this is a good idea,” I repeat.

He shoots me a glance from the corner of his eye. “So you've said for the hundredth time,” he murmurs.

“Well, now I'm saying for the one-hundred and first time that this is all going to go pear-shaped.”

“You heard what my mother said. She thinks it's a good idea to have both her and your mom speak to the press.”

I blow out a breath. “And you do whatever your mother tells you, is that it?”

He purses his lips. “I don't like to say no to her if I can help it, and you have to admit, it's a great idea to have both your mum and my mum issue a joint statement.”

It's not a bad idea at all. Nothing like getting mothers involved to make the situation seem authentic. But I don't say that.

Instead, I say, “I still haven't managed to speak to Lila. I've left her messages, but she's not returning my calls. Maybe she's upset with me?”

“Or maybe she wants some time to figure out what she wants to do with her life?”

I scowl. “Is that you actually being reasonable?”

He raises a shoulder. “I am always reasonable.”

“That's why you want me to take you to meet my mother, with your mother following us in her car?” I cover my face with my fingers. “Oh, I don't have a good feeling about this at all.”

“Stop being so dramatic. Everything's going to be fine.”

He turns into the lane where my parents live. “Ohgodohgodohgod.” I draw in a breath and my lungs burn. Try to breathe and my throat closes. Black flickers at the corners of my vision.

He brings the car to a stop and turns to me. “You okay?”

I shake my head.

He reaches over, places his hand between my shoulders and applies pressure. “Put your head between your legs.”

I allow him to push me forward, then lower my head. I close my eyes and allow the oxygen to flood my lungs. Some of the darkness recedes.

“Better?” he asks in a low voice.

When I nod, he rubs his hand over my back in slow circles. The warmth from his fingertips sinks into my blood. The band around my chest loosens. He continues to run his fingers down my spine gently. At some point, the tempo of his movements changes. His strokes grow more languorous. He drags his fingertips down my neck and my nipples tighten. A moan slips from my lips. I lengthen my spine, inviting him to stroke me down my back again, and he complies. From my neck to my lower back and again. A shiver grips me. My core tightens.

I sit up at once, and he pulls his hand away. The atmosphere in the car is electric. My limbs tremble. I know he’s staring at me, but no way, am I going to meet his gaze. “Thanks.” I clear my throat, then push open the door and step outside. A second later I hear his door slam shut. Then he rounds the front of the car and draws abreast.

“Should we wait for your mother or—”

“Why don’t we go in?” He takes my elbow. “I’m sure she’s not far behind.”

Another car draws up and stops at enough of a distance that they give us our privacy. At the same time, it’s clear they’re keeping us in their sights.

“Friends of yours?” I nod in their direction.

“Security. They won’t intrude.”

“Do we need security?”

“I do, and now that you’re marrying me, you do, too.”

“Oh.” I blink. Not sure how I feel about having someone on my heels twenty-four-seven, but I’ll have to think through that one later. Right now, I need to get this meeting with my family over with.

I square my shoulders and step onto the sidewalk with Liam in tow. I walk up the short garden path I traversed so many times when I was younger. Before I can rap on the door, it’s pulled open. My mother stands there, clad in a flowing kaftan with a big smile on her face.

“You’re here!” She throws her arms around my shoulders and hugs me. “I’m so happy to see you, Isla.”

“Me too,” I mumble, then disentangle myself from my mother’s embrace and step back.

“Mom, this is my-uh, fiancé, Liam Kincaid. Liam, this is —”

“Nadine.” My ma eschews his proffered hand and throws her arms around him. “Welcome; Isla has told me so much about you.”

“She has?” Liam turns to me with a question in his eyes. I shake my head.

“She said she had a surprise and was bringing someone home to meet me. Of course, I knew who it was right away.”

“You did?” I clear my throat.

“Of course, I did.” She keeps a hold on Liam, then grabs my arm and pulls me along. “Come in, come in. I can’t wait for the entire family to meet you.”

“Ma,” I half yell, “I told you not to invite anyone else. This meeting was supposed to be private—just for the immediate family.”

“And they are *my* immediate family. Since you chose to leave me and go off to London, first to study, and then to work. And, I probably won’t see you for another year.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” I lower my chin to my chest. This is it, my worst nightmare. The reason I prefer to stay far away from them. My extended family means well, but by god, having them all up in my business has driven me to madness so many times in the past.

There’s a loud barking, then the skitter of claws on the wooden floor, and a Great Dane leaps down from the landing and jumps toward us.

“Liam, watch out—”

The dog reaches Liam in one bound, then butts his thigh.

Liam doesn’t blink. The tendons of his neck bunch, but he stays calm.

“Tiny, come back here, boy. I’m so sorry; he escaped me.” My brother Dorian pants as he races down the stairs toward us. “As soon as he heard your voices, he knew someone new had arrived, and he got excited.”

“He’s harmless,” I whisper.

“Your Great Dane is called Tiny?” Liam asks without taking his gaze off of the dog.

“What else would you call him?” I retort.

He doesn’t flinch as Tiny looks up at him and rests his weight against his leg. The two seem engaged in some kind of stand-off. Tiny is, easily, three-and-a-half feet tall when he’s standing on all fours. On his hind legs, he stretches to well over six-feet high. Not to mention, he weighs 115 pounds. For someone not used to his dimensions, he can come across as daunting, but you wouldn’t know it the way Liam narrows his gaze on the dog. Of course, it helps that Liam is six feet four inches tall—and yes, I know his height. I had to, given I was organizing his wedding. And yes, that’s the only reason I made it a point to find out.

Liam lifts his hand and lets Tiny sniff his palm. Tiny bares his teeth.

My heart somersaults into my throat. “Oh, no.” I take a step forward, when Tiny rolls out his tongue and licks Liam’s

palm.

“Tiny, stop that.” Dorian grabs Tiny’s collar and slips on the leash.

Not that it deters the Great Dane from wagging his tail so hard his entire body vibrates, and god help the person who stands behind him. That’ll bruise. He pants and butts Liam’s thigh again. Liam doesn’t stumble, which is impressive given Tiny’s size. Liam chuckles then rubs the dog’s neck. He scratches Tiny behind his ear, and the dog arches his neck in ecstasy.

“Tiny.” Dorian yanks at the dog who has obviously decided he’s not going anywhere. He barks, then brushes his head against my hip with so much force I stumble.

Liam catches me about my waist, and pinpricks of heat shudder out from his touch. Oh, no, no, no. Not falling for that again.

I pet Tiny. “Hey, Tiny. How’re you doing? You keeping everyone busy with your antics?”

Tiny barks, then moves to get closer to me. I brace myself for his weight, but Liam steps in front of me, and Tiny plows into him instead.

“Hey boy, want a treat?” He pulls a clear package from the inside of his jacket, then extracts a treat and holds it out, above Tiny’s head.

“Down, boy.” His voice crackles with authority. “Sit.”

Tiny blinks, then sits on his bottom, the best way to see the treat above him. His gaze shifts between Liam and the treat, his mouth hanging open.

“Good boy.” Liam tosses him the treat, and Tiny grabs it out of the air. As he crunches, he watches Liam with eager eyes.

“Lay down, Tiny,” Liam orders.

Tiny hesitates, his gaze held by Liam’s. Then, Liam crouches and holds the treat on the floor. Tiny follows him

with his eyes, then with his head, and finally, with his body. Once he's lying on the floor, Liam feeds him the treat.

By the time Liam is standing, Tiny has already polished off the treat, is back to sitting, and is looking for more.

Hmm, no way Tiny would stay sitting, unless he's ordered to. Even then, it's anybody's guess what he'll do, but... Apparently, Liam is alpha enough for Tiny to do so without being told by him.

Tiny whines. Liam chuckles, "Okay, that's it for now, but you behave yourself, and you'll get more before we leave."

At this point, Dorian tugs on his leash, and the dog allows my brother to lead him away and into the living room.

"Well look at that. You came prepared?" My mother looks at Liam with big heart eyes. Well, apparently I needn't have worried about how she was going to receive the news. She seems to have fallen for him without finding out anything about him. Of course, the way he's dressed in his tailor-made suit, clean-shaven jaw, and that dark hair which is so black, there's almost a bluish cast to it. Not to mention, those deep gray eyes which currently wear a slightly bemused expression. I'd have fallen for him, too. If I didn't know what an asshole he truly is. But you wouldn't know that, looking at how he smiles broadly at my mother.

He takes her hand in his and kisses her knuckles. "Enchanted to meet you, Nadine," he rumbles.

My mother blushes. Good god, her cheeks actually flush. "Oh, you are a sweetheart, aren't you?" She tugs on his arm. "Come, meet the others."

Liam

“How did you know to bring the doggy treats?” she hisses as we follow her mother into the living room.

“You should know better than to ask that question.” I smirk.

Her features darken. “I suppose you found out about Tiny when you had me investigated. No wonder he bypassed me and went straight for you. That was a cheap trick, carrying treats for him.” She huffs.

“It worked, didn’t it?” I can’t stop myself from grinning wider.

“Don’t think you can win over the others the same way.” She brushes past me, making sure to grind her *Ferragamo*-clad heel into my shoe. I chuckle. She’s curvy but weighs barely enough for me to feel the pressure.

She moves into the room, then pivots and begins to walk back past me.

“Hey,” —I grab her wrist— “where are you going?”

“It’s worse than I thought. They’re all here. All of them.”

“Who? Your extended family?” I blink.

“They—” She gulps. “My mother’s entire knitting club is here.”

“Your mother’s knitting club?”

She tries to pull away in the direction of the door, but I hold her back.

“So fine, we’ll meet her knitting club. Why is that a problem?”

She looks at me like I’ve grown horns or just landed from outer space. “They are her knitting club. You have no idea what that means, do you?”

“Umm, that they knit together?”

“And while they knit, they talk. They gossip. They dissect each and every one of their friends and family and relations—including their fourth and fifth cousins removed—to pieces. They know everything about everyone in this town. And once they start asking questions, believe me, the paparazzi are nothing compared to them.”

I chuckle. “I’m sure you’re exaggerating. They’re a small-town knitting club. Surely, they can’t be that intimidating.”

She laughs, a desperate, evil sound. “You have no idea, do you? You poor thing.” She pats my cheek. “I already feel sorry for you.”

Sparks of sensation sizzle out from her touch. My pulse rate shoots up. Jesus, what is this crazy response toward her? It must be the fact that I don’t like her. That’s all it is. It’s a natural reaction to someone you can’t stand. I take a step back, and her hand slides off. A hurt look flickers across her face, then she tosses her head.

“I hope you’re prepared.”

“Stop trying to make it out to be something bigger than it is.” I draw myself up to my full height. “Let me show you how it’s done.” I brush past her and cross the room. The clickety-clack of knitting needles greets me, and I stop in the middle of the room next to Nadine.

The sofa opposite me has three women of varying ages between fifty and seventy, with varying degrees of gray in their hair. To my right, a man and a woman in their late forties

are seated; to my other side are another man and two more women. The women are dressed in formal skirts or dresses, the men in slacks. All are intent on their knitting.

“They’re dressed in their Sunday best to see you,” Isla murmurs.

Right. “Ladies and gents.” I clear my throat. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Nadine turns to me with a gleam in her eyes. “This is the Lymington Knitting Club. We meet every week on Friday to knit together. But when they heard Isla was coming with her beau, they wanted to meet you. They’re very excited.” She claps her hands and turns to the ladies in front. “Everyone, this is Liam Kincaid, Isla’s—” She looks to me for her help. “Isla’s ___”

“Husband-to-be,” I say.

“Friend,” Isla interjects at the same time, but it’s, clearly, only for my ears.

I shoot her a glance, and she raises a shoulder. *Had to try*, she mouths silently.

“Husband?” Nadine pales. “Did you say husband?”

The clickety-clack of the needles stops. Silence descends, except for the panting of Tiny, who’s settled down in a corner of the room on his mat.

“Umm, yes, Ma.” Isla walks over and puts her arm around her mother. “That’s why we wanted to see you. It didn’t feel right to tell you over the phone. And Liam thought it best we break the news to you together.”

“Oh, my.” Nadine sways.

I turn to her. “Are you okay? Maybe you should sit down?”

“No, no.” She shakes her head. “I’m fine. It’s just, I’ve dreamed of this day, when my Isla would get married, and I can’t believe it’s here already.” She sniffs.

“Ma, please.” Isla pats her shoulder.

“I’m good, just... happy. Of course—” she turns to me “—in order to marry her, you need to pass the Lymington Knitting Club test and be inducted into our circle of trust.”

“Test?” I look toward the gathered crowd. All of their gazes are on me. The expressions on their faces are, universally, ones of curiosity. They don’t seem friendly, but they’re not unfriendly. “I’m ready to answer any question you may have of me.”

“May I introduce Wilma Mason, the President of our knitting club?” Nadine gestures to the woman on the far right of the sofa in front of me.

“Hmph.” Wilma purses her lips. She puts her knitting in her lap, and fixes her steely gaze on me. “Do you love her?”

I blink. Talk about going straight for the jugular.

All of them look at me expectantly.

“I’ll do anything to protect her. I promise to cherish her for the rest of my life. I swear, she’ll never want for anything as long as she lives. I’ll ensure she’ll always be happy.”

I glance around the faces of the knitters, then turn back to the woman who spoke.

“But do you love her?” A frown creases her forehead.

Next to me, Nadine tenses. I sense Isla watching me closely. Dorian leans forward on the balls of his feet. Even the dog has stopped panting. Every person in the room is watching me with rapt gazes.

I cross over to stand on the other side of Isla. I pull a box from my pocket, then open it.

The early evening sun slants through the window and reflects off the sapphire.

“Holy shit,” Isla breathes. “Is that a—”

“Ring.” I pull the ring out, then slide the box back into my pocket. “Isla, will you marry me?”

The tension in the room seems to multiply.

Isla's gaze is caught on the diamond. It's her turn to sway. Her mother wraps an arm about her waist and steadies her.

"Isla?" I frown. For some reason, sweat pools in my armpits. Which is crazy. This is a charade. I'm not really going to marry her. Well, I am going to marry her, but not in the way a man who loves a woman and wants to spend the rest of his life with her is going to. I'm doing it so I can fulfill the clause in my father's will and ensure I have an heir to whom I can pass on my legacy. That's all this is about. So, why is my throat dry? Why is my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth? Why is there a hollow feeling in my chest? And what if she refuses me? Nah, she won't. She needs this wedding as much as I do. So, why is she still hesitating?

"Isla?"

She doesn't respond.

"Look at me." I lower my voice to a hush.

She blinks, then glances up at me.

I hold her gaze. I search her features, and her pupils dilate. Color flushes her cheeks. She bites down on her lower lip, then nods. "Yes. Yes, I will."

"Yes!" Dorian is the first to clap. The others follow.

I take Isla's hand in mine, then slide the ring onto her ring finger. It's a perfect fit. Naturally.

I tug her closer, and she comes without resistance. I press a kiss to her forehead. Her entire body is stiff. The muscles of her back and shoulders are so tight, I can feel the stress pouring off of her. "Relax," I murmur against her skin, "or else they'll suspect something."

"Oh, I'll give them something to suspect, all right." She tips up her chin, stands on her tiptoes and smashes her lips to mine.

Heat explodes under my skin. A current of electricity zips out from where our lips connect. Adrenaline laces my blood. My fingers and toes tingle. A yearning explodes deep inside and fights its way to the surface. I grasp the curve of her waist

and haul her even closer. Her breasts push into my chest, and the slight roll of her belly fits into the concaveness of my stomach. She's soft where I'm not, her warmth a balm to the coldness I've carried around inside without even knowing it. Her scent curls around my senses—seductive, evocative, a fragrance that stirs desires I've only called upon when I'm able to control them. With her, it would be impassioned, intense, fierce, ardent. With her, it would... It *is* different. I lean into her, tilt my head, and take control of the kiss. She moans, then parts her lips, and I sweep my tongue in. I kiss her, drink of her, draw from her so I can fill every cell of my being. I—

The pop of a cork from a champagne bottle cuts through my mind.

I tear my mouth from hers so suddenly she sways. I hold her about her waist for a second longer. Her features are pale, her lips swollen. She looks at me with the same expression of surprise and terror that I know must be reflected on mine.

I lean in, press my cheek to hers and whisper, “If I'd known you'd respond like that, I'd have kissed you sooner.”

She makes a sound deep in her throat, and when I pull back, I notice her face is flushed. Her eyes glitter. Good. She's angry. That makes this much easier.

I turn her to face the Lymington Knitting Club. “Does that answer your question?”

The same woman who'd asked the question earlier scowls. “You still haven't answered it. Do you—”

She's interrupted by the sound of paws hitting the wooden floor. I spot movement from the corner of my eye then turn in time to watch Tiny execute a perfect leap through the air. He grabs the bottle of champagne from a surprised Dorian, then upturns the bottle so its contents pour down his throat.

“Tiny, stop that.” Dorian yanks on the bottle, but Tiny refuses to let go.

“This dog, you'd think he'd have learned by now not to drink, considering he always suffers a hangover the next

morning.”

Nadine strides toward the dog and catches his jaws. It takes her and Dorian’s combined efforts to pull the bottle away from the pooch. And even then, I suspect it’s because he’s already downed the contents of the bottle. He wags his tail happily, and I swear, the Great Dane laughs as he staggers back to his mat.

“And that was the most expensive bottle of champagne in the wine shop,” Dorian laments.

“No problem; I came prepared.” A new voice says.

I glance over my shoulder to find my mother standing at the door. Behind her is a liveried butler with a tray of flutes filled with champagne.

“A dog with a drinking problem?” I smirk.

“Your mother arrived with her own catering van?” She scoffs.

“And you call him Tiny?”

“He *was* tiny when he arrived. We didn’t think he’d grow up to be so big.”

“He’s a Great Dane,” I point out as I swing the car onto the highway. That was the most entertaining few hours of my life, to be honest. Even if the same woman who asked me if I loved Isla hinted that she wasn’t happy that I hadn’t answered the question directly.

Luckily, people had been too distracted by my mother’s arrival, and the subsequent food and drinks that had been served to them, to press the matter further. And Nadine seemed too overwhelmed by the events to notice otherwise. Dorian, Isla’s brother had, however, shaken my hand, then leaned in close and warned me that he’d been her protector growing up, and if I did anything to upset Isla, he’d sic the Great Dane on me. When I asked him who or what he had to

protect her from, he looked at me with a funny expression on his face and suggested I ask Isla about it. Then, he glanced at Tiny and back at me and assured me that Tiny could be a terror when necessary.

Looking at Tiny, who was snoring softly in the corner, I wasn't sure he was capable of hurting a fly—unless it was by inadvertently squishing it— I wasn't certain but decided never to test that theory.

What I still find hard to comprehend is the champagne. “Tiny really likes his booze?”

Isla raises a shoulder. “Only champagne. Nothing else tempts him. But every time we open a bottle of bubbles, he gets to it first. And it doesn't seem to do him any harm. On occasion, he's woken up with a hangover, but like most of us, it doesn't seem to put him off the champers.”

“What does a hangover look like on a dog?” I muse.

“As ugly as it does on us humans. Last time Tiny emptied a bottle of bubbles down his gullet, he was so sick the next morning, my ma threw him in the bathtub and hosed him down. Tiny was not happy, but he didn't dare move from the tub. My ma can be fierce when she's pissed off.”

I glance sideways at her. “You're kidding, right?”

“No.” She meets my gaze and we both laugh.

The image of Nadine, who's shorter than Isla, facing off with Tiny, the Great Dane looking properly cowed while being hosed down, is hilarious. Our gazes hold, and the laughter dies.

Just like that, a familiar heat ignites in my belly. My groin hardens. I clear my throat and glance forward, focusing on the road.

We drive for a few minutes in silence, then she says, “Thanks,” and clears her throat. “But you needn't have.”

“Needn't have what?”

“The ring. It wasn't necessary.”

“On the contrary, it’s important, so the press knows we’re genuine.”

She fingers her ring, then glances at me. “It really is beautiful. How did you know sapphires are my favorite?”

“I didn’t, but they’re deep and mysterious, with a heart of passion locked at their core. It reminded me of your eyes.” *Where the hell did that come from? Now I’m waxing poetic about her eyes—when there isn’t even anyone around to hear me? Get it together, man.*

She swallows. Her gorgeous eyes grow deeper until they seem almost indigo in color. Color flushes her cheeks. She opens her mouth to speak when her phone buzzes, as does mine. She glances at her screen, then squares her shoulders. “Speaking of, I hope you’re ready for what’s coming.”

Isla

“I’m not ready for this.” I dab on the lipstick, then glance at my reflection in the bedroom mirror. At least, I don’t have to worry about my hair. That’s about the only thing I’m happy about, all things considered. Oh, also, the Jimmy Choo’s on my feet. He insisted on purchasing a whole new wardrobe for me, which I, of course, refused. Still, when he had so many pairs of my favorite shoes—and in my size—delivered to me, I wasn’t able to turn them down. I’m determined to maintain my independence in this arrangement, but not even I can say no to couture shoes.

I opted for a simple blue dress that nips in at my waist and flows in an A-line to below my knees. The color of the sapphire on my ring finger matches the color of my dress. I purchased this dress a few months ago and haven’t had a chance to wear it. I thought it was perfect for this occasion, but now I’m not too sure.

Earlier today, I managed to slip away long enough to see Karma West Sovrano for a fitting. She’s the hottest name in designing bridal wear and she agreed to come up with a dress for me and for my bridesmaids, who will be meeting with her separately. I’ve known Karma since she was a teenager and we all saw her as Summer’s little sister. It’s hard to believe how much things have changed.

Still, I truly appreciate her willingness to take me on, given how last-minute everything is. When I pointed that out to her, she brushed it aside. Apparently, she would have been more shocked if I'd told her I had months for her to design my dress. She said she's become so accustomed to working with insane deadlines, she wouldn't know what to do with herself if she had more time. It wasn't until I stood in her atelier and her team member took my measurements that the reality of my situation began to dawn on me.

I'm getting married to a man I barely know. He might insist it's a fake wedding, but it feels all-too-real to me. Which, given this relationship has a sell-by date, does not bode well for me. Which is why I need to protect myself from feeling anything for him.

"You're the picture of understated elegance," my friend, Summer Sterling, murmurs from where she's sprawled on my bed.

"You mean I look boring."

"That's not what I meant." She laughs.

"You implied it." I frown at my reflection. "When I bought this, I thought it'd be perfect to wear to client meetings. But I'm not sure it's enough to wear when we announce this on social media." My breath catches. "Oh god, did I just say make an announcement on social media?" I shake my head. "I can't do this. I can't." My heart flutters in my chest like a dragonfly trapped in a jar. My throat hurts, and I squeeze my hands together to stop them from trembling.

"You can." Summer rises to her feet and walks over to me. She's dressed, as always, in a flowing skirt and peasant blouse. Her boho chic outfit hints at the bump she's sporting around her middle. "If I can get pregnant—which I never thought I would do so soon—you can face the social media audience."

"I... I can't." My palms dampen. I begin to rub them on my dress then stop. "I can't do this."

"Rubbish, of course you can." A new voice sounds from the direction of the doorway.

I turn to find Zara Chopra propping a hand on her hip. As usual, she's dressed in a pantsuit and high heeled pumps. Her hair is blow-dried, every strand in place. Her makeup flawless. She looks like a million bucks, or like a hotshot lawyer who's capable of running a Fortune 500 company. Or a country, which she's going to make a bid for very soon.

"Hey, Z, you came."

"Of course I came," Zara scoffs. "It's not every day I have a message from one of my best friends saying she's about to marry the most eligible bachelor in London."

"I thought that was Hunter Whittington?"

Zara seems taken aback, then she tosses her hair over her shoulder. "That stuck-up-twatwaffle? Not likely. I prefer my men to be more salt-of-the-earth."

"Thought you wanted to lick the salt off his skin," I mumble, then cough.

Zara blinks, then cackles out a laugh. "Oh, good one, girlfriend. You should be talking. Have you seen the picture of you and Liam getting out of his car yesterday?"

"Wait, there's a picture of us?"

"Of course there's a picture of the two of you. It's all anyone can talk about on social media." She pulls her phone from her *Birkin* and swipes her fingers across the screen. Then walks over and holds it out to me.

I study the blurry video shot from a distance. It's still unmistakably me getting out of his Jag. Liam holds out his hand, I hesitate, then take it. He pulls me up to my feet, and for a second, I'm toe-to-toe with him. I tip up my chin. Even with the shitty resolution, the look on my face is indisputable. Longing, lust, and something else... A vulnerability I try so hard to keep the world from seeing. *And it's right there, for everyone to see.* Liam lowers his head, when the screen shakes. We hear the sound of someone yelling—probably Liam's security—then the screen goes dark.

"Oooh," Summer says and fans herself. "That's some chemistry, lady. You've been holding out on me. So, that's

why you agreed to marry him?"

Zara turns to her. "You must be Summer. I've heard so much about you from Isla."

"Wait, you guys have never met?" I glance between them. "I can't believe that. Zara, Summer is one of my best friends. We've known each other since university. And Summer, Zara and I met on a work gig, and we've been friends ever since. I'm so happy both of you are here today."

"Of course silly." Summer rolls her eyes. "Where else would I be when you're about to announce your engagement to the world?"

I feel the color drain from my face. "Don't remind me."

"Aw, sweetie, you don't have to be nervous. You're going to be great." Summer squeezes my arm, then turns to Zara. "It's good to meet you, Z. I can call you Z, right?" Summer throws her arms around Zara and hugs her. "I feel like I know you already."

Zara stiffens. She snaps her gaze to me with a look that screams, *is she always this friendly?*

I chuckle and nod my head. That's Summer for you. Bubbly, happy, friendly, and always so good at putting everyone at ease. She's a born hostess, that one, and marrying Sinclair Sterling, one of the most powerful men on the continent, has only helped bring her into her own. It's like she's finally found herself. Guess that's what falling in love and finding where you belong does to you. You come into your own self.

"Isla?"

I blink to find both Zara and Summer looking at me, twin expressions of curiosity on their faces.

"Have you told him?" Zara asks.

I glance between both of my friends. This might be the first time they've met, but they have one more thing in common, other than me as a friend. On separate occasions, I shared with each of them the one thing I haven't mentioned to

anyone else in the world. Not my family. Not any of my other friends. They each caught me when I was at my lowest, and I was unable to stop myself from confiding in them. It's also why I called the two of them over to give me a boost of confidence.

"No." I shake my head.

The two of them exchange glances.

"You're going to marry him and live in close quarters with him. Don't you think you should?" Zara frowns.

"I don't know." I wrap my arms about my shoulders. "Maybe I don't need to tell him at all."

"Is that wise?" Summer massages her belly. "He's going to be your husband. If you tell him, I'm sure he'll be supportive."

"I agree." Zara leans forward on the balls of her feet. "The man wants to marry you. Surely, he loves you enough to look past any surface issues."

"This is more than a surface issue." I twist my fingers together. "It's one of the hardest things I've ever faced in my life."

"I understand, Isla." Zara closes the distance to me and touches my shoulder. "And I don't mean to minimize what you've gone through. I know how stressed you are that he'll reject you, but have you thought of the fact that he might accept you as-is?"

"And if he doesn't?"

"That's his shortcoming, not yours." Zara tips up her chin. "But I don't foresee that happening. You chose the man. Trust your choice, lady. Trust in the fact that he loves you enough to support you and be by your side so you don't have to go through this journey alone."

Only he doesn't love me, and this wedding is a farce. I hunch my shoulders, "I wish I could be as positive about this as you, but I don't feel strong enough to take that risk."

Besides, what if I told him, and he called off the arrangement? What then? My fledgling company wouldn't

stand a chance of surviving. No, I'm doing the right thing by not bringing this up at this stage.

"You do realize that once you tell him you'll feel lighter?" Summer says softly.

"Also, Liam Kincaid isn't stupid. You know that better than any of us. It's only a matter of time before he finds out—assuming he doesn't know already."

"What? No." Shit, I hadn't thought of that. But seriously, why would he know something like this? I shake my head. "I'm sure he doesn't."

Zara knits her eyebrows over her nose. "Still, wouldn't it be better if you told him first?"

"I... I'm going to make sure the chances of him finding out are minimized."

"Eh?" She blinks. "How do you do that?"

"Umm—" *It's because the wedding is not what it seems. This entire thing is a charade I've had to play along with because, thanks to my advice, Liam's bride dropped him before they could get married. And now, I have to take her place. And, of course, I need to get impregnated... Artificially... Soon. So...yeah... No... I can't even tell my friends because I signed a non-disclosure agreement that prevents me from sharing this with anyone else. I can't tell a single soul. Anyway, it sounds so far-fetched. What is this? Some kind of silly romance novel with a fake wedding? To be honest, I'm not sure they'd believe me. I know I wouldn't.* I draw my lower lip in between my teeth. "I, uh, insisted on separate bedrooms."

"And he agreed?" A look of suspicion enters Zara's eyes.

"He wants to marry me, and this was a deal breaker for me, so he agreed." My voice comes out confident, though I confess, I feel anything but. "So" —I glance down at myself—"what do you think; should I change or not?"

Zara looks closely at the dress. So does Summer. Then, as one, they say, "Change."

“Maybe this is too much?” I rub my palms down the satin skirt of the dress I settled on. It’s a deep burgundy color and brings out the highlights in my hair. The neckline is high in the front, and it has lacy sleeves that cling to my arms and end at my wrists. From the front, the dress is demure; the back of the dress plunges to just above my butt crack. It’s the mullet of dresses—business in the front; party in the back. I smother an hysterical giggle. *I can’t believe I’m doing this.*

I’m reconsidering this outfit, but the doorbell rings. Liam’s chauffeur is here to pick me up, security in tow, and Zara and Summer have agreed to accompany me so I don’t have to make the journey alone.

I have just enough time to check my makeup—or lack thereof, since I decided on only a little mascara and lipstick to complement the dress. I wanted to look sexy, without being obvious. Interesting, but not come-hither. Not boring, but not too provocative.

We arrive at Liam’s apartment, a penthouse with a view over London that’s unrivaled, with a lot of chrome and steel, clean lines and sharp angles, and glass. There’s lots of glass—from the tables to the shelves, to the floor-to-ceiling windows in the atrium where we’ve been led.

After placing my handbag on a side table, I set up my selfie ring light and get my phone ready for us to film.

Now, I glance out of one of the floor-to-ceiling windows and wonder, again, what the hell I’m getting myself into.

“You look great.” Zara squeezes my arm. “Now remember, you need to make the audience your bitch. They are dying to hear from you. They love you. They can’t wait to find out what your big news is about.”

“They’ll have to find me first, considering my social media posts haven’t been particularly successful in the past.” I scoff.

“Oh, they’ll find you all right. You put out the word, and they’ll come running. You’re incredible. Your perspective is unique. All you have to do is call, and they’ll come running to you.”

“Wow, that’s some positive reinforcement you have right there.”

“You bet, sister. Now go out there and grab reality by its balls, and make it rearrange itself for you. To suit your needs. Your thoughts. What you want. All that exists is you and this moment, and you’re going to own it like the boss you are.” She holds her hand in the air. “High-five for strong women.”

Summer and I laugh and slap her hand.

“Go get ‘em.” She winks.

The fine hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. A current runs up my back. A current of revulsion. That’s all it is. That’s the only reason I know he’s in the room. That’s why my internal signaling mechanism is going haywire—because I can’t stand to be in the same space as him. Yep, that’s exactly what it is.

“Isla.” His voice rumbles over my skin and seems to arrow straight to my core. My thighs clench. How is it possible that, with that one word, he seems to imply that he wants to bend me over that pristine cream chaise in the corner, pull up my dress, tear off my panties and bury himself between my legs? Because I have a fanciful imagination, is how.

Zara and Summer look past me, then at each other. A silent message passes between them. Zara leans forward and kisses my cheek, “Our earlier conversation? Don’t, for one second, think I’m not coming back to it.”

Summer kisses my other cheek, then the two brush past me. I hear them exchange greetings with Liam. I can’t hear the words, but I hear the low hum of Zara’s voice as she speaks to Liam.

Liam

“If you hurt her in any way, you’ll have to deal with me,” Zara scowls as she shakes my hand. “Isla’s been through a lot already. Make sure you take care of her.”

“Eh?” I narrow my gaze on her. I met Zara Chopra when my friend JJ Kane got the founding members together to introduce us to the concept of his club. And when I had Isla investigated, I knew she and Zara were close friends. But, for once, I have no idea what she’s talking about. And that’s strange, because I thought I knew everything there was to know about my future fake wife. “Care to explain that?”

Zara steps back, then purses her lips. “That’s Isla’s prerogative to tell you or not. Just keep in mind, if you mess with her, you mess with me.”

“And me—” Summer says from next to her. She smiles sweetly. “As well as the Seven, who are one of your biggest clients.”

I frown. She’s referring to her husband Sinclair Sterling who’s among the seven billionaires who own 7A investments. They advise some of the biggest brands in the business who, in turn, constitute the bulk of my advertisers.

“Are you threatening me?” I ask lightly.

“Threatening?” She laughs gaily. “Oh, no, I’m just taking care of my friend’s interests.”

I tilt my head. “I’m glad Isla has such good friends in her corner.” And I mean it. I can appreciate friendship. The kind you could trust enough to keep your secrets.

Of course, I’m not one of those who needs friends. I have myself and my work ethic, and the business I took over from my father and built. A business that will belong to me as soon as I marry and produce an heir. That’s what this entire pretense is for, after all.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, ladies.” I incline my head.

“Guess that’s our cue.” With a last scowl at me, Zara heads for the door, followed by Summer, who still has that sweet-yet-lethal smile pasted to her face. They leave the atrium and I turn and head toward the woman whose back has been turned to me since I walked into the room. And what a gorgeous back it is. The dress she’s wearing bares the creamy expanse of her back. It’s cut so low, I can see the dimples on either side at the base of her spine.

The blood thuds in my ears. My pulse thrums at my wrists, at the back of my eyelids, and even in my fucking balls. I can’t take my gaze off that strip of skin revealed by the ‘V’ of her plunging neckline. I reach her, and before I can stop myself, drag my knuckles down her spine. Goosebumps pepper her skin. She pulls away from me and walks to where her phone is clipped to a tripod rigged with an LED light and a microphone.

“If you’re ready, I thought we could start shooting right away.” She switches on the light, fiddles around with the phone, then glances at me over her shoulder.

I take in the gorgeous column of her neck, her upturned nose, that slight tilt to her chin which hints at her stubborn nature. Her skin is dewy, her pink lips are parted. She swallows, and the slim column of her throat moves. A pulse flutters at the base.

Once more, I reach out, and press my thumb to it before I can stop myself. “You are so fucking gorgeous.”

She glances at me, stricken, then pulls away.

What the— What did I say? “Isla, I—”

“If we’re going to do this, we need to have ground rules.” She puts distance between us.

“Ground rules?” I slide my hands into my pockets.

She nods. “No more touching; no more kissing.”

“We need to be intimate for the media to believe us.”

“That’s when we’re out and about, but once we’re on our own, you keep your distance. No more” —she waves her hands in the air— “whatever that was.”

“And what was that?” I widen my stance.

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. But it’s not happening again.” She squares her shoulders. “Promise me, you won’t try to seduce me.”

I laugh. “Trust me, when I seduce you, you won’t stand a chance.” I wipe the smile off of my face. “It’s not like I want to touch you or kiss you, either. But sometimes—” I drag my fingers through my hair. “I can’t help myself.”

“Too bad.” She firms her lips. “You need to try harder for me to uphold my side of the bargain.”

“Is that an ultimatum?” I ask in a soft voice.

Some of the color fades from her cheeks. “It’s a deal breaker,” she murmurs.

I draw myself up to my full height. “Don’t forget, you need this job to salvage your reputation. Already, the tabloids are buzzing with what you and I were doing together. They’ve already identified who you are, and rumors about why my wedding planner was canoodling with me instead of my bride are circulating. As you know, with these kinds of things, you’ll come out of it looking like a wedding wrecker—”

“While you, as the man, will get away with it.”

“—if we don’t handle this properly.” I hold my hands out in front of me. “Hey, I don’t make the rules.” I raise a shoulder. So, I’m an asshole. Deal with it. Besides, no one tells me what to do. Not even my future fake wife.

Her jaw hardens. Color flushes her cheeks. Her eyes gleam, and once more, I'm entranced by how vital she is. "You're an asshole."

"You may call me alphahole."

She flips me the bird, and I bark out a laugh. "Wasn't expecting that from you."

"Deal with it, jerkass." She all but stamps her foot. "Just... Stay away from me when we don't have to perform in front of an audience, okay?"

"Are you worried you like my touch entirely too much? You stressed that you're falling for me? Is that what's got your panties in a twist?"

"If you must know, my panties are soaked, actually. And yes, that's exactly why you need to stay away from me." She slaps her hand to her forehead. "Shit, what was I thinking blurting that out? Erase; rewind. Let's go back to before I said it."

"Let's not." I close the distance to her, and that's when the camera beeps. I glance toward the screen to find it recording. "Perfect timing." I wrap my arm about her shoulders and draw her close. She stands stiffly in the circle of my arms and I pull her even closer until her side is plastered to mine. Until we are joined from torso to hip to thigh. I slide her in front and notch her head under my chin.

"Isla and I have an announcement to make." I interlace the fingers of my left hand with hers, then hold it up so her ring is visible to the camera. "We're getting married."

"That went well." I raise a glass of whiskey to my lips.

"You think?" She walks back and forth in front of the kitchen island. "Did you have to just put it out there—that we're getting married?"

I narrow my gaze. “Wasn’t the intention to inform the press and everyone else by putting it out on social media?”

“Yes, but—” She wrings her fingers together. “Couldn’t you have led up to it in a softer manner?”

I raise a shoulder. “Best not to pussyfoot around these kinds of things. People know when you’re vacillating, and that would have only made us look guilty when we have nothing to hide. It was best to be upfront and let them know our intentions.”

Her phone vibrates, and keeps vibrating, as it has since the post went up on the social media platform. She glances at it, then away.

“Oh, you did a good job of that all right. The straight-speaking groom who’s sorry that it didn’t work out with Lila, but who knew as soon as he set his eyes on me that I was the only one for him.”

“It’s the truth.”

“The truth.” She throws up her hands. “The truth is that I look like a slut, like someone who, while organizing my client’s wedding, fell in love with my client’s husband-to-be.”

“It happens.” I slide the shot glass of tequila I’ve poured across the counter. “Have a drink.”

“I don’t want to have a drink. I think this was a mistake. We shouldn’t have announced it like this.”

“So, you’d have rather turned up at the wedding where the press would have realized it was you only when I lifted your veil?”

“Something like that.”

Her phone vibrates again. She reaches for it, but I snatch it up and pocket it.

“Hey, give me that.”

“It’s not going to help to look at the comments. Let them go crazy. It’s only going to get worse when we finally marry.

But it will die down, I promise. Something else will come along, and they'll shift their attention away."

"How can you be so... blasé?"

"Practice?" I drum my fingers on the counter. "When I first started out in the company that my father founded, everyone compared me to him. They soon realized I was more ambitious, far more ruthless, and didn't give a fuck about what any of them thought of me."

"That must have made your employees happy."

"Those who didn't like my style left. The employees who stayed, grew with me. Some of the naysayers never stopped spreading rumors about me. But the fuck if I cared. The more I built up the company and added new businesses to the portfolio, the more money I made, the more their voices dropped in pitch, until they were gone, drowned out by the jingle of coins. Metaphorically speaking, that is."

"Is everything about money?" She scrutinizes my features.

"Isn't everything about money?"

"I know... It's why I'm here, but that's only because I don't have any. What about when you have more than you can ever spend? Life can't be just about amassing wealth and power and possessions. There has to be something more to it, surely."

"Says the woman who agreed to this arrangement to have access to both."

"No, I just didn't want you to drive me out of business. It's not as if you gave me much of a choice." She hunches her shoulders. "Maybe I didn't think it through completely. I'm not sure it's worth having my name out there as a wedding-breaker. I'm a wedding planner, not a wedding-destroyer."

"Should have thought about that before you gave my ex-fiancée the advice you did." I smirk.

"Argh!" She plants her hands on her hips. "Don't you have one iota of empathy in you?"

I pretend to think about it, then respond, “Nope,” and shake my head. “Empathy never got me very far in life. On the other hand, ignoring everyone and everything else to focus on my goals? That’s what’s helped me move forward.”

“Me, too.” She rubs her forehead. “But I’m not sure about anything anymore.” She draws in a breath. “You know what that means, right?”

“No, what does it mean?”

She glances about the space, then her gaze alights on my bar at the far end. “It’s time for a drink.”

Isla

“No... no way. You said what?” I giggle, then hiccup. Shit, I’m drunk as a skunk in a drum. Oops. That doesn’t make any sense. I slide off the barstool and promptly land on my arse.

“Isla!” He’s beside me in an instant. “Are you okay?”

Shock reverberates through me, then I burst out laughing. I laugh until tears slide down my cheeks. Then snort in the most unladylike manner. When I wipe my face, it’s to find him smiling down at me.

“Seems you’re a happy drunk.”

“You have no idea.”

I blink—see two of his gorgeous faces—blink again. They fuse into one. Gorgeous thick hair, high forehead, hooked nose, and those lips, those puffy lips that I want to chew on. I raise my gaze and find him watching me with a hangry look in his eyes.

“Have you eaten?” I hiccup.

“What?”

“I’m hungry. And you look” —I point at his features and giggle— “hangry. Why are you hangry?”

“Hangry, huh?” His lips curl up on one side. I reach up and touch it. Shimmers of electricity explode through my veins.

Those annoying goosebumps dance across my skin.

He must feel the same, for his gaze narrows. Those gray eyes deepen in color, and I can swear there are sparks of blue and green swirling in their depths. The tendons of his throat flex, and a vein throbs at his temple. His jaw is so hard, with the makings of a five o'clock beard, even though I'll bet he shaved this morning. How can one man be so beautiful? Every time I look at him, my ovaries seem to go into overdrive. Every time I smell him, all the cells in my body seems to awaken. And when he looks at me, my nerve endings spark, and my brain cells threaten to short-circuit. "It should be illegal."

"What?" he asks in a rough voice.

"Looking the way you do. Talking the way you do. Being you... It should all be outlawed. You're not allowed to be so..." I blink. "So..."

"Charismatic?"

"So arrogant." I frown.

"And you're not allowed to be so beautiful, inside and out. There's a generosity in you that always wins, which is why you told Lila what you did. It couldn't have been easy telling her to leave, knowing you would pay the price for it. And yet, you did."

My cheeks heat. "What's this? A be-nice-to-Isla session before you pull the rug out from under me?"

"It's a be-nice-to-Isla-before-you-put-her-to-bed, session."

"Bed?" I shake my head. "No, no, no, I need to go home first."

"You're not going anywhere in this condition. Get some sleep in the guest room, and when you're sober in the morning, I'll drop you back home."

"Promise?" I hold out my pinky finger.

"Promise." He locks his finger with mine. A shiver runs down my spine. This... feels different, like something shifted.

Like the balance in this relationship—or whatever it is between us—just tipped toward the middle.

A yawn grips me. “Sorry.” I pat my mouth. “Not that you’re boring or anything.”

“I know, you’re knackered.”

“Yeah, best I get to be—whoops.” He scoops me up in his arms and stands up in one fluid movement that leaves me with my mouth gaping open. “Wow, you’re strong.” I reach up and feel his biceps. “Like really tough.”

“You don’t weigh much at all.”

“Ha, ha, ha, joke.”

He frowns at me. “There are many things about you that I can criticize. Your weight is not one of them though. You are perfect as-is.”

“Flattery will get you” —I yawn— “everywhere.” I hook my fingers into the front of his shirt and close my eyes.

The next thing I know, he’s trying to disengage my hold.

“Isla?”

“Hmm.” I rub my cheek into the pillow.

“Isla, baby, you need to let go of me.”

“Uh-uh.” I pull him closer. Without opening my eyes, I know his face is poised over mine for I can feel his breath mingle with mine. I can smell his dark, edgy scent, feel his gaze on my features, sense the cloud of heat that spools off his body and slams into my chest, holding me captive. A moan bleeds from my lips.

“Isla, what are you doing?” He drags his nose up my jaw, and my entire body seems to detonate. I wriggle under him, squeeze my thighs together, then thrust out my chest so the tips of my breasts graze his chest. All his muscles go hard. I still haven’t opened my eyes, but I sense the tension that grips him. “Isla,” his voice is hard. “You don’t want to do this.”

“Don’t I?”

“You want me to fuck you when you’re drunk so you can blame it on me in the morning.”

I snap open my eyes. “And what if I do? This way, we can get rid of this stupid chemistry that seems to always zing between us.”

“When I fuck you, it won’t be just once, and it won’t be casual. So be very careful what you ask for.”

“I—” I try to speak but the words don’t emerge from my throat. “I—”

He searches my features. “That’s what I thought. You’re not ready to face the consequences of our fucking, woman. Be content with building your little company, and the fake sense of authority that comes with it. You’re never going to be able to take off your blinkers and see the potential of what we could be together.”

He pulls away, and this time, I release him. He pivots and is halfway to the door before I sit up.

My head spins, but I ignore it. “Wait, what do you mean by that? What do you mean the potential of what we could be together? I don’t understand.”

He pauses, then half turns his head. “I don’t, either.” Without explaining himself further, he leaves. I sink back into the bedding, my thoughts in tumult. Nothing makes sense anymore. I close my eyes, and sleep draws me under.

When I awaken in the morning, my head feels like there are many little people inside trying to drill their way out. Ouch! I manage to peel open one eyelid and spot the bottle of water and the two pills in the small dish next to it. Painkillers, thank god. I down them with the water and lay back. The next time I open my eyes, the light coming through the window is much brighter.

Ignoring my phone, which has also been placed on the nightstand next to the glass of water, I head for the door that I assume leads to the bathroom. After a hot shower and brushing my teeth with the new toothbrush I found next to the sink—courtesy of Liam again, I’m sure—I step into the same clothes

I slept in and head out of the bedroom, down the corridor and toward the kitchen... Where the smells of breakfast being cooked turn my stomach.

Liam has his back to me. He's wearing a pair of sweats, his upper body bare. His shoulder blades move in perfect synchronicity as he cooks something on the stovetop. His waist is trim, and his arse—oh, god, that arse—is tight and firm and stretches the fabric of his sweats in a manner that has my mouth watering. I must make a sound, for he turns and spots me.

“Good morning,” he rumbles.

“Morning.”

I shuffle toward the coffee maker, when he points to a chair and says, “Take a seat. I'll get you coffee and something to eat.”

My stomach churns. “No breakfast. Coffee is good, though.”

He slides a cup of coffee toward me. Then turns back to the stove. Within seconds, two plates of food are placed on the table. One in front of each of us. I glance at the hash browns, baked beans, toast and sausages.

“I don't eat mea—”

“These sausages aren't meat-based. And none of that soya stuff, either. These are custom-made with fresh vegetables. I had them delivered yesterday.”

“Oh.” I gape, not sure what to say.

“Oh.” He smirks, then slides into the chair opposite. He tucks into the food on his plate which I notice has bacon and sausages—the real thing. I sip my coffee as he eats. He points at my food with his fork. “Go on, I've been assured the sausages are delicious.”

“You didn't have to do that.”

“What kind of a fiancé would I be if I didn't cater to my future wife's tastes?”

“You don’t have to say that for my benefit.” I scowl up at him. “After all, this is all a pretense.”

He opens his mouth, then shuts it. He raises a shoulder. “I have to keep up appearances, don’t I?”

My shoulders slump. Why did I think he was going to say something else? Of course, this is all a farce. He’s doing it to ensure if any of the tabloids spy on us, they’ll see the constructs of a fairy-tale wedding. One that took place under dubious circumstances, but a wedding, nevertheless. I cut off a piece of the veggie sausage and chew on it. The savory herbs, the tangy spices, the sweet beetroots, and the more complex taste of butternut squash cause my stomach to settle and I moan. “Oh, these are really good.” I eat the veggie sausages which are well-cooked. The hash browns and toast are crunchy, just the way I like it. This time, I don’t ask him how he knew this. I know the answer.

When I sit back, having demolished most of my food, I find he has a strange expression on his face.

“What?” I frown. “Am I wearing my food on my face?”

“That, too.” He wets his finger, reaches over and rubs at a piece of food on my chin, then brings his finger to his lips and sucks on it. My entire body seems to light up with a strange weightless sensation. My nipples pebble. My core throbs. My throat dries, and I can’t tear my gaze away from him. He leans across the breakfast counter until his nose bumps mine.

“I have a surprise for you.”

Liam

“You could have given me some advance notice.” She folds her arms across her chest.

“If I had, would you have more agreed to get on the plane with me?”

She firms her lips.

“That’s what I thought.”

After breakfast, I gave her just enough time to grab her handbag before I whisked her out of the house and into my car. I refused to tell her where we were going, but when we’d reached the private airstrip, it became clear to her we were leaving the city. When she refused to get on the plane, I reminded her of our arrangement. She scowled at me but finally conceded. To my relief.

Now she glances out the window, then whips her head around in my direction. “What about my clothes? My accessories, my—”

“Medication?”

Her features are pale. “How do you know about—”

I glance at the handbag she’s thrown down next to her seat. A bottle of pills peeks out from the opening. She stuffs it back inside, then juts out her chin. “They’re vitamins. I need them to support my energy levels.”

I raise my hands. “What you take is your business; I’m not asking.”

She huffs, then glances about at the plush leather seats, the thick carpet, the gleaming light fixtures, not to mention the glasses of champagne the stewardess gave us as soon as we boarded. She sniffs, “If you’re trying to impress me, I’ll have you know I’ve flown private many times.”

“If I were trying to impress you, you’d have been so swept off your feet, you’d have been rendered speechless. Finally.”

My phone vibrates, as does hers. We glance at each other then pull out our devices.

“Mother,” I answer my phone.

“Did I hear that you’re taking Isla and leaving for the island before the wedding?”

“I’m on the plane right now.”

“Good. I hope you’re using the time to turn this wedding into the real deal.”

“Nothing of the sort is going to happen. As you said, this is the only way for you to get an heir, so you should be grateful for that.”

“Liam,” my mother admonishes me, “that wasn’t very nice of you.”

“You’re right.” I squeeze the bridge of my nose. “Look, I thought it best we leave early and be on hand to make the final arrangements. That way, when all of you arrive,” I wince, “everything will go smoothly.”

“I don’t buy that one bit, but that was almost convincing.”

I rub the back of my neck. “Why is it that talking to you always makes me feel like I’m five?”

“Because no matter how old you get, you’ll always be my youngest.”

Leave it to my mother to cut me down to size. “I’ll see you in a few days, Ma.” I disconnect at the same time as Isla.

“Was that—?”

“My mother.” She frowns. “How strange they both called at the same time.”

“Knowing mine, they’re probably together right now and have already plotted out our progeny and their names.”

It’s her turn to wince. “I knew it was a bad idea introducing the two of them. Also—” She stiffens. “How are our phones working on the flight?”

“Voice over WiFi.”

“Ah, of course.”

“Which means,” —her features brighten— “I have access to social media.” Her fingers begin to fly over the phone, and I snatch it away from her.

“Hey, that’s not fair. I need to speak to all of the vendors and make sure all of the arrangements for the wedding—”

“Are being taken care of.”

“Exactly. How am I supposed to get anything done if you won’t let me use my phone?”

“There’s no need.

“What do you mean?”

“I deputized one of the best people on my team to take over the preparations.”

“Wait, what?” She sits up straight. “You did what?”

“Made sure all the organizational headaches belong to someone else so you can enjoy your own wedding.”

She opens and shuts her mouth, but no words emerge.

“I believe you owe me a thank you?”

“Motherfucker.” She fumbles with her seatbelt and jumps to her feet so quickly, the glass of champagne next to her tips over. I grab it, right it, and look up in time for her palm to connect with my cheek.

Pain radiates out from the point of contact.

She stands there, chest heaving, color high, and her eyes sparking with such intensity, it's a wonder the plane hasn't caught fire. She's magnificent, this woman. And hot and glorious in her anger. My heart thumps into my ribcage. A hot sensation coils in my chest. My balls tighten.

"How dare you take over my business?" she spits out.

"I'm not taking over; I'm simply allocating you enough resources to ensure the ceremony goes off without a hitch."

She raises her hand again.

I glare at it, then at her. "If I were you, I wouldn't do that."

"And imagine if I'd done the same thing to you and allocated 'extra resources' to help you on one of your key projects—without telling you anything. How would you feel about that?"

"That would never happen."

"Why not?"

"I've planned out so far in advance that the occasion would never have risen where I would need additional resources. You, on the other hand, have been running your organization as a one-person show for far too long. It's unsustainable, not to mention incredibly stupid."

Her gaze narrows. "Incredibly stupid, eh?"

"What happens if you're not available for some reason, or you're not feeling well? Who's gonna fill in for you?"

"That's never going to happen. You know? Not all of us have enough money to hire loads of people to help. And I do have third-party vendors helping out."

"Not the same thing."

"I have an assistant—"

"If you're referring to the receptionist who answers your phone and takes care of your admin work, we both know that's not enough. You need someone more experienced. A second-in-command who can pick up some of the load and cover for you when you're off, so you don't spend all of your time

worrying about your projects. You need time off to rejuvenate and replenish your energy. Even a workaholic like me knows when to switch off.”

“And I don’t,” she says in a flat voice.

“You don’t. Given the nature of your job and the need to be on top of social media, I understand why, but it’s not going to help you in the long run. If you don’t manage your time wisely, you’ll burn out.”

“And you’re the man who’s going to stop that from happening, I suppose?”

“As your future husband—”

“Fake husband.”

