



Stuck with Mr. Grump

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: The billionaire grump stormed back into my small town, and now I have a café to save, a heart to guard, and a secret to keep hidden.

Two years ago, Sterling Harrington walked away without a word—taking my heart with him.

Now he's back, drowning in wealth and arrogance, looking as devastatingly handsome as ever, and he wants one thing: my café.

Too bad for him, I'd rather burn it to the ground than sell it to the man who left me behind.

But resisting him is getting harder when he's everywhere—smirking like he owns the town, tempting me with that infuriating charm, and making me remember exactly how it felt when I was his.

Worse? He's an incredible father. When I see him with his son, my heart does this stupid little flip—because every time I watch them together, I think about the little girl with his same green eyes...

The one he doesn't know exists.

He's going to find out. It's only a matter of time.

And when he does?

I don't know what scares me more—being stuck with Mr. Grump forever... or watching him walk away all over again.

Total Pages (Source): 103

CHAPTER 1

Emilia

“I want to be a bull rider,” my sister murmurs, releasing a small sigh beside me.

Her gaze is fixed to the TV in front of us, watching an undeniably attractive man climb onto a bull and try his best to hold on for as long as he can. Frankly, I don’t get it. Doing something life-threatening to entertain an audience doesn’t seem like a good idea to me.

But according to Anika, these men can earn up to millions of dollars. Weighing the risk-reward factor, it seems like a pretty sweet deal. Then again, you can’t spend the money if you’re dead.

It’s clear the athletes enjoy it, though. The one currently on the bull is a young man with a cocky smile and when he lifts his head toward the cameras, I catch sight of a glint in his blue eyes that shows he’s having fun.

I reach for a bottle of Coke, taking a swig before turning to give my sister an arched eyebrow.

“Last week you wanted Edward to become one so you could marry a bull rider,” I remind her.

She offers me a sly smirk, her brown eyes twinkling, “And now I want to be one. Why get a man when you can do it yourself?”

“Feminist icon, whoo,” I say half-heartedly. “Can we watch something else?”

“No,” Anika immediately protests. “I want to learn how to ride one of those monsters.”

“Nika, you can’t get on a bull, you’ll die. Settle for riding things that can fit between your legs,” I say with a short laugh.

Her nose wrinkles. “You know, for someone who barely gets any, you sure do make a lot of sex jokes.”

“Hey,” I say slightly offended. “I get some.”

Anika gives me a look that says she totally does not believe me, and she’d be right. I can’t remember the last time I was on a date or had sex. I’m twenty-five years old and the only things I’ve got going for me are the café I own and the house I just bought with my little sister.

Anika makes a short dismissive sound. “Please, the last time I saw you with a man was...” She proceeds to think on it for several seconds. “Damn, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you with a man. That’s kind of sad, sissy.”

“It’s not sad if you consider the fact that you’ve only known me for four years. I’ve been too busy to date,” I say defensively.

“I doubt you had a wild dating life even before we met,” she points out with a sad smile.

She’s probably thinking about said life before we met. Anika’s my half-sister. She’s about two years younger than me, but up until five years ago, I had no idea she existed. My family history is long and complicated, and half the time I refuse to even

acknowledge it or the time I spent before I found the family I have now.

“True,” I admit. “But enough about me. The hot cowboy’s about to be thrown off the bull.”

I manage to successfully divert her attention to the TV, and over the next couple of minutes we watch sweaty cowboys try to control the wild animals that seem intent on killing them. Soon enough, I realize we’re running out of snacks, so I get to my feet, telling Anika that I need to make some popcorn.

She waves me off without looking up from the screen. She’s genuinely interested in bull riding, despite not having any idea it was a sport until about a week ago. But that’s Anika. She has dozens of hobbies and interests, which she picks and chooses every other week. She’s tried everything from mountain climbing to sky diving, always looking for some sort of adrenaline high.

We couldn’t be any more different, despite being sisters. We look different, too. While we share the same father, Anika’s mother is a gorgeous Indian woman with the kindest heart ever. Anika takes after her in the looks department too, with her thick, shiny, waist-length black hair and dainty doll-like face. She looks like a vixen but has this innocent, unassuming air about her that draws everyone in.

I’m making the popcorn when I hear a scream that has my heart leaping out of my throat. I grab a knife from the counter before I can blink and run into the living room despite my racing heart.

Fear courses through me and I want nothing more than to take off in the other direction, but it’s not like I can let my little sister get hurt. Once I arrive there, however, I see that the intruder has Anika in a headlock and is currently rubbing his fist into her hair while she struggles for dear life.

The scene would be disturbing if the intruder didn't have blue eyes the exact same shade as mine and an extremely punchable face. Annoyance immediately fills me.

"What the fuck, Anika? I thought someone broke into the house or something," I burst out, the knife in my hand clattering to the floor. I lean against the wall, clutching my still-racing heart.

It's okay, Emilia. You're fine. She's fine. You're safe. I repeat the words a couple more times in my head before glaring at them both.

"Let her go, Carson," I say with a sigh.

My brother chuckles before slowly releasing Anika and stepping back. He swipes the half-empty bowl of crackers on the table, shoving a handful into his mouth before collapsing onto the sofa behind him.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

“How are my favorite girls?” he questions with a grin.

“We were fine before you showed up, jerk,” Anika replies.

She tosses a beer can at his head, which he annoyingly manages to catch at the last second. He pops it open with a satisfied smirk, taking a swig before looking at me. His gaze moves from the knife on the floor to the expression on my face and his smile immediately drops.

“Hey, little sis. You okay?”

My heart is still racing but I can feel the rest of my body settling. I inhale a soft breath before nodding once and slipping back into the kitchen. I hear Anika and Carson trade a few hushed words and two minutes later, I can feel my brother’s presence behind me.

Well, smell would be more accurate. He uses this annoying cologne with a musky scent that he swears draws in all the ladies. I’m, like, fifty-percent sure said ladies need to get their olfactory receptors checked.

He places the knife I dropped on the counter beside me, his silence loud and probing.

“I’m fine, Carson,” I mutter, pulling the popcorn out of the microwave and pouring it into a bowl.

“We didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I know. It’s okay. I overreacted. It’s not like I was going to stab anyone,” I say, my tone light.

That’s a lie, though. If the situation arises, I wouldn’t hesitate to go for the liver of anyone that tries to hurt my little sister. Self-defense was one of the first things I learned growing up. It’s the only reason I’ve lived this long.

“You didn’t overreact, muffin,” he murmurs.

I turn around and he’s giving me that look. Like he’s trying to figure out how to talk to me. I hate that look.

“Carson,” I say on a sigh, “you don’t have to worry about me.”

“I’m your big brother,” he states. “Worrying about you and Nika’s my full-time job.”

He’s a very genuine, open person, my big brother. They all are. Carson, Anika, my father, and Anika’s mother, Priya. They’re the type of family to gather around a table to talk about their feelings—an activity that is torturous to me.

“Oh, please. We both know you’re only here to steal our snacks and intrude on girl time,” I state, tossing a piece of popcorn on his face.

It hits his nose before sliding down to the floor. Carson gives me an unimpressed look. He’s a goofball half the time, but he can get very serious very fast. At twenty-eight years old, he’s the CEO of his own company, a small financial advisory firm. Cameron Financials is literally his baby. He put his all into building it and now it’s a flourishing business in Greenville, a city that’s about an hour or so away from here. Carson’s an intelligent, successful young man. He’d be a catch if only he wasn’t such a player.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” I ask, heading back into the living room and effectively putting an end to the conversation.

If I don’t change the subject, my siblings will keep pushing. But thankfully, they always drop it once I do.

“It’s family night tomorrow,” he replies, taking a seat on the sofa.

I settle down next to Anika and she immediately grabs the bowl of popcorn from my hand. Her attention is back to the cowboys bull riding on the screen. I’m getting worried she’ll actually make her way to a competition and somehow find a way to do it. I wouldn’t put it past her.

“Exactly. It’s stomorrownight, loser,” Anika speaks up. “Do you have no friends in Greenville or something? You’re always here.”

“Well, I’ve gotta make sure I always provide you two with the pleasure of my company.”

Anika and I snort simultaneously.

“Why the hell are you watching cowboys?” he questions.

I sigh, leaning back into the couch, “Don’t ask.”

“Can we watch a movie instead?” he asks hopefully, blue eyes fixed on Anika.

“You’re a twenty-eight-year-old man who wants to watch a movie with his little sisters on a Friday night. That’s sad. I miss the old you.”

“I don’t,” I immediately state.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

The old him would probably be in a club right now, partying and drinking. It's nice to have fun every once in a while, but Carson was always at one party or another until a couple years back. Then he slowed down, started taking his firm and his life more seriously.

It was around the time I showed up, actually, around a year after when he started being able to look me in the eye. Before I showed up, he attended all those parties for fun. After I showed up, I think he did it as a distraction from the guilt he was feeling.

"I'm just saying, you need a girlfriend, Boba," Anika continues. "And I mean an actual girlfriend, not one of the endless women you keep on your roster."

"'Endless' is a bit of a stretch," Carson says with a wolfish grin.

"Manwhore," Anika says, shaking her head in disappointment. "One of you is practically a virgin?—"

"Hey," I protest.

"And the other one isn't even close to settling down. And these are the elder siblings I'm supposed to emulate?" Anika muses.

"There's nothing wrong with being almost a virgin, Nika. Be like Emilia. There's no man that's worthy of either of you," our brother says seriously.

My nose wrinkles. "That sounds sexist. You get to chase after anything in a skirt and we can't chase after things in pants."

Carson snickers, his eyes meeting mine, “You might actually benefit from something in pants.”

“Ew, gross. Never again, Carson!”

“Yeah, you’re right. I feel a little sick,” he says, looking genuinely disturbed.

Anika laughs. “The two of you need to be in happy healthy relationships. Look at me and Edward—we’re happy.”

“Sure,” Carson mutters.

He’s not a fan of Anika’s boyfriend. Edward’s in a band, which would be cool if it didn’t mean he’s an unemployed twenty-three-year-old. They’re high school sweethearts, though; they’ve been together for years, and he treats her well. I’m happy as long as Anika’s happy.

“Hey, how are things at the shop?” Carson asks after a couple of minutes.

My lips turn down in a frown. “Fine,” I mutter.

I really don’t need a reminder about how bad things are right now with my business. My brother’s the CEO of a successful firm, while I’m barely keeping things together at my small coffee shop. It’s embarrassing.

“You know I’m always here if you need help right, muffin?”

“Sure, Carson.”

Anika eventually agrees to switch to something we can all enjoy, and the three of us settle in to watch a movie about a heist gone wrong. We’re about an hour in when

Carson suddenly sits up.

“Shit,” he mutters under his breath.

The both of us look toward him. He’s holding his phone in his hand, his finger scrolling down. I arch an eyebrow in question.

“What’s wrong?” Anika questions.

He doesn’t say anything for several seconds which immediately has me worried. When he doesn’t reply, Anika gets up and moves closer so she can read over his shoulder. She gasps, like, a minute later and now I’m too curious to sit down.

“Did someone die or something?” I ask, moving toward them.

The first few words I see on the screen of Carson’s phone make no sense.

My brows furrow. “Who are the Harringtons? And who is an illegitimate child?”

Carson looks up at me with wide eyes. “You’re joking, right? The Harringtons? They’re the people who own, like, half the buildings and prime real estate in this town.”

“Oh. Them,” I say, remembering the super-rich family I’ve heard so much about. They apparently lived here for a long time but eventually moved, establishing the headquarters of their multi-million dollar company in New York. “What’s this about illegitimacy?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

“They’re saying Sterling’s father isn’t his real father. What the actual fuck?”

He really looks upset. If I’m remembering correctly, Carson and this Sterling guy used to be best friends until Sterling moved away. They apparently still keep in touch, but I’ve never met him or any of the Harringtons.

Anika’s holding her phone now. “The blogs are blowing up. They’re saying Sterling doesn’t deserve to inherit the company. They’re saying Aunt Lana had an affair. And this person just commented that Sterling’s a bastard. It’s really bad,” she says, chewing on her bottom lip.

Damn, that’s really mean.

“Shouldn’t you call him?” I ask my brother. “You’re friends, right?”

Carson leans back with a small sigh. “On the off-chance he’d even pick up my call, what would I even ask, muffin? ‘Yo, I just read an article talking about how you’re not really your father’s son. Are you okay?’”

“Yeah,” I say on a nod. “I’m sure he’d appreciate a friend checking on him.”

Carson smiles softly. “Sterling’s not that type of person. He’d hang up on me if I tried that shit. The guy’s not exactly sunshine and rainbows. I am worried about him, though. This must be rough.”

“Something like that will have damaging effects on their company as well, won’t it? The issue of succession aside, corporations rely on publicity,” Anika points out.

“Yeah,” Carson huffs. “If the rumors are true, both Harrington Holdings and the Harrington family are about to have a rough couple of months.”

CHAPTER 2

Sterling

I’m immensely skilled at tuning people out. Filtering irrelevant information is a talent I’ve come to hone over the years. I’m currently seated at the head of a long boardroom table, and there are several other men in chairs that run the length of the table in front of me. Each of them are in crisp suits befitting their positions as executives of my family’s company. And they’re yelling, talking over each other—an attitude that is decidedly not befitting their position.

They’ve thus far ignored my attempts to silence them so I’m sitting quietly, my fingers tapping against the table, as I wait for them to shut the hell up. Truthfully, my attempt to silence them would be much more successful if I had any idea what to even say.

This is a mess.

That’s all I’ve been able to think since last night. Since the news broke. If it were anything else, any other problem, I would have come up with several solutions. But considering the root of the problem is none other than myself, I’m coming up blank. I haven’t even begun to come to terms with the news.

“Mr. Harrington,” a voice says sharply, breaking through the haze.

My gaze lifts, landing on a bulky man in a navy blue suit and a short, neatly trimmed mustache. Wellis Barton. He’s the head of financials in the company, a capable man who’s really good at his job.

I arch an eyebrow, waiting for him to speak.

“Despite the news breaking just last night, we’re already seeing a sharp decline in the company’s stock prices. There have been several calls from stockholders, questions which we have no answer to. This is a PR nightmare. What is the company’s stance on this... tasteless rumor? I believe the first step is to put out a press release.”

My chest rises and falls as I consider his words. What the fuck do they expect me to say? I only just found out about the article last night. I haven’t even begun to form an opinion on this entire debacle. I tend to do that when something doesn’t make sense—put it off, ignore it for as long as I can. Clear my mind until I can come up with a valid solution or explanation.

To be fair, the fastest way to do so would probably be answering my father’s calls. He’s been trying to reach me all morning. I’ve been putting off the hard conversation, though. I’m terrified of what he’ll have to tell me. I’m angry because if it’s true then that means my mother has once again done something unforgivable.

I’ve been a Harrington the past twenty-eight years of my life, and now it feels like I’m about to lose that vital part of my identity.

What’s even more worrying is that the blog that put up the article is known for its fact-checking. If it was a bold-faced lie to garner views, it wouldn’t be such a problem. But it’s not. There’s even an undisclosed source assuring them that my identity as a Harrington is nothing more than a fraud.

My voice is steadier than I feel when I finally speak. “Since this news was obviously meant to destabilize the company, I think the last thing we should be doing is panicking.”

“What would you suggest we do in lieu of panicking, Mr. Vice President?” a bald,

green-eyed man spits.

The scorn in his voice is clear as day. Michael Lawson is a bigwig executive who owns a lot of company shares. When it comes to the company's succession, he's also firmly on my brother's team. I'm sure he's just thrilled about this whole mess.

The room falls silent, all eyes turning to me, anticipation heavy in the air. I take a deliberate breath, steadying myself.

"Thank you for your concern, Michael," I reply, my voice unwavering. "Our immediate priority is to manage the narrative. I've already instructed our public relations team to prepare a statement addressing the allegations. Concurrently, we're initiating an internal review to ascertain the source of this leak and its validity."

There are a few murmurs of agreement.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

Michael's brow arches skeptically. "And what if the allegations hold merit? How do you propose we salvage the company's standing then? The subject of your paternity directly impacts the line of succession, which has a lot to do with the strength of our leadership and the integrity of our projects. I know you're trying to be positive, Sterling, but people will wonder—if you're not really a Harrington, do you even have a right to be in that position?"

I stiffen at that, my jaw clenching. The boardroom's atmosphere grows increasingly charged, tension coiling like a tightened spring. Michael's words hang in the air. I feel a surge of anger, my composure threatening to fracture. Just as I open my mouth to respond, the double doors swing open with decisive force.

Sebastian Harrington, my grandfather and the esteemed chairman of Harrington Holdings, strides into the room. Seventy-five years old and he remains a commanding presence. His tall, lean frame is impeccably dressed in a tailored navy suit, exuding both authority and timeless elegance. His thick silver hair is combed back with precision, and piercing brown eyes undimmed by age survey the room with a discerning gaze that misses nothing.

The room falls into an immediate hush, the previous clamor silenced by his mere presence. Sebastian's voice, though softened by time, carries an undeniable authority.

"This meeting is adjourned," he declares, his tone brooking no argument. He turns his attention to Michael, who visibly recoils under the scrutiny. "Regardless of any personal conjectures, Sterling's position as vice president is a result of his unwavering dedication and the substantial contributions he has made to this company. His role is both earned and deserved, not because of his last name or blood relations."

I wince at that last part. My grandfather might have openly supported me with that little speech, but he's the same man who taught me to play chess when I was six. He taught me how to expect your opponent's moves before they're made, to read between the lines.

He might as well have confirmed the rumors with that last statement.

I feel fucking ill.

His gaze shifts to me. "Sterling, may I have a word in my office?"

I rise, the weight of the board's collective stare pressing heavily upon me. We ride the elevator up to his office in silence, neither of us saying a word until we're safely tucked away from the rest of the world. As soon as we're inside, my grandfather reaches for the bottle of whisky on the counter in the dimly lit office.

He pours himself a glass before moving to sit down. I stay standing with his desk, a monolith of dark mahogany, between us, its surface meticulously organized. He sits with his back straight, eyes sharp and unyielding.

I decide to speak first, in a bid to control the conversation just like he taught me.

"Is it true?" I ask, feeling the tension coiling through me tighten.

My grandfather's expression doesn't waver. He takes a sip of his whisky, pauses to contemplate his words.

"Genetics are a funny thing, Sterling," he begins, his voice measured and devoid of warmth. "My son Steven is the complete opposite of me. While I worked hard to build this company from the ground up as a teen, he was born into a life of luxury. He doesn't understand the importance of hard work and he's refused to take up a mantle

that should be rightfully his. Lazy, uninspiring, and unambitious. Your father's never done a thing to support me or this company."

His lips are curled up distastefully. I have no idea where he's going with this. I'm very aware of how complicated their relationship is. Dad's never had an interest in the company, and my grandfather has always held it against him. They orbit around each other, my father bearing the weight of his disappointment seemingly easily. Like he doesn't care.

That's one thing I've always admired him for. Steven Harrington may be lazy, uninspiring, and unambitious like my grandfather said, but he's always lived his life on his own terms. It takes courage to do that, especially with a father like Sebastian.

"And then there's Spencer, your older brother," Grandfather continues. "He's in many ways like your father. But Spencer has something he doesn't, and that is ambition. He might not have the skills or the fortitude, but he does have the ambition and he knows what he wants. He knows what he's owed."

Those words sting. Owed? Considering the way he's lived his life, Spencer isn't owed a damn thing and everyone knows this. The only thing he has is his position as the first-born son, but that's not justification for what he believes should be rightfully his. Spencer and I have been pitted against each other since birth, and the simple truth is that I've always been better than him. And that's been okay, until now.

My throat tightens.

"Are you saying Spencer's owed the company?"

Sebastian's eyes narrow. "Don't be so simple-minded, Sterling. Do you not understand what I'm trying to say?"

“Sure I do. You’re saying while my father and my brother are your blood, they’re nothing like you. Which means I am decidedly not your blood?”

A muscle pulses in his jaw but he doesn’t confirm my statement.

“Talk to your parents, Sterling.”

“They’re in Mykonos,” I reply. My parents spend more time off U.S. soil than they do on it.

“I’m sure they’ll return eventually.”

My eyebrow arches. “That’s it? That’s all you have to say to me?”

“You’re an intelligent man, Sterling,” he states, leaning back against his chair. “Which is why I know you understand that for the sake of the company’s stability and impending acquisition, which is worth millions of dollars, it would be prudent for you to step back temporarily. Public scrutiny can be detrimental and we cannot afford distractions at this juncture.”

My hand curls into fists. “You’re kicking me out?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

“Temporarily,” he emphasizes. “You and I both know that it’s the best move we can make right now. At least until the acquisition is over. Go home, to Edenton. Take a breather for a couple of weeks. And if you’d still like to work, you can take over as executive manager at the company’s branch in Edenton.”

He can use all the flowery words he’d like, but it’s pretty clear I’m being sidelined. This cannot be fucking happening to me. Not after how much I’ve dedicated myself to this company. I’ve worked hard all my life to uphold this family’s legacy.

And now it’s becoming clear it might not be my legacy after all.

“I understand,” I reply, keeping my voice steady. What choice do I have but to comply? Grandfather’s word is law. “I’ll do what’s necessary for the company.”

He gives me a curt nod, his expression unchanging. “As expected, Sterling. I’m sure you’ll make the necessary arrangements as well.”

With that, he dismisses me and turns his attention to the documents on his desk, signaling the end of our conversation. The sting of his words linger as I leave his office. When my phone rings for the twentieth time today, I decide to finally pick up.

“Father,” I say, my voice cold.

“Hey, bud. How’s it going?” he questions warmly.

I lean against the wall, suddenly extremely exhausted. At this point, I don’t give a damn who sees me like this.

“Fine,” I mutter. “Where’s my mother?”

“She’s, uh... currently occupied.”

I roll my eyes. “I take it she’s enjoying her vacation then. Meanwhile I’m here having to deal with the fallout of her actions.”

He pauses. “You’re my son, Sterling. You know that, right? No matter what anyone else says.”

Something burns in my chest at his words.

“I know,” I murmur. “When will you be returning?”

“In about a week or so. Your mother is still feeling a little ill.”

“Of course she is,” I say, not believing that in the slightest.

Elana Harrington is probably going to put off dealing with this mess for as long as she can. It’s what she does best.

“Just take care of yourself, alright? Dad told me he’s sending you to Edenton. It might be good for you. Try to rest a little, Sterling. You work too hard.”

“Got it.”

My gaze lifts just as the elevator doors in the hallway swing open. My lips thin when I catch sight of who steps out of it, but a chuckle follows as soon as he sets his eyes on me as well.

“Would you look who it is. Baby brother. I was hoping I’d run into you.”

Irritation coils through me like a lash. He's the last person I wanted to see right now.

"Spencer's here," I tell my father who's still on the other end of the phone.

I slowly straighten to my full height as he walks toward me. I've always been two inches taller than him, one of the various victories I've had over him all our lives. Everything has been a competition with Spencer for as long as I can remember.

"Tell him not to be a dickhead," Dad states.

I scoff. "I doubt he's capable. Must be those genes."

"Hey, don't insult our stellar genes, smartass."

Despite everything, I manage a small smile. "Bye, Dad."

"Chin up, buddy."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

He hangs up before I finally turn my attention to my dickhead of an elder brother. Standing beside him is none other than his biggest dick rider, Michael Lawson. I don't pay any mind to the man, instead facing my brother with a blank expression.

"I take it Grandfather called you back from Japan?"

"Yeah, and I hear you're being kicked out. Shame, isn't it?" False sympathy coats his voice.

Spencer and I actually look a lot alike, a fact that I've always hated. We share a lot of similar facial features with our mother. The most prominent difference however, is the color of our eyes.

"I don't have time to talk to you right now," I say dismissively, placing my phone in my jacket pocket.

"No, no. I've had to endure your gloating each time I've been sent away from the company. You don't get to stop me from doing the same to you."

My jaw tightens as I stare straight at him. "Okay then, Spencer. Gloat," I prompt.

He shifts forward, and his expression would be intimidating if I wasn't immune. His voice drops an octave lower so that only I can hear what he's saying.

"How does it feel to have the confirmation that you don't belong? I always knew, Sterling. Everyone always knew. They all just ignored it but now that it's all out in the open, there's no more hiding from the truth. The reality of who you are."

“It doesn’t matter who I am, Spencer. What matters is who you’ll never be. What you’ll never be. And the truth is, you’ll never be better than me,” I say, my voice low and cold.

He smirks. “You’ve got a lot of nerve for a bastard.”

And that does it. My vision tunnels and I’m swinging before I can think twice about it, my fist landing on his jaw with a loud thwack. There are a few gasps from employees that are milling about in the hallway.

Spencer stumbles backward but there’s a big, bright smile on his face because he got exactly what he wanted—provoking a reaction out of me.

“Seeing how you just lost your cool for the first time in your life, baby brother,” Spencer says, massaging his jaw, “I’d say it’s pretty clear just how much all of this is affecting you. Have fun in Edenton. You just might not get to come back here.”

With those words he walks away, toward grandfather’s office. I curse softly under my breath, hating every single thing under the goddamn sun. Well, everything to do with one person. Once I’m safely in my office, I exhale a soft breath. And then I’m making the preparations to head home to Edenton.

CHAPTER 3

Emilia

Is it at my usual corner table in Emilia’s Café, the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingling with the scent of baked pastries. The morning light filters through large, paned windows, casting a warm glow on the wooden floors and the soft pastel hues of the walls. The mismatched vintage chairs and tables, each with its own story, add to the cozy, eclectic charm that I’ve painstakingly curated.

Outside, Edenton's historic streets are lined with Georgian homes overlooking the wide-open bay. The sidewalks aren't as busy as they usually would be on a Monday morning. I glance at the ledger before me, the numbers stark against the page. Despite my efforts, the recent opening of the nearby shopping mall has siphoned away much of the foot traffic that once filled my café.

Paige, my ever-enthusiastic part-timer, approaches, her apron slightly askew and a smudge of flour on her cheek. She's been a great help to me from the start, ever since the café opened. She's eighteen years old, with dark brown hair and the brightest smile.

"It's really quiet today," Paige remarks, her brows furrowing with concern.

I offer her a reassuring smile, though my heart mirrors her worry.

"It is, but we'll find a way to bring people back in. Maybe it's time to think about hosting some events or introducing a new menu item."

She nods, her eyes brightening. "A pottery night could be fun! Or maybe a workshop on brewing the perfect cup of coffee."

I make note of her suggestions, grateful for her youthful optimism.

"Those are wonderful ideas, Paige. Let's start planning and see if we can remind Edenton why they fell in love with this place in the first place."

As she returns to her duties, I take a moment to look around the café. The potted plants in the corners, the chalkboard menu with its artful calligraphy, and the soft hum of indie music playing in the background. Everything was designed to create an inviting atmosphere. I had it all thought out. This place was supposed to be worth everything I scarified to get here.

My hand clenches around the pen in my hand. That damn shopping center. Fuck the Harringtons.

Because of course they're responsible for building it. The family has their hands in every single piece of prime real estate in the town. They're the reason the small quaint town I fell in love with when I first arrived is slowly disappearing. It's funny because despite having only lived here for a couple of years, I'm one of the few people in town that's against the new developments. Everyone else just loves it.

So, yeah, I'd say the Harringtons are definitely the source of all my current frustrations.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

“It’s okay, though,” I say to myself. “I overcame insurmountable odds to be where I am today. I’m not going to let a shopping mall stand in the way of my dreams.”

With renewed determination, I turn back to the financials, ready to strategize and adapt. This café is more than just a business, it’s a reflection of my passion and drive to not just succeed but to live. It’s the first thing I’ve ever owned and I’ll do whatever it takes to save it.

An hour later and not one person has walked into the café. Which is ridiculous. It’s ten in the morning, surely people need coffee to function. I know I do.

When the bell at the front door chimes, I practically jump out of my seat. Then immediately deflate when I see it’s my sister. She struts into the shop in her wedge heels, black jeans, and crop top, looking like she’s walking on a runway and not into an empty coffee shop.

She beams when she sees me and I’m about to smile back when my gaze is drawn to the shopping bags in her hand. I gasp like I just witnessed a fucking murder, my hands going over my mouth.

Anika startles. “What is it?”

“Nika,” I start, my voice low, “are those shopping bags from the new mall?”

She pauses, looks down at her hand, and then shrugs. “Yeah, I needed new clothes.”

“You betrayer,” I say accusingly.

Anika laughs. “Don’t be dramatic, sissy. It’s not like I went to a café in the mall or anything like that.”

“We should be boycotting that place,” I insist. “Not giving our money to the capitalists.”

“Technically you’re also a capitalist considering you have your own business for profit,” Anika points out.

“I don’t need you to show off that you minored in marketing right now,” I say tiredly.

I guess she can see that I’m genuinely upset because she sighs softly before coming to stand beside me. She throws an arm around me, rubbing my shoulder comfortingly.

“That bad, huh?”

“No one’s walked in here all morning,” I complain.

“Have you considered what Carson suggested? This place is amazing, but people are always intrigued by something new. What if you moved your café into the mall? I’m sure he could make it happen for you.”

I balk. “You want me to join my oppressors?”

“Okay, calm down, drama queen.” Anika giggles. “Come on, I came because I was excited to show you this new purse I got at the mall for Mom. They just opened a new Chanel store and I thought it looked cute.”

“She’ll love it,” I say on a smile.

We take a seat and Anika proceeds to show off the contents of her shopping bags.

She's always had good taste and she even got me a cute bracelet so I have no choice but to forgive her disloyal actions.

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot. Sterling's back in town," she mentions.

"Who?" I ask, confused.

"Sterling Harrington," she reminds me.

"Oh. My arch nemesis," I mutter, wondering why I should care about his presence in town.

I think back to the rumors surrounding him right now and immediately feel bad, though. If he's had to return to a place he hasn't stepped foot in for five years, then things must be really rough.

"You've never even met the guy and he's already your arch nemesis?"

I shrug. "Every Harrington's my arch nemesis, Nika. Anyway, so is Carson coming back? I know he's been worried about his friend."

She nods, "Yeah, he'll be here in about in a couple of hours. We're driving up to the Harrington mansion. Do you want to come along?"

"Why would I do that?"

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

“Come on, aren’t you curious about the home of your arch nemeses? Also, Sterling—doesn’t the idea of meeting him intrigue you a little bit?”

I give her my best uninterested stare. “Anika, from what I’ve heard about the guy from Carson, I’m almost sure he’s a jerk.”

“Oh, he is,” my sister assures me. “But he’s kind of a loveable jerk?”

I scoff. “Not interested.”

“Come on, Em. You’ll see him around town eventually. He’s going to be here awhile. Let’s just get introductions out of the way now.”

The thing about my sister is that she’s extremely skilled at getting whatever she wants. Anika wears you down so much that you have no choice but to say yes. Which is why later that evening, I’m in a car with my siblings, driving up a long, narrow, tree-lined road that leads to the Harrington estate.

I’ve never been here before, which is why I’m incapable of downplaying my shock at the display of wealth. I knew these people were rich but I didn’t think they were this rich. The tires crunch softly on the gravel as we drive up to the gated mansion.

Carson, at the wheel, hums along to the faint jazz music playing from the speakers in the car, while Anika sits beside him, scrolling through her phone. I’m sat in the back, gawking like an idiot as the road opens up to a sprawling vista. The mansion stands majestically at the end of the drive, an imposing structure with its symmetrical design and grand columns.

“Damn, we’re definitely not in Kansas anymore,” I mutter under my breath.

We’re granted entrance through the gate by the security guard posted in front of it. Carson drives in, navigating a smooth curve around a large white fountain with an obnoxious statue in the middle of it before we finally come to a stop.

I step out of the car, blowing out a soft breath as I take in the grandeur. Near the entrance, there’s a man in his early fifties standing there wearing a crisp black suit, his expression devoid of any emotion.

“That’s Karl,” Anika says, coming to stand beside me. “He’s the butler.”

“Right...” I trail off. Of course they have a butler.

Karl stands poised, hands clasped behind his back, exuding an air of practiced professionalism. Other staff members move discreetly about, each engaged in tasks that ensure the estate runs like a well-oiled machine.

“Welcome to the Harrington residence,” Karl intones, his voice smooth and rehearsed.

“Yo, Karl,” Carson says with a whistle and I almost facepalm.

You’d think my brother would act more courteous and formal in the face of all this. But nope, he just strolls forward, claps the butler on the back, and trades a few words with him, asking about his family. Karl doesn’t seem to mind, though. He offers my brother a small smile and then turns to Anika.

“It’s been a while, Miss Cameron.”

I don’t miss the way his gaze flickers toward me in question.

“How have you been, Karl?” she greets before placing her arm around mine. “This is my sister, Emilia. Carson and I thought we’d introduce her to Sterling. How is he, anyway?”

Karl’s smile turns into a grimace. “You’d have to see that for yourself, Miss Cameron. You can go in. And it’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Cameron.”

I offer him a warm smile before bending my head toward Anika.

My voice lowers an octave. “He knows he can call us by our names right?”

Anika laughs. “Don’t even start. Trust me, that’s a losing battle.”

“Let’s go,” Carson calls, leading us through the massive double doors adorned with intricate carvings.

I try not to make too much of a fool of myself gawking as we walk into the house. Karl shows us to an opulent living room before informing us that Mr. Sterling Harrington will join us shortly. The room exudes elegance, with high ceilings, ornate moldings, and plush furnishings that speak of so much affluence.

I take a seat next to Anika on the couch, while Carson stays standing beside Karl. They’re talking about his business and he seems really friendly with the butler. Then again, Carson’s friendly with everybody. All he has to do is turn up that magnetic charm with a smile, run a hand through his dirty-blond hair and everyone is putty around him. It’s so annoying.

Five minutes pass and Mr. Harrington still hasn’t shown up. Meanwhile, I’ve realized I need to pee.

“Excuse me,” I say, rising from my seat. “Could you point me to the restroom?”

Karl nods politely. “Certainly, miss. Down the hall to your left. I could call someone to show you there,” he offers.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

I wave him off. "It's fine. I can manage on my own."

He shows me exactly where to go and I walk out of the living room, following his directions and finding the bathroom easily. After doing my business, though, I start to get curious about the rest of the house. Figuring no one will mind me giving myself a little tour, I walk a little further inward, which turns out to be a huge mistake. The labyrinthine corridors of the mansion soon have me disoriented. As I turn yet another corner, I nearly collide with a small boy.

He steps back at the last minute and I falter before standing up straight, looking down at the kid with flushed cheeks.

"Hi," I greet bashfully.

He stands at about three-and-a-half feet, with a mop of dark, slightly tousled hair that contrasts strikingly with his light green eyes and his warm caramel-toned skin. Despite his young age, there's a certain seriousness in his gaze, a curiosity tempered with caution.

"Who are you?" he demands, his small brows knitting together in a frown.

My lips tilt up in a smile. He's such a cutie. Kneeling down to his level, I offer a gentle smile.

"Hi, there. I'm Emilia. I'm visiting with my siblings. What's your name?"

He hesitates as if weighing the risk of sharing personal information before replying,

“Sean.”

“Nice to meet you, Sean. I took a wrong turn and got lost. This house is so big. I feel like I’m in Oz.”

His frown eases slightly, a flicker of interest lighting up in his eyes. “Oz?”

I nod with a small laugh. “Yeah. It’s from a movie called *The Wizard of Oz*. The main character Dorothy gets transported to the magical land of Oz and she finds herself in a strange place, all alone.”

“She must have been sad,” the little boy says gently.

My heart aches a little at how easily he understood that.

“Yeah, she was. The movie was my favorite when I was younger. I used to read the book, too. They’re really fun.”

His green eyes brighten. “I’d like to read the book.”

Before I can respond, a deep, authoritative voice interrupts.

“Who the hell are you? And what are you doing with my son?”

I look up to see a man towering over us, his presence commanding and intense. He’s tall, with broad shoulders and a physique that suggests he works out often. His dark hair is neatly styled and his chiseled features could easily grace a magazine cover. However, the deep frown etched on his face adds a formidable edge to his handsomeness, making him appear unapproachable.

Rising to my feet, I feel a flush creep up my neck. But I refuse to let him intimidate

me.

“Hi. I’m Emilia.”

His eyes, a mirror of Sean’s striking green, narrow as they assess me.

“Sean, come here,” he calls for his son. The little boy immediately goes over to his father’s side.

His father steps closer, positioning himself protectively between me and his child.

“This is private property, Emilia,” he sneers. “And you’re currently trespassing.”

Geez, dramatic much?

“I promise I’m not,” I say quickly, keeping my voice steady. “I’m here with my siblings to meet Sterling Harrington.”

His gaze sharpens, and for a moment, I feel pinned under its intensity.

“I’m Sterling Harrington.”

Oh. Well, that checks out. He really is a jerk.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

“Who are your siblings?” he asks.

“Carson and Anika,” I reply sheepishly because really I wouldn’t be in this position if I hadn’t wanted to give myself a tour of someone else’s home. I was wrong. “I apologize for the intrusion, Mr. Harrington. It was an honest mistake.”

He studies me for a moment longer, the tension in his jaw easing slightly. Then he’s pulling his phone out of the pocket of his black pants. I stay silent as he types something in and two minutes later, Karl appears.

He shoots me a sharp look and I apologize as best as I can with my eyes.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Harrington. Miss Cameron seems to have wandered off,” he says to his boss.

Sterling turns up his aristocratic nose, the frown on his face not letting up in the slightest.

“She’s Carson’s sister?” he asks Karl suspiciously.

Dude, I already told you I was.

“Yes sir. She arrived with him and Miss Anika Cameron.”

“Alright then,” Sterling Harrington states, turning to me with a curt nod. “Karl will escort you back to the living room.”

As I follow the butler back, I feel the weight of Sterling Harrington's gaze on me, a mixture of suspicion and something else I can't quite place.

CHAPTER 4

Sterling

As soon as the woman's gone, I'm looking down at the quiet five-year-old at my side. I lean down so we're eye level, giving him my best disappointed expression. He avoids my eyes, making it clear he's aware he did something wrong.

"What have we said about talking to strangers, Sean?" I ask.

"You said I shouldn't do that," he replies.

"So you remember? Good. Now explain to me why were you talking to her?"

He shrugs. "She didn't look like a bad person. And she's pretty."

I pause at that. Now that I think about it, she was pretty, with her shiny blonde hair and dainty doll-like face. I've never met Emilia Cameron before but I have heard about her. Carson's long-lost sister.

She's fiery. I think back to how she stood her ground, her blue eyes meeting mine head on, something even some grown men are unable to do.

"Pretty people can be bad people, too," I tell Sean. "Just don't do that again. If you see a stranger, don't talk to them. Just walk away."

I'm actually surprised he engaged in a conversation with her. Sean's a socially reserved kid. He mostly keeps to himself, playing with his toys or reading a book.

“Okay, Daddy. Can I go play now?” he asks hopefully.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “You and I will go and greet our guests. I’ve kept them waiting long enough.”

His nose wrinkles. “Do I have to?”

I smile. He really does not like hanging out with other people.

“But the pretty woman from earlier will be there, too,” I point out to provide some incentive.

It works because his expression brightens. “Okay, I’ll go.”

It would seem Emilia Cameron is the exception when it comes to his feelings about human interaction. Interesting. He slips his hand into mine as I lead him to the living room. The Cameron siblings are there, standing in a half-circle and whispering about something.

If I was a betting man I’d say Emilia’s informing them about our interaction. She’s gesturing wildly with a frown on her face. I look from her to her brother, who’s listening to her with a shit-eating grin.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

Carson Cameron is, frankly, an idiot. But he's an idiot I've known my whole life. We grew up together, and most of my childhood memories involve Carson in one way or another. He's also a genuinely good person with a good heart. Growing up, kindness was a quality most of my family members, other than my father, didn't appreciate. But being around Carson helped to ensure I didn't turn out to be a completely unfeeling dick.

Although I'm sure some people would not agree with that.

Anika notices me first, and I double-take at the sight of her. The awkward teenager I knew back when I used to live in Edenton definitely grew up. I can't help a small smile as she squeals, walking toward me and Sean.

"Hey stranger," she says excitedly, her ponytail swinging.

"Anika Cameron," I greet with a small smirk. "Look who decided to grow up. I see you finally stopped wearing those weird glasses."

"I see you haven't changed much, jerk. I'd offer to hug you if I didn't know you have an aversion to human contact," she returns.

Carson speaks up then. "It's a good thing I don't care about that."

Before I can react, he's striding over, enveloping me in a bear hug. I tense at first before relaxing into the embrace. I return the gesture, patting his back with a semblance of affection.

“Nice to see you haven’t changed, Cameron,” I say warmly.

He pulls back, his hands resting on my shoulders as he studies me. I can see in his eyes that he wants to ask how I am and all that cheesy shit, but I break the eye contact to gesture to the small human who’s doing his best to pretend he’s invincible at my side.

