



Billionaire's Runaway

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: Luke

I fell in love with Laura months ago, but she's determined to be "free" and not fall for anyone who might take over her life. I'll admit, as a billionaire, a CEO and the oldest of five brothers, I'm prone to being bossy, but I don't want to keep her under my thumb. I want her under me in the best possible, most pleasurable way. Because regardless of what she might think, she's mine and I'm hers. I knew it in an instant. Now, I just need to bring her onboard with it.

Laura

Luke Cassel is the most dangerous man I've ever met: handsome, smart, powerful, dominating. It's the last characteristic that frightens me. On the run from my domineering father, who wants to force me into an arranged marriage to a man I've never even met, I'm desperate to find the freedom to live my life on my own terms. No matter how much I want Luke, I'm afraid I may fall under his control and lose the only thing I've had to cling to all my life: Myself.

This book was originally released as *Billionaire's Beautiful Runaway* but has been extensively revised and given a bonus epilogue.

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Prologue

Luke Cassel

I stood next to my brother, Fray, on the happiest day of his life, his wedding day to Emerson Blake, the woman he'd been obsessed with for months. I was sure the entire crowd there noticed the scowl on my face. I didn't care how I looked. I was too busy glaring daggers at Emerson's maid of honor, Laura Moretti.

It kind of shocked me she'd actually showed up at this wedding. She'd been running from me and everyone else for a month, but now, she was trapped on a boat with me for the weekend. Too bad for her. There was no way in hell I'd let her get away again.

When she'd broken off her joke of an engagement to a man she'd never met, I'd been crystal clear she should immediately come to my family in New York for protection. But she hadn't come. And I'd been worried sick about her though I barely knew her.

It didn't matter. Just like my brother, Fray, I'd fallen in love at first sight.

As much as I teased him about falling for Emerson the first time he'd seen her, I'd been a total hypocrite. Though I wasn't fully convinced I was in love with Laura, I was utterly fascinated by the exotic beauty currently glaring daggers right back at me from across the aisle.

Though she stood just feet from me, she might as well have been an ocean away. I hadn't so much as glimpsed her since boarding the ship, not until moments ago when

she'd walked down the aisle in front of Em. I'm sure my future sister-in-law looked beautiful, but I hadn't been able to focus on anyone but Laura.

Her black hair shone in the sunlight streaming through the windows of the ship's chapel and the black bridesmaid dress with silver beading she wore was low cut in the front, and featured a thigh-high slit on one side. Otherwise, it hugged every one of her delicious curves. She looked so damn sexy, I'd had to fold my hands in front of my crotch to hide my body's obvious interest.

She was here. My woman, my destiny, was here. And she couldn't be more of a captive than on a ship in the middle of the ocean. Once the ceremony was over, I planned to drag her to my room and... Well, I wasn't sure what I planned just yet. Half of me wanted to put her over my knee and spank her for scaring me with her disappearance.

Except, she wasn't mine to worry about, was she?

Yet.

She would be.

A sharp nudge to the ribs brought me out of my inner musings.

"Can you maybe wait until after I'm actually married before you drag Laura to bed?" Fray growled through his teeth, his voice low, for my ears only. "You're a terrible best man."

"Sorry," I whispered.

"Give me the fucking ring," he whispered back.

I fought a blush as I pulled Em's wedding band from my pocket and handed it to my older brother. When I looked up at Laura again, she was hiding a smile behind her bouquet, but I could tell she was amused by my mistake.

Her grin vanished when she caught my narrowed gaze across the aisle. What was happening to me? I'd never believed in love at first, or second, sight. In fact, I'd teased Fray mercilessly while he'd pined for Emerson after their first encounter. But look at them now. Getting married, starting the rest of their lives together. And I wanted that for Laura and me.

Could you really know you wanted someone forever before you really knew anything about them? Yes. As I gazed at Laura, I believed you could. I did. And I couldn't make Laura fully mine soon enough.

Finally, Fray and Emerson were announced properly wed, and they headed up the short aisle together. I strode over to Laura and took her arm in mine. I'd forgotten how much smaller than me she was. Even in heels she barely came to my shoulder.

I stooped to murmur in her ear. "I hope you're not planning on running off again."

"First chance I get," she confirmed, meeting my gaze as she hurried us after the newly married couple. "Truth be told, I'm pretty tired of men I don't know telling me what to do. So, if you know what's good for you, you'll back the fuck off."

Damn it, that was entirely too true of a statement. I didn't have an argument for that at all. After all, she was escaping an arranged marriage she didn't want at all. One being forced on her by her parents. Lately, she'd done nothing but try to escape people trying to force her into something. And directly after her escape, I'd demanded where she go and what she do. Just like that fake fiancé of hers.

"I apologize," I told her. "That's not what I was trying to do."

We reached the corridor outside of the chapel, and she allowed me to steer her aside, letting the rest of the people from the ceremony exit and head toward the reception area.

“No one is ever trying to,” she said, crossing her arms under chest. “Everyone just seems to think they know what’s best for my life. And I don’t need some billionaire asshole trying to weasel his way into doing the same.”

“Whoa!” I glared at her. “I was just trying to help. You needed a place to stay, somewhere safe where no one would look for you. I had that place available. I wasn’t telling you what to do.”

“Tell her to come here,” she spat, quoting what I’d told Emerson when Laura had called her in a panic after running away from home.

“Yes, because, as I said, you needed someplace where you could be protected.”

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“I don’t need to be protected,” she argued. She straightened and blew out a sigh. “What I need is to be left the hell alone.”

She shoved past me, and I let her go, frustrated but knowing I’d just make the situation worse if I followed after her right now. I’d give her time to cool off then try to talk to her again after the reception.

Unfortunately, she managed to disappear again. When I went to her room later that night I found she’d switched cabins with someone else. And Laura obviously didn’t want to be found. I spent the rest of the cruise trying to locate the elusive woman, but she was in the wind, departing the ship early when we landed at one of the ports. And when I begged Emerson for Laura’s phone number, my relentless calls went to a full voicemail.

I flew home alone, angry at myself, angry at her. Suddenly, Fray’s insane stalking of Emerson made even more sense. I vowed I’d find Laura and set everything right if it was the last thing I’d ever do.

One

Laura

Fuck my life. Fuck my family. Fuck this credit card. Fuck this damn rain and this broken-down car. Just fuck, fuck, fuck!

My head dropped forward as I took deep breaths and tried to fight back my tears. I wasn’t usually a crier. I certainly wasn’t one to swear. Usually. But everything about

this day was more than I could handle with calm and composure.

And here I was, all alone, in BFE—AKA Northern Michigan.

I leaned my head against the steering wheel, wishing some hot tow-truck driver would materialize and take away all my worries. If he looked like Luke Cassel, all the better.

And fuck my libido or whatever it was that wouldn't let me forget that man. Even when I'd been engaged—albeit unwillingly to a man I'd never met—everything in me had stood up and paid attention the first time I'd met Luke. My girlfriends and I were in a bar in NYC, Bradford's, the day he'd irrevocably entered my awareness. He'd been there with his brothers, and we'd met them ten minutes before my group was supposed to leave for a show.

That ten minutes? Life changing.

The meeting was the proverbial straw that broke the camels back, making me feel things, spiking an awareness, I'd never experienced. It awakened me and drove me to put down my foot and refuse to marry the guy my parents arranged for me. Yeah, unfortunately, arranged marriages still existed, especially in old-school, totally religious-fanatical families like mine.

And fucking fuck that.

I grinned for the first time in an hour, enjoying my little bit of internal rebellion.

My refusal hadn't gone well that day. My father had locked me up; I'd literally climbed out a window and run away. I'd been subsisting on my cash savings, but when my car had broken down, no one would help me without a credit card. Not that I had much cash left. I was down to my last couple hundred.

That was how I found out my dad canceled my Visa. Effectively stranding me. Now, it would be just my luck he had people watching the card. He was trying to force my hand with the credit card thing. Heck, he likely would have reported my car as stolen if it weren't in my name—a technicality from a clerical mistake that had never been corrected. But without money to repair my vehicle, what could I do?

For about the millionth time, I questioned not getting a job as soon as I'd run, but I'd been afraid I'd be traced with my social. Not that I had experience or skills from doing any job. I had an Applied Arts degree with honors, but it was hard to get a gig designing people's living rooms when you were on the run.

What I needed to do was call Emerson. My best friend would know how I should proceed.

Except she was on her honeymoon.

But I was stuck, and literally, she was all I had. Sure, I had other friends, but none were as close to me as Emerson was. Plus, I knew Em didn't particularly care for my relatives, so she was Team Runaway all the way. She'd been less than thrilled over my engagement but determined to stick by my side and give me every bit of support I asked for. I hadn't asked for anything.

At first, I'd resolve to just do what my parents wanted. It was the way in our family and in the families of all of my parents' society friends. Heck, I was lucky I hadn't ended up as a child bride. My mother had put down her foot on that and somehow kept my father from marrying me off, as she'd been when she was fifteen. My whole life, she'd put on a serene, all-is-good face, but I knew she wasn't happy. She was totally stuck. For all my family's wealth, she had very little freedom.

I would never be like her. I would never let someone rule over my life as she did.

What Em had with Fraser Cassel was nothing like that. Again, I thought of Luke and wondered what it would be like with him. Would he be like Fray or like my father? The prospect of loving him, then finding out and being stuck, scared me. It was why I'd avoided him, both at Christmastime and at Emerson's wedding. God, that had been difficult. Because I was drawn to that man as I'd never been to another. He looked so similar to Fray, yet I had no interest in my friend's husband, not even a flicker of attraction.

Luke, however...

That man set off all my alert systems and fired up all my pleasure centers.

And I needed to stop thinking of him, with his dark hair, chocolate-brown eyes, and lickable physique I wanted to climb like a—

Stop it, Laura!

I pulled out my phone. I had signal, thank God, but my battery was dangerously low. With my dead car, I couldn't even charge it.

Emerson answered on nearly the first ring. "Laura, what's wrong?"

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“I see your ESP is working full-force,” I laughed.

“Well, I know you wouldn’t call me on my honeymoon unless there was a problem.”

I heard Fray in the background, telling her to find out where I was.

“My car died,” I told her. “I’m sorry to call you; I really am. But I didn’t know who else to phone. Most anyone else would sic my dad on me. He canceled my credit card, so I can’t even get someone to come tow me, so I can get it fixed.”

“Where are you?”

“In the middle of BFE Michigan?” I sighed.

“More specific?”

“Northern BFE Michigan. I’m about ten miles outside of Brandywine. Upper Lake Michigan.”

“Kay,” she said. “Hang tight. We’ll get you taken care of and safe. It could be a couple hours, alright? But we’ll have you out of there by tonight. Will you be okay to wait there?”

I heard Fray talking in the background while I glanced down at my console. “Yeah, I have water and my tablet. I’ll just kick back with a book. I’ll wrap up in a blanket, since it’s February and pretty dang cold. At least, it’s not snowing.”

Yet. The rain had been slowly turning sleet-like over the past half hour.

“Stay as warm as you can. Don’t go off with any strangers; you hear me? We’ll be there soon?”

“You’re coming?” I exclaimed. Crap, I didn’t want her leaving her honeymoon for me.

Emerson didn’t answer. Glancing down at my phone, I saw it hadn’t died yet, but the wind must have shifted or something. I had zero bars, and the cell had dropped the call.

I sighed, tossing it onto the seat beside me. This day was super freaking great. And I’d just disrupted Em’s day, by dragging her into my drama, too. Well, fuck, fuck, fuckity fuck.

* * * *

The knock on my window startled me from sleep, and I jumped about a mile, slamming my head against the glass in the process. I rubbed my hand across the frosted-up surface, trying to clear it enough to see outside.

All I could make out was a large body in what looked like a long wool coat. It was open, revealing a charcoal suit, white shirt and silvery-gray tie. I couldn’t see the person’s face through the icy glass, but this wasn’t a tow-truck driver or some regular Joe happening by. The guy seemed like a businessman of some sort.

Then he leaned down, and I reared back, my eyes wide as I met the dark-brown stare of the man I’d steadfastly tried so hard to forget.

He didn’t look happy as he glared at me, even as a smirk lifted one side of his full

lips.

Luke...

“Open the door, Laura,” he ordered, his voice muffled by the window.

I hesitated. If I released the lock, there was no protection from him—not that I thought he’d hurt me. I just... A deeper, more fragile part of me was in danger.

“Laura,” he growled.

What could I do? Stay here and freeze? I didn’t have much choice. Even as bundled up as I was, my fingers barely worked due to the cold. I fumbled with the mechanism. I’d barely clicked it when the door opened. Luke crowded inside immediately. He pulled me into his arms, leaving everything else, then stalked toward a running black SUV, waiting several yards away. My arms went around his neck. I held on tight, though I didn’t think he’d drop me. His warm woodsy scent enveloped me, and I closed my eyes momentarily just letting it sink into me, envelop me, comfort me. Along with it came surprising peace.

“What are you doing here?” I murmured into his neck.

“Get everything from her car. Everything. Clean it out,” he told the man we passed. I hadn’t even seen him until we were going by him.

