



# Rockstar Next Door Neighbor

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** The irresistible rockstar next door is making me weak.

Golden-haired, tattooed, and devastating behind a keyboard.

He's completely out of my league.

I don't mean to fall.

But one bite of my cooking, and Luke Sterling says he's in love.

And I feel it too.

Then I find out he's my neighbor.

Every beach-loving, tanned, chiseled inch of him.

Being a famous rockstar, he's totally off-limits.

Friend vibes only—that's the rule.

Keeping my distance should be easy.

Except he looks at me like he's craving more than just my food.

I pretend I don't feel the heat between us, the magnetic pull  
whenever he's near.

But then he kisses me.

And every rule, every line, every we're just friends goes up in flames.

Now, I'm in danger of getting burned.

Luke isn't mine—he's the last man I should want.

So why does every melody he plays sound like a love song meant for  
me?

**Total Pages (Source):** 108

# Page 1

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One

Lila

The engine groans slightly as I pull into the parking lot of Shot in the Dark, a quirky name for a pub. My older car is stuffed to the brim with everything I own. It looks hilariously out of place between two gleaming SUVs.

I switch off the ignition, and the car does its customary shudder. Leaning forward, I lovingly pat the dashboard. “Agatha, we made it! Thanks, old girl.”

Taking a deep breath, I pull down the visor mirror and finger-comb the loose blonde strands. Today marks the start of something new—something terrifying and exciting. Jacksonville is going to be my fresh start—no more small-town limitations. I can do this.

Before I lose my nerve, I grab my purse and step out into the warm Florida sun, spotting Emily Ryder almost instantly. She’s waiting near the entrance with a baby carrier that cradles Presley, her adorable infant with soft red fuzz and rosy cheeks. Emily spots me and waves enthusiastically, her smile bright and welcoming.

“Lila!” she calls, stepping forward. “You made it!”

“Emily!” I wave back, my nerves easing at the sight of her. She’s the kind of person whose energy fills a room—or, in this case, a parking lot. “And how’s baby Presley?” I coo, smiling at the baby.

Emily shakes her head ruefully. “She’s only six months old and already running my life.”

“She’s perfect,” I say, reaching out to gently touch the baby’s tiny hand. Presley grabs onto my finger with surprising strength, and we both laugh. “Looks like she has her mom’s grip on things.”

“Literally and figuratively,” Emily jokes, her blue eyes sparkling. “Come on, let’s get inside before Presley decides she’s hungry again.”

I follow Emily toward the entrance, my heart lifting a little with each step. It’s been months since I last saw her and her husband, Sam Ryder, at his father’s farm. They had brought the baby down to meet Clay. Yet, Emily feels like an old friend. She insisted I call her if I decided to move to Jacksonville, promising to show me around and help me settle in. True to her word, here we are.

Emily balances the carrier expertly as she opens the door, stepping inside and holding it for me. The pub looks amazing—with dozens of screens around the interior, each showing a different channel, but the sound is muted.

As I continue to glance around the friendly pub, the tension I’ve been carrying since I packed up my car begins to melt away. Emily nods toward a booth near the window, already smiling.

“Let’s grab that one. It’s easier to squeeze Presley’s carrier in.”

We weave through the tables and settle into the booth.

“I’m glad I’m finally here,” I say, placing my purse on the seat beside me. “It feels like a lifetime ago since we saw each other. So much has changed since then.”

Emily tilts her head, her blue eyes warm with curiosity. “Like deciding to move to Jacksonville? That’s huge! What made you finally take the plunge?”

I laugh softly, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “I just needed a change. Ocala’s great, but I felt stuck. I’ve always wanted to try my hand at being a private chef, and when you mentioned Jacksonville—it felt like the right place to start.”

“It’s the perfect place,” Emily agrees, nodding. “There’s such a demand for private chefs here. You’ll have clients lining up in no time.”

Her words are encouraging, but a small part of me still worries about the leap I’ve taken. “I hope you’re right. My car’s loaded with everything I own. If this doesn’t work out, I’ll be back home before I know it.”

Emily waves off my concern, her confidence infectious. “You’re going to crush it. I still dream about that cupcake you made at the barn dance. If that’s any indication, you’ll be booked solid in no time.”

I smile, feeling a bit more at ease. “Thanks, Emily. I needed to hear that.”

The server swings by, dropping off our menus and taking our drink orders—iced tea for both of us. We scan the selections, and by the time our food arrives, it’s like no time has passed since we last saw each other.

Emily is easy to talk to, and I find myself sharing my plans for the future: the kind of clients I hope to work for, the dishes I’ve been perfecting, and my dream of running a small business. She listens intently, asking questions and offering advice as we polish off our meals. If anyone can help me with my business, it’s Emily. She’s successfully managed the Wild Band for over a year.

“Presley is a perfect little angel,” I tell Emily, who gives me a proud smile.

“Thanks.” She rolls her eyes. “But she can be a terror when she wants to be.”

After lunch, Emily insists on following me to my car. She wants to see just how much I managed to cram into it. “This I have to see,” she says, laughing as she picks up the baby carrier.

We step into the afternoon sun, the heat wrapping around us. I lead her to the corner of the lot where my old car sits, with its faded paint and one hubcap missing.

“There she is,” I say, gesturing with a flourish. “Agatha. She doesn’t look like much, but she gets me where I need to go.”

## Page 2

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Emily lets out a low whistle, circling the car. “It’s a miracle you made it here. Are you sure it runs okay?”

“Better than you’d think,” I say, grinning as I pop the back trunk. Emily peers inside the trunk and then the dusty windows as she takes in the stacked boxes, bags of clothes, and a small collection of kitchen gadgets I couldn’t bear to leave behind.

“Wow,” she says, shaking her head. “You weren’t kidding when you said everything you own is in here. Where are you staying tonight?”

I hesitate. “I booked a hotel not far from here. Just for tonight.” Followed by a shrug. “I’ll figure out the rest as I go.”

Emily straightens up, crossing her arms with a determined look. “Absolutely not. You’re staying with us. We’ve got plenty of room, and you’ll save a little money while you get settled.”

“Oh, Emily, I couldn’t—“

“You can, and you will,” she says firmly, her tone leaving no room for argument. “I insist. Plus, it’ll give us more time to hang out. I’ll even help you find a place.”

Her offer warms me, and I find myself nodding before I’ve fully processed it. “Okay, but only if you’re sure. I don’t want to impose.”

“You’re not imposing,” she says, grinning. “And trust me, Sam will love having you around. He’s still raving about your baked goods.”

We laugh, and I can't help but feel a little lighter as I follow Emily out of the parking lot, ready to begin my new life.

When we pull up to a charming beach house directly on the ocean, my eyes widen.

I knew Sam and Emily were doing well—the Wild Band is one of the most successful rock bands in the country—but this place is something else. The house is a beautiful two-story with a wrap-around front porch overflowing with flowers in full bloom.

“Home sweet home,” Emily says as she exits her car. “Come on, I’ll show you around, and then we can start bringing in your things.”

I follow her inside, trying not to gawk at the gorgeous interior. The house is stylish but comfortable, with warm woods and cool blues that mirror the ocean outside. The living area has large windows that offer amazing views of the Atlantic. One wall is filled with family photos—Emily and Sam, pictures with the band, and countless shots of baby Presley. And everywhere you look, you see plants in pots or hanging from the ceiling.

“This is incredible,” I breathe, following Emily through the open-concept first floor.

“Thanks,” she says, settling Presley’s carrier on the kitchen island. “But wait until you see where you’ll be staying. The guest room has one of the best views in the house.”

Before we can head upstairs, the front door opens, and Sam walks in. He’s exactly as I remember him—tall, broad-shouldered, with that easy smile that made him the heartthrob of our high school.

“Lila!” he exclaims, giving me a friendly hug. “Emily said you were coming, but I didn’t know it was today. Welcome to Jacksonville!”

“Thanks, Sam. Your wife just rescued me from a sketchy hotel stay.”

He laughs, moving to kiss Emily and scoop up Presley. “That sounds like her, always ready with a plan and a helping hand (or two!).”

Emily swats his arm playfully. “Speaking of which, I have an idea about where Lila could live permanently.”

Sam raises an eyebrow. “Let me guess—the duplex?”

“The duplex,” Emily confirms, turning to me with excitement. “The band owns this amazing property right on the beach. It’s split into two units, and the one on the left just opened up. It would be perfect for you!”

My heart skips a beat. “On the beach? Emily, I can’t afford—“

“Don’t even finish that sentence,” she interrupts. “The rent would be reasonable, and you’d have your own private entrance. Plus...” She exchanges a knowing look with Sam. “We already have another tenant living in the other half.”

“Who?” I ask, vaguely suspicious of the look they’re exchanging. This feels like a setup.

“Someone connected with the band,” Sam explains, bouncing Presley on his hip. “He’s a great guy. Quiet neighbor. Terrible cook.”

Emily’s eyes sparkle mischievously. “Which means he could probably use a private chef.”

I feel my cheeks warm. “Are you trying to set me up with a client or a date?”



“Can’t it be both?” Emily winks, making Sam chuckle.

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“Don’t let her matchmaking scare you off,” he says. “The duplex really would be perfect for you. It’s safe, private, and close to everything, and you’d have us nearby if you need anything.”

I bite my lip, considering. A place on the beach has always been a dream of mine, but it seemed impossible on a starting chef’s budget. “Can I at least see it first?”

“Of course!” Emily claps her hands together. “We can go right now. Sam, you okay with Presley?”

He waves us off. “Go. We’ll have some daddy-daughter time.”

Twenty minutes later, we’re standing in front of a charming yellow duplex with white trim. The sound of waves crashes nearby, and I can smell the salt in the air. The left unit’s small front porch has a swing, and tropical plants frame the entrance.

“This would be yours,” Emily says, unlocking the door and punching in a security code. “The one on the left.”

I step inside and immediately fall in love. The space is open and bright, with hardwood floors and large windows that let in natural light. It’s already furnished with sturdy, comfortable furniture. The kitchen, though small, is updated with stainless steel appliances and plenty of counter space. A sliding glass door in the living room leads to a deck with an unobstructed view of the ocean.

“Emily,” I whisper, “this is lovely.”

She beams. “I knew you’d love it. There’s also a bedroom and office upstairs, plus a half bath down here and full bath up there.”

I run my hand along the kitchen counter, already imagining the meals I could create here. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch. Just be a good tenant.” She pauses, then adds more seriously, “The band purchased this place thinking the band or crew could stay here when not on tour. Nate lived here for a while but found something he liked better, and Vince—well, Vince is a playboy, so this was a bit too laid back for him.”

I turn to face her, overwhelmed by everything—the move, the apartment, the possibility of living this close to the ocean. “You really think this could work?”

Emily pulls me into a hug. “I know it will. Welcome to your new home, Lila.”

Standing in this beautiful space, with the ocean breeze drifting through the windows and new possibilities hanging in the air, I finally feel like I’ve made the right choice. Jacksonville isn’t just a fresh start—it’s exactly where I’m meant to be.

Two

Luke

I’m running late to Sam and Emily’s, as usual. The sun’s setting over Jacksonville Beach as I pull into their gravel drive, casting everything in that golden Florida light. The house smells amazing before I even get through the door—something savory and rich that makes my stomach growl.

“Look who finally showed up,” Vince calls out from his spot on the couch, barely glancing up from his phone. Typical Vince, who is probably griping again about

some social media drama.

“Traffic,” I lie, grinning as I make my way to the kitchen where everyone’s gathered. The truth is I lost track of time working on a new arrangement, but they’re used to that by now.

Emily’s at the island, organizing what looks like a spread fit for royalty. “Luke! Perfect timing—everything’s ready.”

Cass and Kendrick are there with their daughter Cassidy, who’s grown a few inches since I last saw her. Sam’s manning the grill outside through the sliding glass doors, and Nate’s helping him, both of them laughing about something.

But what catches my attention are the appetizers laid out on the counter. “Holy shit, Emily. Did you take a cooking class or something?”

She laughs. “Not me. Just wait until you try them.”

I don’t need to be told twice. I snag what looks like a stuffed mushroom and pop it in my mouth. The flavor hits me like a chord progression—layers of herbs, cheese, and something else I can’t quite place but tastes amazing.

“Damn! Who made these? I think I’m in love,” I declare, reaching for another one.

I hear a soft laugh. “I’m glad you like them.”

The voice comes from behind me, soft and pleased, with just a hint of a Southern drawl. I turn around, and suddenly I’m not thinking about food anymore.

She’s tiny, probably a foot shorter than me, but curves for days in a sundress that hugs everything just right. Blonde hair falls in waves past her shoulders, and her

brown hazel eyes meet mine briefly before dropping away, a pretty blush spreading across her cheeks. She's holding a tray of something that smells incredible, but I can't take my eyes off her face.

"I, uh..." Smooth, Luke. Real smooth. I clear my throat and try again. "Did you make these?"

"I did," she says softly, setting down her tray and tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm Lila."

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“Luke,” I manage, watching as she moves around the kitchen with the confidence of someone who knows their way around, even though she seems nervous about meeting my eyes directly. “These are delicious.”

“Thanks.” She sneaks another glance at me, her blush deepening before she busies herself with arranging things on the counter. “Though usually, the guy wants to get to know me before he declares his love.”

Despite her shy demeanor, there’s a hint of playfulness in her voice that makes me want to hear more.

“Fair enough,” I say, finding my footing. “How about I start by trying everything else you made? You know, for research purposes.”

She laughs softly, ducking her head in a way that’s absolutely adorable. “Research purposes?”

“Absolutely. Very serious business.” I grab another appetizer, trying to catch her eye. When I do, she holds my gaze for just a second before looking away, but that brief moment of connection sends a sizzle of attraction coursing through me.

“So, you’re the Wild Band’s keyboard player?” she asks, pulling out more food from the oven. Her voice wavers slightly, like she’s trying to sound casual but isn’t quite managing it.

“Guilty as charged. You a fan of the band?”

She straightens up, rearranging a few of the appetizers. “I know most of your music. Sam was actually in my high school class back in Ocala.”

I notice how she keeps sneaking quick glances when she thinks I’m not looking, each one accompanied by that becoming blush. It’s endearing as hell and completely different from the usual confident women who approach me at shows and the kind of company I’ve been keeping lately.

“Small world,” I say, leaning against the counter. “And now you’re here making the best food I’ve ever tasted. How’d that happen?”

“Long story,” she says, but before she can continue, Emily calls her over to help with something. She seems almost relieved for the excuse to step away, though I don’t miss the way she glances back at me over her shoulder as she goes.

I watch her work, fascinated by the contrast between her shy demeanor around me and her absolute confidence in the kitchen. When she’s focused on cooking or plating, all that nervousness disappears, replaced by sure movements and careful attention to detail.

Reluctantly turning away, I step out onto the deck, where the salty breeze carries the mouthwatering scent of whatever Sam’s grilling. Nate’s lounging in one of the Adirondack chairs while Sam flips burgers with the expertise of someone who’s hosted too many band cookouts to count.

“Those mushroom things,” I say, accepting a beer from Nate. “Best thing I’ve ever tasted.”

Sam grins knowingly. “Just wait till you try Lila’s other stuff. The girl’s got talent.”

The sliding glass door opens behind us, and Lila steps out carrying a platter. “Emily

wanted me to bring out the vegetables,” she says softly, not quite meeting my eyes as she hands it to Sam. The setting sun catches her hair, turning it to burnished gold, and when she passes by me, I catch the faintest hint of citrus and something floral. Then she’s gone, disappearing back inside, the door clicking shut behind her.

I watch her walk away, unable to help myself. There’s something about her—beyond the obvious attraction—that pulls at me. Maybe it’s the way she moves with such purpose, or how her eyes crinkle when she smiles, or...

“Dude, you’re staring,” Nate says, appearing beside me with a knowing smirk.

“Am not.” But I am, and we both know it.

“She’s cute,” he observes, grabbing a beer from the cooler.

“She’s gorgeous,” I correct without thinking, then catch his amused expression. “Shutup.”

“Didn’t say anything.” He takes a sip of his beer, still smirking. “But you might want to close your mouth before you catch flies.”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t help tracking Lila’s movements as she helps Emily set up the rest of the food. She’s talking with Cassidy now, laughing at something the young girl said, and the sound carries across the space.

When she catches me watching her this time through the glass, her cheeks flush pink again. But there’s a small smile playing on her lips before she quickly looks away. She might be shy, but that smile tells me she’s not entirely unaffected by whatever this is between us.

Yeah, I’m definitely in trouble.



I'm still thinking about her the next morning as I pour myself a bowl of Frosted Flakes. Lila. Even her name is stuck in my head like a melody I can't shake. After she'd brought out those vegetables in a marinade, she'd spent the rest of the night in the kitchen or surrounded by the others. I hadn't managed to get more than a few glances at that shy smile that haunted my dreams.

I should've found out more about her. Should've at least tried to talk to her more, even knowing that I shouldn't...

The sound of a car door slamming next door pulls me from my thoughts. Great. Moving day. I take my cereal to the kitchen window, curious about who Emily found to rent the other half of the duplex this time. The last tenant was some wannabe musician crew member who would play loud music every minute and tried to get me to collaborate with him on his music.

An old car that's seen better days is parked in the driveway, stuffed to the brim with boxes and what looks like kitchen equipment. Emily's there, directing, as usual, someone I can't quite see. Sam's carrying boxes inside, and—is that Vince helping? Since when does Vince help anyone move?

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I spoon another mouthful of increasingly soggy cereal into my mouth, watching the scene unfold. Whoever this new neighbor is, Boss Lady's got the whole band involved. Even Nate's there, carefully handling what appears to be a box marked 'FRAGILE' in bold letters.

A familiar laugh drifts through my window, and I freeze, milk dripping from my spoon back into the bowl. No way. It couldn't be...

But then she steps into view, and my heart does this weird stuttering thing in my chest. Lila. She's wearing cutoffshorts and a loose t-shirt, her blonde hair pulled up in a messy bun, and somehow, she looks even better than she did last night.

She's my new next door neighbor.

The realization hits me like a train. Those sneaky bastards—no wonder Emily and Sam were exchanging looks all night. No wonder they kept interrupting whenever I tried to get Lila alone. I thought it was because...

I set my bowl down, suddenly very aware that I'm standing in my kitchen in nothing but sweatpants, watching through the window like some creep. I should go out there. Help them move. But first, I need to put on a shirt. And maybe brush my teeth. And—

A knock at my door makes me jump. "Luke?" Emily's voice calls out. "I know you're in there. I see your jeep."

Shit. I grab a t-shirt from the clean laundry I haven't put away yet and pull it on as I

head for the door. When I open it, Emily's standing there with that cat-that-ate-the-canary grin I know too well.

"Come say good morning to your new neighbor," she says sweetly.

"You could have mentioned this last night, Boss Lady," I tell her, trying to sound annoyed but probably failing miserably.

"And miss the look on your face right now? Never." She pats my chest. "Now, come help us move your future girlfriend in."

"Emily—you know I—"

"I saw how you were looking at her last night. And how she was looking at you when she thought no one would notice." She raises an eyebrow. "Consider this my gift to you both. Now get your ass out here and carry some boxes."

I follow her outside, where Lila's trying to wrestle a box from her car's backseat. When she sees me, she freezes, that pretty blush I remember from last night spreading across her cheeks.

"You live here?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

I nod, moving to help her with the box. "Looks like we're neighbors."

Our fingers brush as I take the box from her, and I swear I feel it all the way down to my toes. She quickly pulls her hand back, wiping a loose strand of hair off her face and tucking it behind her ear.

"Emily didn't mention that," she says, shooting a look at our mutual friend, who's suddenly very interested in something on her phone.

“Yeah, funny how she left that part out.” I adjust my grip on the box, which is heavier than it looks. “Kitchen stuff?”

She nods. “My knives and spices. They’re important to me. My tools of the trade.”

“The tools that created those mushrooms last night? These deserve VIP treatment.” I carefully carry the box toward her door, very aware of her following behind me. “I’ll guard them with my life.”

Her soft laugh makes me smile. “They’re just regular chef knives.”

“Nothing regular about what you do with them.” I set the box down where she directs me, in her kitchen, which mirrors mine but somehow already looks warmer and more inviting.

“I could, um...” She hesitates, that blush deepening. “I could cook for you sometime. To thank you for helping with the move.”

Is she flirting with me? No, probably just being polite. But still...

“Only if you let me help,” I say. “Seems only fair.”

She looks up at me through those lashes, and for a moment, I forget how to breathe. “Deal.”

Someone clears their throat from the doorway—Vince, holding another box. “If you two are done chit-chatting, there’s still half a car to unload.”

Lila’s blush reaches nuclear levels as she hurries past me to grab another box. I watch her go, already knowing my life just got a lot more interesting.

And a lot more complicated.

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Because my new neighbor isn't just any chef; she's the shy, beautiful woman I haven't been able to stop thinking about since last night. The one who blushes every time I look at her but still manages to make my heart race with just a glance.

Emily's right about one thing—I'm in trouble. But as I watch Lila direct traffic in her new kitchen, sneaking glances at me when she thinks I'm not looking, I realize I don't mind at all.

Three

Lila

"Thank you all so much," I say, surveying my new living room, now filled with boxes. "I couldn't have done this without you."

"That's what friends are for," Emily responds, lifting Presley onto her hip. The baby gurgles happily, reaching for her hair.

Sam wraps an arm around his wife. "Plus, we got to enjoy watching Vince break a sweat."

"Shut up," Vince grumbles, but there's no heat in it. For someone Emily described as perpetually grouchy, he'd been surprisingly helpful all morning.

I'm comfortable with all of them now—even Nate, who's quiet but kind, and Cass and Kendrick, who showed up halfway through with cold drinks for everyone. It's strange how quickly they've accepted me into their circle, these famous musicians

who could probably have anyone they want as friends.

Well, I'm comfortable with almost everyone.

Luke emerges from the kitchen, where he's been organizing my boxes of cooking equipment. His t-shirt clings to his broad shoulders, and a lock of blonde hair falls across his forehead in a way that looks like he belongs on a magazine cover. My heart does a little flip when his light blue eyes meet mine, and I quickly look away.

"Your kitchen's all set," he says, his voice doing that warm, rumby thing that makes my stomach flutter. "Though I'm pretty sure you have more cooking gadgets than anyone I've ever met."

"A chef is only as good as their tools," I manage to say, proud that my voice comes out steady despite the blush I can feel creeping up my neck.

Why does he affect me like this? I'm fine around the others—even Cass, who's arguably the most famous of them all. But one look from Luke and I turn into a stutteringmess.

Maybe it's because he's just so good-looking and sexy, tall and fit, with those intense, light-colored eyes and a smile that probably makes women weak in the knees across the country. Meanwhile, I'm built like a 1950s pin-up girl—generous curves from sampling my own cooking too much.

"We should probably head out," Emily says, giving me a smile. "Let you get settled in."

Everyone starts gathering their things, and I busy myself by hugging them goodbye and thanking them again. Luke is one of the last to leave. When he steps forward, I tense slightly, but he just smiles.

“Welcome to the neighborhood,” he says softly. “If you need anything, I’m right next door.”

“Thanks,” I squeak out, very aware of how close he’s standing. He smells amazing, slightly musky, and something uniquely him. Clearing my throat, I ask quickly, “When did you want to come over for your thank you dinner?”

He gives me a lopsided grin. “How about tomorrow, or is that too soon?”

“No, that works. I planned to go grocery shopping in the morning anyway. So, I’ll see you here at six?”

Luke nods with a smile and a wave and walks out the door.

When I turn around, Emily arches a brow. “Already making dinner plans, I see.”

“It’s just a thank-you dinner,” I protest, but Emily just rolls her eyes. Sam takes Presley out to the car as I thank Emily again and give her a final hug.

After they’ve all left, I sink onto the couch, letting out a long breath. Through the wall, I can hear muffled movement from Luke’s side of the duplex. He’s my neighbor. The gorgeous, talented keyboard player rockstar is my next-door neighbor.

The same keyboard player who kept watching me all morning with those intense eyes. But that’s just because of my cooking, right? The way to a man’s heart and all that. He’d made it clear last night how much he loved the appetizers I’d made.

That must be it. He’s probably just hoping I’ll cook for him again, which is fine. Great, even. Cooking is what I’m good at, what I’m confident at. If Luke wants to flirt a little to get some home-cooked meals, I can handle that. It’s certainly better than thinking he might actually be interested in me.



Because guys who look like Luke don't go for girls who look like me. They date slim supermodels and actresses, not small-town chefs with flour-covered aprons and too-generous curves.

I stand up, determined to start unpacking and stop thinking about my ridiculously attractive tattooed neighbor. But as I pass the window, I catch a glimpse of him on our shared back deck, drinking water after all the moving. His head tilts back, exposing the strong, tanned line of his throat, and I nearly trip over a box.

"Get it together, Lila," I mutter to myself, forcing my eyes away. "He just wants your cooking."

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But even as I think it, I remember the way his fingers brushed mine when he helped with the boxes, how his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled, and how he seemed to find reasons to be wherever I was all morning...

No. No, no. I can't go down that road. Luke's my neighbor now, and if I'm going to survive living next door to him, I need to keep things strictly friendly. Professional, even. I can cook for him sometimes, chat about the weather, and be a normal neighbor—not some star-struck groupie.

Yeah, I can totally do this.

Then I hear him start playing his keyboard through the wall, a melody so beautiful it makes my heart flutter, and I realize I'm in way over my head.

I'm stirring the French coq au vin when I hear Luke's keyboard go quiet next door. The recipe is one of my favorites: chicken braised in wine with mushrooms and pearl onions, served over creamy mashed potatoes. It's simple but elegant—not that I'm trying to impress him or anything.

The knock at my door makes my heart jump, even though I'm expecting it. When I open it, Luke is standing there in dark jeans and a snug black t-shirt that should be illegal, as it shows off his chiseled chest and biceps.

"Something smells amazing," he says, stepping inside.

"Just a simple French dish," I explain, trying to sound casual as I lead him to the dining area, where the table is already set for two. I'm glad I didn't go overboard and

light candles. “I hope you like chicken.”

“I like anything that smells this good.” He leans against the counter, watching me plate the food. “Can I help?”

“Almost done,” I say, trying to ignore how domestic this feels. “There’s wine if you want some.”

I pour him a glass of wine, and as I hand it to him, I state, “Why don’t you have a seat on the couch? Dinner should be ready in a few minutes.”

As I turn back to the stove, I have to sternly remind myself that cooking is my way of communicating—a way of creating comfort and connection. But tonight, it feels different. Tonight, Luke is sitting in my living room, waiting for dinner.

I still can’t quite believe it. Luke Sterling, keyboard player for the Wild Band, is in my home. His presence is impossible to ignore, even from the kitchen. Every movement I make feels amplified, and I’m hyperaware of how I look and sound.

“Need any help in there?” Luke’s deep voice calls out, cutting through the quiet.

“I’ve got it!” I reply, hoping my voice doesn’t betray how much his offer makes my heart flutter. “Just a few more minutes.”

He steps into the doorway anyway, leaning against the frame with a casual ease that makes my pulse quicken. “Smells amazing. Are you sure I can’t do something? Stir a pot or chop a carrot?”

I laugh, shaking my head as I brush my hair away from my face. “Trust me, you’d be bored. The hard part’s done.”

His grin is slow and disarming. “You’d be surprised. I can be useful.”

Turning, I hold up the finished platter. “Dinner’s ready.”

We settle around the table, and I give each of us a serving. Making sure Luke’s portion is generous.

He takes a deep, appreciative breath. I watch as he takes his first bite. “This tastes amazing. What did you call it again?”

“Coq au vin,” I say with a smile.

“Fancy.”

“It only sounds fancy,” I admit with a grimace. “It means rooster in wine.” Then I laugh at his expression.

Luke continues to compliment the food, trying to put me at ease. It’s working as I feel some of the tension leave my shoulders.

We’re almost finished eating when I finally get brave enough to ask him a personal question. “So, how do you like performing in the Wild Band?”

Before he can respond, we hear the distinctive purr of a high-performance engine pulling into the driveway. Luke’s expression changes slightly—something flickers across his face too quickly for me to read.

The sound of heels clicking on the wooden porch precedes a sharp knock on Luke’s front door. Through the main window, I catch sight of her—tall and willowy. Her dark hair is sleek and straight, framing sharp cheekbones that make her look like she’s just stepped off a Milan runway. Even from here, I can tell her makeup is

flawless.

“That’s Crystal,” Luke says, setting down his wine glass. His voice is carefully neutral. “I should probably...”

“Of course,” I say quickly, even as my stomach sinks. “Go ahead.”

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He hesitates. “Why don’t you come with me? I should introduce you since we’re next-door neighbors.”

Before I can protest, he’s leading me outside. Crystal turns when she hears us, and up close, she’s even more stunning—but there’s something sharp in her perfect features, like cut glass.

Crystal. The name fits her perfectly, all hard edges and delicate sharpness. My stomach churns as she gives Luke a possessive smile.

“Surprise, Luke,” she practically purrs, then stops short when she sees me. Her eyes scan me from head to toe, taking in my casual dress and the apron I forgot I was wearing. “Who’s this?”

“Crystal, this is Lila, my new neighbor. She’s an amazing chef.” Luke’s hand brushes the small of my back as he makes the introduction, and I try not to read anything into it. “Lila, this is Crystal. We’ve uh... been seeing each other.”

The words are like a slap, jolting me back to reality, but I force a smile. “Nice to meet you.”

Crystal’s red lips curve into what might be a smile, studying me like she’s trying to figure out where I fit in Luke’s world. “A chef? How quaint. We should hire you for our next private dinner party. The last caterer was such a disappointment.”

“Oh, I—“ I start, but she’s already pulling out her phone.

“I’m sure Lila’s not set up yet,” Luke says. Is it my imagination, or does he sound uncomfortable?

“Actually,” I hear myself say, “I’d be happy to discuss it. Here’s my card.” I always keep a few in my apron pocket, and I hand one to Crystal, proud that my hand doesn’t shake.

“Perfect!” She slips it into her designer purse. “Now, Luke, we’re already late. I know I should have warned you, but it was so last minute. Daddy is having a few people over for dinner, and there’s someone he wants you to meet—” She suddenly frowns. “You should change—that t-shirt is too casual.”

Luke glances down at his shirt with a frown, then gives a casual shrug.

“Come on, Luke. Daddy hates it when we’re late.” Crystal then calls over her shoulder, “I’ll text you later about the party.”

I nod stiffly, unsure how else to respond. The whole exchange feels surreal as if I’m in a movie scene where I don’t belong.

“Thanks for keeping Luke company for me. I’m sure he’s been a perfect gentleman.”

I bite back the urge to snap at her, forcing myself to nod instead. “It was no trouble.”

Luke shakes his head and looks like he wants to say something else, but Crystal’s already steering him toward her car—a sleek red convertible that probably costs more than I’ll make in five years.

“Wait,” he says, glancing back at my door. “I should help Lila clean up...”

“Oh, I’m sure she doesn’t mind.” Crystal’s hand slides possessively around his arm.

“Do you, Lila?”

“No. Not at all,” I manage. “You go ahead.”

I watch helplessly as Luke allows himself to be led to her car. He pauses just before climbing into the passenger seat, looking back at me with an expression I can’t quite read.

“Thanks for dinner,” he says, his voice soft. “It was delicious.”

“Anytime,” I manage to say, my throat tight.

Crystal doesn’t give me a second glance as she slides into the driver’s seat, her polished nails gripping the wheel. The engine roars to life, and within seconds, they’re gone, leaving nothing but a faint trail of exhaust and a sinking feeling in my chest.

I close the door and lean against it, letting out a shaky breath. The house feels emptier than it did before he arrived, and the pride I felt from the meal I cooked so eagerly fades fast.

For a moment, I let myself imagine what it would be like if things were different—if Luke wasn’t part of such a glamorous world of fast cars and women like Crystal. But that’s the thing about imagining: it only gets you so far.

With a sigh, I push off the door and head to the kitchen, determined to distract myself with the dishes. It’s better than thinking about how out of my league Luke Sterling is.

Four

Luke



The evening air is heavy with salt and humidity as I settle into one of the Adirondack chairs on my back deck. The sun setting over the Atlantic paints everything in shades of pink and gold. Right on cue, I hear Lila's screen door slide open.

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“Long day?” I ask as she emerges with two glasses of iced tea. This has become our routine over the past couple of weeks—watching the sunset together, talking about everything and nothing.

The back deck is quickly becoming my favorite place to end the day, and I’m starting to think it has less to do with the view and more to do with the company.

Lila settles into the chair next to mine, resting her bare feet on the railing and sipping her iced tea from a mason jar. She’s a bundle of contradictions—soft-spoken but sharp-witted, laid-back but with a fire in her that I can’t quite figure out. She’s been sending out nothing but friendly vibes ever since Crystal showed up unannounced that first night, but that doesn’t make her any less captivating.

I remind myself to keep things in check, to honor the boundaries she’s set. I get it—she’s new to town and focused on getting her business off the ground. And after meeting Crystal, she’s probably guessed that I’m tangled up in something I’m not ready to explain. I should be grateful she’s keeping her distance. It makes my life less complicated.

But damn, it’s not easy.

Especially when she looks like she does now—all soft curves and barefoot in cutoff shorts and an oversized t-shirt, her hair piled messily on top of her head. Yep, it’s damn hard.

“The morning rush at Beach Bites was crazy,” she confides, “But I sold out of my lemon scones by ten.”

I take a sip, wondering how she manages to make even basic iced tea taste better than anyone else's. "Sounds like Jacksonville is starting to discover your talents."

She shrugs, but I catch the pleased smile she tries to hide. "It's not much different from the bakery back home. Though the customers here are a bit more... particular."

"Particular?"

"Today someone ordered a gluten-free, sugar-free, dairy-free birthday cake that still had to taste 'indulgent.'" She uses air quotes, making me laugh. "I'm still trying to figure that one out."

"You will," I say, completely confident in her abilities. "I've never met anyone who understands food like you do."

A light blush colors her cheeks, and she quickly changes the subject. "How was your day? I heard you working on something new this morning."

"Just playing around with some chord progressions." I stretch my legs out, deliberately keeping my tone casual and strictly friendly.

"It sounded beautiful," she says softly. "I love hearing you play while I'm cooking. It's like having my own personal soundtrack."

The thought of my music being part of her daily routine does something to my chest that I try to ignore. "Speaking of soundtracks, that death rattle your car made this morning when you left for work? Not normal."

She rolls her eyes. "Agatha's fine. She's just quite particular."

"Particular seems to be the word of the day." I take another sip of tea. "But seriously,

let me take a look at her. I'm pretty good with engines."

"You work on cars?" She looks genuinely surprised.

"When I'm not making music or eating your leftovers? Yeah. It relaxes me." I grin at her. "I work on my jeep all the time."

She laughs at that, a real, full-bodied laugh that makes my grin widen just hearing it.

"What's so funny?" I ask, leaning back in my chair, one foot resting on the deck rail.

"You mean the one without doors?" She laughs. "At least mine has all its parts."

"We live on the beach! Doors are optional." I gesture to the ocean view. "Besides, your car shakes like it's about to transform into a robot."

Lila waves a hand, still laughing. "Just thinking about how you're worried about my car when you drive around in that new-fangled contraption. You've got some nerve, Sterling."

"Hey, leave the Jeep out of this," I say, pointing at her with mock seriousness. "She's a fine-tuned machine."

Lila gives me a thoughtful glance. "I'm surprised you don't drive something sleeker like a Mercedes or Ferarri. Something more in tune with your rockstar image."

"Nope. Not for me. I like driving my Jeep—she's perfect."

"She's a show-off," Lila shoots back, smirking.

I laugh, shaking my head. "I keep the jeep in top running form. You should try it with

Agatha.”

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She groans, but there's a smile tugging at her lips. "I should've never told you her name."

"Oh no, I love it," I say, grinning. "Agatha. Sounds like the name of someone who drinks hot tea and tells kids to get off her lawn."

"She's reliable," Lila says, sitting up straighter, mock-defensive. "Maybe a little cranky, but she gets me where I need to go."

"Does she, though?" I ask with a grimace. "Because I'm pretty sure she was begging for mercy the last time you turned her off."

Lila tosses a crumpled napkin at me, and I catch it midair, laughing. "I'm serious," I say, leaning forward. "You should let me take a look at her. I know my way around an engine."

"Really?" she says, raising an eyebrow. "You're a musician and a mechanic? Is there anything you can't do?"

"Cook," I say, deadpan. "Which is why I'm glad I know a talented chef."

She laughs again, shaking her head. "I'll take it under consideration."

"Fair enough." I watch as she tucks her legs under her, getting comfortable in her chair. She's so different from the shy girl who could barely meet my eyes when we first met. Now, she's relaxed and confident—at least when she's not overthinking things.

“My dad taught me about cars,” I tell her, not sure why I’m sharing this, but I want to keep the conversation going. “He said if I was going to tour with the band, I needed to know how to fix things myself.”

“Smart man.” She takes another sip of her tea. “My grandma taught me to cook. She said every farmer should know how to feed themselves.”

“Is that why you became a chef?”

She nods her head, smiling. “Yes. My grandmother could make anything taste amazing, even with the simplest ingredients. I used to spend hours beside her in the kitchen, learning all her secrets.”

The way her face lights up when she talks about cooking reminds me of how I feel about music. It’s not just what we do—it’s part of who we are.

“And now you’re here, making Jacksonville a more delicious place one scone at a time.”

“Stop,” she laughs, but I can tell she’s pleased. “What about you? Have you always wanted to be a rockstar?”

“Honestly? I just wanted to play music. The rockstar part kind of happened by accident.” I lean back in my chair. “Sometimes I still can’t believe this is my life.”

She nods, understanding. “That’s how I feel every morning when I wake up and realize I’m actually doing what I love for a living. Even if right now it’s just at a bakery.”

“Hey, everyone starts somewhere. One of the band’s first gigs was at a bowling alley.”

“No way!”

“It’s the truth. There was a mix-up, and we couldn’t back out. Cass knocked over three pins during our final song. It was very rock and roll.”

Her laughter carries across the deck, and I find myself watching how her whole face lights up, how her curves shake slightly with each giggle. When she catches me looking, I quickly glance away.

After her laughter, we fall into a comfortable silence that doesn’t need to be filled. That’s one of the things I like about Lila—she’s easy to be around. No pretenses, no trying too hard. Just herself.

After a while, I ask, “So, do you like working at the bakery despite the particular customers?”

“Yes,” she says, her voice softening. “Not what I want to be doing long-term, but it’s a start. Plus, it’s been great for meeting people. I’ve had a few inquiries about private chef stuff already.”

“That’s good,” I say, meaning it. “You’ve got the talent, Lila. People are going to figure that out fast.”

Her cheeks flush a little, and she looks down at her drink, swirling the ice. “Thanks,” she murmurs. “That means a lot.”

“It’s just the truth,” I say, shrugging. “I’ve had your cooking, remember?”

That earns me another smile, and I tuck the moment away, glad I could bring it out of her.



She tilts her head, looking at me. “What about you? When you’re not playing rockstar, what do you do?”

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I grin. “What, the Jeep isn’t enough of a hobby?”

She rolls her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“I tinker,” I say, shrugging. “Guitars, cars, whatever’s lying around. Keeps me busy when I’m not on the road.”

“Tinkering,” she repeats with a grin. “That’s very... rustic of you.”

“You say rustic, I say practical,” I counter. “What about you? What do you do when you’re not baking or defending Agatha’s honor?”

“Lately? Notmuch,” she says, her smile fading a little. “Getting my business off the ground has taken over my life. But I like to read when I get the chance. Or watch a cheesy rom-com. The cheesier, the better.”

“Rom-coms?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. “Like what?”

“All of them,” she says, her grin returning. “Bonus points if it’s a Hallmark Holiday movie.”

“Holiday movies in April?” I tease, shaking my head.

“Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it,” she says, pointing her glass at me. “Sometimes you need a little Christmas in July—or April.”

I chuckle, leaning back in my chair. “You’re something else, Country.”

She looks at me for a moment, her expression unreadable. “You’re not so bad yourself, Sterling.”

The words are casual, but they land heavier than I expected. The air between us shifts for a second, and I feel the pull I’ve been trying to ignore since the night we met. But just as quickly as it happens, it’s gone, and she’s looking out at the ocean, the breeze catching a loose strand of her hair.

I take a long sip of my iced tea, trying to remind myself why keeping things friendly is the right call. Lila’s got enough on her plate without me adding to it. And besides, she’s been clear about where we stand for now.

Even so, it’s hard to ignore the way she fits so easily into my life, the way her laughter feels like a song I want to keep playing on repeat. I remind myself: just friends.

But damn, if being just friends with Lila isn’t becoming one of the hardest things I’ve done.

I shift in my chair, trying to focus on the sunset instead of how the fading light makes her skin glow.

“Oh!” She suddenly sits up straighter. “I almost forgot to tell you—Emily thinks she may have got me my first real private chef booking. Possibly a small corporate dinner next week.”

“That’s great!” I say, genuinely excited for her. “How many people?”

“Nine. It’s not huge, but it’s a start.” She bites her lip, and I can see a mix of excitement and nervousness in her expression. “I’m thinking of doing a Mediterranean theme. Maybe start with some mezze platters, then move to—“

She stops abruptly, blushing. “Sorry, I’m rambling.”

“Don’t apologize. I like hearing you talk about food.” And I do. The way her hands move when she describes a dish and her eyes light up when she’s planning a menu—it’s fascinating.

“Well, in that case...” She launches into her planned menu, and I find myself leaning closer, drawn in by her enthusiasm.

The sun has almost completely set when my phone chimes with a text. I glance down at it, but seeing it’s Crystal, I choose to ignore it.

Lila stands up, gathering our empty glasses. “I should go. Early morning tomorrow.”

“Right, those scones won’t bake themselves.” I stand, too. “Want me to look at Agatha this weekend?”

She hesitates, then nods. “Okay, but only if you let me cook you dinner as payment.”

“Deal.”

As she heads back to her side of the duplex, I catch myself watching the sway of her hips in those cutoff shorts. Just friends, I remind myself firmly. But then she turns back, catching me looking, and instead of her usual blush and quick look away, she holds my gaze for a moment.

“Goodnight, Luke,” she says softly.

“Goodnight, Lila.”

I stay on the deck long after she’s gone, listening to the sounds of her moving around her kitchen, probably preparing for tomorrow’s baking. The familiar domestic noises mix with the ocean waves, creating a kind of peace that settles deep within me.

Just friends, I think again. But even I don’t believe it anymore.

Five

Lila

“Try it now,” Luke calls from under Agatha’s hood. He’s been working on my car all morning, his strong hands moving confidently among the engine parts. I’ve been trying not to stare at how his tattooed muscles flex when he reaches for tools or how his t-shirt rides up, exposing a strip of firm, tanned skin.

I turn the key, and for the first time since I’ve had her, Agatha starts without a single complaint. The engine purrs smoothly—no rattles, no worrying clicks.

“Oh my God,” I breathe, stepping out to join Luke at the hood. “What did you do?”

He wipes his hands on a rag, looking pleased with himself. “Just showed her some attention. I replaced the spark plugs, adjusted the timing belt, and fixed the loose connection causing the rattle.” His grin is boyish and proud. “Want to hear the best part? Turn her off.”

I do, and instead of her usual protesting shudder, Agatha powers down quietly.

“Luke!” I squeal, climbing out of the car, and without thinking, I throw my arms around him. “You’re amazing!”

He laughs, his hands settling naturally on my waist, and suddenly, I’m very aware of how close we are. His chest is solid against mine, and he smells like motor oil, sweaty male, and... Luke.

I step back quickly, my cheeks burning.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “I got excited.”

“Don’t apologize.” His voice is a little rough. “But you know what this means, right?”

I eye him suspiciously. “What?”

“Now that she’s running properly, we should clean her up.” He gestures to both our cars parked in the shared driveway. “My Jeep could use a washtoo.”

This is how I end up in my driveway on a sunny Saturday afternoon, armed with a bucket of soapy water and a sponge. Luke’s got his own bucket, and he’s already started on his Jeep, which honestly doesn’t look all that dirty to me.

“You’re doing great,” Luke calls from the other side of Agatha, his voice laced with amusement.

“You’re not even watching,” I shoot back, scrubbing the passenger door. “For all you know, I’m doing a terrible job.”

“I’d know,” he says, stepping around the car. He leans against the hood, crossing his arms as he surveys my work. “Not bad, actually. You missed a spot, though.”

“Where?” I ask, frowning.

“There,” he says, pointing to a completely clean section of the car.

I narrow my eyes. “You’re messing with me.”

“Maybe a little,” he admits, his grin widening.

