



Tempting My Billionaire Master

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Description: I thought I was going to interview the most secretive billionaire on the planet... ..but I ended up in his underground dungeon instead. Ethan Hamilton is a mystery to the world. No one knows anything about him, except that he's rich, powerful, and dangerously attractive. And he wants me. That smoldering emerald gaze. That delicious body under the tailored suit. That powerful, masculine scent. And an army of trained killers set on ruining our evening with unwelcome violence. But he protects me from everything fate throws at us and I never felt safer than in his embrace. He locks me up in his underground bunker and then claims me and it feels like a dream. A dream I don't deserve. He is a powerful hot billionaire who cooks and plays the piano. I am just Chloe. How can I hope to hold his attention when the danger is over? Is there a way to save myself from a broken heart? I save his life and then abandon him in the hospital, hoping I can forget him before it kills me. But it doesn't seem like he is going to give up that easily. Because once Ethan Hamilton makes something his, he is not letting it go.

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Chapter One

Chloe

“Damon, you wouldn’t believe this limo!” I gushed into the phone, my voice a mix of excitement and disbelief. “This limo has massaging seats, a minibar, even a freaking curved TV! It’s like I’m in a spaceship or something!”

“Chloe, focus,” Damon said, his voice stern even through the phone. He was always the practical one—maybe that’s why he made such a good editor. “This interview is your big break. You can’t get distracted.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry.” It wasn’t just the luxury of the limo that had me all worked up. “It’s just... I can’t help being nervous, you know? I know we’ve been over this, but what are the odds of the most reclusive billionaire in history hand-picking me for his first-ever interview. Nobody even knows what he looks like, and he asked specifically for me.”

“Chloe, you’re a fantastic investigative journalist,” Damon said. “Remember how you exposed those corrupt government contracts? And you did it with no budget and zero connections. You’ve got this.”

“Thanks, Damon,” I said, touched by his support. But even with his words of encouragement, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was out of place. What was I doing here? I was barely out of college, saddled with debt, about to meet one of the richest men in the country. Everything about this was surreal, from the luxurious limo to the sprawling mansion looming before me. While my job title sounded glamorous, most

of the time I was reading documents and writing emails, not actually meeting people. I felt like an impostor, like I didn't belong in this world of wealth and privilege.

"Look," Damon said, sensing my uncertainty. "If this interview goes well, it'll open doors for you. You'll have access to all the celebrities and important people in the country. You can do this."

I took another deep breath, trying to steady myself. "You're right," I agreed, even as a knot of anxiety tightened in my stomach.

"Good. Now go and break a leg."

"Thanks, Damon," I said, just as the limo came to a stop. "I've arrived. I'll call you back!"

We hung up and I took a deep breath, steadying my nerves. I could do this.

The limo door opened, and a middle-aged driver in a crisp uniform silently extended his hand. I hesitated, and it was only after I awkwardly climbed out on my own that I realized he had been trying to help me.

"Sorry," I mumbled, fumbling with my purse and feeling my face flush with embarrassment. The driver didn't react, simply nodding as if it happened all the time.

A group of stern-faced men in dark suits approached, their eyes scanning the area for threats. The bodyguards were all big, built like tanks with bulging muscles straining against their black suits. The smallest one was at least six feet tall, and they all had faces carved from granite. They didn't say a word, simply forming a protective cocoon around me.

Their leader, an imposing man with a scar on his forehead, nodded to me. "Miss

Collins, Mr. Hamilton is waiting for you.”

My mouth went dry. So this was it—I was about to meet the elusive Ethan Hamilton. “O-of course,” I said, cursing my stammer. “Lead the way.”

The scarred man’s gaze hardened. “Your possessions, please.”

I blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“Your phone, recording devices, ID, wallet—security protocol requires they be surrendered for the duration of your visit.”

Panic flared in my chest. I needed my phone for notes and my recorder to capture the interview. But from the man’s tone, I could tell arguing would get me nowhere.

Begrudgingly, I handed over my purse containing my phone and driver’s license. I took solace in the fact that I had spent a sleepless night going over every question for the interview until they were etched into my memory.

“This way,” the scarred man said, gesturing toward the mansion. The other guards fell in around me, a human barrier between me and the outside world. It was equal parts intimidating and claustrophobic, their looming presence and watchful eyes making me acutely aware of my own vulnerability.

I walked faster, keeping pace with the scarred man while drinking in my surroundings. The mansion was enormous, all sharp angles and concrete beneath a steel-colored sky. It suited what little I knew of Ethan Hamilton—a man as mysterious as he was wealthy, ruling his empire from the shadows.

As we walked along the path, I glimpsed a collection of luxurious supercars parked nearby. Each one likely cost more than my entire life’s earnings.

I nervously cleared my throat and asked, “Do you have any insights about Mr. Hamilton?” As I waited for a response, their faces gave away nothing—not even a flicker of emotion.

The silence was stifling as we continued our journey towards the mansion, the only sound was our shoes crunching against the gravel path. The intimidating fortress at the end of the road seemed to swallow up any trace of sound, creating an oppressive atmosphere.

The entrance to the mansion looked like the gate of a bunker—a pair of metal doors, as cold and imposing as the rest of the mansion. My pulse drummed in my ears and my stomach flipped as I stood in front of it.

“Mr. Hamilton is waiting for you inside,” the scarred man informed me, pushing the heavy door. “Proceed through the foyer, down the corridor to the library. You are forbidden to go elsewhere.”

I nodded, throat tight. “I understand.”

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The doors groaned open. “Go on,” the man said.

Here went nothing. I walked through the doors into the lion’s den, hearing them close behind me with a note of finality. There was no turning back now. I was Ethan Hamilton’s, for better or for worse.

Trepidation mixed with excitement bubbled inside me as I took in my surroundings. The foyer was cavernous and echoing, dwarfing me entirely. I felt like a mouse compared to the towering walls and expansive floor. I wondered if that was the intention of the architect, to inflate the ego of the host and make people like me feel insignificant.

The interior was brutal and minimalistic, stark concrete and steel, but dotted with expensive abstract sculptures and modern art pieces in vibrant colors. They stood out as bright focal points amidst the cruelly gray palette. It was a strange juxtaposition, and eerie in its own way.

I walked down the center of the room, acutely aware of the closed doors behind me, and the unseen eyes surely watching my every move.

My eyes were drawn to a large, modernist painting hanging on the wall. It was a riot of colors, with shapes and lines intersecting and looping around each other in a frenzied dance. Men like Ethan calculated every step and I was sure that this piece and all the others were placed here with a specific purpose, to create an impression or send a message.

I reluctantly walked through the opulence, feeling more out of place than ever. As I

entered the corridor, the haunting notes of piano music flowed toward me from behind a door at the end of the hall.

Summoning my courage, I made my way down the corridor, the music growing louder with each step. By the time I reached the end, my heart was racing to match the rapid, dramatic notes of the piano.

My curiosity piqued, I pushed open the door and stepped into an enormous library.

The opulence surrounding me felt surreal, as though I had stumbled into a fairytale. Priceless leather-bound books lined floor-to-ceiling shelves, intricate Persian rugs covered the polished oak floor, and a crystal chandelier dripped from the vaulted ceiling like frozen rain. In the center of the room sat a black grand piano, and at its helm, a man who could only be Ethan Hamilton.

He played with effortless grace, with a passion and intensity that made the music almost tangible. The melody swirled around me, its beauty pulling me further into the room until I stood just a few feet from him. For a moment, I simply listened, captivated by the sound and the sight of this enigmatic, powerful man.

Ethan's fingers flew over the piano keys, creating a harmony that wrapped around me like a warm embrace. He looked effortlessly handsome, with sharp cheekbones, dark hair just beginning to turn silver at the temples, and eyes the color of emerald green. His chiseled jawline was accentuated by a day or two of stubble, giving him a rugged yet refined appearance.

I felt a lump form in my throat, and my cheeks began to flush as the melody reached its crescendo. Ethan exuded an aura of confidence and power, and all I could think about was how captivating he was. He was so much older than me, yet somehow it made him even more attractive.

But the main thing that drew me to him was the passion that exuded from the way he played the instrument. Here was a man who had a reputation for being cold, distant, and ruthless, whose home looked like the lair of a soulless tyrant, yet his fingers caressed the piano keys with a tenderness that I never would have expected. It was as though the piano was an extension of his being, something that he poured his soul into, and I couldn't help but be drawn in by the power of his emotion.

It made me feel inadequate. Here was a man who seemed to have everything, from his wealth and power to his looks and charm. Surely he had his pick of the most beautiful and famous women in the world. I was out of my league but in this magical moment I could indulge in a bit of daydreaming.

As the final notes of the melody faded away, I found myself frozen in place, lost in the wake of the beautiful music that had just washed over me.

Suddenly, my heart leaped as Ethan spoke, his deep and commanding voice sending shivers down my spine.

"Do you like music, Chloe?" he asked, his fingers still poised over the piano keys. He just sat there, not even bothering to turn his head, as if he had known I was there the entire time.

I cleared my throat, trying to suppress the warm flush that had spread across my face. "Mr. Hamilton," I stammered. "It is nice to me—"

"Please, Chloe, call me Ethan," he said, cutting me off before I could say more. He turned to face me, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. His eyes glinted like jewels, and I found myself drowning in their depths.

Ethan rose from his piano bench and stepped toward me, closing the distance between us, his eyes never leaving mine. I felt like a deer caught in headlights, unable to move

or speak. My heart pounded in my chest as he approached. “Chloe, I want you to feel comfortable here and enjoy your time with me. We will be spending a lot of time together, after all.”

I felt my body tremble at his words as he walked towards me, and I couldn’t help but notice the way his tailored suit emphasized his broad shoulders and muscular build. As he came near, I caught a whiff of his enticing scent—a mix of wood, spice, and something uniquely masculine. Up close, he was even more intimidating, towering over me and radiating a powerful energy.

“Chloe, it’s nice to finally meet you,” he said, offering his hand.

I extended my hand hesitantly, feeling a sudden jolt of electricity shoot through my body as our skin touched. Ethan’s grip was strong, yet surprisingly gentle, as if he was afraid of breaking me, and I couldn’t help but feel a sense of safety wash over me as he held my hand.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Ethan,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

Instead of releasing my hand, he gave it a light squeeze and confidently led me toward the window overlooking the sprawling grounds. This was a man accustomed to getting his way, and leading others along with him.

The entire scene felt surreal, and I struggled to wrap my head around the fact that I was standing next to one of the most powerful men in the country, who also happened to be incredibly handsome.

I had an interview to conduct, but it was difficult to concentrate when all I could think about were Ethan’s smoldering eyes, the scent of his cologne, and the feel of his hand in mine. I felt as if I had stepped into a fairytale.

Ethan led me to a table set up in front of a huge window that overlooked the beautiful grounds of his estate. On the table sat a bottle of wine and two expensive-looking glasses.

“We can talk here,” Ethan said, releasing my hand at last. I felt relieved when our fingers parted, but also disappointed at the loss of contact. What was happening to me?

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Ethan picked up the bottle of wine and effortlessly uncorked it. “I hope you don’t mind, but I thought we could enjoy some wine during our interview,” he said, pouring the deep red liquid into our glasses and handing one to me with a devastating half-smile. His statement sounded more like a fact than a question.

“Thank you,” I said, accepting a glass. Our fingers brushed, and a spark of electricity shot up my arm.

Ethan raised a glass of the rich, dark red wine in a toast. “Here’s to an enlightening interview,” he said.

As we clinked glasses, Ethan looked into my eyes with a smoldering gaze. I took a sip of the ruby-red wine, the flavor bursting on my tongue. My gaze locked with Ethan’s—his eyes shimmered like emeralds over an open flame. A flush crept up my neck as a delicious warmth spread through me. The taste of the wine combined with his intense stare made my head spin.

“Did you enjoy the wine?” he asked, a small smile playing on the corners of his mouth.

“Uh, yes,” I stammered. “It’s delicious, but I must admit that I’m not used to expensive wines. I’m sure my palate isn’t refined enough to truly appreciate its nuances.”

Ethan smiled lightly. “This wine costs eight dollars per bottle.”

“Really?” I asked, feeling confused and intrigued at the same time. Was he mocking

me? He was a billionaire, and I was just a young journalist—of course he wouldn't see me as his equal and rub it in my face.

“Indeed,” Ethan confirmed. “This was my favorite wine when I was getting my degree in university. I never liked the taste of beer, and I couldn't afford good alcohol, so I discovered this inexpensive but delicious wine. It's been my favorite ever since. In fact, five years ago, the winery that produces it was in financial trouble, and I bought it so I could continue to enjoy the taste that reminds me of my humble beginnings.”

I felt a pang of guilt for making the wrong assumption about him.

Ethan's smile widened as he watched me squirm under his intense gaze. “I can see the cogs turning in that clever mind of yours,” Ethan said, his voice low and seductive. “You thought I was mocking you, didn't you?” It felt like he could read my mind, and the thought both scared and excited me.

“N-no,” I stuttered, shaking my head. “Well, yes. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to assume,” I said, feeling embarrassed.

“No need to apologize.” Ethan gazed out the window at the sprawling gardens outside. “When I chose to avoid the public eye, I thought it would prevent people from making erroneous assumptions. Instead, it only led to more far-fetched speculation.” His eyes found mine again, seeing into my soul. “But I don't believe you're prone to jumping to conclusions. You're smarter than that.”

I cleared my throat and tried to focus. “Why give an interview now? You've guarded your privacy for so long.”

Ethan considered for a moment, swirling the wine in his glass. “I've worked hard and honestly to build my businesses. So far, I've managed to avoid the corruption that

infests the corporate world and the government. But at my level, the playing field has narrowed. There are few players left. I can't choose my competition anymore."

He paused for a moment, his green eyes darkening with intensity. "One of my holdings, PharmaB, is bidding for a government contract in the national healthcare sector. There are forces working against my company that threaten more than just my business interests. Certain corrupt officials and competitors would rather see me dead than have me win that contract."

I shuddered, images of Ethan lying lifeless flashing through my mind. The thought was too awful to bear. I gripped my wine glass tightly, as if that could stop the flow of disturbing pictures in my head.

Ethan placed a hand over mine, his touch warm and comforting. "Do not be afraid. I have no intention of dying anytime soon." His thumb caressed my knuckles, sending tingles up my arm. "This interview is meant to shine a light on my enemies' misdeeds. With the public eye upon them, they will not dare make a move. I want to protect my company and my employees from physical harm," Ethan said.

My cheeks flushed at his intimate touch, my entire being attuned to the feel of his skin on mine. A shiver ran down my body that had little to do with the temperature. I took another sip of wine for courage and asked, "Is that the only reason you're speaking out now?"

Ethan's gaze turned inward for a moment. "Yes. Though I have to admit that speaking with an intelligent, principled woman like yourself is a pleasant change."

I blinked, unsure how to respond to such a personal admission. A blush heated my cheeks at his implied compliment. It took a tremendous effort to remember that I was a journalist and had work to do.

“Why did you contact me specifically?” I asked, my heart pounding in my chest. “Any journalist in the country would kill for an opportunity to interview you.”

Ethan leaned in closer, his gaze never leaving mine. “You’ve proven yourself with that exposé on corruption in the Department of Defense. You’re talented, intelligent, and principled—qualities lacking in most journalists today.” Admiration lit his eyes and a rush of warmth spread through me upon hearing his praise. “The major outlets all have their own agendas. But you? You’re young, ambitious, trying to make a name for yourself. I can rely on that.”

Pride bloomed in my chest at his praise. I hung on his every word, craving more. Did he have any idea how he made me feel? As if in answer to my unspoken question, Ethan suddenly stepped closer, his presence and closeness making my body tremble.

“But now there is also another reason that I wasn’t aware of until we met,” he said softly as he lifted his other hand to brush a lock of hair from my face, his knuckles grazing my cheek, “you’re a very beautiful woman, Chloe Collins.”

My heart slammed against my ribs, ready to burst from my chest. I opened my mouth, but no sound emerged. I was drowning in his smoldering gaze, in the feel of his hands on mine.

A sudden noise jerked me from my trance.

The door.

Ethan’s gaze shifted past me, his eyes narrowing. “What are you doing here?” he demanded. “I instructed all staff to stay outside.”

I turned around and saw the scarred bodyguard, his expression cold and determined as he pulled out a gun.

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Chapter Two

Ethan

My instincts kicked in with an animal ferocity. I lunged forward to shield Chloe from the impending danger, her petite frame trembling against mine.

The shot rang out and shattered the glass behind us. Chloe screamed.

With her arms wrapped tightly around my neck I leapt through the broken window, ignoring the searing pain from the cuts inflicted by the shattered glass.

Gordon fired again. The bullet whizzed past my ear, too close for comfort.

Chloe was trembling in my arms, her breaths coming in panicked gasps. I tightened my hold on her. "It's okay," I rasped. "I've got you. We have to move."

I held her close as we sprinted away from the window while Gordon fired at us relentlessly. Chloe's heart raced against mine as we ran across the lawn.

Chloe stumbled, nearly falling, but I scooped her up and kept running.

As we rounded a corner Chloe's panic reached its peak and she started squirming in my arms. Her face was pale, eyes wide with terror. Chloe clung to me desperately, her breaths coming in short, shallow gasps. I pressed her against the cold stone wall, shielding her with my body.

“Chloe, you have to trust me,” I said firmly, my eyes locking onto her tear-filled ones. I set her down but kept an arm around her waist. Her body was soft against my side, radiating warmth even in her fear. “I will protect you, but I need you to stay calm. Can you do that?”

Chloe shook her head, eyes glassy with tears. “We can’t go out there! Your bodyguards, they’re everywhere—”

“Chloe.” I grasped her shoulders, forcing her to meet my gaze. “I will keep you safe.”

Her lips parted. She blinked up at me, a myriad of emotions flickering through her eyes. Then she took a deep, shaky breath and nodded.

“Good.” I pulled her close again, tucking her head under my chin. She was in danger because of me. I would do anything, sacrifice everything to keep her safe. “Stay close to me. I’ll get us out of this.”

Chloe nodded against my chest. I stroked her hair once, a brief moment of comfort, before pulling away. “Let’s go.”

We crept along the side of the house, dodging between bushes and flower beds. The garage loomed ahead, offering a fleeting hope of salvation. If we could just reach it, perhaps we could make it out of here alive.

In the distance, I could see a couple of bodyguards stationed near the garage, assault rifles in hand. I bit back a curse. Getting past them would be tricky, but for Chloe, I’d do whatever it took.

“Stay close,” I whispered to Chloe, as we dashed toward the garage, her long auburn hair streaming behind her like a fiery banner of defiance.

My heart pounded as we crept along the side of the house, keeping to the shadows. Chloe gripped my hand tightly, her palm slick with sweat. I squeezed it gently, hoping to reassure her, but suddenly her grip tightened as we paused behind a thick hedge, listening intently to the sound of raised voices nearby.

“Shouldn’t have done it, shouldn’t have listened to the scarred bastard,” one bodyguard growled. “Ethan would’ve paid us more for loyalty.”

“Easy for you to say,” another retorted. “You don’t have a daughter being held ransom. I would do the same in Gordon’s place!”

I clenched my jaw, fury simmering beneath the surface. The betrayal cut deep, but now was not the time for retribution. Chloe’s safety came first.

She whimpered softly. I pulled her closer, murmuring, “It’s alright. We’re almost there.”

Chloe buried her face in my chest and seemed to calm down a little.

“Stay close,” I whispered, guiding her towards the garage. If we could just get inside, we might stand a chance of escaping this hellish nightmare.

Sneaking past the arguing bodyguards, my heart raced in my chest as we reached the garage door. But when I pressed my hand against the biometric lock, it remained stubbornly closed.

“Damn it,” I muttered under my breath. “They must’ve reprogrammed the system.”

Chloe’s eyes widened in panic, and I pulled her into my arms, offering what little comfort I could. “It’ll be okay, Chloe. We just need to find another way in.”

She looked up at me, concern etching her features as she took in my various cuts and scrapes. “But Ethan, you’re hurt—”

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“Focus on getting out of here first,” I insisted, silencing her with a determined look. “We can worry about me later.”

I studied the door, searching for any weaknesses. Spotting a small gap between the panels, I wedged my fingers inside and heaved with all my strength. The door groaned in protest before finally giving way, revealing a treasure trove of luxurious cars. I kept some of my cars on display outside along the path, but the most treasured parts of my collection were now in front of us. It seemed that my wasteful hobby would turn out to be our salvation.

“Come on,” I said, guiding Chloe inside. “We’ll take one of these and get as far away from here as possible.”

I slid behind the wheel of the sleek Aston Martin, one of the fastest cars in my collection. Chloe settled into the passenger seat, her eyes darting between me and the garage exit as I revved the engine and the main door of the garage opened automatically.

The Aston Martin shot forward like a bullet, gravel spitting from its wheels, flinging us back into the leather seats. Chloe gasped, grabbing the door handle in a death grip.

“Almost over,” I assured her, gripping the gearshift as we careened down the winding driveway towards freedom. For a moment, it seemed like we might actually escape unscathed.

Almost there. Almost—

I slammed on the brakes.

A limo—my limo—blocked our path, three bodyguards fanned out in front, guns trained on us.

Chloe screamed.

“Hold on!” I yelled, swerving off the road and into the thick woods, weaving between trees as bullets peppered the air around us. We plunged deeper into the woods, branches whipping against the windows as the car bumped and shuddered over the uneven ground.

“Where are we going?” Chloe’s voice trembled, her fingers clutching the door handle.

“Somewhere they can’t follow,” I replied, focused on navigating the treacherous terrain.

“We can’t go on like this!” Chloe cried, clutching at her seatbelt. “We’ll wreck!”

She was right. I wrestled with the steering wheel, trying to keep us from flipping over, but it was no use. We skidded to a stop, the car lodged between two large trees.

“Out!” I threw open my door and pulled Chloe after me. “We have to go on foot.”

Her eyes were huge, terrified as she gazed at the seemingly endless forest surrounding us. “On foot? But where—how will we—?”

“Trust me.” I took her hand, feeling the softness of her skin against my callused palm. My chest tightened at the thought of anything happening to her. I would get her out of this mess—no matter what it took.

Together, we plunged deeper into the woods, branches scratching at our clothes as we pushed onward. “Do you have your phone with you?” I asked.

Chloe shook her head. “The bodyguards took everything when I got here.”

“Damn.” I clenched my fists. “I never ordered your belongings confiscated. It must’ve been part of their plan. They probably wanted to make it look like you shot me, then kill you to cover their tracks.”

Her breath hitched, and I could see despair creeping back into her eyes. I stopped, pulling her close. “Listen, Chloe. Everything will be okay. We just need to reach the main road. I know the way.”

“Okay.” She nodded against my chest, her body trembling.

I kept thinking about the betrayal. The bodyguards we overheard back near the garage said that whoever ordered it took Gordon’s daughter hostage. I could almost feel sympathy for the scarred man, but I wished he had sought my help instead of blindly submitting to blackmail.

I would deal with that later. It was getting dark and we needed to hurry.

We kept moving through the forest towards the road. Adrenaline coursed through my veins and I felt ready for anything, but when Chloe noticed the blood soaking through my shirt sleeve, worry creased her brow.

“You’re hurt. You’re bleeding.” She reached for my arm.

I glanced down at my arm, at the jagged rip in my sleeve and the blood soaking through.

I shook my head. “It’s nothing.” The cuts stung, but I’d endured far worse. I couldn’t worry about myself now. I had to get Chloe to safety.