“Yes, sir.”

Luke didn’t say anything more until we were settled into the back of his vehicle. “I’m here to get you.”

“I...”

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He shook his head, and the words froze in my throat. He was here. He was saving me. But he was super pissed.

“I’m sorry you had to come get me. I—”

“Don’t,” he interrupted.

“But—”

“Don’t,” he said again through his teeth. “Just give me a minute to calm down.”

He wasn’t calm? He seemed calm.

“Do you have any idea what could have happened to you? In this weather. Out here all alone. If some predator... My God, Laura. When I think about it...” He lifted a hand as if to swipe away his words and sighed, staring out the window opposite of me.

My eyes burned, and I blinked back my emotions. I hated for him to be upset with me. It was as if I felt his agitation down to my bones. And what was that? I’d never felt that way. My father was the master of guilt, and I’d learned early on not to cave to it. But with Luke... I wanted to promise him whatever he needed to ease his pain and irritation.

His driver climbed into the front seat before I could say anything else. “Everything’s in the back, sir.” He reached over the seat and handed me my large purse. “I put your phone, wallet and tablet in there, ma’am.”

“Thank you,” I told him, surprised. I tucked the bag on the floor by my feet, not feeling as if I needed to look inside to confirm his words.

He nodded then shifted his gaze to Luke. “I called the service, and they’ll be here for the car shortly.”

“Thank you,” Luke said. “We can go.”

This time, the man gave Luke a chin lift then turned to shift the SUV into gear.

“Where are we going?” I asked my brooding rescuer.

“Home.”

Two

Luke

I’d thought Laura was dead. I’d been banging on the window for almost a full minute, ready to break the glass, before she’d finally moved. The whole time, my heart had been in my throat, terror gripping me that she wouldn’t wake up.

When I’d seen her stir then wipe the frost from the window, I’d almost collapsed to my knees in thanks. It was so fucking cold here, and without any heat in the car, I was sure she’d have hypothermia or frostbite. I refused to think about the worst.

But now, she was safe and in my arms. I had news for her. I was never letting her go again. She obviously couldn’t take care of herself. She was impetuous, spoiled, and so God damned beautiful. Not that the last attribute had to do with her abilities.

“What the hell were you thinking?” I asked finally, unable to let the silence stretch

between us anymore. The SUV was taking us straight to the airport, and I couldn't wait to get the hell out of this cold. NYC was cold, but not like this.

"I wasn't," she admitted. "I mean, I was. But I didn't expect the car to break down. And I didn't think my dad would actually cancel my credit card. And I certainly never imagined Em would send you to rescue me."

"You shouldn't have needed rescuing," I hissed. "I know you were pissed at me because you thought I tried to control you. But you could have been seriously hurt out here."

"I know," she snapped, pulling away from me. "But fuck, Luke, for a minute, try to imagine what I'm going through. Please."

"Oh, yes, tell me all about the hardship of someone who cares about you trying to protect you."

"My father has been trying to arrange a marriage for me since I was fifteen. The only reason it didn't happen before now is because my mom protected me from it. But once I turned eighteen, the choice was taken away. The best I was offered was permission to finish college. I've spent my entire life being told what to do, who I can spend time with, where to go and how to act. I just wanted to escape all of it." She shivered, and when I pulled her back against me, she didn't fight it. "Luke, I just want to make my own decisions. I want to live my own life. Why can't anyone understand that?"

My heart hammered in my chest. Married off at fifteen? What in the actual fuck? How could that happen? I'd gathered she was from a culture that was stricter than I was accustomed to, but there were still laws in this country that prevented shit like that from happening. Weren't there?

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “You warned me not to try to control you, and I didn’t listen. And you’re right. I don’t understand your situation. But when I told you to come to New York, it was only to keep you safe. I wasn’t planning to force you into a relationship with me.”

“I don’t want to depend on anyone,” she said softly. “It makes it easier for them to hold power over me.”

Strangely, she held all the power between us. I wouldn’t move an inch without her permission. How did I explain that to her, though? Unsure for now, I let silence take over again.

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Letting Laura lead would be difficult, but I'd find a way. Somehow. Typically, I was a take-charge kind of guy. I'd been running a multi-billion-dollar company since I was twenty-four. I had a staff numbering in the thousands. I was the oldest Cassel brother and had lorded it over my siblings their whole lives. I was bossy, demanding and yes, controlling. Unfortunately, those skills would only serve to push away the one person I wanted most in the world.

"Will you come home with me?" I asked her.

"I don't really know what you're asking," she admitted.

"Come to New York. I'll get you an apartment."

She tensed, and I corrected myself immediately.

"Or you can stay with my parents until you get on your feet," I quickly went on. "I can help you find a job. Emerson will be back soon, so you'll have a familiar face." I scrubbed a hand over my eyes before moving to wrap my arm around her again. "I'm not telling you to do it. I'm asking. Honestly, I just want to help you. My family... My family's powerful, and we can protect you."

"Okay," she whispered. "If you're sure I won't be an inconvenience."

I snorted. She'd been nothing but inconvenient since the moment I'd met her. Taking off on me at the club. Running away from home and not coming to New York to let me protect her. Disappearing on the ship during Fray's wedding cruise. And now, breaking down in the middle of nowhere and calling Emerson instead of me.

“My family will love you,” I said rather than addressing any of those things.

How could my parents and siblings do anything but adore her? I was pretty sure I already did.

“Okay,” she whispered as we made it to the private airstrip where my company jet had landed barely an hour ago. It had been hell to find one out here. Thankfully, my assistant, Roz, was the best in the world and had contacts I couldn’t even imagine. Before my town car had made it halfway to JFK, she’d gotten everything squared away for my pilot.

As we arrived now, the SUV drove right up to the aircraft. A message from my pilot had informed me the jet was fueled up and ready for us, so I immediately helped Laura out of the car and let the driver bring the bags aboard for us. I tipped him a thousand dollars and asked him not to tell anyone he’d seen us. With a single nod, he agreed, promising Laura’s car would be taken care of and the shop would call my office directly to make arrangements.

As Laura boarded the plane, the driver pulled me aside.

“Sir,” he whispered. “When I gathered the young lady’s things, I noticed a flashing light under the passenger side dash.” He hesitated. “I believe it was some sort of tracking device.”

I nodded. Why didn’t that surprise me?

“You left it there?” I confirmed.

“Yes, sir,” he assured me.

“Thank you for letting me know.” I pulled another five hundred dollars from my

wallet and handed the bills to the wide-eyed man.

“Have a safe flight, sir,” he said, tipping his cap to me before heading back to the warmth of his car.

I blew out a sigh and climbed the stairs up to the plane. This was one of those situations I wasn’t sure how to handle. I didn’t want Laura to be scared she’d been tracked, but if she found out later that I’d kept the information from her, she’d just get pissed at me all over again.

Damn, this girl was playing hell with my morals.

Our flight attendant, Kathy, secured the door then went to sit with the pilot, preparing for takeoff.

I sat across from Laura, watching her as she looked out the window, her brow furrowed and her fingers gripping the armrests as we taxied down the runway then lifted off.

“Are you afraid to fly?” I asked, terrified I’d pushed her into something she didn’t want again. I’d given Fray so much hell for taking Emerson on a cruise when she was terrified of water. He hadn’t known. Had I done the same sort of thing?

“No,” she said, looking at me and smiling brightly. “I think it’s just dawned on me that I’m free. Like, really free. I don’t have to get married to someone I don’t know. I don’t have to go home. I’m not beholden to anyone.”

Well, sort of. She was free of that family. But if I had anything to say about it, she’d belong to me for the rest of our lives.

“When we get back, I’ll get you some food,” I promised. “I might be able to scrounge

up some peanuts or something if you're hungry now. I didn't exactly give them time to kit out the plane's kitchenette before takeoff."

"I'm actually starving," she admitted. "It's been...a while since I've eaten."

Exactly how long was a while? I beat back the protective fury that instantly rose in my chest.

I pushed the call button beside my seat, and a few moments later, Kathy came out.

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“Kathy, this is Laura,” I introduced, and they nodded to each other. “Do we have food anywhere on the plane?”

“I have peanuts, pretzels and crackers,” Kathy said. “I’m sorry, we don’t usually stock the pantry between flights.”

“Could I get some crackers?” Laura asked. “And possibly a coffee?”

“Of course, sweetheart,” Kathy said, patting her on the shoulder. “Luke?”

I shook my head, and the flight attendant left to take care of Laura’s request.

“Laura,” I said, leaning forward and resting a hand on her thigh, intending to tell her about the tracker. She smiled softly at me and the confession died on my lips. I couldn’t ruin this tenuous moment. I’d tell her about it, but not yet. “Do you want me to have them land somewhere so you can eat? You were in that freezing-cold car for a long time. You should have some real food.”

“I’ll be okay,” she answered. “I promise. If it makes you feel better, you can take me to some five-star place when we get to New York. We went to the one when...um, last time I was there, and it was awesome. They had the fanciest food you’ve ever seen in your life! But...well...Actually, I’d rather go to Jekyll and Hyde’s. It looks fun, but it wasn’t on our approved agenda when I was there.”

“Then we’ll go there,” I said, smiling at her excitement. “Whatever you want.”

I’d always give her whatever she wanted. And one day, very soon, she was going to

wantme.

Three

Laura

Luke confused me. No, that wasn't right. My feelings for Luke confused me. My brain told me to be wary, that he was just another man who wanted to bend me to his will. The rest of me? Well, it was ready to bend however Luke wanted.

Since I'd blown up at him, he'd been so careful in what he said, and clearly, he was trying hard not to spook me. The thing was, I didn't want him to fake who he was for me. I needed him to be the real Luke. Yet, I needed him not to take over my life...if that made any sense at all. I needed the big, bad alpha CEO to be himself and give me autonomy.

That was probably an impossibility, but no one had ever claimed I was easy to please. Though she'd never said as much, my mom had spoiled me since she was fearful of what my later life would be like. My father mostly ignored me, likely because I wasn't the boy he'd always wanted. The only time I'd mattered to him was when some guy, who didn't even speak English, decided he wanted to pay for the right to marry me.

I was pretty sure I was protected from that happening now that Luke had swept me up. Judging by the way he watched me, his jaw as rigid as stone, he wasn't letting any other man near me, if he could help it—unless they were part of his family. Even then, I wasn't so sure he'd trust his single brothers with me.

Yes, he was overbearing, though he visibly tried to reel in that tendency, but with Luke, I was safe. I felt safe, anyway, and I wasn't afraid for the first time in a long while. I glanced over at him as we left JFK airport. He'd spoken to his driver before

we'd departed, but I wasn't sure where we were headed. A restaurant probably. He'd promised me food.

His hand clamped around mine as if he thought I'd leap from the moving car and bolt. His hold wasn't too tight, but the steely grip would be inescapable. I waited for panic to rise, but it didn't. Strange.

"Luke," I said, breaking the silence between us.

"Yeah, baby?"

My teeth sank into my bottom lip. I drew in a deep breath, absorbing the pet name he'd carelessly tossed out, claiming it.

Be strong, Laura.

"I don't want to stay with your family or get my own place right now," I confessed.

"Can I just stay with you? Would that be okay?"

His brows drew together. "You're sure?"

"I mean...if you have the space. If I won't be cramping your style."

His eyes narrowed, and he huffed a laugh under breath.

"Cramping my style how?" he asked, clearly amused.

"You're a single guy. Rich. I'm sure there are women—"

"And I can assure you, you're wrong," he interrupted. "I'm not a playboy or some manwhore. Never have been. I certainly haven't even glanced at a woman that way in

months.” His gaze burned into me, conveying a message I wasn’t sure I wanted to receive. “I’m confident I’ll never get enough of my woman once I have her, but I don’t live to get my dick wet.”

My eyes widened at his crass words. Okay...

“So, I can assure you, if you’re comfortable with it, you’re welcome at my place,” he said. “Actually, I’d prefer you there. I just didn’t want to push you.”

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And there it was, the confession of what I'd sensed. He was holding himself in check. I took another deep breath. One problem solved. Now, for the second.

"Something else, Luke..." I started. Nerves clamped down on my words. Should I even go there? Should I tell him to just be himself with me? But I didn't know him that well. Maybe, I'd read him wrong before and this was his true personality. Maybe, this was him.

"What?" he asked, his voice concerned.

No. I couldn't do it. Pulling out a teasing smirk, I detoured away from what I'd planned to say.

"I'm starving. If you don't feed me soon, I may bite you."

His rich laugh filled the car, and goosebumps cascaded down my spine, all my awareness pulsing to high alert. This man spiked something in me, and to my surprise, it wasn't fear.

"Well, then, we better get you something to eat. Since it's dinner on the weekend, maybe a restaurant isn't the best idea without reservations. Will you let me cook you something for you at my place—our place?"

"You can cook?"

"Some basic stuff. I hate eating out all the time and hiring a chef for only me seemed a waste."

“I can see that. If you want, we can go home instead of out. I’m kind of tired anyway. It was...a long day.” To my surprise, being out in the cold for so long, even within the shelter of my car, had really taken it out of me. “How did you find me so fast, anyway? I assume Emerson called you?”