Rolling my eyes, I splash my sponge back into the bucket and keep scrubbing. The sun is high overhead now, warming my skin and making the soapy water glisten on Agatha’s newly scrubbed exterior.

He softly whistles as he works, and I try not to notice how good he looks with his shirt damp from the occasional spray of the hose.

Focus, Lila.

I finish washing the last spot on Agatha and stand back, admiring my work. “Done!” I call out, brushing a stray curl out of my face.

Luke glances over, raising an eyebrow. “Not bad. But you’ve got soap in your hair.”

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“What?” I reach up with wet, soapy hands but find nothing.

“Just kidding.” He laughs. “Or I was, now you really do have soap in your hair.”

“Where?” I lean over to check out my image in the side mirror and suddenly feel cold water hitting my back. I spin around to find Luke grinning with the garden hose in his hand. “You didn’t!”

“Oops?” But his innocent expression is ruined by the unrepentant glint in his eyes.

“Oh, it’s on.” I dip my sponge in the bucket and fling it at him, water arcing through the air. It hits him square in the chest, darkening his gray t-shirt.

“Now you’re asking for it,” he growls playfully, advancing with the hose.

I shriek and dodge, but he’s quicker. Water sprays everywhere as we chase each other around the cars. I manage to get him with another sponge full of suds, and he retaliates by catching me around the waist with one arm while wielding the hose with the other.

“Surrender!” he demands, laughing as I squirm. He shakes his head, sending cold water raining down on me.

“Never!” I grab for the hose, but he lifts it higher, using his vast height advantage.

Finally, able to grab the hose away from him, I turn, sending a stream of water straight at him. Luke yelps, jumping back, but it’s too late—his shirt is soaked now,



too, clinging to his chest in a way that makes me immediately regret my decision.

“Oh, you’re in trouble now,” he says, laughing and lunging for the hose again.

“You started it!” I say in defense, laughing just as hard.

We struggle for control, still amused, until I slip on the wet concrete. Luke catches me before I fall, but the sudden movement throws us off balance. We end up against Agatha’s side, my back pressed to the old car, Luke’s body heavily pinning me there.

The laughter dies in my throat as I realize our position. We’re both breathing hard, clothes soaked through. Water drips from his hair onto my face and his eyes—God, his eyes are so blue when we’re this close.

I’m suddenly painfully aware of my white t-shirt, now completely transparent and clinging to every generous curve, my nipples hard as they rub against the wet fabric. Luke’s gaze drops for just a second, then snaps back to my face, his pupils dilating slightly.

“Lila,” he says, voice rough. His hand is still on my waist, burning through the wet fabric.

A car horn blares from a distant street, making us both jump. Luke steps back quickly, running a hand through his wet hair.

“We should, uh...” He clears his throat. “We should probably finish washing the cars.”

“Right,” I say, my voice higher than usual. “The cars.”

We work in silence for a few minutes, carefully maintaining distance between us. I’m

hyperaware of my wet clothes, crossing my arms over my chest when I catch Luke sneaking glances at me.

What am I doing? He has a girlfriend—who probably never gets into water fights or wears see-through t-shirts. The thought is like a bucket of cold water on my heated skin.

“I should go change,” I say abruptly, setting down my sponge.

“Lila—“ He starts to reach for me, then seems to think better of it.

“Thanks for fixing Agatha,” I say quickly, already backing toward my door. “I’ll, um, I’ll make dinner later to pay you back.”

I don’t wait for his response, escaping into my house. I watch him stand there for a long moment through the window, still dripping wet, before he turns back to the cars.

My heart is racing, and not just from our water fight. The way he’d looked at me, his body pressed against mine—No. No, I can’t think about that. Luke is my friend, my next-door neighbor, and he’s taken—end of story.

But as I peel off my wet clothes, I can still feel the ghost of his touch on my waist, and I wonder how long I can keep pretending I don’t want more.

I planned a thank you dinner for the Wild Band, and tonight is the night all of them were free. Well, everyone but Cass and his family. By seven, my kitchen is filled with the aroma of a slow-roasted pot roast, Emily’s insider tip about Luke’s favorite comfort food paying off. The potatoes are perfectly creamy, the carrots glazed with honey, and the homemade rolls are just coming out of the oven when the doorbell rings.

“Something smells amazing,” Nate says as I let them in. Vince follows, carrying a six-pack of craft beer. Emily, Sam, and the baby arrive next.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” I say, grateful for their presence. After this afternoon’s incident, I needed witnesses to keep things friendly.

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Luke arrives last, freshly showered and wearing a black button-down that makes his eyes look impossibly blue. Our gazes briefly meet before I busy myself with serving.

“Something sure smells good,” Vince declares, taking a seat. “I knew you could cook, but damn.”

“Wait till you taste it,” Luke says, and something in his voice makes me blush.

Dinner is a lively affair. The guys trade stories about their early days, and Emily and I laugh at the tales of misadventures and near-disasters on their first tour.

“Remember when Luke tried to crowd surf at that club in Tampa?” Nate grins. “And everyone just... moved?”

“I still have bruises from that,” Luke groans good-naturedly. “In my defense, I thought the crowd was paying attention.”

“They were too busy watching Cass,” Vince says. “Or those of us playing the guitar. No one notices the keyboard player.”

“Hey, some of us notice,” I say without thinking. When they all look at me, I add quickly, “I mean, the keyboard parts were always my favorite. In your songs.”

Luke’s eyes meet mine across the table, intense enough to make my breath catch. I quickly look away.

“What about us drummers? Nobody notices us either,” Nate points out quietly.

“Why should they, when they’ve got me to look at?” Vince jokes arrogantly.

Everyone groans and Luke asks for seconds. I smile, feeling the food is a hit. Sam makes a dramatic show of declaring the pot roast ‘the best thing I’ve ever eaten,’ and Emily asks for the recipe. Even Presley wakes up in time to enjoy a little mashed potato, earning delighted laughs when she smears it across her face.

The meal is everything I hoped it would be—light, fun, and filled with the kind of energy that makes being with friends fun.

When it’s time for dessert, I pull out the apple pie I’d baked earlier.

“This is so good,” Vince says after his first bite of pie. “Luke, if you don’t start dating this girl, I will.”

I nearly choke on my coffee. Luke’s knuckles go white around his fork.

“And on that note,” Nate says, standing, “we should probably all head out.”

Luke stands, recovering. They bicker, good-naturedly, as everyone gathers their things. I hug them goodbye and thank them for coming.

“Thanks for dinner,” Emily quietly says as she hugs me. “And for making Luke smile like that again.”

Before I can ask what she means, they’re gone, leaving Luke and me alone in my suddenly quiet kitchen.

“That was fun,” I say, moving to wrap up the leftover pie.

“It was.” Luke steps closer, and I can feel the heat of him behind me.

“Glad you liked it,” I say, glancing at him. “You deserved a good meal after fixing Agatha.”

He chuckles, shaking his head. “You didn’t have to go to all that trouble.”

“Sure, I did,” I say, smiling. “It was the least I could do.”

The silence stretches, and I realize he’s still watching me. His gaze is steady, warm, and just a little too intense for comfort.

“Thanks. Not just for dinner, but for asking about my favorite food.”

I turn around, intending to make a joke about Emily’s loose lips, but the words die in my throat. He’s so close, looking at me with an intensity that weakens my knees.

“Lila,” he says softly, reaching up to brush a strand of hair from my face. His fingers linger on my cheek, and I find myself leaning into his touch without meaning to.

He bends down slowly, giving me time to pull away. I know I should. That this is wrong, and I’m setting myself up for heartbreak.

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But his lips are inches from mine, and I can feel his breath on my face, and—

The sharp ring of his phone makes us both jump. Crystal's name flashes on the screen.

Reality crashes back like a harsh wave. I step back quickly, putting the kitchen island between us.

“You should get that,” I say, proud that my voice only shakes a little.

He looks at the phone, then at me, conflict clear on his face. “Lila—“

“It's fine.” I force a smile. “Really. Thank you again for fixing Agatha.”

He answers the phone reluctantly, still watching me. “Hey, Crystal... Yeah, I'm just leaving Lila's. The band had dinner...”

I turn away, unable to watch as he talks to her. My hands shake slightly as I finish wrapping the pie.

After hanging up, he says, “I should go. Crystal's father is having some kind of emergency meeting.”

“Of course.” I keep my voice light and casual. “You should leave.”

Luke freezes, his expression unreadable. I think he might object for a second, but then he nods, stepping back. “Yeah,” he says, his voice quieter now. “You're right.”

The air between us is thick, with everything unsaid, and I feel like I've just escaped something dangerous and intoxicating all at once.

"I'll see you tomorrow?" I say, forcing a lightness I don't feel.

"Yeah," he says again, offering me a small smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Tomorrow."

After he leaves, I sink onto my couch, pressing my hands to my burning cheeks. I almost forgot about Crystal—his gorgeous, successful—thin girlfriend.

One thing's clear: I need stronger boundaries. I can't trust myself around him, not when my heart races whenever he looks at me.

I can still feel the touch of his fingers on my cheek and see how he looked at me right before Crystal called.

Yep. Stronger boundaries. Starting first thing tomorrow.

Six

Luke

The new song's coming together nicely, but something's still not quite right. I run through the chord progression again, tweaking the timing while Cass works out vocal harmonies with Vince.

"Maybe if we—" I start but stop when I notice Nate checking his phone again. "Hot date?"

He shakes his head, eyes still glued to the screen. "Market's volatile today."



“You mean more than usual?” Vince sets down his guitar. “What’s happening with that tech stock you were watching?”

“Down six percent.” Nate’s fingers fly over his phone. “But the fundamentals are solid. They’re about to announce something big—I can feel it.”

I shift on my stool, curious despite myself. Nate’s always been the quiet one, more likely to be reading financial reports than partying after shows. But his investment track record speaks for itself.

“Is that the same company you mentioned last month?” I ask.

He looks up, surprised I remembered. “Yeah. They’re developing some revolutionary technology. The stock’s been beaten down because of missed deadlines, but...” He trails off, already back to studying his charts.

“Nate’s got that look,” Vince finishes, grinning. “The same look he had before Tesla split and Amazon exploded.”

“You really think it’s going to pop?” I try to keep my tone casual, but something in my voice must give me away because Nate actually puts down his phone.

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“Finally interested in investing, Luke?” He gives me a calculating look. “Thought you were all about keeping it safe in mutual funds.”

I shrug, running my fingers absently over the keys. “It may be time to take some risks.”

“Says the guy who drove the same beat-up Honda for ten years before finally buying that Jeep,” Cass teases. “What changed?”

Everything—I want to say. But instead, I just shrug again. “Just curious about what Nate’s seeing.”

“Show him the numbers,” Vince urges. “I’m already in another two hundred grand.”

“Two hundred grand?” I nearly choke. “That’s...”

“Nothing compared to what it’ll be worth if I’m right,” Nate says quietly. He pulls up some charts on his phone and hands it to me. “Look at their patent portfolio. Their partnerships. The way they’re positioning themselves...”

I study the screens he shows me, trying to make sense of the graphs and projections. It’s like looking at sheet music in a foreign language—I can tell there’s a pattern, but I can’t quite read it.

“How much have you made following his advice?” I ask Vince.

He grins. “Enough to buy that beach house I’ve been eyeing. And before you

ask—yes, cash. No mortgage.”

“And you think the risk is worth taking?”

Nate hesitates, his analytical brain clearly weighing how much he wants to share. “It’s risky,” he says finally, “but the numbers make sense if you look at the trend.”

Vince crosses his arms. “If Nate says it’s risky. That means it’s practically a sure thing.”

Nate shrugs again, a little uncomfortable with the attention. “There’s always a chance it won’t pan out.”

“Yeah, but when’s the last time you were wrong?” Cass says, laughing. “Seriously, man. You’ve turned my bank account into something that would make the Rolling Stones jealous.”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far,” Nate mutters, though his lips twitch into a faint smile.

“Wait, wait,” I say, holding up a hand. “You’re telling me that all of you guys have invested?”

“Hell yeah,” Vince says, leaning against the wall. “Nate’s like a stock market wizard or something. He’s got the touch. I just ride his coattails and watch the money roll in.”

Sam chuckles from the corner, plucking a few notes on his bass. “It’s true. The guy’s got a freaky talent for this stuff. I’ve made enough to put Presley through college already.”

Nate looks faintly embarrassed, but he doesn't deny it. "It's not magic," he says. "I just do my research."

"And by research, he means spending every waking minute not playing music glued to a screen," Vince jokes.

"Luke, everyone's made money except you," Cass adds. "Because you never take chances."

"I take chances," I protest. "I joined the band, didn't I?"

"That's different," Nate says, taking his phone back. "That was following your passion. This is about being smart with the money you've already earned." He pauses, studying me. "But again, it's risky. I won't lie about that. This could go either way."

I think about my carefully managed portfolio, which most people would envy, and the conservative investments my financial advisor recommends. Safe. Stable. Predictable.

And I still don't have enough capital to help my dad.

"How much would you recommend investing?" I hear myself ask.

Vince whistles low. "Look who's finally ready to gamble."

"I didn't say I was doing it," I say quickly. "Just asking."

"Minimum five hundred grand to make it worth the risk," Nate says matter-of-factly. "But don't do it unless you're sure."

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Five hundred grand. It's a lot of money but not life-changing for someone with my income. Still...

"Let me think about it," I say.

"Better think fast." Nate picks up his drumsticks. "Word's getting out. Won't stay this low for long."

We get back to working on the song, but my mind keeps drifting to those charts, those possibilities. It's time to shake things up. Take some real risks.

An image of Lila flashes through my mind—the way she looked in my arms yesterday, water dripping from her lashes, her lips so close to mine...

"Earth to Luke," Cass calls. "We losing you to the stock market already?"

I shake my head, forcing myself to focus. "Just thinking about the bridge. What if we tried it in a minor key?"

But even as we work through the new arrangement, part of my mind is still on risks worth taking and changes waiting to be made.

I've always been careful with my money. After watching my dad almost lose everything, I swore I'd never take a gamble I couldn't afford to lose. The guys are right. The only major expense I've allowed myself this past year is my Jeep, and even that felt like an indulgence.

We spend the next hour fine-tuning the arrangement. We're each focused and purposeful—the kind of vibe that means we're on the verge of something great.

By the time we call it a day, the song feels solid—one of those rare tracks that come together so smoothly it feels like it was just waiting for us to find it.

As the others pack up their gear, I catch myself glancing at Nate again, the wheels in my head still turning. Maybe it's time to take a leap of faith—not just in the market, but in the idea that sometimes, a calculated risk is worth the reward.

When I pull into the driveway, the sun is still bright in the sky. The hours with the band had been productive—one of those rare sessions where the music seemed to flow effortlessly. But instead of feeling accomplished, I can't shake the restless energy that's been clinging to me all morning.

Maybe it's Nate's stock talk, maybe it's the song we've been working on, or maybe it's something else—or someone—blonde and curvy who's been occupying way too much space in my head lately.

I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and head out to the deck, hoping the ocean air will clear my mind. But when I step outside, the sight that greets me only makes things worse.

Lila is out on the beach, stretched out on a bright yellow towel in the sand.

My feet stop moving of their own accord.

She's wearing a vintage-style swimsuit, the kind that's supposed to be modest but somehow makes everything more enticing. The deep red fabric hugs every curve, highlighting the dip of her waist and the fullness of her hips. Her hair is loose, spilling across her towel in honey-colored waves. The way she looks in that swimsuit

has my brain scrambling for coherent thought.

I freeze, trying to stop myself from doing something stupid, like walking down there just to be closer to her. She's oblivious to my presence, her focus entirely on the small bottle of oil she's holding.

I should go inside. I definitely shouldn't stand here watching as she slowly unscrews the cap off the bottle.

But then she starts applying it, and I swallow hard as she pours a small amount into her palm, her movements slow and deliberate. She starts with her arms, smoothing the oil over her skin in long, graceful strokes. She moves with an unconscious sensuality that's far more alluring than any deliberate attempt at seduction.

It's hypnotic. Mesmerizing. And it is absolutely not something I should be watching.

I tell myself to look away, to go back inside and leave her to her peaceful moment. But my feet stay planted, my eyes locked on her as she moves to her legs, her fingers skimming over the curve of her calf, up to her thighs.

My chest tightens, and I take a long drink from the water bottle, hoping the cool liquid will temper the heat simmering under my skin. It doesn't.

She shifts slightly, reaching again for her shoulder, and I see a hint of a smile on her lips like she's enjoying the warmth of the sun on her skin. It's such a simple, natural moment, but there's something about it that feels intimate—like I'm witnessing a side of her she doesn't let many people see.

And damn, if it doesn't make me want to be closer and to know what's going on in her head when she smiles like that, to hear the sound of her laugh without a group of people around, and to feel her skin under my hands the way her fingers glide over it

now.

I drag a hand down my face, muttering a curse under my breath. This is getting out of hand.

When she arches her back to reach behind her, I have to grip the deck railing tighter to remain where I'm standing as I half-chub.

"Get it together, Sterling," I mutter to myself. But I can't tear my eyes away as she rolls onto her stomach, exposing the graceful line of her back, the gentle swell of her heart-shaped ass—

She's made it clear she wants to keep things friendly—after she found out about Crystal. And I've been doing my best to honor that. But every time I'm around Lila it gets harder to ignore the pull. She's different from anyone I've ever met—funny, smart, confident in a way that sneaks up on you.



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And then there's this. The way she looks right now, laid-back and radiant, the picture of effortless beauty. It's enough to make any man lose his freakin' mind.

Then Lila sits up, stretching like a cat in the sunlight, and all my good intentions go up in smoke.

As if sensing my thoughts, she glances over her shoulder, her warm hazel eyes scanning the deck. I duck back, cursing myself for being so obvious, but it's too late. She's seen me.

"Luke?" she calls, sitting up slightly. Her hair falls over one shoulder, loose and golden in the bright sunlight. "Is that you?"

I step into view, trying to play it cool. "Yeah. Just got back."

She starts gathering her things as if she's done sunbathing just because I'm here.

Taking the steps down to the beach. Sand shifts under my feet as I make my way to where Lila's wrapping herself in a white cover-up.

"You don't have to leave on my account," I say, trying to keep my voice light.

"I should get inside anyway." She's not meeting my eyes. "I have some recipe testing to do for that corporate dinner on Friday."

"Right." I shove my hands in my pockets to keep from reaching for her. "Need any taste testers?"

She looks up then, and something in my expression makes her breath catch. “Luke...”

“Sorry.” I step back, giving her space. “That was... I shouldn’t...”

“It’s okay.” She clutches her towel tighter. “We’re friends, right? Friends can taste test.”

Right. But friends don’t watch friends apply suntan oil like it’s soft-core porn. Friends don’t imagine tracing those oil-slicked curves with their hands, their mouth...

“We should go in,” I say roughly.

She nods but doesn’t move. The wind off the ocean plays with her hair, carrying the scent of coconut oil and the soft fragrance of Lila to me. My hands clench in my pockets.

“Luke?” Her voice is soft, uncertain.

“Yeah?”

“Why...” She takes a deep breath. “Why are you with Crystal?”

The question hits me like a punch to the gut. Of all the things she could have asked, this is the one I can’t answer. Not truthfully.

“It’s complicated—and It’s not what you think. I mean, we’ve never even—“

I cut off my words at Lila’s raised brows. She looks like she doesn’t believe me, and who can blame her? A famous rockstar would—could have his pick of women. Instead, I made a deal with the devil, which comes with a high-society girlfriend I don’t want. Someone I’m not even attracted to because she is too superficial. Crystal

acts possessive and makes it clear to everyone that she's dating a famous rockstar, but I'm just a means to an end—a way for her to advance up the social ladder and get more attention. There are times I doubt if she even likes spending time with me.

Lila just stands there waiting for me to finish my sentence, but I don't. Instead, I say again, hating myself a little. "It's complicated,"

"Right." She gives me a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "Of course it is."

She turns to go, but I catch her arm before I can stop myself. Her skin is warm and smooth under my fingers, still slick with oil.

"Lila, I—"

Her phone chimes from inside her beach bag. The sound breaks whatever spell we're under, and she pulls away.

"I really should get inside," she says.

I watch her climb the steps to our deck, the red swimsuit visible through her white cover-up. Just before she goes inside, she turns back.

"For what it's worth," she says quietly, "complicated isn't always better than simple."

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Then she's gone, leaving me standing in the sand with the taste of regret in my mouth and the ghost of her skin under my fingers.

She's right. Simple would be better. Simple would be walking away from Crystal, from the deal with her father, from all of it. Simple would be going after what—who—I really want.

But simple isn't an option. Not if I want to protect my father and everything he's worked for.

So, I'll keep things complicated. Keep my distance. Keep pretending I don't feel anything when I look at Lila.

But standing here, watching the space where she disappeared, I'm starting to wonder if any of it is worth the cost.

Seven

Lila

The breeze feels like it's carried straight off the Mediterranean Sea as I step onto the stone patio of the oceanfront villa. It's extravagant in a way that doesn't just scream money—it whispers it, refined and understated. Twinkling lights wrap around palm trees, casting a warm glow over the intimate dining setup. A long, elegant table draped in linen sits at the heart of the patio, surrounded by plush chairs that look like they belong in an interior design magazine.

“Lila, this is stunning,” Jenny, my assistant from the bakery, whispers as she sets down the last of the stemless wine glasses. Her dark curls bounce as she glances around, wide-eyed. “I can’t believe we’re working here tonight.”

“Neither can I,” I admit, smoothing my apron as I step back to admire the setup. “But let’s focus. This is our shot to make a great impression.”

It’s not just a shot—it’s the shot. The kind that could change everything. When the company reached out, they made it clear they wanted top-tier service for their executives, and I’ve gone above and beyond to deliver. Every detail, from the custom menu to the timing of each course, has been carefully planned. The theme is Mediterranean, and I’ve spent the last week perfecting every dish—including grilled lamb skewers, fresh hummus with handmade pita, citrus-marinated olives, roasted eggplant, and a decadent honey-almond baklava for dessert.

Executives in tailored suits and cocktail dresses gather on the patio, their laughter and clinking glasses blending with the soft crash of the waves below. Jenny and I move seamlessly between the kitchen and the table, presenting each dish with the kind of care that makes even the simplest ingredients feel luxurious.

“Fresh grilled lamb with rosemary and garlic,” I say, setting down a plate in front of the host, Mr. Carmichael, a distinguished man with salt-and-pepper hair and a polished smile. “Paired with a mint-yogurt dipping sauce.”

By the time dessert rolls around, I know we’ve nailed it. The honey-almond baklava is the final triumph, golden and glistening on the plates as the guests marvel over the perfect balance of sweetness and spice.

“This is incredible,” one of the women gushes, her diamond earrings catching the light as she turns to the host. “Where did you find her?”

“She came highly recommended,” the host says, smiling at me. “And now I see why. Lila, you’ve outdone yourself.”

“Thank you,” I say, my cheeks warming. “I’m so glad you enjoyed everything.”

The last of the baklava disappears from crystal serving plates as I begin cleanup in the villa’s enormous kitchen. Jenny is efficiently loading the commercial dishwasher while I package the few remaining appetizers for the host.

“That went perfectly,” Jenny whispers excitedly. “Did you see their faces when you brought out the baklava?”

I smile, remembering the appreciative murmurs that had followed each course. The practice runs over the past week had paid off—especially the night Luke had sampled everything, offering thoughtful feedback between bites. His obvious enjoyment of the food had given me the confidence boost I needed.

“Mrs. Carmichael loved the mezze spread,” I say, carefully wrapping the last of the leftovers. “And the lamb tagine and skewers were a hit.”

“A hit?” Jenny raises an eyebrow. “That silver-haired man asked for thirds.”

The evening had gone better than I’d dared hope. The Mediterranean menu worked perfectly for the upscale business dinner, each course flowing seamlessly into the next. Everything came together exactly as planned.

“Lila, dear,” Mrs. Carmichael sweeps into the kitchen, her designer dress sparkling under the recessed lighting. “You’ve absolutely outdone yourself. Everyone is raving about the food.”

“I’m so glad you enjoyed it,” I say, trying to maintain professional composure despite

my internal victory dance.

“Enjoyed it? My dear, you’ve set the bar impossibly high for all future dinner parties.” She takes my hands in hers. “I’ve already given your card to three of my friends.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Carmichael. That means a lot.” I say, my voice steady despite the thrill coursing through me.

“Please, call me Diane.” She waves elegantly toward the dining room. “Take your time cleaning up. The company men are moving to the terrace for cigars and brandy—so cliché, but what can you do?”

She glides out, leaving behind a cloud of expensive perfume and the promise of future bookings. Jenny and I exchange excited grins before returning to our cleanup routine.

The evening would’ve been perfect—one of those rare, seamless nights that stays in your memory forever—if it weren’t for the conversation, I’m unfortunate enough to overhear next.

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I'm gathering empty glasses on a tray near the terrace doors when male voices drift in through the partially open French doors.

"...Sterling Motors won't know what hit them."

I pause, the name catching my attention.

"Marcus has it all arranged," a deeper voice says.

"Trust me," one of the men says, his voice low but full of certainty. "It's a done deal. Once Sterling Motors is under Marcus' control, we'll swoop in and grab it for pennies."

Sterling Motors? The name rings a bell—because it's Luke's last name. But I doubt there's a connection.

"Are you sure about this?" another man asks, his tone skeptical. "Sterling's been in the game a long time. They're not going down without a fight."

"They don't have a choice," the first man replies, a smug edge to his voice. "I've got it on good authority—certain... arrangements have already been made. It's just a matter of time."

The clink of crystal startles me, and I realize I'm in danger of dropping a glass. I had better get moving and mind my own business. Their conversation has nothing to do with me. I head to the kitchen. Forcing the overheard gossip to the back of my mind, yet something about the confidence in that man's voice leaves a sour taste in my



mouth.

As I walk to the kitchen another of the guests approaches, pulling me aside. “Hi, I’m Rebel Henson. I own the pub, Shot in the Dark. I sometimes partner with Haley Harris, my sister-in-law who caters, but we’re always looking for talented chefs, for one reason or another.”

“I’m Lila Jeffers,” I introduce myself, remembering the pub where I met Emily on my first day in the city.

“My husband Hunter will be hosting a charity gala in a few months,” Rebel tells me. “Expect a call.”

“That’s very kind of you,”

“It’s not kindness,” she says with a smile showing deep dimples. “It’s common sense. You’re a gem, Lila. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

My heart leaps. A gala would be a huge opportunity, exactly the kind of exposure I need to build my business.

The high from tonight’s event stays with me all the way home. The compliments from the host, the promises to spread the word—it’s all swirling in my head, leaving me breathless with excitement. I can’t stop smiling, my hands gripping the steering wheel as I replay the night in my mind. For the first time since setting out on my own, I feel like I’m truly on the right track—like all my hard work is finally paying off.

When I pull into the driveway, I notice the faint glow of lights on the back deck. Luke’s Jeep is parked in its usual spot, and I find myself wondering if he stayed up just to see how my night went. The thought sends a flicker of warmth through me, though I quickly push it aside. It’s just a friendly gesture, I tell myself. Nothing more.

I grab my bag and make my way inside, kicking off my heels with a sigh of relief. The house is quiet, but when I step out onto the deck, Luke is there, leaning against the railing with a glass of wine in hand. A second glass sits on the small table beside him, condensation beading on its surface.

“Hey,” he says, his voice low and warm. “How’d it go?”

“I thought you’d be asleep,” I murmur.

“And miss hearing about your big night?” He hands me a glass of what I recognize as my favorite Pinot Grigio. “Not a chance.”

“So?” His eyes are bright with genuine interest. “Tell me everything.”

“It went better than I could’ve imagined,” I say, my smile widening as I sink into the chair across from him. “The host loved everything. The guests were raving about the food. And at the end of the night, I was told to expect a call about a gala.”

Luke grins, lifting his glass in a toast. “Sounds like a hell of a night. Congrats, Lila. You deserve it.”

“Thanks,” I say, taking a sip from my glass. The wine is crisp and cool, the perfect contrast to the warm breeze drifting off the ocean. “It feels... incredible. Like I’m finally doing what I was meant to do.”

“I know that feeling,” Luke says, his smile softening. “It’s like coming offstage after a killer show. You’re riding high, completely in the moment. It doesn’t get much better than that.”

I tilt my head, studying him. “Is it really like that for you? Performing?”

“Yeah,” he says, nodding. “Everything else fades away, and all that matters is the music. The crowd, the energy, the connection—it’s addictive.”

I sip my wine, letting his words sink in. “I guess tonight was my version of that. It wasn’t a stage, but—I don’t know. Hearing people talk about how much they loved my food, seeing the looks on their faces—it felt good.”

Luke chuckles, his gaze steady on mine. “Sounds like you’re hooked.”

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“Maybe I am,” I admit, laughing softly. “I could definitely get used to feeling like this.”

The night air is perfect—warm with just enough breeze to carry the salt spray. Luke’s watching me with an expression that makes my heart flutter.

“Want to walk it off?” he asks, nodding toward the beach. “You seem too energized to sit still.”

I should say no. It’s late; we’ve been drinking wine, and a moonlit beach walk with Luke Sterling is definitely not on my list of smart decisions.

“Sure,” I hear myself say instead.

We make our way down to the water’s edge. The sand is still warm from the day’s sun, and the waves create a rhythmic soundtrack to our conversation.

The wine has loosened my nerves, and I find myself opening up in a way that feels easy and natural.

“I want to thank you,” I say, glancing over at him. “I was so nervous about tonight, but knowing you believed in me... it helped. More than you probably realize.”

Luke shrugs, but there’s a softness in his expression that makes my chest tighten. “You didn’t need my help, Lila. You’re talented as hell. Anyone with half a brain can see that.”

“Still,” I say, my voice quieter now. “It means a lot.”

We walk in silence for a moment. He steals a glance at me, his profile illuminated by the moonlight.

“I love seeing you like this,” Luke says softly, turning toward me. “You’re glowing.”

“It’s probably the wine,” I deflect, but I can feel myself blushing.

“No, it’s not.” He stops walking, turning to face me. “It’s passion. When you talk about food, about creating experiences for people, you light up from the inside out.”

The intensity in his voice makes me shiver despite the warm night. “Like you with music after a great show?”

“Feeling like you could conquer the world?” He steps closer, and I can smell his familiar scent—salt air and a faint hint of the masculine cologne he wears. “Yeah, exactly like that.”

We’re standing too close now, the waves lapping at our feet. The moon catches the silver in his eyes, and I’m reminded of another passionate conversation—one I overheard tonight.

“Luke,” I start, not sure how to ask if he’s connected in some way to Sterling Motors.

But before I can find the words, he reaches up and cups my face in his hands. “I’ve been trying so hard to stay away from you,” he murmurs.

“We should stay away from each other,” I whisper, even as I lean into his touch.

“Should we?”

Then he's kissing me, and all thoughts of overheard corporate takeovers disappear. His lips are soft but insistent, tasting of wine and moonlight. I melt into him, my hands resting on his firm chest as his slide into my hair.

He kisses like he makes music—with his whole soul holding nothing back. I hear myself make a small sound of need, and he pulls me closer, deepening the kiss until I almost feel dizzy with desire.

The sharp ring of his phone shatters the moment.

We break apart, both breathing hard. Crystal's name glows on his screen like an accusation.

"I can't," I say, stepping back. "We can't."

"Lila—"

"You have a girlfriend, Luke." The words taste like ashes in my mouth. "And however complicated it is... that's not my business."

His face goes still. "You're right."

The phone keeps ringing between us. I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly cold despite the warm night.

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“I can’t be this person.” I take another step back. “I can’t be the other woman sneaking around and stealing moments. I deserve better than that.”

“Yes, you do,” he says roughly, “but it’s not that simple.”

“It never is.” I turn away, fighting tears. “Goodnight, Luke.”

“Lila, wait—“

But I’m already walking away, my feet carrying me swiftly across the sand. Behind me, I hear him finally answer his phone, his voice low and strained.

By the time I reach the house, my lips are still tingling from his kiss, but my heart feels heavy. The taste of success from earlier has been replaced by something bitter and filled with regret.

I touch my fingers to my mouth, remembering the way he kissed me—like a drowning man finding air. I slowly walk inside, leaving behind my empty wine glass and an even emptier dream of a future with Luke.

Eight

Luke

The plane touches down at a private airfield near JFK, and I’m already exhausted. Not physically—though the red-eye flight didn’t help—but emotionally. My fingers drum restlessly against my thigh, playing phantom melodies as I stare out the

window.

“You look like shit,” Cass says cheerfully, dropping into the seat next to me as the other band members file past. “Trouble in paradise?”

If by paradise he means the constant war between what I want and what I have to do, then yeah, there’s trouble.

“I’m fine,” I say, but even I don’t believe it.

“Right.” He draws out the word skeptically. “That’s why you’ve been moping around like someone kicked your ass for days.”

“I don’t mope.”

“Bro,” Vince calls from the aisle, “you’ve been playing nothing but sad ballads during rehearsals. Even your sound check yesterday was depressing.”

They’re not wrong. Ever since that kiss on the beach—God, that kiss—I haven’t been able to focus on anything else. The way she felt in my arms, the soft sound she made when I pulled her closer, and the look in her eyes before she walked away.

“I almost invited Lila,” I admit quietly, while the others are distracted with gathering their carry-ons. “To come with us tonight.”

Cass frowns. “Why didn’t you?”

“Because I can’t offer her what she deserves.” The words taste bitter.

“Can’t? Or won’t?” He fixes me with that penetrating stare that’s always made me feel like he can see right through my bullshit. “Luke, I’ve known you for all these



years, and I've never seen you so instantly enamored by anyone—"

"Don't," I cut him off. "I know I've got it bad."

He holds up his hands in surrender, but his eyes are knowing. "All I'm saying is, maybe it's time to stop letting other people control your life."

If only he knew how impossible that was.

Our driver is waiting with a sleek black SUV, and soon, we're threading through Manhattan traffic toward our hotel. The others chat excitedly about tonight's show at Madison Square Garden, but I'm lost in my own thoughts.

Years ago, when we were just starting out, playing at The Garden seemed like an impossible dream. Now we're headlining, our band name in lights above one of the most iconic venues in the world. I should be ecstatic. Instead, I wonder if Lila will watch the performance on live stream or even miss me while I'm gone.

"Earth to Luke," Nate's voice breaks through my brooding. "We're here, man."

The Four Seasons rises above us, all glass and luxury.

In my room, I sit at the baby grand piano the hotel provided at Emily's request—she's a great manager and always thinking of each band member. My fingers find the keys automatically, playing the melody that's been haunting me for days.

It's a new song—one I haven't shared with the band yet. Too personal, too raw. Every note speaks of hope and new love.

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I suddenly turn from the piano and walk over to the floor-length window.

New York City. The lights, the noise, the energy—it's everything you'd expect. And usually, it's the kind of place that gets my adrenaline pumping. Walking through the bustling streets, knowing I'm about to play to a packed house, should have me riding high. I'm a rockstar in one of the biggest bands in the country. This is the dream, right?

So why the hell can't I stop thinking about her?

We're playing a one-night show. The event was planned to keep the hype alive before we head back to the studio to finish the new album. It's the kind of thing we live for—stepping onto a stage, hearing the roar of the crowd, and losing ourselves in the music—especially here.

But instead of focusing on the setlist or the soundcheck, my mind keeps drifting back to Lila. I think about the way her smile lights up her whole face. I remember how her voice softens when she talks about her dreams. And I can't forget how she looked at me on the beach—like she was starting to feel something, too.

But then my phone rang, and she left—and who could blame her?

I drag a hand through my hair, frustrated with myself. She made her feelings clear. She wants to keep things neighborly, and I've been doing my best to leave her alone. But damn, it's not easy. Not when she's all I can think about, even in the middle of the city that never sleeps.

I return to the piano, but this time the melody won't come. Instead, I find myself thinking about choices and consequences, the price of freedom, and the cost of family loyalty.

Tonight, I'll go on stage and play the part of the successful rockstar. I'll smile for cameras and pretend everything's perfect. But something has to give.

I pull out my phone, looking at Lila's last text before I left on our flight: a simple 'good luck' with a smiling face emoji. My thumb hovers over the keyboard, but what can I say? Sorry, I'm trapped in a relationship because her father could destroy my family's company. Sorry, I kissed you and then had to walk away.

Sorry, I'm not selfish enough to choose you.

I put the phone away and get ready for the performance.

We're backstage at Madison Square Garden, and you can already feel the thrum of excitement in the air.

"Hey, you good?" Vince's voice pulls me out of my thoughts. He's leaning against the entrance to the dressing room, his guitar slung over his shoulder, his trademark frown firmly in place.

"Yeah," I say, forcing a smile. "Just... tired, I guess."

He raises an eyebrow, clearly not buying it. "Tired? Come on, man. We're in New York. You should be on fire right now."

"I am. I will be," I lie, grabbing a bottle of water from the dressing table. "Just need to get through tonight."

Vince watches me for a moment, trying to figure out what's really going on. But thankfully, he doesn't push. "Well, snap out of it," he says, smirking. "We've got a sold-out crowd waiting to lose their minds."

I nod, taking a long sip of water as he heads out to join the rest of the band for a soundcheck.

By the time we hit the stage, the venue is electric. The roar of the crowd is deafening, a wall of sound that crashes over me like a wave. I hover over my keyboard, my fingers finding the familiar keys as the opening notes of our first song fill the air.

This should be the moment where everything else fades away, and it's just me, the music, and the crowd. But even as I lose myself in the performance, the ghost of Lila's presence lingers in the back of my mind. Her laugh, her warmth, the way she looks at me when she thinks I'm not paying attention.

I push through, song after song, pouring everything I have into the music. By the time we hit the final notes of the encore, the audience is on their feet, screaming for more. I should feel invincible, untouchable. But as the lights go down and the adrenaline starts to fade, all I feel is the ache of something missing—or someone.

Back at the hotel, the guys are in full celebration mode. The couples share the moment; Cass is kissing Kendrick, and Sam has his arm around Emily. Vince orders a round of drinks, and Nate gets his phone out, probably checking the stocks again. Everyone's in high spirits, the kind of energy that comes from nailing a show in one of the biggest cities in the world.

I should be right there with them, soaking it all in. But instead, I find myself standing by the window, staring out at the glittering skyline.

"Hey, Luke," Sam says, walking up to me and nudging me with a grin. "What's

going on with you, man? You've been in your head all day."

"Nothing," I say, shaking my head. "Just... thinking."

"About what?" Sam presses, taking a sip of his drink. "Wait, let me guess. Blonde, curvy, killer cook?"

I glare at him, but he just laughs. "Come on, man. It's obvious. You've been different ever since she showed up."

"Drop it, Sam," I say, my voice sharper than I intended.

"Alright, alright." He holds up his hands in mock surrender. "But for the record? You should go for it. Life's too short to play it safe. I should know."

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I don't respond, turning back to the window as his words echo in my head.

Later, lying in bed in my darkened hotel room, I can't sleep. My body is practically humming like a live wire from the adrenaline still coursing through my veins.

The show, the city, and the noise outside—it all blends into a kaleidoscope of noise and energy as my thoughts circle back to Lila. I remember how she looked at me on the beach like she was daring me to close the distance between us—and I wanted to. I also remember the look on her face as she walked away and how it made my chest ache.

I can't keep doing this—hovering in limbo, pretending I don't want more when every part of me is screaming that I do. But what the hell am I supposed to do? I wasn't lying when I told her it was complicated.

And then there's Crystal. Her father's hold on me, the mess I've been trying to keep under wraps—it's all tied together in a knot I don't know how to untangle. The last thing I want is to drag Lila into it, to make her a part of a world that's been filled with nothing but difficulties and compromises.

I turn and punch my pillow, but it doesn't help. Nothing can change the fact that she's under my skin in a way no one else has ever been. And as much as I hate to admit it, I don't think I can walk away.

Glancing at the clock again, I see it's almost three in the morning. Lila sometimes gets up this early when she's working at the bakery. Before I can talk myself out of it, I grab my phone from the nightstand and tap out a quick text.

‘NYC performance went great. Hope you have a good morning.’ My thumb hovers over the screen for a moment before hitting the send button.

A few minutes later, I get her response. ‘It was incredible!’ with her familiar smiley face emoji.

I wait to see if she’ll say more but after a few moments. I put my phone away and lean back against the pillows. What did I expect? She’s probably busy taking a shower and getting dressed before she heads to work. Damn. My mind immediately gets a picture of how she looked, spreading oil on her arms and legs, only this time she’s damp and naked in the shower. Fuck!

In frustration, I viciously yank off the covers, stand, and walk into the hotel’s luxurious bathroom. I turn on the shower, full blast and step under the stinging spray.

As I soap up, an image of Lila in the shower with me appears. Her soft pink mouth opening as she kneels in front of me and leans her head back, blinking water drops from her long lashes. My hand, slick with soap, snakes down my body and wraps around my lengthening cock. I begin stroking myself as I imagine what she does next with her hot little mouth, giving a guttural groan when I finally find a singular form of release—jerking off with my hand.

Leaning against the cool shower wall, I rest my forehead on my arm and let the warm water continue to cascade over me. Reduced to satisfying myself—some hot shot, rockstar I am. But I don’t want anyone else. No groupies, no Crystal. All I want at this moment is Lila. But she’s millions of miles away, and I’m not just talking about distance.

Nine

Lila

The scent of lemon and vanilla fills Beach Bites as I slide another tray of scones into the industrial oven. My phone sits on the stainless steel prep table, and I fight the urge to check it again. Luke's 3 AM text shouldn't make my heart flutter like this, but it does.

'It was incredible!'—my small-town response to his sold-out Madison Square Garden show.

Hours later, I'm still staring at his text, plus his signature keyboard emoji—his little stamp of rockstar personality that makes me smile. It's so different from my standard smiley face.

"Lila!" Jenny waves her flour-covered hand in front of my face. "You've checked your phone every ten minutes since you got here."

"Sorry." I adjust my apron and grab the bowl of cream cheese frosting. "Just distracted."

"Uh-huh." Jenny's smile grows, and I know she's about to start digging. "Let me guess. A guy?"

"What? No," I say too quickly, which only makes her laugh.

"It's a guy," she says, nudging me with her elbow. "Spill, Lila. I'm dying of curiosity over here."

"It's nothing," I say, focusing on the next cupcake with laser precision. "It's just... confusing."

Jenny gives me a knowing look. "Isn't it always?"



The truth is, it's more than confusing. It was exactly three nights ago, on a moonlit beach, after he congratulated me that he—

No. I won't think about that kiss and how perfectly his lips fit against mine, how his hands in my hair made me forget everything except the sound of the surf, and how I felt his heartbeat under my palms.

“He's dating someone,” I say, more to remind myself than her—Crystal, who I've only met once but felt completely out of my league afterward.

My eyes automatically go again to my phone, and Jenny reaches over and snatches it from my hand.

Heat creeps up my neck as Jenny eagerly reads Luke's early morning text. “So, this guy is in a band? Cool!”

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“Yeah. It was just a quick update about their show,” I say as I smear a generous portion of cream cheese frosting over more cupcakes. “Nothing special.”

“Uh-huh.” Jenny’s knowing smile makes me want to throw flour at her. “That’s why you have that dreamy look on your face.”

“I do not have a dreamy look!” I turn to look at the clock and see that it’s almost time to open the doors. We’re soon so busy with the morning rush that we don’t have time for personal talk. Yet, even as I serve the coffee and dish out the baked goods, my mind continues to sift through the details.

Crystal’s call is still sharp in my mind, her name flashing on Luke’s phone and interrupting the moment. Luke didn’t have to take it—not right then—but he did. And as much as I tell myself I’m okay with the boundaries we’ve set, the truth is, I’m not sure I am.

Part of me wants to confront him, to demand answers about what’s really going on between him and Crystal. But the other part of me—the part that remembers how it felt to be kissed like that—doesn’t want to hear an answer that will shatter whatever fragile connection we have.

Jenny’s voice suddenly snaps me back to the present, and I realize she’s been talking.

“Sorry,” I mumble, wiping my hands on my apron. “What were you saying?”

Jenny shakes her head, laughing. “I was saying you missed some serious flirting. That guy who just asked for the double chocolate muffins? He was totally into you.”

“What guy?” I frown, glancing at the register where a customer is walking out the door with a box of muffins in his hands.

Jenny lets out a dramatic sigh. “Exactly. You didn’t even notice.”

I roll my eyes, but she’s not wrong. I didn’t notice him. My head is too full of Luke Sterling to make room for anyone else rightnow.

“You should give him a chance,” Jenny teases. “He was cute. And he tipped well.”

“Noted,” I say dryly, grabbing a tray of scones to restock the display case.

“Seriously? He was a catch—and clearly interested!”

“Was he?” I busy myself with cleaning the counter. “Like I said. I didn’t notice.”