“—Fake husband, it’s only right I help where I can.”

“By taking over my business?”

“By giving you a helping hand.”

She tips up her chin. “And if I refuse to accept?”

“Are you refusing to accept?”

She bends and stabs a finger in my chest.

Sensations sizzle out from the point of contact. My blood seems to pump faster through my veins, most of it draining to my crotch. I’m instantly hard.

“I absolutely, completely and utterly refuse, you overgrown, egotistical, swollen-headed baboon.” Her gaze meets mine and holds it. In her baby-blues, silver sparks flicker like drops of rain on a lake’s surface. Such gorgeous eyes, with those haunted depths that call to me.

I’ve never been able to resist puzzles. And this woman, with her prickly attitude and independent nature, not to mention, her clear aversion to me—even though she’s also attracted to me—is one that piques my interest like nothing has in a long while. I can’t rest until I’ve found a way to get to the bottom of whatever it is she’s hiding from me. I grip her wrist and tug; she loses her balance and falls into my lap, then throws her arms about my neck to support herself.

She opens her mouth to speak, and I'm so tired of hearing her say no, I shut her up the only way I can think of. I kiss her. I slant my mouth over hers and bite on her bottom lip. She gasps, and I slide my tongue inside her mouth. I kiss her deeply, suck on her tongue, drink from her, and she kisses me right back. She opens herself up, presses herself close so her breasts are pushed into my chest. All the blood drains to my groin, and my cock thickens. I dig my fingers in her hair, wrap the strands about my fingers and tug. She moans, plasters herself to me, and burrows in even closer, then her entire body stiffens.

"Let me go." She pulls away from me so suddenly, I release her. She slides off me and hits the floor.

"Isla, are you okay?" I reach forward to help her, but she jumps to her feet.

"Stay away from me, asshole."

She pats her hair in place, snatches up her handbag, stands up and holds out her hand.

I glance from her outstretched palm to her.

Her eyebrows lower. "Give me back my phone."

I hesitate. "Just give it a little more time. Let things settle down before you check—"

"Don't tell me how to do my goddam job. Give me my phone. Right now, Liam."

Fuck. I pull out her phone and place it in her hand. She turns and marches off toward a seat on the far end of the plane. The one that's farthest away from me. For the rest of the flight, she's engrossed in her device. Even across the distance, I can tell she's stressed. Her cheeks are pale, her shoulders rigid. She deserves it, of course, considering how she screwed up all of my plans. But damn if I'm not pissed that she's so upset.

She stabs at her phone screen, shakes her head. Stabs at the screen again, then glowers at me.

"You deleted my social media apps, and I'm not able to download them."

“Correct.”

Her scowl deepens. She goes back to playing with her phone for a few minutes, then grips the device so hard the skin stretches white across her knuckles.

“I don’t have access to my emails, or the internet, nor to the phone numbers of any of my vendors.”

“You get a ten out of ten.” I smirk.

She jumps to her feet, raises her hand as if to throw her phone at me, then thinks the better of it. “But my mother was able to reach me.”

“As will your close friends and family. Their numbers have not been blocked.”

“What?” She glances at her phone, then back at me. “How did you do that? I had the phone with me all this time.”

I tilt my head. She holds my gaze then her jaw hardens. “I see, you don’t need to physically access my phone to fiddle around with it.”

“You’re acing all the tests today, LadyBird.”

Her features flush, and her eyes spark. “This is all wrong. What you’re doing is illegal.”

“Not when it relates to the mental health of my fiancée.”

“Fake fiancée,” she snaps.

“*Real fiancée* in the minds of all those who saw the video we posted.”

Her shoulders snap back. “I demand to be able to access the internet and all of my social media platforms. I need to see what’s happening. I need to be on top of things.”

“There are people who’ll do that for you. Once we’ve turned the corner of this media storm, I promise, you’ll get access to everything again.”

“And when will we turn the tide of this... this media disaster?”

“It’s not a disaster.” *Not if I have anything to do with it.*

“It has all the makings of a disaster of such proportions, I won’t be able to fix anything, even with seven generations of schmoozing.”

I chuckle. “You have a vivid imagination; I’ll give you that.”

“Turn this jet around. Right now,” she cries.

“Sorry, babe, not happening. You may as well strap in and enjoy the ride.”

“Argh!” She makes a noise at the back of her throat, then pivots and stalks away in the direction of the restroom. I almost rise to my feet to follow her, but then sink back down. Best to give her a little time to cool off.

Besides, she’s right. No doubt, the social media feeds have gone crazy since the last post. It doesn’t bother me one bit, but clearly, she’s taking it more personally than I am. It’s the nature of the beast though; that’s how media cycles work. We’ll be the hot news of the moment, until the next big thing comes along, and then they’ll move on. I’m aware it’s more difficult for her to look at it dispassionately. And she’s right—chances are, they’ll paint her in a worse light than me. I need to do something about it... Without it being obvious that I’m the person behind it, of course. Something to manage this flurry of publicity so things don’t get out of hand. I pull out my device and dial a familiar number.

“Hello?” Karina Beauchamp comes on the line. She owns a security agency and is married to one of the Seven—which means, she’s trustworthy. Also, her brother is the head of the Bratva, so she won’t bat an eye when I tell her about my intentions.

“I need your help.”

Isla

“You’re where?” Zara screeches.

Her eyes are so big I’m sure they’re going to fall out of their sockets.

“Shh!” I glance toward the door of the restroom where I’ve locked myself in. The bathrooms on private airplanes are big enough to rival my bedroom in my apartment. “Told you, I’m on the alphahole—I mean, the asshole’s private jet.”

“Alphahole, huh?” She narrows her gaze on me.

“Asshole, I meant asshole,” I snap.

“And he’s whisking you away to the island near Venice where the wedding is going to be held?”

“He says he wants me away from the media ruckus from our last post. He wants me to relax and unwind in time for the big day.”

“He may have a point there.”

“Hey, who’s side are you on? His or mine?”

“Yours, of course, sweetie. It’s just... I’m worried about you.”

I blink. “You are?”

“It’s a lot you’re going through right now. Marrying him so suddenly, and in circumstances that are far from ideal. Are you sure he’s not coercing you into this?”

I scoff. “Do you think I can be coerced into anything?”

“You have a point. Still, marrying him so quickly after his previous fiancée walks out on him? Couldn’t you two delay the wedding?”

“Uh, he didn’t want to, and neither did I, to be honest.”

“Now you’re going to tell me the two of you are so in love together that you didn’t want to wait?”

“Something like that,” I concede.

She searches my features. “You sure that’s all there is to it? Is there something else you need to tell me?”

“Of course not.” I glance at my reflection in the mirror, making sure my hair is in place.

“And you’re definitely going to tell him?”

I glance away, then back at her. “I will... Eventually.”

“It’s not anything to be ashamed of, Isla. It’s who you are. If he loves you, he’ll accept all of you.”

“And the media, will they accept me as I am? Especially now that I’m going to be married to a man who looks like him?”

“You are the most beautiful, most courageous woman I know. And anyone who thinks otherwise needs to be drawn and quartered. If they judge you for who you are, then it reflects badly on them, not on you.”

Warmth fills my stomach. My chest feels like it’s going to burst. Pressure builds behind my eyes and... *No, no, no, I’m not going to cry. Not now.* I sniff, and Zara looks concerned.

“Oh sweetie, I didn’t say that to upset you.”

“You didn’t upset me. I wish I had your strength of conviction. Wish I could disregard the media the way you do.”

“Oh, I’ve just had more practice. As has Liam. Which is why he made the wise move of taking you out of London, to somewhere distant enough that the paps can’t trail you.”

I stiffen. “Are they... Have they been staking out my house?”

She stares at me.

“Damn, why didn’t I think of that? Of course, now that the video’s out, they know who I am and where I live. And if I were there, they’d trail my every move in London.”

She nods. “Which is why what he’s doing is very wise. And I assume you’ll move in with him when you return.”

Unfortunately. “Yes.”

“Well, that’s good then. His security will ensure you’re safe.”

“At least you’re coming at this from a practical standpoint. I’m afraid I’m too close to the situation.”

There’s a knock on the door then I hear his voice, “Isla are you okay?”

“Shit, that’s Liam. I gotta go.”

“You take care, and I’ll see you soon.” Zara signs off.

I disconnect the call, then splash water on my face.

“Isla?” His knocks are more urgent. “If you don’t answer, I’m going to break the bathroom door down.”

“I’m fine.” I dry my face, drop my phone into my bag and cross over to the door. I throw it open to find Liam standing there with a scowl on his face.

He surveys my features. “Everything okay?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I brush past him and into the main cabin of the aircraft, then head over to the seat farthest away from his. To my annoyance, he stalks over and sits down opposite me.

“In case you haven’t noticed, there are many other empty seats on this flight,” I huff

“I like this just fine.” He leans back and kicks out his legs so they brush mine.

I pull my legs back and glower at him.

He presses the tips of his fingers together and surveys me.

“I envy those people who’ve never met you,” I say sourly.

“And you’re not pretty enough to be *that* dumb.”

I gape at him, then clamp my lips shut. “You... You’re a pizza burn on the roof of the world’s mouth.”

He smirks. “Someday you’ll go far; I just hope you’ll stay there.”

What the— “Can’t believe you were the sperm that won,” I snap.

“That sounds like a you problem,” he drawls.

I scowl. “Grab a straw because you suck.”

He laughs, a spontaneous, belly laugh that wells up from somewhere deep inside. It’s so hot, such a sexy sound; my toes curl, and my stomach flip-flops. Heat flushes my veins and I can’t tear my gaze off of his features. Something shifts in the air, and his laughter dies. He looks between my eyes, then leans forward. The charge between us seems to amplify.

“I’d agree with you, but then we’d both be wrong,” he says in a low voice.

The heat under my skin seems to grow even more intense. A shiver runs down my back. I lick my lips, and his gaze drops to my mouth. He firms his jaw and a pulse throbs at his temple. He’s looking at me like I’m a morsel he can’t wait to gobble up.

I force my brain cells to fire, to form the words needed, to send impulses to my tongue to obey their direction.

“You just might be why the middle finger was invented in the first place,” I whisper.

His lips quirk. The dent in his chin deepens. He reaches over, runs his knuckles down my palm.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.” His warm voice flows through my veins like honey.

I squeeze my eyelids shut. “You don’t mean it.”

“You can trust me, Isla.”

I snap my eyelids open. “Excuse me?”

“Whatever it is you’re hiding, you can tell me. I won’t judge you.”

I search his features but only find empathy there. His touch on my arm sings like someone dragged a drill down my arm. My stomach hollows out, and something inside urges me to come clean. *Tell him, this is the opportunity. Just get it over with.* I open my mouth but what comes out is, “You’ve already investigated me, so you know everything.”

He tilts his head and an expression of disappointment flickers over his face before he wipes it away. “I know the salient facts of your life. What I don’t know is the scars you carry inside. I want you to share your fears, your hopes, your dreams with me, Isla. What gets you out of bed in the morning? What has you constantly pulling away even though you’re so attracted to me? You can tell me.”

Liam

Her chin wobbles. Her gaze widens. The tension coils inside her until every line and curve of her body seems to be vibrating with it. Then she juts out her chin and says, “Nice try, but I’m not falling for this. What we have is a business transaction; I suggest we stick to that.”

“We went past that into strictly personal territory a while ago, sweetheart.”

She firms her lips. “Don’t fool yourself. Just because you kissed me—”

“You kissed me back.”

“Doesn’t mean anything.”

I pinch her chin so she has no choice but to meet my gaze. “Look into my eyes and tell me you don’t feel anything for me.”

She swallows.

I hold her gaze for a few seconds more. “That’s what I thought... Whatever it is that’s bothering you, I’m going to get it out of you. This, I promise.”

She jerks her head to the side and glances out the window. “Looks like we’re about to land.”

The captain's voice comes over the speakers, confirming what she surmised.

We snap on our seatbelts in silence, and after we land, I guide her to the waiting car that drives us to my estate. We ride in silence for a few minutes, then she asks, "So this island is near Venice you said?"

"It's twenty minutes by boat."

She glances at the sparkling sand and the waves as we pass the beach. In the distance, the spires of St. Mark's Church, a Venetian landmark, can be seen. Venice itself is bustling with tourists, but where we are is an oasis surrounded by an open lagoon and wild marshland. Trees line the road, and wildflowers abound on both sides. A peacock saunters by the wayside, its gorgeous blue and green feathers trailing behind it.

She sits up straight and points at it. "Is that a... a..."

"Peacock, yes."

"And it roams wild?"

"As do the more than a hundred other different species of animals and insects on the island."

"No predators among them, I hope." She laughs nervously.

The only predator you need to be afraid of is the one sitting next to you.

When I don't reply, she turns to me and asks, "What did you say?"

"That you have nothing to be worried about. The wildlife on this island is not dangerous."

She stares at me from under heavy-lidded eyelids, then turns back to her perusal of our surroundings. For a few seconds, she says nothing. "It's a gorgeous place," she finally sighs. "Who did you say it belongs to?"

When I don't respond, she turns to face me. She scrutinizes my features and her gaze widens. "It belongs to you?"

I smirk.

“Of course it belongs to you. Why am I not surprised?”

“You’re going to marry one of the richest and most powerful men on the continent,” I remind her.

She locks her fingers together in her lap, the skin across her knuckles stretching white.

“Hey...” I place my hand over her joined-up ones. Her fingers are ice-cold. “You don’t have to be nervous about anything. I promise, everything is going to be okay.”

She chuckles. “Only a billionaire who’s insulated from the day-to-day happenings on social media would say that.”

“It’s a choice, LadyBird. Either I spend all my time obsessing over what others think about me, or I can focus on what I want and let the others eat dust in my wake.”

She hunches her shoulders. “You sound like Zara, and why LadyBird?”

“Listen to her then, if not me. And LadyBird because you’re cute and always just out of my reach. Also, how can I alleviate your nervousness about this situation?”

She chuckles, then shoots me a sideways glance. “You could always kiss me again.”

My pulse rate instantly shoots sky high. My blood pumps through my veins.

We hold each other’s gazes, and the air turns electric. My cock stiffens. I lean in toward her, and she clears her throat.

“Forget I said that. I don’t know what comes over me when we’re in close proximity. You short circuit all of my brain cells. And now, I’m shooting my mouth off like a complete nincompoop. Gah!” She squeezes her eyes shut. “I’m tired of making a fool of myself in front of you. Tired of stressing about what the reaction is going to be when we get married, tired of... being tired.” She hunches her shoulders and lowers her chin to her chest. “What I wouldn’t give for one evening where I don’t have to think about the future. I just want to let go of my worries for a little while, you know?”

I take in the downturned curve of her lips, the dark circles under her eyes, the hollows under her cheekbones. My heart does a strange leap in my chest. My stomach muscles tie themselves up in knots. Of course, I knew she was stressed but I hadn't noticed the toll it was taking on her. And I'm the cause of it. I push that thought away. This is the only way forward for both of us. Doesn't mean we can't live in the here and now and enjoy ourselves while we're at it. It's why I've worked so hard all my life, for Chrissakes.

I lean in close and place my mouth next to her ear. "Your wish is my command."

She insisted on taking the room down the corridor from mine. I didn't push it. She needs her space for the moment, needs to sort things out in her head, and I understand that. For now.

I also told her to freshen up and meet me downstairs. My team deposited our bags in our rooms, and I changed into my work-out clothes and headed out for a run. Now, I jog up the beach that runs around the villa. My feet sink into the wet sand. The wind brushes my hair. The afternoon sun rays warm my skin. My pulse settles a little. An eagle circles lazily in the sky, riding the air current. I follow the bird's trajectory, watch as it swoops down to hunt its prey, then rises in the air again with a fish caught in its beak. I thought I was the hunter in this relationship, but damn, if the net doesn't seem to be closing around me instead.

I continue running when my cellphone vibrates. I pull it out and swipe; Hunter's face fills the screen.

"Missing me already?" I smirk.

"Like I miss having my prostate examined."

"Ouch." I decrease my speed. "What's up?"

"A few of us were wondering where you'd vanished to."

"Just needed to get away before the big day."

“This have anything to do with the video that went up yesterday?”

“You saw it then?”

“Me, and three million others.”

“Three million?” I come to a stop. Not that it matters to me, but it’s probably going to send Isla into a tizzy.

“In short, you two have gone viral. So, wherever you’ve escaped to, you may want to stay there until this blows over.”

“It’s going to get worse—”

“With the wedding, yes.” He narrows his gaze. “The attention is good for your impending IPO, even though it’s not the same bride you started out to marry. Still everyone loves a good wedding. The only way to trump that is if or when you announce the imminent birth of your heir.”

I wince. That’s my plan, of course. Use the clauses of the will to further my share prices. But having him lay it out like that makes it all seem cold and calculated. Which is what it is. So why am I shying away from my actions?

“How’s Isla taking it?”

I wipe my face on the sleeve of my T-shirt. “It’s stressing her out. Maybe there’s an easier way to achieve what I want without putting her in the eye of the storm.”

“You’re changing your mind about how high-profile you want the wedding to be?”

“Maybe.”

“She knows about your plans?”

“Not really. This is supposed to be her showcase wedding so she can highlight just how well she can pull off a wedding of this magnitude. It helps exhibit her company in the best light.”

“Hmm.” He strokes his chin. “So, what are you going to do?”

“Definitely going to manage the situation so it doesn’t stress her out more, but at the same time, not diminish the benefits of sharing this wedding with the world... Which is what she wants... I think.”

“You do realize what you just said is a contradiction? You can’t do both.”

“I’m aware, but maybe I can.” I turn and begin to jog toward the villa.

“So, you’re going to find a way to make it happen?”

“I have a plan.”

Isla

“Oh, wow!”

I take in the flickering candles placed on every table, by the windows, on the shelves by the wall, even along the bar counter at the far end of the restaurant. There’s not a single other soul in sight. Only us.

“You needn’t have shut down the restaurant for us.”

“I’m not sharing you with anyone else tonight, LadyBird.”

Heat saturates my center. I draw in a breath and a complex, intoxicating, scent fills my senses. The space not taken up by candles has been filled with roses. Red roses. So many red roses. Some with petals which are blood red. Others where the color of the petals is so dark, they’re almost black. Yet others, so pale a red they are almost blush. My favorite color. My favorite shades of color. My favorite flowers.

“You... you did all this?” I glance sideways to find Liam watching me from under hooded eyelids.

When he doesn’t answer, I walk over to touch the perfect petal of the most perfect specimen of a rose. “All Dale King roses.” I refer to the family business who has been cultivating flowers for generations, and whose blooms are some of the most expensive in the world. It’s the flowers I turn to for any occasion, or non-occasion. And somehow Liam had found out about it.

“You must have asked to have these flown in even before we left for Venice.”

“And if I did?”

“You had so much confidence in your charm, huh?”

“Is it working?”

I chuckle. “I should find your confidence obnoxious; instead, I find it exciting.”

“You do, hmm?” The heat of his body singes my back. He pushes my hair to the side, then presses a kiss to the nape of my neck. A flush trickles down my back. My core clenches. His musky scent laces the air, and the combination of that and the sweeter scent of the roses sinks into my blood. My head spins. I need to put distance between us. Need some perspective on this situation.

I pull away from him and walk toward the table in the center, the only one not covered with flowers, laid with cutlery, a single candle in the center.

I came down to find Liam ready and waiting for me. He was wearing white linen pants and a shirt so thin, I could make out the cut of his pecs. His hair was brushed back from his temples like he’d just had a shower. He was freshly shaved, and when I walked over to him, the spicy edge to his dark scent was so potent, my mouth watered. I almost threw myself at him. I wanted to lick him from head to toe, but I stopped myself. Just barely.

Instead, I brushed past him and walked out of the villa to the waiting car. The driver held the back door open, and I climbed in. So far, he’s the only staff member I’ve seen. Clearly, there are more, since someone delivered my luggage to my room.

Inside of my room, I found all of my essentials, including my medication. When I asked Liam, he told me he’d reached out to Summer to pack it for me. He also said he’d asked her not to mention it to me, since he wanted to surprise me. I messaged her my thanks, and she replied with a thumbs up and told me not to worry about anything. If only it were that easy,

considering I'm positive my inbox and my social media platforms are blowing up with messages.

In a way, it's good to be ignorant, I guess. If I don't know how bad things are, I won't have to put salvage operations in place. On the other hand, if things are worse than I think, then good god, it'll be the end of my career—the end of me as a person... The end of everything I've been working toward. And what if my family sees the media reactions? Not that they spend much time online, but what if they do? How am I going to explain it to them? And Lila? I left her another message, asking her to call me back, but it went to voicemail. Again. Oh, god. If she sees the media reactions, she's going to be so hurt. I'm a terrible friend and a terrible daughter and—

“Don't.” A touch on my hand sends a current of heat shooting up my arm. I glance down to find Liam's big hand engulfing mine. “You're going to give yourself an ulcer or something with this level of stress,” he says from his seat across the table.

“Or something.” I glance away. Tears prick my eyes. “I know I overthink things. And I keep making up scenarios in my mind, most of which imagine the worst possible results to a situation. It's just... I want this so badly, you know? It's been my dream since I was a teenager and saw Jennifer Lopez in *The Wedding Planner*. She's my idol, my queen, and when I saw her so sexy and confident and making the dreams of so many brides come true, I thought she was a princess. I wanted to be her when I grew up.”

“And you are, only sexier.”

I half laugh. “No one is hotter than J-Lo.”

“Except for Is-lo.”

I chuckle. “That was pretty bad, but I'll take it.”

“You look stunning when you laugh. Come to think of it, you look stunning any which way.”

My cheeks flush. “Liam please. Don't you think you're laying it on too thick?”

“I never say anything I don't mean, LadyBird.”

I curl my fingers around the stem of my champagne flute. “Thanks... I guess.”

The waiter arrives with the first course, and sets the plates down in front of us.

“Wait a second, I didn’t order—” I take in the food. “Is that—?” I shake my head. “No,” I laugh. “You ordered—”

“Butternut, sage and hazelnut mini-quiche.”

“That’s my—”

“One of your favorite dishes, I know.” His lips kick up.

“And what did you order for my main?”

“Why don’t you let it be a surprise?” He reaches for my hand, and I let him take it.

“Tell me,” I insist.

“Vegan cannellini nut roast for your main, followed by tiramisu ice-cream cake, also vegan.”

“How did you know? I mean, I know you investigated me, but still. You remembered what I love to eat?”

“I remember everything about you” —his eyes burn with intensity— “including whatever it is that you haven’t told me yet.”

“Liam, please.”

He draws in a breath. “Right, no more serious talk. Tonight, we’re simply a man and a woman who enjoy each other’s company, and who love to eat good food and relish the best champagne in one of the most romantic cities in the world.” He reaches for his glass and raises it.

I clink my glass with his, then take a sip. It’s as if I’ve consumed an entire flower garden. “This champagne is exquisite.”

“You are exquisite.”

My cheeks burn. At this rate, I’m going to turn into a fiery mass of magma. “What are we doing after dinner?”

“What do you want to do after dinner?”

“I know you said you didn’t want to share me with anyone else, but I really want to go to a nightclub.”

“A nightclub?” He blinks.

“When was the last time you went dancing, Mr. Lord-of-all-he-surveys?”

“I don’t dance.” He picks up his fork and digs into his risotto.

I glance from the food on his plate to his face.

“Did you order a non-meat dish because of me?”

His shifts uncomfortably, but he doesn’t say anything.

“And did you call ahead to tell the chef that both of our dishes should be made with vegan ingredients?”

He flushes.

“Oh, my god, you did call ahead to instruct the chef, and then you ordered a vegan dish because of me. You didn’t have to do that. I may be vegan, but I don’t impose my beliefs on others.”

He fixes those deep gray eyes of his on me. “I wanted to do it for you. I want to experience what you do.”

My heartbeat grows faster. It feels like my insides are turning to jelly. Why is that the most erotic thing ever? Also, how far will he go for me, I wonder? I peek up at him from under my eyelashes. “So will you also come to the nightclub?”

Liam

The *boom-boom-boom* of the beats reverberates through my body. It seems to echo the pounding of my heart in my chest. I wasn't kidding when I said I don't dance. I also don't like nightclubs or crowded dance floors. Two girls giggle next to me at the bar. One of them brushes my arm, and I scowl at her. She blinks, then looks away. Good. The last thing I want is to engage in extraneous chatter with anyone else. A bead of sweat slides down my back. The blood thumps at my temples. Why is it so hot in here? I undo the buttons on my shirt, but that doesn't seem to help.

"Who sent you?" The man asks.

"N-no one. I came here on m-my own," I stutter.

"Liar." He laughs then flips a switch. Instantly the beats from the trash metal track pump through the earphones I'm wearing. The sound sears through my brain. It feels like someone stuck a hot dagger through my head. I squeeze my fingers into fists. I will not give up. I will get through this. I must.

I squeeze my fingers around my glass of whiskey and peer through the crush of bodies on the dance floor. There in the center, with the laser lights crisscrossing her body, is my LadyBird. The red highlights of her hair glint as she moves. Her dress twirls about her knees. She thrusts out her leg and a

strip of her thigh flashes. What the bloody hell? I should have gone onto the floor when she'd asked me, but the thought of being stuck in the middle of that heaving mass had made my insides crawling. I contented myself with sticking to the bar, where I could source liquid sustenance and ensure I don't let her out of my sight.

She turns her head and her gaze clashes with mine. She widens the space between her legs, bends her knees, and begins to grind her hips as she lowers down. Heat coils under my skin. My cock hardens. My mind insists I need to get out into fresh air, but my body and my heart insist I not take my gaze off of her. Still swaying, she runs her hands up her torso, over her breasts and splays her fingers across her clavicles. The blood drains to my groin. My heart has turned into the goddamn rotors of a chopper. If I continue this way, I'm going to have a coronary, no doubt about it. The vixen must sense how close to the breaking point I am, for she slides her forefinger into her mouth and sucks on it. My balls tighten. Holy fuck, I think I just came in my pants without having touched her. Without breaking the connection, I throw back the rest of my whiskey and slam the glass back on the counter.

That's when the man dancing behind her clamps his palms on her hips. Anger flushes my blood. Before I realize it, I'm moving. I plow through the dance floor, elbowing people aside, and then I'm at her. I grab the shoulder of the man who still has his paws on her. I yank him off of her and throw him aside. He hits the man next to him and they go down in a tangle of arms and legs. I bend down, grab the man by his collar, and haul him to his feet, then grip his wrist. I twist his arm and the man yells... At least, he opens his mouth. The sound is lost in the decibels that blast through the air.

Someone pounds on my shoulder. I turn to find Isla yelling at me. "Let him go, Liam. You're going to break his arm." I jerk my head back to find the man no longer screaming. He's panting; his chest rises and falls, his shoulders bent forward. I release him, and he slumps to the floor. I turn, lock my fingers around her wrist, and stalk out. The crowd parts in front of us, and in minutes, I'm at the front door. I step outside and take big gasps of the cool night air.

“What was that?” Isla pants. “Why did you do that? We were only dancing, we—”

I glare at her. Some of the color leaches from her cheeks. She looks between my eyes, and I’m sure she’s going to tug her hand away. Instead, she steps closer.

“Liam, I’m okay. It was innocent.”

My heart still slams into my ribcage, my pulse rate sky-high. My breath comes in pants like I’ve run a marathon.

“He touched you,” I say through gritted teeth. “He had his hands all over you.”

“That’s what happens when you go to a nightclub. You dance, Liam.”

“And I don’t.”

She sighs. “I don’t want to condone the violence, but Liam, that was—” She swallows. “I shouldn’t find it hot. But... Oh, god, I do.” She cups my cheek. “Who are you, Liam Kincaid? The thoughtful dinner companion who turns vegetarian for the meal because he wants me to be comfortable. The billionaire with so much money he can buy and sell corporations around the world. The man who wants to marry to secure his inheritance. The son who doesn’t want to upset his mother. The possessive alphahole who can’t stand to see another man touch me. The dominating, controlling, morally gray man who only has to look at me to turn me on. The—”

I drop my head, close my mouth over hers, thrust my tongue between her lips, and kiss her. It’s a deep, long, demanding kiss. I suck on her tongue, draw from her, and she gives me what I need. She opens herself up and allows me to drink from her.

I scoop her up in my arms and stalk toward where my motorboat is moored. I step on, lower her to the floor next to me and start the engine. Keeping an arm around her, I steer us away from the jetty and toward my island. That’s when she sinks to her knees and lowers my zipper.

“Isla, what—” I gasp. She’s pulled out my cock and clamped her mouth around it. She grips my thighs, tilts her head, and swallows around my girth. Desire shoots up my spine. Lust slams into my chest like a ten-ton truck has crashed into me.

“Isla, what the fuck?”

In answer, she slides open my belt buckle, unbuttons my pants and massages my balls. Then she takes me down her throat. A groan rips from me and is torn away by the wind.

She gags around my girth, then swallows. Sensations zip out from the point of contact. My groin is so hard, it feels like that ten-ton truck is now strapped to my waist. I grip the wheel of the motorboat and give it full throttle. The vessel leaps forward, bouncing off the waves.

Each time we hit the water Isla seems to swallow me deeper. The hot wet column of her throat closes around my length. My groin hardens. My thigh muscles ripple. I groan, then widen my stance, giving her even more access. She releases my balls, only to slide her hands around to cup my butt. She squeezes and brings me closer still. She hums around my cock, and the vibrations bolt up my belly. My eyes cross. I’m sure I’ve died and gone to heaven.

I lower the speed of the boat and shut it off. In the silence that descends the wet plop of my dick as she allows it to slide to the rim of her mouth is like a thunderbolt. I release my hold on the wheel and clamp my fingers around her neck. “I’m going to fuck your mouth now.”

She draws in a deep breath, but before she can speak, I’ve come through on my earlier promise. I wrap my fingers about the nape of her neck and gently pull her back, then forward. I slide down her throat in one smooth thrust. Tears flow from her eyes, and mascara streaks her cheeks. Saliva drools from the corners of her mouth, and I’ve never seen a more enticing picture. She grips my butt, and I begin to fuck her mouth in earnest. Each time I pull out, she gasps. I feed my cock to her, and she stares up at me. Those blue eyes of her are almost purple in this light.

“Touch yourself,” I snap.

She instantly slides her hand under her dress. A groan boils up her mouth as she weaves her fingers in and out of her center. A quiver courses up her spine and the trembling that grips me seems to be a continuation of the same convulsion.

I speed up my movements, thrusting my cock in and out of her mouth. Her actions increase in intensity, mirroring the thud-thud-thud of my heart. The blood pounds in my ears, and my pulse rate jackknives. Her back arches and her fingers dig into my hip. I pull out, then lunge forward and down her throat. My balls draw up. “Fuck, I’m coming, baby.”

Her entire body jolts, and I shoot my load down her throat. My orgasm seems to go on and on, and she swallows it all down. A drop trickles down the side of her mouth. I scoop it up, pull out of her, drag her to her feet, and kiss her fiercely. Our teeth clash and our tongues meld. I taste myself and the sweeter, more delicate flavor of her, combined to form the kind of aphrodisiac that has my dick swelling again. I tear my mouth off of hers, chest heaving, sweat dripping down my temple.

She grips the front of my shirt and I lower my forehead to hers. We stay that way for a few seconds and she swallows. “That was—” she coughs. “That was—” She seems to be at a loss for words.

“Yeah.” I kiss her nose, then her mouth. “I need to be inside you again.”

Isla

We reach the island in minutes. There are men waiting at the pier to help dock the motorboat. Liam steps on shore, helps me out, then lifts me up in his arms again.

“I can walk,” I protest.

“Humor me.” He stalks up the pier toward the villa. Despite carrying me, he’s not even out of breath. I loop my arms about his neck and gaze up at him. The jut of his chin, those high cheekbones which I could cut myself on, the hooked nose, and those lips... Those pouty lips which should look so feminine, but conversely, seem to enhance the masculinity of his presence. “You really didn’t like the nightclub, huh?”

His hold about me tightens, and he speeds up until he’s almost running.

I cup his cheek, then rise up and press a kiss to the corner of his mouth. “You can trust me, Liam.”

His jaw tics. His heartbeat increases in tempo. I flatten my palm into the skin on the left side of his chest. I nuzzle his cheek and feather kisses up his jawline to his nose. I bite down on his earlobe, and a growl rumbles up his chest. He reaches the villa, but instead of heading for the main door, takes a left turn. I smell the chlorine a second before he reaches the pool.

“What are you—?”

He steps off the edge and into the deep end. We sink down through the green and blue with the beams of the underwater lights slicing through the depths. His lips fix on mine, sharing his breath with me. He kicks back and then we're rising, rising. We break through the surface. He pulls away, and I draw in a deep breath. Oxygen rushes through my lungs. My eyesight focuses, and all of my senses seem to sharpen. I hold onto his shoulders as we tread water. "Those are brand new Jimmy Choo's," I cry.

"I'll buy you a roomful more."

"You're crazy," I gasp.

"You're beautiful."

I laugh. "You really are off your rocker, Kincaid."

"And I can't get enough of you."

My smile slips away. I look up and into his gorgeous face. Our breaths mingle; our gazes catch. He wraps his arm about my waist and swims us over to the shallow end. His feet touch the bottom and he walks us over to the side of the pool. He pins me to the wall with his hips, then reaches around for my zipper. The vibrations of the slider down the teeth of the zipper send a shiver up my spine. He peels the dress down, then off of me, and releases it. The cool air hits my bare skin and goosebumps pop.

He glances down to where my breasts are exposed to his scrutiny, then bends and latches his mouth around one of my nipples. He sucks on it, and I feel the tug all the way down to my center.

I fumble with his buttons, managing to undo them. He peels his shirt off, then moves his attention to my other breast. He bites down, and I moan. He massages my other breast, all the while suckling my nipple. My head spins. The next moment I cry out as he yanks off my panties, then grips me under my arse and hauls me up and onto the edge of the pool. He hooks my legs over his shoulders and stares at my pussy. And stares and stares. Heat flushes my face. My stomach

lurches. I try to pull away, but he grips my ankles and doesn't let go.

“You don't shave.”

My cheeks turn scarlet. Oh, god, this is so embarrassing. I know it's not fashionable to sport hair down there, but it's my way of clinging to a part of me that I fear I'm in danger of losing completely.

I swallow. “Is that... Is that okay?”

One side of his mouth curls. “It's more than okay.” He continues to study my lower lips, and a thousand little sparks detonate under my skin. I feel like I'm going up in flames.

“Liam, please—” I gasp when he buries his nose in my pussy. He draws in a deep breath, and those little sparks burst into flames. Every part of me feels enflamed, engorged, swollen with lust and desire. My mind is full of the many lewd acts I want him to commit with me. Even as a part of me wants to pull away.

I'm sinking, caught in the thick, syrupy mire of my own greed, to have him touch every part of me, to have him bury his fingertips and his tongue and his cock in that very intimate core of me. Then he licks me right there, from back hole to clit, and all thoughts empty from my mind.

He reaches up and plants his big palm in the center of my chest. He applies pressure, and I sink back and onto the still warm pool side.

I glance up at the stars in the night sky, then cry out when he slurps his way up my slit in one long, leisurely swipe of that wicked tongue.

“Oh, god,” I gasp.

Then, he's moving so fast, the breath leaves me. He pries my pussy lips apart and his hungry mouth latches onto my clit. He sucks and nibbles on it, then stuffs one finger, then two, then three inside my weeping center. He curves his fingers, grazing that spot deep inside me. A jolt of electricity shoots up my spine. I squeeze my thighs on either side of his face, locking my heels around his neck. He plunges his fingers in

and out of me, in and out, then replaces it with his tongue. He slurps on my center, pulls on my core then closes his mouth around my pussy. He bites down on my clit, and the orgasm crashes over me.

The climax plows through me with the intensity of a tsunami. I swear, I see stars. I close my eyes for just a second and when I come to, he's carrying me back inside the villa. I wrap my arms around his neck and press my cheek into his chest. *Thump-thump-thump*. His heart booms against his ribcage. He walks into the villa, up the stairs, and shoulders open the double doors to his bedroom.

That's when I push against his chest. He comes to a halt and I wrap my arms about his neck.

"Kiss me," I demand.

His lips quirk, and he lowers his head. I press my breasts into his chest and meet his lips. I suck his tongue inside my mouth, kissing him deeply. His arms tighten around me. I straighten, and he balances me as I swing my legs around his waist. I lean into the kiss, allowing as much of my body as possible to come in contact with him as I can. When we break free, we're both panting. His gray eyes reflect back the desperation I'm feeling.

"Fuck me, Liam."

His lips pull back. The next second, he carries me to his bed and throws me down. I bounce once. The wet strands of my hair flow over my face. I shove them back, and by the time I straighten, he's kicked off his shoes and pants. He stands there completely naked. The light from the bedside lamp highlights the shadows and divots of his sculpted torso. His shoulders are so broad, he blocks out the view behind him.

In his tailor-made suits, he's the epitome of James Bond. Underneath, he's as unbridled as Tarzan. Figures. "Lord Greystoke," I murmur.

"Eh?"

I shake my head. "You're gorgeous," I murmur.

His lips curl. He plants his palms on his lean hips, and I spot the cursive tattooed on his upper arm. It's a language I don't recognize, the script rounded in a way that hints at being Thai. Or maybe another Far East language. His chest planes flex, drawing my attention back to that spectacular eight pack—Jesus, it *is* an eight pack—to where his cock juts up against his concave waist. It's thick and fat, with a vein running up the underside, and a swollen head with a PA. Yep, Mr. Stuck-up-grumpass-billionaire has a piercing.

He squeezes the base of his cock, then drags his fingers up to the crown. He runs his fingers across the weeping slit and my mouth waters. I stare at the thick appendage which twitches and seems to grow longer and more distended, if that were possible.

“Get on your front, on your hands and knees.” His hard voice sends a thrill up my spine. Everything in me insists I obey him, and that's precisely why I don't want to. Not yet, that is. I sit up, swing my legs over the side of the bed, primly cross them, and straighten my back. “And if I refuse?”

He freezes. Every muscle in his body seems to coil. He angles his head. The movement so predatory, I gulp. The color of his eyes intensifies until they are that blue-green combination that's so uniquely Liam.

“Are you refusing me, LadyBird?” His voice is so soft, so hushed. My skin prickles; my toes curl.

“I am... challenging you.” I leap past him. He shoots out his arm and his fingertips graze my arm. I scream and race out the door. Footsteps pound behind me. My heart beats like the whirring of a hummingbird's wings. Adrenaline laces my blood. I pump my legs and am almost at the stairs when he grabs my arm and swings me back toward him.

“Let me go,” I yell.

“No fucking way. I caught you, and now I'm going to have you.”

Liam

I haul her up and throw her over my shoulder. She screams and begins to wriggle. She kicks out with her knees and catches me in the side. I barely feel it. I tighten my grasp under her arse and stalk back toward my bedroom. Arousal throbs through my veins. My cock is so engorged, I can barely walk. “Let me go you... you... brute.”

She brings her joined hands down on my back.

I laugh. Then my palm connects with her bottom.

She goes still, her muscles freezing. Then she lets out a shriek that almost takes my ears off.

“Did you just spank me?” she cries.

“And again.”

I whack her other cheek, then the first, alternating between the two. I burst through the doorway of my bedroom, walk to my bed and throw her down. She rears up, but I cover her body with mine.

Her face is flushed, her hair about her shoulders. I push a strand off her face, then peer into her features. Her pupils are dilated, taking up so much space there’s only a thin circle of blue around the circumference. She raises her arm, and I grab her wrist, then the other, and twist her arms up over her head. I shackle her wrists with one hand, then run my hand down her

throat to her breast. I squeeze her nipple, and a moan slips from her lips.

“I hate you,” she spits out.

“I’m going to fuck your arse.”

She stills. “E... excuse me?”

“You heard me.” I bring my arm down and squeeze the curve of her hip. She shudders. “You surprise me at every turn, my LadyBird.”

“And I want to kick you in the balls at every turn.”

I laugh. “You love my cock; admit it. You can’t wait until I sink it inside your pussy, and in that other little virgin hole of yours.”

“I... I’m not a virgin there.”

I laugh. “Nice try, but I’m not buying it. Now, ask me nicely to fuck you.”

“Fuck you,” she hisses at me.

“Ah, so the LadyBird is finally spreading her wings.”

She opens her mouth again, and I lock my lips over hers. She bites down on my lower lip. I hiss in pain, then sweep my tongue across her mouth. I tilt my head to deepen the kiss, and slide my other hand down between us to find her drenched, and it’s not from the pool water, either. I stuff two fingers inside her cunt, and she gasps. Instantly, I slide my tongue across hers and drink from her. She thrusts her breasts up and into my chest. I curl my fingers inside her. She wriggles and makes a sound deep inside her throat. I bring my thumb to the swollen bud of her clit, and her entire body jolts. She curves her back, then a shudder runs through her. Her muscles unwind, one by one. I sense the exact moment she submits, for a whine bleeds from her lips. She opens her mouth, and I sweep my tongue across her teeth. I kiss her until my head spins and heat permeates every cell in my body, until my dick is so hard, so turgid, it feels like I have weights attached to my balls. I release my hold on her arm, then reach between us and

position my cock at her opening. In one smooth thrust, I impale her.

She gasps; her entire body jolts. “Liam.” Her chin trembles.

“I’ve got you.” I hook my arms under her knees and push them up below her ears. The angle causes me to slide in even deeper. Both of us groan at the same time. For a second, I stay there, allowing her to adjust to my length, then holding her gaze, I begin to move. In-out-in, long, flowing strokes that trigger her pussy to clamp down on my shaft.

“Fuck, baby, you’re so hot, so tight.”

I reach down and slide my thumb across the puckered bud between her arse cheeks.

She freezes; her gaze widens.

“Let me in, LadyBird.” I lower my head and brush my lips over hers once, twice. She sighs, her muscles relax, and I slide my thumb inside her.

She moans against my lips and I begin to fuck her in earnest. Each time I bury myself in her, she shudders. The next time I plunge inside, it’s at an angle so my pelvic bone brushes against her swollen clit.

Her entire body jolts. Her eyes roll back in her head. She digs her heels into my back, and I know she’s close.

“Look at me.”

She cracks open her eyelids, and I hold her gaze, increasing the pace of my movements. I pull back one last time, and this time, when I thrust into her, I order, “Come for me, baby. Come right now.”

Her pussy squeezes my dick, her mouth opens in a silent cry, and she shatters. I fuck her through the aftershocks, then lower my forehead to hers.

She stares at me with drugged eyes. “You didn’t come?”

“Oh, I’m not done yet.”

“W-h-a-t?” She swallows.

“I’m going to take your arse, baby,” —I search her features — “if you’ll let me...”

She holds my gaze, then nods.

“You sure?”

“I am.”

“Definitely sure?”

Her lips curve up as she says, “Yes.”

A hot sensation grips my chest. I kiss her again, and once more, she opens up to me so completely, it’s like she’s drawing from my soul. I soften the kiss, rub my nose against hers, then pull out. She whimpers, and the sound goes straight to my cock.

I flip her on her front and pull up her hips until she’s balanced on her knees. I press down on her upper back, and she obediently juts out her arse.

Her heart-shaped butt is right there, positioned for me.

I rub the faint pink marks left by my earlier spanking, and she shudders. I bend over her, place my cheek next to hers. “I’m going to make this so good for you, baby. I promise.”

Isla

He kisses me again. He nibbles on my lower lip, sucks on my tongue, and once more, that drugged sensation overcomes me. My limbs seem unable to hold up my weight, and I sink further into the mattress. He draws circles around my clit, then drags those magic fingers down to my slit. My already sensitized nerve endings spark. Moisture baths my core. He scoops it up, then smears it between my arse cheeks.

A shiver runs up my spine. He brushes my hair to one side, then kisses the nape of my neck. A languorous sensation bleeds through my veins. He nibbles kisses down my spine. All of my muscles liquify. That's when he slides a finger inside me. I stiffen. He straightens and presses his cheek to mine. "Trust me, Isla."

In this, I can.

One-by-one, from thigh to shoulder, I allow my muscles to unwind.

"Good girl."

A blush sweeps my cheeks. When he praises me like this, it feels like everything is right with the world. With me. He adds a second finger, and I push back and into him. He brings his other hand up to toy with my nipple. He cups my breast, massages it, and a low moan slips from my mouth. That languorous sensation spreads to my extremities. My entire

body is one melting blob. At this rate, I'm going to sink through the bed, and he's going to have to scoop me off the floor. Reduced to droplets of lust by the lion-eyed alpha. A snort escapes me.

"What's so funny?" I sense him smile.

"Nothing." Even my voice comes out slow, lazy.

He pulls out his fingers, and I feel the loss at once. I open my mouth to protest, but he's already replaced it with something bigger and much wider. He nudges my opening.

"Relax, baby." He slides his hand around to play with my pussy lips. He rubs my clit, and the friction is sooo good. Goosebumps pepper my skin. I slip my knees wider apart, and he slides inside. He bends over me, the heat of his body a furnace against my back. He rubs his fingers down my slit, and...

What witchcraft is this? My entire body quivers. Vibrations radiate out from the point of contact. My arms and legs tremble. A whine spills from my lips, and he slides in. Too big, too much. He has me spread out around his cock, pinned to the bed with his monster shaft. It's unlike any sensation I've felt before. It's different, and so forbidden, and so very hot. I can't explain it. Can't speak. I simply shudder, trying to process the different feelings coursing through my body.

As if he feels my conflicting emotions, he presses his cheek to mine again. "You're so fucking amazing baby. You feel so good. So tight. You're rocking my world, LadyBird. How did I survive this long without you?"

A glow cocoons me. His words. Why do they mean so much? Why does everything inside me respond to his voice? His touch. The feel of his skin against mine. He rains kisses on the edge of my mouth, my cheek, on the sensitive skin behind my ear. He nips at the curve of where my shoulder meets my neck, and I clamp down on his cock.

"Jesus, Isla," his voice is strained. "I need to move, baby, is that okay?"

I nod.

“Good girl. I’m never going to be same again.”

Huh? What does he mean by that?

Before I can ask, he’s plunging in and out of me. Each time he bottoms out inside me, my entire body shudders. Sweat slides down the valley between my breasts. I bury my fingers in the blankets and hold on as he fucks me. The trembling tightens into a ball at the base of my spine that curves in on itself. The next time he buries himself in me, I cry out. The climax slices through me, taking me by surprise. The orgasm carries me high, higher than I’ve ever been. I’m dimly aware of his low shout, then he comes inside me.

He lowers his weight to mine, pinning me to the bed. For a few seconds, we stay that way. His heart jackhammers in his ribcage, mirroring the frantic fluttering of mine. I turn my head and nuzzle his shoulder, drawing that dark, spicy scent of him inside my lungs. My insides quiver, and my core clenches again. It’s crazy how just smelling him turns me on so much.

“Me, too,” he murmurs against my hair as if he heard me. It’s uncanny how he seems to sense my thoughts even before I do myself.

He slides to the side and pulls me on top. Against my hip, I feel the length of his cock throb again. When I place my chin on his chest and glance up at him, he chuckles. “Seems when it comes to you, I’m insatiable.”

“Me, too,” I echo his earlier words.

His gaze softens. He frames my face, then pulls me in for a kiss. “We need a shower.”

My heart stutters. I shake my head. “Not yet.” I pretend to yawn. “I need my rest first.” I pillow my cheek on his chest and close my eyes.

He hesitates, then closes his arms about me. In a few minutes, his breathing deepens. I stay still until his body twitches, indicating he’s slipped into deeper sleep. Then another half an hour or so, until his heartbeat has slowed down and his muscles have relaxed one by one. I slide out of his

embrace, then off the bed. I glance around and realize my clothes are scattered in and around the swimming pool. I walk into his bathroom, pull on a bathrobe, then head toward my room. Once there, I pick up my phone and dial Zara's number.

She answers on the second ring. "Everything okay?"

"I need your help."

Liam

When I wake up the next morning, she's gone. I throw my arm behind my head and lay in bed for a few minutes. Somehow, I'm not surprised. The sex last night had been a surprise. True to my word, I took her out to dinner, not with the intention of bedding her, but because I wanted to surprise her, to make her feel cherished. An emotion I don't normally associate with women. I've slept with them in the past, but never allowed them to get close. I've always drawn the line when it comes to my personal life.

Although, I was conscious of the contents of my father's will and knew, at some point, I'd have to choose a life-partner and deliver on the clauses, it always seemed like something in the distant future. I kept putting it off, never allowing myself to emotionally engage with any of them, and one day, I woke up, close to forty, and realized I didn't have anyone to call my own. To be fair, I'd yet to meet anyone I wanted to get intimate with, someone with whom I could lower my barriers and allow them to get to know me better. I'd never wanted to find out more about any of them, either.

I'd reconciled myself to a possible marriage where I'd have a safe relationship. One in which the boundaries would be known and never overstepped. One in which both partners knew what was expected of them. A safe connection which

went only as far as was needed to deliver on the demands posed by my father's will. And no further.

Then she came along and turned my world upside down. It's no wonder I reacted so strongly to her from the beginning. What I thought was hate was a form of self-preservation. A deep attraction that my body had sensed, an attachment my subconscious had instantly recognized but my mind had not been able to fathom. No wonder I'd expended so much energy in pushing her away. My instinct had known that if she slipped under my skin, it would be very difficult to resist her. I should have known fighting the draw was going to be futile.

As a business man, I know when I no longer have the winning hand. Know when to retreat. Know when to join forces, rather than initiate a hostile takeover. And now, it's time to apply these lessons to my personal life. It's time to embrace what I've been unwilling to accept all along. That she came into my life at the right time, and a part of me immediately recognized her. It's time to accept her. To accept that she's the right partner for me. The chemistry between us is earth shattering, the sex is soul destroying, and the banter we share stimulates my intelligence like no one ever has. It makes a strong case for a very promising partnership.

As for the question of a child? We can enjoy ourselves while we deliver on that stipulation. Why deprive ourselves of a pleasurable experience when we can make a baby the normal way? And after the child is born... We can still go our own ways. We'll co-parent, of course, maybe even stay in the marriage and take advantage of our physical compatibility.

Naturally, she can use my contacts and connections to continue to grow her own business. It will benefit the both of us. I'm sure she'll see the wisdom in that.

Mind made up, I spring out of bed, then rush through my shower and get dressed. I walk down into the kitchen and come to a halt.

Clustered around the kitchen island are Zara Chopra, Summer West, and a woman I don't recognize, but who looks vaguely familiar.

Apparently, I was sleeping so soundly, I didn't hear the engines of the plane that brought them in. How strange. I never sleep that deeply. Not since—the aftermath of the incident. Evidently, there's nothing like sex with her to lull me into complacency. Something I need to be careful about in the future.

With her back to me, Isla stands in front of the cooking surface. She places another pancake onto an already heaped stack. "I think you guys are going to love these strawberry pancakes."

She turns, spots me, and her gaze narrows. Without acknowledging my presence, she walks over to the table and slides the pancakes into the center. Then she grabs the bottle of maple syrup, along with the non-dairy butter, and places them near the pancakes. She walks around to take her seat next to Zara.

The women look at me, then back at Isla. For a second, no one speaks.

Then Zara raises her hand. "Hey, Liam, hope you don't mind us gals coming a few days early. We wanted to help Isla with the wedding preparations."

"My husband was happy for us to take his jet. After all, what's the point of having your own private mode of transportation if it isn't to be there for a friend?" Summer adds.

Isla keeps her gaze averted. So, it's going to be like that, is it? She's going to pretend nothing happened last night? We'll see.

"Of course." I flash them a smile. "Whatever my fiancée wants is fine by me."

Zara's eyebrows rise. Summer suppresses a smile. The woman who looks faintly familiar rises to her feet. "We haven't met, but I'm Solene Sabatini."

"Oh, sorry, I should have introduced the two of you," Isla says, looking at a point somewhere beyond my shoulder. "This is Solene. Not only did her last single top the Spotify charts,

but she's also approached me to help plan her upcoming wedding to Declan. And we've become good friends. I hope you don't mind that I invited her along with Zara and Summer. You know how it is. A woman needs her friends around her when she's about to tie the knot. Moral courage and all that." She gives a fake laugh.

My insides clench. Is marrying me such a repulsive thought that she needs her friends here in her corner. Doesn't she realize I'm in her corner, too? Haven't I tried to show her that I'll do anything to accommodate her wishes? *You're still tying her to the contract and to keeping her end of the deal.* Which is the right thing to do. After all, that's the reason we're both here, isn't it?

I walk over to take the seat next to her, then drop a kiss on her forehead. "Of course, darling, whatever you need."

Isla's shoulders stiffen further. A ripple of surprise runs around the table. The women glance at me, then at Isla who, in turn, plates out the pancakes. "Dig in, ladies."

"I see you found the ingredients for your vegan pancakes."

"I did, thank you for ensuring the kitchen was stocked with all the necessities," she says stiffly.

My lips tighten. Why am I acting like a wanker and belaboring the point that I made sure to cater to her tastes? I blow out a breath. "Sorry, didn't mean to act like a dick," I murmur.

"If it talks like one, and walks like one—" She raises her shoulder.

I scowl.

"You weren't complaining about it when I was inside you yesterday."

"Good thing you didn't fuck me where it counted."

Anger slices through my chest.

I rise to my feet and grab her arm. "Would you ladies excuse us for one second?"

“Wait, what—?” Isla protests.

“I need to talk to you.”

“But—”

I glare at her. She pales. Then, to my relief, she rises to her feet. I pull her out of the kitchen and on to the deck, making sure to shut the doors behind us.

She tugs, and I release her arm.

“What the hell are you doing?” she hisses.