“Fray, actually. He called me while you were on the phone with Em.”

“Why?”

“Because he knows,” he replied quietly, looking down at our hands where his thumb grazed back and forth over my wrist.

“Knows...what?” I asked, hesitant to hear the answer.

Luke’s hand tightened, the only sign he might be worried as his dark eyes met my gaze and held me captive. “I’m not going to bullshit you, Laura.”

“Okay. Good.” My voice seemed to have raised an octave while nerved rattled in my middle.

“I want you. He knows it. Hell, my whole family knows it. The same thing happened when he first saw Em. Don’t worry, though. I won’t pounce on you. I promise you’re safe with me—from me or anyone else. But I want to know you. I want to pursue this...you.”

“Whatever this is,” I added.

“You feel it, too.” His confidence left no room for argument and I wondered if he ruled the boardroom that way. I had no doubt seeing him in action would steal my breath and get me hot with arousal.

My tongue shot across my bottom lip and I took a deep breath. “Yeah. I feel something. And whatever it is, it worries me.”

He turned in his seat and cupped my face with his free hand. His thumb brushed over my cheek. “Baby, you never, ever have to be afraid with me. Ever.”

With a nod, as if to underline his promise, he let go then leaned toward the town car’s driver. “Change of plan, Rick. Back home, instead.”

“Yes, sir,” the man replied.

Luke leaned back and took my hand again.

“Just promise me one thing,” I implored, looking out the window.

“Anything.”

“Don’t trap me.”

I felt him lean in, then his chin rested on my shoulder. His breath warmed my neck. “I want you to be mine. But trapping you? No, babe. Never. I want you of your own free will.”

“Okay,” I whispered. I wasn’t sure if I was acknowledging him or telling myself things would be alright. My life was still a mess, but maybe, with Luke helping me, I could unmuddle it.

* * * *

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“Best omelet ever,” I said after a couple bites of my food, which was admittedly more farmer scramble than farmer omelet-shaped eggs. It tasted awesome, and my ravenous belly agreed.

Luke grinned and raised a brow while he chewed a bite of toast.

Once we’d gotten to the building on Park Avenue, he’d ushered me up to his top-floor penthouse then shown me around. It was three floors, plus a private terrace overhead. There were four bedrooms, including the primary, and he’d put me in the one closest to his. I was grateful he hadn’t tried something dumb like dropping my bags in his room, but no, Luke was a gentleman. The spacious floorplan was beautifully appointed in steel and glass, with plush chairs and couches in the living room. Overall, though, everything but his bedroom, which I’d only seen on a glance, seemed utterly unlivable. It even smelled brand new.

“Have you been here long?” I asked before I took another bite of my omelet. We were eating at the marble-topped table in the kitchen that was all matching white marble and starkly white wood. A huge window behind him showing miles of city lights, while the planked-wood floor gleamed beneath our chairs.

“No. I bought it a little over four months ago. My company procured the place to renovate after the previous owner found it legally judicious to move to a non-extradition country. I liked the floor plan and wanted to move into Manhattan, rather than commute from Tarrytown, so I purchased it.”

I didn’t say anything, but he probably saw the wheels going in my head.

“I made the decision the day after we met at Bradford’s,” he continued. “We might have had a few minutes together in a club, but it was enough to spur me into making changes.”

I looked around. “It seems...almost like you don’t live here.”

“I haven’t been here a lot. I plan to be much more, though. It was still under renovation when I purchased it, then when I could move in, I had to hire a decorator to do everything. I’ve only been in residence since the end of December.” He followed my gaze around the bare room and grimaced. “It is a little bland—”

“The whole place is nice,” I said quickly. No need to hurt his feelings, even if every bit of the décor in the three-floor penthouse was white, cream, sterling and lifeless.

“Laura, it’s boring. I get that. You can do whatever you want with it. Consider it your canvas.”

I raised an eyebrow, excitement bubbling inside me at the prospect of getting my hands on this place. “You know I studied design in college, right?”

“You did not.”

“I did.”

“Do you know what my family’s business is?”

I shook my head slowly, trying to recall if Emerson had ever told me. “Something, something...big buildings?”

His warm, rich laugh spilled over me again. “We’re one of the leading construction firms in the whole of New York City and the surrounding areas. We cover all aspects

of development projects from architecture to building to final interior design, including security systems, landscaping and environmental remediation when necessary.”

“I... Really?” Suddenly, I was pretty sure I’d heard of Cassel Construction. I’d seen some of their signs while we’d traveled through the city tonight.

“Really. So, anything you want to do to make everything homier, you can have at it.”

I looked around the kitchen again, this time, letting ideas bombard me. Since Luke was letting me stay here with him, I could definitely do something less generic in all the rooms and make this penthouse into an actual home.

And if it became a space I wanted to live in forever... Well, I’d deal with that later. In my opinion, it wasn’t the walls that made a home anyway; it was the people. And the current resident was already burrowing deep down into my soul.

Four

Luke

I lay awake listening to Laura tossing and turning in the room one floor down from me. I’d never realized how sound could carry in this place. I’d never had company here, so this was the first time I’d noticed how rustling could carry through the open space, especially if we left doors open and I flipped on the monitoring system. Yeah, I’d done that. Because I wanted to be sure she was okay. At least, that’s what I told myself.

After a few minutes, the rustling stopped, but my heart clenched when I heard a sniff, followed by a muted sob.

“That’s it,” I muttered, getting out of bed and walking into the hallway to take the curved staircase downstairs. I was halfway down when I remembered I only wore my black silk pajama pants, but screw it. I couldn’t leave her in misery.

I stood in front of her door for a full minute, before finally reaching out and knocking. “Laura, can I come in?”

“Yes,” she answered softly.

I pushed open the partly closed door to see her sitting up on the bed, the blankets piled around her, her back against the headboard and her arms around her knees. I strode into the room and sat next to her on the edge of the mattress.

“Baby, are you okay?”

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She nodded, sniffing again. But the city lights coming through the window illuminated the tear tracks on her cheeks.

“Talk to me,” I said. “Please.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she said, with a soft, watery laugh as she ran the back of her hand across her cheek. “I’m so happy. Really. I’m so glad to be here. And you’ve been so great. My knight in shining Hugo Boss. But I don’t know. I was lying here in this big bed, staring right out at the Central Park, and I just couldn’t stop crying.”

Before I even thought twice, I gathered her into my arms. She came willingly, her small body almost melting into my touch. I wondered if maybe she hadn’t gotten a lot of physical affection from her family or another man, though I definitely didn’t want to think about that. Still, every touch I’d given her since pulling her from her car had been met with the thirst of a dying man in the desert.

“Will you stay with me?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” I answered honestly. It was difficult enough not to kiss her, not to claim her lips and push her back onto the mattress. She fit so perfectly against my body, I never, ever wanted to let her go. “You should really try to get some sleep.”

“I thought you weren’t going to tell me what to do,” she replied wryly.

I took a deep breath and turned to correct her, but when I caught the humor in her

gaze, saw her biting her lower lip to hide a smile, I shook my head.

“You’re a brat.”

My brat. My spoiled, sassy, gorgeous brat who I would marry and put my babies into the first chance I got. And we’d raise a pack of spoiled, sassy brats of our own. Then we’d have spoiled, sassy grandbrats.

“You just went somewhere,” she said, cupping my chin in her palm and peering into my eyes.

“Somewhere you don’t want to go, yet,” I confessed, pulling her hand into mine and kissing her fingers. “I’m not telling you to go bed. I’m just saying you’ve had a hard day, probably a hard few months really. You’re safe here. You should get some sleep. Tomorrow, we’ll go out to breakfast and talk about what we’re going to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tomorrow,” I insisted. Unable to resist it any longer, I leaned forward and softly pressed my mouth to her tempting lips, lips I’d wanted since a second after I’d laid eyes on her the first time.

I’d expected the kiss to be chaste and comforting, but my little monster had other ideas. Her arms snaked around my neck and pulled me closer, her tongue running over the seam of my mouth.

With a deep groan, I opened to her probing, running my own tongue over hers, drawing a whimper from her. I pulled her tighter against me, her breasts pressed to my chest as I tangled my fingers into her dark, wild locks.

“I’m sorry,” I said, pulling back from her. “Laura, I can’t do this right now.

We...can't."

What the hell was I saying?

"What the hell are you talking about?" The glare she gave me would have made most men quake. I was stronger than that, though with her, barely.

"Look, God knows I want you. I mean, baby, you have no fucking clue how much I want to bury myself inside you and never leave. But you must be at the legal limit for stress. And I don't want you ever to regret our first time."

"You think I'd just sleep with you all willy-nilly because I'm stressed?" She narrowed her gaze at me. "I've been stressed since the sixth grade. This is that caveman shit I don't like, Luke. Don't presume to tell me what I'm thinking or feeling."

"Jesus! I need a God damned handbook with you," I snapped.

Before she could respond, I pulled her into me again, crashing my mouth over hers, as I pushed her body onto the mattress so I could lie over her.

She responded immediately, her nails digging into my back as she splayed her thighs, allowing me to fall between them. Thank fucking God I was wearing pajama bottoms. As it was, my erection was pressed against her core, and even through my pants and the cloth of her skimpy sleep shorts, her heat radiated from her to me.

Lust was making me act rashly. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I couldn't take her tonight. No matter what she thought, this wasn't the right time. That didn't mean I couldn't tease her and tempt her with a taste of what she had to look forward to for the rest of her life.

“Luke, I want you,” she whispered, breaking away from the kiss to meet my gaze.
“Please. Just, make me forget about the rest of the world.”

“I will,” I promised her. “But I’m not fucking you tonight.”

“Why not?” she pouted.

“Because I don’t like that caveman shit where you tell me what to do.”

“You’re kind of an asshole.”

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“And you’re kind of a hellion.” I shrugged. “We all have our crosses to bear.” I ran a hand down her chest, cupping one of her supple breasts and rolling her taut nipple between my fingers. “But don’t worry, baby. I won’t leave you wanting.”

Her back arched at the intimate touch, a gasp rasping from her throat. My cock jumped in response, and I couldn’t wait to hear all the arousing sounds she’d make for me.

“I’m going to eat your pussy,” I whispered against her ear. “And I don’t want you to try to keep quiet. I want to hear every word, every shout, every scream. There’s no one but me to hear you, and every sound you make belongs to me. I’m going to earn them, to memorize them, so I know exactly what makes your thighs shake while you fall apart for me. So, don’t you dare hold out on me. Understood?”

She nodded, her eyes wide and her chest heaving while she drew quick, shallow breaths.

I pulled at the hem of her shirt, lifting it over her head and tossing it to the floor. Dipping low, I sucked one of her nipples into my mouth, teasing the bud with my teeth for a moment before switching to the other perfect mound and repeating the action.

She moaned, and the sound was like heaven. Her reaction to me caused my precum to leak into my pants. I could already feel the sticky fluid, and I was afraid avoiding fucking her would be even more difficult than I’d thought.

Sliding down her body, I trailed my tongue over her skin, pausing to lick at her

bellybutton until she squirmed and giggled. When I reached her shorts, I pulled them down, exposing her to me.

Her scent was like honey, and I couldn't wait a moment longer to taste her. I slid my arms under her thighs, spreading her wider until I could see the dampness clinging to her pink folds.

"My God, Laura, you're fucking beautiful," I said, looking up her body to stare into her eyes. She met my gaze, but her lip found its way between her teeth again as if she were embarrassed. "Don't be shy. I'm the only man who will see you like this ever again. This is mine. All of you will belong to me."

"You're the only one who has...like this," she whispered, her fingers burying in my hair.

"All mine," I repeated.

I leaned forward and ran my tongue up her slit. Her hips bucked, and a deep sigh escaped her. The tension in her body made me think she was so close to her orgasm that, if I touched her just right, she'd fall over the edge.

My thumb found her clit, and I pressed hard, fast circles over it as I slid a finger inside her channel. She cried out, her body spasming as the climax washed over her lithe body, her knees squeezing my shoulders.

"You're so fucking wet," I whispered, adding a second finger to her soaked pussy. "I can't wait to feel this gripping my cock. I'm going to love fucking you."

I slammed my fingers into her, bumping her clit with my knuckles as I finger-fucked her until she screamed my name, her body shaking with a second release.

“Stop!” she cried, sinking onto the mattress and panting. “Please, oh my God. Stop. It’s too much.”

“Are you sure?” I teased, sliding my fingers in again.

An aftershock rocked her body, and she sobbed, clutching at my arm and pulling it away from her sensitive core.

I climbed up her body and kissed her softly. Her eyelids fluttered, each time staying closed a little longer.

“You should get some sleep,” I told her again.

“Don’t leave,” she whispered, rather than chastise me, a sure sign she was spent.

“I’ll never leave you,” I promised.

I pulled her into my arms, and she laid her head on my chest, her fingers running back and forth over my pecs. In minutes, her breathing had evened out, and she’d fallen into a deep slumber.

“I love you,” I whispered, before placing a kiss on the top her head. “And I’m never, ever letting you go.”