She throws her hands up. “Lila, he was ready to ask you out. But you’re too busy mooning over some guy who already has a girlfriend.”

“I wasn’t mooning,” I protest weakly.

“No? Then why do you keep checking your phone?” She challenges.

“I’m waiting for business calls. The dinner party was a huge success, remember?”

As if on cue, my phone starts ringing. I glance at it, then let it go to voicemail, not recognizing the number.

“See? Business calls.”

Jenny just shakes her head and goes to help a new customer.

The morning rush continues, keeping us busy, but during a lull, I finally get a chance to check my messages. The first is from Mrs. Carmichael, who gushed about the other night's dinner and promised more referrals. The second is from someone who was at the dinner and wants to book a future wedding anniversary party.

The third makes my heart skip.

“Hello, this is Hunter Henson's office calling for Lila Jeffers. We're organizing the annual Mothers Advancement Program Gala in three months, and your name came highly recommended. Please call us back at your earliest convenience to discuss the possibility of handling the catering.”

I play the message again, hardly daring to believe it—the Mothers Advancement Program. I quickly Google the name to find that the gala is one of the biggest charity events of the year. Politicians, celebrities, business leaders—everyone who's anyone attends.

“Jenny!” I call out, my voice squeaking.

“What?” she asks, her expression curious.

“I think,” I say, unable to keep the smile off my face, “I just got my big break.”

She hurries over, and I play the message a third time. Her eyes get wider with each word.

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“Holy shit,” she breathes when it ends. “Lila, this is huge!”

“I know!” I clutch her arm. “But can I even handle something this big? It could be dozens of people, multiple courses...”

“Of course you can,” she says firmly. “You’ve been training for this your whole career. Plus, you’ll have help. You don’t have to do this alone.”

I hug her impulsively, flour dust and all. “You’re the best.”

“I know.” She pulls back, grinning. “Now call them back before they change their minds!”

But even as I dial Hunter Henson’s office, my thoughts keep drifting to Luke—to the kiss we shared and to the complications he can’t explain.

Focus, I tell myself firmly. You have a chance at your dreams here. Don’t let anything, or anyone, distract you from that.

Even if that anyone has the lightest blue eyes you’ve ever seen and kisses like he wants to devour you.

The setting sun slants through my kitchen windows as I chop vegetables, steadfastly ignoring the fact that I’m making way too much food for one person. The knife moves rhythmically against the cutting board—carrots, celery, onions—the foundation of a simple yet classic meal, and definitely not because Luke mentioned once that one of his favorite comfort foods was his mom’s chicken in gravy recipe.

“You’re being ridiculous,” I mutter to myself, tossing the vegetables into my Dutch oven. The aromatics hit the hot oil with a satisfying sizzle.

I know Luke’s flight gets in around seven—not that I checked the arrival times or anything. And I’m definitely not timing this dinner to be ready around then. That would be pathetic, considering how I walked away from him on the beach and considering he has a girlfriend.

Considering everything.

Still, my hands move with practiced efficiency as I brown the chicken, deglaze the pan with wine, and add the herbs. The familiar routine of cooking usually centers me, but today, it doesn’t seem to be helping.

I’m determined to keep things strictly platonic. So why am I cooking for him? Because it’s Luke, and he’s always hungry. And I’m a chef and just being neighborly. Right?

Or maybe he was telling the truth. I mean, I’ve not even seen him kiss Crystal; she just does those little air kisses—Isn’t that a sign? Could there still be a chance...

No. I cut that thought off before it can take root. Hope is dangerous when it comes to Luke Sterling.

Back in the kitchen, the rich aroma of the cooked chicken fills the air. I taste-test the flavor, adjusting the seasonings automatically. It’s perfect—the wine is mellowed into a velvety sauce, the herbs bright but not overwhelming, and the chicken practically falls off the bone.

I’ve made dinner, and it just happens to be enough for two.

“This is getting embarrassing,” I tell my empty kitchen. But I’m already reaching for containers and planning how to package everything.

I add fresh green beans with toasted almonds because they need to be eaten tonight while they’re crisp-tender. A warm baguette, because what’s chicken without bread to soak up the sauce—what Luke calls gravy? And because I’m apparently going all in on this bout of temporary insanity, I throw in a slice of the chocolate tart I made this afternoon.

The basket I use for picnics sits on my counter, mocking me with its perfect size for this definitely not-planned care package.

“I’m just being neighborly,” I say out loud, carefully arranging everything inside. “That’s all.”

It’s ridiculous, really. We’re just friends. But even that feels like shaky ground after the kiss on the beach and the early morning text that’s been looping through my head on repeat. I shouldn’t care this much. I shouldn’t be cooking extra food just in case he comes home hungry—but let’s face it, Luke’s always hungry. And I definitely shouldn’t be standing here, debating whether leaving it at his door is a thoughtful gesture or a completely transparent one.

Neighbors regularly make dinner for each other after sharing one smoking hot kiss and then explicitly stating they need space—right?

Who am I kidding? I like cooking for Luke! So, I grab a notecard, then spend an embarrassingly long time staring at it. What do I write? ‘Welcome back’ sounds too intimate. ‘Hope your flight was good.’ sounds like I’ve been tracking his travel schedule (which I haven’t... not really). ‘Thought you might be hungry’ is just... No.

Finally, I scribble ‘Tested a new recipe. Let me know what you think. - L.’

There. Casual. Professional, even. Just a chef looking for feedback. Right!

I check the time—7:15 PM. My heart does a little flutter. Luke's flight should have landed by now despite the traffic delays. Which means he'll be home soon unless...

Unless Crystal met him at the airport, unless they're having a romantic welcome-home dinner together, or unless—"Stop it," I order myself firmly. I already cooked it. Letting it go to waste now would just be silly.

Wouldn't it? "Just drop off the food, Lila, then leave."



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The evening air is warm as I cross the short distance between our apartments. There are no lights on inside yet. Good.

I set the basket carefully by the door, adjusting the note so it's impossible to miss. For a moment, I stand there, my hands hovering over the handle as I debate whether just to take it back and pretend none of this ever happened. But then I hear it—the low rumble of an engine coming up the driveway.

My pulse kicks into overdrive as I glance toward the Jeep pulling in. It's Luke.

I'm caught in the moment, unsure whether to run or stay, when the headlights cut off, plunging the yard into near darkness. A second later, the driver's door swings open, and Luke steps out, his silhouette backlit by the faint glow of the vehicle's interior light, and my heart pounds in my chest.

"Lila?" His voice is low, rough with surprise.

"Hey," I manage, my voice higher than I'd like. "I, uh, was just dropping this off. I was testing a recipe, and... well, I thought you might be hungry."

He glances at the basket by the door, then back at me, his expression softening. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know," I say, shifting on my feet. "But I figured... well, you've been traveling, and since I made enough for two..." I let my voice trail off, knowing I just gave myself away.

“Lila,” he says, his voice gentle. “Thank you.”

The way he says it—like he’s thanking me for more than just the food—makes my chest tighten. I shrug, trying to play it cool. “It’s no big deal.”

“It is to me,” he says, stepping closer. The light catches his face now, and I can see the exhaustion etched into his features. But there’s something else, too, something warmer in his eyes as they hold mine.

“You look tired,” I say softly, trying to break the tension.

He chuckles, running a hand through his hair. “It’s been a long couple of days. But it’s good to be back.”

“Well, now you can eat and get some rest,” I say, gesturing toward the basket. “Enjoy.”

I start to step back, but he stops me, his hand brushing my arm. “Lila.”

I freeze, my breath catching as I meet his gaze. There’s something in his expression, something that makes my heart pound in my chest.

“Yeah?” I whisper.

He hesitates, his hand dropping reluctantly back to his side. “Nothing. Just thanks again. For this.”

I nod, feeling the moment slipping away before I can figure out what it was supposed to be. “Anytime.”

With that, I turn and make my way back across the yard, the sound of his voice still

echoing in my head. As I step inside and close the door behind me, I can't help but wonder what he would've said if he hadn't stopped himself.

Ten

Luke

'That was the best welcome-back gift ever. The gravy is incredible.'

Without giving Lila a chance to reply, I quickly tap out another text. 'Did you really 'test' this recipe, or did you remember me saying this was my mom's version of comfort food?

I finally received a reply, 'Busted,' with an embarrassed emoji.

I throw back my head and let out a bark of laughter. My mind's eye already seeing the blush covering her face.

I quickly tap out the message I've been waiting to send. 'I missed you, Lila. Not just your cooking.'

This is dangerous territory, and I shouldn't have gone there. I should maintain the boundaries she set. But she cooked for me, doesn't that mean something?

'How was New York?'

'Would have been better if you were there.'

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I close my eyes, remembering the way she kissed me back. The way it felt like falling and flying at the same time, but also what she said as she walked away.

‘Luke... don’t do this. It isn’t fair.’

‘I know. I don’t have the right. But that doesn’t change how I feel.’

I stare at the screen, but she doesn’t respond. Damn. How does she feel? For that matter, how do I feel?

‘The chocolate tart was amazing, by the way,’ I finally text, giving her an easy out from the emotional quicksand we’re sinking into. But then I ruin it by typing ‘Almost as sweet as you.’

‘Don’t,’ Lila immediately texts back. Then, ‘No dessert-based pickup lines allowed!’

‘Spoilsport. At least come sit on the deck with me while I finish this feast you ‘tested’.’

Will she say no? She probably wants to maintain her distance and not get caught up in the complicated situation I’m in.

‘Just for a few minutes. I have to work tomorrow,’ she taps back. ‘but I’ll need detailed feedback on that sauce.’

I can practically see her smile through the text. Grinning, I reply. ‘Of course. Very professional.’

This is a terrible idea. But as I head for the sliding glass door, I can't bring myself to care. Sometimes, terrible ideas feel an awful lot like good ones.

I hear her soft footsteps on the deck before I see her. She's changed into yoga pants and an oversized sweater that slips off one shoulder, and the sight of her makes my chest tight.

"Hey," she says softly, hovering by the door.

"Hey." I gesture to the chair next to mine. "Sit. Have some wine?"

She hesitates, then nods. "Just one glass."

I pour her some Pinot Noir that I know she likes, watching as she curls into the chair, tucking her feet under her. The ocean provides a gentle soundtrack to our silence.

"This really was incredible," I say, indicating the nearly empty plate. "Similar to how my mom used to make it."

"Only similar?" she asks with a slightly disappointed grimace.

"Yeah, my mom's gravy wasn't nearly as smooth. It always had lumps."

She gives an amused laugh. "I'm glad it was similar." Her gaze soft in the dim light. "Sometimes... sometimes food is the best way to say things we can't put into words."

The way she says it makes me wonder what, exactly, she was trying to say with this meal. I take another sip of wine instead of asking.

"The moonlight looks beautiful tonight," she murmurs, looking out over the water.

But I'm looking at her—the way the fading light catches her profile, how her fingers absently trace the rim of her wine glass. “Yeah, beautiful.”

She catches me staring and blushes, that lovely pink I can't get enough of spreading across her cheeks. “Luke...”

“I know,” I say quickly. “I'm sorry. I just...” I run a hand through my hair in frustration. “Being around you makes me forget all the reasons why I shouldn't...”

“Shouldn't what?” Her voice is barely a whisper.

Silently, in my head I answer, ‘I want to pull you into my lap. I want to kiss you until we both forget everything else. And I want to find out if your skin tastes as sweet as it looks’.

“Nothing,” I say out loud instead, gripping my wine glass tighter. “Tell me about your day.”

She gives me a knowing look but plays along, telling me about the bakery, Jenny's latest dating disaster, and the exciting call from Hunter Henson's office. I listen, soaking in her voice and the way she talks with her hands when she's excited.

The moon rises higher over the water as we talk, casting everything in silver light. She's luminous in it, and when she laughs at something I've said, the sound travels straight to my heart—and groin.

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“I should go,” she says finally, setting down her empty glass. “Another early morning tomorrow.”

“Right.” I stand when she does, and suddenly, we’re too close in the narrow space between chairs. Her breath catches as she looks up at me, and my hands itch to reach for her.

“Thanks again for dinner,” I manage.

“Thank you for the company.” She takes a step back, but her eyes never leave mine. “Night, Luke.”

I nod my goodnight, not able to find my voice.

I watch her walk away, every step feeling like she’s taking a piece of me with her. At her door, she turns back, our eyes meeting across the distance. For a moment, I think she might come back, or I might go to her. The air between us feels electric with possibility.

Then she gives me a small, sad smile and disappears inside.

I stay on the deck long after she’s gone, nursing my wine and wondering how something can feel so right and so impossible at the same time. Eventually, I head inside to bed, though I know sleep won’t come easily.

Not when I can still smell her perfume on the night air, still taste the wine we shared, still feel the weight of everything left unsaid between us.

The next day I don't catch even a glimpse of Lila. She's already working when I get up, and by the time her shift is over at the bakery, I'm in the studio until late. When I finally get home, she's already sleeping, or at least it appears she is sleeping as the lights in her apartment are off. Instead of sitting on the deck, which is my norm, I head on to bed. It surprises me how unsettled I feel not having seen or heard from her. She's so close, right next door, yet it feels like we're still miles away.

The next morning, I'm still thinking about Lila. I'm so lost in thought that I don't notice her until we literally collide on the front porch. She's apparently just finished a morning run, face flushed and breathing hard, while I'm heading out for mine.

"Oh!" she gasps as my hands automatically grip her waist to steady her. Her palms land flat against my chest, and for a moment, we're frozen like that, hearts racing for reasons that have nothing to do with exercise.

"Sorry," I manage, but I don't let go. I can't let go. She's wearing one of those sports bras and tight running shorts that should be illegal, and her skin is warm and slightly damp under my fingers.

"My fault," she breathes, looking up at me through those impossibly long lashes. "I wasn't paying attention."

'Neither was I', I want to say. 'I haven't been paying attention to anything but you for weeks now.'

Instead, I force myself to drop my hands and step back. "Isn't this normally your day off?"

"Yeah." She takes a deep breath, composing herself. "But Jenny and I swapped. I'm working her mid-morning shift." She then glances down at my outfit.



“Right.” I adjust my baseball cap, pulling it lower. “I should probably...” I gesture vaguely toward the beach.

“Of course.” She moves past me, and I catch the scent of her shampoo mixed with salt air. “Have a good run.”

I watch her turn, not able to take my eyes off her lush heart-shaped backside in those shorts. My body is still humming from our brief contact. When she glances back over her shoulder, catching me staring, I quickly look away and jog down to the beach.

The sand is firm near the water’s edge, perfect for running. I push myself harder than usual, trying to outrun the memory of how she felt in my arms. The steady thud of my feet against the sand matches the rhythm of my thoughts: can’t have her, want her, can’t have her, want her.

A few early morning beachgoers are out, but no one recognizes me in my running gear and dark glasses. It’s one of the reasons I love these morning runs—just another guy trying to stay in shape, not Luke Sterling, rockstar with a girlfriend I don’t want and a complicated life.

I push myself even harder, running until my lungs burn and my legs shake. But it doesn’t help. Nothing helps. Lila’s under my skin, in my blood, taking up residence in parts of me I thought were locked down tight.

Five miles turns into seven, then ten. By the time I circle back to my house, I’m drenched in sweat and no closer to figuring out what to do about any of this.

The sound of a car door slamming makes me look up. Crystal’s cherry red convertible is parked in my driveway, and she’s leaning against it in an outfit that probably cost more than most people’s monthly rent.

“There you are, Luke,” she calls out. “Daddy wants to see us for brunch.”

And just like that, reality comes crashing back. This is my life—obligations and deals and keeping up appearances. Not early morning runs and homemade dinners, and the way Lila’s eyes sparkle when she really smiles.

“Let me shower first,” I say, climbing my steps.

“Of course.” Crystal checks her perfect manicure. “But hurry. You know how Daddy hates to be kept waiting.”

I glance toward Lila’s apartment one last time before heading inside. Through her front window, I can see her moving around, getting ready to leave for work. She looks up, just for a second, and the sadness in her expression hits me like a physical blow.

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This has to end. One way or another, something has to give. Because I'm starting to realize that no business deal, no obligation, no anything is worth the cost of walking away from someone who makes me feel like I'm more than just a name on a contract or a face on a billboard.

I just hope I figure out how to fix this before it's too late.

The Ocean Club's Sunday brunch is exactly as pretentious as I remember. The Davidsons insist on the terrace table overlooking the water so Marcus Davidson can hold court like the king he thinks he is.

"Luke, my boy." Marcus rises as we approach, his smile sharper than the crease in his tailored suit. "I trust your performance went well?"

"Very well, sir." I take my seat, noting how he's positioned himself to face the rest of the terrace. Everything is calculated with Marcus, down to sight lines and power positions.

A server appears with mimosas, and Marcus raises his in a toast. "To success, in all its forms."

There's something in the way he says it that makes the hair on my neck stand up. I've seen that look before—it's the look he gets right before acquiring another company.

"Speaking of success," he continues, setting down his glass, "how is your father?"

My jaw tightens. "He's focused on his business. Still rebuilding after the fire last

year.”

“Ah yes, the fire.” Marcus’s sympathetic expression doesn’t reach his eyes. “Terrible timing, with that balloon payment coming due.”

Crystal shifts beside me, suddenly very interested in her menu. She knows. Of course, she knows.

“I’m sure he’ll work something out. Maybe with the banks, he has a couple of bankers on the board,” I say carefully.

Marcus cuts into his Eggs Benedict, the yolk bleeding across his plate like a warning. “Banks can be so... inflexible. Especially with companies that have suffered recent setbacks.”

And there it is.

“I’m sure my father appreciates your concern,” I manage.

“More than concern, Luke.” He dabs his mouth with a napkin. “I’m not the only person concerned about your father’s... current state of mind.” He glances over at me casually. “I’m willing to possibly renegotiate our contract. Give your father some time to come up with the payment. Allow him to keep Sterling Motors in business where it belongs.”

My stomach churns as his words don’t ring true, probably because I can read the ruthless greed in his eyes.

“Of course,” he continues, “family looking after family would be the ideal situation. Crystal tells me you two have been getting serious.”

Crystal beams perfectly on cue. I force myself not to pull away when she leans into me.

“We’re taking things slow,” I say.

“Time is a luxury some can’t afford.” Marcus’s smile doesn’t waver, but his eyes are cold. “Your father’s payment is due in what, a couple of months? It would be such a shame if Sterling Motors had to be broken up and sold off piece by piece. All those employees—all that history...”

The threat hangs in the air. I think of my father, who used to work sixteen-hour days, who is now trying to save the company, and how he’d object if he knew I was letting myself be manipulated like this.

My hands clench into fists. “My father is still in charge—“

“Yes, for now.” Marcus cuts in smoothly. “Of course, it would only require a majority vote by the board to change that.”

His meaning is clear. Damn him. But my father insists that the board is loyal to him—

“More mimosa?” Crystal chirps, oblivious to—or deliberately ignoring—the tension.

“No.” I stand abruptly. “I should go. I need to get to the sound studio.”

“But Luke—“ Crystal starts, and I cut her off.

“Stay Crystal. I’ll find my own way home.” I turn to leave, ready for this brunch to be over.

“Luke.” Marcus’s voice stops me. “Carefully consider what’s at stake here. Some opportunities only come around once.”

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I meet his gaze, seeing for the first time what I've been trying to ignore—the predator behind the polished facade.

“I'll tell my father you send your regards,” I say stiffly.

Eleven

Lila

Emily calls just as I'm finishing my shift at the bakery: “Hi, Lila. Are you free tomorrow afternoon? I have a shopping emergency!”

“Is everything okay?? I ask, wondering what constitutes a shopping emergency for someone who could probably buy the entire store if she wanted.

“There's a charity event this weekend, and Kendrick and I both need a new dress. You need one, too, because you're coming withus!”

I blink. “I am?” I stammer.

“Yes! Wild's annual children's hospital benefit. No arguments—I already have your ticket.”

Before I can protest, she states firmly, “Don't worry about the dress. It's my treat. Consider it payment for all the amazing pastries you've been feeding us.’

“Emily, that's too much. You've already helped me with the apartment as well as

some catering connections.”

“Please? Kendrick and I need someone normal there. These events can be... pretentious.”

I think about declining, but honestly, the thought of getting dressed up sounds fun. And maybe a tiny part of me wants to see Luke in a tux.

“Okay,” I respond. “But I’m buying lunch.”

“It’s a deal! We’ll pick you up at 1 o’clock. Wear comfortable shoes!”

The next day, Kendrick’s sleek SUV pulls into my driveway right on time. She and Emily both look effortlessly chic in their designer jeans and fitted shirts.

“Ready for some retail therapy?” Emily asks as I climb in.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I say quietly, as what red-blooded American girl doesn’t like to go clothes shopping?

“So, we were thinking San Marco,” Kendrick says as she pulls into the street. “There’s this boutique that has the most amazing selection.”

“The stylists there are miracle workers,” Emily says, turning to look at me in the back seat. “I was there last month looking like a sleep-deprived mom zombie, and somehow, they made me look like a human being again.”

Kendrick snorts, and I laugh, relaxing into the comfortable leather seat, stating, “I could use some of that magic. I tried to jog the other morning and ended up only speed walking instead. So much for getting in shape.”



“Oh please,” Emily rolls her eyes. “Your curves look amazing. Meanwhile, I’m still trying to lose these last few baby pounds, and soon Presley will be a year old.”

We share a laugh, and the drive quickly passes as we chat about everything and nothing. They both have a way of making me feel comfortable, as if I’ve known them forever. By the time we pull into San Marco’s upscale shopping district, I’ve almost forgotten to be nervous about the prices.

Almost.

The boutique looks exactly like the place where I’d normally press my nose against the window and keep walking. But Kendrick and Emily march right in, obviously regular customers.

“Emily and Kendrick.” A woman glides toward us. “What can I help you with today?”

“Hi, Caroline. This is our friend Lila. We each need a gown for Saturday’s gala.”

Caroline’s professional assessment makes me want to stand up straighter. “Lovely. We have some new pieces that would be perfect.”

What follows is like a scene from a movie. Caroline and another stylist named Janet bring dress after dress into our private fitting rooms. They instinctively understand what works for different body types.

“Try this one,” Janet says, holding up a deep emerald gown. “The ruching will highlight your curves beautifully.”

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I take the dress. It's gorgeous, but the idea of wearing it—of owning a dress like this—makes my stomach twist. I glance nervously at Emily. "I don't know..."

"Lila, just try it on," she says, giving me a gentle nudge toward the fitting room.

I step into the dress, the fabric cool and smooth against my skin. When I catch sight of myself in the mirror, I barely recognize the woman staring back at me.

"Holy shit," Emily breathes as I emerge.

"Wow," Kendrick says, her eyes widening as she takes me in. "Lila, you look incredible."

The gown hugs every curve without being tight. The color makes my skin glow, and my eyes look more green than hazel. The sweetheart neckline shows just enough cleavage to be sexy but still elegant.

"This is probably way too expensive," I smooth my hands over the silk.

"It's perfect is what it is," Emily declares. "We'll take it."

"Emily—"

"Nope. Not hearing it. You look amazing, and if certain people's jaws don't hit the floor when they see you in this, I'll eat my designer clutch."

I blush, knowing exactly which 'certain people' she means.

“Your turn,” I say quickly, turning to her and Kendrick and changing the subject.

Emily tries on several dresses before finding ‘the one’—a sapphire blue goddess gown that makes her look like she just stepped off a red carpet.

“Blue’s always been my favorite,” she says, twirling in front of the mirror. “Makes me feel like myself.”

“It’s stunning,” I agree. “Sam won’t know what hit him.”

She grins. “That’s the idea.”

Kendrick’s willowy figure looks great in whatever she tries on, but when she steps out in a black gown with a high slit up the side, we’re all in agreement that it’s the perfect gown for her.

Kendrick grins. “Yes, I’ll take it.” As the sales clerk walks away, Kendrick’s grin spreads wider. “Ladies, we need shoes!”

Two hours later, we collapsed at a café with numerous shopping bags at our feet.

“Thank you,” I say softly, looking at both of them. “Not just for the dress, but for... including me in all this.”

Emily reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. “Thank you for coming. These events can be dull, with lotsof fake smiles and politics. It’s nice having someone real there. Right, Kendrick?”

“Absolutely,” Kendrick nods in agreement, giving me a warm smile.

I think about Luke, Crystal, and her father and all the complications I don’t

understand about his life.

“How do you guys deal with it?” I ask. “The spotlight, the expectations?”

Both are quiet for a moment. It’s Kendrick who answers softly, “You find your truth and hold onto it. The rest is just noise.”

“And if you’re not sure what your truth is?”

Emily leans forward this time, her eyes knowing. “Then you wait until you are, Lila. The right path usually becomes clear, even if it’s not the easy one.”

I nod, thinking about green silk and light blue eyes and all the complicated feelings tangled up between them.

“Now,” Emily says brightly, “let’s talk about hair and makeup. We know this amazing stylist...”

The ballroom of the Ritz-Carlton sparkles like something out of a fairy tale. Crystal chandeliers cast golden light over everything, making even the champagne bubbles seem to glitter. Emily wasn’t kidding about the glamour—I’ve never seen so many designer dresses and diamond necklaces in one place. I’m glad I’m walking in with Sam and Emily.

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“You look amazing,” Emily whispers, squeezing my arm as we make our entrance. “Own it.”

I try to channel her confidence, keeping my spine straight and chin up. The emerald silk whispers against my skin with each step, and I have to admit, I feel beautiful.

—Until I see them.

Luke and Crystal are holding court near the back of the room. He’s devastating in a black tux that fits him like sin. Crystal, in a slinky red dress that draws attention, hangs on his arm, looking every inch the society princess she is.

They look perfect together, like they belong in this world of wealth and influence.

I turn away, forcing myself to smile as Emily and Sam introduce me to what feels like half of Jacksonville and Amelia Island’s elite. Most blur together in a parade of expensive suits until—

“And this is James Harrison,” Emily says. “James, this is my friend Lila Jeffers.”

The man before me is classically handsome. He has dark hair with just a touch of gray at the temples and a smile that suggests he’s used to getting what he wants. His eyes appreciate the way my dress fits without being sleazy about it.

“The chef Emily’s been raving about,” he says, taking my hand. “I hear your food is extraordinary.”

“That’s very kind.” I pull my hand back, but he holds on a moment longer than necessary.

“Not kind at all. Simply accurate.” His smile widens. “Would you care to dance?”

I hesitate, glancing involuntarily toward Luke. He’s watching us, his expression unreadable as Crystal chatters to someone beside him.

“I’d love to,” I hear myself say.

James leads me onto the dance floor as the band starts a slow jazz number. He’s an excellent dancer, guiding me smoothly through the steps.

“So tell me,” he says, “how did you end up in Amelia Island, or are you from Jacksonville?”

I find myself relaxing into the conversation. James is charming and genuinely interested in hearing about my new business. When he mentions he sits on several charity boards, I feel a thrill of possibility.

“You should come by the bakery sometime,” I say. “Try our baked goods.”

“I’d like that.” His hand slides slightly lower on my back. “Perhaps we could discuss business opportunities over dinner afterward?”

From the corner of my eye, I see Luke watching us. His jaw is tight, and he’s barely paying attention to whatever Crystal is saying.

Good, some petty part of me thinks. Let him see what it feels like.

I laugh at something James says, tilting my head back just enough to show off my

neck. Two can play this game of perfect couples and public appearances.

“You’re quite beautiful when you laugh,” James murmurs.

“And you’re quite good at giving compliments,” I counter.

“Years of practice.” He spins me in a gentle turn. “Though it’s easier when they’re true.”

The song ends, but he doesn’t let go. “Another dance?”

I should say no. I should mingle, network, and do all the things I came here to do. Instead, I nod, letting him pull me closer as a new song begins.

“What about you?” I ask, tilting my head. “What brings you here tonight?”

He smiles, his gaze warm. “A little philanthropy, a little business. Mostly, I’m here to enjoy myself. And right now, I’d say I’m doing just that.”

There’s an appreciative glint in his eyes that helps soothe my battered ego. He’s attractive, sure, and clearly wants to get to know me. But even as we dance, I feel a pang of guilt. This isn’t about James—it’s about Luke. I can’t stop comparing myself to Crystal, and I can’t shake the jealousy that coils in my chest every time I see them together.

Still, I force myself to smile, laugh at James’ easy banter, and pretend I’m not watching Luke out of the corner of my eye.

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“I have a table at Coast next weekend,” he says. “Best seafood on the island. Join me?”

Before I can answer, a familiar voice cuts in. “Mind if I steal my neighbor for a dance?”

Luke stands beside us, all careful polish and barely contained tension. James looks between us, reading something in Luke’s expression that makes him step back with a knowing smile.

“Of course.” He brings my hand to his lips. “Think about dinner, Lila. I’ll be in touch.”

Luke’s hand replaces James’s on my waist, and suddenly I can barely breathe. We move together like we’ve done this a thousand times, like our bodies remember each other even if we’re pretending they don’t.

“Having fun?” His voice is low, almost dangerous.

“Yes, actually. James is quite charming.”

“James is also quite connected to most of the well-known charities. As well as head of the Jacksonville Magazine.” His fingers tighten slightly. “I’m sure he’d be more than willing to promote your services—for a price.”

I feel heat creep up my neck, embarrassment mixing with anger. “Like you’re one to talk about complicated relationships.”



He flinches like I've slapped him. "That's different."

"Is it?" I meet his eyes. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks pretty similar. Public appearances, calculated moves, everyone playing their parts."

"Lila—"

"You should get back to Crystal," I cut him off. "Wouldn't want to start any tongues wagging."

I pull away, ignoring the way my body protests the loss of contact. His hand catches my wrist.

"You look beautiful tonight," he says softly. "That color... I couldn't take my eyes off you."

"I noticed... and probably so did your girlfriend." I gentle my tone. "Let me go, Luke. Please."

He does, physically, at least. But I feel his gaze following me as I weave through the crowd to join Emily and Sam.

I notice James subtly follow me. Am I setting him up for heartbreak, knowing I only want Luke, or am I the one destined to get hurt? No matter what, I decide that if James asked me to dance again—I'm not going to turn him down.

Twelve

Luke

She's killing me in that emerald silk.

I've been watching Lila all evening, even when I shouldn't be, even with Crystal's perfectly manicured hand resting possessively on my arm. Every time Lila moves, the fabric catches the light, highlighting curves that make my mouth go dry. Her hair falls in soft waves around her shoulders, and whatever makeup she's wearing makes her eyes look huge and luminous.

"Luke?" Crystal's voice cuts through my distraction. "The governor's wife asked you a question."

I drag my attention back to the conversation, pasting on my practiced smile. "I'm sorry, ma'am. You were saying?"

But my focus splinters again when I see James Harrison approach Lila. I know his reputation well—board member of half the charities in town, as well as the magazine. He's also notorious for using both positions to his advantage. The way he looks at Lila like she's his next conquest makes something dark and possessive twist in my gut.

"Up for another dance?" I hear him ask her.

Don't say yes, I think silently. But she glances my way first, something flashing in her eyes that looks like a challenge, and accepts his hand.

Crystal's fingers dig into my bicep. "Luke, you're staring."

"Just making sure Lila is alright," I mutter, but I can't look away as Harrison leads Lila onto the dance floor.

"Luke, she's your neighbor—not your responsibility." Crystal's tone drips with annoyance. "I see the Prestons by the bar. I should say hello."

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She sashays away, leaving me to my own personal hell of watching Harrison's hands on Lila's waist. He's holding her too close, whispering something that makes her laugh—that full, throaty laugh I used to hear across our deck at night. The one I haven't heard in a while.

I down my whiskey in one burning gulp, signaling for another.

“Easy there, Luke.” Nate materializes beside me.

“I'm fine.”

“Sure you are.” He follows my gaze to where Harrison is spinning Lila in a graceful turn. “You know he's got connections at every major publication in North Florida, right? Could be good for her business.”

“Or he could be looking to add another notch to his belt,” I growl.

Nate raises an eyebrow. “And that would be your business because...?”

Because she's mine, the thought comes unbidden, dangerous in its intensity. Except she's not mine. I made sure of that when I let Marcus dictate my life—when I chose obligation over what my heart really wants.

“I need some air,” I mutter.

But instead of heading to the terrace, I find myself stationed near the entrance watching as Harrison monopolizes Lila's attention, as his hands drift lower on her

back, and she again tilts her head back, laughing at some witty remark of his.

I've been standing there too long, staring at them like an idiot, when I see Lila excuse herself. She says something to James, her hand brushing his arm lightly before she walks toward the far side of the room. I watch as she heads for the hallway, slipping through the door that leads to the powder room.

Without thinking, I set my drink down on the nearest table and follow her.

The hallway is quieter, the noise of the party fading as I move farther from the ballroom. Finding the door leading to the stairwell, I lean against the wall to wait for Lila.

A few minutes later, I catch sight of her. Just as she exits the powder room, my pulse quickens. I know I shouldn't be doing this. I should go back, find Crystal, and pretend I didn't just spend the last hour watching another woman. But I can't.

Just before Lila reaches the entrance to the ballroom, I catch her arm, pulling her into the private stairwell. She gasps as I crowd her against the wall, one hand braced beside her head.

"Luke! What are you—"

"He's using you," I say roughly. "You know that, right? Using your business aspirations to get close to you."

"So what if he is?" Her hazel eyes flash. "At least that's better than what you're doing. Right?"

The accusation hits like a physical blow because she's right. What am I doing? What right do I have to feel this surge of jealousy, this desperate need to stake a claim?

“I—“ I start, but she cuts me off.

“No, you don’t get to do this. You don’t get to play my protector while you’re out there with Crystal, looking like society’s next power couple.”

“It’s not what you think,” I say, even though I don’t exactly know what it is anymore.

“Isn’t it?” Her eyes narrow. She glances at my arm, penning her in, then up at me. “You’re here with a date.”

“That’s different,” I snap before I can stop myself.

Her laugh is sharp, almost bitter. “Different how? Because you’re ‘seeing’ Crystal? Because she fits into your world? Or is it just different because you say so?”

“It’s different because I can’t stop thinking about you,” I say, my voice rough. “Even when I’m with her, even when I know I shouldn’t, you’re all I think about.”

My hands go out and roughly pull Lila toward me, crushing her lips with mine. She goes straight to my head, and the whole world tilts, and I forget where we are. All I’m aware of is the soft, lush woman in my arms. Her scent, her warmth. Still keeping her pressed against the wall, I lean my weight on her, my hands roaming her generous curves.

Bending down, I press my mouth against her neck as I growl out her name, “Lila.”

I cup her breast through her gown, feeling its weight in my palm. My thumb rubs her nipple through the silk fabric, feeling it pebble. While my other hand roams from her waist over the curve of her ass, grinding her against me, letting her feel my body’s hard response. My mouth goes back to ravishing hers while I deftly gather the length of her skirt in my free hand, pulling it up around her waist. My other hand leaves her

breast to delve between her thighs, finding her hot core.

I press my fingers in a circulator motion against the crotch of her panties, increasing the pressure with each pass.

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While my hand stays busy below, I reluctantly raise my head from her lips. Allowing her to catch her breath before I immediately cover her lips again, sliding my tongue against hers to cover her soft whimpers. She's like a drug, and I can't seem to get enough of her, leaning even more of my weight against her, keeping her pinned in place.

I know I should stop, but I'm too far gone, my fingers slipping under the slim barrier of her silk panties and finding her wet and aching for me. Without slowing, I press a finger deep inside her, then another, pumping into her as I bring her to the edge of her desire. As my lips release hers, she lifts her head back, her eyes closed and I watch as her face flushes in the dim light. I continue to work her, knowing she's close—wanting to see her face when she comes.

Her breathing grows harsh, and then I feel her clamp down on my fingers, but I continue to finger fuck her until she comes on my hand. A shudder coursing through her body. As I hold her, there's a sudden hollow sound in the distance. A door to the stairwell opens and then closes, harshly startling us both back to an awareness of our surroundings.

Lila's eyes suddenly fly open, and when she finds me staring directly into her eyes, her face flushes an even deeper red as she pulls herself angrily out of my arms. Without looking at me she silently straightens her gown. Then she lifts her chin, glancing around the dimly lit stairwell before she turns and opens the door, cautiously checking the hallway. Without another word or look in my direction, she sweeps regally out of the stairwell and into the hall. I watch her as she heads silently back to the powder room.

I stand there for a moment or two, hating myself for that brief look of shame that covered her face. Whether from allowing me to touch her so intimately in a public place or the fact that my girlfriend is somewhere in the next room, I'm not sure.

Glancing around in distaste at the grimy stairwell and the marked-up walls. A sudden thought hits me, and my heart thuds loudly in my ears as I glance hurriedly toward the ceiling, checking for cameras. Not seeing any monitoring devices, I gratefully let out the horrified breath I'm holding.

Finally, convincing myself I've waited long enough, I warily step into the hallway and walk casually toward the men's room. When I stride back into the ballroom a few minutes later, I find Crystal waiting impatiently by the bar. As I approach her, my eyes discreetly search the room for another woman—Lila, but I don't find her anywhere. She's gone.

"There you are, Luke," Crystal says stiffly, allowing me to see her displeasure. "I was wondering where you'd gone."

"Sorry. Did you get a chance to talk to the Prestons?" I ask her, knowing that will take her mind off my disappearance.

She smiles. "Yes, they invited us to dinner..."

Crystal continues to tell me about her conversation with the Prestons, but my mind is on Lila. I didn't mean for things to go that far. But remembering the look on her face, how responsive she was, and the way she felt in my arms—I don't regret it. None of it.

Glimpsing a flash of blonde hair, my chest tightens. It's Lila. She's talking quietly with Emily and Kendrick at a corner table. She seems almost subdued; gone is her cheerful, bubbly disposition. The way she animatedly talks with her hands. Instead,



she holds herself stiffly, her shoulders slumped, keeping her eyes carefully averted, and I hate myself a little more. Knowing I'm the one who did this to her—made her feel this way.

My eyes flick back to Crystal, and I give a cursory nod, still not registering a single word. I need to get out of this situation. Extricate myself from this ridiculous arrangement with Crystal and her father.

Knowing I can't bail on my father or his company—but even he wouldn't want me to abandon my convictions just to save the family business. Besides, who am I saving it for? I think with a bitter laugh. I don't have any interest in the company. No, I'm doing this for my father and the employees. I don't want his company to go under, not if I can help it.

I'm suddenly aware of Crystal looking at me and waiting for me to respond.

“What did you say?” I murmur, giving her my attention.

“I said, Daddy's just trying to help.”

“Is that what you call it?”

She grabs my arm. “What he's proposing could solve everything. Your father's company would be safe, and we could be together—“

“Is that what you want?” I turn to face her. “Really? Or is it just what your father wants?”

Something flickers in her eyes—doubt, hope, or maybe even hurt. But it's gone so fast I might have imagined it.

“What I want,” she says carefully, “is what’s best for everyone.”

I shake my head. “No. What you want is what’s best for Marcus Davidson.”

“Luke—“

“Are you about ready to go,” I cut her off. “Because I am. I just need to say goodbye to my friends.”

She insists on coming with me, of course. But her perfect facade is finally showing cracks. You’d never know it by the plastic smile on her face as she smiles sweetly and gives everyone a wave. Everyone but Lila who stiffly nods as we say our goodbyes. Not once meeting my eyes.

In the car, I grip the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white, trying to figure out how everything got so twisted.

I narrow my eyes, remembering Marcus’s words. Time is a luxury some can’t afford.

Two months—I have two months to figure out how to save my father’s company without selling my soul in the process.

Thirteen

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Lila

My fingers trace my lips for the hundredth time, remembering. The heat of Luke's mouth, the press of his body, the desperate way he held me in his arms and touched me—bringing me to...

No. Stop it.

I force my attention back to my weekly schedule. It's been two weeks since the charity, and I've managed to avoid Luke completely—helped by the fact that Wild has been touring up and down the East Coast. Every time I see news about their shows in Charlotte or Atlanta, I pretend my heart doesn't skip a beat.

Between my morning shifts at Beach Bites and the growing list of private clients, I barely have time to breathe—which is exactly how I want it. Staying busy means not thinking about what happened at the charity. And it definitely means not remembering how Luke's hands felt...

"There you are!" Emily's voice makes me jump. She's standing in Beach Bite's tiny break room doorway, Presley on her hip. "What's so fascinating?"

"Just organizing next week's private events," I tell her. Then, excitedly, "I picked up three new clients at the charity, by the way. Thank you for inviting me."

"Uh-huh." She settles into the chair across from me. "And that's definitely what had you looking all dreamy just now. New clients."

“Emily...”

“Come on! You still haven’t told us what happened that night. One minute, you were dancing with James Harrison; the next, you disappeared, and when you returned, you looked like you had lost your best friend.”

I focus on my color-coded planner. “Nothing happened.”

“Kendrick saw Luke follow you into that hallway.”

Heat creeps up my neck. “It wasn’t—we just talked.” I try not to remember how Luke’s hands felt sliding up my sides, how he growled my name against my throat as he...

“Uh-huh,” Emily grins knowingly. “You just... talked.”

“Can we please change the subject?” I beg. “Tell me about the tour. How’s the band doing?”

She lets me deflect, but her knowing look says this conversation isn’t over. Emily updates me on Wild’s latest shows. Sometimes, I forget how busy she must be, managing such a popular band and with a baby. She makes it look effortless.

“Now, back to Luke—“ Just hearing his name makes my heart lurch.

“Lila, can you give me a hand?!” Ruth Ann, Beach Bite’s owner, calls from the front.

“Saved by the bell,” I say, standing quickly.

But Emily follows me. “You know you’ll have to face him eventually, right? He lives next door.”

“Not if I perfect my ninja-like stealth skills.” I tie my apron. “Besides, I’m too busy for... complications. My private chef business is finally taking off.”

It’s true. James Harrison’s magazine feature brought in several high-end clients, though I’ve been carefully dodging his dinner invitations. Between morning shifts here and evening events, my schedule is packed.

“Speaking of business,” Emily says casually, “Wild’s doing a private Jacksonville show next weekend. They need catering for the afterparty.”

My hands freeze on my apron strings. “No.”

“Lila—“

“I can’t, Emily. Please don’t ask me to.”

She sighs. “You can’t avoid him forever. Whatever happened between you two—“

“Nothing happened!” But even I can hear the lie in my voice because everything happened in that stairwell. Every brush of his lips, every intimate touch, changed everything.

And nothing at all. Because he’s still with Crystal, still trapped in whatever complicated mess makes up their relationship. And I’m still here, trying to build something real while pretending I don’t feel the ghost of his hands on my skin every time I close my eyes.

“Fine,” Emily says softly. “I’ll find another caterer. But Lila? Sometimes, the important things are worth fighting for.”

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I watch her leave, Presley waving bye-bye over her shoulder. My phone buzzes with a text from my newest client, reminding me about tonight's dinner party.

The charity might have been a disaster in some ways, but it also opened doors for me professionally.

I type out a quick reply, then put my phone away. For a moment, I let myself feel the small thrill of accomplishment. My hard work is paying off. My dream of building a private chef business is starting to become a reality.

This is what I should be focusing on. Building my business. Making my dreams happen. Not the way Luke tasted that night, the way he said he couldn't stop thinking about me.

But as I head back to the front counter, I can't help but think about his desperate touch and hungry kisses one more time.

Some things, it turns out, are impossible to forget.

A few days later, my phone rings just as I'm finishing inventory at Beach Bites. Kendrick's name flashes on the screen.

"Hey, I need a huge favor," she says without preamble. "How fast can you pull together a dinner party for twenty?"

I check my watch. "When?"

“Tonight?” Her voice rises apologetically. “The caterer just bailed, and it’s for Pixie Cane—“

“The Pixie Cane?” My voice squeaks embarrassingly.

“She’s in town visiting. She’s got a bit of a foul mouth, and whatever she said—anyway, please tell me you can help. She’ll pay double your usual rate.”

I should say no. My prep time would be tight, but it’s Pixie Cane! “Text me the details. I’ll need Jenny to help serve.”

“You’re a lifesaver!” Kendrick pauses. “Her rental house is right on the beach. Very private, very exclusive.”

Three hours later, Jenny and I pull up to a modern glass mansion that costs more per night than I could ever afford. Security checks our credentials before waving us through.

“Holy shit,” Jenny whispers as we unload our supplies. “Is that Pixie Cane’s Ferrari?”

Before I can answer, the front door flies open. “Thank my fucking stars, the food people are here!”

Pixie Cane bounces down the steps, all five-foot-nothing of her vibrating with energy. Her dark hair has hot pink streaks, and she’s wearing ripped jeans with a vintage t-shirt that screams famous pop star.

“You must be Lila!” She hugs me like we’re old friends. “Kendrick says you’re a culinary genius. Please tell me you brought appetizers because these bitches will be hangry.”