“What the hell are *you* doing?” I lean forward on the balls of my feet. “If you think you’re going to get away with acting like we don’t mean anything to each other—”

“We don’t.” She tips up her chin.

“Last night—”

“Meant nothing,” she bursts out.

“—Meant everything to me,” I say at the same time.

She twists her lips. “Don’t lie. You planned the whole thing last night. You softened me up and wooed me. You capitalized on the chemistry between us. You hoped it would lead up to giving you a chance to fuck me.”

I hesitate.

Her features pale. “So, I *am* right.”

“I admit, now that we’ve fucked, our body language is different. It helps to come across as more genuine to everyone, but that’s not why I planned the evening last night. I wanted to do it for you. I wanted to make it special for you.”

“And I don’t understand why. This entire thing is a contract, nothing more.”

“But what if it isn’t? What if it’s the start of something else? What if—” I scan her features. “I want it to be something more.”

“You mean, like a real marriage?”

“I mean, like a real partnership. You saw how combustible we are in bed and how compatible we are out of it. What if, instead of going through alternative means, we make a child the old-fashioned way?”

Something shifts behind her eyes. “I see. This is about your heir.” She laughs. “Of course it is. It’s one of the clauses of your father’s will, after all.”

“I’ve never hidden that. But given everything that’s happened between us, I don’t see the point of going through artificial means of having a child. Also,” —I lean in closer until our eyelashes tangle— “it would be so much more pleasurable, don’t you think?”

Her lips part. An array of emotions sweeps across her features. Lust, need, then regret.

“No.” She takes a step back.

I blink. “No?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want a future with you. I don’t think we’re compatible. We come from very different backgrounds, and I value my independence. Given how strong a personality you have, I’d be smothered in any relationship with you. It’s why I think it’s best we don’t sleep together again. And we stick to our original agreement of things being strictly business from now on.”

My guts churn. It feels like that ten-ton truck that slammed into my chest yesterday, which I thought I’d shaken off, is back. And this time, driving back and forth over my prostrate body, ensuring my annihilation.

I grip her by her shoulders and haul her up to her tiptoes. “Look into my eyes and tell me you didn’t feel something last night. That you weren’t as affected as me by our making love. That it didn’t mean anything to you.”

“It meant nothing to me. I wasn’t affected by it. I didn’t feel anything.” She glances away, then back at me.

“At least learn to lie better.”

“I’m not lying.”

I bare my teeth. “I so fucking don’t believe you, Isla. Why’re you resisting the chance for us to have something together? Why’re you turning your back on what could turn out to be the thing that’s missing from both of our lives?”

“What’s missing from my life is that I don’t have my independence anymore.” It would make more sense for her to complain that she will never have her independence again because she’s being forced to have a baby she never planned to have and now she’ll be tied down to it forever. But not to him, because he’ll be a reminder of what she had to give up. I tighten my hold on her and glance between her eyes. “What are you scared of, Isla? What’s got you running at the first signs of genuine intimacy?”

“It’s you. I don’t want to be with you, Liam. Is that so difficult to understand? I don’t want another woman’s castoff.”

Hurt pounds at my temples. Anger claws at my insides. She doesn’t mean it. She’s saying it to hurt me, so I’ll push her way. A part of me insists that, but I disregard it.

“So, this is it then? This is what you want? For us to have a strictly contractual relationship from now on?”

She nods. Her features are set. There’s no hint of emotion in her eyes. I want to believe she’s hiding her genuine feelings, but right now, I can’t see evidence of it.

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

Isla

“You okay?”

Zara shuts off the treadmill and wipes her face with the towel slung around her neck.

“I’m good.” I return to perusing my phone with the treadmill set at a low speed where I can both walk—and pretend to exercise—as well as reply to the emails which I was sure would have flooded my inbox overnight. Unfortunately, it turns out none of my vendors are missing me, given they are taking instructions from the people Liam assigned to take over the wedding planning operations from me.

After our fallout earlier, Liam returned to the breakfast table, as did I. We both stayed on, making conversation with my friends— Correction, he charmed them while I stayed silent. I barely managed to eat my breakfast, while he polished off the rest of the food on his plate. Typical male behavior. He’s able to compartmentalize everything. Whereas my guts were churning so hard, I could barely keep my food down. He even helped to clear away the breakfast dishes, no doubt, to earn brownie points with my friends, after which he left.

The girls retired to their rooms. Summer and Solene wanted to catch up on their sleep, but Zara and I made plans to get a work-out before lunch.

Later, as I'd made my way to the gym, Liam texted to say my phone was unblocked and I had access to my email and social media. Sure enough, notifications began to crowd my phone right away, although it wasn't as bad as I'd expected. The comments on the post I'd put up had died off. Apparently, our wedding doesn't warrant as much public scrutiny as I thought it would.

Now, I click through to the social media platform again and check. Nope, except for a couple more comments, one of which is someone hawking their T-shirt and another of which compliments my choice of outfit, there's nothing. It's like everyone moved on to other news already. Huh. I guess Liam was right. People are happy to turn their attention to the next big thing that comes along.

Still. "This really is strange."

"What is?" Zara asks.

I switch off my treadmill and use my towel to pat the faint beads of perspiration on my forehead. "I thought I'd have trolls making my life miserable and passing judgement on me. But the attention has died down so quickly..."

I search through the internet. "We barely made any news." Except for a passing reference in some gossip blogs and a couple of wedding influencers who commented on 'brideswap,' all the other mentions are overwhelmingly positive. People bought Liam's little speech about how he fell for me and how this is the right thing for both of us.

The tension in my shoulders drains a little. I hadn't realized how stressed I was about the potential outcome of the post until now.

"That's good, right?" She uncaps her water bottle and drinks from it.

"Y-e-a-h?"

"You don't sound very sure."

"I mean, I'm glad there isn't a bigger backlash." I step off the treadmill, then hold the phone out to her. "I mean, look. Some of the articles even mention how mature it is of all

parties involved to do what's best for us. When was the last time you saw the press being this measured?"

She reads it, then glances at me. "It does seem people are being more sensible about it than not." She hands the phone to me. "And you've got loads of positive coverage around the actual news of the wedding, including the fact that it's a private affair being held on Liam's island in the Mediterranean. So, enough to keep people engaged but not so much information that it comes across as crass, considering it comes on the heels of his previous broken engagement." She pauses and taps her chin. "It's all tasteful, actually."

"Too tasteful," I stop my treadmill and jump off it with my phone in my hand.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, it just seems strange there haven't been more trolls commenting on the sequence of events. There seemed to be people taking sides initially, but even that's died off."

"You do have your own joint hashtag," she points out.

"#Lisla," I half laugh.

"That's not too bad."

"I guess," I hesitate.

"It could have always been #Liamsla or #Slam or #Ilam?"

"I don't even want to go there." I resist a shudder.

"Overall, things have worked out okay, eh?"

"They have." I purse my lips, "I just wish I could be more hands on with the wedding preparations."

"Best you aren't. The details would only stress you out. This way, your vision is still executed, but you don't have to be involved with the nitty-gritty."

I narrow my gaze on her. "Is that your way of hinting I haven't been delegating?"

"I'm the last person to find fault with you on that. God knows, I'm the same. It's difficult to let go when you know

you can do things better than anyone else. But it's also the shortest way to burn out.”

“So I've been too hands on.” I purse my lips.

“Hey, I understand. When you're building your own business, you have to do everything. You have been a bit of a workaholic, though.”

“Hello pot, meet kettle.”

She laughs. “Agreed. Still, I dropped everything and came when you called, didn't I?”

I sober. “I can't thank you enough for that. I was panicking when I called last night.”

“You did sound like you had a lot on your mind.”

“It was so good of Summer's husband to let you borrow his jet.”

She waves her hand in the air. “He's a gazillionaire; he can afford it. Though I was surprised you invited Solene on to come.”

“I wanted Amelie to come along, but she had work to wrap up before she could make it. Also, just between us, I think she preferred to come with Weston on a later flight. Summer asked if she could bring Solene. I figured it would be good to have her—safety in numbers, you know?”

“Surprised Declan let her come on her own.” She refers to Solene's fiancé who's also an up-and-coming movie star.

“He's shooting in the Caribbean, but he'll be here the first chance he gets.”

“Also surprised Liam's letting you out of his sight,” she murmurs.

I open my mouth, then close it. “Oh, no, no, no, don't think for one second you can trap me into revealing something I shouldn't by your smooth questioning technique.”

“Damn it,” she says lightly. “And here I thought I could use my court-tested cross examination technique on you with success. Seriously, though...” She chugs down more water

from her bottle then caps it. “There are enough sparks between the two of you to light wet kindling.”

“Umm, okay?” What else am I supposed to say? That what she senses between us is an illusion? Because it’s not. Try as I might, I can’t deny it. What happened last night was real. And I’m the one who started it... And it was everything I’d hoped for, and so much more. His touch, the feel of his skin on mine, his fingers inside me, his tongue fucking me, his eyelashes grazing mine, his lips on mine, his teeth biting into the curve of my neck, his cock in my most forbidden place. And yet, he didn’t come inside me. Was that by accident or design?

He was in me, he made me come, and then he had enough self-control left to pull out and take me the other way. Is that strange, or is it simply him being kinky? Come to think of it, I don’t know much about this man who’s going to be my—*fake*—husband, at all. And do I want to find out more about him? Considering our relationship is a farce? I’m not sure.

He intrigues me. He has as many contradictions as I do. And secrets like I do. At least, that’s what I sense. In that way, we match—each of us having something we don’t want the rest of the world to find out about. He feels like a kindred spirit. Like someone who, if I spent more time with him, I wouldn’t be able to resist. Who am I kidding? I’m past that stage already. I thought I hated him. But maybe what I’d been feeling was actually attraction. The kind that is so intense you want to deny it right away. The kind that is so potent you shrink away from it. The kind that melts your panties and liquifies your brain cells so you can’t think coherently.

Is that why I told Lila not to marry him? Is that why, when she asked me, I decided to tell her the truth? Because I knew, even then, I was attracted to him?

No, that’s not possible. I did truly hate him, and I was acting in Lila’s best interests when I could see he didn’t love her. It was obvious to me, even then, that he was looking at the wedding as a business arrangement, and I truly thought I was acting in her best interest. Only now, I’m not sure if my subconscious mind urged me to tell her the truth, knowing what the outcome would be. Hoping for the outcome...

“Earth to Isla, hello!”

I blink and look into Zara’s worried face.

“You okay, babe?” She frowns.

“Of course I am.” I plop the towel over my shoulder. “I also owe you a thanks for bringing over my wedding dress.”

“It’s a Karma WS original. Of course I was going to bring it along. Especially since she’s also designing the bridesmaids’ dresses.” Zara smirks.

“I can’t believe she agreed to do it. Especially since it’s so last-minute.”

“She’s your friend, why wouldn’t she do this for you?” Zara steps off her treadmill. She pats her forehead, even though she’s hardly broken a sweat. This, despite the fact that her treadmill was set at double, if not triple, the speed I set my own. The woman’s an overachiever in every way. Still holding my phone, I stretch out my leg and begin to cool down.

“You’re right, I’ve known Karma for many years, but she’s a successful designer and her time is stretched. I’m fortunate she could see me for a quick dress-fitting before Liam surprised me by bringing me here early,” I reply.

“You mean, he let you out of his sight long enough for that?”

I narrow my gaze on her. “It really isn’t like that with Liam and me.”

She scoffs. “Oh, please. You agreed to marry the guy, knowing the media shitstorm it was going to leave in its wake. And you are the most risk-averse person I know. Also, the way he looks at you—like he’d rather have you for breakfast, lunch and dinner, than eat food. I mean, when he walked into the kitchen and saw us, I thought for sure he’d tell the rest of us to leave so he could have his way with you. I was so surprised when he didn’t.”

“Your point being?”

“You wanted your friends around, and he was happy to oblige. Despite the fact he, clearly, wanted more one-on-one

time with you.”

I purse my lips. “Why do I get the feeling you’re beginning to admire him.”

“I’m warming up to him,” she concedes.

“He did bring me here without giving me a choice,” I point out.

“And that has definitely helped to take your mind off the media reactions before the wedding. Also, the media backlash itself seems to have died off.”

I rub my temple. “Which is really strange. It’s almost like he reached out to the influencers and online trolls and told them to back off, and they did.”

She rolls her eyes. “Really? That’s your explanation for the media leaving you in peace?”

I lower my hand to my side. “You’re right, of course. Not even the great Liam Kincaid would be able to influence the influencers.”

Liam

“You’re trying to influence the influencers. You’re playing with fire.”

Karina scowls at me from the screen of my phone.

“Not my first time; definitely not my last.” I lean back in the chair in my home office.

Her frown deepens. “My family is the Bratva and I’ve seen some insane things in my life.” She firms her lips. “While this may not be life-threatening, there’s certainly a risk of reputation suicide that you’re heading toward.”

I raise my shoulder. Maybe I should be more worried about what happens if what I’m doing comes out. But in all honesty, I can’t be bothered. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Make sure you continue to pay influencers to spin the news in a positive light, while you keep the trolls at bay.”

“It’s going to cost a lot.”

If it were anyone else telling me so, I’d bite their head off. But Karina is Arpad Beauchamp’s wife. He happens to be a friend, as well as one of the Seven, and someone with whom I’ve done business in the past. So, I content myself with saying, “I have the money.”

“It’s going to be double the budget I asked,” she warns.

“I’ve set aside a billion dollars for this; is that enough?”

Her gaze widens. “You sure?”

I twist my lips. “Never more sure of anything than I am now.”

She scans my features. “So, it’s like that.”

I frown. “Like what?”

“Another alphahole bites the dust.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Of course you’re in love. That’s why you want to marry her. I don’t know why I doubted that.”

“I’m not in love with—” I press my lips together.

Her eyes gleam. “You were saying?”

“That you need to get on with what you were doing.”

“Yes, boss.” She smiles broadly. “As long as you’re footing the bill, I’m happy to keep the wolves at bay. But know this, it’s only a matter of time before one of them decides notoriety is better than money.”

“Everyone has a price.”

She tilts her head. “So I’ve heard people say. Then they fall in love and learn better.”

“Never gonna happen to me.”

This time she throws her head back and laughs. “Famous last words.” She grins at me. “Also, give my husband a kiss. Not from you, but from me, of course.” She disconnects.

I stare at the now empty screen. It’s another twenty-four hours before the rest of the guests are supposed to arrive. So, what did she mean by—

“Here’s the bridegroom. Still standing, ol’ chap?”

I swing around to find Sinclair Sterling prowling into the room. Which doesn’t surprise me. After all, his wife is here so it stands to reason he wouldn’t be far behind. With him are my brother Weston and Hunter Whittington.

“What are you guys doing here?” I scowl.

“Is that any way to speak to your groomsmen?” Hunter smirks.

“I didn’t ask any of you for advice.”

“Which is why we volunteered it,” Weston says in a cheerful tone. He ambles over and grips my shoulder. “Welcome to our merry tribe, bro. I’m glad you finally decided to change your ways.”

“If by that, you mean, getting married, then I’m afraid you’re mistaken. I don’t plan on changing much. She’s the one who’s going to have to adjust.”

Weston stares at me. “Wow, you really do believe your life is going to continue how it used to be before you got married?”

“Of course I do.”

Hunter makes a choking sound and turns it into a coughing fit.

Sinclair covers his mouth with his palm, but his eyes are crinkled like he’s fighting not to laugh.

Weston opens and shuts his mouth, then quickly turns away from me and heads straight for my bar.

I’m glad they’re all so amused. Douchebags. “What are you up to?”

“What does it look like?” He reaches for my whiskey—my most expensive, unopened bottle of Macallan twenty-four-year-old reserve. He grabs my tumblers, lines them up on the counter, then proceeds to pour a splash of the whiskey into each of the glasses.

Sinclair and Hunter walk over and pick up one each.

Weston ambles over and slides one to me.

“It’s not even six p.m. yet,” I grumble.”

“Best to knock it back, brother. You’re going to need it for the hard truths coming your way.”

“And you’re the one who’s going to give them to me?”

My younger brother—a pain in the butt since the day he was born—heaves his bulk into a chair and places his feet on my table. On my antique Empire desk.

I scowl at him, but he doesn’t seem to notice. He swirls his drink in his glass then sniffs at it. “Considering you’re not having a stag do?”

“What’s that?” I sniff.

“You know, the kind of party where you invite your male friends and we all drink to your health and give you advice and warn you about the end of your existence as you know it —”

“You mean one of those urban male bonding traditions?” I look down my nose at my brother, who knocks back the whiskey in one go.

“Easy, tiger, that’s some vintage whiskey you have there.”

“I’d recommend you do the same. You’re going to need it,” Weston drawls.

“Eh?” I glance toward Sinclair, who’s wearing an expression of delight on his face, and Hunter, who seems mildly amused. Something tells me the evening is going to get a lot worse.

“How did you guys get here? I didn’t hear the sound of a plane.”

“Clearly, your mind was elsewhere.”

That’s twice in a row. Un-fucking-believable.

“You guys fucking me around? You flew commercial then took the boat from the mainland, didn’t you?”

“Hate to tell you, but no, we landed half an hour ago. You must have been too absorbed in whatever it is you were up to. Don’t feel too badly, it happens to the best of us, ol’ chap, ” Sinclair murmurs.

I glower at them.

“You were caught up in your feelings, trying to process everything that’s happening. It’s just the beginning, bro. It’s normal,” Weston says with a big smile on his face. *Motherfucker.*

“Make another crack about my emotional state of being, and I’ll knock your heads together,” I growl.

Weston clicks his tongue. “Temper, temper.”

“This is nothing. Wait until you find yourself smiling for no reason in the middle of the day,” Sinclair adds.

Weston points his fingers at me and makes a popping sound like he’s shooting an imaginary gun. I scoff. Clearly, he didn’t get the memo that we’re adults and past the kind of teenage nonsense he revels in.

I narrow my gaze on Sinclair, who takes another sip of his whiskey. At least, he didn’t knock it back. Unlike my brother, the philistine.

When Sinclair contents himself with a smile, my scowl grows deeper. “Don’t you have another asinine remark to add to the proceedings?” I snap.

“Moi?” Sinclair adopts an innocent expression. “I’m here to lend you moral support as you go through this rite of passage.”

“Bull-fucking-shit.” I snatch up my glass of whiskey, when from outside the window comes the unmistakable drone of a Learjet.

“Ooh, hear that?” Weston cups his palm behind his ear. “It’s the fucking cavalry.”

I pale. “You mean—”

“Your closest friends.”

“I don’t have any.”

“The people who consider themselves close to you should be here shortly.”

I pale.

“Are you talking about—”

“The Seven.” He nods.

Of course, he’s talking about the seven of them including Weston and Sinclair, who together with five of their friends run 7A, the biggest financial services company in Europe.

“Always thought it sounded like you guys belong to a boy band. Also, they’re your friends, not mine.”

“We’ve appropriated you for the duration of your wedding. Couldn’t let you walk up the aisle on your own, could we?” Sinclair chuckles.

“I have no problem tying the knot on my own. In fact, if it weren’t for this upcoming IPO, I’d have insisted we get married in the town hall.”

“Aww, where’s the fun in that?” Weston places his elbows on the table. “Besides, it’s to your advantage to have us in the picture. It’s a signal to the world that you have the support of the most powerful men in the country.”

It’s true, and it’s the main reason I decided to go through with this event. That, and the fact the publicity will benefit Isla’s wedding planning company. Which means, I don’t have a choice but to get through this evening. Doesn’t mean I needed to stay sober. I turn in the direction of the bar, but Hunter’s already at my side. He tips the whiskey bottle, pouring the golden liquid into my glass.

I knock it back. The liquor burns a trail down my gullet and explodes in my stomach. A warm glow radiates out to my extremities. I hold out my glass. “More,” I growl.

He splashes more of the Macallan into my tumbler. I snatch it up, drain it, then thunk the tumbler on the table.

“You trying to get drunk so you can pass out before the party starts in earnest, eh?” Weston strokes his chin.

“Shouldn’t you be using your mental capacity for whatever surgery you’re planning next?” Yep, my rat’s ass of a brother turned out to be much more useful than me when it came to his choice of profession. Bastard’s a leading cardiac surgeon in his

field. Patients from around the world seek him out. He's saved the lives of many, including Michael's wife. The same Michael who just walked in the door. He's followed by Karina's husband Arpad.

Michael scowls at someone. I follow his gaze to find he and Sinclair are engaged in some kind of a stare-off. It's no secret the two of them don't like, so much as tolerate, each other. By rights, they should have shot each other, considering it's Michael's father who kidnapped Sinclair—as well as my brother Weston and their five friends—when they were boys. The incident changed the course of their lives... And mine. None of them know about how it impacted me, and it's not something I'm going to share with them, either.

Of course, Michael is not his father. And no one should be held responsible for the crimes of their sperm donor. If Sinclair and Weston—who were more directly affected by Michael Senior's actions—have been able to look past the repercussions of the incident to forge a tentative bond with the Sovranos, then I can do the same. Of course, it helps that Michael and Sinclair are married to sisters who are insistent that the two men get along. A dictate which seems to be working... Somewhat.

Michael jerks his chin in Sinclair's direction.

Sinclair's features are closed, but he tips his head in acknowledgement.

At which point, Michael turns his attention on me and snorts. "Lost your will to live yet, you *pezzo di merda*?"

"Gee, don't all of you try to blow smoke up my arse all at once." I reach for the bottle of whiskey, but before I can get to it, Arpad is there.

He snatches it up. "Good whiskey."

Hunter joins us with two more tumblers that he places on my antique table.

"Fucking hell, at least use the coasters, you wankers," I grumble.

“That’s the least of your worries.” Arpad tops up everyone’s glasses, and by the time he gets to mine, the bottle is dry. “Sorry, ol’ chap.”

The fuck?

I open my mouth to protest, but my best friend comes through. He appears at my elbow, a fresh bottle of Macallan—the thirty-six-year-old one. Good thing my pest of a brother didn’t find it earlier.

Hunter pours the liquid into my glass and keeps pouring until the liquor is in danger of overflowing. “Bottoms up.”

Isla

“Oh, my god, you girls shouldn’t have.”

I’m overwhelmed by the spread of food and drink on the terrace adjoining the living room. It’s a beautiful evening. The air is balmy, and the scent of flowers teases my nostrils. In the distance, the sun is beginning its journey toward the horizon. I heard the sound of the plane earlier and knew more visitors were arriving. I was sure it was Liam’s friends who’d touched down. In fact, I didn’t give it any more thought because Zara and Summer, along with Amelie and Karma were keeping me busy.

They insisted I try on my dress for them, then showed off their own bridesmaid dresses, which were gorgeous. In fact, Karma Sovrano ensured her creation celebrated Summer’s bump. Rather than trying to hide Summer’s condition, the design highlighted Summer’s pregnancy in a way that was both tasteful and sexy. Leave it to a pregnant woman to design something that not only didn’t look like frumpy pregnancy-wear, but in fact, flattered the mother-to-be’s figure and made her look captivating.

Not that I would’ve expected anything less from her, especially since Summer’s her sister. But still, the fact that she put so much thought into creating the dresses made me teary.

Damn, I really am getting into the mood of the wedding. So what, if it all started as an arrangement? Things are getting dangerously mixed up in my head. I'm already feeling emotional, so when I walk onto the terrace and see the food and drink laid out on the table, along with the familiar faces of Amelie Kincaid and Karma Sovrano herself, my emotions well up. My throat closes, and I'm unable to stop the tears that trail down my cheeks.

"Oh, my goodness, are you okay?" Amelie walks over to me. She throws her arms around me, enclosing me in a cloud of what smells like sugar and cinnamon. She squeezes me tightly.

"You always smell like a walking dessert," I murmur.

Amelie laughs. "Perks of being a pastry chef."

I hear footsteps as first Summer, then Karma, and finally Zara—who's not much of a hugger—put their arms around us.

"Group hug!" Summer chortles.

"Ooh, haven't had one of these in a while. It feels so good, doesn't it?" I hear the smile in Karma's voice.

"There; now that's out of the way." Zara steps back.

I chuckle. "Can't believe you girls managed to get Z to hug."

"You're right. I don't normally indulge in superfluous emotions, except when it comes to you." She stabs a finger at me.

I sniff again, get a good whiff of the pastries that are arranged on the table. There are— I stare. "Are those penis-shaped cookies?"

Amelie nods happily.

"And those bonbons are supposed to be—"

"Balls, it would seem." Zara's eyes gleam. "I know which one I'm eating first."

"Ms. Balls-of-steel," I refer to her by the name a well-known mainstream daily has nicknamed her, "I didn't think

you needed more balls in *your* orbit.”

“One can never have too many of them, darling. You just have to be careful to keep them all up in the air at the same time, if you know what I mean.”

“Not exactly.”

She opens her mouth, no doubt, to explain herself, and I raise a hand. “Don’t need the details.”

She shrugs. “Hey, one needs to get one’s protein fix. I just choose to get mine this way.”

There’s silence, then the girls burst out laughing.

“Though, perhaps, just this once, I might favor going for the biggest ones of them all.” She narrows her gaze on two of the balls which are larger in size than the others.

Once more, silence descends. After a few seconds, Zara looks up and spots the rest of us staring at her.

“What?” She scowls.

“That’s the first time I’ve heard you talk about a specific pair of balls,” I murmur.

Zara lowers her chin to her chest so her hair falls over her face. “I think we should park this conversation for another time. Don’t want to steal your limelight today, babe,” she mumbles under her breath.

I peruse what I can see of her features. “OMG, you’ve met someone.”

She seems taken aback, then laughs—a little weakly, I think, “What? Of course not. What gives you that idea?”

“Because you’re blushing.” Summer’s lips curve at the sides.

Her cheeks pinken further. “Me, blushing?” She waves a hand in the air. “You girls are imagining things. Also” —she glances at the table loaded with pastries— “I’m hungry.”

As if on cue, my stomach rumbles.

“That’s a ton of goodies.” I glance from Amelie to the table, then back at her. “Did you really make all of these?”

“Yes.” She rubs her palms. “I had so much fun. We were taking the jet, so I transported everything over.”

“Almost ran out of space, too.” Karma chuckles.

“Speaking of—” I narrow my gaze on her. “Should you even be here?” Not only is Karma pregnant, but she also has a heart condition which means she needs to be very careful not to exert herself. Summer mentioned to me that she kept this from Michael until recently. After which, he’s refused to let her out of his sight.

“Don’t you start, too. It was almost impossible to convince Michael I’d be fine.”

“I’m surprised he agreed to let you come,” I murmur.

“Him agree to let me come?” She sets her jaw. “Nothing and no one is keeping me away from enjoying the wedding of one of the Sorority-of-the-Seven.” She grins. “Besides, he’s here, too, as is Weston, my own personal heart specialist.” She winks at Amelie. “Don’t worry, we all know whose heart he cares about the most.”

We all laugh. “I’m really happy to see you here. This way, I can personally thank you for the gorgeous wedding dress—”

“—And for the dresses of the bridesmaids. At least someone realizes we are bridesbabes who don’t need to be dressed in drab colors, or uniformly, for that matter.” Zara tosses her mane. Her thick, dark hair seems to have a life of its own as it flows and crackles about her shoulders. I touch my own hair, making sure it’s in place. Z catches sight of my action and frowns.

I shake my head in an almost imperceptible gesture. Her gaze narrows.

I look away, then squeeze Karma’s hand. “Thank you, anyway,” I say softly. “Couldn’t have done this without you. Without” —I glance about the faces of the women who mean so much to me— “all of you.”

“Aww!” Summer’s chin wobbles. “You’re making me all emotional. And it’s not just because of the pregnancy hormones.”

Karma blinks away what looks like tears. Amelie sniffs. Even Zara looks moved. Emotions coil up in my chest. My throat closes. *Oh, no, no, no I’m not going to cry.* I clap my hands. “Time to sample the cookies.”

“And drinks.” Zara walks over to the jugs of margarita placed next to a bowl of jellybeans shaped as—you guessed it, willies. To her credit, she doesn’t even glance at them as she reaches for the pitcher of slushy liquid. “There’s alcoholic and non-alcoholic versions of this cocktail. I know which one I’m drinking.”

“I shouldn’t be drinking so much.” I stare down into the depths of my double-bowl glass. The rim is so massive, I could be holding a soup bowl between my fingers. Also, most of the contents of said glass are now in my stomach.

“Nonsense.” Zara raises the jug and tops me up... for the fifth, or is it sixth, time. I’ve lost count, to be honest. Sometime after the second glass, a warmth began to spread through my veins. After the fourth, I remember giggling a lot as Amelie, Summer and Karma had recounted for Zara’s benefit the stories of how they’d met and tamed their respective alphaholes. Zara scoffed and said the asshole—she pointedly refused to use the world alphahole—who’d tame her has yet to be born. At which point, the three women looked at each other and shared a secret smile.

She demanded they tell her what that look meant.

And the three women had insisted it was merely a shared sentiment about how they’d each been sure they’d never meet their match and yet, they had... in said alphaholes.

To which I had raised a finger—which had seemed suspiciously like two fingers in my line of sight but which I had ignored—and told them I was with Zara. It might have

worked for them but no snarly, mean-mouthed, grumpy-faced, handsome as Lucifer a-hole was going to put me in my place.

The three had glanced between me and Z then snickered to themselves. They hadn't pushed the matter further but I had this strange feeling they were going to have the last laugh at our expense.

Shortly afterward, Michael and Sinclair came by to pick up Karma and Summer. Considering they're pregnant, we couldn't stop their early escape. Amelie had stayed on and told me how she was thrilled to be here and help with the arrangements. She also mentioned how her catering business was booming thanks to her having pitched in with the quick-turnaround weddings of the rest of the Seven. Which is positive right? Perhaps this harebrained scheme of mine will have the intended effect and benefit my wedding planning business too?

When Zara tops up her own drink and mine yet again, I don't even pretend to resist. I hold up the glass and rise to my feet, sway, then find my balance.

"To girlfriends who always know what to say." I try to smile but my face has gone numb. Given the ordeal I have to face tomorrow, I welcome it. Hopefully, my thoughts will also be frozen so I don't have to relive the sensations of his skin on mine, his rough fingers inside me, his thick cock swelling until it felt like he was going to carve me in half.

"Isla?"

I blink and turn to find Zara and Amelie watching me closely.

"Uh, sorry, it's been a long day. What did you say?"

Zara arches her eyebrows but doesn't question me, thank god. She raises her glass and says, "I was raising a toast to hoes before husbands."

"I'd say they're both equally important." Amelia grins, her eyes over-bright, no doubt, because of all the alcohol she's consumed. "I'll toast to sex, lots and lots of sex, and enough

orgasms to keep you adrift in happy hormones so you always look on the bride side.”

Both Zara and I groan.

Amelie hiccoughs, then begins to giggle helplessly.

“I think this is my cue to take you to bed, Buttercup.” Weston prowls into the room and scoops the still giggling Amelie into his arms. “Ladies,” he says and dips his head in our direction before walking out.

The two of us watch them leave, then Zara blows out a breath. “I hate to say it, but being around you guys might convert me yet.”

“You mean, you’d actually think of a relationship with you-know-who?” I waggle my eyebrows at her.

“I have no idea who you’re talking about.” She buries her nose in her drink.

I lower my voice. “Aww, come on, Z, the way you and Hunter go at each other—”

“Is because we hate each other,” she snaps.

“See, this is what I mean.” I crunch down on a piece of ice, then raise my soup bowl—I mean, my margarita glass—in her direction. “The way the two of you snipe at each other, then steal glances when the other is not looking, it’s clear there’s this entire sexual attraction thing going on—”

Zara makes a gagging sound. “Please! I wouldn’t sleep with him if he were the last man on Earth.”

“You talking about me?”

Both Z and I pivot in the direction of the voice.

Hunter leans a hip against the door, his gaze on Zara. Next to him, Liam stands with a hand in his pocket. He’s taken off his jacket, and his shirt sleeves are rolled up. I glimpse his veiny forearms and my core throbs. What is it about his veiny forearms that I find so irresistible?

His gaze holds mine. The air seems to grow dense. In the distance, lightning flashes. At some point, the sun dipped

behind the horizon, and one of Liam's staff came around and lit the candles. The flickering light illuminates the hollows under his cheekbones and lends a blue hue to his already dark hair. Those gray eyes of his seem almost silver. Like clear mirrors of emotions. Fluid, yet secretive. Like fireflies spark below their surface.

Meanwhile, the standoff between Hunter and Zara continues. Hunter's jaw tics. Zara leans back in her chair and drains her glass. She holds it out and gestures to the half-full pitcher of margarita by her side. Hunter's gaze narrows. His shoulders bunch. He seems like he's about to say something, then changes his mind. He crosses over, picks up the jug and motions it in my direction. "Would you like some more?"

"Umm, no, thank you." I rise to my feet and sway. The only reason I don't fall is Liam's appearance next to me. He swings me up in his arms.

"Hey, what are you doing?" At least, that's what I think I say. I can't confirm that, to be honest, because the numbness that started at my extremities has now spread to include the rest of me. It feels like I'm floating away on a soft cloud, tethered to the earth by firm arms. Firm, muscled arms, the muscles flexing against me as he carries me out of the terrace, through the adjoining room, and up the stairs. He carries me like I weigh nothing, which I know is not true, for I've weighed myself and my scales don't lie.

I turn my face into the wall of his chest. I can feel the solid planes of his torso digging into my skin. He's so damn tough, I could hurt myself. Correction, I've already hurt myself. I allowed myself to sleep with him, and now he's under my skin. I'm pathetic, really. Okay... So maybe not 'sleep' in the strict sense of the word, but he fucked me in ways that make forgetting him impossible. He takes the steps two at a time, and his heartbeat stays even. Jeez, how much does this guy work out? More to the point, when does he work out? Every time I see him, he's either too busy being pissed at me, or he's running his empire.

"In the early morning." His voice vibrates up his chest.

Apparently, I asked the question out loud.

“It shows.” I curl my fingers about his biceps and squeeze.

When he lowers me to the bed, I look around. “I’m not going to sleep in your room.”

I sit up, and the room instantly swims. “Oh shoot.” I sink back onto the bed and squeeze my eyes shut.

“Relax,” his voice wafts over me, “I can go one night without touching you.”

Liam

I lied.

I can't go the night without touching her. I can't let her fall asleep in her clothes. I slip off her heels, then manage to get the dress off of her. I lay it over the chair, then pull the covers over her. I can't resist pressing a kiss to her forehead, then lay on the bed next to her, above the covers. I turn on my side and watch her sleep. Her cheeks are flushed... Her lips slightly parted... She has a hand tucked under her cheek and her breathing is even. It takes me what feels like hours to fall asleep, despite the whiskey kicking about in my system.

The dreams come then—first the low banging, then the vibrations grow in intensity. Thump-thump-thump. The beats grow bigger, heavier, faster. Each strike seems to cut through my head, through my blood. My nerve endings seem to short-circuit. My brain cells protest. The backs of my eyeballs hurt. My scalp feels too tight. A cold sensation grips my arms and legs. I stare into the eyes of the bastard, which is the only part of him visible in the mask he's wearing.

“I'm going to teach you a lesson for sticking your nose where you don't belong. You shouldn't have come looking for your brother, boy. Now I'm going to have to teach you a lesson.”

He backhands me, and even though I'm braced for it, my entire body seems to seize with pain. Blood trickles from my nose. My teeth ache. The pounding of the death metal music grows even more intense. THUMP-THUMP-THUMP. The beats seem to ricochet around my brain. The pressure builds in my chest; the heaviness grows in my stomach until it feels like I've swallowed a stone. And the agony, the white-hot, skin-flaying agony grips me, pours into my cells, fills every crevice of my body until I'm one giant ball of misery. It feels like someone has pulled the nails out of my fingers one by one and thrown salt in my wound. I begin to cry, huge gasping tears that pour down my cheeks. It hurts; it hurts so much. I can't stand this noise. Someone turn off the music, please. Please. I'll do anything. Anything. I can't take this anymore. Please.

"Liam!"

I can't. I'm going to die if I stay here for a second more.

"Liam!" Cold water splashes across my face. I gasp, open my eyes, and find her staring down at me.

"Liam, are you okay?" she cries.

I blink the water from my eyes, take in her pale features. Her lips are parted. Her chest rises and falls as if she just ran a marathon. Or witnessed a man losing his mind. In one swoop I grab her shoulder and flip her so she's under me. The empty glass—the contents of which I assume she poured on me—slips from her fingers and rolls off the bed and onto the carpet with a soft thunk.

"Liam?" She cups my cheek and I wince.

"What is it?" she asks. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing major. It's nothing like what happened to my brother and his friends when they were kidnapped."

"Yet, it causes you nightmares so many years later..."

I swallow. Then lower my nose to the curve of where her neck meets her shoulder. The lush notes of violets and peaches engulf me, and I'm instantly hard. I raise my head and peer into those baby blues. "Why do I have such a hard time resisting you?"

“I imagine it’s the same reason I’m unable to resist you.”

She reaches up to touch me again, but I lock my fingers around her wrist and shove it up and over her head. “When my younger brother was taken, I couldn’t sit by and do nothing. I felt responsible for him. I felt so guilty that I hadn’t been around to protect my little brother when he needed me most. So, I went in search of him.”

She tilts her head. “I know Weston and his friends were kidnapped and later rescued by the police—”

“After nearly a *month*. It’s why the seven of them are such good friends. In retrospect, it’s a miracle none of them became criminals or turned to addiction to deal with the trauma. They were lucky.”

“Unlike you?”

I push off of her and sit on the edge of the bed. “I wasn’t kidnapped, if that’s what you are asking.”

“But something did happen to you.”

I ball my fingers into fists. *Why am I telling her this now?* It’s something I’ve never wanted to share with anyone else. Why do I feel the need to finally get this off my chest? Today, the day of my wedding—which somehow, doesn’t feel as fake as it should?

“I found where they were, but before I could get to them, I was discovered.”

She gasps. “What did they do to you?”

“They took me prisoner. I heard the men joking that they had one more pawn to bargain with. They didn’t keep me with the rest of the Seven, though I assume they kept me somewhere close by. I think they watched too many Hollywood movies; they tortured me day and night.”

She gulps. “What did they do?”

“They played fucking death-metal music. Played it for an hour on then off, on then off. It was so much worse when they switched if off. I’d barely start to fall asleep when it would start up again. They kept me in an unrelenting state of

wakefulness and anticipation. After a while, I could barely form thoughts and lost track of time. They tied me to a chair, and sometimes it felt like they didn't give me food or drink for days. And if I asked for anything, they laughed. The worst, though, was when they'd pretend they'd be right back with something, but I wouldn't see them again for hours. And whoever came in next was empty-handed. They couldn't make up their minds if they wanted to kill me or let me live."

"So how did you..."

"Escape?"

She nods.

"You sure you want to hear this?"

I sense her looking at me, but don't meet her eyes.

"Once you hear it, there's no going back."

She swallows. "Yes. Tell me, Liam."

I rise to my feet and begin to pace. The silence stretches. I head to the window and look out. It's not completely dark, but it's not yet dawn. The silver on the horizon indicates the sun will be rising soon. I push up the window pane, lean out and take huge gasps of air. By the time I turn to her, I'm almost in control.

"One of them was sweet on me. He was always touching me and complimenting me. Asking me about myself. Bringing me food when it seemed like the others had forgotten about me. He told me if I did what he asked of me, he'd eventually set me free."

"What" —she rises to her feet and walks toward me —"what did he ask of you?"

My lips twist. "What do you think?"

"Tell me." She takes one of my hands between both of hers. "Please, Liam, tell me."

I pull my hand away from her, then walk to the center of the room. "It started with him taking me out of the room. He'd allow me to shower, provided he could watch. Not that I cared.

After days of peeing and shitting myself, I couldn't wait to get clean. He even brought clean clothes for me. Then he'd feed me, and by that, I mean he actually put the food in my mouth and wouldn't allow me to do it myself. I was ravenous, so I didn't care. Then it was back to the room and more of that infernal noise." I squeeze the bridge of my nose. "This went on for days. At first, I was just happy to be out of the room. I didn't care what he did to me. But soon, he insisted on bathing me, touching me subtly at first, then more overtly. I could tell the motherfucker was getting aroused, but I also knew if I protested, he would shut me back in that room with the noise. So, I stayed quiet and bore it. All the while, I was biding my time. Then he took it up a notch higher. He wanted me to touch him. When I refused, he said I had a choice. Either I touch him or—"

"Or?" Her voice is soft. "What did he do to you, Liam?"

I take in a deep breath. "Or I allow him to electrocute me."

"Electrocute?" I sense her stiffen. "You mean—"

"I mean, erotic electrostimulation or E-Stim, where electricity is used to arouse a person."

There's silence. I'm sure I've shocked her. Pun intended. When I'm unable to bear it any further, I glance over my shoulder to find her looking at me with an expression of such empathy that my throat closes. That heavy weight in my stomach where it feels like I've swallowed a ten-ton-truck is back—that damn weight I've carried around so often in my life since the incident.

I walk back to the bed, sink onto it, and sigh.

"So, I let him do it. I didn't want to touch him, so I let him stimulate me with electricity. To my absolute horror, I found it turned me on. Bastard started me off on small doses, then higher ones, training me to get an erection and come on command. And all along, he watched me and jerked off."

Her voice cracks, "I'm so sorry, Liam." I shrug my shoulders, but she continues, "So, he never forced you..."

I shake my head. “Not until the day I’d finally had enough and refused to cooperate. He seemed to lose his temper and slapped me. I fought him back, but of course, I was barely a man, and he was stronger. He overcame me, and began to choke me. I panicked.

“You know what they say about your life flashing in front of your eyes when you’re about to die? Turns out, it’s a lie. I realized I’d barely lived. So, there wasn’t much, in terms of memories, I could reach for. Which is when I knew with certainty that I was *not* going to die. No asshole pervert was going to kill me. Not when I hadn’t even started living. I fought back, threw him off, then used the same wires he’d rigged me with to knot around his neck, and squeeze and squeeze. He fought me back, but I was persistent. I was fighting for my life. I tightened the wires until his eyes bulged, his mouth opened, and his face turned purple. And even then, I didn’t stop. I kept compressing the life out of him until I heard a sound from outside the room.

“I released him, then ran out of the room and down the corridor to the main door which, thank god, was open. There was a man entering, and I took him by surprise. By then, I was so focused on getting away, nothing could stop me. I bowled him over, ran out of the house, and found myself on the street. It was a residential area with houses on either side. Motherfuckers had held me in a house which, from the outside, looked like a normal suburban house.

“There was a car driving toward me, and I ran out on the street and threw myself in its path so the driver would stop. He wanted to take me to the hospital, but I refused. Instead, I convinced him give me a lift to the nearest tube station and pay for my travel card. I got his address, and later, I sent him the money with a note saying, ‘thanks.’ I figured I’d let him guess who sent it—I certainly wasn’t giving him my name.

“Anyway, I made it back to university and went to my room. Somewhere along the way, I’d lost my phone and my parents had been trying to reach me to tell me that Weston had already been found. So, I put the whole thing behind me and moved on.” *Ha-ha. Keep telling yourself that, buddy.*

“That was it? No one missed you?”

I shake my head. “My parents were grappling with Weston’s disappearance. I was already eighteen and at university. It wasn’t unusual for me to not answer my phone or to go for weeks without speaking to them.”

“What about the officials at the university? Surely, someone would have noticed when you didn’t attend your classes?”

I shoot her a sideways glance.

“What?” She scowls. “It’s a reasonable question.”

“I was a rich, entitled, jock, baby. You think the professors or administrators would dare question me?” I blow out a breath. “It’s also because I was a spoiled, impulsive idiot that I decided to take off on my own to try and find Weston. It’s what led to my capture by his kidnappers. And later, when I escaped, I couldn’t say anything because I was too embarrassed I’d allowed myself to be caught. Had to maintain my reputation at all costs, you know?” I lower my hands between my knees. “The only consolation is that Weston and his friends were released while I was held. I’d like to believe it was a prisoner exchange...”

She closes the distance between us, crouches in front of me, then touches my cheek. “Didn’t your friends wonder where you were?”

“They thought I’d gone home or that I was with a woman. No one was going to be a pussy and raise an alarm just because I hadn’t been seen in a few weeks.”

“With a woman, huh?” Her eyebrows draw down.

For the first time since I woke up with the sound of my screams in my ears, my chest feels lighter.

“You jealous about that, baby?”

She firms her lips.

“You upset because I hooked up with girls in university?”

She reaches up and locks her fingers around my neck, bringing her face close to mine. “I don’t care about who you were with before I came along. No, strike that. I do care about who you were with, but there’s nothing I can do about it. But if I ever see you with another woman, I’ll kill her first and then tear off your balls.”

I can’t stop my lips from curving. I grab her by her waist and haul her into my lap. “Say that again.”

“What?” She pouts.

“So possessive, LadyBird.”

“No more than you.” She hooks her fingers into the front of my shirt. “I’m sorry for what happened to you. But I’m not sorry you killed that bastard.”

“So bloodthirsty.” I peer into her face. “These are the hands of a killer, baby.”

“Or of someone who did what had to be done to survive. If you think this is going to make me look at you differently, you’re wrong.”

I hold her gaze, and in them, I see a resolve. She’s not upset about what I did to survive. She’s not repulsed by what happened to me. “There’s one more thing you need to know.”

She pushes the hair off my forehead. “What is it?”

“There are some scars I carry from the experience that you can’t see. Scars which still affect me. Scars which are now part of me. Indeed, I don’t believe I can do without them.”

“Where... where are these scars?”

“If I show them to you, you might not be so understanding.”

She lowers her forehead to mine. “If you think that scares me, you’re wrong.”

“Even if I told you that it’d affect how we can be together?”

Isla

Before Liam could tell me anything more, Zara knocked on the door of Liam's bedroom. She'd gone searching for me, and when she didn't find me in my room, she came to Liam's. I told Liam I wanted to leave, and he said the conversation wasn't over. In a way, I'm glad Zara interrupted us. I'm not sure I want to know whatever it is Liam wanted to tell me next. My head is already reeling with what he divulged. Somehow, I'm not sure I can also digest whatever it is that he hasn't yet told me. We'll have enough time for that after we're married. Enough time for me to tell him my own secrets.

After how he trusted me, I should be able to share my own scars with him, right? I bite the inside of my cheek. It's not just about trust. It's about... Believing in myself enough to share something so intimate and know I'll survive. Do I have the courage to do that? Am I strong enough? Do I want to?

I glance at my reflection and ask, "How do I look?" I meet Zara and Summer's eyes in the mirror in my bedroom.

Both stand behind me already dressed in their bridesmaid's, or as Z prefers to call them, bridesbabe's dresses. True to her word, Karma made sure each of their looks was distinctive.

Zara wears a simple sheath-like dress in a dark purple which brings out the gorgeous color of her skin. She's painted

her lips the same color. Her only ornament is a silver pendant. She looks sexy, yet understated.

Summer wears a dress in pink that tightens over her belly to celebrate her pregnancy and flows out behind her as she walks. She also wears a scarf around her neck, and somehow, manages to pull off the look without looking too hippie-ish.

Amelie's dressed in a dark red concoction, with an off-the-shoulder neckline with delicate sleeves. The bodice is decorated with sparkling beads and sequins while the skirt is made of multi-layer tulle. It's a romantic dress which suits her personality to a T.

As for me? I wear a white, mermaid wedding dress made with Chantilly lace and embroidered cotton lace, stretch satin and organza. The dress hugs my curves and the neckline at the front hints at the cleavage. At the back it dips down to reveal my lower back. The skirt flares below the knee, creating a mermaid-like tail that is utterly elegant. The dress boasts mother of pearl sequins and its pièce de résistance is the dramatic train that extends seven feet from the waist.

I had eschewed the idea of bringing in a hair and make-up team, and had opted to wear my hair down, as always, with very little make up.

"Jesus Christ, woman, you look like a million bucks," Zara exclaims.

"If that doesn't render Liam speechless, I don't know what will," Summer agrees.

I glance between them. "I can't believe Karma managed to create this dress in such a short period of time. In fact," —I swallow the ball of emotion in my throat— "I still can't believe I'm standing here all dressed up." *It's a fake wedding—a fake wedding—remember? So why doesn't it feel that way?*

Zara holds out her arms. "I'd hug you, but I don't want to spoil the dress."

"Bullshit, woman." I hold out my arms. "I need to squeeze the hell out of all you right now."

They dutifully oblige, and we hold onto each other for a few minutes.

Zara sniffles. “You’re going to make me cry. That’s not allowed. No tears on this occasion.”

I manage to smile. “Not sure I’ll be able to oblige, but I’ll try.”

“Not enough, lady.” She blinks away her tears and scowls at me. “You’re not going to go out there with swollen eyes.”

“Yes, Mom.” I chuckle.

“You look amazing,” Summer says, and leans over and kisses my cheek.

“You go out there and floor them, lady.” Amelie kisses my other cheek.

We end up hugging again.

There’s a knock on my door, then my mother’s voice calls out. “You have a minute for us, Isla?”

I wince. The last person I want to see right now is my mom. Not because I’m not happy to have her here. It’s just, the less time I spend with my family, the less I have to lie to them about the circumstances that brought me to this wedding.

“You okay? Do you want us to send them away?” Zara frowns.

I draw in a breath and square my shoulders. “No, it’s fine.”

“You sure?” Summer asks. “I’m very good at keeping family entertained.”

“I’m sure you are, and thank you for being such wonderful friends, but it’s best I meet my ma, else she’ll never let me hear the end of it.” Which is true. My ma’s wonderful, but she’s also smart enough to know when I’m evading her, and she won’t take too kindly to that.

“Okay.” Zara presses a quick kiss to my cheek. The women step back and head for the door. “I’ll knock in ten minutes to remind you that we need to get going.”

“Make that five,” I mutter.

She nods, then the two of them open the door and slip out. I hear them greet my mother, then hear another voice. Shoot. Seems like Liam’s mother is also here. And she knows about this entire charade. I’m sure she hasn’t told my mother anything, because I’d have heard from my mother if she had. That’s my only consolation. I reach for a tissue and dab under my eyes, then paste a smile on my face before I turn.

“Mother, Mrs. Kincaid,” I greet the two women.

“I told you to call me Rosie, didn’t I?” Liam’s mom beams at me.

My mother stands inside the room, her fingers pressed to her bosom. “Oh, my goodness, you look so beautiful, my darling little girl.”

“Thank you.” I glance between them. Rosie is the first to move. She walks over and pats my shoulder. “You look radiant.” She lowers her voice. “If Liam doesn’t change his mind about the veracity of this wedding, then he’s more stupid than I thought.”

Umm, what about me? What if I want to maintain the status quo and not change the status of this relationship from ‘It’s complicated’ to ‘Happily Married’? I want to say it aloud but I don’t because my ma is in the same room. Also, she’s just walked over to join us. When she hesitates, I resist the urge to roll my eyes, my ma may not take too kindly to that. Instead, I wrap my arms about her and hug her. “Thanks for everything, Mom. I’m not the easiest of daughters, I know, so thanks for being patient with me.”

My ma snuffles. “Now you’re going to make me cry.”

“Nope, no tears, happy occasion, remember?” I echo Zara’s words.

She nods, then snuffles again. “I know I can be an overbearing mother sometimes but you do realize it’s because I have your best interests at heart?”

“I know, Ma.” I squeeze her arm.

“If there’s anything you ever want to tell me I’m here for you, Isla,” my mother murmurs.

I glance at Rosie who shakes her head indicating she has no idea what my ma is talking about. “I’ll leave you two to catch up.” With a last look at the both of us she walks away.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about Ma,” I say carefully. My heart begins to gallop. She can’t be hinting at what I think she is... can she? Nope. No way my mother knows anything about the one thing I haven’t been able to share with anyone in my family.

My mother shuffles her feet. “All I mean is that we’re all there for you, Isla. Me, your brother and the entire Lymington Knitting Club.”

“Of course, Ma.” I release her and step back. “I’m aware.” Not that I plan on sharing anything with the infamous nosey parkers of the Knitting Club. I could, possibly, share my secret with Dorian. But the moment I tell my mother, she’ll tell the Knitting Club, and then it will be all over my hometown. To be honest, it’s one of the things that’s stopped me from confiding in her. The last thing I need is all the people I grew up with looking at me with knowing eyes. So, guess it’s going to have to wait. The much bigger issue I have is deciding if I want to share my secret with Liam. Honestly, I’m not sure.

My mother is watching me closely. She must see something of my thoughts reflected on my face because she sighs. “Isla, I—”

“Isla, it’s getting late.”

Thank god. “Ma, we’ll talk more later, okay?”

She doesn’t look happy but contents herself with kissing my cheek. “Love you, honey.”

“Love you, too, Ma.”

She turns and leaves the room, leaving the door open behind her. Zara peers in, Summer next to her. “Ready to do this?”

Liam

I'm not ready for this. It may have started off as fake, but after last night, I'm not so sure anymore. I haven't shared that part of my past with anyone, but something about her invited me to confide in her. I followed my instincts and poured my guts out to her. To her credit, she didn't seem disgusted. If anything, the empathy in her eyes was my undoing. I told her everything about the time I'd been held captive. And afterwards, I felt strangely lighter. I wasn't lying to her when I said this would affect how we could be together.

Something shifted between us last night. It started with the sex two nights ago—which was earth shattering. I've never felt this close to a woman, this connected during the act, and for that reason, I haven't actually come inside her yet.

Considering we parted on not so good terms after, I didn't expect to spend another night with her. Certainly not one in which I'd share so much with her. But my instinct led me to confide, so I didn't stop myself. We've turned a corner. We've reached a space where I've never been with anyone else. Question is, what am I going to do about it?

“How you doin', bro?” Weston, who's also my best man, slaps my shoulder.

