



Sleeping with the Frenemy

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Description: I've never had high expectations for Valentine's Day, but this one takes the cake. Not that there's any cake involved. I can't afford any. I'm stuck trying to save my family's crumbling motor lodge. Ever since the Valenti Family moved into town and built their roadside monstrosity of a hotel, the lodge gets more bills than paying guests. Worse, the Valentis have bought most of my family's debts, making them our biggest creditor. If they can't drive us out of business, they'll just buy us and force us to fold. The whole family is rotten. As my grandmother says, I wouldn't cross the street to spit on one. I wouldn't want to get that close. I especially wouldn't want to get anywhere near Chase Valenti, the family golden boy. The one time I ventured too close to him, it didn't take me long to find out he's the worst Valenti of all. Arrogance and selfishness in a pretty wrapper. And best forgotten. I have enough to worry about. Like preserving my family's livelihood. If I have any hope of saving the lodge, I have to get a second job. Fast. There are just a few minor problems. The only job available in my hometown is at the Valenti Hotel. It's an entry-level housekeeping job. My new boss is Chase Valenti. And I can't seem to stop sleeping with him.

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Victoria

The stack of bills was so high, it was in danger of toppling over.

I slumped in my chair, letting my head thud against the cheap, plastic back. We had long since replaced the nice, wooden chairs with mismatched thrift store finds. “We” being my grandmother and me. Although, lately, it was just me. After Nana’s last fall required seventeen stitches, my sister and I put our foot down. Now, Nana was safely ensconced at her assisted living facility in Philly, and I was...here. I looked around at the faded carpet, dingy walls, and outdated kitchenette.

Cabin Number Fourteen—AKA “The Honeymoon Cabin”—was hardly the romantic escape it had been when my grandparents built the Virginville Motor Lodge sixty-five years ago.

That’s right. Virginville, Pennsylvania. The origins of the town name were murky, with some people claiming early settlers named it after a Native American word and others saying it referred to the area’s untouched natural beauty. The running joke in my old high school was that the town was so boring and sparsely populated, virgins were our only local industry.

But it was a tight-knit, friendly community. “A good place to put down roots,” as Nana always said. Her family had been in Virginville for generations, and she and my grandfather had been fixtures in town when the lodge was in its heyday. Back then, it was a comfortable stop for young couples and adventure-seekers exploring the Appalachian Trail. Now, it was a rundown cluster of cabins in dire need of repairs. Several contractors had told me it would be cheaper to bulldoze the entire site and

sell the land to one of the half dozen construction companies building new homes in the area.

But it would break Nana's heart. At nearly ninety, she was still sharp as a tack. Her body might be frail, but her mind could run circles around most people. She and my grandfather built the lodge themselves, driving home every nail by hand. They spent their whole lives in Virginville, raising my mother in the cabins. After she and my dad died, they raised my sister and me, too. Every leaking roof and rotting board held a memory.

I couldn't tear it all down. It would be like ripping apart what little was left of my family.

But I couldn't pay all the bills, either—and my main creditor knew it.

At that thought, anger rose in my chest. Unable to help myself, I rolled my head an inch to the right. That was all it took to give me a view out the kitchenette window and straight across the valley, to where a gleaming, multi-story hotel overlooked the highway.

"A monstrosity," Nana called it. "The Olive Garden of hotels."

She had a point. All Valenti Hotels were built to resemble rustic Italian villas, with stone-tiled roofs and stucco walls. The architectural style was out of place in Eastern Pennsylvania, but that didn't seem to bother weary travelers on their way to Pittsburgh or Philly. Given the choice between my family's crumbling motor lodge and the Valenti Hotel's running water and functioning toilets, people didn't even bother crossing the highway.

I couldn't blame them. It wasn't their fault the nicest hotel in town was run by a scheming, money-grubbing family hellbent on destroying small businesses and

bulldozing historic landmarks. The Valentis targeted towns like Virginville, where they could buy land cheap. They built their faux Italian monstrosities off highway exits, ensuring they crushed local motels. And if they couldn't drive small innkeepers out of business, they simply bought their competitors' debts—and then waited for them to default.

The entire family was rotten, and I felt zero remorse in nurturing a seething hatred for the whole lot of them.

I reserved the bulk of my hatred for one member in particular.

Most of the time.

Almost all of the time.

Nearly every moment.

Except sometimes when I was alone and memories crept in...

Then, just very occasionally, I thought about the time I got close with that particular member of the Valenti family.

It was hardly worth thinking about.

But sometimes I couldn't help thinking about it...

The steps outside the cabin squeaked.

I shoved my errant thoughts aside. Memories rarely lived up to the hype. Too often, reality came along and proved them wrong.

My sister Katherine's characteristic knock—shave and a haircut—rang out and then she hollered, “You in here, Victoria?” A second later, the door popped open, and her bright red head appeared. “Ah! There you are.”

I lifted a limp hand. “Hey.”

She thumped inside, shook snow off her orthopedic boot, and shut the door, sending a whoosh of winter air into the room. “Happy Valentine's Day!”

Bitter cold swirled around me, and I huddled deeper in my chair. “Don't remind me.”

Kat gave me a hopeful look. “Did you change your mind about the job?”

“I start tonight.”

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Her shoulders slumped. “I was hoping you’d come to your senses.”

“Is that why you drove an hour and a half out of your way? To talk me out of it in person?” She visited Nana one Friday a month. We originally planned to trade off every other week, but the four-hour round trip drive from New York City was rough, especially in the winter. My apartment in Allentown was only an hour from Philadelphia, so I handled most of the visits. Plus, my social life was much tamer than Katherine’s. And by tame I meant nonexistent.

“I promised Nana I would stop by,” Kat said.

Alarm bolted through me, and I shot upright in my chair. “You didn’t tell her anything, did you?” If my grandmother got wind of my employment plans, I wouldn’t have to visit her. She’d show up at the lodge and murder me.

Wait, no. She’d tell me how stupid I was. Then she’d murder me.

Kat looked offended. “Of course not. I said I wouldn’t, didn’t I? But Nana isn’t easily fooled. I swear she knows something is up. She spent the whole visit asking very pointed questions, and I spent the entire three hours dancing around the truth.”

“At least you’re good at dancing.” She was an honest-to-goodness ballerina. And I was fiercely proud of her. Who could have imagined the little girl who took lessons at Miss Imogene’s Dance Studio in little old Virginville would grow up to dance for the New York City Ballet?

Speaking of which, I gestured to her boot. “Are you sure you’re supposed to drive in

that thing?” She had a hairline fracture in the top of her foot. It was a common enough injury among dancers, but nevertheless frightening for someone whose livelihood depended on two working feet. Or, in her case, tiptoes.

“Good question.” She clonked across the living room, somehow still graceful despite the hunk of plastic encasing her right leg from the knee down. She stopped in front of the dining table—an antique Nana rescued from the landfill—and gazed at the pile of bills as she spoke in her usual bubbly rush. “The doctor didn’t mention driving. No one in New York seems to remember the rest of the country gets around in cars. Why haven’t you opened any of these?”

I looked at the wobbling stack. “What’s the point? I can’t pay them.” Worse, the bills were just a drop in the bucket compared to what I owed the Valentis.

As if she read my mind, Kat asked, “How much do we owe the Valentis?”

“Don’t ever say that name around Nana. Last time I mentioned them, she turned her head to the side and spit.”

“How much?”

I suppressed a sigh. There was no point keeping it from her. Most of the liens and judgments were public record, anyway. “One hundred ninety-three thousand dollars.”

Her jaw dropped. “What? You’re never going to be able to pay that off!”

“Yes, I am.” Slowly. Because I also had student loans. And rent. And a car.

But I couldn’t think about that. Not all at once. If I did, I’d curl into a ball and give up. As long as I made the minimum payments to the Valentis, they probably wouldn’t foreclose. For one thing, there were other creditors snapping at my heels. More

importantly, the property was still in my grandmother's name. I'd scraped enough money together to pay a high-profile Philadelphia lawyer to review the lodge's debts. He assured me that even evil assholes like the Valentis usually avoided the bad press that came with taking homes from little old ladies. Treading water would probably work.

So it was a matter of not drowning.

I squared my shoulders and looked at my sister. "And the Valentis are going to pay me, remember?"

She put her hands on her hips. "Victoria, you can't go work as a maid at the Valenti Hotel!"

"The politically correct term is housekeeping. You should know that since you cleaned apartments in the city." It was how she paid her tuition during her first two years at the ballet academy—and the inspiration behind my plan to save the lodge.

"That was in New York!" she exclaimed. "And I wasn't working for our sworn enemy!"

"Valenti money is as green as anyone else's." Even if it was dirty.

She pulled out a chair and plopped in it, her expression exasperated. "There are so many reasons this won't work." She ticked items off her fingers. "You already have a full-time job. You live a half hour away from Virginville. Oh, and the Valentis will fire you as soon as they find out. I can't believe they hired you in the first place. Did you use a fake name?"

I adopted my best Big Sister voice. "The Valentis don't work there, Kat. They own hundreds of hotels. You really think Mark Valenti is running the check-in desk?" I

knew for a fact the head of the Valenti family hadn't set foot in Virginville since the hotel went up. As with all of his hotels, he hired locals to staff it. Which made his business model even more objectionable, in my opinion. He was the hotel version of Walmart—running mom and pop stores out of business under the guise of creating jobs for struggling communities.

Kat bristled. “Of course I don't think that. But aren't you worried about this getting back to the Valentis somehow?”

“Honestly? No. There hasn't been a Valenti in this town for seven years. It's easy to forget they were ever here.”

She was silent a moment. Then, voice soft, she asked, “What about Chase?”

“What about him?”

Shit. That came out sharper than I intended.

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“I don’t think you’ve forgotten him,” she said.

“Of course I have. I only knew him for three months.” His father had rented one of the handful of historic homes in town while the hotel was under construction. When Mark Valenti went to the job site every morning, Chase roamed the streets of Virginville. And since there weren’t that many streets to roam, he eventually ended up wandering around the motor lodge.

Then Nana tried to run him off the grounds with a shotgun. Fortunately, I intervened.

Kat gave me a look. “Yeah, but it was an intense three months.” She hesitated.

Uh oh.

“Especially near the end,” she added.

Okay, I was not discussing sex with my twenty-one-year-old sister.

I made my voice stern. “It was a long time ago. Maybe it was intense, but everything is intense when you’re eighteen. And Chase was the closest I ever got to a bad boy. It’s no wonder I fell for him.”

Kat’s expression turned thoughtful. “You think he was a bad boy?”

“Well, he swore like a sailor.” I let out a huff of laughter. “In Virginville, that automatically makes you the head of a motorcycle gang.”

She smiled, but then she quickly sobered. “He was constantly getting into fights, too. He always had bruises or cuts on his knuckles, remember?”

I did. And even now, it didn’t make sense. Because the Chase I spent three months with was a lot of things, but he wasn’t a hothead. He was cocky and a bit of a smartass, sure, but not violent. With his model good looks, expensive clothes, and cultured background, he’d been exotic to eighteen-year-old me. But he never made me feel inferior, despite my country bumpkin status. Instead, he followed me around town, asking question after question about the historical district and its rows of Victorian buildings. He followed me to the Dairy Barn and the local swimming hole, where he sat on the dock and watched my friends and me swim, the look in his green eyes letting me know I had most of his attention.

He even followed me home, where he ate dinner with us while his father worked late. When Nana said he reminded her of a golden retriever with his blond curls and insatiable curiosity, he just laughed.

Then he caught my eye over the dinner table and, when she wasn’t looking, murmured that maybe I should put a collar on him.

It pained me to admit it, but I would have dropped everything for him. My future. My college scholarship. My dreams.

I would have given him anything.

Our last night together, I gave him something I could never take back.

Then he disappeared. No notice. No goodbye. Not even a note.

And the next time I heard from the Valenti family, it was from a process server knocking on one of the cabin doors to tell me the Valentis purchased nearly all of the

lodge's debts.

Kat made a noise, jerking me from my memories.