I can't help but laugh at her enthusiasm. "Everything's prepped and ready to go. Just point me to the kitchen."

"Through here, chef!" She loops her arm through mine. "Fair warning—this crowd gets rowdy. Last dinner party I hosted, someone ended up in the pool... naked." She turns, glancing at me sideways. "Don't fuck this up, okay?"

"I won't," I assure her, smiling.

The kitchen is a chef's dream—all gleaming stainless steel and marble countertops.

Pixie is brash and unapologetically foul-mouthed, but there's a warmth to her that makes it impossible not to like her.

"Just keep the drinks flowing," she says, smirking as she refills her martini glass. "And make sure the food tastes better than my first album—shouldn't be that hard."

Jenny shoots me a wide-eyed look, trying not to laugh as we quickly set up, laying out appetizers as the first guests start arriving.

I'm garnishing the last plate when I hear familiar voices in the foyer.

No. Kendrick wouldn't.

But of course, she would. Because there's Luke, looking unfairly gorgeous in dark jeans and a gray henley that shows off every chiseled muscle, and my chest tightens. Right behind him are the rest of the Wild Band: Kendrick and Cass, Nate, and Vince. Sam and Emily bring up the rear. She and Kendrick shoot me an innocent look.

"I'm going to kill them," I mutter.



“What?” Jenny asks.

“Nothing. Let’s get these hors d’oeuvres out.”

For the next hour, I focus on timing courses and plating dishes, steadfastly ignoring the way Luke’s eyes follow me around the room. The other guests are a mix of musicians and industry people—I recognize at least three Grammy winners among them.

“This is fucking amazing,” Pixie announces, holding up a bacon-wrapped date. “Kendrick, where have you been hiding this food goddess?”

“Right next door to Luke, actually,” Kendrick says innocently, sharing a knowing glance with Emily. Some friends they are, I think, sourly.

I shoot them a death glare as I serve the main course—pan-seared sea bass with Mediterranean quinoa.

“No shit?” Pixie’s dark eyes sparkle with interest. “Lucky boy.”

“Very lucky,” Luke murmurs quietly, his eyes on me, and I nearly drop his plate.

Our fingers brush as I set it down, sending electricity up my arm. I move on quickly, but I feel his gaze burning into my back.

“Seriously,” Pixie continues between bites, “this is better than that Michelin-starred place in LA. You should do my tour catering.”

I laugh, thinking she's joking, but she points her fork at me. "I'm serious. My current guy can't make a decent risotto to save his life."

"I... that's very flattering, but—"

"But nothing. We'll talk numbers later." She turns to Cass. "Remember that shit they tried to feed us in Miami?"

The conversation moves on, but my head is spinning. Tour catering? For Pixie Cane?

"Lila," Jenny whispers. "The desserts?"

Right. Focus. I head back to the kitchen, only to find Luke already there, allegedly getting more beer.

"Lila, this is amazing," he says softly. "The food, the way you handle yourself... you deserve all of this."

"Luke—"

"I miss you." His voice is rough. "These past two weeks, not seeing you..."

"Don't." I grip the edge of the counter. "Please. I can't—"

"Yo, food goddess!" Pixie's voice carries from the dining room. "Where's that chocolate thing everyone promised would change my life?"

Saved by the pop star. I grab the dessert plates, brushing past Luke without meeting his eyes.

"Holy shit, this is orgasmic," Pixie moans around her first bite of chocolate lava cake.

“I’m not even kidding about the tour thing. Call my people.”

She slides a business card across the table with her manager’s contact info. Actual, legitimate tour catering. The kind of opportunity that could launch my business to a whole new level.

I pocket the card, trying to stay professional while my heart does backflips.

Pixie suddenly raises her martini glass in a rare moment of seriousness. “To Kendrick Wild. For writing the best fucking song on my album. It’s been number one on the charts for months now.”

The guest all raise their glasses, joining in on the toast. I glance at Kendrick in surprise. I didn’t know she was a songwriter. She blushes prettily, giving a modest nod, while Cass beams his pride beside her. Their eyes meet, and the obvious love they share makes my heart twist.

Jenny helps me clean up as the party gradually moves to the deck, music and laughter drifting in through the open doors.

“That was intense,” Jenny says, loading the dishwasher.

“The crowd or the service?”

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“The way Luke Sterling kept looking at you.” She raises an eyebrow. “Want to talk about it?”

“Nothing to talk about.” I wipe down the counter with more force than necessary.

“Oh my God, he’s the guy in the band that texted you—“

“We’re neighbors. That’s all.”

“Uh-huh.” She doesn’t sound convinced. “Well, your ‘neighbor’ is headed this way.”

I turn to see Luke in the doorway, devastatingly handsome in the soft kitchen light.

“Lila—“

“Jenny, can you take these leftovers out to the car?” I hand her the containers, ignoring Luke. “I’ll finish up here.”

But when Jenny leaves, the kitchen feels too small, too intimate. Luke steps closer, and I catch the faint scent of his cologne.

“Congratulations on the tour offer,” he says. “You deserve it.”

“Thank you.” I keep my voice neutral and professional.

“Lila, come on—at least look at me.”

I can't. Because if I do, I'll remember everything—the kiss, his hands, the way he made me feel like I was burning alive.

"I can't do this right now," I say, trying not to sound desperate. "Please, Luke—I'm working."

I make it to the doorway before his voice stops me.

"I'm trying to end things with Crystal."

My heart stutters, and my steps falter, but I don't turn around. "Trying?"

He sighs, "It's—"

"Complicated," I finish for him. "Yeah, I know."

I walk away with a sad little smile, my heels clicking on the marble floors, trying to convince myself the ache in my chest is just professional pride in a job well done.

But we both know that's a lie.

Fourteen

Luke

I've been sitting at my keyboard for an hour, but nothing comes. No melody, no progression, just memories of Lila in that stairwell and later in Pixie's kitchen three nights ago, looking everywhere but at me. Damn, what was I thinking, cornering her like that? Telling her I was trying to end things with Crystal? As if that would mean anything to her. As if she'd want to hear that from me while I'm still tangled in this mess.

“Real smooth, asshole,” I mutter, getting up from my keyboard.

Now, all I can do is give her space. She deserves that much.

The problem is space feels impossible. We live in the same duplex, separated by nothing more than a thin wall. Every time I step outside, I half expect to see her tending to her herbs on the front porch or sitting on the back deck with a cup of coffee.

I’ve allowed her to avoid me since the dinner party, which is harder than it should be. And the truth is, I miss her. Not just the tension or the heat between us, but the ease of it—the way we used to talk, sitting out on our deck, laughing over nothing and everything.

I need to fix this. Even if I can’t have her the way I want, I don’t want to lose her as a friend.

The sound of car doors closing draws me to the window. Lila’s pulling grocery bags from her back seat, looking soft and casual in yoga pants and an oversized t-shirt. Her hair’s pulled up in a high ponytail, exposing the curve of her neck where I’d run my lips over her that night at the charity.

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Before I can think better of it, I'm heading to the front porch and to the driveway.

"Need help?" I call out, keeping my distance.

She startles slightly, then offers a careful smile. "I got it, thanks."

"Lila, wait." I rake a hand through my hair. "Can we talk? Just... talk?"

She hesitates, her hands tightening on the bags. "I guess so. But I should put these away first."

"I'll get those," I say, reaching for the bags before she can protest.

"You don't have to," she starts, but I ignore her, grabbing a couple of the heavier ones and following her to her door.

Once the groceries are on the counter, she crosses her arms, leaning back against the counter and raising an eyebrow. "What's up, Luke?"

I shove my hands into my pockets, suddenly unsure where to start. "I wanted to apologize," I say finally. "For the other night."

As her face flushes a deep red, I clarify. "At Pixie's dinner party."

She gives a brief nod, but I can see the wary tension in her shoulders. "What about it?"

I stay where I'm at, giving her space. "I shouldn't have ambushed you like that."

"It's fine."

"No, it's not." I meet her eyes. "You were working—doing your job. Being professional. And I... I made it awkward."

"A little bit, yeah." She crosses her arms, but some of the tension leaves her shoulders. "Maybe more than a little bit—it was distracting and uncomfortable."

She's not wrong, but hearing her say it still stings. I nod, taking a step back to give her even more space. "You're right. And that's on me."

"Luke—"

"I know I screwed up. I know I crossed a line at the charity that I had no right to cross. At least, not until I've ended things with Crystal completely."

Her lips part slightly, and for a moment, she just stares at me, like she's trying to decide whether she believes me. She opens her mouth to respond.

"Just let me finish," I interrupt gently. "I miss you, Lila," I say, my voice rough. "Not just... the other stuff. I miss you as a friend. I miss talking to you. And I don't want to lose that."

I look up, meeting her eyes. I take a deep breath and then continue. "We're next-door neighbors, Lila. And before everything went sideways, we were friends. Good friends. I miss that."

She's quiet for so long I think she might ask me to leave. Then: "I miss that too."



“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Lila turns, putting some of the groceries away. I watch without rushing her. She finally turns to me. “We can be friends,” she says, her voice quiet. “I think we need to be.”

Relief washes over me, but it’s tinged with the ache of knowing it’s not enough. “Thank you,” I say.

She nods, her eyes flicking back to mine. “Is that all?”

“Yeah,” I say, stepping back toward the door. “That’s all. For now.”

That night, I join her on the deck with a six-pack of beer and a hopeful smile.

“What’s this?” she asks, glancing at the beer.

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“Friendly neighborly peace offering,” I say, holding it out to her.

She sighs, but there’s a hint of a smile on her lips. “Fine. But only because it’s been a long day.”

I settle into my chair the evening breeze cool against my skin as we sit side by side in the fading light. For a while, we don’t say much, just sipping our beers and listening to the sound of the waves in the distance.

It feels like old times, but it doesn’t. There’s a weight between us now, an unspoken understanding that things have changed.

“We’re leaving for Cleveland tomorrow,” I say as she takes another sip of her beer. “Ten days, we have a few shows in the Midwest.”

“I saw that on your website.” Her cheeks pink slightly at the admission. “The venues look amazing.”

“Yeah, Emily’s outdone herself.” I glance over at Lila, trying not to notice how good she looks just sitting there. “I heard how your private chef business is booming,” I say with enthusiasm. “That’s huge.”

Her face lights up. “I still can’t believe it. Jenny and I have been working on menus and logistics all week.”

“You’re going to kill it.” I mean it. “The way you handled that dinner party... you were completely in your element.”

“It felt right,” she admits. “Like everything finally clicked into place.”

“Speaking of clicking...” I take a breath. “I need you to know something. About Crystal.”

She stiffens slightly. “Luke, you don’t have to—“

“I do.” I set my beer down. “I’m working on ending things. The right way, not just—It’s complicated with her father and—other things, but I’m figuring it out.”

“Okay.” Her voice is carefully neutral.

“But until I do, until everything’s resolved...” I meet her eyes. “We’re just friends. I won’t cross that line again. It wasn’t fair to you, and you deserve better than stolen moments in stairwells.”

She looks away, but not before I catch the flash of hurt in her eyes. “We both knew what it was.”

“Did we?” I lean forward. “Because I’m pretty sure I’m still trying to figure it out.”

“Luke.” Her voice holds a warning.

“Right. Friends.” I force a lighter tone. “So, tell me about your new clients. I’m sure you’ll soon have everyone eating out of your hand.”

She laughs, and something in my chest eases. We spend the next hour catching up on everything new in our lives—her business plans and the band’s upcoming shows. But underneath it all, there’s a current of awareness. Every accidental brush of hands, every shared laugh that lingers too long... We’re playing at being just friends, but we both know it’s a lie.

Because friends don't notice how the setting sun paints gold across each other's skin—friends don't track every smile, every slight shift of our bodies. Friends don't feel this bone-deep ache to reach out and touch each other.

"I should head in," she says finally. "You know me and early mornings."

"Yeah, me too. Bus leaves at seven."

We stand awkwardly, neither quite sure how to end this new version of us. Finally, she gives me a small smile.

"Have a good tour, Luke."

"Thanks." I stuff my hands in my pockets to keep from reaching for her. "Take care of yourself, Country."

Forcing myself not to want more, I turn and head inside, hearing her door close softly behind me, but I don't look back.

I find myself at my keyboard, fingers hovering over the keys. The melody comes easily this time—a bittersweet progression that captures everything I can't say out loud. About pretending not to want what you can't stop wanting and how sometimes doing the right thing feels exactly like torture.

Some lines, once crossed, leave permanent marks on your soul.

The roar of the crowd is like electricity, a living, breathing force that surges through the arena and into my veins. The energy is addictive, the kind of rush that makes you feel invincible, like you could take on the world and win. The lights are blinding, the bass vibrating in my chest, and every time the audience screams the lyrics back at us, it's a reminder of why we do this.

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Nights like this are everything I've ever wanted—the music, the connection, the high of knowing I'm exactly where I'm meant to be. But as I step offstage, the adrenaline fading into a dull hum, I'm left with the hollow ache of what's missing—Lila.

Even here, hundreds of miles away, she's still in my head. I keep replaying our conversation on the deck, the way she smiled at me, soft and hesitant, like she was holding something back. I miss the way we used to be—the easy way we could talk about anything and how her laugh could make even the most ordinary moments feel special. I wonder if we can ever find our way back to that.

But I can't go to her—not yet. Not until I've figured out how to end this thing with Crystal and Marcus.

Later, after the rest of the band has gone to their bunks or headed out to unwind, I find Nate sitting in the lounge area of the tour bus, his phone in one hand and a glass of whiskey in the other.

“Am I interrupting?” I ask, sitting down.

“Not unless you've got stock tips,” he says, glancing up with a grin.

Leaning back against my chair, I ask, “How's the investment looking?”

“Solid,” he says, setting his glass down. “I've been tracking it every day. We're still on track for a big return. A few more weeks, and we should be golden.”

“Good,” I say, nodding. “I need that to pan out.”

Nate leans back in his chair, studying me. “You okay, man? You’ve been... off lately.”

“Yeah,” I lie, “Just got a lot on my mind.”

He doesn’t push, which is one of the things I appreciate about Nate. He’s not the kind of guy to pry unless he thinks it’s necessary.

“Thanks for keeping an eye on it,” I add, standing. “Let me know if anything changes.”

“Will do,” he says, raising his glass in a mock salute.

The next morning, I seek out Cass on the family bus. He’s already awake despite the early hour.

“Hey, Luke,” he says. “What’s up?”

“I need your help,” I say, getting straight to the point.

He nods, motioning for me to have a seat. After I sit down, he turns to me, his tone serious. “What’s going on?”

“I need someone who can look into Marcus. His business dealings, any skeletons he might be hiding.”

“This about protecting your father’s company?” His eyes are shrewd. “Or about getting free of Marcus’s daughter?”

“Both.” I drop into a chair. “Something’s not right, Cass. The timing’s too perfect, the pressure too calculated.” I sigh, running a hand through my hair. “I don’t trust

Davidson. I've been thinking about it more and more, and I need to find out what he's planning. I also want to look into my dad's business. Just to make sure there's nothing I'm missing."

"Okay," Cass says slowly. "Do you have anyone in mind?"

"Not really," I admit. "I was hoping you might know someone."

"I do, actually," he says. "Jaxson Gibson. He's a PI He's sharp, discreet, and he has handled stuff for us in the past. I think he'd be perfect for this."

Cass pulls out his phone and sends me the contact info. "He's not cheap, but he's the best. And Luke?" His expression turns serious. "Be careful. Men like Marcus Davidson don't take kindly to people poking around their business."

"I need to know what I'm dealing with." I stand, pocketing my phone. "Before he tries to lock me into something I can't get out of," I say firmly. "I'm done playing Marcus's game. Whatever he's hiding, I'm going to find out. And I'm going to fix this, once and for all."

He nods, understanding. "Call Gibson. And Luke? Whatever you find... be ready for it. Men like Marcus rarely play clean."

Fifteen

Lila

The phone rings just as I'm putting the finishing touches on a batch of strawberry shortcakes for Beach Bites. My first instinct is to let it go to voicemail—Luke's name flashing on the screen throws me off balance more than I care to admit. But something stops me.

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I swipe to answer, holding the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“Lila,” he says, his voice rough, tired. There’s noise in the background—voices, movement, the faint hum of a bus engine.

“Luke.” His name feels strange on my lips as if I shouldn’t say it so easily. “What’s going on?”

He exhales the sound heavy. “Sorry to bother you. I know you’re busy. But... I could really use a favor.”

A favor. I shouldn’t feel the soft tug in my chest that his words bring. I shouldn’t feel anything at all. But of course I do. “What is it?”

“It’s my dad.” His voice is tight with worry. “His nurse called. He’s not doing great—nothing emergency room serious,” he adds quickly, “but she’s concerned. He’s not eating, barely leaving his room...”

“Luke—“

“I know it’s a lot to ask,” he cuts in. “And if you’re busy with clients, I completely understand. But you’re so good with people, and food is—well, it’s your thing. I just thought maybe...”

“You want me to check on him?”

“Would you?” The relief in his voice makes my chest ache. “Just... maybe make sure



he eats something? We'll be back tomorrow night, but..."

"Text me the address," I say, already mentally rearranging my schedule—which, thankfully, is clear through the weekend. "I'll head over this morning as soon as I get off."

"You're amazing." His voice softens. "I mean it... thank you. Really."

"Just doing what friends do," I say lightly, ignoring the flutter in my stomach.

"Right. Friends." There's a pause. "Dad's place is just over the Georgia line. About forty minutes north. The nurse, Marie, will be expecting you."

After getting the details and ending the call, I get back to work, but my thoughts keep drifting to Luke and his dad. I wonder what his dad will be like and if it will help me better understand his son. My thoughts are interrupted by a customer, which is just as well. I can't believe how nervous I feel at just the thought of meeting someone so close to Luke.

The drive gives me time to plan. I stop at a market, picking up ingredients for simple, comforting dishes. The kind of food that might tempt someone who's lost their appetite and wants to be left alone.

Sterling Manor sits on several acres, the grounds immaculately maintained even if the house itself has a slightly neglected air. A sturdy woman in scrubs meets me at the door.

"You must be Lila." She smiles warmly. "I'm Marie. Thank you for coming."

"How is he?" I ask, following her inside with my grocery bags.

Her expression falls. “Not good, dear. Since Luke’s mother passed—well, some hearts never quite heal, do they? And this is around the time she passed.”

She leads me through the house—a beautiful home that feels more like a museum, with everything preserved just so as if waiting for someone who’s never coming back.

“He’s in his study,” Marie says softly. “That’s where he spends most of his time lately. Looking at old photos, barely touching his meals...” She eyes my bags, hopefully. “Luke says you’re some kind of food wizard?”

I laugh. “Hardly. Just someone who believes in the power of a good meal.”

“Well, the kitchen’s yours. I’ll let Mr. Sterling know you’re here.”

The kitchen is gorgeous but clearly underused. As I unpack my supplies, I hear Marie’s gentle voice from down the hall: “Mr. Sterling? Luke sent someone to check on you. A friend of his...”

I busy myself preparing a light breakfast—nothing too heavy or complicated. Simple scrambled eggs with fresh herbs, whole grain toast with avocado, and a fruit smoothie packed with nutrients.

“He says he’s not hungry.”

I turn to find Marie in the doorway, looking discouraged.

“Maybe I should try?” I suggest. “Sometimes it’s easier to say no to someone you know well.”

She nods gratefully. “Down the hall, last door on the right. Don’t take it personally if

he's... short with you. Lately, his bad days outweigh his good days.”

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I load everything onto a tray and head for the study. The door is ajar, but I knock anyway.

“Marie, I told you I’m not—“ The man’s voice breaks off as I enter. Jim Sterling looks both exactly like and nothing like I expected. He has Luke’s strong features, but grief has carved deep lines around his eyes and mouth. He sits in a leather chair by the window, a photo album open on his lap.

“You’re not Marie,” he says, frowning.

“No, sir. I’m Lila. Luke asked me to stop by.”

“Ah.” He studies me. “The neighbor girl. The one who cooks.”

“That’s me.” I set the tray on a side table. “I made breakfast.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“That’s okay.” I start arranging the plates anyway. “But I drove forty-five minutes to make you these eggs, and my ego’s a little fragile. Would you mind at least telling me if they’re terrible?”

He eyes me for a long moment, then sighs. “You’re not going to leave until I try them, are you?”

“Probably not,” I admit. “Luke says I can be stubborn.”

Something flickers in his eyes—amusement, maybe. “He would know.”

To my surprise, he actually takes a bite of the eggs. Then another. Soon, he’s finished half the plate.

“These are... quite good,” he says, sounding almost surprised.

“Thank you.” I gesture to the photo album. “May I?”

He hesitates, then nods. I settle into the chair opposite him, and he turns the album so I can see. A beautiful woman with Luke’s light blue eyes smiles up from the pages.

“Sarah,” he says softly. “My wife.”

“She’s lovely.”

“She was everything.” His voice catches. “Some days, I still expect to hear her laughing in the garden or scolding me for tracking mud on her clean floors...”

“Tell me about her?” I ask gently.

He looks startled, then thoughtful. “She loved roses. Grew them everywhere, even though I told her they were too much work. And she made the worst coffee you’ve ever tasted, but she was so proud of it, we all pretended it was perfect...”

As he talks, he continues eating almost absently. When he finishes, I replace his plate with the smoothie.

“Luke says you’re starting your own business?” he asks suddenly.

“Yes, sir. Private chef services.”

“Sarah would have loved that. She was terrible in the kitchen—except for one dish. Her chicken and gravy.” He smiles faintly. “She made it every time Luke or I was sick. Swore it could cure anything.”

“Luke has mentioned his mom’s chicken and gravy,” I reply with a smile. “Maybe I could make it for lunch?”

His eyes mist slightly. “I wish Sarah was here to eat it with me. She always said good food could cure anything.”

We spend the next hour looking through photos while he tells me stories—about Sarah’s beautiful singing voice, Luke’s first piano recital, family vacations and holiday disasters and all the small moments that make up a life.

When Marie checks in, she looks shocked to find Mr. Sterling not only eating but talking and even smiling.

I stay through lunch, making Sarah’s chicken and gravy. I keep it simple but tasty—wanting it to wrap around him like a remembered hug. The sauce is silky smooth, and I smile, remembering how Luke said his mother’s gravy had lumps. Luke’s father eats every bite.

“Luke was right,” Mr. Sterling says as I prepare to leave.

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“About what?”

“About you being good with people.” He pats my hand. “Thank you, dear. For the food, and... for listening.”

“I’ll come back tomorrow.” I offer. “Maybe you can tell me about the time Luke got his head stuck in the stair railings?”

He actually chuckles. “Oh, he’ll hate that.”

On the drive home, I call Luke.

“How is he?” he asks immediately.

“Better than this morning. We had breakfast and lunch. He told me stories about your mom.”

There’s a long pause. “He talked about Mom?”

“A lot, actually. I hope that’s okay?”

“It’s—yeah. It’s more than okay.” His voice is rough. “That’s the first he’s talked about her since—Thank you, Lila. Seriously.”

“Of course.” I hesitate. “I’m going back tomorrow. He promised to show me your embarrassing childhood photos.”

His laugh makes my heart flip. “Of course he did. I’d better warn you, though—I was an incredibly cute kid.”

“I’m sure you were.”

Another pause, heavier this time. “Lila...”

“I should go,” I say quickly. “Traffic is picking up.”

“Right. Thanks again. For everything.”

I end the call and try to ignore the way my hands are shaking. Because this—caring for his father, hearing stories about his childhood, feeling this deep pull to help heal his family’s grief—is dangerous territory for ‘justfriends.’

But as I think about Jim Sterling’s sad eyes lighting up as he talked about his wife, I know I couldn’t have done anything else.

Some things are worth the risk of getting your heart broken.

The morning air is crisp, perfect for sitting outside. It takes some gentle persuasion, but Mr. Sterling finally agrees to join me in the garden.

“Sarah loved this swing,” he says as we settle among the blooming roses. “Said she could solve any problem with enough time sitting in her garden.”

I hand him his coffee—prepared exactly as Marie instructed. “It’s beautiful out here.”

“She’d be happy to see the roses still blooming.” He traces a finger along the swing’s chain. “Not so happy about other things, though.”



“What do you mean?”

He sighs heavily. “The company. Sterling Motors and the mess I’ve made of things.” His eyes grow distant. “Sarah always said I was too trusting. Should’ve listened to her about Marcus Davidson.”

My breath catches, remembering that overheard conversation at the dinner party. About once it goes down, Marcus and his investors will swoop in and take over. Sterling Motors is Luke’s father’s company. I should have guessed.

“When Sarah got sick...” Mr. Sterling’s voice roughens. “The medical bills, the experimental treatments... I’d have sold my soul to save her. Instead, I gave up some of my stock—to Marcus. I also took out a loan I knew would be hard to repay.”

“Mr. Sterling, you don’t have to—“

“And now Luke’s paying for my mistakes.” His hands tighten around his coffee cup. “That’s the real reason he’s with that girl, Crystal, you know. Because Marcus has me—has the company—by the throat, and Luke...” He shakes his head. “It’s not just about the money—My boy’s trying to protect what’s left of the company and the employees. Some of them have been with us for years—they need their retirement.”

My heart aches. “I’m sure Luke doesn’t blame you.”

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“He should. I was desperate, and Marcus knew it. Kept pushing for more shares, more control.” His laugh is bitter. “Sarah would be so angry with me. She never trusted Marcus—said he was a snake in an expensive suit. She didn’t even want him on the board.”

“I’m sure It’s not too late,” I say softly. “To fix things.”

“Maybe.” He looks at me sharply. “I probably shouldn’t have told you all this. Luke wouldn’t want—“

“I won’t say anything,” I promise. “But Mr. Sterling? Luke’s stronger than you think. And he loves you.”

“I know.” He pats my hand. “And please, call me Jim. Anyone who makes Sarah’s chicken and gravy like you has earned that right.”

We sit in companionable silence, the swing creaking gently, surrounded by Sarah’s roses. I think about Luke, the weight he’s been carrying, and all the puzzle pieces finally start falling into place.

No wonder he’s been so careful about ending things with Crystal. It’s more than saving his father’s company—he’s protecting the employees and their retirement. It’s about keeping his father’s dreams from crumbling completely.

“You care about him, don’t you?” Jim’s voice is gentle. “Luke?”

“We’re friends,” I say automatically.

“Mm... hmm.” He smiles faintly. “You know, Sarah used to look at me the same way Luke looks when he talks about you. His friend and neighbor.”

Heat floods my cheeks. “It’s... confusing.”

“Love usually is.” He stands slowly. “Come on. You promised to show me how to make that lemon tart Luke keeps raving about.”

As we head inside, I glance back at the garden. Somewhere among these roses, a woman once sat and worried about her family’s future. I hope, wherever Sarah is now, she knows her son is fighting to protect everything she loved.

No wonder Luke is still seeing Crystal. He’s right—it’s complicated.

Sixteen

Luke

The tour bus hasn’t even fully stopped before I grab my bag. Dad’s nurse called again this morning—not with bad news this time, but to tell me he was sitting in the garden and eating. All thanks to Lila.

“Let me know once you hear anything, Luke,” Cass calls as I head for my Jeep.

The drive to Dad’s place feels endless, even though traffic is light. The second I pull into the driveway of my dad’s house I feel the tension in my chest start to ease. The ten-day tour was grueling—back-to-back shows, interviews, endless hours on the bus—but none of it compared to the weight of knowing Dad wasn’t doing well while I was hundreds of miles away.

Looking at the house, I am aware something feels different. There’s life here

again—curtains drawn back, windows open to the spring breeze, and the faint sound of laughter drifting from the back garden.

I follow the sound, stopping short at what I see. Dad and Lila are sitting on Mom's old garden swing, surrounded by blooming roses. Lila's saying something that makes him laugh—actually laugh—

“Luke!” She spots me first. “You’re back early.”

Seeing Lila in my mom's garden, her golden hair practically glowing in the morning light, makes my heart stutter. The roses Mom planted years ago are still thriving, their vivid reds and pinks standing out against the green hedges. Seeing them always makes my heart ache, yet it soothes me at the same time.

“Couldn’t wait to see what trouble you two were getting into.” I hug my father, noting with relief that he feels stronger and more present than he has in weeks. “You look good, Dad.”

“Feeling better, thanks to this one,” he says, nodding toward Lila. “She’s a miracle worker.”

Lila ducks her head, a faint blush creeping up her cheeks. “Just doing what I can.”

“Well, I appreciate it,” I say, meeting her gaze. “More than you know.”

Her smile slightly falters like there's something on her mind. But before I can ask, Dad shifts in his seat, grunting slightly. “Alright, I’m going to head inside and let you two catch up. Don’t let her leave without saying goodbye.”

I start to help him, but he waves me off. “I’m fine, you two enjoy yourselves.”

We watch him shuffle back toward the house his movements slow but steady. Once he's out of earshot, I turn to Lila. "Thank you," I say again, my voice quieter.

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“You don’t have to thank me,” she says, leaning back in her seat. “I wanted to help.”

“You’ve done more than help,” I say, shaking my head. “You’ve made him smile again. I haven’t seen that in a long time.”

She shrugs, but there’s a softness in her expression that makes my chest tighten.

I settle onto the swing beside her, and when my arm brushes hers, a sizzle goes up my spine, and I’m suddenly aware of how close she is, close enough for me to see the softness of her hair. Close enough to feel a tension radiating off her.

“Lila,” I say, breaking the silence. “Is everything alright?”

She hesitates, her hands twisting in her lap. “There’s something I need to tell you,” she says, her voice low.

I sit up straighter, my stomach tightening at her tone. “What is it?”

She takes a deep breath, her gaze fixed on the roses in front of us. “I overheard something at a dinner party—the first one I catered. A conversation.”

My pulse kicks up, and I nod for her to continue.

“These men were talking about Sterling Motors,” she says, her words measured. “They said it was going under and that they were planning to ‘swoop in and grab it for pennies.’ They mentioned Marcus—said he had it all arranged. And they seemed smug like it was already a done deal.”

The words hit me like a blow to the chest. “They actually said Marcus’s name?”

“Yes,” she says, her eyes meeting mine, and the concern there makes my chest tighten. “And they said certain arrangements had been made, and Sterling Motors wouldn’t be able to fight back.”

“When was this?” I ask.

“About six weeks ago?” She twists her hands together. “I didn’t know then about your connection to Sterling Motors. But after spending time with your dad and hearing about Marcus’s involvement...”

“It fits,” I say grimly. “The timing, the pressure about Crystal...” I stare at her, my mind racing. It’s one thing to suspect Marcus is up to no good—it’s another to have it confirmed.

Lila watches me carefully, her hazel eyes filled with regret. “I didn’t say anything before because I didn’t think it was connected to you. But now—now I understand why you’ve been doing what you’re doing.”

She knows.

She knows about Crystal and why I’ve stayed in this nightmare of a situation. The relief is immediate like a weight being lifted.

“Lila,” I say, my voice raw. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” she says quickly. “I get it now. You’re trying to protect your dad, the company, the employees. But, Luke...” She hesitates, her hand brushing against mine. “You don’t have to do it alone.”

Her words knock the wind out of me.

“I want to help,” she says, her voice firm. “We’ll figure this out together. For your dad, the company, and for you.”

I shake my head, overwhelmed by her offer. “Lila, this isn’t your fight. You’ve already done so much—“

“And I’m not stopping now,” she interrupts, her gaze steady. “You deserve better than this, Luke. You deserve to be free of Marcus and Crystal. You deserve to live your life the way you want to.”

“She’s right, son.” We both look up in surprise to see my dad standing there. He’s obviously overheard us talking.

Lila stands. “I’ll give you two some time—“

“Stay,” I say quickly. “Please?”

Something flickers in her eyes, but she nods. “I’ll make some fresh coffee.”

As soon as she disappears inside, Dad turns to me. “She’s something special, son.”

“Dad—“



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“No, listen.” His voice grows serious. “These past two days, having her here... It reminded me of things I’d forgotten. Important things.”

“Like what?”

“Like how your mother would never have wanted us to let Marcus Davidson destroy everything we built. How you need to live your own life.”

My breath catches. “What all do you know?”

He sits down in the chair across from us. “Not as much as I should. I heard what Lila told you—about Marcus’ investors remarks at that dinner party.”

Before he can continue, Lila returns with coffee.

Leaning back in the swing, I run my hands over my face. “Dad, I was already suspicious of Marcus and hired a private eye to investigate him. Jaxson Gibson and his team. They’ll also be looking at the company’s finances. They should know something soon.”

“Son.” Dad leans forward. “I’ve been a fool. Letting Marcus get his hooks into the company, thinking I could trust him...”

“You were trying to save Mom,” I say softly.

“And now you’re trying to save me.” He shakes his head. “No more. I won’t let you sacrifice your happiness for my mistakes.”

“It’s not that simple—“

“Actually,” Lila cuts in, “maybe it is.” We both look at her. “Sorry, but... you’re both so focused on what you might lose, you’re not seeing what you have.”

“Which is?” I ask.

“Evidence.” Her eyes light up the way they do when she’s planning a complicated menu. “Think about it. Those men at the party were talking about arrangements already being made. If we or the investigator can prove that Marcus is deliberately trying to tank the company...”

“Yes, of course,” Dad says, sitting straighter now. “But we’ll need concrete proof. Documents, recordings...”

“What was that PI you mentioned?” Dad asks me. “Gibson?”

“I’m meeting with him tomorrow.” I run a hand through my hair. “But what if we don’t find anything...”

“Then we fight,” Dad says firmly. “United this time. No more letting Marcus manipulate either one of us.”

We spend the next hour discussing strategies and different theories. The only interruption is Marie as she leaves for the night. We all stand, and I notice my father seems more vibrant and less fragile. Like he’s finally got something to live for—fight for.

“It’s time for dinner,” Lila says as the sun starts to set. “I put leftovers in the fridge earlier.”

“You have more of that spaghetti?” Dad asks, and my chest tightens. He hasn’t shown an interest in food in ages.

“Yes.” Lila helps him up from the swing. “And garlic bread.”

Inside, the kitchen feels different—warmer, lived-in. Signs of Lila’s presence are everywhere. A pitcher of iced tea sits ready on the counter. The familiar scent of Italian spices and toasted garlic bread drifts in the air as Lila warms up the leftovers.

“I can’t remember the last time this kitchen felt so... alive,” Dad says softly, settling at the island while Lila moves efficiently around the space.

I watch her spoon spaghetti onto plates, the domestic scene hitting me right in the chest. This is what I want—not Crystal’s cold perfection or Marcus’s corporate schemes—just this: family and warmth and Lila looking completely at home in the family kitchen.

“Here.” She slides plates in front of us, then adds thick slices of crusty bread. “It’s better as leftovers anyway.”

“This is...” Dad’s voice catches. “Very good. Sarah really wasn’t a very good cook—I think that’s why Luke is constantly hungry.”

We all share a laugh. Lila squeezes his shoulder as she sits with her own plate. “Tell me more about her. You said she was an amazing gardener.”

For the next two hours, we talk and eat and remember. Dad tells stories I haven’t heard in years—about Mom’s failed attempts at cooking, about the time she accidentally dyed all our laundry pink, and how she used to sing while working among her roses. He even takes a few harmless jabs about my teenage band rehearsals in the garage. Lila listens with an easy smile, her laughter filling the room

like a melody.

It's past ten when Dad finally yawns. "You two should stay," he says. "It's late, and you've both had long days."

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“Oh, I couldn’t—“ Lila starts.

“Please?” Dad gives her that look—the one that always made Mom cave. The same one I hopefully inherited. “The guest rooms are all made up, and it’s a long drive back to Jacksonville.”

She glances at me, uncertain.

“Stay,” I say softly. “Marie would feel better knowing someone’s here overnight anyway.”

“Well...” She smiles. “I did promise to show you how to make proper French toast in the morning.”

Dad beams. “That’s settled then. Luke show her to the guest room. I’m going to turn in.”

He hugs us both—before heading upstairs. I lead Lila to the guest room, trying not to think about how right it feels having her here.

“Your room’s right here,” I open the door, and she follows me inside. “Bathroom’s connected.” As I turn to leave, I suddenly turn back. “I forgot you might need something to wear tomorrow.”

“I have spare clothes in my catering kit,” she says. “Always be prepared, right?”

“Right.” I hesitate at her door, the air suddenly thick with everything we’re not

saying. “Lila...”

“Don’t.” But she doesn’t move away when I step closer. “Luke, we shouldn’t...”

“I know.” My hands find her waist, drawing her closer. “Tell me to stop.”

Instead of answering, she rises on her toes, her fingers curling into my shirt. When our lips meet, it’s like a culmination of every kiss we held back these past weeks. Her mouth opens under mine, soft and warm and perfect, and I press her roughly against the doorframe.

She makes a small sound in the back of her throat that nearly undoes me. My hands tangle in her hair as the kiss deepens, becoming something hungry, desperate, and dangerous.

“We should stop,” she whispers against my mouth, even as her body arches into mine.

“I know.” But I can’t resist trailing kisses down her neck, feeling her pulse race under my lips.

“Luke...”

I force myself to step back. Her lips are swollen, her eyes dark. I turn to leave, but I just can’t do it. I can’t leave her standing here alone—not now that she knows the truth about Crystal.

Turning, I quietly shut the door. When I turn, I notice how her breath quickens, betraying how much she wants this, too.

Seventeen

Lila

When Luke shuts the door, my breath catches, but my heart almost stops when he turns and starts walking toward me with that determined stride. His eyes are so intense, burning with desire. When he reaches me, his eyes, up close, are such a clear blue, and they darken as they lock onto mine.

He then reaches out to touch my chin, lifting my face to his. As if in slow motion, his lips come down, covering mine. He takes his time, slowly savoring my taste. Instead of deepening the kiss, he pulls back slightly, nibbling on my lower lip and teasing me with his slowness.

My hands reach up, tangling in his hair as I pull him closer, my body melting into his. As he continues to taunt me with his nearness, I pull slightly on his hair in retaliation. I feel more than see his grin, but then his arms tighten around me, fitting me snugly to his body, and I feel his instant arousal against my belly.

He immediately deepens the kiss. I feel his tongue slide against mine, exploring. I'm suddenly aware of his taste, his touch, his scent. He smells like the outdoors, and underneath that is his pure male scent, which arouses me more than anything else. His masculine scent goes right to my head, leaving me feeling dizzy. My hands tighten in his hair, and I lean into his chest.

His hands wander down my back, over my ass, and then he cups my bottom in his broad hands, fitting me to him, letting me feel his hardness. He grinds me against him, then eases up, and his hands give my generous backside a lusty squeeze. I can tell he appreciates my softness, my curves as he continues to fondle my ass.

He's building a need inside of me with his slow caresses. I can feel it increasing, and I want more. I rub against him, letting him feel my response, urging him to go faster. He doesn't. Instead, Luke takes his time as his hands leave my bottom, lightly

caressing my thigh. When I think he's going to touch me where I ache the most, his hand instead travels up to my waist.

I sigh against his lips in frustration and disappointment. The man is driving me wild with wanting—and he knows it. When his hand tightens around my thigh, I shift my weight, allowing him access, and again feel his grin. He knows exactly what he's doing to me. Damn him!

I tug on his hair, and his grin widens as he lifts his head. When I open my eyes, I see his face. And the flame in his eyes sends another zing straight to my core. He's taking his time, yes, but he wants me just as urgently as I want him.

He suddenly bends, cupping my ass and lifting me against him. My legs automatically rise around his waist as he carries me to the bed. My legs go down, but I'm unsteady on my feet, and his hands are around my waist, steadying me.



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I feel Luke's hands tug my shirt up and over my head. Leaving me in my bra. I smile, glad I decided to wear my matching black panties and bra set. The appreciation I see flaring in his eyes makes me feel sexy and attractive.

"Damn, you're beautiful," he murmurs as his hands cup my breasts. He bends and places his mouth over the fabric, wetting my nipple, and I shiver at the sensation. Then I feel his teeth as he finds my nipple. His hands travel behind me, deftly unclasping my bra, and my breasts spill free.

The warmth of his palms as he again cups my full breasts steals my breath. His thumbs reach up, pressing against my nipples, and he bends again, nuzzling against me. His warm breath and hot mouth bring my nipples to rigid peaks, and a soft moan slips from my mouth.

He grins against me, not stopping, and I bite back another moan. What he's doing to me is sinful, and it feels so good I can hardly think straight.

He finally straightens, and I feel his hands at my waistband, and then he's zipping down my jeans and pulling them off me. My clothing and shoes are in a crumpled heap. Leaving me standing before him in only my black silk panties.

His gaze feels hot as it rakes over my curves, leaving me breathless and feeling wanton. I step forward and boldly start to tug on his t-shirt, but he's faster than me and pulls it off over his head. My greedy hands land on his chiseled chest, marveling at his defined muscles. My fingertips skim over his ridges and circle his nipple. Moving lower, I unclasp the button of his jeans.

His hands take over, and he hurriedly unzips his pants, and his eager cock jumps free. I swallow at his size. He's bigger than I would have expected. As I reach for him, he grabs my hands.

"Not yet," he says, his voice gruff. "I've been waiting for you a long time, and I want this to last."

The strain in his voice makes me smile. Then he's pushing me back onto the bed and following me down. He kneels between my legs, and I shiver as he rids me of my last barrier, throwing my panties behind him.

He lifts my leg, placing it over a broad shoulder, and then he's there—at my most intimate place, his breath warm as he nuzzles me. His tongue comes out, giving me one long swipe, and I shudder. I feel a finger sliding through my slick folds as he pushes it inside me. Before I can react, he slides in another digit, and I feel full as he primes me, working me as he pushes deeper in a circular motion. He curls his fingers, and I see stars and let out a gasp.

"You like that, huh?" I feel him whisper in approval against my thigh, and I nod, unable to speak.

He continues, my eyes are closed, but my hands helplessly curl into his hair again, urging him on. I feel the first tremor, faint, but as he continues, the tremors grow stronger until my body uncontrollably clenches, closing around his fingers as I come hard in his arms.

Luke holds me through my climax, and when I finally open my eyes, it's to find him above me—a smug smile on his face.

"You're beautiful when you come, you know that?" His words are soft, but there's a hardness to his face, and I realize he's holding back and waiting for his turn. I feel

him reach for a condom, and I'm glad that one of us is coherent enough to think of protection.

When I smile, acknowledging his compliment, I immediately feel his rough thigh between my legs, nudging them wider, making room for him.

He reaches down, wrapping his hand around his thick cock, guiding it to me. He enters me in one swift, sure stroke, and the fullness of him steals my breath.

"You okay there, Lila?" His voice sounds tight. At my nod, he begins to move. Slow at first, but steady. As the rhythm takes over, I lift my legs around his waist, and the angle allows him to push deeper, harder into me. Our breathing becomes harsher as the tempo increases. This time, I don't have any warning of my climax—it's just suddenly there, making my body spasmand shudder, milking him until he follows me over the edge with a low groan.

I'm finally aware of the weight of Luke's body as he rests against me. He slowly shifts his weight to the side and off me but remains close. His arm across my stomach as he pulls me against his side.

I am lying here listening to his deep breathing, and my eyes flutter closed. Before I know it, I'm lost in sleep. I wake later to the feeling of warm hands caressing my breasts and then an even warmer mouth sucking a nipple. When I open my eyes, it's to see an alert Luke with a sexy grin staring down at me.

"Hey beautiful," he whispers as I feel him slide between my legs and slowly enter me. This time, it's slower, sweeter, with no sense of urgency as he moves steadily against me, sometimes surprising me with a circular motion. It takes longer for us to both reach that peak of passion, but when it comes, the intensity surprises us both, and I hear Luke give out a deep groan as he empties inside of me. "Luke," his name a whisper as it leaves my lips.

“Damn, Lila,” Luke mutters against my neck. “See what you do to me?” He says as he pushes up on his hands, staring down at me with a sexy, lopsided grin. He then turns and looks at the clock on the nightstand. “I need to go,” he mutters in regret, leaning down to give me a lingering kiss. “We’ll have to forego the pleasure of showering together until another day.”

With that, he pushes up off the bed, and I sleepily watch as he gathers his clothes, only pulling on his jeans, not even bothering to zip them up. With one last breath-stealing grin, he winks at me and then soundlessly opens the door and leaves, closing it quietly behind him.

The morning sun streams through the guest room window as I try to steady my hands enough to button my blouse. Last night feels like a dream—how we managed to keep quiet even when...

I feel the blush creeping up my neck. So much for “fixing things first.”

After a quick shower, I head downstairs to find Jim already in the kitchen, attempting to crack eggs into a bowl.

“Let me help with that,” I offer, taking over before he can make more of a mess. “I promised to show you my French toast recipe, remember?”