Chloe shook her head. “We have to stop the bleeding. If it gets infected—”

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“Chloe, there’s no time. We have to get to the road.”

“I’m not going anywhere until we bandage that arm.” She ripped a strip of fabric from the hem of her blouse. Before I could protest further, she had wrapped it around my bicep, tying it off with a firm knot.

I stared down at her bowed head, her hair spilling over her shoulders like strands of fire. Here I was, trying to protect this woman, and she was fretting over me. When was the last time anyone had shown me such compassion?

My chest tightened. I didn’t deserve her concern—not after putting her in danger.

This was my fault. I never should have allowed her to come to the mansion. I could have conducted the interview over a video call, but instead, I had invited her into my world—into all of this. Now she was paying the price for my selfishness.

Guilt and something else twisted inside me, something I didn’t dare name. I tamped it down. Right now, I had to focus on getting Chloe to safety. Nothing else mattered.

I took her hand again, squeezing it in silent thanks, and plunged into the woods. The trees loomed overhead, branches intertwining to block out the sun. An owl hooted softly in the distance. The rustle of leaves underfoot was the only sound breaking the eerie silence.

Chloe quickened her steps to keep up with me. I could feel her trembling, could sense her growing panic. I gave her hand another reassuring squeeze. We were going to make it out of here. I wouldn’t stop fighting until she was safe.

After what seemed like hours of struggling through the dense forest, I finally spotted a break in the trees up ahead.

My heart swelled with relief. We'd made it.

Just as we reached the edge of the woods the familiar shape of a police cruiser came into view, heading straight for us... Relief spread across Chloe's face as she broke free from my grip and ran onto the road, waving her arms frantically.

"Help! We've been attacked!" she cried out.

The car screeched to a halt, and a single policeman stepped out.

"Please, we've been attacked! And Ethan, he's hurt. He needs a doctor," Chloe pleaded.

"Get in the car," the officer said, his gaze shifting to me. "I'll take you both to the station." The officer glanced at me, his eyes narrowing. "Don't worry, Mr. Hamilton."

Shit.

The edges of my vision blurred and adrenaline surged in my body when I heard my name. How did he know who I was? Without hesitation, I lunged forward and knocked the man unconscious with a swift punch to his jaw.

"Ethan, what are you doing?" Chloe shrieked, her voice high-pitched with shock and anger.

"Chloe, listen to me," I implored as she tried to resist my grip on her arm. Her eyes were filled with a mixture of confusion and anger.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Chloe demanded, her body trembling with fury and fear alike.

“Think about it, Chloe,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady despite my irritation at having to explain myself. “How could that officer have known who I am by sight? He knew my name. Whoever is after us has bought out the police. This situation is far worse than I initially thought.”

As the weight of my words sunk in, Chloe’s face paled, and her bottom lip began to quiver. “So... we can’t trust the authorities?” she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

“Unfortunately, no,” I replied, my heart aching at the devastation etched onto her beautiful face. “Whoever is behind this has bought off everyone they could, and the entire area is probably cut off.”

“Then what do we do now?” she asked, tears forming in her wide, frightened eyes.

My chest tightened—I never meant to scare her like this.

“I made a promise,” I told her gently, pulling her into my embrace. “I told you I’d keep you safe, and I intend to keep that promise.”

Chloe bit her lip, conflict flashing across her face, before she nodded reluctantly, placing her faith in me once more. I took her hand and led her back towards the house—a move that clearly surprised her.

“Wait, why are we going back?” she asked.

“Because it’s the last place they’ll expect us to go,” I explained, a small smile playing on my lips despite the circumstances. “One lesson from business success that I

learned is to always do what people don't expect you to do. Right now, they're probably searching for us in the woods."

"Promise me you won't let go," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the rustling leaves and crunching gravel beneath our feet. She clung to my hand tightly, her slender fingers wrapped around mine, anchoring us to one another.

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“I promise, Chloe,” I vowed, squeezing her hand. “I won’t let anything happen to you. Now, stay close to me. We’re almost there.”

We carefully re-entered the grounds and made our way towards the small private pier. It was dark already and the moonlight cast eerie shadows across the landscape, heightening my senses and hiding our approach.

I held Chloe’s hand tightly as we snuck past a bodyguard who had been left behind to patrol the area around the house. Her breath hitched when she saw him, but she remained silent—trusting me completely.

As we crept past the bodyguard, muffled voices mixed with radio static caught our attention.

“Yo, we found the cop. He’s out cold, but still breathing,” the voice said.

“Fucking idiot. How the hell did Hamilton see through him?” another voice responded.

“No idea, but we’re widening the search area with the county police’s help. They’ll be keeping an eye on the roads and highways,” the first voice reported.

My blood ran cold as I realized the gravity of our situation. So it wasn’t a corrupt cop or two. Whoever ordered this invested a lot of money. The good news was that they were looking in the wrong place.

Chloe and I continued to move along the wall of the house, our backs pressed against

the rough stone as we crept towards the rear of the house. Every rustle of leaves underfoot, every creak of wood in the distance, made her jump and squirm.

As we passed by the large window we had escaped through earlier, I couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness. The shattered pieces of glass were a stark reminder of the careless life we had left behind.

"Can we go inside for a moment?" she asked in a hushed tone. "I need to get my phone."

"Chloe, we don't know if anyone else is still inside," I responded. "Our first priority is to escape. We'll figure out the rest later."

She hesitated, but ultimately nodded in agreement. We continued on, sneaking past a second bodyguard who was patrolling the riverbank. Finally, we reached the small motorboat moored at the pier. The river was too shallow for any of my yachts and this motorboat was mostly used by staff to get supplies.

"Quickly, get in," I urged, helping her onto the deck. Once we were both aboard, I started the engine, casting one last glance at my home before pulling away from the dock.

As we sped off into the night, the bodyguard on the shore took aim and fired at us, but thankfully missed. I let out a shaky breath, relieved that Chloe was out of immediate danger.

"Thank you, Ethan," Chloe murmured, wrapping her arms around me and pressing a tender kiss to my cheek. I didn't understand why she was thanking me, the cause of her suffering. "Now, let me take care of your wounds."

"Chloe, I need to concentrate on driving the boat," I told her, gently pushing her

away. “You should rest.”

“Promise me you’ll let me help you later,” she insisted, her eyes filled with worry.

“Promise,” I agreed, smiling softly at her concern. She nodded and relaxed on the passenger seat next to mine. Despite the growling of the motor, stress took its toll and she was asleep in minutes.

As I guided the boat through the dark waters, I glanced over at Chloe’s sleeping form, taking in her beautiful features bathed in moonlight. She thought it was over, but I didn’t want to spoil her rest with the harsh truth. She was my responsibility and I’d do whatever it took to keep her safe, even if it meant protecting her from herself. And I knew just the place to hold her.

Chapter Three

Chloe

“Chloe, wake up,” a gentle voice whispered near my ear. I slowly opened my eyes to find Ethan’s handsome face just inches from mine, his green eyes filled with concern. A tiny shiver of excitement ran through me at the sight of him so close, but then memories of the previous day’s harrowing events came flooding back. The assassination attempt, our frantic escape, and the realization that we were still in the motorboat hit me all at once.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Ethan murmured, sensing my sudden panic. “Soon we’ll be somewhere secure. Somewhere we can rest.”

Somewhere secure. I breathed a sigh of relief, nestling closer to his warmth and he wrapped his arms around me protectively.

I looked up at Ethan, taking in the cuts and bruises on his handsome face, the bloodstains on his ruined suit. How was it possible that I felt so safe with this man, a near stranger, after the trauma of yesterday?

After a few more moments spent in his embrace, we climbed out of the boat onto the riverbank. Ethan pushed the boat further downstream, while I stared at the dense forest before us.

The chilly morning air raised goosebumps on my skin. I shivered, and Ethan draped an arm around my shoulders, pulling me close.

“Come on, let’s get going,” he said. As we walked deeper into the woods, mist hovered above the ground, clinging to the foliage in delicate droplets. An eerie silence prevailed, as if the world was holding its breath.

His once pristine suit was now bloodied, and cuts marred his strong face. Yet, he remained impossibly attractive. I couldn’t help but think that under normal circumstances, I would never have been able to get this close to a man like him. Still, I couldn’t deny the comfort I felt in his embrace. I breathed in his scent, musky and masculine, finding solace in his strength.

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“I look like a mess,” he joked, catching me staring. “But don’t worry, Chloe, we’ll be completely safe here.”

“How are you feeling?” I asked softly, reaching up to touch his cheek. My fingers came away stained with dried blood, and I frowned worriedly. “We should get you cleaned up. Properly bandaged.”

Ethan’s lips curled into a wry smile. “I’ll survive,” he said, his arm tightening around my shoulders. “Right now, you’re my top priority.”

His words unleashed a swarm of butterflies in my stomach. I averted my gaze, hoping he couldn’t see the blush staining my cheeks.

We trudged through the forest for what seemed like hours, but finally arrived at a small, overgrown house that seemed to have been abandoned for years. Vines and moss covered the exterior, while the windows were boarded up and the paint was peeling.

“Here we are,” Ethan announced proudly, as if he’d just presented me with a five-star resort. “Welcome to our safe haven.”

“Are you serious?” I asked incredulously, staring at the dilapidated structure in front of us. “This place looks like it’s falling apart.”

“Appearances can be deceiving, Chloe,” Ethan replied with a knowing smile. He led me inside, where the interior was no better than the exterior. We walked through the creaking front door into a room covered in dust and cobwebs.

Ethan knelt down and removed a seemingly random floorboard, revealing an electronic keypad underneath. He punched in a series of numbers, and to my astonishment, a hatch opened beneath a rotten table. “Ladies first,” he said, pushing the table to the side and gesturing towards the darkness below.

Despite the fear (and hunger) churning in my stomach, I trusted Ethan and descended the ladder into the gloom. As soon as my feet touched solid ground, I heard his command from above, “Lights on.” I blinked as the room was suddenly flooded with light, leaving me breathless.

The underground hideout was a stark contrast to the rundown house above. It was a large, luxurious space adorned with classic works of art and opulent furniture. Plush velvet sofas and armchairs were arranged around a magnificent fireplace, while a grand piano occupied one corner of the room. Beautifully carved wooden bookshelves lined the walls, filled with leather-bound volumes. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, casting a warm glow throughout the space. It was like something out of a movie, an enormous difference to his mansion we escaped earlier.

“Wow,” I breathed, unable to believe my eyes.

“Welcome to my private hideaway,” Ethan said, pride evident in his tone as he joined me. “No one else in the world knows about this place, only the two of us. We have three thousand square feet of space with electricity, climate control, running water, and a state-of-the-art security system. There are enough supplies in here to last us a hundred years.”

“Really?” I asked, my eyes wide with amazement.

“Really,” he confirmed. “We have a mini-gym, a small spa, a private cinema, and only one bedroom... but we’ll figure something out. We’re completely safe here.”

My heart stuttered at the implication in his words. Heat flooded my cheeks as I stared up at Ethan, wondering what exactly I had gotten myself into. But his bloodied visage looked out of place in this pristine opulence and it reminded me of more pressing matters.

“We need to clean and bandage your wounds,” I said. “Come on, let’s get you fixed up.”

“Alright,” Ethan said, finally giving in, a smile tugging at his lips. “As my lady commands. The mini-spa is this way.” My cheeks heated at the term, but I hid it with an eye roll.

He led me through a set of ornate double doors into a lavish spa room, complete with a hot tub and a variety of pampering amenities.

As I began collecting hot water to clean his wounds, Ethan rummaged through a cupboard and found a small medkit.

“Here,” he said, handing it to me. “Let’s get started.”

“Okay, first let’s take off your clothes,” I suggested, my hands trembling slightly as I reached for the edge of his bloodied suit jacket. The fabric was warm and damp from his body heat, and my heart went into overdrive as I helped him remove it, our bodies coming closer together than ever before.

I couldn’t help but be aware of his strong, muscular form beneath the bloodstained shirt. It was hard to keep my mind focused on treating his wounds when all I wanted to do was run my fingers over every inch of him.

“Your turn,” Ethan whispered, his voice low and seductive as he gazed into my eyes. His hands moved to the buttons of my blouse and I had to playfully slap his hands.

“Stop fooling around and help me with the shirt,” I said, slowly undoing buttons one by one. With each button that came undone, more of his chiseled torso was revealed, making my mouth go dry.

Ethan’s body was a masterpiece, sculpted to perfection. His abs were well-defined, leading down to a tantalizing V-line that disappeared beneath the waistband of his trousers. His chest was broad and powerful, adorned with just the right amount of dark hair.

I licked my lips, forcing myself to focus.

“Like what you see?” he teased, smirking at my obvious appreciation of his physique. My cheeks burned with embarrassment, but I couldn’t look away.

“Maybe a little,” I admitted, trying to regain my composure. “Now, let’s get you cleaned up.”

I dabbed a sponge into the hot water and gently began washing away the dried blood from his cuts. Despite my best efforts to remain professional, my fingers seemed to have a mind of their own, lingering on the contours of his muscles and exploring the texture of his skin. The warmth of his body beneath my fingertips was intoxicating.

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I was hyper aware of Ethan's gaze on me, dark and intense.

"Chloe," he murmured, his voice making my flesh tremble. "You're doing an excellent job. But you don't have to be so gentle. I can handle it."

"Is that so?" I asked playfully, pressing the antiseptic-soaked cotton to one of his cuts. His sharp intake of breath told me that perhaps I overdid it a little.

"Alright, maybe not that rough," he chuckled, a teasing glint in his eyes. But still, he continued to watch me work, his intense gaze making it difficult for me to focus on anything other than the chemistry crackling between us.

"Thank you, Chloe," Ethan said, reaching for my hands as I finished disinfecting the last cut. His fingers wrapped around mine, warm and strong, and his touch sent a jolt of electricity up my arm.

"Of course," I replied, trying my best to sound nonchalant even though my heart was stuttering in my chest. "It's the least I can do after everything you've done for me."

"You know, you're making it very difficult for me to be a gentleman," Ethan said, his voice a low rumble. I glanced up to find him watching me with a predatory look, desire burning in his eyes. "Perhaps I should return the favor, and inspect you for injuries."

I tried to laugh it off, but my voice trembled with nerves. "I'm pretty sure I'm okay, but thanks for the offer."

“Are you sure?” He leaned closer, his breath hot against my cheek as he softly whispered, “I wouldn’t want to miss anything.”

His words, suggestive and seductive, set my blood on fire. I faltered in my ministrations, heat flooding my cheeks. I didn’t know how to respond, but I most definitely knew one thing.

I wanted him.

Ethan’s hand came up to cup my jaw, tilting my face up to his. “Well?” he purred, and my resolve crumbled.

“Yes,” I whispered.

Ethan’s eyes gleamed. “Good girl.”

Before I knew it, Ethan captured my lips in a searing kiss, pulling me flush against his hard body. I moaned into his mouth, my hands fisting in his hair as I kissed him back with abandon. His hands roamed over my body, squeezing and kneading, lighting me on fire.

As we kissed passionately, my fingers dug into the hard planes of his chest, relishing the feel of the strength that lay beneath his skin. In turn, his hands caressed me with a tenderness that belied their power, squeezing and kneading, lighting me on fire.

Ethan reached over and turned on the faucet of the hot tub, filling it with warm water that soon saturated the air with steam. His hands worked their way down my body, kneading the soft flesh and eliciting a gasp from me as they cupped my breasts.

“Chloe,” he whispered between kisses, his voice ragged with desire. “You have no idea how beautiful you are, do you?”

“I d—thank you,” I managed to reply, my cheeks reddening in embarrassment.

“Trust me,” he said, kissing my neck and shoulders before returning his gaze to mine.

“I know what I’m talking about.”

Suddenly, Ethan’s strong arms wrapped around my waist and yanked me backwards into the bathtub, sending a tidal wave of water sloshing over the rim, our clothes soaked in an instant.

“Hey!” I exclaimed. “You made me all wet!”

Ethan’s eyes twinkled mischievously as he leaned close, his lips brushing against mine. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t help the smile that tugged at my lips. “No, I meant my clothes are wet now. How am I supposed to wear them?”

His deep, raspy chuckle vibrated against my back. “My apologies. I couldn’t resist.”

As I struggled to stand, his arm tightened around my waist, pinning me against his hard chest. His lips brushed the sensitive spot below my ear, making me tremble in his embrace.

“I’ll make it up to you,” he purred. “Starting with helping you out of those wet clothes.”

Ethan gently pushed me back so that I was sitting on the edge of the tub. He knelt before me as his fingers drifted to the buttons of my blouse, slowly popping each one open. His calloused fingertips grazed my skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. As the fabric fell away, he pressed gentle kisses to each newly exposed inch of skin.

“Chloe, you’re absolutely exquisite,” he breathed against my flesh, putting it on fire wherever his breath touched me.

By the time he reached the bottom button, my chest was heaving with each shallow breath. My blouse slipped off my shoulders, pooling at my elbows as he trailed kisses along my collarbone.

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His hands slid up to cup my breasts through the lacy fabric of my bra. I gasped, arching into his touch as he massaged and squeezed.

“Absolutely exquisite,” he rasped against my skin.

My jeans were next, his hands gliding over my hips and thighs as he stripped them away. I kicked them off, suddenly self-conscious of my near nudity.

Ethan noticed my hesitation, his smoldering gaze locking with mine. “You’re beautiful, Chloe. Never doubt that.”

His words sparked a fire inside me and I surged forward, crushing my lips to his. We kissed with a hunger I’d never known, all thoughts fleeing my mind except how much I wanted this man.

My bra fell away as Ethan’s hands roamed over my bare flesh. Every nerve ending was alive and tingling. Finally he pulled down my panties and we tossed my wet clothes out of the tub, leaving me completely naked before him.

The water was deliciously hot, steaming around us. My hands moved to his trousers, pulling them down underwater and discarding them alongside my own. The sensation of his hard, throbbing length pressing against my body sent pangs of anticipation up my spine.

“God, Ethan,” I whispered, unable to quell the moan that escaped me as I traced my fingers over his muscular form. “You feel incredible.”

“Only for you, Chloe,” he replied huskily, his intense gaze locked on mine as he positioned himself at my entrance, teasing me for just a moment before he sheathed himself inside me with one sharp thrust. A strangled gasp escaped my lips at the intrusion, the stretch and fullness almost too much to bear.

I cried out again, nails digging into his shoulders. Ethan groaned, his hands tightening on my hips. “So perfect,” he growled, before pulling back and slamming into me again.

A gasp tore from my throat as he began to pound into me with unrelenting fervor, hard and deep, with a fierce rhythm. The water sloshed around us, splashing onto the floor with the force of his thrusts. I was dizzy with ecstasy, incoherent moans and cries spilling from my lips. The feeling of being stretched so thoroughly by his impressive girth was nothing short of divine, making my entire body tremble with pleasure. I couldn’t help but marvel at the surrealness of it all—here I was, being taken by a man who, in any other circumstance, would have been leagues out of my reach.

“Chloe,” Ethan groaned, his voice strained as he continued to thrust into me, his powerful hands gripping my hips to hold me steady. “You feel so fucking good.”

“Please, don’t stop,” I pleaded, my voice barely audible over the pounding of my heart and the splashing of water around us.

“Never,” he said, the intensity of his gaze never faltering as we moved together.

Ethan’s strong hands gripped my breasts, kneading them with a possessiveness that filled my body with ecstasy. He whispered dirty things in my ear as he fucked me harder and harder, faster and faster, deeper and deeper.

“God, Chloe,” he moaned, his breath hot against my skin. “You’re so fucking tight.”

I couldn't hold back my own moans of rapture as I clung to him, my fingers digging into the hard muscles of his back. The invigorating scent of his body mingled with the warmth of the water, amplifying my delight to dizzying heights.

"You're mine now," Ethan growled, his voice rough and primal as he brutally pounded into me. "No one else will ever have you."

His words should have frightened me, but in that moment all I could feel was desire. I wanted to belong to Ethan, to give myself over to him completely.

"Yes," I moaned, clutching at him desperately. "Yours, only yours."

Ethan let out a victorious snarl, kissing me with a ferocity that left me breathless. I was drowning in sensation, losing myself in Ethan's embrace. The coil of pleasure inside me wound tighter and tighter until I thought I might shatter from the intensity.

"You feel so good inside me, Ethan," I gasped, my nails leaving marks on his back.

"Sweet little Chloe," he purred, his lips brushing against my ear. "I knew you'd be perfect for me."

The sensation of being owned by this powerful, dominant man overwhelmed me. I had never felt anything so intense or satisfying. It was as if my entire being had been consumed by the ecstasy coursing through my veins.

Ethan's hands roamed my body, exploring every curve and valley as if committing it to memory. As his fingers brushed over my sensitive nipples, a wave of delicious heat crashed over me, building up to an orgasm that threatened to consume me whole.

Ethan sensed how close I was, his thrusts becoming wild and erratic. "Come for me," he ordered, his voice a low rasp. "Now. I want to feel you come around my cock."

His order triggered something within me, and I exploded in a mind-numbing, bone-shattering orgasm release that seemed to go on and on. The tsunami of visceral bliss crashed over me, wave after wave of ecstasy, clenching rhythmically around Ethan's hard rod.

With a roar, Ethan followed, his hips stuttering as his warmth flooded inside me.

We collapsed against each other, chests heaving as we struggled to catch our breath. I'd never felt so spent, or so blissfully content. I couldn't believe this was happening. That I was here, with him. With Ethan Hamilton, the unattainable man that wanted me for some unfathomable reason.

"Thank you," I murmured, nuzzling against his chest. "You really need to rest now, Ethan, before we return back to civilization."

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He held me tighter for a moment before pulling back to look into my eyes. The smile that had lit up his face moments ago vanished, replaced by a cold, steely resolve.

“You’re not going anywhere, Chloe,” he said firmly. “You’re staying right here with me.”

Chapter Four

Chloe

My legs burned as I furiously pedaled on the stationary bike in the gym of Ethan’s underground hideout. The dim lights in this godforsaken place were giving me a headache, and the incessant droning of the electric generator behind the wall got on my nerves. Even the way Ethan’s joggers and an oversized t-shirt clung to my sweat-slicked body annoyed me, because of course there were no women’s clothes in his wardrobe.

I couldn’t believe that after all we’d been through—an assassination attempt and a narrow escape—I was stuck here with Ethan Hamilton, the most handsome man I ever slept with.

This was not fair and no matter how hard I pedaled at maximum resistance, the burn in my chest didn’t go away.

“Chloe,” Ethan’s voice echoed in the small space as he calmly strolled into the gym, his hands tucked casually in the pockets of his tailored slacks. “Have you cooled off enough to talk now?”

The nerve.

I ignored him, pedaling even faster.

“Chloe,” he said. “We can’t go back. Not yet. There’s no guarantee the first policeman we meet isn’t on their payroll. And they are most definitely searching for us along the river.”

“So your solution is to keep me here forever!” I spat, sweat dripping down my face.

“Not forever.” His tone was infuriatingly calm. “Just until the government tender is over. After that, there will be no point in wasting resources to eliminate me. We can return home safely,” he explained patiently, his green eyes locked onto mine.

I wanted to scream. Part of me understood his reasoning, but I couldn’t stand being cooped up in this place a moment longer. I needed fresh air, sunlight, freedom and now I felt like a caged animal.

My emotions swirled within me, anger and fear dancing with the undeniable attraction I felt for Ethan. Everything about him drove me wild—the way he held himself with such confidence, his smoldering gaze, and that slightly raspy voice that made my heart beat even faster than the bike workout.