Five

Laura

“You’re almost twenty-three,” I muttered to myself as I left my bedroom, dressed in jeans and a loose red, V-neck tee. “Stop being an idiot. It’s not like he’s your first experience.”

No, Luke was the second and I barely remembered the other guy's name. He'd been an act of defiance at a frat party I wasn't supposed to be at, a jock who'd fuck any girl willing to be his flavor of the night, no strings attached. He'd been a means to an end. Me giving up my virginity on my own terms, and I had no regrets.

But Luke? He meant something. I cared about his opinion and where this was going with us. Had he enjoyed last night, even though I'd been the only one getting pleasure? Did he think I was selfish for that?

Unsure of things, I'd been delaying all morning. As an early riser, I usually would have left my room long before now and been well on my way to completing the never-ending list of goals I set out for myself.

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But this morning, I felt sheepish and shy from my interlude with Luke last night. It had been amazing, but what if it hadn't been so special to him? What if he thought less of me today? What if he wanted me to leave now that he'd tasted me—literally?

As I climbed the stairs to the penthouse's main floor, the litany of insecurities was as endless as my to-do lists. I hated it. Until mid-high school when my father had complexly shifted my life-view with his determination that it was time I marry, I'd been a carefree outgoing girl, always ready for the next adventure. I wanted her back! I missed her.

“What was that?”

I jumped and looked up, startled. Luke was standing in the kitchen doorway on the far side of the living room. He was also dressed for the day, though far less casually in a pair of charcoal dress pants and a lightweight, olive-green sweater. It fit his body to perfection, emphasizing his lean, muscular figure and stealing my breath. Damn it, no man should look so good with their sleeves pushed up their mouthwatering forearms.

And what had he said? I shook my head, indicating I didn't understand him.

“I thought you said something.”

“No,” I replied. I threaded my fingers into my long, thick hair, pushing it back from my face.

“Hmm, okay. Coffee?”

“Yes,” I moaned, without thinking and even from where I stood, I saw Luke’s eyes darken. I bit my lip and smiled at him. Okay, he still wanted me.

And that look empowered me to let that carefree girl reemerge. She’d been hiding for too long while I’d been running from the inevitability of that arranged marriage. And she was ready for an adventure.

“I was thinking we could have it out on the living room terrace, or we can go upstairs to the rooftop terrace. Both have outdoor heaters, and it’s beautiful out. Then... Do you want to eat here or go out?”

“Here is fine.” I closed the space between us and followed him into the kitchen. I slipped into one of the chairs to watch him. The muscles in his arms flexed while he simply poured a cup of coffee for me and slid it toward me.

“Cream or sugar?”

“Cream, please.” I bit my lip, not wanting to be shy with him. I mean the man had his face between my legs last night. Okay, wrong thought. That was definitely something to be shy about.

“You okay?” he asked as he set the carton of half and half and a spoon near me. His cool fingers stroked over my heated cheek.

“Mm-hmm,” I squeaked.

C’mon, Laura you’re a grownup.

“Just thinking,” I continued.

“Me, too,” he replied, his tone growly, and my lower stomach pulled in reaction. My

panties were definitely getting damp.

“Probably not about the same thing,” I said.

Liar, liar pants on fire!

“I know it’s the weekend and New York,” I rushed out. “But I’ve never been here except for that quick weekend. We barely saw a thing—basically the airport, hotel, the club and a show. I’d really like to see some of it, you know? I mean...” I bit my lip. “I know it’s touristy and you probably don’t want to but—”

“We can do whatever you want. What are you thinking?”

“Silly stuff really. I want to ride the Staten Island Ferry and see the Statue of Liberty and do a Central Park carriage ride and go to the Bronx Zoo,” I blurted out in one breath. “And maybe see the Empire State Building and Radio City Hall.”

He leaned forward onto his elbows, bringing us eye to eye. “I could take you anywhere. Paris, Venice, London...”

That flutter happened in my belly again. “I’m sure you could,” I answered more casually than I felt. “But I’ve never really seen New York. Let’s start here.”

Stretching forward, he kissed my forehead then straightened and walked toward the refrigerator. “Maybe Paris for our honeymoon.”

“Luke,” I huffed.

He turned to face me, leaning his butt against the counter next to the fridge. “I’m not going to lie about this. I told you how I feel yesterday. You know I want you—I want you forever. I won’t force you into anything. When it comes to us together, our lives

together, I won't coerce you into anything." His chin lowered, his intense, determined eyes pinning me. "But someday, I promise you, we're getting married. And I will take you on an extravagant honeymoon. You might as well figure out where you want to go and start planning on that now."

"You just decided that, and you're telling me to start planning on it, but you're not forcing me?" I asked in disbelief. "Because, from where I'm sitting, it sounds an awful lot like I have no choice."

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“I didn’t just decide it. And you know you have choices, so don’t be a brat about it. I’ll wait as long as you need me to. But I’m not letting go. I’m not giving up. Don’t try to tell me you don’t feel this thing between us. I know you do.”

I stared at him, thinking this was way too heavy of a conversation for this early in the morning with no caffeine in my system. Without breaking the glare-down, I lifted my cup and took a swallow of my coffee. I realized a moment too late I hadn’t put the creamer in it. Finally dropping my gaze, I poured some half and half then slowly stirred it in. Luke groaned when I glanced back up at him and slowly sucked the spoon between my lips.

“Fuck, baby,” he muttered.

“What?” I asked, injecting innocence into my tone. My attention scanned over him. He’d crossed his ankles and his arms while he leaned there watching me. From this distance, I didn’t really need to drop my eyes to see his cock pushing against his fly. And he wasn’t trying to hide it from me, either, further evidence he wanted me. But lust didn’t actually add up to a relationship.

Lying to him wouldn’t get me anywhere, though.

“You know I feel it, too,” I admitted.

“Then don’t fight it. Be open and let’s see where this goes. I’m not going to dial back on expressing my intentions, because that would be the same as misleading you. But you can’t shut down and pretend we’re not happening. I’ll be honest, and you’ll be honest.”

I took another sip of my coffee, watching him over the rim while I thought. I wanted to recapture the girl I'd been before the forced engagement had bound up my spirit. This was my chance. I'd never gotten to date; my father's decision had stunted that. I didn't want to be a teenager again, but I wanted to have fun and fall in love, just like most other girls in the world. With this man, I was practically halfway there.

"I do feel it," I told him again. "I'm scared to give in, but I'm going to try."

He straightened and was around the table in a moment, his long legs eating up the distance. He pulled me to my feet and cupped my face, urging me to look up at him. "You never need to be afraid with me. I don't want to trap you; I want you to fly. And if you start to fall, I'll catch you. Because no matter how far you go, what heights you want to reach, I'll be there with you. Not to hold you back, not to do things for you or to take your thunder, but to cheer you on and support you however you need me to."

My vision blurred with my emotions. "What if I need you to let go?"

"You won't need it. You're scared—I get that. You've had so much taken from you. But I don't want to take anything from you. I want to give you everything I can and be there when you achieve your goals."

"I don't want to lose my freedom," I whispered. "I don't want to be like my mom."

"You won't be. But Laura? Have you really been free? Since you left home, have you really been free, or have you been imprisoned by your fear of being tracked down and dragged back into that life? You can be free with me. No one is touching you." He smiled suddenly, veering from the thick, oppressive timbre that had overtaken our discussion. He lifted me onto the table, narrowly missing my coffee. I wouldn't have cared if it spilled, so long as we could get closer. "Except me. I'll touch you. But I have a feeling you'll like that."

I wrapped my legs around his thighs, pulling him closer to me. My fingers curled in his soft sweater. “I have a feeling you’re right. Will you kiss me, then will you take me to have fun in New York?”

His hand curled around the back of my head.

“Anything you wish,” he promised against my lips. I groaned, opening my mouth for him and the immediate invasion of his tongue. It slipped against mine, and my back arched as I tried to press nearer to him. The kiss deepened, both of us getting lost in it and the feel of each other. The erection I’d seen tenting his pants rubbed against me, and his hand palmed my breast, this thumb strumming over my beaded nipple.

“Luke, Luke, Luke,” I chanted between kisses.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “Being with you is better than I ever imagined all these months. Do you have any idea how much I’ve wanted you?”

“Yeah,” I panted as he kissed down my neck, sucking and nibbling along the way. “If it’s anything like I’ve wanted you, yeah, I do. I’ve been so alone. But any old guy wouldn’t ever do. It was only you.”

“Damn straight,” he growled and nipped at my shoulder where my neckline had shifted aside. “You’re not alone anymore, baby. Never again.” His sigh blew across my shoulder, making me shiver. “But...”

“What?” Fear sliced through me at his gear change.

“We should get going. We’ll eat brunch at The Garden at Four Seasons.”

“Um...” I blinked at him, reeling. We were kissing and...

He cupped my cheek, his gaze tender. “Babe, if we don’t get out of here, this is going to escalate fast. I promised I wouldn’t push you, and that includes having sex before you’re ready. And once your brain gets back online, you’ll know that. Because I know you were awake, and probably overthinking, for a long time before you joined me this morning. I don’t want any regrets between us.”

“I hate you a little right now,” I muttered, even though he was spot-on correct.

“Because I’m right?” he asked, a touch too smugly.

“Yeah.” My reply was grudging at best.

He grasped my waist and lifted me down to my feet. His lips pressed to my forehead, and I closed my eyes as a warm fuzzy sensation surrounded me at his closeness.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, I’d been alone and stranded, unsure of my future. Now, I had Luke...and I was still unsure of my future. But I had a feeling whatever it was, he’d be right there. It didn’t seem as if he planned to give me a choice. Strangely, nothing inside me rebelled over the realization. That would take some getting used to.

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“I’ll go change my clothes then,” I said, breaking away and taking a Luke-free breath. New panties were a must, and there was no way I was going to the Four Seasons dressed in my old T-shirt while he looked like some high-end magazine model. “I’ll be right back. Do you think Four Seasons has French toast?”

“If they don’t, they will by the time we leave,” he promised.

I licked my bottom lip then sank my teeth into it as I nodded. Right... He was a billionaire, and he made things happen. What he wanted, he got. That would take some getting used to, too.

Six

Luke

Watching New York through Laura’s eyes was kind of amazing. I didn’t know that I’d ever been excited by the city before her. My family had lived adjacent to NYC, in Tarrytown, for my whole life, so the lights and the crowds and the noise were all just background to me.

But Laura was a breath of fresh air. She squealed like a little kid at the zoo, ate candy at almost every place we visited, and pulled me physically by the hand into shops and through different attractions. It was amazing. And I didn’t know that I’d ever had as much fun.

“Are you ready for dinner?” I asked, wrapping my arm around her shoulders and pulling in her in for a kiss.

“I could eat,” she admitted. “Where are we going?”

“You asked to go to a five-star restaurant. I have reservations for us at Per Se.”

“Really?” She gasped, a huge smile stretching her beautiful face. We’d talked about the luxurious dining there when we’d passed earlier.

“Of course.” I had to release her to grab my phone. I shot a text to our driver to come pick us up. We were at the wrong end of the city and had done quite a bit of walking today. I wasn’t about to make her walk miles to dinner. “Rick will be here in a few minutes with the town car.”

“What’s your life like?” she asked suddenly, peering up at me with a small smile on her lips.

“What do you mean?” I tugged her hand and led back to the small park we’d just passed through and urged her to sit on a bench with me.

“I mean, what’s it like to be a billionaire? You just swiped your black Amex everywhere we went today. You send a text, and car is coming to get us and take us to dinner somewhere I’m pretty sure will cost more than I can fathom, but I’m betting you won’t blink at it. You flew halfway across the country in a private jet to rescue me then immediately flew me back. I mean...my God, Luke. What is that like?”

“First of all,” I told her. “If you wait another year or so, you’ll be so used to it you won’t even think about it. My life is your life, now. You’re free to swipe my Amex anywhere you damn well please. But don’t think for a second I take it for granted. My father worked his ass off to build our company, and my brothers and I continue that legacy. My parents were anti-spoiling, so we didn’t get handed anything we could ever want. It’s normal for me to work twelve to fifteen hours a day sometimes. I don’t just push paper in my ivory tower. I’m on the job sites, I’m lifting steel and climbing

scaffolds, right next to my guys. I've worked for every penny I have, Laura. And I've done it so that, when you came along, I could give you the world."

"That last part was beautiful," she said. "It's all total bullshit, but it was nice."

"You're such a brat," I hissed, swooping in to kiss her. "It wasn't bullshit. I do work really hard."

"Oh no!" she said quickly, her hand squeezing my arm. "Not that part. The part about me getting used to it. I don't think I could ever adjust to that much excess. Especially knowing how hard you work for it."

My car pulled up then, so I led her to it then helped her inside before climbing in as well. Traffic was a disaster, as usual, and it took half an hour to make it up to the restaurant. Since I wasn't sure how long we'd be here, I told Rick to just head home, and we'd grab a taxi or walk back to the penthouse, which wasn't too far away. He didn't look happy, but he didn't argue with me. Probably because Laura was there.