“This is my son, Sean,” I introduce.

Sean shifts closer to my side, but I rest a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Both Camerons’ eyes are soft when they land on my son.

“Bud, this is my friend Carson, and that’s Anika, his little sister,” I tell him.

Carson leans down to offer him his hand for a shake. “Nice to meet you, little man. I’m Carson. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“I haven’t heard a lot about you,” Sean replies easily.

I inwardly groan at that. Carson chuckles.

“Oh yeah? I wouldn’t be surprised, knowing your dad. There’s probably a lot he hasn’t told you but it’s cool. Now that you’ve met your Uncle Carson, I’ll tell you everything. Ever heard of vampires?”

Anika slaps her brother’s shoulder. “Dude, he’s five.”

“What?”

They start bickering like they always do, and I’m glad to see that’s also something that hasn’t changed. I tune them out, my gaze going to the last Cameron sibling. The

unfamiliar one. She's hanging back, an awkward expression on her face. When her eyes meet mine, she offers me a small close-lipped smile.

Carson must notice that small interaction because he rises, moving to stand beside me.

"Em said you both already met," he states. "But I'll make the introductions anyway. Emilia's my long-lost sister. She moved to town about a year after you left."

I nod once. "Nice to meet you, Emilia."

"I can't tell if that's a lie or not," she murmurs.

Beside me, her brother chuckles. "Sterling's a pretty honest man, muffin. If he says it's nice to meet you, then it's nice to meet you."

"Fine." She steps forward, her hand lifting in the space between us. "I'm sorry again for 'trespassing.'"

I smirk, shaking her hand, which is dainty and warm in mine. "It's alright, Emilia. Water under the bridge."

She offers me a brighter smile at that and I feel the awkward air between us dissipate. Emilia Cameron seems like a formidable woman. I don't know her story, but something about the way she carries herself tells me she's had to make her way through the world with a certain type of strength.

I like that, respect it even.

It doesn't take long before Sean is asking to be excused. I allow him, and once he's gone, the Camerons and I settle down on the couches. We're served refreshments and

then we get to talking. Or should I say, they get to talking. Anika and Carson carry most of the conversation, each of them telling me about their lives in the past few years. Carson and I met once or twice in New York but, living in different cities, I haven't really had the chance to catch up with him.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

Emilia's mostly quiet, which makes me curious about her. I think she has a big personality of her own, but in the face of her siblings' louder personalities, she just blends into the background. It's pretty clear the three of them share a close bond, though. Anika must really like having a big sister; I remember how she used to follow Carson and me around all the time when she was little, demanding to be included.

The Camerons end their visit quickly. Carson still has to return to Greenville where his business is located, but he promises to hang out for longer during the weekend when he's in town. I say goodbye to my childhood friend and his sisters, grateful for the visit but a little bit glad to be on my own again.

Sean definitely gets his antisocial personality from me.

A familiar hum of activity greets me as soon as I step into the Edenton branch of Harrington Holdings. I took my grandfather's advice and accepted a position as executive manger here. Mostly because I haven't not worked since I was in college. And with everything going on, a break from work is the last thing I need. I wouldn't even know what to do with the free time. Except maybe overthink my existence.

The office, though more modest than our main headquarters, maintains an air of professionalism. Employees glance up from their workstations, their expressions a mix of curiosity and apprehension. I waste no time in gathering the department heads for a meeting in the conference room. Once everyone is seated, I begin.

"I've reviewed our recent performance metrics, and there are several areas requiring immediate improvement."

Handing out copies of the latest reports, I highlight concerns. “Our sales figures have declined by eight percent over the last quarter, and project completion times have increased by an average of two weeks. These trends are unacceptable. We need to streamline our operations and boost efficiency. I expect weekly progress updates from each department.”

The team members nod, diligently taking notes. I’m sure they’ve heard about my reputation and are fully aware of the standards I uphold.

Midway through the meeting, the head of acquisitions, who introduced herself earlier as Lisa Briggs, speaks up.

“Mr. Harrington, I feel the need to inform you about a potential investment opportunity we’ve been evaluating. There’s a parcel of land on Maple Street that we’ve been hoping to acquire. It’s occupied by a couple of small businesses and could be advantageous for our expansion plans.”

I lean back, considering the information. “Have we approached the business owners about this?”

“We’ve initiated discussions with some, but we anticipate the owner of the coffee shop might be especially resistant. I personally know her and she has a strong attachment to the place,” she responds.

Nodding thoughtfully, I decide, “Understood. I’ll handle the negotiations with her personally. It’s crucial we approach this delicately to ensure a smooth acquisition.”

There are nods of agreement all around. As the meeting concludes, I feel a renewed sense of purpose. Elevating the Edenton branch’s performance is imperative, and this potential land acquisition could be a strategic move in that direction.

After the meeting, I return to my office and pull up the property details for the parcel on Maple Street. The coffee shop, Emilia's Café, stands out as the centerpiece of the lot. My eyebrows rise as I read the name of the shop.

Emilia?

I make a call asking for more information on the owner of the café and my suspicions are confirmed. It would seem the newest Cameron and I are meant to keep running into each other.

Later that evening, I decide it might be prudent to pay the café a visit. A stakeout to gauge the best route for the acquisition. I drive through the familiar streets of Edenton, taking note of just how much has changed and how much of it is still the same.

The town exudes a quaint charm, with its tree-lined avenues and well-persevered architecture. I pass by the local bakery, its windows displaying an array of freshly baked goods, and the old bookstore, its sign slightly faded but still inviting. I used to spend a lot of my time in both those shops as a teenager.

Turning onto Maple Street, I spot the parcel of land in question. Like it was stated in the documents I examined, Emilia's Café is right in the middle. The exterior is painted a warm, inviting shade, and potted plants adorn the entrance, giving it a homely feel. I park my car across the street and take a moment to observe.

According to the report Lisa Briggs submitted on the café, it hasn't had a steady stream of customers in a while. Not after the shopping mall that our company recently finished in the town a couple months ago. There shouldn't be any reason not to sell the place.

Taking a deep breath, I exit the care and cross the street, the aroma of freshly brewed

coffee growing stronger with each step. I push open the door and a small bell chimes, announcing my arrival. The interior is cozy, with mismatched furniture that somehow fits together perfectly. Soft music plays in the background, and the walls are adorned with local art.

Behind the counter, Emilia is busy preparing a drink. She has on a white apron and her blonde hair is in a high ponytail that swishes behind her as she moves around behind the counter. She's attending to a man standing in front of the counter.

She looks up as I approach and our eyes meet. Recognition flickers in her face, followed by surprise.

"Sterling Harrington?" she asks, handing the customer his drink.

He thanks her with a small smile, and after a curt nod in my direction, he exits the shop.

"Emilia Cameron," I acknowledge her, standing in front of the counter.

She sizes me up a little, blue eyes moving over my face. "So, is there a reason you're currently in my shop?"

"To buy coffee?" I say it like it's a question.

She hums in disbelief. "I'm sure there's a café between here and wherever you came from that you could have bought coffee at. Try again."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

Okay, it's pretty clear she's not going to make this easy for me.

"I could be here for a friendly visit," I suggest.

"Except we're not friends and I don't know you. Plus you were pretty awful to me the first time we met."

"I thought we were past that. You hold grudges, don't you, Miss Cameron?"

"Yep," she says, popping the "p" in the word. "And you need to tell me why you're here."

I sigh softly. I might as well be direct in my approach. Grandfather always says there's no point beating around the bush. You just need to conquer it like everything else.

"Okay, so I'm not sure if you're aware, but I recently took over as the manager of our company's branch in Edenton. And I was hoping to speak to you about an acquisition the company's hoping to undertake. The land this café is on happens to be a part of the land we're hoping to acquire."

She takes all that in, her brows tugging together. Finally, she seems to piece it all together because her eyes widen. And then she proceeds to surprise me even further when she starts to laugh. I stand there patiently, waiting for her to get over her fit of laughter. I also pretend not to notice how her eyes get brighter when she smiles. It makes her look even more genuine. Beautiful.

“I’m not sure I said anything to provoke that kind of a response. What’s so funny?” I ask when her laughter subsides.

“You are, Mr. Harrington,” she says, wiping at the corner of her eyes. Her voice goes all serious and she makes sure to look me dead in the eye as she says, “There’s no way in hell I’m selling this shop to Harrington Holdings. So whatever it is you want to do or say will ultimately be useless. I’m not giving up this shop.”

My eyes narrow. I’ve always liked a challenge, and if she thinks I’m going to back down from this, then she’s sorely mistaken.

CHAPTER 5

Emilia

For some reason, people tend to underestimate me. Anika once told me it’s because they take one look at me with my blonde hair, blue eyes, and innocent face and decide that I’m this cute, sunshine-y girl next door.

I’m the opposite of that, though. For the first twenty years of my existence, the word “sunshine” couldn’t have been used to describe any part of my life. I’ve gone through shit, and I’ve only just started appreciating the finer things in life. My coffee shop is a part of that journey. It’s mine.

And I’ll be damned if some guy with millions in his bank account, with his custom-designed suit and sharp jawline, is going to walk in here and demand I leave my shop. That’s not going to happen. No fucking way.

Sterling Harrington’s brows furrow, a hint of irritation flashing in his pretty green eyes. And I hate that I’m noticing how pretty his eyes are right now, but they’re so distracting. How anyone can talk to him without getting lost in them is beyond me.

But I'd like to think I'm made of strong stuff.

"I'm here to have a reasonable conversation with you, Miss Cameron. I'm sure if we could just talk about it and negotiate, we'd find a common middle ground that's favorable to everyone involved," he says.

"Not interested," I reply smoothly.

A muscle ticks in his jaw and for some reason a part of me wants to push him. Make him lose control. He's like a six-foot-tall tightly wound ball of tension. Show me what you're really made of, Harrington. Game on.

"Why aren't you interested?" he asks tightly.

"Because selling my café isn't an option. Especially not to the company responsible for the decline in my business."

"Decline in your business?" he asks with a scoff.

I cross my arms, meeting his gaze head on. "Yes. Ever since Harrington Holdings opened that new shopping mall nearby, my customer base has dwindled. Small businesses like mine are struggling to keep up."

He straightens, a defensive edge to his posture.

"The mall has provided numerous opportunities for the community. If your business is suffering, perhaps it's due to other factors."

My jaw nearly flies open. Oh my God, the nerve of this man.

"Other factors? This café has been a staple in Edenton for years. My customers value

the personal touch, the community feel, things a corporate mall can't offer.”

His expression hardens. “Be that as it may, the reality is that businesses must adapt to survive. From what I can see, your establishment could use several improvements. The décor is dated, your marketing efforts are minimal, and your menu lacks innovation.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

His blunt assessment feels like a slap to the face.

“Excuse me? This ‘dated décor’ is what gives my café its charm. And as for marketing, I rely on word of mouth and loyal patrons. Not everyone wants a flashy, impersonal experience.”

He exhales sharply, clearly losing patience. “Ms. Cameron, sentimentality doesn’t pay the bills. Selling now would provide you with the capital to start anew, perhaps in a location more conducive to your business model.”

Anger flashes through me. “Start anew? This isn’t just a business to me, Mr. Harrington, and I’m not going to let you bully me into abandoning it.”

“No one is bullying you. I’m offering a practical solution to an inevitable problem.”

I take a step closer, my voice low. “The only inevitable thing here is that I will fight for my café. Now, I think it’s time for you to leave.”

His jaw tightens. “Be reasonable, Emilia.”

“Don’t call me that,” I snap, my eyes narrowing into a glare.

For a moment we stand in tense silence, the air thick with unspoken words. Finally, his lips tilt up in a smirk.

“Alright then, I’ll leave. But trust me when I say this, darling. You don’t want to fuck with me.”

Oh, please. “Go fuck yourself, Mr. Harrington.”

He glares at me for a second before turning and exiting the café. As soon as he’s gone, I release a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

Damn, that was intense. I really didn’t mean for the situation to escalate that much, but something about that man is really infuriating. It’s pretty obvious he’s gone through life without being told no or had anything taken from him.

I look forward to knocking him down a few pegs.

Seeing as I’ve basically declared war on a multimillion dollar corporation, I decide it might be a good idea to see an expert who could give me some advice on my position. And that expert is... my dad.

I pull up to my dad’s house, a classic two-story home nestled on a quiet street. It has a well-manicured lawn with a garden on the side that my stepmother Priya tends to every single day. I walk up the stone pathway leading into the house and I don’t bother knocking before I push the door open.

As soon as I do, I’m immediately assaulted by the delicious aroma of dinner. The house is pretty warm on the inside and I can hear the distant clatter of pots from the kitchen, which means I came at the exact right time.

“Dad,” I call out, stepping into the living room.

“Is that my beautiful daughter I hear calling out for me?” a soft baritone voice questions right before I step into view.

I laugh as my father, Jeremiah Cameron, rises from his favorite armchair, a broad smile spreading across his face. He’s in his early fifties, with salt-and-pepper hair and

wire-rimmed glasses perched on his nose. He pulls me into a big warm hug that I will never grow tired of.

My dad's a really warm person. He just exudes kindness. Which is why it makes me tear up at times that I missed out on experiencing his warmth in my childhood.

"It's good to see you, Dad," I murmur.

"You too, sweetheart. How have you been?"

"Good, good." I shrug.

He offers me a knowing look, "To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit? Considering I just saw you two days ago, I'm guessing something's wrong."

"Nah," I say, waving him off with an innocent expression. "I just missed you."

His eyes twinkle. "I'd believe that if I didn't know you were lying. But I'm not going to complain about seeing you, Em."

"Is Priya in the kitchen?"

He nods. "Yeah, she's making dinner."

I grin. "I see I have perfect timing, as always. I'll see if she needs any help."

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

He gestures for me to head inside and I do, making my way to the kitchen, the scent of the food growing stronger. Priya is standing at the stove, her long dark hair pulled back into a neat braid. Her caramel skin glows in the warm light and her bangles jingle softly as she stirs a pot.

“Hi, Priya,” I greet, leaning against the doorway.

She turns, her face lighting up. “Emilia! What are you doing here, honey?”

I step over to give her a hug as well. I can’t think of anyone more well suited to each other than my stepmother and my father. The two of them just have the same energy; they’re perfect for each other. They’ve been married for over twenty years and their marriage is still as strong as ever.

“I just came for a quick drop in,” I tell her on a shrug.

She gives me a look, her brown eyes shining with disbelief. I groan softly, looking up at the ceiling.

“Why do neither you or Dad believe me on that?”

“We’d have an easier time believing you if you came home more often,” Priya says, pinching my cheeks. “But you came at the best time. I’m making honey-chili chicken and rice. Nothing too special.”

“It’s always special when you make it, Priya,” I say sincerely.

She smiles. “Why don’t you set the table? Dinner will be ready soon.”

I immediately get to it, grabbing plates and utensils. I still plan to ask my dad about the café, but I’ll do that after our meal. We have our food at the table and after thanking Priya and raving about how amazing her cooking is, because it really is, we get to eating.

They both ask me a few questions, nothing too serious. At least until Priya asks if I’ve gotten a boyfriend. My answer is short and sweet.

“Nope.”

She sighs. “Honestly, honey, I don’t know what you’re waiting for. You’re young and gorgeous and amazing. Anyone would be lucky to date you.”

“That’s true,” my father agrees, reaching for his glass of juice and taking a huge gulp. “But I also wouldn’t mind you moving back in here and living with us forever.”

I grin. “Dad...”

“What? I miss you and your sister. I don’t understand why you both felt the need to move out.”

“Because we’re independent young women who can’t live with their parents for the rest of their lives?”

He makes a face at that. “Says who?”

“I don’t see you petitioning for Carson to move back home,” I point out. “And he’s been gone for ages. Plus he doesn’t even live in Edenton.”

“Carson’s a big boy. You and Nika are my babies.”

I smile, my heart swelling at his words.

“But really, Em. You need to put yourself out there. Let yourself fall in love, be happy,” Priya states.

“Those two things don’t necessarily go together,” I point out.

The both of them nod in agreement, understanding in their gaze.

“You’re right about that, honey. But you won’t know unless you try.”

I clear my throat. “Honestly, no one’s even asked me out or anything.”

Priya gasps. “Don’t even think about lying, Emilia Cameron. Nika told me all about that guy who always comes in to buy coffee at your shop.”

I inwardly groan. Anika and her big mouth.

“Yeah, but he just comes in and smiles a little at me. He hasn’t really said anything. I think he’s shy.” I shrug.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

“Aw, that’s adorable.”

“Who is this guy? Where does he work?” my dad asks curiously.

“No,” I say, pointing my fork at him. “There’s nothing going on between me and him. Retract your claws, Daddy.”

He beams at that. The conversation dies down and we finish our meal. I help Priya load the plates into the dishwasher and once we’re done, the three of us head into the living room.

“Alright, come on,” my dad says, leaning forward in his chair. He’s fond of a direct approach. He’s always saying that whatever problems we have, we bring them straight to him. “Lay it on us, darling. What’s wrong?”

Priya bumps her shoulder with mine at my side, a silent encouragement.

“I wouldn’t say something’s wrong, per se. I might just... need a lawyer.”

The both of them are momentarily silent at that. Then my dad chuckles.

“What did you do, baby? Kill someone?”

“What? No! But it’s nice to know you’d have my back if I did.” I grin.

“We’d bury the body for you if you needed us to, honey,” Priya adds supportively.

“I need the lawyer because I might be entering into a legal battle with Harrington Holdings.”

Dad’s eyes widen in surprise. “Why?”

“I had a visit from Sterling Harrington earlier today?—”

“Oh, yeah,” he interrupts. “I heard Sterling was back in town. How is he doing?”

I huff out a breath. “I couldn’t care less about how he’s doing, Dad. They want me to sell them my café. They’re looking to acquire the land my shop and the surrounding shops are on for some new development project.”

“Hmm,” he says thoughtfully. “That’s a tricky situation. And you have no interest in selling?”

I shake my head, “Absolutely not. And even if I did, I wouldn’t sell it to them.”

“The Harringtons aren’t bad people, sweetheart,” Dad says on a laugh. “I’m good friends with Sterling’s dad, actually. Although I haven’t seen him in years.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better or worse about the hell I’m about to raise on them?” I question.

My dad’s blue eyes narrow.

“Just kidding, Dad,” I mutter. “Maybe. It’s just Sterling Harrington really pissed me off. And I was already angry about that shopping mall and how it’s making things so bad for small businesses in town.”

“But you can’t blame Harrington Holdings for wanting to make the town better,

sweetheart,” my dad offers.

“Sure I can,” I reply cheerfully. “At the very least, I can stop them from building whatever resort or golf course they plan to put on the land they acquire.”

“I don’t think you can stop them, honey. But you can delay them,” he says, eyes twinkling. “First, tell me what Sterling did to piss you off?”

“What didn’t he do? He was just really rude and arrogant, Dad. He was a jerk.”

“Sterling’s a good kid, though,” Priya interjects with a small smile. “I remember when they were little. Sterling would be at our house all the time. He practically ate dinner here every single night as a teenager. He and Carson were glued at the hip.”

“I’m sure he was the most adorable teenager,” I say sarcastically. “Now he’s a man intent on ruining my livelihood.”

Dad chuckles. “Sterling can be a little rough around the edges, from what I can remember. I blame that on him being raised mostly by Sebastian. His grandfather was especially hard on him.”

“Everyone in that house except Steven was hard on him,” Priya adds. “I can’t imagine how he’s feeling now with all the rumors. Steven was his only support in that house, and if it turns out that he’s not his real father...”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

My dad sighs. “I hope it all works out for him.”

“Hello,” I say, waving my hand in the air between them. “This isn’t a pity party for Sterling Harrington.”

“We’re not pitying him, honey,” Priya corrects. “We’re just sympathetic towards his plight.”

Honestly, I do feel a bit bad about what he’s going through. But any sympathy I could have had for him eroded after our conversation today.

“Be that as it may. Dad, I need suggestions on how to bring him down.”

“You’re really serious about this?” he asks on a smile.

I nod. He takes in my expression before clearing his throat. He pulls off his glasses, which is when I know he’s really getting down to business. He might be blind as a bat without them but hey, visual effect, right?

“How far are you willing to go, hon? The best thing you can do in your position is to delay the project, which will no doubt be a lot of trouble for the company.”

My dad used to be a property manager before he retired, which is how I knew he’d have good advice for me on how best to handle this matter.

“But it’s not like they can force me to sell it or take the matter to court, right?”

“No, I don’t think it works like that. You have a lease agreement that protects your tenancy on the land for a specific period and they can’t illegally bulldoze your shop or push through with the development without your consent. At the end of the day, you currently have the power. You’d be a pretty big thorn in their side if you stand your ground, because they wouldn’t be able to proceed.”

I beam at that. “That’s just what I needed to hear, Dad. Thank you.”

“But if they’re intent on acquiring the land, honey, it could be way more than you can handle,” he adds. “How about you have another conversation with Sterling? I’m sure you can come to a good enough compromise. I say you milk them for as much money as you can for the shop and start anew. How does that sound?”

“Not interested,” I murmur, my back hitting the back of the couch.

I understand he was a businessman and he’s always going to consider maximizing profit; Carson takes after him in that aspect. But I really can’t imagine selling my shop. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. I was so happy to have finally built something, made my mark in this town. I finally felt like I belonged, and losing my shop feels like I’d lose that feeling.

“If you’re really set on keeping your shop, honey, then your dad or Carson could talk to Sterling for you,” Priya suggests warmly. “I’m sure they could get him to back off. Find somewhere else. Edenton’s a big town. There’s always new places to develop.”

“Asking Dad or Carson for help is the same as admitting defeat to Sterling Harrington,” I scoff. “That’s not happening.”

I don’t miss Priya and my dad trading a look. And then she gets this smile on her face that causes me to narrow my eyes.

“What?”

“Nothing, darling,” she replies. “But it does feel like this entire thing is personal. Maybe you’re acting like this especially because of Sterling.”

I don’t miss the suggestion in her tone. I groan softly.

“Please don’t tell me you think this is all because I might like him. I’ve met him twice and both those encounters have left a bitter taste in my mouth. Plus, isn’t he married?” I question. “I met his son the day Nika, Carson, and I went to their estate for a visit. He’s an adorable kid—I’m sure he gets that from his mom.”

“Sterling was married, but I heard he got divorced a while ago.”

“That information is honestly irrelevant to me.” I shrug. “Can we please stop talking about Sterling Harrington now?”

Priya links her arm with mine, her gaze heavy with suggestion. “Just saying, your dad and I didn’t like each other either when we first met.”

“Please, stop,” I say, shutting my eyes to get rid of any mental imagery that threatens to arise.

“Honestly, sweetheart, all I can tell you is that you should do whatever you think is best. We’ll support you regardless.”

“I know you will.”

I have no doubt that there’s nothing there’s wouldn’t do for me. I wonder if they’d go to the same lengths for Anika and Carson. Probably not. I’m sure they don’t think they owe them as much considering they raised them and took care of them

throughout their childhood.

A part of me wonders if there'll ever come a day when my family doesn't treat me differently because of the guilt they feel. I'm beyond grateful that they care so much, but the reality is that they'll always look at me through this special lens. They've treated me with kid gloves since I showed up on their doorstep four years ago.

I don't think that's how family is supposed to be.

CHAPTER 6

Sterling

My hands fly over the keys on my laptop as I type out a report on my first week here in Edenton and how things have been going at the company. Despite technically banishing me and tossing me to the side, my grandfather insists on knowing every single action, whether big or small, I'm taking here in the town. The man runs a tight ship and has singlehandedly kept this family afloat for a very long time.

Deep down, there's a part of me that feels like I'm disappointing him. That the news and the rumors are somehow my fault. I shouldn't have to take responsibility for being born, though. Or for a secret that was kept from me all my life.

There's a knock on the door of the office that connects to my bedroom, and I lift my head from the screen to call for whoever's on the other side to come in. It's Karl. He walks through my bedroom and through the open door leading into the office. He offers me a curt nod before speaking.

"Sir, Mr. Cameron has arrived."

I nod. "Okay. I'll be down in a couple of minutes. You can show him to the bar and I'll join him there."

He leaves and I take a few minutes to close my laptop and throw on a shirt before

exiting my room and heading down to the first floor. I check on Sean before I do so, though. He's fast asleep in his bed, which is good. But I know he'll be up in a couple of hours.

My son's not the best sleeper. It's currently 8 p.m., but I know he'll be up again by two. It's a good thing I don't sleep much either so we usually hang out in the middle of the night until he goes back to sleep again.

I honestly think he doesn't sleep much because he misses his mom. He used to sleep a lot more when she was still around. I sigh softly as I shut his bedroom door.

Carson's already helped himself to a drink by the time I show up. He raises his glass in greeting once he spots me at the entrance.

"Hey, man," he greets.

I take a seat on the stool beside him. "Hey. Thanks for coming."

"No problem. If his royal highness beckons for me to arrive at his castle, then I'll be there."

I roll my eyes. It's really nice to see that Carson hasn't changed much. He's still the same immature dumbass he was when we were kids. But then again, I know he has changed a lot as well. Especially when I consider all he's been able to achieve while I was gone.

"Thanks for coming over. I would have met you outside but I can't very well leave at night because of Sean."

"Yeah, sure. I totally get it. It's a little surreal to see you as a dad, though. You've come a long way, Sterling. Remember how you said you'd never start a family of

your own?"

My jaw ticks at that. "I meant it."

Carson raises an eyebrow in question. My lips thin and I decide to pour myself a drink as well before saying anything else. I reach for a bottle of vodka, pouring it straight into a glass before taking a swig. It burns going down my throat, but after so many years of drinking, it's more of an enjoyable burn.

"Sean is..." I blow out a breath. "The best thing that's ever happened to me. That kid is the most important thing in my life and I would do anything to protect him. But my ex-wife and I, we didn't exactly plan to have him. He was an accident. One I'm so grateful for now, but thinking back on it, when we first had him, I was so young. I didn't plan to have a kid at twenty-four."

Carson nods in understanding. "Yeah, I get that. But these things happen and for what it's worth, I think you're a great father."

"Sean makes it pretty easy. He's a great kid," I say with pride. "But enough about that. I asked you here for a reason."

"Always straight to the point, Harrington. Let me guess, you want to talk about my sister?" he questions. "I heard all about this fight the two of you are current in."

"It's not a fight," I grit out.

Over the past couple of days, I've sent both my head of acquisitions and the company's general manager to talk to Emilia Cameron, to show her the contract we've been preparing for business owners on the lot and see if she's keen on selling. I thought she'd be more inclined to speak to them, since our last conversation didn't go well. But they got the same answer from her.

A big fat no.

“Your sister’s a big pain in my ass,” I mutter.

Carson chuckles. “While I’m not interested in getting in the middle of whatever’s going on, I will say that it’s nice to see her getting under your skin like this. The great Sterling Harrington being rattled, never thought I’d see the day. Most people usually fall over their feet to do stuff for you when you ask.”

“She’s not getting under my skin,” I counter. “But she’s been a thorn in my side and I need you to talk to her. You own a financial advisory firm, surely you can advise your sister on the benefits she’ll be getting if she just backs down and sells her shop.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

“Yeah, no, I can’t. No one gets Emilia to do what she doesn’t want to do.”

I roll my eyes at that. It’s becoming clear he’s not going to help me on this.

“Where did she even come from, anyway?” I ask.

“Hm?” Carson says with his mouth around his glass.

“Emilia,” I clarify. “Is she really your sister?”

The question feels a little dumb. A person only has to look at them together to see that they’re siblings. She’s like the female version of Carson with curves, full lips, and legs for days.

“Yeah, she is,” Carson replies, his tone becoming serious. “She showed up on my dad’s doorstep four years ago. Man, I can’t even begin to tell you how awful it was back then. We just woke up one morning and there was this skinny twenty-one-year-old girl with blonde hair and bright blue eyes that looked like they’d seen a lot of shit. She introduced herself as Emilia Sutter, then said Dad was her biological father. I had a hard time believing it, but Dad immediately knew she was telling the truth.”

“Must have been hard,” I say sympathetically.

“Yeah, it was. Emilia had been living with the woman who gave birth to me her whole life. Her name was Olivia. Olivia and my dad got divorced when I was like four years old. I don’t even remember her, but my dad’s told me stories of how awful she was. A drug addict, emotionally abusive. He said once he realized he didn’t have

a future with a woman like that, he got me out and away from her as soon as he could. But he had no idea Olivia was pregnant when he left. We relocated here to Edenton and dad never looked back, never bothered to see how Olivia was doing after. If he had, he would have known she gave birth to a little girl, his daughter, and she didn't even tell him. It kills me to think about what Emilia must have gone through living with that woman," he says sadly.

"Why did she come looking for you after so long?" I ask.

He shrugs. "She said she just found out about us and made her way here. Emilia doesn't really talk about her life before moving to Edenton. I think she just needed us to accept her into our lives and once we did, it's like she's locked up her old life and thrown away the key. We know nothing about it. Dad tried to look for Olivia but nothing's come up. I think a part of him keeps waiting for Olivia to show up or something, but I couldn't care less if I'm honest. That woman had better not show up again in our lives. She's dead to me, and I hope she's dead to Em as well."

I don't speak for a couple of seconds. My hand swipes across my mouth as I clear my throat.

"She's going to be pissed if she ever finds out I told you about this. I'm serious, Sterling."

"Yeah, I got it," I assure him.

"Now that you know now, just go easy on her, alright? She's been through a hard time and that café means a lot to her."

"I feel bad for her but I'm not giving up on getting that land," I say after a couple minutes.

Carson laughs. “Yeah, I knew you were going to say that. You and Emilia are actually quite similar. You know that, right?”

I make a face at that. “Look, I hear you. And I’ll consider a better approach to the negotiations with her. I’ll be nicer and more appealing.”

“Sounds like you’re talking about someone else.” Carson grins. “Do you even know how to be any of those things?”

“Sure I do,” I mutter.

“Good luck then,” he states, clapping my shoulder. “Just remember, I may have known you my whole life, unlike Em. But she’s my sister. If you hurt you, I’ll make you pay.”

I meet his gaze and the firmness in his voice makes it clear he’s not kidding. I didn’t think he was. Carson likes to pretend he’s an idiot, but he’s secretly one scary motherfucker. I once watched him beat up a guy for harassing Anika when she was thirteen. He’s not a person to be trifled with.

“Yeah, I got it,” I tell him.

It’s another Monday when I make my way to Emilia’s café, bright and early. I park my car in the same spot as the last time before making my way into the shop. She’s not behind the counter today. Instead, she’s seated at one of the tables, biting the corner of her bottom lip absentmindedly while she scrolls through her phone.

She doesn’t immediately look up, perhaps too distracted by whatever’s on her phone, but once she does, she freezes. And then her lips pull up in smirk. She slowly rises to her feet.

“Are you here to accept defeat?” she asks cockily.

My eyebrows rise and I give her a look that conveys that that will never happen.

The nerve of this woman, seriously. I ignore the way her hips swish as she walks over to stand in front of me. She’s wearing a white skirt paired with a frilly blouse and there’s a gold necklace hanging around her neck, the word “survive” written on the pendant. She catches me staring at it and her gaze narrows right before she tucks it into her shirt.

“What are you doing here, Sterling Harrington?”

I make a show of looking around, followed by an awkward cough. “I’m here to get coffee,” I mutter.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

She quirks a brow. “Really?”

“Yes. Are you going to take my order or not?”

Her eyes slide across my face for a minute before she shrugs.

“Alright,” she finally says, walking toward the counter. “What can I get you today?”

I tap my fingers against the smooth surface that separates us before replying. “Coffee, black.”

She makes a small snorting sound. It’s kind of cute.

“Why am I not surprised? Black like your soul?”

“Very funny.” I smirk. “You talk to all your customers like that?”

She offers me a smile sharp enough to cut. “Only the special ones.”

“Then I’m flattered.”

“And by special I meant rude dickheads who think they own everywhere their feet touch,” she retorts, handing me my coffee.

“Cute,” I murmur, collecting the cup.

“That’ll be ten dollars.”

My eyes widen. “For a simple black coffee?”

“Yes. And for subjecting me to the sight of your face this early on a Monday morning,” she adds.

My lips twitch. But I hand her my card for payment all the same.

“I’m being really patient here, Ms. Cameron. How about we cut back on the sass?”

“No,” she replies without hesitation. “Now that you have your coffee, how about you tell me why you’re really here? More threats?”

“I didn’t threaten you,” I state.

“No, you just sent Lisa and that uptight manager guy to tell me that ‘you’d be pursuing legal solutions if I continue to be obstinate.’ Really rude, by the way. Lisa and I are friends; you didn’t have to send her to do your dirty work.”

Interesting that she doesn’t seem to know that her “friend” was the one who suggested this lot for the development.

“It wasn’t dirty work,” I grit out, feeling a headache start to creep up in my skull.

“Listen, can we just sit down and talk for a couple of minutes?”

She crosses her arms over her chest, her expression not budging.

My jaw tightens. “Please?”

“Fine,” she says on a sigh. “Five minutes, Sterling Harrington.”

She steps out from behind the counter and I let her lead me to the table she was sitting

at. She retakes her seat and I sit down opposite her.

“So...” she prompts. “What else have you got to threaten me with on this fine day?”

“Actually, I’m here to apologize,” I say a tad bit forceful on that last word. “Looking back, I realize I didn’t handle our past interactions in the right manner. And I’m sorry about that. You’re a Cameron—your brother and I are close friends, and our families are close as well. The two of us being on bad terms isn’t ideal.”

“Interesting. I see you’re going for emotional blackmail next,” she states, sounding unimpressed. “It’s not going to work, Harrington.”

I take a sip of coffee to hide my lip turning up. “Okay, so what is going to work?” I ask, leaning back in my chair. “I’m willing to do anything in my power to ensure this development works out. And for that I need you to cooperate, Ms. Cameron.”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:15 am

She doesn't say anything for several seconds, her studious gaze never leaving my face.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I ask self-consciously.

She blinks once before her lips tilt up in a smirk.

"I'm just wondering if it's killing you to be so civil to me. You're like a shapeshifter. I'm having a hard time thinking of you as the same dickhead I met last week."

I inwardly sigh, asking for strength from some higher power. "I'm trying my best here, Ms. Cameron."

"Save it. Why are you being so nice, anyway?"

"Because I'm a good person?" I suggest.

She does that cute snorting thing again. "Yeah, right."

I watch as she thinks something over, her expression distant before her eyes widen.

"Please tell me someone didn't put you up to this. Carson?"

Seeing as I refuse to lie, I simply stay quiet. Her eyes narrow and I watch as her fists clench.

"I can't believe he talked to you, and what? Asked you to go easy on me? Be nicer?"

“Your brother’s not the reason I’m acting like this,” I state. “I’m doing this because I handled the matter in poor taste at the beginning. I’m usually better at keeping my cool, but for some reason you can be pretty aggravating.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Now, are you going to leave or do I need to ask you to?”

A muscle twitches in my forehead and my eyes narrow. Our gazes connect and hold for I don’t even know how long. Then we hear the doorbell chime and Emilia looks up at the person who enters. I don’t turn around, my eyes still fixed on the infuriating woman across from me.

“Hey, Emilia,” a feminine voice says.

I hear footsteps walking toward us, which is when I finally look up. It’s a young woman with brown hair and a smile on her face.

“Paige, you’re here early. How was your night?” Emilia asks, her tone friendly and warm.

“It was okay. Is something wrong?”

“Nothing,” Emilia replies. “Mr. Harrington was just leaving,”

My jaw clenches but, having no other choice, I rise to my feet, gripping the coffee cup in my hand.

“This isn’t over, Ms. Cameron.”

“Don’t let the door hit your face on the way out, Sterling Harrington,” she says sharply.

CHAPTER 7

Emilia

Paige squeals as soon as Sterling Harrington walks out the door. I inhale a steady breath. I wonder what it is about his presence that always manages to throw me off-kilter. I think it's his energy. Mine must be repelling his.

"Was that really Sterling Harrington? As in the famous Sterling Harrington?" my part-timer questions.

"Famous for what? Being an ass?" I say drily.

"Oh, come on, Emilia," Paige gushes. "Apart from him being one of the most attractive men I've ever seen, his family's also, like, mega rich."

"I know," I murmur. "About his family being rich, not about him being an attractive man or whatever," I feel the need to clarify.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

Paige stares at me in disbelief. “Please tell me you’re joking. Anyone with eyes can see how unfairly good looking that man is.”

I frown. “Paige, sweetie. He’s too old for you.”

“I know that,” she hurriedly says. “It doesn’t even matter, especially after feeling all that tension when I walked in here.”

“What tension are you talking about?” I ask, my frown deepening.

“The sexual kind,” she says in a whisper, making me gasp.

“Paige Lornan!” I chide. “I know you’re eighteen, but keep it PG.”

She rolls her eyes. “Seriously, Em. He was looking at you with those otherworldly green eyes like he wanted to rip your clothes off. How can you even look into his eyes? I’d be nervous as hell.”

Trust me, sweetie. It’s not easy. I laugh, despite the sudden unevenness of my heart rate.

“Yeah you’ve got it all wrong,” I tell her. “Not only do I dislike him, but you walked in on us having an argument. That’s the tension you were sensing.”

“I don’t know, Emilia,” Paige sings. “My sister always says fighting’s the best form of foreplay.”

Seriously, what is it with people and trying to pair me with that dark-haired Lucifer? I'm not interested. Plus, he looks like a player. I'm not necessarily saying he is one, considering he does have a little kid and he was married, but a man like that would definitely be more trouble than he's worth.

"You are completely wrong. And you also have work to do," I say to the moon-eyed teenager in front of me.

"Just think about it, okay?" Paige says on a laugh.

I shake my head. "That's the last thing I want to do. Sterling Harrington will not be occupying more space in my head than necessary."

Paige is still laughing as she heads into the kitchen to get started on making some fresh pastries for the day. Which is a good thing because a couple minutes later, we get our first customer. Although technically Sterling Harrington was our first customer.

I think back to the way he tried to hide his smile earlier. It was kind of cute. He tries very hard to project these fuck-off vibes to the rest of the world, but he's not fooling me. Deep down, I'm sure he has a heart.

I'm not saying I'd like to be the one to draw it out, though.

Ugh, keep him out of your headspace, Emilia.

"Hi, what can I get you today?" I say with a warm smile to the middle-aged woman in front of me.

The only thing I need to be thinking of right now is saving my café.

I'm sprawled on my couch, the soft hum of the television serving as background noise, when Anika bursts through the door. Her energy fills the room instantly.

"Em, you won't believe what I scored!" she exclaims, waving two tickets in the air.

I raise an eyebrow. "I'm sure you're going to tell me."

She rolls her eyes before plopping down beside me. "Now I don't feel like telling you. A little more excitement would be nice. Match my energy, sissy."

I inhale a soft breath before getting into character.

"Whoo!" I exclaim, raising my hands in the air and giving her my best smile. "I'm so excited. What tickets have you got there, Nika?"

"Feels very fake," she says, wrinkling her nose.

I shrug before lying back down on the couch. "You just can't please some people."

"Anyway, I got tickets to the new musical that's playing at Rocky's Playhouse. It's called *Hadestown* and I think it'll be really good."

"Sounds... interesting."

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“Come on, Em! You’ve been so focused on your café these past few weeks. You need a break. Let’s go together,” Anika pleads, her eyes wide with hope.

I sigh, glancing around my cozy living room. The thought of dressing up and going out feels exhausting.

“I don’t know, Ani. I’m really tired,” I tell her.

We actually had an influx of customers at the café today, which was really needed. And then I went to the grocery store after work. I don’t have any energy left. Plus, I have to be at the café again bright and early tomorrow morning.

My sister nudges me playfully, “You sound like an eighty-year-old grandma and not a young beautiful twenty-five-year-old.”

“Maybe I’m an eighty-year-old grandma at heart,” I mumble.

She pouts, her brown eyes growing softer, and I inwardly groan, feeling a pang of guilt. We’ve both been so busy lately, and it’s been ages since we had a sisters’ night out.

“Alright,” I relent, smiling. “Let’s do it.”

Anika squeals with delight. “Great! I’ll pick your outfit.”

I laugh, watching her dart into my bedroom. Her enthusiasm is contagious and I find myself looking forward to the evening.

An hour later, we're dressed and ready. Anika has chosen a deep blue dress for me, one that hugs my curves and brings out the color of my eyes. She's opted for a vibrant red dress herself, her dark hair cascading in loose waves.

"You look stunning," she says, appraising me.

"Thanks, little sis. So do you."

We arrive at Rocky's Playhouse, which is a charming venue known for its great productions. The lobby is buzzing with patrons, all eagerly anticipating the performance. As we find our seats, I take in our surroundings. The theater is cozy, with rows of plush seats facing a modest stage.