Why does my brother always sound like a player in an American sitcom, despite his British accent?

“You hangin’ in there? Soon you’ll be a married man, and your nerves will be a thing of the past.” He smirks.

“I don’t get nervous, *brother*.” I run my fingers under my collar.

“So why are you sweating?”

“I’m not sweating.” I pull out my handkerchief and mop my forehead.

He arches an eyebrow, but mercifully, stays quiet.

“Here.” Hunter, my other groomsman, pulls out a flask of whiskey and hands it over. I accept it gratefully, and chug a few mouthfuls. The liquor burns a path down my throat and sets off an explosion of heat in my stomach. Hunter offers it to Weston—who refuses—then takes a mouthful himself.

“Interesting *you* felt the need for sustenance.” I smirk at him. “Does it have anything to do with a certain dark-haired bridesmaid who’s sending you death threats with her eyes?”

Hunter arches a shoulder. “No idea who you’re talking about.”

“Ahhhh...” Weston makes a satisfied noise. “So, Hunter and Zara—”

“Nothing. Hunter and Zara, nothing.” Hunter scowls at me. “Now you’ve done it. Once this wanker” —he stabs his finger in Weston’s direction— “gets an idea into his head about a possible match for one of us unmarried folk, he doesn’t let go of it.” He pockets his flask and widens his stance. “Why don’t you married folks let us bachelors enjoy our single status? I’m on my own and extremely happy about it.”

Weston opens his mouth again, and Hunter raises his hand. “No, really. I am not interested in the ball and chain anytime soon. I have a campaign to run, which leaves me no time for any relationship.”

“Think about how your candidacy would benefit with a girlfriend or wife on your arm. Also, it’s because she doesn’t hesitate to go toe-to-toe with you that you’re so evenly

matched. Bet she'll take you down a peg or two and teach you the meaning of love."

"Love?" He blinks. "How the hell did this conversation turn toward love?"

"We're at a wedding ceremony. Logically, thoughts of love and happily-ever-after are all that anyone here should be talking about," Sinclair, my third groomsman points out.

"Not everyone," Hunter scoffs. "Also, FYI, you don't need to be in love to get married."

Weston's gaze widens. "Do you actually believe that?"

"Ask your brother."

Weston turns to me. "Go on then, brother of mine, tell him he's wrong. Tell asswipe here you love your wife-to-be, and that's why you're marrying her."

I purse my lips. "So this is what happens to alphas when they get married? They lose their balls?"

"Don't change the topic." Weston narrows his gaze. "Unless—" He scans my features and understanding dawns on his own. "You poor, poor man. So that's what this is about. Is that why Lila left you—because you didn't love her?"

I stay quiet.

"And that's why Isla agreed to marry you, hmm? You struck a deal with her, I presume? Something along the lines of 'you help me get my inheritance' and 'I'll help get your wedding planning company on the map'?"

"Shut the fuck up," I snap.

Thankfully, this entire circus isn't in a church, which is the only consolation. It's being held on the lawn by the beach. Our close family and friends have already gathered on either side of the flower petal strewn aisle. On the far end, Declan, who is recording this event in his role as our 'celebrity photographer' holds up his thumb.

In addition, the professional photographer and videographer are in attendance. They'll be sharing exclusive

snippets, subsequent to our approval, with the influencers and the media.

I spot the rest of the Seven who confirmed their attendance, with their wives. On the other side of the aisle, Michael is seated with Karma. He has his arm around his wife, but his attention is on Sinclair, who scowls back at him.

In front of them are my mother, my sister Kirsten, and her husband and kids. Next to them are Isla's mother and brother. Their Great Dane Tiny is on a leash. Even from this distance, I can tell his gaze is fixed on the conservatory where the post-wedding reception is going to be held. It can't be because of the glasses of champagne that are, no doubt, being poured in readiness for the dinner that will follow soon. Jeez, does that dog have a problem, or what?

"Liam, what's he talking about?" Hunter's voice cuts through my thoughts.

"Ignore the twat; his mind is full of romantic fantasies. It's what happens when you're pussy-whipped."

Weston laughs. "Typical defense mechanism. When you don't have a rejoinder, strike out at your opponent so you can distract them. *FYI*, bro, it ain't flying with me."

"Go fuck yourself," I grumble.

Behind me, the official who'll be conducting the wedding shifts his weight. Clearly, when he agreed to solemnize the marriage, he didn't expect such colorful language to be used. Not that it matters, considering he's going to be handsomely compensated for his efforts.

Then the strains of *LadyBird* by Nancy Sinatra and Lee Hazlewood begin to play.

Amelie steps onto the flower-strewn path and the crowd grows silent. As she walks up the aisle, she beams at Weston.

My brother, for his part, has eyes only for her. Amelie tilts her chin up and puckers her lips at him. My brother puckers up his lips right back at her. I think I just threw up in my mouth. They've been married a few months, but the two still act like they're on their honeymoon. If he thinks I'm going to turn into

a googly-eyed, douche-canoe like him then he's sadly mistaken. Amelie comes to a halt on the opposite side of the aisle.

Summer steps onto the aisle and approaches us.

"Isn't she gorgeous?" Sinclair says softly from his position in line behind me.

Summer glides over to stand on the opposite side of us and beside Amelie, and then it's Zara's turn.

Next to me, Hunter stiffens. I shoot him a sideways glance to find him following her progress. His jaw is stiff, and a nerve throbs at his temple. I turn to find she has her head held high, and she glances right past him to the officiant. She flashes him a smile, then walks past us to take her position next to Summer.

Hunter curls his fingers into fists at his sides, as if to stop himself from using them on something or someone. Or from reaching out to pull her into his side.

The hair on the back of my neck rises. A thrill runs down my spine. Even before I turn, I know she's walking up the aisle.

Isla

He turns his head toward me, our eyes hold, and my breath leaves me. He rakes his gaze down the length of my body from my features to my chest, down past my hips, to my skirt clad legs, to my crystal-embellished Manolo Blahnik's. A pair I found when I returned to my room this morning. I really need to speak to him about his shoe fetish. That, combined with his hinted penchant for erotic electrostimulation, paints the picture of a very complex man.

He raises his gaze back to my face, and my entire body feels like it's on fire. A surge of what seems like thermonuclear radiation sizzles between us. He's the fisherman reeling in the catch. The magnet against which I have no defense. The calm at the eye of the storm that's enveloped me, pulling me toward him, inch by inch. Then I'm a few yards from him, then a few feet away.

He holds out his hand, and I place my palm in his. His is warm, mine freezing cold. I'm trembling like the chords of a guitar that's been dropped. He squeezes my fingers. The band around my chest loosens. I draw in a breath and my head spins.

“Easy,” he murmurs. “Easy, LadyBird, I've got you.”

His voice rumbles across my skin. My blood begins to pump again. My arms and legs feel weak, but I manage to pull

myself together.

The music fades away and we turn to face the official.

“Thought we weren’t going to have any music,” I murmur.

“I changed my mind.”

I turn to him, but the official is already speaking.

We decided not to say any vows, so the ceremony is quick. Then he’s sliding a ring onto my finger. I blink. It’s a platinum band that matches with my engagement ring. I slide the coordinating, slim band onto his ring finger, and we’re done. I step back, but he circles his fingers around my wrist.

“Not so fast.” He tugs, I lose my balance, and he catches me against his chest. He wraps his other arm about my waist, then closes his mouth over mine. No half-assed, chaste pecking on my lips. This is a full-fledged meeting of his mouth with mine, his tongue sliding over mine, his lips sucking on mine as he takes—and gives. It’s a mutual melding of our desires—our hearts beating in synchronicity, our breaths intermingled, my arms twined around his neck. I don’t close my eyes and neither does he. The rest of the world—the clapping by our family, the whistles from our friends, the smile of the official—all of it fades.

It’s just me and Liam. Liam and me. And his bottomless, ocean-like eyes into which I’m sinking, sinking without an anchor. Without the want to swim. Without the need to save myself. My entire life has been building toward this moment where I’m trapped by the weight of his body, the heat that spools from his chest, the heaviness of everything that has transpired between us, and the possibility of a future together. He sees me like no other person, trusts me enough to share his secret, hints at his proclivities—which should scare me, but honestly, don’t.

I want to find out everything about this man. About how his past impacted him, and about why it’s so important for him to inherit the family business, a reason that I think goes beyond just money. It’s something he’s built, something he’s proud of, something he wants to put his stamp on.

Something he cherishes as much as the idea of being married to me. Something he hasn't realized yet.

He must sense my thoughts, for he pulls away. My breath is my own again, my heart pounding like the wings of a caged bird. The noise of clapping and cheering washes over us.

He frowns into my face. "What's wrong?"

I shake my head.

"Tell me, LadyBird."

I clutch my fingers together, the weight of the new ring weighing me down further. "The wedding... Coming here... It's a lot to process."

He brushes a strand of hair that's blown across my face. "You need a drink."

I chuckle. "That, too."

He wraps his arm about my waist, then turns me so we both face our friends and families. They're all on their feet smiling. We walk forward, and birdseed showers us.

Then, Zara is at my side. She hugs me. "Congratulations, babe. Thanks a lot—you made me cry again." She laughs.

She steps back, and the rest surge forward. First Summer, followed by my mother and Liam's mother, then Amelie and the rest of the Sisterhood-of-the-Seven, most of whom are here, with the exception of Baron and Ava who are traveling.

Meanwhile, Liam is slapped on his shoulder by Weston, his hand shaken by Hunter.

Karma hugs me, while Sinclair and Michael congratulate Liam.

My brother, with Tiny straining at his leash, approaches me. He takes my hand and kisses my knuckles. "You look beautiful, baby sister."

I throw my arms around Dorian and hug him. "I'm so pleased you could make it. And Tiny, too."

As if hearing his name, Tiny gives a bark, then leaps forward. Tiny tears his leash from Dorian's hand, then crashes into the chairs. He uses them for leverage and jumps over the others. He hits the lawn and, while barking, races toward the open bottle of champagne that's been left on one of the cocktail tables set up outside the tent.

"Tiny!" Dorian yells. He runs toward our Great Dane, but it's too late. Tiny jumps up and places his paws on the table. He neatly snatches the bottle in his jaws, upturns it, and in one gulp, empties it down his gullet.

"The dog likes to drink?" Zara stares at Tiny who's sprawled on the grass next to my feet. "He emptied the entire bottle of Cristal, in one go." There's awe in her voice. And it takes a lot to surprise this woman.

Tiny raises his head, then crawls toward her. With a heavy sigh he plonks his head on his paws, then stares up at her from under his long eyelashes.

"He also does an army crawl?" She blinks.

"He's Tiny." I shrug.

"Like that explains everything?"

I chuckle, "He's been this way since he came to live with us. The first time he jumped on a champagne bottle and downed it, my Ma nearly had a heart attack. She rushed him to the vet, who examined him and couldn't find anything wrong with him. They kept him overnight for observation. He was sick the next morning and they concluded he had a hangover. As you can see, he seems to thrive on it."

Tiny makes a whining sound at the back of his throat, as if he knows we're talking about him.

"Hmm." She holds her hand out to him, and Tiny licks it. He makes a contented sound at the back of his throat. Then rubs his head against her fingers.

“I think he wants you to pet him,” I murmur.

She scratches him behind his ear, and Tiny arches his neck.

“You remind me of the men I’ve been with—all bark, no bite, like to be petted, and overdoing on the drink without realizing the repercussions,” she says in a thoughtful voice.

“Clearly, you haven’t been with the right kind of man yet,” Hunter’s voice cuts in from behind her.

Zara stiffens. She arches her eyebrows at me, but I’m too distracted watching Liam approach. His hair is mussed as if he’s run his fingers through it. Other than that, he looks like he walked off the pages of a fashion magazine, or off a catwalk. Once more, I can’t help but admire how the fitted jacket clings to his shoulders, how his pants mold to his powerful thighs, how the white of his shirt sets off the tan on his skin.

He walks over and holds out his hand. “Dance with me.”

I blink. We didn’t discuss having a first dance, and vetoed speeches by bridesmaids or groomsmen. Guess both of us wanted the ceremony to be done with and focus on having enough pics and video footage to share with the influencers and media. After all, the main reason for this entire charade is to prove to the world at large that we’re married, so he can claim his inheritance, and I can legitimize my wedding planning business. And we’ve done that. So why is he asking me to dance with him now?

“Isla,” he lowers his voice to a hush.

A shiver ladders up my spine. My nerve endings crackle. And before I can stop myself, I’ve placed my hand in his and he’s pulled me up to my feet. He leads me out to the center of the space, then past it and out of the tent. “Where are we going?”

He doesn’t reply.

I glance up at his features, but he’s staring straight ahead. He leads me down the decking where we got married earlier, then toward the beach. The last rays of the sun slant down over us. The sun is a ball of fire sinking slowing into the horizon.

He pauses and pulls out his phone. “What do you say, shall we put up the video showing us as a happily married couple?”

“Here?” I glance about the decking in the backyard of the house where the wedding had been held. Ahead is the beach and behind us, the sounds of the party floats over to us. “Isn’t this a little informal?”

“Isn’t that the best way to be? So it comes across as unplanned and spontaneous?”

“You do have a point there,” I concede.

He pulls the phone from his pocket, switches it to selfie mode, then wraps his arm about my waist and pulls me toward him. He holds up the phone so the screen reflects back the two of us. Even with my heels, I only reach his chest. My cheeks are flushed, and my eyes shine. My hair is behaving itself; its simple style enhances the look of the dress which reflects back the rays of the sun. He flattens his palm against my stomach, and the darkness of his fingers is almost obscene against the white of my dress. I glance into his eyes to find he’s surveying me with a frown on his face.

“What?” I frown back.

“Something’s missing.”

“There is?”

He nods, then releases me long enough to pull something from his pocket. “Hold my phone, will you?”

When I do, he slides a chain around my bare neck. The locket is a single tear-drop-shaped sapphire. Sparks of blue and gray flash from it. “Wow, it’s... It’s gorgeous.”

“It matches your eyes.”

“And yours.” I touch my left hand to the stone and realize it matches the one on my ring. I’ve never been into jewelry, have never cared about the size of the stones I wear, but this... The combination of the pendant at my neck and the jewel on my finger turns me from a woman into a queen.

“You’re my queen,” he says as if he’s read my mind.

“You’re...scary.” I half laugh. “You seem to pick the thoughts from my mind.” Hopefully, not all of my thoughts though. Because if he’s read half of what goes on in my head, then this conversation could be going very differently.

“You do realize I don’t really care what you wear or how you look. In fact, I’d prefer for you not to have a shred of clothing on. I like you bare and naked and writhing under my cock.”

Heat surges under my skin. My breath comes in pants. I’m going to go up in smoke right here. Self combust under the onslaught of his gaze. Melt into a puddle at his feet, and every drop will still ask him to fuck me.

“But if you must wear anything, I’d like for it to be the jewelry I’ve placed on your body.”

Before his words have sunk in, he holds up the phone, and once more, pulls me close. The camera starts recording.

He kisses me on the top of my head, then stares into the screen. “Today, I am the happiest man in the world. Today, the woman who means everything to me is finally mine.” He turns to me. “I love you, Isla. I promise to honor and cherish and protect you. I promise to be there for you always. You’re my true north...and my south and east and west.” He peers into my eyes. “You’re who makes my life worth living. The first face I want to see when I wake up in the morning. The last before I fall asleep at night. You make me so happy just by being yourself.”

My heart flutters in my chest like I’ve been subjected to an electric shock. My stomach feels so light; my chest, arms and legs, every part of me seems to have come unmoored. I’m rising, flowing up in the air. I’d float away, if not for his firm grip anchoring me to him, to us.

“I didn’t even realize what I was missing until you came along. I was half a life, half a man, half a soul, and then I found you. And now?” He leans in closer until I can make out the individual strands of his ridiculously long eyelashes. “I can’t wait to make memories with you, to hold you and love you as only I can, for the rest of our lives. I’ll always love you,

Isla, no matter what.” He searches my features, and somehow, it feels like he’s communicating something else to me. But what? What is he trying to say?

“Always and forever. I promise you, Isla.”

I open my mouth to reply, but he closes his lips over mine. He must stop filming at some point, for he wraps his other arm around my waist and lifts me straight off the ground. He keeps kissing me, keeping me suspended in the air, and now I’m really flying. Soaring up, up and away. My head spins, and my heart feels so full, surely, it’s going to burst out of my chest any moment. Still kissing, he lowers me slowly to the ground, making sure every part of me connects with every inch of him. Making sure I feel the thick rod between his legs outlined against his crotch. When my feet touch the ground, and he’s ensured I’m steady, he finally releases me. I’m flushed and panting, and so is he. My heartbeat seems to have reached warp speed, the way it’s banging into my chest. But so is his. I feel it, sense every vibration that pulses through his veins like it’s my own.

Dimly, I hear claps, whistles, and hoots from behind us. Guess our friends and family watched us filming. Guess that’s what made him kiss me with such intensity. It must have looked good on camera. It’s perfect, really. So off-the-cuff that even the most cynical of paparazzi would have to admit it was unrehearsed. Which it was. I think. He didn’t mean what he said. He couldn’t have. He hasn’t known me long enough. In fact, he doesn’t know me at all. And when I share my secret with him, he’ll take his words back. He has to. I pull away from him and am about to step onto the sand when he scoops me up in his arms.

“Hey,” I gasp, “what are you doing?”

“So many questions, wife. Don’t want you spoiling your stilettos in the sand. Also, can’t you simply accept the fact that I want to take care of you?”

Wife? He called me wife? I am his wife, but hearing him say it... sends a thrill of something complicated through my veins.

“And since when do you want to take care of me?” I mumble.

“Since we have our friends and family watching us closely to see what we’re going to do next.”

I glance over his shoulder, and sure enough, most of the crowd is still focused on us. All except Zara and Hunter, who are glaring at each other. Even across the distance, the animosity between them is potent.

“Those two need to talk out whatever it is that they don’t like about each other. I know they don’t see eye to eye, but they take loathing to an all new level.”

“Or maybe they should fuck it out,” he offers, knowing exactly who I’m talking about. We’ve been on the same wavelength that way from day one. Only we used that synchronicity to hate each other, and now... Now, I’m not sure what it is we feel toward each other.

“I can’t believe you just said that.” I scowl at him.

“You mean, you haven’t noticed how they can’t keep their gazes off of each other when they’re in the same space?”

“I did... but sex is not the answer to everything.”

His lips twist, “In my experience, there are very few things sex can’t resolve.”

“Spoken like a man.” I roll my eyes. “If they sleep together, it’s only going to hurt her.”

“If anything, it’s Hunter who’s likely to be decimated.” He scoffs.

“Now, who’s completely missing the big picture?” I wrap my arm about his neck and raise my chin. “Zara has a soft heart. She’s the most generous, most empathetic person I know. It’s why she puts on such a ball-busting front. That, and the fact that she’s built a career in a role where she needs to be strong.”

“As does Hunter. He’s going to be running for Prime Minister.”

“Being in the public eye is not easy. It’s probably best they hate each other.” I raise a shoulder. “If feelings ran the other way, the tabloids would have a field day. In fact, that’s what I thought they’d with our announcement, but luckily, they seem to have backed off.”

“Luckily,” he agrees.

Something in his tone makes me glance at his face. “You wouldn’t happen to know why that happened? I mean, they should be blowing up my social media feed after that last post, but instead, things seem to have settled down.”

“Maybe we’re not as newsworthy as you think we are,” he offers.

“Funny, that’s what Zara seems to think, too.”

“Well, you should listen to Zara. She has lots of experience in media-related situations, after all.”

“Hmm...” I purse my lips. “Or maybe they’re waiting for the announcement of our marriage before things get out of hand.”

He heads toward the jetty. That’s when I spot the plane. It’s not the one we came in because this one has propellers and skis. It bobs gently on the waves. I blink.

“What’s that?”

“Our transport.”

Liam

“Our transport?” She gapes at me. “We’re leaving the island?”

“Just for a few nights.”

“But why? Isn’t this island secluded enough for you?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, it’s currently overrun by most of our friends and family.”

“They’ll be leaving soon.”

“Not for the next few days.”

“So? The place is big enough for all of us.”

“Not big enough for when you’ll be screaming my name so loudly everyone within a mile will be able to hear you.”

She grows still in my arms. I glance down to find her features flushed. “I... I can’t believe you’d make that decision without consulting me.”

“Why? Don’t you want to come with me?” I step onto the jetty and begin to walk toward the motorboat parked by the steps.

“No, I definitely do not.” She begins to struggle in my grasp, but I hold her tightly.

“Stop that, people are still watching us.”

“I don’t care. Let me go, Liam,” she cries.

“No.”

“Let me the hell go. You had no right to make this decision on my behalf.”

“It was supposed to be a surprise.”

“I can’t leave without my things. My clothes, my supplements, my—”

“Zara helped me pack everything.”

“What?” She stiffens. “When?”

“Right after the ceremony when we were greeting everyone else.”

“Oh,” she subsides.

“I know how important it is for you to have your things with you. I’ll always make sure that you have everything you need. When you’re with me, you’ll never want for anything, Isla.”

She glances away. I sense the emotions coursing through her body. Worry, anxiety, and the remnants of her anger vibrate off of her. She’s trembling so much, I pull her closer. “Shh.” I tighten my grasp even more around her. “It’s okay. You can trust me, LadyBird.”

“I know, I should. There’s no reason not to.” She swallows and seems to get a hold of herself. “It’s just... I’ve held this part of myself so closely, it’s difficult for me to let go of it, you know?”

I nod.

“I know how difficult it must have been for you to share what you did last night. And I wish I could do the same with you. But I need more time.”

“We have all the time in the world.”

“Not if, as per your father’s will, we need to produce an heir before you’re forty.”

“I’m happy to try for it the old fashioned way, if you are.”

When she stays silent, I slow my pace. I glance down to find her eyes fixed on me.

“What do you say, LadyBird? Let’s do this properly. Give this relationship a chance of becoming something real.”

She hesitates, then nods. “I guess there’s no harm in trying.”

I carry her from the plane toward the cabin. We’re on an island an hour away from the one on which we got married. I piloted the plane into the air, leaving the pilot to take the motorboat back. By the time we gained enough altitude that I could put the plane on autopilot, she was already asleep. I watched her features—more relaxed in sleep than I’ve ever seen them before—until it was time to land the plane. Now, I shoulder open the door to the cabin, cross the living room into the bedroom, and place her on the bed. Her wedding dress fans out and over the sides of the mattress. The starlight pouring in from the window emphasizes the dark circles under her eyes and the hollows under her cheekbones. She’s more tired than she’s let on.

It’s been an eventful few days for both of us. But we’ve made it this far, and for the next few days, at least, we don’t have to worry about the outside world. I undo the straps on her shoes, gently pull them, and place them on the floor beside the bed.

Then I head back to the plane to get our luggage, which I stow in the walk-in closet. I slide out my phone, walk around the bed, and place it on the nightstand. I pull off my bowtie and jacket, toe off my shoes and socks and crawl into bed. I am asleep before my head hits the pillow.

When I awaken, sun streams in through the windows. I turn my head, but the spot next to me on the bed is empty. I glance around the space and spy the unopened suitcases visible through the doorway of the closet. I swing my legs over the side of the bed, walk out of the bedroom, and come to a stop.

She's asleep on the couch, her head on a cushion, her arms around another. Her train has been abandoned in a pile of lace on the floor but she's still wearing her wedding dress, my ring on her finger and the chain I gave her around her neck. Something hot coils in my chest. My heart begins to race. My pulse gathers speed until it's beating against my temples, my wrists, behind my eyelids. My groin tightens, and I can't explain why. She's done nothing to seduce me. She's not even awake. Yet looking at my woman, a primitive surge of possessiveness fills me.

I walk over and squat down next to her. I whisper my knuckles down her cheek and her breath hitches. She turns on her back. I take in the neckline that's slipped down to bare the slope of one breast. Her waist is tiny, her hips flared, the shape enhanced in that perfect guitar-shape I so love. The dress clings to her legs and shows off her shapely ankles. Her feet are bare, her toenails painted a feminine pink. I reach over and trace the shape of her arch, the curve of her heel, up the line of flesh of her leg that disappears under the dress. I continue over the fabric, over the swell of her thigh, to the underside of her breast.

When I raise my gaze to hers, her eyes are open. The black of her pupils has bled out until only a circle of blue remains around it. Her cheeks are flushed and her lips are parted. I lean in, then bend my head and sniff the curve of her neck. She shivers. I turn my head until my lips are poised over hers. Her breath mingles with mine. She swallows, and I feel the tension in her body ratchet up. She bites down on her lower lip and I feel the tug all the way to the tip of my cock.

"Liam," she whispers. Her breath catches. "Liam." This time, my name comes out on a whine.

One side of my mouth kicks up. I rise to my feet, and hold out my hand.

She blinks, then places her hand in mine. I tug and pull her to her feet. "Are you hungry?"

She opens and shuts her mouth.

"I'll take that as a yes."

“I’ve seen you cook before, yet I’m still surprised that you can.”

“Why is that?” I pour the freshly-squeezed orange juice into her glass, then top up mine before taking a seat next to her.

“I’m not sure why, but you don’t look like a man who cooks.” She glances at the French toast I’ve served both of us. We’re seated on the patio that adjoins the kitchen, and the stretch of grass in front of us leads to the beach. The sand is white, the waves are blue, and the yellow sun is beginning to climb the sky. A bird skims the current, and a gull calls out from our right.

“What kind of a man do I look like?”

She looks up at me from under her eyelashes. “You look like a man who has people fetching and carrying for him. Someone who can take down governments with a tilt of your head, someone who can plan takeovers of companies without breaking a sweat.”

“And I’ve been brought to my knees by you.”

“What?” She shakes her head. “I don’t think I heard that right.”

“You did. I don’t go around confessing my past to anyone. No one in my family knows about what happened to me.”

“No one?”

“Weston guessed something happened during the time he was taken, but he’s never been able to get the full story of what the younger me went through. If my parents noticed that I was subdued, they put it down to being upset about what went down with Weston and his friends. It’s one reason why I became closer to the Seven. Not that I hung around in the same circles as them—they’re younger than me—but there’s a certain sense of our being kindred spirits.”

“So, I’m the only person you’ve shared so much with?” she whispers.

I nod. Her chin wobbles and I place my hand on hers. “I didn’t share it with you so you’d feel sorry for me. I don’t need your sympathy, LadyBird.”

“Then why did you—”

“Choose to share with you?”

She nods.

“We were going to be married. Also, you caught me in the midst of my nightmare. It felt right that you know my demons. Just as I hope you’ll share whatever is on your mind.”

Isla

Why is he telling me this? Why is he looking at me with those all-knowing eyes that imply he knows what I'm hiding. This is the second or third time he's hinted that it's safe for me to tell him what's bothering me. I admire him for the courage he had to share his past; I'm just not there yet.

“If we're going to co-parent a child, it seems important that we're honest with each other. You can't build a relationship on a weak foundation,” he adds.

I nod. What else can I say? ‘I don't have the courage to tell you my secret because I'll hate how you'll view me after that'? Worse, I'm not sure how I'll view myself. And that's the issue here. I recognize it, but am at a loss about what to do about it. I cut off a piece of the French toast and chew on it. The sweetness of the sugar, combined with the custardy texture of the eggs and the buttery, crispy golden edges, melt on my tongue. It's like eating bread and butter pudding, only much more complex.

A moan wells up.

His gaze narrows on my mouth, then he reaches out to rub his thumb at the edge of my lips. He sucks on his thumb, and my entire body feels like it's being slow cooked... Like the French toast.

“You had some powdered sugar there,” he explains. His voice is husky. He may as well as have said, “You’re going to be fucked by me.” Which, oh god, I admit, I really want.

I focus on my plate and finish off the rest of the meal with gusto.

When I look up, he’s watching me with a grin.

“What?”

“Nothing like a woman with a healthy appetite.”

“It helps that your cooking was not bad.”

“Not bad, eh?” He laughs. His entire demeanor is relaxed. His shoulders are not tense; his features are open. There’s a general sense of contentment about him, which is so at odds with how I’ve seen him before.

I glance about the island, then back at him. “You really are not a people person, huh?”

He leans back in his chair. “They’re a necessary evil, but I don’t engage with them unless I have to.”

“So why did you decide upon such a public wedding.”

“You know why.”

“I know you said the PR would benefit you, but I’m sure even if you hadn’t had such a public event, it wouldn’t have taken away from whatever you have planned for your company.”

His gaze grows inscrutable.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

He neither agrees, nor disagrees.

I reach for a strawberry and pop it into my mouth. “So why did you go through with—” I stop midway into biting down on the fruit, then glance at him. “Did you—” The piece goes down the wrong way and I cough and cough. He pats me on the back, then slides the glass of water over. I take a few sips then wipe the tears off my cheek. “It’s for me. You did it for

me. You knew the resulting publicity or notoriety” —I wince — “would benefit me.”

“Don’t make me out to be all that altruistic. The publicity definitely helps with the IPO, although you’re right, it would have gone through even without the resulting PR.” He shuffles his feet. “And yes, I knew it would be more of a help your business than not. Also, as you pointed out, it was too late to cancel the exclusives we’d promised the media, so it made sense to go through with it.”

“I... I’m not sure what to say.” I begin to play with my ring, then stop when I realize what I’m doing.

“Why does the thought that I might have had your best interests at heart upset you so much?”

“Because,” I swallow. “Because it’s easier to deal with you when you’re not being nice.”

“And now?”

“Now...” I glance up at him. “I’m not sure what to think.”

I tilt the large-brimmed hat on my head to better protect against the sun’s rays. I’m wearing a one-piece maillot cut high on my thighs with a sarong around my waist. I’m on the beach in the shade of a tree. My vantage point allows me to watch the part of the sea where Liam has gone swimming. He asked me to join him, but I refused. Not only am I not a great swimmer but I hate getting my hair wet. It’s a pain to dry it off later. I also hate stowing it under a swimming cap.

This way, I’m getting the best of both worlds. I can catch up on the latest smutty novel on my Kindle while watching Mr. Sex-on-legs cut through the waves like the predator he is. He didn’t insist I swim, for which I’m grateful. And if he thinks it odd I prefer to sit in the shade rather than swim, he didn’t shown it. Of course, I used the opportunity to ogle the alphahole’s gorgeous form as he walked toward the sea. The way his broad shoulders blocked out the sun, how the sight of

his narrow waist and his tight butt made my mouth water. How the muscles under his powerful thighs undulated as he stalked into the water, then flexed as he dove into the waves. He disappeared from sight for a few minutes, then I spotted him cutting through the breakers.

He wanted both of us to go nude on the beach because it's a private island and there's no one around, but I managed to convince him I'm too much of a prude for that. I insisted we both wear our swimsuits. He looked like he wasn't going to agree, but when I begged him he relented. I honestly didn't think he would. He's so alpha, I was sure he'd refuse, but when he said he'd wear his swim trunks if it made me feel more comfortable... Well, I think I fell for him a little more in that instant. There's something so sexy about a man who knows when to demand and when to give in to your demands.

Now, I split my attention between reading the spicy scene in my book with keeping my gaze peeled for his return. Yet nothing prepares me for the sight of him now emerging from the waves.

Remember Daniel Craig walking out of the ocean in *Casino Royale*? Multiply that by one-thousand and you have the general idea of what I'm seeing. The water pours off of him, and the sunlight glints off the droplets that cling to his shoulders, his chest, his thighs. He holds his arms slightly away from his torso, and sun rays slant through the space between his elbows and his waist. His chest planes are sculpted, that eight pack I've run my palms over thrown into relief; his waist is concave and it only serves to highlight the bulge in his swim trunks.

Heat floods my skin. My stomach twists with lust. A pool of moisture clings to my core. Thank god, I have my sunglasses on so he can't make out how I'm ogling him as he stalks toward me. Those corded thighs of his are poetry in motion as he approaches me. He comes to a stop less than a foot from me, his stance wide, feet planted in the sand. He's so close I can reach out and touch the hairs that curl about his calves. My fingers tingle and I grip my Kindle tightly.

Water drips from his trunks, clings to his powerful thighs. My throat dries. I'm conscious he's staring at me but I refuse to raise my gaze to his face. If I do, he'll definitely discover my face is flushed, and it's not from the heat. Sweat beads my forehead.

"How is it so warm on this island?" I mutter.

"This island has its own microclimate. It's why I bought it. No matter how cold it gets in England, I know I can escape here and work in my shorts all day long."

"So that's what it feels like to be rich? You can order your own tailor-made climate?"

"Among other things."

Something in his voice makes me glance up, and those colorless eyes of his snap on mine. They seem more a mix of blue and green today, taking on the hues from the scenery around us. There's an expression of fierce longing on his face—something naked and hungry and vulnerable. Something so potent it reaches out to that hidden part inside of me. The one I've been guarding from him all along. Something that makes me want to trust him. To tell him my secret, to relieve myself of the burden I've been carrying for so long.

I open my mouth, then catch myself. This is why he brought me here. There's no escape from him here. Everywhere I turn, he's there. His gaze follows me wherever I go. His scent clings to that cabin, embedded in every log used to create the house. He told me he designed it himself, and it makes sense. The house is so much him—rough yet sophisticated, untamed yet with a finesse that flows through its veins.

I'm not imprisoned here, but I'm cut off from the world. There's a sense of isolation that's both seductive and scary. One that warns me I'm so close to breaking. And once I do...

I won't be able to control this narrative. I have no idea how he'll react. He can't divorce me—not until he'd got his inheritance. But what if he begins looking at me with pity? I won't be able to bear that.

If I spend any more time in his presence... I won't be able to hold back. I'll end up telling him everything. It's inevitable. Doesn't mean I can't delay. I jump up to my feet. The expression on his face is surprised. I take a step back, and his gaze grows wary.

"Where are you going?"

"I know what you want from me."

"You do?"

"You want to fuck me, don't you?"

He tilts his head. There's a predatory feel to how he assesses me.

"Admit it." I hold onto my Kindle, glance to the side, then back at him. "You want to be inside me, husband. You want to feel my pussy clamp down on your cock as you shag me."

His eyes gleam. "And if I do?"

"You'll have to catch me first."

I turn to run, but he's so fast, he grabs a hold of my wrist. I yelp, the Kindle slipping from my grasp. He tugs and I fall against his chest. "Not so fast, LadyBird." He searches my gaze. "I take it you want to play?"

"And if I do?"

"We need some clear rules first."

"R-rules?"

He smirks. "What do I get if I catch you?"

"What do you want?"

"That's not how it works. I ask the questions here, baby."

I scoff. "And if I don't answer?"

His hold on me tightens. He pulls me closer until my breasts are crushed against his chest. "You can find out now, or you can answer the question and postpone the inevitable."

I tip up my chin. "If you were serious about playing, you would let me go."

“And?”

“And give me a head start.”

His nostrils flare. “And when I catch you, you’ll do everything I say.”

“On one condition.”

Liam

I scowl. Anyone else in her position would agreed to my proposal and take the opportunity to run. But this woman has to defy me. She always has to find a way to contradict the simplest of my instructions. It's what caught my attention in the first place. She's never been scared of me. Never been so awed by my presence that she's submitted. Not yet, that is.

“Well?” She curves her lips. “What do you say?”

“What's the condition?”

“I won't sleep in the same bed as you.”

“No fucking way.”

“Yes way.”

“What is it, Isla?” I search her features. “Why is it that you won't share my bed? Are you afraid you'll grow too dependent on me? Are you afraid you'll get used to my presence next to you? Are you afraid that” —I lower my head until my nose bumps her— “you won't be able to live without me?”

She pulls back as much as my hold on her will allow.

“You're implying I have a problem with intimacy, and I can promise you, it's not that.”

“Then what is it? Tell me. Whatever it is, we can face it together.”

She bites the inside of her cheek. Some of the color fades from her features. She glances to the left, then the right. A trapped look comes into her eyes.

“Baby, it’s okay. You can tell me anything, Isla,” I say in a soothing voice.

She opens her mouth to speak, and I’m sure she’s going to tell me what’s worrying her. I’m focused on her expression to the exclusion of everything else. It’s why I least expect her to bend her leg and knee me.

“Motherfucker!” Pain slices through me, white and blinding. Sweat breaks out on my shoulders. My grip on her loosens, and she darts away. I bend over, trying not to scream as the waves of agony pound through my body. I take a deep breath, then another. By the time I straighten, I spot her running around the boundary of the house. I’m going to track her down, and when I do, I’m going to teach her a lesson she’ll never forget.

I grab her Kindle, then limp forward, then break into a run. I jog slowly around the perimeter of the island. If she thinks she can evade me, she is so wrong. I know every inch of this island like the back of my hand. I’m going to track her down if it’s the last thing I do.

“LadyBird,” I call out, “where are you?” The wind blows through the trees. The long grass ripples. I circle the island once, then head toward the house. Once inside, I shut the door and lock it. I prowl through the living room, the hallway, the kitchen, then the bedroom, before I reach my study. I walk in, shut the door behind me and lock it. The scent of books is as pervasive here as the smell of the sea air outside. The windows are closed, and the only other furniture is a deep settee in front of the now dark fireplace. I run my fingers down the spines of the books—classics I grew up reading, others I picked up along the way. The Three Musketeers by Alexandre Dumas, The Odyssey by Homer, The Complete Sherlock Holmes by Arthur Conan Doyle, the entire series of Harry Potter by J.K.

Rowling, King Solomon's Mines by H. Rider Haggard, The Last of the Mohicans by James Fenimore Cooper, Tess of the d'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy, Pinocchio by Carlo Collodi. When I reach my vinyls, I pause. One shelf holds my collection of opera, and above it is a row of classical music greats.

I hear a sound behind me; turn to see her dash toward the exit. She reaches the doorway and tries to twist open the handle, but it doesn't give. She tugs on it, shakes it, but the door won't open.

"Looking for this?"

She turns, spots the key I pull out from my pocket, and scowls. "Give it to me," she holds out her hand.

"Come and get it, baby."

Her chest rises and falls. "Don't call me baby."

I take in her flushed features, the pulse that beats at the base of her throat. "Thought you liked it when I called you baby, baby?"

She sniffs. "That's beside the point."

"The point is that there's no way out. I have you where I want you, *baby*."

She draws in a sharp breath, and her pupils dilate. "You haven't caught me yet."

"That's easily remedied."

I lunge toward her. She screams, evades me and runs past me and into the room. I turn, stretch out my fingers, then close them again. "I'm gonna get you, LadyBird."

I walk toward her, and she races around the sofa. I reverse my route and she runs the other way. We keep this going for a few seconds more. Her chest rises and falls. Her breath comes in pants. I reach across the settee, and she yells and backs away. I prowl around the couch and head toward her. She skitters back until she hits the shelf behind her, then gasps and comes to a stop. She glances toward the door, then back at me.

I click my tongue. “Don’t even think about it.”

I take a step toward her, and she flattens herself against the shelf. I move forward another step, and she darts past me, or tries to. I grab her arm. She screams. I haul her to me, and this time, I shove her into the shelf, leaning some of my lower weight into her so she can’t knee me again. One of the books on the far side of the shelf falls off the far end with a crash.

She jumps. “Let me go,” she says in a breathless voice.

“Remember what I said. Once I catch you, you’ll do everything I say.”

“And I said I had a condition.”

“Which I’m not agreeing to.”

She wriggles against me and the blood drains to my groin. She freezes. “You... you—”

“Am aroused. And if you keep that up I’m going to have to throw you down and take you right here.”

Her breath hitches, and her pupils dilate. A trembling grips her, and I swear, I can smell the sweet scent of her arousal.

“Liam, please,” she gasps.

“Please what?”

“Liam, I—” She shakes her head.

“What is it you want? Tell me, LadyBird.”

She bites down on her lower lip.

I stare at her mouth. “No one is allowed to bite you there except me.”

She blinks. “You’re crazy.”

“You make me crazy.”

“And you make me...want things I don’t think I can have.”

“Tell me what you need, and I’ll give it to you.”

She swallows.

“Or maybe you want me to tell you what you want?”

She frowns.

“How about this?” I hold up her Kindle and begin to read. “He tears off her panties then lowers his head to the melting flesh between—”

“Gimme that.” She reaches for the Kindle, but I hold it up and out of her grasp. I read aloud. “He holds open her pussy lips, then swipes his tongue up to her clit. He—”

“Liam, don’t you dare read further,” she yells.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Why don’t you read, and we’ll act out the scene?”

“You’re kidding right?”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?”

“N-no,” she murmurs.

“Either you read it and I’ll follow your instructions, or I’ll come up with ideas of my own, all of which are going to be kinkier than anything you could read in your romance books.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Do you even know how spicy the scenes in my books can get?”

“Is that a challenge?”

She tilts her head. “And if it is?”

“And if I win?” I retort.

“You won’t.”

“But what if I do?”

She’s already shaking her head. “Please don’t ask me to spend the night with you, Liam. Please.”

I lower my hand, then cup her cheek with the other. “What is it, baby? Please, tell me.”

“I can’t Liam. Not yet.”

I look between her eyes. There’s helplessness in them, and hurt and fear. What is she so afraid of? “Whatever it is, I

promise, I'll support you.”

“How about you stop talking and fuck me instead?” She drops down to her knees and pulls down my swimming trunks.

Isla

His thick, hard cock swings free, and I close my mouth around it. So it's cheating. And I'm distracting him. Sue me. I grip his thighs and take him down my throat.

"Isla," he growls. The Kindle slips from his hand and hits the floor. He's so big, so wide, he fills my mouth and pushes down on my tongue. I swallow, and he groans. I tip up my head and the head of his shaft hits the back of my throat. Instantly, I gag. His thigh muscles ripple. A groan rips from him. The next second, he holds my hair away from my face, then slides his hand around to the nape of my neck. I glance up to find he has his gaze fixed on me.

Without breaking the connection, I take him in as far as I can, then pull back. His cock balances between my lips. I move forward, and he slips down my gullet. He releases my hair, only to plant one hand on the books above; the other he wraps around my throat.

"Fuck." His chest rises and falls. "I'll never get enough of feeling you swallow my cock." His grip tightens. I pull back, then move forward and this time he meets me with a thrust of his own. Tears squeeze out of the corners of my eyes. Saliva drools from my mouth. He holds me in place with his grasp around my neck as he fucks my mouth. In-out-in. His silver-gray eyes deepen in color until they seem almost amber. Once more they take on the color of our surroundings. I can see

myself in them. See my need to bring a flush to his cheeks. His jaw is tight, and a nerve throbs at his temple. Heat vibrates off of his body, turning the air between us into an inferno. Sweat beads his shoulders, and I become conscious of the moisture sliding down my back. We're part of the same organism, one continuous thought of lust and passion and sexual desire the kind I've never faced before. Will never face again. Then, just like that, he pulls out.

He releases his hold on my neck, only to bend and haul me up to my feet. He fastens his mouth on mine and kisses me deeply. I can taste him, and smell the sea mixed with his deeper muskier scent.

"I can taste myself on you, do you know how crazy that makes me?"

He shoves my swimsuit aside, fastens his hands under my butt and lifts me up. I wrap my legs around him, and in one smooth move, he's inside me. My breath heaves. My gaze widens. I'm wet enough for him to penetrate easily, and yet, he's so wide, I'm spread around his girth. He holds me there, giving me time to adjust. A beat, another. He looks into my eyes and must sense the pain of his intrusion is fading, for he propels his hips forward and sinks inside all the way.

I gasp, and my breath catches. He's so deep, it's like I can feel him in my throat. I open my mouth, but no words come out.

"Hold on, baby."

I cling to his shoulders, and he begins to move. He drives into me with single-minded focus. His gaze locks on mine. His palm clamps around the nape of my neck. He tunnels into me like it's the very last thing he's going to do before he dies. *Aren't there animals who go on a mating spree and then are so overcome by exhaustion that they die?* Not that I'm comparing him to an animal. Though he is a beast. My beast. A brute who's shagging me with such ferocity that I'm sure he's going to fuck my soul out of me. "Liam—" I gasp out. "Liam."

He peels back his lips, pulls out of me until his shaft is balanced at the opening of my pussy. Then, he thrusts forward

and impales me. I orgasm instantly. One moment, I'm looking at him; the next, I'm falling through space. Sparks explode behind my eyes, and I'm sure I've died a little. *La petite mort, indeed.* That's how intense the sensations coursing through me are.

I can't feel my limbs. I'm a shard of light racing through space, over continents, under the sea and up again. Then, just as suddenly, I'm back in my body. My breasts feel heavy, but my chest is light. I cling to him with my knees locked around his waist.

And still, he drills into me. His shoulders are drenched in sweat; his breath comes in pants. *Bam-bam-bam*, his heart thunders in his chest, mirroring the racing, overheated sentiment of mine. The aftershocks course through me as he continues to power into my pussy. His hips flex, the curve of his butt slick with sweat. My biceps hurt, and my triceps protest. I can't hold onto him any longer. I can't. I'm held up by the force of his monster cock and his energizer bunny impersonation in how he fucks me, with that back-forth-back action that seems to go on and on and on.

From somewhere deep inside, I call upon the last dregs of my energy. I clamp my inner muscles around his dick. A growl wells up from his throat. His shaft swells further, getting impossibly massive. He tunnels into me with such force, his balls slap against my arse. The shelf I'm balanced against shakes. Books tumble down over us, around us, and just as I'm sure he's going to drill right through me... With a hoarse cry, he empties himself inside me.

His entire body shudders. He pushes his forehead into mine. His breath sears my cheek, the heat from his body a furnace pinning me in place. That, and his dick, which still pulses inside of me like it has a life of its own. His shoulders flex, and his chest planes ripple. The left over energy from our fucking pulses through him, and by extension, through me.

He leans more of his weight into me. Another book jumps off the shelf above us and hits the ground with a crack.

He draws a deep breath, then pulls back. The sucking sound of his sweat drenched flesh separating from mine is loud in the space.

“LadyBird.” He bends enough so his face is on the same level as mine. “You okay?” His voice sounds as raw as I feel.

I turn away, not wanting to meet his gaze. If I do, there’s no telling what he’ll read in my eyes.

“Isla?” His voice is more urgent. “Answer me, baby. Did I hurt you? I got carried away a bit.”

I shake my head. “I’m okay,” I finally whisper.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“You did. But in a good way.”

He drags his nose up my jaw and slides a strand of my hair aside. “You sure?”

I nod.

“So why aren’t you looking at me?”

“Because...” I bite the inside of my cheek. “Because, I don’t want you to see how shaken I am by what just happened.” Despite my best efforts, my voice cracks.

“Isla, baby. It’s okay. You can fall apart in my arms, and I won’t judge you.”

And that’s what makes it even more difficult for me to confide in you. I don’t want to let you down. I don’t want to let myself down. I don’t want the world to think you’ve married someone like me when you can do so much better.

A-n-d there it is. The reason I haven’t been able to tell him about myself. It’s not about him judging me. It’s about the world telling me I’m no good for him. And I’d believe it because, deep inside, that’s what I believe myself. Tears leak from my eyes, and I start to shake.

“Isla, baby—” He pulls me even closer. I bury my face in his neck and breathe him in, trying to push away all these thoughts of unworthiness that are strangling me from the inside.

He's been through so much. In comparison, honestly, I got off lighter. Yet, I'm the one who seems to be reeling from the scars I'm carrying inside. Is it a guy thing? Are they better at compartmentalizing? I mean, Liam can be an asshole, but he's also proven himself as someone who genuinely cares for me. I know. This relationship between us started off as a farce, and he still expects a child out of our union, but other than that... He's surprised me at every turn with his thoughtfulness, his ability to read my mind, and how intuitively he seems to guess what I want. Like right now, when he rocks me in his arms and rubs circles over my back. I loosen my hold on him and begin to slide down, but he props me up with his palms under my butt. He brushes against the bookshelf, and two more books fall off the shelf.

"Shit," he swears, then turns, and without pulling out of me, walks over to the settee. He sits down with me straddling him. He pushes my face into his shoulder, continues to rub circles down my back. That only makes me cry harder, my labored breaths rasping in and out. Damn, I'm so tired of feeling sorry for myself, and yet, I can't stop myself from letting the tears flow down my cheeks.

"Baby, stop. Please. Seeing you cry is killing me."

I sniffle, but can't stop my crying.

"Tell me something you've never told anyone else."

"Eh?"

"Indulge me," he murmurs.

Is this his way of getting me accustomed to the idea of telling him what's on my mind? It's not a bad tactic, actually. I chew on the inside of my cheek. "I already told you how I loved *The Wedding Planner* and Jennifer Lopez's character in it?"

He nods.

"Well I didn't only watch RomComs. I also loved *Donnie Darko*, and *Lost in Translation* and *8-Mile*."

He whistles. "Wouldn't have expected that."

“Because *Donnie Darko* is too dark, *Lost in Translation* is too whimsical, and *8-Mile* is too grungy?”

“That, too.” He chuckles.

“Where do you think the name Tiny comes from?”

I sense him looking down at me. “That’s why you called him Tiny? After Eminem’s character in *8-Mile*?”

“Yep. His *Lose Yourself* is the anthem of my life in a way, you know?”

“So you’re not only a talented organizer of things who knows how to get things done, you’re also a poet at heart?”

“More like an angsty, rebellious teen who never grew up.” I laugh.

“It’s good to channel your inner angsty teen. It propels you forward toward what you truly desire.”

I look up then. “Is that what you do?”

“Channel my inner angsty teen?” His features grow hard. His eyes take on a faraway look, and I know he’s gone back to that space as a teenager when he was taken and held. He sighs and his expression grows thoughtful. “Maybe a part of me never left that room where I was held. Perhaps, deep inside, I’ll always be that helpless boy trying hard not to lose his mind to the panic that had set in. Trying to be grown up, but realizing I was still a child. Trying to put on a brave face, even to myself. Telling myself if I didn’t break, everything would be okay.”

“And did you break?” I ask in a low voice.

“Not then. It might have been better if I had. I might have found catharsis then. I’ve never stopped fighting since that day. Never stopped trying to prove myself to myself since.”

Like me. I’m trying to prove to myself that I can move on and still be me, despite a part of me being not what it once was.

“If I could control myself, I could control everything else around me. At least, that’s what I thought, you know?”

“You have no idea how much I do,” I murmur.

“That’s what I love about you. Even when we’re at odds, it feels like there’s a tacit understanding between us.”

He used the L word. Is he aware he used the L word? Maybe it doesn’t mean anything that he did. Maybe it was just a figure of speech. Also, we don’t know each other well enough for him to use that particular word. I push the thought of my head.

“What now?”

“Now? I feed you.”

Liam

“You’re either feeding me or fucking me.” She’s perched on the counter next to me as I chop the vegetables. After that discussion in my study, I brought her back to the bedroom. We showered and changed, separately. And only because I knew if I pulled her into the shower with me, we wouldn’t leave the bedroom for the rest of the day; which was fine by me, but after that mini breakdown in the study, I wanted a chance to get to know her better. Asking her what was on her mind was only going to cause her to shut up further. So I had to change tactics.

If you can’t get what you want the direct way, you have to employ cunning; perhaps, even be underhanded in how you go about it, which I’m not above.

I jumped into the shower, then walked to the kitchen to start preparing a late lunch. It took another forty-five minutes for her to join me. By which time, she seemed more put together. Her features were more composed, her gaze calmer. She’d changed into a simple dress that fell below her knees. It was a deceptively simple get up, but one which highlighted her figure. I asked her to open the wine, and she offered me a glass. She’d offered to help, and I waved her off.

Now, I take a sip of the red wine and glance down at her.

“Are you complaining?”

“Nah.” She reaches over and picks up a slice of pepper. “I admit, I’m not a great cook. I mean, I cook, on occasion, but given a choice, I’ll call out for the food I need.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” I slide the vegetables into the salad bowl, then get started on the dressing. The lasagna I’d prepared is already in the oven.

“You think cooking is fun?”

I hear the note of incredulity in her voice and chuckle.

“It’s relaxing. Keeps me focused, so I’m thinking of something other than work.”

“You actually take a break from building your empire?”

“Even Darth Vader needs to, on occasion, recharge.”

“A-n-d a pop culture reference. Careful, or I’ll think you’re almost human.” She snickers.

“Only where you’re concerned.”

In the silence that follows, I glance at her. She’s looking into her wine glass, her forehead furrowed.

“Why do you get uncomfortable when I talk about my feelings for you?” I murmur.

“You don’t have feelings for me,” she says and tries to laugh, but the attempt is feeble.

“You know I do, but you prefer not to acknowledge it.”

“Assuming that’s the case...” she tips up her chin. “Is that a problem?”

I peruse her features. “So that’s how it feels to be on the receiving end of not having your feelings reciprocated, huh?”

She shakes her head. “Don’t, Liam. Don’t be so—”

“Sensitive?”

“I was going for histrionic, but I’ll settle for sensitive. It’s not a look that suits you.”

I place the knife down on the counter, then turn to stand between her legs. “I know when we first met I came across as

authoritative—”

“Which you still do.”

“And dominant—”

“Which you still are.”

“And I won’t apologize for that.”

“So what’s this conversation about?”

I take the wine glass from her and place it on the table, then take both of her hands in mine. “I want something more with you. Want to *be* something more than what I’ve been so far without you. I want” —I bring her hands up to my mouth and kiss her fingertips— “to be the kind of man you’d be proud to stand next to.”

“And you are, Liam. Any woman would love to be the one you vow to spend the rest of your life with—”

“Just not you. Why, Isla? What we shared earlier when we made love—”

“When we fucked, you mean?”

“When we *made love*; it was different. Every time we’ve made love, our connection has deepened. I feel close to you. Like you’re the only other person who knows me as well as I know myself. What I’m feeling for you... It’s new and scary, but it’s also so very exciting. The chance to have you by my side, to have a family with you... It’s like I’ve found my purpose in life. Turns out, all that power and money I’ve been accumulating is not half as satisfying as the opportunity to have my own family.”