“Can’t you just send a message and withdraw the bid for the tender?” I said, my pulse still pounding in my ears. “That way nobody has to try to kill us, and we can go back to our lives.”

“Chloe,” he sighed, rubbing the tension from his brow. “This hideout is completely cut off from all communications. That’s the whole point of having a secret safe space so that no one can track it.”

Deep down I knew he was right, but I refused to give in to him. As much as I admired his determination to protect me, I needed to maintain some semblance of control over my own life. Even if it meant arguing with him, just to spite him.

“Look,” Ethan said, his voice softening. “I understand why you’re frustrated, but you have to accept this. I promised I would protect you no matter what, and this is how I fulfill that promise.”

“By taking away my freedom?” My words came out more wounded than I intended.

“Only temporarily,” he assured me, his eyes searching mine for understanding. “Two weeks, Chloe. Then we’ll find a way to make everything right again.”

“Fine,” I muttered, turning away from his gaze. He left the room without another word, and I stopped pedaling, slumping over the handlebars, my chest heaving as I tried to catch my breath. Two weeks trapped in here with Ethan Hamilton, the very embodiment of temptation... none of it felt real.

But I couldn’t ignore the restlessness simmering inside me. I needed to do something. Anything. Being trapped in this bunker for two weeks was unbearable, even if it meant spending that time with the most irresistible man I’d ever met. The moment Ethan’s guard was down, I would find a way out of this bunker. I didn’t know how yet, so I would play along for now, but I would find a way to escape.

After showering and changing into a fresh set of Ethan’s clothes, I went in search of Mr. Billionaire, hoping to pretend to mend some bridges. The sound of clinking pots and pans drew me towards the small kitchenette, where I found him donning an apron over his tailored suit. My breath caught in my throat as I took in the sight: the man who had everything, cooking dinner for us.

“Wow,” I said in astonishment. “I didn’t think you knew how to cook.”

Ethan glanced over at me with a hint of a smile playing on his lips. “Well, I wasn’t born wealthy, Chloe. I learned a thing or two about fending for myself along the way. Are you hungry?”

“Starved,” I admitted.

“It’s almost ready,” he said, stirring something that smelled delicious in a pot on the stove. “As I said before, I understand why you are frustrated and I wanted to make it up to you. And if we can make it ‘kiss and make up’ then all the better.”

“I’ll think about it,” I replied coyly, trying to hide the fact that his words sent a shiver down my spine. “Need any help?”

“No,” he insisted, waving me away. “Just sit back and relax. I want to pamper you tonight.”

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“Alright,” I said, taking a seat at the kitchen table.

As I watched him work, a part of me wanted to forget my escape plan and just give in to the warmth of his presence.

Ethan soon presented me with a simple yet mouthwatering feast. He’d made a hearty vegetable soup, a fragrant pasta dish, and a fresh salad using the bunker’s limited supplies. What truly caught my eye, however, was the expensive-looking bottle of wine he’d uncorked.

“It’s great,” I said as I took a sip, savoring the rich and velvety taste. “Is this another one of those eight-dollar bottles?”

Ethan smirked, shaking his head. “No, Chloe. This one’s closer to eight hundred dollars.”

“Eight hundred?!” I nearly choked on the wine, my eyes widening in disbelief.

“It’s ok,” he said, smiling at my reaction. “When I stocked this hideout, I figured if I ever had to stay underground, I might as well have good wine to keep me company. But now... now I have something better.” His gaze softened as he looked at me. “I have you.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” I teased despite the warmth flooding my cheeks.

His cooking was delicious and warm food helped calm down my nerves, but the idea of escape still lingered in my thoughts. Though I had to admit that being with Ethan

like that made the captivity almost bearable. Almost.

“Thank you for dinner, Ethan,” I said sweetly, batting my eyelashes at him. “But I think it’s time for me to contribute, too. This place is a little dusty, I’ll deal with it.”

“Chloe, you don’t have to do anything. Just relax and let me take care of you,” he replied, his green eyes softening for a moment.

“Come on, I won’t be able to truly enjoy myself here if I know I’m not pulling my weight. Besides,” I added with a mischievous grin, “exploring the place will help pass the time while we’re cooped up in here.”

Ethan hesitated, but eventually nodded. “Alright, if that’s what you want.”

“Thank you,” I purred, giving him a quick peck on the cheek before setting off on my impromptu cleaning mission.

I found a duster in the pantry and started my exploration under the guise of tidying up. The first room I came across was Ethan’s study, its walls lined with rare books and an antique leather-topped desk taking pride of place in the center. I traced my fingers over the spines of the books, as my eyes scanned for any signs of a hidden exit, but I couldn’t find any.

Next, I ventured into the kitchen area, a small but functional space where Ethan had worked his culinary magic earlier. Stainless steel appliances gleamed in the dim light, and I couldn’t help but admire his resourcefulness in creating such a delicious meal with the limited provisions. I supposed the ventilation shaft connected this room to the surface, but it was too small for me to crawl through.

Continuing my search, I stumbled upon a small private cinema. A huge plush red velvet divan faced a screen that took up almost the entire wall. It seemed like the

perfect place to lose yourself for a few hours, but I couldn't afford to get too comfortable—not when my freedom was at stake.

Finally, I found myself in the bedroom, and my breath caught in my throat. It was a sensual haven, dominated by an enormous bed swathed in luxurious linens. The soft glow of the bedside lamps cast a warm, inviting light over the room, and I couldn't help but imagine what it would feel like to have Ethan's strong arms wrapped around me as he claimed my body on that sumptuous mattress.

Shaking off the distracting thoughts, I scanned the room for any possible escape routes, but found none. Frustrated, I made my way back to the main hall, where Ethan was waiting for me with a glass of wine in hand.

“Did you find everything to your liking?” he asked, his voice laced with amusement.

“Very much so,” I replied, trying to keep my tone light despite the growing desperation gnawing at me. “But let's just say I won't be running out of things to clean anytime soon.”

Ethan chuckled, handing me the wine. “Well, at least you'll be occupied. Cheers to making the best of our situation.”

“Cheers,” I echoed, clinking my glass against his before taking a sip of the velvety liquid.

“Chloe, I need to do some work in my office,” he said, gesturing towards the study I had just explored. “I won't be long, but if you need anything, just call out and I'll be there.”

“Of course,” I replied, trying to mask the glee in my voice. “Work always comes first.”

He gave me a reassuring smile before disappearing behind the door. Seizing the opportunity, I tiptoed back to the trapdoor that had brought us into this underground hideout.

To my surprise, it wasn't locked. My body was filled with excitement and anxiety as I considered my options. If I were to escape now, Ethan would likely notice almost immediately, giving him ample time to catch up with me. I needed a plan to buy myself more time—and the cover of night seemed like the perfect solution.

"Are you ready for bed?" I asked Ethan when I found him later, still engrossed in his books and journals. "I think I'll sleep on the couch in the main hall."

"Absolutely not," he replied firmly, not even looking up from the page he was reading. "You'll sleep in the bedroom."

"Excuse me?" I bristled, feeling my temper flare at his presumptuous tone. "You can't force me to sleep with you!"

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Ethan's eyes finally met mine, his expression icy and devoid of any romantic intent. "This isn't about sex, Chloe. The bedroom is the most secure and safe room in this hideout. You'll sleep there, and I'll take the couch in the hall."

My cheeks burned with embarrassment, but I couldn't let my pride get in the way of my escape plan. I had to play along if I wanted to slip past him unnoticed, and it would be easier to do if he slept in the bedroom. Swallowing my irritation, I softened my voice and offered a small smile.

"Alright," I conceded, trying to sound conciliatory. "But it will be safer if you sleep in the bedroom too."

His eyes darkened with desire. "Of course, Chloe. I promise I'll do my best to behave like a gentleman."

I smiled up at him, tracing a finger along his jaw. "That sounds perfect. Thank you for taking such good care of me. Wait for me in bed, Ethan," I said flirtatiously as I brushed a stray strand of hair from my face. "I'll just take a quick shower and join you."

"I'll be waiting, Chloe," he replied with a hint of anticipation in his voice. The thought of him waiting for me, wanting me, sent a thrill through my body. But I couldn't let myself get carried away—I had to focus on my escape.

As soon as I stepped into the bathroom, I turned on the shower, letting the sound of the water fill the room. Quickly, I grabbed a couple of t-shirts and a sweater, knowing that the woods outside would be cold at night. My heart pounded in my chest as I

silently made my way to the hatch, feeling a pang of guilt at what I was about to do.

But there was no turning back now.

With one last glance towards the bedroom where Ethan lay waiting, I opened the hatch and crawled out, leaving behind the warm, inviting sanctuary of the hideout.

The cool night air hit my face as I emerged outside, moonlight bathing the dilapidated cabin in an eerie glow. An owl hooted softly in the distance, leaves rustling around me. I shivered, suddenly aware of how unprepared I was for a trek through the woods at night.

Picking a random direction, I started walking slowly, struggling to see in the darkness.

Any second, Ethan could realize I was gone. I had to put as much distance as possible between us before—

A dark figure loomed before me, arms reaching out to grab me. I screamed, thrashing against the solid chest I collided with, but his strong arms held me in place.

“Chloe, calm down,” a familiar voice rumbled, arms tightening around me. I sagged in relief and annoyance.

It seemed like there was no escape from Ethan Hamilton.

Chapter Five

Chloe

The sound of the door closing gently stirred me from my slumber. My senses were

immediately awakened by the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and delicious baked goods. I blinked open my eyes, rubbing the sleep from them, and saw a tray set beside me on the bed. It held a simple but scrumptious-looking breakfast—warm pancakes with butter and fruit preserve, a bowl of mixed berries, and a steaming cup of coffee in an elegant porcelain mug.

I couldn't believe that Ethan had brought me breakfast in bed. This was the first time anyone had ever done this for me in my entire life. The thought of a powerful, handsome man like him—fifteen years my senior—going out of his way to make me feel special should have been exciting. But instead, I felt a surge of annoyance.

I knew I had broken Ethan's trust by trying to escape, and deep down, I felt guilty about it. But instead of chastising or blaming me, he had calmly brought me back, tucked me into his large, comfortable bed, and slept on the couch in the hall. Now breakfast. I felt like an unruly child being coddled.

I sat up and dug into the pancakes, relishing the burst of sweetness on my tongue. The coffee was perfect, just the way I liked it. Damn him.

After I finished, I rummaged through his dresser for something to wear, settling on a pair of shorts and a soft t-shirt. Everything else would swallow me whole.

In the pantry, I checked the washer and found my clothes nearly dry.

My gaze fell upon Ethan's crumpled shirt from yesterday, discarded on the floor, the fabric still holding his scent. Closing my eyes, I breathed it in, heat pooling low in my belly as I remembered the intense, passionate moments we had shared in the bathtub.

Acting on impulse, I slipped off the t-shirt and put on his shirt. The hem brushed my thighs, the sleeves falling over my hands. I rolled them up and inhaled again, arousal simmering under my skin.

Steeling myself, I walked into the hall where Ethan was seated in a plush armchair, deeply engrossed in a book. He glanced up as I entered, gaze flickering over me in my borrowed shirt, a smile tugging at his lips.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked, his voice smooth and devoid of any hint of anger or irritation.

His calmness irked me. Shouldn’t he be furious that I’d tried to escape? I couldn’t understand why he wasn’t mad at me. It felt wrong, like he should be chastising me, but here he was acting as if nothing had happened.

“Is that really all you have to say to me?” I demanded.

He didn’t rise to my bait, instead raising an eyebrow before gesturing to a stack of books on the side table next to him. “I thought you might be interested in passing the time by reading and I took the liberty of choosing some books I thought you might find interesting.” As I drew closer, I saw that they were serious science and philosophy books, including *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius, *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking, and *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins. Exactly the kind of heavy reading I’d expect from Ethan. “We can discuss them once you’ve finished,” he added, his voice still infuriatingly calm.

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“Are you kidding me?” I exploded, unable to hold back my frustration any longer. “How can you be so calm? Why aren’t you angry with me for trying to escape?”

Ethan regarded me thoughtfully for a moment before replying, “I knew you would try sooner or later. It’s simply who you are. And I happen to like who you are.”

“So you left the hatch open on purpose!” I said, my hands on my hips.

“No, I left it open because I thought you might enjoy taking short walks outside during the daytime,” he explained, unfazed by my outburst. “But now, I have to revoke that privilege, and the hatch is locked. I suggest you stop wasting effort trying to escape. The sensors outside will alert me to any movement in the house above us.”

Taking a deep breath, I allowed the storm inside to calm down. “You’re right,” I admitted quietly, my voice wavering slightly. “I know it is not reasonable to leave the bunker, but everything that’s happened... it’s just too much. I want to feel at home, sense something familiar, something to feel... normal.”

Ethan softened, his stern expression melting into a gentle smile. “I understand,” he said. “Promise me you won’t try to escape again?”

“I promise,” I whispered, feeling the weight of my words as they left my lips.

“Good,” he replied, his eyes twinkling with a hint of mischief. “Now, how about you make it up to me by going on a date with me?”

My heart leapt into my throat, and I blinked in surprise. “A date? Here?”

“Of course,” Ethan said, his voice low and flirtatious. “We have a small private cinema here in the bunker. I thought it might be a nice, familiar experience for you—and an opportunity for us to spend some time together.”

“That sounds amazing! I’d love to!” I asked, excitement bubbling up inside me.

“Great,” he grinned, his green eyes sparkling. “I have some work to do and a few preparations to make for this evening. I hope you can think of something to pass the time.”

As Ethan disappeared in the doorframe, I settled down in a chair that enveloped my body like a blanket and picked up and opened *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand. The prose was as heavy-handed as I’d expected, the characters mere mouthpieces for the author’s philosophy. The protagonists—Dagny, Wyatt, Rearden, and Galt—were all tall, attractive geniuses with seemingly supernatural sexual prowess, while the antagonists were caricatures of stupidity, pettiness, and physical disabilities. Marvel movies have more depth and nuance than this, I thought to myself as I skimmed through the second half of the novel.

As I put the book aside, I wondered how this ideology of objectivism may have influenced Ethan, molding him into the man he was today.

Did he leave this book here on purpose? Was it another glimpse into his inner self, along with the architecture and décor inside his home and that trick with the cheap wine? Was it his way of telling me about himself, feeding me jigsaw pieces one by one until the puzzle of Ethan was complete?

I tossed the book aside, I made my way to the kitchen and began rummaging through the cupboards for something to eat. I eventually settled on some canned fruits and defrosted bread. As I sipped my coffee in the hall, I began to feel that despite everything, this place wasn’t so bad after all. I was still trapped here, but not only by

steel walls but by the unwanted desire he stirred in me.

My thoughts shifted to the upcoming date with Ethan, and the anticipation for my 'date' with Ethan made it hard to sit still. I knew I wanted to wear something nicer than Ethan's shorts and shirt, but I didn't have many options. The only proper clothes I had were the blouse and jeans drying in the pantry. They would have to do.

As I walked towards the pantry, I passed by the open door to the gym. There, I caught sight of Ethan from behind, doing heavy deadlifts. He wore only a pair of shorts, and his strong muscles rippled with every movement. I paused in the doorway, transfixed by the sight of his muscles flexing and with each repetition his hips moved like they did during our passionate encounter in the bathtub. His masculine scent, laced with sweat, enveloped me and I breathed it in hungrily.

Desire pooled low in my belly, intensifying when Ethan straightened and rolled his shoulders. His piercing gaze met mine in the mirror, and a knowing smile curved his lips.

By the time I made it to the pantry, I was breathless and flushed. I leaned against the wall, cursing my traitorous body for reacting to him like that. I steamed my blouse and jeans and on a whim, I decided not to wear panties. Feeling bold and mischievous, I headed to the shower to freshen up before our date.

Stepping into the mini-cinema, I found Ethan already there, lounging on a plush red divan looking unfairly handsome in dark slacks and a gray button-down shirt.

"You look beautiful," he said and a smile touched my lips in response.

A spread of popcorn, light snacks, and a bottle of wine awaited us.

"Ok, I'll bite," I teased, pointing to the wine. "How much did this one set you back?"

Ethan laughed. “Actually, I’m not sure. It was a gift from a business associate.”

“Should we even drink it then?” I joked, remembering our recent brush with danger. “Your business associates haven’t exactly proven trustworthy lately.”

Ethan chuckled, a low raspy sound that made me shiver. “Touché. I don’t need wine to be intoxicated in your presence.”

“Wait, do you want to say that my incessant caprices make your head spin?” I grinned, testing him.

His eyes flickered up and down, scanning my body and I instinctively straightened my back a little. “No, Chloe, I think it is the whole package.”

Heat flushed my cheeks as I felt disarmed. Fortunately, Ethan didn’t gloat about my defeat and gestured for me to join him on the divan.

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The lights dimmed, and Ethan pressed play on a remote, revealing the opening credits of a film I hadn't expected: *The Great Gatsby*. But this wasn't the flashy, modern version I'd seen before—it was the 1949 adaptation.

"I didn't know you were into classic films," I said, genuinely surprised.

Ethan shrugged, his eyes never leaving the screen. "I'm not a movie snob, but there's something sincere about old movies that appeals to me."

As the story unfolded, I found myself agreeing with him. Watching this version of *Gatsby* without CGI or familiar actors was a refreshing change. It definitely felt more raw and gritty than the version I knew. The actor playing Gatsby was perfectly charming yet sinister, and I found myself liking him more than Leonardo DiCaprio's portrayal.

During the scene where Gatsby and Daisy first met, Ethan's hand found its way over my shoulder, pulling me closer. The warmth and scent of his body enveloped me as I instinctively leaned into his embrace, feeling safe and protected in his arms.

The longer we watched, the more difficult it became for me to concentrate on the film. Ethan's hand stroked my arm, sending little thrills through me and memories of our steamy encounter in the hot tub flooded my mind, reminding me just how much I'd missed the feel of Ethan's body against mine. I tried to push those thoughts aside, focusing instead on the way people in 1949 depicted the high society of the Jazz Age.

The camera work seemed more direct and naive than what I was used to—no reliance on special effects—and yet, it managed to capture the essence of the era effortlessly. I

felt like I was seeing the world through a different lens, one that prioritized emotion and authenticity over spectacle.

Ethan's hand tightened on my arm, and he pulled me closer. I looked up to find him watching me, eyes dark with desire. "Are you enjoying the movie?" he asked softly.

I licked my lips, watching his gaze track the movement. "I was," I said, "until you distracted me."

A smug smile curved his lips. "My apologies." He didn't sound very apologetic.

"Isn't it amazing how they could tell such a powerful story without all the flashiness of modern cinema?" I whispered to Ethan.

He nodded, his strong jawline illuminated by the flickering light of the movie. "Sometimes I think we've lost something in our pursuit of technical perfection."

As the film continued, I let myself get lost in the story, all the while snuggled securely in Ethan's arms. And for a moment, it felt like everything outside that little mini-cinema—the danger, the bunker, and the uncertain future—had ceased to exist. I felt safe, and dare I say it, at home.

Nick and Jordan left the frame holding hands and the credits began to roll. I felt a melancholic heaviness settle in my chest. It was as if the illusion of normalcy we'd created in this darkened room was about to shatter, leaving me exposed once more to the harsh realities of our situation. But for now, I lingered in Ethan's embrace, cherishing the warmth of his body pressed against mine. His strong arms were wrapped around me, his chest rising and falling against my back with each breath. I felt cocooned in safety, and a part of me wanted to stay like this forever.

"Did you enjoy the film more than the modern remake?" he asked gently, his deep

voice resonating in my ear.

I hesitated before answering, savoring the feeling of his arms around me. “I don’t know. They felt like two different stories. Both beautiful in their own way.”

But as I thought about it, I couldn’t help but draw parallels between Daisy’s selfish actions in *The Great Gatsby* and my own attempt to escape yesterday. Had I been trying to ruin the fragile connection Ethan and I shared? I frowned, suddenly feeling guilty.

“Hey,” Ethan said softly, noticing the change in my expression. “Are you okay?”

A frown tugged at my lips. “I’m sorry for running off yesterday. I don’t know what came over me.”

Ethan kissed the top of my head. “Don’t think that way. You’ve been through a trauma, and it’s only natural to have moments of fear and doubt.”

He was right. Coming here, escaping into a fantasy world for a few hours, had given me a reprieve from the chaos that had overtaken my life. I craned my neck to look up at him. “Thank you. For understanding. For always knowing exactly what I need.”

One hand slid up to cup my cheek as his head dipped down. Our lips met in a slow, deep kiss that ignited my blood like wildfire. By the time we broke apart, I was breathless and aching for more.

The scent of him enveloped me, stirring up desire deep within my core. My heartbeat raced as I looked up into his eyes, seeing the same yearning reflected back at me. Unable to resist any longer, I pulled him down for a searing, passionate kiss.

Our lips melded together hungrily, tongues dancing and exploring each other’s

mouths with fervor. The world outside ceased to exist once again, replaced by the primal need to be close, to feel the heat of his touch.

“Take me to our bedroom,” I whispered when we finally parted.

Suddenly, the lights flickered and the bunker went dark.

Chapter Six

Chloe

“I didn’t know you were such a romantic,” I teased as he carried me into the pantry.

“Candles? Really?”

“The generator stopped working. We need them anyway,” he retorted with a smirk.

“But I’ll deal with that in the morning. Right now, I have more important matters to attend to.”

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It felt good to be an important matter to Ethan Hamilton. Almost as good as being carried in his strong arms.

He held me effortlessly as I rummaged through the shelves. His scent surrounded me; a mixture of expensive cologne and masculine musk that made my head spin.

“Ah, found them!” I exclaimed triumphantly, grabbing handfuls of candles and piling them on my stomach while balancing precariously in Ethan’s embrace.

Ethan carried me to the bedroom as I lit the way with a flashlight, his powerful frame never faltering under my weight. He gently laid me down on the bed before leaning in for a passionate, lingering kiss. The intensity of his lips against mine left me breathless.

“Wait here,” he murmured, pulling away just enough to speak. I watched him walk around the room, lighting the candles one by one. The flickering flames cast a warm glow on his chiseled features, making him look even more handsome—if that was possible. As I admired his strong, muscular body, I couldn’t help but wonder if this situation could ever have been possible were we not locked together in this bunker.

Was this just a game to him? Another conquest to add to his list of lovers?

His lips crushed against mine, stealing my breath and scattering my doubts. The familiar taste of him—masculine, intoxicating—sent heat spiraling through my body.

“Ready?” Ethan asked, his eyes dark and full of desire. I nodded eagerly, my body trembling in anticipation of what was to come.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he growled, nipping at my jaw. His hands slid under my blouse, callused palms gliding over my skin, feeling like fire. “I’m going to take good care of you.”

A delicious shiver ran down my spine. How did he always know the perfect thing to say?

With a wicked grin, Ethan grasped the hem of my blouse and tugged it over my head. His gaze roamed over my exposed flesh, darkening with hunger. “Gorgeous.”

Heat flooded my cheeks even as my body arched toward him, craving his touch. “You’re the romantic one,” I teased breathlessly.

“And you love it.” Ethan’s lips curved against my throat as he peppered a trail of kisses down to my collarbone. “Admit it, Chloe. I’m your weakness.”

“I’ll never tell.” It was getting harder to think with his hands and mouth moving over my body, leaving a blaze of sensation in their wake.

Ethan made a low sound of amusement. “Is that so?” His fingers flicked open the clasp of my bra, baring my breasts to his gaze. “Then I’ll just have to find another way to get the truth from you.”