“Ah, yes,” He settles onto a stool, watching as I work. “Sleep well?”

Something in his tone makes me glance up, but his expression is carefully neutral. Before I can respond, Luke walks in, hair still damp from his own shower.

“Something smells good.” He reaches past me for coffee, his hand brushing my lower back where no one can see. I nearly drop the bowl of eggs I’m whipping.

“Lila’s showing me her French toast recipe,” Jim says, definitely hiding a smile now.  
“Though I suspect you’ve already sampled her goods.”

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Luke chokes slightly on his coffee, and I focus very intently on dipping bread in egg mixture.

“Dad,” Luke warns.

“What? I’m just saying, you two seem closer after spending the night here.”

“Oh God.” I close my eyes, mortified.

But when I peek, Jim is grinning like he hasn’t in years, according to Luke. “Don’t worry, dear. It does my heart good to see Luke finally enjoying life.”

“Please stop talking,” Luke groans, but he’s fighting a smile too.

We eat breakfast in comfortable silence, broken only by appreciative murmurs over the food. It feels right, like family.

“You two should head back soon,” Jim says finally. “That PI won’t wait forever.”

“You sure you’ll be okay?” Luke asks.

“Marie will be here in an hour.” Jim squeezes my hand. “And thanks to Lila, I’m actually looking forward to lunch for the first time in... well, a long time.”

We’re loading our bags into our separate vehicles when Luke’s phone rings. His expression darkens when he sees the screen.

“Crystal,” he mouths to me before answering. “Hey, I just got back—“

Even from a few feet away, I can hear her shrill voice. Luke’s jaw tightens as he listens.

“No, I haven’t seen the society page yet... What announcement?”

My stomach drops at his expression.

“Crystal, I never agreed to—No, listen—“ He pulls the phone away from his ear, cursing softly. “She hung up.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Marcus had their PR team release an engagement announcement.” His eyes meet mine, fierce and determined. “I’m meeting Gibson at noon, and then we’ll end this charade.”

“Be careful,” I say softly.

He glances toward the house and then quickly pulls me close, kissing my forehead. “Trust me?”

“Always.”

As we drive away—me back to the duplex, him to meet the PI—I try not to think about how much is at stake. Or how many ways this could all go terribly wrong.

But mostly, I try not to think about how it felt waking up in his arms and how badly I want to do it again.

Eighteen

Luke

Jaxson Gibson's office is tucked into an unassuming building downtown, the kind of place you'd walk right past without a second glance. But as soon as I step inside, I can tell this isn't some fly-by-night operation. The space is sleek and professional—sleek furniture, abstract art on the walls, and a receptionist who greets me with a polite smile as she motions me toward a private conference room.

Jaxson is already waiting for me, standing by the window with his hands in his pockets. He's bigger than I expected, with an air of quiet authority that immediately gives me trust in his abilities. This is a man who knows what he's doing. I can only assume his quiet confidence stems from knowing everyone's secrets.

"Mr. Sterling," he says, turning to face me as I step inside. "I've been looking forward to this meeting."

"Call me Luke," I say, shaking his hand. His grip is firm, his expression unreadable.

"Luke, then." He gestures toward the chair across from him at the table. "Have a seat. We've got a lot to cover."



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“What have you found?” I’m not in the mood for small talk, not with Crystal’s ‘engagement’ announcement already making the headlines.

“Marcus Davidson is exactly what you suspected,” Jaxson opens a leather portfolio. “A corporate raider with a sophisticated methodology. He identifies vulnerable companies, usually family-owned operations, then systematically dismantles them from the inside out.”

My jaw clenches. “And Sterling Motors?”

“Is his current target.” Jaxson slides over several documents. “Your father’s company caught his attention a few years ago, right around the time your mother’s illness became public knowledge.”

“Son of a bitch.” The timing hits like a punch to the gut. “He was watching, waiting for Dad to get desperate.”

“Precisely. The medical bills, the experimental treatments—all of it created the perfect storm of vulnerability. That’s when he struck, offering what appeared to be a lifeline.”

“The loan. The stock options.”

Jaxson nods. “Which, combined with the board members he’s already compromised, puts him in striking distance of a controlling interest.”

“What happens if he gets controlling interest?” I ask, though I have a chilling feeling

that I already know.

“With the shares he already holds,” Jaxson states, “and the influence he’s secured with the two other board members, If he calls for a vote of no confidence in your father or pushes for a major change in direction, he’ll have the numbers to make it happen.”

I grip the edge of the table, the weight of his words settling heavily on my chest. “So, what you’re saying is... he could force my dad out. Take the company.”

“Exactly,” Jaxson says, his tone matter-of-fact. “And from what we’ve found so far, that’s precisely what he’s planning.”

“Who on the board?”

“Robert Chen and William Hartley.” He shows me surveillance photos of Marcus meeting with both men. “They’re facing their own financial pressures, which Davidson is expertly exploiting.”

I recognize both names—Chen’s been with the company since before I was born, and Hartley was one of Dad’s closest friends. “Can we turn them?”

“That’s where it gets interesting.” Jaxson leans forward. “My team has uncovered evidence of Davidson’s pattern with previous acquisitions. It’s... not pretty.”

He spreads out more documents—newspaper clippings, financial reports, court filings. A pattern emerges: companies gutted, promises broken, showing former owners left with nothing.

“In every case,” Jaxson continues, “he made similar promises to board members. Support the takeover, keep your position, and maybe even advance. Know how many

actually benefited?”

“None of them,” I guess.

“Worse. Many ended up facing criminal charges when Davidson’s less-than-legal methods came to light. He’s very good at leaving others holding the bag.”

Hope flares. “So if we show Chen and Hartley what happened to their counterparts in other companies...”

“They might reconsider their alliance.” Jaxson gathers the documents. “But we need more time. Concrete evidence, not just patterns and possibilities.”

“How long?”

“Two weeks, maybe three. My team is close to accessing some very interesting offshore accounts.”

I think about Crystal’s announcement, Lila waiting back at the duplex, and Dad finally starting to fight back. “The balloon payment is coming due. I don’t know if we have that long.”

“Which brings us to the engagement announcement.” Jaxson’s expression is knowing. “Quite the timely leak by Davidson’s people.”

“I never agreed to—“

“No, but it works in our favor.” He holds up a hand when I start to protest. “Think about it. Davidson believes he has you cornered. The more secure he feels, the more likely he is to get sloppy.”

“You want me to play along?” The idea turns my stomach. “Pretend I’m happy about marrying Crystal while you dig for more dirt?”

“I want you to give my team time to build an ironclad case.” His voice softens slightly. “Look, I understand there are... personal complications. But if we move too soon, Davidson will bury the evidence and accelerate his timeline. Is that a risk you’re willing to take?”

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I think about Dad, finally showing signs of life again. About the hundreds of employees who depend on Sterling Motors. About Lila...

“She’ll understand,” Jaxson says quietly.

“What?”

“The neighbor. The chef.” At my surprised look, he shrugs. “It’s my job to know things, Luke. And from what I’ve observed, she seems like someone who would understand.”

“I can’t ask herto—“

“To what? Wait a few weeks while you protect your family’s legacy. From what I’ve seen, neither of you has any other choice.”

He’s right, damn him. And Lila would tell me to do whatever it takes to save the company. But after last night...

“You have until the payment is due,” I say finally. “Three weeks.”

“I’ll have my team work around the clock.” He starts typing on his laptop. “In the meantime, I suggest you call your... fiancée. Act appropriately surprised and happy about the announcement. Maybe even schedule a celebration dinner.”

The thought makes me nauseous, but I nod. “What about Chen and Hartley?”

“Leave them to us for now. I’ll arrange to have some information about Davidson’s previous ventures find its way to them. Plant seeds of doubt.”

“And my father?”

“Tell him the basics but not the details. The less he knows about our investigation, the more genuine his reactions will be. Davidson’s watching him closely.”

I stand, feeling the weight of what I’m agreeing to. “Alright. Three weeks.”

“One more thing.” Jaxson’s voice stops me at the door. “The neighbor—Lila. Be careful how much time you spend with her. Davidson’s people may be watching you both.”

The implication sends a chill down my spine. “You think he’d—“

“I think Marcus Davidson got where he is by covering all the bases.” Jaxson’s eyes are hard. “Protect her by keeping your distance. At least until we have what we need.”

Outside, I sit in my car for a long time, staring at my phone. Finally, I pull up Crystal’s number.

“Luke!” She answers on the first ring. “Have you seen the announcement? Daddy’s PR team did such an amazing job!”

“Yeah,” I manage. “It’s... perfect.”

“Oh, I know we hadn’t officially decided, but Daddy said the timing was right, and you know how he is about these things...”

I let her chatter on, making appropriate noises of agreement. When she suggests a celebration dinner this weekend, I agree with that, too.

Then I pull up Lila's number, my finger hovering over the call button. But Jaxson's warning echoes in my head.

Instead, I type out a text: 'Meeting ran long. Need to handle some things in town. Talk soon.'

Her reply comes quickly: 'Everything okay?'

No. Nothing about this is okay. But I write: 'Just a lot going on. Will explain when I can.'

After a moment, she sends back a simple heart emoji. Because, of course, she does. Because she's Lila, and she understands even when I can't explain.

I start the car, pointing it westward instead of toward home. Toward Crystal and her father's games, away from what I really want.

The Davidson estate makes my family's home look modest. Everything screams new money—from the gaudy fountains to the gold-plated door handles. Crystal's waiting in the foyer, wearing something stylish and expensive.

"Luke!" She throws herself at me, and I force myself to catch her, to smile like I'm happy to be here. "Isn't this exciting?Daddy's arranged everything!"

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Speaking of the devil, Marcus Davidson descends the curved staircase like he's making an entrance. "Luke, my boy! Welcome to the family—officially, that is."

His handshake is too firm, his smile too sharp. I think of Jaxson's warnings and match his grip. "Marcus. Quite the surprise announcement."

"Oh, sometimes you have to take initiative in life." He steers us toward his study. "Crystal, give us a moment to discuss business?"

She pouts but complies, leaving me alone with the man who's trying to destroy my family's legacy. The study is exactly what you'd expect—oversized desk, pretentious art, everything designed to intimidate.

"Drink?" He doesn't wait for my answer, pouring two fingers of scotch that probably costs more than most people make in a week.

"The announcement was premature," I say, accepting the glass but not drinking.

"Nonsense." He settles behind his desk. "The timing is perfect. Sterling Motors' stock jumped three points just on the rumor of our families officially joining forces."

Of course, it did because that was his plan all along.

"The celebration dinner," I say instead of what I want to. "Saturday night?"

"Excellent." His smile widens. "Crystal's already invited half of Jacksonville's society pages. Your father will attend, of course?"



“He’s still not feeling well—“

“Insist.” The word carries steel beneath its polish. “It would look... unfortunate if he missed his only son’s engagement celebration.”

I grip my glass tighter, thinking of Jaxson’s timeline. I just have to play this game for three weeks.

“I’ll make sure he’s there.”

“Perfect.” Marcus stands. “Now, let’s not keep my daughter waiting. She’s already talking about venue options.”

The drive home is a blur of anger and frustration. My phone rings—Dad.

“The announcement’s already online,” he says without preamble. “Son, you don’t have to do this.”

“Yes, I do.” I stare out at the darkening sky. “Just for a little while longer. Jaxson, the PI, is close to having everything we need.”

“Luke—“

“Three weeks, Dad. That’s all we need. Can you trust me that long?”

A long pause. “I trust you. But this game Marcus is playing—it’s dangerous.”

“I know.” I think of Lila, of how understanding she’ll be, and how that almost makes it worse. “The celebration dinner is Saturday night. Marcus was insistent that you attend.”

“Of course he was.” Dad sighs. “What time?”

“Eight, at The Capital Grille.”

“I’ll be there.” Another pause. “Have you talked to Lila?”

“No.” The word feels like glass in my throat. “But I will—I’m headed home now. Jaxson suggested we not spend time together.”

“Ah.” So much understanding in that single syllable. “She’s tougher than she looks, son.”

“That’s what scares me.”

After we hang up, I continue the drive home. I enter my apartment, walk out onto the back deck, and wait for Lila to join me.

She opens the sliding glass door, still wearing her apron, flour dusted across one cheek.

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“I was stress baking,” she explains, stepping back to let me in. The kitchen smells like cinnamon and warmth and everything I have to stay away from.

She leads me to her couch, her hazel eyes soft, sitting close enough that our knees touch. “Tell me everything.”

So I tell her about Jaxson’s investigation, Marcus’s pattern of destroying companies, and the evidence they’re gathering. I tell her how he needs time to build a case strong enough to stop him.

“Jaxson thinks it’s safer if we... if I keep my distance from you,” I finish, watching her face carefully. “Marcus may have people watching, and if he suspects anything...”

“Hey.” She takes my hand, threading our fingers together. “I get it. You need a little time—then it will be over.”

“I have to play along,” I say roughly. “The engagement dinner is this weekend. And I can’t be seen with you, can’t risk Marcus figuring out the way I feel—“

“Luke.” She cups my face with her free hand. “I understand. Truly. Do what you need to do to protect your family’s company.”

I lean forward, resting my forehead against hers. “Thank you for understanding.” Then I brush away the dusting of flour on her cheek with my lips.

“You’re welcome,” she teases, but her voice catches. “Just... be careful. Marcus Davidson doesn’t strike me as someone who loses gracefully.”

“Three weeks,” I promise. “Then I’m taking you on a proper date. No complications, no pretending, just us.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” She kisses me softly, briefly. “Now go. Before I try to convince you to stay.”

Standing, I turn to her one last time, not wanting to leave. “Lila...”

“I know.” She wraps her arms around herself. “Me too.”

Leaving out the back, I somehow feel lighter. Because even though I can’t see her, can’t be with her, at least she knows the truth. At least she understands.

Three weeks. I can do anything for three weeks. I just hope Lila will still be waiting for me when it’s over.

Nineteen

Lila

It’s Friday night, and I throw myself into preparations for the MAD charity event. I’m grateful for the distraction of menu planning and staff coordination. Every time my phone buzzes, my heart jumps—but it’s never Luke. It can’t be him because he’s being extra cautious not to give Marcus any warning about what’s coming.

“You’re doing that thing again,” Jenny says, catching me staring at my phone for the hundredth time.

“What thing?”

“That sad puppy dog face.” She helps me unload supplies at the event venue—a

ballroom at one of the high-end hotels near the river that Hunter Henson and his team have transformed into something magical. “Did you and Luke... uh, your neighbor have a fight?”

“No.” I focus on arranging appetizer plates. “Everything’s fine.”

“Right.” She draws out the word. “That’s why he’s suddenly engaged to Crystal Davidson, and you’re stress-cooking enough food to feed an army.”

“The food is for the charity event,” I remind her. “Speaking of which, where’s Emily and Kendrick? They promised to arrive early for moral support.”

“Nice dodge,” Jenny says deadpan. “When they get here, I’ll point them in your direction. But don’t think I didn’t notice how you changed the subject.”

Before I can respond, Rebel Henson, Hunter’s wife, approaches me. She’s as curvy as I am, with dark hair, eyes, and deep dimples when she smiles—which seems to be often.

“Lila! The food looks and smells amazing!”

“Thanks.” I welcome the interruption. “The passed appetizers will start circulating at six, dinner service at seven-thirty...”

“Perfect.” Rebel surveys the space. “Hunter’s stuck on a call, but Paige is bringing the auction items soon. We’ve already sold more tickets than last year!”

Emily and Kendrick arrive, looking sleek and stylish in their gowns. I quickly give them a hug, avoiding their sympathetic gaze. I’m soon lost in final preparations but grateful for the busy work. The venue fills with volunteers, then early arrivals, and now I’m in my element—directing servers, monitoring food temperatures, and

ensuring everything runs smoothly.

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“The food is delicious,” Paige gushes, sneaking a crab cake. “Hunter was right about hiring you.”

“Thanks.” I adjust a display. “How are the auction items doing?”

“Really good! That private concert package from the Wild Band is getting tons of attention...”

My hand slips, nearly toppling a tower of glasses. Right. Luke and Emily arranged the auction package weeks ago before everything got complicated.

“Careful!” Emily steadies the display. “Maybe take a break? You’ve been going non-stop all day.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not,” she says softly. “And that’s okay. But at least tell me what’s going on?”

I glance around, but everyone’s focused on their tasks. “I can’t... it’s too hard to explain.”

“And now isn’t the place—I understand.” She squeezes my arm. “But whatever’s happening, we’re here for you. Kendrick and I both.”

“I know.” I blink back sudden tears. “I just need to get through the next few weeks.”

“Well, hello, everyone!” A familiar voice makes my blood run cold.

Crystal Davidson glides in, her father right behind her. Of course, they’re here—it’s a major charity event, and the Davidsons never miss a chance to be seen supporting good causes.

“Lila!” Crystal air kisses near my cheek. “Everything looks fabulous! Doesn’t it, Daddy?”

“Impressive,” Marcus agrees, his sharp eyes taking in everything—including my reaction to their presence. “Though I’m surprised Luke isn’t here. Supporting local charities is important for public image.”

“The band has a guest appearance scheduled for tonight,” Emily cuts in smoothly as Kendrick gives a confirming nod.

“Yes, none of the band members could make it.” She glances at Crystal with a grimace. “Part of being involved with a famous rockstar.”

“The Wild Band donated an auction package...” Emily points out.

“Yes, we saw that in the program.” His smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “Crystal was just saying how wonderful it will be to have a celebrity in the family. I’m sure you’ll be seeing a lot more of her in the future.”

Emily shifts closer to me, protective. “Yes, we saw the announcement. We can’t wait.” Looping her arm with mine. I allow her and Kendrick to pull me away. “Excuse us, Lila needs to check on the main course.”

In the kitchen, I grip the counter until my knuckles turn white.



“Okay, spill,” Emily demands.

“What’s really going on with you and Luke?” Kendrick asks, crossing her arms.

“Because that whole scene out there was weird as hell.”

“I can’t...” I take a shaky breath. “Not yet. Just... have a little faith?”

They study me for a long moment. “Fine. But whatever’s happening? Be careful. That Marcus guy gives me serious creeper vibes.” Emily says with a shudder.

As the night progresses, the hum of conversation fills the elegant banquet hall and ballroom, mingling with the clink of glasses and the soft strains of a live string quartet. It’s a perfect evening, every detail coming together exactly as I envisioned. The MAD charity gala is in full swing, and by all accounts, it’s a success.

Waitstaff in crisp black uniforms glide between tables, refilling glasses and serving plates from the carefully curated menu. My menu. It’s a thrill to see the dishes I painstakingly crafted being enjoyed by a room full of people, but there’s an ache that tugs at me with every passing moment.

I wish Luke were here.

I push the thought away as quickly as it comes. He’s busy with his own battles, and I’ve thrown myself into my work to keep from dwelling on the longing to be with him that consumes me.

“Lila!” a familiar deep voice calls, pulling me from my thoughts.

I turn to see Hunter Henson approaching, his wife, Rebel, by his side. Hunter is all polished charm in his tailored tux, and his confident smile is a perfect match for Rebel’s easygoing air. Her deep green gown flows around her, hugging her curves,

and her dark hair is styled in waves that scream effortless glamour.

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“You’ve outdone yourself,” Hunter says, shaking my hand. “This event is incredible.”

“Thank you,” I say, smiling. “But it’s your organization that makes the real difference. I’m just happy to be part of it.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Rebel says, her eyes sparkling. “The food is phenomenal. Everyone is raving about it.”

“Really?” I ask, my cheeks flushing with pride.

“Absolutely,” Rebel insists. “And the dessert? That chocolate mousse tart? I’m considering sneaking an extra one to take home to our twins.”

I laugh, the warmth of their praise easing some of the tension in my chest.

“We couldn’t have done this without you,” Hunter says. “Paige has already mentioned how seamless everything has been from your end. I know you’ve had a lot going on, but you’ve handled it beautifully.”

“It’s been a pleasure,” I say, meaning it. The MAD program is something I believe in deeply, and working with Hunter and his team has been inspiring. Their dedication to helping single mothers find meaningful work and advance in their careers is nothing short of extraordinary.

“We’ll let you get back to it,” Rebel says, giving my arm a light squeeze. “But don’t forget to take a moment to enjoy your own success.”

“I’ll try,” I promise, watching them disappear into the crowd.

The rest of the evening passes in a blur of service and smiles. The food is perfect, the auction successful, and Hunter’s speech about MAD’s mission brings tears to every eye in the house.

“We’ve raised over one hundred thousand dollars!” Rebel announces near the end of the night. “Thanks to everyone’s generosity, especially our amazing staff and team...”

The applause washes over me as we stand there, and I force a smile. I glance up and see James Harrison approach me, looking very suave in his black tux.

“Lila, I knew you had to be the chef behind that incredible food.”

“Thank you, James,” I reply, feeling a twinge of guilt that I’ve been avoiding him.

“I’ll have to give you a call. There are some social events I’ve been invited to. Perfect opportunity for me to introduce you around.”

I give him a hesitant smile, not wanting to commit. “Thank you—“

But before I can finish, I’m called away by one of the staff. I hope my relief didn’t show on my face, as James has been nothing but kind to me. It’s not his fault he’s not Luke.

The evening winds down in a blur of smiles, handshakes, and compliments. When the last guest leaves, my feet are aching, and my cheeks hurt from smiling. Jenny and I are in the kitchen preparing to leave when Emily and Kendrick find me.

“You killed it tonight,” Emily says, pulling me into a hug.

“I agree,” Kendrick adds, her eyes warm. “This was flawless, Lila. You should be proud.”

“Thanks,” I say, managing a smile.

They exchange a look, one of those silent conversations I can’t quite decipher before Emily states quietly. “Well, when you’re ready to talk, you know where to find us.”

“Thank you, that means a lot,” I say softly.

Once I get home, it’s well past midnight. As I step on the front porch, I notice there are no lights on next door. The apartment feels quiet, the kind of quiet that feels heavy, like it’s pressing down on me. I kick off my heels and collapse onto the couch, staring up at the ceiling as the evening replays in my mind.

It was a perfect event—everything I worked so hard to achieve. But the hollow ache in my chest won’t go away.

I want to share this with Luke. I want to hear his voice and see how his eyes light up when he smiles. But he’s not here, and I can’t let myself hope for something that feels so out of reach.

With a sigh, I pull out my phone and scroll through the photos from the gala, pausing on one of Hunter and Rebel onstage, their arms raised in triumph. This is what I need to focus on—the good I’m doing, the work that matters.

But even as I tell myself that, the ache doesn’t fade.

Suddenly, I see a dark figure on the deck. My pulse leaps as I see a flash of blonde hair and Luke’s broad shoulders. Without turning on the lights, I walk over to the sliding glass doors, unlock them, and slide them open.

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“Luke?” I whisper, my voice catching. “What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t stay away,” he says softly, stepping inside. His hair is slightly damp, like he just showered, and the faint scent of soap clings to him. He’s wearing jeans and a plain black t-shirt, simple and understated, but he still manages to take my breath away.

“I shouldn’t be here,” he whispers, even as he draws me into his arms. “But I had to know how it went.”

“It went well,” I tell him, smiling. I go on to tell him about the event—the record-breaking donations, Hunter’s moving speech, and the way his band’s auction package sparked a bidding war. “Everyone loved the food. Hunter and his team were thrilled.”

“Of course they were,” he says, his voice warm. “You’re talented, Lila. I knew you’d pull it off.”

His confidence in me sends a flutter through my chest, but I push it aside. “You didn’t have to stay up just to tell me that.”

“I wanted to,” he says simply, his gaze steady. “Wish I could have seen it.” His thumb traces patterns on my palm. Turning my hand over, he presses a kiss to my palm that makes me shiver. When he pulls me closer, I go willingly, wrapping my arms around his neck as his mouth finds mine.

The kiss is desperate, heavy with everything we can’t say. His hands span my waist, holding me like I might disappear, as if these stolen moments are all we’ll ever have.

A dog barks in the distance, breaking the spell. Luke rests his forehead against mine, his breath unsteady.

“I should go.” But he doesn’t move; he just holds me tighter. “In case...”

“I know.” I breathe him in—wanting one more whiff of his scent and soap. “Just... one more minute?”

He answers by capturing my mouth again, softer this time like he’s memorizing my taste. When he finally pulls away, the loss feels physical.

“Soon,” he promises, tightening his arms. “Everything will be worth it—I promise.”

I watch him slip out the back sliding glass doors, a shadow among shadows. Then he turns and looks at me through the glass, and even in the darkness, I feel the intensity of his gaze.

Then he’s gone, leaving only the phantom press of his lips and the ache of empty arms. I touch my mouth, still warm from his kiss, and try to believe that ‘soon’ will come quickly enough.

Twenty

Luke

The Capital Grille feels like a stage set tonight, with everyone playing their assigned roles to perfection. Crystal sparkles in something silver and extravagant while Marcus holds court at the head of the private dining room like a king overseeing his subjects. Even the other diners seem carefully chosen—Jacksonville’s elite, here to witness this merger of money and music.

Dad arrives exactly on time, looking stronger than he has in months. If I didn't know better, I'd never guess he was putting on an act.

"Son." He hugs me with just the right amount of fatherly pride. "Crystal, you look lovely."

"Jim!" She air kisses his cheeks. "We're so happy you could make it. Aren't we, Daddy?"

Marcus raises his crystal wine glass. "Indeed. Nothing better than family coming together."

The threat underlying his words isn't lost on either of us, but Dad just smiles and takes his seat. I catch Jaxson's warnings echoing in my head: The fewer details he knows, the more genuine his reactions will be.

"Luke, dear." Crystal loops her arm through mine. "Come say hello to the Hendersons. They simply must attend the wedding."

I let her drag me around the room, making small talk and accepting congratulations from people I barely know. My cheeks hurt from fake smiling, but Marcus watches my every move like a hawk studying its prey.

"To the happy couple!" Someone calls out, and suddenly, everyone's raising glasses.

"Speech!" Crystal squeezes my arm hard enough to leave marks. "Luke, say something!"

The room falls quiet, all eyes on me. Dad gives me an imperceptible nod—play the part, his eyes say. Just a little longer.



I clear my throat. “Crystal and I...” The words taste like ashes. “We’re overwhelmed by everyone’s support. This partnership—“ Marcus’s eyes narrow at my word choice, ”—this union of our families feels...”

“Destined,” Crystal supplies helpfully.

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“Right,” I manage. “Thank you all for being here tonight.”

“And thank you, Marcus,” Dad stands smoothly, saving me. “For welcoming my son into your family with such... enthusiasm.”

The subtle emphasis isn’t lost on Marcus, but he just smiles that snake’s smile. “Family is everything, isn’t it, Jim? The legacy we leave, the empire we build...”

“Among other things,” Dad replies mildly.

Dinner arrives—perfectly cooked steaks and wine. Crystal chatters about venue options while her mother nods vacantly, clearly medicated into serenity. The other guests add appropriate commentary about flowers and dates and all the details I can’t bring myself even to pretend to care about.

“June weddings are so lovely,” someone gushes.

“Yes,” Crystal laughs. “Daddy thinks we shouldn’t wait too long. Right, Daddy?”

My fork freezes halfway to my mouth as I try not to choke.

“The sooner, the better,” Marcus agrees, watching me carefully. “Why wait when you know it’s right?”

“The band’s schedule... our tour,” I start.

“Can be adjusted.” Marcus’s tone brooks no argument. “After all, family comes first.

Isn't that right, Jim?"

Dad sets down his wine glass with perfect control. "Of course. Though these things do take time to plan properly."

"Money makes everything move faster." Marcus signals for more wine. "I've already spoken to several exclusive venues about dates."

The room suddenly feels too small, too hot.

"Excuse me." I stand abruptly. "I need some air."

The restaurant's back hallway offers a temporary escape. I lean against the wall, loosening my tie, trying to breathe.

"Quite the performance." Dad's voice makes me jump. He joins me, looking tired but determined. "Jaxson's timeline?"

"Three weeks," I whisper. "So, there's time... I just hate all of this. How Marcus needs to control everything."

"We'll handle it." He squeezes my shoulder. "Your mother would be proud, you know. Standing up to bullies was always her specialty."

"I'm not standing up to anyone," I say bitterly. "I'm playing along like a puppet."

"You're protecting what matters." His voice turns fierce. "Sometimes that means swallowing your pride and waiting for the right moment to strike."

"What if we don't get that moment?"

“We will.” He straightens my tie with familiar hands. “Now come on. Let’s go watch Marcus think he’s winning.”

Back in the dining room, Crystal pounces immediately. “There you are! Everyone’s asking about our wedding dance. I was thinking something from the band’s first album...”

I let her chatter wash over me, watching Marcus hold court at his end of the table. He’s already talking about board meetings and transition plans, only thinly disguising his future plans to take over the company.

“Whatever you want,” I tell Crystal because it’s easier than arguing.

She beams, squeezing my arm possessively. “See? I told Daddy you’d be perfectly reasonable once everything was settled.”

The rest of the evening passes in a blur of champagne toasts and pointed comments from Marcus about ‘fresh perspectives’ and ‘necessary changes’ at Sterling Motors. Dad plays his part flawlessly, appearing just concerned enough about the company’s future without seeming suspicious.

By the time the last guest leaves, my jaw aches from forced smiling.

“Walk me to my car?” Crystal pouts prettily.

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Outside, she turns into my arms, clearly expecting a goodnight kiss. I manage a quick peck, already calculating how quickly I can make an exit.

“Dream of me,” she sighs dramatically.

I will—but they’ll be nightmares.

Marcus appears as she clicks ahead on designer heels, walking to their car. “Excellent evening, wouldn’t you say?”

“Perfect,” I lie.

“Crystal’s right about the wedding.” His tone hardens slightly. “No reason to delay joining our families... officially.”

The threat hangs between us like smoke. I think of Jackson, of Lila waiting patiently at home, of Dad playing his part so perfectly tonight.

“No reason at all,” I agree, hating every word.

His smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “Very good, then. We’ll start venue hunting Monday.”

I watch them drive away in his luxury car, Crystal waving from the passenger seat like a princess in a parade. Dad appears at my shoulder, looking as exhausted as I feel.

“Home?” he asks quietly.

“Yeah.” I loosen my tie completely. “Need a ride?”

“Marie’s waiting.” He studies me carefully. “You did well tonight, son. Just...”

“I know.” I scrub a hand over my face. “Be careful.”

The drive home feels endless. All I want is to go to Lila’s and wash away this night with her quiet understanding and steady presence. Instead, I park in the driveway and head straightfor the shower, trying to scrub away the feeling of Crystal’s possessive touches and Marcus’s calculating stares.

Three weeks suddenly feels like an eternity.

The morning after the engagement dinner from hell, I run until my legs burn, trying to outpace the memory of Marcus’s threats and Crystal’s shrill voice. The sun climbs higher as I push myself along the beach, sweat soaking my shirt despite the ocean breeze.

By the time I circle back toward home, the morning crowds have thinned, leaving the beach nearly empty. That’s when I see her.

Lila emerges from the waves like something from a dream, water streaming down her curves, her purple swimsuit starkly contrasting against her sun-kissed skin. Her blonde hair falls in wet ropes down her back as she walks toward shore, completely unaware of how the rising sun turns the water droplets on her skin into diamonds.

I stop dead, unable to look away. Unable to breathe.

She bends to pick up her towel from the sand, and my mouth goes dry. Every line of

her body is a masterpiece—strong from hours in the kitchen, yet graceful and perfectly curved in all the right places. She’s nothing like the society women at lastnight’s dinner, with their sharp angles and artificial perfection. Lila is real, warm, and absolutely magnificent.

I should turn away. I should go inside, take a cold shower, and remember all the reasons we need to keep our distance. Instead, I find myself following her path toward our deck, staying close to the dune line where the sea oats provide cover.

She climbs the steps, humming something under her breath—one of our songs, I realize with a jolt of pleasure. The towel’s draped around her shoulders, but it does little to hide the way her wet swimsuit clings to her every curve.

“You’re staring,” she says without turning around.

Caught, I step out of the shadows. “Can you blame me?”

She faces me then, and the morning light catches the water droplets in her eyelashes. “Shouldn’t you be somewhere more... appropriate?”

“Probably.” I climb the steps, drawn to her like gravity. “But I couldn’t look away.”

She turns and opens the glass sliding door. I silently follow her inside, turning to face her.

“Luke...” Her voice holds a warning, but she doesn’t step back as I move in closer.

“You looked like a goddess,” I tell her honestly. “Rising from the sea like Aphrodite...”

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A blush colors her cheeks. “I look like a wet mess.”

“You look perfect.” I reach out and catch a drop of water sliding down her neck. “You’re absolute perfection.”

Her breath catches. “We shouldn’t...”

“I know.” But I can’t stop touching her, tracing the path of another droplet down her collarbone. “Just... let me look at you—touch you. Please.”

She shivers despite the warm morning. “How was last night?”

“Horrible.” My hand slides to her waist, continuing to her hip, feeling the warm silk of her skin through the wet fabric.

“Crystal’s already planning the wedding. Marcus insists we don’t wait.” I inform her. But the words taste sour in my mouth—talking about Crystal doesn’t seem right when I have Lila in my arms.

“Really?” Her eyes widen.

“Yeah,” I rest my forehead against hers, needing her closeness. “But don’t worry. We’ll figure it out. Somehow.”

She lifts her hand to my cheek, and I turn into her touch. “Luke, you look tired.”

“I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t stop thinking about you, about us, about everything we



can't have yet. So, I went running instead."

"I can tell." Her fingers trace the sweat at my temple. "You're all hot and..."

I kiss her before she can finish, unable to resist any longer. She tastes like salt water and sunrise, like everything pure and real in my complicated world. Her towel falls forgotten as she winds her arms around my neck, pressing her damp body against mine despite my sweaty running clothes.

The kiss deepens and turns desperate. My hands slide over her wet skin as I pull her closer, needing to feel her warmth, her reality. She makes a soft sound that nearly breaks my control.

"We have to stop," she whispers against my mouth.

"I know." But I kiss her again, softer this time. "I know."

"Someone could see..."

"Right." I force myself to step back, though everything in me protests the distance. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"Don't." She touches my lips gently. "Don't apologize for this. Not ever."

A door slams somewhere down the beach, making us both jump. Reality crashes back like a cold wave.

"I should go," I say reluctantly. "Before someone..."

"Yeah." She picks up her fallen towel, wrapping it around herself like armor. "Be careful, okay?"

I back away slowly, memorizing every detail—the way the morning light plays on her damp skin, the slight swelling of her well-kissed lips, the look in her eyes that tells me she’s doing the same.

“Luke?” she softly calls as I reach the steps.

“Yeah?”

“You look pretty perfect yourself.”

The compliment warms me all the way to my lonely apartment, where I finally let myself remember every detail of our stolen moment—the taste of salt on her skin, the soft sounds she made, the way she felt pressed against me.

I touch my lips, still tasting sea salt and sunrise, and try to believe that everything will work out. That somehow, we’ll find a way through this maze of complications and obligations. The morning’s stolen moment replays in my mind—Lila rising from the waves, perfect and real, a vision worth any wait.

For now, that memory will have to be enough.

Twenty-One

Lila

James Harrison is charming. I'll give him that. When he asks me out, his smile is so genuine and his tone so disarming that I don't know how to immediately say no without sounding rude. I don't want to lead him on, but James has been so instrumental in getting me high-profile clients that I'll feel guilty if I refuse.

"Please tell me you'll at least consider it?" He stands before the bakery's counter, the perfect gentleman in full force, watching me adjust the baked goods in the display. "You know you've helped me as well. Those restaurant recommendations you gave me last month landed me two new clients. Let me thank you properly."

I carefully arrange the row of cinnamon rolls, buying time. James has been nothing but kind since we met—Still...

"It's just dinner," he adds, correctly reading my hesitation. "No pressure, no expectations."

The problem is, he's exactly the kind of guy I should want to date—successful, thoughtful, uncomplicated. In another life, maybe, but he's not Luke.

"Okay," I find myself saying. "But just dinner."

His smile widens. "Great! How about Azurea tonight? I hear their new chef is giving you some competition."

"I wouldn't know. I've never eaten there." I smile despite myself. "Alright. Seven?"

“I’ll pick you up at six-thirty.”

Later, standing in front of my closet, I try to remember how normal dating works. The black dress I finally choose is pretty but not too suggestive—perfect for a casual dinner with a friend. Because that’s all this is.

James arrives exactly on time, looking polished in a well-cut jacket. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks.” I accept his offered arm, purposely not thinking about another arm, another man’s touch.

The restaurant is elegant and understated, with muted tones and soft lighting. The kind of place that practically begs for hushed conversations and whispered secrets. Azurea is filled to capacity, but James has secured a prime table.

“I’ve been looking forward to this,” he says as we settle into our seats.

I nod politely, picking up the menu. “It’s a beautiful restaurant. Thank you for inviting me.”

At first, the conversation flows easily, with James peppering me with questions about my work and recent events. It’s nice, normal, and exactly what my life should be right now. He’s attentive and complimentary, but as the meal progresses, I can’t shake the feeling that something is missing.

It’s not him, I realize. It’s me.

The conversation easily flows as we discuss upcoming events and shared clients. Then, the universe decides to test me.

“Luke, isn’t this perfect? All my friends have been raving about this place.”

My heart stutters, and I glance toward the source of the sound, my stomach sinking.

Crystal Davidson.

She’s standing at the hostess stand, her perfectly coiffed hair and designer dress making her look every bit the society queen she so desperately wants to be. And beside her, looking uncomfortable but devastatingly handsome is Luke.

He spots me almost immediately, his gaze locking on mine like a magnetic pull he can’t resist. For a second, the rest of the room fades away. It’s just us, caught in a silent exchange that says everything we can’t.

“Lila,” James says, pulling me back to the present. “Are you okay?”

I blink, forcing a smile as I turn back to him. “I’m fine. Sorry, I thought I recognized someone.”

“Small world,” he says, glancing around briefly before returning his attention to me.

I nod, my pulse still racing as I pick up my glass of wine and take a sip. But I can’t stop myself from glancing back at Luke.

He’s looking at me again, his jaw tight, his expression unreadable. Crystal is talking to the hostess, making sure they know she’s here with Luke Sterling, completely unaware of the silent war raging in the space between us.

When the hostess leads them to their table—just two rows over—I have to grip the edge of my chair to keep from bolting.

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The meal turns into a slow kind of torture. Every time I look up, I feel Luke's eyes on me. I try to focus on James, who is completely oblivious to the tension crackling around us.

"This wine is incredible," James says, holding up his glass.

I nod, smiling tightly. "Yes, it is."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Crystal laughing at something, her hand resting on Luke's arm. He doesn't react, but the sight still sends a pang through my chest.

"You've gone quiet," James says, leaning closer. "Are you sure you're, okay?"

"Just tired," I say quickly. "It's been a long day."

He nods, thankfully letting the conversation drift to lighter topics. But the tension in my shoulders doesn't ease. I notice Luke's presence is drawing looks from the rest of the patrons, which makes Crystal preen.

As we're finishing dessert, she notices us.

"Oh, Lila!" she says, her voice too loud and too bright as she walks up to our table. "What a wonderful surprise!"

James looks up in surprise, his expression polite but curious.

Crystal smiles at him briefly before turning her full attention to me. "I thought that

was you. Isn't this place fabulous? Luke and I were just saying we need to come here more often."

Luke stands behind her, having followed in her wake, his face carefully neutral. But I catch the slight tightening of his jaw when he sees James's hand covering mine on the table.

I slide my hand free as naturally as possible. "Crystal, Luke. Nice to see you."

"Isn't it?" She practically vibrates with artificial enthusiasm. "Oh, where are my manners? James Harrison, right? Daddy mentioned you own a magazine."

James stands to shake hands. "Ah, Crystal Davidson, Luke. Congratulations on your engagement."

"Thank you!" She clutches Luke's arm possessively. "We're just so happy, aren't we, darling?"

Luke's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Ecstatic."

"We shouldn't keep you from your dinner," I say quickly, desperate to end this interaction.

"Nonsense! I'm glad I caught you," Crystal continues, her voice dripping with enthusiasm. "Luke and I are hosting a small dinner party next week, just a handful of close friends. We'd love for you to be the chef."

My wine glass freezes halfway to my mouth. "I..."

"It sounds high-profile—it would be great exposure for you, Lila," James says encouragingly. "Your food is perfect for intimate gatherings."

“I’ll have to check my schedule,” I say, choosing my words carefully. “I might already be booked...”

“Please?” Crystal pouts prettily. “It would mean so much to have you handle our first hosted dinner party as an engaged couple.”

The word ‘engaged’ hits like a physical blow. I risk a glance at Luke and find him staring intently at the table.

“I’ll... check my calendar tomorrow,” I say finally.

“Perfect!” Crystal says, turning toward Luke. “We should let you get back to your date. James, it was nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure was mine,” James replies smoothly.

As they walk away, Luke glances back once. The look in his eyes makes my heart stutter.

“They make a striking couple,” James comments.

I take a large sip of wine. “They certainly look the part.”



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“Are you okay? You seem tense suddenly.”

“Just tired.” I force a smile. “Big event tomorrow.”

James proves himself yet again by shifting the conversation to safer topics. He’s attentive and charming as he signals for the check, and I hate myself a little for wishing he was someone else.

“I had a wonderful time,” he says later, walking me to my door.

“Me too.” And I did, mostly. Before...

He leans in slowly, telegraphing his intentions. I turn slightly so his kiss lands on my cheek.

“James...”

“Too soon?” His smile is understanding. “No pressure, remember?”

“You’re a very nice man,” I start.

“But not the right man?” He squeezes my hand gently. “It’s okay, Lila. Friends?”

The relief makes me dizzy. “Friends.”

Inside, I kick off my heels and pour a generous glass of wine. I close my eyes, remembering the look on Luke’s face when he saw James’s hand on mine. The

careful distance he maintained all night. The way he looked back, just once.

Tomorrow, I'll find a polite way to decline the dinner party job. I'll focus on my business and pretend my heart isn't constantly wanting him.

But tonight, I let myself remember every stolen glance, every unspoken word, every moment our carefully constructed walls threatened to crumble and a pair of stormy blue eyes that even now threatens to steal my breath.

The afternoon sun filters through the window, casting long shadows across my kitchen counter. I stare at my phone, Crystal's number glowing on the screen as my thumb hovers over the call button.

I've been putting this off all day, but I can't avoid it any longer. I have to call her and politely decline the offer to cook for her and Luke's dinner party. Even the thought of that evening makes my stomach twist into knots.

Just as I steel myself to make the call, my phone buzzes in my hand. The screen lights up with an unknown number.

Without thinking, I answer. "Hello?"

"Lila Jeffers? This is Jaxson Gibson."

My pulse jumps at the PI's name. "Is Luke—"

"He's fine," Jaxson assures me quickly. "I'm calling about Crystal Davidson's dinner party next week."

I sink onto my chair. "Yes, I was about to call and tell her I can't—"

“I’d advise against that,” Jaxson cuts in.

His words make me pause, confusion knitting my brows. “Why?”

Jaxson’s voice is calm but carries a weight that makes it impossible to dismiss. “Because we believe Marcus Davidson will use that dinner party as an opportunity to solidify his plans. The guest list includes two key board members from SterlingMotors. We suspect Marcus will be sharing more of his intentions for the company with them that night.”

“And?” But my pulse is already racing with possibility.

“Marcus is careful, but he lets his guard down in his own home,” Jaxson explains. “If we can get a member of my team into his study while the dinner is happening, we may be able to uncover documents or communications that prove his plans to take over Sterling Motors.”

“You want to break in?” I whisper, though I’m alone.

“We want to gather proof of his illegal activities. The dinner provides a perfect cover—all eyes will be on the food, the conversation, the happy couple.”

I close my eyes. “Why are you calling me about this? Why not Luke?”

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Jaxson's silence speaks volumes.

"He doesn't want me involved, does he?"

"He's trying to protect you." Jaxson sighs. "But we need someone on the inside, someone who can help create the right... distractions at the right moments."

My chest tightens. "Which is why you called me anyway."

"We need you," Jaxson says simply. "And I trust you can handle yourself. This is bigger than just Luke or his father. If Marcus succeeds, it won't just hurt the Sterling family—it'll affect everyone tied to the company. Employees, their families, and countless others. You'd be helping protect more people than you realize."

"What do you need me to do?" I ask quietly.

"Accept the job," Jaxson says. "Prepare the dinner, keep everyone focused on the event, and let us handle the rest. My team will handle the infiltration—we won't ask you to do anything outside of your role as the chef. But your presence gives us the opportunity we need."

I think of Luke's careful distance last night, the strain around his eyes as he played along with Crystal's performance. "What exactly would my role be?"