Rick had been with my family since I was a kid, and he took his job extremely seriously. He absolutely hated it when any of the Cassels offered to take public transportation, but I hated to keep him out until all hours of the night, especially when I knew he was driving back to Tarrytown where he still lived.

"Have a nice time, young lady," Rick offered as he held the door for us.

"Thank you," she said, smiling brightly. "It was lovely to meet you."

"You, as well," he said, bowing slightly before closing the door and walking around to the driver's side again. "Mr. Cassel, will you be heading into the office tomorrow morning?"

“If I do, I’ll call you. I’m undecided, at the moment.”

“Yes, sir.” He got into the town car and pulled away as I guided Laura to the restaurant entrance.

“Is he always that formal?” Laura asked.

“Never. Not once in the thirty years I’ve known him.” I laughed. “He’s a great guy, and I think he assumes I’m trying to impress you.”

“Do you usually try to impress women?” she asked, her tone light, but the fire in her gaze let me know she didn’t like the idea.

“No. In fact, I haven’t had a lot of time for women at all.”

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“Good,” she said. “I don’t share.”

“Neither do I,” I agreed, pulling her into my arms and kissing her. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” she said.

“How is that even possible?” I asked, unable to stop myself when I thought of all the junk we’d eaten today.

She just laughed and looked around. When her gaze finally caught on the restaurant’s blue door with huge panes of glass to either side, giving a peek at the interior, she gasped and held a hand over her mouth.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

“Yes, you are,” I agreed, unable to take my gaze from her.

“Stop it.” She rolled her eyes. “Come on. I want to go in.”

I wanted to, as well. I had a plan in mind. Earlier today, I’d purchased an engagement ring. It had been impulsive as hell, but when Laura had been distracted in a jewelry store we’d stopped into at one point today, I’d covertly pointed to what I wanted and handed over my black card. I’d hoped to surprise her by proposing at the Empire State Building. Granted, that would be super touristy, but she’d been so excited to go. I thought I’d the element of surprise on my side, and she’d accept I really did want her to spend the rest of our lives together. There just been about a million people on the observation deck with us, and the moment had been all wrong.

So now, I was on Plan B. Propose at the chic restaurant.

We headed inside, and I was thrilled my assistant, Roz, had been able to get them to hold a table for me. Since I'd had no idea what time we'd arrive for dinner, it must have taken a bit of coercion and probably a lot of cash to keep a table for us without a reservation for an actual time.

"How did you do that?" Laura whispered as we were led through the busy restaurant to a table situated by the window.

"I have no idea," I admitted. I helped her into her seat before sitting across from her. "My assistant is a magician, I think."

The waitress came over and took our drink orders while we perused the menu. By time she returned, we were ready to order food.

"This place is beautiful," Laura said as she looked around. "Thank you."

"For what?" I asked.

"I don't know...everything. Rescuing me. Bringing me here. Showing me the city today. Spoiling me rotten. It's been the best day I've had in a really long time. I appreciate it."

"You're welcome," I told her. "This is just the beginning, you know? I plan to give you the whole world."

"I kind of feel like you already have," she admitted.

The moment couldn't have been planned more perfectly. I reached into my pocket and pulled the ring from its box, watching her look around the restaurant.

“I wonder how many guys propose in this place,” she said, still not looking at me. “They probably think it’s so romantic. How cliché, right?”

“Right,” I said, the ring pinched between my fingers, my mouth suddenly dry. A waiter walked by carrying a tray with two champagne flutes. He paused to tell another waiter his order was ready, and I quickly dropped the ring into one of the glasses without him noticing. “Totally cliché.”

She turned back to me and smiled. Her hand stretched across the table, and I closed my fingers around hers.

“So tomorrow,” I started but was interrupted by a squeal.

“Oh my god!” a woman yelled from a table behind us. “Yes! Mark! It’s gorgeous! It’s huge! Yes.”

I turned to see a blonde woman standing up, staring at the ring she’d just slid onto her finger. She was crying, and the man she was with, Mark apparently, looked like a deer in the headlights.

Oops.

“See,” Laura hissed, giggling behind her free hand.

“You’re very astute,” I told her, turning back to her. “So, what do you want to do tomorrow?”

“Can we finish tonight first?” she asked.

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“Of course. I just wondered if you’d given any thought to what you’d like to do. Tomorrow. Next week. For the next year.”

“I’ve given no thought to anything beyond tonight’s special and another glass of wine,” she said. “Don’t you have to work tomorrow?”

“No, it’s Sunday,” I assured her. “Besides, we’re kind of at a lull point. Normally, I go into the office to get ahead for the week, but I don’t need to.”

“I don’t want to be a burden. Or a distraction.”

“And I don’t want to be overbearing,” I said. “But you just got here. I’d like to spend time with you.”

Our food came, interrupting the conversation. While Laura stared down at her plate, I stole a glance over to Mark’s table. His new fiancée was texting on her cell phone while he appeared to be whisper-shouting at the waiter a few feet away.

“Can I freshen your drinks?” our waitress asked, coming back to the table.

“Yes, please,” I said. “Also, I’d very much like to pay for the dinners of the happy couple over there.”

“That’s very kind of you,” she said.

“Please don’t let them know who’s done it.”

“Of course not, sir,” she assured me. “I’ll have that taken care of right away. And I’ll be right back with your drinks.”

“That was sweet,” Laura said.

I shrugged. It was literally the least I could do. It had been a beautiful ring, and if they ever broke up, the woman could hock it and buy a condo. But I’d obviously just forced an engagement, and Mark didn’t seem too happy about it.

After dinner, I led Laura back outside and hailed a cab. As we rode back to the penthouse, she snuggled against me, her arm threaded through mine.

“I guess it was kind of romantic,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“Him proposing to her there. Sure, it was hokey, but she was really excited. And it’s a beautiful place. Maybe, cliché isn’t all bad.”

Seriously? I blew out a sigh and kissed the top of her head.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It was romantic.”

Son of a bitch.

Seven

Laura

It was late when we got back to the penthouse, and I was both keyed up and exhausted from the day. We’d done so much and had so much fun yet not even

skimmed the top of everything to do here. I'd grown up in a boring small city where the sidewalks practically rolled up at eight at night. It wasn't an exaggeration to say there had been nothing to do but eat and go to a movie. So being here with Luke, I just felt as if the possibilities were endless.

Including one possibility I wanted to pursue tonight.

Either Luke wasn't on the same page with me, or he was doing that not rushing me gentlemanly crap. Not that I didn't appreciate it. For so long, I'd been pushed and coerced into the directions other people wanted, but I needed this as much as he did. And I was starting to believe him about looking for long term. After seeing his brother with Emerson, I suspected it was a Cassel family trait that they saw what they desired and went for it. And Luke wanted me.

I wasn't so sure about the whole forever thing, but I sure wanted him, too.

The penthouse was eerily still as we walked through it, and though we had a magnificent view of Central Park through the expanse of glass on the far side of the great room, we couldn't hear any of it. Luke didn't turn on the lights as we entered, the outside illuminating the area well enough for us to navigate it. It was as if we were enclosed in our own little cocoon. Just Luke and me and enough sexual tension that I wasn't sure how I'd make it through another lonely night alone.

"Well..." Luke said, his deep quiet, voice matching the silence as we stopped at my room. "Here we are."

"Here we are," I repeated. My teeth sank into my bottom lip as I gazed up at him. My heart slammed against my chest wall as I contemplated the coming kiss and what I wanted to say to him.

His hands slid into my hair, cupping my throat, while his thumbs caressed the

sensitive skin near my ear. My breathing stuttered as my anticipation grew. Fear twined with it as I imagined him shooting me down.

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“This was the best day of my life,” he told me. “Being able to spend time with you, live life with you. I want that forever.”

“Luke...” I whispered. “You don’t know—”

“I do know. I knew it the second I saw you.”

He started to lean in, and I wrapped my arms around him, going to my toes and pulling him closer. “You felt it?”

“Yeah.”

“Me, too, Luke. I... I don’t want to sleep alone tonight,” I whispered against his lips.

“I want you.”

“You’re sure?”

“You’re sure I’m yours?”

“More than I have been about anything else in my life,” he growled.

“Then take me to bed.”

Luke moved so fast that if I’d changed my mind, there wouldn’t have been time. Not that I would have. I knew what I wanted here, and that was to be with Luke. He swung me up in his arms and headed for his room upstairs in long strides. A cloud of bedding surrounded me as he dropped me, yes dropped me, onto the mattress then

climbed over me. His arms and legs caged me in as he stared down at me through the shadows, his eyes almost glinting as they picked up the lights coming in through the windows.

“If I take you, if I claim you, you’re mine. All mine. I’m not sharing you, and I’m not letting you go. Do you understand me?”

My tongue skimmed over my bottom lip. That should scare me. Shouldn’t I be frightened of a man claiming he’d own me? Wasn’t that what I’d been running from? But Luke didn’t scare me. Instead, a flutter went off in my belly at the idea of belonging to him forever.

One side of my mouth lifted. “Like you would give me up or share me now? Like I don’t already belong to you?”

“I see we’re on the same page,” he growled. His fingers went to the buttons of my shirt. I covered his hands, stopping him.

“But...if I give over to you, you’re mine, too, and I don’t share. Do you understand that? I don’t do double standards, Cassel.”

“I wouldnevercheat on you,” he rasped. “I can’t even imagine anything or anyone that would take my attention from you. Even while we were apart, you consumed me. And besides that... I don’t know what kind of men have been in your life, but I’m not like them. You’re mine, and I’m yours, and that’s it.” He kissed my neck, making a path from my collarbone up to my ear, while he deftly released the buttons on my blouse.

Other men? Did he think I’d had a bunch of lovers?

I covered his hands again, and he lifted up to stare at me once more. His brows drew

together.

“Luke, I’m... I’ve only been with one guy. One time. I’m not... I don’t have a bunch of experience. I never had any freedom. If I hadn’t snuck out, I wouldn’t have even had that one time.” My teeth sank into my lip, worried. Maybe, he did want someone more worldly, less sheltered. Somehow, that didn’t ring true.

His chin lowered as he stared into my eyes. “Past is the past. All that matters is you and me. I’ve had a hard-on for you for months.”

Oh.

“But... So, what about afterward, after we’ve been together? Then it goes away?” Was I grasping for flaws? I still couldn’t believe this man was mine.

He scoffed. “Hardly,” he laughed. “Afterward, you’ll be mine. And you’ll be lucky if we aren’t fucking on every accommodating surface we can find, flat or not, as often as possible.”

Oh. Oh! My body went all soft and wet at his assertion—well, softer and wetter.

The things he said just fried my brain, sizzled all circuits and sent me scrambling for new connections. My lips moved, trying to form words while he finished unbuttoning me and shoved the shirt down my shoulders. At the same time, he kissed every inch of flesh he exposed along the way.

“I think I like that idea,” I gasped.

“Good,” he chuckled against my skin. He flicked open the front release on my bra, shoved aside a cup then drew his tongue over the puckered peak. “Then we have a plan. I claim you, you’re mine, and I’m yours. Then we fuck like proverbial bunnies

from now until the end of time.”

“Uh-huh,” I cried out as he sucked on that nipple, sending ribbons of white-hot sensation twisting down to my core. I bucked beneath him, calling out his name. My hands tore at his sweater. He helped me tug it off then went right back to his torment to the pebbled tip. I shoved my fingers into his thick, dark locks, holding him there while he sucked and licked. His hand molded the mound. Then the other joined, learning the dimensions of my other breast. He pinched and pulled at the tip, and my pussy flooded in reaction. I knew when he touched me, I’d be embarrassingly slick for him. So ready for his cock.

My hands slid down the muscular expanse of his bare back until they reached his waistband. Undeterred, I slipped my fingertips just beneath it. Luke moaned against me, shifting. His covered cock thrust against my center, and lights flashed across my vision. Holy...

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“Do that again,” I breathed. “Oh God!” I cried when he complied. It felt so good, better than I’d imagined. My one time had been clinical, unappealing even, but I’d touched myself before. Honestly, nothing of consequence had ever happened. I’d begun to believe that whole clit and orgasm thing was a myth.

There was no myth here.

Good lord, I wanted to have him rub against me for the rest of my life. And to think, I could have had this weeks ago.

“You’re thinking too much,” he growled against my neck.

“No...it feels good. I was just thinking...we could have done this sooner if I hadn’t—”

He kissed me and smothered my recrimination. His lips brushed over mine, taking, tasting, soothing occasional nips until he leaned his forehead against mine. “You weren’t ready then. You had to be ready, because I’m not playing to you—I am not letting you go.”

I swallowed hard, drowning in his eyes. How could I have run from this, and now, I was jumping in with Luke without reservation?

Because it was Luke.

I was still uncertain about the future, but underlying everything else, I trusted him. Never breaking eye contact, I reached between us and wrenched open the button on

his pants. I didn't hesitate or think about my lack of experience as I shoved down his zipper.

Luke didn't reach in to help me. He just let me disrobe him, probably understanding I needed to take this step. It had to be all me. But as soon as I pushed down his pants and boxer-briefs and my fingers closed around his cock—his oh-my-God huge cock—he sprang into action.