The lights dim soon after we arrive, and the play begins. Before I arrived at Edenton, I'd never even watched a musical. I couldn't have cared less about them. But little plays like these are what helped Anika and me to bond. It was pretty hard for her in the beginning, for both of us. She was unused to having a big sister and I had no idea how I was supposed to treat her.

But now, I don't think she treats me any differently than she would treat her big sister, despite what she thinks she knows about what I've experienced. And I'm so beyond grateful to her for that.

The play is pretty nice. The actors deliver their lines with passion, their voices harmonizing beautifully during the musical numbers. I find myself easily engrossed in the story and the play concludes with a powerful finale that has the audience erupting into applause.

Anika turns to me, her face glowing. "Wasn't that amazing?" she gushes.

I nod. "It really was. Thanks for dragging me out tonight."

“Sure,” she says, bumping her shoulder with mine. “I have a responsibility as your younger sister to make sure you’re not a geriatric at twenty-five.”

I laugh. She’s telling me her favorite moments of the play as we make our way to the exit. But then I spot someone standing in one of the rows of the theater and for some insane reason, my heart stutters.

Only slightly, out of surprise.

Sterling Harrington is there. The soft lightning of the theater accentuates his strong jawline and the hint of stubble on his face. He’s so annoyingly attractive. Anika notices me staring at me and follows my line of sight.

“Oh, that’s Sterling,” she says in surprise, already raising her hand to wave him over. “Ster?—”

“No!” I interject, dragging her hand down. “I’ve had three whole days without talking or seeing that man, and I have no interest in starting again now.”

Anika smiles at me like I’m talking nonsense. “Oh, come on, Em. We can just say hi to him as friends.”

“We’re not friends,” I reply. “Now let’s go.”

She pauses, looking back at the man who’s now looking around the theater, his jaw ticking.

“Is he searching for something?” I ask unconsciously. “You know what? I don’t care.”

I practically drag Anika out of there and inhale a soft breath at having escaped yet

another confrontation with Sterling Harrington. We're almost at the door leading outside the building when I spot a tiny human peeking out from behind a pillar. He seems to be hiding, a small smile on his face.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

Anika sees a friend of hers around the same time I spot the little boy. She asks for a minute while I continue staring at the kid, realizing he must be who Sterling's searching for.

"Hey there," I say gently to Sean, approaching him. "Are you okay?"

He looks up at me, green eyes soft. "I'm hiding from my dad."

"Why?"

"Because," he says on a shrug.

I'm sure to a five-year-old, simply answering "because" might cut it. But that's not happening. I crouch down so we're eye level.

"I think your dad's already looking for you, Sean," I say softly. "Why did you feel the need to hide?"

He shrugs, "I just didn't like being in there anymore. I made my dad bring me but I didn't like it so I left."

"Without telling him?" I prod gently.

He seems to realize that he made a mistake because his eyes grow wide.

"Do you think he'll be mad?"

“No.” I shake my head, taking a deep breath. “I think he’ll be really glad to have found you. Let’s go see him now, okay?”

Taking his hand, I help him navigate through the departing crowd. I spot Sterling near the entrance, his expression a mix of worry and frustration.

“Harrington,” I call out, approaching him.

He turns, surprise flickering across his face. It turns to relief when he sees the little boy at my side.

“I believe this belongs to you,” I say, gently nudging Sean forward.

Sterling’s face softens with relief. “I was worried sick, Sean.”

He looks down, shuffling his feet. “Sorry, Dad.”

Sterling crouches down and pulls him into a hug. “Just don’t wander off like that again, okay?”

I feel like I’m having whiplash right now, because he’s so soft with him. Compared to the energy he projects to the rest of the world, there’s something incredibly heartwarming about the way he treats his son. It makes him seem so human. Which is the last thing I need right now.

I need to see him like a bug so I can squash him.

He looks up at me, his eyes meeting mine. The stare lingers for a bit before he slowly rises to his feet, holding Sean’s hand tight in his.

“I got distracted reading an email on my phone and in the next minute he was gone,”

he says to me.

“Didn’t ask for an explanation, Harrington,” I mutter, looking around awkwardly.

“But you do have my thanks,” he states. “I appreciate you bringing Sean back to me.”

“You’re welcome.” Do my ears deceive me or are we actually having a civil conversation?

“We’ll go now,” Sterling informs me. “Tell her goodbye, Sean.”

“Bye, pretty lady,” he says enthusiastically with a small wave.

“Her name’s Emilia,” Sterling grits out, making me laugh.

“Bye, Emilia,” Sean switches.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

I smile. “Stay out of trouble, Sean.”

I watch as Sterling leads his son away. Which is when my sister shows up again at my side.

“Thought you said you weren’t going to talk to him,” she says, nudging my shoulder.

When I look at her, there’s a suggestive smile on her face.

“What?” I exclaim. “The man lost his son and I brought him back to him. No need to read into anything.”

“I’m not,” Anika lies, but I can still see that glint in her eyes.

“You guys are driving me crazy,” I mutter.

And I swear all these looks and comments are starting to get to me because now I’m having a hard time thinking of Sterling Harrington as the enemy.

Fuck.

CHAPTER 8

Sterling

“Hey bud,” I say, walking into Sean’s room.

He's on the floor in front of his bed, playing with two race cars. He looks up with a frown.

"Dad, it's play time," he complains.

I chuckle, heading over to ruffle his hair before settling down on his bed. Sean's a kid that values routines. Not strictly, but he does have a particular time he eats his meals and plays. But when it comes to his reading time and sleeping, the cards are off the table.

"I just wanted to talk to you about yesterday," I start. "You disappearing on me like that. You can't do that, Sean. It's dangerous. What if something had happened to you?"

He fell asleep on the car ride back home and I had to leave early this morning for work so I couldn't talk to him about his disappearing act yesterday. He scared the shit out of me. I literally took my eyes off him for a minute and then he was gone. It would be more worrying if this was a regular occurrence, but that's the first time he's done something like that.

He's usually very well behaved.

"Sorry, Daddy," he says, biting his bottom lip. "It won't happen again."

I smile. "But are you sure nothing happened? You can talk to me, Sean. I'm always on your side," I say gently.

He avoids my gaze at that, looking down at the toy cars on the floor. Which confirms my suspicions that something did happen yesterday.

My tone grows more serious. "Sean," I prod firmly. "You know you can talk to your

old man.”

He looks up at me with a sad smile. “You’re not an old man, Daddy. You’re like twenty.”

I laugh. “Not quite. Now tell me what’s wrong.”

“There was a little boy there, where we watched the play. He came with his mommy and daddy. His mommy was so pretty like mine and she kissed him here like my mommy does,” he explains, pointing at his cheek.

My heart grows tighter. I stare at him for several seconds, without a clue what to say to him.

“I’m sorry you had to see that, bud,” I finally say, my tone a little shaky. “But you know your mommy’s on a trip. She’ll come see you soon, I promise.”

He nods slowly. “I know, Daddy. I just miss her.”

Fucking hell.

“I know, bud. You’ll see her soon,” I promise.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

He stands up and moves between my legs to throw his little arms around me. I hold him as close as I can, the sinking feeling in my stomach growing. I hate seeing him in pain, but at the moment, I can't fix it for him.

I'm his father. I should be able to fix fucking anything for him.

Before Sean was born, I hated the physical contact. I couldn't understand the need to be close to any human beings. I did it out of necessity at times, but it always left me feeling hollow.

But since my son's been born, there's this space in my heart that he occupies that helps me to somehow feel full. I felt empty for more than half my life and now I have Sean. I'll do anything to ensure he has a better childhood than I had growing up.

I'm just terrified that the blocks are already in place and history is starting to repeat itself.

After I assure him and ensure that everything will be okay, he starts telling me about a book he read.

"It's about a girl that rescues a bunch of dogs and takes them into her house and gives them really nice names, like Olaf and Pinocchio and Richard," he says with a giggle. "Can you believe that, Dad? Richard is Mommy's dad's name."

"Yeah, cool," I murmur distractedly, my mind still fixed on his earlier revelation.

"Dad, can we get a dog?" he asks. "I want a dog."

That draws my attention. I arch an eyebrow. “Sean, you can barely take care of yourself. How will you take care of a dog?”

“I can take care of myself,” he argues.

“You can’t even bathe yourself,” I tease. “Who’s going to bathe the dog?”

He pauses, taking the time to think about the question. Finally, he beams.

“My nanny will bathe the dog, too. Just like she does me.”

I roll my eyes. “Bud, you can’t go through life expecting people to do things for you. You need to learn how to take responsibility for your stuff. For example, you can learn to put your socks away and into the laundry basket. And you can’t always leave your toys and your books wherever you like.”

One thing about my son, he’s going to quietly dissect your every sentence. If he doesn’t know something, he asks before giving his own reply. He’s brilliant, really. I have no doubt he’ll do great things.

“But we have people that do all those things for me,” he says quietly.

Yeah, no.

“Sure you do. And you’re so incredibly lucky to be in this position. But you should also know how to take care of yourself. At the end of the day, the only person you can depend on is yourself.”

“Can’t I depend on you and Mommy?”

I exhales softly. “Yeah, of course you can. Always.”

“So, does that mean you can take care of my dog?” he asks excitedly.

I chuckle. “That’s not where I wanted this conversation to go.”

I really hope he learned something from that. He’s probably too young to fully understand, but we’ve got time.

“Can we please get a dog, Daddy? Please.”

His green eyes go wide as he looks at me pleadingly. I inwardly groan.

“Tell you what, Sean. I’ll consider your request.”

“Does that mean you will?” he asks hopefully.

“Maybe.”

He fist bumps the air. “Yay. I’m getting a dog!”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

Eventually, his nanny comes in to get him ready for bed. As soon as I leave his room, my expression crumples. My jaw tightens as I slowly walk to my room, letting myself feel the anger I couldn't feel when I was with Sean.

I change out of the suit I wore to the office and into joggers and a black T-shirt. I grab some running shoes as well, putting them on and heading downstairs.

"Sir?" Karl questions as soon as he sees me. "Would you like to have your dinner now?"

"Do I look like I'm about to have dinner?" I snap.

He pauses in surprise for a moment before his expression goes blank once again. There's a reason Karl has worked for my family for so long, especially with my father being a control freak. He's good at keeping his emotions in check. Still, that was out of line.

I lift a hand to rub the side of my forehead. "I'm sorry, Karl. I'm just really tense," I tell him.

"No problem, sir."

"I'm just going out for a quick run. I'll have dinner when I get back."

He nods in understanding. The sun is long gone by the time I step outside of the house, pale moonlight peeking through. Sean's confession from earlier echoes in my mind, further igniting the simmering anger within me.

I start down the endless driveway heading toward the front gate, which opens for me without hesitation. As soon as I'm outside the compound, my pace increases. Running has always been a sort of escape for me, a way to channel the chaos that's always brimming within me. The rhythmic pounding of my feet against the concrete serves to steady the erratic tempo of my emotions.

As I push forward, the familiar burn in my muscles begin to surface, but it's a welcome sensation. It distracts me from all the shit I've had to deal with in the past couple of weeks. My parents still aren't back in the country and I want so fucking badly to talk to my mother. I want an explanation, but it's pretty clear she's going to avoid the discussion for as long as it takes.

And then there's my ex-wife. The last time Sean and I saw Marissa was a couple months ago. We've been divorced for three years but we kept up a good co-parenting relationship. Then one day she comes to me and announces that she's leaving on a trip. She tells me it'll be a while but that she'll be back soon. Naturally, I'm confused, but it's not like I could stop her. But then weeks turned into months and she's still not back.

Even worse, she's cut off all contact. Neither Sean nor I have spoken to her in months. I don't fucking get it.

Everything around me blurs as I increase my speed, my breath coming in sharp bursts. I focus on the physical exertion, welcoming the strain. But no matter how fast I run, I can't escape the reality of the shitty situation I've found myself in.

Sean is going to continue asking for his mother. And I'm this close to hiring a P.I. to figure out exactly where she's gone. I've talked to her parents and all they've offered me is hollow reassurances. Apparently, Marissa's on some kind of wellness retreat with no cell service.

Which is honestly bullshit.

Sweat drips down my brow, stinging my eyes, but I don't slow down. I think of Sean seeking answers that I can't provide and it makes me feel inadequate, like I'm failing as a father. Finally, I have to stop. I come to a halt, hands on my knees, gasping for air. The world spins slightly and I close my eyes, willing the dizziness to pass.

My breathing slowly starts to settle, and with that comes the heaviness in my chest. I straighten up, wiping the sweat from my face before pulling my phone from my pocket. I pull up Marissa's contact information and press the call button, holding the phone to my ear as it rings on and on without an answer.

Predictably, it goes straight to voicemail.

"Where the hell are you?" I begin, my voice filled with barely restrained fury. "Sean asked about you today. He misses you. You said you'd be back soon but it's been months, Marissa. Your parents keep feeding me this line about you not having cell service, but that's bullshit and you know it. In this day and age, who goes completely off the grid without a word? Especially not when you're a mother to a little boy."

I pause, swallowing hard. "At least have the decency to call and talk to Sean. Let your son hear your voice. Let me know you're alive. This isn't like you, Marissa. And it's driving me crazy. Call me the fuck back."

I end the call abruptly, tension coiled tight within me. After a heavy sigh, I turn back around to head back home. Five minutes later, though, I'm coming to an abrupt halt at the sight before me. I realize I must have strayed farther away from home than I realized. I'm standing in front of a small park, and of all the people I could have run into, Emilia Cameron sits beneath a sprawling oak, on a weathered bench.

Her blonde hair cascades over her shoulders, catching the moonlight and framing her

delicate features. She's gazing at a cluster of birds nestled in the branches, her expression tinged with melancholy. For a moment, I stand frozen, captivated by the sight of her. The soft light accentuates the gentle curve of her jaw, the subtle arch of her brows.

There's something innately beautiful about her. I feel a sudden tug, an inexplicable desire to approach her. It's odd. I don't understand why I'm so drawn to her. But it's the last thing I need right now.

Just as I decide to leave her in peace, my foot snaps a dry branch underfoot. The sharp sound shatters the quiet, causing Emilia to startle and turn in my direction. Our eyes meet, and for a heartbeat, the world narrows to just the two of us.

Then her brows furrow. "Sterling Harrington?"

CHAPTER 9

Emilia

When you live in the same house as your little sister, you don't get many private moments. Which is why when I really need an escape, I make my way over here. This park is like my sanctuary, it's quiet, calm, and no one ever really comes here.

Until now.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

There's no mistaking Sterling Harrington's gaze despite him standing so far away. There's always this intensity in his eyes that takes my breath away. I'm still getting over the shock of seeing him when he starts to approach. I slowly rise when he reaches my bench.

He clears his throat awkwardly. "Ms. Cameron."

"You're seriously everywhere," I mutter dully.

His eyes sharpen at that comment. I take in his outfit. Joggers, a black tank top, and running shoes. I try and fail not to get distracted by the sheen of sweat on his jaw. It practically glistens as it slides down his bronze skin. The tank top is tight enough that I can glimpse his abs. This feels very dangerous.

"It's late. What are you doing here alone?"

"Minding my own business," I say with a small smile. "You should try it sometime."

He rolls his eyes. "That was me trying to be a good person. How about you try it?"

Okay, he's got me there. It's 10 p.m.; any reasonable person would be asking what I'm doing at a park thirty minutes from my house.

"You're right, I'm sorry. I could ask you the same question, though," I retort. "What are you doing all the way out here? Did you run?"

"Yeah." He nods.

“The Harrington Estate is, like, way back there, though. How long have you been running?”

He looks down at the smart watch on his wrist. “About forty-five minutes.”

“What kind of person runs for forty-five minutes at ten p.m.?” I say in disbelief.

“What kind of person hangs around an abandoned park at ten p.m.?” he retorts.

My lips twitch. “Touché. Are you okay, though? Is someone chasing you? Because a warning would be nice so I can haul my ass out of here.”

To my surprise, Sterling Harrington actually laughs at that. It’s a small one, like three simple ha-ha-has. But it’s nice to hear.

“Don’t worry, Cameron. Your ass is fine,” he tells me, with a glint in his eyes.

If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was flirting with me. I feel a sudden flush of heat creeping up on my neck. The tension between us goes up a few notches.

“I know it is,” I mutter, feeling my heart race a little.

Get it together, Emilia.

“Anyway, I’m going to head home. See you later, Harrington.”

He frowns. “And how do you plan to get home?”

“While my body wasn’t made for running, unlike some people, I do have two working feet that are perfect for walks,” I inform him.

“No,” he states, his frown deepening. “You’re not walking all the way home alone. In the dead of the night.”

My eyes narrow. “There’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

A muscle ticks in his jaw. “Fine, I’ll walk you.”

My eyes widen. “Did I ask you to?”

“You’re my best friend’s little sister. Putting aside your personality, I do have a responsibility to ensure you’re safe.”

“My personality is perfect,” I snap. “Plus, Mr. Responsible Gentleman, I know you haven’t lived in Edenton in a while but it’s reasonably safe. Therefore I do not need you and I absolutely do not want you walking me home.”

“Do you ever just agree to do things or will your biological makeup be disrupted if you do anything without putting up a fight?” he asks, his tone bored. “Besides, it’s on my way anyway. I was just about to turn around and head home. Considering we’re both heading in the same direction, we can just walk together.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

He's right. I'd offer to go the other direction out of spite, but that would mean walking straight into the woods. I inwardly groan. Why does this keep happening to me?

A couple seconds pass and I keep glaring at him without saying a word.

"Are you going to say anything or...?"

"Let's just go," I grumble.

Without further ado, we set off down the path leading back to civilization. The walk back is quiet for a total of five seconds before he speaks.

"What were you thinking about back there?"

"You know, you're really chatty tonight for some reason," I say in frustration. "Can we not speak?"

"No. Tell me what you were thinking about when you were sitting on that bench. You looked..." He hesitates. "Sad."

Sad is an understatement. I was considering running away and shutting myself off from the rest of the world.

"How about you? Are you okay?"

Anyone running for forty-five minutes this late at night must be going through

something rough.

“Must you always counter a question with a question?” he asks, frustration tinging his tone.

“I call it the law of give and take, actually. If you answer me honestly, then maybe I’ll consider answering you, too. Sweet deal, isn’t it?”

He looks like he’d rather chew a metal can than open up to me. Which is why I want it even more.

“Come on, Sterling Harrington,” I prod.

“I’m really starting to hate being called that,” he says on a huff. “There. That’s an answer. Is that acceptable enough?”

I nod slowly, a little awed that he actually confessed that to me. But now I don’t know what to say.

“You don’t have to feel like that though. I’m sure you’re just as?—”

“Save it, Ms. Cameron. I didn’t tell you so we could offer me sympathy. I’d rather not talk about emotions I am or am not feeling.”

“It’s okay to do that, though,” I point out. “You’re not a tin man, you’re human. You’re allowed to feel anything you want. Life’s too short to keep our emotions at bay.”

His eyes meet mine at that, the intensity in them causing my heart to race. I’m starting to think sunglasses should be my new *modus operandi* anytime I’m around this man.

Those damn green eyes.

I look away, unwilling to get sucked into the wonder that is Sterling Harrington. He seems to realize how long we've been staring at each other as well. There's awkward silence for like a minute before he breaks it.

"Your turn. Why did you come all the way out here? And why did you look so sad?"

I inhale softly, considering the implications of telling him something so raw. But he also just confessed something that couldn't have been easy for him to say to me, so turnabout's fair play.

"I broke a glass cup," I finally decide to say, my tone low. "It was triggering."

Sterling tenses. "What did it trigger?"

"Unpleasant memories. Memories I want to stay buried."

He doesn't say anything for several seconds. Finally, he sighs softly.

"I thought you said it was bad to keep things like that at bay."

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“I said you shouldn’t keep your emotions at bay. I feel everything. I’d like to not feel so much on some days. And I want more than anything to turn my brain off most of the time.”

“Yeah, I get that,” he says, his voice a little hoarse but filled with understanding.

We arrive at the pathway that connects the road leading to the Harrington estate and the one leading out of it.

“You can go now. I’ll be fine on my own.”

His gaze narrows suspiciously. “Your house has to be at least twenty minutes away.”

“Yes, and I’m sure I can manage it on my own,” I repeat. “Go home, Sterling Harrington.”

He stares at me for a moment before reaching into his pocket. He pulls out his phone, and I watch quietly as he dials someone’s number. My jaw drops open when he starts speaking to someone I’m guessing is his driver. He tells the person on the other end to bring the car over to where we currently are.

“Yeah we’re standing at the side of the road. Thank you.”

“You’re seriously infuriating. You know that, right?”

He doesn’t reply. A couple minutes later, there’s a black car with tinted windows pulling up in front of us. Sterling opens the door to the back seat, gesturing for me to

step inside. I stay put, my arms crossed as I glare at him.

“Hey, Callum,” he says to the middle-aged man at the wheel. “Sorry to bother you this late, but could you take her home?”

“Of course, sir,” the other man says with a curt nod.

“Thanks,” Sterling states before looking at me. “Get in.”

A part of me wants to throw a tantrum and refuse, but poor Callum’s already being dragged out here. There wouldn’t be any point.

“You’re annoying,” I mutter, sliding into the back seat.

He smirks. “Good night, Emilia.”

“I didn’t say you could use my name,” I chide.

“No?” he asks cockily and I catch a passing glimpse of a small smile right before he shuts the car door.

Well, that was intense.

Sterling’s driver, Callum, drops me right in front of my house and, after wishing me a good night, leaves immediately. The memories of what happened before I left home crash down on me as I stand on my doorstep.

I exhale a soft breath before slowly pushing the door open. As expected, my sister’s in the living room, biting her nails nervously. She looks up as soon as I enter, and it’s hard to miss the worry in her brown eyes.

“Hey,” I say, walking into the living room.

“Emilia,” she breathes. “What happened? You were saying you needed a glass of wine, and I was going to change and then join you in the living room when I heard the glass shattering. By the time I stepped outside my room, you were gone. And you didn’t even take your phone. I thought something had happened to you.”

I take a seat on the couch, tucking my knees beneath my feet and avoiding eye contact with my sister.

“I’m fine, Nika.”

She shakes her head. “No, not good enough. This isn’t the first time you’ve done something like this. You can’t just disappear without telling anyone, Em.”

She’s right. And I don’t mean to, really. But whenever something triggering happens, I kind of just black out. It’s like I’m not really in the moment anymore. I barely remember walking out of the house or all the way to the park. But it happened, and I made my little sister worry unnecessarily.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper softly.

She takes a seat beside me on the couch and sighs. At first, she doesn’t say anything. And then she’s wrapping her arms around me in a tight hug.

“I just want you to be safe, Em,” Anika says quietly into my neck.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“I was safe,” I assure her, rubbing her back.

“No. Safe around us. I don’t want you to hide your pain anymore.”

My throat tightens. I have no clue what I’m supposed to say to that. I just continue rubbing her back in small, comforting circles.

“I’m not in pain, Anika.”

“Liar,” she murmurs.

It takes a couple of minutes before we finally separate. When we do, I offer her a small, encouraging smile.

“You don’t have to worry about me, Anika. I’m the big sister.”

She shrugs. “Just don’t do that again.”

I don’t agree to that because I don’t want to make any false promises. And I don’t think she expects me to, either.

“Okay, now tell me about the car that dropped you off,” Anika says.

My eyes widen. “You saw that?”

I was hoping she hadn’t because then I wouldn’t have to explain, but it’s clear I won’t be that lucky tonight.

“Yeah, of course. I heard the car coming up the street and then it stopped in front of my house. Imagine my surprise when I looked out the window to see my sister stepping out of the back seat. I couldn’t see who was inside, though.”

I shrug, trying to come up with a good excuse. “It was an Uber?” I offer.

Anika’s eyes narrow. “Come on, Emilia. That car looked way too expensive to be an Uber. Tell me the truth. Who was driving?”

I look straight forward, biting down on the corner of my lip.

“Callum,” I reply forcefully.

“Callum?” she asks, confused. I glance at her expression and she seems to be struggling to make sense of that. And then she gasps. “Holy shit. Callum as in the Harringtons’ driver?”

I sigh softly. Of course she knows him.

“He used to drive us to the school all the time when we were kids,” Anika murmurs. “Wait. If Callum drove you home, does that mean you were with Sterling Harrington?”

It’s hard to miss the excitement in her tone.

“No, I wasn’t with him. We ran into each other,” I correct.

Anika’s expression practically screams disbelief. I sigh.

“I’m serious, Nika. We just ran into each other. I don’t know why or how it keeps happening. And then he called Callum over and asked him to take me home despite

my protests.”

“Okay so let me get this straight,” my sister starts. “After you left the house, you met up with Sterling?—”

“No!” I exclaim. “I said we ran into each other. Get it together, Nika.”

She laughs. “Sorry, but this is too good. So not only were you with Sterling but he also called his driver to ensure you made it back home? That’s nice, sissy. I thought you two hated each other.”

“He was trying to be nice,” I mutter.

“Sterling isn’t nice,” Anika states. “He’s an asshole and yet he’s doing all these things for you? Something fishy is going on.”

“No. Nothing fishy. This entire situation is clean as hell. There are absolutely no odd smells and there’s nothing suspicious. It’s just a random encounter, Anika. Seriously.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

She pauses, looking into my eyes. I bear her scrutiny for a couple of seconds before she shrugs with a small smirk. Then she slowly rises to her feet.

“Deny it all you want, Emilia. But I can’t wait to see how all this plays out,” she says on a short laugh.

That sounds ominous. I cross my arms over my chest, glaring at her as she walks into her bedroom, her laughter not subsiding.

Ugh. Damn you, Sterling Harrington.

CHAPTER 10

Sterling

I turn off the shower, grabbing a towel and wrapping it around myself before grabbing another one to dry my hair as I walk out of the bathroom. I pass my bedside table and my gaze snags on my phone, which I haven’t checked since last night.

With a small sigh, I grab it to look through the messages, seeing that I have a voicemail from my father. I play it and place the phone back on the table before heading into my closet to get dressed.

“Hey, son. How’s it going? How are things in Edenton?” are the first questions he asks. “Listen, Ster, I know we’re supposed to be back home by now, but your mother’s really ill and she needs me to stay here to take care of her. I can’t imagine how hectic things are for you back there. I hope you’re okay. Say hi to Sean for me,

alright? And I promise we'll be home as soon as possible. Bye, kid."

The voicemail ends and an amused smirk crosses my lips.

"It's fine, Dad. You and mother can stay there for as long as you want," I say into the quiet space.

Frankly, I'm done letting this dominate my thoughts. I'm done thinking about it, about who I am, who I could have been, and all that shit. Those aren't questions I should be asking myself as a twenty-eight-year-old. I have a life, I have a son—that should be all that matters.

After getting dressed for work, I open the drawer that houses all my watches, pulling out a gold one. I'm suddenly reminded of the feisty woman I saw last night and the secrets we shared. I'm not sure why I opened up to her; I never open up to anyone. She wasn't overly comforting or anything, but even her presence had a calming effect that I appreciated after the storm I went through last night.

After I'm done getting dressed, I head to Sean's bedroom to wake him up. I try to do that every morning because he gets grumpy when someone other than me or his mom are the first people he sees when his eyes open.

"Hey Dad," he says, rubbing his eyes as he sits up on the bed.

I run a hand through his dark hair. "Hey, bud. Time to get up. Your nanny will come in here soon."

He nods, yawning softly. "Have a good day at work."

"Thanks, Sean."

After ensuring he's out of bed, I head downstairs. My breakfast consists of a smoothie and two pieces of toast and then I'm out of the house. I opt to drive myself to work today, hoping it'll distract me from my thoughts a little. It's getting pathetic, really. I'm not this person.

Her soft melodic voice fills my head then: Don't be a tin man, Sterling Harrington.

And I really need to stop thinking about Emilia Cameron. As soon as I arrive at the office, I convene a meeting with the heads of department involved in acquisitions. I take a seat at the head of the polished mahogany table just as they all walk into the room, taking their seats.

Lisa Briggs sits to my right, her tablet poised for note taking. Opposite her is Mark Slade, our director of development, who's flipping through a stack of blueprints. Next to him, Susan from legal adjusts her glasses, and there's also the man from finance whose name I can never seem to remember. He's sipping his coffee, eyes alert.

"Good morning, everyone," I begin. "Let's dive straight into the agenda, shall we? We're here to discuss the feasibility of relocating our upcoming development to an alternative site."

I've been thinking about it since my conversation with Emilia last night. Knowing her personality, this is probably just going to keep dragging on and on, and I'm not sure I or the company are prepared to bear the cost of that. Plus, I'm running out of ideas on how to convince her.

Lisa's brows furrow slightly but she remains silent. Meanwhile, Slade leans forward, curiosity evident.

"Sir," he starts, "are there specific concerns about the current property?"

“Yes. We’ve encountered resistance from one of the tenants and it’s causing delays. I want us to evaluate if pursuing this location is still in our best interest.”

Lisa clears her throat, drawing attention. “I understand the challenges, but this lot is strategically positioned, Mr. Harrington. Its proximity to the central business district and existing infrastructure makes it ideal. Pursuing another location would mean settling for a less optimal site and potentially higher costs.”

Susan nods in agreement. “From a legal standpoint, shifting locations would require renegotiating permits and possibly facing new zoning issues. It could set us back months.”

My jaw ticks. The finance guy chimes in as well.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“We’ve already invested in preliminary assessments for the site. Moving would mean additional expenditures and could affect our projected ROI.”

I nod, absorbing their input.

“Valid points. However, Ms. Cameron is being especially resistant. We can’t very well force her out of her building. I’m worried that pursuing this further could lead to public relations issues.”

“I firmly believe Ms. Cameron will eventually budge. We should consider applying more pressure on her. I know firsthand that her café is already struggling. Sooner or later, she’ll have to make the sale. We just have to be more persistent,” Lisa says sharply.

Her insistence piques my curiosity. Considering her personal connection to Emilia, I’d think she’d be more inclined toward supporting her friend’s decision.

“We could explore offering Ms. Cameron relocation assistance. Perhaps into the shopping mall that was recently completed?” Slade offers.

Susan adds, “Legally, we have options to incentivize her move. However, if she remains obstinate, we might need to consider eminent domain, though that’s a last resort and could tarnish our reputation.”

I lean back, weighing the options. Despite my newfound respect for her, a part of me is reluctant to concede. Letting Emilia win by vetoing all their ideas and moving to another site would be frowned upon by not just them but the company’s board.

Grandfather wouldn't agree with the decision, and I plan on ensuring that I achieve something to be proud of during my time here.

“Let's proceed cautiously. I'll continue discussions with Ms. Cameron, emphasize our willingness to assist with the relocation and highlight the benefits. Slade, identify potential contingencies. Susan, if you could prepare a legal brief on our options including risks associated with eminent domain, that would be helpful. Let's all work to ensure this development goes smoothly.”

They nod in unison and understanding.

“Remember,” I conclude, “our goal is to proceed with the development efficiently, but ethically. Let's aim for a solution that aligns with our objectives without unnecessary conflict.”

The meeting ends and I head into my office to go through some emails and reports. The day goes by pretty quickly, and despite being tired and wanting nothing more than to head home for some much-needed rest, I find myself driving toward Emilia's Café instead.

I don't immediately step out of my car once I arrive. I watch her through the window. She has headphones on and is walking around cleaning. I watch as she moves her body rhythmically to whatever song she's listening to. There's a small smile on her face and, even from here, I can see the glint in her eyes.

Happiness looks beautiful on her. She's like a rose in a garden, on its way to full bloom.

I exhale a soft breath. Fucking hell, that was sappy.

Exiting the car, I cross the street. It's pretty late, and when I reach the door I take note

of the closed sign on the front. That doesn't stop me from walking in, however. Emilia doesn't look behind her as I do so. She's too engrossed in whatever she's listening to. I walk up to her, trying to ignore the swaying of her hips in the jeans she's wearing. She has no idea how fucking sexy she is.

I lightly tap her shoulder to draw her attention. She jumps, whirling around, her blue eyes wide. I stay still as she takes off the headphones.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you," I say sincerely.

She nods slowly, placing the headphones on the counter. I can tell she's pretty rattled and is taking the time to steady herself. She sucks in a deep breath.

"What are you doing here, Sterling Harrington?"

"Getting coffee," I reply.

"You never come here to just get coffee. Plus, we're closed. I'm sure you can read the sign hanging outside." She waves toward it.

"Sure I can. But I figured you'd make an exception for your best customer."

She scoffs. "More like my biggest headache."

"Come on, Emilia. Just one cup of coffee," I prompt.

"You're still not allowed to call me that," she mutters, heading behind the counter and starting up the coffee maker. "Black like your soul?"

"Yeah, thanks. I'd like a slice of banana bread with that as well."

“Coming right up,” she replies professionally.

I stand in wait as she finishes making the coffee and serving the bread into a plate. Once she’s done, I offer her my card for payment. She surprisingly doesn’t overcharge me this time. I’m taking that as a sign that she’s warming up to me.

After she hands me my order, I gesture toward one of the tables and she rolls her eyes before following me to take a seat. Fork in hand, I bite into the banana bread, which is actually pretty delicious.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“You want some?” I ask, trying to be hospitable.

She shakes her head. “No thanks. I’m allergic to bananas.”

“Really?” I drawl. “How did you find out?”

Her brows furrow. “What?”

“Allergies are interesting to me. How did you figure out you’re allergic to bananas?”

She pauses at that. Then her eyes get this faraway look tinged with pain. Whatever happened, I’m guessing it was traumatic.

“I almost died,” she says quietly. “Twice, if you can believe it.”

“It was that bad?” I question, surprised.

I want to ask her about what happened but it’s highly unlikely she’ll tell me. Still, I can see whatever happened must have been really scary.

She exhales a soft breath. “Yeah. Now tell me what you’re doing here?”

“To enjoy the pleasure of your company?” I suggest, trying to stall.

Her lips part and I’m momentarily distracted. My eyes flick toward them and the sight of her cherry lips has blood rushing downward. I clear my throat, shifting in my seat to hide my reaction to her. Thankfully, she seems oblivious.

“Try again, tin man,” she says in reply to my suggestion.

“Alright, fine. I came to talk to you about the sale again. This is me asking that you reconsider your stance. No more threats or bravado. I propose a truce so we can work toward mutual gain.”

She considers my words for a couple of seconds. Finally, she sighs.

“I really don’t want to let go of this café, Harrington. I know it’ll be hard for you to understand, but it means something to me. Personal issues between us aside, I’ve invested too much into this place to simply just give up on it.”

“And I understand that, I do, but?—”

I’m interrupted by a sharp ringing in the air. Emilia glances toward the counter where her phone appears to be buzzing. She offers me an apologetic smile before standing to pick up the call. I take a sip of my coffee in the meantime, the bitterness coating my tongue. Which helps to counter the sweetness of the bread.

“Hello?” Emilia says on the phone.

I listen in on her end of the conversation, curious about who could be calling her this late.

“Colleen?” she asks, her eyes growing wide. My focus narrows onto her, watching as her body tenses. “Wait, slow down. What happened to Paige?”

She listens quietly to whatever this woman, Colleen, says for a couple of seconds before she gasps, her hand flying over her mouth.

“Oh, God,” she says, her voice muffled. “What hospital are you at right now? I-I’ll be

there soon.”

I rise to my feet as Emilia drops her phone. Her movements are jerky as she reaches behind the counter for her purse, panic written across her face.

“Hey,” I say, stepping in front of her. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

Her eyes are glassy. “Paige,” she gasps. “Paige was in an accident.”

If I’m remembering correctly, Paige is the teenager who works as a part-timer here in the café.

“Okay, calm down,” I say, my voice steady. “I’ll take you to the hospital. Just breathe, okay.”

She looks around wildly, her breaths coming out in short gasps.

I grab her shoulders. “Emilia, look at me,” I prompt. “It’ll be fine. Just try to breathe.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

She inhales a soft breath, then another. Finally, she's looking at me clearly.

"Could you please take me to the hospital?" she asks quietly.

"Of course. Come on, let's go."

I help her lock up the café before leading her toward my car. She's still extremely rattled. She picks at her fingernails all the way to the hospital. They're raw and red by the time we arrive. I wait for her to jump out of the car, but when I look at her, the brightness in her blue eyes has dimmed.

"Emilia?" I call gently.

But she doesn't reply.

CHAPTER 11

Emilia

People respond to trauma in so many different ways. When you've experienced a certain degree of pain in your life, it sticks to you like a wound that just never heals. Or a scar you can't ignore.

My scars materialize in the worst ways, though. The littlest things bring out my memories of pain. And the worst things, as well. Like right now. I blame my earlier conversation with Sterling Harrington for the memory that now skips to the forefront of my mind. An incident that's buried deep in my mind.

“Where are you going, Emmy?” he asked from his position on the couch.

A couch he never really left. My hand had been on the doorknob when I tensed at the sound of his voice. And then I slowly turned around. I should have known by the sinister smirk on his face that he was planning something nefarious. I should have gotten out of there as fast as I could, but I didn’t.

“To a movie,” I reply quietly, scared to make the wrong move.

Saying or doing the wrong thing had gotten me in so much trouble in the past. Even my body language could get her fired up. And she was in the kitchen, whistling a tune. It seemed like she was in a good mood. But with my mother, you could never really tell.

She stepped into the living room then, wiping her hands with a washcloth.

“You’re not going anywhere, Emilia,” she stated firmly, her tone leaving no room for argument. “I made dinner and Lucas made some ice cream. It’s cooling in the fridge.”

She stood beside him on the couch, rubbing the back of his neck. Lucas stared at me with his trademark drooly eyes. He always looked half asleep, probably because he was always drunk. And yet, I had seen him move so fast in an instant, throwing a glass cup at me that had sliced my cheek. He was dangerous, volatile.

But sometimes my mother scared me even more.

“He did?” I asked timidly.

The last thing I wanted to do was to eat a meal prepared by Lucas. Why had he even cooked in the first place? He never did that. And fucking ice cream? That was weird.

“Yes,” my mother replied, looking down at him with moon eyes. She leaned down to place a kiss on his forehead. “Isn’t it sweet? It’s our anniversary today. Can you believe we’ve been together for ten years already?”

“Yeah, I can. Congratulations.”

He was a fucking drunk and a psychopath who enabled her and manipulated her into doing whatever he wanted her to. It wasn’t surprising he had managed to keep her under his thumb for ten years. Lucas had been a part of my life since I was six. I knew he wasn’t leaving anytime soon.

“Go sit at the table, Emilia. You’re always hanging out with that boyfriend of yours instead of your family. It’s unacceptable.”

I swallowed. “Sorry, Mom.”

She nodded and I’m sure she would have said something more if he hadn’t distracted her by pulling her into his lap. I took the chance to quickly exit the living room, dutifully taking my seat at the dining table until they arrived. Once they did, we ate our meal and then I was asked to bring the ice cream from the fridge.

As soon as I set it on the table and locked eyes with Lucas, I knew something was wrong. My mother served all three of us generous heaps of the ice cream. When she handed me mine, I forced a small smile.

“What flavor is it?” I asked quietly.

They both turned to look at me sharply then. My mother gaped at me like me asking a simple question was a sin.

“Eat your ice cream, Emilia. Don’t be rude. Lucas put a lot of effort into making it for

us,” she cautioned.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“I know and I appreciate it,” I returned. “I just want to know what flavor it is.”

The ice cream looked like it was chocolate and vanilla, but I couldn’t be sure. My mother stared at me like she was about to hit me or worse. And then Lucas spoke up.

“Come on, Emilia. Eat your ice cream,” he prompted with a small smile that reminded me of raccoons.

“But—”

“Emilia Rose Sutter, if you don’t finish that ice cream right now!” my mother yelled icily.

I knew what would come out of me refusing. She would never let it go and would torment me with my disobedience for days. I thought about the camping trip that was coming up soon. It was my chance to escape the house for at least a night. She would never give me permission to go if I refused to do this now. I had to be on my best behaviour if I wanted a break.

So, with shaky hands, I reached for the spoon and took a small bite of the ice cream. As soon as it touched my tongue, I knew I was screwed. I gasped, clutching my throat as I felt the liquid slide downward.

“There’s bananas in it!” I screamed, my eyes growing wide.

My mom had stared at me in shock for a couple of moments. When my eyes met Lucas’s, he was hiding his smile, making it clear that he had done it intentionally. He

wanted me dead.

“Mom...” I stammered, taking gasping breaths.

I could already feel my throat closing up. I slid out of the chair onto the floor and that finally prompted her into action. She rushed to my side, tapping my cheek.

“Emilia! Emmy, honey. Look at me. Lucas, call 911!” she shouted, her expression flashing with panic.

Lucas finally stood up, coming to stand beside us. “Are you sure she’s not being dramatic?”