"Private chef. Create an elaborate meal, one that requires frequent check-ins from the hosts. Keep Crystal talking about the wedding. Most importantly, keep Marcus in the dining room at specific times."

“And if something goes wrong?”

“Nothing will link back to you. You’re just the chef doing her job.”

I stand, pacing my living room. “Why me? Why not hire someone else?”

“Because Crystal asked you. You already have a reason to be there and because you understand what’s at stake.”

He’s right. I do understand. I hesitate, and the knot in my stomach tightens. Luke doesn’t want me involved, and part of me knows he’ll be furious if he finds out. But another part of me—the part that can’t stand by and let Marcus win—knows what I have to do.

“Okay.” The word comes out steadier than I feel. “I’ll do it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.” I think of Luke’s face when Marcus mentioned escalating the wedding date.

“Just... promise me one thing?”

“If I can.”

“Don’t tell Luke I know. Let him think I’m just doing my job.”

Jaxson’s quiet for a moment. “He’ll figure it out. He’s not stupid.”

“No, but he’s protective. This way, he can focus on his part without worrying about mine.”

“You care about him.” It’s not a question.

“Enough to help end this faster.”

“I’ll be in touch with more details soon. And Lila?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

The line goes dead, and I set my phone down on the counter, my hands trembling slightly.

For a moment, I just sit there, the enormity of what I’ve agreed to sinking in. This isn’t just cooking dinner or playing nice with Crystal. This is about taking a stand, about fighting for something bigger than myself.

And as much as I know, it’s the right thing to do. I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve just stepped into dangerous territory.

Twenty-Two

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Luke

The air inside the recording studio feels electric, humming with the anticipation that comes whenever we're laying down new tracks. The other guys are scattered around the room—Cass and Kendrick are sitting close together on the couch, talking, while Sam is fiddling with his bass, lost in his own world. Nate lounges behind the drum kit, tapping out a rhythm just to keep his hands moving.

It's chaos, but it's our chaos. And somehow, it always works.

My fingers find the keys automatically, muscle memory taking over as the band works through our newest track.

"One more time from the bridge," Emily calls through the control room mic. "Luke, can you add more complexity to that chord progression?"

I adjust, letting the music flow through me. This is what I'm good at—speaking through sixty-one keys and sound waves, letting the instrument say what I can't.

"Perfect!" Emily's grin lights up the booth. "That's the one."

Vince stretches his dark hair messy from running his hands through it. "Finally. Hey Luke, want to grab dinner?"

"Can't," I say, standing, probably too quickly. "Meeting with Crystal later."

Everybody exchanges looks. They've been careful not to push, but I know they sense

something's off. The whole band has been walking on eggshells since the engagement announcement.

"Everything okay, man?" Nate asks carefully.

"Working on it." I force a smile. "Just... give me some time?"

"Okay," Emily says, exiting the sound booth.

Kendrick approaches and squeezes my arm. "But you know we're here if you need us, right?"

"I know."

They file out, leaving me alone with my keyboard. This is my favorite time in the studio—just me and the music, no expectations or complications.

I sit down, letting my fingers find the melody that's been haunting me for weeks, letting it flow through my fingers. It started the night of the first kiss with Lila, and it's grown with every stolen moment since. But the words won't come. Every time I try to capture what I'm feeling, the lyrics fail me.

The notes rise and fall like waves, like the way she emerged from the ocean that one morning. I haven't seen her properly in days—we're both being careful, staying busy, avoiding temptation. But the music remembers every detail: the taste of sea salt on her skin, the way she fits against me, the sound of her laughter...

The notes swell under my hands, the melody growing more urgent. The music is saying everything I can't.

When I finally stop, the silence feels deafening. I close my eyes, resting my hands on



the keys, and exhale slowly.

“That was beautiful,” a voice says, startling me.

I look up sharply to see Kendrick standing in the doorway, her notebook tucked under one arm.

“How long have you been there?” I ask, feeling a flush creep up my neck.

“Long enough,” she says with a small smile. She steps into the room, closing the door behind her. “What’s the story behind that melody?”

I shake my head. “It’s just something I’ve been messing around with. No lyrics yet.”

Kendrick raises an eyebrow, dropping into the chair beside me. “That’s not like you. You’re usually so quick with words.”

I laugh bitterly. “Not this time. Every lyric I’ve come up with feels wrong. Too shallow.”

She studies me for a moment, then flips open her notebook. “Play it again.”

I hesitate, then let the music flow. Kendrick closes her eyes, swaying slightly as the notes fill the room. When I finish, she opens her eyes and flips through her notebook.

“Try this,” she says softly and starts to sing.

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Her lyrics catch me off guard—they're about hidden love and stolen moments, about wanting something you can't have yet, about hope and waiting, and the space between now and soon.

“How did you...”

“I’ve been there, remember?” She smiles knowingly. “Also, I’ve seen the way you look at Lila when you think no one’s watching.”

My hands freeze over the keys. “Kendrick...”

“Don’t worry.” She scribbles something in her notebook. “I’m good at keeping secrets—and I assume you have your reasons. Now, try the bridge again, but slower this time.”

For the next hour, we work on bringing the song to life, my fingers dancing across the keys as her words weave perfectly with my melody, telling the story I couldn’t find words for.

“You should sing it,” she says finally.

I shake my head. “I’m not a singer.”

“Please.” She rolls her eyes. “I’ve heard you in soundcheck. You’ve got the voice for this one.”

I prefer just playing,” I say firmly.

“Emily’s been trying to get all of you to do solos,” she points out. “Because she knows what she’s doing.” Kendrick tears the pages from her notebook. “Take these. Work on it. When you’re ready...”

“Thanks.” I tuck the lyrics carefully away. “For everything.”

“Just...” She hesitates at the door. “Make sure you know what you’re doing.” Then, in a softer voice, “I won’t say anything about the song, but you should think about it. This one’s too good to hide away.”

I nod, unable to trust my voice. Once she’s gone, I play through the melody one more time, letting Kendrick’s words bring shape to everything I’ve been feeling, everything I can’t say—at least not yet.

I pack up slowly, knowing Crystal’s waiting at some overpriced restaurant to discuss flower arrangements or table settings or whatever else she’s planned for tonight.

But I take Kendrick’s lyrics with me, tucking them safely away like the secrets they tell. Once this charade is over, I’ll find the courage to sing them.

Until then, I’ll let the music speak for me.

The Davidson mansion is a study in tasteful excess—crystal chandeliers, museum-quality art, and tonight, Jacksonville’s elite mingling over cocktails.

I spot Crystal near the entrance, wearing a dress that screams high society. She beams when she sees me, looping her arm through mine before I even have a chance to say hello.

“There you are,” she says brightly. “You’re late.”

“Traffic,” I mutter, letting her steer me toward the house.

“Why do you insist on driving that ridiculous Jeep?” She asks me, then without waiting for my answer, she continues, “Once we’re married, I’ll insist you purchase a nicer car.” With a calculating look in her eyes. “Maybe a Ferrari or a sleek Mercedes, something more elegant, and sleek. You know, something a rockstar should drive.”

I grimace but don’t even bother to try and change her mind. We’re so close to ending this charade that the wait is becoming unbearable.

The moment we step inside, I spot them—Robert Chen and William Hartley, two key members of SterlingMotors’ board. They’re standing near the bar, drinks in hand, chatting with Marcus like old friends.

Crystal must notice where my gaze lands because she leans closer, her voice low. “Daddy’s just getting them up to speed. Isn’t this exciting? Once the deal goes through, Sterling Motors will be unstoppable.”

I grit my teeth, forcing a neutral expression. “Yeah. Exciting.”

Marcus catches sight of me and waves us over. His smile is all teeth, and the glint in his eye makes my skin crawl.

“Luke!” he says, clapping me on the shoulder. “Glad you could make it. You remember Robert and William, don’t you?”

“Of course,” I say, shaking their hands.

“We were just discussing the future of the company,” Marcus continues, his tone dripping with faux enthusiasm. “Big things ahead, right, gentlemen?”

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Robert and William nod, their expressions guarded. I can't tell if they're genuinely on board with Marcus or just playing along.

"Your father and I go way back." William Hartley shares, crystal tumbler in hand. "Speaking of Jim, where is he tonight?"

"Under the weather," I lie smoothly, exactly as Jaxson instructed. "He sent his regrets."

Marcus's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Such a shame. We had so much to discuss. But with Jim's declining health, it's probably best he's not here. The mental and physical strain are taking their toll."

The implied notion of my father's declining mental capabilities makes my shoulders tense, but I maintain my practiced smile. Somewhere in this house, Gibson's team is putting their plan into action. I just have to play my part. Jaxson's words echo in my head: Marcus will use tonight to solidify his plans. We need evidence.

I glance around the room, searching for any sign of Jaxson or his team. He told me everything was under control, but that doesn't stop the knot of tension in my chest from tightening.

Another guest approaches, and Marcus turns his attention away. Crystal immediately latches onto my arm, dragging me around for introductions like I'm her favorite new accessory.

I'm midway through another mindless conversation when I spot him—one of

Marcus's new staff looks eerily familiar. It takes me a moment to place him. He's one of Jaxson's men. He's dressed as part of the staff, blending in with the servers carrying trays of drinks. He lingers near the edge of the room, his movements purposeful yet unassuming.

My heart rate kicks up, but I maintain my practiced smile as Crystal introduces me to yet another member of high society who can't hide their enthusiasm in meeting a celebrity rockstar with the Wild Band.

I track Jaxson's man from the corner of my eye as he efficiently works the room. What the hell is Jaxson thinking, putting someone this close to Marcus?

"Dinner is ready to be served," Lila announces from the doorway.

She looks completely professional in her chef's whites, but the sight of her here, in Marcus's territory, makes my stomach clench. When I'd told Jaxson absolutely not to involve her, I never imagined she'd accept the job on her own.

"Everything smells amazing," Crystal gushes. "Daddy, wasn't I right about hiring her?"

"Indeed." Marcus studies Lila with calculating eyes. "Quite the coup, getting such a highly recommended chef, who just happens to be your fiancé's next-door neighbor."

"I go where the opportunities are," Lila replies smoothly, not even glancing my way. "Shall we begin with the first course?"

Throughout dinner, I divide my attention between the conversation and Jaxson's undercover man. He moves with practiced ease, but I notice him drifting closer to the hallway that leads to Marcus's study whenever possible.

The wine pairing is exquisite," Chen comments as the staff serves the third course.

"I have an excellent wine steward," Lila responds, topping off Marcus's glass. "Though I believe Mr. Davidson's cellar provided tonight's selections."

Marcus preens at the compliment, glancing at Chen. "Perhaps you'd like a tour of the wine cellar later? I have some rare vintages..."

That's when I see Jaxson's man slip away from the dining room, heading toward the study.

My pulse quickens.

The conversation at the dinner table continues for a few minutes, drifting toward casual topics, but my eyes secretly watch the hallway for any sign of motion.

Suddenly, Marcus clears his throat and stands, his chair scraping against the floor. "Robert, William," he says, his tone casual but firm. "Why don't we step into my study for a moment? There are a few details I'd like to share privately regarding Sterling Motors' future."

Fear knots in my chest. Jaxson's man is still in the study, and if Marcus catches him, this entire operation is blown.

Before the panic can fully set in, there's a tremendous crash from the hallway. The sound of shattering glass echoes through the house.

Marcus's face darkens. "What the bloody hell—"

All eyes turn toward the hallway when Lila appears. She steps forward discreetly. "I apologize for disturbing you, Mr. Davidson. It appears we'll need another bottle from

your cellar. The '82 Bordeaux..."

"This is completely unacceptable," Marcus snaps. "I don't appreciate this level of incompetence with my wine collection. Your staff—"

"Actually, sir," Lila interrupts, her voice perfectly modulated, "the young man who dropped the bottle is one of your household staff, not mine. My team is exclusively in the kitchen."

The silence that follows is profound. I hide my snicker in my napkin.



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Marcus recovers quickly. “Yes, well... Perhaps this is an opportunity. Robert, William—I’ve been meaning to show you my wine cellar. Some exceptional vintages you might appreciate before we discuss business.”

“Wonderful idea,” Crystal chirps. “Luke, dear, do you want to join them?”

“Of course,” I say, standing. “I’d love to see your father’s collection.”

As we follow Marcus toward the cellar, I pass close to Lila. Our eyes meet briefly, and I’m struck by the tension in hers. She knows something—something that makes her worried.

But there’s no time to decode her look. Marcus is already launching into a detailed history of his wine collection, leading us past his study where, hopefully, Jaxson’s man has found whatever we need.

Once we emerge from the wine cellar a few minutes later, I catch a glimpse of Jaxson’s man slipping back into position, adjusting his uniform. Whatever he did in the study, he’s done now.

The night isn’t over, though. As Marcus leads the two board members into his study, he firmly shuts the door, excluding me from their business plans. And judging by the careful way Lila’s watching everything, there’s more happening here than even I understand.

I just pray that whatever the PI team had planned worked because being this close to Marcus while he plots against my father is getting harder by the second.

A cold fury starts to build as I watch Lila direct her staff with too much precision, her timing too perfect. If she's involved in this—after I explicitly told Gibson to keep her out of it—there will be hell to pay—for both of them.

Twenty-Three

THREE HOURS EARLIER

Lila

I meet Jaxson Gibson in the back of an unmarked van parked two blocks away. The space is cramped with surveillance equipment, and Jaxson's team moves with practiced efficiency as they prep for tonight. We have a few hours before dinner service begins at the Davidson mansion.

"These are your points of contact," Jaxson says, indicating one man that I recognize from my staff interviews last week. "Ryan's posing as one of Marcus's household staff, Curtis as your sous chef. They'll handle the technical aspects—you just need to create opportunities."

"The study is our primary target," Curtis explains, showing me blueprints. "But we need his personal devices, too. Marcus keeps his phone close, but he's careless with his tablet."

My hands are steady as I take the small device they give me. "And this will copy everything?"

"Just needs thirty seconds of contact. But Lila—" Jaxson's expression turns serious. "Ryan will gain access to the study. We're only giving you a drive in case an opportunity arises for you to use it—understand?"

“I’ve got it,” I confirm, meeting his eyes.

“Lila, If anything feels off about this entire plan—you abort. Luke was explicit about keeping you out of this. I’m already risking his wrath involving you at all.”

“Luke doesn’t get to make my decisions.” The words come out sharper than intended. “I’m doing this for Jim,” I say in a softer yet still firm voice, “For all of Sterling Motors’ employees who’ll lose everything if Marcus succeeds.”

A tech suddenly interrupts with last-minute equipment checks. I use the time to review the plan, trying not to think about Luke’s reaction if he discovers my role in this.

The Davidson kitchen is controlled chaos when I arrive. Curtis seamlessly integrates with my regular staff, while Ryan circulates with the household servers. Everything appears normal—exactly as it should. Then Luke walks in.

Even though I prepared myself for this, the sight of him hits me like a physical blow. He looks devastating in a charcoal suit that emphasizes his broad shoulders. Crystal hangs on his arm, picture-perfect as always, and the reminder stings more than it should.

I focus on plating the first course, hyperaware of his presence but maintaining professional distance. The preparations proceed smoothly until I see Marcus’s tablet, temporarily abandoned on the table, while he joins Crystal as they greet the first arriving guests.

My heart begins to pound. I give a furtive glance around to see if anyone is near. Taking a deep breath for courage, I connect the copying device. Thirty seconds. Just thirty seconds...

Footsteps approach the dining room, and I freeze, feeling lightheaded.

“Daddy,” Crystal’s voice carries through the opening. “The Hendersons just arrived...”

The footsteps move away, and I give a shaky exhale. With trembling fingers, I disconnect the thumb drive from the tablet, my pulse racing. Hurriedly, I place the drive in my pocket, where its weight feels like it’s burning a hole. I slip back to the kitchen, my heart in my throat, expecting someone to call out at any minute, revealing my deception.

The real test comes later when Ryan needs access to Marcus’s private files. The diverted tour to the wine cellar buys him crucial minutes, but I can barely breathe until he’s clear.

Now, watching Luke follow Marcus and the other men downstairs, I pray we got enough. The weight of everything Jaxson’s team hoped to discover rides on how successful we are tonight. They are looking for proof of Marcus’s plans, his offshore accounts, and the shell companies he’s using to orchestrate Sterling’s hostile takeover. Hopefully, we have all the evidence we need.

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Luke's gaze catches mine one last time before he disappears down the cellar stairs. The suspicion there makes my chest ache, but I'd do it again. Some things are worth the risk, even if it means making Luke angry by not following his orders.

I head back to the kitchen, where my staff is preparing dessert. There's still a dinner service to complete and appearances to maintain. Curtis glances over at me with a single nod, and I let out the breath I was holding.

I silently slip him the thumb drive, and his eyes widen in surprise and approval. That one look makes me feel lighter. In less than four hours, I've committed corporate espionage, betrayed Luke's trust, and potentially saved Sterling Motors.

Not bad for a night's work.

Now, I just have to survive the fallout when Luke finds out.

I haven't seen Luke in a while when Crystal approaches. "Lila, thank you for making this evening a wonderful success for Luke and me," she says with a wide smile. "I'm sorry he couldn't stay to thank you himself. Something about an early morning rehearsal."

"It was a pleasure," I murmur, the lie awkward on my tongue. I return to the kitchen, grateful that her father didn't feel the need to acknowledge the success of the dinner party.

It's an hour later, after the last guest leaves, before my staff has the kitchen cleaned and ready to go. Ryan and Curtis stay until I exit the house, ensuring I make it out

safely without mishaps or delays.

The cool night air greets me as I step outside. The drive home feels strangely anti-climatic, the adrenaline still humming through my veins. Once home, I start toward my apartment, my shoulders aching with tension, but I stop short when I see him.

Luke.

He's leaning against his Jeep, arms crossed, his suit jacket unbuttoned. His tie is loose, and the faint glow of the moonlight catches the sharp lines of his jaw. He doesn't look angry, not yet, but there's something in his expression that makes my stomach twist.

"It took you a while," he says, his voice calm but tight.

"I was just wrapping up," I reply, gripping my bag a little tighter. "Long night."

He nods, his eyes slightly narrowing as they drift to my hands. "You seem tense."

"Just tired," I say quickly. "It's been a busy day."

Luke pushes off the Jeep, taking a slow step toward me. "Lila, do you have something to tell me?"

"About the dinner?" I ask, my voice a little too high. "Everything went fine."

"Did it?" he asks, his tone harsh. He steps closer, his eyes searching mine. "Because you weren't supposed to be involved with what went down tonight."

My breath catches, and I force myself to hold his gaze. "I'm not sure what you mean."

His jaw tightens, and he looks away briefly, exhaling sharply. “Right.”

I hesitate the words caught in my throat. Every instinct screams at me to tell him the truth, to explain why I did what I did. But the memory of Jaxson’s warning—about Luke’s wrath stops me.

“The dinner seemed to go great,” I say finally, keeping my voice steady. “Crystal loved it.”

Luke studies me for a long moment, his eyes flicking to the tension in my stance. “Of course she did,” he says, his tone unreadable. “The meal was superb. You did a fine job.”

The weight of his words hangs between us, and for a moment, I think he’s going to push further. But then he steps back, his hands sliding into his pockets.

“Get some rest,” he says quietly, his voice softer now. “You look like you need it.”

I nod, my throat too tight to speak, and turn toward my door. The tension doesn’t leave my shoulders until I’m safely inside.

As I shut the door, I glance out the window. Luke is still standing there, watching me, his expression shadowed by the night.

The weight of the evening presses down on me, and exhaustion tugs at my limbs. But it’s not just physical—it’s emotional. The thought of Luke finding out what I’ve done, the anger that will undoubtedly follow, makes my chest tighten.

I should sleep. I need to sleep. But instead, I sink onto the couch, my mind racing. Tonight was a victory—a small one—but the battle is far from over. And with every step we take, the stakes only get higher.

I didn't lie, but I don't know how much longer I can keep this from Luke. For now, all I can do is hope we're one step closer to stopping Marcus.



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About an hour later, I stand up from the couch without turning on the lights and turn toward my bedroom. A shadow moving on the back deck catches my eye. My heart jumps to my throat as panic rushes through me. But when I see it's Luke, the moonlight revealing his shaggy blonde hair, I give a sigh of relief and move to the glass sliding doors. Unlocking them, I slide them soundlessly open.

His eyes are dark and dangerous. I've never seen him like this—coiled anger radiating from every inch of him.

“Were you going to tell me?” His voice is deceptively quiet.

I lift my chin. “Eventually.”

He stalks into my apartment, and I take an involuntary step back. Not from fear—Luke would never hurt me—but from the raw intensity rolling off him.

“Jaxson just called.” His jaw clenches. “He told me everything. About how you were involved in tonight's operation.”

“Luke—“

“Do you have any idea what could have happened if you were caught?” He advances until I'm backed against the wall. “Any concept of the danger you put yourself in?”

“I knew what I was getting into.”

“The hell you did!” His palm slams against the wall beside my head. “You're a chef,

Lila. Not a goddamned trained operative. Not someone who knows how to handle—“

“I’m also not a child!” I push against his chest, but he doesn’t budge. “I saw an opportunity to help, and I took it.”

“To help?” He laughs, but there’s no humor in it. “You could have been arrested. Or worse.”

“It was worth the risk.”

“Nothing is worth that risk. Nothing.”

“Your father is worth it,” I snap. “The people who’d lose their jobs if Marcus succeeds—they’re worth it. And you...” My voice catches. “You’re worth it.”

Something flashes in his eyes. “I didn’t want your help. I never asked you to risk yourself for me.”

“You didn’t have to.”

The admission hangs between us, charged and heavy. Luke’s breath comes fast, his body caging mine against the wall. I should be intimidated by the barely leashed violence in his posture, but all I feel is heat.

“If anything had happened to you...” His voice is rough.

“It didn’t.”

“But it could have.” His fingers thread into my hair, gripping just shy of painful. “Do you understand what that would do to me?”

“Luke—“

His mouth crashes into mine, desperate and demanding. There’s nothing gentle about this kiss—it’s all teeth and tongue and furious passion. I meet him with equal force, my fingers digging into his shoulders as he presses me harder against the wall.

When he raises his head, his eyes are still burning but with a different kind of heat. One that makes my heart pound inside my chest and my panties dampen. He roughly leans his weight against me as his hands hurriedly strip off my clothes and shoes, leaving me naked and vulnerable before him, my back still pressed against the wall.

I feel his hot breath as he leans forward, his hand still tight in my hair as he urges my face upward. His hand reaches out and boldly squeezes a breast. He gives a light nip as he closes his teeth around a nipple, and I give a soft gasp at the slight sting.

As he continues to ravish me with his mouth and lips, his free hand travels between us, and I hear the sound of his zipper. Before I can even think, he lifts me farther up the wall, sliding his thigh between my legs. Holding me in place, suspended above him. He rubs his fabric-covered leg suggestively against my core, eliciting another gasp from me.

Without letting my feet touch the floor, he grips me around the waist and raises me higher before bringing me down onto his hard, thick shaft, filling me completely.

The fullness of him stealing my breath. He begins to move, his hands tight around my waist, anchoring me between him and the hard wall as he surges into me. His thrusts are rough, forceful—and thrilling.

The only sound is our harsh breathing, my helpless whimpers, and his occasional low growl as he continues to relentlessly pound into me. Taking me roughly up against the unyielding wall.

Only when the storm is over, and he slumps against me, his forehead resting against mine, can I take a breath. His smell, mixed with the musky scent of our lovemaking, fills the air around us, making it hard to think as our breathing slows.

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He finally raises his head and slowly releases his harsh hold on me, allowing me to slide down the wall until my feet touch the floor. I sway, my legs unsteady, and his broad hands steady me.

He finally speaks, breaking the silence between us. “Get some sleep. Don’t turn on any lights. There could still be a risk of danger.” He demands gruffly.

With that, he turns swiftly and silently. He lets himself out the back door and disappears into the darkness.

I stand where he left me, leaning back against the unforgiving wall, my heart still pounding in my chest. I think of his words of warning, ‘a risk of danger,’ might still remain, and I shudder. The real danger was Luke, and it’s already too late to save me from him.

Twenty-Four

Luke

I stare at my reflection in the recording booth’s glass, but my mind is elsewhere. Two days have passed since that night at Lila’s apartment. Between rehearsals, meetings with the band, and trying to piece together everything that went down that night, I’ve barely had time to breathe, let alone think about Lila.

But when I do think about her, it’s all-consuming.

The memory of that night lingers like a shadow, creeping into every quiet moment. I

regret how rough I was with her and how I let my frustration and fear cloud my judgment. But I don't regret the truth that passed between us, the way she met my anger with unwavering strength.

She risked everything—her business, her reputation—just to help my father and me. And she looked so damn beautiful doing it. I can't get the image out of my head. The memory of her pressed against that wall, defiant even as I lost control. Even just thinking about the passion of that moment makes my heart pound.

“Hey, Luke!” Vince waves his hand in front of my face. “You planning on laying down these tracks today, or should we reschedule?”

“Sorry.” I adjust my headphones, trying to focus. “Let's take it from the bridge.”

Three hours and countless takes later, we finally nail the track. It's good—maybe our best yet—but my heart isn't in it. Everything feels secondary to what's happening with Sterling Motors—with Marcus—with Lila.

Especially Lila.

I check my phone again. No messages from her, not that I expected any. I'm the one who abruptly left her apartment that night, too angry to trust myself further around her. Too scared of what I might say or do if I stayed any longer.

The guys are packing up their gear when my father calls.

“Luke, I've heard from Gibson. His office, in one hour,” he says without preamble. “The team's finished their analysis.”

My stomach tightens. “I'll be there.”

The drive across town gives me too much time to think. About Lila in that kitchen at Marcus's mansion, playing her part perfectly while conducting corporate espionage. About how natural she looked, how no one suspected a thing. Not even me, until it was too late.

I should be furious. Part of me still is. But mostly, I'm in awe of her courage. And terrified of what could have happened.

Gibson's office is already crowded when I arrive. He and his tech team have transformed one wall into a display of interconnected documents and financial records. My father sits beside Jaxson's desk, looking more like himself than he has in weeks.

"Late night?" Jaxson asks as I drop into a chair.

"Studio session." I clear my throat, stealing myself. "What did you find?"

"More than we could have hoped for." He hands me a thick file. "Thanks to the data from Marcus's tablet—which we wouldn't have without Lila's help, by the way—we've mapped his entire operation."

I ignore the pointed comment about Lila. "Give me the highlights."

"Marcus has been systematically weakening Sterling's position for months through a series of shell companies. He's been acquiring additional shares, along with convincing Chen and Hartley to vote with him. All while positioning for a hostile takeover. But that's just the surface."

My father leans forward. "Might as well show us the rest."

Jaxson pulls up several documents on his laptop. "These are internal memos between

Marcus and his conspirators. He's been orchestrating 'accidents' at your manufacturing plants—strategic supply chain disruptions. All designed to make it look like mismanagement on Jim's part.”

“Son of a bitch,” I mutter, scanning the evidence.

“It gets worse.” Jaxson clicks through more files. “He's been gathering dirt on all the board members, building blackmail files. Robert Chen and William Hartley were his major targets. I'm guessing that if they tried to back out of the deal, he'd still be able to control them...”



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“The board would vote however he wanted.” The pieces click into place. “Including removing Dad as head of the company.”

“Exactly.” My father’s voice is grim. “Robert and William are meeting us here in twenty minutes. They need to see this before Marcus makes his next move.”

I lean back, processing. “You think they’ll believe it?”

“The evidence is irrefutable,” Jaxson says. “And both men have been friends with your father for years. They’ll listen.”

My phone buzzes—for just a moment, I think it’s from Lila.

‘Just checking that you’re okay. I haven’t heard from you.’

But it’s from Crystal. I grimace, ignoring the text, and shoving my phone back into my pocket.

Simple words that, if they were from Lila would slice right through me. I think of her that night, the way she stood her ground as I raged at her. How she didn’t back down, didn’t apologize for doing what she thought was right.

God, she was beautiful in her defiance and even more beautiful later when I—

“Speaking of Lila,” Jaxson says carefully, “she’s been instrumental in—“

“No!” The word comes out sharper than intended. “I won’t have her involved in this

again.”

My father gives me a knowing look. “Son, you can’t protect her if she doesn’t want your protection.”

“I can try.” I stand, needing to move. “She’s not trained for this. She has no idea what Marcus is capable of.”

“I think she knew exactly what she was risking,” Jaxson counters. “She made an informed choice to help despite the danger. No matter what she says—she did it for you.”

The memory of her words that night hits me again: “You’re worth it.”

Worth risking her safety, her business, and everything she’s built. The thought makes me want to shake her and kiss her senseless at the same time.

“Robert and William will be here soon,” my father says, mercifully changing the subject. “We need to decide how to present this to them.”

We spend the next ten minutes organizing the evidence and building our case. But my mind keeps drifting to Lila’s and how she looked when I left her.

I should apologize for that night, for losing control. But I’m not sorry for claiming her, for showing her exactly what she does to me. And I’m not sorry for wanting to protect her, even if she doesn’t want my protection.

“They’re here,” Jaxson announces, checking his phone.

I straighten in my chair, pushing thoughts of Lila aside. Time to focus on taking Marcus down. Time to save my family’s company.

But later... later, I need to see her to make her understand why I took her the way I did—so roughly. I need to feel her against me again, warm and alive and safe.

For now, though, we have a war to win.

I find myself outside Lila's apartment the next afternoon. The movement in her kitchen window tells me she's cooking, probably planning the next week's dinner parties. My chest tightens, thinking about how dedicated she is to her work, helping us, and everything she does.

When I ring the bell, there's a pause before her door opens. She's wearing her usual yoga pants and an oversized t-shirt, her hair pulled up in a messy bun. Something flickers across her face—uncertainty, maybe, or wariness. But she looks behind me, biting her lip, then steps aside to let me in.

"Hi," she says softly, closing the door. "Are you sure it's okay for us to be seen together?"

"I don't care if it is or not," I tell her truthfully. "I wanted to see you. Give you an update on what's been going on."

She's been baking—the apartment smells like warm sugar and vanilla. It's so perfectly Lila that my throat tightens.

"I'm sorry," I finally say, moving closer. "About the other night. I shouldn't have—"

"Lost control?" Her lips curve slightly. "Or what happened afterward?"

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“Everything except what happened after.” The words come out before I can stop them.

She looks up, those brown-hazel eyes searching my face. “I know you were worried.”

“Worried doesn’t begin to cover it.” I lean against her kitchen counter, needing its solid support. “You acted like you weren’t involved. Then, when Jaxson told me just how involved you’d been—“

“Luke.” She moves to stand in front of me. “I’m okay. Nothing happened.”

“But it could have.” I reach out, unable to help myself, caressing the curve of her face. “You don’t know what Marcus is capable of.”

“Can you tell me what Jaxson’s team found?” She gives me a rueful smile. “It’s been hard not knowing.”

The scent of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies fills the space between us as I blow out a breath. “We met with Chen and Hartley today. Showed them everything we found—everything you helped us get.” I grimly tell her of Marcus’ plans. “The look on their faces when they realized what Marcus has been doing...” I shake my head.

“How is Crystal? Does she suspect anything?” Lila moves to her oven, pulls out a hot tray of cookies, and sets them to cool.

“Honestly? I don’t know. I haven’t been in touch with her.” Lila glances up in surprise. “I almost feel sorry for her. She didn’t pick her father, but that doesn’t mean

she's innocent. She brought most of it on herself." I think of Crystal's calculated manipulations over the last few weeks. "I have a feeling she'll always land on her feet."

Lila nods, then hesitates. "So, it's over then?"

I shake my head. "Not yet. But hopefully, it will be next week, after the board meeting. Chen and Hartley are firmly in Dad's corner now. Jaxson's coordinating with federal authorities—turns out Marcus's creative accounting caught some serious attention." I run a hand through my hair. "We're setting up a sting. The less you know about it, the better."

"Luke—"

"Please." I cross the kitchen to her, catching her hands in mine. "Just trust me a little longer. Until this whole mess is behind us."

She nods and squeezes my fingers. "Of course. Always."

The simple declaration hits me like a punch to the gut. The sunlight streaming through her windows cast shadows across her face, and I want nothing more than to pull her close, to show her exactly what those words mean to me. But there's more I need to tell her.

"There's still the balloon payment to deal with," I say reluctantly. "Even with the board backing Dad, last year's fire put the company in a tough spot. Between my music revenue and our other holdings, we're still coming up short."

"How short?"

"Too much." I don't want to burden her with the exact figures. "We need a miracle,

basically.”

She’s quiet for a moment, then says, “You’ll find a way. I’m sure of it.”

Her faith in me is humbling. Dangerous. I’m already too invested, too attached to this woman who moved in next door—into my life and turned everything upside down.

“Lila.” My voice is rough. “What you did—helping us, risking everything—I need you to know...”

She presses her fingers to my lips. “Not yet. Tell me when this is over.”

She’s right, of course. There’s too much at stake right now for declarations or promises. But standing here in her warm kitchen, I’ve never wanted her more.

I watch as she places three still-hot cookies from the oven on a plate and hands them to me.

“Here, I made these for you. You said they’re your favorite.” She smiles. “And I know you’re always hungry.”

Instead of taking the plate of cookies, I reach for her, pulling her into my arms. “You’re right about that,” I softly whisper as I cover her lips with mine.

“Luke, what if someone saw you come in here?” She says as she reluctantly starts to pull away.

“And I told you, I’m done caring,” I tell her roughly, then lean down and sweep her off her feet and cradle her in my arms.

I carry her into her bedroom and proceed to make slow, sweet love to her, so different

from the last time—until she softly calls out my name and comes in my arms.

Afterward, I hold her close, keeping the words I long to say locked inside—at least for now.

Twenty-Five

Lila

The energy in Wild's recording studio pulses like a living thing. It hums in the air like a song waiting to be played, and I can feel it thrumming through my veins the moment I step inside.

I sit on a leather couch behind the glass partition, watching five men who move together in sync, connected by invisible threads of music and years of friendship. Luke stands at the keyboard, his back to me, the slope of his shoulders relaxed in a way I don't see often. He looks effortlessly cool and sinfully handsome in ripped jeans and a faded t-shirt.

Cass stands at the mic, eyes closed, as he works through a complicated harmony while singing the lyrics. Vince is tuning his guitar, fingers moving like they've memorized every note in the universe. Sam sits nearby with his bass propped on his lap, plucking strings and listening intently to the vibrations. And Nate, the heart of their rhythm, spins a drumstick between his fingers, tapping a soft beat on the edge of his snare.

The band hasn't even started playing yet, and I'm already mesmerized.

Luke waves, turning and flashing me a crooked smile that sends warmth spiraling through me. His expression soft but full of that magnetic confidence that always makes my pulse skip.



“Luke looks happy you’re here,” Kendrick says, her tone light but knowing.

I glance toward the band, where Luke is now fiddling with a few settings on his keyboard. “He’s just being neighborly,” I say, brushing off the comment, but I can feel my face get hot.

Kendrick smirks. “Sure he is.”

Suddenly, the atmosphere in the room shifts. The banter dies down, replaced by a focused intensity as the guys take their places. Emily, looking every inch the band’s manager, stands near the sound booth, her clipboard in hand as she coordinates with the audio engineers. Her calm authority is impressive, and it’s clear she’s the one keeping the team on track.

“Ready?” Emily calls out, her voice cutting through the buzz.

“Let’s do it,” Cass says, his deep voice carrying effortlessly across the room.

The next second, music fills the studio, and I’m completely transported.

“They’re something else, aren’t they?” Kendrick settles beside me on the couch, her eyes fixed on Cass as his voice blends perfectly with the music.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” I admit. “The way they just... know what each other is going to do.”

“Years of playing together will do that.” She grins as Cass stops mid-verse to gesture at Vince, wordlessly communicating some change in the arrangement. Vince nods, adjusts his fingers on the fretboard, and they start again seamlessly. “It’s second nature to them now. They don’t even need to talk—they just know.”

I nod, unable to tear my eyes away. It's fascinating to watch how they move and connect; each note a thread in an intricate web of sound.

When the song ends, Emily steps forward, giving them a few notes on the tempo and transitions. She's calm but direct, and her feedback is concise and constructive. It's clear they trust her judgment completely.

I shift uncomfortably. "Are you sure it's okay that I'm here? I don't want to intrude on their process."

"Are you kidding?" Kendrick laughs. "Vince brings a different girl every week. However, none of them last long enough for us to even learn their names. He's a bit of a womanizer."

I raise an eyebrow, glancing toward Vince. "Really?"

From her position near the mixing board, Emily rolls her eyes. "Vince's last girl thought Sam was the lead singer."

"That's because she never actually listened to any of our music," Sam calls through the intercom, making everyone laugh.

Kendrick laughs, low and easy. "Trust me, no one will blink at you being here, Lila."

That sets me at ease. "Alright. I'll just sit back and watch."

"Luke's never invited Crystal," Emily says in a low voice, with a meaningful look in my direction.

Before I can respond, Luke catches my eye through the glass and winks. The simple gesture sends warmth spreading through my chest. He looks so natural here so in

hiselement. His t-shirt clings to his shoulders as he moves with the music, and his face—God, his face when he plays—is like nothing else in the world exists.

“They’re working on the bridge for the new single,” Emily explains, her gaze lingering on Sam. “It’s been giving them fits all week.”

As if on cue, Luke holds up a hand, stopping the music. “Let’s try something different. Sam, can you drop that bass line an octave? And Cass—“

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“Yeah, I hear it.” Sam’s already adjusting. “Vince, follow my lead on the harmony.”

They launch into the section again, and this time it clicks. The music swells, building to a crescendo that makes my skin tingle. Cass’s voice soars over the instruments, raw and powerful.

“They’ve nailed it,” Kendrick mutters. “That’s it. That’s the one.”

Emily is already marking something on her clipboard. “Got it. Let’s run it again from the top.”

“She’s good at this,” I say to Kendrick, nodding toward Emily.

Kendrick smiles. “She has to be. Between managing the band and being a new mom, she’s pretty much a superhero.”

“How is Presley?” I ask, thinking of Emily’s sweet baby girl.

“She’s doing great,” Kendrick says, her smile softening. “Cassidy loves babysitting her. She’s been over the moon about it, honestly. I think it makes her feel like a grown-up.”

“That’s sweet,” I say, picturing Kendrick’s daughter doting on her little cousin.

“She’s a natural with her,” Emily adds, having heard us. “Unlike her father, who still looks terrified every time he holds her.”

“Hey, babies can be scary!” Sam protests through the intercom.

Luke chuckles into his microphone. “You faced down twenty thousand screaming fans at Madison Square Garden, but you’re afraid of a baby?”

“Those fans don’t throw up on me.”

The easy banter continues as they start another take. I watch, fascinated by how they work—professional one moment, teasing the next, but always in sync. There’s so much affection in this room, so many different kinds of relationships woven together by music and time.

Cass signals something to Luke, who nods and adjusts his headphones. The opening notes of a different song startup—something slower, more intimate. When he begins playing, his eyes find mine through the glass.

“Oh boy,” Kendrick murmurs. “I know that look.”

“What look?”

“The ‘I’m playing this for you’ look. Trust me, Cass and I have both given it to the other enough times to know.”

Heat creeps up my neck, but I can’t look away from Luke. The melody wraps around me like a caress—the sound soft, loving, and filled with unspoken promises.

My heart threatens to burst right out of my chest.

The band’s taking a break, and we join them when Nate’s phone starts buzzing. He glances at the screen, and his eyes go wide. The whoop he lets out makes everyone jump.

“Holy shit! Holy actual shit!”

“What?” Cass lowers his water bottle. “You okay there, man?”

Nate’s practically vibrating. “Remember that tech startup I told you guys to invest in? The one with the new breakthrough technology?”

“The one you wouldn’t shut up about until we all bought in?” Vince grins. “Yeah, what about it?”

“They just got acquired. By one of the big boys.” Nate’s grin threatens to split his face. “We’re talking ten times our initial investment. Ten. Freaking. Times. Each!”

The room erupts. Vince drops his guitar pick. Cass spits out his water. All eyes are staring at Nate in growing amazement.

“You’re serious?” Luke steps closer to Nate, peering at his phone. “That’s not a typo?”

“Dead serious. Check your accounts—the shares and money are already there.”

There’s a scramble as everyone pulls out their phones. The next moment is filled with shocked exclamations and creative cursing.

“Holy mother of—“

“Is this real?”

“Nate, you beautiful genius!”

The high-fives and hugs start flying. Vince actually picks Nate up and spins him around while Sam and Emily do their version of a victory dance. Cass’s got Kendrick in his arms, both of them laughing.

I hang back, watching their joy, until Luke turns, and his eyes find mine. The smile on his face is blinding. Before I can react, he’s crossing the room in three long strides.

“This is it!” He sweeps me into his arms, lifting me clear off the ground. “This covers the balloon payment. We can save the company!”

His jubilant kiss takes me by surprise—firm and sweet and tasting of pure joy. When he pulls back, his eyes are dancing. “We did it, beautiful. We actually did it.”

The room has gone quiet. I’m suddenly aware that everyone’s watching us, and heat floods my cheeks. But Luke just grins, completely unabashed, still holding me close.

“Well, well,” Vince drawls. “Guess that answers the question about you two.”

“About damn time,” Sam mutters.

Cass is watching us with a knowing smirk while Kendrick elbows him, trying to hide her smile. Emily's not even trying to hide hers.

"Oh, shut up," Luke tells them all, but he's laughing. His arms still around me, solid and warm and safe. "I need to call my dad. This is a game changer."

The excitement builds again as everyone starts making plans. Talk of celebrations and parties fills the air, but I'm stuck on the way Luke is looking at me, like I'm somehow part of this miracle.

"You did this," I tell him softly. "You made this possible."

He shakes his head. "Nate did this. We just trusted him enough to invest."

"Very smart."

"Smart enough to know what truly matters." His thumb brushes my cheek. "Let's have a private celebration. We should probably talk about... this." He gestures between us.

"This?" I raise an eyebrow, trying to ignore how my heart is racing.

"Yeah, this thing where I can't seem to stop kissing you in front of all my friends."

As if to prove his point, he dips his head and captures my lips again, softer this time but no less devastating. Someone—probably Vince—lets out a wolf whistle.

"Get a room!" Sam calls out.

Luke breaks the kiss but keeps me close. "Ignore them. They're just jealous."



“Damn right we are,” Vince agrees. “When do we hear the story of how you two ended up together?”

“When you learn some manners,” Luke shoots back.

I hide my face against his chest, overwhelmed by the teasing, the joy, and the sheer rightness of being in his arms. His hand strokes down my back, and I can feel him chuckling.

“Come on,” he murmurs in my ear. “Let’s get out of here before they start asking for details.”

As he leads me toward the door, Emily calls out, “Don’t forget we have practice again tomorrow!”

“I’ll be there,” Luke answers, his hand warm on my lower back, but he doesn’t slow down.

As I take a quick glance around at the people who mean so much to him—his band, his family—I can’t help but feel like I’m part of something bigger, something extraordinary.

We step into the hallway, leaving behind the sounds of celebration. Luke pulls me to a stop, pressing me gently into his arms.

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“Thank you,” he says softly.

“For what?”

“For your support, your trust in me, and being my lucky charm—for being here and sharing this with me, for everything.” His eyes search mine. “Just... thank you.”

This kiss is different—slower, deeper, and full of promise. When we break apart, I’m dizzy with it.

“So,” he grins, “about that private celebration...”

I laugh and let him lead me away, my heart lighter than it’s been in weeks. Something tells me this is just the beginning.

Twenty-Six

Luke

The boardroom feels different today. Maybe it’s the morning light streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows, or maybe it’s the knowledge that everything is about to change. I sit beside my father at the head of the massive oak table, watching Marcus Davidson’s face as the board members file in.

He still thinks he has this in the bag. Still wearing that smug smile that makes me want to punch him.

“Shall we begin?” Dad’s voice carries the quiet authority that’s led Sterling Motors for three decades. “We have several items on the agenda, but I believe we should start with the vote regarding leadership structure that has been proposed.”

Marcus leans forward, adjusting his Italian silk tie. “Excellent suggestion, Jim. Given recent... performance issues, I think it’s time for some fresh perspective at the helm.”

I catch Robert Chen’s eye across the table. He gives me the slightest nod.

“Before we vote,” William Hartley speaks up, “I’d like to address some concerns that have recently come to light.”

Marcus waves a dismissive hand. “We can discuss minor operational issues after—“

“These aren’t minor issues, Marcus.” Chen’s voice could freeze hell. “Would you like to explain the shell companies? Or shall we discuss the manufactured accidents at our plants?”