“And what about me?”

I pull back a little. “What do you mean? You agreed to marry me—”

“So you could get your inheritance.”

“And you could get publicity for your wedding planning company,” I point out.

“I’m not sure it was a good idea to agree to this arrangement,” she says quietly.

“Because you’re beginning to feel something for me?”

“And I don’t like it—not one bit. The sex between us may be great, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

“It’s a start.”

“It’s not enough.” She tries to pull her hands out from between mine, but I don’t let go.

“I’m not going to let you turn your back on what we have. I’m not going to allow you to deny that you’re developing feelings for me.”

“Whatever it is I feel for you, it’s not enough for a future together, Liam.”

“And here I thought you were fearless. That when you wanted something you went after it.”

“I don’t want you, Liam.”

I bend my knees and peer into her eyes. “I don’t believe you.”

She holds my gaze. “Better believe it.”

After that she sipped her wine as I finished cooking. We ate at the table on the deck. A squirrel hopped over to the edge of the deck, and sat watching us until I wasn’t been able to stop myself from throwing it a piece of bell pepper from the salad. It ran away, only to return and pick up the morsel when I had my gaze turned away. *Maybe I should nickname her squirrel instead.*

She was watching the squirrel. And I was watching her. I recorded every nuance of her expression—the way she gazed at the squirrel, first, with wide eyes, then laughing at its antics, and finally, exclaiming in surprise, when the creature darted back and grabbed the slice of vegetable.

It's as if something inside of me knows the clock on our relationship is running down. Soon, we'll have to return to the real world. Soon, she'll ask me again to release her from our agreement, and this time... No, I won't think about that. Still, I'm taunted by that old saying: if you love something, set it free. I always scoffed at it, but now I'm beginning to understand... I won't be able to stop her from leaving me, and for someone known for being so powerful, that's an oxymoronic statement...for a moronic man.

I've never not owned what I want. Never not taken what I need. Never not focused on my own desires, to the exclusion of everything else. This... Thinking of another person before myself, respecting another person's wishes, being tuned into another person to the extent her frame of mind becomes my own, is new. More to the point, it's shockingly out-of-character for me. It's strangely different and yet, not. It's like she's unlocked something intrinsic, yet hidden, inside of me with only her presence.

That's how much this woman affects me. I can only watch my own reactions in bemusement. If anyone had told me, even a week ago, that pretending to be married would change the blueprint of my life, I'd have laughed at them. Come to think of it, I did. On the eve of my wedding. After all, the entire goal of this project was to ensure I didn't get caught up in a relationship.

I set out to protect my feelings and gain access to my inheritance. I ended up losing my heart and unsure if owning my company outright and getting my trust fund will give me the kind of satisfaction I derive from taking care of her, making her smile, holding her in my arms, burying my face in the curve of her neck and breathing in her scent. Feeling her shiver under me, her pussy quiver around my cock, her breasts tremble, her shoulders convulse as she falls apart on my command.

Directing her to orgasm is far more thrilling than managing another takeover or acquisition. Persuading her to open up for my tongue, my fingers, my dick is far more satisfying than closing a merger. Coaxing her to trust me is the biggest

challenge I've undertaken in my life. One which I can't afford to lose, at any cost.

I have more riding on this than on the outcome of any business negotiation. And I've never been more nervous. It's why I grip my wine glass with such force that the stem snaps and the bowl shatters. The red liquid spills over the wooden surface of the table and drips down the sides.

She pushes her chair back with a yelp. I glance down at the blood that drips from my palm. It's curiously bright.

"Oh, your poor hand." She grabs the paper napkin, and presses it down on my hand. Within seconds, the blood has blotted through it. "We need to take care of this."

I watch her face, take in the concern in her features. The way the color has leached from her cheeks. How her lips are parted in concern. How she's cradling my hand in hers. The emotion on her face runs the gamut from worry to anxiety to determination. She sets her jaw and looks up at me. "This needs to be seen to, Liam."

"Okay."

"Okay?" She jumps to her feet. "Is that all you have to say?" She grabs another napkin, places it in my other hand and brings it down on the injured one. "Hold your arm up above your heart and keep this there, please." I oblige. She tugs on my shoulder. "Get up. Let's go inside, please."

I rise to my feet. *Does she know she can ask me for anything and I'll give it to her? I'd set the world itself on fire for her.* I shake my head. Maybe the cut is more severe than I thought. It's the only explanation for why my thoughts are turning so sentimental.

She slides her arm around my waist, and urges me forward. As if I'm an invalid, and she needs to support my weight. My lips quirk, then I wipe the expression off of my face. I put my uninjured arm about her waist, but I keep the other elevated so she won't yell at me. Yep, I'm taking advantage of her nearness, but if this is the only way I'm going to be the focus of her attention... So be it.

“Where’s your first aid kit?”

“In the kitchen, in the cabinet on the right.”

We head in that direction.

“Sit.” She points to a chair at the dining table on the far corner. I raise my eyebrows, but decide to play along. And only because I’m enjoying her attentiveness.

She grabs the first aid kit, then turns and walks over to me. Meanwhile, I sit down on the stool and hold my hand above my heart. She sets out what she needs, then reaches for my palm. To clean it, she has to get closer, and to get closer, she has to step into the space between my thighs. Also, when she reaches for my hand, it thrusts her chest right in my face. Nice. My groin hardens. A thrill of satisfaction runs through me.

Holy shit. Being this close to her is more exciting than chasing the next million dollar deal. I am well and truly fucked. I knew it, but this...right here—her in my space, focused on my injured palm as she presses a wad of cotton to the wound, quickly cleaning the wound, blowing on it, and apologizing for hurting me when I wince, while concentrating on taking care of me—is a heady feeling. It’s more of a turn on than watching porn. It’s almost as arousing as undressing her, which I’m doing with my eyes right now.

I drag my gaze down her back to the curve of her butt. She reaches over for the ointment, and the hem of the dress she’s wearing rises up her thighs. I reach and place my palm of my uninjured hand on the exposed skin. She freezes. For a beat, another. Then continues with her ministrations. She spreads the ointment on my cut, then begins to wrap a bandage around my palm. “Maybe we need to take you to a doctor. You might need stitches.”

“The wound has stopped bleeding already. Also, the only thing I need is you kissing it and making it better.”

She shoots me a sideways glance. “Aww, you big baby.”

I allow my lips to turn down. “I’m hurt. I need some TLC.”

She bites the inside of her cheek. “I think you’ve been acting all this time. You aren’t really in much pain are you?”

She tightens the bandage and pain flashes up my arm. This time, I wince for real.

“There, all done.” She admires her handiwork.

“You still haven’t kissed it,” I point out.

“And I still think you need to get stitches.”

“I barely felt the cut,” I admit. “There was more blood than a small wound warrants.” I slide my hand further up her skirt, and she shivers.

“Liam,” she warns.

“LadyBird.” I smirk.

I brush my fingers against the edge of her panties, and she draws in a sharp breath.

“Liam, don’t,” she says in a low voice.

“Why not? I’ve already fucked you. I’ve taken your arse. I’ve owned your mouth. I’ve taken every hole in your body that counts. So why can’t I touch you?”

“Because” —she reaches for the sanitizer and rubs her palms with it— “I haven’t changed my mind. I think this was a mistake. I think we should head back to the mainland, and go our separate ways.”

“Look at me when you say that, Isla.”

She hesitates, then turns to meet my gaze. “I think we should part ways.”

I arch an eyebrow. I don’t want to say this but if it’s the only way to get her to stay then I’ll pull out every argument I can get my hands on. I’m not above playing dirty. “You’ve already benefitted from the contract. There’s enough buzz around the wedding in the media, your business has already benefitted from this. If you leave now it’s breach of contract.”

She pales. “You... you’re going to hold me to the contract now?”

“Especially now,” I lean in closer until my lips almost brush her’s, “Considering you may already be pregnant with my child.” *Not to mention the fact that I can’t even contemplate the thought of letting you go.*

Isla

My jaw drops. Holy shit, I hadn't thought of that. He came inside me. I knew it in the heat of the moment, felt his dick throb as he emptied himself inside of me. The ramifications of it, though, are something that only sinks in now. A tremor runs up my spine. I could be pregnant with his child. With a little Liam or a little Isla emerging into this world nine months from now. I try to speak, but my throat closes. Try to breathe, but my lungs burn. My chest rises and falls. My pulse rate shoots up. My skin feels too tight for my body. Sweat trickles down my spine. Clearly, I'm having some kind of a meltdown.

"LadyBird." He pulls his hand out from under my skirt and wraps it about my shoulder instead. "Breathe, baby, breathe."

"Like this..." He draws in a breath. "In." He exhales. "Out. Breathe with me, baby. In..." He inhales, and I follow his example, not taking my gaze off of his face. "Out." He breathes out through his nose, and so do I. Again. I breathe in and out slowly. Feel my heart rate stabilize.

"Good." He rises to his feet and pushes me onto the chair. He stabs his finger at me. "Stay there."

A chuckle wells up, but it sounds more like a sob. I lower my chin to my chest and close my eyes. *Focus on your breathing. Get yourself under control.*

You've calmed down frantic bridezillas, and soothed the tempers of mothers-of-the-bride. Why, I even jumped into the dress of a bridesmaid who failed to turn up at the last minute. And then there was the time the bridegroom was caught with the father-of-the-bride—don't ask. I announced to the assembled guests that the wedding was off and invited them to the reception so they could drink and dance and have a blast. Strangely, it'd worked. The bride and groom had joined in too, getting drunk enough to decide they hadn't been made for each other in the first place.

My pulse rate finally evens out. My stomach stops that bottoming out effect it has been replicated over and over again. Thank God. The last thing I want is to be sick. And no, I can't think about being pregnant. It was just once that his sperm was pumped into my vagina, and I can't be pregnant from that, can I? It only takes one stupid, highly mobile, very focused sperm. A sperm with all the hallmarks of its donor, Mr. A-hole-who's-bent-on-having-his-way-with-me.

"Here." He materializes next to me and hands me a glass of orange juice.

"I think you need the sugar more. You're the one who's lost blood."

"Drink, Isla," he growls.

I drink. I empty the glass, then place it on the flat surface with a snap.

"More?"

I nod.

He fills it up.

I take a few more sips, then toy with the glass. "You said that if... When I get pregnant, we'll co-parent."

"If we were together, we'd be real parents," he counters.

"I'm not sure I want that."

He keeps his gaze on my face, but like the coward I am, I don't look in his direction.

“You’re running scared,” he remarks.

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“But you want to leave.”

“This... impromptu honeymoon is not working out for me, Liam.” I finally look him in the eye. “Believe me, this is the only way. We can’t be together.”

“So why did you agree to the fake marriage in the first place?”

“Because I thought I’d do anything to keep my business and grow it to the heights I’ve always dreamed of.”

“You can still have that.”

“I’m not sure it’s worth the sacrifice.”

His entire body tenses. “So, being with me is a sacrifice?”

It’s the most amazing experience of my life. It’s what I want. To be with you, to laugh with you, to have experiences with you, to travel the world with you. To have you make love to me, and also, to fuck me. To introduce me to your kinks you’ve only hinted at so far. I want it all. But I can’t have it. I won’t let myself ask for it. Because you deserve better.

I don’t say any of that aloud. Instead, I square my shoulders, push away any emotion that could show on my face, and tip up my chin. “It is. You fuck well, I’ll give you that, but it’s not anything I couldn’t have got from any other man.”

His gaze narrows. A pulse jumps at his temple. “You’re hitting out at me because you feel cornered. You want to be with me, but you don’t want to admit to it.”

“That’s what you’d like to believe..”

His nostrils flare. His jaw tics. He squeezes his fingers at his side—the ones that are attached to his injured palm.

“Your hand—” I reach for it but he shakes me off.

“Leave it.” He steps back, and it’s the first time he’s put physical distance between us, and it hurts as if he’s slapped

me. My stomach folds in on itself. My gut ties itself in knots. My chest feels like someone punched me directly in the heart.

“Liam, I—”

“Not another word. Not unless it’s to tell me you’re giving us a chance.” His voice is so hard, his features so closed, that all the emotions I’ve tried to lock down since the day I met him come tumbling to the surface.

My throat closes. A pressure builds behind my eyes. *I’m not going to cry. I’m not.* “There’s no chance for the two of us to be together.”

His entire body seems to turn into stone. It’s as if Ayers Rock itself has been transported in his place. That’s how still he goes. Those gray eyes of his turn that clear color that makes them look like twin mirrors. Opaque mirrors which no longer allow me to see through to him.

I didn’t realize just how much of himself he’s shown to me, until now. For a second, I regret my words. Maybe I should take back what I said. Maybe I should tell him everything. Maybe he’ll understand. And then...? He’d be stuck with someone like me, and I couldn’t bear that.

It’s not just about him; I couldn’t bear to be seen next to all that perfection that he is. A Prince Charming deserves a Cinderella, not the woman in rags.

And damn it, I hate putting myself down. Or indulging in self-pity. And normally, I don’t. But when I’m with him, I end up comparing my less-than-perfect self with the one-hundred percent alpha maleness that is him. The issue is not with him. It’s with me. It’s a cliché, but it really is not him. It’s me—my insecurities, my feeling that I need to be flawless so I can match him. And yes, he’s gone through a lot himself, but he’s emerged without any physical scars. Unlike me.

“Is that your final decision?” His voice is remote. He holds my gaze, and for a second I see a flash of something like hope in their depths.

A spark I kill when I say, “It is.”

He seems to absorb the impact of what I told him, and stays silent for a beat, another. Then he nods. “Very well, then.”

“Hey, Isla, baby, you’re back!” Zara’s voice, full of life, flows through the phone. I would have preferred a voice call rather than FaceTime, because the last thing I want is her keen eyes picking up on the fact that I haven’t slept since we got back last night. That I seem to have lost my appetite. That I’m currently still in bed and don’t seem to even have the energy to check social media to find out what people are saying to the wedding post we put up before flying to the second island.

Also, I need to stop referring to us as a ‘we.’ There’s no ‘we.’ There never was a ‘we.’ I made sure of that. And it was the right thing to do. It was.

“Isla, you there?” Zara’s voice cuts through my thoughts.

“I’m here.” I shake my head to clear it. No use thinking about what happened and if I could have handled things differently. I wanted to piss him off, and going by how he ignored me completely on the flight home, I succeeded. Still, after a few days of being with him and having him focus his attention solely on me, it feels like I’ve been cut loose from my moorings. Like I don’t know what to do with myself anymore. I do have a job to go to, but frankly, that drive that pushed me to work around the clock to build my business is conspicuous by its absence.

“Everything okay?” she murmurs.

I don’t reply.

“Everything is not okay.” She blows out a breath. “I’m coming over.”

“Hey don’t, Zara—” But she’s already hung up.

Jesus, this woman. Does she have to be so scarily intuitive? Almost as clued in to my moods as him.

During the flight, I suggested I move back into my apartment when we return, and he shot that down. When I said I wasn't sharing his bedroom, he didn't insist. Which was good. Even though a part of me was disappointed. But if he'd insisted, I'd have simply put my foot down or threatened to move out of the house. Not that he would have let me, but I would have tried my darnedest.

Thankfully, it didn't come to that because when we reached his home—not the penthouse, by the way, but a townhouse on Primrose Hill—he asked one of his staff to show me to my room. I asked him why we hadn't returned to the penthouse and he simply said, we're married and this is where we're living now. Then, he'd disappeared into his study.

I didn't see him at all last night. I didn't even hear him come up to bed. I'm on the same floor as him—or so his housekeeper told me. I had my pick of the guest rooms and chose one down the corridor, as far away from his bedroom as possible.

After a solitary dinner in the big formal dining room, I went to bed and tossed and turned until I fell asleep as the sky began lightening outside. I woke up only when Zara called me this morning.

I look at the time and gasp. It's almost noon. No wonder, she was concerned. I must have sounded like I was still out of it, halfway through the day. I drag myself out of bed and head for the bathroom. Feeling more like myself after the shower, I dress in a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, pull on socks, then pad down to the kitchen.

There's no sign of Liam, and his housekeeper doesn't seem too happy to see me in the kitchen. I ask her for coffee, and she tells me she'll serve me in the conservatory adjoining the living room. She seems to be in a hurry to get me out of her kitchen, so I leave and go to where she instructed. It's a beautiful space, actually, with the sun shining through the glass ceiling. I step out onto the patio behind it. Beyond that is a lawn with flowers bordering it, which in turn, leads to an infinity pool. Beyond the pool is the slope of Primrose Hill with a view of London. I stare at the skyline in the distance,

making out the dome of St. Paul's and the tall sliver of white metal that is The Shard.

The housekeeper brings me my coffee and breakfast on a tray. Before I can dig in, another member of the staff, the butler by the looks of it—how many staff did Liam have anyway?—escorts Zara into the room. She's on the list of friends and family I shared with Liam's security team so they'd know to let her in without having to check first.

"Hey you!" She walks over, and I hug her. Finally, someone I know and someone who's not one of Liam's household staff.

"Do you want coffee?" I ask.

She nods.

I turn toward the door. Do I need to go to the kitchen to ask for another cup or—Zara walks to a button that's tucked away to the side of the settee and depresses it.

"Umm, what did you do?"

She holds up five fingers, then four, then three, two— The housekeeper walks into the room.

"You called, Madam?" she asks me.

"She did." Zara tips up her chin. "Can I get a cup for the coffee, please?" She flashes a smile at the woman who half-bows.

"Very well, Madam." She turns and leaves.

I pick my jaw up off the floor and turn to her. "How did you know that's what the button was for?"

"It seemed like the most probable reason for it to be tucked away out of sight." She raises a shoulder.

"Where did you learn to do this Lady of the Manor impersonation?"

"When I was little, I used to practice in front of the mirror. I used to pretend that I had a lot of money and a staff I could order about to do my bidding."

“Really?” I blink.

“When you don’t have much, it’s exciting to live a different life in your head.”

“Oh.” I’m not sure what to say. In the time I’ve known her, she’s never mentioned her background.

“I know you wouldn’t think so to look at me now, but fact is, I come from modest beginnings.” She gestures to herself. Today, she’s wearing a perfectly cut skirt-suit, probably Chanel, designer shoes which, if I’m not mistaken, are Manolo Blahnik’s, and is carrying her Birkin handbag. Her makeup is flawless. She looks like a dead ringer for the woman who played the lead in the second season of *Bridgerton* crossed with a hipper version of the character Meryl Streep played in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Only Zara is a lot more vital. Energy crackles around her like she’s in a hurry to get somewhere.

“Not that we were poor. We never went hungry. And my parents worked their butts off to give me and my brother a good education.”

“You have a brother?”

“He’s my twin.”

“You have a twin brother?” One Zara is already a force of nature; to think there are two of them is mind-boggling.

She laughs. “He’s only a few minutes older than me, but the way he acts, you’d think he was years older. He was very protective of me when we were younger.” Her gaze softens. “I used to have frizzy hair, wore braces, and spectacles. I used to get teased by all the other kids in school. He was always coming to my defense.”

“That must have been so nice to have someone looking out for you.”

“Maybe too much. Thanks to him, most of the boys kept away from me. Everyone but one, that is.”

A weird look comes into her eyes. Guilt? Or remorse, maybe? Then it’s gone, and once more, she is Zara Chopra, superwoman. “It’s why I had to fight extra strong to be heard.

Maybe that's why I still fight so hard to stand out. Maybe that's why I'm constantly testing the limits imposed on me."

The housekeeper arrives with a cup of coffee and places it on the table next to the food.

"Thank you..." I blink. "What's your name again?"

She gapes at me as if I asked her to give up her firstborn.

"Umm, you okay?"

She jerks her head up and down in a rapid movement. "Yes, Madam. It's just, you asked me my name."

"So?" I frown.

"He's never asked me for my name."

"You mean Liam?"

She nods again.

I exchange glances with Zara, then turn to the housekeeper. "And how long have you been working here?"

"Two years, Madam."

"Two years, and he never asked you for your name?" I stare.

"N-no, Madam." She glances from me to Zara, then back to me. "Uh, please don't tell him I said that."

"Of course, not. This stays between us girls." Zara slants me another look. "Doesn't it, Isla?"

"Yes, of course—" I tilt my head.

"Oh, it's Malory, Madam." The housekeeper pats the back of her silver-streaked bun.

"Thank you, Malory." I flash her a smile.

Malory all but blooms under the attention. "Thank you, Madam." She half-curtsies to me.

"Oh, and please call me Isla. And you don't need to" —I wave a hand in her direction— "bow and stuff. I'm not royalty."

She blinks, then dips her head again. “As you wish, Madam.” She walks away.

“Jeez, was that surreal or what?” I murmur as I walk over to take a seat beside the coffee table. “To think, I didn’t ask her name earlier. It’s the first thing I should have done.”

“You’ll learn.” She takes a sip of her coffee.

“Hopefully not. I don’t plan to be here much longer.”

“What? Why?” She sets down her cup. “Wasn’t the honeymoon everything you wanted it to be? I thought it was too short, but figured he had to be back at work. But maybe I thought wrong? Maybe you guys returned because you had a fight?”

“Nothing like that. Quite the opposite. He’s everything I thought he was. No, he’s much more than I thought he’d be. He didn’t put a foot wrong. He was tender and caring, and has a way with words that’s almost as good as the way he—” I firm my lips.

“Almost as good as the way he fucks?” She smiles widely.

Color flushes my cheeks. Which is really strange. I’m not a prude. Okay, so maybe I’ve never come as hard as I did around Liam’s dick, but I’ve had my share of boyfriends. And I’m totally cool with discussing details of my sexual life with my friends. It’s just, with Liam it feels wrong. Things are too new, too raw, too intimate, too personal... So personal and so invasive, I made sure to piss him off enough that when I finally leave, he won’t be too surprised.

“So what’s the problem?” She peers into my face. “If he makes you happy, and from what I’m reading in your eyes, he does, why do you think you need to leave.”

“He’s getting too close to me,” I whisper.

“And that’s a problem?”

I nod. “He’s so much more than he seems. He built up the company he inherited from his father to more than it ever was before. Not only is he powerful, but he’s actually sensitive. He loves reading. He has a library that’s packed with books I wish

I owned. He even gets my pop-culture references and wants to act out scenes from my smut books.”

“So, clearly, he’s not perfect for you at all.”

“He’s too perfect.”

“So are you.”

“I’m not.” I hunch my shoulders. “You know I’m not.”

“You’re a strong, powerful, gorgeous woman who’s an inspiration for so many others—”

I hold up my hand. “I don’t feel very strong or powerful when I don’t even have the guts to show people who I really am.”

“You’ll do it when you’re ready.”

“And what if I’m never ready? What if I never have the courage to come out and share all of myself with the world? What then?”

Liam

I swirl my Macallan in the cut-glass tumbler. It's a thirty-year-old double cask. The fresh honeycomb and apple aroma is potent. And the taste? A complex melody of ginger, vanilla, dried fruits, and oak. Sweet and soft, with a bit of spice and the depth of toffee, with notes of red apple and fig thrown in for good measure.

Almost as evocative as her taste. Almost as memorable as her scent. As lush as her cries when she fell apart under me. As haunting as the secrets in her eyes. I had her investigated, but nothing stood out of the ordinary. Other than her father dying early, her childhood seemed happy. And meeting her family only confirms that. She has friends who are loyal to her, runs a thriving business—which is going to boom with the publicity that continues to roll in from that single video, and the pictures the paps took of us disembarking my private jet and through the windows of our car as we drove home.

I arranged for that, of course. Just enough to keep them salivating, but not too much to spoil the mystique of what we are. What are we, anyway? Another made-for-media couple who will be filing for divorce soon?

At least, we won't be setting any records on that. Small consolation. She thinks I'm going to let her out of the agreement, but she's in for a rude awakening. I married her with one purpose—to get my inheritance—and I plan to ensure

that happens. Which means, she has to stay married to me for whatever length of time that takes. Which gives me a fighting chance. An opportunity I'm not going to squander.

“Deep thoughts for someone who just got married. Shouldn't you be home with the Missus?” Hunter-fucking-Whittington strolls over. He sinks into the armchair next to mine, then places his phone facedown on the small round table between us. We're at the club JJ Kane opened a month ago and which Sinclair Sterling's company 7A invested in. It's smack dab in the center of London, yet hidden away behind one of the pockets of greenery the city seems to abound in.

It's a good place to retreat to when you don't want to be disturbed by anyone. Normally, I'd be at my townhouse if I felt the need for solitude, but she's there, and I'm not ready to face her. Not after that last conversation, when she trampled my heart. Not yet, at least. I also don't want to go to the penthouse which holds too many memories of her. Which is why, like a coward, I came here after work. I could have worked from home, but opted to go into the office for the same reason. Good thing I checked earlier and know I still have my balls. Else I wouldn't have believed it, given this overwhelming need to sulk that seems to have grabbed hold of me.

“I thought they promised privacy here?” I glance around the living-room-like space of the club.

“They do.”

I look at him pointedly. It takes a second for it to sink in, then he chuckles. “Good one, ol' pal. Good to know you haven't yet lost your rapier wit, despite the ol' ball and chain.”

“If you don't have anything meaningful to say, why don't you get your fat face out of here?”

In response, he leans forward, pours a generous splash of whiskey in his glass, and raises it in my direction. “Here's to you and your beautiful bride, and to a long and happy marriage.”

“You’re a little too late with the wishes. It won’t be long before we go our separate ways.”

He lowers his glass without taking a sip. “You’re shitting me.”

I toss back the contents of my glass, then pour out more of the elixir.

“She doesn’t think we have a chance with each other.”

“And you accepted that?”

“Of course, not. But my every overture has been met with an adamant refusal to recognize that what we have is unique.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“For one thing, I’m not letting her get out of the agreement, I—” I firm my lips. What the—? Did I actually blurt that out? That was utterly foolish. Since when did I start making such juvenile mistakes? Did I actually reveal the true nature of the connection between me and my wife? Jesus Christ, looks like I am losing my touch.

“I... see,” Hunter says slowly.

“No, you don’t.”

“Sure I do. You had to be married to claim the rights to your company and your trust fund, so you proposed an agreement.”

I scowl.

“Very mature of you.”

“Don’t patronize me, asshole.”

“Me, patronize you?” He widens his eyes. “What gave you that idea? Besides, it’s what I would have done.”

“You would?”

“Sure—” He pulls his phone out of his pocket and begins to play with it. “You wanted to keep your feelings out of this entire marriage business, while also locking down your inheritance.” He glances down, his fingers flying over the screen as he addresses me. “You wanted to find someone over

whom you have control, and strike an arrangement with her. Everything was good, but for one thing.”

“What?” I’m almost too scared to ask.

“You fell in love with her.” He looks up at me.

I laugh, or at least try to, but it comes out more like a cough. “You’re out of your mind.”

“No, you’re going out of your mind, wondering how, for the first time, things are not going according to plan. You made the mistake of getting your emotions involved, brother. Now, you don’t have a choice but to deal with it.”

“I’m not going out of my mind. I’m simply—”

“Going out of your mind?” he offers helpfully.

“—trying to understand the nature of the problem I’m dealing with.” I scowl

“Sure, you’re using your head to figure out why it is you’re having this emotional reaction to her. You know you’re in over your head, but you’re still trying to deny it.”

His words ring more true than they should. “And since when did you become an expert in relationships?”

“Can’t claim to be one, but I have one advantage over you.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m not you.” At my scowl, he continues, “I have the advantage of having perspective on this situation.”

“No shit.” I toss back the contents of my glass, then reach forward to top up my glass again.

“Don’t you think you should go slow on that?”

“On the contrary, it’s time for me to drink copious quantities of alcohol.”

“Yep, definitely entangled in the quagmire of love.” He smirks.

“Shut the fuck up.” I glance into the depths of my tumbler.

“And now, he stares into his liquor. You do realize you’re conforming to the stereotype of the heartbroken lover in every way?”

“Were you always this annoying?” I glare at him.

“Not as much as Declan.” As if on cue, his phone vibrates. Before I can stop him, he’s pulled up his screen and put the call on speaker.

“Hey, motherfuckers,” Declan singsongs.

I wince. “Clearly, I’m surrounded by men who’ve never moved beyond the student stage of life.”

“Well, hello, gramps, how’s it hanging?” He calls down the line.

“I think I have a very important meeting to go to.” I lean forward as if to rise to my feet, but Stooze 1, aka Hunter, grips my shoulder.

“Oh, no, you don’t. You’re the first of the three of us to tie the knot, and then get yourself into a situation that appears to have no escape. You don’t think we’re going to pass up the chance to ridicule you, do you?”

“And I suppose it’s a coincidence that Declan calls while I’m with you?”

“I *may* have messaged him,” Hunter says without a trace of regret on his face.

I glower at him. “And why would you do that?”

“Knowing I needed back up for what I’m going to say.”

“Which is?”

He scrutinizes my features. “You’re a lot of things but you’re not a liar, or a coward.”

“Are *you* calling me a liar and a coward?” I snap.

He scoffs. “Didn’t you hear what I just said, Kincaid? You’re anything *but* a liar and a coward, which is why I know you’re not going to pretend your feelings don’t exist.”

“Are we turning into a chick-flick here? Is that what this is about? You lost your balls? Is that why we’re sitting around talking about my sentiments?”

“We’re talking about this because, clearly, you’re not going to. And it can’t be easy for your tiny mind to process that, for the first time, it’s not your head but your heart that’s going to have to take the lead. Also,” —he raises his hand before I can open my mouth to protest— “don’t contradict me because I won’t believe you. Not only that, your eyes say the opposite of whatever trash you’re going to spew.”

“Oh, so now you’re reading my unspoken gestures?”

“I’m a politician. I make a living by interpreting the unsaid.”

“And here I thought all politicians were good for was to say things without thinking.”

“That’s what makes me different. And don’t change the topic.”

“I’m not,” I protest.

“Yes, you are,” both Declan and Hunter say at the same time.

It’s bloody annoying when someone you grew up with knows you so well. Better than my own family, actually. Which is also my fault. I couldn’t tell them what I went through when Weston went missing. And I’ve only hinted what happened to Declan and Hunter. She’s the first person I’ve unburdened myself to. And maybe it’s time I told my best friends, too.

“I was taken and held prisoner for a week when I was eighteen.”

“What?” Hunter blinks.

“Eh?” Declan makes a noise of surprise.

“What are you talking about, ol’ chap?”

“I was held captive by the same people who took Weston and the rest of the Seven.”

“Is this your way of deflecting attention?” Hunter scoffs.

“It’s not. You remember the time I went missing for two weeks—”

“I do—” Declan interrupts me. “It was a few months after we met at Oxford. We thought you were shackled up with the older woman you were shagging at that time. But I take it that wasn’t the case?”

I nod. “I managed to track down the whereabouts of Weston’s kidnappers, but instead of saving him and the rest of the boys, I was taken.”

“And then they let you go?” Hunter frowns.

“I escaped.”

“But they kept you for nearly two weeks...” his voice tapers off. “What are you not telling us? What did they do to you?”

“It wasn’t as bad as what you’re thinking... but it was everything else.”

Hunter’s frown deepens. “Did they...?”

“Rape me, fuck no. Abuse me, yes.”

“Fuck!” Hunter’s fingers tighten on his glass. “Did they catch the guy?”

“He’s dead.”

“And you know that because—”

“Michael Soprano, whose father was behind the entire plan of kidnapping Weston and the Seven, told me so.”

“So, he’s aware of what happened to you?”

“No. No one is—except her. And now you two.”

There’s silence for a few seconds, then Declan murmurs, “I always wondered what happened to you during that time. You seemed to drop off the face off the earth, which wasn’t unusual, per se, but then you seemed to shut us out for a period after that. You stopped attending classes, went on a spree

where you seemed to pick fights with everyone possible. You even volunteered for the Fight Club.”

He’s referring to the very originally named street-fighting club organized by the Russian mafia that took place in a warehouse in East London. For a while I was, indeed, on a self-destructive spree. Rather than talk to my parents or a professional about it, I decided to take matters—and my life—into my own hands. I preferred to brawl as a way of dealing with what had happened to me. The fighting and the pain I inflicted on myself by my own choice seemed one way of being able to control my life.

“It was thanks to the two of you that I stopped before I killed myself.”

“I assume you’re referring to the time the two of us intervened in a fight as you were about to be pounded by that Russian giant who looked like Big Foot?” Hunter snorts.

“He smelled worse.” I scowl recalling the fetid odor of unwashed skin and desperation that had wafted off the man. He’d hammered me from the get-go and kept laying into me. And indeed, if the two of them hadn’t found me in that makeshift ring and jumped in to save my ass, I’d have been toast. I wince. It was a good month before I was able to walk properly after the beating I taken at the hands, and under the foot, of that behemoth. It was a wake-up call. Nothing like a few broken bones and the inability to get out of bed to give one a chance to examine one’s sins and one’s past and decide what to do moving forward.

“It didn’t hurt that the two of you gave me a talking to, either,” I murmur.

“Oh good, so you’ll realize this intervention is to stop you for making a bigger mess of your life than it already is?” Declan drawls.

“And maybe you’ll pay heed to what we’re trying to get through your thick skull,” Hunter growls.

He’s not wrong. In fact, I hate to admit that both twatarses make a few good points. It’s what I’d already realized, but

hearing it from them somehow makes it all real.

Not only am I well and truly fucked, but things are about to get worse. It's the kind of life-changing shit that comes about only a few times in a man's life. It happened to me when I was kidnapped, then when my father died, and now... When I realized I'd done the one thing I swore I never would. Fall in love with a blue-eyed, curvy, spit-fire of a woman from whom I won't take no for an answer.

I glance between them, toss back the rest of my whiskey, then reach for the bottle. But this time, Hunter beats me to it. He tops off my glass. "Not preaching to me about the need to keep a clear head?"

He chuckles. "Somehow, I think you're going to need the alcohol this time."

Isla

The sound of something crashing cuts through my sleep. I straighten in the chair where I fell asleep by the fireplace in the living room. My Kindle falls to the floor and I pick it up.

After Zara left, I decided to stay up and read in the library. I wasn't sure where Liam was, and I wasn't going to call him. I'm not really his wife. I certainly wasn't going to act like one now. I wasn't going to nag him or try to discover his whereabouts.

At midnight, I went up to my room, but sleep eluded me. At one a.m., I finally stopped trying to sleep and went to the kitchen, made myself hot cocoa, and settled in front of the fire.

I glance at the antique wall clock now. Four a.m. Something else crashes, this time followed by the sound of cursing. I walk over to the door of the study and peek in. Liam's standing with his back to me. He's at the bar. Next to him, an empty bottle of whiskey lies on the floor. As I watch, he reaches for another bottle of whiskey and misses. "Bugger. Bugging fuck."

"Is that even a swear word?" I walk into the room, but he doesn't turn. He puts out his arm, his actions that of a man who's inebriated but is trying his best to make his limbs obey his commands. He manages to brush his fingertips across the bottle, but yet again, he doesn't grasp the bottle. I draw abreast

with him and lift the bottle. I pour it into the glass and slide it over to him.

He scowls at the liquid in his glass, then turns to me. “No nagging about staying out late or drinking too much?”

I open my mouth, but he holds up his finger. “Oh yeah, I forgot. You’re not really my wife, are you? You might become the mother of my child, but you still wouldn’t want to be my wife, which you made abundantly clear.”

I wince. “I... I’m sorry for what I said earlier.”

“No, you’re not.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “You’re right, I’m not. I meant it.”

“And I mean it when I say, I’m not letting you out of your contract.”

I nod. Nothing I didn’t expect. He didn’t get to be where he is without ensuring people stick to their commitments.

He wraps his fingers about the glass, making no move to lift it.

“How’s your hand.” I glance toward his other hand with the dressing I wrapped about it. “Does it hurt?”

“Not as much as my heart.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Liam, please,” I whisper.

“The only ‘please’ I want to hear from you is when you’re under me with your pussy pried open and around my cock.”

A hot flash of heat detonates in my belly. I’m instantly wet. The throb in my core is only matched by my heart thrashing against my ribcage like a bird yearning to break out of its cage.

Like I’m craving to smash through my self-imposed walls and tell him the truth about me. Why is it so hard? Have I tamped it down so deeply inside that now, when I want to tell him, I’m no longer able to bring it to the fore? Have I spent so long trying to ignore it that now, when I want to reveal it, I’m unable to? Like a muscle memory that’s been relived over and

over again, until it's formed a neural pathway that I can no longer erase? Have I forgotten what it means to speak from my heart? Will I no longer be able to share what it means to go through what I did? What makes me...me? Am I no longer the person I thought I was? Have I lost the ability to see myself in the mirror, and now, when I'm trying to remove the shroud from over my eyes, I can't?

"LadyBird?" I glance up to find he's watching me closely. I thought he was inebriated, but his eyes are clear. Maybe he isn't as drunk as I thought he was? Maybe I'm the one who's been lost all this time?

"What is it?" He searches my features. "Tell me, baby, please."

The tears that spill from my eyes are as cleansing as the moisture that drips down from the opening between my legs.

I reach over, grab the glass from him, and take a gulp of the whiskey. Then, I place the glass back on the counter, grab the hem of my nightshirt, and pull it up and off.

His breath catches. "Isla, what are you doing?" His gaze snaps on my bare breasts and stays there.

I bring my palms up to cradle the weight of the globes. Then I tweak the nipple. It instantly tightens into a pin-point of pain.

His nostrils flare. A vein throbs at his temple. Color flushes his cheeks, and it's not from the alcohol he's consumed. If anything, his eyes are clear. They're burning into me, his irises that blue-green color that appears only when he's experiencing heightened emotions.

I slide my fingers into the waistband of my sleep shorts. I slide them down my thighs, then my knees. I straighten and they pool around my ankles. I kick them aside, then stand with my arms at my sides. He rakes his gaze down my waist to the triangle between my legs. My thighs clench, and my core spasms. My fingers tingle, but I refuse to cover myself. Instead, I spread my legs wider apart.

His entire body hardens; his muscles seem to turn into orbs of solidness that ripple under his skin, like they have a life of their own. I glance at his crotch to find it's tented. The thick column of his cock outlined by the fabric of his pants. My mouth waters. Another fat drop of cum slips out from between my lower lips.

In a flash, he's on his knees in front of me. He grabs the back of my thighs, holds me immobile, then lowers his head and licks the errant droplet.

Heat flushes my skin. My knees weaken. I sway, then dig my fingers into his hair and tug. A growl rips from him, then he swipes his tongue up my pussy lips, and I cry out. He begins to eat me out without hesitation. He attacks my pussy like he's a starving man and he's been served up his favorite dessert. He licks me from my slit to my swollen nub. He swirls his tongue around my cunt. He licks me, tastes me, stabs his tongue inside my pussy and curls it inside. I moan, the sound broken, and intertwined with the messy slurping of his mouth on my most intimate part.

"Liam, please," I gasp.

He leans back then, his mouth and chin glistening with the evidence of my wetness. A fierce sliver of lust sizzles up my spine.

"What do you want?"

"I..." I blink, trying to get my brain cells to function. "I want you."

"What do you want from me?" he asks in an impatient tone.

"I... I want you to fuck me."

"You need to get more specific. Tell me exactly what you want me to do to you."

"You know," I murmur.

"No, I don't. You need to be more specific with what it is you need."

When I hesitate, he releases me, but I grip his hair harder. He grunts.

“What’s it going to be? What do you crave right now, Isla? Tell me. Now.” His voice seems to cut through the noise in my head.

Everything else fades but me, and him, and his wicked tongue, and his cock, and those massive thighs I love to ride, that hard arse of his I love to squeeze, that gorgeous... heart of his, which I know he’s already given to me, and which I don’t deserve. But which I’m going to pretend I own just for the next few hours.

I release my hold on him and meet his gaze. “I want you to fuck all of my doubts out of me. I want you to shag me so hard, I see stars. I need you to come on my breasts. I’m desperate for you to bury your cock in my pussy, then take my arse and—”

He rises to his feet and hoists me up and over his shoulder.

Liam

“What are you doing?” she gasps.

I slap her butt, and there’s no mistaking the shivers that grip her. “You don’t talk until I let you. You don’t come until I allow you to.”

“Wait, what?” This time I slap her butt cheeks one after the other, again and again, until she’s writhing, and panting, and moaning. Then I spank her again. “No more words until I give you permission.”

“But—” I slap her arse so hard, she yells. “What the fuck?”

“No more saying the four-letter word unless it’s translated into an action, you feel me, Ladybird?”

She draws in a breath, and I sense her nod.

“Good.” I spin around and walk toward the bookshelf on the far right. If the library on my island is about catering to the classics, then the one here holds my personal favorites. I press down on the spine of *Venus in Furs* by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and the door slides aside. When I step through, she stills. “You have a secret room? Is it like the red room that Christian Grey has in *Fifty Shades of Grey*?”

I slap her butt again, she huffs. “What the hell, Liam?”

“Remember what I said? You ask me for permission before I let you speak.”

She scoffs.

“Isla,” I lower my voice to a huff, “defy me, and I promise I’ll wallop you so hard, you’ll feel my handprint on your arse for days.”

A shudder grips her, and that’s almost my undoing. She likes it when I talk dirty to her. She loves it when I slap her butt. Can she be any more perfect?

“Fine, fine. Permission to speak, please?”

“That wasn’t very polite,” I smirk. She makes a growling sound at the back of her throat, but when she speaks her voice is subdued. “Permission to speak please?”

“There, that wasn’t too hard, was it? Also, I heard you the first time. Who’s this Christian character?”

“You haven’t heard of *Fifty Shades of Grey*?” she cries in surprise.

“Is it one of your smutty books?”

“It’s *the* smutty book. It’s thanks to *Fifty Shades* that an entire generation of us discovered BDSM.”

“What you’re going to discover now is not ordinary BDSM, baby.”

“Umm, o-k-a-y. Should I be worried?” She giggles, then gasps when I throw her down on the bed. She bounces once, then supports herself on her elbows. Her gaze widens. She takes in the gray, cashmere-covered walls, the thick carpet, the dimmed lighting, the raised table in the corner, until her gaze comes to rest on the closet that covers one wall. The spotlight from above highlights her soft skin, making her seem even more ethereal than usual.

“This looks—”

“Normal?”

“Too normal.” She laughs. “You’re hiding your not-ordinary-BDSM devices in that closet, huh?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you’re trying to scare me.”

“Am I succeeding?”

Her chest rises and falls. Her pupils dilate, until there’s only a circle of black left around the circumference of her irises. It’s answer enough, without any words being spoken. She’s turned on by the thought of what I can do to her. She glances at the closet, then back at me. “Do your worst.”

I can’t stop my mouth from twisting. Goddamn, but she challenged me. Either she’s really not scared of me, or... she’s trying to push me to find out what I’m going to do next.

I move closer to the bed, then in one quick move, I’m on it and over her, balancing my weight on my palms and the toes of my feet as I plank over her.

She shrinks back against the bed, but her eyes are defiant. Color tinges her cheeks. The pulse at the base of her neck beats so fast, it’s like the rapid movement of a hummingbird’s wings.

“You sure about that, LadyBird? Once I start, there’s no stopping me.”

She glances between my eyes.

“How many women have you brought here?”

“What if I tell you, there’s been no one here... before you. What if I tell you I’ve been stocking this room for the day that I’d have the woman of my dreams here to play with me, that from the moment I saw you, I knew it was you. What if I tell you that” —I lower myself until my lips are poised less than a millimeter from hers— “once I fuck you in this room, you’ll be spoiled for anyone else?”

“Is that a promise?”

I rub my nose against hers. “That’s a pledge.”

Her gaze softens. She cups my cheek. “Just for tonight, you can do whatever you want to me.”

“And after?”

She swallows. “I don’t know, Liam. I’m trying to figure this out. Please, be patient with me.”

It’s as close to a promise as I’m going to get from her. It’s not nearly enough, but it will have to do. For now. “Okay,” I say before brushing my lips against hers.

“Okay,” she breathes against my mouth.

“Okay.” I lower my head and sniff her neck, and the scent of her, as always, goes straight to my head. At the same time, the blood rushes to my cock. A groan rumbles up my chest. My biceps tremble. “Goddamn, woman, you slay me every time.”

I sense her smile, then she wraps her arms about my shoulders. “Come inside me, baby.”

My thigh muscles spasm. My dick thickens further. If I stay here another second, I’ll be doing exactly that, and I don’t want to. Not yet.

“Soon.” I lean over her again and kiss her deeply.

She parts her lips, and the taste of her courses through my veins. Like salvation and redemption and deliverance, all rolled into one. She’s my lifeline, and I’m hers. Only she hasn’t realized it yet. And maybe I’m taking undue advantage of her by using everything I have at my disposal to bind her to me, but it’s the only tool I have. Something more potent than my wealth or my power. It’s a chance to show her just how good I can make it for her. And I’m going to press my advantage while I have it.

I push back, then slide to my feet next to the bed. “First, I need to take care of you.”

I prowl over to the cabinet and fling open the doors, revealing the array of my sex toys. Devices I’ve accumulated as lovingly as my books. Both stimulate me mentally and emotionally, but the gadgets also push boundaries and are a source of physical pleasure.

I sense her still, then feel the worry that vibrates off her body.

“They’re completely safe,” I murmur.

“I know.” Her voice is strong, but the underlying hesitation is unmistakable.

I spin around, walk over to her and pull her into my arms. “If you want to stop, just say the word.”

“You mean like a safe word.”

A flush of satisfaction wells in my chest. “Apparently, your smutty books have also given you a basic education.”

“More than you realize,” she says with a secret smile.

“Hmm.” I study her features. “Choose a safe word.”

“Reflection,” she says without hesitation.

I tilt my head. “Reflection.”

She nods.

“And you definitely want to go ahead?”

She nods again.

“You’re definitely sure?”

“I’m sure.” She half-smiles, then slides her hand between us and squeezes my crotch. “As are you.”

“More than you’ll ever know.”

I kiss her forehead this time, then push her onto her back. She goes willingly. I arrange her arms by her sides, lean over and lick one of her nipples, then the other. She shivers. I continue to lave her pointed flesh, then slide my fingers between her legs. I strum her pussy lips and she shudders. She throws her arms about my shoulders and pulls me closer. I bite her nipple, while at the same time, I thrust two fingers, then three, inside her slit.

A moan bleeds from her lips, and she parts her legs. I place my mouth on hers, swallow her other sounds, then increase the intensity of my actions. I weave my fingers in and out of her, then grind my thumb into her clit. Her entire body jolts. The pulse at the base of her throat thuds faster. That’s when I tear my mouth from hers and pull out my fingers.

She blinks at me, eyes glazed with lust, skin flushed. “Liam, I was so close,” she whines.

“Patience, LadyBird.”

I bring my fingers to my lips and lick them clean. Her lips part.

“Much as I hate to do this, it’s for your safety.” I reach over and slide off the ring I placed on her finger.

“Why are you doing that?”

“You’ll see.” I slide off my own ring and place it next to hers.

“Are you wearing any other jewelry?”

She shakes her head.

I survey her features, her neck, her wrists, her ankles, just to be sure. When I’m satisfied there’s no metal on her body, I lean over, and without taking my gaze off of her, I pull a tube from the drawer in the bedside table. Then I smear the lube across her stomach, in and around her pussy, down her inner thighs.

“What are you doing?” she asks in a voice heavy with lust.

“It’s a water-based lubricant and it’ll amplify your pleasure so much more.” I kiss her lips, whisper my lips across her jawline, and nibble on her earlobe. She shivers. I press her eyelids shut, then step back. I head to the cabinet, pull out what I need, then return to her. “Raise your head.”

When she obliges, I tie the silk scarf about her eyes.

She jerks, but doesn’t protest. I test it to make sure it’s not too tight, but tight enough to stop her from anticipating what’s to come.

“Is that okay?”

She nods.

Then I kiss her on her lips again.

“I’m going to restrain your hands and your legs.”

She hesitates, then slowly nods.

“Are you sure about this, LadyBird?”

She draws in a breath, then jerks her chin. “I’m sure.”

“What’s your safe word?”

“Reflection.”

“All you have to do is say it, and I’ll stop.” Then I pull her arms over her head and loop the rope around her wrists before securing them to the headboard. I test the knots. “Is that comfortable?”

She swallows, but when she says, “It is,” her voice is strong.

Once more, I brush my mouth over hers. Her lips part, but I resist the urge to slide my tongue over hers and taste her. I loop the rope around one ankle and tie it to the footboard, then do the same with the other.

I test the knots, then kiss each ankle in turn before I survey her, all spread out for my delectation. “How does that feel?”

A trembling grips her. She opens her mouth, and a whine bleeds from her lips. Her nipples are diamond hard, and moisture glistens on the pink flesh between her thighs.

“Baby, do you want me to stop?”

Isla

“No,” I breathe. “No. Don’t stop.” And I mean it.

I thought he’d simply proceed with what he was going to do. The fact that he’s stopped every step of the way and checked in on me is both reassuring and encouraging, and so hot. There’s something so very sexy about him being concerned for me—almost as much as the need for him to take from me without asking.

The contradictory emotions flare in my chest. My belly tightens, and my clit throbs. I try to squeeze my thighs together, but the restraints stop me. And somehow, that only turns me on more.

“You sure, baby?” He wraps his fingers about my toes and squeezes gently. I can’t stop myself from shuddering, half in arousal, but also because it’s so comforting. The combined sensations are even more arousing.

“Liam, please,” I whine.

“Please what?” I hear the laughter in his tone. Asshole’s toying with me. He knows the more he extends the process, the more turned on I am, and the more I crave his touch.

“Liam!” I warn.

“Tell me what you need, baby.” His voice brushes over my sensitized nerve endings.

My scalp tingles. My palms itch. My skin feels too tight for me, and every cell in my body seems to be holding its breath.

“I need whatever it is you’ve planned for me. Then, I want you to fuck me, hard,” I gasp.

“As you wish.”

I hear his footsteps move away, then the sound of him taking something from the cabinet before he returns to stand next to me. The whisper of silk, then a click, and silence. For a beat, another. My heart begins to race. A heavy pulse begins to throb between my legs.

I sense the warmth of his body a second before the warm, wet slurp of his tongue engulfs my clit. A mewl spills from my lips. Then a buzzing sound fills the air. It stretches my nerve endings. My heart smashes into my ribcage. A panting sound fills the air, and I realize it’s coming from me.

“Liam?” I gasp.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“N... no...”

He winds his fingers between mine, and my pulse rate slowly reduces.

“Better?”

I nod.

“Good.” I hear him rise to his feet, then a feel soft brush of his lips over mine. He keeps his fingers in mine, before touching the buzzing device to the inside of my upper thigh. He retracts it, and my skin instantly warms at the point of contact. My toes curl. He touches me on another spot and a sensation like pins and needles shivers under my skin. Touches me again, and I tremble. His touches are like whispers of sensation, almost not there, and yet I know he made contact because pinpricks of heat streak through my blood.

“Wh... what’s that?”

“A wand massager.”

“Oh.” Not that I know what that means, but whatever it is, it doesn’t sound too bad. In fact, it sounds almost comforting, like something I would voluntarily use on myself.

“Is it like a vibrator?”

“Yes and no.”

“What do you—?” I gasp because he’s touched the device closer to my clit, then still closer. Then he touches it to the edge of my pussy lips, and pleasure zings up my spine. My core clenches. My entire body flushes with that, with delight, with an overload of endorphins. My head spins and he’s only touched me there once. “Oh, my god,” I gasp.

“At your service, baby.”

Jerk. I decide to ignore that ego-filled statement.

“Do it again,” I demand.

He laughs. “You forgot something.”

Fuck asking for permission. “Stop playing with me and touch me, you—”

He touches me on the other pussy lip. This time, the sensations course up my back. What seems like double the streams of rapture grip me. The pressure begins to build in my core. I writhe, tugging at my fastenings.

“Liam, please, please, please.”

This time, he touches me on either pussy lip, once on each side, and I cry out. My back curves, and my thigh muscles spasm. I throw my head back as multiple rivers of sensations slam into me. I open my mouth and scream as the orgasm pounds into me. As I float back down to earth, I open my eyes, and find I can see again—the scarf is gone. I’m still bound and I find Liam between my legs, lapping at my core.

The sight is so filthy, and so primal, and so completely erotic. My arms and legs tremble. A thousand little pinpricks tickle my skin. My breasts hurt with a physical need to feel his mouth on them, and my pussy... Oh, god, he’s all over my pussy. Those messy, greedy noises he makes as he cleans up my cum are so dirty. So salacious, so explicit. No scene I’ve

read so far in my smutty books compares, and we've barely started.

The pressure builds behind my eyes, the beating of my heart increases in intensity. "Liam, please, I can't take it anymore. I can't."

He looks up at me from under those ridiculously thick eyelashes. Then crawls up over my body and kisses me. The taste of him and me merges on my palate. Heat flushes my skin. My heart feels like it's going to burst. When he finally pulls away, we're both out of breath.

"Liam..." I can't say anything more. Somehow, everything I want to communicate is wrapped up in that one word.

"I know." He half-smiles. "But I'm not done with you yet."

"I can't possibly come again," I protest.

"You can, and you will." His voice is hard, his gaze steady. The force of his dominance pins me to the bed. "I'm going to wrap this scarf around your eyes." It's a command, but I recognize it's also his way of telling me if I want to stop him now, he will.

When I nod, pleasure lights up his features. "Good girl."

My entire body lights up like firecrackers on the Fourth of July. The rush of pleasure overflows my cells. I am one big mass of melting jelly and each drop of the squiggly mess has only one aim—to please him. He owns me. He possesses me. He's stamped himself on me. I'll never be free of him.