I could feel the life slowly sliding out of me but I remember being shocked at his audacity. My mother was shocked, too. She gaped at him for a second before jumping to her feet to hunt down her phone. As soon as she left, Lucas was crouching down beside me, his face inches from mine.

“Why don’t you just die and save us all the misery, you little bitch?” he asked with a small sneer.

And then I passed out. When I woke up, I was in a hospital bed with my mom seated beside me.

“Hey, sweetie, how are you?” she questioned as I sat up.

“Where is he?” I burst out. My chest felt raw and my head was pounding.

“Who, honey? Lucas? He’s at home. He told me to apologize to you. He didn’t mean to add bananas to the ice cream.”

I stared at her in shock. “He... didn’t mean to almost kill me?” I screeched.

“Kill you?” Mom laughed. “Don’t be dramatic, Emilia. You had a small accident is all. It won’t happen again. Now come, you should rest some more.”

She fluffed my pillows before slowly guiding me back so I was lying down. My heart thundered in my chest out of fear. No one would believe me. My own mother didn’t believe me. But I wasn’t safe in that house. The only thing I saw when I opened my eyes was Lucas’s sinister smirk.

He’d wanted to kill me, but he had killed my mother first.

“Emilia!” a voice calls.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, shaking me out of my thoughts or out of the memory.

My eyes focus on Sterling Harrington’s stunningly green ones. They’re filled with worry right now, just like at the café. I swear I’ve taken years of the man’s life in only a couple of minutes. I pull myself together, trying to steady my breathing before offering him a small smile.

He exhales in relief. “Where did you go?” he questions softly.

I shake my head. “Nowhere. I was just... thinking about something.”

“Are you...” He pauses, glancing at me like he’s not sure what to say. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I assure him. “I just need to make sure Paige will be okay.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

I unbuckle the seatbelt, ready to leave the car.

“I’ll come with you,” Sterling announces.

“No, you don’t have to,” I immediately say.

He shrugs before opening his car door. “I want to. Come on.”

I sigh, knowing there’s nothing I can do to stop him as walks over to my side of the car and opens the door for me. Once I’m outside, I look up at the hospital in front of me, my heart pounding in my chest.

Please, please, please let her be okay.

I first met Paige when she was still in high school. She walked into my café when it first opened, all smiles, and asked if I was hiring. I wasn’t at the time, but I guess something about me drew her in. She kept coming every day and we got to talking, and from there we formed a close bond.

She’s a lot like me in some ways. Paige’s dad abandoned her and her mom a couple years ago, and since then they’d been finding it a little hard to survive. Money was tight, so tight that she couldn’t even afford to go to college at the moment. But Paige has never let her experiences bring her down. I admire her so much, and I’m terrified that something bad has happened to her.

When we arrive, we’re told to go up to the third floor where Paige’s mother is. Sterling’s a gentle, reassuring presence at my side. He’s the one who talks to the

nurses who direct us to where to go. Paige is currently in emergency surgery, so we find Colleen pacing in the waiting room, tears streaming down her face.

She cries harder when she notices me. I immediately steps toward the older woman, pulling her into a hug.

“It’s okay, Colleen. Be strong,” I say softly. “What happened?”

She starts to speak, her tone a little hysterical. “I’m not sure either, but there was an accident. A truck collided into their car. Paige wasn’t the only one in the car, but she was in the back seat and she had her seatbelt on so she wasn’t as hurt as the other kids. The doctor said she has some internal bleeding and they’re performing surgery right now to fix it. But they’re more worried about her leg. They said it got pretty damaged when the car flipped over and she’ll need a major surgery to fix it otherwise she may never walk again. I-I don’t know what to do, Emilia. How am I going to afford a surgery like that? What am I going to do about my baby girl?”

I hug her closer, rubbing her back in an effort to console her. My heart is still racing as I consider all that she’s said. I’m so grateful Paige is still alive, and I know she’s a fighter and will pull through, but she doesn’t deserve to go through life without the ability to walk. It would crush her. It would crush me.

I’m not going to let that happen.

It takes a couple of minutes but I finally calm Colleen down enough that she sits down. In that time, Sterling’s brought her a cup of water. I offer him a grateful smile as I accept it, handing it to Colleen. Once she’s settled, I get up, walking over to where Sterling stands at the side.

He arches an eyebrow in question as I pull him farther away from Paige’s mother.

“Thank you so much for being here. I really appreciate your presence, but you can leave now,” I tell him.

He pauses, and for a minute I think he’s going to argue, but then he offers me a terse nod.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay, though?”

“Yeah. I’m just going to wait for Paige to get out of surgery. Colleen said she should wake up awhile after so I’ll wait for that to happen before I leave.”

“Okay. Just let me know if you need anything, okay?” he states.

I smile. “You’re being such a good person right now,” I can’t resist pointing out. “It feels weird.”

“Don’t get used to it, Cameron,” he says lightly.

“There’s one more thing,” I start, feeling a chill run through me. I struggle to get the words out for a minute, but then they’re leaving my lips quietly. “I’m ready to sell my café.”

Sterling’s eyebrows rise. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look so surprised.

“You’re what?”

“You heard me. You were right earlier. I can’t keep holding on to a café that’s not bringing in much profit. I need to focus on the benefits selling my café will provide.”

He’s visibly confused. I can practically hear the wheels turning in his mind as he tries to figure out what’s changed between now and when we were talking earlier. Then I

see understanding dawn in his features when he comes to a realization.

“You’re doing this because of Paige, aren’t you?”

I blow out a breath. “Yeah. Colleen’s not going to be able to afford the surgery and I need to help Paige.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

Sterling stares at me with something akin to wonder in his expression.

“Emilia, I’m sure there are other options. You can’t just sell your café. It means a lot to you,” he argues, his voice full of concern.

I look up at him with a soft smile. “Are you seriously trying to change my mind right now? Isn’t this what you want? Besides, the café might mean a lot, but Paige means so much more. She’s like my little sister. I have to help her.”

He grows quiet once again. “Honestly, I think you’re being a little impulsive. Shouldn’t you talk to someone? Like your family? I’m sure they’d be interested in helping you make such a big decision. Maybe call your dad or your sister?”

I hadn’t even thought to call anyone back home despite the storm brewing in my heart. Especially Anika. She and Paige are a little close.

“I’m just—I’m not used to having a family I can depend on like that,” I admit. “But you’re right. I need to call Anika and I’m sure Dad and Priya would want to know what’s going on. But I’m not changing my mind about the café. I’m selling it. You can draft the contract or whatever.”

A muscle ticks in his jaw. “I’ll give you a couple of days to think about it, yeah?”

“Yes, that’s fine. I’ll be spending a lot of time here at the hospital anyway. How about you tell me where to meet you in a week and I’ll sign the papers?” I suggest.

He doesn’t reply.

“I’m going to sell the café,” I reassure him. “You don’t know me very well, but when I make a decision it’s pretty hard to change my mind.”

“Yet,” he corrects quietly.

“What?”

“I don’t know you very well yet. But I think you’re a pretty amazing person, Emilia Cameron.”

Our eyes lock and the intensity in his gaze takes my breath away. Sterling’s eyes are really the sort of eyes you get lost in. I don’t just get lost, though; I sink so far down it takes me a couple moments to find myself. I force myself to look away.

Seriously, it’s one of the top ten hardest things I’ve ever had to do. And I’ve had to climb over a tall fence in a mini skirt without flashing everyone on the other side.

I cough to break the tension. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me, Sterling Harrington.”

“Just Sterling,” he counters. “You can call me Sterling now.”

“Nah, I actually prefer Tin Man. It fits you better. Plus, I like giving my friends nicknames.”

He chuckles. “So we’re friends now?”

“Maybe,” I say on a shrug. “I’ll see you soon, okay? Go home. I’m sure Sean’s waiting for you.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” he agrees. “Call your family, though.”

“I will,” I assure him with a small wave.

I stay put as he goes to stand in front of Colleen, bending slightly to say something to her. I’m not sure what it is, but she looks up at him with a grateful expression and he offers her a kind smile in return.

“See you later, Cameron,” he says as he passes by me.

“Bye, Sterling.”

CHAPTER 12

Sterling

Like she requested, I give it a week before I try to get in contact with Emilia again. Seeing as I don’t have her number, I decide to call her brother—not just to ask for her number, but to feel out how she’s been and the situation right now.

Carson picks up on the third ring. It’s late evening on a Monday and he could either be at home or still at work.

“Yo, Harrington,” he greets. “How are you, man?”

“I’m good. You?”

“All things considered, I’m good, too. It’s been a little hectic over at my company in the past few weeks. Which is why I haven’t really come over there.”

“It’s alright. Listen, have you talked to your sister recently?”

“Which one?” Carson questions.

“Emilia,” I reply. “I just wanted to find out how Paige is doing.”

Carson doesn’t speak up for a long minute. When he does, his voice is tinged with suspicion.

“And how do you know about Paige?”

“Because I was with her when everything went down. I drove her to the hospital.”

“And why were you with her?”

I roll my eyes before answering. “Because we were discussing the possibility of her selling her café. By the way, do you know if she’s changed her mind about selling to pay for Paige’s surgery?”

I wanted really badly to offer to pay for it, but I had a feeling she’d have shut me down without hesitation.

Carson huffs out a breath, “No, she hasn’t. We’ve all tried to talk her out of it. I even offered to pay for the surgery but Emilia’s always had a bleeding heart and a lot of pride. I admire her strength, and while a part of me knows that selling the café’s the right thing to do, I don’t want her doing it because of something like this.”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“Why would you want her to change her mind, Harrington? Doesn’t this benefit your company?”

Since I don’t have a good answer to that question, my jaw tightens.

“Stop interrogating me, Carson,” I state. “Now tell me how the girl is.”

“I think she’ll be okay. I talked to Em last night and she said they’re going to transfer Paige to a hospital in the city. Her mom’s going with her. The doctors are all sure she’ll be okay after the surgery, and with a lot of physical therapy she should be able to walk again.”

“That’s good,” I murmur.

“Yeah, I’m glad it all turned out okay,” Carson agrees. “Now back to you being so question-y about Emilia.”

“Question-y’s not a word,” I say drily.

“Whatever, man,” he retorts. “Remember our pact in high school?”

“What pact?”

“The one where we both promised not to go after each other’s sisters.”

“Considering I don’t have a sister, I’d say that agreement referred only to me.”

“Exactly. But the point is, you agreed.”

I vaguely remember making the dumb promise when we were buzzed one night. It’s not like anything was ever going to happen between me and Anika anyway so I didn’t think much of it back then.

“Yes, and?”

“Emilia might not have been in our lives then, but she is now, and she’s still my sister. So stay away, okay?”

“You’re being dramatic, Carson,” I tell him.

“And now you’re not giving me a straight answer,” he states, his tone growing even more serious. “Listen, dude, I don’t know what’s going on between you two. But one minute I’m thinking you’re, like, mortal enemies or some shit. And the next you’re driving her to the hospital and asking how she is. It’s a little weird.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“Nothing weird is going on. It’s a business transaction and I think we’ve gained some mutual respect for each other in the process.”

“Mutual respect,” Carson repeats, amusement coating his voice. “Anyway, just be careful, alright. Especially with Emilia. I don’t know what’s going on, but if there’s anything between you, shut it down. I can’t think of two people that would be worse for each other than the two of you.”

I stiffen. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Carson grows silent for a beat. “Just that the two of you already have a lot of shit going on in your lives. You’re really similar in the sense that you hide your emotions and you’re both hardheaded as fuck. I just don’t think your personalities would work well together.”

“We get along,” I say coldly.

“That’s good. Just keep it friendly,” Carson states. “Now, is that all? I’ve got a shit ton of reports to go through before I have to bed.”

“No, I need Emilia’s number,” I tell him in a low tone. “Before you say anything, it’s business related. If she’s really ready to sell her café, I need to get the documents ready for her to sign.”

“Uh-huh,” Carson says cautiously. “If you say so, Harrington. I’ll send it to you after the call.”

“Thanks.”

He hangs up and I let out a deep breath before lying down on my bed. That was a draining conversation. I'd like to tell Carson to fuck off and reiterate that there's nothing going on between me and his sister. But then I think about the way she looked at me right before I left the hospital and I'm not sure that wouldn't be a total lie.

I might be screwed.

Unsurprisingly, Emilia hasn't changed her mind. I text her as soon as Carson sends her number over, but I can tell she's distracted because she only provides short answers to my questions. Then she says the reason she's so distracted is because Paige has just been transported to the city.

She assures me that she'll be ready to sign the contract in two days. I tell her she can come to the office any time and I'll have the documents ready by then.

I'm on a call with a potential investor for the new project when I get another call through the office phone. I inform the man on the other end that I'll arrange a meeting so we can talk about the deal and he agrees. After he hangs up, I pick up the office phone.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Harrington, Ms. Cameron is here to see you,” the receptionist informs me.

“Okay, please have someone direct her to the lounge on the first floor.”

I need some water anyway, and it'll be less intimidating if we meet there instead of a stuffy office. I step out of my office, heading to the lounge to wait for Emilia. I grab a

bottle of water in the meantime, drinking some before placing the bottle on the small white table in front of me.

Emilia walks through the doors of the lounge soon enough. She smiles when she sees me and the sight of it causes a flutter in my heart. Maybe because I hadn't been expecting it. I rise to my feet.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah I'm fine."

"How's Paige?"

Emilia beams. "She had her surgery yesterday. It went well."

"That's great. I'm happy for her. Have a seat," I say, gesturing to the chair opposite mine.

"This is a pretty cool company," she informs me, taking her seat.

"Thanks," I mutter. "I didn't build it."

"Yeah, but you contribute to it every day. It's impressive," she states.

I need to remember not to look into her eyes because they're incredibly distracting and it's the last thing I need right now. Emilia seems to have come to the same conclusion because her gaze is fixed somewhere on the table when she speaks again.

"Anyway... I heard you've got a contract for me to sign?"

I'm momentarily distracted by the sight of her legs in the dress she's wearing.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“Uh, yeah,” I say, placing the documents on the table so she can go through them.
“Are you sure you don’t want to have a lawyer here or anything?”

“No, it’s fine. I can read.”

I smile before leaning back and we both sit in silence for a couple of minutes while I let her go through the three-page document. She finishes pretty fast but I can tell she took in every single word.

“So? What do you think?” I ask once she sets it back down on the table.

“It’s good. I don’t have a problem with anything in there,” she replies easily.

Thank fuck. “So, are you ready to sign?”

She crosses her legs, her blue eyes roaming over my face in a way that makes me feel exposed.

“Maybe,” she drawls.

My eyebrow rises. “What more could you possibly want, Emilia?” I made sure her contract was iron clad and that she receives appropriate compensation as well.

She shrugs but doesn’t reply. I shake my head, a little impressed.

“You know, you’ve got good instincts and are a masterful negotiator. We could use someone like you working at our company.”

“Okay, I’m in,” she says with a smile, surprising the hell out of me.

“What?”

Emilia leans back, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “Without my café, I’ll be effectively jobless with nothing to do. Let me work with you here at Harrington Holdings.”

My brows furrow. “That was a joke, not an invitation.”

“I’m adding another card to the table,” she announces. “We haven’t signed the contract yet so take it as another one of my conditions. A temporary position at Harrington Holdings.”

I stare at her for a moment before realizing that she’s absolutely serious.

“Where is this even coming from?”

She smiles before shrugging. “Honestly, I just came up with it and I’m rolling with it.”

“Life is that easy for you, isn’t it? Just deciding to jump into a career you know nothing about out of, what? Boredom?” I say, my tone a little harsh.

“Calm down, Tin Man. I’m not coming for your position or anything like that. This is just me being spontaneous, free. I haven’t had the chance to live like that so far. Might as well start now.”

“How wonderful,” I bite out. Then I’m sighing, rubbing the middle of my forehead. “Do you even have any qualifications that merit you a job at Harrington Holdings?”

“No, I do not,” she replies, and it’s a little amusing how flippant she’s being about this.

“I feel like I’m being blackmailed right now,” I mutter.

“We’re simply conducting a business deal,” she says innocently.

“I’d have to think about it,” I state.

“Sure. You do you, Tin Man. But I’m not agreeing to the sale until you give me a job. Remember, it’s only temporarily until I find out what next to do with my life.”

She gets to her feet, pulling her dress down. Then she smiles at me and I feel my heart do a little backflip.

“Choose wisely, Sterling. I’ll see you later.”

She walks out, leaving behind the floral scent of her perfume and a blossoming headache as I consider how best to deal with this new situation.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

I don't have to think too hard about it, though. By the time morning rolls around, I'm sending her a text asking her to show up to work before 10 a.m. It doesn't take her more than a couple of minutes before she replies.

Emilia: You already have a job for me?

Me: Sure, how do you feel about being an assistant?

Emilia: Whose?

Me: Mine.

She said the job would only be temporary, and considering I'm about to get really busy with the development plans taking off, I'll be in need of an assistant anyway. It's like killing two birds with one stone.

Emilia starts to text, then the dots disappear before they reappear once again.

Emilia: Why does this feel like a bad idea?

The openness of the text surprises me a little bit. Because she's absolutely right. I can't think of anything worse than spending time in close quarters with her every single day. But you live, you learn. There's also a part of me that really wants to spend time in close quarters with her every single day.

I text her back a couple simple words.

Me: Where's your sense of adventure, Emilia?

CHAPTER 13

Emilia

My heart lurches in my chest as I read his last text over and over again. The two of us are practically toeing the edge of something, and I can't exactly name what it is. All it know is that it makes me feel sick, but it also feels nice at the same time.

Then the reality of my situation settles in and I practically jump out of bed.

"Nika!" I call out as I beeline straight for my closet. "Anika?"

My sister walks into my bedroom, her eyes half closed and her steps sluggish. She rubs her eyes before peering at me.

"Why are you yelling my name at such an ungodly hour?" she asks, yawning softly.

"It's eight a.m.," I point out. "And I have to be at work in less than two hours."

Her brows furrow and she stares at me in confusion.

"Don't you usually need to be at the café by seven, though?" she questions airily.

"Nika, I already closed down the café and it's about to be sold. Keep up, little sis."

"Right, I knew that," she murmurs. Her eyes briefly flicker close and she rubs her forehead before looking at me again. Her confusion is kind of adorable. "If you're not going to the café, then what work are we talking about?"

“My new job,” I clarify. “At Harrington Holdings.”

“Your new job at...” She stops abruptly, and her pupils grow larger. “Say what now? Okay, slow down, sissy. I’m going to need you to start making sense. You’re working where?”

“At Harrington Holdings,” I repeat.

“I didn’t know you applied for a job there. When?”

“Yesterday.”

Anika sighs. “The full story, Emilia. Please.”

“Alright, fine. So you know how I’m selling my café to them? Well, I was talking to Sterling yesterday and I may have brought it up as a joke that I wanted to work at his company, but then it became serious because I actually do need to work. And I honestly thought he’d tell me to fuck off, but he just texted me this morning and told me I was hired and that I have to be there before ten a.m. and I have nothing to wear!”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

I think I said all those words in one breath. Anika blinks, and I blink as well. And then she's walking toward my bed and slowly lowering herself onto it.

"Yeah, that made no sense," she finally says.

I snort. "Which part, exactly?"

"All of it," she exclaims. "What do you mean you're working at Harrington Holdings? What would you even be doing there?"

"I'll be Sterling's assistant."

My sister falls silent yet again, her brown eyes practically piercing into my skull. I allow myself to be the subject of her scrutiny considering I did wake her up at this "ungodly hour" to lay all this overwhelming information on her.

"So you're going to be working as Sterling's assistant," she starts slowly, and I nod. "Despite you asking for the job just yesterday?"

"Yep."

"And he's hiring you despite you not having any qualifications to be an assistant."

"How hard can it be?" I shrug. "I just need to answer his calls and read his emails. I'm honestly so glad. A part of me was worried he'd tell me that the only position available was a janitor or something. Not that there's anything wrong with being a janitor," I hurriedly say. "My skin just reacts badly to the chemicals in most cleaning

agents.”

“Uh-huh,” Anika murmurs. “And you don’t think it’ll be a bad idea to work as an assistant to the guy you like?”

I choke on air and Anika starts to laugh.

“Holy shit.” She giggles. “You actually like a man, Em. That’s... crazy.”

I’m quick to protest. “No. I don’t like him. You’re being ridiculous, Nika.”

“Oh, really?” she says, arching an eyebrow. “In the time I’ve known you, you’ve never once asked me to help you to pick out an outfit to anywhere.”

“That’s just because I’m nervous,” I insist. “It’s my first day and I have no idea what to wear.”

“Sure, I believe you’re nervous,” Anika says. “Nervous to see your crush. Sterling Harrington. Honestly, that’s insane. I can barely believe it. I knew I was sensing some sexual tension between you!”

“Nika!” I yell, flustered.

Her words are reminiscent of what Paige said the day Sterling was in my office. And now I’m thinking about Paige. I wonder if she’ll already be awake so I can call and ask how she’s doing.

“Hello?” Anika draws my attention. “What are we going to do about this? When are you going to tell Sterling you like him?”

“I’m not!” I snap. “Because I do not like him and we are not telling anybody

anything.”

She smiles. “You’re right, we should probably keep it a secret for now. If Carson finds out, he’ll lose his shit.”

“He’s not going to find out anything because there’s nothing to find out,” I say in frustration.

“Come on, Em. You can admit it to me.”

I groan loudly before falling face down on my bed. There’s no use trying to convince Anika otherwise when she’s fixated on something.

“I don’t have time for this. Can you just help me figure out what to wear?” I ask, my voice muffled. “Something office appropriate.”

“But sexy,” Anika adds.

I turn my body around to look at her. “No.”

“Yes. Don’t worry, Em. Let me handle this. I am so excited!” she squeals, heading into my closet.

While she does that, I continue staring up at the ceiling. Wondering at the position I’ve somehow landed myself in. If you’d asked me two weeks ago if I saw myself working as Sterling’s assistant, I would have laughed in your face.

And yet.

“It’s weird, though,” Anika says from inside my closet. “Sterling’s the last kind of person I would have expected you to fall for. He’s so cold all the time.”

I frown. “He’s not cold with me, though,” I tell her. “But that doesn’t mean I’ve fallen for him. He’s just different from what I thought he was.”

“That’s so cute.”

Anika doesn’t say anything else for a while, leaving me to my thoughts. When she finally reappears out of my closet, she’s holding an outfit in her hand.

“I think this is perfect for your first day,” she announces.

I stare at the ensemble, and even I have to admit it looks nice. Well then, here we go.

Three minutes before 10 a.m., I’m striding into Harrington Holdings, my heels clicking confidently against the polished marble floor. I’m clad in a tailored black suit which includes a sleek blazer and a fitted blouse, paired with a pencil skirt that hits a little above the knee. Anika even helped style my hair into a sleek, professional bun and I’m wearing minimal makeup.

Despite the flutter of nerves in my stomach, I keep my head high and my expression composed. As I approach the reception desk, I spot a familiar face emerging from a nearby hallway and quickly lift my hand to wave her over.

“Lisa,” I call out to the brunette.

Her eyes widen in surprise at the sight of me before narrowing slightly. “Emilia? What are you doing here?”

I offer her a polite smile. “Good morning to you, too. I’m here to see Sterling Harrington.”

“Why?” she says on a frown. “And why are you dressed like that?”

I could be imagining it, but I’m getting serious fuck off vibes at the moment. Still, I decide not to engage. Lisa and I are friends, sure, but I know her through my siblings. Lisa and Carson apparently hadn’t crossed paths in Edenton until they ended up at the same college, when Carson was in his third year. According to Carson, she gravitated toward him, forming a friendship, and once they were done with college and moved back home, she did the same thing to Anika.

Anika likes her a lot, though, and when someone hangs out with your little sister, you kind of get them as a friend by default.

Lisa blinks, clearly taken aback. Join the club, sister.

“Assistant? Since when?”

“Since today,” I reply, maintaining my composure.

Her expression shifts from surprise to skepticism. “And what exactly qualifies you for this position?”

There’s a small smirk playing on her lips that feels condescending. I don’t like this, not at all.

“I don’t know why you’re asking me all these questions when you can always ask Mr. Harrington himself.”

She huffs, clearly unimpressed. “You’re right. Let’s go to his office.”

I clench my jaw as we walk through the expansive corridors, the air scented with a hint of polished wood. Reaching Sterling’s office, Lisa raps sharply on the door, waiting for him to call us inside before pushing it open.

His office is the epitome of luxury with floor-to-ceiling windows and a massive mahogany desk that sits close to the wall, its surface immaculate save for a laptop and a few neatly stacked files. There are some plush leather chairs arranged for visitors and a bookshelf that houses an array of journals and books.

Sterling looks up from his laptop, his piercing gaze sliding over Lisa before settling on me. A shiver rolls up my spine.

“Emilia, welcome,” he says, his tone neutral.

He rises to his feet just as Lisa steps forward, her posture rigid.

“Mr. Harrington. I just need to discuss Ms. Cameron’s appointment. I’m a little concerned about her qualifications and if she’s going to be a right fit at the company.”

Sterling’s expression hardens. “While I appreciate your diligence, Ms. Briggs, Emilia’s position isn’t up for debate and it certainly doesn’t concern you. She’s my assistant. Let me worry about her qualifications.”

Damn, that was cold.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

Lisa opens her mouth to protest but Sterling raises a hand to silence her.

“That’ll be all, Lisa. I’ll call you in here again if I require your presence.”

Lisa shoots me a withering glare before storming out. Damn, I thought we were friends. She acted friendly to my face. I guess that just goes to show you can’t trust people.

The door closes behind her with a soft thud, leaving me alone with Sterling. Something I need to get used to. Because I’m going to be alone with him a lot from now on. I think.

He gestures to one of the leather chairs. “Please, have a seat.”

His gaze lingers on me, a faint smile playing at the corners of his lips.

“You look nice,” he adds.

Heat washes over me, but I pretend to be unaffected by the compliment.

“Thanks. You look good, too,” I say a little awkwardly.

He chuckles softly, leaning back in his chair. The air between us thickens with tension. I clear my throat, breaking the silence.

“So, shall we begin?”

He nods, his expression shifting to one of businesslike focus.

“Of course. After you sign the contracts for the sale, you’ll need to go to HR and the legal department. I’ve already spoken to them and your employment contract has been prepared as well. You can discuss it with whoever attends to you at the legal department.”

“Okay, no problem.”

“Now let’s discuss your role and how to integrate you into your position. I think it should be fairly easy. I’m having a desk prepared for you outside my office. It should be done in a few hours. It’s nothing much, just a cubicle-esque space that offers you with a direct line into my office. As my assistant, you’ll be taking all my calls and managing my schedule. You’d also have to take care of the little things as well, like buying me coffee or lunch if I request it.”

My nose wrinkles.

“Yeah, I had a feeling you’d hate it,” Sterling says, his eyes soft as they study me. “This is going to be fun. Just remember, you asked me for this job.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s okay. I can do all of that with a smile on my face,” I tell him.

“Oh yeah?” Sterling asks, a playful glint in his eyes that has my heart racing in my chest.

“We can’t do this,” I blurt out.

He pauses, clearly taken aback. “Do what?”

“Nothing,” I reply. “This. We need to keep things professional.”

“Ah, of course. Professionalism is important, Ms. Cameron. I don’t think it’ll be hard for us to display it.”

Turns out, it’s really hard. Throughout the day, I slip up and call him Tin Man about three times, and I can feel his eyes on me anytime I’m in his vicinity, his heated gaze feeling like he’s trying to crawl into me. By the time it’s time to leave, I’m almost glad to be out of his presence. Of course it’s not that easy to escape him, though.

“I’ll give you a ride,” he informs me as I stand in front of his desk.

He’s just finished filling me on his schedule and making sure I’m up to date on any important events coming up. I’ve got every meeting of his ticked in my calendar and I’ve taken note of the meager free time he has going forward with the development underway.

“No,” I protest, a little too quickly. “I mean... you’re my boss. Do bosses really drive their assistants home?”

“I didn’t realize there was a rulebook we had to follow,” he states gruffly.

“There isn’t, but...” I trail off and the glint in his eyes tells me he’s won.

“We’re going to be spending a lot of time together, Emilia. And we’ll be leaving work at the same time each day so it makes sense for you to just let me drive you home. Plus, your house is on my way.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

I sigh softly before agreeing. I leave his office to pack my things from my desk outside, and by the time I'm done, he's standing right behind me. As far as first days ago, my day here at Harrington Holdings wasn't so bad.

I received a lot of weird looks from the other employees but they mostly stopped after Sterling reiterated that my presence here is only temporary, same as his, until he returns back to his position at New York. I think a lot of the looks from the other employees has a lot to do with Lisa, to be honest. I had no idea she was such a bitch.

"You okay?" Sterling questions from the wheel.

I look at him and nod once. "Yeah, I'm okay. Just thinking about today."

"And how was it?"

"It was fine. You're actually much more tolerable than I give you credit for."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?" he drawls.

"Yeah. One of the few ones you'll ever be getting from me."

He simply shakes his head at that. "How's Paige?"

My heart warms at the fact that he's thought to ask. Sterling Harrington is surprisingly not as superficial as I thought he would be. He's proven me wrong on a lot of things, actually, and I feel like every day he continues to surprise me with his actions.

“She’s okay. Her leg’s healing nicely and they’re hoping she can get started on the physical therapy soon enough.”

“That’s good. She seems like a strong girl. I’m sure she’ll be okay.”

“Yeah, she will be,” I agree.

We arrive at my house pretty quickly. “Thanks for the ride, Mr. Harrington,” I say to him once he’s parked on the curb.

I take off my seatbelt, but a part of me wants to linger because I’m enjoying being in his car a little too much. It even smells like him. I’ve never been a person to notice a person’s scent but Sterling has a pretty distinct one. I think it’s his cologne. It has this musky, wooden scent that just sends pheromones running through me.

“You can call me Sterling when it’s just us,” he states, leaning his head back against the headrest of his seat to look sideways at me. “It feels more natural. Or Tin Man if you prefer.”

I laugh, avoiding his gaze. “I do prefer, actually. It just fits you so well.”

“Ironic considering you’d be a tin woman as well if you think about it.”

My brows furrow. “What do you mean?”

“You and I are a lot alike, Emilia,” he continues. “When you got the call about Paige, you were so distraught. But you only had to be in her mother’s presence for a second before your pain took a sort of backseat. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone repress emotions as fast as you did back at that hospital. One minute I was genuinely starting to get worried about you and in the next you were pretty much fine. You took control of the situation in minutes, figured out the solution. It was pretty impressive.”

My mouth dries as I take in his words. I had no idea that was how it looked.

“Thanks?”

He chuckles. “I didn’t say it was a good thing, Emilia. Your feelings matter, too.”

“Sure,” I say on a shrug.

“No, I’m serious.” His green eyes meet mine and I suck in a sharp breath. “You’re allowed to feel anything you want to feel. Life’s too short to keep our emotions at bay.”

It doesn’t escape my notice that he’s basically saying my words back to me.

“Some emotions are too dangerous to explore, though,” I point out.

Sterling’s jaw tightens. He looks away from me. “Yeah, you’re probably right about that.”

I don’t think we’re talking about what happened at the hospital anymore. I feel a clenching in my chest.

“I’m going to head inside,” I say, my voice a little shaky. “Good night, Sterling.”

“Good night.”

He doesn't look as I open the door, stepping out of the car. As soon as I do so, though, I feel a sharp stabbing pain in the soles of my feet that causes me to stumble.

“Ah,” I hiss, leaning on the car for support.

I hear the car door open and slam shut, and in the next breath Sterling's standing in front of me, green eyes peering at me curiously.

“What's wrong?”

His gaze moves down to my feet. I wave off his concern.

“I'm fine. I just don't wear heels often enough so my legs are killing me after having being in these all day,” I say with a small embarrassed smile. “Lesson learned, though. You'll be seeing me in ballet flats tomorrow at work.”

Sterling frowns. “Take them off.”

“What, now? My house is right there.” I gesture toward it with my hand.

“Can you walk?”

I make a face at his strict tone. “Of course I can.”

But I only need to take one step forward to disprove that statement. Sterling catches

me when I stumble once again, his hands wrapping around my waist. My heart beats once, twice, and then it's beating too fast for me to count. I feel my breathing stop. Everything around me simply stops.

We've never been this close before. His chest is pressed against mine and his face is right there. His lips are right there, and I don't think I've ever wanted to kiss anyone more than I do right now, in this moment. His grip around my waist tightens like he can hear my thoughts. He moves in closer, his scent surrounding me as the air between us hums. I can't stop staring at his mouth. I can't help but imagine how it would feel against mine, on my body.

"You know, staring at me like that is a really bad idea, Emilia," he rasps.

I stammer, trying to step away from his grip. "I-I'm sorry."

Sterling's eyes fall shut and he looks like he's in pain for a moment. When they open, though, they're clearer and I can practically see the intent behind them.

"Fuck it," he whispers.

And then his lips come down on mine. Tingles shoot out like electricity through my body, sending sparks dancing, twirling across my skin. His hands are possessive, pulling me tight around him almost aggressively. His other hand reaches up to the back of my head, cradling my skull, and the kiss is soft, so soft, and filled with so much heat.

I shouldn't be doing this. I really shouldn't be kissing him right now. But sometimes doing the right thing is exhausting and you've just got to damn the consequences and live in the moment. Besides, kissing him feels way too good to be wrong.

I'm the one that pushes my tongue into his mouth. I step even closer to him, his hand

sliding down to my ass. I moan when I feel the bulge in his pants rubbing against my thigh. The knowledge that I'm responsible for it makes me wild. His thumb trails down the column of my throat as his silky tongue tangles with mine.

I squeeze my thighs together, feeling my core clench. A part of me wants to rip his clothes off right there and then. But we're standing outside my house.

Oh my god, we're standing outside my house.

I pull back abruptly, panting hard. My hands are clenched, fisting the front of his shirt, and our hips are lined up in a way that's entirely inappropriate. Sterling's breathless too, his eyes peering at me in a way that makes me feel naked.

I slowly take a step away from his rock-hard body, floundering for something to say.

"That was..." I start, then stop. Finally, I shut my eyes, the words rushing past my lips. "Good night, Mr. Harrington."

I hurriedly walk past him, as fast as my blistered feet can allow. I make it to my front door and when I glance back, Sterling's still staring at me with his jaw clenched. I enter my house with a relieved sigh before slowly sliding down to the floor. Thankfully, Anika's nowhere in sight.

I just hope no one saw us.

Fucking hell. This really was a bad idea. We didn't even last a day.

CHAPTER 14

Sterling

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

The morning light filters through my bedroom windows as my eyes slowly open. I run my fingers through my hair, feeling completely and utterly drained after a mostly sleepless night. I'd like nothing more than to lie in here all day but I have to get to work so I rise to my feet, scratching at the stubble on my jaw as I head in to the bathroom.

I strip before climbing into the shower, and almost immediately the memory of yesterday's kiss with Emilia assaults me. It's been replaying in my head on repeat. The feel of her lips on mine, the sight of them swollen and raw after the kiss. The way I felt with her body in my hands. I imagine the feel of her soft ass and groan softly, feeling my cock grow even harder.

I slowly fist my length, my mind chasing after the image of her eyes filled with lust. I imagine her slowly lowering herself beneath me, her lips tentatively touching my cock before closing around me, her tongue laving at the head. Her blue eyes on me as she takes me in deeper. I let out a soft groan as the image in my head becomes even clearer.

I imagine lifting her up and taking her on all fours, my cock sliding into that perfect ass, thrusting inside of her over and over again until she's screaming my name. My lips fall open in a gasp as my release coats the floor of the shower. I lean against the wall, watching as the evidence of my arousal is washed away.

This is so fucked.

After spending more time than I usually would getting ready, I make my way to perform the other tasks on my routine before leaving for work. Wake Sean up, have

some breakfast. I'm a little distracted as I go through the motions. I ask Callum to drive me in, and once we arrive I feel a rush of trepidation at the thought of how to handle this delicate situation I'm in with Emilia.

She's already at work. She's seated at her desk, but she stands up at the sight of me. Her face lights up with a cheerful smile that confuses the fuck out of me. She's dressed in a tailored navy skirt suit today. Just like yesterday, the outfit accentuates her figure, paired with a soft pink blouse that adds a touch of warmth.

She walks toward me and I notice she really is in flat shoes today. They look cute.

"Good morning, Mr. Harrington," she says brightly, extending a cup of coffee toward me. "Just the way you like it."

I take the cup, momentarily thrown off by her casual demeanor.

"Morning, Emilia. Thank you."

I search her eyes for any hint of acknowledgment about yesterday, but she offers none. She moves to her desk, organizing files and preparing for the day as if nothing out of the ordinary has occurred. I feel a sense of emptiness as I walk into my office, taking off my jacket distractedly.

Emilia walks inside just as soon as I'm seated. I clear my throat, deciding it'd be better for me to broach the subject.

"About yesterday?—"

She looks at me, her expression neutral. "Yes?"

"Don't do that," I grit out. "We need to talk about the kiss."

A flicker of something, perhaps discomfort, crosses her face but she quickly masks it.

“There’s nothing to talk about, Mr. Harrington. It was a mistake. A temporary lapse in judgment. But we’re both professionals, and I think it’s best we forget it ever happened.”

I would have taken Emilia Cameron to be a lot of things, but I never expected her to be a coward. Her dismissal stings more than I care to admit but I don’t let that show.

“So what, we just go on pretending you didn’t have your tongue in my mouth just last night?” I ask, my tone even.

Her eyes flare, but she’s still smiling, “Exactly. That’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

“Emilia,” I growl.

Her mask slips for a second. “Sterling, please. I can’t, okay? We can’t. So let’s just go back to normal because I think I might actually be good at this job and I don’t want to have to quit after one day.”

“No one is asking you to quit,” I mutter.

“Good. So can we please just move on?”

Her blasé tone is really getting on my nerves, but a part of me understands where she’s coming from. I think about all the complications in my life right now and I know the right thing to do would be to block the kiss from my memory and pretend it never happened.

A little hard considering when I look at her all I can think about is how much I want

to kiss her again, and so many other things.

“Alright,” I reply, keeping my tone even. “Whatever you say, Ms. Cameron.”

She offers me a tight smile. “Shall we go over today’s agenda?”

I nod, pushing aside my feelings. “Yeah, sure. What do I have scheduled?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

She unlocks the tablet in her hand. “You have a meeting with the development team at eleven to discuss the hiring of contractors, then another meeting with the finance team immediately after. You asked me to set a reminder for one p.m. so you could talk to foreign investors.”

“There’s nothing scheduled before eleven?”

“Actually, I pushed back your meetings because I received a call right before you arrived. Your grandfather’s secretary informed me that he’ll be placing a call to you in about an hour.”

My jaw ticks. “I see. Alright, thanks, Emilia. I’ll let you know when I need you.”

She leaves me alone while I think about the impending call from my grandfather. There’s no predicting what Sebastian Harrington could have to say. He’s pretty much ignored me since I came back to Edenton except for the weekly emails I’ve been sending to update him on what’s been going on here.

I’m distracted as I go through some reports from different departments while also glancing through the company’s main bulletin for any major announcements. Spencer hasn’t been named the new vice-president so that can’t be the reason for grandfather’s call.

But I wouldn’t hold my breath on that. It could be that he wants to inform me first before sweeping the carpet from under me and handing my rightful position to my undeserving older brother.

The call comes exactly an hour after. A video call.

Wonderful, I think drily as I press the button on my keypad to answer.

I clear my throat as his face comes into view. Like me, he seems to be seated in his office, wearing a crisp tailored suit with not a hair out of place. His piercing brown eyes immediately latch on to mine as he leans back in his chair.

“Grandfather,” I greet with a small nod.

“Sterling,” he says in a similar tone. “I trust you’ve been well?”

“Yes. And you?”

“Good,” he grunts. “How’s Sean?”

“Fine.”

Now that we’ve got the meaningless greetings out of the way, he’ll be jumping straight to business.

“Why do you think I’ve called you today, Sterling?” he questions, causing me to raise an eyebrow.

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

He hums disapprovingly. “You have your suspicions, of course,” he prompts.

I shrug. “It could be anything ranging from a discussion about a potentially big movement within the company to news about my summary dismissal,” I state, deciding to cut right into the thick of it.

Sebastian smirks. “Do you really believe that?”

“That there’s a potential movement within the company I’m unaware of? Of course.”

“Enough with the blithe comments. Tell me how you’re really feeling.”

“I’m not feeling anything,” I grit out.

“Oh really? Not even a little angry about being banished to Edenton?”

“Actually, no. Believe it or not, I’m enjoying my time here and I’ve been spending it doing something worthwhile. It’s less immersive than the New York branch. I’ve had some time to myself and Sean as well,” I tell him honestly.

“Sounds like you’re having a nice time,” he states. “Would you rather stay there, then? Permanently.”