Ethan’s mouth closed over one nipple, teasing and sucking until it pebbled under his skilled tongue. I gasped, arching into his touch as jolts of pleasure shot through me.

“You’re mine, Chloe,” he rasped, shifting to lavish the same attention on my other breast. “All mine.”

I moaned, tangling my fingers in his hair to hold him close. “Yours,” I breathed.

As his hands cupped my breasts, I leaned closer to him and began unbuttoning his shirt, but suddenly, with one swift motion, Ethan pinned me back down onto the bed, a devilish grin playing on his lips. “I got a taste at the spa,” he said, his voice low and seductive. “But now, I want the main dish.”

As Ethan lowered his head, his lips trailed a searing path down my body, each kiss like a brand claiming every inch of me. My breath hitched in anticipation when he finally reached the apex of my thighs, teasingly hovering over the sensitive flesh there for a moment before he tugged my panties down and off, baring me completely to his gaze.

“So beautiful,” Ethan murmured reverently. He slid his hands under my thighs and lifted, draping them over his shoulders. I gasped as he lowered his head, his breath hot against my aching center.

“Please,” I said, too far gone for shame. I needed this, needed him. Now.

Ethan’s gaze flicked up, his eyes gleaming in the candlelight.

And then his mouth was on me.

I cried out as he gave my clit a slow, deliberate lick, instantly moistening it. Then, just as suddenly, he pulled away and gently blew on the wet spot.

The sensation of cool air on my aroused flesh made pleasure burst through me like fireworks, my hips involuntarily bucking towards him, begging for more.

He licked broad strokes over my slit before focusing on the sensitive nub, sucking it between his lips.

My fingers tightened in his hair. “Oh God, yes. Just like that.”

Ethan groaned, the vibration sending another shockwave through me. His hands kneaded my breasts, rolling my nipples between his fingers in a rhythm that matched the thrusts of his tongue. I was drowning in sensation, in him.

The coil of pleasure in my core wound tighter and tighter.

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“Ethan, I’m so close. Please don’t stop.” I moaned, the words tumbling from my lips unbidden.

He licked and sucked my clit with an expertise that left me gasping for air, my fingers gripping the sheets beneath me.

He continued to lavish me with attention, his tongue working magic on my most intimate parts. The pleasure built inside me like a tidal wave, threatening to crash over me at any moment.

“Please, Ethan,” I begged, my fingers tangling in his thick, dark hair. “More...”

His tongue continued to tease and tantalize me, while his hands roamed over my body like a master sculptor shaping his greatest masterpiece.

“Is this what you want, Chloe?” he murmured against my swollen clit, his breath hot and heavy on my sensitive flesh.

“Y-yes,” I stammered, barely able to form words as the waves of pleasure rolled over me. “Please, don’t stop.”

He didn’t waste another moment. His mouth enveloped me completely, sucking and licking with eager abandon. The sensations were overwhelming, building into a crescendo of sheer ecstasy that threatened to tear me apart. As my orgasm neared, my grip on his hair tightened, my hips bucking uncontrollably against his face.

“Ethaaan!” I cried out, my voice cracking as the most intense climax washed over

me. I felt like I was on the verge of blacking out, my vision blurring at the edges as my body writhed beneath him. But somehow, he never missed a beat, continuing to coax wave after wave of pleasure from me until I was left panting and spent.

Finally, he lifted his head and crawled up next to me, his eyes dark with desire. His fingers replaced his mouth, teasing my still-sensitive clit before slipping inside me, eliciting a shudder of rapture. He kissed me hungrily, my taste lingering on his lips, while his fingers worked magic within me.

“God, you’re so beautiful when you come undone like that,” he whispered in my ear, his voice husky and raw. “I could watch you all night.”

“Your... your turn,” I managed to breathe out, wanting to return the favor. But he shook his head, pressing a finger against my lips.

“Later,” he promised, his eyes never leaving mine. “Right now, I just want to make you feel good.”

His fingers continued their dance inside me, hitting all the right spots and making me moan with each thrust.

“Come for me again, Chloe,” he urged, his breath hot against my neck. “I want to hear you scream my name.”

As if on cue, another climax slammed into me, tearing through my body like wildfire. I cried out, gripping his arm tightly as I rode out the waves of pleasure that threatened to consume me whole.

Ethan worked me through the aftershocks, his touch gentle but insistent. When I finally went limp, he withdrew his fingers and moved up to gather me in his arms.

“Two...” I gasped, struggling to find my breath. “I’ve never... two orgasms, and you’re not even undressed yet.”

“I’m just getting started,” he whispered, brushing the hair back from my face. His green eyes were soft with tenderness and something more, something that made my heart skip a beat.

Still panting, I tilted my chin up in invitation. Ethan bent his head, meeting my lips in a kiss and I melted into it.

As we parted, Ethan rested his forehead against mine.

“Please, Ethan...” I begged, my voice a needy whisper. “I want you inside of me.”

My fingers trembled with anticipation as I reached for the buttons on his shirt, slowly revealing his muscled torso inch by tantalizing inch. The flickering candlelight cast shadows across his chiseled chest and abs, an incubus come to life.

“God, you’re so handsome,” I murmured, unable to resist running my fingertips over the roughness of his skin, mapping the dips and grooves of muscle. His flesh was warm satin over steel, scented with sandalwood and sex.

My core throbbed in time with my heartbeat, aching to be filled. I slid my hand lower, brushing the waistband of his trousers.

Ethan’s breath hitched. His erection strained against the fabric, hot and hard under my palm. I rubbed my hand along his length, desire pooling low in my belly at the feel of him.

“You’re still wearing too many clothes,” I said huskily.

As I pulled his trousers down, his huge cock sprang free—already hard, thick and heavy, and even bigger than I remembered. My mouth watered at the sight, and I couldn't wait to feel it inside of me. But first, I wanted to pay him back for the pleasure he'd given me earlier.

Leaning in, I licked the length of his shaft, exploring the map of veins on its surface with my tongue. It felt hot and hard against my lips, and a thrill shot through me as I realized how much power I held over his pleasure. Opening my mouth wide, I took in as much of him as I could, my cheeks hollowing as I sucked him like there was no tomorrow. I maintained eye contact with Ethan, and the intensity of his gaze only spurred me on further.

“Fuck, Chloe,” he groaned, his fingers tangling in my hair as he struggled to maintain control. “You’re so good at this... Don’t stop.”

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But I was determined to draw out his pleasure, just as he'd done for me earlier. I enjoyed the sense of power it brought me—the way he moaned and writhed beneath me, the dirty talk that tumbled from his lips in a desperate attempt to maintain some semblance of control.

“Enough,” Ethan growled, his voice rough with desire. “I can’t take it anymore.”

In an instant, he pushed me down onto the bed, pinning me beneath him. The raw power in his movements sent a jolt of arousal through me. His body enveloped mine like a warm, protective blanket, and I could feel the heat radiating from him.

“Look at you,” he whispered, locking eyes with me as he positioned himself between my legs. “So beautiful, so eager for me. You’re driving me wild, Chloe.”

Ethan thrust home in one smooth stroke. I cried out at the sweet invasion, my pussy stretching to accommodate his girth. He filled me to the brim, and it was a sensation unlike anything I’d ever felt before—overwhelming, intense, and utterly exquisite. My breath hitched in my throat, and I couldn’t tear my gaze away from his.

For a long moment we stayed locked together, savoring the connection. I clung to his shoulders, pulse racing as I adjusted to his size.

“You feel incredible,” Ethan said hoarsely. He withdrew slightly before sliding back in. Sparks of pleasure shot through me and I moaned.

Ethan began to move in earnest, hard and fast. I met him thrust for thrust, desire burning red-hot.

“God, you feel divine,” he murmured, his voice heavy with lust. “So tight, so perfect... I can’t get enough of you.”

My hands and legs wrapped around Ethan’s mighty torso, clinging to him as if my life depended on it. The sounds of our breathing and moaning filled the room, mingling with the scent of sweat and arousal that clung to us both.

“Please, Ethan,” I gasped, my voice barely more than a whisper. “Harder... I need more.”

“Anything for you, Chloe,” he replied, his words punctuated by a particularly brutal thrust that left me seeing stars.

The sensory overload was intoxicating, and I could feel myself teetering on the edge of ecstasy. Every sound, every scent, every touch only served to heighten my pleasure.

Suddenly, Ethan’s strong hands gripped my hips and flipped me over onto my stomach. I gasped as he entered me from behind, the new angle causing him to fill me even deeper than before. My body shuddered at the sensation, feeling every inch of him inside me.

“God, Chloe,” Ethan growled in my ear. “You look so damn sexy like this.”

He punctuated his words with a firm slap on my ass, the stinging pain melding deliciously with the pleasure coursing through me. I could feel my arousal building once more, bringing me closer and closer to the edge. As if he could sense it too, Ethan began squeezing and kneading my breasts, his rough hands creating an intoxicating contrast against my soft skin.

“You belong to me,” he whispered, his voice heavy with desire. “And you’ll do

everything I say.”

“Y-yes, Ethan,” I moaned, my body quivering with anticipation.

“Are you close?” he asked, his voice strained as he continued to drive into me with relentless force.

“Y-yes,” I stammered, my entire body trembling as the pressure built to an unbearable crescendo. “E-Ethan... I’m...”

“Come for me, Chloe,” he commanded.

In that moment, Ethan flipped me around again, pinning me beneath him as he stared into my eyes. “I want to see your eyes when I fill you up,” he said, his gaze burning with intensity.

The coil of pleasure inside me wound tighter and tighter until I shattered around him with a scream. Wave after wave of ecstasy washed over me, leaving me breathless and trembling in his arms. Ethan followed after a few more strokes, burying himself deep as he came inside me.

We lay there entwined, spent and sated, our bodies slick with sweat. The scent of sex and passion filled the air around us, but neither of us spoke for what felt like an eternity.

I nuzzled into Ethan’s chest, tracing idle patterns through the light sheen of sweat. His heart thudded under my ear, a steady beat that lulled me into a haze of satiation.

Ethan’s hand stroked up and down my back.

“Tomorrow,” Ethan murmured into my hair, breaking the silence, “I’ll be busy fixing

the generator. Maybe you'd like to take a walk outside?"

Chapter Seven

Chloe

Darkness.

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Panic rose in my chest as I blinked open my eyes, seeing nothing. Where was I? For a terrifying moment I couldn't remember.

Then I felt the warmth of Ethan's body curled around mine, the weight of Ethan's strong arms encircling me and his steady breaths on my hair. Memory flooded back—I was in our bedroom in Ethan's underground hideout, tucked away with the most incredible man I'd ever met.

I snuggled deeper into Ethan's embrace, breathing in his masculine scent. A pleasant ache throbbed between my legs, a reminder of our passionate lovemaking. It felt surreal, how good everything was between us. What could someone like him possibly see in someone like me?

Ethan stirred behind me, his arms tightening around my waist. "Morning," he rasped, his voice even sexier when laced with sleep.

"Good morning." I angled my head to capture his lips in a slow, languid kiss. Our tender caresses quickly grew more heated, hands roaming each other's bodies. Our bodies seemed hyper-attuned in the absence of sight, every touch electric. I shivered as his hand slid under my shirt to cup my breast, but I pulled away, instantly missing his warmth.

"I really need to take a shower."

"The power is still out," Ethan said gently. "Water pumps don't work without it."

"We should probably get the generator fixed," I said, trying to avoid his lips.

“Mm. In a minute.” His mouth trailed down my neck, igniting little sparks all over my skin.

I laughed, even as I arched into his touch. “I know what you’re thinking and it will take way more than a minute!”

“You can’t rush perfection.”

I playfully slapped him on the shoulder as he nibbled on the side of my neck.

“Ok, I’ll switch on the auxiliary generator so you can shower while I fix the main one.”

The mattress creaked as Ethan swung his feet to the floor. “Now, where did we leave that flashlight...”

I crawled across the bed, groping around until my hands landed on his muscular back. “Want me to help you look?”

He chuckled, a low rumble in his chest. Then his paws landed on my breasts. “Just checking if the flashlight’s hiding on your body.”

“Very funny,” I shot back, but I couldn’t help the smile spreading across my face.

Ethan’s fingers trailed down my arm before pulling away completely. “I’ll be right back.”

The mattress creaked again as he stood, and I listened to the sounds of him shuffling around the room, fumbling in the dark. After a few moments, a beam of light flickered over the walls.

“Found it.” The flashlight clicked off, and Ethan’s weight settled on the bed once more.

Then the flashlight clicked on and Ethan slowly traced its beam over my body, his eyes following the light. “You’re absolutely stunning,” he murmured.

“Thanks,” I whispered, suddenly self-conscious as he continued to take in every inch of me. He set the flashlight aside and lit a candle, handing it to me with a smile.

“The auxiliary generator should be running by the time you reach the shower.”

I leaned in to kiss him, relishing the warmth and solidness of his lips. “You’re the best.”

“So you keep telling me.” He nipped at my lower lip playfully. “Now go.”

“Yes, sir.” I slid off the bed, wincing at the pleasant ache in my muscles.

I held the flickering candle close, casting soft, warm light around the room as I made my way towards the mini-spa.

The auxiliary generator hummed to life as I stepped into the bathroom, flickering emergency lights illuminating the stark white tiles. I turned the shower on, but the water was ice cold, sending shivers down my spine. I gritted my teeth and powered through the quick shower, the frigid water bringing me out of a fairytale back to reality.

Emerging from the shower stall, goosebumps still covered my skin, so I rummaged through the drawers in search of something warm. I found Ethan’s sweatpants, t-shirt, and a hoodie—all several sizes too big for me—and pulled them on, feeling enveloped by his lingering scent.

I ventured out, following the trail of dim emergency lights to the kitchen. With Ethan busy with the repairs I figured I could make breakfast for my man.

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First, I tried making toast, but the toaster seemed to work against me. The bread came out a charred mess, blackened and smoking. I sighed, tossing the ruined toast into the trash and moving on to pancakes.

In the dim candlelight, I mixed the batter, but my measurements must have been off because the consistency was watery. Undeterred, I poured the runny mix onto the griddle and hoped for the best. The pancakes didn't turn out as I'd hoped—they were thin and slightly undercooked.

I brewed coffee in an attempt to redeem myself and with two cups poured, I carried the coffee and pancakes through the underground hideout, following the sounds of mechanical clanking and Ethan's cursing.

I found Ethan in the mini-gym, his muscular arms flexing as he wrestled with the generator. One of the wall panels was removed, wires and machinery exposed.

"Coffee and pancakes," I announced, holding out the tray.

Ethan looked up at me, smiling warmly. "It's alright, Chloe. Thank you." He took a sip of the coffee and gave me a reassuring nod. "Mmm, this is good."

Feeling relieved, I sipped my own coffee, only to realize that it was too strong and bitter. My heart sank—he had lied to make me feel better.

"Can I help with anything?" I asked, trying to hide my disappointment.

Ethan shook his head, his focus still on the generator. "No, I've got it under control. I

just need some time to reassemble the control block. But there is one thing you can do...”

“Really? What is it?” I asked eagerly.

Ethan glanced up at me, a teasing light in his green eyes. “You can help by continuing to be amazing.”

I felt my cheeks warm at the compliment. “Look at you, you charmer. Since when did you become such a mechanic?”

“I worked in a few garages during summers in college,” Ethan said. “I had to pay my tuition somehow.”

Of course he did. Ethan seemed able to do everything, while I struggled to even make a decent cup of coffee. Once again, I was struck by how ill-suited we were. Ethan was a powerful billionaire who seemed able to do everything and solve any problem, and I was... well, just me.

Ethan furrowed his brow, concern evident in his emerald eyes. “Is something wrong, Chloe?”

“Nothing,” I replied quickly, not wanting to burden him.

“Fair enough.” He attempted a smile before changing the subject. “Did you have a chance to read any of those books I suggested?”

“I skimmed *Atlas Shrugged*,” I said. “I can’t say I cared for it.”

Ethan chuckled. “No, Ayn Rand’s writing isn’t for everyone. You can get the gist of her philosophy without suffering through hundreds of pages.” His gaze turned

playful. “Although, reading it does build character just by the required application of will to finish it.”

“Actually,” I said, “you remind me a bit of John Galt.”

“Do I?” Ethan’s lips quirked. “Is it because I’m also good in bed?”

“Hey!” I jokingly punched him in the arm. “Get back to work, you. Some of us prefer hot showers to cold ones.”

“Alright, alright,” he conceded with a grin. “While I’m working, you’re welcome to pick another book. We can discuss it later.”

“Actually, I had something else in mind,” I began cautiously. “Did you mean what you said yesterday? That I could go for a walk?”

“Of course.” Ethan nodded. “I’ve already unlocked the hatch. I trust you, Chloe. Just don’t go too far or stay out too long.”

My heart swelled at his words. After being cooped up for days, the thought of going outside was bliss.

“Thank you,” I said, rising on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

Ethan’s eyes darkened. “You’re welcome. Now go enjoy the sunshine before I decide to keep you inside all for myself.”

Excited to finally breathe in fresh air after so much time underground, I made my way to the hatch and crawled through it, emerging in the dilapidated house above. Sunlight streamed through the dusty windows, and a bird chirped outside.

I walked outside, blinking against the bright sun. A warm breeze rustled the leaves, carrying the fresh scent of pine. It felt like a gentle embrace from the universe itself, and I couldn't help but smile.

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God, I'd missed this.

Taking a deep breath, I filled my lungs with the clean forest air, savoring the earthy scent of leaves, soil, and wood. It was a stark contrast to the sterile atmosphere of our bunker—even if that bunker housed the most gorgeous man on Earth.

I picked up a fallen leaf, admiring its vibrant colors and intricate veins. I ran my fingers over the rough bark of a nearby tree, marveling at the beauty and life surrounding me.

Everything felt so alive and vibrant and real.

I decided to stretch my legs with a walk and started walking through the forest, careful not to lose sight of the old house behind me.

As I ventured deeper into the woods, I noticed something strange behind the foliage. Intrigued, I approached and found a paved road.

I knelt down to run my palm over the smooth pavement. It felt oddly foreign beneath my fingertips, somehow seeming so very foreign to the environment around me.

A distant hum made me freeze. Tires on asphalt, drawing closer. I panicked, realizing I couldn't hide in the foliage in time. As a car came around the bend, I almost succumbed to panic until I realized that it was one of those small electric Smartcars.

Hardly a vehicle suitable for paid killers.

The car slowed to a stop beside me, and I found myself looking into the kind eyes of an elderly woman in an elegant pink hat. Relief washed over me.

“Are you all right, dear?” she asked, concern etched on her face. “You look a little lost.”

I quickly shook my head. “No, I’m fine. Just out for a hike, enjoying the fresh air.”

“Nothing like it!” The woman sighed happily. “We’re so lucky to have this wilderness. But still I’m on my way to Pinegrove and I can give you a lift if you’d like.”

“No, thank you,” I said. “I’ll head back soon.”

“Suit yourself, dear.” She gave me a warm smile. “Be careful out here, all right? And have a lovely day.”

“You too. Thanks.”

As she drove away, I watched the small car disappear around a bend. A vehicle like that had a very limited range, which meant there must be a town nearby. Curiosity piqued, I decided to follow the road uphill to get a better vantage point.

The incline gradually increased, and my muscles burned with each step. Still, I pressed on, determined to see what lay beyond the curve of the road. When I finally reached the top, I stopped in my tracks.

Nestled in the valley below was a small town, its quaint buildings glowing in the golden afternoon light.

Chapter Eight

Ethan

A faint beep from my watch caught my attention as I fixed the wall panel to cover the working generator. The security system had picked up movement on the surface, and I knew it must have been Chloe returning from her walk. By this time concern had already started to gnaw at my gut and now relief washed over me like a calming wave.

She was safe.

I couldn't bear the thought of something happening to her while she was out there without my protection.

I hurried to the mini spa, cranking the hot water tap as high as it would go. Then I dumped an entire bottle of bubble bath under the stream of water. As the scent of jasmine filled the room, I made a silent vow: I wouldn't let her venture outside again without me by her side.

The sound of the hatch opening sent a ripple of anticipation through me, and I hurried to the hall to greet Chloe. My heart swelled as I saw her petite frame, her auburn hair framing her face as she smiled. But as our lips met in a tender kiss, I couldn't help but notice that something was off. Her usually bright, inquisitive eyes seemed distant, and her smile didn't quite reach them.

"Chloe, is everything okay?" I asked, searching her face.

"Of course, Ethan. Everything's fine," she said brightly. Too brightly. I didn't believe her for a second. She thought she could hide things from me, but I knew her too well. Knew every flicker of emotion that crossed her face, every hitch in her breath.

"Are you sure? You seem...distracted," I said softly, tilting her chin up so she had to

meet my gaze. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Her shoulders slumped in defeat. “It’s nothing, really. I just felt... alone.” She bit her lip.

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Of course. How could I have been so stupid? I pulled her into my arms, hating myself for letting her leave the bunker alone. She needed me to protect her, keep her safe. I would never make that mistake again.

“I won’t let you out of my sight,” I promised, stroking her hair. “You don’t have to be afraid. I’m here now, and I’m not going anywhere.”

She relaxed against me, and the last of the tension eased from my body. My Chloe was back where she belonged.

“Chloe, I have a surprise for you,” I said, a mischievous grin spreading across my face. I took off my tie and used it as a blindfold, gently covering her eyes. Her brows furrowed, but she didn’t protest. I took her hand and led her towards the mini-spa, the scent of jasmine bubble bath filling the air.

“Okay, you can look now,” I announced, removing the blindfold. Chloe’s eyes lit up at the sight before her: a luxurious bathtub filled to the brim with bubbles. She gasped, a delighted smile gracing her lips. She turned to me, eyes shining, and threw her arms around my neck.

“Oh, Ethan,” she breathed, her eyes sparkling as she kissed me. “Thank you for fixing the generator. I can’t believe I get to have hot water again!”

I held her close, breathing in the scent of her skin and hair. “I’d do anything for you,” I replied. I used to say that to women all the time, but with Chloe, I meant it.

She kissed me, slow and sweet, then playfully pushed against my chest. “Now shoo, I

want to enjoy my bath in peace.”

I caught her hands, grinning. “I don’t think so. I went through all the trouble of preparing this bath for you, now I intend to share it.”

“Okay,” she agreed hesitantly, “but no funny business.” I held up my hands in surrender. “I promise to act like a gentleman,” I said as I tried to inch closer, but Chloe firmly placed her hand on my chest and I could sense that something was still off with her.

When we undressed I swept her up into my arms, eliciting a startled squeak. Before she could protest further, I stepped into the bath and slowly lowered us both into the warm, fragrant water.

“Ethan!” She splashed at me, cheeks flushed. “Put me down this instant!”

“Hmm, I don’t think I will.” I settled back against the edge of the tub, arranging her on my lap. “There, isn’t this nice?”

She huffed out an exasperated breath, but I felt her relax into me. “You’re impossible.”

“So you keep telling me.” I nuzzled her neck, delighting in the feel of her body against mine. The water lapped at our skin as I caressed her shoulders, her arms, the swells of her breasts peeking above the bubbles. It felt incredible—her soft skin, her warmth—and I marveled at how such a small woman could have such a profound impact on me.

“You promised to behave,” she reminded me, though her protest lacked conviction.

“Did I?” I teased the shell of her ear with my teeth, gratified by the shiver that ran

through her. “My memory fails me.”

“Ethan...” Her breath caught as my hand dipped lower, finding the apex of her thighs. “We can’t...”