The rest of my clothes were gone in a flash, and our naked bodies were moving against each other as if it were the most natural thing in the world. And maybe, it was at the most basic of levels.

He kissed me tenderly, his hands stroking over me as if he were intent on learning every curve and finding every secret that had been hidden by my clothes. I did the same. The man was so hard and strong, without a soft spot on him as his smooth, warm skin stretched over the firm muscles.

“How are you so built?” I muttered. His fitness was a little intimidating. “I mean...don't you sit at a desk all day?”

He chuckled against my skin as he kissed a line between my breasts. I fought the urge to shove him away from my soft belly before he reached it. I was slim, but not super fit like him.

“Hardly,” he said. “I'm in the field a lot. And lately, in the gym a lot, too. You have no idea the frustration I've had to work off.”

“I might have an inkling. Some of us just work off our frustration with Ben and Jer—Oh my God!”

Luke sucked hard on my clit, and I bucked under him, overwhelmed by the sudden

orgasm that hit me at his touch.

“That’s right, baby,” he murmured, pulling my legs over his shoulders. His fingers came to play, parting me, stroking me while his mouth explored but unerringly returned to my sensitive nub every few seconds to keep me edging closer and closer to another release. But after the initial one, he kept drawing back and keeping me from tumbling over, making me insane with need for more. Sadist.

“Luke, please...” I begged, writhing as his tongue teased at my opening. “I...please,” I moaned.

He pressed his lips the top of my mound, staring up at me, white-hot passion in his eyes. As he moved over me, trailing kisses up me, I knew this was it. This was the moment I’d become completely his, and we’d enter a whole new world. His cock was throbbing and heavy between us, and I wrapped my fingers around the hot, steel rod, squeezing and running my hand along it to feel what would soon be inside me.

Luke moaned against my collarbone. “It feels so good to have you touch me. I’ve needed you for so long.” Together, we positioned him at my opening. “Now, you’ll be fully mine, Laura. Tell me to stop now because I will never let go once I have you.”

His please was an ‘out’ I didn’t want. Yes, I needed to figure out my way in the world and find independence outside of my family, but I’d have to navigate it with Luke beside me. Sometimes, inside me. More than sometimes. More like a lot.

At the moment, nothing was more important than us being one.

“I’m sure. I want this.” I grinned him. “Consequences and all.”

“All good consequences,” he promised. We both groaned in unison again as his cock

started pushing inside me. So slowly, stretching my walls wide with his girth. It pinched, since it had been so long for me, but it was also perfection. I clenched around him, my body trying to draw him in.

“Luke,” I cried, my head tossing back.

He froze.

“Stop?” he whispered, concern and a touch of pain in his gaze.

“No, God, no, don’t stop. I’ll kill you if you stop.” My nails dug into his shoulders, and I shook my head frantically. “More. Give me more. Fast. Give me all of it. I need you filling me.”

His lips brushed over mine. “Anything you want.”

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And he surged forward, going deep. I arched, crying out beneath him.

“I’m good. It’s good,” I whispered when he paused. I curled a hand behind his head and brought his lips back to mine. My whole world had shrunk to his body over mine, his cock deep in me, stretching me so full. If more existed outside that, I didn’t know anymore. But nothing in my life had ever felt so right as being one with Luke. I’d been made for this moment. Maybe, even made for this man. Was it...love?

And suddenly, I understood why I’d run, why I’d been so afraid. Luke changed everything for me. Nothing would ever be the same again. Part of me had recognized him as my missing piece and been afraid of what it would mean.

I stared up at him, breathing hard.

“Luke,” I whispered almost reverently.

His eyes shone down at me, full of...promise. “You feel it, too, don’t you? We’re meant to be.”

I nodded. My hips shifted beneath him, unable to stay still. A cry escaped me, but he recognized it for the pleasure it was. Slowly, he started moving, gaining momentum as we lost ourselves in each other.

Something I didn’t recognize, twisted and grew inside me, growing tighter, readying for imminent explosion. It still took me by surprise, and I gasped, clinging to Luke as my pussy spasmed around his driving cock. Stars flew across my vision, his pounding hips the only thing keeping me anchored to earth.

“Oh fuck, Laura, yes,” he grunted out. “You’re so damn tight. You...feel so...good. So...perfect...” A deep, guttural growl echoed through the room and warmth painted my core as he released, deep inside.

He collapsed forward but still rested most of his weight on his forearms. His forehead pressed to mine.

“Mine,” he vowed, staring into my eyes.

I grinned, the weight of the past years sliding away and leaving behind only joy. God, I’d missed joy! There had been times I’d been happy, but nothing like this. I’d never realized there was a difference.

“Yours...so you say,” I teased. “But I may need further demonstration.”

“Anything you need. As many times as you need,” he promised. Then he proceeded to do exactly that as we finished out the best day of my life.

Eight

Luke

“You’re up early,” Laura said as she walked into the kitchen on Monday. “And you’re dressed.” She wrinkled her nose in apparent disappointment.

“And you’re not.” I strode over to her and pulled her into my arms, dropping a kiss onto her beautiful mouth. She was wearing my shirt, which covered more than I’d like, but the unbuttoned top portion gaped, hinting she was probably naked underneath. I slid my hands up her thighs, confirming she was. “You’re so perfect.”

“You taste like coffee,” she whispered.

“Do you want some?” When she nodded, I reluctantly released her and went back to pour her a cup.

As she settled onto a chair, I brought the coffee to the table then slid the creamer over to her, as well.

“What’s the plan for today?” she asked.

“I have to go in to work for a little while,” I told her. She looked as disappointed as I felt. “I’ll try not to be long.”

“It’s okay,” she assured me. “I know you have things to do. I don’t expect you to entertain me for the rest of my life.”

“I would, you know.”

She smiled, and my heart stuttered in my chest. I’d quit my job without hesitation to see that look on her face every day.

“I know you would. But how would you keep me in the lap of luxury if you didn’t get back to the office?”

I heard the teasing in her tone but wondered if she fully realized how set for life we were, regardless of whether or not I kept working. Before I assured her that I’d treat her like a princess for the rest of time, she spoke again.

“Do you really want me to spruce up the apartment? I could start looking at stuff today while you’re out. I should probably start getting the lay of the land, so to speak, if I’ll be living in New York City.”

“Of course, I meant it.” I reached across the table and wrapped my hand around hers.

“This is your home. I want you to feel comfortable here.” I stood and pulled out my wallet, grabbing my Amex and handing it over to her. “Whatever you want. For this place, for yourself, just swipe.”

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“Just swipe,” she repeated softly, staring down at the credit card in her hand.

“As long as you don’t use it to run away again.”

She glanced up at me, a look on her face I couldn’t quite read. We stared at each other for a moment, before she slid off the stool and walked over to me.

“Luke.” She wrapped her arms around my neck and met my gaze. “For better or for worse, I’m here. I’m yours. I won’t run again.”

Once again, I found myself wishing I’d just proposed last night. Maybe when I got back this afternoon, I could whisk her to city hall and just get it all over with at once. I wanted her to be my wife. The sooner we got married, the sooner I could start putting my babies in her. The sooner I could guarantee she was out of her family’s clutches forever. The sooner we could build our forever.

“You look very serious all of a sudden,” she said, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Sorry.” I kissed her quickly. “I really should get going, so I can get back.” I pulled out a business card and scribbled our address on the back. “Anything you buy can be delivered, don’t let them tell you otherwise. I’ll send Rick to drive you wherever you need.”

“Okay. Have a good day, dear.”

I smacked her ass as I walked past then grabbed my briefcase and headed out before I changed my mind and carried her back to bed.

* * * *

“Well, who the hell filed the permits!” I yelled at my brother, Jameson, staring down at the stop-work notice he’d handed me when I’d gotten to the job site just outside Tarrytown.

“I did!” he bellowed back. “All of them. But it looks like they got blocked in committee.”

“That’s ridiculous.” I ran my free hand through my hair and glared down at the papers. “We’ve never been denied. Who would want to block us?”

“I’m working on it.”

I was honestly glad to see the fire in his eyes. My youngest brother hadn’t always been the most ambitious of us. But he’d been stepping up a lot lately, and I was proud of him. But this was a disaster. We’d already broken ground. The crew was standing around smoking, talking, and occasionally casting furtive glances our way.

We employed hundreds of people, and a stop-work affected everybody. We’d still pay them out. They had a thirty-day guarantee in their contracts for just this sort of hiccup. But if we didn’t get it resolved soon, they’d be unemployed and we’d be out millions of dollars. Not to mention the hit to our company’s reputation.

“Figure it out,” I growled, shoving the notices back at him. “And fix this.”

“What are you gonna do?” Jameson asked.

“I’m talking to the guys, then I’m heading to the office to put in a few calls. Then I’m going home, I guess. If you need me, call me. Immediately.”

He nodded, clapping me on the back before walking toward the parking lot.

I blew out a sigh and looked back at the crew. What a fucking nightmare. Locating the foreman, I strode over to him. He was in conversation with a small group of men, and I walked slowly, allowing them to continue. This wasn't their fault. The fact that they were still on site showed a work ethic that made me proud of them. Technically, they should have vacated as soon as they knew about the stop-order.

"So, the waiter brings over the champagne, and there's a fucking ring in it!" one of the crew was saying as I approached. "I couldn't believe it. Before I could say anything, Mel just screams yes at me. Then she's on her phone, calling her mom."

"You just let her think you were proposing?" another man asked.

"What was I gonna do? She had this massive ring on her hand, and she was all excited. Man, I'm so fucked."

Oh. My. God.

It was Mark. The kid I'd accidentally pushed into a proposal at the restaurant the night before. Fuck. Could this day get any worse?

"Mr. Cassel," Mark said, noticing me. "Sorry, sir, me and the guys were just talking. I'm sure you want Doug." He pointed at the foreman, who'd turned to face me. "We'll just be...over there."

I nodded, smiling grimly as they walked off to give us privacy.

"What do you want us to do?" Doug asked bluntly. "We'll stay, but I can't let the guys work right now."

“No, no, of course not. I’m not risking any of your licenses getting pulled. This is our mess, and we’ll get it fixed. I promise you.” I sighed and looked over at the rest of the crew. This was gonna put us behind schedule. “They okay?”

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“Oh, yeah.” Doug made a dismissive gesture. “It’s not the first time we’ve run into this. Those permit committees pull this shit all the time. You’re a good family. You’ll fix it, and we’ll be back at it before you know it.”

“Thanks, Doug.” I shook his hand. “Send your boys home. I’ll be in touch. Make sure they know their wages are covered.”

“No problem.” He nodded then headed over to dismiss his guys.

I glanced around the site and kicked a rock with the toe of my shoe. I was pissed. Doug might think it happened all the time, but it had never happened to us. Our company was meticulous, and we didn’t let these things affect us or our crews.

My phone chirped, and I looked down to see a message from Jameson.

It was Willow.

Jesus Christ. Willow Tate and my brother had been at each other’s throats since kindergarten. Honestly, I thought they were secretly crazy for one another but both were too chicken to admit it.

She worked for another development firm that built strip malls in the towns surrounding the Burroughs of New York, just as we did. Well, we didn’t build strip malls, but that company was our competition and occasionally we battle over land and contractors. If she’d been able to get our permits revoked, her boss must have pulled a million strings. I knew for a fact the state made way more off our buildings than his developments. He must have called in every favor he’d ever gotten to pull off

something like this for spite.

Can you fix it? I texted back.

His reply came immediately. It's being handled. Give me a few days.

I fucking hoped so. This was a nightmare.

Instead of going into the office, where I'd just be bombarded with questions I couldn't answer, I climbed into my town car and had the driver take me home.

I heard music as soon as I got off the elevator to the penthouse. Silently slipping into the living room, I leaned against the wall and watched Laura as she danced around the room. She'd gotten dressed, more's the pity, but her tight jeans highlighted her pert little ass as her hips swayed to the pop song she blared through her phone.

"Honey, I'm home," I called out as soon as the music ended.

She jumped, spinning around as her hand went to her chest. "Jesus, Luke, you nearly gave me a heart attack."

I walked over and pulled her into my arms, kissing her deeply.

"I'm sorry," I said, leaning back to look into her eyes. "I didn't mean to scare you."

She pulled away and turned off the speaker. "You're back early. I wasn't expecting you for hours."

"Yeah, well, there's a problem at the site, so they had to shut down. Jameson is working on it."

“That’s your youngest brother?” she asked.

“Yeah. He’s kind of a goof, but if he says he’ll get it taken care of, he really will.” I pulled her back into me. “But for now, it looks like you’re stuck with me.”

“Lucky, lucky me,” she murmured, going up on tiptoes to kiss me. “Whatever shall we do with ourselves?”

God, I was so in love with this woman. I knew I’d never tire of coming home to her. Of kissing her. Of holding her in my arms. I wanted her forever, and I needed that forever to start as soon as possible.

I knew I couldn’t ask her yet. But before the end of this week, I was damn sure Laura Moretti would be Laura Cassel for the rest of her life.

Her stomach grumbled, and she giggled as her cheeks turned pink. “Oops. I finished my coffee but skipped breakfast.”