She stared at my hands.

Which I'd clenched into fists on top of the table.

Oh.

I stuck my hands in my lap and cleared my throat. "Right. He was a bad boy and a spoiled rich kid. Which is why he's best forgotten."

She gave a slow nod.

Excellent. Now we could stop talking about the Valentis once and for all.

"Still," she said, "do you really think it's smart to work for them?"

Or not.

I drew in a deep breath. "It's not an issue, Kat. It's just a job, and it's just on the weekends."

At that, guilt crept across her face. "I feel terrible that you're shouldering all this debt alone. You're already working forty hours a week, plus coming here every weekend. Trust me, Victoria, housekeeping is back-breaking work."

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“I’ll be fine.”

“As a maid, though? You have a college degree.”

The outrage in her voice almost made me laugh. “You’re becoming a snob.”

“There’s got to be somewhere else you can work.”

Now, I did laugh. “This town has a population of three hundred, little sister. Where, exactly, am I supposed to find a different job? The Valentis are the only ones hiring.” And it wasn’t like I could drive to a neighboring town to work. In the last year or so, the lodge had been vandalized more than once. It usually happened on the weekends—bored teenagers pulling pranks. But every bit of damage demanded dollars I didn’t have, so I’d started sleeping over every weekend.

Hence, my dead on arrival social life. My Saturday nights were usually spent huddled in one of the cabins streaming Netflix on my phone. Sometimes, I felt more like eighty-five than twenty-five.

Kat put her elbows on the table and leaned forward. “Can’t you just talk to Nana? Explain the situation?”

“Been there, done that.” Multiple times. And my grandmother always responded with “Virginville isn’t Philadelphia.” It was one of her favorite sayings. She didn’t want to see our little rural town lose its trees and open spaces. If we caved to the Valentis and sold our land to pay our debts, they would turn around and flip it to a developer. It was in their interests to do so. In a couple of years, the motor lodge would get leveled

and a bunch of fast food restaurants would take its place.

Nana had a point. It was one I even agreed with. But trees didn't do us much good when we were drowning in debt. The lodge hadn't hosted a paying guest in over a year.

And the chances of one showing up now were about as good as a bag of money falling from the sky.

A loud knock filled the room.

Kat and I jumped and looked at the door.

In a hushed voice, she asked, "Are you expecting someone?"

"No," I said in the same tone.

She swung her gaze to me, her eyes wide. "Could it be a customer?"

The knock sounded again—a loud thundering that seemed to shake the room. Irritation sparked in my mind. Growing up in a motor lodge taught me a great deal about human behavior. You can tell a lot by the way a person knocks, and whoever was outside was pushy as hell.

Pound, pound, pound. The dull thuds vibrated through the cabin.

"Jesus," I muttered, standing and straightening my skirt. "You stay here," I told my sister as I stalked to the door. Just as I reached for the knob, the pounding started up again.

I yanked the door open. "Can I help—"

My body froze, and not from the blast of cold air that rushed inside.

No way.

No way.

The universe couldn't be this cruel.

Except what was I thinking? Of course it could. Just when I thought my Valentine's Day couldn't get any worse, here was this poisoned cherry on top of my shit sundae of a day.

Chase Valenti smiled, his teeth as white as the snow swirling around his mop of dark blond hair.

Except it wasn't quite the mop I remembered. Now, it was pushed back from a broad, faintly lined forehead. Similar lines radiated from leaf-green eyes that gleamed with amusement.

But the lines didn't detract from his looks. If anything, the signs of maturity enhanced them. So did his three-piece suit and camel-colored overcoat. Snow dusted his broad shoulders and wavy hair, and dark blond stubble shaded his square jaw. His blue silk tie nestled under a pristine white collar. He looked rich and sophisticated. The Chase I'd known had been a boy.

This was a man.

A scent teased my nose—a mix of leather and spruce and maybe a little tobacco thrown in.

I frowned.

He grinned.

Then, in the most blatant and infuriating move imaginable, he dropped his gaze to my feet and slowly raked it up my body. Like he knew it. Like he owned it.

I clenched my fists.

He reached my face, and his green eyes crinkled a little more.

“Hey there, Vicky Parker. You gonna let me in?”

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Chase

Victoria Parker was more beautiful than I remembered.

She was also royally pissed off.

I was prepared for that.

A parade of emotions marched across her face as she absorbed my presence. First, there was shock as her blue eyes widened and her plump lips parted on a strangled gasp. Then there was disbelief—accompanied by a slight shake of her head that sent some of her mahogany hair slipping over her shoulders. Finally, her cheeks grew flushed and she narrowed her eyes.

Ah, yes. Anger laced with irritation.

Anger at seeing me again. Irritation because I called her Vicky.

“It’s Victoria,” she said, her eyes narrowing even more.

“My mistake.”

Her expression didn’t change.

The wind picked up, sending a shot of cold air straight down my collar. I leaned to the side so I could look around her.

“Can I come in?”

She moved, blocking me. “No.”

“Bad manners,” I murmured.

She made a huffing sound. “You would know.”

The wind gusted harder. Ice crystals swooped on a current of air between us. My overcoat was plenty warm, but I hunched my shoulders. “Come on, Victoria. What are you afraid of?”

Fire leapt into her gaze.

I was gonna get it.

Which was fine.

Considering I wanted it.

Just as she opened her mouth, a tall redhead appeared over her shoulder.

“Victoria? What’s wrong—” The redhead saw me and snapped her mouth shut.

Surprise flitted through me. This could only be Katherine, her younger sister. She had to be around twenty-one now. When I left Virginville seven years ago, she was a skinny teenager who wore her flaming hair in a tight bun at her nape. Not much had changed, except now the orange-red mass was piled on top of her head.

It was a striking color, but I preferred something darker. For example, a waterfall of brown with flashes of garnet that played hard-to-get in the sun.

I extended my arm past Victoria, brushing her sleeve with mine. “How are you, Katherine? You look well.”

“Ah...good.” She looked between me and Victoria before shaking my hand. “You, um, look good, too.”

Well, at least one of the Parker sisters thought so. I was batting five hundred.

I smiled. “Thanks.”

“Chase was just leaving,” Victoria said. She’d moved back when our sleeves touched, jerking her arm away like I burned her.

“No, I wasn’t,” I said.

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She spoke between clenched teeth. “Yes, you were.”

“Wasn’t.”

Katherine’s lips twitched.

I winked at her.

Victoria lifted her chin, giving me a nice view of the creamy skin of her neck and the little pulse point pounding on the side. “If you don’t leave, I’m calling the cops.”

“You mean the ones having lunch at the Valenti Hotel bar?” I looked at Katherine. “We give police and EMTs free meals at all of our hotels. You never know when you’ll need to remove a rowdy guest.” I pulled my phone from my pocket and swiped my thumb over the screen. Then I looked at Victoria. “Want me to call them for you?”

For a moment, she just stared at me. Then she muttered, “You’re a real asshole, you know that?” before spinning and stalking into the cabin.

I met Katherine’s gaze. “Guess that means I can come in.”

She bit her lip and stepped back.

The cabin was in worse shape than I imagined. As I passed Katherine and made my way inside, the floorboards seemed to sink under my weight. Seven years ago, the lodge was shabby but clean, and each unit was fully furnished.

That wasn't the case anymore.

Victoria went to a beat up dining room table and leaned against it. She was dressed simply, in a navy blue pencil skirt, cream blouse, and pointy heels that made my heart rate kick up a notch. It was a sensible outfit. Professional. On another woman, it wouldn't have turned any heads. But Victoria Parker wasn't any other woman. The blouse clung to her tits, which were—if memory served me correctly—fucking magnificent. The skirt did the same to her hips. I was making my way down her legs when Katherine cleared her throat.

“I should go.”

Victoria straightened. “What? No. You just got here.”

“I have rehearsal at five today.” Katherine made a face. “The director still makes us attend even if we're injured. With the snow and everything, who knows how long it'll take me to get back into the city. New Yorkers can't drive.” At the last, she shot me an anxious look. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean that as an insult.”

I stuffed my hands in my coat pockets and rocked back on my heels. “None taken. I'm not from New York.” I wasn't from anywhere, really. Although, depending on how you looked at it, maybe I was from everywhere.

Kat offered me a polite smile. “Oh... I thought your family's headquarters were in the city.”

“They are. My father has a place there but he doesn't use it much.” Which never failed to confound me, given the “place” was a penthouse overlooking Central Park. As a kid, I begged him to let us stay in the city for the Thanksgiving parade. His response was always the same.

I have work to do.

Victoria spoke, her voice hard. “You were too busy roaming the country, invading small towns and running their hospitality industry out of business.”

“That’s true,” I said, and the faintest surprise flashed in her gaze. Clearly, she hadn’t expected me to agree. But her assessment of my family’s business model was fair. A little too simplistic, but nevertheless accurate.

An awkward silence descended, the cabin filled with nothing but the sounds of wind, creaking wood, and snow pelting the windows. I kept my gaze on Victoria, which was hardly a chore. She was the best looking thing in the room. By a country mile, as they said in these parts.

“Well,” Kat said, stretching the word out in the uncomfortable stillness. “I’ll be on my way.”

“Need help?” I gestured to the plastic boot on her leg.

“Oh! No.” She waved me off, her cheeks pinkening. “It’s not as bad as it looks.” As if to prove her point, she thumped quickly to the door.

“I’ll walk you out,” Victoria said, already brushing past me and trailing a soft, clean scent that made my cock stir. She ushered Kat outside, murmuring something in her sister’s ear as they went.

I pretended to study the wood paneling even as I kept my attention tuned to their muted conversation. The wind stopped me from overhearing more than a couple of words—“call you later” and “let me know.”

Once Kat was safely down the steps, Victoria wasted no time shutting the door and

rounding on me.

“Why are you here?” she demanded, her hands in fists at her sides. We faced off like a couple of gunslingers, each one waiting to see who drew first.

Well, she was waiting, anyway. I had no problem making the first move.

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I looked around the bare cabin, taking in the peeling paint and threadbare curtains before settling back on her. “Maybe I just wanted a room.”

“I don’t find your jokes funny.” She crossed her arms. Her first mistake. The position thrust her tits up, revealing deep cleavage. Jesus, her shirt was nearly the same color as her skin.

And there went my dick, going hard as a rock and straining toward her like it was a compass needle and she was true north.

“I’m not joking,” I said. “I’d love nothing more than to get a room with you.” Or the table in the corner. Or the floor. I wasn’t picky.

Her mouth tightened. “That’s not happening.”

“It happened before.”

“That was a mistake.”

“Didn’t feel like one.”

An edge of cruelty entered her tone. “Funny, because I barely felt anything at all.”

I didn’t answer right away. I just took the hit, partly because I deserved it and partly because my father taught me there was value in letting your enemies land the occasional blow. It gave you the illusion of weakness and encouraged them to lower their guard. Using the tactic on Victoria probably made me the asshole she called me,

but I was willing to fight dirty if it meant winning our little war. She was furious with me, but she was also hurt. There was a lot that was wrong between us. More than she knew, actually. If I was lucky, I could make everything right.

But first I needed to remind her why I was worth the effort.

The wind outside picked up, sending more snow pattering against the window.

“A lot can change in seven years,” I told her. “For example, I went to college and then grad school. Oxford for college. Yale MBA.”

“Congratulations,” she said flatly. “Remarkable how the heir to a hotel fortune managed to get into those schools.”

I smiled. “Those aren’t my most remarkable traits, Vicky. If memory serves me correctly, you were pretty impressed by my cock when we were eighteen. I’m an even bigger boy now than I was then. And I’d be happy to show you my...credentials.”

“No thanks.”

I went on as if I hadn’t heard her. “I’m not the only one who’s been busy. You did some remarkable things yourself. Got that scholarship you were after—”

“Partial scholarship. We can’t all be trust fund babies.”

“You got your degree and a nice job at an accounting firm which, I assume, is why you’re buttoned up all prim and proper. Although, as a man, I have to tell you that can backfire. It’s the librarian effect.” I looked pointedly at her legs. “For example, if you wore that skirt to the office, I guarantee every man there is fantasizing about seeing you out of it.”