My hand forms a fist but I keep my expression blank as I stare straight ahead.

“Does that mean you’re asking me to stay?”

Because I don’t want that. Losing my position at the company would mean that all my work the past few years has been for nothing, and I refuse to let that happen. I worked my way up to that position. It was harder for me than most normal people because my grandfather wanted to teach me a lesson. He’s always teaching me lessons and I fear I may never stop learning from him.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

But the worst lesson would be him tossing me aside. The only thing I would gain from that is the confirmation that I really am useless and undeserving of my last name.

“I’m not going to stop you from returning to the company, Sterling,” Sebastian says after a short silence. “Ask yourself if you deserve to return.”

A muscle ticks in my jaw. “Of course I deserve to return.”

“Really?” he questions, arching an eyebrow. “You might not be aware of it, Sterling, but you’ve always had an inferiority complex. I’ve watched you struggle with your position as a Harrington. You worked ten times harder than everyone else—why?”

“What?” I grit out.

He sighs. “I’m sure you’ll find the answers to these questions on your own. When you do, come and find me and then we’ll talk.”

“Wait, how’s Spencer doing?”

My grandfather chuckles at that. He’s always had a soft spot for my brother, the old sap. It’s always been blatantly obvious considering the amount of shit that Spencer’s pulled in the past couple of years and how he’s never been kicked out or disowned.

“He’s doing his best,” he finally replies.

But Spencer’s best is never enough. He knows it, Grandfather knows it, the entire

fucking world knows it.

“Your parents are back. I’m sure they’re on their way to Edenton as we speak,” he informs me.

My lips thin and I feel my heart speed up at that, “Great,” I say unenthusiastically. “Goodbye, Grandfather.”

He nods once and then the screen grows blank. Once it does, I sigh, rubbing my hands over my face. It seems I’m in for a very long day. After several boring meetings and a lot of paperwork to begin work on the site, I finally clock out of work.

Emilia practically raced out the door as soon as I said she was free to go. It’s pretty obvious she’s avoiding a situation where I’d offer her a ride. The two of us being in close quarters is a bad idea, so it’s good that she’s doing her best to avoid me. Hell, I wouldn’t want to be in close quarters with myself right now.

The drive home is shorter than I would have liked. Because I already know what I’m going to find once I arrive at the mansion.

I hear my father’s voice before I see him. A couple of steps lead me to the living room. He’s on his knee in front of Sean, laughing heartily as he listens to what my son is saying.

“And I want a train set and Lego blocks and the third Harry Potter book,” Sean lists.

My dad chuckles, while my eyebrows lift.

“That’s a lot of requests for a tiny man,” I state, announcing my presence as I walk into the room.

Sean's eyes widen and he avoids eye contact as I lower myself into the couch behind him and my dad.

"Hey, son," my dad greets.

I offer him a small smile before turning to my son. "I thought we agreed you would stop demanding gifts, bud. You have enough toys and books," I say firmly to the little boy who now has a sheepish expression on his face.

He and I have had a conversation about this before. But he knows my dad's a big softie who will immediately get him whatever he asks for.

"Relax, Ster," Dad says on a laugh. "He's allowed to ask for more toys."

"He has enough," I repeat. "You're excused, Sean. Go to your room. I'll come in a bit to tuck you in."

I don't miss the small wink my dad shoots Sean's way, right before he runs out of the room. And then I'm left alone with my father. He rises to his feet, standing tall in front of me. He's about six foot two, and when I was younger that used to make me feel like he was a giant.

He felt like that at times. A giant that was desperately trying to protect me from everyone who tried to make my life harder. And I know he did his best with regard to that, but sometimes there was nothing to do. Because he didn't have any power.

"Don't buy him any of the toys, Dad," I reiterate once Sean's gone.

He sighs before taking a seat beside me. He's wearing frayed jeans and a t-shirt. An extremely simply attire. Anyone looking at him would have a hard time believing he's the first son of a business tycoon. His dark hair is longer than I remember,

almost to his shoulders. Wild and free, just like my father.

“Alright fine, sergeant. But you can at least allow me to buy him his Harry Potter book?” he questions. “Or are you against reading as well?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“Where’s Mother?” I ask, ignoring the question.

He knows it’s an affirmation without me having to say it. His brown eyes grow softer.

“In your room, waiting for you,” he replies tightly.

I nod, rising to my feet immediately. There’s no time for formalities when the fate of my future hangs in the balance. I thought my parents would talk to me about the truth together but it seems my mother, who is at the core of it all, has been chosen to be the spokesperson. I prefer it like that. Elana Harrington won’t sugarcoat shit.

“Ster,” my dad calls right before I walk through the threshold. “Whatever she says doesn’t matter, alright? This has no effect on our relationship.”

A muscle tightens in my jaw. But it does. Whatever she has to say changes everything.

After making sure Sean’s ready for bed and tucking him in, I head over to my bedroom. The door is wide open and I get a glimpse of my mother sitting with her legs crossed on the edge of my bed. After inhaling softly, I walk in, unknotting my tie and sliding it off as I do.

She arches one delicate dark eyebrow as I enter.

“Mother,” I greet, inclining my head respectfully. “You look nice.”

She stands and I step forward to give her two air kisses on the cheek. It's what's expected whenever you're in the presence of the great Elana Harrington. She thrives on compliments. And despite the fact that she's basically demanding them, they're never empty.

"Thank you, Sterling," she says stiffly. "The trip to Mykonos did me well."

My parents couldn't be more different. My mom's a typical rich heiress with her manicured nails, expensive vacations, and Birkin bags. She thrives in the spotlight, while my dad has tried all his life to shy away from it. It's a wonder they've lasted this long. But after over thirty years of marriage, it's pretty clear that they're a match made in heaven or hell. Dad tempers my mom's character and she helps him to get more out of life. It works well and I'd say it's true love, if the recent rumors didn't spark doubts and the possibility of a betrayal.

"Would you like to speak in my office?" I ask, gesturing to the door with my hand.

She walks to the door without another word. I take off my jacket and undo a few buttons on my shirt before following her in. She's taken a seat in my chair behind the desk, leaving me to take the one opposite. I inwardly roll my eyes.

She and my grandfather get along well because they have similar ideologies. Everything's a power play and everyone's a bug that can be crushed beneath their shoe. My mother hasn't smiled at me once since I entered the room. I'm not sure she's actually ever offered me a warm smile before. Elana's always been cold, distant. She's made it quite obvious that she never wanted to have kids.

Spencer and I were raised by nannies in place of our mother. All Elana really found joy in was traveling the world, throwing expensive parties. Anything that didn't have to do with her two children. She's the least motherly person I know. I made my peace with that a long time ago, although I can't say the same for my brother. Spencer's a

mama's boy for a mama that's never really there. In his defense, though, she's always treated him a little better than she did me.

"I assume you have questions with regard to the recent news?" she starts.

Her hands are clasped together atop the table, her brown eyes meeting mine straight on. She makes a formidable picture seated at the head, olive skin smooth and glowing. We look a lot like her, Spencer and I. My dad always used to joke about how sad he was that we both inherited all of our mother's traits.

"The news you tried so hard to avoid until you couldn't?" I retort.

She rolls her eyes. "Don't get smart with me, Sterling."

My eyes narrow. "I want an explanation, Mother. The truth."

The room is silent for a couple of seconds until she finally begins.

"You've always been very smart, Sterling," she says on a sigh. "Too smart, at times. By the age of five, I could tell you were already noticing how dissimilar you were from your father and your older brother. When you were ten, Spencer collapsed because of a peanut allergy, the same allergy your father has. It made you sad when you realized you didn't have it. There were always little things you noticed that made you question if you were really Steven's son. Deep down, a part of you has always known you weren't."

My heart feels like it's been serrated by her words. I never realized I was a person capable of being in denial until now. A part of me wanted all of this to be a lie, just a dumb rumor. But now that the truth's looking me in the eye, there's nowhere to run anymore.

“Who’s my father?”

CHAPTER 15

Emilia

I’m getting ready to settle into bed for the night when I get a call. I frown, wondering who could be calling me so late. My first guess is Dad or Priya, but I just saw them earlier when I went over for dinner. Anika’s asleep in her room. Maybe it’s Carson? I doubt anyone apart from my family would be calling me in the middle of the night.

When I grab my phone, though, Carson’s name isn’t the one flashing across the screen. My frown deepens when I see that it’s Sterling, instead. I inwardly groan. I briefly consider not answering, but the guilt related to that action would eat at me until I couldn’t take it anymore. I’d wonder if it was an emergency.

Technically, it has to be one. Sterling and I are complicated, but I doubt he’d be calling me so late unless something was wrong. I answer the call right before the ringing stops, feeling my heart rate spike when it connects.

“Hello?” I say, my voice low.

There’s no reply. I wait one second, two. By the time five seconds have passed, I start to grow a little confused.

“Mr. Harrington?” I question, my brows furrowed.

Still nothing but crackles on the other end. I hear something else, though—the sound of jazz music playing quietly in the background.

“Sterling,” I say, softly this time. “Where are you?”

Finally, I hear a muffled groan. “I have no idea. I got into a car and drove for a while, ended up in some dive bar in the middle of nowhere.”

The first question on the tip of my tongue is why he started driving in the first place. Instead, I ask, “How long is a while?”

It takes a couple of minutes before he replies. “An hour or so.”

My mouth drops. “Are you serious right now?” He doesn’t reply. “Then drive back. You can, right?”

“I would. But I’m several glasses into a bottle of whiskey, can’t drive back in my state.” He mumbles the last words a little but I’m able to make it out all the same.

I run my hand through my hair, pushing it back as I stare incredulously at no one.

“Wait, are you saying you’re drunk? Are you fucking kidding me?” I question, uncaring if that’s a rude thing to say to my boss.

“I didn’t say I was drunk, just too inebriated to drive,” he says lowly.

My jaw tightens. “Why did you call me, Sterling?”

“I need your help.”

“There’s literally nothing I can do. Call someone from your house. You have, like, two dozen people working for you. Ask someone to come pick you up or something.”

“Can’t do that,” he murmurs, sounding a little sleepy. “Please, Emilia. I wouldn’t be calling you if I had any other options.”

I want to tell him to fuck off. He made the mess and he can get out of it himself. But then I think about how wildly out of character this is for him. Something must have happened to make him act this way. He’s been off ever since the call with his grandfather earlier this morning.

“Sterling, it’s almost midnight,” I remind him gently.

He makes a small sound that I can’t interpret. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m being way out of line. It’s late and I can’t expect you to come all the way here to get me. I shouldn’t have called you. Goodbye, Emilia,” he hurriedly says.

“Wait,” I blurt out, shutting my eyes as I consider the consequences of my next actions. “Send me your location. I’ll come get you.”

“I can’t ask you to do that,” he says softly.

“You already did, Tin Man,” I reply with a small smile.

Argh. Curse my bleeding heart.

I tell him to ask for the name of the bar and the location, and once I have that information, I hang up. In less than five minutes, I’m dressed and ready to go. I sneak into the living room, careful not to wake Anika up, and grab the car keys on top of the table. Thankfully, my dad insisted I drive his car home earlier because he thought it was too late for me to walk home on my own.

It’ll be fine. The roads are safe and this should honestly be a piece of cake. Especially when I think about the fact that I once ran away from home at 2 a.m. after watching my mother overdose.

My life is nothing if not eventful.

A little over an hour later, I arrive at Sterling’s location. It’s a small, rundown place called Tim’s Bar. It’s the kind of establishment I would have never expected Sterling Harrington to be caught dead in. But there he is, seated on a stool right in front of the bar, a glass in his hand and a far-off expression on his face.

The bar is quiet, a little dirty, with about four patrons. All of them are men, with beer bellies and inebriated expressions. They stare as I walk past them with my head up high, heading straight toward Sterling. I gasp softly when I catch sight of the two whiskey bottles in front of him, one of them empty and the other one halfway there.

“Please don’t tell me you fucking drank all of that!” I state, my voice hard.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

He looks up at me, blinks once, twice, before his eyes fill with recognition. Shit, he's plastered.

"Alright, I won't," he mutters, reaching for the half-filled bottle.

I grab it out of his hands immediately. "What is wrong with you, Sterling?"

That seems to draw the attention of the bartender, a middle-aged man with a brown mustache and kind eyes.

"Hey, honey. You here to pick him up?" he questions.

"Yeah," I say, forcing a small smile. "How long has he been like this?"

"A while now. He walked in here about two hours ago and asked for two bottles. I thought he was joking until he started throwing back glass after glass. Never seen someone consume that much in so little time."

I glare at the man in question and apart from the look in his eyes, he looks the same. Nothing about him screams drunk person.

"How high is your tolerance, Tin Man?" I can't help but ask.

"Too fucking high," he replies lowly.

The bartender watches our exchange with a smile. "You his girlfriend or something?"

“No,” I grit out. “I’m his assistant.”

“He must be a pretty good boss if you came all the way down here to get him.”

“He’s not.” Sterling looks like he’s about to fall asleep so I sigh before reaching for my purse. “Let me pay for the drinks so we can get out of here.”

The kind bartender nods, accepting my card. He’s printing out the receipt when someone stumbles into me from behind. I whirl around to find one of the beer-bellied patrons standing or should I say swaying on his feet behind me.

“Hey, sweetheart. I’m Crane,” he slurs with a wide-toothed grin.

“Can I help you?” I ask carefully.

“Was just wondering if you wanted to ditch the asshat in the suit and come back home with me,” he suggests, blue eyes moving down the length of my body.

My lips curl in distaste. “No.”

He takes a step forward. “Come on, pretty girl. I promise I’ll take care of you.”

I hear the sound of a chair being pushed back right before someone shoves Crane in the chest, causing him to fall to the ground. With wide eyes, I turn to look at Sterling.

“Leave her the fuck alone,” he growls.

Crane’s a coward because he immediately scrambles away, heading back to his seat and his pathetic bottle of beer. Once he’s gone, Sterling looks at me, his expression slightly warmer.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I reply, a little rattled. “Let’s just get out of here.”

He stumbles a little when he tries to take a step and I’m just glad for a sign that all that alcohol he consumed has actually had an effect on him. He doesn’t protest when I slide my hand under his shoulders to help him stand straight, and after thanking the bartender, we leave.

Once we’re in my car, I exhale a soft breath. Sterling’s in the driver’s seat, looking straight ahead and blinking rapidly like he’s trying to stave off sleep. I can tell he’s really close to losing that battle though.

“I don’t think we can drive back to Edenton tonight,” I start, wondering if he can even hear me. “We could drive into the city. Maybe stay over at Carson’s place until morning?”

He sits up at that, eyes suddenly alert. “That can’t happen. Your brother will murder me if he finds out about this.”

I groan. He’s right. “Then what do you want me to do, Sterling?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I shouldn’t have called you.”

“Why didn’t you call Carson? He’s, like, twenty minutes away.”

“I didn’t want to see or talk to anyone,” he mumbles, resting his head back.

“Where’s your credit card?” I ask after a couple of minutes.

He pulls out a wallet, bleary-eyed, and hands it to me. “Why?”

“I’m going to use it to pay for our hotel rooms,” I explain, turning the key in the ignition and starting the car.

By the time we arrive in front of the first decent hotel I see, Sterling’s already out. It takes a while before I’m able to wake him up and I practically have to carry him to the front desk, where we’re promptly informed by the receptionist that there’s only one room available.

“This cannot be happening to me,” I whisper underneath my breath, glaring at the man leaning on the counter beside me.

He grimaces as he looks at me, an apology in his eyes. Having no other options, I pay for the room and we’re led up to it. It’s a pretty nice room, a suite with lots of space. As soon as we’re inside, I lead Sterling to the bed. I help him out of his suit jacket and shoes, and he passes out the moment he hits the mattress.

“Perfect,” I say on a sigh, looking at the sprawled man on the bed.

Having nothing else to do, I head over to take a seat on the couch in front of the TV. A movie's my best option to keep my eyes open. I don't want to fall asleep in an unfamiliar place; I doubt I'd even be able to. But I need to do something to keep myself busy until Sterling wakes up so we can leave.

Soon enough, I have *Pride and Prejudice* playing to distract me from my thoughts. My eyes are wide open and I'm not even the least bit sleepy. My senses are wired; my brain is trying so hard to overthink everything that's happened in the last couple of hours. I have no idea how I'm going to handle things when Sterling wakes up.

But that's a problem I can deal with much later. Right now, I can just try to sit back, relax, and watch one or two of my favorite movies.

Unfortunately, my distractions are short-lived because I hear rustling on the bed behind me exactly two-and-a-half hours after Sterling passed out. I look back in surprise and he's groaning softly as he slowly rises up on the bed. My jaw drops.

"Fuck," he breathes, rubbing his forehead.

"Sterling?" I ask dumbly. "How are you awake right now?"

He tries to get out of bed and that spurs me into action, rushing to his side. He looks up at me, green eyes way too alert for a man who passed out drunk a couple of hours ago.

"What time is it?" he grumbles.

"Um, three a.m.," I reply with wide eyes. "Are you okay? How are you feeling?"

"Like shit."

“Oh, well, that checks out. You downed two bottles of gasoline a couple hours ago,” I inform him.

His lips twitch. “It was whiskey, not gasoline.”

“Same difference,” I say on an eye roll. “I thought you’d sleep for way longer considering how much you drank.”

“I don’t sleep much,” he mutters. Then he’s looking up at me again, eyes softer, “Why aren’t you asleep? Do you want the bed? You could sleep for a couple of hours and then we can leave.”

I quickly shake my head. “No, it’s fine. I can’t sleep in unfamiliar places.”

He arches an eyebrow in disbelief.

“Seriously. I’m fine. I don’t even feel the least bit sleepy, I promise,” I inform him.

That seems to do it. He breaks eye contact, looking down at the covers with a sigh. “I never should have dragged you into this.”

“Yeah, but you did,” I say on a shrug. “It’s fine, though. We’re friends and you needed my help, so I helped.”

“We’re friends?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“You think I would drive an hour in the middle of the night for just anybody?”

“And here I thought you were trying to be a good employee,” he says, his voice lightly teasing. “Maybe get a raise while you’re at it.”

“Oh, you’re definitely giving me a raise and paying me overtime for my troubles,” I reply.

He smiles and I feel my heart skip a beat or two. Focus, Emilia. No matter how distracting his smiles are.

My eyes widen when he starts to stand up again. I place a hand on his shoulder to steady him and I’m surprised by the searing heat that rushes from my palm through my entire body at the slight touch. A soft sound echoes under my breath, too low for him to hear.

He rises without me helping him, though, and I automatically take a step backward. Sterling rubs the side of his forehead, looking like he’s in pain, which I guess he would be. Then I remember I requested some water and aspirin from the front desk that he could use when he woke up.

I hurriedly head over to the table in the room and grab the water and the pills, offering them to him.

He blows out a relieved breath. “Thank you. You’re an angel.”

I grin. “Yeah, angel sounds about right.”

“Don’t get cocky,” he states, downing two of the pills before chugging down the entire bottle of water. He looks around the room for a couple of seconds, probably taking it in. The silence feels a bit uncomfortable.

Now what?

I’d been hoping he’d go back to sleep or something but that’s proven incorrect when his gaze latches on to the wooden door in the corner of the room.

“I think I need a shower,” he informs me. “I still feel like shit.”

My eyes widen. “A shower?”

As in he wants to strip down, naked, while I’m right here? That feels rude and inconsiderate. Because the whole time he’s in there, all I’ll be thinking about is his naked body, and that’s the last thing I want to be thinking about.

This entire situation already has me feeling wired. And now I have a feeling things are about to get even worse.

Sterling arches an eyebrow in question and I gulp silently.

“I mean, of course! A shower is exactly what you need,” I say with false enthusiasm. “Go on. I’ll go back to watching the March sisters and their sojourn through life.”

“Who?” he asks, with furrowed brows.

I make a face. “You’ve never watched or read *Little Women*?”

“I’ve heard about it,” he grumbles.

“Okay,” I decide with a short clap. “In you go to the shower, buddy. And once you come back, you and I are going to watch one of the best pieces of media ever created. The movie has Emma Watson, Saoirse Ronan, Florence Pugh, and Timothée Chalamet. It’s amazing and we’re watching it,” I say excitedly.

Movies and books have always been my favorite things in the world. Mostly because they served as a distraction from my actual world.

Sterling stares at me for a couple of seconds, giving me a look that causes me to falter. My throat dries and I have a hard time breaking eye contact, but when I manage it, I’m a little breathless.

“Sterling?” I whisper, and that seems to cut through to whatever he was thinking.

“Yeah, right. Shower,” he mumbles, turning around to head for the door.

Once he’s gone, I can finally breathe easier. I settle on the couch, trying my hardest not to think about Sterling or whatever’s going on behind the closed door. I consider texting Anika while I wait for him to return. Although I plan to be back home before she even wakes up in the morning, there’s a possibility she could surprise me and rise earlier than 8 a.m. Although that possibility is incredibly low.

Telling her about this entire situation would only subject me to endless questions I have no answers to. Plus, I’m sure she wouldn’t appreciate the fact that I left the house so late without informing her. It might be a good idea to just keep everything to myself. Anika will be none the wiser and everyone can just go about their lives once I get back home.

The first step to doing that would probably be creating clear boundaries between myself and Sterling. Things can’t go on this way. Whatever this is between us needs to end. I thought I ended it. After that kiss, I was sure I had enough fortitude to resist

him. It was hard, telling him to forget it ever happened, but I was doing what was best for the both of us.

One call from him had me dropping everything, though. And that's dangerous.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

I could argue that it was just me being kind, but kindness shouldn't negate self-preservation. I just need to be strong. So what if he has pretty green eyes and a face that looks like it was specially carved to drive women crazy? I need to focus. He's my boss. And regardless of that, we're on completely different paths in life. We would never even work so there's no point trying to foster any feelings between us.

But then I think about the sadness in his eyes. The one that's seemingly woven into him, and my heart can't help but empathize because it's a sadness I understand all too well.

I'm shaken out of my thoughts when the door to the bathroom open. Sterling steps out and the sight of him has my mouth drying. Because he's shirtless. He walks into the room, his head wrapped in a towel which he's currently using to dry his wet dark hair.

My eyes trace the shadows between every defined ab on his olive skin. The dip at the hollow of his throat, the way strands of his hair cling to his forehead. My gaze lowers once again to the perfect v on his hips that goes all the way down to?—

“Are you planning on taking a picture, Miss Cameron?” Sterling asks, sounding so fucking cocky I could punch him in the face.

My gaze snaps to his, narrowing immediately into a glare. “Why aren't you wearing a shirt?”

He smirks, looking way too amused. “Because I just took a shower? I'd be walking around in my briefs but I figured it wouldn't be appropriate considering present

company.”

“You’re damn right it wouldn’t,” I grit out. “Go put on your shirt.”

“I’m pretty sure I don’t take orders from you, Emilia,” he states, stepping forward.

I feel something in my stomach take a plunge. He cannot come near me looking like that.

“Please, put on a shirt,” I say, uncaring that I have to resort to begging.

“No.”

My fists clench. He is such an asshole.

Sterling’s expression is one of complete nonchalance as he continues walking closer. Finally, he settles on to the couch next to me. I promptly shift back, leaving enough room between us.

“How would you feel if I took off my shirt right now?” I mutter without looking at him.

“It’s a free world, Miss Cameron. Although I can’t take responsibility for my actions if you did that,” he states, his gaze heated.

I swallow, momentarily lost for words.

“Are we going to watch the movie or not?” Sterling questions after a couple of moments.

I shake my head slowly. “Not.”

He's seated right beside me and he has refused to put on a shirt. There's no way I'd be able to concentrate on the great love triangle that is Amy, Laurie, and Jo.

"How about we talk instead?" I suggest.

Sterling gives me a look that says he'd rather chew granite. "About?" he grumbles.

"You tell me what happened to you last night. Exactly what made you drive for an hour at night only to get wasted alone in the middle of nowhere?"

I might as well have doused us both in cold water. The temperature in the room goes down and Sterling becomes eerily silent for a bit. When he does speak, his voice is hard, unflinching.

"I thought I'd do something impulsive for once. You're the one always saying I'm too uptight," he says drily.

My eyes roll. "Bullshit. You were in pain."

"Leave it, Emilia," he orders.

"No. You don't get to tell me not to pry when you're the one who brought me into this. You called me, Sterling."

A muscle ticks in his jaw but he stays silent.

"You can talk to me," I say softly. "I'll listen."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

Finally, he sighs, leaning back on the couch. He keeps his eyes straight forward when he speaks.

“My parents are in town. They arrived yesterday,” he starts. Glancing at me, he says, “I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors. About my... paternity.”

I nod.

“My legitimacy as a Harrington was called into question when that article came out. It’s a question I didn’t have an answer to. At least not until yesterday, when I finally spoke to my mother.” He smiles suddenly, but it’s a sad smile, laced with pain. “You know I’ve always hated the color of my eyes. Every other Harrington—my grandfather, my father, my brother, hell, even my mother—they’ve all had brown eyes. I was the only exception.”

“Genetics aren’t always black and white,” I venture. “The color of your eyes doesn’t mean you don’t belong.”

Sterling looks at me then, his eyes softer than I’ve ever seen them. It hurts that he hates something so immensely beautiful. If only he could see what I see.

“I wish someone could have told that to a six-year-old boy wondering why he looked different. I wish my family could have acted better. Instead they fostered those doubts, made it abundantly clear that I wasn’t meant to be in my position. It made me work harder to be better. I’ve lived my life with the underlying fear that my family could throw me out for being different. That I didn’t belong.”

My heart aches at his words. Sterling and I, we're two sides of the same coin. We could even be on the same side, balancing ourselves against the weight of the life and experiences we had no choice but to be a part of.

I don't think I've ever felt like I belonged anywhere, either. Not when I lived with my mother. And especially not now. I found the most wonderful, kind, and supportive family. But the truth is, they had each other before. No matter how hard they try to deny it, they were together for years and I disrupted it. I'll always feel like an outsider and it's awful.

No one should have to feel like that.

CHAPTER 16

Sterling

"They all knew."

The words come out in a pained whisper. It's amazing how the walls I try to build tend to crumble around this woman. A couple of hours ago, the only thing I felt was numb because I had no idea how I was supposed to feel. And now it's like I can feel everything. The hurt, the anger, the disbelief.

I don't know why Emilia's the only one with the ability to do that. To draw all these emotions out of me. But she is, and that's probably why I called her. Selfish as that action was, I needed her.

"Who?" she questions gently, her eyes filled with so much sympathy and kindness it hurts to look at.

"Everyone. My entire family," I clarify. "They all knew the truth and they kept it

from me.”

My jaw tightens as I think about every single thing my mother told me. She said it all with a blank face and a tone that suggested that it was water under the bridge. Because to them, it was. I’m the only one that has to deal with this new truth. With my new reality.

Harringtons can be so fucking cruel. Even the best of us, my father, hid everything from me.

“What’s the truth, Sterling?”

I exhale a heavy breath. “My mother had an affair. Or as she called it, ‘a mistake.’ One night after a couple of drinks, she accidentally slept with someone she shouldn’t have, and that led to me. She found out she was pregnant and she could have kept that hidden, but because she and my father have such a wonderful relationship,” I say bitterly, “she told him what happened. And he forgave her. Told her that he’d raise the child as his own. That my actual father didn’t even have to know. It all came to light eventually, though. Grandfather found out. It was a whole issue but they got their shit together, I guess. All parties came to an understanding and life moved on. The end.”

Emilia’s brow furrows. “I don’t understand.”

I chuckle darkly. “That’s exactly how my mother told me the story. I had a hard time understanding as well. But according to her, what happened in the past doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Respectfully, that’s bullshit,” Emilia states. “What about you? Your feelings?”

“My family isn’t really big on feelings,” I explain. “I was raised to handle things

robotically, stoically.”

“Again, bullshit. Human beings aren’t robots. You’re not a tin man.”

“Thought you said I was one.”

“You don’t have to be,” she says quietly. “You can learn not to be.”

“I don’t know if I can,” I murmur.

“What else did your mother say?” Emilia questions. “Did she tell you who your real father is?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“Yeah, she did,” I say on a short laugh. “The biggest revelation of the night, actually. I swear it’s the stuff of all those shitty melodramas on TV, angel.”

It’s not funny though, not in the slightest. Emilia waits patiently for me to speak.

“My real father’s name is Stephan Harrington. My dad’s half-brother. He was grandfather’s son out of wedlock. My mother had an affair with her brother-in-law. What all of that means is that I’m a Harrington after all. Ironical, isn’t it?”

Emilia huffs out a breath but she doesn’t say anything. When I look at her, she’s still got that soft look in her eyes. They betray no surprise or pity. Just understanding. Like she can read past all the bullshit. Like she can see directly into me.

“Where is he now?” she asks.

“He passed away about two years after I was born. Until a couple of hours ago, Stephan was an uncle who died tragically in an accident. Now he’s a father I’ll never get to meet.”

The words are like a lash against my heart. I imagine this is how it feels to be stabbed by a serrated knife. It feels like a wound that I can’t heal. A wound I don’t understand. How am I supposed to grieve someone like that? I don’t even know if I’m meant to grieve him.

I feel a soft touch on my shoulder, right before warm hands envelop me. I turn, allowing myself to lean against Emilia, resting my head against her chest.

“I-I don’t know how to comfort you,” she says quietly.

“That’s okay,” I whisper. “I just need you, angel.”

I don’t know how long we stay like that for. But it feels like forever before the pain in my chest begins to dissipate. It gives way to something else: longing. Because in this moment, I’m with a woman that’s invaded my thoughts more than anyone else. And I’ve never wanted anyone more than I want her.

When I look up, her eyes are already on me. Our gazes connect and nothing in that moment makes more sense than me placing my hand on her jaw. She shudders at the contact and then I’m lowering my head to hers. The first brush of my lips against hers is tentative. But when she doesn’t pull away, it spurs me on.

My entire body thrums with need. I shift even closer, my fingers pressing against the side of her neck as I taste her soft lips. I kiss her like my life depends on it, like hers does too. We latch onto each other, her arms curling around my neck while my hands roam her body.

It’s a desperate sort of kiss, full of angst and longing. So slow, like neither of us want it to end. And yet it feels like there’s a time limit. Like we’re a piece of glass that could shatter with barely any effort. I pull back just a little, cupping the base of her head, her blonde hair silky beneath my hand.

“Why did you stop?” she breathes, her gaze bright and full of longing.

“You don’t want me to?” I ask, trying to give her a chance to stop this. To ensure this doesn’t go any further than she wants.

Emilia shakes her head, eyes fixed on to mine.

“Are you sure, angel?” I prod. “Because if we do this, there’s no going back.”

She swallows softly. “I know. I want this.”

My lips tilt up in a smile. “Good girl. There’s no rush, though. I’m going to take my time with you,” I murmur before taking her lips, swallowing the sweet little humming noise she makes.

Her hands trace across my shoulder and a shiver races down my spine when she drags her nails against my back. Our tongues slide together and she tastes so fucking erotic. My cock is so hard it hurts right now.

“Can I touch you?” I whisper against her lips.

My hand slides down the curve of her body, my thumb resting against her full breasts. She’s wearing a big T-shirt and black leggings. My words are a plea because I want to take off her clothes and feel everything, touch her everywhere.

“Yes,” Emilia breathes, shifting back to take the shirt off.

She’s left wearing a blue bra that pushes her tits up, making them look entirely too enticing. Her nipples are clearly hard beneath it.

I flick one budding nub and she moans, “Fuck.”

I press a kiss to the bottom line of her jaw and another right beside her jaw.

“Sterling.”

The sound of my name on her lips drives me crazy. Like it might undo me. I kiss the spot just below her ear and she squirms against me. I hear her breathing quicken.

“You like that, angel?” I ask, nipping at her ear.

Page 60

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

She mumbles something incoherent under her breath. Her fingers tighten as they rest in the back of my hair. I reach for the back of the bra, unclasping it, so that her bare tits are exposed in front of me. They look so soft and full, her pale pink nipples as hard as rocks.

I immediately drop my head down and suck her breast into my mouth, taking a long pull. Her chest arches into me.

“Oh, God,” she groans, her hand moving wildly over my chest.

“Let’s not bring God into it yet, angel. I haven’t even started,” I murmur around her tit.

I move to the other one, providing it with equal attention. Emilia’s a writhing mess and when I pull back to look at her, she paints a picture that gets me impossibly harder.

She’s the stuff of dreams. So incredibly beautiful.

“Tell me, angel. How wet are you right now?” I ask huskily.

“Why don’t you find out for yourself?” she retorts.

I chuckle. Fuck, I love that sass.

“You wish is my command,” I tell her.

She starts to breath even heavier as my fingers trail down to the top of her leggings. I skirt the edge for a moment before I reach further, brushing past the lacy material of her panties. Emilia gasps when I tease at her entrance, swirling my finger around the moisture gathered there.

“Fucking hell, angel,” I breathe.

“Don’t get cocky,” she mutters.

I smile. “Take it off,” I command, looking into her eyes.

“What?” she asks shakily.

“Your pants, sweetheart. Stand up and take them off.”

Her eyes narrow.

“Please,” I add.

She smiles before slowly rising to her feet, maintaining eye contact as she slowly slides down her leggings. She’s so fucking sexy.

“Those too,” I state, gesturing at her panties.

Most women would grow shy but Emilia has nothing but laudable confidence as she takes off every article of clothing on her body until she’s standing naked before me.

“Happy?”

“Very,” I drawl, lifting my hips to shuffle out of my pants as well and then my briefs, leaving us on even ground.

I grip my hard cock, stroking it once, twice. She watches intently, almost hungrily, the look in her eyes spurring me on even further. When she can't take it anymore, she steps forward, her bare tits jiggling with the movement.

"Let me," she murmurs, sitting in my lap.

She places a soft hand against my cock, giving it a slow drag with, her fingers. I palm her breast with a squeeze, pressing my lips to her shoulder.

"You've got all the power right now, angel," I whisper against her skin. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I want to fuck you," she states.

And I grin because those words are music to my ears. I slide one hand between her legs, a whisper of a moan sliding from her lips at the touch. My cock jolts in response. I'm desperate for a release but I want to drag this out, intensify the pleasure.

"I've thought about you like this," I say softly, my fingers grazing her clit.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

She shifts on top of me, gripping my shoulders with her eyes shut.

“On top of me. Begging for my cock.”

Her eyes fly open to rest on my face. “I’m not begging you, Sterling.”

“No?” I ask, sliding one finger into her before adding another. “I think you will, darling.”

She moans my name, grinding against my fingers, fucking them while she chases release. A release I’m not too keen on giving her until she begs for it.

“You want to come, angel?” I ask lowly.

She shivers. “Yes.”

“Then beg me.”

Her nails dig into my arms, the pain mixing with the intense pleasure of the moment even as her pussy grips my fingers.

“Come on,” I prod, my fingers hitting a deep part inside of her that has her screaming.

“Please,” she gasps. “Please let me come, asshole.”

I grin. “That’s my girl,” I tell her before my thumb snakes up to her clit, massaging it

in tandem with the fingers moving inside of her until she explodes.

“Fuck,” she groans, her head resting against my chest as she comes.

I rub her lower back to calm her down, waiting for the aftershocks to stop. When they do, she pulls back to look at me, her expression tender, but I’m glad to see some hunger still in her expression. I’m about to lift her and set her down on my cock when I remember something.

“Shit, I don’t have a condom,” I tell her.

Emilia’s silent for a beat. “That’s okay, I think. I’m on birth control. I get shots every month. And, um... I’m clean.”

“I’m clean too,” I state, touched that she’s choosing to trust me, to take a chance on us. I press a quick kiss the side of her jaw. “So are you going to fuck me now, or...”

She stares at my hard cock for a second before reaching for it. I notice the hesitation in her expression and my heart speeds up.

“We don’t have to do this if you don’t want to, angel,” I quickly say.

“No, I want this. It’s just... been a while since I’ve had sex,” she informs me nervously.

I run my palm across her hips in a soft, soothing motion. “Take your time, angel. You’re the one riding this bus.”

She laughs at that. “Pun intended?”

“Maybe,” I reply with a smile of my own.

“Okay, I’m ready,” she says, lifting her hips and shifting forward.

I tweak an erect nipple with my fingers before taking it into my mouth, sucking hard as she slowly lowers herself onto my cock. I jerk at the sensation of entering her.

“You feel so fucking good,” I groan, clutching her ass.

“And you’re so big,” she moans.

She doesn’t move for several moments, acclimating to my size. Finally, when she’s ready, she holds onto my shoulders as leverage to rise before taking me down into her once again. She soon sets a pace that has me seeing stars as she bounces on my cock, taking every inch of me.

“Fuck, Emilia,” I growl. “You’re so fucking tight.”

Her moans come at a higher pace as she continues to fuck me.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“That’s it, angel,” I tell her as she rocks her hips back and forth.

My hands are gripping both her ass cheeks tight, helping to guide her rhythm. I feel her walls clenching around me as her pace speeds up. Her eyes glaze over and I can tell she’s about to come. She does so, screaming my name in a way that has me ready to burst as well.

I hold on to her, thrusting upward, in and out of her wet pussy. Emilia’s hands slide around my neck and she drops a soft kiss on my jaw before placing one against my lips.

“Let go, Sterling,” she whispers.

And that’s all it takes. I slam into her one more time before my orgasm rushes through me and I release with a soft groan. I fall backward on the couch when I do, taking Emilia with me. She’s content to stay like that, resting her head against my chest as we both try to remember how to breathe properly.

That was fucking amazing.

Neither of us says anything for a long moment. Until she starts to shift on top of me.

“I need to use the bathroom,” she mumbles tiredly.

She stands and I watch as she walks, or should I say wobbles, to the bathroom door, grabbing my white shirt off the floor. While she’s gone, I grab my boxer briefs to wear as well. It takes about five minutes before she returns. My shirt has been

buttoned and the way she looks in it makes me want to throw her back down on to this couch and fuck her until she's screaming my name again.

Cool it, Harrington.

She walks over to me with a short yawn that makes her look adorable, with her disheveled hair and tired eyes.

"Sleepy?" I ask.

She shakes her head, "No I'm fine."

"Come here," I prompt, gesturing at my arms.

I lie on the couch and she doesn't hesitate before lying down on top of me. It's weirdly comfortable. I start playing with the strands of her hair, running my hand through it in gentle motions.

"You can sleep, angel. I promise you're safe," I tell her.

She doesn't say anything for a couple of moments.

"Okay," she decides, yawning again. "I'll just close my eyes for like an hour."

"No complaints from me," I state.

She's out like a light in a matter of seconds. She snores when she sleeps. It's light snores, the cute kind that makes her even more attractive, although I didn't think that was possible. I continue brushing my hand through her hair, enjoying the solid weight of her above me.

Until eventually the soft lull draws me to close my eyes, as well.

CHAPTER 17

Emilia

The first thing I feel is confusion when my eyes open. The room is dark and all I can feel is something warm and hard underneath me. I wriggle softly on top of whatever it is and nearly jump out of my skin when I hear a soft chuckle.

“Careful, angel. You probably shouldn’t be doing that if you don’t want a repeat of last night.”

I gasp, nearly sliding off Sterling. Oh my god.

Memories from last night come rushing back to me. Our talk, the kisses, the sex. Oh my god.

I lift my head, my gaze connecting with his. He has a small smile on his face that is entirely too endearing.

“Morning,” he says in the sexiest voice ever.

I feel my stomach warm, butterflies churning in my gut. An insane part of me is actually about to ask for a repeat of last night when I look up, my gaze moving toward the window blinds. My eyes widen when I see the rays of sunlight peeking through.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“What time is it?” I blurt out, quickly climbing off Sterling.

It’s a little ungraceful, but I manage to slide to the ground before standing up again to hunt for my phone.

“Fuck!” I shout when it see it’s already 6:30.

I hurriedly start grabbing the articles of clothing spread out on the floor. Uncaring that he’s still watching, I quickly unbutton his shirt, sliding it to the ground. I start putting on my bra and that seems to spur Sterling into action.

“Hey, calm down,” he says, sitting up on the couch.

“I have to get home before Anika wakes up,” I inform him, pulling on my panties and then my shirt.

Sterling stands, walking over to me. He grabs the leggings out of my hands before I have the chance to finish dressing.

“Emilia, breathe,” he orders.

He’s right. I need to calm down. I inhale a soft breath and then another, trying to think clearly. I have about two to three hours before my sister’s alarm goes off. It’ll be fine. I take the time to look at the man standing in front of me. He looks way too good for 6:30 in the morning.

“You calm?” he asks after a couple of minutes.

I nod.

“Good, because we need to talk, angel.”

The weight of everything that happened last night crashes down on me. I look down at my feet, thinking of the best way to handle the situation. He’s right. We do need to talk.

“Okay,” I agree. “Could you hand me my pants, first?”