And oh, god, I knew this would happen. I knew this last night was a mistake, but I couldn't stop myself. And I'll have to pay the price. Just not yet.

He wraps the cloth around my eyes, and the tension in my body instantly recedes. It's as if, as long as I don't see the world, as long as I'm in this room with him, I can push everything else aside. I don't have to make choices, or face decisions, or deal with the consequences of my actions. I can simply be his submissive, his wife, the woman who's happy to lay spread-eagle in front of him and allow him to have his way with me.

Then I sense him move around again. There's another click, and a buzzing fills the air, fainter this time, but the effect on my body is even more intense. Like a well-trained pet, heat sweeps through my blood and my pulse rate ratchets up. Every part of me feels so much lighter, more ready. More sensitized.

It's almost not a shock when what feels like pinpricks of delight trail over my leg. It's like a comb being pulled over my skin, only so much lighter, yet also, heavier. From every point of contact, pleasure pools under my pores, all joining up to form a network of lust that spreads through my veins, my cells, and my very flesh. It grows and grows, until I'm writhing and moaning and trying to find relief from the emptiness that crawls at my core. I would cry and beg him to let me come. I *want* to cry and beg him to let me come, but my brain cells seem to have lost the ability to form words, and my tongue isn't cooperating, either.

Then, just as suddenly, the buzzing stops. For long seconds, I twitch and jerk and lay there, gradually coming down from the wicked space he took me to. I sense him moving about, then something big and blunt teases my puckered hole.

"Liam?" I groan. I want to protest more, but the happy hormones coursing through me have turned my muscles to jelly. I feel like I'm floating. Like I've turned to liquid and am one happy daub of putty he can mold into any shape he wants.

He must have slathered this piece of hardware with more lubricant, for combined with my very happy relaxed state, it slips in through the ring of muscle easily. I draw in a breath, my backchannel contracting around the device. It's full and stretches me, but as my body adjusts, the feeling fades, to be replaced by anticipation.

That weightlessness in my belly multiplies, until every part of me is alive and open and squirming with need. A vibration whispers through the air, then through me. I gasp. It's not completely unexpected, but oh, god, that thing quivering up my backside is like nothing I've experienced before. The tingling leaches out through my skin, my blood, and to my extremities. Coiling in my nipples, my toes, my fingers, my

clit. Every part of me is responsive and open and ready and waiting. My very breath is charged. The blood pumps at my temples; fills my pussy until it feels painfully engorged.

And waiting...waiting. I curl my fingers into fists, and dig my heels into the mattress, attuned to his breathing, his every move. Then, just as suddenly, the device is switched off.

The bed dips, and I gasp. I sense his heat between my legs, the heaviness of his bulk as he squeezes in between my thighs. He drags his fingers across my clit, and I cry out. Sparks streak out from the point of contact. Every part of me is so sensitized that the orgasm threatens to sweep over me. My pussy weeps, and he seems to realize how close I am to the edge, for he cups my face and leans in until his breath grazes my lips.

“You will not come until I give you permission,” he growls.

The part of my hind brain trained for survival acknowledges his total supremacy over me. I want to answer him, but the words seem to have dissolved into the liquefied pool of need that my body has turned into.

Once more, he seems to understand me, for he drags his finger under my lower lip. “Nod, if you hear me, baby.”

I nod.

“Good girl.” He presses his lips to mine, but before I can open my mouth and entice him to deepen the kiss, he’s gone, only for the thick head of his cock to replace his fingers at my slit.

Liam

She's so close, her entire body vibrates with the need for release. Sweat beads her chest, her breasts are swollen, her skin is flushed, and she strains at the bindings.

I pause with the head of my cock at her entrance. She's more open than she's ever been under me. More vulnerable than she's ever allowed herself to be. She's panting, her breath coming in heavy gasps. She writhes under me, trying to chase the intrusion that is my shaft.

I hold myself without moving. Grit my teeth to stop myself from plunging inside and taking what's mine. I need this to be so good for her, she won't want to leave me. I need this to be the most intense orgasm she's ever had. I need this to be the kind of experience that will join her with me, so she'll always remember what it feels like to be truly mine.

I pull back, and she groans, "Liam, don't tease me."

"Believe me, baby, that's the last thing on my mind."

I sit back on my heels and remove the restraints from about her ankles, then reach between us and grasp the E-Stem electrode that I used to tease her back channel. I work it out of her slowly.

She shivers and makes mewling noises that drive me out of my head with desire.

I replace it with my fingers. She moans, tips up her chin, then tilts her hips so my fingers slip deeper inside her. A groan emerges from her mouth and her lips part.

I reach up and pull off the blindfold, then bend and kiss first one closed eyelid, then the other. She opens her eyes, and I snag her gaze with mine.

I position myself between her thighs, and in lunge forward and impale her. She opens her mouth, but no noise emerges. Her pupils are blown, the skin stretched across her cheekbones. I reach up and undo the ropes from about her wrists. Instantly, she winds them about my shoulders. I slide my hand under her upper thigh, urging her to lock her legs about my waist, then I begin to move. I thrust into her slowly, watching as her features contort with pleasure. I plunge into her, grind my pelvic bone into her clit, and she cries out. Her pussy clamps on my dick, she throws back her head and she's so close to the edge, so close. I slow down and she groans.

“Liam, please, please, let me come.” Her voice is merely a thread.

I plunge inside her and she tightens her legs around me. I push the hair off of her forehead, then kiss her deeply with my eyes open. She kisses me back, and it's like we are one body, one mind, one soul. I've never been this close to a person before. My heart thunders in my chest. Sweat beads my shoulders. Every part of me hurts, and yet, has never been this awake before. I hold her gaze as I begin to move. I piston my hips, and bury myself inside her to the hilt. She digs her heels into my back and holds me captive. I bottom out inside her, and the ball of pressure at the base of my spine tightens.

I pull back, draw in a deep breath, and this time, when I plunge forward, my entire body shudders. Vibrations grip me and shudder through her. One melded together organism.

“Come with me, right now.”

She cries out as she shatters. I lower my head to the curve of her shoulder and bite down as I follow her over the edge. My orgasm seems to go on and on, and I empty myself inside her. Flecks of black dot my vision, my entire body is one ache,

one cry, one pure length of satisfaction as I lean more of my weight into her.

“I’m too heavy for you.” I try to move but she doesn’t let go.

She shakes her head, holds me close and I stay there as the sweat dries on both of our bodies. When I finally turn on my back and pull her into my chest, she curls into me, her breathing already deep. I pull the cover-up over our bodies and allow my eyelids to shut. When I open them again, she’s gone.

Goddamn, how could I have slept so deeply that I didn’t realize she crept out of bed? I’m a light sleeper, and the slightest sound usually awakens me. Thanks to the time I was taken and held captive, I always sleep with my system tuned into any sign of danger.

Yes, it’s PTSD, and I did try to see a therapist, but when she seemed more inclined to proposition me than offer me suggestions on how to manage my trauma, I walked out of her office in a huff and decided not to see another. Who knew? The only therapy I needed was fucking a woman I care about. A woman I enjoy holding, kissing, and making love to. A woman whose presence calms me, whose scent arouses me, whose skin is softer than silk, whose curves are made to melt against mine, who’s clever enough to pit her wits against me, who can stand up to me, whose laughter has become the soundtrack of my life in such a short time. Whose mere presence makes me breathless to touch her, and who I can’t bear to be separated from, not for a minute longer.

I swing my legs over the bed and stand up. I reach for my wedding ring and notice hers is still there. Strange. Maybe she forgot to take it with her when she left the room? A cold sensation slithers down my spine. I slip on my wedding band, pull on my clothes, then pocket her ring and walk out. I head up the stairs to her bedroom, but she’s not there. I head to the closet and the clothes are still there. So is her suitcase. I can’t find her handbag, though. I stalk to the bathroom and find her cosmetics are still on the counter. This makes no sense at all.

A cold sensation leaches into my veins. Icicles invade my blood. I race up the corridor to the first guest room on this floor, then the other. I'm not surprised to find she's not there. She can't have left. Her clothes—the clothes I bought her—are still here. Her ring is still here. But her bag is missing. I head back to her room and to the closet. Pull open the drawers to find half of them are empty. Her underclothes—the ones I'd had delivered from her apartment—are gone. The other side contains the lingerie I bought for her. I open the other drawer. Once again, the night clothes I bought for her are still here. But the ones she brought with her are gone.

The band around my chest tightens. My ribcage squeezes so tightly my lungs burn. I spin around and survey the contents of the closet. The suitcase is here because it's the one I bought for her. But the smaller traveling bag which belonged to her is gone. I missed that the first time.

I dash out of the closet and sprint down the steps. When I tear into the kitchen, my housekeeper turns to me.

“Where is she?”

“You mean your wife?”

“Who else could I be talking about?” I growl.

“She left early this morning.”

My guts churn. “She left, and you didn't think of telling me?”

“She's your wife, sir, I wouldn't dream of stopping her.”

“Fuck!”

I turn to leave when. “Mr. Kincaid, it's not my place to say this—”

“Then don't,” I bite out.

In the silence that follows, I squeeze the bridge of my nose.

“I'm sorry,” I finally say through gritted teeth.

I hear her sharp inhale, then, “That's the first time you've apologized to me, sir.”

I spin around to face her. “It’s the first time for a lot of things for me, apparently,” I say bitterly.

She nods and doesn’t seem surprised by my vehemence.

“What is it then?”

She blinks. “She wasn’t happy, sir. Since she moved in here, she’s been on her own.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“She’s your wife, as you said, sir. And newly married, and a little lost in this house.”

“Are you saying it’s my fault she left?”

“Of course not, sir. It wouldn’t be my place to say that, sir.”

“And yet, you did.”

“I’m merely saying, she may have left because she’s lonely, but these things happen in the early days of marriage. It’s a period of adjustment for the both of you.”

“You don’t say.”

The side of her mouth kicks up. “You’re a resourceful man, sir. I’m sure you’ll be able to convince her to return.”

Even a week ago, I’d have agreed. Now, I’m not sure about my influence when it comes to her. Oh, as long as we’re in bed, I know I can bend her will to do as I want, and I know she enjoys it, too. But outside of it? I’m not sure about anything anymore.

“Thanks,” I murmur. I’m about to leave when I turn to ask, “What’s your name again?”

“Malory, sir.”

“Keep up the good work, Malory.”

Her jaw drops. I scowl. Have I really not thanked her before or asked her name before this? Honestly, I haven’t felt the need for either. But I’m realizing if I want to find a way to get her back, I need to start with figuring out how to rejoin the human race. It’s a necessary evil, but my gut says I need all the

help I can get to get her back, starting with the aid of my own staff.

I walk out of the kitchen, pull out my phone, and swipe to the app. When I click it, it opens to reveal a blue dot in South London.

If she thinks I'd let her leave without knowing where she is every second, she's so wrong. Since my kidnapping, one thing I've made sure of is to always know where my near and dear ones are. It's why I retained Karina Beauchamp's services.

I'm about to head to the car when my phone rings.

Isla

“Liam?” I brace myself for his questions. I’m sure he woke up and found me gone. I know I only left a few hours ago, so technically, I could be out getting coffee or for a run, but Liam’s too sharp.

I’m sure he noticed my ring on the bedside table, and that my clothes and handbag are gone. Also, after last night, and the way he manipulated my body and commandeered my orgasms, and made me come so hard and so often in such a short period of time... The relationship between us isn’t the same. Things have shifted, changed, and become even more complicated.

I promised myself one night; I hadn’t thought so much would change in so little time. I entered that room confident I’d be able to leave him. Confident I’d be able to stick to the agreement he’d laid out. That once I got pregnant and had a baby, we could separate and co-parent.

But when I woke up this morning to find him curled about me, with his arm under my neck, his chest plastered to my back, and his legs twined with mine—his warmth around me and his scent cocooning me... I knew then, I want to wake up like this every morning. With him next to me and our children down the corridor.

Then we'd have breakfast, and one of us would drop the kids off at school, and we'd go to work and return to a family dinner every night. It's a dream, so normal in its scope, so simple in its ordinariness, and yet, it's everything I want. Yes, I do want my wedding planning company to be world-renowned, and I want to organize spectacular weddings and be known for my original ideas and for pulling off the most dazzling spectacles. But I also want to own this dream.

Until I saw those images, I didn't realize how much I want it. Maybe from the moment I saw Liam, I've been building toward this. Maybe that's why I told Lila to leave him. Maybe my subconscious had known right away he was the guy for me, which is why I also hated him on sight... Or, at least, I thought I did. Perhaps I've simply been fighting the inevitable. The future's closing in on me and I'm not sure I'm ready for it.

He's my future, and I still haven't told him my biggest secret. How can I even think of sharing his life without showing him my true self?

I needed time to think. I needed distance to figure out my next steps. It's why I left and came to Zara's place. I didn't dare go to my apartment, knowing that'd be the first place he'd look. Not that he couldn't track me down at Zara's, but at least, I thought it'd buy me some time.

That's before I told Zara the entire story, and she convinced me to call him.

Now, I swallow and wait for him to say something. The silence stretches. He's so quiet, I can't even hear his breathing. But I know he's there. I can sense his presence. I can picture his features hardening, the pulse at his jaw ticking as he glares into the distance waiting for me to speak.

"Liam," —I clear my throat— "I know you must be pissed at me, but I have my reasons."

He doesn't reply.

"Just let me work things out, and I'll return, I promise. I can't think straight when I'm near you. And staying under your roof, everything reminds me of you. It's messing me up.

It's warping my decision-making process. I need to figure this out so we can both move forward, Liam."

He's still silent.

I glance up at Zara, who's frowning at me from across the length of the living room. She raises her eyebrows, and I shake my head.

"Talk to him," she mouths before she leaves to give me some privacy.

I nod, turn to glance out the window and lower my voice. "I have feelings for you, Liam. I know I've never told you that, but you must have sensed it. And after last night, I can't keep them hidden from you. What you did to me, how you made me come with so much mastery, how you treated my body like it was yours... It was mind-blowing. Now I know what people mean when they say 'the world shifted.' That's what last night was, Liam. It's like nothing I've ever experienced. I didn't even think it was possible to be aroused so much, to come so hard that I swear, I saw stars. It felt like some kind of a religious rite of passage. And I'm sorry I left without waking you up. But I knew you'd talk me out of it. I knew you'd say or do something that would distract me. It's why I left. Because I need a little time."

"How long?"

I blink. I hadn't expected him to ask that. To be honest, I was sure he'd disconnect on me, or rage at me, or maybe, sic his lawyers on me. After all, we had a deal and I'm rescinding it.

"I... hadn't thought about that."

"How long, Isla?" I sense the impatience in his voice.

"It's difficult for me to put a timeline to this."

"So, you're going to stay away for an indeterminate amount of time, and I just have to deal with it?"

"Y-yes?"

Silence again.

“This is our future, Liam. Our child’s future, if I’m pregnant.”

I sense him shift his position.

“I wasn’t rough with you last night, was I? I got carried away in the heat of the moment. You make me lose my mind, and say and do things that are out of character. And if I hurt you, I’ll never forgive myself.”

I swallow. “You didn’t hurt me. You were... dominant, demanding—”

“I hurt you.”

“No, you didn’t. If anything, you showed me how much I like to be told what to do in bed.”

“I know.”

I hear the smirk in his voice a-n-d, there he is. The alphahole I know. It’s a relief to hear him speak in that smug tone. It’s so very Liam. It means he gets what I’m saying. I hope. Some of the tension drains from my shoulders.

“I’m here at Zara’s place.”

“I know.”

“What?” I frown.

He blows out a breath. “I know. I put a tracker on your phone.”

“You what?” I swivel around to find Zara frowning at me. “What did you say?” I ask again.

“I put a tracker on your phone, Isla. It’s one of my quirks. I was kidnapped. I lived to tell the tale. I swore it would never happen to me or to anyone I love. I take precautions. I protect my own. Deal with it.”

That arrogant jerkface.

“And what if I don’t want to?”

He chuckles; his dark voice shivers down the phone and all my pores seem to pop. My stupid pussy instantly clenches. My thighs quiver.

“Don’t ask questions you already know the answer to.” He disconnects.

“What the—” I move the phone away from my ear, and glare at the screen.

“What happened?” Zara comes toward me.

“He hung up.”

“He hung up?” She blinks.

“After he told me that he’s tracking me through my phone.” I stare at the device.

“I see,” Zara says softly.

“You don’t sound surprised.” I scowl at her.

“He’s a gazillionaire. He gets what he wants. And he wants you. So no, I’m not surprised.”

“But—”

She raises her hand. “I’m not condoning what he did. I think it’s wrong, and if I were in your place I’d be pissed with him. All I’m saying is, he’s a powerful man. You knew that when you married him—”

“Fake married.”

“You knew he wasn’t above bending the rules.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“How do you think he got to where he is? Hard work?”

My cheeks flush.

“Oh, my, you really did think it was his work ethic that made him what he is.”

I shuffle my feet. “I’m not innocent. I knew he’d have shades of gray to his character. He’s probably done things that were not one-hundred percent on the right side of the law. I knew that. But there’s a difference between knowing and being faced with evidence that confirms it.”

“Hmm.” She pulls up her phone and her fingers race across the screen.

“What are you doing?”

“Cancelling my appointments for today.”

“Aren’t you like the Queen of Spin or something?” I refer to the title the press has bestowed on her.

“I have been called that, yes. But I am sure my team can manage without me for a few hours.”

She continues to type furiously on her screen.

“You’ve been on your phone all morning. What are you up to?”

“Me? Nothing,” she says casually. Too casually.

“Don’t even try to look innocent. It’s a look that doesn’t suit you.”

She chuckles. “The helpless little female was never my thing. It’s probably why I find it so difficult to hold down a relationship. Most men seem to prefer women who are dependent on them emotionally.”

“Maybe you just haven’t found the right man.”

“I don’t think there’s anyone out there who’d even attempt to tame me.”

“Hunter seems like he wouldn’t hesitate to take you up on that.”

She snorts. “Hunter-twatface-Whittington can go fly a kite.”

“Hmm.” I survey her features. “I think you protest too much. Maybe the two of you can’t stand each other because you’re secretly attracted to each other.”

“Please. Even if we did get together physically,” —she holds up a finger— “and that’s a big if, the fact that we come from such different backgrounds means there’s no future together.”

“You only need to fuck him, not marry him.”

“I’d rather fuck someone more malleable, thank you very much.” She flicks her hair over her shoulder.

“Oh wow, so you really are attracted to him. It’s why you’d rather not consider a purely physical relationship with him.”

“There’s also this little issue of what a scandal it would be if the two of us were caught together. Can you imagine? The press would have a field day. And I’m sure it won’t hurt him as much as it would me.” She purses her lips. “Unfortunately, even I have to admit that my being a woman is a disadvantage in this situation.”

“You’ve given this some thought, huh?”

She flushes, then tips her nose in the air. “Of course not.”

I laugh. “You sure have, missy. You’ve had secret erotic dreams about Mr. Tight-Arse Whittington. Admit it.”

“I have not, I—”

The doorbell rings. The relief on her face is unmistakable. She spins around, goes to the door, and throws it open.

“Hey babe!” Amelie walks in first. She walks toward me and hugs me, then steps back.

Summer walks in followed by Karma. Both women make a beeline toward me, and hug and kiss me.

Summer tries to hug Zara, who pats her on her shoulder. I stifle a laugh. Zara’s going to have to get over being uncomfortable with gestures of affection if she wants to hang out with us.

A man in a butler’s uniform carrying paper bags with the logo of a well-known restaurant follows in their footsteps.

“You brought your own lunch?” I laugh.

Summer pushes her hair back from her face. “It’s only noon, but since we’re eating for four between Karma and me, and since we don’t trust Zara’s cooking, no offense—”

“None taken,” Zara chirps.

“—we came prepared with food,” Karma completes the statement.

The three women walk over to the sofa and park themselves there.

“Where would you like this, ma’am?” the liveried man asks.

“In the kitchen is good.” Summer waves a hand in the air.

“Very good, ma’am.” He walks into the kitchen, places the bags there, and returns in a few seconds. “Will that be all, ma’am?”

“Thank you, Jeeves.” Summer throws him a flying kiss.

The man’s ears redden. “Of course, ma’am.” He turns and leaves, shutting the door behind him.

“Is his name really Jeeves?” Zara asks.

“No, but he doesn’t mind if I call him that. He takes it as a compliment.” Summer drums her fingers on her stomach.

“Are you hungry?” Karma pushes up to her feet. “I am. I’m going to get the food.” She heads for the kitchen.

“I’ll help you,” Amelie follows.

“Wait, hold on, what are you all doing here?” I scowl at the women.

“We came to offer moral support, of course,” Summer says sweetly.

“So that’s why you were on the phone?” I scowl at Zara, who has the grace to look ashamed.

“I figured we needed all the support we could get.”

“I came here because I needed space to think,” I admonish her.

“And you’ll think much better when you have your girlfriends to bounce ideas off.”

Zara’s phone buzzes. She looks at it, then begins to type again. “Solene’s on a flight back to LA, so she can’t make it, but she’s rooting for you.”

“Is there anyone you haven’t called? How about the guy at the corner shop? Or maybe the bartender at your local pub?” I

huff.

Zara pretends to think. “That’s not a bad idea, actually. He’s a good-looking dude with this man bun, and he always has good advice for the lovelorn—”

The bell rings again.

“In fact, I think that’s him.”

“What?” I gape. “You’re kidding right?”

“Nope,” she says with a straight face.

The bell rings again.

“Tell me you’re kidding. Zara, if you’ve actually called him, I’ll—”

“Relax, of course I’m kidding. I actually don’t know who it could be.” She walks to the door and opens it. A woman I haven’t met before steps through.

“Karina?” Summer blinks. “What are you doing here?”

Liam

I sprawl back in my seat and survey the glass of whiskey in my hand. It's only noon, but what the hell? It must be six p.m. somewhere in the world, right? I take a sip, and the alcohol goes down smoothly. It hits my stomach and sets off a pleasant heat. My computer screen dings with an incoming email. For the first time in my entire career, I can't be bothered. I shut down my computer, then pick up my glass of whiskey again. My phone rings. It's a FaceTime call from my mother. Damn. How does she know when it's the most inopportune time to call me? I can't ignore her call. I can't. I hit the audio on the FaceTime call.

"Liam? Why are you on audio?" my mother demands.

"Because I don't want you to see me on video," I retort.

"Are you being impertinent, young man?"

I wince. The only person a grown man can still fear is his mother, apparently. I place my glass on the desk. Then for good measure, push it to the side, so there's no chance of it being seen on screen. Not that I have anything to hide from her, but it would take a lot of explaining. And even then, I'm not sure I'd be able to convince her of my necessity to drink at midday.

I turn on the video screen and my mother's face appears.

"There you are," she smiles at me.

“Hello, mother.” I roll my shoulders, trying to loosen the knots in them.

“Why do you look so tired? And you’ve lost weight since I last saw you.”

“I’m busy, mother. It’s the middle of a working day.”

“Not so busy that you’ve been drinking.”

I gape, then snap my teeth together. “I haven’t been drinking.”

“Oh, psst. You think I don’t know you and your brother used to sneak whiskey from your father’s bar when you were teenagers?”

“You knew?” I ask cautiously. Where is she going with this?

“A mother always knows,” she says archly. “Like I know you’re sulking right now.”

“Mother, I don’t sulk.”

“And it’s because you had a fight with your new wife.”

“We didn’t have a fight.”

Not unless you count the fact that she needs space, and I don’t understand what she means by that. Why the hell does she want to put distance between us? Can’t she stay under my roof and work out whatever it is she needs to work out? Why is it that she has to go off to a friend’s place for that? It can only mean she doesn’t want to be with me, but she’s fine to be with her friends. So, she doesn’t really need space in an abstract concept; she only wants to keep me at arm’s length. I place my phone on the table then jump up and begin to pace.

“Your restlessness tells me otherwise.” My mother’s voice follows me. “I assume she wants something and you want something else?”

“Isn’t that the definition of marriage?”

“It’s the definition of life. Marriage is when you try to find common ground.”

“You’re going to tell me next to compromise.” I crack my neck.

“Do you want to compromise?”

“I don’t think I should be having this conversation with my mother.”

“On the contrary. Given I have thirty years more experience at being married than you, I’m the right person to tell you that you need to follow your instinct.”

“And what if my instinct says to go against what she asked me for?” I grip the back of my chair. “She wanted some space to figure out where her head’s at.”

“That sounds reasonable. Getting married is a big change for anyone. But the woman seems to take the brunt of it, in most cases. Remember, you knew you were heading toward getting married for a while, but you only gave her a few days to adjust to it. And then, she’s the one who’s had to leave her home and move in with you. It stands to reason, that’s a lot of change to digest.”

“It’s not only that; she seems to have something on her mind she’s grappling with. But apparently, she doesn’t trust me enough to tell me about it.” I rub at my temple.

“Maybe she doesn’t trust herself enough,” my mother says softly.

“Maybe.”

“Either way, I’m sure the two of you’ll work things out.” My mother’s features soften. “What you’re going through is no different from what many couples go through. I’m sure you guys will figure things out.”

“Somehow, I’m not that sure.”

She laughs. “It’s the first time I’ve heard you voice doubt about something.”

“Apparently, it’s the time for many firsts in my life.” I lean over and pick up the phone. “Thanks for the advice, Mother.”

“Oh hang on, I almost forgot why I called you. Nadine and I want to jointly host you and Isla for lunch at her place, this Sunday.”

I shuffle my feet. “Considering she’s not staying with me at the moment, I’m not sure if that’s possible.”

“You underestimate the power of mothers.” Her eyes gleam.

I scowl, “What have the two of you planned?”

“Nothing. Can’t we have our children over for a family lunch?”

“Don’t try the innocent act, Mother.”

She laughs. “This is completely harmless, I promise. You bring yourself. I’m sure Nadine will ensure Isla turns up.”

If I can get to see Isla this way, then sure, I’ll go.

My mother must read the satisfaction on my face, for she nods. “Good, I’ll see you at twelve-thirty. At Nadine’s place. Don’t be late.”

She hangs up. I place the phone back on the desk when the door opens. I glance up, and it’s as if a bolt of thunder has hit me in my chest. My lungs burn. My throat closes. Every pore in my body seems to stand to attention. For there, framed in the doorway, is Isla. She’s wearing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt with a leather jacket over it. Her face is makeup free, yet she’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

She steps inside the room, then shuts the door behind her. I straighten and watch her as she approaches. She circles the desk, places her handbag on it, then pauses in front of me.

She tips up her chin and her blue eyes hold mine. I search her features, trying to read her mood, but for the first time, I’m unable to. If I were to hazard a guess, I’d say it’s a mixture of surprise, mixed with a little bit of fear, all of which is underlined with a sense of resolve.

We glance at each for a few seconds, then she holds out her hand. “Liam.”

I take her hand, raise it and kiss her knuckles.

Her features crumple. She tries to pull away but I hold on. “Isla, baby.”

“Don’t. Please. I need to tell you something first, and if you act so tender, I won’t be able to.”

“What is it?” I look between her eyes. “You can tell me anything, LadyBird.”

She swallows. “Please, let me go.” There’s so much pain in her voice, so much anxiety, so much everything. A cold hand grips my heart. “What is it?”

She tugs on her hand again, and this time, I let her go. She draws in a breath and squares her shoulders.

“Karina Beauchamp came to see me today.”

“Oh?” I narrow my gaze.

“She told me what you did.”

“What did I do?” I keep my tone casual.

“All this time, I was wondering why there hasn’t been any trolling or anything negative about our wedding. I thought it was because I’d misjudged the level of interest in our lives. I thought maybe people didn’t care that I was the wedding planner before I became the bride. I should have known that was not the case. I should have known it was thanks to you that the reaction to our wedding was largely positive.”

I hold her gaze for a few seconds, then nod. “She told you.”

“She told me how you asked her to shut down the trolls. To reach out to the influencers and pay them enough to ensure they’d only say positive things.”

I raise a shoulder. “It was important to me that you not get stressed over the announcement. I wanted you to enjoy our honeymoon. I take care of what’s mine, Isla.”

She shakes her head. “I should have known you’d do something like this. Should have known you’d use your

influence and power to shut down anyone who'd dare raise a voice against our wedding."

"You were worried about it. I knew how to defuse the situation. I did it."

She half-laughs. "Only you would be arrogant enough to be able to shut down the internet itself."

"Not the internet. Only those who'd have misused it to cause you pain."

"I don't even know what to say to that." She rubs her forehead.

"Don't say anything. I don't regret what I did. I'd do it all over again if I had a chance."

"Do you want me to thank you for it?"

"Do you want to thank me for it?"

She bites down on her lower lip, and my cock twitches. Blasted thing has a mind of its own, and right now, is not the time to think how gorgeous she looks. How her strength comes through in her clear-eyed gaze. How she holds herself. She's on a mission. And there's nothing as hot as a woman who knows her mind. My woman. This firecracker of a female is all mine.

"Isla?" I soften my voice. "What is it?"

She swallows, then squares her shoulders. "There's something I need to do." She picks out her phone from her bag, opens the camera, switches it to selfie mode then holds it up and asks, "Do you mind?"

I glance at the phone, then back at her. "You want me to hold the phone up so you can shoot a video?"

She nods.

"Is this for your social media feed?"

She nods again.

"Do you want to announce that we're splitting?"

She doesn't reply. Any emotion I saw on her face before is gone, replaced with steely determination.

"You *do* want to announce that we're splitting."

"Please, can you just hold up the camera?"

My pulse booms in my ears. A trickle of sweat runs down my back. The only other time I was this scared was the day I refused to do as my kidnapper demanded. I looked at his face and knew, that was the day I was going to escape or die trying. No, I lie. That was easier. I had nothing to lose then, except my life. Today, I'm going to lose more than my life. I'm going to lose her.

"Liam, please," she whispers. Something shines deep in her eyes. A plea. An appeal. An entreaty. I can't refuse her. I never have been able to refuse her. All she has to do is ask, and I'll always give her anything she asks for. I'd set the world on fire for her. I'll fight her enemies. Kill anyone who dares hurt her.

But what do I do when I'm the person she seems to not want to let into her life? I take the phone, trying to hide the tremor that grips me, and hold it up. She steps up closer so she's standing in the circle of my arms, then turns so we are framed on screen. Her gaze meets mine in the camera. She nods, and I feel equal parts dread and relief. I don't know what to expect, but I start recording because that's what she asked me to do.

For a few seconds, we stay silent. Then she speaks to the camera, "There's something I need to tell you. Something I've hidden from you. Something I haven't been able to admit myself. But the time has come that I need to do this for myself, and for so many others like me who haven't been able to share their true selves with the world. This is for them, and for my husband. But most of all, this is for me." She raises her gaze to mine once again. "No more hiding," she whispers, then reaches up and pulls off her hair.

Isla

I wish I could tell you I practiced that little speech I made to the camera, but I hadn't. When I heard from Karina what Liam had done for me, it was like a veil was lifted. That knot of doubt that I hadn't even realized I carried under my breastbone simply dissolved. I knew what I had to do. If he'd gone to such lengths to make me feel safe, if he felt so much for me, it was only right I share with him the one secret that stood between us.

I hadn't planned on doing it so publicly. Not until that moment when I walked up to him, looked into his eyes, and knew it was best I get it all out in one go. So he'd know what I am. So he'd understand the reason we couldn't be together anymore.

I pulled up the camera app on the phone, turned on the selfie mode, said my bit, and removed my wig. I typed up a short post in which I mentioned I have alopecia. Yeah, I'm courageous, but not enough to say it aloud. Yet. But at least, I said it in writing. And maybe it was a tad dramatic to whip off the wig like that, but there was no easy way to do it, was there?

Now, the wig hangs from my fingers. I place it on the table, then pull off my wig cap so my bald head is visible to everyone.

On-screen, Liam's face is frozen in shock. He seems incapable of action. So, I take the phone from him and upload the video to my social media feed. There are no other words in this post. I think it's quite self-explanatory.

Then, I slide the phone into my handbag, along with my wig and my wig cap. When I glance at him over my shoulder, the expression on his face is somewhere between surprise and anger. He hates how I look. He hates me for what I hid from him. I expected as much.

I walk out from behind the desk and head to the exit. I reach for the door and begin to pull it open when footsteps sound behind me.

The next moment, he's there. He slams the door shut, turns, and leans against it. "Where do you think you're going?"

His voice is controlled. I don't dare raise my gaze, so all I can see of him is his chest and shoulders. The muscles of which are bunched and stretch the jacket of his suit.

"Let me go."

"No."

"I... I said what I came to say. I'm ready to leave."

"I'm not ready for you to leave."

A cloud of anger spools off of him and slams into my chest. It's visceral in its intensity. The air between us is thick with emotions... with annoyance... with exasperation... and with rage.

A ball of sensation takes up residence in my throat. It feels like a heavy weight is pressing down on my chest. I try to breathe, but my lungs burn. I'm not going to break down. Not now. Not after I've come this far. I need to get out of here with my dignity—whatever's left of it—intact.

"Liam, please," I whisper.

"You don't get to tell me what to do; not after that stunt you pulled."

“I know, it’s a surprise—”

“A surprise?” He seems to have trouble forming the words. “You think what you did was a surprise?”

I swallow. “I know it’s not something you were expecting.”

“You know nothing.” His voice is so hard, I wince.

“I know I should have told you about my... condition.”

“You think?”

“It took me a while to come to terms with it, you know. I’ve been coming to grips with it for the past five years. I knew I needed to come out and show my true self to the world, but I couldn’t do it. And after everything you’ve done for me, I decided I owed you.”

“So you decided you were going to publicly bare yourself?”

“Seemed like the best way to do it.”

“And you didn’t think you should share it with me first?”

I hesitate. I still haven’t looked up at him, but I can see the pulse beating at his throat.

“I thought it best to do it all in one go. Like pulling off a bandage, you know?”

“Do you have any idea what you put me through? I thought you were going to announce we were splitting up. Instead of being upfront with me, your hurt me, but more importantly, you hurt yourself.” His voice is low.

“It was going to happen.” I raise a shoulder.

“I would have done anything to protect you from it. I can’t bear to see anyone hurt you, Isla. Not even you.”

I swing my gaze up to his face. He’s watching me carefully, an expression I can’t fathom on his face.

“Do you see me, Liam?” I point to my bald head. “This is who I am.”

“I know who you are, LadyBird,” he says gently.

I blink. This is not making any sense. He should be upset with me for hiding this from him. He should be angry that the woman he married is less than perfect. That the possible mother of his child is someone who lives with this condition.

“No, I mean do you really see me?”

“I’ve seen only you from the moment I set eyes on you.”

I search his features. Those gray eyes of his are the clearest I’ve ever seen them, like the surface of a lagoon where the water is so still you can see all the way to the depths below. Like fish darting below the surface, blue and green sparks streak through his irises. His pupils expand and his nostrils flare. He desires me.

He still desires me, even after what I told him? Nope, it’s not possible. It’s my mind playing tricks on me. More likely, he despises me. His emotions haven’t caught up to his logical mind and what he’s seeing in front of him. Or perhaps, he’s just being polite. That’s all this is.

“Liam, I’m bald.” I wince even as I hear myself. Turns out, even after my big reveal, I’m not used to saying the words aloud.

“And you’re even more beautiful than before.”

“Don’t you want to know why I’m like this?”

“I already know.”

I blink. “What did you say?”

“I told you I had you investigated before I asked you to marry me. I’ve known for a while that you have alopecia.”

Of all the things he could have told me, this is the one thing I didn’t anticipate.

“You... you knew?” I grip the straps of my bag. “How did you—” I stiffen. “So, that’s what you meant when you told me that you knew everything about me, even whatever it was that I hadn’t told you?”

“That slipped through without my intending it to.” He looks between my eyes. “I wanted it to be you who told me

about your condition. I wanted you to trust me enough to share your deepest secrets with me.”

“That’s why you told me about being taken and held prisoner when you were a teen?”

He hesitates. “No, that happened naturally. I felt I could trust you, and I wanted you to realize that you could trust me. Afterward, I hoped that opening up to you about my past would encourage you to do the same.”

“And all this time I was so stressed about how to share the details of my condition with you.”

He opens his mouth to answer, and I raise my hand. “No, don’t tell me. I should have known you’d find out about it. You probably found out about my visits to the doctor and the wig store.

When he doesn’t reply, I know I’m right.

“That’s such an invasion of my privacy.”

“You knew what you were signing up for when you said you’d marry me.”

He’s right. I knew I was going to have my personal life picked apart by the media. I had to live with the fact that, not only did I have to tell Liam, but also, at any moment the media could find out about it, and that would be even worse. It’s why I needed to control the narrative. It’s why I wanted to take the initiative and share it with the world first.

But the fact that he knew it all along and he didn’t tell me? I can’t get my head around it. I swallow down the ball of emotion that seems to have taken up permanent residence in my throat.

“Damn, but you’re a fine actor, aren’t you? You didn’t even let slip once that you knew. Not a hint.”

“That’s not true. I kept giving you openings to tell me. I told you you could trust me, that I’d protect you. I wanted you to share it with me of your own accord. And to be honest, it wasn’t a big deal to me. And I didn’t want you to think it was.”

He reaches for me, and I step back. “Don’t. Don’t touch me, Liam.”

“Isla, please give me a chance to explain.”

“There’s nothing to explain. You look like that, and I look like this. I will not be pitied by you, or by anyone else. I will not have people compare the two of us and be found lacking.”

“You could never be lacking in anything, baby. You’re the most courageous, most vital, most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.”

“That’s not what I see when I look in the mirror.”

“That’s what I see. Why can’t you allow yourself to see what I see? You are not your hair, Isla.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. I’ve lost track of the number of times I’ve repeated those words to myself in the mirror. And remained unable to believe it. And here is this man, throwing it in my face, as if it’s a simple matter-of-fact realization.

“How would you know what I am or not?”

I fold my arms about my waist. “We barely know each other enough. Sure, the sex is great—more than great, actually, if I’m being honest. And your kinks are something that adds an unexpected spice to our relationship. But other than that, you don’t really know me.”

“I know enough,” he murmurs.

“I hid this from you.”

“You were hiding it from yourself. I knew you were courageous enough to face what you are in the mirror. I had a sense that, perhaps one day, you’d want to go public with it, too. For yourself. To own who you are to the world.”

“Stop—” I hold up my hand. “Don’t second guess me, Liam.”

“Isla, baby, I’m trying to help.”

“Well, don’t. This is something I’ve faced on my own so far. And maybe you were the trigger that convinced me it was

time to come out to the world. But that's where it stops. After this, surely, you don't want to be with me."

"There's no one else I can see myself with."

"I... I don't believe you."

"Believe it."

I bite the inside of my cheek. "What if I decide I don't want to have any children, after all?"

"Then I accept it."

"It'll endanger your chances of getting ownership of your company and your trust fund."

"I can do without it."

"That's what you're saying now. When it's time to face the consequences of your actions, you may not feel the same way."

"On the contrary, I've already informed my lawyers that I have no interest in claiming my inheritance. It doesn't make a difference to me if we don't have children."

I blink. Is he hearing himself? I shake my head. "You don't mean it. And even if you do, the day will come when you'll realize you made a mistake, and then you'll blame me for being the cause of losing your company."

"I have other companies, other interests. I've built enough of a fortune of my own that I'd never let you lack for anything."

"I'm not talking about me—"

"But I am. You're the most important thing in this world for me, Isla. More than my inheritance. More than my company. More than my future progeny. You're my soulmate. And I want nothing more than to have you by my side, every step of the way, for the rest of our lives."

I take in his features, the seriousness in his gaze. There's no mistaking the intensity of his words. Heat flushes my skin. My head spins.

This is not what I expected when I walked into this room. Maybe, at some point, I'd hoped to hear these words from him. Maybe a part of me even believes him.

But he knew my secret all along, and he never mentioned it to me. I agonized over how to break it to him. How to share this very intimate part of myself, but he already knew about it. He knew and he never mentioned it to me, and somehow, that feels like a betrayal.

I tip up my chin, "What if I don't want to? What if the only reason I agreed to be with you was because of the benefit to my business? It provided me with the perfect platform to share my story with the world. And now that it's done, maybe I don't see the need to be with you anymore."

"I don't believe it."

"Better believe it."

His forehead knits tighter. "Don't do this, baby. Don't put yourself down. Don't give away your power to anyone else, not even to me."

"Easy for you to say. You're not the one going through this."

"But I want to. Let me be your companion in this. Let me share your pain. Let me hold you and shield you from the worst of it. Let me protect you, baby."

I hear his words, and some part deep inside of me relaxes. I didn't realize how much I wanted to feel his empathy. And yet, all those days when I stressed about how to share this very personal part of me, he knew. And he never told me. And it's too much for me.

"Let me go, Liam."

"No."

"You don't have a choice."

"I always have a choice." He rubs the back of his neck. "Maybe it was wrong of me not to tell you earlier that I knew."

"You think?"

“But I knew if I tried to have the conversation with you, you’d hate me for not allowing you to be the one to tell me.”

“I hate you now.”

His jaw hardens. “No, you don’t.”

“Oh, so now you’re telling me how to feel toward you?”

“Let me help you, Isla. Please.”

I hold up my hand. “Has it occurred to you that, perhaps, I need to do this on my own, for my own self-confidence?”

“But you can do it with me by your side, to shield you from the worst.”

A part of me understands. And maybe he’s right. Maybe it doesn’t have to be as much of a struggle as it would be if I were on my own. Maybe I don’t have to isolate myself the way I have the last few years. Either way, I need time to think this through.

I rub at my temple. “Let me go, Liam.”

He holds my gaze, and he must see how serious I am, for his face falls. The skin around his eyes tightens. The color fades from his features. He looks like he’s lost his best friend, and everything he holds dear in his world. I never thought I’d see this powerful, dominant man brought to his knees.

This is what having a condition like mine does. It not only affects me, but it also affects everyone I come in contact with. It’s one of the reasons I wanted to keep it to myself. It felt simpler that way. It was also the more cowardly way to go.

I don’t have to discuss it with anyone or explain the intricacies of how I deal with it. I don’t need to have any confrontations with anyone about what it means for the quality of my life. I mean, it makes things more difficult on a day-to-day basis, but I can manage it. I’m not dying. I don’t have cancer, although, invariably, that’s what many assume when they see a woman with a bald head. I know it; I’ve read the stories of other alopecia survivors, so I have a general idea about what to expect, now that I’ve exposed myself to the world.

And it would only be helpful to have Liam on my side. Someone with his power and influence could smoothen the way for me. Even more importantly, he would be emotional support.

But maybe I don't want that. Maybe it's time for me to face this on my own. To prove that I'm stronger than I thought. I haven't come this far to hide behind the protection of another, even if that man is my husband... I mean, my fake husband. The man I love.

If I do this on my own, it means giving up the love of my life, and I might hate myself later. But if I come to depend on him, if I don't do this my way, I'll lose all respect for myself. Our relationship started out as a mutually beneficial agreement, but depending on him will put me in his debt, and I can't accept that.

"Liam I don't want to hurt you—"

"Then don't." His shoulders bunch. He glares at me, and I know he has an inkling of where my thoughts are at.

"Don't do this, Isla," he growls.

"I have to, baby." I swallow. "I need to do this on my own terms, Liam. It's the only way I can prove to myself that this doesn't define me. I need to stop blaming myself for something that has always been beyond my control. I need to stop putting myself down for my condition."

The skin around his eyes tightens. He opens his mouth as if to say something, but I shake my head. "You remember what you said earlier about not giving away my power to anyone else?"

He nods.

"I'm claiming my power, Liam."

Liam

I let her walk out on me. Again. This time, she made me promise I wouldn't shield her from the media storm she unleashed. My beautiful, gorgeous, strong wife left, but only after extracting a promise I wasn't going to shield her, that I'd stand by as word of our video spread, and as comments began to pile up on her social media feed.

My fingers trembled as I scrolled down the thread. My palms sweated, and my mouth dried. I was never this nervous... Not even when I faced down the bastards who kidnapped me. At least then, I was taking my fate into my own hands. This is a thousand times worse—having to bear witness to the world reacting to her disclosure, and not being able to do anything about it. At least, it seemed like no one had seen her post yet.

That was half an hour ago. She's only been gone for thirty minutes, and already, I'm pacing my office. Already, my muscles are tight, my guts so knotted I'm sure I'm going to be physically sick. How am I going to stay away from her physically, when everything inside of me insists I stay by her side, hold her hand, comfort her, and distract her? When I know, with one phone call, I can track down anyone who dares speak ill about her and shut them down in the online space.

There's nothing more frustrating than knowing you have the power but are not allowed to wield it. There's nothing

more humbling than realizing all the money in the world that could help me to help her is off limits, and only because she insisted. Because I can't go against my word. I promised her. Doesn't mean I'm going to sit here silently without doing something... But what?

My phone vibrates with an incoming call. I answer it.

"Don't do it," Hunter says even before his face appears on the screen.

"Don't do what?"

"Whatever you're planning."

Remember what I said earlier about your childhood friends knowing you so well they can anticipate your response? Well, this is another of those times.

"What are you, a mind-fucking-reader?" I snap.

"I am your best-fucking-friend. Isn't that what BFF stands for, anyway?"

I glower at him. "What are you, ten?"

"What are you, a plonker?"

I shake my head. "This entire conversation is bonkers."

"No more than you doing something you're going to regret for a long time to come."

"A-n-d, there you go again. Like I said, you have no idea what I was up to when you called."

"You mean, you weren't going to call Karina Beauchamp and have her team monitor Isla's social media and block trolls and delete negative comments the way you controlled the response to your wedding announcement?"

I try to wipe any expression off of my face, and he shakes his finger at me. "Don't even try on that innocent look. It makes you look like Max after he's dug up all the plants in the flower bed."

"You're comparing me to Sinclair's pet?"

“At least, I didn’t compare you to Michael and Karma’s kitten, or JJ’s turtle.”

“JJ has a pet turtle?” I’m referring to the head of Kane Enterprises who also happens to have launched an exclusive networking platform through which I identified my next startup investment. One for which I have high hopes.

“I’m a politician.” He leans back in his seat. “I know everything.”

“And I know something about you that you don’t even realize yet.”

“If you mean Zara—”

“So, there’s something going on between the two of you.”

His brow creases, then he rearranges the expression on his face. “There’s nothing between us.”

“So you keep saying.”

“Because it’s the truth. Also, nice segue, but it didn’t work.” He narrows his gaze on me. “Coming back to what you were going to do when I called you—”

“I was going to get a cigar. Is that allowed?” I huff.

“Bull-fucking-shit. Do not try to manage the response on this video. Not when she dared to share her true self with the world.”

I sink back into my chair. “So you saw it?”

“I did, and I think Isla is incredibly brave for what she did. It takes guts, it takes bravery, it takes belief in oneself to do what she did.”

“She was daring in what she did, and now I must be gallant and protect her from the backlash.”

“You’re doing her a disservice.”

“Because I want to ensure no one harms her?”

“She knew the risks when she put herself out there. She’s willing to face the response, whatever it is. If she finds out what you’re going to do—”

“She won’t.”

“You mean like she didn’t find out how you managed the reaction to the wedding video?”

I stiffen. “And how did you find out about that, anyway?”

“Because I told him,” a female voice pipes up from near Hunter. He places the phone on a stand, and when he steps back, I spot Karina and her husband Arpad clustered about his chair.

“I know, client confidence is very important in what I do.” Karina’s lips firm. “I’ve never done this before, but just this once, my friendship with Isla overrode all other considerations.”

I draw in a breath. On the one hand, I’m pissed at what Karina did. On the other—well, Isla needs friends who are loyal to her. If I really wanted to keep this from Isla, I never should have chosen to do it in the first place. Maybe a part of me had known she’d find out. Maybe I even counted on it. Maybe I hoped she’d be appreciative when she found out, that she’d understand just how deep my feelings for her run. Either way, I’m not upset with Karina. I drum my fingers on the table. “You’re right in what you did.”

“I am?” Karina seems taken aback.

“You’re a good friend.”

She exchanges a glance with Arpad. “O-k-a-y.”

Arpad, for his part, seems uneasy at my reaction. And Hunter? He’s watching me carefully. The man has a bloody impressive poker face. Of course, he’d have to, considering the astute politician he is. This is the first time I’ve been at the receiving end of it though.

“Don’t all three of you try to stroke my ego at once.” I look between them. “I’m not a complete idiot.”

“You’re a knob-head,” Hunter drawls.

I disregard him. “Look, what I want to do is short-term. I just want to control the worst of the internet’s reaction. I want to ring-fence the response and keep it positive for her. Or at

least, not so nasty. Maybe at some point, the responses will get out of hand, and I won't be able to shield her any further. But at least, she'll have slowly built up a resistance so it doesn't hurt so much."

Karina leans forward on the balls of her feet. "What makes you think the rejoinder to her video will be negative?"

"Because I'm a cynical bastard who's seen enough in life to know, when people spot a weakness, they like to use it to destroy you."

"You are a bastard, period," Hunter interjects.

"A sentiment I'm not going to comment on since you're my client, but perhaps you need to get your facts right." Karina hides a smile.

"Eh?" I scowl.

"She means, have you seen the comments on her social media feed?" Arpad asks.

"I haven't, I—" I glance at the expressions on all of their faces, then switch out of the camera and onto her social media handle. I take in the reactions and the comments to her post. It's only been forty-five minutes since she posted, but there are already ten thousand likes and hundreds of comments on her post.

I read first one reaction, then the next.

I scroll down, unable to believe my eyes. "Holy shit!"

Isla

“Holy shit, woman, you’re on fire.”

I walked into Zara’s apartment, and she runs over. She waves her phone in my face, the screen open to my social media feed.

I glance at the phone, then back at her face. My heart jumps into my throat. My stomach bottoms out with such speed, it feels as if I’ve swallowed a rock.

I must go pale because she grips my elbow and guides me to a sofa. Then she disappears inside the kitchen and returns with a glass of water. I glug down half of it, then place it on the side table.

“Better?” She studies my features.

“I’m fine,” I lie.

“You’re not” —she laughs— “but you will be.”

“What do you mean?”

She sinks down on the settee next to me. “Promise you won’t freak out.”

Sweat beads my palms.

“It’s okay. Whatever it is, I can take it.” I swallow.

“It’s all good, honey, I promise.”

She begins to hand the phone over to me, and I stop her. “Umm, maybe you should read out the comments?”

“If you want.”

“I do.” I fold my hands in my lap and brace myself. “Hit me with it.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

After another few seconds of scrutinizing my features, she nods. “Here goes.” She dips her gaze down to the screen and begins to read.

Thank you for sharing your positivity with the world. Your vulnerability and bravery are appreciated beyond words. Thank you!

You are beautiful! Your hair doesn’t define you.

My heartbeat kicks up a notch.

Girl... you’re brave and gorgeous! I’m in the same situation as you, thank you for sharing. [Heart emoji]

Beautiful. [Heart-eyes emoji]

First, you look amazing! Second, I wish I was as brave as you. I would never feel comfortable posting pics without my wig.

I rub my palm across my head and wince when I realize I haven’t yet worn my wig. I took public transport like this, and you know what? No one gave me a second glance.

Magnificent! [fire emoji]

*Yesss girl, you're so inspiring! You're so strong, keep it up.
[Heart emoji]*

Why are you so beautiful? [Loudly crying face emoji]

Beautiful inside and out. [blue heart]

You are an inspiration. [Heart emoji. Heart emoji.]

I love—

“Stop—” I burst out.

She glances up at me. “You okay?”

I nod. “All the messages are—”

“Positive.”

“How many messages are there?”

“A couple of thousand? Maybe more?”

“Couple of thousand?” I squeak. “Which means—”

“You have a hundred thousand likes and counting on the post.”

“Oh, wow.” That empty feeling in my stomach begins to fill with butterflies. “Bu...but...the wedding post had...”

“Half that number of likes and comments.”

“Oh.” I sink back in my seat. “There must be some negative comments. Some trolls having fun at my expense.”

She frowns, then scrolls down the feed. “To be honest I don’t see any. Okay, maybe a couple. But people are commenting on them and shutting them down.” She looks up at me, a smile on her face. “You’ve won over people already. You have the community with you. They understand and appreciate how much courage it took to do what you did. And those who don’t see it, frankly, it’s their loss.”

The butterflies in my stomach take flight. My heart feels like it’s expanding and getting bigger and crushing everything else. I try to breathe, gasp, try again, and draw in breath. I swallow, and it goes down the wrong way. I begin to cough, reach for the glass before Zara can, and empty the rest of the water. I place the glass down, and by the time I turn to her, I feel more composed.

“Wow, I...” I shake my head. “I’m gobsmacked.”

“Why are you so surprised?” she asks gently.

“I was sure they’d hate me. I was sure people would make fun of me. I was resigned to people saying it was a publicity stunt. That I was ugly. That the most eligible bachelor in London deserved better than me.”

“On the contrary, as this comment says, *You are a rockstar. Liam is lucky to have you.*”

My throat closes. My pulse flutters so hard at my temples, I have to close my eyes and take a deep breath.

“Isla?” Zara asks in a worried voice.

“I’m fine,” I manage. “Really, I’m good. It’s just... I never imagined.”

“In all honesty, I don’t think people care one way or the other. When you walked in, I didn’t even notice that you didn’t have your wig on.”

I tilt my head. When I walked in, I noticed she looked at me closely, but after that, she didn’t react with surprise or treat me differently. “I thought it was because you were my friend. That maybe you were being polite.”

She snorts. “Me and polite? You know how outspoken I can be.”

“Don’t I?” I half-smile. “Maybe it’s because you were too taken in by my social feed. Maybe I was too taken in by how you had pounced on me and thrust your phone in my face.”

She stares at me.

I flush. “Point taken.”