“Shh.” I held her tighter, kneading the soft, wet flesh until I felt her melt. “I’ve got you.”

She moaned, head falling back against my shoulder, and I smiled in triumph. My Chloe was home, safe in my arms where she belonged.

I savored the feel of her body, the warmth of the water, the intimacy of holding her like this. It felt... right, in a way I’d never experienced before.

“Did you see anything interesting on your walk outside?” I asked. But her eyes flickered away from mine.

“Actually, I was wondering... What did you major in during college?” she said after a while, her fingers playing over my arm.

“Is that really what you want to talk about right now?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. But she just nodded, avoiding my gaze.

“Alright, Miss Collins,” I said with a playful smirk. “Shall we continue our interview then?”

“Absolutely, Mr. Hamilton,” Chloe responded playfully, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “I’m ready to interview the hell out of you—as long as there are no killer bodyguards around.”

“Fair enough,” I agreed, my heart swelling at the sight of her genuine smile. “Well, to

answer your earlier question, I majored in literature.”

“Really?” Chloe’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, and I couldn’t help but chuckle at her expression. “That explains your love for books, but it’s not exactly what I would have expected from a ruthless business shark like you.”

“Ah, well,” I began, enjoying the feel of her body pressed against mine as the warm water and bubbles surrounded us. “The truth is, it doesn’t really matter what your major is or what knowledge you gain in college or even in school.”

“Interesting,” she murmured, her eyes gazing into mine with curiosity. “How so?”

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“Simply put,” I explained, my hands slowly caressing her body under the water as the bath bubbles engulfed us. “What school does is train a person how to think. All the knowledge is just a byproduct.”

“Go on,” Chloe urged.

“School provides new information and forces you to digest it—rinse and repeat,” I continued, my voice soft yet passionate. “Math gives you information in symbolic form, geometry in graphic form, history in textual form, but all of it is essentially a gym for your gray matter. It teaches you how to learn, again and again until the process itself is ingrained in you and feels intuitive.”

“Interesting perspective,” Chloe murmured, her fingers tracing idle patterns on my chest.

“Once you learn how to learn,” I went on, “you can learn anything. That’s how I succeeded in all of my businesses—even in sectors I wasn’t initially proficient in.”

Chloe nodded, seemingly deep in thought as she processed my words. Silence filled the room, interrupted only by the gentle sound of water lapping against the sides of the bathtub.

I traced the curves of Chloe’s body as she lay in my arms, her fingertips dancing across my chest. The outside world faded away when I was with her, my mind quieting in a way I had never known before.

“Chloe,” I whispered. She looked up at me, her eyes shining in the dim light of the

mini-spa. “What are you thinking about?”

Her fingers continued to trace delicate patterns on my chest, a jolt of electricity running down my spine. “I was just thinking how I could have used your perspective on learning back when I was in school. Maybe I wouldn’t have ended up as such a loser.”

Anger flared, hot and sharp.

“Hey,” I said firmly, pulling her closer and pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Don’t ever say that. You’re amazing.”

But she shook her head. “No, Ethan, I’m serious. I’m average. A nobody compared to you.” She bit her lip, her gaze dropping to the water’s surface. “My career as a journalist is unremarkable at best. This one time I exposed corruption in the Department of Defense... it happened by pure luck. They sent me the wrong documents by mistake, and that’s how I came up on the whole thing.”

I wanted to rage at whoever had made her feel this way. She needed me now, so I held her even tighter, letting the warmth of my embrace surround her. “Chloe, listen to me. That doesn’t matter. What matters is that you were brave enough to follow through with it, even if it was by chance.”

“Chance,” she repeated bitterly. “That’s all it was. A fluke. You invited me here to interview you because you thought I was some professional investigative journalist, but I’m a fraud. And all of this”—she gestured between us—“our connection, our passion... it’s all just a result of pure chance.”

“I don’t believe in chance or luck or coincidence.” I tilted her chin up, gazing into her eyes. “I believe in fate. And fate brought us together.”

“Is that what you say to all the women you seduce?” she asked, a hint of bitterness in her voice.

My heart ached for her, for the insecurity that gnawed away at her self-esteem. “You really don’t know how amazing you are, do you?” I insisted. “I’m going to have to keep showing you until you see it for yourself.”

My hands slipped beneath the water, gliding over her soft skin, seeking out her most sensitive spots. But before I could fully explore, she gently pushed my hands away, evading my kiss.

“Tell me,” she said bitterly, her eyes searching mine, “how many other women have you shown just how amazing they are?”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I pulled her close, wrapping my arms around her lithe body and breathing in the scent of her hair. I wanted her to know that I meant every word, but for now, all I could do was hold her.

“Chloe,” I whispered into her ear, feeling her body tense against mine. She seemed to calm down a bit, giving me a small, apologetic smile.

“Sorry,” she murmured, her words barely audible above the gentle sound of water lapping against the sides of the bathtub. “I... I guess I just need some time to get used to all of this.”

“Of course,” I replied softly, my fingertips tracing delicate circles on her back. “Take all the time you need.”

She smiled sadly, her eyes not quite meeting mine. “Maybe later,” she said quietly. “Right now, I think I’m just tired from being outside. I’m not used to so much sun and fresh air, living in this bunker and all.”

“Understandable,” I agreed, giving her a reassuring squeeze. “You’ll acclimate soon enough. So, you’re planning on going outside again tomorrow?”

She hesitated for a moment before nodding. “Yeah, I think I need it. Do you mind?”

“Of course I don’t mind,” I said, warmth filling my voice. “In fact, I’ll join you. It’ll be nice to spend some time outside together.”

Chloe’s eyes widened in alarm, and she shook her head vehemently. “No, you can’t come with me. I need to go alone.”

“Alone?” I frowned, my instincts kicking in. “Why?”

“Because you’re a target, Ethan,” she replied, her tone unconvincing. “It’s not safe for you out there.”

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“Chloe, you’re a target too,” I argued, trying to keep my emotions in check. “I can’t leave you unprotected. Besides, if we stay near the bunker, the probability of someone discovering us is practically nonexistent. I chose this place for a reason.”

She opened her mouth to protest again, but when I raised an eyebrow, demanding an explanation, her words faltered. She sighed, looking defeated. “I just... I want some alone time, okay? Is that too much to ask?”

“Of course not,” I reassured her, my voice softening. “I’ll give you all the space you need here, but I can’t let you go out there alone. It’s too dangerous.”

“Fine!” Chloe snapped as she shoved away from me, her face flushing with anger. “Then I won’t go outside at all!”

Before I could say anything else, she wriggled free from my embrace, water sloshing over the sides of the tub as she stood up. Her auburn hair dripped down her back, and I couldn’t help but admire the way the droplets clung to her curves, even as my heart ached at the sight of her storming away.

Chapter Nine

Chloe

The darkness wrapped around me like a blanket as I lay next to Ethan, listening to the steady rhythm of his breathing. My heart thumped in my chest, guilt gnawing at my insides.

After my tantrum earlier, Ethan didn't try to talk me down, he just gave me space to calm down. It made me feel even worse because even when he was supposed to be mad, he acted perfect. He did everything just right, and it scared me.

Ethan shifted beside me and I froze, holding my breath. His arm draped over my waist, pulling me closer to his warm body. I grimaced, hating how comforting his embrace felt. How could I betray someone who made me feel so safe?

Exactly because of how he made me feel. I was falling for him, but I knew that what we had now wouldn't last once we returned from hiding. When we got back to reality, Ethan would once again be surrounded by the most beautiful and smartest women, vying for his attention. So I just needed to rip it off like a Band-Aid and Pinegrove could be a chance to solve things my way.

"Ethan?" I whispered into the darkness. No response came from his side of the bed. After a few moments of silence, I heard him breathing deeply again. Now was my chance.

I carefully slid out from under his arm, wincing as the cold air hit my skin. The wooden floor creaked under my feet as I tiptoed to the dresser and fumbled around in the dark for the flashlight Ethan kept there.

My fingers closed around the cool metal and I clicked it on, casting a dim glow over the room. Ethan didn't stir.

I tiptoed into the pantry, using the dim light of the flashlight to find my shoes and Ethan's sweatshirt and sweatpants. The soft, worn fabric smelled like Ethan—sandalwood and spice.

I tugged them on and with one last glance towards the bedroom, I crept to the trapdoor, leading out of the bunker and slowly opened it. The hinges squeaked in

protest and I winced.

The bunker hatch was unlocked, making me feel even worse—he trusted me, and here I was, sneaking out behind his back.

Fresh, chilly air greeted me as I climbed out of the bunker and onto the rotting wooden floorboards above. My heart pounded in my chest, fueled by equal parts fear and anticipation.

The woods loomed before me, dark and dense and more than a little frightening. The chilly air seeped through Ethan's warm clothes, making me shiver. I tried to recall the direction of the road from memory and squaring my shoulders, I headed into the trees, the beam of the flashlight guiding my way.

I cautiously stepped over roots and fallen branches as I made my way deeper into the woods. The flashlight's beam danced across the trees, casting eerie shadows that seemed to reach out for me. My breath came out in small puffs, each one hanging in the chilled air before disappearing into the night.

The darkness was oppressive, and the silence was punctuated by the occasional hoot of an owl or rustling leaves.

As I ventured deeper into the woods, the darkness seemed to close in around me. Every rustle, every distant sound sent a shudder down my spine. I wished I could turn back, return to the safety of Ethan's arms, but I couldn't.

It suddenly hit me that in this darkness, finding my way back to the bunker would be almost impossible. Without the dilapidated house as a landmark I didn't even know if I was walking in the right direction toward the road that would lead me to Pinegrove.

Panic rose in my chest at the thought of wandering these woods all night, cold and

afraid. I picked up my pace, nearly jogging as I swung the flashlight around.

There! In the distance, a glint of light off something. I ran toward it, heart pounding.

The beam of my flashlight revealed a metal guardrail, and beyond that, an asphalt road. I nearly cried in relief.

I followed it and soon after the dim glow of streetlights appeared in the distance. The path sloped downhill and Pinegrove came into view, a smattering of houses and shops with only a few lights on at this late hour. I quickened my pace, eager to get off this dark, lonely road.

The cold night air stung my cheeks as I entered the sleepy town, my wet sneakers squelching with every step. After days confined in Ethan's bunker, it felt strange and unfamiliar to see signs of civilization. Streetlights cast pools of yellow on the pavement. Trash bins and mailboxes lined the sidewalks, relics of ordinary life.

With no money or ID, I knew I would have to depend on the kindness of strangers, but most houses were dark, their occupants long asleep. I couldn't knock on doors in the middle of the night. People might think I was a burglar and call the police and I couldn't trust the police.

I walked through the eerily quiet town, my breath visible in the chilly air. Desperation began to gnaw at me as I passed darkened windows, no sign of life anywhere. The weight of loneliness settled on me, and I couldn't help but feel like an intruder in this peaceful, slumbering place.

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As I reached the center of the town, a large building came into view, its lights glowing like a beacon in the darkness. I quickened my pace, approaching the old brick facade.

The library. Of course. My lips curled into a wry smile. If only my high school teachers could see me now, seeking refuge in the halls of learning.

It struck me as odd that a library would be open at this hour, but I desperately needed access to the internet or a phone, and I had no other options.

I slipped through the heavy wooden doors and breathed in the familiar scent of books and coffee. The front desk was deserted, silent except for the soft hum of fluorescent lights overhead. I strained to hear any signs of life, and faint voices reached my ears. Cautiously, I followed the sound, my heart pounding in my chest.

The voices led me to the reading area, where three elderly women sat around one of the numerous tables, playing cards. They noticed me and stopped talking, their eyes fixed on me with suspicion. The woman with silver hair narrowed her eyes, clutching her cards closer, her voice stern and challenging.

“If you’ve come to rob us, young lady, you’ve got another thing coming, sweetheart.”

Before I could respond, another old lady wearing a pink hat intervened. “Now, now, Susan, let’s not jump to conclusions.” She pursed her lips, scrutinizing me over the rims of her glasses. Then her expression softened into a smile. “Well, aren’t you the girl I met in the woods yesterday? What on earth are you doing out at this hour, child?”

Relief flooded over me as I recognized the kind face behind the wheel of that electric Smartcar. “It’s a long story,” I said sheepishly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Nonsense, dear,” she said, her eyes twinkling as she waved me over. “Why don’t you come join us?” She shuffled the deck and began dealing me into the game.

“By the way, I’m Mary,” the elderly lady in the pink hat introduced herself, “and this is Susan,” she gestured to the woman with gray hair, “and Elisabeth.” She indicated the third woman, who smiled at me kindly.

“Mary, Susan, and Elisabeth,” I repeated, taking in the trio of old ladies before me. Mary, with her pink hat perched atop a riot of white curls, exuded warmth and friendliness. Susan, her gray hair pulled back into a tight bun, had an air of sternness that was betrayed by the twinkle in her eyes. Elisabeth, the most glamorous of the three, wore a blonde wig styled in loose waves, her bright red lipstick making a bold statement even at this late hour.

“Exactly,” Mary said with a smile. “We find it hard to fall asleep as we grow older, so we call ourselves the Insomniacs. Our lovely librarian, Jess, allows us to gather here at night sometimes, to pass the time.”

As if on cue, a young woman appeared from behind a bookshelf, her short chestnut hair framing a face that radiated quiet strength. “Hi, I’m Jess,” she said, extending a hand to me. “I hope these ladies haven’t given you too much trouble.”

“Nice to meet you, Jess,” I replied, shaking her hand. “Actually, they’ve been incredibly kind. I’m Chloe. I hate to impose, but I was wondering if there’s a phone or computer I could use? It’s urgent.”

“Of course,” Jess nodded, but before she could say anything else, Susan interjected.

“Wait a minute, young lady. Where are you from? Why are you wearing men’s clothes? What happened to your cellphone? And what’s with the flashlight?”

“Really, Susan,” Mary chided, cutting her off. “We shouldn’t stick our noses in other people’s business.”

“Fine,” Susan huffed, turning back to her game. “I just think it’s odd, is all. This whole situation seems peculiar if you ask me.”

“Simple-minded people can’t comprehend the beauty of mystery,” Elisabeth chimed in, A smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “Some of us appreciate a little mystery in life.”

Susan scoffed. “Beauty of mystery, indeed! This isn’t one of your plays, Elisabeth.”

“Neither is it one of your classrooms, Susan,” Mary added with a grin.

“Hey, you must be freezing,” Jess said, grabbing my hand and leading me away from the table. “Come on, let’s get you some hot tea to warm up.”

As Jess prepared the hot tea, she looked over at me with a gentle smile. “The Insomniacs are a nice bunch, but they can talk forever,” she said, pouring the steaming liquid into a ceramic mug. “Something tells me you’re in a hurry.”

“Thank you,” I said gratefully, curling my hands around the mug. The heat seeped into my skin, bringing my numb fingers back to life. “Sorry for intruding.”

“Nothing to apologize for,” Jess replied, shaking her head. “You must have your reasons, and I won’t pry. Just let me know if you’re in trouble.”

“No, it’s nothing like that, but thank you,” I murmured gratefully. Curiosity bubbled

inside me as I took a sip of the tea. “What brings you here so late at night?”

Jess sighed, glancing back at the table where the three old ladies still chatted animatedly. “The mayoral election is coming up, and there’s this one candidate I don’t want winning. I’m researching ways to support the other candidate.”

I sensed there was more to the story, but decided not to push further. I ducked my head, staring into the mug. “I need to use a phone, if you don’t mind.”

“Here,” Jess said, handing me the landline phone she had fetched from behind the counter.

“Thank you. You’ve all been so kind.”

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Jess waved a hand. “Small towns, you know. We have to stick together. Now, drink up and make your call. I’ll keep the Insomniacs occupied if you need some privacy.”

Jess left and I dialed Damon’s number with trembling fingers. The phone rang once, twice, three times—no answer. Panic crept into my chest, tightening its grip on my lungs. The soft glow of dawn was beginning to filter through the library windows, and I knew I needed to get back to the bunker before Ethan noticed my absence.

What if he didn’t answer? What if—

“Hello?”

Relief flooded me at the sound of Damon’s voice. “It’s me.”

“Chloe!” The relief in his tone mirrored my own. “Thank God. Where the hell have you been?”

“Listen, I don’t have time to explain,” I cut him off, my voice shaking from a mix of cold and urgency. “There was an attempt on Ethan’s life, it was his bodyguards and the police were involved too! We’re hiding not far from Pinegrove. I need you to look into the ongoing bidding for government contracts for PharmaB—its competitors might be connected to the people behind the attack.”

Damon sucked in a sharp breath. “What? Are you serious?”

“Dead serious.” I glanced over my shoulder at the Insomniacs, but they seemed fully occupied arguing over a hand of rummy. “We’re in hiding right now. I managed to

slip away to call you.”

“Chloe, you’re not making any sense—” Damon began, but I couldn’t let him continue.

“Promise me you won’t tell anyone about this call,” I pleaded, gripping the phone tightly. “Not even the authorities. I’ll call you in a couple of days for an update.”

“Chloe—” he started again, but I hung up before he could say anything else. Time was running out.

I thanked Jess again for her help as I headed for the library doors. “You’re welcome back any time,” she said with a warm smile. “And good luck.”

“Thank you,” I said softly. “Have a good night, Jess. You too, ladies!” I added, waving to the Insomniacs. Mary and Elisabeth waved back cheerfully while Susan sniffed, but even she gave me a little wave.

Stepping outside, I shivered in the chilly pre-dawn air. I had a long trek ahead of me, and not much time. The sky was gradually lightening, an eerie mix of purples and blues signaling the approach of morning. I set off down the empty street at a jog, the bunker hatch already rising in my mind.

I couldn’t help but be grateful for the growing light as it made finding my way back to the bunker a lot easier.

The abandoned house came into view as the sky lightened in the east. I rushed down the ladder and closed the hatch behind me, hurrying to the hall. My heart caught in my throat when I heard Ethan moving around in the bedroom.

I crept to the bathroom and quickly shucked off my clothes and jumped in the

shower. The sound of running water filled the air as I let the warm spray cascade over me just as Ethan walked in.

“Chloe?” Ethan’s voice, rough with sleep. “I was worried about you when I woke up alone.”

I poked my head around the curtain, going for nonchalance. “Sorry, I didn’t want to wake you. I thought I’d take a shower.”

Ethan searched my face, the tension in his body betraying his suspicion. And then his eyes flicked down to the floor where my clothes sat discarded.

“Why are your shoes wet?”

Chapter Ten

Chloe

“God, Chloe, you’re such a klutz sometimes,” I muttered to myself, trying to keep my voice from trembling. I looked at Ethan, feigning annoyance. “I must have forgotten to close the curtain when I turned on the water, and it must have splashed onto them.”

Ethan frowned, his piercing green eyes searching my face. I held my breath, praying he couldn’t see the lie in my eyes. “Why did you bring your shoes in at all?”

“I wanted to go outside for some fresh air. I’m sorry about yesterday. I was hoping we could go for a walk, if that’s okay with you.” My fingers fidgeted nervously as I waited for his response.

“Of course, Chloe. There’s nothing to apologize for. I’ll be happy to accompany you outside.” Ethan’s eyes softened, and I felt a wave of relief wash over me. “I also need

to check on the motion detectors in the old house.”

Relief flooded me as the tension eased from my body. He believed me. I wasn’t sure how long I could keep up these lies, but for now I was safe.

Ethan scooped up my soggy shoes. “I’ll put these on the water heater. They’ll be dry in no time.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead before leaving the bathroom, my shoes in hand.

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“Thanks, Ethan.” I watched him leave the bathroom, my legs suddenly feeling weak.

As soon as he was gone, I slid down the shower wall, my knees buckling. That was too close. If Ethan had realized I left the bunker last night, I didn’t know how I would have explained it. I had to be more careful. I only needed to keep up the act for a couple more days until me and Damon found a way to publicly expose Ethan’s assailants.

I knew that Ethan would never agree to this and I had to hide my work from him until we found the criminals. Until then I would make the most of these last few days with Ethan. Even if it was all a fantasy, I would let myself indulge in the fairytale a little while longer.

The hot water sluiced over my skin, washing away the tiredness that clung to my bones. I kept alternating between scalding and icy, trying to shock my senses awake. It wasn’t a perfect solution, but it would have to do. After last night’s expedition, I needed all the energy I could muster to keep up appearances in front of Ethan.

As I stepped out of the shower and dried myself off, I noticed that Ethan’s hoodie and sweatpants I had worn last night were covered in dirt from the forest. How could I have been so careless? Luckily, he hadn’t seen the dirt or the flashlight beneath the clothes. I couldn’t afford any more mistakes.

Feeling like a criminal, I carried the dirty clothes and flashlight with me to the pantry, which also housed the laundry basket. Burying the clothes deep in the bin, I hoped they wouldn’t be discovered before I could get them cleaned. I left the flashlight on a shelf, trying to make it look as inconspicuous as possible. I grabbed a fresh set of

Ethan's clothes—a t-shirt and sweatpants—and quickly changed into them.

As I left the pantry, a delicious smell greeted me. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and eggs with bacon wafted through the air, making my stomach rumble in anticipation.

In the kitchen, Ethan was busy at the stove, wearing an apron over his shirt and trousers. My heart did a little flip flop. The apron clung to his athletic frame, accentuating the muscles rippling under his clothes. He looked incredibly sexy, completely at ease in this unexpected domestic setting. How was it possible for any man to look that sexy while cooking eggs?

"Coffee?" He nodded at the mug waiting on the counter.

"You're a lifesaver." I took a deep drink, relishing the burst of warmth and energy that spread through me.

"That I am," he said, flashing me a warm smile. "Your breakfast is ready."

"Thank you, Ethan." I leaned in to peck him on the cheek before taking a seat at the small table. A plate of eggs with bacon was waiting for me, and without waiting for him, I dug into the food. The first bite of bacon melted in my mouth, salty and crisp. The eggs were fluffy and perfect. I moaned in appreciation, feeling the caffeine and food already reviving me after the sleepless night.

Ethan's foot nudged mine under the table in response and a surge of affection for this man swept over me, mingled with a pang of sadness. In a different life, this could have been ours: lazy mornings together, sharing meals and conversation. But that life wasn't meant to be. I pushed the thought away, focusing on the present.

"This is amazing," I said between bites. "I still can't believe that a billionaire can be

such a good cook. You turned simple eggs into a delicacy.”

“There’s nothing simple about eggs,” Ethan said, watching me eat with an amused smile. “You can boil them, fry them, scramble them, simmer them, poach them. There are egg curries, frittatas, egg tarts and a thousand other dishes, each with their own nuances. I wish you could try the shakshuka my personal chef makes—it’s an experience so divine you’d swear you died and went to heaven with every bite.”

I laughed again and shook my head. “You seem really passionate about cooking. I could never learn.”

He smirked and leaned in close, his green eyes gleaming with mischief. “Not as passionate as you make me feel, Chloe,” he whispered.

Heat flooded my cheeks. I ducked my head, unable to prevent a smile creep across my face. “Oh, stop.”

He tipped my chin up, gazing at me with a smoldering look. “I won’t stop until you admit you enjoy my passion.”

I squirmed, acutely aware of his leg caressing mine under the table. “Fine, I enjoy your passion. There, are you happy now?”

“Very.” His lips curved. “And since you enjoy my passion so much, how about I teach you to cook? It’s not some esoteric art form.”

“I don’t know about that. Cooking is like chemistry and I am more of a ‘forgot my homework at home’ kind of gal.”