“Not every man is a misogynistic pig.”

“It’s not misogyny. It’s biology.” I raised my eyebrows and added, “Although, maybe you haven’t dated enough to know.”

“I’ve dated enough.”

“You’re single right now.”

Her lips thinned. “You have no idea if I’m single.”

“You’re alone in an abandoned motor lodge on a Friday night.”

She spoke through clenched teeth. “Why. Are. You. Here.”

“My father’s having me audit every Valenti property. It’s part of his surprise corporate drop-in program.” I let a little of the sarcasm I felt about it leak into my voice. “You can bet local management loves it.”

The change of subject seemed to startle her, but she recovered quickly. “What do you mean by surprise?”

“Just what I said, Vicky. No one in Virginville knows I’m coming.”

“Then how did you know the police are eating at the hotel?”

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“Oh, that? I lied.”

She sucked in a breath. “Fuck you.”

“We’re getting to that.”

Her blue eyes shot sparks. “In your dreams, Valenti.”

Ah, if she only knew.

I wandered to the table, which was empty except for a cell phone and a stack of unopened envelopes. “You look tense. Why don’t you sit?”

She stayed where she was. “I asked why you’re here.”

“And I told you.” I peered at the envelopes.

“Don’t touch those!” she snapped, coming over.

I hid a smile.

She stopped a few steps away, her body rigid. “I want you to leave.”

“I don’t think you do.”

“You’re trespassing.”

I pulled out a plastic lawn chair and sat. Then I took my time making sure the two halves of my overcoat fell just so. I adjusted my cuffs, tucking my beaded wood bracelet under the fabric. Making sure the two stainless steel beads rested against the inside of my wrist. I sat back and propped one ankle on the opposite knee. When I was done with all of this, I stretched an arm along the chair's back and met her gaze.

She looked like she wanted to cut my heart out with a spoon.

"I'll leave," I said.

"Good."

"As soon as you tell me you don't want me."

"I don't want you."

I tilted my head. "Now who's lying?"

She opened her mouth, but I cut her off.

"You want me." I dipped my gaze to the juncture of her thighs. "I bet if I ran my hand up that skirt, I'd find you hot and wet."

Her expression didn't change, and she didn't say anything.

But the pulse fluttering in her neck gave her away. So did her hard nipples poking through her shirt.

I put both feet on the floor and leaned forward, my hands clasped between my spread legs. "You were soaked for me last time, remember? Like hot silk on my fingers."

She lifted her chin. “I don’t remember.”

“Yeah, you do,” I said, and I rubbed my fingertips together slowly. Deliberately.

“You’re an arrogant bastard, Chase.”

“I’ll own up to the first one, but the second is inaccurate. My parents were very much married when I was born.” Although, they didn’t stay that way for long. Fortunately, they divided their assets amicably and went their separate ways without much angst. Even more fortunate, those assets included two sons. Like the gentleman he was, my father gave my mother first pick. She lived in the South of France with my brother and her third husband, and every year I got a beautiful handmade Christmas card signed by her assistant.

Victoria drew herself up. “I don’t care why you’re visiting your stupid hotel. I asked why you’re here.” She jabbed a finger toward the floor.

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She was so close I could have reached out and pulled her onto my lap. Just one quick lunge, and I could have taken her in my arms and kissed her until she forgot to be angry and remembered how good we were together. They say your first time is always a disappointment. That sex gets better with experience.

They didn't know what they were talking about.

No one and nothing had ever been better than Victoria. We should have fumbled the whole thing, a couple of virgins with more hormones than sense. But we moved together like we had a fucking choreographer directing us. The memory of it—of her—was seared into my brain and etched across my skin.

Victoria held my gaze. Judging from the way her eyes had darkened, the memory was just as strong for her.

I stood. "We started something, you and I."

She took a step back.

"I came to finish it."

Her breath caught, and desire flickered in her eyes. But then her forehead wrinkled. "Oh really? You think it's that easy? That I'm that easy?"

I took another step forward. "I think I gave you the best sex of your life and no one else has ever come close to satisfying you. And, yeah, I think you're plenty easy when it comes to me."

She gave an angry gasp and moved backward. “You give yourself too much credit,” she said hotly. “We fucked once.”

I kept going forward, slowly gaining on her. “But you can’t stop thinking about it. I think you’d do just about anything to feel my dick inside you again.”

Her eyes flashed. “Fuck you, Valenti.”

I had her almost to the door. “As I said, we’re getting to that.”

She whirled and went for the knob.

I slapped a palm against the cheap wood.

She spun back around, all that mahogany hair flying. Her cheeks were flushed, and her breaths came in short little rasps that made lust sear my veins. “I hate you,” she hissed.

“Maybe. But your nipples are so hard they’re in danger of ripping through your shirt. The mere sight of me is making you wet, and I like knowing that pussy of yours is trained to respond to me.”

Her hand flew.

I caught her wrist and yanked it down, pinning it against the door.

“Let me go!”

I captured her other wrist and pinned that one, too. “Not yet.”

Her breasts heaved, the creamy mounds trembling under my gaze.

My dick went hard as iron.

We were so close, my breath stirred the fine hairs at her temples. “Two rules. Never swing at me unless you can knock me out. You get a pass this time because you didn’t know any better. Next time, there’ll be consequences.”

If looks could kill, I would have turned to stone on the spot. “There won’t be a next time, asshole.”

“That brings me to rule number two.”

“I don’t care about your stupid fucking rules!”

I released one of her wrists and cupped a firm breast, making sure my thumb rested over her taut nipple.

She shuddered, her eyes darkening to sapphire as they went heavy-lidded.

Thumb pressing firmly against the taut peak, I murmured, “Rule number two, and it’s multiple choice, so pay attention. Tell me to leave again, and I’ll go. Say nothing, and I stay and we fuck on that table over there.”

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She hesitated, her heart thundering under my hand.

I moved my thumb in a slow, tight circle. “Tell me to leave,” I dared her.

Pain flashed in her gaze. Her voice went quiet, as if it hurt to say her next words.
“You left me first.”

“I had my reasons, if you want to hear them.”

“I don’t.”

“Liar,” I whispered.

Her nostrils flared.

I pressed my hips against hers, letting her feel the full length of my cock. “Decision time, Vicky. What’s it going to be?”

Victoria

I struggled to keep my wits about me as Chase pressed his hips against mine, his shaft as hard and unforgiving as the door at my back. He was arrogant—and a liar—but he wasn't exaggerating about his size. I'd had nothing to compare it to at eighteen, but experience since then had taught me he was in a league of his own.

And the jerk knew it, because he leaned in and put his lips next to my ear. "You know you've missed this." He kept up his circuit around my nipple as he spoke, his voice like gravel and his breaths coming faster and heavier. "You missed how good I make you feel. How much you love having my hands on you."

My eyes wanted to slide shut, and a moan rose in my throat. I couldn't even contradict him.

Because I did miss his touch.

And I loved his hands on me. Memories rushed back. Chase was built like a linebacker, and he was well-proportioned everywhere. His dick nudged between my legs, reminding me there were just a few layers of fabric separating us. His big body emanated heat, and his delicious scent swirled around me.

But we had serious, serious problems.

Like the past seven years.

Like him taking my virginity and then falling off the face of the earth.

Like the fact that his family had ruined mine.

Anger surged up, threatening to choke me. He had a lot of fucking nerve showing up at the lodge.

And yet...

His wicked thumb circled my nipple, sending lightning bolts of desire shooting through me. My knees loosened, and heat gathered between my legs.

He was right about that, too. I was soaked for him. My head knew I should be furious, but my body clearly wasn't on board with that plan.

I held my palms flat against the door so I wouldn't reach for him, even though I longed to tangle my fingers in his thick hair. There were too many unanswered questions between us.

I needed to think.

"Don't think," he growled. Then his teeth grazed my earlobe.

The moan I'd been holding back escaped.

He pinched my nipple, making me jerk. He talked in my ear, his breath tickling my neck. "Five seconds. Tell me to leave or we're picking up where we left off, and you're going to get every single inch of what I have to give you."

I shouldn't.

"Five," he rasped in my ear, and his stubble scraped my cheek, sending shivers coursing down my spine. I closed my eyes as my heart threatened to pound from my

chest.

We shouldn't.

“Four.”

Blood rushed in my ears. This is a big mistake.

“Three.”

So why didn't it feel like one?

“Two.” He slid his hands to my hips, his palms so hot they seemed to brand me through my shirt.

My eyes flew open.

And met Chase's narrowed, burning ones.

“One.” He scooped me up with two big hands on my ass, then strode to the table and deposited me none too gently on the edge. The old wood creaked as he yanked up my skirt and shoved my thighs apart. My heels dangled in the air, and my skirt bunched around my waist.

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“Wait,” I said, stopping him with a flat palm on his chest. “I have a rule, too. You wear a condom or this doesn’t happen. For all I know, you spent the past seven years fucking your way through the Ivy League.”

In response, he shrugged out of his coat and let it drop to the floor. Then he stepped between my legs and pressed a firm hand against the crotch of my panties.

I gasped, my clit throbbing. Quickly, I put my hands behind me to support my weight.

“You’ve always been bossy,” he said, satisfaction in his eyes. He looked down as he stroked his fingers over the fabric covering my sex. “Cream-colored lace. I like it.”

I followed his gaze, and the sight of his big hand petting me made a fresh wave of desire roll straight to my pussy. Almost unconsciously, I spread my thighs wider.

He chuckled. Then he shoved the lace aside, baring me to his gaze. Any humor in his expression disappeared, replaced with something hard and primal.

My arousal ratcheted higher.

He lifted glittering green eyes to mine. “Smooth as silk. I like that, too.” Without preamble, he pushed two fingers inside me, making me suck in a breath. I leaned heavily on my palms as desire rocked me and my sex clenched around him. With his coat off, it was easy to see his custom suit fit him like a glove, the dark material hugging his thick biceps. Something about the sight of his matte silver cuff link brushing my inner thigh made fresh heat blast through me.

“Jesus,” he muttered. He pumped in and out, drawing wet sounds from between my legs. “I was right. You’ve soaked your panties, haven’t you, Vicky?”

“Victoria,” I gritted, goosebumps rising on my skin. “I hate that stupid nickname.”

He plunged deeper, forcing another gasp from me. “I know. But it makes you angry, and you’re sexy as hell when you’re angry. Remember how mad you got when I ate your ice cream?” He slid in and out, stroking me from the inside, angling his hand so he brushed my sensitive clit.

God. His hand felt so good, and it had been so freaking long since I felt anything remotely good. My hips rocked, thrusting up to meet his fingers. I was so keyed up, I could only nod.

He kept up his pumping, using his other hand to undo the buttons on my shirt. “We were at that little roadside place outside of town. You went to get a glass of water, and I finished your sundae.”

“Are you going to reminisce, Valenti, or are you going to use that huge cock you love bragging about?”

He pulled his fingers from my sex and yanked my panties down my legs, bending as he maneuvered them off my ankles. As he straightened, he stuffed the scrap of lace in his pocket. “I’m hanging onto these.”

“Valen—”

He pushed my thighs wide and flung open my shirt, then tugged my bra straps off my shoulders. The cups went too, and my breasts popped out, my nipples a lurid pink. I was totally exposed now, my legs sprawled apart and my tits perched on my bra’s underwire like it was a shelf.

He cupped my breasts and pushed them up, thumbing my aching nipples. “Now, these are a pair of beauties,” he said, voice guttural. He pinched my nipples and tugged, forcing me to sit up to avoid discomfort. “Do you know how many times I’ve jerked off thinking about these? Tits as white as the cream in your bare pussy, with pink gumbdrop nipples I can still fucking taste in my mouth.”

The heated words hit me like a shot of raw, unfiltered lust. Shivers danced over my skin, and a restless ache throbbed between my legs. I was so on edge, I thought I might come just from his fingers pinching my nipples—something I didn’t think was possible.