“Good.” She places her phone on the table, then takes my hand in hers. “Darling, you are gorgeous, brave, and clearly, more than a pretty face. And if you paid attention to what every bitch on the internet said about you, you’d never step out or check social media again.”

“I know that.” I swallow. “It doesn’t stop me from being overly sensitive to criticism, and that was before I showed the world how I look without my wig.”

“And now, you’re so fucking fabulous my eyes ache. Fuck these people. Fuck society. Who are they to judge you anyway?”

I can’t help it, I laugh. “This is why I love you.”

“You love me because I’m fabulous.” She tips up her nose in a regal gesture.

“That, too.”

“Seriously though,” —she narrows her gaze— “you’re media savvy; you knew what you were doing. At least, I think you did. You had an idea how they would react, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“So what’s really eating at you?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “I had half-hoped the reaction to the post would be positive. I mean, I didn’t dare to hope, but I did... Know what I mean?”

She nods. “It took a lot of balls to do what you did. But people love an authentic voice and that” —she nods toward the phone— “is the fucking pinnacle of authenticity. Even

more than your previous lovey-dovey video which, by the way, also seemed pretty damned genuine.”

“Because it was. They both were. And yes, ultimately, I am media savvy, so I went with my gut. I didn’t plan to post when I took off my wig. I didn’t warn Liam.”

“He does look taken aback in the post,” she concedes.

“Only because I didn’t tell him that’s what I was going to do.”

She frowns. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, he already knew about my... alopecia.” See? It does get easier. At least, I can admit it aloud in the privacy of my friend’s apartment. Maybe next time, I’ll be able to say it in front of the world.

“He did?” She blinks.

“He had me investigated. Turns out, he knows a lot more about me than I know about him.”

“Okay, hold on a second...” She puts distance between us. “He knew you had alopecia all along?”

I nod.

“And he never let on?”

I shake my head.

“And you never guessed that he knew?”

“No.” I throw up my hands. “I mean, I was so stressed about him finding out—not that I wasn’t going to tell him, but I wanted to do it in my own time. So I was trying my best to hide it from him all this time.”

“And I want to ask, why? Why would you want to keep it from him?”

Because the marriage between us started out as farce. I rub my temple. “Initially, it was because I didn’t know him and I wasn’t sure if I could trust him. Later, it was because I was worried he’d find me wanting. I suppose, on some level, I

felt he was so handsome and I was so ugly. I was scared of being judged and found inferior.”

She stares at me.

My flush deepens. “Fine, I know what you’ll say. Exactly what he said. Don’t give away my power.”

“Huh? Mr. Dickwad actually makes sense sometimes.”

“Don’t call him Dickwad, and he makes sense most of the time.”

Her lips quirk, then she wipes the smile off her face.

“Why are you smiling that snide smile of yours?”

“I’m not smiling.”

This time, she curves her lips and doesn’t even bother to hide it.

“See?” I stab my finger in her direction, “You are smiling.”

“Okay, you’ve got me.” She holds up both of her hands, palms facing me. “So, I’m assuming Douchecca— I mean, your husband—told you not to give away your power. But all this time, he knew about your secret.”

I nod.

“So he knew about it, but it didn’t bother him. And he didn’t push you to mention it. And he didn’t confront you with it, either?”

“Y-e-s,” I say slowly.

“But you’re pissed at him because you were expecting him to be shocked at your appearance when you pulled your big reveal and he wasn’t.”

I shuffle my feet. “Yes, again.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? That’s it?”

She shrugs. “What do you want me to say?”

“Wouldn’t you be upset if you were in my place?”

“Well, I never would’ve gotten married, period.”

I blink. I mean, I know Zara’s a feminist, but this is the first time I’m hearing her declare this out loud.

“No need to look so shocked. Marriage doesn’t guarantee a happy ending. You know that, right? Not that I’m referring to your marriage, of course.”

“Of course...” I purse my lips. “You don’t believe that, do you?”

“Oh, honey. Of course, I do.” She swipes her hair back from her face. “I also happen to believe practically all relationships are based on a foundation of lies and mutually accepted delusions.”

I look at her closely. “Who hurt you, Zara?”

She looks stunned, then lowers her eyelids. “Is it that obvious? I’m normally better at hiding it.”

“Not from me,” I murmur.

“Guess not.” She half-smiles. “I guess it’s the fact that he accepted you so wholeheartedly that’s making me reconsider whether all men are bastards.”

“Unlike the arsewipe who caused you distress.”

She waves her hand in the air. “I’m over him. Although, clearly, I’m carrying the scars of his emotional rejection, and PS, don’t change the topic.”

I blow out a breath. “I wasn’t changing the topic.”

“Yes, you were.”

I narrow my gaze on her, but she stares right back at me.

“Fine.” I hunch my shoulders. “So maybe I was. But you do realize, your attitude is unhealthy.”

She scoffs, “As long as it works for me, I’m good.”

“But—”

She holds up her hand. “Enough about me already. Back to the relationship between you and that tosser, Liam. What are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know.” I rub the part of my finger where I wore his ring. The ring I left behind. The ring I wore for only a few days. So why do I already miss it?

My phone vibrates in my bag. I pick it up, glance at the screen, then raise my eyebrows at Zara. “It’s my mother.”

Liam

What the hell am I doing here?

I slam the door to my McLaren, then walk up the steps of Isla's mother's house. For once, I'm thankful that my mother—and hers, by the looks of it—took it upon themselves to intervene. I haven't taken it too kindly, in the past, when my ma has tried to steer me into alliances. I'd politely, but firmly tell her that I'd find my own bride, and I did. But this time, I'm more than willing to accede to her plans.

If this is the only way I'm going to see Isla again, then so be it. I didn't specifically ask my ma if she'd be here, but I have no doubt she will be. It's why my mother invited me, after all. Isla may not be sure about our future together, but I've decided otherwise, and so have our mothers.

This has the signs of an intervention written all over it, and maybe I should have warned her. But if I had, she wouldn't have come. And I'm not so sure I owe her a warning, anyway. After all, she's the one who sprang a massive surprise on me last time. I don't mean the fact that she has alopecia, but the fact she shared it with the world at the same time as me, thus denying me the chance to protect her.

Then she made me promise not to intervene on her behalf, either. She tied my hands, so I wouldn't be able to protect her. Of course, the response to what she did was overwhelmingly

positive—so that last part didn't matter. But it could have gone the other way. She could have been subjected to cyberbullying, and I wouldn't have been able to do anything about it... Okay, maybe that's not true.

If things had gone pear-shaped, I'd have insisted Karina help me defuse the situation and protect her. And if she'd refused, I'd have gone to someone else who was willing to help me. But it hadn't come to that, and I'm thankful. I've been monitoring her feed though, just to be sure.

And yes, I've also been tracking her phone, just so I know she's safe. So maybe that's not strictly ethical, but it's not like she doesn't know. Plus, I've always played by my own rules, especially when it comes to her protection.

She did the most courageous thing possible in revealing her true self to the world. I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for her to do so. If I could, I'd share her pain. And if she'd let me, I'd be by her side as she goes through such a tumultuous phase of her life. But she told me she wants to do this on her own. And I respect that. Doesn't mean I can't do my bit to show solidarity for her.

I reach the door, but before I can ring the bell, it's flung open.

Nadine stands in the doorway. "How wonderful to see you, I..." She looks at me and her voice trails off. "Liam—" She swallows, then a tear runs down her cheek. "You're a wonderful husband."

"You mean, I have a wonderful wife, don't you?"

"That, too." She grabs my arm and pulls me in. "Come on in."

She hooks her arm through mine and walks me toward the living room. "I wish Isla had confided in me. I wish she'd told us what she was going through all these years."

"It couldn't have been easy for her to come to terms with it." I pat Nadine's arm. "She didn't want anyone to pity her, you know."

“But we’re her family. We’d have stood by her. We’d have supported her.”

“Maybe that’s what she was afraid of. She wanted to deal with it in her own way, you know?”

She looks up at me. “You really understand her, don’t you?”

“I try.”

“She’s always been so independent. Always wanted her own space growing up. Even when she was very little, she wanted to do things by herself. She wanted to eat on her own, go to school on her own... I had to explain to her when she was still very little that she could walk to school on her own when she was a little older. And after her father died, she became even more remote.” She swallows. “Maybe it’s my fault. I shouldn’t have let her drop out of college and travel. I should have insisted that she stay closer. Of course, she was already eighteen by then, so she could do what she wanted. But maybe if I had been more determined, she’d have listened, you know?”

I pat her arm. “You shouldn’t blame yourself. From what I can see, you’ve been a wonderful mother, and Isla loves you and respects you.”

She blinks away her tears. “It’s very kind of you to say that, Liam.”

“Also, once Isla makes up her mind, I don’t think anyone can change it.”

“Except you, maybe?”

“Maybe.” I smirk. I do have my own ways of persuading her. None of which are fit for the ears of her mother.

“Thank you for being there for her,” she murmurs.

“Oh, whether she likes it or not, she’s stuck with me.”

As we near the living room voices, reach me. The sound of laughter, of people speaking... “It sounds like there’s a party going on,” I mutter.

“Oh, it’s our monthly Sunday lunch with all the members of the Lymington Knitting Club in attendance.”

The blood drains from my face. “But don’t you meet on Fridays to knit?”

“Oh, sure, but we also meet one Sunday a month for lunch.”

“I thought this was going to be a family dinner?”

“Oh, it is,” she smiles brightly. “They are my extended family.”

Of course, they are.

She tugs on my sleeve. “Come on, everyone is so excited that you’re here. It’s the first time they get to meet you and Isla as husband and wife.”

We step inside the room. My gaze instantly goes to Isla. She’s standing with her profile to me and is deep in conversation with my mother. Isla’s wearing a simple blue dress that reaches below her knees. On her feet are ballet pumps. I can see her gorgeous face in profile. The column of her neck, her tiny upturned nose, the angle of her eyebrows, the smooth curve of her head. She reminds me of a bust of Nefertiti I picked up on a trip to Egypt. Regal, alluring, and utterly captivating, she stands out in the room like a spotlight is focused on her.

I’m aware that the members of the Knitting Club seated on the couch ahead of Isla notice me and fall silent. The chatter in the room fades away.

I don’t realize I’ve come to a standstill until Nadine touches my shoulder. “Good luck. If any two people deserve each other, it’s the two of you.” Then she steps away.

Isla glances around and notices everyone’s attention is focused beyond her. She turns, her gaze connects with mine, and everything else fades away.

It’s only me, and her, and the sound of my blood pounding in my ears. My throat is dry. In fact, my mouth feels like I haven’t had a drink of water in years. My heart rams into my

ribcage like a lion pounding against the steel bars of a cage, fighting to get out. My knees knock together. I've never been this nervous in my life. Not even when I faced down my kidnapper. Not when I've sat in meetings where I've signed multibillion-dollar deals. Not even when I turned to find her walking up the aisle toward me. Somehow this... What's happening between us now seems so much more real, more personal. More genuine than any other event in my life. Riskier than anything I've ever done before.

She rakes my features and her gaze widens. Her chin trembles. She shakes her head, then raises her palms over her mouth.

A teardrop sneaks down her cheek.

I blink, then force my legs to move until I pause in front of her.

She's still staring at me, her gaze wide, her blue eyes anguished, her pupils so dark it's like a full solar eclipse when the moon covers the sun.

With trembling fingers, I slide the ring out of my pocket, then I go down on one knee, right there in front of everyone assembled.

"Isla," —I swallow— "will you marry me, this time for real?"

She shakes her head from side to side, her gaze still fixed on mine. "No," she chokes out the word. "No."

Isla

How could he do this to me? I can't do this. I brush past Liam and out the living room, then through the kitchen and the backdoor to the yard beyond. I reach the grass and come to a stop. I stuff my knuckles in my mouth to stifle my sobs. I hear the backdoor close a second time, and then he's there in front of me.

"LadyBird," —he grips my shoulders— "please, baby, don't cry."

I only sob louder.

"Isla, please. Each tear of yours is like a hot knife being stabbed into my heart."

I try to pull away, but his grip tightens. He pulls me close, and I bury my face in his chest. He holds me. He wraps his big arms about me and holds me tightly... And it feels so right, and that only makes me cry even more.

He scoops me up in his arms and carries me over to the swing on the porch. He sits down with me in his lap and begins to rock me.

My tears finally slow down. I keep my fingers entangled in the front of his shirt, press my cheek into the solid warmth of his chest, and stay there.

He rubs circles over my back and the action is so soothing, so... Everything. The tension slowly fades from my shoulders. I rub my nose against the collar of his shirt and inhale his scent. The familiarity of him cocoons me; the heat of his body surrounds me. We stay there, not saying anything, and in the silence, I hear the thump-thump-thump of his heart. It echoes the pulse at my wrists, the thrum of blood at my temples, the beat of my own heart behind my rib cage. When I finally sit up, he releases me. I tip my chin up, and run my palm up his face and over his head. His very bald head.

“Liam, all that beautiful hair of yours...” A fresh sob bubbles up my throat.

“I wanted to know.”

He holds my gaze and in his eyes, I see the pride, the respect, the empathy... The love. He doesn't need to say those three words. I just know.

“You didn't need to,” I choke out.

“But I had to.” He lowers his head and bumps my nose with his. “How could I let you go through this alone, Isla? How could I possibly allow you to face the world on your own? I needed to understand how it felt, even if for just a short time. I needed to feel a fraction of the kind of pain you're going through.”

A warm sensation pools in my chest. It bleeds into my veins, permeates my cells, and extends to my extremities until every part of me seems to be overrun with that melting feeling.

“Liam, I—”

He places his finger on my lips. “You didn't want me to protect you. You wanted to face the world with your truth, and I respect that.”

“You do?”

“I bow to your courage of conviction, your fierce determination to show everyone your reality, to share your truth, no matter how much it was going to hurt you.”

I swallow. His words form an invisible fortress around me, one in which there's only me and him and our intimacy. This thing that connects me to him—it feels bigger than love. Bigger than each of us. Because it is. When we're together, we're more than the sum of our parts. We're unassailable, indomitable, invulnerable... At least, it feels that way.

“But you have to realize, I can't just stand by and let you carry the load. I'll never be the kind who can look on as you go through the biggest test of your life and not try my best to alleviate the distress it's causing you.”

I sit up, then straddle him with my knees. I loop my fingers around his neck, then rise up and kiss him on top of his head. I place my cheek on his smooth shaven pate and marvel at just how much my life has changed. When I finally lower myself into his lap with my knees on either side of his thighs, a familiar hardness pokes into the flesh between my legs.

“Oh!” I blink. “Oh, my.”

His lips kick up. “I'm still only a man—holding the woman of his dreams in his arms. I fucking adore your soul. I worship your spirit. And when you combine that with your body, baby, that... is my downfall.”

I laugh. “These words of yours are everything. You are everything.”

“But without you, I'm nothing.”

He slides his hand into his pocket and holds up the ring. Then, he takes my other hand and slides the ring onto the finger on my left hand.

I weave my fingers through his, then reach up and kiss him. He lets me brush my lips on his once—then takes charge. He pulls me close, slants his mouth over mine and kisses me so deeply, every pore in my body seems to open, every cell seems to catch fire, and every last molecule in me sighs in happiness.

When he finally lets go, we're both panting.

A burst of clapping reaches us. I glance over my shoulder to find my mother, his mother and the rest of the Knitting Club

gathered behind us.

I flush and try to rise, but he doesn't let me go. "Liam, they're watching us."

"Let them."

My flush deepens. "Liam, please," I hiss.

He smirks. I blink. Without his hair, he looks like a younger, hotter, more arrogant version of Bruce Willis a la his *Die Hard* days. Bruce Willis meets Tom Ellis meets Jason Stratham if you want to be specific. Those grey eyes of his seem even more piercing. Of course, Mr. Alphahole would look devastating any which way.

"You're staring, baby," he drawls.

"So are you."

"I'm looking at the woman who occupies my dreams and my every waking moment. To have you with me, in my arms, to be able to hold you and know we have the rest of our lives together, forever, every day, makes me so fucking happy."

My heart feels like it's filling my chest, extending to my stomach, and filling every cell in my body. I feel like I'm floating.

"I want to kiss you so badly again. In fact, I can't imagine a scenario where I don't want to jump on you, kiss you, tear your clothes off, and fuck you every time I see you."

"Keep going; don't stop."

"If I had to dream of the person I was going to share my life with, it wouldn't have been you."

I blink. "No?"

"No." He cups my cheek. "You meet so many people in your life, and none of them touch you. And then you meet the one, and you realize you don't deserve her."

My cheeks grow fiery. I wriggle about in his lap, and that rod in his crotch seems to grow bigger, thicker, more stabbiier, if that's possible.

“Don’t move again, or I might embarrass myself.”

I bury my face in his throat. “Liam, you’re embarrassing me.”

“Don’t be. You deserve every single, last compliment and more. You’re the bravest, boldest, gutsiest, most stubborn, exquisite, bewitching, beautiful woman I’ve had the privilege of knowing.

“I’ve spent so much of my life angry with what happened to me when I was still a teenager. I’ve spent so much of my life trying to compensate for the hubris of my youth.

“I focused my efforts on my father’s company over everything else, trying to prove myself to the world. I told myself if I had more power, more money, and more influence, it would fill that gaping need inside of me. But then, I met you, and that part that had been so dead inside of me burst to life, and it was a shock. All of those feelings, those emotions I’d refused to contend with, came to the fore. It’s what made me so angry at you. It’s why I thought I’d fuck you out of my system. But one taste of you, and I knew.”

He leans in closer until his eyelashes brush mine. “I knew I was trapped. I knew I wanted to be trapped. I knew even one more second without you in my life would be like the earth without rain—parched, dry, thirsty, waiting for your touch, your scent, the feel of your lips on mine, your skin against mine, your body curved into mine, your breath fluttering on my cheek, your arms entwined about my neck, your thighs cradling me as I bury myself in you.

“You are mine, LadyBird. Mine. I hate what I am without you. I’m amazed at what I become when I’m with you. You make me the kind of person I never thought I’d have the opportunity to be. You’re my other half, my better half, the twin to my consciousness, the reflection of my soul, my match, my mate, my partner. Every day we’re together is the best fucking day of my life because I spend it with you.”

That feeling of floating picks up speed. I’m flying through the air, soaring to the top, drawing in oxygen so rarified I feel lightheaded.

I lean back in the circle of his arms and look up into those features which are as familiar as my own. "Liam."

"Yes, LadyBird."

"Shut up and kiss me again."

Liam

So I kiss her, again and again. I kiss her until we're both breathless, and she makes that little noise at the back of her throat that tells me she's close to coming—and just from me kissing her—until she squirms around in my lap and the fabric covering my crotch is so tight, I'm sure my cock is going to burst through my zipper.

Someone clears their throat behind us, and I realize there's no putting off the upcoming inquisition. I pull away and push my forehead into hers. "You ready for this?"

"What do you think?" She grumbles.

"I think you're as aroused as I am, and that we're both going to have to get through the battle line that is our mothers and the Lymington Knitting Club before we can go home and feast on each other."

She groans. "Stop, please, or I'm going to have to ask you to ravish me right here, not caring that we'll scandalize our family and their friends."

It's my turn to groan. "Don't tempt me."

She laughs. "You deserve the pain, by the way. It's your wicked tongue that's gotten us in this situation, after all."

The pattering of paws reaches us, and Tiny pushes his cold nose between us.

“Hey, you.” She rubs him behind his ear, and I swear, the Great Dane groans in ecstasy. *I know how you feel, boy.* He wags his tail with such gusto, his entire body shakes.

“Liam? Isla?” my mother calls out. “Are you coming in to join us?” It’s framed as a question, but it’s very much a dictate.

“Time to face the hordes,” I murmur.

“You decent?” She teases me.

“I might have to use Tiny to hide my Tiny,” I admit.

She laughs. “Is that going to be our code? I can just tell you that I want Tiny and you’ll know what I mean...”

“Not sure how I feel about that, but if that’s what you want.” I raise a shoulder.

This time she gapes. “Who are you, and what have you done to my alphahole?”

“Oh, he’s very much here, and he wants to do all manner of naughty things to you, but the man I am when I’m with you also knows it’s time for propriety.”

Tiny whines. She smiles. I resist the urge to kiss her once more because it’s going to take me down the Tiny hole—pun intended. I lift her off my lap and set her on the ground. Tiny instantly plops his head in my lap. I scratch him behind his ears and he moans. I laugh, and so does she. I play with him for a few more seconds, using the time to get myself under control, then I rise to my feet. I take her hand in mine, then turn to face the rest of the group that’s been growing restless by the second.

They instantly spill onto the porch. My mother comes up to us. She takes Isla by her shoulders and kisses her on both cheeks. “You’re too good for him.”

“She is.” I tighten my grip on her fingers. “But she’s already my wife, and I’m not letting her go.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything else.” My mother turns to me, then rises to her tip-toes. I bend my head, and she kisses my forehead. “I’m so happy for you, Liam. You made me proud today. There was a time, all those years ago, when I thought

I'd lost you, but seeing you with her, I know she's brought you back to me."

I straighten, then shuffle my feet. "There's something I need to tell you, Ma."

A strange look comes into her eyes. "Later. There's time for that later. Right now, I want to enjoy my new daughter-in-law and this version of my son that she's gifting me." She steps back and then Nadine is there.

She hugs me, then kisses Isla. "I'm so happy for the both of you." She sniffs.

"I'm happy, too, Ma." Isla hugs her back.

She steps back, and the rest of the Lymington Knitting Club members surround us. They congratulate me and hug Isla. When it's Wilma's turn, she narrows that gimlet-eyed gaze of hers on me. "Took you long enough." She sniffs.

"I'm here now."

"About time." She glances from me to Isla, then back at me. "You take good care of her now, you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am." I resist the urge to snap off a salute.

"Also, I'm pleased to say, you are now an honorary member of the Lymington Knitting Society."

I bow my head. "It's my honor and privilege that you've accepted me as one of your own."

"You do realize, this means you're going to have to learn how to knit?" Isla chuckles.

"Can't say I'll be good at it, but if that's what you want. Also, I think I know one more person who'd fit right in. Someone who enjoys knitting as a means to destress."

"Who would this be?" Wilma's brows draw down.

"A friend who's who knits to relax."

I'm referring to Michael's brother Christian, who I've met a few times in my business interactions with the Sovranos.

Wilma harrumphs. “It’s time for lunch.” She steps back and heads for the door. The rest of the Knitting Club take their cue from her.

Dorian, who I hadn’t even noticed earlier, blocked by the wall of the Knitting Club, walks over and grips my hand in a bone-crushing handshake. “Welcome to the family.”

“That wasn’t too bad, was it?” I lead her up the steps to our home. *Our* home. I’ve always thought of this as her home, of course, but after the events of the last few hours, it feels particularly poignant to think of it this way. It feels real. It feels like from the moment I saw her I knew my life was going to change.

This feels monumental... and colossal... and the beginning of something new, something I’ve waited for my entire life. Something I didn’t even know I was missing, and yet, now that I have her with me, I can’t imagine how I came this far without her presence in my life. We reach our door and I swing her up in my arms.

She laughs. “What’s this?”

“I’m carrying my bride over the threshold.”

“Today isn’t our wedding day.”

“Today is the first day of the rest of our lives together.”

She looks at me with adoring eyes. “I love you.”

“And I love you.”

Suddenly, the door swings open, and Malory stands there. She looks from me to Isla. Her gaze widens. She opens and shuts her mouth as the impact of my new look sinks in. Then slowly, her face splits into a big smile. “Congratulations, Mr. Kincaid, madam.”

“It’s Isla.” She smiles back, then digs her elbow in my stomach.

I cough. “Uh, yeah, it’s Liam. Call me Liam.”

The smile vanishes from her face, to be replaced by a look of such incredulity my lips twitch. “Y-y-yes... Mr.— “

“Now that we have that out of the way.” I take a step forward, but Malory doesn’t give way.

“Uh, Mr. Kincaid, you should know that—”

“Whatever it is, it can wait.”

“But—”

“Later, Malory.”

She looks like she’s about to protest, but I’m already moving forward, so she steps aside. I stalk past her, heading for the stairs before I’m interrupted.

“There you are,” a new voice says.

I turn and stare. “What are you doing here?”

Isla

“Couldn’t let the two of you hide yourselves away without first allowing us to congratulate the two of you on your milestone.” Hunter leans his hip against the door frame to the study. “Also, the new look suits you.” He jerks his chin in Liam’s direction.

“Thanks.” Liam holds me closer. “What’s the milestone you’re talking about?”

“The milestone needs to be seen to be believed.” Zara walks out of the study, her phone, as usual, attached to her hand. She bumps Hunter’s shoulder as she passes him, as if by mistake; or rather, a deliberate act designed to look like a mistake.

Hunter scowls at her, but he doesn’t tell her off. Instead, he grits his teeth as if he’s trying not to react to her provocation. He sweeps his gaze down her figure—taking his time about it, too—before he glances away. Meanwhile, Zara moves toward us, completely oblivious to just how closely she was perused by him.

“Did you see what I just saw?” Liam mutters from the side of his mouth.

“Oh yeah, this is going to be one hell of an interesting situation.”

Zara looks between us, a trace of suspicion on her features. The only fact that she's registered Liam's new look is the nod of approval she threw him when she first saw him. Now, she scowls at me. "What are the two of you whispering about?"

"I was just telling Liam how wonderful it is to see the both of you." I smile sweetly at her.

"Don't forget us," Karma's voice rings out from inside the study.

"We've been waiting for you," Summer chimes in.

"You mean there are more people in there?" Liam scowls.

"It's more accurate to ask who isn't here." Hunter smirks.

"Did you plan this?" I scowl up at Zara.

She holds up her hands. "Don't shoot the messenger. And for the record, this was unplanned. Summer messaged Amelie, Karma, and me, and before I knew it, we were heading down here. Hope you don't mind that we barged in on your little lovefest. We figured it'd best we caught you now rather than becoming *coitus interruptus* later."

"There will be no *coitus interruptus*, now or later," Liam assures her.

Heat flushes my cheeks. I smack Liam on the shoulder. "Seriously, you have no filter."

"Not when it comes to you." He waggles his eyebrows at me. "What say we ditch these losers and go up to my room so I can show you just how much I missed you?"

Zara screws up her face. "TMI, you guys. And I get it, you can't keep your hands off of each other. But you need to see this." She thrusts her phone at us.

I glance at the screen. It's open to my social media feed and—"Whoa!" I straighten. "Am I reading that correctly?"

"One million likes on this social media feed and the video's been shared on other platforms and racked up thirty times that in views."

"No way," I gasp.

“Yes way, lady. You’re a celebrity,” Zara announces.

My arms and legs tremble. At the same time, that weightless feeling I’ve been carrying since Liam’s earlier declaration intensifies. Surely, I must be dreaming. Maybe I’m in a parallel world where, not only am I free to be myself in front of everyone, but also there are people out there who support me in this endeavor.

Liam must sense the emotions coursing through me, for he brushes his lips against my temple and whispers, “You okay?”

I nod.

“You want me to tell them to fuck off so you have some time to come to grips with everything?”

“No, it’s okay. I want to see them.”

“Not for long, though.”

I peer into his features, and the hunger I see there sparks a burn of need in my lower belly. My thighs clench. I bite down on my lower lip. He lowers his gaze to my mouth and his gaze heats.

Zara throws up her hands. “Seriously, you guys, can’t you keep your hormones in check for a few minutes more?”

“No,” Liam says at the same time that I laugh.

“Sorry. We’ll behave, I promise.”

She spins around and walks back into the study. Hunter follows. Liam strolls into his study, still carrying me. That’s when I realize he was right. Not only are Summer and Karma seated on either end of a couch but their husbands Sinclair and Michael are also there both standing behind their wives. Weston is seated with Amelie on his lap in another chair. Arpad is leaning against a table with Karina in the V between his legs. There’s also Declan Beauchamp, who cuts a solitary figure near the bar.

Their gazes track us. None of them comment on Liam’s new look, either. It’s almost like they expected it of him, and accept that this is right for the two of us. Liam walks over to

the armchair near the unlit fireplace. He sinks into it with me in his lap.

“Glad to see you all are so at home,” he drawls.

“Thought you wouldn’t mind us consuming your favorite whiskey, either.” Hunter pipes up from where he’s joined Declan near the bar. Zara takes the seat farthest from him, which puts her near Amelie and Weston.

“What are you having?” Liam narrows his gaze on the glass in Michael’s hand that’s filled with clear liquid. “Is that —?”

“Soda,” Michael confirms.

“Soda?” Liam blinks. “That what you’re having, too, Sinclair?”

“And about time. Why should they drink when their wives can’t?” Zara interjects.

Sinclair raises his glass. “I have no regrets. I can truthfully say, I don’t miss the booze. If I can support Summer in this journey, it’ll all have been worth it.”

Hunter looks at Liam. “Perhaps I should get you soda, too, so you can start practicing.”

Liam laughs. “Bet you were waiting for the opportunity to say that to me.”

“I freely admit that.” He raises his glass filled with an amber liquid that must be whiskey, given the open bottle on the bar between him and Declan.

“Sorry, again, about barging in, but we wanted to be the first to congratulate you, Isla, on your very brave step, and to tell you that we’re here with you and for you, every step of the way.” Hunter raises his glass.

“We are in your corner,” Summer blows me a kiss.

“To you, Isla, and to Liam, for being with you on this adventure.” Karma smiles.

“We have jointly donated a million dollars to the National Alopecia Research Foundation. It’s nothing compared to what

you must have gone through, but it's the least we could do." Michael squeezes Karma's hand.

"You're one of us, and we take care of our own." Weston smiles. Amelie blows me a kiss.

"Solene wanted me to convey that she misses you and wishes she could be here. But she's on her first concert across the States, so... You know."

Tears prick the backs of my eyes. "Thanks, guys. It means a lot to me—all of it."

"We didn't do this to make you cry," Zara says softly. "I know first-hand just how much your life has been affected by this condition, and how much it impacted, not only your physical but also your mental and emotional state. You faced it with grit and determination. You didn't allow it to rule your life. You found your way through it. You didn't stop it from letting you get out of bed. You didn't let it stop you from pursuing your goals. You didn't let it come in the way of your living life to the fullest. And now, with Liam at your side, I know you're only going to reach new heights."

"Thank you," I whisper. "This... All of this is incredible and overwhelming. I couldn't have asked for better friends. Or" —I glance up at Liam— "a better husband, truly."

"Anything you want." Liam bends and kisses my mouth, and of course, it doesn't stop at just a brush of our lips. He deepens it, and I know I need to stop it, that people are watching. But when I'm with him, in his arms, surrounded by him, feeling his heartbeat in tandem with mine, his breath intertwined with mine, his gaze holding mine, the rest of the world, as always, fades. It's only me and him, him and me, and this new state of mind we're building together.

When he finally releases me, I look about the room to find the rest of them grinning at us.

"I think that's our cue to leave, folks." Hunter drains his glass and pushes away from the bar. He prowls over to Zara and holds out his hand. "Why don't I give you a lift home?"

She lifts her chin. “No, thanks, I have my own car.” She rises to her feet and walks over to kiss my cheek. Then straightens and stabs a finger at Liam. “Hurt her in any way, and you’ll have to deal with me.”

Liam laughs. “I can’t hurt myself, can I?”

“Aww,” Summer gushes. She rises to her feet and Sinclair leads her over to us. “You guys are sooo cute together.”

Zara holds her thumb to her ear with her little finger stretched out, and mouths, “Call me.”

I nod.

She leaves, and Hunter follows her anyway. Gosh, the man doesn’t take ‘no’ for an answer, does he? The rest of them say their goodbyes, with the women blowing me kisses. And just like that, we’re on our own. For a second, we sit there as the silence settles about us. It’s a comfortable quiet, a stillness that percolates deep into my blood...my body...my mind...my soul. For the first time in my life, I feel like I’ve stopped running. It feels like I’ve arrived home.

“Liam,” —I wrap my arms about his neck— “will you fuck me?”

“No,” —he shakes his head— “but what if I make love to you?”

Liam

I carry her up to my—*our* room. I'll never stop loving that word 'our' ever again. I'll never get used to it. Never take it for granted. There was a time I was been sure that I'd never find my woman. I didn't think she existed; perhaps, I never even looked for her. Now I know, I was simply waiting to find her. Thank god, she told Lila not to marry me. I'm glad I pulled my head out of my arse and recognized her and did everything possible to bind her to me. Maybe that's why I proposed the entire fake marriage scenario which, come to think of it now, is laughable. I never intended to toe the line. I wanted to find a way to tie her down while I figured out my shit, which is why I came up with this proposal, in the first place. Now, I carry her into the bath and lower her to her feet.

“What are you doing?” She glances about her.

“We're going to take a bath together.”

She looks taken aback, then nods. “There was a reason I didn't want to shower with you before.”

“The wig.”

“The wig,” she agrees. “It was a double-edged sword. When I wore it, I felt I could face the world. But I was always so worried that a strong gust of wind would knock it off kilter, or I'd pull at it and end up displacing it, and I tried to avoid getting it wet because then I'd have to take it off and dry it.”

I pause halfway to the bathtub then glance at her over my shoulder. “Wait, what about the time when we fell into the pool?”

She laughs, “Oh my god, you have no idea how stressed I was then. I wear synthetic wigs, which are supposed to be secure enough that you can go swimming in them. I also use wig glue to fasten my wigs but you never know when there’s going to be an accident. I was so on edge—”

“And I thought that was because of me.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yes, Mr. Egomaniac, it was... because you held me back from coming. But the stress of trying to act like it was natural also, no doubt, contributed. Thankfully, Zara had packed me my backup wig.”

“Hmm.” I drag my thumb across my lower lip.

“I don’t like the sound of that *hmm*.”

“So you’re saying being stressed contributed to your coming hard that day in the pool?”

“Not quite, but yeah, kind of.” She shrugs.

“And now you’re not as preoccupied as you were that day?”

“Yes?”

“So you’re much more relaxed today?” I murmur

“I am, and it’s not just the fact that we’ve been having a lot of sex. It’s because I had someone step in to take care of the day-to-day details of the wedding so I had some perspective on the event and could enjoy myself.” She walks toward me. “I know I was pissed off when you deputed someone to take over the details of the wedding, but in hindsight, you were right.”

I smirk, “I’m always right, baby.”

She chuckles. “Of course I’d much prefer it if you consulted with me first, next time.”

I turn to face her. “I’ll try, but you know dominance is what comes to me naturally.”

“Don’t I?”

“But I promise I’ll try my best. Especially if the end result is that it helps you loosen up.”

“You’ve no idea.” She does a little twirl. “I can be myself, completely. I don’t have to hide any part of me, not from you, not from the world, not from myself. You have no idea how freeing it is.”

“Hmm.” I look her up and down. “Strip.”

“Eh?” Her gaze widens.

“Strip, LadyBird. Let’s see how hard I can make you come today.”

She drags the tip of one of her ballet pumps across the floor. Then with something resembling a smirk on her face she unbuttons her blouse. She slides it down her shoulders, baring her luscious breasts framed by her demi-bra, and I’m instantly hard. I bring my hand to my crotch and squeeze the growing bulge. Her breath hitches, and her pupils dilate. When she reaches for her waistband, her fingers tremble. Good. Seeing how much she’s affected by me turns me on even more.

I continue to stroke myself as she shoves her jeans and panties down her hips, then kicks them off, along with her shoes. She drags her fingers up the insides of her thighs, then runs them between her pussy lips. Heat flushes my skin, my scalp tingles, and every part of me goes on alert.

I take a step in her direction, then click my tongue. “Oh no, you’re not going to tease me into losing my control, baby.”

I spin around, walk to the tub and run the water, then reach over and drop in a few bath bombs. Instantly, the scent of violets and peaches fills the air.

She draws in a lungful. “That’s my favorite brand of bubbles.”

“I know.” The bubbles begin to form and I straighten. I turn to find she’s stripped off her bra and is naked. She stands with her legs slightly apart, her hands on her hips. Her breasts are plump and tipped with dusky nipples currently signaling in

my direction. Her waist is narrow, her thighs thick and strong, and between them, the pink flesh of her pussy. As I watch, a shimmering trail of cum trickles down her inner thigh. I squeeze my fingers together at my sides. I am not going to jump her. I am going to take care of her. I'm going to make sure this is the most relaxing bath she's ever had.

"Isla, you're going to pay for this," I snap.

"Promise, promises." She tilts her head, then scoops up the moisture from her slit and holds out her glistening fingers. "You sure you don't want this?"

My mouth waters. My chest tightens. "Isla, I'm trying to be good here," I growl.

"How disappointing." She brings her palms to her breasts and supports them. My cock threatens to stab right through my jeans. My pulse rate jumps through the roof.

"Isla," I warn.

"What? I'm simply playing with myself."

I pivot, head for the tub, and shut off the water. It's only half-filled but too fucking bad. If I'm going to stick to my plan, I need to get her in the tub so those tempting curves of hers are hidden by the bubbles.

"Get in the tub."

I turn to glance at her, just as she brings her fingers to her mouth and sucks on them. Then she brushes past me and slips into the water. She leans back against the tub, and I place a rolled-up towel behind her neck. She sighs, and muscle by muscle, I sense her relax.

I drag my gaze down her chest and almost groan aloud. The bubbles barely cover her breasts. In fact, I can make out the hard nubs of her nipples. She sticks a knee up through the water, and even though bubbles cover the triangle between her thighs, I can imagine the swollen flesh of her pussy there, can taste the sweetness of her cum on my tongue. A ball of heat detonates in my chest. My groin hardens. My vision tunnels until all I can see is her, all I can smell is her arousal. I can

almost taste her cum on my tongue, and I haven't even licked her.

Fuck. This. Shit. I tear off my shirt, toe off my shoes, shove my jeans and briefs down, kick them off, then prowls back to the tub.

“Lean forward.”

Isla

One second, I have my eyes closed, head tipped back against the tub as the heat of the water works its magic. The next, I hear his voice telling me to move forward. I open my eyelids to find him looming over me.

The intensity in his gaze burns through me. The throbbing in my core grows in ferocity, yet the rest of my body is so relaxed, my arms and legs so heavy, the contrast makes me even more conscious of just how turned on I am.

He presses down on my shoulder, and I move forward. He slips in behind me, then stretches his legs out on either side. His massive thighs bracket my hips, and his chest planes support my back. I lay back against him, and he settles his arm about my waist. The thick column of his cock is a steady pressure against my hip.

The fact that he knows everything about me, has seen me at my naked and most vulnerable, and is still so turned on is more erotic than anything he's done to my body, including the orgasms he's wrung from me... Almost. Okay, they'd have a very close competition, and I'm not sure which would win, to be honest. The fact that he can both make me come so hard I see stars, as well as accept me for who I am without asking me to change, is the singular most titillating thing ever.

I place my palm on his and wind my fingers through his much thicker ones. “It was wrong of me to reveal who I am to the world without telling you about it first.”

His fingers tighten on mine. He tucks my head under his chin, wraps his other arm about my shoulders, and pulls me even closer. “It was important for you to share your genuine self with the world.”

“It was more important to share it with you, but I was afraid.”

“Afraid?”

I nod. “I thought you’d hate me, that you’d want to walk away from me. That you’d take one look at me with my shaved pate and tell me you wanted nothing more to do with me.”

He scoffs, then kisses the top of my head. “And how do you feel now?”

I swallow and turn my cheek into the hardness of his chest. “Now, I realize I was the one judging you. I was the one with the issues. I was so scared of how much you’d begun to mean to me, how much I couldn’t bear it if you rejected me that I let my fears override all other thoughts. You’d shown me how much you wanted me, but I wasn’t giving myself the space to believe it. I guess, I’d already found you deficient, without giving you a chance. In reality, I was judging myself harshly. I thought if I revealed my real self to the world at the same time as you, then I was protecting myself from the inevitable hurt. Or maybe, I was setting myself up for the inevitable fall to come with both you and with everyone else out there. I figured I might as well get it all over with in one go, rather than staggering the rejection.”

“I’m glad I, and everyone else, didn’t let you down.”

“I know you’ll never let me down. I know now you’ll always be there for me. You’re my love, my protector, my defender. I’ve always been my own knight in shining armor. I’ve always thought it was a sign of weakness to let anyone else watch out for me.” I sit up, then turn around and straddle

him. “I realize now, it’s a sign of security to allow someone else into the parts of my life I wouldn’t have before. To share my thoughts and emotions with others. I choose you, Liam. My husband. My one and only. My beloved.”

He plants his palm on the nape of my neck and peers into my face. “That, baby, is the most valuable gift you’ve given me. The gift of trust.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t believe in you earlier. But I do now, wholly and completely. I believe in you, in us, in this.”

He applies pressure so I lower my head until my forehead is pushed into his.

“It’s understandable you were scared. What you did was life-changing, in more ways than one. You were protecting yourself from being hurt further, you shouldn’t apologize for that.”

I sniffle. “How can someone who started out as so much of an asshole turn out to have such a mushy center?”

He smirks, then pistons his hips up so the unmistakable rod of his cock stabs in between my pussy lips. “Does that feel mushy to you, baby?”

I snort. “Good to know that dominant part of you is still alive and kicking.”

As if in response his shaft throbs.

“And how,” he chuckles.

I laugh. God, it feels so good to be able to let go with him like this. To utterly trust in him, knowing he knows and accepts me completely. And I know it won’t always be smooth sailing—not with his ego—but if I fall, he’ll catch me. If I stumble, he’ll right me. If I lose my footing, he might even carry me a short distance before he helps me in finding my balance again.

He’ll match me footstep for footstep and sometimes, he’ll pull ahead but he’ll wait for me to catch up. And other times, I’ll overtake him, and he’ll be okay with that, too. He’ll probably be too busy staring at my ass in those cases, but

that's fine, too, because the only person whose gaze I want on me is his. The only arms I want around me are his. The only voice I want to hear whisper in my ear is his. The only heartbeat I want to hear when I fall asleep at night is his. The only heat I want, is to wake up cocooned in the cradle of his body.

“Dorian mentioned to me that he was your protector growing up.” He searches my features. “What was he protecting you from?”

I draw in a breath. “I went through a phase in my teens when I was overweight. I got bullied about it in school, and Dorian stepped in.”

“I'm glad you had him in your corner.”

I smile at the memory. “He roughed up anyone who dared to make fun of me. He got into trouble for it too, but thanks to him, the bullies backed off. Luckily, my weight came off as I grew taller, and my relationship with food didn't suffer either. I'm vegan out of choice, but I enjoy what I eat.”

“The bullying is what made you conscious of your appearance,” he says softly.

“It did, which is why losing my hair hit me even harder. I did try to own it at first, you know? I almost shaved my head a few years ago. In fact, I went to the salon and asked my hairdresser to shave off my hair, but he said I didn't have the kind of face that could carry off the bald look.”

He blinks, then his features contort. “The fuck? Who is this guy? How dare he insult you in this way? How did he have the audacity to put you down like that?” His chest heaves. His nostrils flare. “I'm going to find him and bash his face in.” Liam straightens as if he means to step out of the bath right now and deliver on his words.

I laugh, then choke, then laugh again. The fact that he'd defend my honor, that he'd avenge those hurtful words that cut my confidence at the knees and wrapped me in chains of defensiveness that constrained me for so long... Is so sweet, so healing. Link by link, the last of the shackles that kept me

paralyzed and stopped me from taking control of my life, fall off. My entire being feels freer. The energy seems to circulate through my body with more intention. I feel both more fluid and more purposeful, at the same time. And as always seems to be the case when I'm with Liam, I'm turned on. I reach between us, position myself on top of his fat cock, then impale myself to the hilt.

Liam

She thrusts down so my throbbing dick is surrounded by her wet, pulsing warmth. A part of me knows she's distracting me—likely, so I don't march out of this bath right now and find the bastard who dared hurt her with his words. "I know what you're doing, and I'm going to let you go through with it. For now."

"Oh?" She grips my shoulders, then rises until my cock is balanced at the rim of her opening.

A shudder runs up my body. My chest planes flex.

"You were saying?" She smirks. My woman smirks at me, and it's so fucking hot. Her being confident and strong and owning her power is more addictive than the world's finest whiskeys.

"That I'll let you take the lead this once, but be prepared for payback, baby."

She pushes down, and once more, that tight, melting hole of her encapsulates the column of my cock. A groan rips up my throat. I tighten my hold on her hips and hold her immobile. So, of course, she flexes her inner muscles, and fuck me I almost come right then.

"Isla," I growl.

She chuckles. "You were saying?"

“That I’m going to spank you for your impudence.”

Her pupils dilate. “I can’t wait.”

I release my grip on her, only to slide my hand down to circle her clit. She gasps and clamps down harder, and the pressure at the base of my spine multiplies. Sweat beads my forehead, and it’s not only from the steam. The heat of our bodies twines together and swirls about us. I drag my fingers through the soft hair between her thighs. “So this is why you prefer to be au natural?”

“Yes,” she gasps and writhes on my cock. “My type of alopecia is not universal, which is lucky... If I can call it that. It’s restricted to the hair on my head, which I’m grateful for.”

“What caused it, do you know?”

She raises a shoulder. “It’s an autoimmune condition which is sometimes genetic, but no one else in my extended family seems to suffer from it.” She raises a shoulder. “Likely, it’s a genetic predisposition that was triggered due to hormonal changes in my body, or maybe stress. I tried a few treatments, but nothing seemed to work. I decided to opt for a more holistic lifestyle to cope with it.”

“Is that why you turned vegan?”

She nods. “I wasn’t a meat lover to begin with, and turning vegan made me feel more comfortable in my own skin.”

“How did it start?” I continue to strum her pussy lips and she shudders.

“I first lost the hair on my head five years ago. It began coming out in clumps, then would grow back, and fall off again.”

She swallows, and I run soothing circles over her back. Her muscles relax further.

“I didn’t lose the hair on the other parts of my body though, which was a relief. There are so many out there who suffer from more acute forms of this condition, where they lose all of their body hair. It felt wrong to shave the hair on my body after that. Still, I wanted to look good for myself, so I

continued to remove the hair on my underarms, and legs. When it came to shaving my pubic hair, though... I couldn't bring myself to do it. I wanted to make a statement to myself by keeping it. It made me feel like I was defying my condition by not touching it. Also, it felt wrong to remove it when I'd been so desperate to keep the hair on my head. I—”

She gasps as I pluck on the nub of her clit. Her entire body jerks. “Liam,” she moans. “That feels so good.”

“You were saying?” I smirk.

She tries to look angry but spoils it with another gasp when I slide my fingers between her butt cheeks and finger the puckered bud there.

“That is so filthy. It shouldn't feel good—”

“But it does,” I say with satisfaction.

“It does. And when you fill me up from both the front and the back, the sensation is too much.”

I slide my finger past the ring of her sphincter, and her entire body jolts.

“Ohgod, ohgod, ohgod.”

I laugh, then shove another finger inside her back channel.

“Liam!” she yells, then gasps loudly. I let her adjust to the intrusion as quivers tremble down her spine.

“What were you saying before I interrupted you earlier?” I chuckle.

“That you're an asshole.”

“Whose fingers are in your arsehole.”

She laughs, and that makes her clamp down on both my dick and my fingers. I gasp, and so does she. “You're filling me, Liam. You're stretching me. You're so deep inside me, it feels like you're consuming me.”

“Good. I'm going to make it my life's ambition to fuck you every opportunity I get. That way, you'll be so high on endorphins, you won't have the chance to get stressed again.” I

piston my hips up and into her with such force that water spills over the side of the tub.

She moans loudly, and the sound goes straight to my head.

“Baby?”

“Hmm?”

“Hold onto me.”

Her eyelids flicker, but she digs her fingertips deeper into my skin. The sensations ricochet down my spine, straight to my cock, and my shaft thickens even more.

“Eyes on me,” I order.

She fixes those blue eyes, heavy with lust, on me, and I thrust up and into her again and again. I curl my fingers inside her as I power up into her. I feel the moisture bathe my cock, see her open her mouth, sense the climax sweeping up her spine, and then she shatters. I hold her gaze and follow her over the edge. I empty myself inside her with such power, it feels like my life force is melding with hers. I stay still as the aftershocks ripple through both of us. Then she slumps against me. I fold her in my arms, the beating of her heart as frantic as mine, in tandem with mine. My woman. My LadyBird. My wife. Mine.

Later, after we’ve dried off and made love again, this time on our bed, I slip on a bathrobe, slide her arms through another, then carry her down to the kitchen, where I heat the spicy veggie pie Malory has left to warm in the oven.

Seated across from her at one of the stools at the island, I feed her a mouthful, then hold up a glass of wine so she can take a sip from it.

“I can eat and drink on my own,” she laughs.

“Indulge me.” I feed her another mouthful.

“Only if I can feed you.” She holds up a forkful, and I draw it into my mouth.

When we’ve both eaten, I carry her into the study. I build the fire and make sure she’s comfortable and settled with

another glass of wine. I leave, returning shortly with her Kindle and phone. I hand them both to her, sit down on the sofa, and pull her against me before settling a blanket over her legs.

“Are you warm enough?”

She nods and snuggles in. “Thanks for bringing me my Kindle.”

“Now, you can read more of your smutty books.” I smirk.

She flutters her eyelashes at me. “And who’s the recipient of all the techniques I learn from the books?”

“I’m not complaining, at all.” I cup her cheek. “You should know, I donated my hair to a charity that makes wigs for women with alopecia. I’ll also be contributing twenty-five percent of my company’s monthly profits to funding research for this condition.”

Her chin wobbles. “Liam, I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything.” I kiss her again before I pull back and pick up her phone. I switch to the camera and hold it up in selfie mode so we’re both framed on screen. “There’s one thing you can do though; I think you should share another video post.”

A line forms between her eyebrows. “Now?”

“It has to be now.”

“But this feels too intimate,” she protests.

“Nothing you post will take away from what we have, baby.”

She searches my features. “I don’t want to share us with the world,” she finally admits.

“But you need to—for yourself and for others like you. You can inspire so many more women and men out there by showing this condition is not the end of the world. You can continue to live a full, happy life on your own terms, without having to be defensive. Just by being yourself, you can give hope to so many others.”

She sits up, places her Kindle on the coffee table, then slides back into the circle of my arms. “Are you always going to read my thoughts before I’ve even had a chance of forming them in my mind?”

“Always.”

She chuckles. “So confident.”

“As are you.”

She searches my features, then nods. “You’re right, I need to do this, but it’s the last post I’m going to share about us. This, what we have, is too personal, but I know by sharing us, it sends out a sign that nothing changes when you decide to live with this condition.”

I pull her closer and kiss the top of her head. “I love you.”

“I love you.”

Isla

“Will the two of you stop breaking the internet, please?” Zara waves her phone in my face. We’re on the patio of Liam’s—I mean, my and Liam’s—townhouse that looks out on the rolling slope of Primrose Hill. Turns out, we’re also close to Summer and Sinclair’s home and Karma and Michael’s place. The rest of the Seven, too, have opted to set up homes in and around the area. It’s nice to have our own little micro-community here, especially with Karma and Summer giving birth before the year is out. Some of the other wives of the Seven are pregnant, too, so we’re going to be knee-deep in babies very soon.

“Earth to Isla.” Zara touches my shoulder.

I blink. “I’m here... just trying to come to grips with everything.”

“You mean your newfound stardom?”

I glance at the screen of the phone which is open to my social media where we posted the video of Liam and me that we recorded in his study. The video has done almost as well as the one of me revealing my real look. That was a week ago. All of the videos on my feed are continuing to rack up hits. I’ve been receiving invitations to speak about alopecia, to become a spokesperson for it, and even an offer to write an autobiography, all of which I’ve turned down.

I'm not going to rush into anything. For now, I want to focus on my husband and myself. And while I'm not going to share any more videos of the two of us, I'm going to continue to talk at strategic intervals about my journey up until now, and moving forward on my feed.

"I'm glad my videos seem to have resonated with so many people, but what matters most is that I dared to face myself," I murmur.

Zara tilts her head. She stays that way for a few seconds, then nods slowly. "That's very mature of you."

I raise a shoulder. "I was so worried about putting up that video where I told everyone about my condition but now, I'm glad I did it."

"Whatever you decide is right for you is the right thing to do."

I smile. "Thanks."

She lowers the phone, then drops it into her handbag. "So what now? Are you going to continue with your wedding planning business?"

"It's still my dream. So yes, I'm going to continue to build it up." Needless to say, the popularity of the videos means I've been flooded with offers to organize weddings. I decided to take my time in accepting the ones I'm going to work with.

My new focus is to offer discounted services to women with conditions like mine who need help with organizing their weddings in a way that gives them the most confident start to the next chapter of their lives. Having shared my real self with the world, I feel so right, so ready, like I'm finally fully in my body. I want to bring that same feeling to those who've felt defensive about their looks. If I can help make them feel good about themselves and enhance their wedding by making them feel their best selves, then I'll know I've done my job.

Also, Lila finally messaged me. She went off-grid for a while to get herself together and is now traveling around the world. She decided not to use her father's money for the trip. Instead, she's working her way through her journey. By all

accounts, she's enjoying herself and discovering parts of herself she didn't know existed. She's thankful I saved her from marrying Liam, and she's happy we found each other. She's seen some of videos and says it's obvious we were meant to be. Apparently, she also caught my viral video where I revealed I have alopecia and she was very supportive of that, too. She assured me that we're still friends and says we'll get together when she gets back. She's not sure when that will be, but promised to keep in touch. And of course, I can follow her journey on social media.

"And I assume your fake wedding is no longer fake?" Zara arches an eyebrow.

"Far from it." I laugh. "And Liam insists he doesn't care about getting access to his trust fund or having the rights to his company finally transferred to him. He insists that as long as I'm happy, he's happy, and everything else is secondary."