The change in Marcus’s expression is subtle, but I catch it—a tightening around the eyes, a slight clench of his jaw.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Dad slides folders to each board member. “These documents suggest otherwise. Detailed records of systematic attempts to undermine Sterling Motors’ stability. Offshore accounts. Blackmail attempts against board members.”

“This is ridiculous.” Marcus stands, but I notice his hands trembling slightly. “These are clearly fabricated—“

“They’re authenticated,” William cuts in. “By three separate accounting firms.”

“And federal authorities,” I add, enjoying the way Marcus’s face pales.

“Now,” Dad continues calmly, “shall we proceed with the vote?”

The next few minutes are almost anticlimactic. One by one, each board member votes to maintain current leadership. Even Marcus’s most reliable allies turn against him, their expressions cold.

“This is impossible,” Marcus snarls when the last vote is cast. “You can’t—“

“The vote is unanimous,” Dad announces. “Sterling Motors’ leadership structure remains unchanged.”

Marcus slams his hands on the table. “Fine. Then I call in the loan. Full payment due immediately, as per our agreement.”

I’ve been waiting for this moment. Reaching into my briefcase, I withdraw a certified cashier’s check and slide it across the table.

“Payment in full,” I say quietly. “Including all interest and fees.”

He snatches up the check, eyes widening at the amount. “How—“

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“Does it matter?” I stand, unable to resist twisting the knife. “The loan is satisfied. Your attempt at a hostile takeover has failed. And your resignation from the board will be accepted, effective immediately.”

“You can’t force me to resign.”

Chen clears his throat. “Actually, Marcus, you might want to save your energy for more pressing matters.”

As if on cue, the boardroom doors open. Two men in dark suits enter, followed by several uniformed officers.

Marcus’s face goes from red to white in an instant. “What is this?”

“Mr. Davidson,” one of the suits steps forward, “I’m Agent Phillips with the FBI’s Financial Crimes Division. We’d like to ask you some questions about certain irregularities in your international banking activities.”

I catch Dad’s eye as Marcus starts sputtering legal threats. There’s a lifetime of relief in his slight smile.

“Gentlemen,” Dad addresses the board, “I suggest we adjourn for now. I believe Mr. Davidson has a rather important meeting to attend.”

As the agents lead Marcus toward the door, he turns back with pure hatred in his eyes. “This isn’t over.”

“Actually,” I tell him, “it is.”

The doors close behind them, leaving blessed silence in their wake. One by one, the board members stand and approach Dad, offering handshakes and quiet words of support.

I sink back into my chair, finally letting myself breathe. It’s over. We won.

Matthew’s is one of Crystal’s favorite restaurants—all-white tablecloths and perfectly placed silverware. I glance around the room as I step inside, the low hum of quiet conversation and clinking silverware fading into the background. I’m not here for the food or the ambiance. I’m here to put an end to the charade that’s taken over my life.

Crystal is already seated at a private table near the window, a flute of champagne in her hand. She looks flawless, as always—her dark hair is sleek and straight, not a single strand out of place. Her pink designer dress is tailored to perfection. But as I approach, I notice the faint tension in her shoulders, the way her perfectly painted nails tap against the stem of her glass.

“Luke,” she says with a bright smile, standing to greet me. She leans in to air kiss my cheek, her perfume cloying and too sweet. “Running late again, I see.”

“Got held up,” I say simply, pulling out the chair across from her.

She sits gracefully, giving me a searching look. “I uh... trust everything went okay at the board meeting.”

Nodding, I keep my face neutral.

She looks briefly around, then smiles sweetly. “Daddy and Jim must be running behind, too, but in the meantime, let’s toast.” She lifts her glass. “To our combined

future.”

I don’t pick up my glass.

Her smile wavers, just for a second, before she sets her flute down with a softclink. “What’s wrong? This was supposed to be a family celebration.”

“Crystal,” I say, leaning forward, my voice low. “Our fathers aren’t coming.”

Her smile completely disappears, but I can see a flicker of something in her eyes. She suspects the board meeting didn’t go well, but she probably thinks Marcus still has us over a barrel.

“We need to talk,” I say quietly.

Something in my tone makes her straighten. “What’s going on?”

“The engagement is over, Crystal.” No point dragging this out.

Her lips part slightly, her expression a perfect mix of shock and hurt. “Over?” she says, her voice trembling just enough to sound convincing. “Luke, what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the fact that we’ve been lying to ourselves and everyone else for months,” I say. “This was never about love or a future together. It was about your father’s plans for Sterling Motors.”

Her eyes narrow, and for the first time, I see a crack in her polished facade. “I don’t know what you think you know—“

“I know everything, Crystal,” I interrupt, my voice firm. “I know what Marcus has

been planning. The hostile takeover. The way he's been using you to keep me in line. The leverage he's been holding over us."



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She flinches, just barely, but enough to confirm that she suspected at least some of what Marcus had planned.

“Don’t try to deny it,” I say, leaning closer. “Your father didn’t even bother hiding it. And you went along with it.”

Her eyes flash, and for a moment, I think she might lash out. But then she takes a slow breath, composing her face into an expressionless mask as she glances quickly around the restaurant to make sure we’re not being overheard.

“So that’s it?” she says, her voice cold. “You’re blaming me for everything my father’s done?”

“I’m not blaming you,” I say evenly. “I’m saying this ends now. I’m not going to keep pretending, and I’m not going to let your father manipulate my family anymore.”

Crystal’s laugh is sharp and bitter. “Pretending? You think I’ve been pretending thiswhole time?”

“You tell me,” I say, holding her gaze.

For a moment, her mask slips, and I see something raw and unguarded in her expression. But just as quickly, it’s gone, replaced by a steely glare.

“We’ll see what Daddy has to say about this.”

“Your father was just arrested by federal agents. His effort to take over Sterling Motors didn’t only fail—it brought to light his other illegal activities.

She blinks, then laughs. “Very funny, Luke. Now, where is he really?”

“Your father engaged in illegal international banking activities, orchestrated accidents at our plants, and attempted to blackmail board members.” I keep my voice low, mindful of nearby tables. “It’s over, Crystal. All of it.”

The color drains from her face. “You’re lying.”

“Turn on any financial news channel. It should be breaking news by now.”

She fumbles for her phone, perfectly manicured nails shaking as she pulls up headlines. I watch the realization hit her—first shock, then anger, finally settling into something calculated.

“Luke, darling, “ Her voice goes soft, pleading. “I had no idea what Daddy was doing. You know that, right? We can still—“

“Stop.” I lean back, suddenly tired. “We both know this was never real.”

“How can you say that? After everything we’ve—“

“Name my favorite color.”

She falters. “What?”

“It’s a simple question. What’s my favorite food? My favorite song? When’s the last time we had a real conversation about anything that actually mattered?”

Her lips thin. “We’ve been busy.”

“We’ve been playing parts. You wanted the rockstar fiancé, and I wanted to help my father’s company. Let’s not act like it was ever more than that.”

Something shifts in her eyes—the vulnerability replaced by cold anger.

“You think you’re so righteous,” she says quietly. “So noble for walking away. But what about me, Luke? Do you have any idea what this will do to me? To my reputation? The press will eat this up—“

“Crystal,” I say, my voice softening despite myself. “You’re going to be fine. You’ve always landed on your feet, and you always will. But this—“ I gesture between us—“wasn’t real. And you know it.”

Her jaw tightens, but she doesn’t argue.

“Maybe,” I continue, “in your own way, you’re relieved too. Because neither of us deserves to be trapped in something like this.”

She looks at me for a long moment, her eyes searching mine. And I see again that flash of understanding.

“You’re a fool, Luke,” she says finally, her voice soft but sharp. “But maybe you’re right. Maybe we were both acting.”

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I lean back in my chair, the tension in my chest easing slightly. “You’ll be okay, Crystal. I know you will.”

She doesn’t respond; she just lifts her glass and takes a long sip.

I stand, pulling out my wallet and tossing a few bills on the table to cover the champagne. “Take care of yourself,” I say, my voice low.

As I turn to leave, she calls after me.

“Luke.”

I pause, glancing back.

Her expression is unreadable, her voice almost wistful. “The press will spin this however they want. But just remember—I won’t be the only one they crucify. No one ever gets out of this business clean. Especially once they figure out who you’re really with.”

I freeze. “What do you mean by that?”

Her smile is astute. “Please. I’ve seen how you look at that little chef of yours. Does she know what she’s getting into? The cameras, the speculation, the endless scrutiny?”

“Leave her out of this.”

“Face it, Luke. The media has been given a scandal they’ll feast on for months. I hope she’s ready for it.”

“Don’t worry about Lila.” I nod once, then walk out of the restaurant, leaving Crystal and everything she represents behind.

All I can think about is Lila. Sweet, private Lila who deserves better than having her life turned into tabloid fodder. I need to get to the duplex and warn her.

My mind’s eye can picture her already. She’s probably stress baking right now—her way of keeping busy while waiting for news. I can picture her in her kitchen, dusted with flour, her hair pulled up in that messy bun that makes me want to kiss her neck. The scent of something amazing filling her apartment. It’s what she does when she’s worried or excited or just needs to think.

Right now, she’s probably pulled out her stand mixer, whipping up a batch of chocolate chip cookies because she knows they’re my favorite. The thought makes me smile despite everything. Soon, I’ll tell her we won, that it’s all over, and I’ll get to watch her face light up with that beautiful smile of hers—before I warn her about the coming media storm.

Because Crystal was right about one thing—the paparazzi will have a field day with this. But if they think they can scare Lila away, they don’t know her like I do.

Still, as I drive away from the restaurant, I can’t help but wonder if I’m being selfish by pulling her into this circus.

Then again, when has Lila ever let anyone else decide what she can handle?

Twenty-Seven

Lila

The scent of vanilla and brown sugar fills my kitchen as I pull another batch of cookies from the oven. My hands shake slightly as I carefully transfer the hot cookies from the tray to the cooling rack. I've already finished a batch of chocolate chip cookies—Luke's favorite—that I baked twenty minutes ago.

Stress baking. It's what I do.

The kitchen in my half of the duplex is small but efficient, and right now, it's working overtime. Flour dusts the counter, and there are at least three mixing bowls in the sink. My face feels flushed from the oven's heat or maybe from the anticipation coursing through my veins.

I brush a strand of blonde hair from my face, leaving what's probably a smear of flour on my nose. My oversized Wild Band t-shirt is spotted with vanilla extract, and my shorts fit just a bit too snugly, but I can't focus enough to change.

The front door opens, and Luke fills the doorway. All six-foot-two of him, broad shoulders, and that gorgeous face that makes my heart skip a beat. His blue eyes lock onto mine.

"It's done," he says simply.

I freeze the spatula halfway to the cooling rack. "Sterling Motors?"

"Safe. Dad's in control. Marcus is in custody." His eyes drift to the cookies. "And Crystal..."

"And Crystal?" My voice barely works.

“Is no longer my problem.”

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The spatula clatters to the counter. I'm moving before I realize it, launching myself across the kitchen into his arms. He catches me easily, lifting me off my feet as his mouth finds mine.

The kiss is electric, passionate, and everything we've been yearning for since this started. His hands span my waist as he presses me against the counter, and I thread my fingers through his hair, drawing him closer. He tastes like coffee and every dream I've been afraid to voice. When he groans into my mouth, heat pools low in my belly.

Then suddenly, he's pulling away, putting space between us. The loss of contact leaves me cold.

"Luke?" I hate how small my voice sounds.

He runs a hand through his hair, making it stand up in ways that would be adorable if he didn't look so troubled. "We need to talk about what's coming."

"What do you mean?"

"The press." He starts pacing, his movements tightly controlled. "It's already starting. The media will get hold of this story. The paparazzi will have a field day."

I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly conscious of my messy appearance. "How bad?"

"They'll focus on Marcus first, then my broken engagement to Crystal." His laugh is bitter. "But sooner or later, they'll find out about us. They're going to follow you, dig



into your life, try to make this into something scandalous. Your whole world is about to change. Everything you do will be photographed and analyzed.”

“Luke—“

“You’ll have no privacy. They’ll tell stories about you and speculate on how you came between Crystal and me. They won’t care that none of it’s true.”

“Stop.” I move toward him, but he backs away.

“Lila, you deserve to know what you’re getting into. This isn’t just dating a guy in a band anymore. This is—“

“This is you trying to protect me.” I close the distance between us, refusing to let him retreat. “But I’m not scared.”

He stares down at me, conflict written across his handsome face. “You should be.”

“Why? Because some photographers might follow me? Because people might say mean things?” I reach up, cupping his cheek. “I can survive gossip, Luke.”

“I should have waited—should have found a better way to handle this.” His hand covers mine. “The last thing I want is to see you hurt.”

“You could only hurt me by pushing me away.”

Something breaks in his expression. His arms wrap around me, pulling me against his chest. I breathe in his scent as his chin rests on top of my head.

“I’m not good at this,” he admits quietly.

“At what?”

“Letting someone else be strong for me.”

I smile against his shirt. “Good thing I have plenty of practice being stubborn.”

His laugh rumbles through his chest. “Yeah, I noticed that.” He pulls back just enough to look at me. “You’ve got flour on your nose.”

“Hazard of stress baking.”

His thumb brushes my nose, gently wiping away the flour. The gentle touch sends shivers down my spine. “Those chocolate chip cookies for me?”

“Maybe.”

“And what’s in the oven now?”

“Brown butter snickerdoodles. New recipe.”

His eyes darken. “You know what your baking does to me.”

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“Maybe that was the point.” I stretch up on my tiptoes, brushing my lips against his jaw. “Want to taste?”

His grip on my waist tightens. “The cookies, or you?”

“Both?”

The growl that escapes him makes me giggle. Then his mouth is on mine again, and I’m not thinking about paparazzi or press coverage or anything except the way he makes me feel.

He lifts me and carries me to the couch, then lets me slide slowly down his front. I marvel at his strength, and it sends a shiver through my entire body. I’m barefoot. Luke toes off his loafers. We take turns undressing each other.

The first piece of clothing off is my t-shirt.

“Wild Band, huh? I like seeing you in that.” His voice sounds possessive. As he slips it over my head, he whispers, “But I like seeing you even more like this.” His warm hands cup my breasts through the lace of my bra.

My hands unbutton his dress shirt, pulling it from his waistband. My palms explore his chiseled abs, and I hear his harsh intake of breath. He bends so I can pull his shirt off his shoulders. He makes quick work of my shorts, leaving me standing before him in only my white lace bra and panties. He takes his time. His gaze burns as it travels slowly over my exposed curves.

Seeing the lust in his eyes makes me almost dizzy. I step forward, and my hands reach for his waistband. I unbutton his dress pants, slowly lowering the zipper. My hand slips inside and cups him. His cock is warm, almost hot, and he groans as I stroke him. His fingers circle my wrist, and I glance up at him in surprise.

“Not yet,” he grits out.

At my smile, he pulls off his pants, taking his briefs with them. My eyes slip down to see his growing erection. Then he’s pulling me to him, his skin hot against mine. As he kisses me, his hands expertly unclasp my bra, and my full breasts spill out. His broad hands capture them, and he lightly squeezes and fondles each, pressing his thumb over my nipples.

He pulls back slightly and sits down on my couch. He strips off my last remaining barrier, my white panties, and pulls me onto his lap, facing him. My knees on either side of his hips. His mouth closes over a breast, and he alternates, taking turns grazing each with his teeth. His hands are the only thing keeping me from falling backward as I tilt my head back.

His hand sweeps through my hair, removing my scrunchy so that my hair falls out of its messy bun and cascades down my back.

Luke lifts his head from my nipples and pulls me toward him so that I’m sitting up straight. Then I feel his freehand slide between my thighs. His long, talented fingers find my slick folds, and he slides a fingertip through them. I shudder in his arms, leaning my forehead against his shoulder as he continues to work me with his hand.

“Damn, you’re tight. And so responsive,” he whispers, his breath warm against my ear. As soon as he feels a brief tremor, he removes his hand, and I shiver in disappointment or anticipation of what comes next. I sit back and meet his eyes. His face is tight with his arousal, his bright blue eyes brilliant and intense.

His eyes stay locked on mine as his hands spread my thighs wider, and I lift up, putting my weight on my knees until I'm over him. His hands slip from my waist to my hips and down, cupping my ass with his broad hands as he pulls me down onto him. Impaling me with his thick, hard length. Once I'm fully seated over him, it feels so good a small moan escapes my lips.

His hands don't need to urge me to move as I rise up and down with the occasional slow swivel. I'm in control, and I revel in the feeling—knowing I'm the one turning him on. I finally close my eyes, his blue eyes too intense. Concentrating only on our connection, I continue to move, setting the rhythm, just to change it slightly now and then.

Our breaths grow ragged, his thrusts more forceful, my motions more jerky until we both shout as we climax simultaneously. I slump forward, resting my face into the crook of his neck, his hands lightly caressing up and down my back, as our breathing slows.

His hands tighten around my hips as we begin to disengage when suddenly, we both become aware of the pungent smell of something burning.

“The cookies!” I scramble the rest of the way off his chest, run to the kitchen, and grab my oven gloves. I open the oven door, and smoke billows out. I take the charred cookies out of the oven, being careful of the hot tray and place them on top of the stove.

Instantly, the smoke alarm starts to blare, and I see a naked Luke try to shut it off as I grab a dish towel and try to fan the smoke away from the alarm. Luke finally jumps up and knocks the alarm off the ceiling. It clangs as it hits the kitchen tile—the sudden silence startling.

My eyes fly to his. I see the amusement in his eyes, and my lips start to curve upward

as well. We both begin to laugh as we stand naked in my kitchen, the smell of burned cookies filling the air. Luke advances and pulls me against his chest, where I can feel his laughter as he holds me close.

“Some chef I am,” I say ruefully, my face pressed against his broad chest.

“I’m the one at fault. I... ah... distracted you.”

His hands are in my hair, and he lifts my face to his. “And I’m looking forward to distracting you some more...” His lips cover mine in a slow kiss as I melt against him, all thoughts of burnt cookies replaced by his taste.

The rest of the afternoon is spent being lazy, with numerous distractions as we revel in our time together.

It’s later, and the sun has already set when Luke asks me if I want to take a walk on the beach with him. But as we approach the back deck, the flash of a camera through the sliding glass door makes me jump, and Luke immediately pulls me away from view.

“They found us already,” he mutters, his jaw tight. “So much for our walk on the beach.”

Luke pulls out his phone and dials. “Emily? I need a favor.” He listens for a moment, then relaxes. “You’ve seen the news?... Yeah, I want to take Lila away for a bit... A week, maybe two.”

I can hear Emily’s warm laugh through the phone. “Go,” she says. “I’ve been there. The band’s schedule is clear, and you two deserve some peace. Just keep your phone on for emergencies.”

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After he hangs up, Luke pulls me close. “Now, we need to find a quiet place to lay low for a while. Where reporters would never think to look.”

“I know just the place,” I offer with a small smile. “It’s private and tucked away. We’d have to rough it a little, but it has all the necessities—and a very comfortable bed,” I add innocently.

His answering grin is anything but innocent. “When do we leave?”

“First thing tomorrow? We could pack tonight and leave early in the morning.”

Another camera flash reminds us we’re not alone. But soon we will be.

Luke gives me a quick kiss and slips back to his apartment without turning on the lights. I clean the kitchen before I pack, thinking, let them come. We can handle anything as long as we’re together.

Twenty-Eight

Luke

The morning sun is rising higher in the sky by the time we turn onto the unmarked dirt road. Lila’s old car, Agatha, kicks up dust behind us. We’ve been driving for about two hours, leaving behind the constant buzz of Jacksonville for increasingly remote territory. The last town we passed through was so small that it barely qualified as a town at all.

“Are you sure we’re still in Florida?” I tease, glancing at Lila in the passenger seat. She’s curled up with her feet tucked under her, looking completely at home despite the rough road.

“Born and raised, remember?” Her smile is soft in the fading light. “Take the next left at the old oak with the twisted trunk.”

I follow her directions, amazed at how she can distinguish one tree from another out here. The dense forest presses in on both sides of the narrow road, Spanish moss draping the ancient oaks like silver curtains. It’s beautiful in a wild, untamed way—nothing like the manicured parks and beaches I’m used to.

“I didn’t even know there were private properties in the Ocala National Forest,” I admit, carefully navigating around a fallen branch.

“My great-great-grandfather settled this land in the 1800s,” Lila explains. “When they established the national forest in 1908, our family was allowed to keep the property. A few other old families, too.” She points ahead. “There’s the gate.”

The metal gate is almost hidden by vegetation, but Lila jumps out to unlock the padlock and chain. Once through, the road gets even narrower, winding through towering pines and massive live oaks. Then suddenly, the trees open up to reveal a clearing, and I catch my breath.

The cabin sits in a natural hollow, surrounded by about two acres of maintained land that gives way to the wild forest beyond. It’s rustic but well-maintained, with weathered wood siding and a tin roof that gleams in the rays of sunlight. A wrap-around porch hugs the structure, complete with an old porch swing that makes me immediately picture holding Lila there under the stars.

“Home sweet home,” Lila says softly. “At least for the next couple of weeks.”



I park next to the cabin and kill the engine. The silence is immediate and complete. No traffic, no helicopters, no screaming fans or clicking cameras—just katydids starting their evening chorus and a whip-poor-will calling from somewhere in the forest.

“This is incredible,” I breathe.

Lila beams. “Wait until you see inside.”

We grab our bags from the back, and Lila leads the way up the porch steps, fishing an old key from beneath the front mat. The wooden boards creak welcomingly under our feet, and I notice little touches that speak of years of family care—fresh paint on the window frames and new screens in the windows.

Inside, the cabin is small but perfectly proportioned. The main room combines a living area and kitchen, with exposed wooden beams overhead and a stone fireplace dominating one wall. The kitchen might be compact, but I notice it has all the essential equipment Lila would need. She’s already eyeing it with that look she gets when she’s planning to cook.

“Bedroom’s through there.” She points to a door off the main room. “Bathroom’s attached. It’s not fancy, but—“

I silence her with a kiss, unable to hold back any longer. She melts against me, her hands sliding up my chest as I cup her face. When we break apart, her cheeks are flushed.

“It’s perfect,” I tell her.

She bites her lip, looking up at me through her lashes. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I brush my thumb across her cheek. “Just like you.”

She rolls her eyes, but I can see her fighting a smile. “Smooth talker. Help me unload the groceries?”

We fall into an easy rhythm, putting away the supplies we picked up on the drive. Lila moves around the kitchen like she’s done this a hundred times before, and I suppose she has. I can picture her here through the years—as a child helping her grandmother cook, as a teenager escaping the world, and as a young woman finding her path.

“You love it here,” I observe, watching her arrange items in the old refrigerator.

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“It’s where I learned to cook,” she says, straightening up. “Grandma and I would spend weeks here in the summer. She taught me all her recipes right here.” Her voice softens with memory. “After she died, I would come to the cabin. It helped, being surrounded by her favorite place.”

I wrap my arms around her from behind, pulling her against my chest. She sighs and leans back into me.

“Thank you for sharing this with me,” I murmur against her hair.

“It’s the perfect place to hide out.”

I chuckle. “Not exactly how I planned to start our relationship.”

“Oh?” She turns in my arms, raising an eyebrow. “You had plans?”

“Maybe.” I can’t help but smile at her playful tone. “They definitely involved less paparazzi and more actual dates.”

“This counts as a date,” she declares. “A very long, very private date.”

“I like the sound of that.” I lean down to kiss her again, but she ducks away with a laugh.

“First, I need to check the generator and make sure everything’s running properly. Then I’ll make us some lunch.”

“I can help,” I offer, following her to the back door.

She pauses with her hand on the knob, giving me an amused look. “With the generator or the meal?”

“Both? Neither? Whatever keeps me close to you.”

Her expression softens. “You’re already close to me, Luke. That’s kind of the point of all this.”

The simple truth of it hits me then—we’re here, together—starting something real. No more having to pretend, no more holding back. Just us, in this beautiful hidden place, with nothing but time.

As if reading my thoughts, Lila stretches up on her tiptoes and kisses me softly. “Come on, rockstar. Let me show you how we rough it in the forest.”

The day unfolds slowly and peacefully. We check the generator (which Lila handles with surprising expertise). We have a simple lunch—just sandwiches, if you can call anything that Lila prepares simple.

Afterward, she shows me the different trails that lead through the forest. As dinner time approaches, I help her prepare a quick but delicious meal. If anything, my appetite is even more evident, but Lila just laughs, stating it has something to do with the fresh air.

As night falls, we settle on the porch swing, listening to the chorus of frogs and keeping an eye out for deer in the clearing.

Lila fits perfectly against my side, her head resting on my shoulder. The gentle back-and-forth of the swing matches the rhythm of our breathing, and for the first time in

months, I feel completely at peace.

“What are you thinking about?” Lila asks softly.

I press a kiss to her temple. “How grateful I am that you had this escape plan ready.”

She laughs quietly. “I wouldn’t call it a plan exactly. More like... a hope?”

“You hoped we’d need to hide from the press?”

“I hoped we’d need somewhere to be alone together,” she corrects, snuggling closer.

“The press part is just an inconvenient bonus.”

I tilt her chin up, meeting her eyes in the growing darkness. “We have two whole weeks of being alone together.”

“Whatever will we do with all that time?” Her voice is innocent, but the sultry look in her eyes is not.

Instead of answering, I kiss her, slow and deep, pouring everything I feel into it. She responds eagerly, turning in my arms until she’s practically in my lap, her fingers threading through my hair.

When we finally break apart, we’re both breathing hard, and the swing is swaying erratically.

“Maybe we should take this inside,” Lila suggests, her voice husky.

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“Probably wise,” I agree, though I can’t resist stealing another kiss. “Wouldn’t want to break your family’s porch swing.”

She stands, taking my hand and pulling me up. “Come on. I’ll show you the bedroom.”

As I follow her inside, I send up a silent thank you to whatever twist of fate brought us here—to this place and to this new beginning.

We have two weeks of solitude ahead of us, and I plan to make everysecond count.

The mid-morning sun streams through the bedroom windows as I step out of the shower, wrapping a towel around my waist. Lila’s just crawled out of bed pulled on some hot pink panties, and is reaching for a t-shirt.

“Babe?” I call out. “Have you seen my—“

The sound of tires and an engine cuts me off. Through the front window, I catch sight of a truck pulling up.

“Lila?” Turning to her as three doors slam and voices drift up to the porch.

“That’s my dad’s truck.” She appears beside me, her eyes now wide open.

Before either of us can do more than sink further back into the bedroom, the screen door creaks open.

“Lila?” a woman’s voice calls out. “Honey, we brought breakfast!”

I’m standing there in nothing but a towel, my hair still wet, and Lila’s in my t-shirt from last night. Her hair is still mussed from our morning in bed, and there’s no mistaking what we’ve been up to.

“Lila? Are you—Oh!”

Mrs. Jeffers stops dead in the doorway to the bedroom, a picnic basket in her arms. Behind her, a teenage girl lets out a squeak that could probably shatter glass.

“Oh my God, you’re... you’re Luke Sterling! And you’re in the bedroom with my sister!”

“Lily Marie!” Her father’s voice booms from the main room. “What are you—“ He appears behind his wife and daughter, his face turning from confusion to thunderous in record time.

Lila moves to stand slightly in front of me, though given our respective heights, it doesn’t hide much. “Mom, Dad, Lily... this is Luke. Luke, this is... well, my family. Who we weren’t expecting.”

“It’s nice to meet you all,” I manage, trying to maintain some dignity while clutching my towel. “I’d shake hands, but...”

“Perhaps,” Mr. Jeffers says through gritted teeth, “we should give you a moment to get dressed.”

Lila gives me an apologetic look as we both hurriedly throw on some clothes and walk into the main living area.

“It’s nice to meet you all,” I say, trying to ignore Mr. Jeffers’ increasingly stern expression. “Lila’s told me so much about you.”

“Funny,” Mr. Jeffers says quietly. “She hasn’t mentioned you.”

“Jonas,” Mrs. Jeffers chides, but she’s looking between Lila and me with concern. “Though I have to admit, when you said you needed the cabin for a while, we didn’t expect...”

“Wait!” Lily interrupts, phone in hand. “Is this why Luke’s all over TMZ? They’re saying he broke up with Crystal Davidson because—“

“Lily Marie!” Both parents snap at once.

“Sorry,” she mumbles, but her eyes are still wide with curiosity and excitement.

Lila squeezes my hand. “Why don’t we all sit down and eat the breakfast you brought? And Luke and I will explain everything.”

The next hour is simultaneously awkward and enlightening. We gather around the small kitchen table, eating the scrambled eggs and bacon that Lila’s mother brought. We tell them about how we met, about Marcus and Crystal, and about needing somewhere quiet until the media circus dies down. Her mother listens with increasing understanding while Lily practically vibrates with questions.

Mr. Jeffers, however, remains silent throughout, watching me with the kind of intensity that would make lesser men squirm.

“Well,” Mrs. Jeffers says finally, “at least you’re not the only Wild Band celebrity we know. I take it Sam Ryder is a friend of yours?”



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“That’s right,” I say, having forgotten. “Lila and Sam went to school together.”

“Yeah, Sam grew up around here.” Lila nods. “Our families are friends.”

“Young man,” Mr. Jeffers says suddenly, “Would you help me check the generator? It’s been acting up lately.”

It’s not a request.

“Dad,” Lila starts, but I squeeze her shoulder.

“I’d be happy to help,” I say, following him outside.

We walk in silence until we reach the generator shed. Mr. Jeffers turns to face me, arms crossed.

“So,” he says, “you’re seeing my daughter.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you thought hiding out here was the answer to what’s happening?”

I meet his gaze steadily. “I thought giving Lila space to decide how she wants to handle the publicity was the answer. She’s private, and I respect that.”

He studies me for a long moment. “You’re aware of what dating you might mean for her? The attention, the scrutiny?”

“Very aware. It’s something we’ve discussed at length.”

“And your... lifestyle? The touring, wild parties, and women—“

“With all due respect, sir,” I interrupt carefully, “I’ve never been that type of rockstar. Your daughter... well, she’s different too. She’s special.”

Something in his expression shifts. “You care for her.”

It’s not a question, but I answer anyway. “Yes, sir. I do.”

He nods slowly. “She’s strong, my Lila. Stronger than most people realize. But she’s also got the biggest heart of anyone I know. Break it, and we’ll have problems.”

“If I ever hurt her, I’ll hand you the shovel myself.”

To my surprise, he laughs. “Good answer.” He claps me on the shoulder. “Now, about that generator...”

Twenty-Nine

Lila

When Luke and my dad return to the cabin, my dad doesn’t seem quite as concerned as he did before. Knowing how he treated all of my past dates, I give a small sigh of relief.

The minute they left, Mom asked almost as many questions as Lily had about Luke and the Wild Band. But I notice the tension from earlier has dissolved into something warmer and more familiar.

I catch Luke's eye, raising an eyebrow in question. He gives me a subtle nod, and the casual way he approaches and puts an arm around my shoulder makes me smile.

"Mom," I call out, "are you guys planning on staying for lunch?"

"Please, Mom? I'm sure Luke could tell us some stories about being in Wild," Lily pipes up. "Please?"

My parents exchange a look, and then my dad sighs. "I suppose that would be alright."

We spend a pleasant day out on the porch. Luke and I on the swing, my parents sitting in chairs Luke brought out from the kitchen. My younger sister is sprawled across the front steps. As the sun moves lazily across the blue cloudless sky, we share stories and laugh until it's time for lunch.

Sitting there, I realize something important: Luke fits right in with my family. I was a little concerned when I saw his family's manor. I was worried that spending time out here, he'd miss the fancy galas and elegant society events he attended with Crystal. Instead, he seems right at home as he and my dad talk about cars and engines.

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“So, you’re the guy who got Agatha to stop sputtering when the motor’s turned off?”

“Yes, sir. That was me. My dad taught me everything I know about engines.”

Watching Luke with my family—how he doesn’t roll his eyes at my sister’s fan questions, how he unconsciously treats my mother with respect. The quiet understanding that passes between him and my dad—makes me fall a little harder for him.

Later, after my family leaves with promises to leave us alone for the remainder of our stay (and Lily clutching an autographed paper), I wrap my arms around Luke’s waist.

“You had them eating out of the palm of your hand,” I murmur as I glance up at him.

He leans down and kisses the top of my head. “Your family’s is nice. Just like you.”

“Even my dad?”

“Especially your dad. He loves you a lot.”

I look up at him, my eyes soft. “And you? How are you feeling after the Jeffers family invasion?”

“Honestly?” He cups my face in his hands. “I feel like the luckiest man alive.”

I can’t help the brightness of my smile. “Such a smooth talker.”

“You know you love it.”

“Yeah, I do. I’m glad they got to meet the real Luke Sterling and not just the Wild Band rockstar or the guy in all the news feeds.”

Pulling his head down to mine, I kiss him. It’s soft and sweet, and it’s my way of telling him that whatever comes next—whatever challenges we face—we’ll handle them together.

“Are you sure about this?” Luke adjusts his baseball cap for the tenth time as we pull into the parking lot at Juniper Springs. “Maybe we should—“

“Nope,” I interrupt, grabbing our day pack. “We’ve been holed up in that cabin for over a week. And while it’s been wonderful—the springs are calling, and we’re answering.”

He fidgets with his sunglasses, but I can see the smile tugging at his lips. “The springs are calling?”

“Loudly.” I stretch up to kiss his cheek. “Besides, you look nothing like a famous rockstar right now. You look like any good ol’ Florida boy about to go canoeing.”

He catches me around the waist, pulling me close. “Should I be offended by that?”

“Definitely not.” I run my fingers along the top of his broad shoulders. “You wear it very well.”

The rental office is blessedly empty except for a sleepy-looking teenager who barely glances at us while processing our canoe rental. Soon, we’re pushing off from the dock, the crystal-clear spring water beckoning us forward.

Luke proves to be surprisingly adept with a paddle. “Eagle Scout,” he explains when I comment on it. “Though it’s been a while.”

The morning unfolds like a dream. We navigate the winding waterway, where Spanish moss blows lightly overhead. A white crane watches us pass with regal indifference, and turtles sun themselves on fallen logs.

“Gator,” Luke whispers, pointing to our left, where a small alligator basks on the bank.

“Wait till we see a big one,” I tease, loving how his eyes widen behind his sunglasses.

We’re rounding a bend when another canoe approaches. The couple inside wave friendly greetings, and I feel Luke tense slightly behind me.

“Beautiful day for it,” the man calls out as we drift closer.

“Perfect day,” I agree, hoping we can pass quickly.

But the man is squinting at Luke. “Hey, do I know you from somewhere? You look familiar.”

Before Luke can respond, I laugh lightly. “Yeah, he gets that all the time. Some people say he looks like the keyboard player from the Wild Band.”

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“Luke Sterling?” The man shakes his head. “Nah, I don’t see it. That guy’s amazing, though. Did you catch their last concert in Orlando?”

Luke clears his throat. “Missed that one, unfortunately.”

“Man, you should check them out if they come back through. The way Sterling handles those keys... he’s brilliant on that keyboard.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Luke says, and I can hear the suppressed laughter in his voice.

We exchange a few more pleasantries before the couple moves on, and once they’re out of earshot, Luke leans forward to murmur in my ear, “Brilliant, huh?”

“Oh, shut up.” I splash some water at him. “Your ego doesn’t need any more stroking.”

“I don’t know...” His hands slide around my waist. “I kind of like it when you stroke my—“

“Luke!” I’m laughing now, trying to squirm away without tipping the canoe. “We are in public!”

“Barely,” he argues, but he behaves himself... mostly.

We find a secluded spot for lunch, where we can pull up our canoe and have a brief picnic lunch. The water is impossibly clear, and after eating, we strip down to our

swimsuits. Luke's appreciative glance makes me shiver as we wade in.

"This is amazing," Luke says, floating on his back. "How did I not know places like this existed?"

"Most people don't." I swim closer to him. "That's what makes it special."

He rights himself in the water, pulling me to him. "You make it special."

When he kisses me, his lips taste like spring water and sunshine. I wrap my legs around his waist, letting him keep us both afloat.

"Thank you for sharing your world with me," he murmurs against my neck. "For knowing exactly what I needed." His eyes meet mine, serious despite the playful setting. "For being you."

I run my fingers through his damp hair, knocking his cap off in the process. "You know what I think?"

"What's that?"

"I think the guy in the other canoe was right about one thing."

He raises an eyebrow. "Oh?"

I press a soft kiss to his lips. "The way you use your hands is kind of brilliant."

His answering smile is brighter than the Florida sun overhead, and as he pulls me in for another kiss, I silently thank whatever twist of fate brought us here.

Even if it means occasionally pretending he's just a Luke Sterlinglookalike.



The last rays of sunset paint the cabin's weathered walls in shades of gold and rose as I fold the last of our clothes into our bags. Two weeks have passed like a dream, each day blending into the next in a haze of soft touches, quiet evenings on the porch swing, and making love wherever and whenever we wanted to.

"I can't believe we have to leave tomorrow," I say, running my hand along the smooth wooden doorframe. The cabin holds so many memories now—not just of my childhood or my grandmother, but of Luke. Of us.

He wraps his arms around me from behind. "We could stay," he suggests, but we both know we can't. Reality is waiting for us back in Jacksonville.

"The media coverage has died down a bit," I offer, leaning back against his chest. "Emily says most of the press has moved on to the next scandal."

"Mm." He presses a kiss to my neck. "But they'll be watching when we get back. These past two weeks, being here with you, it's been perfect. No cameras, no expectations. Just us."

"I know." I trace the line of his jaw with my fingertips. "But we can't hide forever."

"Can't we?" But he's smiling now, soft and a little sad. "We could become hermits. Live off the land. I could learn to fish."

I laugh despite the ache in my chest. "You hate fishing."

“I’d learn for you.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” I stretch up to kiss him softly. “And I wouldn’t want you to. Your music is part of who you are, Luke. I like all of you, not just the parts that fit into a quiet cabin in the woods.”

He pulls me closer, burying his face in my hair. “When did you get to be so wise?”

His kiss starts off slow but deepens into that now-familiar passion. When he pulls back, he smiles at me.

“Let’s make this a night to remember.” He leans down, sweeps me up in his arms, and carries me into the bedroom. He makes mad, passionate love to me until I call out his name in my climax. Holding him while he follows me over that sharp edge of desire.

Lying in bed, I watch Luke sleeping peacefully beside me. In the pale moonlight filtering through the window, he looks younger, unburdened. Here, he’s just been Luke—my Luke. Not Luke Sterling, the famous Wild Band keyboard player.

He’s such a talented musician—but there’s so much more to him. More than I ever dreamed.

Luke’s a fascinating blend of contradictions: sweet yet sexy, arrogant yet humble. He can effortlessly rock a tux at a gala yet feels completely at ease having a picnic or cooking in a rustic kitchen. He’s accustomed to the luxury of a limo but equally comfortable behind the wheel of his Jeep. He can fit in anywhere.

Tomorrow, we head back to reality, and I wonder if I'm ready for what that means. It's one thing to promise, that I can handle the pressure of dating a rockstar. It's another thing to actually live it. The thought of the lack of privacy and the social media speculation are daunting. Will I still be able to run my business when every client knows I'm Luke Sterling's girlfriend? And what about when he's touring? The thought of being separated for weeks or months at a time makes my chest tight.

But then Luke shifts in his sleep, reaching for me even in his dreams, and I know deep in my bones that he's worth any amount of scrutiny.

Next weekend, I'll go with him for an overnight trip to Tampa for a performance. Just one night, he said, to see how it feels. To dip my toe in the water before diving into the deep end. The thought both terrifies and excites me. I want to see him in his element, and I want to understand that part of his world. And if I can handle that small taste of his life on the road, I'll know for sure that I can handle everything else.

Rolling onto my side, I trace my fingers lightly over his chest, feeling his steady heartbeat beneath my palm. The truth is, I'm already in too deep to turn back now.

We'll figure out the rest together, one day at a time.

Luke stirs, catching my hand and bringing it to his lips without opening his eyes. "I can hear you thinking," he mumbles sleepily.

"Sorry," I whisper, then I get an idea. "Hey, would you like some pancakes?"

"At this hour? It's midnight."

"Is that a no?"

"Of course not. It's more like a hell yeah," Luke says as he rolls out of bed.

After fifteen minutes of cooking in the kitchen, we carry the finished pancakes back to bed. Sitting naked on the bed, we feed each other bites, in between kisses, the taste of sweet maple syrup on our lips—and we make love again.

Afterward, with Luke's arms holding me close, I know in my heart that we have something special—something real.

Thirty

Luke

The roar of the crowd is deafening, a relentless pulse of energy that rattles through the walls of the amphitheater in Tampa Bay. The air is thick with the scent of sweat, adrenaline, and anticipation—thousands of voices chanting, screaming, demanding the music.

I roll my shoulders, exhaling slowly as I grip my keyboard, fingers hovering over the keys. The lights are low now. The arena shrouded in darkness except for the glow of phone screens and the stage lights flashing in tempo with the drumbeat that signals our entrance.

This moment, right before we step into the light, is always electric. Always exhilarating.

But tonight, there's something else humming beneath my skin.

Lila. She's here. She's watching.

And just knowing she's backstage, standing only feet away from me, is a distraction—a wonderful, dangerous distraction.

She's standing off to the side with Emily, wearing all-access credentials and an outfit that shows off her generous curves and makes my heart thud loudly in my chest. Our eyes meet across the crowded space, and she mouths, "Good luck," with a smile that takes me right back to that cabin in the woods.

The cabin—Just thinking about it brings a wave of peace. The morning, we left, watching the sun rise over the trees one last time, I'd made her a promise. "When it gets too much," I'd told her, holding her close, "when we need to escape, we'll come back here. Just us." The way she'd melted into my arms made it clear she needed to hear those words as much as I needed to say them.

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The cabin was our escape, the one place where the outside world didn't exist. But now, we are back in the chaos, and I have to keep my head in the game.

A hand claps down on my shoulder, yanking me from my thoughts.

"You good?" Cass asks, his voice barely audible over the crowd.

I nod, rolling out the tension in my neck. "Yeah."

He gives me a knowing look but doesn't press. Instead, he lifts his mic, signaling to the crew.

The lights explode to life.

The crowd erupts.

And we launch into the first song.

The performance is electric.

The music pulses through my veins, syncing with the rhythm of my heartbeat. The crowd is alive, their energy feeding into ours, making every note sharper, every beat heavier.

I fall into the music, my fingers flying over the keys as Cass's voice booms through the speakers, raw and powerful. The band moves together like a well-oiled machine—Sam's steady bassline grounding us, Nate's drums pounding like a

heartbeat, Vince's guitar shredding through the air like lightning.

And through it all, I feel her. I know exactly where she is.

Just offstage, her presence burns through the haze of flashing lights and deafening sound.

When I steal a glance between songs, I spot her watching me with wide, mesmerized eyes.

The sight sends a jolt through me, a surge of something heady and addictive.

I want her here. I want to pull her into this moment, into the chaos and the rush and the sheer high of performing. I want to play just for her.

And maybe I do.

Because the next song—one of our slower, more intimate ballads—feels different as my hands move over the keys.

More personal. More hers. I pour everything I'm feeling into it, and I swear I can sense her smile.

After the encore, we barely make it backstage before the adrenaline catches up with us.

Vince is grinning like an idiot, already reaching for a beer. "Damn, that crowd was insane."

Nate wipes sweat from his face, still catching his breath. "Yeah. That energy was next level."

Cass claps me on the back. “You were on fire tonight, man.”

I nod, still buzzing. Still wired. But my eyes are already scanning the room, searching for the only person I care about seeing right now.

And then, there she is. Lila, standing just a few feet away, looking up at me with something I can’t quite name—pride, admiration, and something that makes my heart pound harder.

I cross the space between us before I even realize I’m moving.

“Well?” I ask, unable to hide my grin. “What’d you think?”

She just shakes her head like she’s still trying to process it all. Then, finally, she exhales a breathless laugh.

“That was... unbelievable.”

A rush of satisfaction rolls through me, followed quickly by something warmer, deeper.



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I step closer, lowering my voice. “Yeah?”

She nods, looking up at me like she’s still caught in the spell of the show. “You were incredible, Luke.”

I should say something. Should play it cool.

But I don’t.

Instead, I reach out, brushing my lips against hers, sharing this heady moment with her. “Incredible, huh?”

Later, we’re gathered in the private lounge of the hotel we’re staying at—a sleek, dimly lit space reserved just for us. The band is still riding the post-show high, beers in hand, laughter echoing through the room.

The hotel has been good to us, giving us a top-floor suite with panoramic views of the city. Everything about this place screams luxury, from the custom drinks menu to the private security ensuring no crazed fans break in.

But even with all of that, we still have to hide.