He bent and sucked one into his mouth, his tongue flicking over the hard point.

I writhed, my ass nearly coming off the table as electric sparks shot through my breasts, lighting up every nerve ending. My hands found their way into his hair, my fingers clenching in the soft waves. His blond head bent over my chest, and his tongue teased all around my flesh, suckling me like a starving man who just stumbled upon a feast.

The table creaked. Then it rocked, and I realized I was thrusting against him, my pussy bumping over his dick. He switched to the other nipple and gave it the same treatment, his hot mouth sucking me over and over again.

“Chase...Chase...” I said his name in gasps and whimpers, desire coiling tighter and tighter in my core. My clit ached with need, and I ground harder against his cock, desperate for friction.

Abruptly, he lifted his head. In a voice almost too low to hear, he muttered, “I can’t get inside you fast enough.”

I held my breath as he stepped back, unzipped, and took out his cock.

Lord have mercy. He was even bigger than I remembered. His erection stuck out from his hips like an arrow, with thick veins running over the smooth shaft. A bead of moisture clung to the slit in the swollen head.

Gaze on mine, he gripped himself in one hand while he used the other to pull out his wallet and withdraw a condom one-handed. He flung the wallet to the table, where it landed with a soft thwack, then he ripped the condom open with his teeth and rolled it onto his cock.

All without ever breaking eye contact.

His fist gripped his length, the shaft so thick his fingers didn't meet his thumb.

Anticipation thrummed through me. My sex clenched, eager for him. Cool air caressed my nipples, which were damp from his mouth. I could imagine how shameless I looked—perched on a table with my tits out and my legs spread in blatant invitation. I'd have to care about that later. Right now, I just needed him to fuck me.

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He lowered his gaze to my pussy. “Christ, I can see you getting wetter for me.”

“Hurry up.”

Amusement danced in his eyes as he stepped closer and guided himself to my entrance. As he pushed inside, however, the humor fled and his jaw tightened.

“So fucking tight, Victoria. So wet and tight.”

My opening burned, and I wriggled my ass to relieve the twinge of pain as I struggled to accommodate him. God, he could split me in two if he wasn’t careful.

He gripped my thigh. “Easy. You keep moving like that, and I won’t be able to hold back.”

Sweat broke out on my forehead. “Keep going.”

“Not yet.” He snaked a hand between our bodies and found my clit.

Immediately, a buttery wave of pleasure rolled through my sex. I bit my lower lip to keep myself from groaning.

“You like that?” he asked, his green eyes hooded. “You like me playing with your pussy until you’re stretched enough to take me? Open up a bit wider, baby. Let’s give that greedy little clit of yours what it wants.”

The groan escaped. I leaned hard on my hands, my body threatening to go limp.

His fingers played over my clit, slipping easily around the throbbing center of my desire. He rubbed in tight, fast circles, teasing around the edge and then dipping down to my lips flared around his shaft. Unable to stop, I thrust my hips up, humping his cock. Sucking him in deeper.

He clenched his jaw and pushed forward, his dangling belt buckle clinking against the table. All the while, he rubbed my clit, his fingertips working a dark magic that stoked the ache between my legs higher and higher. His cock slid inside, the thick length filling me inch by inch, feeding me a delicious fullness that stuffed every inch of my pussy. As his fingers stroked and teased, the twinges faded, replaced with restless pleasure.

My chest heaved, my breasts trembling up and down. A flush bloomed across my skin.

“Oh God,” I whispered.

He rubbed harder. “That’s it... Almost in.” He groaned. “Jesus, you’re tight as fuck. Like a fist squeezing every inch of my cock.” His gaze locked on my tits, and he let out a low sound of approval as he thrust forward, seating himself to the hilt.

Warm. Thick. Full.

My brain couldn’t form complete sentences anymore. I was reduced to simple words.

He moved his hand from my sex to grip my hips, but it didn’t matter. He was already rocking his hips against mine, his shaft gliding over my clit. Instinct took over, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, hooking my heels behind his back.

“Fuck, yes,” he grunted, grabbing one of my thighs and tucking it higher on his waist. He held it there as he set a rhythm, pumping his cock in and out of me.

I rocked with him, squirming on the table as the sounds of my wetness and our short, panting breaths filled the air.

The table creaked and groaned, the legs scraping against the floorboards. My breasts bounced up and down as he thrust faster and deeper.

“Take it,” he growled. “Giving...you...every...inch.”

I sensed the moment he let go, all his restraints snapping as he dug his fingers into my thigh, holding me still. He jerked his hips like a piston, driving his dick in and out of me, his balls slapping my ass.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I chanted, my voice climbing along with my approaching orgasm. It was so close I could almost grab it. Then I did, tripping over the edge and plunging into everything and nothing at once. Pure bliss spiraled through me, and my mind blanked as I collapsed against his neck and gave in, helpless to do anything but ride it out.

A second later, Chase gave a hoarse shout and buried himself deep, his cock twitching as he came in a hot jet I could feel through the condom.

For a long moment, I was too weak to move. I leaned against him, my breaths sawing in and out of my chest as sweat dried on my skin. My breasts pressed against his chest, and his heart thundered against mine. Slowly, awareness trickled back in.

I just had sex with Chase Valenti.

Chase Valenti, my family’s enemy, whose dick was still very much inside me.

Fuck.

There was a loud buzz, followed by the table vibrating under my ass.

I pushed at Chase's shoulders. He lifted his head. We both looked at my phone, which was lit up with Nana's face and number.

Double fuck.

Chase

Victoria shoved me hard enough to send me stumbling back.

“Don’t touch it!” she snapped, scrambling off the table and blocking the phone like I might dive for it. She straightened her clothes with jerky movements, panic flashing across her face. When I peeled off the condom, she flushed and snatched the phone from the table.

“Hey, Nana.”

“Hi, honey!” An older woman’s cheery voice blasted through the speaker. Victoria winced and pulled the phone away from her ear.

I tucked my cock back into my pants and zipped.

She scowled.

“Victoria?”

“I’m here!”

“Is everything okay? You sound like you’re breathing heavy.”

A smirk pulled at my mouth.

Victoria shot me a glare and made a “zip it” gesture across her lips. She spoke into

the phone like she might a walkie talkie. “Everything is fine, Nana. I was just doing some cleaning.”

“Which cabin?”

“Um, just a couple here and there.” Victoria watched me through suspicious eyes as I walked into the kitchenette and tossed the condom in the trash. I turned on the taps at the sink, which earned me another glare.

Through the phone, her grandmother’s voice sharpened. “You’re not throwing anything out, are you?”

“Of course not.” Victoria gave me a pointed look. “I promise the only thing I’m tossing out of this cabin is garbage.”

I let the smirk grow as I washed my hands. Then, eyes locked on hers, I scooped water into my palm and drank, lapping up the water with my tongue.

The anger in her gaze faltered. She swallowed and faced away.

Her grandmother made a disapproving sound. “I worry about you, honey. You work too hard.”

“It’s okay, Nana.”

“No, it’s not. And those damn Valentis are responsible.”

I moved back into the living room. Victoria stood in the middle of it, a shaft of winter sunlight setting her hair aflame.

My dick stirred. Christ, I was ready for a second round with her.

But from the look on her face, she'd just remembered our families were at war.

There was also the issue of me leaving Virginville without telling her.

Her hand tightened around the phone. "Don't worry, Nana. I won't let anything happen to the lodge."

"Oh, Victoria, you put my old mind at ease. But no more cleaning tonight. It's Valentine's Day. You should be out with a nice young man. Someone who will buy you dinner and treat you right."

Victoria's stare bored into mine. "Unfortunately, men like that are hard to find."

Her grandmother's tone turned ironic. "It's always been that way, dear. Women have been settling for centuries." There was a shuffling sound over the line, then she said, "Oh, how wonderful, the activity coordinator is here. A bunch of us are having a Valentine's Day dance." She chuckled. "Keep your fingers crossed we don't trip each other with our walkers."

Victoria's expression softened. "Enjoy your evening, Nana."

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“I love you, sweetheart.”

“Love you, too.” Victoria ended the call.

I waited. Always let the enemy make the first move.

Another lesson from my father.

She lowered the phone, her jaw set in a stubborn expression. “You should go.”

“After what just happened?” I gave the table a meaningful glance. “I think we should talk.”

“You heard my grandmother. I have a lot of work to do.”

“We both know that’s a lie. There’s nothing here to clean.”

“Because of you!” She jabbed the phone at me. “Your family ruined mine. You own most of our debts, or do you claim not to know anything about that?”

“I know about it.” Although, I hadn’t always.

She flashed a bitter smile. “Is that why you’re here? Daddy put you in charge of collections?”

“No.”

“So you’re going to forgive the debt?” Something dangerous entered her gaze. “Did I just settle what I owe, or do you expect more reunions?”

A little voice in the back of my head warned me to be very careful. There were about ten feet of dusty floorboards between us, and every inch felt covered with landmines. One misstep and I could blow everything up.

“That’s not what this is about,” I said. “The debt has nothing to do with what’s between us.”

“Yeah, it kinda does, Chase. We spent three months together.” Her voice rose. “We slept together, and you told me it was amazing and that you couldn’t live without me. Then you fucking left, and I didn’t hear from you for seven years. Now you just show up and expect, what?” She tilted her head. “What do you want from me, aside from the obvious? Sorry, but I don’t really have time to play your games right now. As you can see, I’m trying to make sure my family’s business doesn’t get bulldozed so we can give your billionaire father some pocket change!” She nearly shouted the last, her voice echoing around the barren room.

Her anger was a palpable thing, but the hurt underneath it was stronger. And she was right. Her family’s debt and my departure were intertwined—more so than she knew.

There was no sense feeding information to her piecemeal. She deserved the truth. All of it.

“I’m going to talk,” I said, “and I want you to listen. Don’t say anything. Just hear me out.”

She frowned but stayed silent.

“First, you should know I didn’t want to leave. My father...” I cleared my throat.

“I’ve never lived up to my father’s expectations. Our relationship has always been volatile. We never lived in the same place for long. Always, we were on the move, building the next hotel and then the next and the next. He didn’t much care what I did or where I went, as long as I kept up with school. I never actually went to school. I had nannies...and tutors when I got older.”

Her frown deepened. God, I was rambling.

I realized I was fiddling with my bracelet and stopped.

Wrap it up, Valenti. Before she throws you out.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets. “Those three months in Virginville were the best of my life. I meant every word I said that final night, Victoria. I couldn’t live without you then, and I can’t now. I left because my father found out I planned to stay. He must have had us followed.”

“Followed?” Confusion filled her face.

“Yeah. When you have the kind of money we do, kidnapping becomes an issue.” Christ, I probably sounded like a lunatic. I sucked in a breath. “It doesn’t matter how he found out. But he did, and he put me on a flight to England the next morning. And he made sure I knew I’d be cut off from the family forever if I came back. No second chances.”

Silence stretched between us. Her expression was inscrutable, and I could almost see the gears turning in her head as she processed my words.

Finally, she said, “You were eighteen then, I get it. You chose your family and the Valenti money. But you’ve had seven years to make your own choices—”

“And I’m making them.”

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“You were technically an adult when we met. You could have done this years ago.”

“I was a teenager, Victoria. Cut me a little slack.”

Her free hand flew to her hip. “Seven years of silence, Chase? You’re telling me Oxford didn’t have any breaks? What about Yale? No Christmas vacations?”

I gritted my teeth. “My father controls every penny I have. The money is in a spendthrift trust until he dies. It’s hard to fly overseas when you’re broke. Besides, he would have cut me off in a heartbeat if he knew I came here.”

She narrowed her eyes, her glare both angry and skeptical. “You couldn’t have picked up the phone? What about email? Or does he control that, too.”

“It’s complicated,” I bit out, my own anger stirring.

“Apparently.”

My anger climbed higher. “Your sarcasm isn’t helping.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know I was supposed to help you explain yourself. Especially when your explanation doesn’t make any sense!”