Zara screws up her face. "Stop. The two of you are going to give me diabetes, with how lovey-dovey you always are."

"It is what it is." I raise my hands. "I can't help that I'm madly in love with my husband."

"You called, baby?" Liam's voice reaches me. I turn to find him making his way over to me. He bends, and at the same time, I tilt my face up. Our lips meet in a long, drugging kiss. By the time we break apart, I'm flushed, and Liam's wearing that infernal smirk on his face. A smirk I find even hotter, knowing the man behind all that sexiness is so caring, so tender, so tuned into my every need, that I'll never lack for anything as long as I live.

"I had a message from my ex-hairdresser," I cup his cheek.

"Oh?" He tilts his head.

"Don't pull that innocent look on me. Did you threaten him or something?"

"Do I look like the kind of man who goes around threatening people?"

I laugh. "Yes, you do. Especially when that person is someone who's upset me. I don't know what you told him, but

he apologized profusely for his statement. He told me he could only imagine how much distress his comment must have caused me, and promised to be more aware of what he says to his clients in the future. He asked how he could make it up to me.”

“And what did you say?” He searches my eyes.

“I didn’t want to forgive him, to be honest. But I knew I was being petty, and the only way I could heal move forward was to accept his apology and not harbor ill feelings toward him anymore. I made him promise never to judge another person so harshly again. He also agreed to donate 10% of his next month’s salary to the National Alopecia Research Foundation.” Liam pulls me closer.

“You’re a better person than I am. This is why I love you so much. You have such a generous heart, Isla.” He kisses me firmly. My heart jumps in my chest, and my stomach flutters. Liam’s kisses are the best. I mean, everything else he does to me is also amazing, but the touch of his lips on mine? It’s the most romantic thing ever.

“Love you,” I whisper against his mouth.

“Love you.” His lips curve up.

“Ugh, okay. I get it. Time for me to leave.” Zara jumps up to her feet.

“Oh, hey, didn’t mean to drive you away,” I protest.

Zara snorts. “Please, the two of you can’t wait to get rid of me so you can go back to burrowing into your love nest.”

I laugh, not denying the fact that I love spending time with my new husband. But I also don’t want any of my friends to feel like I’ve deserted them. “Call me, please, and tell me how the preparations for your new campaign are going.”

“You got it, babe.” She blows me a kiss, turns to leave, then stiffens.

There, leaning against the doorframe to the patio, is Hunter. He looks her up and down, a look of blatant longing on his face. Zara’s shoulders seem to tense even further. Then

she walks over to the doorway. As she's about to walk through, Hunter steps in front of her, blocking off her exit.

"Ooh, this should be interesting," I murmur.

"Indeed." The next moment, Liam lifts me, before sitting down on the sofa in the spot Zara has just vacated, with me in his lap. "Now we have a ringside view."

I cuddle into my husband and watch as Zara's spine goes ramrod straight.

"Let me pass," she says in a low voice, which we can still hear.

"And if I don't?" Hunter drawls.

She throws up her hands. "What do you want, anyway? Why can't you leave me alone?"

"A question I'm asking myself." Hunter's features take on a look of surprise which seems genuine. Maybe she senses it, too, because Zara seems to force herself to relax.

"I'm tired, Hunter."

"So am I—of fighting." He searches her features. "Why do you hate me?"

"It's not you; I hate the concept of you."

He blinks. "Excuse me?"

"You belong to the kind of entitled, snobbish, rich pricks who think the world owes them."

"So you're the kind who believes the meek shall inherit the world, and all that?" He smirks.

And just like that, Zara snaps her shoulders back again. "I should have known it was pointless to engage in any conversation with you. Now, let me pass or I'm going to knee you in the balls, and I promise, that's going to hurt."

Hunter takes a step back. His movement is so quick, so lithe, it's almost like a dance step. He holds up his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Sorry, I apologize. That was

unwarranted. At least, let me take you out to dinner so we can discuss this further.”

She snorts. “As if I’m going to waste my time with a person like you.”

His eyes gleam. “Why? Are you scared you’ll find that you actually like me?”

She laughs. A peal of sound that seems to entrance him.

“That’ll be the day,” she scoffs.

“Then you won’t have a problem giving me two hours of your time this evening?”

There seems to be a face-off between the two, but something she sees on his face must convince her, for she nods. “You have one hundred and twenty minutes.” With what looks like a magical twist of her wrist, she pulls out her phone from her bag. “Your clock starts now.”

Hunter’s gaze narrows. He peels back his lips, and for a second, a wolfish expression crosses his features. By the time Zara looks up at him, it’s gone. Once more, he seems contrite. He steps back and gestures to her to precede him. “After you, let’s see who wins this round.”

TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT READ [HUNTER AND ZARA’S STORY IN THE CHRISTMAS ONE NIGHT STAND HERE](#)

READ AN EXCERPT

Zara

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?” The man sitting next to me in the driver’s seat of his car, the man who represents so much of what I hate on every level, glares at me.

“Exactly that,” I glance out my window. And why did I agree to him taking me out to dinner? Why couldn’t I have turned him down? Why did I rise to his challenge when he asked earlier if I was scared I’d find him attractive? I’ll never find him appealing—not even if he were the last man on this

planet. And especially not when he stands for everything I hate.

Hunter Whittington is the very embodiment of entitlement. He comes from old world money, and has been groomed to take his place as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. He belongs to that class of Oxbridge educated, elitist, stuck-up, pain-in-the arse, wankers who thinks it's their right to rule and dominate. A grumphole who's highly popular with the old-boys-network, perceived as cunning, ruthless and lethal while also appearing to not give a damn about anything. Well, except for being very insistent I attend this dinner with him.

"I thought we were agreeing to a truce for this evening?" Mr. posh-tosh drawls.

I toss my hair over myself shoulder, "I agreed to have dinner with you; doesn't mean I'm going to be all docile and pleasant."

"Pity, because when you smile, you're actually quite charming."

I scoff. "That the best you can do? Also, your compliments leave me cold."

"When I compliment you, you'll know it." He drawls, "That was simply me stating a fact."

"And this is me stating that I'm already regretting being here with you."

He flips on the indicator, then turns off the highway and onto a secondary road. He's rolled up his shirt sleeves and the veins pop in his arms. Oh, yeah, I forgot to mention that the arrogant prick has very well-defined forearms with sculpted muscles covered with tanned skin and a peppering of dark hair. My fingers tingle.

How would it be to trail my fingers over them and feel the scrape of those rough strands against my skin. How would it be to have his blunt fingertips trail up my arm, over my shoulder down the curve of my breasts and—*why am I thinking along these lines?* Sure, Hunter Whittington has the sort of features that wouldn't look out of place on the cover of

GQ, his build resembles that of a Hollywood action hero, and his broad shoulders invite me to snuggle into his chest. He makes my knees go weak, makes my throat dry, makes a pulse flare to life between my thighs... None of which negate the fact that he stands for the kinds of values I've always hated. He's an, egoistical, wanker who was born into one of the richest families in the country. The kind of family related to royalty. The kind who'd never have to work for a day in his life if he didn't want to. The kind who had everything handed to him on a silver platter. The kind who is the exact opposite of how I grew up. Plus, I hated him on sight.

The first time I met him was at Club 7A, an outfit run by JJ Kane and Sinclair Sterling, two of the most powerful men in the country and founders of the club intended to help identify talent and invest in them. They invited me to be a founding member, and I was the only woman at the table. Given the career I've chosen, that's not unusual. What threw me, though, was the visceral reaction I had to this man. How I took an instant dislike to him and he toward me. How we barely managed to be civil to each other in that first meeting. It was only exacerbated when we met at work.

He'd filed his candidacy to run for the position of the Prime Minister, and I'm the fixer. A well-known PR spin-doctor who the country's tastemakers—from influencers to politicians—come to when they need to salvage their reputations. Which made things messy, to say the least. Because no way, can I personally be involved in a scandal.

His ride to Downing Street depends on his track record being free of scandal. And my job depends on my not *becoming* the scandal. I need to always be seen as an impartial party by the media. My ability to manipulate the news people depends on that. Which means, I can't let my association with him be seen as anything but professional; i.e. I need to be courteous toward him when we meet in person.

If the media gets wind of just how much we hate each other, it would only become the topic of debate. Not to mention, hating someone on a personal level never bodes well. It would only encourage people to see me as someone who

can't be objective when it came to those in the news, and I can't afford that. I've built my career as someone who is never pulled into media clashes, and I need to stay that way. Which means, I need all of my wits about me. Ergo, I need to defuse this...situation between Hunter and me that's becoming increasingly untenable.

It's why, when he asked me to dinner so we could try to come to some kind of an understanding, I agreed. It's not like I had a choice, either. When my instinct was to turn him down, he challenged me by saying, perhaps, I was too scared to spend time with him one-on-one, that I might find I actually liked him. I knew I was being played, that he was appealing to my competitive spirit. And yet, I couldn't say no. That's my weakness. I never can resist a confrontation.

So here I am, in the car that he's parked in front of a building set back from the road.

Behind us, the security car—with my security detail—that has been following us comes to a stop. Another pulls ahead and parks in front. One of the men—his security detail, who have been coordinating with mine on this short journey—gets out of the car. He scans the area, speaks into the hidden mic on his watch the way security people seem to often do, then walks over to open the door on Hunter's side. I gather my things and reach for the handle on my door, but Hunter has already walked around to hold it open. My stomach folds in on itself. A stutter swirls about my chest. So annoying that he has to shove his good manners in my face.

I slide out, then straighten. "You didn't have to do that. I can open my own door," I snap.

"My mother taught me better."

I sniff, brush past him and head up the path leading to the restaurant without waiting for him. Footsteps follow as his long legs eat up the distance. He walks past me and is holding open the door to the restaurant by the time I reach it. I scowl up at him, then step through the entrance and up the short hallway. I reach the restaurant and pause. The lighting is dim, the walls are painted a pale ivory. Both sides of the restaurants

are glass walls. To my right, past the glass wall, is what seems to be a forest of bamboo trees. And beyond the glass wall on my left is a manmade fountain. The entire effect is soothing, like being in a Zen space. Strangely, all of the tables are empty.

“Where is everyone?”

“Everyone who matters is here.” He takes my coat, hands it over to a maître d’ who materializes out of nowhere, then shrugs off his own jacket and gives it to the same man. He guides me to the table in the center of the room—to the only table set with silverware and candles. He holds out my chair and I slide in. There’s a third chair set on one side of the table between us.

“Is there someone else joining us?” I frown.

“That’s for your bag.”

Eh? I blink, then lower my eyebrows. “Care to explain?”

“I’m aware of how much you love your accessories, especially your shoes and purses. And I know you’d never place one on the floor. And putting it on the table is simply gauche, so—” He raises a shoulder.

“So, you arranged for an extra chair for my Balenciaga?”

“Was I wrong?”

“You were...” I hesitate. I don’t want to admit he’s right. That he correctly anticipated me that I do take great care of my shoes and my handbags. They’re an extension of me. They project who I am to the world. They are more than a brand statement; they are a declaration of how much I value myself. Somehow, I hadn’t expected this...uppity, almost-royalty twat to understand that. But in one fell swoop, he’s done that and more. Probably just a lucky guess. Maybe I’m reading too much into it. I place my handbag on the chair and tip up my chin. “Thanks,” I murmur.

“You’re welcome.” He inclines his head.

I glance about the restaurant again. “So, we’re the only ones here?”

“And my bodyguards.”

In my peripheral vision, I spot his security detail positioning themselves at strategic points around the room and by the entrance. It’s dim enough that their black suits blend with the shadows, but of course I know they’re there.

“You know I don’t mean them, either.”

“There’s also the service staff.” He waves a hand in the air, and as if by magic, a waiter materializes next to him with a bottle of champagne.

“Are we celebrating something?” I scowl.

“You agreed to have dinner with me—”

“I agreed to give you two hours to convince me why I shouldn’t hate the idea of you.” He begins to speak and I raise a finger, “—of which, you now have eighty minutes left.”

He curls his lips. “Are you always this...blinker?”

“Are you always this...carefree?” I snap.

His grin widens. “Appearances can be deceptive.”

“You don’t say.”

He arches an eyebrow at the waiter who pops the cork on the champagne. The sound ricochets about the space, emphasizing again, that we are only ones here.

“You still didn’t tell me where everyone else is,” I murmur.

The waiter pours the bubbles into my glass, then Hunter’s. He places the bottle into the ice-bucket perched on a stand next to the table that I only now notice. Then he fades away into the darkness.

“Given the potential speculation seeing the two of us together could cause, naturally, I had to find a solution to take you out to dinner in a public space while ensuring we had privacy.”

“Ergo, you used your money and influence to buy out the place?”

“I simply asked the owner, who happens to be a friend, if he could accommodate us. And he did.”

“Is it always this easy for you? To wave you hand and have all of your needs met? To incline your head and have minions jump to do your bidding? To ask and always receive?”

“Except with you.”

He narrows his blue-green gaze on me from across the expanse of the table. The candlelight highlights the golden-brown specks in the depths of his eyes and haloes his dark hair, turning it almost blue. The hollows under his cheekbones seem more pronounced, the dip in his chin seems more delicious.

I try to tear my gaze from his, but it's as if he holds me in a tractor beam. Awareness tugs on and stretches the air between us. My heart begins to race. This is ridiculous. So, he's good-looking. I knew that already. What I hadn't realized is that hidden behind that polished mask he presents to the world is an untamed animal. A beast lying in wait to unleash that darkness inside of him. An edginess, a sharp wickedness that I never would've guessed he'd be capable of, but which I sense now lapping at the restraints that he's placed on himself.

I curl my fingers around the stem of my champagne glass. “I didn't say I wanted champagne.”

“You love champagne. It's your drink of choice,” he declares.

My eyebrows shoot up. “And you guessed this, how?”

“Nothing a little bit of research didn't throw up.”

I stiffen. “You had me investigated?”

“As you did me.”

I blink, then surprise myself when laughter tumbles out from between my lips. “Touché.” I raise my glass.

He seems taken aback himself, then his lips curve up in a smile that's so open, so real that something flutters deep inside. It's probably ripples of hunger, that's all. I had very

little for lunch and no breakfast. That's the reason my stomach seems to be bottoming out.

He touches his glass to mine. "To us."

"There is no us." I incline my head.

"Not yet."

"Excuse me?" I widen my gaze. "I'm not sure I heard you correctly."

"Oh, you did. You just don't want to admit it."

He takes a sip of his champagne. The tendons of his throat move as he swallows. My pulse rate speeds up.

Stupid. This is stupid—really stupid. I underestimated him. I thought I hated him. Oh, subconsciously, I'd noticed how my body reacted to his nearness, but I'd simply set that to one side. I'm not the kind who will allow my desires to lead me. Not after I've worked so hard my entire life to get to where I am. To break stereotypes. To make a difference to my community and to my country. This is what I've always wanted. This is why I studied so hard, why I got a scholarship to study law, then started my own PR firm. Why I've been so focused on my goals, to the exclusion of everything else. Why I accepted his challenge to spend time with him. I was confident I'd come out on top of our encounter. But now, I'm not so sure. And one thing I'm not is stupid. I know when to cut my losses and run. "Excuse me, but I have to leave."

I place my glass of champagne on the table and begin to rise to my feet, but he swoops out his hand and grabs my hand. Electricity shoots out from the point of contact. My breath catches in my chest. I glance to where his fingers are wrapped about my wrist. I glance up to find his gaze locked on my face. Some of the color seems to have drained from his features. He releases me, and I sit back down. We stare at each other. The silence stretches. Then the waiter wheels in a cart of food. He places a dish in front of me, then another in front of Hunter, before once more, retreating. We still haven't taken our gazes off of each other. My throat closes. My pulse thuds at my

temples. Moisture pools between my legs and I squeeze my thighs together.

“That...” He inclines his head and smirks. “That is what I’m talking about.”

“What?” I laugh, or at least try to, but all that emerges is a thready sound.

“You sensed it, same as I did This chemistry that sizzles between us.”

“We’ve barely met a few times in person.”

“And yet, every time I enter a room with you in it, my gaze instantly finds you.”

Heat flushes my cheeks, but I manage to school my features into an expression of nonchalance. “Not my fault.” I raise a shoulder.

“Don’t shrug it off. If we don’t address this” —he points to the space between us— “it’s only going to build and become so monumental, it’ll hurt something or someone. Possibly, both of us.”

I pretend to yawn; except when I pat my mouth, my fingers are shaking. “I have no idea what you mean.”

His eyebrows draw down, and for a second, he looks disappointed. “Funny, I had you pegged as the kind of woman who wouldn’t hesitate to speak the truth, no matter how difficult.”

“I’m also someone who knows when I’m better off ignoring the obvious.”

“So, you’d rather lie to yourself than face the fact that the chemistry between us is explosive?”

“You said it; not me.” I bite the inside of my cheek.

“I have a better idea. A way in which we can both be truthful to ourselves, and walk away from this with our careers intact.”

“Oh, so you do understand how dangerous it is for the two of us to even be seen together, let alone having dinner?”

“Which is why I’ve ensured privacy.” He waves his hand at our surroundings. “And I have absolute trust in the restaurant staff, as well as my security detail. Additionally, I ensured your security detail were vetted, so I know they’re trustworthy.”

I stare at him. “I’m not sure if I should be impressed by your thoroughness or creeped out by how rigorous you’ve been in thinking through the possibilities.”

“One thing you should realize about me... I’m always one step ahead of the obvious,” he murmurs.

“One thing you should realize...” I lean forward in my seat. “I’m always thinking ten steps ahead of my rival.”

This time, he’s the one who laughs. “Am I your rival?”

“Aren’t you?”

“When it comes to our jobs, yes, we’re on opposing sides, But I do believe we can use this intense hostility we feel toward each other to our advantage, when it comes to our personal lives.”

I tip up my chin. “My personal life is my own business.”

“Not anymore. Not since you caught my eye. Not since you can’t stop tracking me with your gaze when we’re in the same space and stalking me online when we’re not.”

“I don’t stalk you—” I firm my lips.

He smirks. “That’s what I thought. You’re as obsessed with me as I am with you.”

I open my mouth to protest, but he holds up his finger. “Don’t even try to deny it. You and I both know, the fact that we never seem to get along when we meet is more than because we belong to opposing sides. It’s because we are both aware of the other to an extent which is unhealthy.”

“I am not going to condone that statement with an acceptance.”

“All you need to do is accept my offer.”

“Which is?”

“Let’s fuck it out.”

Hunter

“You’re kidding me, aren’t you?”

Twin spots of color burn high on her cheeks. Her features wear an expression of surprise and shock, but her pupils are dilated, the black bleeding out until only a thin circle of gold can be seen around the circumference. Her chest rises and falls. She’s flushed and angry, and also turned on. I didn’t think it would be possible to shock her, but clearly, I have. Which is what I’d hoped for, of course. Only I hadn’t thought I’d be able to achieve it.

Since the moment I first laid eyes on Zara Chopra, she’s fascinated me and also, surprised me. Truth be told, I’m not even sure I like her. For one, she’s curvy, with the kind of hourglass figure I didn’t think I’d find alluring—which I haven’t found enticing, until her. My previous girlfriends have been slimmer—mostly models and actresses, or those who’ve earned a living through their looks. Zara, on the other hand, has striking features and she’s, clearly, more than a pretty face. In short, she’s the exact opposite of the kind of woman I normally date. Add to that the fact that she’s my rival in the upcoming elections...

It means the entire situation is one that could well blow up in my face. It’s also the kind of challenge I relish. Not only have we fought each time we’ve met, but she’s also made it clear the dislike is mutual. Which I admit, is a blow to my ego. I’ve never met a woman who has been able to resist me. Until her. Perhaps that’s why I made that offer to her.

I didn’t bring her here with the intention of doing so, but when she sat opposite me and seemed unmoved by my presence, I had to test her. I wanted to catch her off guard—which I did. And perhaps, also, myself. For until I heard my own words, I didn’t realize just how much I mean it. How much I want to bend her over this table right now and explore what it means to have her writhing under me, impaled on my cock, as I bring her to orgasm over and over again.

“Do I look like the kind of man who’d say anything I don’t mean.”

“You’re a politician,” she scoffs.

“And you aren’t?”

She firms her lips. “I’m a fixer, I solve problems. I am not the one who makes them, I leave that to you politicians.”

“Spoken like a true salesperson.”

She blows out a breath. “I didn’t come here to be insulted.”

“That wasn’t an insult.” I incline my head. “Salespeople are some of the most persuasive, some of the cleverest, people I have met.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t agree with you. You ask me to dinner, then tell me you had me investigated, then order my favorite drink and” —she glances down at her plate, then back at me— “my favorite food.”

“So, I did my homework.” I raise my shoulder.

“Then—” She raises her forefinger, “—ou tell me you want to fuck me.”

“I said, we should fuck each other.”

“No, thank you.”

I lean forward in my seat, “You scared you’ll like it too much?”

“I’m not going to answer that. I’m not falling for that again.”

I survey her still flushed features. “You *are* worried that you might be spoiled for anyone else after our encounter.”

“Your ego knows no bounds.”

“And your ego would never settle for anyone with balls smaller than mine.”

She stares at me, then throws her head back and laughs. It’s a full-bellied laugh that comes from the depths of her being. Her eyes are squeezed shut, and her mouth is open. It’s

not a pretty laugh; it's a wicked, full-of-life laugh. It's the laugh of a woman who knows how to enjoy life.

“Let's enjoy ourselves, Zara. One night. You and me. Let's find out why it is, that even though we can't stand each other, we also gravitate toward each other.”

She lowers her head and fixes me with those glowing, tawny eyes of hers. The candlelight dances over her skin, highlighting her high cheekbones, her upturned nose, her stubborn chin. She's going to be a handful. She'll never give in without a fight. She'll resist me every step of the way, and fuck, if I don't find that thought exciting. Nobody has piqued my interest, or drawn my hackles, or made me want to both spank her and kiss her at the same time, as this woman has.

“What do you say? Twelve hours. Until the sun comes up, we explore why it is that we're so drawn to each other even as we also hate the other's guts.”

One side of her lips kicks up. She reaches for her champagne and takes a sip. “Very clever. You think by outlining all of the reasons this is going to make our relationship exciting, you'll tempt me?”

“So, you agree that we're going to have a relationship?”

A crease appears between her eyebrows. “That was a figure of speech.”

“Or a Freudian slip.”

“Or a slip of the tongue.” She trails her finger around the rim of her Champagne glass and my balls tighten. Goddam! Now, she's teasing me, while she still continues to deny the attraction. Every little action of hers is calculated to tease me. She has the way of a seductress, a siren song on her lips, and the look of a huntress in her eyes. She's unharnessed, unbridled, a wildling come to turn my world upside-down. An untamed vixen who'll steal my heart and my soul, and whose name will be stamped in every cell of my body.

The hair on the back of my neck rises. Something like a forewarning ripples up my spine. *Get away from her. Leave. Get out as soon as you can, before things get too complicated.*

A-n-d the very fact that I have that thought, that for the first time in my life I, Hunter Whittington, am thinking of leaving the battlefield without even trying to engage with my opponent, gives me pause. I'm not a coward. It takes balls to embark on a career in the public eye. It takes nerves of steel to decide to run for the highest office in this country. It takes courage of conviction and a special kind of crazy to embark on the journey I have. And I wouldn't have done it if I didn't love a challenge. If I didn't relish the opportunity to win a confrontation. If I didn't enjoy finding my way through obstacles. All of which she seems to personify. I drag my finger across my lower lip.

"I'd love to slip my tongue inside you," I murmur.

Her gaze widens. A pulse throbs to life at the base of her neck. She bites down on her lower lip, and I feel the tug all the way to the base of my cock.

I tighten my grip about my own glass of Champagne. "You liked that, didn't you?"

She huffs. "I expected better than a cliché from you."

"Clichés exist because they're true."

"And I thought you were capable of more original thinking?"

"You don't want to know what I'm thinking right now."

She holds my gaze boldly. "Why don't you tell me?"

I release the hold on my flute, then lean forward and slide the glass from her grasp. I turn it to where the mark of her lips graces the rim and take a sip of the sparkling wine. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

Her lips part, then she raises one brow. "Try me."

"I want touch your curves and fondle the dips in your body. I want to hold you and kiss you, and bite you and suck on you. I want lick you, taste you, sink my fingers inside you. I want to take you to the edge over and over again, until your blood is coursing with pheromones, until you're so high from the experience, you'll be spoiled for anyone else. Until all you

can think of is me, all you taste is me, until your every breath belongs to me, until” —I place my hand over hers— “I bring you to your knees and have you begging me to show you every depraved thing I can do to you, until I bring every secret, perverted dream of yours to life, until you’re begging me to show you just how far I can push you, until you surprise even yourself.”

Her breath hitches.

“I want to arouse you to the extent you have no other thoughts but how it will be to have my cock buried in your pussy, my fingers in your arse, my tongue in your mouth, and how I’ll take you to the edge until you beg me to come and even then I won’t let you—”

“Unless?” She breathes.

“Unless you beg me and plead with me and submit to me.”

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READ AN EXCERPT FROM MAFIA KING – MICHAEL AND KARMA’S STORY

Karma

“Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day...”

Tears prick the backs of my eyes. Goddamn Byron. His words creep up on me when I am at my weakest. Not that I am a poetry addict, by any measure, but words are my jam. The one consolation I have is that, when everything else in the world is wrong, I can turn to them, and they’ll be there, friendly, steady, waiting with open arms.

And this particular poem had laced my blood, crawled into my gut when I’d first read it. Darkness had folded within me like an insidious snake, that raises its head when I least expect

it. Like now, when I look out on the still sleeping city of London, from the grassy slope of Waterlow Park.

Somewhere out there, the Mafia is hunting me, apparently. It's why my sister Summer and her new husband Sinclair Sterling had insisted that I have my own security detail. I had agreed... only to appease them... then given my bodyguard the slip this morning. I had decided to come running here because it's not a place I'd normally go... Not so early in the morning, anyway. They won't think to look for me here. At least, not for a while longer.

I purse my lips, close my eyes. Silence. The rustle of the wind between the leaves. The faint tinkle of the water from the nearby spring.

I could be the last person on this planet, alone, unsung, bound for the grave.

Ugh! Stop. Right there. I drag the back of my hand across my nose. Try it again, focus, get the words out, one after the other, like the steps of my sorry life.

"Morn came and went—and came, and... and..." My voice breaks. "Bloody asinine hell." I dig my fingers into the grass and grab a handful and fling it out. Again. From the top.

"Morn came and went—and came, and—"

"...brought no day."

A gravelly voice completes my sentence.

I whip my head around. His silhouette fills my line of sight. He's sitting on the same knoll as me, yet I have to crane my neck back to see his profile. The sun is at his back, so I can't make out his features. Can't see his eyes... Can only take in his dark hair, combed back by a ruthless hand that brooked no measure.

My throat dries.

Thick dark hair, shot through with grey at the temples. He wears his age like a badge. I don't know why, but I know his years have not been easy. That he's seen more, indulged in more, reveled in the consequences of his actions, however

extreme they might have been. He's not a normal, everyday person, this man. Not a nine-to-fiver, not someone who lives an average life. Definitely not a man who returns home to his wife and home at the end of the day. He is...different, unique, evil... Monstrous. Yes, he is a beast, one who sports the face of a man but who harbors the kind of darkness inside that speaks to me. I gulp.

His face boasts a hooked nose, a thin upper lip, a fleshy lower lip. One that hints at hidden desires, Heat. Lust. The sensuous scrape of that whiskered jaw over my innermost places. Across my inner thigh, reaching toward that core of me that throbs, clenches, melts to feel the stab of his tongue, the thrust of his hardness as he impales me, takes me, makes me his. Goosebumps pop on my skin.

I drag my gaze away from his mouth down to the scar that slashes across his throat. A cold sensation coils in my chest. What or who had hurt him in such a cruel fashion?

“Of this their desolation; and all hearts

Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light...”

He continues in that rasping guttural tone. Is it the wound that caused that scar that makes his voice so... gravelly... So deep... so... so, hot?

Sweat beads my palms and the hairs on my nape rise. “Who are you?”

He stares ahead as his lips move,

“Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour

They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks

Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black.”

I swallow, moisture gathers in my core. How can I be wet by the mere cadence of this stranger's voice?

I spring up to my feet.

“Sit down,” he commands.

His voice is unhurried, lazy even, his spine erect. The cut of his black jacket stretches across the width of his massive

shoulders. His hair... I was mistaken—there are threads of dark gold woven between the darkness that pours down to brush the nape of his neck. A strand of hair falls over his brow. As I watch, he raises his hand and brushes it away. Somehow, the gesture lends an air of vulnerability to him. Something so at odds with the rest of his persona that, surely, I am mistaken?

My scalp itches. I take in a breath and my lungs burn. This man... He's sucked up all the oxygen in this open space as if he owns it, the master of all he surveys. The master of me. My death. My life. A shiver ladders along my spine. *Get away, get away now, while you still can.*

I angle my body, ready to spring away from him.

“I won't ask again.”

Ask. Command. Force me to do as he wants. He'll have me on my back, bent over, on my side, on my knees, over him, under him. He'll surround me, overwhelm me, pin me down with the force of his personality. His charisma, his larger-than-life essence will crush everything else out of me and I... I'll love it.

“No.”

“Yes.”

A fact. A statement of intent, spoken aloud. So true. So real. Too real. Too much. Too fast. All of my nightmares... my dreams come to life. Everything I've wanted is here in front of me. I'll die a thousand deaths before he'll be done with me... And then? Will I be reborn? For him. For me. For myself.

I live, first and foremost, to be the woman I was... am meant to be.

“You want to run?”

No.

No.

I nod my head.

He turns his, and all the breath leaves my lungs. Blue eyes—cerulean, dark like the morning skies, deep like the

nighttime...hidden corners, secrets that I don't dare uncover. He'll destroy me, have my heart, and break it so casually.

My throat burns and a boiling sensation squeezes my chest.

“Go then, my beauty, fly. You have until I count to five. If I catch you, you are mine.”

“If you don't?”

“Then I'll come after you, stalk your every living moment, possess your nightmares, and steal you away in the dead of night, and then...”

I draw in a shuddering breath as liquid heat drips from between my legs. “Then?” I whisper.

“Then, I'll ensure you'll never belong to anyone else, you'll never see the light of day again, for your every breath, your every waking second, your thoughts, your actions... and all your words, every single last one, will belong to me.” He peels back his lips, and his teeth glint in the first rays of the morning light. “Only me.” He straightens to his feet and rises, and rises.

This man... He is massive. A monster who always gets his way. My guts churn. My toes curl. Something primeval inside of me insists I hold my own. I cannot give in to him. Cannot let him win whatever this is. I need to stake my ground, in some form. *Say something. Anything. Show him you're not afraid of this.*

“Why?” I tilt my head back, all the way back. “Why are you doing this?”

He tilts his head, his ears almost canine in the way they are silhouetted against his profile.

“Is it because you can? Is it a... a,” I blink, “a debt of some kind?”

He stills.

“My father, this is about how he betrayed the Mafia, right? You're one of them?”

“Lucky guess.” His lips twist, “It is about your father, and how he promised you to me. He reneged on his promise, and now, I am here to collect.”

“No.” I swallow... *No, no, no.*

“Yes.” His jaw hardens.

All expression is wiped clean of his face, and I know then, that he speaks the truth. It’s always about the past. My sorry shambles of a past... Why does it always catch up with me? *You can run, but you can never hide.*

“Tick-tock, Beauty.” He angles his body and his shoulders shut out the sight of the sun, the dawn skies, the horizon, the city in the distance, the rustle of the grass, the trees, the rustle of the leaves. All of it fades and leaves just me and him. Us. *Run.*

“Five.” He jerks his chin, straightens the cuffs of his sleeves.

My knees wobble.

“Four.”

My pulse rate spikes. I should go. Leave. But my feet are planted in this earth. This piece of land where we first met. What am I, but a speck in the larger scheme of things? To be hurt. To be forgotten. To be taken without an ounce of retribution. To be punished... by him.

“Three.” He thrusts out his chest, widens his stance, every muscle in his body relaxed. “Two.”

I swallow. The pulse beats at my temples. My blood thrums.

“One.”

Michael

“Go.”

She pivots and races down the slope. Her dark hair streams behind her. Her scent, sexy femininity and silver moonflowers, clings to my nose, then recedes. It’s so familiar, that scent.

I had smelled it before, had reveled in it. Had drawn in it into my lungs as she had peeked up at me from under her thick eyelashes. Her green gaze had fixed on mine, her lips parted as she welcomed my kiss. As she had wound her arms about my neck, pushed up those sweet breasts and flattened them against my chest. As she had parted her legs when I had planted my thigh between them. I had seen her before... in my dreams. I stiffen. She can't be the same girl, though, can she?

I reach forward, thrust out my chin and sniff the air, but there's only the damp scent of dawn, mixed with the foul tang of exhaust fumes, as she races away from me.

She stumbles and I jump forward, pause when she straightens. Wait. Wait. Give her a lead. Let her think she has almost escaped, that she's gotten the better of me... As if.

I clench my fists at my sides, force myself to relax. Wait. Wait. She reaches the bottom of the incline, turns. I surge forward. One foot in front of the other. My heels dig into the grassy surface and mud flies up, clings to the hem of my £4000 Italian pants. Like I care? Plenty more where that came from. An entire walk-in closet, full of clothes made to measure, to suit every occasion, with every possible accessory needed by a man in my position to impress...

Everything... Except the one thing that I had coveted from the moment I had laid eyes on her. Sitting there on the grassy slope, unshed tears in her eyes, and reciting... Byron? For hell's sake. Of all the poets in the world, she had to choose the Lord of Darkness.

I huff. All a ploy. Clearly, she knew I was sitting next to her... No, not possible. I had walked toward her and she hadn't stirred. Hadn't been aware. Yeah, I am that good. I've been known to slit a man's throat from ear-to-ear while he was awake and in his full senses. Alive one second, dead the next. That's how it is in my world. You want it, you take it. And I... I want her.

I increase my pace, eat up the distance between myself and the girl... That's all she is. A slip of a thing, a slim blur of

motion. Beauty in hiding. A diamond, waiting for me to get my hands on her, polish her, show her what it means to be...

Dead. She is dead. That's why I am here.

A flash of skin, a creamy length of thigh. My groin hardens and my legs wobble. I lurch over a bump in the ground. The hell? I right myself, leap forward, inching closer, closer. She reaches a curve in the path, disappears out of sight.

My heart hammers in my chest. I will not lose her, will not. *Here, Beauty, come to Daddy.* The wind whistles past my ears. I pump my legs, lengthen my strides, turn the corner. There's no one there. Huh?

My heart hammers and the blood pounds at my wrists, my temples; adrenaline thrums in my veins. I slow down, come to a stop. Scan the clearing.

The hairs on my forearms prickle. She's here. Not far, but where? Where is she? I prowl across to the edge of the clearing, under the tree with its spreading branches.

When I get my hands on you, Beauty, I'll spread your legs like the pages of a poem. Dip into your honeyed sweetness, like a quill pen in ink. Drag my aching shaft across that melting, weeping entrance. My balls throb. My groin tightens. The crack of a branch above shivers across my stretched nerve endings. I swoop forward, hold out my arms, and close my grasp around the trembling, squirming mass of precious humanity. I cradle her close to my chest, heart beating thud-thud-thud, overwhelming any other thought.

Mine. All mine. The hell is wrong with me? She wriggles her little body, and her curves slide across my forearms. My shoulders bunch and my fingers tingle. She kicks out with her legs and arches her back, thrusting her breasts up so her nipples are outlined against the fabric of her sports bra. She dared to come out dressed like that? In that scrap of fabric that barely covers her luscious flesh?

"Let me go." She whips her head toward me and her hair flows around her shoulders, across her face. She blows it out of the way. "You monster, get away from me."

Anger drums at the backs of my eyes and desire tugs at my groin. The scent of her is sheer torture, something I had dreamed of in the wee hours of twilight when dusk turned into night.

She's not real. She's not the woman I think she is. She is my downfall. My sweet poison. The bitter medicine I must partake of to cure the ills that plague my company.

"Fine." I lower my arms and she tumbles to the grass, hits the ground butt first.

"How dare you." She huffs out a breath, her hair messily arranged across her face.

I shove my hands into the pockets of my fitted pants, knees slightly bent, legs apart. Tip my chin down and watch her as she sprawls at my feet.

"You... dropped me?" She makes a sound deep in her throat.

So damn adorable.

"Your wish is my command." I quirk my lips.

"You don't mean it."

"You're right." I lean my weight forward on the balls of my feet and she flinches.

"What... what do you want?"

"You."

She pales. "You want to... to rob me? I have nothing of consequence.

"Oh, but you do, Beauty."

I lean in and every muscle in her body tenses. Good. She's wary. She should be. She should have been alert enough to have run as soon as she sensed my presence. But she hadn't.

I should spare her because she's the woman from my dreams... but I won't. She's a debt I intend to collect. She owes me, and I've delayed what was meant to happen long enough.

I pull the gun from my holster, point it at her.

Her gaze widens and her breath hitches. I expect her to plead with me for her life, but she doesn't. She stares back at me with her huge dilated pupils. She licks her lips and the blood drains to my groin. *Che cazzo!* Why does her lack of fear turn me on so?

“Your phone,” I murmur, “take out your phone.”

She draws in a breath, then reaches into her pocket and pulls out her phone.

“Call your sister.”

“What?”

“Dial your sister, Beauty. Tell her you are going away on a long trip to Sicily with your new male friend.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” I curl my lips. “Do it, now!”

She blinks, looks like she is about to protest, then her fingers fly over the phone.

Damn, and I had been looking forward to coaxing her into doing my bidding.

She holds her phone to her ear. I can hear the phone ring on the other side, before it goes to voicemail. She glances at me and I jerk my chin. She looks away, takes a deep breath, then speaks in a cheerful voice, “Hi Summer, it's me, Karma. I, ah, have to go away for a bit. This new... ah, friend of mine... He has an extra ticket and he has invited me to Sicily to spend some time with him. I... ah, I don't know when, exactly, I'll be back, but I'll message you and let you know. Take care. Love ya sis, I—”

I snatch the phone from her, disconnect the call, then hold the gun to her temple, “Goodbye, Beauty.”

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READ AN EXCERPT FROM SUMMER & SINCLAIR'S STORY

Summer

“Slap, slap, kiss, kiss.”

“Huh?” I stare up at the bartender.

“Aka, there’s a thin line between love and hate.” He shakes out the crimson liquid into my glass.

“Nah.” I snort. “Why would she allow him to control her, and after he insulted her?”

“It’s the chemistry between them.” He lowers his head, “You have to admit that when the man is arrogant and the woman resists, it’s a challenge to both of them, to see who blinks first, huh?”

“Why?” I wave my hand in the air, “Because they hate each other?”

“Because,” he chuckles, “the girl in school whose braids I pulled and teased mercilessly, is the one who I—”

“Proposed to?” I huff.

His face lights up. “You get it now?”

Yeah. No. A headache begins to pound at my temples. This crash course in pop psychology is not why I came to my favorite bar in Islington, to meet my best friend, who is—I glance at the face of my phone—thirty minutes late.

I inhale the drink, and his eyebrows rise.

“What?” I glower up at the bartender. “I can barely taste the alcohol. Besides, it’s free drinks at happy hour for women, right?”

“Which ends in precisely” he holds up five fingers, “minutes.”

“Oh! Yay!” I mock fist pump. “Time enough for one more, at least.”

A hiccough swells my throat and I swallow it back, nod.

One has to do what one has to do... when everything else in the world is going to shit.

A hot sensation stabs behind my eyes; my chest tightens. Is this what people call growing up?

The bartender tips his mixing flask, strains out a fresh batch of the ruby red liquid onto the glass in front of me.

“Salut.” I nod my thanks, then toss it back. It hits my stomach and tendrils of fire crawl up my spine, I cough.

My head spins. Warmth sears my chest, spreads to my extremities. I can’t feel my fingers or toes. Good. Almost there. “Top me up.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.” I square my shoulders and reach for the drink.

“No. She’s had enough.”

“What the—?” I pivot on the bar stool.

Indigo eyes bore into me.

Fathomless. Black at the bottom, the intensity in their depths grips me. He swoops out his arm, grabs the glass and holds it up. Thick fingers dwarf the glass. Tapered at the edges. The nails short and buff. *All the better to grab you with.* I gulp.

“Like what you see?”

I flush, peer up into his face.

Hard cheekbones, hollows under them, and a tiny scar that slashes at his left eyebrow. *How did he get that?* Not that I care. My gaze slides to his mouth. Thin upper lip, a lower lip that is full and cushioned. Pouty with a hint of bad boy. *Oh!* My toes curl. My thighs clench.

The corner of his mouth kicks up. *Asshole.*

Bet he thinks life is one big smug-fest. I glower, reach for my glass, and he holds it up and out of my reach.

I scowl. “Gimme that.”

He shakes his head.

“That’s my drink.”

“Not anymore.” He shoves my glass at the bartender. “Water for her. Get me a whiskey, neat.”

I splutter, then reach for my drink again. The barstool tips in his direction. This is when I fall against him, and my breasts slam into his hard chest, sculpted planes with layers upon layers of muscle that ripple and writhe as he turns aside, flattens himself against the bar. The floor rises up to meet me.

What the actual hell?

I twist my torso at the last second and my butt connects with the surface. *Ow!*

The breath rushes out of me. My hair swirls around my face. I scramble for purchase, and my knee connects with his leg.

“Watch it.” He steps around, stands in front of me.

“You stepped aside?” I splutter. “You let me fall?”

“Hmph.”

I tilt my chin back, all the way back, look up the expanse of muscled thigh that stretches the silken material of his suit. *What is he wearing? Could any suit fit a man with such precision?* Hand crafted on Saville Row, no doubt. I glance at the bulge that tents the fabric between his legs. *Oh!* I blink.

Look away, look away. I hold out my arm. He’ll help me up at least, won’t he?

He glances at my palm, then turns away. *No, he didn’t do that, no way.*

A glass of amber liquid appears in front of him. He lifts the tumbler to his sculpted mouth.

His throat moves, strong tendons flexing. He tilts his head back, and the column of his neck moves as he swallows. Dark hair covers his chin—it’s a discordant chord in that clean-cut profile, I shiver. He would scrape that rough skin down my core. He’d mark my inner thighs, lick my core, thrust his tongue inside my melting channel and drink from my pussy. *Oh! God.* Goosebumps rise on my skin.

No one has the right to look this beautiful, this achingly gorgeous. Too magnificent for his own good. Anger coils in my chest.

“Arrogant wanker.”

“I’ll take that under advisement.”

“You’re a jerk, you know that?”

He presses his lips together. The grooves on either side of his mouth deepen. Jesus, clearly the man has never laughed a single day in his life. Bet that stick up his arse is uncomfortable. I chuckle.

He runs his gaze down my features, my chest, down to my toes, then yawns.

The hell! I will not let him provoke me. Will not. “Like what you see?” I jut out my chin.

“Sorry, you’re not my type.” He slides a hand into the pocket of those perfectly cut pants, stretching it across that heavy bulge.

Heat curls low in my belly.

Not fair, that he could afford a wardrobe that clearly shouts his status and what amounts to the economy of a small third-world country. A hot feeling stabs in my chest.

He reeks of privilege, of taking his status in life for granted.

While I’ve had to fight every inch of the way. Hell, I am still battling to hold onto the last of my equilibrium.

“Last chance—” I wiggle my fingers from where I am sprawled out on the floor at his feet, “—to redeem yourself...”

“You have me there.” He places the glass on the counter, then bends and holds out his hand. The hint of discolored steel at his wrist catches my attention. Huh?

He wears a cheap-ass watch?

That’s got to bring down the net worth of his presence by more than 1000% percent. Weird.

I reach up and he straightens.

I lurch back.

“Oops, I changed my mind.” His lips curl.

A hot burning sensation claws at my stomach. I am not a violent person, honestly. But Smirky Pants here, he needs to be taught a lesson.

I swipe out my legs, kicking his out from under him.

Sinclair

My knees give way, and I hurtle toward the ground.

What the—? I twist around, thrust out my arms. My palms hit the floor. The impact jostles up my elbows. I firm my biceps and come to a halt planked above her.

A huffing sound fills my ear.

I turn to find my whippet, Max, panting with his mouth open. I scowl and he flattens his ears.

All of my businesses are dog-friendly. Before you draw conclusions about me being the caring sort or some such shit—it attracts footfall.

Max scrutinizes the girl, then glances at me. *Huh?* He hates women, but not her, apparently.

I straighten and my nose grazes hers.

My arms are on either side of her head. Her chest heaves. The fabric of her dress stretches across her gorgeous breasts. My fingers tingle; my palms ache to cup those tits, squeeze those hard nipples outlined against the—hold on, what is she wearing? A tunic shirt in a sparkly pink... and are those shoulder pads she has on?

I glance up, and a squeak escapes her lips.

Pink hair surrounds her face. *Pink? Who dyes their hair that color past the age of eighteen?*

I stare at her face. *How old is she?* Un-furrowed forehead, dark eyelashes that flutter against pale cheeks. Tiny nose, and that mouth—luscious, tempting. A whiff of her scent, cherries

and caramel, assails my senses. My mouth waters. *What the hell?*

She opens her eyes and our eyelashes brush. Her gaze widens. Green, like the leaves of the evergreens, flickers of gold sparkling in their depths. “What?” She glowers. “You’re demonstrating the plank position?”

“Actually,” I lower my weight onto her, the ridge of my hardness thrusting into the softness between her legs, “I was thinking of something else, altogether.”

She gulps and her pupils dilate. *Ah, so she feels it, too?*

I drop my head toward her, closer, closer.

Color floods the creamy expanse of her neck. Her eyelids flutter down. She tilts her chin up.

I push up and off of her.

“That... Sweetheart, is an emphatic ‘no thank you’ to whatever you are offering.”

Her eyelids spring open and pink stains her cheeks. Adorable. Such a range of emotions across those gorgeous features in a few seconds. What else is hidden under that exquisite exterior of hers?

She scrambles up, eyes blazing.

Ah! The little bird is trying to spread her wings? My dick twitches. My groin hardens, *Why does her anger turn me on so, huh?*

She steps forward, thrusts a finger in my chest.

My heart begins to thud.

She peers up from under those hooded eyelashes. “Wake up and taste the wasabi, asshole.”

“What does that even mean?”

She makes a sound deep in her throat. My dick twitches. My pulse speeds up.

She pivots, grabs a half-full beer mug sitting on the bar counter.

I growl, “Oh, no, you don’t.”

She turns, swings it at me. The smell of hops envelops the space.

I stare down at the beer-splattered shirt, the lapels of my camel colored jacket deepening to a dull brown. Anger squeezes my guts.

I fist my fingers at my side, broaden my stance.

She snickers.

I tip my chin up. “You’re going to regret that.”

The smile fades from her face. “Umm.” She places the now empty mug on the bar.

I take a step forward and she skitters back. “It’s only clothes.” She gulps. “They’ll wash.”

I glare at her and she swallows, wiggles her fingers in the air. “I should have known that you wouldn’t have a sense of humor.”

I thrust out my jaw. “That’s a ten-thousand-pound suit you destroyed.”

She blanches, then straightens her shoulders. “Must have been some hot date you were trying to impress, huh?”

“Actually,” I flick some of the offending liquid from my lapels, “it’s you I was after.”

“Me?” She frowns.

“We need to speak.”

She glances toward the bartender who’s on the other side of the bar. “I don’t know you.” She chews on her lower lip, biting off some of the hot pink. How would she look, with that pouty mouth fastened on my cock?

The blood rushes to my groin so quickly that my head spins. My pulse rate ratchets up. Focus, focus on the task you came here for.

“This will take only a few seconds.” I take a step forward.

She moves aside.

I frown. “You want to hear this, I promise.”

“Go to hell.” She pivots and darts forward.

I let her go, a step, another, because... I can? Besides it’s fun to create the illusion of freedom first; makes the hunt so much more entertaining, huh?

I swoop forward, loop an arm around her waist, and yank her toward me.

She yelps. “Release me.”

Good thing the bar is not yet full. It’s too early for the usual officegoers to stop by. And the staff...? Well they are well aware of who cuts their paychecks.

I spin her around and against the bar, then release her. “You will listen to me.”

She swallows; she glances left to right.

Not letting you go yet, little Bird. I move into her space, crowd her.

She tips her chin up. “Whatever you’re selling, I’m not interested.”

I allow my lips to curl. “You don’t fool me.”

A flush steals up her throat, sears her cheeks. So tiny, so innocent. Such a good little liar. I narrow my gaze. “Every action has its consequences.”

“Are you daft?” She blinks.

“This pretense of yours?” I thrust my face into hers, growling, “It’s not working.”

She blinks, then color suffuses her cheeks. “You’re certifiably mad—”

“Getting tired of your insults.”

“It’s true, everything I said.” She scrapes back the hair from her face.

Her fingernails are painted... You guessed it, pink.

“And here’s something else. You are a selfish, egotistical jackass.”

I smirk. “You’re beginning to repeat your insults and I haven’t even kissed you yet.”

“Don’t you dare.” She gulps.

I tilt my head. “Is that a challenge?”

“It’s a...” she scans the crowded space, then turns to me. Her lips firm, “...a warning. You’re delusional, you jackass.” She inhales a deep breath before she speaks, “Your ego is bigger than the size of a black hole.” She snickers. “Bet it’s to compensate for your lack of balls.”

A-n-d, that’s it. I’ve had enough of her mouth that threatens to never stop spewing words. How many insults can one tiny woman hurl my way? Answer: too many to count.

“You—”

I lower my chin, touch my lips to hers.

Heat, sweetness, the honey of her essence explodes on my palate. My dick twitches. I tilt my head, deepen the kiss, reaching for that something more... more... of whatever scent she’s wearing on her skin, infused with that breath of hers that crowds my senses, rushes down my spine. My groin hardens; my cock lengthens. I thrust my tongue between those infuriating lips.

She makes a sound deep in her throat and my heart begins to pound.

So innocent, yet so crafty. Beautiful and feisty. The kind of complication I don’t need in my life.

I prefer the straight and narrow. Gray and black, that’s how I choose to define my world. She, with her flashes of color—pink hair and lips that threaten to drive me to the edge of distraction—is exactly what I hate.

Give me a female who has her priorities set in life. To pleasure me, get me off, then walk away before her emotions engage. Yeah. That’s what I prefer.

Not this... this bundle of craziness who flings her arms around my shoulders, thrusts her breasts up and into my chest, tips up her chin, opens her mouth, and invites me to take and take.

Does she have no self-preservation? Does she think I am going to fall for her wide-eyed appeal? She has another thing coming.

I tear my mouth away and she protests.

She twines her leg with mine, pushes up her hips, so that melting softness between her thighs cradles my aching hardness.

I glare into her face and she holds my gaze.

Trains her green eyes on me. Her cheeks flush a bright red. Her lips fall open and a moan bleeds into the air. The blood rushes to my dick, which instantly thickens. *Fuck.*

Time to put distance between myself and the situation.

It's how I prefer to manage things. Stay in control, always. Cut out anything that threatens to impinge on my equilibrium. Shut it down or buy them off. Reduce it to a transaction. That I understand.

The power of money, to be able to buy and sell—numbers, logic. That's what's worked for me so far.

“How much?”

Her forehead furrows.

“Whatever it is, I can afford it.”

Her jaw slackens. “You think... you—”

“A million?”

“What?”

“Pounds, dollars... You name the currency, and it will be in your account.”

Her jaw slackens. “You're offering me money?”

“For your time, and for you to fall in line with my plan.”

She reddens. “You think I am for sale?”

“Everyone is.”

“Not me.”

Here we go again. “Is that a challenge?”

Color fades from her face. “Get away from me.”

“Are you shy, is that what this is?” I frown. “You can write your price down on a piece of paper if you prefer.” I glance up, notice the bartender watching us. I jerk my chin toward the napkins. He grabs one, then offers it to her.

She glowers at him. “Did you buy him, too?”

“What do you think?”

She glances around. “I think everyone here is ignoring us.”

“It’s what I’d expect.”

“Why is that?”

I wave the tissue in front of her face. “Why do you think?”

“You own the place?”

“As I am going to own you.”

She sets her jaw. “Let me leave and you won’t regret this.”

A chuckle bubbles up. I swallow it away. This is no laughing matter. I never smile during a transaction. Especially not when I am negotiating a new acquisition. And that’s all she is. The final piece in the puzzle I am building.

“No one threatens me.”

“You’re right.”

“Huh?”

“I’d rather act on my instinct.”

Her lips twist, her gaze narrows. All of my senses scream a warning.

No, she wouldn’t, no way—pain slices through my middle and sparks explode behind my eyes.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

My best friend, M revealed to me that she was suffering from Alopecia, after bearing this condition on her own for years. She didn't tell anyone—not her family, not her friends, and definitely not her work colleagues—because she was so worried about being judged. It was when she decided to change jobs and move countries that she felt it was time to make a fresh start and share who she really was with the world.

When she first shared her journey with me, I couldn't believe that she hadn't told me earlier. She wanted to share her story with the world via her social media feeds so she could be her authentic self and not have to hide anymore. We spoke daily over a few weeks until she finally felt she had the courage to do so. Once she came out, it gave her a fresh impetus to live life on her own terms. To say it changed everything is putting it mildly.

That incident where Isla reveals what her hairstylist told her... It actually happened to M. When she told me about it, I was so angry on her behalf. Even now, thinking of it, words fail me.

I can't even begin to imagine what she went through on this journey, but our conversations and what she shared with me deeply moved me. I didn't even realize I was going to write this story until... I started writing it.

I hope you enjoyed Liam and Isla's story.

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