“Well, I suppose I’d better feed you,” I said with a mock sigh.

“Sorry, I went online when you left, and then when I came up for air, my song came on and I was feeling so good I just had to dance. I forgot to eat.”

“I’m not complaining,” I assured her. “I love to watch you dance. You look very happy today.”

“And you look like you could use a ten a.m. beer.” She ran her palm over my cheek. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” I promised her, covering her hand with mine. “I’m just a little shell-shocked from work.” I pulled her toward the door. “Let’s get an early lunch then

come back here and make the most of my free afternoon.”

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“How can I resist an offer like that?” she asked.

“Hopefully, you’ll never be able to resist me.”

“I don’t think you’re in danger of that ever happening.” She slipped on her shoes and snagged her purse before allowing me to usher her toward the penthouse’s elevator.

Nine

Laura

The next week was...bliss. I couldn’t say there wasn’t a thread of unease lingering in the back of my mind, a worry my father or that guy he’d arranged the marriage to would show up, but otherwise, everything was good. When Luke wasn’t on the phone dealing with work issues, we were together. It didn’t matter what we were doing, seeing NYC sights, having fancy dinners, lounging on the couch watching TV or a movie, we were merely inches from each other. That didn’t change when we went to bed. I spent all day next to him and every night wrapped around him while he clutched me to him.

Right now, I was kind of at loose ends since he’d had to go into the office to finalize some crap about the permits that had gotten screwed up earlier this week. His brother, Jameson, had done something to smooth the way. I wasn’t sure what, except I’d heard Luke exclaim, “You did what?” this morning. A few minutes later, he’d rushed out with a quick, knee-buckling kiss and a promise he wouldn’t be too late getting home.

I glanced around the large penthouse. Boxes and parcels had basically taken over the dining area. I headed over, deciding since the things were here I might as well get to making this place into a home. I'd chosen to keep the furniture. It was new, sturdy and workable, but when I was done rearranging and adding my decorative flair, the place wouldn't look like a sterile unused home anymore. Gosh darn it, there would be color. Lots of it.

Like a kid at Christmas, I opened the first of the boxes. This one had come today, and I gasped in delight when I pulled back the flaps. I'd sent photos from my phone to one of those places that made wall prints out of the snaps. These were from my first couple days with Luke, so there wasn't a big timeline, but it was the two of us together. Gathering all the canvases, I headed toward the bedroom. I was excited to make this place ours, but I hoped Luke wouldn't regret giving me carte blanche.

A few hours later, I stood back and surveyed the living room. I'd gone with varying shades of blue—Luke's favorite color. Overall, against the steel and glass, the geometric throw and decorative cushions added a warmth that had been missing. The modern-inspired landscape painting over the couch pulled it all together. I'd kept the clean, uncluttered lines, while carefully adding small conversation pieces and books here and there.

I was nodding to myself when I heard the door to the elevator opening. Turning, I headed for it and threw myself into Luke's arms as he entered. What a change from a week ago.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed, catching me with his free arm. My legs went around his waist as I kissed his face all over. His briefcase dropped to the floor with a loud thud, and he cupped my ass with both hands. A second later, my back hit the wall as he caught my lips and kissed me deeply. I groaned, arching into him and rubbing my center against the hard ridge pressing into me.

“I missed you,” I breathed against his mouth in between kisses. My hands buried in his soft, thick hair.

“I could happily come home to this every day.”

“Yes...” I hissed out as his mouth traveled down my neck.

“Marry me,” he grated against my shoulder.

My head jerked back and smacked into the wall. “What?”

Chuckling, he reached up and cupped the back of it. “Don’t do that. There’s precious perfection inside. We can’t have this brain of yours hurt. I love what you’ve done to the penthouse. Brilliant.”

“You haven’t even seen it.”

“Um, well...” He glanced up at the corner of the living room.

My eyes narrowed. “You have cameras watching me?”

“Protecting,” he clarified. “I had them put in while we were out on Wednesday.”

My eyes narrowed, brows drawing together, but I couldn’t even be mad. I knew he was...overly protective and possessive of me, but he hadn’t once tried to control me.

“We’ll talk about that in a little bit,” I warned. “Now, what did you just say?”

“Marry me.” Putting me to my feet, he stepped back and shoved a hand through his hair. “Look, I know you probably think it’s fast but—”

“Okay.”

“—I’ve wanted to make you completely mine since last week. Hell, longer than that...” He trailed off, his head cocking to the side. “What?”

I laughed quietly. “Okay.”

“Now?”

“What?” I gasped. The word seemed to be a theme this afternoon.

“Let’s go and do it now.”

“But your family—”

He waved it off. “We’ll do a thing for them later. I just want you to be mine now. Then we’ll come back here and make love all night long to celebrate.”

“Luke, I’m already yours.”

“Not legally. I don’t want to leave a single opportunity for someone to try to take you from me.”

“No one could. Wait... What are you not saying? Is there something I don’t know?”

Luke sighed heavily. “I keep meaning to tell you, but you always distract me. There was a tracer on your car.”

I jolted at how close I’m been to being snatched back to my old life. How had I not suspected that? It was totally my father’s MO.

“Okay.” I nodded. “I guess that doesn’t really surprise me,” I replied. “When did you find out?”

“The night I picked you up in Michigan,” he admitted.

I wanted to be angry at him for keeping that from me, but I wasn’t. This was one of those things he did, thinking he was protecting me by keeping me sheltered. I was a little irritated, but not enough to get mad about it. Besides, I could tell there was more bad news coming.

“When they installed the cameras and did a sweep, my security people found one in your things, too,” he continued when I didn’t say anything. “They have this device that can detect—”

“All my stuff was new,” I protested. “I had to buy everything when I basically ran with only the clothes I was wearing. Even my phone is new because I knew my family could trace that.”

“Not your purse. That wasn’t new, was it?”

I glanced over at the black Chanel handbag on the dining room table. I hadn’t brought it with me on Wednesday because I’d used the cute little Kate Spade crossbody bag Luke had gotten me.

Crap. There was a tracker in it? I should have known better than to keep it. Panic surged up in my chest, and I started backing away, my fight or flight taking over. Having a device in my car hundreds of miles from my current location was one thing. But knowing that I’d been broadcasting my whereabouts to my father the whole time I’d been here was too much. I needed to get my things and run. I needed to—

Luke was in front of me in two steps, grabbing my shoulders and making me look at him. “Laura, listen to me. You’re safe.”

I shook my head violently. “No, I need to get out of here. If they find me, they’ll—”

“They’re not touching you.”

“You can’t marry me just to—”

“You’re fucking insane if you think I’m throwing myself on some sword. I love you, God damn it! Your crazy family has nothing to do with what I want for the rest of my

life. You. I want you. Yes, I might want to marry you right away, to keep them from touching you, but damn it, I wanted you wearing my ring last week and that was before I knew they were still tracking you.”

I was shaking hard, but as Luke pulled me into his chest, warmth and protection surrounded me. I breathed in his dark, woodsy scent. In his arms, I was safe. Free to be the person I aimed to be. I wanted to be here for the rest of my life.

“I love you, too,” I whispered into his wide chest, burrowing into him.

He pressed his lips into my hair. “Let’s go get married, okay?”

“Okay.”

Ten

Luke

Two hours, three phone calls, one judicial waiver of waiting period, and a promise from my assistant, Roz, not to alert my family to what I was doing, and Laura and I were on our way to the Tie the Knot Chapel that specialized in quickie marriages for tourists and locals alike.

“Your mom is going to be pissed,” Laura reminded me.

“She’s got four other sons,” I said with a shrug. “Missing one wedding won’t make much difference to her.”

My platitude sounded good, but it was total bullshit. Both of my parents would be livid that I hadn’t included them. Not to mention my brothers would be pissed—and probably Emerson, too. Our family was close knit, and I knew I’d be chapped if one

of my siblings got married without me in attendance. But I'd get over it eventually, and so would they.

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As Laura and I made our way up town the chapel, I realized at least one member of our extended family was available to stand with me.

“Rick,” I said, catching the reflection of the driver in the rear-view mirror. I’d known him my whole life. “After you park the car, would you please join us in the chapel?”

“Sir?”

“Don’tsirme,” I reprimanded, rolling my eyes. “You’re just as much a part of this family as anyone. It would mean a lot to me if you’d come inside to be our witness.”

“Then I would be honored, Luke,” Rick said, nodding at me in the mirror.

“Laura.” I turned to face her, taking her hands in mine. “I promise, when things calm down, I’ll throw you the biggest, most audacious wedding you’ve ever seen.”

“Don’t be silly,” she insisted. “I want a marriage with you. A big wedding is just frosting.”

“How did I get so lucky?” I brought one of her hands to my lips and kissed it softly.

She giggled. “I guess you just run faster than I do.”

“Thank goodness we’re done with all that.” I stared pointedly at her.

“I’m done running,” she promised.

“Well,” I said as we pulled up in front of the building housing the chapel. “I can buy us rings in the boutique they have here, or we can go shopping for them later.” I didn’t bother mentioning the first ring I’d purchased for her had been...donated.

“Let’s see what they have,” she offered as she slid out of the car. “I’d like the world to know you belong to me as quickly as possible.”

“The world has known I belong to you since the first night I met you,” I said, following her to the sidewalk and linking her arm in mine. “It was only ever you who doubted it.”

“No more doubts,” she said, beaming up at me. “Let’s go get hitched.”

“Rick,” I said, turning back to him. “We’ll wait for you outside the chapel.”

He nodded before getting back in the car and pulling away.

Laura and I walked inside together and followed the signs toward the chapel. The woman at the desk greeted us both and let us know there was a wedding currently taking place, but they should be ready for us soon, then she directed us to the jewelry shop located down the hallway.

I let Laura peruse their offerings, promising her that she could have anything she wanted. After a few minutes, she selected two plain, white gold bands.

“What about an engagement ring?” I asked as the clerk rang us up.

“I’m good,” she said with a shrug. “I’m a simple girl, Luke.”

“I know you think so,” I teased. “But you’re the most complicated woman I’ve ever met.”

She rolled her eyes as she took the bag from the clerk, and we walked back to the chapel.

“Willow!” Laura squealed as we approached a small gathering of people who’d congregated in the waiting area. I’d forgotten Willow had been at Laura’s party that night at Bradford’s. I wasn’t sure how they knew each other, but now, I remembered that they had been friends.

The two ladies hugged, and both began talking a mile a minute while I glared at Jameson.

“Did Roz call you?” I demanded.

“Chill,” he said, clapping me on the back. “I was standing at her desk when you called.”

“You didn’t tell Mom, did you?” I asked, my tone warning. “I want a small service. I don’t need the Cassels crowding in here like the Waltons.”

“I haven’t talked to anyone,” he promised. “But they’re going to be pissed at you.”

“They’ll get over it,” I assured him. “I just need her married to me.”

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“I know.” He sighed. “I’m happy for you.”

“Am I happy for you, too?” I asked, looking over at Willow.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jameson said with a sniff. “That woman is a pain in my ass. She followed me to your office, yelling at me the whole way there. When she heard Roz talking about you marrying Laura, she insisted I bring her with me.”

“Okay,” I said, smirking at my little brother.

Everyone who knew Jameson and Willow could see that they’d loved each other their whole lives. Unfortunately, they were the two most stubborn people on the planet, and refused to see it for themselves. The phrase “thin line between love and hate” could have been invented for those two morons.

I walked over to my bride, reaching out to tug on Willow’s hair. I’d known her for what seemed a million years.

“Why don’t you give my brother a break?” I asked her.

“He’s an ass,” she hissed. “But I don’t want to talk about him. Congratulations, Luke. Laura’s a great girl.”

“Oh, I know.” I wrapped my arm around Laura’s waist and squeezed her into my side. “I’m a lucky man.”

“Sir.” The woman who worked at the chapel approached us, smiling. “The current couple is just finishing up. Is your whole party here?”

I looked around and smiled as Rick rushed through the door.

“They are now,” I assured her. “Just let us know when we’re ready.”

The doors to the chapel opened, and I bit back at a laugh as Mark and his fiancée—well, apparently wife now—walked out into the lobby.

“Mr. Cassel!” Mark stopped short when he saw me.

“Mark,” I said, reaching out to shake his hand. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you, sir,” he answered, his tone thick with confusion. “Uh...this is my wife, Melanie. Mel, this is my boss, Mr. Cassel.” He turned his head and caught sight of Jameson. “Oh! And my other boss...Mr. Cassel.”

“Nice to meet you both,” Melanie said, smiling at everyone in my group. “Who’s getting married?”

“That would us,” I said, hugging Laura a little tighter.

“Congratulations, sir,” Mark told me.

“Thank you, Mark.” I nodded to them both.

Mark and Melanie waved to us as they left, and I finally broke down into laughter as soon as I thought they were out of earshot.

“What’s so funny?” Laura asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” I promised. “Let’s go get hitched.”

We all walked into the chapel, and without any direction needed, Jameson stood to my left and Willow took the maid of honor spot beside Laura. Rick made to sit in the front row, but I cleared my throat pointedly.

“Get up here,” I demanded.