The back of my neck heated. If we kept going like this, we were going to end up arguing. Hell, we were already arguing.

I swallowed. “I didn’t come here to fight. My father’s threats kept me away in the

past. Not anymore.”

“What changed?”

“He had a stroke. A series of them, actually.”

She looked taken aback. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m not.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “Don’t say that, Chase. He’s your father. Your family.”

“Family’s overrated.”

“No.” She gave her head a vigorous shake. “It’s not. I lost my parents when I was five years old. I grew up in a motor lodge. Yes, there was love, but I would give anything to have them back.” She gestured around the ruined room. “Why do you think I’m fighting so hard to save this place? It’s all I have left of them.”

“I’m sorry about that. I know what the lodge means to you. It means something to me, too, actually.” That summer with her family was the happiest of my life.

Her lips parted. “So you’re forgiving the debt? I mean, now that you’re in charge, you—”

“I’m not in charge. Not yet.”

The frown came back. “What do you mean?”

I almost said “it’s complicated” again, but thought better of it. “My father is physically incapacitated, but his mind is still very much intact. He knows he needs

me to run the show. Otherwise, business operations fall to his lawyers. But I'm still bound by the trust. I can't spend any money unless he approves it."

"So you can't forgive the debt?"

"Not right now."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Victoria." I stepped toward her.

"No!" Her mouth trembled, and she turned away.

"We'll work something out."

She swung back around. "Like what? More sex on the table?"

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“You know that’s not what I meant.”

A tear streaked down her face. She swiped it away. “I want you to go.”

“Vic—”

“Leave!” She flung a hand toward the door. “God, Chase, how many times have I said no today? Yet you don’t seem to hear it.”

My temper flared. It was my turn to narrow my eyes. “I hope you’re not suggesting you didn’t want what passed between us. Because I still have your wet panties in my pocket to prove you did.”

“Get out.”

My heart thudded hard in my chest. Part of me wanted to cross the short distance between us and snatch her into my arms. And, yeah, take her right back to the table and work out our differences with a bout of angry sex.

But tension arced between us like a hot wire. If it snapped, we could both get burned.

I walked past her and snatched my coat from the floor, then swung it around my shoulders as I went to the door.

She pressed her lips together, her posture rigid.

I put my hand on the knob. “I’m going for now, Victoria. But this isn’t over between

us. Not by a long shot.”

No response. Just a lift of her chin.

“I’ll be back,” I told her. “And you’ll be waiting, because you don’t want it to be over, either.”

Her eyes hardened.

I smiled. “Wear black panties next time.”

I left, her angry gasp on my heels as I shut the door behind me.

Victoria

The second Chase's footsteps faded, I went to the chair and sat, then rested my elbows on the table and put my face in my hands.

What have I done?

I slept with Chase Valenti. How could I have been so stupid? They said men thought with their dicks instead of their brains. Well, now I knew how that felt.

Really amazing, actually. God, I was still aching from him. The scary thing was, for a minute there, lust had flared in his gaze, and I could have sworn he was thinking about hustling me over to the table again.

Even scarier, I wasn't sure I would have stopped him.

I lifted my head. As I did, the stack of bills on the table shifted and slid to the floor, envelopes scattering.

My temper flared. He couldn't expect me to buy his story about his father stopping him from contacting me. Maybe in the beginning, but for all seven years? His so-called "volatile" relationship with his father was clearly just code for "daddy threatened to cut off my bank account." His excuse for skipping town was about as believable as his assertion that he lacked the authority to forgive the lodge's debts. Hell, the suit he wore would probably put a sizable dent in it. What kind of idiot did he think I was?

One who fucks him after not seeing him for seven years.

I groaned and buried my face in my hands again.

Chase spent the past seven years collecting fancy degrees and traipsing around England. I spent it pinching every cent so I could get through school and stay current on the lodge's bills. I was always, always treading water.

Now he'd come along and dangled a life preserver in my face, only to snatch it away.

Worse, I needed that housekeeping job at the Valenti Hotel. My salary barely covered my living expenses and the lodge's bills. And my boss was pushing me to sit for the CPA exam, which was just more money out the window. The only solution was a second job. But I couldn't work at the hotel with Chase running it.

Could I?

I sat up.

Why couldn't I?

If he wanted his damn money so bad, I could make sure he got it. There was nowhere else to work. He'd backed me into a corner, even if he didn't know it yet.

The thing was, animals were at their most dangerous when they were cornered. Every small-town country girl knew that.

Chase wanted me. He made that clear. "I'll be back," he'd said. "And you'll be waiting."

Such breathtaking arrogance. He said it because he believed I was stuck at the

lodge—right where he left me seven years ago. He could come and go as he pleased, dropping in and out of my life when it suited him. The most infuriating part of it was he was right. I was broke and trapped and beholden to my family. No wonder he assumed I'd be waiting for him.

And now he thought he could whisper a couple hot words in my ear and get sex on demand. "We'll work something out."

Fuck. Him.

I stood and shoved my skirt down, wincing a little at the twinge between my legs.

Another reason to despise him. He'd looked cool and unruffled after our...reunion. Meanwhile, I felt like I'd wandered into a tornado. My shirt was buttoned up wrong, and my skirt was creased where he hiked it above my waist.

And the bastard had my panties.

I stepped over the scattered envelopes and headed to the bathroom, a plan forming in my head. I was going to scrub every inch of Chase Valenti off my skin. Then I was going to start my new job. If I happened to cross paths with the owner, well, he could just fire me. I might lose the lodge, but I'd also make sure every newspaper in the state ran a story about the heir to the Valenti Hotel empire kicking Nana out of her home.

As I slammed into the bathroom, I caught my reflection in the mirror. My cheeks were flushed, and my hair lay in tousled waves over my shoulders. I looked like I'd been doing...exactly what I'd been doing.

It wouldn't happen again. From now on, the only use I had for Chase Valenti was cashing the paychecks he signed.

Victoria

Four hours later, I was starting to think Katherine was right to call housekeeping back-breaking work. I spent my teenage years cleaning the cabins at the lodge, but that was nothing compared to the drudgery of maid service at the Valenti Hotel. The manager—a frazzled-looking woman in a blue pantsuit, heavy makeup, and fake pearls—had wasted no time showing me the laundry room and cleaning supplies.

“You’re the only housekeeper on the evening shift,” she’d explained, “so you’ll have to take care of anything the daytime staff missed. We have sixteen dirty rooms at the moment, so I’ll need you to flip those.”

Panic had shot through me. “Sixteen rooms? It’s an eight-hour shift.”

“I know,” she said, her voice muffled as she pulled clean linens from a shelf and piled them on a rolling cart. She straightened and blew a stray hair from her bottle-blond French twist. “Normally, I’d say just wipe down what you can and skip the vacuuming, but we had something of a surprise this afternoon.”

My heart rate sped up. I’d known this was coming, but hearing it out loud made it more real.

She looked up and down the hall, then lowered her voice. “We have a VIP staying with us a few days. Someone from corporate.” She said the last in the hushed tones normally reserved for celebrities and heads of state.

I raised my eyebrows. “Corporate. Wow.”

“Exactly.” Her heavily mascaraed eyes widened, and she mouthed “very big deal.”

“Sounds like it.” For a wild moment, I considered telling her I recently had sex on a table with the very same VIP, but I thought better of it. Just my luck, she’d clutch her pearls and faint right in front of the ice machine.

Instead, I’d helped her stock the cleaning cart with fresh towels and tiny wrapped soaps and made my way down a long hallway of dirty rooms. The hotel was more booked than usual due to Valentine’s Day, and I tossed out several wine bottles and heart-shaped boxes of half-eaten chocolate. I gritted my teeth as I stripped beds and emptied garbage cans. As if that wasn’t bad enough, an instrumental version of Foreigner’s “I Want to Know What Love Is” drifted from a speaker in the hallway ceiling.

But at least I didn’t have to worry about running into Chase. According to the manager, Mister Very Big Deal was staying in one of the two top-floor suites. My rooms were on the second floor, with a romantic view of the parking lot.

I shouldered my way out of a room and dumped an armful of dirty towels in the soiled laundry bin. Overhead, the music switched to a soft rock rendition of Bon Jovi’s “Shot Through the Heart.”

Seriously? Muttering under my breath, I closed the door behind me and pushed the cleaning cart to the next room on my list. When I got there, a beige-colored “do not disturb” tag hung from the handle.

Which couldn’t be right.

I double-checked the list. Yep, it was right there. Room 287. The guest had checked out at 4PM. The manager had written it herself.

Just to be safe, I rapped my knuckles on the door and called out, “Housekeeping!”

Silence.

I knocked and called out again, hoping no one from the other rooms stuck their head in the hall to complain about the noise.

When I got no response, I grabbed a bottle of cleaner and stepped through the door.

And came face to face with Chase Valenti in nothing but a white towel.

The heavy door slammed behind me—an exclamation point on my shock.

“Jesus!” My whole body went rigid, my gaze locked on Chase’s bare chest.

His wet chest, because he’d clearly just stepped out of the shower. His blond hair was tousled, as if he’d rubbed it dry. Beads of moisture dotted his upper body, from his well-defined pecs to his ripped abs. The towel was slung low on his hips, exposing a happy trail of dark blond hair that led to a sizable bulge.

And I knew just how sizable it was.

“Victoria?” For a second, he looked speechless, his handsome features blank with shock. Then he frowned. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I work here.”

“Work... What are you talking about?”

I lifted the bottle of cleaner. “Housekeeping.”

He stared at the bottle, and his gaze narrowed. “Who hired you?”

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“The hotel manager.” I glanced around the ordinary room. “She said you were staying in a suite.”

“That’s because I told her as much.” He put his hands on his waist. “If you want to know how the average guest is treated, you have to sleep in a regular room.”

“Very noble of you.”

“This is ridiculous, Victoria. You can’t work here.”

I concentrated on keeping my gaze north of his hips. “I don’t have a lot of options. In case you haven’t noticed, Virginville isn’t exactly a thriving metropolis. Oh, and there’s the little problem of my family owing yours almost two hundred thousand dollars.”

“I said we’d figure something out. You have options. Maybe partition the land and sell a dozen acres—”

“I’m not selling the land!” God, was that why he showed up at the lodge today? To fuck me into agreeing to sell my property? Rage fired in my veins like someone lighting a pilot switch.

“Keep your voice down.” He said it in an infuriatingly masculine way—the kind of tone men used when a woman disagreed with them and they wanted to pretend she was crazy instead of owning up to being wrong.

“Go to hell, Valenti!”

A muscle leapt in his jaw, and he muttered, “Trust me, I’m already there.”

I drew myself up. “Well, then, let me make things easier for you. This room is occupied, so I can’t clean it, anyway. I’m going to finish my shift. You can finish”—I ran a dismissive look down his body—“whatever it is you were doing.” Before he could respond, I turned on my heel and went for the door.

A hand caught my arm and spun me around.

“Hey!” I shoved away from him, the bottle of cleaner dropping to the carpet. We stood less than a foot apart, our gazes clashing. The scent of soap and aftershave reached me. Dammit, why did he always smell so good?

He sucked his lower lip into his mouth for a brief second, his eyes flicking down my body. “What color panties are you wearing?”

Immediately, a rush of desire swept me.

Which just pissed me off more. Did he honestly think he could turn this into another tabletop session?

I drew on the anger. “Fuck off, Valenti.”

“I’d rather fuck you.” His green eyes gleamed. “Are they black, Vicky? If I yank those jeans down, am I going to find the black panties I ordered you to wear?”

“You don’t order me to do anything,” I shot back, but the words came out weak and sort of breathless.

“Yes, I do. You work for me, remember?” He smiled, clearly delighted with this turn of events. “If you want to keep your job, you have to do what I say.”

My heart raced. “I have rooms to clean.”

“Answer my question.”

“Do the Valenti Hotels have a good sexual harassment policy? I don’t remember seeing one when I filled out my paperwork.”