“Trust me,” Ethan replied, straightening up and giving me a reassuring smile. “It’s not nearly as complicated as people think, it’s all about little tricks.” His gaze turned

sly. “Of course, the company also helps.”

“Smooth talker,” I said, unable to stop smiling.

“Another astute observation,” he smirked. “But really, it’s actually quite fun, and I’d be more than happy to teach you.”

I hesitated, then gave in with a rueful sigh. “All right, chef. Teach me your ways, oh wise one.”

Ethan’s grin widened. He took off his apron and settled it over my shoulders, leaning down to press a soft kiss to my neck as he tied the strings behind my back. The sensation sent a jolt of energy through me, making me feel more alive and invigorated than even the coffee had managed.

“We’ll start with something simple,” Ethan murmured against my skin. “Like bacon and eggs.”

I don’t know how, but even ‘bacon and eggs’ sounded exciting coming from him.

“First things first,” Ethan began, guiding me towards the stove. “The oven is still hot, so we can start with the bacon.”

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Ethan showed me how to line a baking sheet with parchment paper and lay out eight strips of bacon in a single layer. “We only have canned bacon here, but it will work. Just arrange it so the slices aren’t overlapping.”

“Sounds easy enough,” I replied, doing as he instructed. “So far, so good. Maybe I can handle this cooking thing after all.”

“See? You’re a natural,” he encouraged me, setting the timer for 15 minutes once I placed the baking sheet in the oven. “Now, let’s move on to the eggs. First, crack four eggs into a bowl, then add a quarter cup of heavy cream, salt, pepper, and—” he paused for dramatic effect as he reached for the spice rack “—the secret ingredient: nutmeg.”

“Really? Nutmeg?” I raised my eyebrows.

“A little nutmeg goes a long way.” Ethan grinned, dropping a pinch into the bowl. “Cooking isn’t magic or voodoo. It’s about the little touches that transform an ordinary dish into something sublime.”

“Okay, Mr. Ramsey, what’s next?”

“Now it’s time to whisk the eggs,” Ethan instructed, his voice taking on a gentle, guiding tone. I tried my best to mimic the technique he showed me, but my clumsy wrists just couldn’t seem to get it right.

“Here, let me help you,” Ethan whispered, suddenly behind me, his muscular body pressing against my back. His strong arms wrapped around mine as he gently took

hold of my hands, guiding them in the perfect whisking motion. His lips found my neck, kissing a trail up to my earlobe. A delicious shiver ran through me, banishing all thoughts of Pinegrove, the Insomniacs, and my conversation with Damon.

“See? It’s all in the wrist,” he murmured, his lips brushing against my earlobe. As I continued to whisk under his guidance, I felt his hands beginning to wander, exploring my hips and teasing at the sides of my breasts.

“Hey!” I playfully slapped his hands away. “You’re supposed to be teaching me how to cook, not taking advantage of your position.”

“My apologies.” His voice was a low rumble by my ear. “I can’t help myself with such a tempting student.” His hands slid around my waist, fingers splaying over my hips. “What will make you reconsider your stance on impropriety?”

“Maybe I’ll reconsider if these eggs turn out to be as good as you say,” I teased back, feeling more alive and present than I had in days despite going for more than twenty-four hours without sleep. Ethan grinned and stepped up his game, heating a skillet and melting a generous pat of butter in it.

“Alright then, pour the egg mixture into the skillet,” he instructed and I tipped the bowl, watching as the egg mixture cascaded into the heated skillet with a sizzle. The smell of butter and quickly cooking eggs filled the air, rich and savory. My stomach rumbled in anticipation even though I just ate.

Ethan nodded at the oven. “Flip the bacon. It should be getting crisp.”

I pulled the baking sheet from the oven, the rich aroma of sizzling bacon filling the kitchen air. “Mmm, I could eat this right now,” I said, my mouth watering at the sight and smell.

“Patience, Chloe,” Ethan replied teasingly. “The bacon needs to be crumbled. Besides, I’ve got some bacon of my own,” he added, giving my backside a playful squeeze.

“Are you calling me a pig?” I tried for indignation but couldn’t hold back a laugh.

“Never. You’re simply delicious.” Ethan raised his hands in mock surrender before returning his attention to the skillet. “The eggs are nearly set. Set the bacon on the counter, shred a quarter cup of cheddar and sprinkle it over.”

I did as directed, the cheese melting into gooey strands over the eggs. Ethan crumbled the bacon with a spatula and passed me the plate. “Add the final touch.”

I sprinkled the bacon over the cheese. “Like so?”

“Perfect.” Ethan brushed a congratulatory kiss over my lips. “Well done, chef. Our masterpiece is complete.”

Ethan cut the eggs into wedges and placed one on my plate. “Careful, it’s hot.”

I blew on it before taking a bite. Flavor exploded in my mouth—rich egg, savory bacon, sharp cheddar, creamy cheese tinged with just a hint of nutmeg—the secret ingredient. It was heaven.

“I can’t believe I made this,” I said, genuinely shocked at how good it tasted. “I never thought I could cook something so amazing.”

“Here, let me try,” Ethan said, picking up another wedge and taking a bite. He closed his eyes and moaned exaggeratedly. “Chloe, your bacon and eggs are even better than mine!”

“Stop it, you’re just saying that,” I playfully punched him in the shoulder, surprised by the firmness of his muscle beneath my fingertips.

“Seriously, you did an amazing job,” he insisted, his voice sincere. “Remember, you can do anything if you put your mind to it. That’s all there is to it.”

His praise filled me with warmth. I knew this idyllic interlude wouldn’t last but for a moment I allowed myself to forget about everything else and simply bask in the happiness of our little kitchen scene.

“So, does this mean I get to be sous chef again?”

“Anytime.” Ethan finished his eggs and set down his fork. “I need to get some tools from the storage room, then we can go outside if you like,” he said, disappearing towards the storage room.

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I got up to retrieve my shoes from the pantry but stopped halfway, remembering the mess we'd left behind while cooking. It felt wrong to leave it there, especially when this bunker had begun to feel like a real home. I knew I shouldn't think of it that way, but I couldn't help it.

I busied myself cleaning the kitchen, washing the dishes and wiping down the counters. By the time Ethan returned, the room was spotless. He held a toolbox in one hand and a pair of his sneakers in the other.

"Your shoes aren't quite dry yet," he told me, handing me his own footwear. "Try these on."

I slipped my feet into the oversized sneakers, laughing as they flopped around comically. "I feel like a leprechaun wearing these."

"You look adorable." Ethan tweaked my nose. "The sexiest leprechaun I've ever seen."

"Ha ha." I swatted at him as laughter shook my shoulders. Ethan caught my hand and led me across the hall to the hatch.

Ethan climbed out of the hatch first, his toolbox in hand, then reached down to help me up. Sunlight dappled the forest floor, a sea of green as far as the eye could see. The air was fresh and birds chirped merrily in the treetops. As we stepped out of the dilapidated house I could see Ethan was enjoying the fresh air just as much as I was.

I breathed deep, reveling in the simple pleasure of being outside again. "Did you miss

this? The sun, the woods...”

“Not at all.” Ethan drew me close, his eyes glowing. “You’re all the sunlight I need.”

Heat rose in my cheeks. I averted my gaze, but not before noticing a footprint in the mud right behind Ethan. My footprint, left last night when I ventured out alone. If Ethan saw it, he’d know I’d been outside while he slept. I had to distract him, fast.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. As our lips met, I maneuvered us around so my back was to the footprint. By the time we parted, I made sure to trample over the footprint with Ethan’s shoes.

“Let’s go on a walk,” I suggested, carefully stepping over the incriminating footprint one more time just in case.

“Sure,” Ethan agreed, squeezing my hand. “But first, let me check the sensors.”

Setting his toolbox down, he pulled out a pair of pliers and began working on a small device hidden in a crack in the wall. I watched, heart pounding, as he connected some electronic device with a small screen to the plug inside the open sensor and checked something on the screen.

“What are you doing?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Last night there was movement detected outside,” he explained. “I want to make sure the sensors aren’t malfunctioning.”

My stomach dropped. The sensors must have picked up my movements when I snuck out. Trying to think fast, I offered a possible explanation. “Could it have been an animal?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Most likely,” Ethan replied, sliding the sensor back into the crack in the wall. He walked over to another part of the wall, beginning his inspection on a second sensor. “It’s just strange because there’s a small town not too far from here, and animals usually don’t come this close to human settlements.”

My heart skipped a beat. He was talking about Pinegrove. I almost blurted out a question about it but managed to stop myself just in time. Instead, I changed the subject. “Why don’t you have security cameras monitoring the area? Wouldn’t that be more effective than just motion sensors?”

Ethan paused, looking up from the sensor. “Cameras require too much maintenance when I’m away. But you raise a good point.” His eyes glinted with interest. “Now that I am here, installing a few cameras couldn’t hurt. I have some spare equipment in storage we could set up.”

Panic flooded me. Cameras would make leaving the bunker impossible without getting caught. Why the hell did I have to bring them up?

“I don’t know,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant. “Cameras seem like overkill when it’s probably just some stray fox or raccoon passing through. And if it’s not, the motion sensors should detect anything serious, right?”

Ethan studied me, his gaze piercing. I fought not to squirm under the intensity of it. After a few tense seconds, he shrugged. “Even if it is just a stray animal, I don’t mind meeting the neighbors. Besides, I didn’t have a chance to work with my hands for quite a while, this will be fun. I think I will install a couple of cameras tomorrow.”

Fuck.

“Great,” I said, attempting to hide my anxiety. “Sounds like a solid plan.”

Chapter Eleven

Chloe

The opening image of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* flickered across the screen, casting a pale glow over Ethan's face. His arm was wrapped around my shoulders, pulling me close against his side, but I couldn't focus on the movie or enjoy the warmth of his embrace.

Like Madeline in the film, I was lying to the man I cared for. But I was no femme fatale, and I planned to help Ethan. He wouldn't end up like Scottie; he'd forget about me as soon as this was over and if I ever see him again it would be on the cover of some gossip magazine with some starlet on his arm.

"Have you seen this film before?" Ethan asked, his deep voice rumbling against my ear.

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“Uh, yeah,” I replied automatically, barely registering his question. My mind was foggy, and exhaustion weighed heavily on me after almost 36 hours without sleep. Tonight would be another restless night, as it would be my last opportunity to sneak out of the bunker without Ethan noticing. I silently cursed myself for planting the idea of installing cameras tomorrow; once they were in place, there’d be no leaving without his knowledge.

But the worst realization was that this was our final evening together. I was surprised by how much sadness that brought. I snuggled deeper into Ethan’s arms, breathing in his scent and stroking the hard muscle under his shirt. My hands seemed to move of their own accord, desperate to memorize every inch of him.

“Are you enjoying the movie?” he asked, clearly sensing my distraction.

I didn’t answer, just tilted my head up and pressed my lips to his. Ethan responded immediately, kissing me with a hunger that stole my breath. His lips trailed over my cheek and down my neck, igniting my skin.

He paused the movie, the image of Madeline lying in bed now frozen on the screen. The only light in the theater came from that pale glow.

We were sprawled across the red velvet divan, hands roaming and exploring each other’s bodies. A shiver of desire ran through me as Ethan’s fingers slipped under my shirt, his touch like a brand against my skin.

“I want you so much, Chloe,” he whispered, voice husky with need.

A mix of sadness and guilt washed over me, but my desire for him was overpowering. I gave in, hoping to chase away the thoughts that threatened to consume me.

“Make me forget,” I whispered against his lips, pleading with him to take away the pain of our imminent separation. The separation he didn’t see coming.

“Tonight, it’s just us, Chloe,” he promised, his voice filled with raw passion. “Let me make you feel loved, wanted, and cherished.”

I pushed Ethan onto his back, straddling his hips as I began unbuttoning his shirt. His gaze smoldered up at me, hands running over my thighs and hips as more of his muscular chest was revealed. With each button undone, I kissed the exposed skin, my lips lingering on the ridges of his muscles. The intoxicating scent of him filled my nostrils, and I couldn’t help but lick and taste his powerful body.

“Chloe...” he groaned as I felt his cock harden against me through his trousers. His strong hands pulled me closer for a searing kiss, our tongues dancing in a passionate tango.

When our lips parted, I leaned down to place a line of kisses over his collarbone and down between his pecs. His skin was warm under my lips, salty with a hint of cologne. I licked at the ridges of his abs, relishing the way his stomach tensed under my tongue.

Ethan groaned, the sound vibrating through me. His erection strained against his pants, pressing into my core. Need coiled in my belly, hot and insistent.

“I want to see your beautiful body,” he whispered, his green eyes filled with desire. His hands slid under my shirt, slowly dragging the material up and over my head.

For a moment, he just stared up at me, eyes dark with desire. I fought not to squirm under the intensity of that gaze, heat flooding my cheeks.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured, fingers splaying over my ribs. “The way you make me feel...” He shook his head. “You undo me, Chloe Collins.”

My heart clenched at the tenderness in his tone. I surged down to capture his lips in a searing kiss, conveying all the emotions I couldn’t voice.

We were both panting by the time I pulled back. Ethan’s hands had drifted to my ass, squeezing and kneading the flesh. I ground my hips against his, desperate for more contact.

In one smooth move, Ethan flipped us over so I was pinned beneath him on the divan. His pupils were blown wide with lust as he stared down at me, chest heaving.

“I want to taste you,” he growled, sliding down my body. His fingers curled under the waistband of my sweatpants and tugged, dragging the material over my hips and down my legs, leaving me exposed and vulnerable. Cool air hit my soaked core, and I moaned in anticipation. He took a moment to appreciate the sight of my glistening wet pussy. “You’re more delicious than any wine I’ve ever tasted,” he said, his voice raspy with lust.

Ethan’s hot breath ghosted over my thighs, his lips and tongue laving a path inward. My fingers tangled in his hair, desperate to anchor myself as my arousal grew with each tender touch. I could feel his kisses on my sensitive flesh, teasing me as he moved closer and closer to my aching need.

“Please, Ethan,” I whimpered as I buried my hands in his hair, trying to urge him closer to where I needed him most. But he playfully resisted, his hands adding to my desire by squeezing my breasts and rolling my hard nipples between his fingers.

“Patience, Chloe,” he murmured, the sound vibrating against my sensitive skin. “I want to savor every moment with you.” His hands slid under my ass, squeezing and kneading the flesh.

Now Ethan’s lips traced lazy circles around my pussy, teasing me with featherlight touches. I dug my heels into the floor and arched my back, silently begging for more.

He continued to tease me, his kisses and licks dancing around my pussy lips until I was a quivering mess beneath him. My arousal grew with each press of his lips, my whole body thrumming with need. Closer and closer his mouth moved until he was kissing and nibbling at my slick folds. Finally giving in to my desperate pleas, he placed a soft kiss directly on my clit, sending an electric shock through my entire body.

Waves of pleasure crashed over me, intensifying with each stroke of Ethan’s tongue. I writhed beneath him, desperate for release and yet never wanting this exquisite torture to end.

Ethan gripped my thighs, holding me in place as his tongue moved faster. Left, right, up, down. My breaths came in short gasps, each flick of his tongue winding the coil of need inside me tighter and tighter.

“Don’t stop,” I moaned, tangling my fingers in his dark hair. “Please, don’t stop.”

My breath hitched as Ethan’s tongue traced intricate patterns on my clit, his skillful movements sending shivers of ecstasy through my body.

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“God, Ethan,” I whimpered, fingers tightening in his hair. “That feels so good. Please don’t stop!”

His tongue danced even faster over my sensitive flesh, and my entire body shook with pleasure. Suddenly, Ethan plunged two fingers into my slick entrance, making me gasp at the delightful invasion. He began a ‘come hither’ motion inside of me, hitting just the right spot, and it felt more intense than anything I’d ever experienced.

And then the coil snapped.

The dual sensations of his mouth and hands were too much—my orgasm slammed into me, stealing my breath and leaving me trembling in its wake. My body convulsed beneath him, and Ethan kissed his way back up my body, enveloping me in his arms. I clung to him, still shaking from the force of my climax.

“You’re exquisite when you come,” he murmured, brushing a kiss over my temple.

I blinked up at him, still dazed. “You made me come before you even took your clothes off. Again.”

Ethan grinned. “You’re the star of this show, Chloe. I’m just here to put you in the spotlight where you belong.”

Warmth flooded my cheeks as I realized how much I cared for him and I pulled him down for a kiss, desire flaring to life once more. My hands wandered down his chest and lower, finding the hard length straining against his pants. I fumbled with his belt, frustration mounting as I struggled to get him free.

Finally I gave up, grabbing his erection through the fabric. “Give it to me, Ethan,” I demanded breathlessly.

Ethan’s eyes darkened with lust as he freed himself in one swift move, exposing his impressive length.

I licked my lips in anticipation.

I pushed Ethan onto his back, my fingers digging into the taut muscles of his thighs as I marveled at his imposing erection. It pulsed in rhythm with his heartbeat, straining towards me like a stallion ready to charge. Desperate to taste him, I wrapped my fingers around his thick shaft.

“No hands,” Ethan said with a playful slap to my wrists.

Obediently I withdrew my hands, leaning down to press a kiss to the base of his shaft. I worked my way up slowly, teasing licks from the base to the swollen head of his cock, reveling in each gasp and groan I pulled from Ethan’s lips. By the time I reached the head, his fingers were twisted tightly in my hair, hips jerking as he fought for control.

I quickly learned what drove him wild—focusing my attention just below the crown of his magnificent length. “Chloe, your mouth is heaven... No one has ever made me feel this good.”

My eyes flicked up to meet his gaze, and I saw the raw desire burning in those emerald depths. Emboldened, I took him fully into my mouth, using my lips to give him every ounce of pleasure I could muster and relaxing my throat to take as much of his length as possible. My lips stretched wide around his girth as I set a demanding pace, hollowing my cheeks on each upstroke.

As I sucked him faster and faster, Ethan's breathing grew ragged and his moans louder and more frequent, his grip in my hair turning almost painful. I could feel his balls drawing up, signaling his impending release.

But just as I felt him swell and tense up, he gripped my hair and pulled me off of him, leaving me panting. I looked up at him in confusion.

"Chloe," he panted, his voice strained with unreleased passion, "not like this. I want to be inside you when I come."

Scooping me up effortlessly in his strong arms, he carried me through the darkness of the bunker and into the luxurious bedroom that had become our sanctuary.

I felt safe and cherished as he held me, the heat of his body warming my skin. Laying me down on the plush bed, he looked at me with an intensity that made my heart race. "A queen's place is on her king's bed," he whispered, his lips trailing along the curve of my neck as he positioned himself over me.

Our bodies pressed together, my hands roamed greedily over his body, squeezing his muscular back and groping his firm ass. He groaned into my mouth as we kissed, deep and hungry and wet. "You have no idea how much I want you," he whispered.

His fingers tangled in my auburn hair as he aligned himself with my entrance, teasing my sensitive flesh.

And then he was inside me, filling me, stretching me, piercing my body with ecstasy.

"Ethan!" I cried out, my fingernails digging into his back.

He began to move, thrusting into me wildly, brutally, slamming me into the mattress.

“God, you feel incredible,” Ethan rasped, his hips moving with reckless abandon. I couldn’t help but cry out at the intensity of it all, the pleasure and pain mingling together in a dizzying whirlwind.

“Your body was made for me, Chloe,” he whispered huskily, his smoldering green eyes locked onto mine. “I can’t get enough of you... your soft curves, your perfect breasts...” His hand gripped one possessively, a wicked grin spreading across his face as I gasped.

Desperate to silence him, I pulled his face down to mine and kissed him fiercely, our tongues tangling together as he continued to fuck me hard and fast. The world narrowed to the feel of him inside me, the fierce possessiveness in his touch.

Being with Ethan like this, being claimed and possessed by him so completely, was the best feeling in the world. His hands roamed my body, squeezing and groping at random, needing to touch every part of me.

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“Your body is amazing,” he rasped. “If I could, I would fuck every single inch of you.”

“Show me that perfect ass, Chloe,” Ethan growled as he pulled out of me. I complied without hesitation, turning over on all fours and arching my back, presenting my ass to him. For the first time in my life, I felt absolutely no inhibitions. In his presence, I was fully comfortable in my own body, knowing that he desired me exactly as I was.

Ethan grabbed my ass with a possessive grip and I gasped as he slid into me, burying himself to the hilt with one hard thrust. He reached deeper inside me than ever before, every movement sending shivers through my body.

“You feel so good,” Ethan rasped, his fingertips gently traced the curve of my spine, making me quiver with pleasure. He pulled back slowly only to slam forward again, punching a cry from my lips.

I braced myself against the headboard, pushing back to meet each punishing stroke. The coil of pleasure inside me wound tighter and tighter until I thought I might shatter into a million pieces.

“Please,” I sobbed. “Let me come!”

Ethan’s hand came down on my rear in a sharp smack. “Not until I say.”

With a sudden flip, he turned me on my back, positioning himself between my legs once more. We locked our eyes on each other as he entered me again. His mouth found mine, and as we kissed passionately, he whispered against my lips, “Now come

for me, Chloe,” his voice a low growl. “Come on my cock.”

At his command, my orgasm crashed over me in a blinding wave of ecstasy. I screamed his name, clinging to him as I came and came, floating in a sea of pleasure.

With a few more powerful thrusts, Ethan followed me over the edge, spilling himself inside me. He collapsed on top of me, burying me under his weight, both of us panting and trembling in the aftermath.

The weight of his body was a pleasant sensation, anchoring me to the present moment. As I lay there, my arms wrapped around his sweat-slicked body, my thoughts wandered to the practicalities of my imminent departure: the flashlight I had left in the pantry, my shoes that were probably dry by now, and everything else I needed to leave and never return.

Chapter Twelve

Chloe

The damp cold seeped into my bones as I trudged down the dark, winding forest path, my flashlight casting eerie shadows on the trees. My shoes squelched with every step, but this time the discomfort was a welcome distraction from the dull sensation in my chest. I had left Ethan in the bunker, asleep and unaware of my departure. It hurt to leave him like that, but it was better this way. Better for me, at least. Better to walk away now, on my own terms, before he grew tired of me and cast me aside for someone younger, prettier...better.

An animal darted across the beam of my flashlight.

I didn't even flinch.

Exhaustion had sunk deep into my muscles; all I could feel was the emptiness inside.

After what seemed like hours, I finally emerged onto a paved road. As I crested a hill, the lights of Pinegrove flickered in the distance, a beacon of hope. My eyes scanned the quaint buildings, searching for the public library. The lit windows told me Jess would be there, and she'd let me use the phone to call Damon. He had to have something, some piece of information that could end this.

I entered the town. It was as empty as before, only streetlights glowing in the dark. So quaint and picturesque. What would it be like to grow up and live in a place like this? Maybe I never would have met Ethan—billionaires' interests didn't typically intersect with small-town life, after all.

I hurried through the empty streets until I reached the library entrance. Mary's Smartcar parked outside brought a small smile to my face; the Insomniacs were inside.

The heavy door of the library creaked open, and I stepped inside. Warm air and the familiar scent of aging books enveloped me. In the reading area ahead, I could hear the Insomniacs bickering and laughing, their voices like a comforting melody: Mary, Elisabeth and even grumpy Susan.

They sat at the same table as before, cards in hand, just as I remembered them.

Mary glanced up first, her pink hat askew.

"Ah, our mysterious Chloe returns!" she exclaimed. Elisabeth waved with theatric grace and even Susan cracked a sly half-smile and a nod. "What brings you back to our little gathering?"

"Hello, everyone," I greeted them warmly. Their presence distracted from the hole in

my heart just a little bit, but even this distraction was welcome.