“Sir, that’s not necessary,” he insisted. “Your brother is here.”

“And you’re like my favorite uncle,” I said firmly. “Get. Up. Here.”

His cheeks turned pink, and his eyes may have gotten a little watery, but he stepped forward and took his place next to Jameson. My brother reached out and wrapped an arm around Rick’s shoulder, squeezing lightly before we all turned to face the minister.

“Dearly beloved,” she began, smiling around at us. “We are gathered here today to join this couple in wedded matrimony. If anyone here has just cause that these two should not be married, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

“I object!” a strong male voice barked from the back of the room, making me jump. I turned to glare at the intruder but felt Laura stiffen, her lock on my hands growing painfully tight.

“Dad!” she gasped.

Oh, shit.

Eleven

Laura

“Sir, you have just cause?” the minister asked. Her hard tone told me this wasn’t her first rodeo when it came to last minute objections. The narrowed eyes that studied my dad, Luke and me told the same story. What I wanted to know was how my father had found us.

“She’s my daughter, and it seems I got here just in time. That damn inept detective should have done something,” he muttered. “I do not give my permission. She’s promised to someone else, not...not...not this whoever he is.”

Our celebrant raised an eyebrow then looked at me, her notebook hugged to her chest. “You’re over eighteen, if I’m not mistaken?”

“Almost twenty-three,” I replied with a nod then gasped as pain bit into my arm. Steely fingers bit into my bicep to yank me away from my fiancé.

“Luke!” I cried as I stumbled backward toward my father while he tugged me away.

I needn’t have worried. My husband-to-be was there in an instant, grasping my father’s wrist and forcing him to let go of me. Jameson moved beside him, the two

Cassel men forming a wall between me and my dad once Luke urged me behind him. Rick joined them. Willow rushed to my side and embraced me, pulling me a few feet farther away.

“You’re engaged to another man?” the minister asked.

“No! My father wants me to be but I’m not. I’ve never even met the man.”

“She’s promised!” he bellowed, glaring around the shoulders of the powerful men blocking him.

“I don’t believe I was talking to you,” the minister replied. “But since you’re feeling talkative—”

I almost snorted. I liked this woman. I’d rarely seen anyone female stand up to my dad.

“—did you have a valid reason to disrupt these nuptials?”

My father glared.

“Laura,” the minister asked. “Do you want to marry Luke?”

“Yes, more than anything.” Wasn’t that why we were here?

“Good. Luke? You want to marry Laura?”

“Yeah,” he laugh-scoffed. “I wanted to marry her months ago. And I’m sure as hell ready now.”

“Okay, good, then,” she said, scratching her pen across a paper in her notebook.

“Well, we’re done here then. Congrats, you’re man and wife. Make sure you pick up the certificate before you leave. Live long and prosper and all that.”

I stared at her, my mouth dropped open, while joy and relief filled me. The celebrant threw me a wink before refocusing over my shoulder. “Do we need to call security?”

“This is ridiculous! I will have your license,” my father bellowed at the minister.

She nodded. “Good luck with that. I’m just filling in for friends today. In real life, I’m a circuit court judge. Do you want to discuss how you were trying to force your daughter into a marriage without her consent?”

“This is none of your business! It’s a family matter!” he exclaimed.

Apparently deeming it safe, Luke broke away from the blockade and came over to pull me into his arms while Rick and Jameson closed ranks.

“Mrs. Cassel,” he said, cupping my face and peering down at me with pure, possessive love. I never wanted that look to change. A warm golden glow seemed to fill me while I returned the stare, filled with happiness.

“Mr. Cassel,” I whispered, ignoring the blustering a few feet away. Nothing mattered except Luke’s mouth coming down over mine, so firm yet tender. I groaned, leaning into him. With Luke, I knew everything in my life would be okay.

But I needed to face my father. Pulling back regretfully, I saw understanding on Luke’s face. His thumb brushed over my cheek. “I’m right here.”

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His hand grasped mine, and before I guessed what he was doing, he slipped my band onto my ring finger. I held out my palm, and he dropped his ring onto it. Once I had it on his hand, I moved to face my father, Luke at my side, giving me much-needed strength. This was the parent who'd been so harsh and borderline terrorizing my entire life. This was the parent who'd never cared about me until he'd deemed me useful.

"I'm married now," I told him. "But even so, I don't belong to anyone but myself."

Beside me, Luke growled, and I squeezed his hand, silently telling him I belonged to him, but that was different.

"I love Luke, and I'm going to spend the rest of my life with him. And I..." I took a deep breath, steeling myself for some of the hardest words I would ever say. "I...don't ever want to see you again."

"Laura!" my father gasped.

"No," I interrupted before he could argue. "I was never anything to you, not until you wanted something from me. I was the daughter who should have been a son. And because I'm not a boy, I was worthless to you. Luke loves me. Luke makes me feel important, not for anything except who I am. He listens to me and believes in me."

"I do," Luke breathed. "You're everything." His face turned granite as he glared at the man I was evicting from my life. "And I will do everything necessary to protect Laura. I know how precious she is. And you can bet, she will always be guarded. Don't ever think about trying anything." He glanced down at me and away from the

deflated man who clearly realized he'd lost this battle and was probably tallying in his head how much money he'd lost. I knew the arrangement wasn't about me, but about the cash.

"Are you ready to go celebrate?" Luke asked me, bringing my attention back to him.

"Yes."

"Cassel wedding party? Ready?" he asked the room.

"Let's go," Jameson replied. It didn't miss my attention that his eyes were pinned to Willow when he answered.

"I'll get the car," Rick said.

"How much was he—the guy you promised me to—going to pay you?" I asked my father, unable to help myself.

My father's scowl returned, his eyes narrowing. "It doesn't matter."

"It does to me. How much was I worth? What's the going dollar value for a daughter?"

"Two million," he muttered.

"I'll send you a check—"

"Luke, no!" I exclaimed, even as the face of the man who'd sired me brightened. He didn't deserve to be called my father. "You can't."

"And in return, you will never bother us, never come near Laura again—you or

anyone working for you,” Luke went on, ignoring my protest. “You’ll call off whatever detective you’ve had trailing her here in the city.”

“Done,” the other man replied. Turning on his heel, he left without so much as another glance at me. I tried to ignore the pain in my chest, the hurt at being so much...nothing to him.

Luke hugged me to him, somehow knowing what was going on inside me. “I can do it,” he said. “I’m a billionaire, remember? Two million to ensure you’re safe is like pennies to any other man. We won’t even miss it.”

“We?”

“Did you sign a prenup? I sure didn’t. What’s mine is yours, baby. But most importantly, you’re mine. All mine. Forever.”

I melted into him. “All I want from you is your love. And maybe babies, one of these days.”

He grinned. “I look forward to making as many as you want. And as for my love, you’ve owned that for months. You’re stuck with it.”

A few feet from us, Jameson made a gagging sound and Willow punched his arm.

“Shut up, dick,” she grumbled. “Your brother is exactly what women want. Sweet, romantic. He’s the kind of guy I’ll someday—”

She screeched as Jameson suddenly threw her over his shoulder and stormed from the chapel. I looked at Luke, wide-eyed.

“There’s long history there,” he told me. “I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow. Today is

about us.”

Going on tiptoes, I pulled his mouth down to mine. “Nope. Forever is about us. Let’s go, husband. I want to get started on that.”

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I laughed, giggling, as he threw me over his shoulder, too, and followed his brother's footsteps right into our bright future—of course, not forgetting our wedding certificate on the way out.

Epilogue

Luke

One year later...

"Nice of you to invite me this time," my mom said as she straightened my tie.

"Mom, you have to let go of that," I told her. "I've explained a hundred times why Laura and I got married the way we did."

"And where is your beautiful wife?" she asked, patting my cheek a little harder than necessary.

"She's puking her guts up in the bathroom again," I said.

"Poor thing. I was always so sick in my first trimester with you boys." Mom shook her head. "Should I go check on her?"

"Her mom is with her," I assured my own mother. "She'll be okay. I hate it, but she's getting used to vomiting for hours every day."

My poor wife had spent the last two weeks heaving. I'd been on the phone with her

doctor four times, convinced this wasn't normal, begging him to bring her in for another appointment. Finally, Laura and the doc had ganged up on me. He no longer took my calls, and she slapped my phone out of my hand every time she caught me on it.

"Is her father coming?" Mom asked tentatively.

"He'd better fucking not," I growled. Even now, when I thought of how close he'd come to taking her from me, I got agitated.

"Language," she admonished.

"Mom." My tone was a clear warning to drop it. "Look, if you ever tell my wife this, I will never speak to you again. But it cost me another million dollars to get him to let her mother come out here."

"I can't imagine the kind of life that woman has," Mom said, shaking her head sadly.

"Well, it won't be her life for much longer," I said, unable to hide my smirk. "Laura and I are going to convince her to stay here. I've already got the lawyers working up protection orders. We just need to get her mother to agree, and we'll be putting her up in her own apartment in our building."

"She may not be willing to do that," my mom said.

"Oh, she'll do it," Laura said sternly, walking into the room. "A million dollars? Really, Luke?"

"You heard me?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No, my mom told me," she said, rolling her eyes. "Did you think she wouldn't?"

“I don’t know,” I said. “Are you mad?”

“That you throw around money like confetti just to make me happy?” Laura shrugged. “I should be. But I’m so glad to have my mom here, I guess I can forgive you this time.”

“I’ll just go help her find our table,” my mom said, patting my wife on the shoulder before she left the room.

“I’m sorry,” I said, when Laura and I were alone. “I know I should have told you.”

“It’s fine. The fact you’d do anything for me means the world to me.” She ran a hand over her belly and smiled. “And now that I know our babies will have both of their grandmas here to love on them and spoil them rotten...well, how can I be angry at you for that?”

“Babies?” I stared at her. “Babies?”

“Oh, do you have the market cornered on secrets, Mr. Cassel?” She grinned. “The doctor appointment yesterday went really well. They did an ultrasound, and there are two little nuggets in here.”

“Oh my God, Laura!” I picked her up and swung her around.

“Don’t,” she groaned.

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“Sorry,” I said, belatedly remembering her morning sickness and setting her quickly on her feet. “Don’t barf on me again.”

“Can we just go get remarried now?” she asked, rolling her eyes at me. “I’m hungry, and I’m ready to get to the reception part.”

“I’m ready to get to the making babies part,” I teased, pulling her into my arms again and nuzzling her neck.

“We already did that,” she said with a laugh.

“Yeah, but we should keep practicing for next time.”

“Let’s go get hitched again,” she said, taking my hand pulling me toward the door. “Then we’ll talk.”

“Whatever you say, Mrs. Cassel.”

Epilogue Two

Laura

Five Years After That

Luke was wrong. A year after we’d gotten together, I still hadn’t grown used to him being a billionaire. Now, after being married to him for six years, I was getting more accustomed to the lifestyle, but when he did things like this...

For the five year anniversary of our second wedding, we were staying at my favorite castle in Germany. I'd mentioned how romantic the place was and poof! we were here for a week in the heart of the Rhine wine country.

"You're ridiculous," I said as we walked along the bank of the river, enjoying a day trip to one of the small German towns, a boggling mix of medieval village and modern cities. Some of the cobblestone and buildings were ancient, making me think of going to a ren faire, but then we'd turn the corner and there would be a McDonalds. Very weird. Surreal. But I loved every second.

"I told you I'd always give you whatever you want. You said you couldn't imagine anything more romantic than a knight bringing his princess to that castle. I'm your knight, as you've said so many times—your knight in Hugo Boss. And you know you're my queen. Plus it's a push gift."

"A push gift?" The youngest of our three kids had been born two years ago. The trio was at home now with my mom.

He pulled me into him there on the sidewalk, kissing me quickly. Together all this time and the affection and attraction hadn't waned in the least.

"You've been busy. I can't help it that you're one of the most sought after interior designers in the city."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "You could. But I'm a Cassel, so Cassel Construction keeps recommending me."

"You stand on your own merits," he grumbled. "You know it. Your awards prove it."

True. I had gotten my start because of my name and my family, but I'd earned my recognition.

We turned the corner and I saw the castle looming above us on the hill beyond the town. “It really is gorgeous.”

“You’re gorgeous. You were meant to be here.” His hand tightened around mine. “I have a surprise for you.”

“As long as it’s not a ring you immediately give away...”

He groaned. He would never live that down. But at least Mark and Melanie were incredibly happy. Luke had never confessed to them what he’d done, but at least, Mark had mysteriously won a cruise to take his new wife on. Apparently, that was a Cassel thing, since that was how my brother-in-law had gotten my best friend on their first cruise.

“No, not that,” Luke said. “This.”

He pulled me into a textiles shop filled with rich fabrics and tapestries that screamed old world luxury.

“Oh, my God...” I breathed, taking a step forward, my fingers already itching to touch the displays.

“Anything you desire,” my husband said. “Buy every damn thing if you want. You can thank me nicely later.”

I thought of the big canopy bed with the sturdy posts where he said he wanted to fuck me from behind while I held tight to one. What could I say? He had his fantasies and I had mine. But most importantly, we had each other, and neither of us was running away.