“Tell you what.” He tightened his towel, and my heart rate kicked up a notch. “Show me what you’re wearing. If they’re not black, you leave. If they’re black, you stay. If they’re black and wet, you stay and I lick your pussy until you scream my name.”

Jesus.

I stood rooted to the floral hotel carpet, the steam from his shower swirling around my head. I should turn around and walk away. Walk right out the door and never look back.

But my feet weren’t cooperating. And my sex throbbed, more than willing to go along with his games.

He closed the distance between us, giving me an up-close-and-personal view of his damp chest. His tan skin glowed, and little drops of moisture clung to his muscles. For a wild moment, I imagined myself dipping my head and catching one on my tongue.

Smiling, he reached out and wound a stray lock of my hair around his finger. “Well, Vicky,” he murmured, “which is it? Door A, B, or C?”

Suddenly, the air seemed charged—like electricity gathering before a storm.

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He tugged gently, pulling me forward. “I’ll tell you what I think it is.”

I made a strangled sound in my throat.

His chest loomed closer, and then his lips brushed mine as he slid both hands into my hair. Against my mouth, he whispered, “I think it’s C.”

Without conscious thought, I opened my mouth under his.

It wasn’t a tender kiss.

His fingers tightened in my hair, holding my head steady while he stroked his tongue inside, plunging and sucking. He kissed like he was starved for oxygen and I had an endless supply, his mouth hot and wet and demanding.

I clutched at his shoulders, reveling in the feel of his hard muscles rippling and bunching under my hands. His skin was smooth and hot, as if a fire burned under the surface. His chest brushed my breasts, dragging across my stiffened nipples, and I moaned into his mouth.

He made a low, masculine whimper in his throat—a plaintive sound that shot straight between my legs.

It wasn’t enough. I needed more.

Tongue tangling with his, I twined my arms around his neck, mashing my breasts against his chest. Raw desire shot through me, and I slid a hand down his neck to his

back.

And stopped.

The skin wasn't smooth. I swept my palm down. My hand bumped over what felt like...ridges.

He reared back, then thrust me away so hard I stumbled.

"Chase?" I frowned. "What's wrong with your—"

"Nothing." He shoved a hand through his tousled hair. Two spots of color stained his cheeks, and he looked defiant.

But also fearful.

Apprehension crept down my spine.

I licked my lips. "Turn around."

He didn't move.

"Turn around," I repeated.

Something flashed in his eyes—a look so fleeting I couldn't place it. He gripped the towel where one end was tucked into the fabric around his waist, his fingers clenched like he was hanging on for dear life. A beaded wood bracelet circled his wrist.

Still, he didn't move.

Fine.

I'd go to him.

I moved forward, going by inches. He stayed where he was, his shoulders stiff and his expression tense.

But he didn't try to stop me.

As I passed him, he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. Slowly, I rounded his shoulder and stepped behind him.

My breath caught. Nausea burned my throat.

His back was covered in scars.

Chase

I held my breath until my lungs burned.

Behind me, Victoria was silent.

I braced for the inevitable—for her to recoil in disgust or flee the room. I might not look at my back often, but I knew what she saw. Long, puffy scars started at my shoulders and ran all the way to my hips. A few snaked around my sides, but those were faint.

He had good aim, my father, and he was careful not to mark me where anyone could see.

The skin was a mottled mix of pink and white, and the crisscrossed lines were shiny where the belt had broken the skin and healed over. Most of the marks were laid out with methodical precision—strips that alternated directions, like highways intersecting on a flat stretch of land. But here and there, the pattern was marred by a line out of place.

Those were the thickest scars. Those were the times he lost control.

Silence hung over the room. Any minute, Victoria would voice her revulsion. I'd thought I prepared for it. That I was stronger now. That maybe by reminding her of our connection I could convince her I was a man worthy of her respect.

Such a stupid idea. I had no business forcing myself back into her life. She had

enough problems. I was the source of most of them. The best thing I could do was get dressed and get the hell out of Virginville.

Problem was, I didn't think I was strong enough to walk away from her. I needed her to do it first.

So I held my breath, willing her to do the right thing.

"Your father did this," she said quietly.

I turned. I didn't want my back to be the last thing she saw before she left.

Tears streaked her face.

I reached for her, then stopped myself. My throat thickened. "Don't cry."

"H-How long?" She swallowed, and more tears spilled down her cheeks. "How long did he do this, Chase? Why did he do this?"

Fuck it. I cupped her face in my hands and brushed the tears away with my thumbs. A big part of me wanted to say it didn't matter, or that she shouldn't worry about it. But I'd learned that lies could cause just as much pain as a belt. Tell them often enough, and they scar you on the inside.

"I don't remember when it started," I said. "I think I must have been young, because I don't remember a time when he didn't hit me."

Her mouth trembled, her blue eyes sheened with tears.

"Aw, sweetheart, stop this." I rubbed the moisture away.

She grasped my wrists. “I’m s-sorry. I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t want you to.”

“But...why? You could have told me. I could have helped. I could have—”

“I was embarrassed, Victoria.” Old disgust welled up, and I dropped my hands and stepped back. “An eighteen-year-old man getting beaten by his father? You wouldn’t have had anything to do with me.”

“He did this when you were eighteen?” Her eyes widened. “You never swam with us. You never took your shirt off.”

I pushed a hand through my hair and took a deep breath. “He did it until I was twenty-two. The last time it happened was the day I came back to the States. He found out I’d been seeing a therapist, and he lost it.”

Her gaze went to my hands, and I realized I was fingering the wooden beads on my wrist.

Ah, well. Better to put everything out there, now that I was finally spilling my guts.

I lifted my hand. “This is what triggered him that day. It’s a mindfulness bracelet, at least according to the shrink I saw in England. It’s supposed to help you be in the moment instead of worrying about the past or feeling anxious about the future. I’m not really sure why it works, but it does, and that’s good enough for me.”

“What are the silver beads?” she asked, her voice soft.

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“Replacements.” I lowered my arm. “My father equates emotion with weakness. He said if I wanted to wear a ‘charm bracelet,’ as he called it, I could see myself to the door. When I tried to leave, he...” I cleared my throat. “Things got physical. The bracelet broke.” Even as I said it, I recognized that I was rationalizing the abuse. It had taken my therapist a long time to help me understand the pattern. The bracelet didn’t just break. My father broke it.

“The beads aren’t silver,” I said. “They’re steel, which gets harder when you heat and hammer it.”

Victoria’s lips parted, but she stayed silent.

Which was just as well. After she heard the last of what I had to say, she probably wouldn’t speak to me again.

I dragged in a breath. “There’s something else you should know. The last time my father hit me, I hit back. One minute I was on the ground like usual, the next I was standing over him.”

Her brows pulled together. “Of course you hit back, Chase. Anyone would have.”

“You don’t understand. I liked hitting him. It felt good seeing him hurt. I felt good for having done it. And if I can do it once, what’s to stop me from doing it again? I have his genes.” I took another deep breath, and then said the part destined to slam the door shut on any future I had with her. “Even knowing I’m probably a monster in the making, I couldn’t bring myself to stay away from you. The best thing I could have done is leave you alone, and I couldn’t even do that. I tried. I gave it a go. I told

myself I'd come to Virginville, do my job, and go without bothering you. But I failed."

"I'm glad." She stepped forward and laid a hand against my cheek, and something fierce flashed in her eyes as she said, "You've said your part. Now listen to mine. You are not your father, Chase Valenti. You might share his blood, but you do not share his faults, you hear me?"

"I hear you," I murmured, my heart racing at her touch and the intensity in her gaze. Heat crept up my nape, and my cock stirred—an interesting reaction, given the weighty topic of our conversation.

Then again, it didn't take much for my cock to get hard around Victoria. Not when her mahogany hair was streaming over her shoulders and her firm tits pressed against her plain gray T-shirt.

"I hate what happened to you," she said. "I'm so grateful you got help. It takes a strong person to overcome what you have." A soft, sad smile touched her mouth, and she whispered, "A man of steel."

I rubbed a thumb across her bottom lip. "Don't cry. I can't bear it." Her breath fluttered over my fingers, her pink lips impossibly soft. Damn near irresistible. Like other lips of hers I wanted to kiss. I'd gotten a good look at her pussy stretched around my cock earlier, and I hadn't stopped thinking about running my tongue up and down her plump labia and pouting clit.

As if she read my thoughts, the emotion in her eyes shifted, the blue depths firing with unmistakable desire.

She touched the tip of her tongue to my thumb, making my dick go rock hard. Voice low, she said, "Then do something to make me happy."

It was all the invitation I needed. I backed her to the bed and took her down, already pulling at her shirt. The last of the evening light poured through the windows, turning the red highlights in her hair to flame. I made short work of her clothes, stopping only to admire her sleek body in nothing but a matching push-up bra and panties.

“Black,” I murmured, hooking a finger under the bit of lace around her hip. “It seems you follow my orders, after all.” I looked up long enough to catch her pursed lips before I nudged the fabric covering her pussy aside and slipped two fingers inside her.

Instantly, she arched her back and moaned, her sex clenching.

“Christ, you’re even wetter than before,” I said, pumping in and out. Savoring the way her pussy sucked at my hand. I pressed my thumb against her clit.

“Chase,” she gasped, throwing her head back and thrusting her tits toward the ceiling. She fisted the blankets at her sides, her body straining. Her breasts trembled above the black cups. Waning sunlight made her pale skin glow like it was lit from within.

Fucking gorgeous.

I pulled her panties off and tossed them aside, then spread her thighs wide.

And, swear to God, I almost lost it right there. She was pink and glistening and perfect, with slick, swollen lips coated in cream. I went straight for her clit, closing my mouth around the hard nub and sucking hard until her moans filled the air and her thighs trembled around my head.

I couldn’t get enough of her taste. Salt and candy. Heaven on my tongue. I hummed low in my throat as I suckled her, vibrating all around the hard point of her desire.

She gave a strangled cry, her thighs convulsing.

I gave her a final suck, then let my lips hover over her bare mound. “What next, Vicky? I’m yours to command.” I blew gently on her clit, and she shuddered, her breaths coming in rapid pants that made my balls ache with need. “Look at me and tell me what you want.”

She lifted her head, her eyes narrowed with unconcealed lust. “M-More. Please.”

I moved up her body and crushed my mouth to hers, sucking at her tongue the way I had her needy little clit. My towel had come loose, and I yanked it off. Still kissing her, I guided her hand to my shaft, letting her feel how hard I was for her.

She curled her fingers around it and squeezed, letting out a sexy squeal that made me even harder.

I moved my mouth to her jaw and whispered, “Do you want my mouth on your pussy again?”

“Yes,” she gasped.

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Nuzzling the skin under her ear, I slipped a bra strap off her shoulder and pushed a cup down, then palmed a warm, firm breast. “Do you want my tongue inside you?”

She writhed under me.

I smiled against her neck before lifting off her long enough to unhook her bra and pull it away. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

She lay under me, her round tits heaving. Pink nipples as hard as arrows thrust toward the ceiling.

Sexy as fuck.

Unable to resist, I covered her again and took one perfect tip into my mouth, swirling my tongue around the tight point. I smoothed my other hand down her flat belly to her sex, finding her damp pussy. I slipped between her folds and rubbed her clit.

She made another sharp squeal. Her hips lifted, seeking my hand.

I gave her nipple a soft bite, then moved down her body, trailing a line of kisses down her quivering belly. When I got to her pussy, I pushed her thighs open until they were flat against the bed. Then I parted her lips with my thumbs and gave her clit a single swipe of my tongue.

She jerked. “Yes!”

Abandoning her clit, I rubbed my cheek against her inner thigh, grazing her skin with

my stubble before turning my head and planting a soft kiss on her sensitive skin. Above me, she gasped and shuddered, squirming like she couldn't stand it. I did the same to her other thigh, then her mound, bringing my lips close to her clit without actually touching it. All the while, I rubbed my thumbs up and down her slick lips, teasing just under the hard, swollen nub. We did that for a minute, me kissing all around the place she wanted me to be, her jerking and wiggling as she tried to get me there.