There are reporters camped outside the hotel, fans lurking around the lobby, and people who would kill for a photo, a quote, or a sliver of gossip to spin into something bigger than it is. Especially now with what happened with Marcus, Crystal, and Sterling Motors.

I get the feeling that this—is the calm before the inevitable storm.

Vince has already picked up some girls, draping an arm around each of them as he escorts them to our table. They look starstruck. Meanwhile, the rest of the band is having fun.

I glance over at Lila, who's perched on the armrest of my chair, sipping a cocktail and watching the band with quiet amusement.

She's seeing it now—the real Wild Band. The way we celebrate, the way we wind down, the way we live this life.

And she hasn't bolted yet.

That has to mean something.

I reach for her hand, lacing our fingers together.

She glances down, then back up at me, her expression softening.

“You good?” I ask.

She nods, squeezing my fingers lightly. “Yeah. Just... taking it all in.”

I lean in, my voice just for her. “You still sure you want to be part of all this?”

Her lips curve, and without hesitation, she says, “Yes.”

Something inside me settles.

Emily drops into the seat beside Lila. “So, I see you're still here after the show.

That's a good sign." She glances over at me, then back to Lila. "You being here sure puts Luke in a good mood."

"Luke's always in a good mood," Vince chimes in, grumbling, "It's annoying, really."

Sam looks over at Lila. "You weren't bored?"

She laughs. "Bored? I've never seen anything like it. The way you guys lose yourself in the music... it was amazing."

I lean back in my chair, watching them all interact. The easy banter and genuine affection make my chest feel tight. This is what I want for Lila—to feel as much a part of the band as Kendrick and Emily do.

The night has wound down, and Lila and I are heading back to our suite. But as we step out of the private lounge and into the dimly lit hallway leading back to the hotel's elevators, that's when it happens.

The flash of a camera. The shuffle of footsteps as a figure steps out from the shadows, a recorder already in hand.

"Luke!" A voice—sharp, eager, hungry—cuts through the quiet.

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I instinctively step in front of Lila, shielding her with my body.

“Care to comment on the rumors about your breakup with Crystal Davidson?” the reporter asks, eyes gleaming as she shoves the mic toward me. “Sources say it wasn’t mutual. That she’s devastated. Care to set the record straight?”

I clench my jaw.

Of course, they’d spin it that way.

Crystal could probably be sunbathing in the Maldives right now, sipping a martini and not giving a damn, but the press will make her out to be some kind of tragic, scorned woman just for the drama of it all.

Lila stiffens beside me. I can feel it—the way she takes in every word, the way her fingers tighten into fists.

I exhale slowly, keeping my expression neutral. “No comment.”

The reporter doesn’t let up. “What about your new girl?” She turns her attention to Lila, zeroing in like a predator sensing fresh blood. “The woman you’re with tonight—so soon after Crystal. Are you two—“

“That’s enough,” I cut in, my voice firm.

The reporter barely has time to react before chaos erupts behind her.

A rowdy group of fans stumbles out of the hotel bar, loud and drunk, already buzzing with the high of seeing us in person.

“Luke! Oh my God, it’s Luke Sterling!” one of them calls out—a woman in a slinky dress, her voice slurred as she practically drapes herself over me. “Can I get a picture? Please? Just one?”

Before I can answer, another girl grabs my arm, her grip way too tight. “Damn, you’re even hotter in person.”

Lila takes a small step back, her expression shifting from mild discomfort to something sharper.

The third fan—clearly drunker than the rest—turns to Lila with a sneer. “And who’s this?” she slurs. “Are you his new plaything?”

Lila freezes.

My blood boils.

“Back off,” I say, my voice calm but dangerously low.

“Come party with us.” The girl laughs, eyes flicking between us like she’s enjoying the show. She turns to Lila. “What? You don’t like sharing?”

“We don’t mind sharing—do we girls?” The first girl giggles, leaning forward.

That’s it.

I move, gently but firmly untangling myself from their grips, and pull Lila closer, shielding her from the pandemonium.

I hear the lounge door behind us open.

“Girls,” Nate’s voice cuts through, his tone easy but warning. “I think maybe you’ve had enough for one night.”

The drunken girls pout, then huff, clearly annoyed, but they stumble back to the hotel bar.

The reporter, still lurking, leans in again. “Quite the scene, don’t you think?”

I glare at her. She smirks.

I grab Lila’s hand, not giving a damn who sees, and guide her down the hall.

The elevator feels like a sanctuary when we finally reach it. We don’t speak until the doors slide shut, trapping us in silence. Lila’s silent beside me, her face pale.

“I’m so sorry,” I start, but she shakes her head.

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“Don’t.” Her voice is steady, but her hands are still shaking. “This isn’t your fault.”

“Lila—“

“Is it always like that?”

I wish I could lie. “Sometimes. It’s not always that bad, but yeah. It happens.” Glancing down at her, I try to gauge her reaction. “Mostly when I’m out or during performances. That’s why the duplex’s location is kept private.”

She nods slowly.

“I love the music and performing. But it’s this—the personal intrusion. The fans who think they know you because they know your music, the reporters who build entire careers off twisting the truth—that’s hard to take.” I admit in a low voice, watching her.

She takes a deep breath, straightening her shoulders. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay, I understand now. I understand why you needed me to see this side of things.” She meets my eyes. “They don’t see you as a person, do they? They only see your fame.”

The elevator opens to our floor, and I pull her into my arms the moment we’re in our suite. She clings to me, and I can feel her heart racing.

“I meant what I said,” she whispers against my chest. “This doesn’t change anything. But... I’m glad we have the cabin.”

I press my lips to her hair, relief flooding through me. Because she gets it now—really gets it. Not just the glamour and the music but the cost that comes with it. And she’s still here.

“Always,” I promise. “Whenever you need it. Whenever this becomes too much.”

She pulls back just enough to look at me, and despite everything that just happened, she smiles. “You’re worth it, you know. Worth all of it.”

And at that moment, with the echoes of chaos still ringing in our ears and tomorrow’s tabloid headlines already being written, I realize something: she’s stronger than any of them. Stronger than the fans who grab, the photographers who stalk, the rumors that swirl.

She’s stronger than all of it.

And this is just the beginning. The first of countless nights like this, the start of our own stories to tell.

And I can’t wait for every single moment.

Thirty-One

Lila

Steam billows around me as I step out of the shower, my mind already racing with pre-show jitters. The Music Awards—which I’ll be attending. Just thinking about it makes my stomach flip.



Luckily, the media frenzy has died down somewhat, and the paparazzi have moved on to their next celebrity scandal. For a while, it felt like every single article was about Luke and Crystal's breakup—except they weren't just about that. No, the gossip rags made sure to drag me into the mess, spinning the narrative that I was the reason Luke ended things—conveniently ignoring Marcus's arrest as if it were nothing.

And, of course, they didn't stop at speculating about our relationship.

They picked apart my appearance, too.

Too plain. Too curvy. Too fat. Not his type! A girl like her with a guy like him? Impossible.

At first, I tried ignoring it. But then I made the mistake of doomscrolling, letting the words sink in until they felt like truth instead of the ridiculous, baseless nonsense they were.

At least now, I've learned to stop scanning the comments sections. Refusing to read the cruel remarks about my size and the speculation about what Luke Sterling sees in a "full-figured chef,"... but I've still deleted most of my social media apps.

Luke likes my curves. I have to remind myself of that.

And more importantly—I like my curves. I made peace with my figure long ago. I'm a chef, for goodness sake. I cook, I eat, and I enjoy every damn delicious bite.

I refuse to let a bunch of faceless internet trolls make me feel unworthy of the man who's made it crystal clear that he likes me exactly as I am. And dear God, the way he looks at me. The way his hands trace my voluptuous curves like they're mapping treasure. The way he steals bites of whatever I'm cooking and tells me life's too short

not to enjoy great food. He makes me feel beautiful, even when the tabloids suggest otherwise.

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Emily suddenly appears in the hotel bathroom doorway, already dressed in a sleek black number that makes her look like a movie star. “Ready to be glammed up?”

I laugh, securing my robe. “I’m ready. Do your worst.”

For the next two hours, I’m transformed. My hair is swept up into an elegant twist, with a few strategic pieces left loose to soften the look. The makeup artist Emily brought in works magic, giving me smokey eyes and lips that somehow look both innocent and sinful.

“Now for the main event,” Emily declares, unzipping the garment bag.

The dress. I still can’t believe they convinced me to buy it. When Luke handed me his credit card with a casual “get something nice,” I don’t think he was expecting this. The price tag made me dizzy, but Emily and Kendrick were relentless.

“It’s perfect,” they’d insisted. “It’s you.”

And looking at it now, I have to agree. The deep, midnight blue silk hugs my body like it was made for me, with a plunging neckline that shows just enough cleavage to make Luke lose his mind. The back... well, the back is basically nonexistent until the fabric gathers at the waist, flowing down into a sleek, floor-length silhouette. Tiny crystals catch the light with every movement, twinkling like stars. The finishing touch is a side slit running high up my thigh. It’s sexy but elegant and demands attention—the kind of dress that makes me feel like I belong with someone as famous as Luke Sterling.

“Lila,” Emily breathes as I step into it. “That dress—it’s perfect.”

Smiling, I put on my earrings. Long and sparkling, they dangle from my ears, catching the light every time I turn my head. And the shoes—mile-high stilettos that I pray I won’t break an ankle in—give me just enough height to press against Luke’s chest when we dance.

Because there will be dancing tonight.

A spritz of my favorite perfume, the one that makes Luke bury his face in my neck and growl...

“You look fantastic,” Emily says softly. “Like a goddess.”

The woman in the mirror doesn’t look like a chef who spends her days in a kitchen. She looks... Confident. Sensual. Like someone who belongs on a red carpet with a rockstar.

“Lila?” Luke’s voice carries from the main room of our suite. “Are you ready? The limo—“

He stops dead in the doorway, his mouth actually dropping open. He’s devastating in his tailored black suit. His hair artfully styled just enough to look effortlessly messy and sexy as hell. But it’s the look in his eyes that undo me.

Blue and dark with heat, his gaze sweeps over me slowly, thoroughly, like he’s committing every single inch of me to memory.

His jaw tics. His hands clench into fists at his sides.

“I’ll just join Sam in the next room.” Emily slips past him with a knowing smirk.

Luke hasn't moved, hasn't spoken. He just stares, his eyes traveling slowly from my heels up to my face in a way that makes heat pool in my stomach.

And when he finally speaks, his voice is hoarse, low, like he's barely holding himself together.

"Jesus, Lila."

I swallow hard, my pulse pounding in my ears. "You like it?"

He exhales sharply. "Like it?" He shakes his head, his eyes dragging down my body and then back up, lingering on the exposed curve of my thigh before landing on my red lips.

"Too much?" I ask, suddenly nervous.

He crosses the room in three strides. "You're fucking beautiful," he growls, and the raw desire in his voice makes me shiver.

"The dress—"

"Is stunning." His lips find my neck, just below my ear. "But you're what's beautiful."

A shiver races down my spine.

"I'm trying really hard," he says, voice rough, dangerous, "to be a gentleman right now."

I turn toward him, the slit of my dress parting just enough to reveal more skin. "Who said you have to be a gentleman?"

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Luke makes a sound—somewhere between a groan and a curse—before his hands pull me against him.

The air crackles between us.

His lips hover just above mine, his breath hot, his fingers digging into my hips like he's battling himself.

"Lila," he murmurs, his voice like gravel and sin, "we should stay in tonight."

My breath stutters, my entire body thrumming with anticipation.

"Luke," I whisper, sliding my hands up his chest, feeling the tension coiled beneath his muscles. "We can't. The band is up for an award."

He grits his teeth, closing his eyes for a moment before pressing his forehead against mine. "Screw the award."

"Luke..." I melt into him, forgetting about my hair and makeup. "We have to go..."

"Do we?" His hands slide higher finding bare skin through the open back of the dress. "Because I can think of much better ways to spend the evening."

I gasp as his teeth graze my pulse point. "The band... the award..."

"Don't care." His fingers caress the curve of my back. "I want you."

It would be so easy to give in. To let him peel this dress off me, to forget about red carpets and cameras and...

“The limo’s waiting!” Emily’s voice carries from the hotel suite’s main room, making us both groan.

Luke rests his forehead against mine, breathing hard. “To be continued?”

“Definitely.”

Luke growls, his grip tightening before he steps back abruptly, putting space between us.

I blink at him, dazed, breathless.

He exhales hard, raking a hand through his perfectly tousled hair. “If I don’t stop now, we won’t make it to the damn limo.”

My lips curve into a slow, knowing smile. “Then I guess you better control yourself, rockstar.”

His blue eyes darken, his jaw tight.

He steps back, adjusting his tie with a rueful smile. “You’re going to kill me in that dress, you know that?”

“Good.” I smooth my hands down the silk, enjoying the way his eyes follow the movement. “Consider it payback for all those shirtless rehearsal sessions.”

His laugh is low and promising. “Careful. The night’s just beginning.”

And as we head out of the bedroom, his hand possessive on my lower back, I realize I'm not nervous anymore. Let them stare. Let them whisper. I know who I am, and more importantly, so does Luke.

Besides, I think with a secret smile, watching him sneak another heated glance my way, I dressed for Luke—and I love driving him wild.

The limo's interior is all soft leather with ambient lighting, and a bottle of champagne is already chilling in the built-in bar. Across from us, Emily and Sam are in their own world, murmuring to each other as Emily fusses with the collar of Sam's tux.

Luke's hand finds mine, his thumb stroking lazy circles over my knuckles. "Relax, baby," he murmurs, his breath warm against my temple. "You're going to steal the damn show tonight."

I swallow hard, forcing a small smile. "I think your definition of stealing the show is different from mine."

Sam snickers. "He's right, you know. The second you step onto that carpet, every photographer is gonna be fighting for your picture." Sam pours the champagne and hands each of us a glass.

I groan. "That's what I'm afraid of."



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

Emily grins. “Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it. The key is to pretend you don’t hear the screaming, don’t look directly into the flashing lights, and—most importantly—don’t trip.”

“Not helping,” I mutter, adjusting the high slit in my gown.

Luke leans in, his voice low and intimate. “For the record, if you trip, I’ll catch you.”

I roll my eyes, but my pulse skips a beat at the way his heavy gaze lingers on me.

“Remember to smile,” Emily says, smoothing an invisible wrinkle from her dress. “They’ll be shouting Luke’s name from every direction, but just keep walking. The publicist will guide you where to stop.”

I take a generous sip of champagne, grateful for the slight buzz. “What if they ask me questions?”

“They will,” Sam chimes in with an easy smile. “Just keep it light and redirect to Luke or the band. You’re not there to give interviews.”

Luke’s hand finds mine, squeezing gently. He looks impossibly handsome in the dim light, and the way he keeps stealing glances at me makes my skin tingle.

“Just stay close to me,” he murmurs, his thumb tracing circles on my palm. “And remember, half of what they yell is just to get a reaction.”

Through the tinted windows, I can see the venue approaching. The street is lined with

fans behind barricades, their phones and cameras creating a sea of flashing lights. My heart rate kicks up a notch.

“Oh boy,” I breathe as we pull into the arrivals queue. “There are so many people.”

“Focus on me,” Luke says, his voice low and steady. “Nothing else matters.”

Emily leans forward her expression serious. “Lila, listen. You look stunning. You belong here. And in about two hours, we’ll all be laughing about this over drinks.”

“Unless we win,” Sam grins. “Then we’ll be laughing about it over very expensive drinks.”

The limo inches forward. Through the windshield, I can see other celebrities walking the carpet, their outfits sparkling under the intense lights. It’s surreal, like watching a movie I’ve somehow stumbled into.

“Next,” a coordinator taps on our window.

Luke lifts my hand to his lips. “Ready?”

I think about the girl I was just months ago, cooking and living my quiet life. I think about the woman I am now, draped in silk and diamonds, about to walk the red carpet with a famous rockstar.

“I’m ready.”

The door opens, and the sounds hit me first—a wall of screams and music and chaos. Luke steps out first, looking every inch the rockstar in his perfectly tailored suit. He turns back, extending his hand to me.

The moment I emerge, the flashbulbs intensify. I hear gasps and whispers, my name being called alongside Luke's. But all I can focus on is his hand in mine, steady and warm.

"You've got this," he whispers, just for me.

And as we take our first steps toward the carpet, I realize he's right. I do have this. Because I have him.

Kendrick's right—the rest is just noise.

Thirty-Two

Luke

The lights dim as we take our seats, and I still can't take my eyes off Lila. The way she moves in that dress, the elegant line of her neck as she leans in to whisper something to Emily—it's driving me crazy. When she crosses her legs, the slit in her dress revealing just a hint of thigh, I have to force myself to look away.

"Dude, you're practically drooling," Vince mutters from my other side, looking sharp in his own designer suit.

"Can you blame me?"

He glances at Lila and grins. "Nope. But try to keep it together. We're on camera."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

He's right. The entire arena is wired with cameras, catching every reaction, every intimate moment. I should be paying attention to the show and to the presenters announcing the first round of awards. Instead, I'm hyperaware of Lila's perfume, the way her hand feels in mine, and the slight nervous energy radiating off her.

"And the award for Song of the Year goes to..." There's that dramatic pause they all do. "Kendrick Wild for 'Another Night, Another Tear' performed by Pixie Cane!"

Kendrick faces the crowd as she stands in front of the microphone. She's composed but glowing. "This song came from a place of raw honesty," she says, clutching the golden award. "And I couldn't have written it without my rock, my heart, my everything—Cass."

The camera cuts to Cass, and he's not even trying to hide his emotions. He smiles wider, his eyes glowing with that intense, unshakable devotion he always has for her.

"And to our beautiful daughter Cassidy, who teaches me daily what love really means." Kendrick blows a kiss toward the camera for Cassidy, who she knows is watching from home.

Kendrick continues, turning to where Pixie is standing near the edge of the stage. "Pixie, thank you for taking this song and making it so much more than I ever imagined. Your voice, your artistry—it brought these lyrics to life in a way only you can."

Pixie grins and rushes onto the stage, pulling Kendrick into a tight hug before taking the mic.

“This woman is a freaking wizard,” Pixie says, flipping her pink-streaked hair over her shoulder. “Seriously, Kendrick, I’d be honored to sing anything you write. You just say the word.”

The crowd cheers, and Cass stands. I catch the moment he reaches for Kendrick’s hand as she steps down, her fingers sliding effortlessly into his.

It’s so damn easy for them.

Like breathing.

I glance at Lila out of the corner of my eye.

She’s still clapping, still smiling, as she watches Kendrick return to her seat.

I want that with her.

More than I’ve ever wanted anything.

The night moves on, the awards rolling out one by one.

The tension ramps up when the category for Album of the Year is next. The host is back, and I feel the energy in our section shift.

“Album of the Year nominees are...”

Lila’s grip on my hand tightens as they play clips from each nominated album. When they get to ours, “Living Wild,” the screen fills with footage from our stadium tour, the crowds singing along to every word.

“And the Award goes to...”

I hold my breath, feeling the same tension from the rest of the band. We've won before, but this album was different. More personal. More real.

“Wild Band for ‘Living Wild’!”

The roar is deafening. We're all on our feet, hugging, laughing. Cass pulls Kendrick into a passionate kiss before we head to the stage. I steal one last look at Lila, and the pride shining in her eyes makes my heart stutter.

The weight of the award in my hands feels familiar but no less thrilling. Cass takes the lead at the microphone, thanking our producers, our team, and our families. When he gets to Kendrick and Cassidy, his voice roughens with emotion.

Nate thanks the fans, always the diplomatic one. Vince makes everyone laugh with a quick quip about finally having something heavy enough to use as a doorstop.

When it's my turn, I find Lila in the crowd. She's glowing, clapping, and looking at me like I've hung the moon. And suddenly, I know exactly what to say.

“Damn,” I breathe out, adjusting the mic. The crowd laughs, but my chest tightens with something deeper than nerves. Gratitude.

“Sometimes the best music comes from unexpected places,” I say, scanning the room, my gaze instinctively locking on Lila. She's watching me with those warm hazel eyes that somehow ground me, even in a moment this big. “Like when you're sharing pancakes at midnight, and you're hungry for something more than just food.”

The audience probably thinks I'm being metaphorical, but Lila's hand flies to her mouth, her eyes shining.

“This album,” I continue, clearing my throat, “was a labor of love. And, honestly, a

little bit of chaos. We wrote these songs on the road, in dressing rooms, and in hotel rooms at three in the morning. We lived them before we ever recorded them. And to see them resonate with so many people? That's the real award."

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*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:57 am*

I glance at Cass, who gives me a small nod, and then at the rest of the band. “To my brothers—Cass, Nate, Sam, Vince—you guys are the best damn bandmates anyone could ask for. We built this thing together, and I wouldn’t trade a single second of the journey.”

I shift slightly, gripping the award tighter, my voice dropping just a little. “To my dad—Jim Sterling—you taught me that no matter how hard things get, you never stop fighting for what matters. I hope I make you proud.”

A beat of silence, then I take a slow breath and do the thing I never planned on doing—but somehow, it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

“And, lastly,” I say, my voice unshakable now, “to the woman who reminds me what all of this means, who’s made me see the music in a whole new way.”

Lila’s eyes widen, lips parting slightly, but I keep going.

“You walked into my life when I least expected it. And whether you know it or not, you’ve been inspiring me ever since.”

The crowd reacts, murmurs, and whispers rippling through the room, but I don’t break eye contact with her.

“Thank you.”

The cheers are deafening.



And as I step back, my heart is pounding—not from the award, not from the cameras—but from the way Lila is looking at me.

Like I just changed everything.

Because I probably did.

The energy in the grand ballroom is electric, charged with the high of victory. The band just won Album of the Year, and the celebration is in full swing—music thumping, champagne flowing, and the entire party pulses around us.

I should be riding that high with them.

But I can barely focus on any of it.

Because Lila is in my arms, and that's the only thing that matters.

We're dancing, her body pressed against mine, moving in sync with the slow, sensual beat, and all I can focus on is how she feels. The way her dress slides like water beneath my fingers, how it clings to every damn curve, it's testing every last shred of my self-control.

She hasn't said much about my speech yet—about the words that laid claim to her in front of thousands of people.

But I see it in her eyes. She's feeling dazed and a little breathless.

And that's enough for now.

I pull her closer, not caring who sees. Lowering my mouth to her ear, my voice rough and low, I murmur, "I meant every word." My hand splays across her bare back,

feeling her shiver at my touch. “You do inspire me.”

Her breath catches, and she looks up at me with those eyes that see straight through the rockstar facade. I have to fight the urge to kiss her right here in front of everyone.

Instead of responding, she presses closer, her fingers curling into my jacket, her body molding against mine like she was made for me.

I want her.

More than I’ve ever wanted anything in my entire life.

When Emily and Sam tell us they’re staying and that they’re riding back with Cass and Kendrick, my pulse kicks up a notch. A private ride back with Lila? In that dress?

“You sure?” I stammer out.

“Please,” Emily rolls her eyes. “Like you’ve been paying attention to anything else all night anyway.”

My decision is made for me—I’m done with this party.

I need to get Lila the hell out of here. Fast.

## Page 101

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:58 am*

“Let’s go,” I murmur, tightening my hold on her waist. She nods.

We make our goodbyes quick, and just like that, we slip out of the ballroom and into the night.

The moment the limo door closes.

I don’t even think—I just grab her.

I pull Lila onto my lap, finally able to touch her the way I’ve been wanting to all night.

My hands slide over the silky fabric of her dress, my mouth crashing against hers in a kiss that’s all teeth and desperation.

Lila gasps, her hands flying to my shoulders, but she’s kissing me back, just as hungry, just as reckless.

I drag my lips down her neck, groaning at the way she arches into me, her body pressing against mine—I know she can feel my body harden.

“Do you have any idea,” I growl against her skin, “what this dress has been doing to me?” My hands find the slit in her dress, sliding up her thigh.

She gasps. “Luke—the driver—“

“Privacy partition,” I remind her, nipping at her pulse point. “And I’ve been going

crazy wanting to touch you all night.”

My hand continues searching, fingers teasing beneath the slit of her dress, and she makes a soft, breathy sound that goes straight to my damn groin.

The ride is torture of the sweetest kind. Her hair falls from its elegant style as my fingers tangle in it. When I find her dampness under her dress, she bites my shoulder to stay quiet, and I nearly lose my mind.

“Almost there,” I promise, my voice rough with need. “Damn, you’re beautiful like this.”

“Luke—“

The car slows.

A sharp knock against the divider.

I curse, pressing my forehead against hers as I try to catch my breath.

“We’re almost there, Mr. Sterling,” the driver announces quietly.

Lila laughs, breathless, her lips swollen from my kisses.

I grin, dark and dangerous, adjusting my hold on her hips.

Oh, baby,“ I murmur, my voice a promise, “It’s going to be a long night.”

We barely manage to straighten ourselves before reaching the hotel.

As I take her hand and turn.

“Wait,” she gasps. “Your award.”

Reaching into the back seat, I scoop up the gilded gramophone, clutching it tightly in my hand before slamming the limo door shut.

“Thank you.”

If I thought the limo ride was bad. The elevator is even worse—we stand on opposite sides, both knowing one touch will undo all our restraint.

Lila stands beside me, her arms crossed, her chest rising and falling too fast, her entire body wired with tension.

I can still taste her, still feel the way she melted against me in the back of that limo.

## Page 102

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:58 am*

And now, with just a few floors between us and our hotel suite, we're both holding on by a damn thread.

She shifts, the side slit of her dress parting slightly, giving me a glimpse of bare skin.

I grit my teeth, clenching my fists.

If I touch her now, I won't be able to stop.

She glances up at me, her hazel eyes dark and knowing.

"Luke..." she whispers.

I don't know if I can trust myself to answer.

"Stop looking at me like that," she whispers.

"Like what?"

"Like you want to devour me."

I can't help my wolfish smile. "But I do."

The elevator dings.

The doors slide open.

And without a single word, I grab her hand, pulling her inside the suite—and slamming the door shut behind us.

Thirty-Three

Lila

The moment our suite door closes, Luke has me pressed up against it as his mouth crashes down on mine.

“Finally,” he mutters hoarsely, “I get to taste these lips that have been tempting me all night.”

My dress falls away, and I swear he stops breathing. I’m standing before him in only midnight blue lingerie. “You’re trying to kill me,” he groans.

I reach for his tie, a wicked gleam in my eye. “Then I guess my plan is working.”

Something primal roars to life in his eyes at my words, and then there’s no more talking—just skin and heat. As I kneel before him, the only sound is his zipper as I pull it down.

When he looks down at me, I feel the heat of his gaze. It practically smolders as he watches me reach out and cup him with my hand. I stroke him from root to tip, and his breath catches.

Bending, I lightly lick the tip of him. When my tongue finds the slot on the head of his cock, I feel his hands in my hair. Smiling, I lean forward, taking as much of him into my wet mouth as I can. Focusing on him, I begin to work him in and out of my mouth. Sucking and licking as I go. He feels like hard steel covered in taunt flesh.

In a gruff voice, Luke warns me. “Lila, babe. I...”

Ignoring his words, I suddenly deep-throat him, and I hear him give a guttural groan, his hands tightening in my hair, holding me in place while I attempt to finish the job. But at the very last minute, he pulls away. I look up at him in confusion.

His blue eyes gleam with intensity, and he grits out. “Later—I need—inside you.” He roughly pulls me to my feet.

His eyes rake over my body, still in my midnight blue lingerie, and then he’s dragging me over to the armchair. I glance down at him to see his manhood long and thick. I arch my brow, looking up into his eyes, hot with desire.

He bends me over so that my hands are on the cushion of the armchair, my ass in the air. When I start to take off my shoes, he stops me.

“No.” His voice like gravel. “The fuck me shoes stay on.”

The dirty words make me shiver almost as much as the lust in his gaze. My unbound hair falls forward, standing where he positions me—achingly waiting.



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:58 am*

I hear him step closer, and I shiver in anticipation. I feel the warmth of his body and the feel of his hands as they grip my lush hips. He uses his finger to brush under the thong as he moves it out of his way.

Then, with no warning, I feel him enter me from behind. Filling me in one bold stroke. My arms stiffen, holding me in place as he begins to move. He pulls out and then thrusts back in. He immediately increased the tempo, pounding into me. His hands tightening on my hips—probably leaving marks.

It's rough and wild, and I can't get enough. I arch my back, rising up to meet him. Wanting it hard and fast—and he delivers—in spades. Our harsh breathing fills the air, and he's relentless as he continues until suddenly, my entire body clenches around him, milking him. My orgasm is hard and unexpected. After one more thrust, Luke lets out a low groan and empties himself inside me.

His broad hands gently help me up, and he slowly turns me to face him. He quickly unclasps my lace bra, freeing my breasts and capturing them in his hands.

“Damn, Lila. You're so perfect for me,” he raises a breast to his mouth. “So, soft and sweet—“

The warmth of his mouth makes me shiver, and I feel his smile against my skin.

After a few moments of delicious torture, he steps back, bends and scoops me up in his arms. He carries me to the king-sized bed and then slowly sets me down, letting me slide down his hard, chiseled chest. I almost sway as my legs feel weak.

He finishes undressing, taking off his pants, and I shimmy out of my thong, but when I go to take off my high heels. He shakes his head. “Leave ’em.”

“Luke?”

At my surprised look, he smirks. “We’re just getting started.” Approaching the bed, he bends down and whispers, “Rockstarslike encores.”

Later, I slowly open my eyes and the room is still shrouded in shadows. It feels like early morning. I blink, wondering what woke me when I feel Luke’s breath against my neck.

“Ah, so you’re awake,” he mutters.

“Did you wake me up?” I say sleepily.

I feel his shrug. “Doesn’t matter—but now that you’re awake—“

He rolls, taking me with him, until I’m on top. His hands on my back gently guide me into a seated position. He’s already hard and wanting, and my drowsiness disappears as my heart begins to pound. He helps me position myself above him, lowering me onto his rigid shaft.

The sudden fullness makes me give a small gasp. His hands around my hips urge me to start moving. And I start to rock, slowly at first but then gradually increase the rhythm. Suddenly, his hands grab my waist, and he pulls me toward him, rolling again until I’m underneath him and he’s above me.

“Too slow,” he murmurs as he takes over, increasing the tempo until our harsh breathing is the only sound in the room. He reaches down between us and finds my swollen clit. His expert fingers know exactly where to press, and I shatter. He quickly

follows and gives a hoarse shout. Then, he shifts his heavyweight to the side. His arm sneaks out, wrapping around my waist, and he pulls me tight against his body—my back to his chest.

It only takes a moment before my eyes shut, and I fall fast asleep, spent from our lovemaking.

The next morning, after a sex-filled, um... an invigorating shower, we're still in no hurry to get dressed. Luke, of course, always hungry... in more ways than one, I'm learning... calls in a huge breakfast order via room service.

When he notices my wide eyes, he gives me a rueful grin. "I have a huge appetite."

Smirking, I reply, "I'm glad I'm a chef."

He laughs. "Me too."

When breakfast arrives, we sit in our robes around the table and enjoy quietly being together. Luke is fun to be around, and the morning passes quickly.

Luke's phone buzzes, and he answers. "Hi, Emily... In an hour? Yeah. Okay. Thanks, Boss Lady." He looks over at me. "The limo leaves for the airport in one hour."

Nodding, I ask. "That private jet is something."

"Yeah, sure beats the hell out of taking the buses." He grins.

"You only take the buses when you're on tour?" I ask curiously.

Luke shrugs. "Yeah, they're great when we're touring. We can sleep while we're

driven to the next venue. Close quarters, though.”

“When’s the band’s next scheduled tour?” Dreading the answer already.

“We had this time off because we were recording the new album.” He glances over at me with a frown. “Now, with all the publicity over the award. I’m sure Emily will have each of us doing interviews and guest appearances.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:58 am*

“So you won’t be on tour for a while?”

“Once the new album launches, in about six months, we’ll be back on tour.” He gives me a direct look. “Knowing Emily, she’ll also schedule us for more performances to ride the PR wave from getting Album of the Year.”

Swallowing, I try to keep my expression neutral. “I see.” Standing, I turn toward the bedroom to begin packing. But Luke’s fingers close over my wrist, and he gently pulls me toward him and onto his lap.

“Hey, we’ll make this work. Okay?”

I smile as he nuzzles my neck, pushing my robe’s collar out of his way. “I know. It’s just... I’ll miss you while you’re gone.”

“Maybe you could come with us?”

“And do what? Cook?” I laugh, enjoying his lips warm against my collarbone.

He abruptly raises his head. “That’s not a bad idea.”

“Luke, I was only joking,” I protest.

“I know, but think about it. Pixie—“

My fingers over his mouth stop his words. “Pixie was just being... well, Pixie.”

Grabbing his hand, I pull him to his feet. “We better get moving if we don’t want to be late.”

The whirlwind of the awards show, the after-parties, the flashing lights, and the endless camera clicks already feel like a dream. A heady, intoxicating one filled with glamour, late nights, and stolen moments with Luke—but still, just a dream.

Now that we’re back in Jacksonville, reality sets in.

That reality includes the way my business has slowed down.

With all the time I took away, my private chef schedule isn’t nearly as packed as before. And the media and bad press? It certainly hasn’t helped. While some clients love the idea of hiring Luke Sterling’s girlfriend, others... well, they preferred when I was just Lila, the chef who stayed in the background. Maybe they’re wondering if I’m still serious about being a chef. Whichever it is, people are hesitant to hire me.

I glance down with a frown as my phone buzzes with yet another cancellation. That’s three this week. Turns out, being tabloid fodder isn’t great for a private chef business.

I try not to let it bother me.

I tell myself it’ll pick up soon, and the right opportunities will come in.

But after living in Luke’s world for those few days—flying on a private jet, staying in five-star hotels, sitting at a VIP table with celebrities, I can’t deny how... quiet things feel now.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m glad to be home. I love my kitchen, my routine, my normal life. But stepping into Luke’s world, even briefly, made me realize just how different our lives really are.

And then there's Luke himself.

The way he pulls me in and tempts me—at least when he's around.

He's been in and out but mostly out, as Emily has all of the band members doing guest appearances. I'm still not used to the rush of excitement from seeing Luke on TV.

But he got home yesterday morning, and we spent the day on the beach. He'd made me laugh despite my worries. "Put on some sunscreen," he'd said, stretching out on the sand.

I'd reached for the bottle, but he'd stopped me. "No, do it slowly. Like, really slowly."

"What? Why?"

His grin had been pure sin. "Because watching you with a bottle of suntan oil, touching yourself drives me crazy."

I'd blushed scarlet but played along, turning the simple act of applying sunscreen into something that had him dragging me back to the house before I'd even finished my legs.

Now, running my fingers over the lingering tan lines, I smile at the memory. Everything about life with Luke is different—bigger, brighter, more intense. The five-star hotel, the red carpet, the private flights... it's all been indescribable.

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But it's the small moments that matter most. The way he brings me coffee in bed. How he insists on taste-testing everything I cook, even though half the time he burns his tongue because he's too impatient to wait for it to cool. The proud look in his eyes when he catches me singing off-key to one of his songs while I work.

My business might be slower, but I've never been happier. Besides, glancing at the notebook where I've been sketching out ideas, maybe it's time for a change. Maybe this is the universe's way of pushing me toward something new.

Something that combines my love of food with this crazy, beautiful life I've stumbled into.

I just haven't figured out what that is yet.

But for now, I hear Luke's footsteps, probably drawn by the smell of coffee and whatever he thinks I might be baking. And I know, with absolute certainty, that I wouldn't change a thing.

Well, maybe one thing—I should probably start keeping suntan oil in the bedroom.

Thirty-Four

Luke

"No way," I say for what feels like the hundredth time, but the band isn't having it.

"Dude, you wrote a love song," Vince grins from behind his guitar. "An actual,



honest-to-God love song. We should play it. Live. Tonight.”

We’re in final rehearsals for tonight’s one-off televised show, and I’m going to kill Kendrick for mentioning the song. She’d helped me polish the lyrics and turn my raw emotions into something coherent, but it was never meant for anyone else to hear.

Cass shakes his head. “Come on, man. You need to take the spotlight on this one.”

“Luke, you need to sing this. It’s beautiful, and It’s yoursong.” Kendrick chimes in.

“I’m not a singer,” I protest, fingers hovering over my keyboard. “There’s a reason I stay back here.”

“Phil Collins was just a drummer,” Nate points out, twirling his drumsticks. “Then Genesis needed a singer, and boom—legend.”

“That’s different—“

“Luke.” Cass’s voice cuts through my objections. “Play the damn song. Kendrick said it’s great, and she should know.”

They spend the next fifteen minutes badgering me until finally—finally—I play them the song. When I finish, there’s silence.

“Holy shit,” Nate whispers.

“Yeah,” Vince agrees. “We’re playing it. You’ll owe us, man, because that’s gonna make Lila cry.”

“We’re all gonna cry,” Emily corrects, already wiping her eyes.

I look at each of them—my bandmates, my family, really. Cass looking annoyingly smug, and so is Kendrick. Vince pretending to wipe away tears. Nate trying not to smile.

“Fine,” I concede, then hold up a hand before they can celebrate. “But only if I can sing it to her—directly to her.”

“Meaning?” Cass leans forward.

A plan starts forming in my mind. The song isn’t the only secret I’ve been keeping.

“Meaning I’d like her to be there, so I can tell her, ask her...”

Understanding dawns on their faces, followed by grins.

“You’re going to—“ Vince starts.

“Don’t say it out loud,” I warn.

“Oh my God,” Emily clasps her hands together. “This is perfect. Do you have the—“

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I nod, and she actually squeals.

“Okay,” Emily takes over, always the organizer. “Here’s how we’ll set it up...”

After we have it all planned out, Cass comes over to clap me on the shoulder. “You sure about this?”

I think about Lila—about midnight pancakes and stolen kisses, about how she sees me, really sees me. Not just as the rockstar but the man behind the keyboard, how she’s changed everything without even trying.

“Never been more sure of anything.”

He nods, satisfied. “Then let’s make it epic.”

As we run through it a few more times, my heart is already racing. In less than seven hours, I’m going to be singing in front of millions of people on live television.

No pressure.

Someone pokes their head in. “Miss Jeffers is here.”

“Practice is over!” Emily announces quickly. “Everyone act normal!”

Lila appears in the doorway, carrying what smells like her famous lasagna, and everyone suddenly becomes very interested in their instruments.

“Hey,” she smiles, and my heart skips like it always does. “Thought you guys might be hungry.”

As the others descend on the food, I pull her close, kissing her softly. “Thanks. I’m always hungry when you’re around.”

She flushes a bright red at my innuendo. “Good rehearsal?”

I think about the song, about what’s coming tonight. “You could say that.”

“Everything okay? You seem... different.”

I kiss her again, longer this time. “Everything’s perfect. Tonight going to be electric.”

She grins in agreement, and I just smile. Because tonight, our relationship changes.

And I’m so ready for it.

The lights dim in the studio, and my heart pounds against my ribs. Lila’s standing in the wings, exactly where we planned, watching with that proud smile that still makes my chest tighten. She has no idea what’s coming.

The host of the show smiles, in on the act. The cameras are set up, and the stage is set.

“And now we have a special live performance by the Wild Band.” The host announces to the small audience, looking directly into the cameras. He then gestures to the side, and the spotlights and cameras shine on us.

This is it. I’m sitting behind my keyboard, the microphone in front of me. I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans.

“We’ve got something memorable for you tonight,” Cass announces, “Our own Luke Sterling has written a song, and for the first time ever, he’s going to sing for you.”

The surprised cheers from the small audience match the shocked expression on Lila’s face. Emily appears behind her, placing her hands on Lila’s shoulders to keep her in place.

“This song is for someone special in my life,” I say, my voice steady despite the thunder in my chest. “Lila,” my voice echoes through the silent room as I extend my hand. “Come here, sweetheart.”

Emily gives her a gentle push, and she walks toward me like she’s in a dream. I smile at her, and she sits down in the chair they have placed in front of me. The spotlight widens, finding us both.

I meet Lila’s eyes. And then I start to play.

The first notes fill the air, and I forget about being nervous. I forget about the camera and the millions of people watching from home. I only see her.

The lyrics come easier than I expect, the words blending perfectly with the melody I built for her.

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It's honest, raw, filled with emotion—And it's entirely for her.

The lyrics continue to pour out of me, everything I've wanted to say to her since that first night. The band joins in softly behind me, supporting but not overwhelming. When I get to the chorus, I look directly at her as I continue to sing about midnight pancakes and her sweet kisses.

By the final verse, tears are streaming down her face.

When I finish the song, the studio erupts in applause, but all I see is her.

I stand, my heart pounding like a damn drumbeat.

She runs to me, and when I catch her in my arms, everything else fades away—the cameras, the audience, the world. This is what matters. Us.

"I love you," I tell her, not caring that we're live on television. "More than music, more than fame, more than anything."

The audience explodes behind us.

The cameras zoom in.

But all I care about is the woman in my arms.

My everything.

I set her down. Then, kneeling in front of her, I look up into her eyes.

“Lila Jeffers. Will you marry me?” I hold out the velvet ring box.

“Yes. I love you too, Luke.”

When I stand and kiss her, the audience erupts again. But all I can feel is her in my arms, her tears on my cheeks, her whispered “I love you” against my lips.

As we stand there, holding each other, I know there will be more midnight pancakes, more adventures, more moments that take my breath away.

And I can’t wait for us to begin building our life—together.

## Epilogue

Lila

It’s been a roller coaster ride since that night in the studio.

When Luke told me and the world that he loved me, since then, my life has changed in ways I never saw coming. I still run my private chef business, but now? Now, I have only one very important client—the Wild Band.

When Emily first approached me about becoming the Wild Band’s personal chef six months ago, I wasn’t sure. I worried about mixing business with pleasure, about losing the independence I’d worked so hard for. But Luke smiled and said, “Finally, I get you all to myself on tour.”

It turned out to be perfect. I get to do what I adore while being with the man I love. The band gets proper meals instead of takeout, and I get to see Luke every day, even

during their grueling tour schedule.

As Emily pointed out, it's the perfect way to contribute to the band—to be part of their world without getting lost in it.

Plus, there's something special about feeding this crazy, wonderful family we've become.

Being on tour is a whole different world, though. It's a mix of early mornings and late nights, and the tour bus kitchen is tiny compared to what I'm used to, but I've learned to make it work in between chasing Luke away from my desserts so others can have some. I've also learned almost everyone's favorite meals and ensure they each get what they like.

It's chaotic, exhausting, overwhelming...

And I love every second of it.

At the end of the night, when the stadium is silent, the lights dim, and the stage is empty, it's just Luke and me, and everyone and everything else fades away.

No matter how crazy things get, we always find our way back to each other.



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Right now, I'm on the tour bus, and I've just finished baking a batch of chocolate chip cookies.

"Something smells amazing," Luke says, sliding his arms around my waist from behind. He nuzzles my neck, and I lean into him automatically.

"Don't even think about stealing a cookie. They're not cool yet."

"But you love me. Don't I get special privileges?"

"You get midnight privileges," I remind him with a smile, resting against him.

Luke steals a warm cookie despite my protests. After taking a quick bite, he asks, "You've got that look on your face. What are you thinking about?"

"How different everything is from when we first met. Remember when I thought having my own business was my dream?"

He chuckles. "Remember when I thought I'd never sing in public?"

That makes me smile. After his performance of "Midnight Recipe" (yes, that's what he called it), the fans wouldn't let him hide behind his keyboard anymore. Now, he sings at least one song per show.

We still escape to our cabin in the woods when we need a break from the chaos. Last weekend, we spent three days there, just us, no phones, no schedules. Luke still asks for midnight pancakes. It reminds me of that first time, of taking chances, and of how

love can find you in the most unexpected moments.

My phone buzzes with a text from Emily—something about the menu for tomorrow’s venue. My life isn’t what I imagined it would be. It’s louder, messier, more complicated. There are paparazzi sometimes, and social media can be brutal, and living on a tour bus takes some getting used to.

But then Luke pulls me into a slow dance in the tiny kitchen, humming our song, and I know I wouldn’t change a thing. This is where I belong—creating meals for the people I love, stealing kisses between sound checks, and finding quiet moments in the chaos.

“I love you,” he murmurs against my hair.

“I love you too,” I reply, breathing in the scent of him mixed with chocolate chip cookies and home.

Because that’s what this is—home. Whether we’re in the tour bus kitchen, our cabin in the woods, or stealing midnight moments in venues across the country, home is wherever we’re together.

And sometimes, the best recipes in life aren’t the ones you plan. They’re the ones that come together unexpectedly, and you find everything you never knew you were missing instead.

Life is a recipe of love, music, and midnight pancakes... and I wouldn’t want it any other way.

The End.