Susan's eyes narrowed slightly as she looked me up and down.

"Chloe, if you're going to keep traipsing through the woods at night, you really ought to invest in some proper shoes," she grumbled. Her brow furrowed with concern, but her eyes twinkled.

"Hush, you old gossip!" Elisabeth swatted her arm.

"I'm just giving her some advice," Susan retorted. "No need to get all huffy about it."

"So you weren't trying to provoke Chloe into telling you about her business, were you?" Mary said, putting down her cards.

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Susan opened her mouth to reply but Elisabeth took the initiative. “Enough about that, Chloe, come join us!” she trilled, patting the empty chair beside her. Her blonde wig was slightly askew, and the pink feather boa around her neck had seen better days, but her smile radiated warmth.

I started toward them, but then Jess popped up from behind a bookshelf and waved me over. I hesitated for a moment and Mary picked up her cards and smiled. “Go do your business, girl, we are not going anywhere. And let her make you a nice warm cup of tea, you look like you could use it.”

Jess gave me a warm smile when I approached, but she looked tired, her shoulders slumped and movements slow. “You must be here for the phone again,” she teased. “But I’ll only let you use it if you promise to drink some tea first. Doctor’s orders. You look half-frozen!”

I smiled back, warmth flooding my chilled body. “Well, the doctor’s orders seem to match Mary’s, so I guess I have no choice!”

As Jess busied herself preparing a cup of chamomile tea, curiosity got the better of me, “So, how’s your mission to sabotage the evil candidate going?”

Jess snorted. “He’s not evil, just... very rich and accustomed to getting his way. And that’s not what Pinegrove needs.” She handed me the tea, her fingers brushing mine.

So, billionaires’ interests do intersect with small-town life after all. “I think I know someone like that... but I never thought people of this caliber could be interested in a place like Pinegrove,” I admitted.

“Neither did we,” Jess said with a sigh. “But sometimes, money and power find their way into even the smallest corners of the world. I just hope it won’t come to anything serious.”

“Hey, if you need any help, just let me know,” I offered. “I’m an investigative journalist. Maybe I can dig up something on him.”

“Thank you, Chloe,” Jess replied, her eyes filled with gratitude. “Hopefully it won’t come to that, but it’s good to know that we have a friend in our corner. Now that you drank your tea like a good girl, I’ll let you have some privacy.”

With that, she gestured towards the phone and disappeared behind the shelves.

I set down my empty teacup and reached for the phone. It was time to call Damon. My pulse raced with equal parts anticipation and dread—what had he uncovered, and what did it mean for me and Ethan?

“Hey, Chloe! I was hoping you’d call,” this time Damon answered on the first ring, sounding almost as excited as I felt. “I’ve been on this case all day, and I think I found something.”

“What is it?” I gripped the phone tighter, my knuckles turning white.

“So among other things I started looking into the bodyguards who worked for Ethan, and I found two of them openly mentioning it on their social media... and both of them posted about some fancy stuff they bought last week, right before you met with Ethan. One guy actually bought a custom muscle car—so I called up the shop pretending to be his bookkeeper, and they forwarded me the invoice. Turns out it was paid for by Baura Incorporated, a shell company owned by Gradia International—which is one of Ethan’s main competitors in regards to the government contract PharmaB is involved in.”

“Gradia?” My eyes widened. “As in, the biggest medical equipment manufacturer in the country?”

“The very same,” Damon confirmed grimly. “It looks like they may have been involved in the attempt on your lives.”

“This is huge, Damon. We’ve got them. Okay, here’s what we’ll do,” I slumped into the nearest armchair, my legs turning to jelly. “I’ll make a public statement on camera, telling everyone about the attempt on our lives at Ethan’s home and how the police were involved. Mention Gradia’s involvement, and they won’t dare come after us again—it would only implicate them further.”

“Sounds like a solid plan to me,” Damon agreed. “And then we can proceed with a proper investigation. Are you still in Pinegrove?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“I’ll come pick you up, and we can film your statement at the office. I’ve got everything ready to go. It should take me about four hours to get to Pinegrove, so just sit tight until then.”

“Thank you, Damon,” I smiled, feeling a surge of affection for my friend and partner in crime. Or rather, fighting crime. “I’m at the public library, right in the center of town. See you soon.”

“See you soon, Chloe,” he replied before hanging up.

As I set the phone down, a wave of relief washed over me, and for the first time in what felt like forever, I allowed myself to close my eyes and rest—if only for a moment.

I woke to a scratchy blanket tucked around my shoulders and the Insomniacs' voices drifting over from their table. Blinking, I sat up straighter and scrubbed a hand over my face, dismayed to find I'd fallen asleep. I glanced around. It was still dark and the Insomniacs were still engrossed in their card game at the far end of the reading area.

"Sleeping Beauty awakens!" Mary trilled, her eyes twinkling as I approached them.

"What time is it?" I asked blearily. How long had I been out? Damon would be here any minute, and I still needed to—

"In the land of dreams, time has no meaning," Elisabeth intoned in her theatric contralto.

"Two hours and fifteen minutes, to be precise," Susan interjected grumpily, rolling her eyes at Elisabeth.

Two hours? I shook my head to clear the remaining foggiess. "Sorry about that. I didn't mean to fall asleep."

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“Think nothing of it, dear.” Mary patted my hand. “You looked like you needed the rest. Would you like to join us for a game?” Mary offered, shuffling the deck of cards.

“Thank you, but I’d rather watch if you don’t mind,” I replied, settling into a nearby chair.

“Suit yourself, dear,” Mary said.

Suddenly Jess appeared with a steaming cup of tea and handed it to me. “Thought you could use another one,” she said softly.

“Thanks, Jess. And for the blanket too,” I said gratefully, wrapping my hands around the warm mug.

Jess tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, glancing away. “Don’t mention it. Don’t get me wrong, but you seemed exhausted.”

“To be honest, I haven’t slept since I saw you guys yesterday.”

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Susan open her mouth, prompting Mary and Elisabeth to glance at her with raised eyebrows.

Susan threw up her hands. “What? I didn’t even say anything!”

Laughter bubbled up around the table, diffusing the tension. I hid a smile behind my teacup, warmth flooding me that had nothing to do with the tea.

Mary turned to Jess. “How’s that research coming along, dear? Any luck stopping Thomas from running in the election?”

Jess sighed, shoulders slumping. “I’m afraid not. He’s met all the requirements, and it seems there’s nothing to legally bar him from participating.”

“But that’s impossible!” Susan sputtered. “Thomas hasn’t shown his face in this town since prom night. It was back when you and him—”

Elisabeth shot her a quelling look. “Hush, Susan.”

“It’s alright.” Jess waved a hand, though her lips pressed into a thin line. Then she looked at me apologetically. “Sorry, I don’t want to drag you into this. You know how small towns can be.”

I laughed. “Funny, I actually thought small towns were boring and nothing ever happened. But Pinegrove has proven me wrong on that account.” I looked at Jess seriously. “My offer still stands, you know. I’m ready to help as an investigative journalist. Just let me wrap up one thing first.”

“You’re an investigative journalist?” Elisabeth leaned forward, eyes gleaming with interest. “Are you working on something juicy? Political scandals? Corporate fraud? Do we have corruption in our little town?”

“Hey!” Susan scolded, shooting her friend a disapproving look. “Why is it okay for you to ask questions and I am getting shushed all the time?”

“It’s ok, Susan,” I said with a smile. “There’s nothing like that. I just happened to end up here by accident. Soon, my friend will come pick me up and we’ll be on our way.”

“Well, that’s wonderful you two made up.” Mary beamed. “He seemed like such a

polite gentleman.”

“Wait, Damon’s not my boyfriend,” I blinked in confusion. “He’s just a friend and colleague. What gentleman are you talking about?”

Jess frowned. “Well, a man came to the library earlier this evening claiming to be your boyfriend. Said you two had fought and you’d run off, but he wanted to make up.”

“It was right by the end of library office hours,” Mary chimed in, looking concerned. “He asked us not to tell you he’d been here, but since you mentioned leaving together, we thought it was okay to say something now.”

A cold shiver ran down my spine. I didn’t have a boyfriend.

“See, I told you all that scarred bastard seemed suspicious,” Susan said. “But no one ever listens to me, do they?”

“Scarred?” I whispered. My blood turned to ice. “What do you mean ‘scarred’?”

Elisabeth nodded, oblivious to my distress. “Prominent scar on his cheek. But otherwise, he seemed quite charming. Very masculine.”

Without another word, I bolted from the library, leaving the Insomniacs and Jess behind.

I sprinted through the dark, empty streets of Pinegrove as fast as my legs could carry me.

The scarred man could only be one person—Ethan’s bodyguard who’d tried to shoot Ethan and me in the mansion.

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How had he found me?

As my feet hit the pavement, a myriad of thoughts raced through my head. I had to warn Ethan—he was in danger because of my stupidity, my damned insecurity.

If only I stayed in the bunker with him.

The forest loomed ahead, and I plunged into the darkness, running as if my life depended on it. The dilapidated house hiding the entrance to Ethan's bunker came into view as the first rays of sunlight touched the ground beneath my feet. My lungs burned as I finally staggered to a stop, bracing my hands on my knees to catch my breath.

A strong arm wrapped around my throat from behind.

Chapter Thirteen

Chloe

The cold steel of the gun pressed into the soft flesh under my ear, sending a chill down my spine. I struggled against his thick, muscular arms, panic rising in my chest, but I was no match for his strength.

“I don't need to hurt you,” the man growled into my ear and I recognized the voice of Ethan's scarred bodyguard, “but I won't hesitate if you stand between me and him.”

Ethan. He was talking about Ethan. Now fear for my own safety was nothing

compared to the dread pooling in my stomach at the thought of what this man might do to Ethan.

“Ethan’s not here,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “You’re wasting your time.”

The man snorted, his breath hot against my cheek. “Nice try, sweetheart. But unless you make a habit of wandering the woods at dawn for fun, I’m betting Ethan’s holed up in that old house. Or more likely, in the shelter under it.”

“Even if he was, you’d never get inside.” I dug my heels into the dirt, trying to push him back with my weight, but he didn’t budge. “The place is locked up tight. You don’t have a chance.”

“Who said anything about going inside?” He gave me a rough shake. “Ethan would have the advantage. I’d rather wait out here for him. I’m sure he already knows we’re here.” His grip tightened until it felt like my bones would snap. “Don’t see any cameras, so he must be using motion sensors. It’s only a matter of time before he emerges to play the hero.”

Panic and anger warred inside me. I couldn’t let him get his hands on Ethan. I gritted my teeth and said, “Ethan will never come out.”

The man barked out a harsh laugh. “I worked for Ethan a long time. I know he’s too honorable to sacrifice you for his own safety. He’ll come.”

I fought back tears, cursing myself for leading this madman to Ethan’s doorstep. My thoughts raced, searching for a way out of this mess. I couldn’t let Ethan’s life be ruined because of me. For now I had to keep stalling, keep Ethan safe and figure a way to escape.

“What do you know of honor?” I mocked.

The man’s grip on my arm tightened, his fingernails digging into my skin. “What did you say?”

I winced at the pain but didn’t back down. “I said it’s too bad Ethan’s honor didn’t rub off on you.”

The man went rigid behind me. His voice shook as he said, “What do you know about it? They took my daughter, my little baby girl, and they want Ethan. I’ll give them whatever they ask for, do whatever it takes to get her back. And once I do, I’m going to hunt down each and every one of those bastards who took her from me.” His voice broke on a sob. “Do you understand?”

A cold dread filled my stomach. This man was capable of anything. I almost felt sorry for him.

Suddenly, Ethan emerged from the ruins with his hands held out to show they were empty. Even now, with death staring me in the face, I couldn’t help noticing how dashing he looked in his tailored suit. He walked toward us slowly but confidently, like he didn’t have a care in the world.

“Gordon,” Ethan said in a formal tone, his green eyes locked on the scarred man.

The scarred man responded with equal courtesy. “Mr. Hamilton.”

When Ethan was thirty feet away, Gordon warned, “That’s close enough.”

Ethan froze in place, his hands still held out in a placating gesture. His green eyes flickered to mine for a brief moment. Tears streamed down my face when I dared meet his gaze. “I’m so very sorry,” I choked out.

“Chloe, you don’t have anything to apologize for,” he replied, his voice steady and comforting.

Gordon snorted derisively. “Actually, she does. It’s her fault I found you. The first thing my employers did after the two of you disappeared was to hack her friend’s phone. And after she called last night and told us where she was, all I had to do was hide near the library and wait for her to appear.”

Ethan’s expression remained stoic, but my stomach twisted into knots. The guilt weighed heavily on me, making it difficult to breathe. “Gordon,” Ethan said, his voice firm yet calm. “Let Chloe go. Your business is with me.”

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“I will. But they will just send someone else after her.” He paused and added, almost reluctantly, “And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

A gun appeared in my peripheral vision, Gordon pointing it at Ethan from behind me. Panic bubbled up inside me, but I knew I couldn’t let him shoot Ethan. I threw myself back against Gordon with all my weight.

Ethan lunged forward in a blur of motion.

The gun went off with a deafening bang, and pain exploded in my head.

I crashed to my knees, hands clapped over my ringing ears.

Gordon and Ethan’s feet shuffled and pivoted in a frenzied dance. Then Gordon hit the ground, unconscious.

Ethan was at my side in an instant, pulling me into his arms. I clung to him, trembling. Over the ringing in my ears, I could just make out the soothing sound of his voice as he stroked my hair. I shook my head, still clutching my abused ears.

“Are you okay?” Ethan asked again, his voice still muffled but becoming clearer as my hearing slowly returned.

I nodded against his chest. “Yes, I’m fine.” I pulled back to look at him, tears welling up. “I’m so sorry. This is all my fault.”

“There’s no time for apologies.” Ethan cupped my face in his hands, his gaze intense.

“We have to go. Now.”

I turned around to see Gordon lying unconscious on the ground, but Ethan didn't give me much time to take it in. He grabbed my hand and we started running through the morning woods, the damp leaves underfoot crunching softly with each step.

“Damon is waiting for me in Pinegrove,” I panted, struggling to keep up with Ethan's long strides.

“Can we trust him?” Ethan asked, concern furrowing his brow.

“Yes, he's my editor and closest friend,” I reassured him.

Ethan nodded, pointing in the direction of the road. “It's that way.”

We picked up our pace, but after a few minutes I noticed a growing warmth on my hand. I glanced down and saw that my hand, clasped in Ethan's, was covered in blood. Blood seeped from his jacket sleeve, staining both his suit and my skin. I stopped abruptly, tugging on Ethan's hand. He paused and turned to face me, his face pale beneath the dark stubble.

“Your shoulder...” I whispered, horrified at the sight of the huge patch of blood surrounding a bullet hole in his jacket.

“Chloe, there's nothing we can do about it right now,” Ethan said, his voice strained yet determined. “We need to get to town first.”

“No, we need to treat your wound now!” Guilt and fear warred inside me, threatening to rip me apart. This was all because of my stupidity. Because I didn't listen to Ethan.

I felt tears prickling at the corners of my eyes, but Ethan drew me into his arms,

holding me close. Then his lips were on mine, soft and warm, chasing away my anxiety. For a moment I forgot about everything else. For a moment, it felt like everything would be alright again.

“Let’s go,” he murmured against my mouth.

When Ethan pulled away, I saw that my sweatshirt was stained crimson. My panic returned tenfold. “You’re losing blood.”

“We’re nearly there,” Ethan insisted. “Just a little further.”

We continued moving through the woods until we finally reached the road.

I kept glancing at Ethan, watching his face grow paler and paler. His steps slowed and I could tell he was fading fast.

“How far is Pinegrove?” he asked between ragged breaths.

“Less than two miles,” I said. “We’re almost there.”

Ethan nodded, but said nothing more. Two steps later he stumbled and nearly fell. I caught him just in time, bracing myself under his shoulder.

“Stop!” I demanded, planting my feet. “Let’s at least try to stop the bleeding.”

“Chloe, the town is so close,” Ethan said, his voice weak and strained. “I need to get you to safety. Trust me.”

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“I can’t trust you to make sound judgments when you’re delirious from blood loss! And stop caring about my safety for once!” I yelled, tears streaming down my cheeks. “This is my fault! Because I was stupid and insecure and didn’t listen to you. You should be furious with me, not thinking about my safety!”

Ethan’s eyes searched mine, his expression softening. “Why did you come back for me yesterday?” Ethan asked. “After you escaped to town, why return?”

The question caught me off guard. “I needed to wait until Damon found something we could use to expose your competitors.”

A faint smile graced his lips. “That means you tried to help me, the only way you could think of. Thank you, Chloe.” He paused, taking a deep breath. “But now, we need to move.”

He took a step forward and promptly collapsed.

“Ethan!” I rushed to his side, panic clawing at my throat. My hands shook as I tried to cover the bullet hole, hoping to stop the bleeding.

“Please, Ethan...please,” I sobbed as I frantically stripped off my sweatshirt and pressed it to his shoulder as hard as I could.

Just then, a police cruiser appeared from around the bend.

Chapter Fourteen

Chloe

The police cruiser's tires screeched on the pavement, speeding towards me like a lion pouncing on its prey. My heart leapt in terror and I clutched Ethan closer, as if I could shield his unconscious body.

This was it. We were done for. After everything we'd been through, we would meet our end on this deserted country road.

I braced myself for the impact, squeezing my eyes shut. The car came to a sudden halt just a few feet away from us, and for a moment, time seemed to slow down. My eyes flew open as the acrid scent of burnt rubber assaulted my nose.

As I stared at the vehicle, memories of the policeman who had tried to kill us at Ethan's home flooded my mind, and I knew that this was it—I couldn't save both myself and Ethan.

The driver's side door burst open, and a stocky man in a deputy's uniform climbed out. His hand rested on the revolver at his hip, his face stony. My stomach twisted into knots at the sight of him.

And then my dread transformed into a strange acceptance of our fate, as if all the fight had drained out of me. Every detail became vividly clear; the sound of my own breathing, the warmth of Ethan's blood seeping through my sweatshirt, the metallic tang in the air.

But then the passenger door of the police cruiser swung open, and Susan struggled out.

"Patrick!" she barked. "What are you touching your gun for? Can't you see Chloe's gentleman friend needs help?"

Patrick's stony expression melted into one of chagrin. "Come on, Nana," Patrick mumbled sheepishly. "I didn't know it was them."

"Don't 'Nana' me! Get the medkit!" Susan snapped, and Patrick hurried to pop the trunk, and at that moment another vehicle pulled up beside the cruiser. It was Mary's electric Smartcar, the tiny vehicle looking almost comical next to the imposing police car.

Mary stepped out, her pink hat perched jauntily atop her head. "Honestly Patrick, did you have to drive so fast?" she began, but then stopped short at the sight of Ethan and I on the ground. "Oh dear!" Her wrinkled face creased in concern.

Elisabeth emerged from the passenger side, gasping dramatically at the scene. The three elderly ladies rushed over to us, clucking in worry.

"Are you okay?" they kept asking, their voices overlapping in a chorus of concern.

My stupor shattered and I collapsed into tears, sobbing in relief.

We were safe.

Patrick returned with a small first aid kit and knelt beside Ethan.

"Looks like a bullet wound," Patrick said, running his fingers over the torn fabric of Ethan's jacket. He glanced at me. "What happened?"

"Sticking your noses in other people's business runs in the family, huh?" Mary chided, glancing at Susan.

"Leave him be, Mary. My boy's a policeman; it's his job to ask," Susan said firmly.

I swallowed hard, my voice barely above a whisper. “It’s okay. Ethan was shot with a pistol. I don’t know which kind.” As I spoke, Patrick began cutting away at Ethan’s jacket, revealing the blood-soaked shirt underneath.

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“Where’s the shooter?” he asked, eyes never leaving Ethan’s shoulder.

“We left him in the woods,” I replied. “I think he’s unconscious.”

“Better keep your eyes peeled, ladies,” Patrick warned as he began cutting Ethan’s shirt. “I’m afraid that won’t be easy,” Elisabeth said. “Not with such a handsome fellow right in front of us!”

Susan smacked her friend’s arm in exasperation. “Hush, you ridiculous woman!”

Patrick carefully cleaned the wound, his brow furrowing in concentration. “Doesn’t seem too dangerous, but he’s lost a lot of blood,” he muttered, checking the back of Ethan’s shoulder for any exit wounds. Finding none, he sighed. “Bullet’s still inside. We need to get him to a doctor to have it removed.”

“Let’s take him to Amanda,” Mary suggested.

Patrick blinked.

“A-Amanda?” he stammered, visibly flustered.

“Enough dawdling. Hurry up,” Susan ordered. Patrick nodded and began wrapping Ethan’s shoulder in thick bandages, but they kept slipping loose.

“Here, use this.” Mary pulled a long pink ribbon from her hat and handed it to Patrick. He used it to securely tie the bandage in place.

“Keep watch while I get him into the cruiser,” Patrick ordered the three ladies.

With a grunt, Patrick attempted to lift Ethan’s unconscious body, but his weight proved to be too much. Instead, he pulled him towards the police cruiser as Susan and I helped with his legs. Elisabeth stood by the back door, holding it open as wide as possible.

“Alright,” Patrick panted, “on three. One... two... three!” Together, we heaved Ethan up into the back seat of the cruiser. His long legs dangled out of the car, and it took another few minutes of awkward maneuvering before we managed to settle him inside. Sweat dripped down my face, and I could feel my heart pounding in my chest.

“Drive to Amanda’s place,” Mary instructed Patrick, her voice firm. “We’ll follow you in my car.”

Patrick nodded and climbed into the driver’s seat, while Susan settled into the front passenger side. I slid in next to Ethan, cradling his head in my lap as Patrick raced along the empty road towards Pinegrove.

Ethan remained unconscious, pale and still. I smoothed his hair back from his forehead. “Hold on, Ethan. We’re getting help. Just hold on...”

My gut wrenched as I gazed down at his beloved face. I couldn’t lose him now, not after all we’d endured. I needed him to pull through. I needed him, period.

As we drove into Pinegrove, Patrick grabbed the police radio and said, “I need to call this in.”

Panic surged through me. “Please, don’t,” I begged. “You don’t understand—the police can’t be trusted.”

“What?” Confusion flickered across Patrick’s face. “Why not?”

“Chloe,” Susan interjected, her voice stern. “Like it or not, you’re going to have to explain yourself.”

“Of course, I’ll tell you everything,” I stammered, my voice shaky. “But please, not now. Whoever is after Ethan paid off some of the police too.”

“Is that why you were hiding in the woods?” Susan asked, her eyes narrowing. I nodded, and she turned to her grandson, her tone serious. “Put down that radio.”

He obeyed, setting the radio back in its cradle.

“And Patrick, if I learn that you’re on some gangster’s payroll, I’ll kick your ass to kingdom come.”

“Come on, Nana,” Patrick replied. “You know I wouldn’t do something like th—”

“Just drive,” she interrupted. “We’re almost to Amanda’s.”

I gazed out the window at the familiar shops and houses sliding by, as Pinegrove’s streets remained quiet, and the tension in the car hung heavy as we pulled up in front of the local doctor’s office.

Its faded blue exterior looked almost cheerful in the golden morning light. Patrick killed the engine and craned around to look at me, his face etched with concern.

“You gonna be okay?”

I nodded, too numb to speak.

The cold morning air hit me as we stepped out of the car, our breaths visible in front of us. The streets were still deserted, and the silence was interrupted only by the sound of Mary's little electric Smartcar pulling up next to the police cruiser. Mary and Elisabeth got out while Patrick checked his reflection in the car mirror, combing his hair and smoothing out his uniform.