"Chase," she growled in warning.

I gave a huff of laughter against her pussy. "Yes, ma'am," I said, then gave her clit a series of fast, hard rubs as I plunged my tongue into her core.

She lifted off the bed, the orgasm ripping through her like a crack of lightning. Her legs squeezed around my head as she shook.

I wrapped my arms around her thighs, holding her still while I stabbed my tongue in and out of her. She screamed and ground her pussy against my face.

Too fucking delicious.

I went back to her clit, sucking and nipping and pulling another release from her. Then another. Her salty-sweet taste filled my mouth, and I dipped down to her opening, pumping her with my tongue as I had with my cock earlier in the day.

When she couldn't take it anymore, she pushed weakly at my shoulders. "Chase... Chase, please."

But I wasn't done with her yet.

I rose and snatched my wallet from a desk in the corner, somehow managing to snag

a condom and make it back to the bed without tripping over her clothes. She watched through heavy-lidded eyes as I rolled it on, and she bit her lower lip as her gaze fixed on my bobbing shaft.

Then she licked her lips.

Game. Fucking. Over.

Gripping my cock, I settled between her legs and drove into her with a single thrust.

Euphoria. Heat seared my shaft from root to tip. My breath left my lungs on a harsh gasp. For a second, I saw stars. Then my hips moved of their own accord, and I drove in and out, slamming into her over and over.

She moved with me, lifting her hips to meet every thrust, her drenched pussy smacking as I plunged in and out. Our gasps mingled as our gazes locked, the wonder I felt reflected in her eyes. Pressure surged up my cock, and I let go, my thrusts becoming harder and wilder and more frenzied. Her tits bounced up and down, and her mouth opened on a soundless scream as she came again, a flush spreading over her chest.

“Fuck!” I growled, barreling toward my own release. My voice went so guttural my words were more grunts than speech. “So...fucking...tight.” I drove home with a final thrust, my mind blanking as I finished in a hot spurt that seemed to go on forever.

When I drifted back to earth, my head was buried in her neck. I touched my tongue to her skin, tasting salt. “You okay?” I asked quietly.

“Better than okay.”

I slipped out of her and left the bed long enough to get rid of the condom. When I returned, I rolled her into my arms and tucked her head under my chin. Even as sated as I was, I couldn't keep my hands off her, and I stroked lazy circles around her shoulder with my fingertips. "Well?"

She looked up. "Well, what?"

"Did I make you happy?"

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A smile lit her eyes. She kissed my jaw before snuggling against my chest. “Very happy,” she murmured.

“Just so you know, I can do that again in about twenty minutes.”

Her laugh vibrated my ribs. “I’m not sure I can. I’ve been up since six.”

“Your job?”

“Mmhmm. We’re coming up on tax season, so things are starting to get nuts. I’ll be lucky to work twelve-hour days.”

Just like that, the real world intruded.

I stilled my hand. “Victoria, you can’t work at the hotel.”

A beat passed. “Why not?”

“Do I really have to explain it? You’re a Parker. If my father finds out—”

She sat up, a frown creasing her forehead. “You said he had a stroke.”

“He did.”

“So? I thought you were in charge now.”

“It’s more complicated than that.” My body was cold now that she’d moved away. Or

maybe it was just the draft from all the walls flying up between us again.

She tugged the comforter over her chest. “Well, it’s not complicated for me, Chase. I still have a stack of bills waiting for me at the lodge, and most of them have the name Valenti on them. What am I supposed to do? And don’t suggest selling the land. My grandparents bought it when they got married. I know it’s just a piece of property, but some things are sacred.”

I bolted upright so fast, she sucked in a sharp breath. But I hardly noticed, because the idea buzzing in my brain was either brilliant or supremely stupid.

“Chase?” Her gaze was wary.

I got off the bed and went for my suitcase. What I was about to say required pants.

When I swung around, she waited with a white-knuckled grip on the comforter.

I went to the nightstand and flipped on the lamp.

Then I took a deep breath.

“Marry me.”

Victoria

Ifelt my eyes go wide. Did he just propose?

“Marry me,” he repeated.

Yup.

My mouth opened, but no words emerged.

He came to the edge of the bed and stopped. “As my wife, your debts become my debts, and vice versa. The same with wealth. It wouldn’t matter how much you owed.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

Actually, no. He looked completely sincere. And sane—even though what he was saying was crazy. My mind whirled, my thoughts tumbling so fast I couldn’t form an adequate response. Or any kind of response. I still wasn’t fully recovered from the shock of seeing him again after seven years. Now he wanted to get married?

“Our families hate each other,” I blurted.

He shrugged. “That didn’t stop Romeo and Juliet.”

“Everyone dies at the end of that story!”

“It’s fiction, Victoria.”

“The feud between our families isn’t.” My heart squeezed, and I lowered my voice. “What about your father?”

Chase’s expression hardened, his green eyes growing chilled. Menace rolled off him in a way that made me realize he wasn’t just the playful and curious eighteen-year-old I’d known. He was a grown man and the de facto ruler of a billion-dollar hotel empire.

His lips curved in a humorless smile that sent an icy finger down my spine. “There’s not a damn thing he can do about it. I’ve had lawyers crawl over every inch of the trust. There’s nothing in it about marriage. I doubt he thought me capable of having a normal relationship, if he even bothered thinking of me at all. Narcissists can’t imagine other people wanting love or companionship, because they don’t really understand what either of those things mean. If he tries to amend the terms, I’ll challenge it for lack of mental capacity. It’ll be tied up in court until he dies. He won’t do that to the business.”

I tried to process his words. Everything made sense. And it might just work.

Except...

“You’re thinking again,” he said quietly. “Don’t do that, Victoria. Just say yes.”

I wanted to.

Didn’t I?

It was a solution to all my problems. But marriage was so...big. So final.

Chase waited, his muscled body sexy as sin in nothing but a pair of tailored suit pants. His hair had dried in thick waves, and a mischievous lock spilled over his forehead. Any woman would jump at the chance to call him her husband. But was marriage really something to be jumped at? Shouldn't it be more of a long, slow glide?

I took a deep breath. "Chase, I appreciate what you're trying to do."

A rueful expression touched his features. "But you're turning me down."

"It's not that."

"We'd be good together, Victoria." Heat flared in his gaze. "We are good together, and if you've forgotten just how good, I'm happy to give you a refresher."

Right on cue, my sex clenched and my nipples tightened. If my body was doing the decision-making, I'd already be on my way to the nearest courthouse.

"There's more to marriage than just sex," I told him.

"It's a pretty big part of it." He smirked. "Probably the best part of it."

“Chase—”

He put a knee on the bed and kissed me mid-protest, his mouth hot and demanding. My free hand flew to his shoulder, ready to push him away, but somehow I ended up clinging to him instead.

And he noticed, because he growled deep in his throat and tugged the comforter down, baring my breasts.

My eyes slid shut. Heat built between my thighs. He cupped a breast, testing its weight, and I pushed my chest into his hand. Already, a restless ache pulsed in my clit. God, why was he so good at this?

He moved his mouth to my neck and sucked at my skin, murmuring, “Be my wife, Victoria. Make me the happiest man in the world.”

Yes. The word hovered in my mind, ready to slip past my lips. I could marry him and stop worrying about bills and the lodge and my family.

My family.

Nana.

My eyes flew open. I jerked away from Chase, grabbing the comforter as I went.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded, his blond brows pinching together.

“I can’t marry you. I don’t own the lodge. It’s in my grandmother’s name.”

“So have her deed it to you. I can have my lawyers draw up the paperwork on Monday.”

I shook my head. “She’d see it as giving her land to a Valenti. I can’t ask that of her.”

“Why not? She’s had no problem asking everything of you.”

Confusion swamped me. “What?”

“Come on, Victoria, you don’t see it? Your whole family takes advantage of you.”

My confusion turned to anger. “My whole family is two people.”

“Right. And they both let you work yourself to death while they go about their lives.” His frown deepened. “And for what? A deteriorating motor lodge in the middle of nowhere? Christ, Victoria, it might as well be a tomb.”

The words hit like a fist in my gut, making all the air leave my lungs.

For a moment, a tense silence reigned. We stared at each other across the bed.

At last, he cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine.” I drew back, tugging the comforter higher. “I should go.”

His gaze zeroed in on my fist holding the fabric under my chin, and he seemed to arrive at some kind of internal decision, because he stood and turned away, then started collecting my clothes from the floor.

Even though I'd already seen it, his back was no less shocking the second time. My heart broke all over again. So many things about him made sense now. His reluctance to swim. The bruises and cuts on his hands. I'd watched enough police dramas to know those were defensive wounds.

But the rest of his body told a different tale. Strong and lean, he was as graceful as a dancer as he moved around the room, retrieving my jeans and shirt. The suit pants rode low on his hips, and his cock was a noticeable bulge that hung heavy against his thigh. Even his bare feet were sexy.

My mouth watered just watching him. Which was why it was dangerous for me to stay.

He deposited my clothes on the bed and stuffed his hands in his pockets, his broad chest gleaming in the lamp's dim light. "I'm sorry for what I said."

"It's all right."

We stared at each other.

The "yes" still hovered in my mind—and I wasn't certain I could hold it back if he asked me to marry him again.

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His green gaze was intense as he said, “I’ll leave you alone so you can get dressed.”

“Okay,” I heard myself say.

He didn’t move right away.

I held my breath.

He gave a subtle nod, then grabbed his wallet and went toward the door.

“Chase!”

He turned.

My heart raced.

Ask me.

The “yes” filled my throat.

I swallowed.

“This isn’t goodbye,” he said. “I’ll stop by the lodge tomorrow, all right?”

“All right.”

He gave me a soft smile and left the room.

I let my shoulders slump. Everything was okay, wasn't it? He was visiting tomorrow.
This wasn't over.

But as I looked at the door, I couldn't help feeling like something just ended.

Victoria

Cabin Twelve was a mess. The roof had leaked last year, and pieces of soggy ceiling littered the hardwood in the living room.

I was supposed to be cleaning it up.

Instead, I sat on the dusty sofa, an open accounting textbook on my lap.

I probably should have been studying.

I wasn't doing that, either.

The wind gusted outside, making the cabin groan in protest. I shivered and looked at the door. It had been twenty-two hours since I left Chase at the Valenti Hotel.

Not that I was counting.

Except where was he? He promised to stop by. Yet the sun was already going down, and it was past dinnertime.

Right on cue, my stomach rumbled. Normally, I ran out for lunch when I stayed at the lodge. Dealing with the temperamental ovens in the cabins was too much of a pain in the ass. But I skipped my usual routine today. I wasn't that hungry.

And the roads were snow-covered.

Plus, I had a ton of work to do.

My stomach let out a long, mournful growl.

Oh, who was I kidding. I was waiting for Chase.

Sighing, I set my book aside and stood. As soon as I did, there was a sharp but fleeting twinge between my thighs—a reminder of how I spent yesterday. My cheeks heated. At the same time, my nipples went hard.

Good grief. He wasn't even around, and my body was responding to him.

I bit my lip. He wasn't around.

What if he didn't come back?

I went to the kitchenette and got a bottled water from the ancient fridge. As I headed back to the living room, my gaze fell on the pieces of ceiling that littered the floor. Buckets were scattered here and there, and the whole cabin was filled with the sound of water plip-plopping. I stopped in the center of the room, the cold bottle dangling from my hand.

Was this what I rejected Chase for? There was no way I could fix the ceiling. Every cabin needed a new roof—and plumbing and electrical and air conditioning and new furniture. Even if I somehow managed to make all of those things happen, people didn't want to stay in a motor lodge anymore. Yes, the lodge was important to Nana, but was it worth my happiness? I'd tied my childhood memories to the business, but it felt more like an anchor around my neck.

Drowning me.

A loud knock rang out.

My heart jumped into my throat. I rushed to the door and threw it open.

“Chase, I—” I snapped my mouth shut.

A short, balding man in a black puffer jacket stood on the porch holding a large, white envelope in his hands. Between the jacket, envelope, and swirling snow, he had the look of an oversize penguin.