He does so, and once I’m fully dressed, I head over to take a seat on the couch. Memories of what happened on it last night run through my head like a loop.

He can tell that I need space right now. Sterling doesn’t come close to me. Instead, he leans against the wall beside the TV, directly opposite me. His green eyes are fixed on me intently, like he’s trying to guess at my thoughts.

Neither of us says anything for a long moment. I’m trying to organize my thoughts and I guess he is as well. I think about the events that led to us having sex last night and come to a conclusion. An explanation that makes sense. But it does make me feel a little sick.

“I think...” I start nervously, “emotions were high last night. Neither of us was thinking properly. And a part of me feels like I took advantage of the pain you were feeling.”

Sterling’s face crumples and he looks like I slapped him. I hear a muttered, “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” right before his eyes sharpen.

“I think I can decide for myself what I want and don’t fucking want in the moment. And I thought you wanted it, too.”

He sounds hurt, and I hate that I'm responsible for that. But this is what's best for us. It has to be.

"I did. We're both grown adults that can take responsibility for our actions," I tell him.

"Okay, so what's the problem?" he retorts.

"The problem is that we got carried away. It's the hormones. They took over, made us do something we shouldn't have."

Sterling chuckles darkly. "Oh, this is rich. How do you even come up with these things, angel?"

"We shouldn't have had sex yesterday," I say firmly. "It should have never happened. But it did and we just have to move on while living with it."

He nods slowly. "I see. You're a coward, Emilia."

"What?"

"You fucking heard me," he grits out. "When things get too real, you run. You're so scared that someone could actually care about you, that you'd have to open your heart out to someone. Running's easier for you. It's safer. But it also makes you a hypocrite. You preach about being open and in touch with your feelings, but you're probably the most emotionally repressed person I know."

"Hey," I snap, defensive. "You don't have to be mean about it. All I said was that we shouldn't have had sex. If your feelings are hurt, handle it like a big boy. Don't start attacking me."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

He chuckles. “There you go again, evading your own issues and focusing on everyone else’s. I opened my heart to you yesterday. I told you everything and now you think none of that matters?”

“I know it matters. I just don’t think it has to matter,” I say desperately.

“That makes no sense.”

“It does to me,” I say, a note of finality in my voice. “In light of recent events, I don’t think I can keep working as your assistant. I’m going to quit.”

“That’s not happening.” Sterling states, glaring at me.

“Excuse you?”

“I said it’s not happening, Emilia. You’re not going to quit. You signed a contract, remember? You’re going to work as my assistant for as long as I’m manager at the Edenton branch. You don’t get to walk away from that.”

“I think what happened compromises our professional relationship,” I retort.

“And why is that? Like you said, it doesn’t matter. All we have to do is not let it matter. The both of us are going to be tin men. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“I’d be a tin woman, actually,” I mutter, unable to resist making the tiny joke.

Sterling’s lips twitch and I feel the tension ease a little. He steps forward, looking

down at me with those hypnotic green eyes. Even now, my heart feels like it's going to jump out of my chest due to his proximity. He has such a big effect on me. And I hate that he knows it.

"You're going to keep being my assistant, angel," he begins. "And just like you want, we'll both pretend last night never happened. The two of us will be civil. Hell, we'll even be friends. And then we'll grow closer. Eventually, you'll drop all your walls. Where are you going to hide after that?"

My throat feels dry but I manage to speak regardless.

"I won't drop my walls for you, Sterling," I say confidently.

He smirks. "We'll see."

I exhale softly. "Whatever. Can we leave now? I really need to get back home before Anika wakes up."

"Yeah, okay," he tells me. "You can drop me off at my car and then we'll return to Edenton separately. Alright?"

I nod.

"Let me head in there for a sec," he murmurs, turning to the bathroom.

Once the door shuts, I sigh, relieved that we're past that conversation. We didn't agree per se, but I'm glad he's letting me off for now. I don't think I can handle anything else. My emotional capacity is at its peak.

It takes him a couple of minutes to re-emerge. When he does, it's hard not to notice the tired look in his eyes. They were brighter this morning. I guess what I said

dampened his mood even more. I bite down on my bottom lip, feeling bad. I wanted to help him, not make him feel worse.

I stay quiet as he puts on his clothes, slowly sliding into the shell of the unruffled grumpy businessman I've come to know and care about.

"Sterling?" I call softly.

He turns around in the process of buttoning up his shirt, raising an eyebrow in reply.

"How are you feeling now, though? Are you okay?"

"You know, a part of me wants to be an asshole and tell you to focus on yourself," he says with a sly smile.

I roll my eyes at that.

"But I don't need to do that and you don't need to feel bad, angel. I'm fine. I feel better, actually. You helped me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. You know yesterday my whole world felt like a crumbling mess but now that I'm looking at things objectively, I know it'll all work out. My family is still a mess and they all handled things in the worst fucking way possible. But at the end of the day, at least I know the truth now. It'll take a while, but all those thoughts about not belonging will eventually fade. Because I'm a Harrington, angel. It might not feel like it at times, but I actually do belong."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“You should feel like you belong regardless of who your father is. They should have never made you feel like you didn’t.”

“I know that. But it happened, and it sucks. You don’t get to choose your family,” he says on a shrug. “When I get home, I’m going to have a long, hard conversation with my father. And then I’m going to be okay.”

I smile. “I’m proud of you, Sterling Harrington.”

“Wish I could say the same for you, Emilia Cameron,” he says, stepping closer to me. “But we’ll work towards it.”

He presses a soft kiss to my forehead and when I look up into his eyes, I know I made the right decision. Because I could fall in love with him so easily.

And that’s a bad idea. Because I’ve seen firsthand how easy it for love to destroy a person.

Thankfully I get back home before Anika wakes up. When sleeping beauty eventually does rise, she finds me in the kitchen, sipping a cup of coffee after a nice warm shower. She runs a hand through her dark hair, peering at me.

“Don’t you have work today?” she questions, pouring a cup of coffee of her own.

“Day off,” I reply shortly.

“What do you mean, day off? It’s your third day!” she exclaims.

Is it? I feel like I've been working for Sterling for a lot longer. Damn. I must have lived ten lives in three days.

"Sterling isn't going in to work today and since there's nothing for me to do at work without him, he asked me to stay at home as well."

Anika nods in understanding. "Is he okay, though? I heard Uncle Steven and Aunt Elana were back."

"He'll be fine," I tell her.

He's strong. A lot stronger than I am.

CHAPTER 18

Sterling

Things settle eventually. The past couple of weeks were relatively quiet. Albeit busy owing to the recent development. I'm glad for the work, though. It serves as a good distraction from everything else. Especially since the woman who is helping me through it is at the core of one of the biggest things weighing on my mind.

I want Emilia, but I also don't want to scare her off. So right now, I guess I'm biding my time. Keeping her by my side and waiting until she eventually trusts me enough to open up to me.

My parents are still in town. This is the probably the longest period of time they've stayed in one place since I graduated college, which is how I know they feel a little guilty about everything that happened. Or at least my dad does.

My mother is still my mother. She's never going to change and that's okay. I made

peace with who she is a long time ago. Initially, I wanted to blame her for everything, but at the end of the day, her choices are what led to me. The person who was probably the most hurt by her actions has learned to live with it. So I guess I have to as well.

“Ster,” my dad calls as I’m heading out of the house.

He’s jogging up the driveway, dressed in blue running shorts and black Vans. There’s also a blue sweatband around his head. I stop beside my car, waiting for him to reach me. When he does, his breathing’s a little erratic and there’s some sweat on his brow.

“Aren’t you too old to still be running?” I question with a raised eyebrow.

He rolls his eyes. “Who are you calling old? You and both know I can outrun you easily any day, kid.”

“Big talk for an old man,” I return easily.

Running’s one of the ways my father and I bonded when I was younger. I initially took up the hobby because of him. It was a way to emulate him, find similarities between us. I used to try so hard. But at least now it’s a hobby I genuinely enjoy on my own.

“Yeah, whatever. Listen, son, I wanted to talk to you about Sean’s birthday. It’s coming up in a couple of days.”

“I know, Dad,” I say drily. “I’m already making plans to get him his presents. As I’m sure you have as well. Just try not to spoil him too much.”

“I’ll try,” he says, and I inwardly sigh. “Anyway, what I wanted to say is maybe we could have a little get together. Like a small party for Sean.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

I frown. “And who would be the invitees?”

My kid’s turning six and as far as I know he has no friends in town, or anywhere, really. Something I’m hoping changes when he starts kindergarten soon. I tried to put it off because I was worried he’d be too antisocial to fit in, but after seeking expert opinions, I’ve been assured that putting him in an environment with other kids will only help him.

“I was thinking we could invite the Camerons. His nanny told me he likes one of them, the new one. Sean keeps asking to see her.”

“Her name’s Emilia,” I state. “She’s my assistant.”

“Yeah, Jeremiah told me,” my dad says with a smirk I do not like. Not at all. “He also informed me the two of you have a relationship of some kind.”

“A professional relationship,” I affirm.

“Sure. Let’s go with that. I’d like to meet her. She’s been so busy working with you and you’ve been busy as well. The party will be a chance for you to kick back and rewind.”

“This all feels like an elaborate plot,” I mutter. “Father, please mind your business.”

He chuckles, the smile lines around his mouth becoming more apparent.

“This isn’t about you, Ster. I genuinely just want to meet her. And it’s been a long

time since I've seen Carson, as well."

"He's too busy being a big shot in Greenville." I smirk.

"Exactly. Jeremiah and I want to get all the kids together. I was going to call Spence as well."

My lips immediately pull into a scowl. "Don't."

The past weeks without my brother have been blissful. I'd rather not see his smug face unless I have to.

Dad sighs. "He probably wouldn't come anyway. So, what do you say?"

"It seems you and Jeremiah have it all planned out," I concede.

"Great. Invite Emilia for me. I'll make all the preparations."

"No problem. Is that all? I'm running late for work."

"No," he replies lowly, his expression growing serious. "Where's Sean's mother? Will she also be absent for his birthday?"

My jaw tightens. "I don't know where she is."

"This is ridiculous. A person doesn't just cut contact for months," he says angrily. "Sean's going to ask for her as well. Especially on his birthday."

"He told me one of his birthday wishes is to see his mom," I say, frustrated, as I run a hand through my hair. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do, Dad. I've tried but I just can't reach her."

“Do you want me to talk to some of my contacts? If she won’t appear on her own, we could make her.”

“I’m trying to give her time. She asked for time when she left,” I murmur.

“It’s been long enough,” Dad states.

“I know. I’ll figure it out, don’t worry,” I tell him.

“Alright, son,” he says on a sigh. “Get to work. See you later.”

He claps my shoulder affectionately before heading into the house. Once he’s gone, I exhale a breath, thinking about Marissa for a couple of moments. I have a bad feeling about all of this. But I can’t concentrate on that right now.

Especially not when I have so much to do. Before heading into my car, I send a text to Emilia. I’ll see her in a couple of minutes once I arrive at the hospital, but she’s made an unspoken rule that whenever we’re at work, our relationship is strictly professional.

I would applaud her efforts if it didn’t fucking piss me off.

Page 67

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I quickly type out the words.

Me: I need a favor.

She responds in less than a minute.

Emilia: Which is?

Me: Sean's birthday's in a couple of days. He's been asking for a dog, and I plan to get one for him. I already made an appointment with a breeder on a farmhouse just out of town. I was wondering if you'd like to come with me?

Emilia: As your assistant?

I can practically hear the hesitation in the words.

Me: Not necessarily. As my friend. We agreed we were friends, right?

Emilia: Sure... But a drive out of town, alone, sounds like a bad idea.

I think about just how many things I could do to her that she would consider a bad idea. My lips curl into a smirk.

Me: Scared?

Emilia: Absolutely not. I just don't trust you.

She really shouldn't.

I rub a hand over my jaw before I reply.

Me: Don't worry, I won't do anything. I promise. Not unless you want me to.

Emilia: I don't want you to do anything.

Me: I'll behave, angel.

It takes a minute before her reply comes.

Emilia: Fine. But I'm only going because of Sean. I'm sure he'll love a cute little golden retriever. Or a Labrador.

I smile reading the words.

Me: We'll leave after work.

Emilia: Okay.

I feel lighter as I step into my car. Emilia tends to have that effect on me. It's amazing how insignificant my problems feel when I'm around her. I just wish she'd let me in so I can help her the way she does me.

"The guests have already arrived in the back gardens, sir," Karl informs me after I've granted him leave to enter the room.

It's Sean's birthday today. The whole house has been abuzz all morning, preparing for my father's party. Sean already spent the morning opening his presents, one of which included a small pup—a golden retriever he's decided to name Lion. When I

asked him why, he said it was because he wanted the dog to grow up to be big and strong. Strong enough to protect him even when his parents aren't there.

He was happy. Happier than I've seen him in a while. He might be a quiet, reserved kid, but I know he's been a little lonely. Especially without his mother. I hate that I can't protect him from emotions like that. I want to shield him from every bad thing in the world.

I just don't think that's possible.

"Where's Sean?" I ask, patting down on the front of my hair to ensure it's not wild or messy.

Karl hesitates. "I'm not sure, sir. His nanny is searching for him. Your father brought him to meet the guests earlier but he ran off when none of us were watching."

"I see," I murmur, not in the least bit surprised. "I'm sure he'll turn up. He probably just got overwhelmed."

“Yes, sir.” Karl nods.

I step forward, heading for the door, then pause, looking at Karl.

“All the guests are around?”

“Yes. All the Camerons are in attendance, as well as some of your father’s other friends in town.”

I sigh. “If he really wanted to have a get-together for himself, he should have just said so instead of pretending this party’s for Sean. Dad just loves attention.”

Karl’s expression doesn’t change, but I do notice his lip tilting up fondly. He and my dad are pretty close. They grew up together and have known each other their whole lives. Dad’s probably the reason Karl’s been so devoted to this family all this time.

“Let’s go.”

He follows me out the door and we head to the garden for the party. Time for mind-numbing conversations with boomers that will only comment on how much I’ve grown, how adorable Sean is, and how proud they are of my accomplishments.

I have nothing against my father’s friends. I just don’t find any of it necessary. At least Emilia will be there. And Carson. I should be careful, though. If Carson gets even a little suspicious about my relationship with his sister, the tone of this party will change dramatically.

That asshole is nothing if not dramatic.

We're about to turn a corner on a hallway when a voice has us drawing to a stop.

"Sean, I've been looking for you. Why are you hiding here?"

I fall still, as does Karl behind me.

"Hey, Emilia," I hear my son say.

"Hi, birthday boy," she says excitedly. "How are you?"

"Fine."

"Are you having a happy birthday?"

There's a slight pause before he replies. "All birthdays are meant to be happy."

He says it like a question, one that makes my heart ache. I lean against the wall, titling my head to the side to nudge Karl away. He gets the message, turning around and leaving quietly.

"That's not really true," Emilia says softly. "And you'd be surprised, honey. Lots of birthdays aren't happy. Sometimes people feel sad on their birthdays, and people get hurt, too. Which is why it's important to always try to feel happiness. Because it's your special day."

I cross my arms around my chest, wondering at that answer. Just how many birthdays have you spent sad or hurt, angel?

"I'm happy," Sean tells her. "Dad got me a puppy."

“I know. I picked it out with him. What did you name him?”

“Lion.”

I can hear the smile in her voice as she says, “That’s a really nice name. Reminds me of The Wizard of Oz. There’s a lion in it as well. Which also reminds me. Here’s your present.”

She must hand it to him because he makes a short gasp of delight.

“It’s a book.”

“Yes, it is. You’ll love it. It was the first book I ever read. And I’ve loved it since. It has a lot of big words though.”

“That’s okay. I like big words,” Sean informs her excitedly. “Thank you, Emilia.”

“You’re welcome, sweet boy.”

There’s a short lull in their conversation until Sean speaks up again, his voice small.

“Emilia, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Why do you like Wizard of Oz so much?”

“Because it helped me realize there’s a whole world out there that I might not have known about. And that nothing is permanent. Everyone is capable of change.”

“I don’t want anything to change,” Sean says timidly. “Change is bad. It took my mom away.”

“I’m sure she’ll come back, honey,” Emilia assures him.

Deciding I’ve heard enough, I step forward. Sean notices me first, eyes widening. Emilia’s crouched down in front of him, running a hand through his hair. She turns around to see what’s caught his attention. When her eyes meet mine, they grow brighter. I don’t know if she knows this, but her eyes sometimes change color depending on her mood.

They grow bluer when she cries or if she’s pissed. And when she’s really happy, they almost seem to sparkle. It’s mesmerizing. Even more so that she’s looking at me like that. It’s why I have faith we’ll find each other eventually. Her mind just needs to catch up to whatever it is she’s feeling in her heart.

“Hey, Tin Man. How long have you been there for?” she questions, rising to her feet.

She's a vision in the dress she's wearing. It's a short, dark blue flowy dress that's cinched tight around her waist. She's paired the outfit with thigh-high boots, and blonde strands of her hair float across her face in magnificent curls. It makes her look like the stuff of dreams. Probably a wet dream where she's a sexy-as-sin cowgirl riding my cock.

My jaw tightens as I try to focus. I force a small smile, walking toward them.

"Long enough," I answer her before looking down at Sean. 'Hey, bud. If you don't want to be at the party anymore, you don't have to. You can go to your room.'

He bites down on his bottom lip, hesitating. "But what about Grandpa?"

"I'm sure Dad won't mind if you rest for a bit. I'll tell him when I head outside."

He brightens. "Okay. I'll just read some of my books a little, and I'll come back after playing with Lion."

"You do that."

He runs off without another word, heading further into the house and leaving me alone with Emilia. Neither of us says anything for a couple of minutes. We just stare, our gazes intertwined. My eyes on her don't make her nervous. Eye contact is sexy, and Emilia could teach a master class in it.

She continues to look at me without saying a thing. Like she can read the thoughts running through my head, see into me the way I so desperately want to see into her.

"You know staring's rude, right?" I ask, breaking the silence.

She blinks. "You started it."

“What are you, five?” I ask on an eye roll. “I was staring at you because you look beautiful. What’s your excuse?”

Her lips part and they’re momentarily distracting. She has on red lipstick. I want to lick it off, bite down on each cherry lip until they’re naturally red and swollen.

Fuck, this woman has no idea what she does to me.

“What’s with the compliment?” she asks, recovering. “Buttering me up isn’t going to get you anywhere, Harrington.”

“Oh yeah? So what is?” I question, my tone serious.

She arches an eyebrow. “You sound like you’d really do anything I ask.”

“I think I would,” I reply honestly. “Do anything you asked, that is. You have a lot of power, angel. And you don’t even realize it.”

CHAPTER 19

Emilia

The average resting heart rate for a healthy adult is typically between sixty and one-hundred beats per minute. While I’m unsure how many times my heart beats per minute, whenever I’m around Sterling, I’m pretty sure that number increases exponentially. Doubles, triples, it doesn’t matter.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

All I know is that it hurts. My heart always hurts when I'm around him. Pain can come in so many different forms, and I thought I'd experienced all the pain the world has to offer. And then I met Sterling and I realized there's always more to be unleashed.

"You can't say stuff like that," I say, my voice coming out a little breathy.

He tilts his head to the side. "Says who? Freedom of speech, Emilia. I can say whatever the hell I like. You can't control that. What you can control is how you react to whatever it is I say. The feelings it incites in you."

He says those last words in a sexy drawl that has me clenching my thighs. I really hate this man. And what the hell does he mean, I can control the feelings he incites? If I could do that, I wouldn't be in this position.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I lie.

Sterling smirks before taking a step toward me. My legs move nearly of their own accord, carrying me backward away from him, only to find myself halted by the wall. Sterling doesn't pause in his approach, moving until he's effectively caging me in.

And then he places his hands on the wall on either side of me and I realize there's really no escape. My heart starts to pound so loud I'm sure he can hear it.

Be still, you dumb, malfunctioning organ.

The last thing I want to do right now is look into his eyes. But he's right there. His

scent surrounds me, musky with a hint of lemons. I slowly tilt my head up, pretending to be unaffected. When that couldn't be further from the truth.

His green eyes are already fixed on me.

“We're not at work right now, angel. You have no idea how hard I've been trying to hold myself back these past few weeks. It's exhausting,” he grits out.

“Sterling,” I whisper, at a loss of what to say.

His eyes flick down to my lips, staring at them intently.

“If I kissed you right now, what would you do? Would you let me? Kiss me back? Or would you push me away?”

My lips thin. I don't have an answer to that. I don't think I would have the willpower to push him away if he kissed me. I would never be strong enough to do that.

“Don't kiss me,” I plead.

Anguish slashes across his expression. He opens his mouth. “Emilia?”

I don't get to hear the rest of the sentence, though.

“What the hell is going on here?” someone questions, fury mixed in his tone.

Sterling's hands drop and I scramble from against the wall, looking toward my brother who's standing a few feet away. Carson's glaring at us both, hands clenched into fists.

“Carson,” I start, fumbling for what to say. “It's not what you think.”

Beside me, I hear Sterling huff out a breath. When I turn to look at him, he seems amused?

“It’s not what you think,” he mouths with a smile.

That just pisses Carson off more, though. He crosses over to us, grabbing Sterling’s collar.

“What the hell is so funny, asshole? I warned you. Stay away from Emilia!”

I’ve never seen him this mad before. Sterling’s not even fazed. He grabs my brother’s hand at his collar, shoving him backward. Carson’s about to charge again but I step between them, looking up at my brother.

“Enough,” I state. “You’re being dramatic, Carson. Nothing’s going on.”

“Oh yeah?” he asks, blue eyes narrowing. “Because I just saw the two of you in a pretty compromising position. Explain that, little sister.”

I cross my arms over my chest, repeating, “Nothing’s going on.”

“You really expect me to believe that?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“Yes,” I answer simply. “And frankly, even if something was going on, it’s none of your business, Carson.”

“You’re my little sister.”

“That doesn’t make you my keeper. I can make my own decisions.”

“So you keep saying. You’ve been making your own decisions since the day I fucking met you, Emilia. Is this how it was when you lived with her? She just left you alone? You made your own decisions then because you didn’t have anybody else. But now you do.”

I tense. Oh no, he fucking didn’t.

“You don’t get to assume what my life was like with her, Carson, and you don’t get to mention her either.”

“Why the hell not?” he growls. “She gave birth to me. As much as I hate it, she was my mother as well.”

I step toward him, vibrating with tension.

“No, she fucking wasn’t. You don’t know her, Carson. You don’t get to talk about her, think about her, or feel anything toward her. I already know you don’t, so there’s no need to pretend. She’s not your mother, she’s mine, and I don’t want you talking about her,” I spit angrily.

There's a particular family trait we Camerons have. We're stubborn to a fault, and when we're mad, everything thing else blurs. We end up saying things we don't mean in our rage. Things we wish we could take back. And despite not living together for most of our lives, Carson and I still perfectly capable of fighting like most siblings do.

"If your mother's so fucking great then where the hell is she? Why did you come looking for us, then? How about you stop pretending like she was this great person who raised you with love and care. It's bullshit. Even if you don't say it, you think we can't imagine why you came here. She was a drug addict, Emilia. She was probably horrible to you."

"Shut up," I say under my breath.

But he doesn't stop. "If she's so amazing, why hasn't she come looking for you?"

Because she's dead, I scream. Inwardly.

It doesn't matter how angry he's made me, he doesn't deserve to hear about his mother's death that way. I want so badly to tell him. But I've barely even come to terms with the fact that she's gone. I'll tell him. I'll tell him about her eventually. Once I've made my peace with it.

I feel a hand on my waist, firm and steady. It's amazing the effect Sterling has on me. One touch has me feeling able to breathe easier. He takes a step forward until he's standing beside me.

"Take a walk, Cameron," he says to my brother.

Carson looks like he wants to argue. But after reading the expression on my face, he deflates. He huffs out a breath before doing as Sterling said, turning around to leave.

I'm sure when he's calmer, he'll start to feel guilty. He'll probably be calling to apologize in a couple of hours. I know he hates fighting. Especially with his little sisters.

"Well, that escalated," I mutter once Carson's gone.

Sterling stands in front of me. He raises his hand to my forehead, playing with a couple strands of my hair.

"Camerons," he says fondly, shaking his head. "You guys practically exude glitter and happiness, until someone pisses you off. And then it's a warzone."

I smile at that, looking up at him, glad he's able to understand so easily.

"He's just angry because you haven't opened up to him," Sterling says.

My shoulders fall and I shrug. "I don't know how to open up to anyone."

"You do it little by little, angel," he says. "Take it a bit at a time."

My heart clenches when he presses a soft kiss against the middle of my forehead. I can't help but wonder how much longer I can resist him.

"We should probably head back out to the party. Let's just hope there's no more drama," I tell Sterling.

"Wouldn't place a bet on that," he murmurs.

But he gestures for me to take his arm all the same. I slip my hand inside the crook of his elbow as he leads me outside to the garden. It just feels right. Everything feels so right when I'm with him.

That's the problem, though. It's only when something feels right that a person truly understands how quickly things can go very wrong.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

Sterling and I have barely stepped into the decorated garden when everyone's attention is drawn to the small iron gate that serves as an entrance. I arch an eyebrow as a woman walks inside. Long legs, poised posture. She has light brown hair adorned with a small glittering clip, and there's something regal about her. Perhaps it's the way she carries herself? Or the way she's dressed, in a short white dress that fits perfectly on her slim figure. She's wearing stilettos that I would probably break my leg in if I tried to walk in them. She looks beautiful. Even from afar.

Beside me, Sterling seems to have fallen still. When I look at him, he has on an expression of complete shock.

"Who's that?" I ask quietly, wondering why her appearance seems to have shaken him up so much.

I wasn't expecting an answer since he's too busy staring at the woman. His dad has moved into action, though. We're too far away, but he seems to be yelling something at her. The woman doesn't even move an inch. She stays quiet as Steven speaks, her expression barely changing.

"That's Marissa," Sterling replies after a minute, releasing a ragged breath. "Sean's mother. My ex-wife."

Oh.

My stomach twists and I feel an ache spread in my chest. I continue to stand there beside him, no clue what to do. And no idea what her appearance may bring.

My gut tells me it won't be anything good, though. And a part of me hates the way Sterling stares at her. They have history. And history has a way of repeating itself.

Anika drops her bag on the table in our living room before falling back onto the couch with a groan.

"That party was pretty dull," she mutters.

We're just getting back home from the Harrington estate. Things were tense when we left. None of the Harringtons seemed to be in a hosting mood with the appearance of Marissa. Everything happened so fast. Karl arrived and took her into the house, and Sterling swiftly followed.

Steven and Elana stayed for long enough to thank us for coming and apologize for the abrupt end before they also made their way inside. Things fizzled out in the garden soon after that. Dad and Priya just dropped us off before heading to their house. The only thing anyone could talk about was the appearance of Marissa.

I'm not sure why it's such a big deal.

"Do you know about her?" I ask, suddenly feeling exhausted. I sit on the armchair, clutching my stomach that feels a little queasy.

"Not really. All I know is she used to be a model or influencer before she married Sterling. She was pretty popular."

Oh, great. I hate comparing myself to another woman, but I can't deny the uneasy feeling in my chest at the moment.

"She's pretty," I murmur absentmindedly.

Anika sits up at that, the pendant around her neck lifting with the movement before falling back against her chest.

“Don’t do that. Sterling’s obsessed with you, sissy. Plus, she’s his ex-wife for a reason. He wouldn’t go back to her. She probably just came to wish her kid a happy birthday.”

And I’m so glad she did because I know just how much Sean has been missing her. I’m glad he got to see his mother.

“Sterling’s not obsessed with me,” I say firmly. “But thanks for trying to comfort me all the same.”

She frowns, brown eyes studious as her gaze rests on my face.

“Are you sure nothing’s going on between you and Sterling? I noticed Carson left the party quickly. He went looking for you, and when he returned he seemed pissed. Not a lot of things make Carson angry.”

“Carson need to learn to mind his business,” I say rigidly.

I’m still a little angry at my brother. But I can admit I contributed to how things escalated earlier as well. I pushed him, and I like to act all high and mighty when it comes to our mother. She’s always going to be a sore spot for all of us and there’s nothing I can do about that.

“So he saw you two?” Anika questions curiously.

“He didn’t see anything.”

I sigh, rubbing my forehead, and lean backward to stare up at the ceiling, wondering

why I keep feeling the urge to puke.

“You okay, Em?” she asks, rising to crouch down beside me. “You look a little sick.”

I shake my head. “I’m not sure. I think I caught a bug or something. I’ve been tired a lot.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“Maybe you should go see Dr. Hale.”

“Maybe,” I murmur. “But I’m sure it’s just something small. I could just get drugs prescribed.”

“I’ll go make us a snack. I noticed you didn’t have much to eat at the party.”

I offer her a grateful smile and she stands, heading into the kitchen while I think about what could be wrong with me. I think about a lot of things, actually. Sterling’s ex-wife. Our conversation before she appeared. How close he was to kissing me in the hallway.

I don’t know if I’ll have the strength to keep fighting this thing between us. And that’s terrifying. I suddenly sit up, clutching my stomach as I gag on nothing.

“What the fuck?” I murmur.

For some reason, my mind goes back to the night Sterling and I spent at that hotel weeks ago. My heart starts to pound as I try to remember the last time I saw my period. But that’s impossible. Still, if one plus one equals two, then a missed period and the thought of that night can only mean one thing.

“No,” I whisper.

Don’t be dramatic, Emilia. There’s no way in hell I’m pregnant. That’s impossible. It can’t fucking happen.

CHAPTER 20

Sterling

Aknife could probably cut the tension in the living room at the moment. I'm standing beside a wall, staring at my ex-wife, who's seated like she doesn't have a care in the world. My mother's beside Marissa. She's always liked her; they have similar interests. And Marissa's tried hard to get Elana to warm up to her.

Dad's pissed. Like me he's standing in a corner as well, arms crossed as he observes the scene.

"How have you been, sweetheart?" Mom asks, taking Marissa's hand in hers and patting the back of it.

I manage not to roll my eyes. There are several reasons my marriage ended the way it did, and a small, dumb part of me thinks her relationship with my mother might have been a factor. Elana treats Marissa way better than she treats her own sons. She's never tried to make it a secret that she wished she had a daughter of her own. And Marissa played that role well.

"I've been good, Elana," Marissa replies sweetly. "You look amazing. Much younger than the last time I saw you."

Mother beams, placing a hand on her stiff jaw. She must be so happy those cosmetic treatments she's been getting are working.

"Enough." Dad's voice practically slashes through the air. "Your sudden appearance needs to be called into question, Marissa."

"What are you doing here?" I ask, eyes narrowed on her face.

She finally looks at me, and the brown eyes that I used to think were so deep seem almost soulless. Like there's nothing there.

What the hell happened to her?

"What do you mean, what am I doing here?" Marissa asks haughtily. "You didn't think I'd miss Sean's birthday?"

A muscle ticks in my jaw. "Yes, I did think that. Because you've missed every other fucking thing these past few months. Where the hell have you been? Did you not get any of my messages? Why didn't you call?"

"Language, Sterling," my mother cautions.

My fists clench. "Get up," I say to Marissa.

"What? Why? I want to see Sean," she states, crossing her arms over my chest.

"You're not seeing Sean until you explain yourself," I tell her. "And you'd better have a fucking good explanation for your behavior these past few months."

She blows out a breath. "Fine. Let's go."

She smiles at my mother as she gets to her feet, whispering something to her. I offer my dad a slight nod before we exit the living room. I lead her up to my bedroom after ensuring that Karl is still keeping Sean occupied in his room with his nanny.

"Who was the woman with you?" Marissa asks as we walk.

“What woman?”

“The one who was by your side when I arrived. You know me, Ster. I don’t miss anything. Judging by the body language, you two seemed close. She also looked a little uncomfortable at my arrival.”

“Putting that psychology degree to good use,” I snarl, not answering her question.

She’s too smart for her own good. And she never misses anything. Our whole relationship was her constantly psychoanalyzing everything. It drove me crazy just how well she was able to see into me. Kind of the way Emilia does. The difference is, Emilia’s intrusion is calm, soothing. Marissa has a habit of cutting me open in the worst ways.

“What’s her name? She’s pretty.”

“That’s what Sean said the first time he saw her,” I state, not meaning for the words to have a bite but they do regardless.

“Sean knows her?” she asks quietly. “Does he like her?”

“He’s... fond.”

“That’s good,” Marissa murmurs.

When I look at her, there’s a devastated expression on her face. One she quickly covers up. Alright, now I’m worried. As a wife, Marissa drove me crazy. But she’s a

good person and one of the few people I've ever opened my heart to.

We arrive at my bedroom and I lead her inside, closing the door behind us. Marissa takes a seat on my bed, her hands running over the sheets. Her eyes get this faraway look for a moment.

"So this is your childhood bedroom," she says softly. "It's nice. We should have visited Edenton when we were married."

"We were too busy for that," I reply, grabbing a chair at my desk and dragging it over to sit in front of her. I spread my legs forward, crossing my ankles. "Alright, let's hear it. Your big excuse. It had better be good, Marissa."

She smirks. Instead of talking, she lies down on the bed. She sighs softly.

"You know you're my best friend, Ster?"

I shake my head even though she can't see me.

"Nah, I'd say it's more Carson at the moment," I say, only half joking.

I remember how pissed he was earlier. We need to have a conversation about his sister. And I have no clue how it's going to go. I need to do so many things.

Marissa frowns. "Carson?"

"Yeah, I've told you about him. I grew up with him here in Edenton. He's Emilia's brother."

"Oh," Marissa says, looking at me. "So her name's Emilia?"

I roll my eyes. “Would you drop it?”

“Not a chance in hell.” She laughs lightly. “You know, you get this look in your eyes when you’re in love. It’s this soft, ‘I’d burn the world for you’ look. Even saying her name makes the corners of your eyes softer.”

“I’m not in love with Emilia,” I stay stiffly.

“But you’re halfway there,” she retorts sadly. “Oh, Sterling. What are we going to do?”

I run a hand through my hair. “Talk to me, Marissa. Come on. Where have you been the past couple of months?”

“In Germany,” she answers lightly. “Thought I’d go on vacation. And it was so fun I just didn’t want to come back.”

“Bullshit,” I snap. “What were you really up to in Germany?”

She sits up at that, all traces of amusement wiped from her face. Her eyes are glassy and the sight has me reeling.

“What are we going to do, Sterling?” she asks again, heartbreak in her voice.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

A shiver rolls through me. It's like I already know even before she says anything. You can always tell when something's about to break your heart.

My chest tightens. "What's wrong?" I ask gently.

"I have cancer," she whispers.

The first thing I feel is a rushing through my ear. Disbelief pulses through me, followed by the need for it not to be true. It's a good thing I was already sitting because I don't think I have any control over any of my limbs at the moment. I stare at Marissa, dumbfounded, as she continues.

"Pancreatic cancer. I was already at Stage 3 when it was discovered. I found out a couple months ago, which is why I left. My dad has a friend in Germany with a hospital that was founded primarily for treating my form of cancer. I've been getting treated all this while, radiation therapy and chemotherapy."

I exhale harshly, trying and failing to come to terms with everything she's telling me. Marissa's always seemed so strong, unbreakable. Hearing this breaks my heart.

"But you'll be okay, right? You're getting better?" I ask hopefully.

Marissa shuts her eyes with a slight shake of her head. I watch as a tear slides down her cheek.

"The doctors said the cancer's progressed. I don't think I have much time left, Sterling."

My jaw tightens. “Hey, don’t say that,” I say forcefully. “You’re going to be okay. I wish you’d told me about all this from the jump, but you’re here now. You have Sean and me. And I’m going to do whatever it takes to help you, alright?”

“You sound like a knight from all those fairy tales,” she says on a smile.

“And that makes you, what? A troll?” I drawl, trying hard to ignore the fear spreading through my chest.

She laughs. “You’re a jerk. I missed you so much.”

I stand then, settling down on the bed next to her. She allows me to pull her into my arms, holding her body to my chest.

“You did so well on your own. I’m proud of you,” I say quietly.

“I’m scared, Sterling,” she whispers, hugging my waist tight.

“I know. I’m scared, too. But we’ll face it together. I promise.”

It takes me approximately a day to stop feeling numb. To start facing the reality of my new situation. In that one day, I’ve managed to come up with a plan of action of some sort. I’ve worked out the first steps and I’ve started making preparations.

Sean got to see his mother on his birthday, just like he wanted, and he was so happy about it. Marissa and I have come to a decision not to tell him anything yet. We’re going to let him be happy with his mom for as long as he wants. And if things don’t get better, we’ll try to explain what’s going on. But I’m optimistic that things will turn out alright.

It’s funny; I’ve never thought of myself as optimistic until now. Nothing’s ever

worked out the way I wanted simply because I wished it to be. But with Marissa, I hope with every single thing in me that things will turn out okay. Because I'm not sure how I'll be able to handle it if they don't.

Not surprisingly, after making all my plans and preparations, the next thing on my mind is seeing Emilia. It's 9 p.m. when I hear the door to the bar being opened. I smell her before I see her.

Her scent surrounds me, something I've become so accustomed to. Same as her voice, her smile, that cute snorting sounds she makes sometimes when she laughs. Every sense in me is wired to her, reacts in her presence. I don't understand why. But I'm glad that she's someone who can make me come alive.

Emilia places a purse on the stool next to me, and when I glance at her, her blue eyes are peering at both me and the bottle of whiskey in front of me.

"I'm start to think you're an alcoholic," she mutters.

I chuckle. I'm very aware that alcohol's a terrible coping mechanism. But it's what I always turn to when I feel my life derailing. Thankfully, I don't get that feeling too often. But twice in two months isn't really something I'm happy about. Especially because it feels like Emilia only gets to see the worst of me.

"Hey, angel," I say softly. "You look beautiful."

She arches an eyebrow. "Are you already drunk?"

"No, I just got started. And you seriously need to learn how to take compliments," I state.

She shrugs. "Compliments make me feel like a person is trying to get me to take my

guard down.”

Would that be so bad? I want to ask. But instead I smile. “Only you, Cameron.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“At least you chose a bar in town this time,” she states, pulling the stool back to settle down at my side.

“I was trying to escape prying eyes back then,” I say on a shrug.

Even now, I can feel the meager number of patrons in the bar looking at us. I’m a Harrington; I’m used to being watched. But in a town like Edenton, the scrutiny feels even more intense because everyone’s always in each other’s business.

“And now?”

“I just don’t give a fuck anymore,” I say, throwing a shot back. “Want some?”

She hesitates. When I look at her, something flashes in her eyes, too quick for me to discern.

“No thanks,” she replies. “I’m not a fan of drinking. Not all of us have god-level tolerance. I’ll have a Coke instead.”

She calls for the bartender by name, asking him politely for a Coke. The middle-aged man hands her a glass with a smile before moving back to the edge of the bar to continue his conversation with two women there. I’m glad for the privacy. Because I know things are about to get heavy, and I’d rather no one heard us talking.

“So what’s wrong? You look awful,” Emilia states.

I sigh. “I have no fucking clue where to even start.”

“You can start at the beginning,” she replies. “I actually have something to tell you, too. But you look like you have a lot on your mind. Is this about your ex-wife? Marissa, right? She seemed nice.”

“Marissa’s the furthest thing from nice,” I say, huffing out a laugh.

“What’s she like?” Emilia asks curiously.

I pause, staring at her. I guess if I can’t figure out where to start, I might as well start at the beginning.

“She’s feisty. A lot like you, actually. But while you have a lot of kindness in you, Marissa’s not like that. You have a bleeding heart, she’s a spoiled princess. In an endearing sort of way.”

“How did you two meet?”

“At college,” I reply. “Before that, we ran in the same social circles so I knew of her. Her father owns a huge tech company, and she’s his only child, hence the spoiled princess bit. I couldn’t stand her when we first met, but then I got to know her a little and realized she wasn’t so bad. She and I became friends first. There wasn’t any initial attraction. We sort of just grew into our relationship. I think the only reason we started dating was because everyone around us kept telling us that we’d be perfect for each other.”

“Sounds like a recipe for disaster,” Emilia drawls.

“Yeah, it was. But not at first. At first, it was easy. We got married about a year after college. She had her thing and I had my thing and we were fine together. And then she got pregnant.” I blow out a breath, remembering how I felt when I heard that for the first time. “It was an accident. Marissa and I, neither of us wanted kids. We were

terrified by the prospect.”

Emilia inhales sharply at that. But when I glance at her, her expression is blank, her eyes attentive. So I continue.

“Sean’s the most important thing in the world to me now, but I think having him was what led to the breakdown in my marriage with Marissa. We suddenly had someone else other than ourselves to think about, and I think we realized that we deserved more than just settling for each other. Or at least she realized that and she made sure I did, too. She’s pushy like that.”

Emilia smiles. “She sounds cool.”

“She is. Even after realizing we weren’t meant for each other, we tried to make it work. Eventually, we just called it quits. Our divorce was pretty amicable. She and I have always been better as friends. I care about her a lot.”

“Why did you call me here, Sterling?” Emilia asks softly.

I look her at then, wishing more than anything not to have to say the next sentence.

“Because I’m leaving.”

CHAPTER 21

Emilia

My head swims.

I was so glad when I got Sterling’s text. Because since yesterday, I’ve been shuffling between feeling sick and feeling complete and absolute dread.

Page 77

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

I was going to tell him. When I walked in here, I'd made up my mind to tell him. And now this?

Carefully, without betraying my emotions, I ask, "What do you mean by leaving?"

"I mean I'm leaving Edenton, angel. I have to head back to New York."

I suck in a sharp breath, trying to keep calm, trying not to lose my head.

"Okay," I say, nodding slowly. "This was always the plan. You were always going to return to New York. To your job and your life and your everything. I just didn't think—" I falter.

I forgot. I forgot this was temporary.

"Emilia," Sterling says, pain in his expression. "I was never going to leave you."

"And now you're saying you have to. It's fine," I say, my chest squeezing painfully.

Oh, God, I think I'm going to be sick. Or have a panic attack. Or both.

"Aren't you going to ask me why?" Sterling growls. "Don't just tell me it's fine. Don't pretend you're not feeling anything."

My jaw tightens. "Don't piss me off, Sterling. You said you're leaving, so go. I was fine before you came into my life, and I'll be fine when you're gone."

Except I won't be. Not even in the slightest.

Sterling scoffs before reaching for his precious bottle of whiskey and pouring another glass. We're both silent as he takes the shot. I try to steady my heartbeat, trying to be reasonable.

"Why do you have to leave?" I ask after several moments.

Sterling runs a hand through his hair, looking more distraught than I've ever seen him.

"Marissa's sick," he finally replies. "She has cancer."

I gasp, my hands going over my mouth. "Oh my god," I murmur.

"Yeah, it's why she hasn't been around the past couple of months. She's been getting treatments. But they don't seem to be working. That's why I have to leave, angel," he says, green eyes burning intently into mine. "We might not be married anymore, but that woman is the mother of my child. I have to do my best to help her."

Guilt washes over me. "I'm sorry, Sterling," I whisper.

And I'm so fucking sorry for Marissa. She's so young. She shouldn't have to be going through this. No one should.

"It's not your fault, angel. I just need you understand where I'm going from."

"Of course I do," I assure him, my voice hoarse. "You have to be with her, Sterling, because that's who you are. I don't think a lot of people see it, but you're actually such a good person. You're always talking about my bleeding heart, but yours is so beautiful and pure as well," I say softly, placing a hand against his chest.

He takes the hand in his, running his thumb over my palm. The warmth from his touch spreads all over me, heating me up from the inside.

“I’m so sorry, angel. I wish I didn’t have to leave. I wish none of this was happening.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I hate this so much. I don’t want to leave you.”

“Sterling, I need you to listen to me without getting angry, okay?”

His jaw tightens. “I’ll try.”

“You need to go. Because you were always meant to do that. This, whatever’s going on between you and me, it was temporary. I don’t think it was ever going to last. And while I’ve so enjoyed getting to know you, I think our time is up. You have your family to think about, you have Sean and Marissa, and your parents. You’ve progressed so much in the past two months, which I how I know you’ll be strong enough to handle whatever comes next. You have to be.”

He stares at me for a moment before exhaling a breath. “A part of me was hoping you’d ask me to stay,” he says.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

I smile. “That would be selfish.”

“Emilia Cameron’s a lot of things, but selfish isn’t one of them. You’re so annoying,” he says on an eye roll.

“Thanks. It’s my best quality.”

“What did you want to tell me?” he asks after a moment.

My eyes widen slightly and I clear my throat, shifting in my seat.

“Oh, um, I was going to ask you for a day off on Tuesday.”

For a doctor’s appointment. That I was hoping he’d come along with me for.

I’m so fucked.

“But since you’re leaving, it doesn’t matter anymore,” I continue. “Guess I’m out of a job now.”

Guilt flashes across his face. “I’m sorry about your café, angel.”

“I’m not,” I say on a shrug. “Honestly, it took losing it for me to realize it was never really that serious. I made the café a physical embodiment of just how far I’ve come. But the truth is, I know how far I’ve come. And I’ll be okay. Now I just have to think about what I do next.”

“I’m sure you’ll dominate. No matter what you choose.”

My gaze settles on his, tracing the soft creases of his eyes down to the smooth corners of his jaw. And it dawns on me that the point of this entire conversation is that he’s going to leave. And he didn’t say anything about returning, either.

Once again, I feel sick. I don’t know if it’s pregnancy symptoms or just the entire situation making my stomach so queasy. I slip my hand out of Sterling’s.

“Can we go home now?” I ask softly. “I’m tired.”

His eyes grow even warmer. “Sure, angel. I’ll call Callum to pick us up.”

There’s still so much left unsaid between us, but it’s all getting lost in the sea of uncertainty and pain. I always knew it was going to hurt. But this is so much worse than I expected.

He’s only halfway through his bottle of whiskey when we leave. The air outside the bar is chillier than when we walked in.

I shiver, rubbing my shoulders as we wait for the car. Sterling must notice because he takes off his jacket. I suck in a soft breath as he moves closer to place it around my shoulders. It smells like him. I offer a grateful smile.

“I’m keeping this.” Something to remember him by.

“No problem, angel,” he says tightly, like he can tell what I’m thinking.

Callum arrives, parking the car right in front of us. Sterling opens the door, gesturing for me to get in. I slide into the back seat and he’s right behind me. When I place my head on his shoulder, he doesn’t stop me. He leans in closer, taking my hand and

intertwining our fingers.

This feels like a breakup. Even though we were never even together. I want the drive to last longer than it does, but too soon we're stopping in front of my house. I exhale softly, looking up at him.

"I guess this is it," I mutter. "When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow," he replies hoarsely. "I'm sorry, angel."

"Shush, stop apologizing," I tell him.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I throw my arms around his neck. He hugs me back, and I hope he doesn't notice the tremble in my arms. He holds me for so long that everything else disappears. I'm the one that has to let go.

"I have to head inside," I say, escaping his embrace.

I open the car door, and after thanking Callum and waving at Sterling, I walk away. I should have known it wouldn't be that easy, though. I hear the car door opening and slamming shut about two seconds later.

"Emilia," I hear Sterling call.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

He's standing behind me when I turn around, and there's this intense look in his eyes that takes my breath away.

"I'm not going to ask you to wait for me," he starts.

"Good, because I'm not going to."

His eyes briefly flutter shut.

"I'm going to come back, angel," he promises. "I don't know when, but I will."

You have to, I want to scream. Because I'm pregnant, Sterling. I'm pregnant with your baby.

But I can't tell him that right now. Not when he's already going through something so incredibly hard. One day, if he does come back, maybe I'll tell him. But for now, he has to go and do his thing. And I'll do my thing, too.

"Don't call or text me," I tell him instead of the truth. "Focus on Marissa. Focus on your family. All of them, your mother, your grandfather, and your brother. Don't shy away from the hard conversations. At the end of the day, they're all you have."

"I'll take that advice," Sterling nods, "if you promise you will as well."

I knew he was going to say that.

"Deal," I say softly. "I'll open up more. I can't promise to let my guard down

completely, but I also won't act like I'm a burden to the people I know love me unconditionally anymore."

"Atta girl," he says proudly. Then he sobers up almost immediately. "I haven't gotten a chance to talk to Carson since the fight. I'm not sure I'll be able to see him before I leave."

"He called to apologize to me this morning," I tell him. "I'll talk to him for you."

"And say what on my behalf?" he questions.

I shrug. I have no idea.

He sighs. "Tell him I'm sorry. But also that he was wrong. He said we would never work, but I just think we needed more time."

My chest tightens. Time. Is this really about time? Or is Carson right?

"He was wrong, Emilia. Look me in the eye and tell me you feel nothing for me. Tell me none of it was real," he prods.

My lips part. I want so badly to say the words, but they don't leave my lips.

"That's what I thought," Sterling murmurs. He places a hand on my jaw. "If I kiss you, will you push me away?"

The air between us crackles with electricity. Heat rushes through my body, lighting me up in the most intense way. I lean into his palm, feeling my heart race with every beat of my heart.

"No, I won't."

“Just like that first time,” Sterling says, referring to our first kiss.

“Another one for the ages.”

When our lips meet, a sort of desperation fills me. Longing, angst. I realize just how stupid I’ve been all this time. Why did I spend so long pushing him away? Why didn’t I hold on?

The kiss is searing in the best way possible. Consuming. He tastes like whiskey and sin. I whimper when he bites down on my bottom lip, between his tongue slips into my mouth, deepening the kiss. His hand traces down the length of my body almost reverently. I hold onto him tight, because I never want to let go.

Eventually, we have to. We have to breathe, and we have to let go. I’m breathless when I pull away. Sterling’s eyes are so bright right now. He has no idea how special his eyes are to me.

“Be safe, okay,” I say softly, because there’s really nothing else to say.

He nods and I rise on my toes, placing my hands on his shoulders to press a kiss to his cheek.

“Bye, Sterling.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

He doesn't stop me when I walk away this time. I make it all the way to my front door before my eyes start to fill with tears, before my breathing starts to falter. I know he's still standing there, but I don't look back. I practically rip the door open in my haste to get inside.

And once I'm in, I slide down to the floor with gasping sobs, clutching my stomach. Anika's at my side in the next second, sinking down beside me.

"Oh god, what's wrong?" she questions, fear in her voice. "I was watching from the window. I saw that kiss. Why did it look like you were saying goodbye?"

"Because he's leaving," I manage to say, trying and failing to compose myself.

My sister rubs circles against my lower back comfortingly. We're both still on the floor. It feels like I'll never find the strength to stand again.

"I'm so sorry, Em," Anika murmurs. "Please stop crying. I hate seeing you like this. If it hurts this much, ask him to stay."

"I can't," I whisper.

She doesn't say anything for a moment. I think she understands because she only hugs me tighter.

"You've got us, Emilia. It'll be okay."

"It won't," I tell her tearfully. "Because I'm pregnant, Anika. I'm pregnant with

Sterling's baby."

That's the first time I've said it out loud since I took the pregnancy test the day before. It makes it all the more real. And the weight of what I'm going to have to deal with alone is almost unbearable.

"What?" Anika practically screeches, pulling away to look me in the eye. "Are you sure?"

"I took a pregnancy test last night. It came out positive, so yeah. I'm pretty sure."

"Then what are you doing crying here? Go to Sterling. If he knows you're pregnant, then?—"

"I can't do that," I say, cutting her off. "This is all my fault."

My sister frowns. "I'm pretty sure it takes two people to tango."

"I messed up my birth control shots," I mutter.

"It still takes two people to tango. This baby can't be only your responsibility. And you can't possibly be planning on keeping it away from Sterling forever."

"Not forever. Just until he comes back," I grit out.

"And if he doesn't?"

My heart clenches. "Then I guess it's forever."

Anika's expression crumples. "Emilia."

“Just help me, please. I need you and everyone else in our family.”

“You know we’ll always be there for you,” she immediately reassures me. She hugs me again and I relish in the warmth. It helps to calm me down. “Always and forever, Emilia.”

Always and forever.

TWO YEARS LATER

The sound of a blender fills the kitchen in my brother’s apartment. I hurriedly rush to the sink to rinse the cup in my hands before rushing back to the blender, switching it off. I pour my smoothie in, relishing in the sweetness that explodes on my tongue.

“Emilia,” Carson calls from the living room, “you’re going to be late.”

“I know,” I yell back, grabbing my cup and walking over to meet him and the little bundle of joy he has in his arms.

They’re both seated on the couch. My daughter’s eyes are glued to the TV screen as her favorite cartoon plays. I’m not sure if she understands what they’re saying, but she seems to like the pictures.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“Her babysitter’s going be here in an hour so just help me with her until then.”

“Got it,” Carson states. “It’s fine. I don’t have to be in for work until later. We’ll be alright.”

“Okay, and you know where her food is, and make sure to warm up the milk before giving it to her.”

“Emilia. I’ve watched her an uncountable number of times. Would you quit being so anal and get going for your appointment?”

I blow out a breath. “Fine.”

Leaning down, I press a kiss against my daughter’s head before kissing Carson’s cheek as well.

“Bye. Love you both.”

“Oh, and one last thing, muffin,” Carson states, halting my steps. “Thought you should know Harrington’s back in Edenton.”

I choke on air, turning around to face my brother, who has on the most annoying smirk. He lifts my daughter in his arms, waving her tiny hands at me.

“Have a nice day at work, Mommy,” he says in a baby voice that only serves to piss me off. And then he switches up, sounding serious. “Your reckoning has arrived, little sister. Hope you survive it.”

Fuck my life.

CHAPTER 22

Sterling

I'm seated at a timeworn booth at Mckinley's, a restaurant that's been a fixture in Edenton for as long as I can remember. The leather seats are faded now, by decades of sunlight and countless conversations. I remember a younger version of myself seated at this same spot with Carson, the two of us talking about things that don't matter anymore.

It's been two years since I've been in this town, but it hasn't changed much. It still feels familiar in a way I imagine it always will. The clatter of silverware and the low hum of conversations mixed with the soft strains of an old jazz record playing in the background all creates a soundtrack for my nostalgia.

I glance at the clock on the wall. I'm anxious, or maybe terrified. I really fucking hate waiting for people. My thoughts are interrupted by a smiling waitress who asks if I'd like anything. I respond with a slight shake of my head and she leaves.

As soon as she steps away, Anika arrives. She spots me and immediately walks over to the booth I'm seated at.

"Sterling," she greets, sliding into the other side.

"You're late," I can't help but mention.

She chews on her bottom lip. "I'm sorry. How are you? How have you been?"

"Fine," I reply simply. "You?"

“I’ve been okay. I’m, um, sorry for your loss.”

My chest clenches. It doesn’t matter how many times those words are said, losing Marissa will never hurt less.

“Thanks,” I reply gruffly. “Listen, Nika, there’s no need to beat around the bush. We both know why I asked to meet up with you. Where’s your sister?”

She releases a ragged breath, avoiding eye contact. “It’s been two years, Sterling.”

“I’m very aware,” I state. “That doesn’t answer my question. I already asked around. Emilia moved out of town a couple of weeks after I left. Why? Where did she go? Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. She’s safe,” Anika quickly assures me. “I just—I’m not sure if she’d want me to tell you.”

My eyebrow arches. “Tell me what?”

“Where she is.”

“Why wouldn’t she? Has she—” I pause, unwilling to put it into words lest I speak it into existence. “Has she met someone else?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

Please don't tell me I was too late.

Anika snorts. "That's like the least of your problems."

"So she has?" I grit out.

"She told you she wouldn't wait for you, Sterling," Anika states. "But don't worry. She's not with anyone at the moment."

I exhale softly. "Okay. So why can't you tell me where she is?"

She hesitates. "I guess I'd better let Emilia explain everything herself. She's with Carson. She moved to Greenville and is currently living with him."

My brows furrows. "Why did she move?"

"You'd have to ask her. I'm only telling you where she is because the look in your eyes tells me you'd find out eventually on your own."

She's damn right I will. I came back to Edenton for one reason and one reason only. And I'm not going to stop until I get her back.

"Thank you for telling me," I say to her sister.

Anika's brown eyes peer at me curiously for a second. "Sterling, she's happy right now. And I don't mean how she was when two years ago. She's not pretending anymore—she's really found inner peace, happiness."

Well done, angel. I'm glad she kept her promise.

"I'm not going to ruin that, Anika. That's the last thing I'd want to do."

"You might not intend to, but it could always happen. I'm a sucker for epic romances and I think what you two have is really special. I'm so glad you're back, but the truth is, you really broke her heart when you left that last time. I know you didn't have a choice; I understand the choices you made. But she's my sister and I was the one who held her while she was crying on the floor, wishing you didn't have to leave."

My stomach takes a nose dive, plunging to the ground. I always knew I hurt Emilia when I left. She tried so hard to keep up a brave face, but I could tell. I just didn't realize I caused her so much pain.

Fucking hell, Sterling.

"I'll fix it," I assure Anika. "I'll fix everything."

She smiles sadly. "I really hope you can. When are you going to Greenville?"

"Right now," I reply. No time like the present. Two years has been more than enough time. "Don't tell her."

"What?"

"Anika. Don't warn her I'm on my way to Greenville."

"A surprise sounds like a bad idea," she says nervously.

"It won't be a surprise, per se. Just don't tell her. We both know your sister—if she knows I'm coming, she'll steel herself, maybe hide how she's really feeling. She

won't give me a chance if she's able to prepare for my arrival."

I can see her thinking over my words. Finally, she shrugs.

"You'll have to go through Carson before you can get to her, anyway."

I groan softly. "Great."

"Don't look so glum. Your best friend has been your most vocal supporter since you left. You'd be surprised."

"That doesn't sound like Carson," I say warily.

"Two years is a long time. A lot has changed since then," Anika states, getting to her feet.

She's right. I'm not the same person I was two years ago. I worked hard to attain this version of myself. A version not broken, or tainted by grief. A version I want so badly for Emilia to be proud of. No, I know she'll be proud.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

I'm just scared she won't want us anymore.

I stand as well, offering the littlest Cameron a small smile. "Thanks for this, Nika. I owe you one."

She waves a hand in the air. "You can thank me once you've fixed things with my sister. Good luck, Sterling. It'll be probably be much harder than you think."

"When have things with your sister ever been easy?"

She and I walk out of the restaurant together, separating once we get to the parking lot. I release a deep sigh as I head over to my car, glaring at the person standing beside it. A shorter, more annoying version of me.

My brother stands there with his signature smirk, arms crossed over his chest. He's dressed in baggy black pants and a matching vest and shirt that in my opinion makes him look like a twink.

"Stop following me around, Spencer," I grit out upon arriving at my car.

"And miss all the fun? No way," he replies with a chance. "Was that baby Cameron I just saw you with? She grew up a lot. Think I'd have a shot with her?"

"Keep your paws off her. I'm serious. Leave her the fuck alone."

"You're right. It'd be too much to have two Cameron sisters in the family," he says easily in agreement. "So, where's the love of your life?"

“None of your business,” I mutter, pressing the button to unlock my car.

“Oh, come on, baby bro. I’m bored. You’re the reason I came back here in the first place.”

“You’re here because Dad made you come back,” I retort.

He had to be forced and blackmailed. If Spencer had a choice, he would never step foot in Edenton again. Too many bad memories from his past.

“Where are you going?”

“To Greenville,” I answer because I know he won’t quit until I do.

“Oh, fun. I’ve been wanting to enjoy some time in the city. Edenton’s too boring. Want to hit a club with me there later tonight?”

“I’d rather chew grass,” I say drily.

He rolls his eyes. “Whatever. I’m going with you.”

Without waiting for any further arguments, he walks over to the other side of the car, opening the door and entering. I sigh, asking God for strength. Two years ago, I would have told him to fuck off. Actually, two years ago, I wouldn’t have been able to stomach the thought of seeing his face let alone having an actual conversation with him.

I really hated my brother, and that hate only grew when it was revealed he was the one that leaked the news about my paternity. But I think Marissa dying really put things into perspective. For all of us. We had to think about how short life really is.

Spencer's changed. I don't want to say he's turned a new leaf, because he's still the same jackass intent on making my life miserable.

But he apologized. And we have a relationship somewhat akin to brotherhood now. I don't hate him anymore. So even though I know it might be a bad idea to let him come with me, I start the car regardless, driving toward a woman I'm hoping still cares enough about me to give me a chance.

Like Anika said, I need to go through Carson before I can figure out where Emilia is. I feel like I'm playing a game of Where's Waldo and my patience is slowly running thin. A quick text from Carson had him asking me to come to his company.

Cameron Financials has grown a lot in the past couple of years. No longer a start-up, it's a company that rivals some of the best in the game at the moment. And Carson built it all himself. I'm proud of him, how far he's come.

When Spencer and I arrive, we're shown to a lounge and served some refreshments. It doesn't take long for the CEO himself to appear.

Carson walks in, wearing a dark blue suit sans tie because no matter how successful he is, he's still the same unserious dumbass I knew growing up. He surprises me with a small smile when our eyes meet. Then the smile subsequently falls when he notices who's beside me.

He groans, taking a seat opposite my brother and me.

"Hey, Ster. Missed you," he mutters before jabbing his thumb in the direction of my brother. "Why'd you bring him?"

"Nice to see you too, Mercedes," Spencer says with a shit-eating grin.

Page 84

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

I massage the corner of my forehead with my fingers. Spencer's been calling him that stupid nickname since we were kids.

"My name's Carson, dickhead."

"It has 'car' in it, doesn't it? And you should be flattered. I could be calling you Toyota." My brother smirks.

I jab my elbow into the side of his stomach. "Behave. What are you, five?"

"Right, you need to ride his dick so he'll let you date his sister. My bad. Sorry, Carson," Spencer states.

My eyes fall shut as I groan.

"Should have left him at home, Ster," Carson says, but he has on an amused smirk. "Nice to see you haven't changed, Spencer."

"Change is underrated," he replies. "Hey, since this is your city, what do you say about us hitting the club after you clock out of work?"

He went from teasing him to inviting him to party. The duality of Spencer Harrington.

Carson shrugs. "Sure, I'd be down."

My eyebrows rise. I'm well aware of the problems Carson's had in the past when it

came to partying too much. He must read the expression on my face.

“It’s fine, Sterling. I’m older now. I can handle myself. Plus, someone’s gotta watch him right?”

“Right,” I murmur. “Whatever you both do is frankly none of my business. I’m here to see Emilia. Where is she?”

Carson leans back in his chair, expression growing serious. “Why should I tell you?”

“Because I want her back,” I say hoarsely. “It’s been two years. I missed her.”

He huffs out a breath. “I’m glad you came back, man. I was frankly this close to calling you myself, but Emilia’s stubborn. And I wanted to give you more time.”

This is weird. I thought he’d be wanting to punch me in the face for hurting his sister. I guess Anika was right and he’s changed. But why?

“All will become clear eventually,” Carson says, reading the expression on my face and confusing the hell out of me. “As for Emilia, she’s at work right now. But she should be leaving there soon. After that, she’s got a hot date.”

My heart stops for a moment. “Come again?”

“You heard me. She’s got a date. You really chose the best time to come back, man. It’s her first date since you left. Took a lot of convincing before she agreed to give the guy a chance.”

I clench my jaw. “Where’s she meeting him?”

“You’re going to crash her date?” my brother asks, glancing at me.

Carson's the one to reply with a chuckle. "That is exactly what he's going to do. I like the way you think, Ster. And I absolutely support you crashing the date. I'll give you the location and everything."

"You don't like the guy?" Spencer frowns.

"There's nothing wrong with him, per se. He's just boring. My sister deserves better. I'd say she deserves you, actually," he states, looking at me. "But you have a lot of work to do to prove it to me. You have a lot of work to do, period. I'll be watching you, Sterling. The way you handle things from now on is going to show if you're meant to be together or not."

I'm getting tired of all the vague comments. I'd ask him to explain further but my senses are wired. I'm more concerned about the fact that Emilia's meeting someone else. I imagine another man touching her and my vision goes red.

She's fucking mine.

Carson's happy to provide the address of the restaurant where she's meeting her date. He wishes me good luck as we leave. Spencer decides to drive, because I haven't stopped clenching and unclenching my fist since I heard what Carson said. We arrive at the restaurant soon enough. It's fancy, probably one of the most exclusive dining spots in the city.

My stomach twists into knots as I stare up at the building. Stepping out of the car, Spencer claps me on the back.

"You need to chill, Sterling. I'm pretty sure we're this close to crossing into stalker territory," he states, his easy manner a stark contrast to my simmering mood.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

I shift his arm away, my eyes fixed on the glimmering glass doors. “Let’s just go.”

We stride to the entrance. At the door, we’re greeted by one of the employees who offers us a polite smile.

“Good evening, gentlemen. Do you have a reservation?”

I exchange a look with Spencer, a silent conversation.

“No, we don’t. But my brother can sort that out,” I say, my tone clipped.

Spencer steps forward smoothly, his voice warm yet commanding.

“Spencer Harrington, nice to meet you. And that’s Sterling Harrington. If you’d be willing to make one exception for us, we’d just like to see something in the restaurant quickly.”

The employee frowns. “We can’t do that, sir. Company policy. You need a reservation to walk in.”

Spencer flashes him a charming smile. “Let me talk to your manager. I’m pretty sure our grandfather’s friends with the owner of this place. He’ll help smooth things over.”

The Harrington name always opens doors. And while I’d usually dislike doing something like this, the situation is urgent and there’s no time for false modesty. One call later and we’re being led inside. The inner door opens to reveal the lavish interior

of the restaurant.

The ambience is hushed and refined with the low murmur of conversation and the gentle clink of glasses. The tables are adorned with delicate silverware and pristine linens. I scan them, my eyes flicking from one table to another, looking for her.

Finally I spot her at one of the tables in the far back. Emilia is radiant under the soft glow of the muted lights. Her blonde hair cascades in gentle waves around her shoulders, and her blue eyes are wide and luminous. One look at her takes my breath away. If there was ever any doubt that this woman is the one for me, it all disappears at the sight of her. She's still as beautiful as ever.

The man she's currently talking with has his back turned to me. She's laughing softly at whatever it is he says and the sight makes my blood boil.

Suddenly, like she can feel my eyes on her, Emilia looks up. And I watch as she turns pale in a matter of seconds. Her eyes grow wide, surprise and something else I can't quite decipher filling them. I watch as she says something to the man in front of her before she slowly rises from her seat, walking over to where we're standing.

"That's her, right?" Spencer murmurs from beside me.

I ignore him, too fixated on the woman that fills every inch of my vision. The dress she's wearing brings out the color of her eyes. She looks incredible and every speck of longing that I'd been pushing down rises to the surface as she moves even closer.

She stops in front of me and I notice she's recovered from her shock.

"What are you doing here, Sterling Harrington?"

Fuck, I missed her voice. I missed everything about her, actually.

Since I'm too busy staring at her and committing every inch of her to memory once again, my idiot brother decides to step up. He moves forward, stretching his hand toward her.

"Hey, I'm Spencer Harrington," he states. "And I have heard so much about you, you have no idea."

Emilia blinks but accepts the handshake all the same. "Nice to meet you," she says softly.

"Spencer, you can leave now," I speak up, looking at my brother.

He makes a face. "So it's use me and dump me now? You got your girl so you don't need me anymore?"

I roll my eyes. "Spencer, go. Thanks for all the help, but I can handle things from here. I'll see you later."

He arches a dark eyebrow before shrugging, placing his hands into his pockets.

"Bye, Emilia. Good luck," he says, offering her a short wave before leaving.

Once he's gone, I turn my attention back to the blonde woman that just might drive me crazy.

"Hey angel," I say, my voice controlled, a subtle undercurrent of irritation and relief interwoven into each syllable.

CHAPTER 23

Emilia

I've been feeling so many mixed emotions all day, ranging from anxiety to relief to downright fear. Carson only told me about Sterling's return this morning to fuck with me, and it worked perfectly. I couldn't stop thinking about him and what his return may bring.

I almost cancelled my date but I couldn't because I know he deserves better than that. Plus I'd been putting it off for so long. I thought I'd stay for a little while, have a nice meal, and try to enjoy my time with him. What I hadn't been expecting was for Sterling Harrington to show up with his brother in tow.

The first thing I felt when I saw him standing at the entrance to the restaurant was relief. Well, actually, it was shock first and then relief. Because deep down, even if I don't want to admit it, I've missed him a lot and I needed him. And now that he's here, I have no clue how to act or what I'm even supposed to say.

Especially since I'm on a date with another man.

"What are you doing here, Sterling?" I ask again. "How did you even know where to find me?"

He's being way too chill right now, although I can see in his eyes that he's pissed. I don't know why. I told him I wasn't going to wait for him. It's been two years, I'm free to do whatever I want and to date whoever I want, and he doesn't get to make me feel guilty about that.

Although I do feel guilty. A little.

“Your brother told me,” he replies, his jaw clenched.

Carson, you fucking manipulative asshole!

I run a hand through my hair. “You need to leave, Sterling.”

He scoffs. “Like hell I do. This is the first time I’m seeing you in two years, angel. And you’re on a date with some guy.”

“He’s not just some guy. His name is Ian,” I say on a sigh.

Sterling’s green eyes narrow as he stares at something behind me. “Why does Ian look so familiar?”

I whirl around and sure enough Ian’s turned around to look at us. We’ve drawn the attention of other people in the restaurant as well. I grit my teeth as I look back at Sterling.

“That’s because he was a regular customer at Emilia’s Café,” I say in reply to his question. “Now, can you please leave? This isn’t the time or place for this conversation. I’ll get in touch with you later.”

“That’s not happening, angel,” Sterling says on a smirk. “I’m not leaving here unless it’s with you.”

“Are you fucking serious right now?” I question, unimpressed.

“As a heart attack.”

I know he won't budge. This is Sterling Harrington we're talking about. He's almost as stubborn as me. I glare up at him.

"You're being rude, Sterling. At least respect the fact that I'm with someone else."

He shifts closer and his scent surrounds me, reminding me of every single memory, every feeling I've tried hard to bury in the past two years. My heart speeds up. Sterling has always been the only person to instill that effect on me.

"If you can tell me right now that he matters more to you than me, then I'll walk out that door right now," he prompts.

My hands tighten into fists. "You don't fight fair."

"I know." He grins.

I melt at the sight of the smile. It's easy, light. Now that I'm really looking at him, something's different. He doesn't look like the same man from two years ago, the man with the weight of the world seemingly on his shoulders. He's lighter and I'm so glad.

"You're a jerk, Sterling Harrington," I mutter.

He doesn't stop me when I turn around, heading back to my table where Ian is seated. I chew on my bottom lip, feeling guilty as I stare at the man with kind blue eyes and a warm smile. Ian's helped me a lot in the past two years. I first met him when he used to live in Edenton, but we never really spoke.

And then I came to Greenville and started working at my current company, only to realize Ian was acting manager there. He helped me a lot, showed me the ropes. And I knew he liked me. I tried hard to ignore it, though, because I wasn't over Sterling and

I already had a lot on my plate.

The date today was me trying to give him a chance because I know he's waited for a long time.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“Ian,” I say softly.

He shakes his head, adjusting the glasses resting on his nose. “It’s fine. You don’t have to say anything. I can take a hint,” he tells me.

“I am so sorry.”

“You don’t have to be. It’s not like you led me on or anything. I knew what I was getting into and you always made your position clear,” he states on a shrug. “I wish you nothing but happiness, Emilia.”

My heart aches because he’s such a genuinely good person. I didn’t know people like that still existed, but Ian has such a pure heart. It would be so easy to fall in love with him. But I can’t. Not when Sterling owns my heart in a way that annoys me half the time.

“You’re an amazing person, Ian Tucker,” I murmur. “I hope you find an amazing woman who makes you happy.”

“I’m sure I will.” He smirks, getting to his feet. “One last thing. Sterling Harrington, is he your baby’s father?”

Not a lot of people are aware of my baby’s existence, but Ian’s one of them. I knew I could trust him to keep a secret. I exhale a soft breath before nodding once in answer.

He smiles. “I hope it all works out between you two.”

“We’ll see.”

He steps forward to give me a hug and I hug him back, glad that we’re ending things on such an amicable note. When I glance toward the entrance, I find Sterling’s gaze fixed on us, his displeasure about the hug apparent. I roll my eyes.

Pulling away from Ian, I offer him a warm smile. “Don’t be a stranger, okay?”

“I won’t.”

After one last look, I grab my purse, walking away and heading toward a man that could very well ruin my present. But I want to choose to believe in a future with him, as well.

Sterling doesn’t say a word when I reach him. He just grabs my hand, leading me out of the restaurant. Neither of us speaks until we’re seated in his car.

Eventually, he lets out a soft sigh.

“Why does it feel like you’re not happy to see me, angel?” he questions.

“Well, you did just crash my date and demand I end it,” I point out.

“I’m not going to apologize for that. You were wasting your time with him. We both know where you belong.”

My heart thuds in my chest. “Do we really? Because the last time I saw you, you were leaving me.”

He opens his mouth to speak but I continue before he can.

“It was a decision I supported one-hundred percent. I understand why you made that choice, Sterling. I’m not holding it over your head. It’s just, we ended things back then. You can’t just bulldoze your way back into my life and expect us to pick off where we left off,” I explain.

“Okay, first off, we didn’t end anything,” Sterling states. “We were never even together, angel. And second, I’m not trying to pick off where we left off. I want to start something new with you. I want us to be together, officially this time. No more false pretenses, no more secrets or hiding our true selves. I want you, Emilia. And I’m willing to do whatever it takes for you to accept that. I’m willing to wait as long as you want.”

My eyes grow glassy because he’s saying exactly what I’ve wanted to hear all this time that I’ve been waiting. I wanted nothing more than for him to come back and tell me all this.

No more secrets... He has no idea I’m hiding the biggest secret of all.

“There’s just...” I falter, gripping my hair. “There’s so much you don’t know, Sterling.”

“You can tell me,” he says patiently. “I’ll listen to it, all of it, angel.”

He has no idea what he’s asking for. He could very well hate me after all this and I’d only have myself to blame.

“Let’s just take it one day at a time,” I breathe.

“Sure. On that note, how about we go on a date tomorrow?” he asks. “Anywhere you want. Since I got reinstated as vice president of the company, I have access to the private jet. We could go anywhere—Peru, Thailand, South Africa.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:16 am

“You’re ridiculous,” I say on a laugh. “You’d really just pack everything up and go to South Africa?”

“If you wanted to, I’d go anywhere, angel,” he says softly, looking at me.

Those damn green eyes. My life was easier when I didn’t have to feel them on me. Their searing heat, the way they feel like a window into his soul.

“How about having dinner at a restaurant like normal people?” I smile.

He scowls. “Like Ian?”

“Oh my god, you need to let that go. Ian’s a really good person. He’s helped me a lot.”

“Helped you with what?”

“I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow. It’s getting pretty late,” I tell him.

He glances at the watch on his wrist with a frown. “Carson said you’re working. Where?”

“A company.”

“I thought it was on a farm,” he says sarcastically. “What company?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow. We’ll have lots to talk about then.”

“Fine,” he huffs.

There’s a temporary lull in the conversation and I use it to study him for a couple of seconds.

“How are you, though?” I ask gently.

He smiles. “I was wondering when you were going to ask that. I’m fine, angel. You really don’t have to worry about me anymore.”

“I’ll always worry about you,” I counter. “And how’s Sean, after... everything?”

Marissa passed away six months after they left Edenton. I was devastated when I heard the news. It hurt even more that I couldn’t just go to comfort him. It must have been hard.

“Sean’s okay, too. He didn’t talk for about two months after his mother passed away. It was hard,” Sterling says gruffly. “Then he got better. He’s in New York at the moment. He started school and he’s made some friends. He’s really come out of his shell.”

“That’s good.”

“Losing Marissa’s never going to get easier. We’ve just learned to live with it.”

“I’m proud of you,” I state.

“And I’m sorry it took me so long to come back.”

I shake my head. “You took the time you needed to heal. I can’t fault you for that.”

Sterling starts the car, insisting on taking me to Carson's apartment. He frowns as he looks up at the building. Carson lives in the penthouse. It's pretty luxurious.

"Why did you leave Edenton? You loved it there." he asks curiously.

I don't reply. Anything I say would be a deflection or a lie. He looks at me and seems to understand.

"You'll tell me eventually, right?"

"Yes, I promise," I answer.

"Alright. I'll be at a hotel in town. Just text me tomorrow when you'll be available to meet up."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

“Okay,” I tell him, my hand moving to open the door.

“Wait,” he says, stopping me. “Come here.”

He grabs my shoulder, leaning sideways and pulling me into his chest. I exhale.

“I couldn’t let you go without giving you at least one hug,” he murmurs, running a hand through my hair.

A part of me wants to climb into his lap and never let go.

“I missed you, Sterling,” I breathe, gripping his arm and trying hard to hold back tears.

“Missed you too, angel. So much.”

He eventually lets me go and I step out of the car, waving as he drives off. Once he’s gone, my expression crumples. He’s so happy now. How’s he going to feel when he finds out the truth? With a heavy heart, I head into the building, placing a card against the elevator panel to gain access to the penthouse.

I walk into the apartment to the sound of my baby laughing. The sound manages to melt my worries away. I walk in the direction of her laughter to see her and her babysitter seated on the floor. My little girl’s wiggling one of her toys, which creates a rattling sound she seems to love.

Her babysitter, Kim is smiling as she watches her. She’s a woman in her mid-thirties

that's been helping me out with my daughter for a couple of months, ever since I started working. She's efficient, kind, and my baby seems to love her.

"Hey, Kim. How was today?" I ask, taking off my jacket and placing it on the back of the couch.

"Pretty good," she replies, getting to her feet. "She was an angel as always."

I smile, thinking about her dad and how he's always calling me angel.

"Thanks. I can take it from here," I tell her.

Kim leaves and then it's just me and my daughter. I lift her from the floor, placing her on my lap as I settle on the couch.

"Hey, honey. Did you have dinner?"

She giggles, her big green eyes just like her dad's sparkling. She babbles a couple of incomprehensible words that I listen to intently.

"I saw your daddy today. He looked amazing. I didn't realize how much I missed him until now," I tell her.

Her eyes are focused on me like she can really understand what I'm saying.

"Do you want to meet your daddy?"

My daughter blinks.

"He'll love you. I know in my heart that he will. I'm just scared that he's going to hate me for hiding you for so long," I tell her tearfully. "I don't want him to hate me."

She lifts her adorable small hand, trying to rest it against my cheek. The touch is comforting.

“I can’t keep him away from you anymore, though. You deserve to know your daddy. Just give me a couple of days. I’ll tell him, I promise. I just want a few days to be happy with him.”

“Mama,” she says with some effort.

That’s the only word she’s been able to say. I cried a bucket the first day I heard it, a couple weeks ago. My smart, perfect little girl.

“Should we watch a movie or do you want me to read to you? I think a movie would be nice. You fall asleep faster when you’re looking at the pictures. How about Frozen?”

She seems to like that idea so I turn on the TV, playing the movie. She’s out like a light in about twenty minutes but I don’t move, relishing the weight of her in my arms.

My daughter’s the most precious thing in the world to me. I’d do anything to protect her.

Carson gets home about two hours after me. I wrinkle my nose when I smell the alcohol wafting off him. He doesn’t seem too drunk, though.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

“Really?” I ask, glaring up at him.

He smiles before practically falling onto the armchair in the living room.

“Sorry. I went out with Spencer Harrington. That man knows how to party.”

My brows furrow. “I thought you didn’t like him.”

“He’s not so bad,” he says on a shrug. “So, did you meet Sterling?”

“You sent him to me, didn’t you? Of course I did.”

“And how was it? Did you tell him about her?”

I shake my head. Carson looks disappointed.

“You can’t put it off forever, Emilia. I’ve been telling you to call him for over a year. And now he’s here. He deserves to know.”

“I’m very aware,” I sniff.

“You need to tell him. I still need to punch the bastard for getting you pregnant in the first place.” He scowls.

“Mind your own business, Carson,” I mutter.

He smirks, getting to his feet with a yawn, “I’m beat. I’m going to bed. See you

tomorrow, little sister. Good night, cupcake,” he whispers at my sleeping daughter.

The room falls quiet and I spend a long time sitting there, rocking my baby as I consider what my next plan of action is.

A sharp ringing suddenly cuts across the silence in the room. I frown, wondering who could be calling me so late. When I grab my phone and see it’s an unknown caller, my stomach drops. I answer the call, even though I already know the person on the other end won’t say a word.

“Hello?” I breathe, feeling my heart pounding. “This is the third call in two months. If this persists, I’m going to report it to the police.”

The person on the other end doesn’t respond. Absolutely nothing but heavy breathing and crickets. I hang up two seconds later, tossing my phone onto the couch. It’s getting really creepy and I’m terrified.

Because although I’m not ready to admit it, the call might just be a sign that my past is about to catch up to me.

CHAPTER 24

Sterling

The rooftop is bathed in the soft glow of string lights and the fading hues of twilight as I take my seat at the elegantly set table. The city sprawls below me, stretching far and wide. I shift a little, fiddling with the collar of my shirt as I wait for Emilia to arrive.

I wanted to pick her up but she insisted on coming here herself. She finally arrives, a vision in a burgundy top and a short skirt that clings gracefully to her curves, the

fabric catching every subtle movement she makes. Her hair, loosely tied at the nape of her neck, frames her face perfectly. I rise to my feet.

“Hey, beautiful,” I greet with a tentative smile, leaning forward to kiss her cheek.