I realized I was staring and quickly collected myself. “I’m sorry. We’re not currently accommodating guests.”

“Oh, I’m not here for that,” he said. “Are you Victoria Parker?”

“Yes.” My gaze dipped to the envelope. Another lien? Maybe a lawsuit this time. He was probably a process server. I braced myself for the worst.

“Ah, perfect.” He smiled and waggled his envelope a bit. “I’m from the Berks County Historical Society. I have your official historical landmark paperwork here.”

I stared at the envelope. Then him. Then the envelope. “I’m sorry, what?”

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He gestured around the porch. “The Virginville Motor Lodge was designated an historical landmark at our meeting this morning. I admit, the property is a little young to make the list, but the committee decided to make an exception. Mr. Valenti wisely pointed out that not too many motels like this exist anymore. If we don’t protect it, we’ll lose this kind of history. He also raised the issue of Virginville’s well-developed historical district, claiming the Motor Lodge will make a great addition. He was very persuasive.”

It took me a second to absorb his words. “Do you mean Chase Valenti?”

“Indeed. A very well-spoken young man. The committee was quite impressed.”

Wait. Chase talked to the county? Today?

The man held out the envelope. “The grant application is in here, too, but it’s just a formality. Fill it out and drop it at the office. You should receive the funds in a week or two.”

“Funds?”

“Yes, the historical landmark designation comes with a two hundred fifty thousand-dollar grant.”

My mouth hung open. I was back to dumbfounded silence.

The man cleared his throat, his demeanor slightly uncomfortable. “Um...you do want the designation, don’t you, Ms. Parker?”

“Yes!” My voice came out louder than I intended, and he jumped. I lowered the volume. “Sorry. Yes, absolutely.”

He smiled. “Excellent. Well, here you go. My card is in there if you have any questions.”

I took the envelope and, somehow, resisted the urge to rip it open right there in the doorway. As the man gave a little wave and went down the steps, I called out, “Wait!”

He turned.

“Did Mr. Valenti mention anything about coming by today? To the lodge, I mean.”

“No, I don’t recall him saying that. In fact, he was on his way back to his hotel to finish up some business, I believe. He said he has a long list of other properties to visit.” The man gave a friendly nod, then continued down the steps, his shoes crunching in the snow.

My stomach did a flip.

Other properties? Chase was leaving town?

I looked down at the envelope. He saved the lodge. He saved me.

And now he was leaving? Without saying goodbye?

Again.

Not this time. I whirled, marched inside, and grabbed my car keys. Chase Valenti had a bad habit of disappearing without telling me. He didn’t just get to show up, give me

the best sex of my life, and skip town again. I was going straight to his hotel, and I was going to give him a piece of my mind.

And I was getting my damn panties back.

Chase

There were about eight hundred manila file folders on my desk, and all of them needed my review and signature.

I was supposed to be working.

I wasn't.

Instead, I stood at my office window watching the last of the sun's rays touch the snowy rooftops of the Virginville Motor Lodge across the highway.

Pathetic.

In Victoria's absence, I was reduced to gazing longingly at her family's cabins.

The highway was a good metaphor for the rift between us—a rift I caused by asking her to marry me. What made me think I could disappear for seven years and then ask her to enter into a lifelong commitment with me? Because that's how I intended marriage to be. The modern way of thinking might regard matrimony as a potentially temporary state of affairs, but it wasn't going to be that way with me. When I put a ring on a woman's finger, it was staying there.

And I didn't want any other woman but Victoria Parker.

I'd thought the feeling might go away—that time and distance would reveal my memories as distorted versions of reality. But seeing her again only confirmed what

I'd known since I was eighteen years old.

There was one woman in the world for me. One woman who made my cock hard just by entering a room. One woman who exasperated me with her stubbornness. One woman who didn't let me get away with any bullshit.

A woman who made me want to be a better man. A man of steel, she called me.

But that couldn't be true. Because one look from her and I melted.

A sigh built in my chest. All day long, I told myself I needed to stay away from the lodge. It was best for me to keep my distance. If I saw her, I wasn't sure I could stop myself from asking her to marry me again. She'd say no, of course, and then we would fight. Then fighting would lead to sex, and that would just put another knot in the tangled mess we were weaving for ourselves.

Not that I was exactly heartbroken at the prospect of ending up in bed with her. Hell, it was almost worth getting rejected again just to feel her soft skin and inhale her luscious scent. I wanted to see her mahogany hair spread over my thighs while her plump mouth bobbed up and down my cock. I wanted to put her on all fours and take her from behind, my hips slamming into her rounded ass over and over. I wanted to—

A woman's shriek punctured my thoughts. "You can't go in there!"

I spun just as the door flew open and Victoria burst inside with Tracy the hotel manager hot on her heels.

Tracy saw me and skidded to a stop, her chest heaving. "Oh! Mr. Valenti. I am so sorry. This"—she gestured curtly to Victoria—"former employee insisted on seeing you in person. I told her no, and she said she would find you herself. I can't believe—"

“It’s fine, Tracy. You can go.”

“—anyone would have the nerve to—”

“Tracy.”

She stopped. “Yes?”

“It’s okay,” I said gently. “I’ll speak to Ms. Parker.”

“But...” She looked between me and Victoria, a frown pulling down her lipsticked mouth. “You don’t want me to call security?”

Victoria narrowed her gaze.

I stepped around my desk and quickly ushered Tracy to the door. “That won’t be necessary. Ms. Parker and I are old friends.” I flashed the most charming smile I could muster and nudged my still-frowning manager into the hall.

“All right,” she said, her feathers clearly ruffled. “I’ll be at the front desk if you need me.”

“Thank you.”

She darted a look at Victoria through the open doorway, and a knowing look entered her eyes. Without another word, she did an about-face and marched off.

I waited until her French twist disappeared around the corner before reentering the office.

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Victoria leaned against my desk. She raised an eyebrow. “Another second longer, and she definitely would have called me a hussy.”

“I like it when you’re a hussy.”

She swallowed. “You saved the lodge.”

I shrugged. “Technically, the Berks County Historical Society saved it.”

“But you made them do it. You persuaded them.” She pushed away from the desk. “How could you leave again without telling me, Chase?”

Confusion settled over me. “Leave?”

“The other hotels on your list.” Storm clouds gathered in her eyes, but there was pain in there, too. “The man from the historical society said you were finishing up here. I know you’re offended I turned down your proposal. That’s a hard thing for a guy to hear, but we don’t have to get married anymore. The grant money more than covers the lodge’s debts.” The pain in her gaze grew. “I don’t want it to be over, dammit. It doesn’t have to be over. We can just be together. We can try it and see if—”

I was on her in a flash, my mouth hushing hers. I kissed her long and hard, and then I picked her up and walked to the desk. Still kissing her, I settled her on top and stepped between her legs.

She broke off the kiss with a gasp. “We have a bad habit of doing this,” she said, her voice breathless.

I put my hands on her thighs and rested my forehead against hers. “They say it takes twenty-one days to break a habit. I say we make the most of it.”

“But you’re leaving.”

“I’m not.”

“The man—”

“Was mistaken.”

She pulled back, her gaze searching mine. “You’re not leaving?”

Slowly, I shook my head. “I’m afraid you can’t get rid of me, Vicky.” I slid my hand to the waistband of her jeans and thumbed open the top button.

“I hate that nickname,” she said, her voice catching.

“I know,” I murmured. I lowered her zipper and found the edge of her panties. “But it makes you angry, and you’re really fucking sexy when you’re angry.”

She let out a fluttering sigh.

“White lace,” I said, smiling. “Perfect.” I kissed her again—a long, slow kiss that seemed to last forever. But that was okay. We had plenty of time.

Eventually, I drew back and cupped her cheek, my gaze holding hers. “Marry me?”

Tears sheened her eyes. She nodded. “Yes. Definitely, yes.”

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Victoria

Eighteen months later...

* * *

The shovel was a lot heavier than it looked.

The August sun shined bright overhead, its warmth seeping through my dress.

But not even blistering temperatures could warm me as much as the man at my side.

Chase grinned at me as he hefted his own shovel. “What’s wrong, Vicky? Too heavy?”

“Not at all.” Suppressing a grunt, I lifted mine and gave him a sweet smile. “Definitely light enough to knock you in the head with should the need arise.”

His green eyes twinkled, and he murmured, “You’re so sexy when you’re angry.”

“Okay!” the photographer called. “Everyone look at the camera! Shovels ready? Now!”

On cue, Chase and I dipped our shovels into the thick line of soil piled in front of us. We were breaking ground on a new set of cabins being built at the Virginville Motor Lodge—something that seemed like a dream to me.

I still had to pinch myself to believe the restored cabins were a reality. Not only that, people actually wanted to stay in them.

The photographer snapped photos for what felt like forever. Just when my jaw started to ache from holding my smile, he lowered the camera and flashed a thumbs up. “Got it!”

Chase straightened and thrust his shovel into the ground. Then he took mine and gave it the same treatment, sinking it so deep the handle vibrated.

I folded my arms. “Impressive.”

“You think so?” He leaned close. “Your sister has the baby for another hour. What do you say we inspect Cabin Fourteen? And by inspect I mean fuck like a couple of horny teenagers.”

“I hate to ruin your plans, Romeo, but Fourteen is booked. All of the cabins are booked this weekend.”

“So? It might be fun having an audience. We could charge extra.”

My lips twitched. “You have no shame.”

“Not when it comes to you. You’re right about that.”

The photographer strode toward us, his camera bag over his shoulder. “I have everything I need, Mr. Valenti. The story will run in every major newspaper in the state on Sunday.” He smiled at me. “Congratulations, Mrs. Valenti. The cabins are beautiful.”

“Thank you,” I said, pride rising in my chest. He was right, I thought, running my

gaze over the refurbished buildings as he walked away. The cabins really did look incredible. I credited the restoration with making Nana come around to the idea of me marrying Chase. Once she saw the finished product, she declared Chase an honorary Parker, and now he could do no wrong in her eyes.

Naturally, he took advantage of his newfound status at every opportunity. He even volunteered to spend Saturdays at Nana's retirement community. Once a week, he took her a case of cold beer, and they sat around cheating each other at cards and dreaming up new schemes to drive Katherine and me crazy.

In fact, it was their idea to make the lodge part of the Valenti Hotel in Virginville. At first, I couldn't believe Nana agreed to such a thing. But when she and Chase laid out their plan, I had to admit it made a lot of sense from a marketing perspective.

Now, the cabins at the lodge served mainly as long-term rentals. They were popular among newlyweds, as well as families that needed more space and amenities than the Valenti could offer. Since we opened our doors a little less than a year ago, we rarely had a vacancy. Seeing the lodge bustling with activity was one of my top two proudest achievements.

The other was napping with my sister back at the hotel.

I turned to Chase. "We should probably relieve Katherine. She's had the baby all morning."

He chuckled. "Victoria, your sister literally put a crib in her studio apartment so she can babysit. He's just fine. She carries him around so much, I'm worried he might never learn to walk. That baby has an entourage of Parker women at his constant disposal."

"I guess you're right."

He slid his arms around my waist, clearly unbothered that we stood in the middle of the lodge's parking lot. "Of course I'm right. The kid has a great family."

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My heart twinged. I put a hand on his cheek. “Have you heard from your mom?”

“No, but that’s hardly unusual.”

Actually, it was the norm. She skipped our wedding, and she hadn’t even sent a card when Chase’s father died. Now that our son was pushing six months old, Chase thought she might express an interest in meeting him.

So far, though, nothing.

“It doesn’t matter,” Chase said, bringing my hand from his cheek to his lips. “You’re my family. You and the little guy.” He placed a soft kiss on my knuckles. “I love you, Victoria Parker Valenti.”

I reached up and brushed a lock of wavy hair off his forehead. “I love you, too. I’m glad you came back.”

Love and amusement filled his gaze. “Was I worth the wait?”

I rose on my tiptoes. “Every minute,” I whispered, then kissed him.