She returns the smile with a warmth that makes my chest tighten. I move to pull her chair back, gesturing for her to have a seat.

“A private rooftop dinner?” she asks, smirking.

“I’m a Harrington, angel. Go big or go home is practically our motto,” I reply before moving to take my seat as well.

The private chef, a consummate professional whose presence seems to elevate the entire ambience, glides silently toward our table. He informs us that he’s prepared a five-course meal that he hopes we’ll enjoy. In the background, soft piano melodies mix with the gentle murmur of the city. For a brief moment, the world narrows to just the two of us, an intimate oasis.

We begin with an appetizer, a delicate amuse-bouche of seared scallops atop a smear of citrus-infused puree, as the chef explained. I watch as Emilia delicately picks one up, her eyes briefly meeting mine as she shoots me a smirk I understand perfectly.

“It’s a little pretentious, isn’t it?” I ask, my tone carrying a teasing lilt.

“A little? This is, like, crazy fancy. I have never eaten anything like this before,” she exclaims.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

I chuckle. “Try it. I promise you’ll like it.”

She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear before bringing the food to her rosy lips. Her eyes widen at the first taste.

“Okay, that’s really good.”

“Told you. Only the best for you, angel.”

She laughs, a soft, genuine sound that resonates against the clink of the glassware. I sip my wine, letting the taste of dark cherry and oak mingle on my tongue.

“So, what do you want to talk about first?”

There’s a pause, a heartbeat of silence before she says, “Let’s talk about you.”

I frown. “It feels like we’re always talking about me.”

“That’s because your life is so interesting, Ster. Filled with private chefs and vacations and business meetings around the world. I know you took a trip to China earlier this year, how was it?”

I arch an eyebrow. “You’ve been keeping tabs on me?”

“I was just curious,” she says on a shrug. “I guess I just needed to know you were fine.”

I lean backward, growing thoughtful. “After Marissa passed away, I spent the first few months trying to help Sean through his grief to make sure he was okay. And then I spent some time focusing on myself. Eventually, I got better. I started to put my life back together. My family was actually really helpful. Like you saw, Spencer and I are okay now. And my mother—” I hesitate, thinking back to how things were back then.

“She and Marissa were close. It hit her hard as well. And I guess that helped her to connect to me, in a way. It took losing Marissa for her to realize that her sons were important to her. She’s changed a lot. She’s more open and she’s apologized for the way she’s treated us all this time. We’ve still got a long way to go, but we’re getting there.”

“How about your grandfather?” Emilia asks.

“He’s still mostly the same. He gave me my position back. He said all he’s wanted all along was for me to ‘get rid of my inferiority complex and rise to my full potential.’ Grandfather’s always going to be a hard-ass. I respect him for it, though. And I know he cares in his own way.”

“And things are the company are good, too?”

“Yes, Spencer and I have been working together a lot. I don’t know if you’re aware but developments on the land in Edenton had to be stalled after I left. They’re nearly complete now, though. I’ve been overseeing it from New York.”

“Seems like you’ve got everything on track,” Emilia says warmly.

“Except one thing. There’s this woman I really like. She’s stubborn like a mule, makes me work ten times harder than anyone else. She’s strong and so fucking beautiful. I see her everywhere. Her face plagues my every thought. I’ve been thinking about it a lot and I want her by my side. I want everything she has to give. If

she's willing to give it to me."

Emilia's blue eyes turn glassy. "That's so romantic," she says softly. "Who is this woman? She sounds amazing."

I roll my eyes. "I'm being serious, Emilia. I want you."

Her expression sobers. "I want you, too. It's just... hard."

"What's so hard? Just be with me, angel. All you have to do is be with me."

She doesn't reply, looking down at her plate. I can tell she's holding something back. But Emilia's always done that. It's hard getting her to open up, but I'll do whatever it takes to get her to do so.

"Alright, your turn. Tell me how you've been the past two years. Where do you work?"

She beams. "I work for an interior design company. I'm a part of a design team there. I also work as a liaison between clients and the team, ensuring all their needs are met and projects run smoothly. It's pretty small. I never would have thought interior design would be my path, but Carson mentioned one time how I've always had a knack for decorating."

I nod in agreement. "I remember thinking Emilia's Café had a really nice charm."

"Exactly," she says brightly. "I did that. And it was really good. Plus, I'm patient when it comes to handling clients. I help them navigate their wants, guiding them into making the right decisions. It's pretty fun, to be honest. I never would have expected a career path like this, but my journey has been smooth sailing so far."

She seems genuinely content and I'm so fucking glad that she's found this.

“So, what's the plan? Are you planning on staying with the company?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

She shakes her head. “No. Eventually, I plan to start my own company. I’ve been trying to gather resources. I already have an idea in my head and although it still needs fleshing out, I’m sure it’ll work out. I even already have my first employee,” she says proudly.

“Really?” I ask, surprised.

“Remember Paige?”

I nod. “The teenage girl that was in the accident? How is she now?”

“She’s great. She’s in college right now and I don’t know if it’s fate but she’s majoring in fashion and design. When I talked to her and told her about establishing my company, she said she wanted to be my first hire.”

I’m sure Paige simply wants to pay her kindness back. A kindness Emilia probably doesn’t think much of anymore. Back then, she left me in awe by how simple her decision was to save that girl. But that’s who she is. Bright and so selfless it worries me at times. But she’s also strong and tough as rocks. I know she’ll succeed in whatever she sets her heart on.

“That’s amazing, angel. You look excited.”

“I am. I mean, it’ll be a while before I actually get to achieve it all, but at least I have a future to look forward to now. One I can be proud of.”

“You’ll achieve every single thing your heart desires. I know it,” I assure her, raising

my glass toward her for a toast.

Our main course is brought out, delicately prepared lamb and roast that tastes almost divine. We eat silently for a bit until I grow curious about something else.

“So why did you leave Edenton? You love that town. You once told me it was the first place you ever felt safe.”

She smiles softly. “You remember I told you how freeing it was to let my café go. I think Edenton felt like the café to me as well. I realized I needed to stop holding on to sentimentality instead of just moving on and living the life I wanted. Leaving Edenton wasn’t easy, but it was necessary. If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have found my current job or my dreams for the future.”

“Sounds... philosophical,” I say teasingly.

“Shut up,” she retorts with a smile. “But seriously, I’m good now too, really good.”

“And how are things with your family?”

“Things are better,” she says in a low tone. “I’m not going to lie and say I told them every single detail about my past. It would be too painful for them to handle. But I did tell Dad and Carson that my mom died. They seemed sad for me, but I know they don’t really understand why it’s so hard for me to talk about her.”

“Do you think you’ll ever get to a point where it’ll be easy?”

She pauses, thinking about that. “Maybe. I guess I’m waiting for something. Maybe closure? Or peace. I still have so many unresolved feelings when it comes to her. I’m just scared no one will understand them. It doesn’t even make sense to me at times. My mother wasn’t a good person, but it breaks my heart that she’s gone.”

“Promise me something?” I ask. “Whenever you’re ready, whenever you’ve found that inner peace, promise you’ll talk to me about it? Everything. I want to know all of you, angel. Even the bad parts, the things that are hard to say. I’ll understand.”

“It’s not always easy to understand other people’s actions,” she says hesitantly.

“I would never judge you, Emilia.”

“You say that now, but...” She sucks in a breath. “I’m scared, Sterling. That you have this idea of me in your head that I can’t live up to. I’ve made mistakes as well. I’m like, the furthest thing from perfect.”

I frown. “I don’t think you’re perfect, Emilia. I see every imperfections, they just don’t matter to me. I want you regardless of your faults.”

Her lips part and then she sniffs. “Damn, Harrington. Calm down before my heart bursts out of my chest or something. I prefer it when you’re a jerk, makes it easier not to fall for you.”

My lips tilt up in a wild smile. “That sounds like a yes to being my girlfriend.”

“When and where was that question posed? Because I have no memory of it happening.” She laughs.

“Right now, right here, angel.”

I call for the staff to bring out dessert with a small flick of my fingers. It’s a small chocolate cake, her favorite, with the words ‘will you be my girlfriend’ written on the edge of the plate. Emilia gasps softly when it’s placed in front of her.

Her eyes shine with affection as she looks at me.

“You really pulled out all the stops, didn’t you?” she asks.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

“So, what do you say?”

She bites down on her bottom lip, the look in her eyes suddenly fearful. My brows furrow.

“I’m going to say yes, Sterling. Because I want to. I want to say yes to everything with you. I just can’t say it yet.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll tell you in the morning. And you’re probably going to be angry at me. But I can’t hold it off any longer.”

I cock my head to the side, confused. “Tell me now.”

“No. Tonight has been so perfect. I don’t want to ruin it. Please, Sterling.”

Conflict simmers within me but the pleading look she throws my way dulls the edge. At least she didn’t reject me. I have no idea what she could have possibly done to make me angry, but I guess I’ll find out in the morning.

“Alright, angel. Do you want to dance?”

She nods eagerly, her smile returning. We both stand and I extend my hand toward her without a word. She slips her delicate fingers into mine. The contact is electric, igniting a spark that spreads warmth from my hand to my entire being.

We step away from the table, finding a small open space where the soft music from a distant speaker plays. As we begin to sway, I can't help but notice how perfectly she fits against me. Her head tilts slightly as she listens to the rhythm, her eyes closed in quiet reverie.

I'm acutely aware of every detail, the rise and fall of her chest, the soft pressure of her hand on my arm. Time slows, leaving us in a delicate bubble that I'm hoping never shatters. I guide her through the dance, each step measured and tender. My thoughts swirl with the memories of all our past encounters, I think about how hard we tried to fight something that seems so easy and right.

When her eyes flutter open, they meet mine with a vulnerability that takes my breath away. Because I never imagined Emilia Cameron would let herself be vulnerable around anyone. I lean in closer, our foreheads almost touching, and for a moment the world falls away entirely. Every breath, every heartbeat seems amplified, echoing a silent promise of a future together.

My hand finds its way to the small of her back, pulling her closer. The kiss is slow at first, tentative, a question posed in the language of desire. It deepens slowly, evolving into something more insistent, more passionate, a fusion of all the longing and restrained affection that's built up between us.

I taste the familiar sweetness of her, my heart racing in my chest. I sink my fingers into her hair, my thumb digging into her cheek as I claim her lips. I kiss her with unbounded hunger, like I've never kissed anyone before.

My heart pounds with need as I desperately hold on to her. To the way she melts into my arms. She whimpers when I tug on her lips. Our tongues engage in an erotic dance, and I can feel Emilia's hand trembling against my chest. My mouth devours hers for all the time I couldn't.

The moment I wrench my lips from hers, she releases a sound, a disappointed breath that has me smiling. I peck her lips again, soft and quick.

“What do you say about going down to my room in the hotel?”

Her big green eyes are bright, filled with fierce adoration.

“Let’s go,” she breathes.

Electricity buzzes beneath my skin as I unlock the door into my suite. As soon as it clicks shut behind us, I’m grabbing Emilia. My entire body hums with need. For her. I push her back against the closed door, swooping in to taste her perfect lips. I kiss her so hard and for so long. Nothing else matters but us and this moment.

“This brings back memories, doesn’t it, angel?” I ask against her lips.

“Shut up,” she whispers back, sliding her tongue against mine.

All the blood inside of me rushes to my cock. I drag my teeth down the side of her throat, fueled by her moans. I lift her and she immediately wraps her legs around my waist. Her hips rock toward me, her fingers in the back of my hair.

“I want to taste you, Emilia,” I murmur.

When I pull back, she looks unsteady and a lot desperate. I love this look on her.

“Okay,” she says softly.

I carry her across the hotel room with long, sure strides tossing her onto the bed. We pause for a second, her splayed out across the bed, while I stand entranced between her knees.

“You’re sure you want me to, angel?” I ask, undoing the first few buttons of my shirt, and taking off my jacket.

“I wouldn’t have said yes if I wasn’t,” she replies, eyes wide with desire.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

She spreads her legs open, giving me a peek at her panties, wedged high, showing the outline of her pussy. I groan softly. Stepping closer so my knees bump against the mattress, I grip her knees and spread her legs wider. As I do, her panties slide, exposing one of her bare lips.

“You have no idea how fucking gorgeous you look right now,” I breathe.

She whimpers, hands moving to her breasts, sliding under her shirt to roll a nipple between her thumb and forefinger. I groan and reach forward, running my thumb over the seam of her wet pussy, feeling her pulse and clench against me. I want to make her so much pleasure. I want to drive her wild, to ruin her the way I’m terrified she’s ruined me forever.

Nudging the fabric aside, I push a finger into her, reveling in the feeling of her, smooth, slick, and drenched.

“Fuck,” I grit out.

Her cheek flush pink as she moans. I growl, dropping to one knee, slinging her leg over my shoulder and tugging her ass to the bed. I slowly start press little kisses up her thigh, enjoying the way her body writhes beneath me. When I tug at the material of her panties, it rips with barely any effort.

She gasps. “Sterling!”

“I’ll buy you more,” I murmur, holding her wide open before dropping my head to feast.

Emilia cries out as I lick her pussy, mounting pressure and adding in just the right amount of teeth to enhance her pleasure. I slide my tongue right into her and she squirms so hard I have to reach upward to keep her in place.

“Sterling,” she moans. “I’m going to come.”

“Go on, come for me, angel,” I prompt.

Soon after the warning, she explodes. I lap up her juices as they coat my tongue, holding her down as the pleasure racks through her body. I don’t stop until the spasms stop, until her moans quiet. Once that happens, I start kissing my way up her thighs, lifting her skirt as I press soft kisses against her hip. I push up the top she’s wearing, revealing her bare stomach.

I pause when I notice something, though, my brows furrowing.

“What’s this, angel?” I question, staring at the thin, pale scar that bisects her stomach.

“Did you have surgery?”

When I look at her, all the blood has drained from her face. Her reaction worries me. It feels like all the air in the room has been sucked away.

I’ve seen her naked before. My lips turn down in a frown.

“The scar wasn’t there two years ago. What the hell happened to you?” I question worriedly.

“It’s from a Caesarean section,” Emilia stammers.

That more than anything has my eyes widening. She never stutters or stammers. She’s always so confident, but right now she looks terrified and I have no clue why.

I'm just so fucking confused. She's not making any sense.

Still, I slowly try to piece it all together, my brain working hard to understand.

"You were pregnant?" I realize, my heart speeding up.

She sits up, pulling her top down and running a shaky hand through her hair.

"Sterling, just calm down, okay? I-I can explain."

"Then explain," I order in a low tone.

Her eyes well up with tears. "This isn't how I wanted to tell you."

"You're scaring me, angel. What happened?"

"I was pregnant. I found out the day before you left Edenton. I was pregnant with your baby," she states.

I feel a ringing in my ears as she says those words. Words that effectively throw my world off-kilter.

CHAPTER 25

Emilia

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

I'm such an idiot. I can't believe I forgot about the scar. I was just so caught up in the moment, I wasn't thinking straight.

Sterling doesn't move for so long, I start to get worried. He's practically shell-shocked, eyes filled with confusion. Finally, he shifts slowly, sitting down on the bed. He looks at me, expression blank. I hate it when he hides his emotions like that. But I know I deserve it in this moment.

"You..." He falters. "You had a baby."

I swallow softly, absolutely frightened as I nod.

"She was... she came earlier than expected. There were some complications so I had to have surgery. But she's safe now. She's healthy and so beautiful," I tell him.

"A girl," Sterling breathes, disbelief in his eyes. "You had a baby girl. My baby girl?"

His calmness is even more terrifying than if he was shouting at me. I want him to give me some emotion, anything to let me know what he's thinking.

"Sterling," I say, reaching for him arm.

He rips it away, though, getting to his feet.

"This doesn't make any sense," he murmurs, pacing the room.

I don't say a word, letting him work through it all on his own. He's smart enough to

understand. The room is so silent, you could hear a pin drop. He halts in his pacing to look at me again.

“That’s why you moved to Greenville, isn’t it? To keep people from knowing? Because you didn’t want me finding out, right? You were pregnant with my child and you didn’t tell me.”

“Sterling, how could I tell you? You were dealing with so much. I just wanted to give you time,” I say tearfully.

“No, that’s a fucking bullshit excuse. Do you even realize what you’re saying right now? You hid a baby from me!” he yells.

I wince at his tone. He’s never spoken to me like this before. I tell myself that I have to take it. That he has every right to react this way. I knew he would be angry. He should be angry.

“I’m so sorry,” I say softly.

His eyes narrow. He huffs out a breath before grabbing his jacket on the bed.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“This isn’t a fucking joke, Emilia,” he states, betrayal in his tone. “I need... I need to get out of here.”

There isn’t a thing I can say to stop him as he heads for the door. My heart breaks as he slams it behind him, effectively shutting me out. I just sit there and cry for a couple of minutes.

That went so fucking horribly.

After throwing myself a pity party, I know I have to get into action. I get to my feet, fixing my clothes before leaving the room as well. I call a taxi that takes me straight to Carson's apartment. He's in the middle of feeding my baby when I burst through the door.

"Carson, I need your help," I state. "I need you to help me find Sterling."

He frowns, slowly taking in my appearance. My tear-stained cheeks, my frazzled hair.

"Okay," he says slowly. "Just sit down first. Take a deep breath and tell me what happened."

"He knows," I state. "He found out I was pregnant."

Carson takes that in with a blank expression.

"And how did he react to that information?" he asks calmly.

"He just left," I mutter. "He barely gave me a chance to explain."

A muscle ticks in Carson's jaw. "I see. Here, take her," he says, handing the baby to me.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

She smiles at she looks up at me, and as always the sight of her has a calming effect. Everything will be okay as long as I have her in my arms.

I just want her father, as well. No matter what it takes, I need to fix this.

Carson grabs his phone and starts typing. My eyebrows rise.

“What are you doing? We need to leave.”

“Calm down, muffin. I’m texting Spencer. He’ll know where his brother is,” he informs me.

“Oh,” I murmur, waiting patiently. “What’s he saying?”

“He’s with Sterling right now. He says he’s in a rough way and that they’re headed back to Edenton.”

Oh, God. He left the city?

“We-we can go after them,” I say, breathless.

My brother shakes his head. “Spencer says he’s asked for space to think. You dropped a bomb on him, Em. Give him the night to take a breather. I’m not a fan of him leaving you like that, but I’ve got to see things from his perspective as well. Just give him time. Spencer says we should come over tomorrow.”

I breathe in and out, trying to calm my racing heart. Carson frown as he reads

something off the screen of his phone.

“What is it?” I ask worriedly.

“He says to bring the baby when we’re coming.”

I slowly take a seat on the couch, staring forward as I hold my daughter tightly.

Of course he did.

The drive to Edenton is quiet. I haven’t been here in a while. Usually, Anika, my dad, and Priya come to Greenville to visit us. They’ve all been so supportive and understanding. They didn’t argue when I told them my plan was to have her without the Harringtons’ knowledge.

I thought Dad would fight me keeping a secret from them, but he didn’t. They helped me and they were there for me when we needed them.

We stop at my parents’ house first before going to the Harrington estate. Dad and Priya have already been made aware of the situation. Priya gives me a warm hug as soon as she sees me.

“It’s going to be okay, honey,” she says reassuringly.

“I’m just scared,” I whisper. “Did I do the wrong thing?”

Her expression is firm as she shakes her head. “You did what you thought was right, Emilia. You made the best decision for yourself and everyone involved. No one could fault you for that.”

“Trust me, Priya, Sterling’s faulting me for that right now,” I say drily, thinking about

how upset he was last night.

“If he can’t see your side in this then he doesn’t deserve you or my granddaughter,” Dad chimes in gruffly.

“I second that,” my brother states.

I roll my eyes, although I’m secretly so grateful for them.

“Sterling’s a reasonable man. You just need to explain why you did what you did. He’ll understand.”

“I hope so,” I whisper.

I’ve tried to call him about twenty times since he left yesterday, and each call has gone straight to voicemail.

What if he’s just done? What if he never forgives me. I’m trying to be positive, though. Sterling’s not like that. I just have to get through to him.

“The whole family was invited to the mansion,” my dad informs me.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

My eyes widen. “What?”

“Steven called me. He and his wife are there. I guess they also know what’s going on.”

“Oh, great,” I mutter. “So I have to deal with all of them judging me?”

“That’s not going to happen on my watch,” my dad states. “I’ll talk to Steven and Elana. You just deal with Sterling, okay honey?”

“Yeah,” I breathe.

We all head for the estate. Anxiety fills me with every breath as we draw closer. Karl’s already waiting as we pull up in front of the house. It looms in front of me like a figure of impending doom. Karl steps forward as soon as I step down from the car. He looks down at the baby in my arms with a blank expression.

“Hello, everyone,” he greets politely before facing me. “Ms. Cameron, Mr. Harrington is waiting for you in the back garden.”

“Okay,” I murmur, handing my baby over to Priya.

“Good luck,” she whispers.

I exhale a soft breath, nodding once. One of the staff leads me away from the rest of my family to where Sterling’s waiting for me. He leads me past the garden to a small enclosed area beneath a tall tree. My heart pounds when I catch sight of Sterling.

He's on a bench close to the tree. His face is a hard mask.

I tamp down my nervousness, stepping toward him.

"Hey."

His eyes narrow. "Don't 'hey' me right now, Emilia."

"You're still angry," I say on a sigh, taking a seat beside him.

He shuts his eyes briefly, running a hand through his hair. It's a mess right now, like he's done that lots of times.

"I'm not angry."

"Could have fooled me," I mutter. "Do you at least want to hear why I did it?"

He nods. "Yeah, I do."

"You had a lot on your plate, Sterling. Your ex-wife was sick. You were leaving town—" He opens his mouth to speak but I quickly shake my head. "No, I need to get all of this out. I must have practiced what I was going to say to you in my head at least a thousand times. Just let me speak, please?"

"Go on," he says lowly.

"I was going to tell you that night at the bar. I had just taken a test and my entire world was reeling. I came to the bar to tell you the truth, but then you told me about Marissa and I just knew it would be too much for you to handle at that moment. I didn't want a pregnancy where you'd constantly feel guilty about choosing one responsibility over the other. I didn't want to have to force you to choose. And I knew

she needed you. Sean needed you, too.”

“You needed me as well,” Sterling says hoarsely.

“I did. But I also had my family and hella determination that I could do it on my own. I didn’t make a decision to cut you out of your baby’s life because I thought you didn’t deserve to be in it. I made the decision because I knew it was the right thing to do for all of us. When you left, you told me you’d come back. I was waiting for you to do that. And in all honesty, I didn’t want you to come back because I was pregnant or because I had a baby. I wanted you to come back for me.” My voice cracks. “I wanted you to choose me. And you did. I’m so sorry I kept it from you, Sterling.”

He doesn’t speak for a long moment. My heart feels louder in the silence, each beat echoing through me as I wait.

“I wasn’t angry at you yesterday,” he starts. “I think I was more angry at myself. Because I felt like I had failed you. I wasn’t here for you and I was terrified you kept it from me because you didn’t want me in your life or hers.”

“No,” I say quickly. “I swear, I’ve always wanted you in our lives. I debated calling you so many times when you were gone. I just... I wanted to give you time. You have no idea how much you mean to me, Sterling. You’ve taught me so much. You’ve shown me how to care, how to be more in touch with my emotions. I had no idea how much pain I was walking around with in my heart until you helped to start my healing process. I don’t want you to doubt your importance to me for a second.”

He shifts on the bench, facing me, green eyes searing.

“You mean so much to me, too. You have no idea how much,” he says softly, placing his fingers against my cheek. “I’m sorry I left yesterday.”

“I understand,” I whisper. “I’m so sorry I kept this hidden from you.”

“I understand,” he says with a small smile. “It’s just surreal. I have a daughter.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

He sounds like he can't believe the words even as he says them.

"Yeah, you do. And she's the most perfect little girl. She turned one two months ago. She's started walking and talking, although it's mostly incoherent babbles. She called me mama a couple weeks ago," I say my eyes filling with tears. "Oh, and she looks like you. She has your eyes."

Sterling sucks in a sharp breath. "Can I... Can I see her?"

"Of course."

I send a text to Priya asking her to bring our daughter. A couple minutes later she appears, carrying the baby in her arms. I collect her from my stepmother before taking her to meet her father.

"Sterling, this is your little girl," I introduce. "Her name's Stella. Stella Harrington. She doesn't have a middle name yet. I thought you'd like to do the honors. Stella, this is your daddy."

Sterling's expression is tender as he looks at his daughter for the first time. I notice a tremble in his finger as he reaches to touch her cheek. She giggles, trying to reach for his hand, and he gasps softly.

"She's perfect."

"I know."

“And you named her Stella,” he murmurs. “Beautiful name, angel. You did so well. I’m grateful.”

I beam. “Are you happy?”

“Are you kidding? I have a gorgeous little daughter.” He laughs. “I’m fucking ecstatic.”

Priya coughs in the distance, cautioning him against swearing. I giggle.

“Sorry,” he tells her before looking at our daughter again with wonder in his eyes, like he can’t believe she’s real.

“Do you want to carry her?”

He nods and I slowly transfer the little bundle of joy in his arms. She looks content in her father’s arms. And I just stare at them, my eyes glassy because this is all I’ve wanted all this time and now that I have it, I know I’ll be okay.

Sterling holds his daughter for as long as she lets him until she starts to grow a little fussy. When she starts crying, I know it’s because she’s hungry, so I collect her gently, giving her back to Priya.

“Could you give her a bottle, please?” I ask.

My stepmother nods, leaving with our daughter, and then it’s just us. There’s still some things left unspoken.

“So what now?” I ask once they’re gone.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure where I stand with you,” I say carefully.

He rolls his eyes before pulling me into his arms. I rest against his chest, breathing him in.

“What do you mean, you’re not sure? I poured my heart out to you yesterday, angel. Nothing’s changed. I still want you. I want to build a family with you. You, me, Sean, and Stella.”

“Oh God, Sean,” I murmur worriedly. “How’s he going to react to suddenly having a little sister.”

“He’ll be happy about it,” he assures me. “Thankfully, he’s been getting lots of practice looking after someone other than himself thanks to Lion. I’m sure he’ll be the best big brother.”

I look up at him. “You’re the best and I don’t deserve you.”

He shakes his head. “No you are. You’ve given me all I’ve ever wanted. Even the things I didn’t realize I needed.”

We eventually break apart to take a seat on the bench once again. I lean against his shoulder, taking in an easy breath, glad that we’ve finally worked it all out. Now I just have to figure out how to bring up one other problem.

“Hey, angel,” Sterling says after a minute. “Just to be safe. Are there any other life-changing secrets I need to know about?”

My lips tilt up in a smile. I'm really glad he asked.

CHAPTER 26

Sterling

I had been expecting a no and more assurances after that question, but Emilia pulls away to offer me a sheepish look.

"Just one," she states.

My eyes narrow, and she sighs.

"I think my stepfather's found me."

I frown, my eyebrows rising. "You have a stepfather?"

I know she's barely told me anything about her past, I just didn't expect that she kept something so big. The expression on her face tells me she's about to reveal something huge, so I steel myself as she speaks.

"He got married to my mom when I was a little girl. Sterling, he's-he's dangerous. I've never told anyone this because I've been too scared, but he's the one that killed my mother. And before that, he tried to kill me so many times. I ran away because of him, because I was terrified he'd come after me."

My fists clench. "Does he know where you are?"

“I don’t know. But I’ve been getting these strange calls. Anytime I pick up, there’s no reply on the other end, just eerie silence. It’s scary and the only person who could possibly be trying to mess with me like that is him. The man’s a sociopath.”

“Why didn’t you go to the police all those years ago if he killed your mother?”

“I did. They didn’t believe me. They all thought it was an overdose. My mom was a drug addict, but she was always careful. He fed her those pills—I watched him do it. Watched until she took her last breath, and then I ran.”

I exhale softly, my chest aching at the thought of what she might have experienced living with a man like that.

“What’s his name?”

“Lucas,” she breathes. “Lucas Rojas.”

“Alright. I’m going to take care of this,” I tell her. She looks a little freaked out, so I crouch down, taking her hand in mine. “Look at me, angel. I’m not going to let anyone hurt you. Or our daughter. I’m going to protect you. He’s never going to come anywhere near you, I promise.”

“Thank you,” she breathes.

We leave the garden soon after, heading into the house where our families are gathered. Emilia’s hand is in mine so she’s able to hold me back, her grip growing tighter.

“Do you think your parents are going to be upset with me?” she asks.

I look at her, brushing a strand of hair from her forehead. “I think they’re going to be

happy, actually. We've added another blessing to our family. I'm sure they're glad."

"Even your mom?" she asks nervously.

I laugh. "My mom's not an evil witch, Emilia. Or at least I don't think she is."

"It's not funny."

"She'll like you, come on."

Emilia has nothing to worry about, of course. When we enter the living room, we find our families enjoying each other's company. The mood in the room is light, happy in fact. My father approaches us first. He's holding Stella in his arms.

"She looks so much like you, Ster," he says happily. "Look at her eyes."

"I know." I grin.

Then he turns to Emilia. "Thank you, sweetheart. I can't say I'm not a little upset that you didn't come to us, but I already gave your dad hell in your place so it's fine."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

She smiles, but it dims a little as my mother approaches.

“Emilia,” she says lowly.

“Mrs. Harrington. How have you been?”

“I’ve been quite well, thank you. I’m even better now thanks to the good news you’ve brought.”

Emilia and I exchange a quick look. And then she’s smiling widely.

“I’m sorry I kept your granddaughter away from you.”

“It’s alright, sweetheart. She’s here now. Also, not to sound old-fashioned or anything, but when do the two of you plan to get married?”

I notice Emilia’s eyes growing wide. I open my mouth to reply to her, but Spencer beats me to it, walking into the room with Carson in tow. Those two have grown suspiciously close in the past three days.

“Mother, you can’t say ‘not to sound old fashioned’ and then follow up with the most old-fashioned statement ever,” he points out.

I chuckle. “He’s right. We’re going to take things slow, Mom. But I have no doubt that we’ll get there.”

When I glance at Emilia, there’s not an ounce of disapproval on her face. Only a

content, happy smile I'm hoping I get to keep on her face for the rest of her life.

"What are you thinking?" I ask Carson later that day.

We're seated at the bar, having a long overdue conversation.

"I'm contemplating punching you in the face," he replies to no surprise at all.

"Want me to stand in place? Let you get in a really good shot?" I ask.

He makes a face. "I don't need you to stand in place before I can punch you, dickhead."

"You sure?" I say teasingly.

"Shut up," he mutters. "This shit isn't funny."

I sigh. "I know it's not. And I'm sorry. I did exactly what you said I'd do. I hurt her."

He glances at me. "She hurt you, too. I guess that's what relationships are all about, huh? People hurting each other?"

"Maybe," I agree. "But I'm going to actively work toward never hurting Emilia again. She's it for me, Carson. I want to start a family with her."

"That's good, Ster. I'm happy for you both. And I wish you all the happiness. I don't know if you've heard, but I was a pretty big advocate when it came to her telling you the truth."

"I've heard," I say drily.

“Remember that when you ever want to question our friendship.”

“That’ll never happen,” I assure my best friend.

I’m grateful I have him in my life. I’m grateful our friendship led me to the woman of my dreams. But who knows, maybe Emilia and I would have found each other regardless.

“I actually wanted to talk to you about something else,” I tell Carson.

“What?”

“Has Emilia ever told you about her stepfather?”

He frowns. “Yeah, she’s briefly mentioned the deadbeat our mother got married to. Why?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

A part of me wishes she'd told them the whole truth. But I think she was scared, either that they wouldn't believe her or that they'd put themselves in danger looking for him.

Still, I'm sure she'll tell them about him eventually. My job is to make sure that bastard ends up behind bars or dead, with no particular preference.

"He's dangerous," I tell Carson. "And Emilia thinks he might be stalking her. She's worried."

"Why does she think that?"

"She said she's been getting strange calls for a couple of months."

"She should have told me," he mutters. "I would have taken care of it."

"We can take care of it now," I state. "I don't know why, but my gut's telling me that he's close. He's hanging around, biding his time until he can hurt her. But I'm not planning on letting that happen. You've got contacts with the cops right? I want to start a search. I'll hire some independent muscle as well. If he's lurking around, he won't be far. I'm sure we'll find him soon."

I'm not really worried. Men like Lucas Rojas are cowards who get off on preying on people weaker than them. I'll smoke him out eventually, and then I'm going to make him pay.

Carson nods in agreement. "Yeah, I'll get on it. He won't be able to hide for long."

Later that night, Emilia and I are lying on my bed, gazing at each other. We put Stella to sleep a couple of minutes ago. Emilia had to physically drag me away from her crib because I couldn't stop staring at her and how perfect she is. Now, it's Emilia's turn.

"You're going to burn a hole in my face," she mutters.

"I just can't believe you're here. Or that you're real," I tell her.

She bites down on her bottom lip. "I'm real, Sterling. And I'm not going anywhere, I promise."

I shift to pull her closer, relishing in her warmth.

"So what's the plan now? Have you ever considered moving to New York?"

She giggles. "I'll have to think about that. I've never lived in a big city before. There's a chance I'll hate it."

"Or you might love it."

"Maybe. I guess we'll have to see."

Relief washes through me. "So you'll do it?"

"I didn't say that, Sterling. I said I'd think about it."

As far as I'm concerned, that's a yes. I grin, titling her head up to place a soft kiss against her lips. When I pull back and our eyes meet, I feel a bone-deep certainty that this is where I was always meant to be. I open my mouth to say the words, but Emilia talks first.

She sits up to pull the pendant around her neck out. I've noticed that she wears it at times. I know it's special to her. The word 'survive' written on it makes that pretty clear.

She exhales a deep breath before starting to speak. "I spent the better part of my life living in fear. My stepfather made my life hell and my mother enabled it. She was so blind to his faults and it made me so angry that she let me continue to live with a man like that. After she died and I ran away, I bought this pendant on a whim. It says 'survive' because that's what I've always had to do. My mother died and I could have died too, but I survived. I think I survived because I was always meant to find my way to you, Sterling. You complete me in ways I didn't think were possible. You make me feel less scared. You make me feel safe, and I love you so much for it."

I gaze at her, wondering what the hell I did to get so lucky.

"I love you too, Emilia. So much. I've been wanting to tell you that for a while now. I just didn't want to scare you off."

She scoffs. "Tough luck, then. Because you're stuck with me now. For life."

I grin. "Wouldn't have it any other way, gorgeous."

Epilogue

TWO YEARS LATER

Sterling and I got married a few months ago, in a small, private ceremony with all our family and friends with us. It was the best feeling in the world, getting to marry my best friend and love of my life. I met him four years ago and it's crazy to think about just how much has changed since then.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

At times, it feels like everything's moving so fast. And I want to slow it down. But then I remember we have the rest of our lives together, so I've learned to cherish every moment.

We moved into our home in New York about a year ago. I also founded my company a year ago and it's been doing well so far. The growth is steady and I'm slowly achieving a great customer base while building my reputation. I'm doing what makes me happy.

Sterling's still doing his thing, being the big boss at Harrington Holdings. There are rumors that Sebastian's planning on retiring fully and handing the reins over to Sterling and Spencer, but who knows. One can never tell what that old man is thinking.

Our lives have changed so much. We both strive every day to be better versions of ourselves. I've been going to therapy twice a week for the past three months. Sterling suggested it, and after regular sessions, I quickly realized it was the best decision I could have made. I've managed to unpack all my childhood trauma—the stuff I could say out loud and the stuff I couldn't.

I've worked toward expressing myself in a healthier way and opening myself up to my loved ones. It's hard sometimes, but I have the most wonderful, patient man at my side. Everything gets better when I remember that.

They caught Lucas Rojas about a month after I confessed he might be stalking me. Sterling and my brother had hired people to investigate and they finally found him at a motel right outside of Edenton. They also found pictures of me in his bag with my

face crossed out. He had been planning to hurt me, so it's a good thing they got him when they did. I felt so much relief when I heard the news.

He's currently rotting in a jail cell, and a nightmare I never thought would be over has been completely put to rest. Sometimes I think about the horror I had to go through living under the same roof as that man and I wish him nothing but pain for the rest of his life.

"Mama, I'm hungry," my little girl says, rubbing her eyes as she walks into my home office.

I'd been in the middle of sorting through some ideas for a new house, but at the sight of her, every thought of work disappears.

"Stel, I fed you two hours ago," I say on a frown.

"And I'm hungry now," she insists.

I sigh. She's quickly growing up to be a little terror. I blame her dad and grandparents for how much they've spoiled her. She used to be such an adorable little baby and now she's a three-year-old menace.

"Tell you what, sweetheart, how about we wait for your dad to get home and then we can have dinner together?" I suggest. "Where's your brother?"

"Bubba's doing his homework," she replies, brushing back her dark hair from her face.

I shake my head with a small smile. Sean Harrington hasn't changed much. He's still the same quiet little boy who prefers his own company to spending time with other people. But he's warmed a little over the years as well. I can't believe he's already

ten. My heart aches at the thought of him growing up and deciding to leave.

After checking the time on my phone, I get to my feet, grabbing my toddler's hand. I lead her downstairs where our chef is nearly done preparing dinner.

"Daddy should be home in a few minutes, Stel. Why don't you go call Sean?" I ask her.

"Okay," she replies, leaving to do just that.

Sterling arrives then, looking a little tired but as handsome as ever. He pulls at the tie around his neck, walking toward me. I surge upward to press a kiss to his cheek.

"How was work, babe?"

"Awful. Spencer's driving me crazy. It's like he's made it his mission to oppose every single thing I propose. We're both vice presidents; we need to learn to work together," he complains.

I smile. "I'm sure you'll work it out."

"How was your day?"

"Fine. I was home for most of it. Go get changed so we can eat. The little terror's hungry," I tell him.

His eyes narrow. "Don't call my princess that."

I roll my eyes in reply.

He presses a kiss to my forehead. "Be right back."

I help in setting the table, waiting for my family to come down. They do so at the same time, with Stella enjoying a ride on her father's shoulders. Sean smiles at me as he takes his seat at the table.

“Hey, Seanie. You okay?” I ask.

“I'm good, Emilia. Just hungry.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:17 am

I huff out a breath. “Everyone’s hungry, it seems.”

We all take our seats and dig into the meal, talking about the day and mostly listening to Stella drone on about the littlest things and the things she’d like us to buy. I’m worried about her, but Sterling doesn’t seem to care. He adores that girl. We all do.

Dinner ends pretty quickly and soon enough it’s time for bed. Sterling and I make sure to tuck each of our kids into bed, reading Stella her mandated bedtime story before shutting the door to her room. We walk hand in hand to ours.

I’m brimming with anticipation as we head inside. I prepared a surprise for him.

“What are you thinking, angel?” he asks, opening our bedroom door.

“You’ll see,” I say conspiratorially.

When he opens the door, he sees the red petals I asked to be spread onto the bed, giving the room a romantic vibe.

“Happy anniversary, babe.” I beam.

It’s the anniversary of the day he asked me to be his girlfriend. Technically, that day ended horribly, and I also didn’t exactly say yes, but we celebrate it regardless. We celebrate every single one of our blessings, every milestone, every happy moment.

We already celebrated the anniversary this morning and exchanged presents as well. He got me a gorgeous diamond necklace, and I got him VIP tickets to a basketball

game. I just thought I'd do something a little extra for tonight.

Sterling chuckles, turning to me with a raised eyebrow. The chuckle dies in his throat, however, when he sees that I've taken off my nightgown, leaving me in only red lingerie.

"Fuck," he breathes, eyes scanning me from head to toe.

It doesn't matter how many times he sees my body, he always looks at me like he's seeing it for the first time. It's amazing.

"Take off your clothes, Sterling," I order.

He grins wolfishly. "Yes ma'am."

Once he's standing naked before me, I slowly lower myself to my knees. His cock is already hard, pulsing softly, the veins surrounding it growing more defined. I waste no time wrapping my hand around his girth and licking a flat tongue over his head, tipping my eyes to meet his.

"I'm going to come too fast if you stare up at me like that, angel," he groans.

"Good," I say before opening my mouth wide and taking him all the way to the back of my throat. Sterling's head falls back as he shuts his eyes. I suck him slowly but firmly, hands working the base of his cock.

"That's it, baby. You're doing so well," he murmurs as he starts to thrust into my mouth.

I take it, enjoying the feel of him, gagging around his cock each time it reaches the back of my throat. When he's about to come, he taps my cheek in warning. I increase the suction, taking him in deeper until he bursts, spewing into my mouth. I swallow

every last drop with a smile.

Sterling picks me up as soon as he recovers from the orgasm, practically throwing me against the bed.

‘We’re going to have a long night,” he states.

And I lie down as he takes his time with my body, fucking me hard and whispering promises of a future I’m sure we’ll attain.

As long as we have each other.

THE END