"Is Amanda inside, Nana?" he asked Susan, trying to sound casual.

"Of course she is," Susan replied, rolling her eyes. "It's her office, after all. Now stop peacocking and help get Chloe's friend out of the car."

"The handsome mystery man!" Elisabeth exclaimed, peering into the backseat. "My, he certainly is a tall drink of water, isn't he?"

"Hush now," Mary scolded gently.

Together we hauled Ethan out of the car, his long limbs dangling limply as we struggled under his weight. My heart twisted at the sight of him so vulnerable and helpless.

We shuffled through the front door of the practice into an empty waiting room. As we entered, a woman appeared from behind a set of doors, her sharp features framed by wavy brown hair that fell just past her shoulders. She wore a white coat over a simple blouse and slacks, and her icy blue eyes surveyed us with an air of authority.

“What on earth is all this ruckus?” she demanded, her voice stern but not unkind.

Patrick visibly gulped, his cheeks turning red.

“Hi Amanda, we, uhm—”

Then her eyes widened at the sight of Ethan’s motionless form.

“What on earth...?” She hurried over, snapping on a pair of latex gloves. “Get him into the exam room, now!”

With great care, Patrick carried Ethan to the table in Amanda’s office next door and laid him down gently. Amanda gestured for everyone to step back, giving her space to work. She examined the bandage on Ethan’s shoulder, her brow furrowing as she took in the pink ribbon holding it in place. “Who did this? And what’s with the pink ribbon?”

“It was me, you see—” Patrick stuttered before Amanda interrupted him.

“Never mind, you did a decent job,” she said as she cut away the makeshift bandage on his shoulder.

“Please,” I pleaded, my voice cracking. “How is he? Will he be okay?”

“He’s lost a lot of blood.” Amanda’s cool fingers probed the torn flesh. “The bullet’s still in there. I need to get it out and start an IV. He’ll need a transfusion too.”

Panic rose in my chest like a wave. “Is he...will he...”

“He’ll be fine.” Amanda gave me a stern look. “If you all let me work and stop asking foolish questions. Oh, and I need the patient’s name, just in case.”

“His name is Ethan Hamilton,” I replied, my voice barely a whisper.

Patrick stared at Ethan, eyes wide. “Wait, THE Ethan Hamilton?” He let out a low whistle.

Elisabeth sighed dreamily. “Just as handsome as I imagined.”

Amanda pricked Ethan’s finger with a needle and covered it with a blood type test sampler.

Heat flooded my cheeks. I cleared my throat, avoiding their gazes. “I was interviewing him in his mansion when his bodyguards turned on us. We managed to escape to his bunker in the woods not far from here.”

“A secret billionaire hideout!” Elisabeth clasped her hands together. “How thrilling!”

“First Thomas, now this one... I’d say Pinegrove has two billionaires too many,” Mary said.

“Well, luckily for Mr. Hamilton here, billionaires seem to have the same blood as normal people. B negative, to be precise.” She opened a small refrigerator, pulled out a blood bag and expertly attached it to Ethan, her movements fluid and precise. I hovered anxiously at his side, clutching his limp hand, the rise and fall of his chest shallow.

Guilt churned my stomach as I watched Amanda work. This was all my fault.

“Listen,” I began, addressing the concerned faces around me. “I’m so sorry to drag you all into this. It’s because I left the hideout and came to Pinegrove that Ethan’s enemies found him. Now he’s in danger because of me.”

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“Cut it out, Chloe,” Mary scolded gently, while Amanda fixed an oxygen mask over Ethan’s face.

“Stop insulting my work,” Amanda added sternly. “For as long as he is in my care his life is not in any danger.”

Mary squeezed my arm. “Hush now. Amanda knows her stuff. Mr. Hamilton will be right as rain.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Patrick cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable. “Look, I really have to report all of this...”

“Please don’t,” I begged once more. “We can’t trust the police.”

Susan placed a reassuring hand on my arm. “We have no reason to doubt you. But my grandson is a good boy, Chloe.”

“I believe that,” I said. “But how can we know for sure about the rest of the precinct? Ethan’s life is at stake here. We can’t take any chances.”

“Alright, I’ve got a plan,” Patrick announced suddenly, determination in his eyes. “I’ll get some of my buddies from the precinct, guys I trust, and bring them here. Then I’ll report it to the precinct. Even if the others are bought out, they won’t openly oppose their own.”

Amanda glanced up from her work as she hooked Ethan to the IV, a glint of approval in her eyes. “That’s actually quite clever.”

Patrick puffed up at the praise, grinning like a doofus.

Susan nodded. “Go on then, but stay away from Ronny McAllister. That good-for-nothing can’t be trusted.”

“Ronny’s a grown man now, Nana,” Patrick replied defensively. “He’s got kids and everything, they’re gonna make him lieutenant next year.”

“Fine, just hurry up,” Susan relented.

With one last nod, Patrick hurried out of the building. Amanda turned to the rest of us, her expression serious. “I’m going to start removing the bullet now. The faint of heart should look away.”

Susan, Mary, Elisabeth, and I took the warning to heart and turned our backs as Amanda began her delicate work.

“So,” Elisabeth whispered conspiratorially. “How exactly did you meet the dashing Mr. Hamilton? What’s he like? How big is his yacht?” She nudged me with her elbow. “If you know what I mean.”

“Elisabeth!” Mary scolded while Susan shook her head. “Hush, you old gossip!”

A sudden scuff of shoes in the waiting room made us all freeze. Susan called out, “Did you forget something, Patrick?”

But it wasn’t Patrick standing in the doorway.

It was Gordon.

Chapter Fifteen

Chloe

The moment Gordon walked into the room, I could feel the temperature drop. His gaze was cold, and the gun in his hand felt like a death sentence. There was nowhere to run. My stomach churned with fear and desperation, as I stared into his icy eyes. The room fell silent as everyone stared at him, trying to grasp what was happening.

“You,” Susan defiantly stepped forward, her wrinkled face set in determination. “I knew you were up to no good from the very start,” she snapped. “You’d better get out of here before my grandson returns with his police buddies.”

Gordon smirked, his scar twisting on his cheek. “I don’t care,” he said, his voice like gravel. “For my daughter, I will kill the police, I will kill everyone in this town. But it doesn’t need to come to that. Just give me Ethan, and then I’ll walk away.” Silence enveloped the room once more—suffocating, stifling silence.

My mind raced. There had to be a way out of this. His daughter? I latched onto that, grasping at straws. “What’s next?” I asked, my voice shaking. “Do you really think Ethan’s enemies will keep their word? That they’ll release your daughter once Ethan is dead?”

Gordon hesitated, pain flickering across his face. “I have no choice. Once Ethan is gone, I’ll send them proof. They have to set her free.” His voice trembled as he repeated, “They have to.”

“What kind of evidence do you need?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady, belying the panic flooding my veins. My gaze held his, willing him to listen. To trust

me.

“Stop stalling!” Gordon snapped, pointing the gun at me. I didn’t flinch, didn’t back down. I walked closer until the cold metal touched my forehead, the metal pressing against my skin a grim promise of what was to come. I could feel the sweat beading on my temples, my palms grew clammy. Still, I met his eyes and asked again, calmly, “What evidence do you need?”

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Gordon stared at me, eyes narrowed in suspicion. After a long moment, he gritted his teeth, the gun still pressed against my forehead. “They want a video. Two, three seconds long. To prove the job is done.”

My thoughts raced. A short video. We could fake that.

“If we give you the evidence you need, then you can go without killing Ethan.” My words were rushed, desperate.

Amanda chimed in, her voice steady and authoritative. “I have everything I need here to make Ethan look like a corpse.”

Gordon hesitated, his eyes darting between me and Amanda. “It’s too risky.”

“Think about your daughter,” I pleaded. “How would she feel knowing that a good man, an innocent man, died because of her? And that her father, the person she loves so much, is a murderer?”

Gordon’s gaze bore into mine. The cold metal of the gun pushed harder against my head, and I forced myself not to flinch.

Finally, he lowered the gun and nodded. “Do it.”

Amanda sprang into action, rushing to Ethan’s side. She removed his oxygen mask and IV with brisk efficiency. The rest of us hurried to help, grasping Ethan under his arms and legs to lift his unconscious body off the bed. Ethan was heavy, dead weight, and the struggle to lower him left me breathless. I couldn’t help but wince at the dull

thud as he hit the floor.

Once Ethan was down, Amanda carefully arranged his hand to cover the torn shirt and bandaged shoulder. She bent his legs, making it appear as if he had fallen.

But Elisabeth wasn't satisfied.

"Theater is in the details, dear. We must make the scene believable," she decreed. With a dramatic flourish, she shoved the nearby table aside, tilting it over to appear as if Ethan had knocked it over falling. Content, she stepped back to admire her handiwork.

"Still not enough," she declared, her eyes narrowing in dissatisfaction. "We need blood."

Amanda nodded, taking another blood bag from the refrigerator. She punctured it with a needle and carefully splashed crimson stains over his chest and shoulder.

Elisabeth scrutinized Amanda's handiwork with a grimace on her face. "It's still not good enough," she declared. Turning to Amanda, she instructed, "Pour some blood on the floor next to Ethan. Make it look like he was lying there for some time and it poured out of the exit wound on his back."

Amanda nodded, squeezing more blood from the punctured bag onto the floor beside Ethan. It pooled and spread and my stomach churned at the gruesome image we created.

I swallowed hard, my mouth dry as sandpaper. As much as I tried to remind myself this was all part of the act, I couldn't tamp down the nausea creeping up my throat.

Ethan looked dead. Really, truly dead.

But it had to be done. To save Ethan. To save Gordon's daughter.

Elisabeth frowned, tilting her head as she scrutinized our makeshift crime scene. "Not good enough," she proclaimed. "Amanda, splash more on the wall behind him. We need it to look like he was shot at close range."

"Elisabeth, you're quite good at this," Mary remarked, a hint of admiration in her voice.

Amanda rolled her eyes as she flicked blood onto the wall, crimson droplets splattered across the pale paint. "I'm just glad you all seem to enjoy it, since I'm the one stuck with cleanup duty."

Gordon, who'd been silently observing our efforts, finally spoke up. "It looks realistic now," he admitted, pulling out his phone.

"Realistic?" Elisabeth scoffed, rolling her eyes dramatically. "Amateurs. If you want people to believe this scene, everything has to be perfect. Since it looks like Ethan was shot from close range, we need a bullet hole in the wall and a shell casing next to his body." She stared pointedly at Gordon. "Your cue, young man."

Gordon blanched but gave a jerky nod. He raised his gun and fired at the wall behind Ethan leaving a smoking bullet hole at chest level, the sharp crack of gunfire making us all flinch. The shot rang out like an explosion in the small room, and we all slapped our hands over our ears.

"Who's going to pay for the repairs?" Amanda mumbled, rubbing her ear.

"There," Elisabeth said approvingly. "Now the pièce de résistance," chirped with theatrical glee as she reached for the still-smoking shell casing but cried out, dropping it as the hot metal seared her skin.

Amanda clicked her tongue, handing Elisabeth a pair of forceps. “Here, use these.”

“Thank you, dear,” Elisabeth said with a gracious smile, plucking the bullet from the floor with a flourish and placing it in the pool of blood beside Ethan’s body. “Voilà! The perfect crime scene, non?”

My heart thundered in my chest as I stared at Ethan’s lifeless body sprawled on the cold tile floor. So still. So lifeless. So much blood.

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Crimson droplets speckled the stark white cabinets and stainless steel counters of Amanda's clinic, a gruesome Pollock painting come to life.

The gunshot still echoed in my ears, rattling my bones. I blinked hard, trying to reconcile the scene in front of me. It was all fake, I knew that, and yet...

Seeing Ethan like this, even in pretense, made my stomach churn, bile rising in my throat.

I turned to Gordon. "When you film this, make sure you move around a bit. It'll be harder to focus on the details that way."

Gordon stared at me, eyes hollow. Then he blinked and seemed to shake himself. Nodding jerkily, he pulled out his phone and began filming Ethan's body, circling around for a few agonizing seconds as the rest of us pressed against the far wall to give him space.

Satisfied, he stopped recording and checked the video. His gaze met mine. "You need to keep this secret for twenty-four hours. That should give me enough time."

"Okay," I agreed. My words sounded confident even as my knees threatened to buckle. As he headed for the door, he paused and turned back to face me. "Is Ethan going to be okay?"

"Yes," I assured him. "He will."

"Good," he murmured before leaving the room.

Elisabeth let out a theatrical sigh. “What a day!” she exclaimed, smoothing her wig.

“Tell me about it,” Amanda grumbled, already pulling on a fresh pair of gloves. “Now, I need to get him cleaned up and hooked back up to the IV and oxygen.”

“You did wonderfully, dear,” Mary said, patting Amanda’s arm. “We couldn’t have pulled this

off without you.”

Suddenly a loud screech of tires shattered the silence outside, followed by the pounding of footsteps. My heart leapt into my throat as the door burst open—but instead of Gordon, three deputies stormed in, guns drawn. Their eyes widened at the sight of Ethan’s bloodied body on the floor. “What on earth—?” Patrick asked, his voice shaking. “We heard the gunshot.”

“Everything’s fine now,” I said quickly, trying to keep my own voice steady. “The killer was here, but he left.”

Patrick raced to his grandmother’s side, his face etched with worry. “Nana, are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“Stop fussing over me, boy!” Susan swatted him away impatiently. “Help Amanda get him back on the bed!”

Together, Patrick, Amanda, one of the deputies, and I managed to lift Ethan’s limp form onto the bed. The remaining deputy pulled out his radio and spoke into it urgently. “Attention all units, be on the lookout for a potential suspect who may be armed. Last seen near Pinegrove Medical Center. Suspect is considered dangerous, approach with caution.”

Once Ethan was settled, IV drip replenished and oxygen mask in place, Patrick rounded on me with blazing eyes. “This has gone too far, Chloe, and I won’t stand by anymore. I’m reporting this to the chief, and I don’t care what you say.”

“Nice to see my grandson finally acting as a real man,” Susan remarked dryly.

“Damn right,” Amanda smiled as she adjusted Ethan’s IV. “We could use more of them around here.”

Patrick’s cheeks flushed, but he didn’t waver as he left the room, clutching his radio.

Amanda wiped her hands on a nearby towel as she turned to face me, her expression a mix of exhaustion and curiosity. “You know, Chloe,” she began, “I usually mind my own business, but I have to say that this is a first for me—staging a murder. You’ll have to tell us everything later.”

“Absolutely,” Mary chimed in, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“Count me in too,” Elisabeth added.

Susan chuckled, folding her arms over her chest. “If only you’d all listened to me from the start, none of this would have been necessary.”

I couldn’t help but smile at them. “You know what? I’d be happy to spend more time with you ladies after all this is over.”

A sudden shout and commotion from the waiting room made us jump. The remaining deputy sprang to his feet, hand flying to his gun, eyes alert and focused on the door. My pulse skyrocketed.

“Stay here,” he warned us, before cautiously stepping out into the hallway.

Seconds later Patrick reappeared, his face tense and serious. “We got him,” he announced. “He was hanging around the library looking suspicious and Ronny arrested him.”

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My stomach plummeted. They couldn't have—

I grabbed Patrick's arm, panic seizing my voice. "You have to let him go! He needs to get his daughter!"

Patrick's face contorted in disbelief. "Chloe, are you out of your mind?" Patrick shot back, his voice rising with frustration. "I'm getting real tired of your bullshit!"

"Please, Patrick, just listen—" I cried, pushing past him out the door. But instead of Gordon, I found Damon in handcuffs, surrounded by deputies with guns drawn.

"Damon!" I exclaimed, relief flooding through me as I ran to hug him. He looked bewildered, confusion written all over his face.

"Chloe, what's going on? I was looking for you near the library, like you told me to, and then these cops just showed up and arrested me!"

Susan and Patrick followed, the former peering at Damon in confusion. "This isn't the right man. The killer had a scar on his face."

The deputies looked at Patrick and he nodded. One of the policemen uncuffed Damon and his hands wrapped around me.

As I held Damon, my dear friend and only connection here to my past life before Ethan, I felt a sense of closure wash over me. Maybe now I could finally leave Ethan behind.

Chapter Sixteen

Ethan

My eyes fluttered open, blinding white light flooding my vision, the sterile scent of antiseptic stinging my nose. The piercing beep of the heart monitor slowly broke through the fog in my mind. My body felt like it had been run over by a truck, and my shoulder throbbed with a pain that I could only describe as white-hot, a dull throb radiating out from it. My throat was parched and my head pounded like a drum. Where was I? What had happened? My muddled mind struggled to piece together the fragments of memory. The woods. Gunshots. Gordon. Chloe.

Chloe.

I had to find her, had to make sure she was safe.

An oxygen mask was strapped to my face, the air hissing in and out. My fingers brushed against the cold plastic of an IV tube connected to my hand, linking to a bag of clear fluid hanging from a metal pole.

I forced myself to focus on my surroundings. The room I was in was spacious and sterile, the walls painted a soft cream color. Sunlight streamed through the partially opened blinds, casting shadows on the linoleum floor. A small table stood nearby, holding a glass of water and a vase of flowers. It wasn't hard to deduce that I was in a private hospital room.

I winced as fragments of memory flashed through my mind and the last thing I remembered was finding a road and talking to Chloe.

Chloe.

Panic seized my chest and I bolted upright, heart monitor letting out a flurry of alarmed beeps. Ignoring the pain, I ripped off the oxygen mask and IV and the rest of the machines around me erupted into a chorus of alarms, but I ignored them.

I threw off the thin blanket and discovered I was wearing a patient robe. Each movement sent jolts of pain through my body, but I couldn't bring myself to care. All that mattered was finding Chloe.

Sitting up on the bed was a struggle, but I managed to push myself up on shaking arms. My bare feet hit the cold floor, and I willed my shaking legs to support me as I stood. Finding her was all that mattered.

I took a trembling step forward and suddenly the world tilted and spun, my legs nearly buckling beneath me. I steadied myself against the bed. I would crawl over hot coals to get to her if I had to.

The world began to spin after a couple more steps. My vision blurred and my legs threatened to give up. I closed my eyes for a moment and took several deep breaths, trying to steady myself. When I opened them again, the room had stopped spinning, and I pressed onward.

Every step sent a stab of pain through my injured shoulder, but I gritted my teeth and stumbled toward the door. My head pounded in time with my heartbeat, spots dancing at the edge of my vision. After what seemed an eternity of shuffling forward, I reached the door.

The bustle of a hospital greeted me as I stepped into the hallway. Doctors and nurses shuffled past me in a blur of white coats and scrubs, their voices melding together in a cacophony of medical jargon and hurried conversations. The scent of antiseptic and latex hung heavily in the air, an ever-present reminder of the sterile environment I found myself in. Despite the constant movement around me, no one seemed to notice

the injured man hobbling through their midst.

My gaze frantically searched the corridor but I didn't see Chloe. Panic and adrenaline coursed through my veins, giving me strength as I picked a direction at random and started walking.

I would search every inch of this hospital if I had to. I would walk to the ends of the earth to find her. To know she was safe.

"Mr. Hamilton!" A nurse's voice called out from behind me, a mixture of concern and admonishment coloring her tone. "You shouldn't be on your feet! You need rest and care." She grabbed my arm but I instinctively shook it off.

"Where's Chloe?" I demanded, turning to face her. My vision swam momentarily before refocusing on the worried expression etched across her face.

"I don't know who Chloe is," she replied, her eyes darting between my face and my shoulder. "But you need to get back to your bed."

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I ignored her protests, brushing past her as she fruitlessly tried to stop me.

I spotted her at the reception desk, auburn hair shining like a beacon of light. She was talking to a young man, concern etched into her delicate features.

My heart swelled at the sight of her, a wave of relief washing over me. She was here. She was safe.

Chloe looked exhausted, with dark circles under her eyes and her auburn hair tied up in a messy bun. She wore my t-shirt and sweatpants, both of which were hanging off her petite frame. Smudges of dried blood stained the fabric, making my heart ache at the thought of what she had been through.

“Mr. Hamilton!” the nurse bellowed, echoing off the walls of the reception area.

Chloe whipped her head around and her gaze landed on me, her eyes widening.

A mix of relief and concern washed over her face as she hurried toward me, her worn-out shoes squeaking on the tiled floor.

Chloe stopped just a few steps away from me, hesitating as if unsure whether to close the distance between us.

Before she could move, I enveloped her in my arms, reveling in the warmth and softness of her body against mine. She smelled of sunlight, a balm to my battered soul. After a moment she returned my embrace, her fingers curling into my hospital gown.

I didn't understand how or why, only that she was with me. And I would never let her go again.

"Chloe, why are you here?" I asked softly, my fingers lightly tracing the dried blood stains on her clothes. "Are you hurt? Are you bleeding?"

She shook her head, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "No, Ethan, I'm fine. I'm here for you. The blood—it's yours." She took a deep breath before continuing. "I'm okay, just haven't slept in over two days."

"I will never let you go again," I vowed, tightening my grip around her waist. Suddenly, she just looked away.

"Mr. Hamilton," a male voice greeted me, cutting through the tension between us. Chloe gestured towards the man and said, "This is Damon. We've been friends since college, and he's also my editor. I've told you about him, remember?"

I extended my hand, forcing a smile. "Nice to meet you, Damon. I'm afraid I'll have to steal Chloe away from you for now, though."

"Of course," Damon replied, nodding respectfully before stepping back.

"Sorry to interrupt this touching reunion," the nurse from before stood beside us, clearly exasperated, "but Mr. Hamilton needs to be back in bed immediately, or I can't be held responsible for the consequences."

"Of course," Chloe replied apologetically, looking at me with a mix of concern and relief. "I'll make sure he gets back to bed." She turned to Damon, her eyes still filled with worry. "Damon, could you please wait for me? I just need to help Ethan."

"Sure thing, Chloe," Damon said with a faint smile. "Take as much time as you need."

I'll wait in the car."

"Wait, why is he waiting in the car?" I asked Chloe. "You're not going anywhere, right?"

"Shh," Chloe silenced me with a tender kiss. The nurse huffed in exasperation, already turning on her heel. Chloe laced her fingers through mine, guiding me back to my room.

Once we were back in my room, The nurse busied herself reattaching the IV and monitor pads, clucking her tongue in disapproval. "Honestly, Mr. Hamilton. You should know better than to overexert yourself in your condition."

Chloe hovered by my bedside, wringing her hands nervously. I reached out and grasped them, stilling their fretful movements. She offered me a watery smile and perched on the edge of the bed.

The nurse reset the machines and rhythmic beeping filled the room once again. "The doctor will be in to check on you shortly. Please try to actually rest until then."

"Thanks," Chloe said softly, giving her an appreciative smile. "I promise to keep this unruly patient in bed until the doctor comes."

"See that you do," the nurse muttered, leaving the room.

Alone at last, I pulled Chloe down onto the bed beside me. She squeaked in surprise but didn't resist, nestling into my side with a contented sigh, with her head resting on my chest. The warmth of her body against mine felt like heaven, and I knew I never wanted to let her go again.

"Is this okay?" she asked softly, glancing up at me through thick lashes. "I don't want

to hurt you.”

I pressed a kiss to the top of her head, breathing in the sweet scent of her hair. “This is perfect. You’re the best medicine.”

Chloe giggled, a bright burst of joy that made my heart skip a beat. I wanted to hear that sound every day for the rest of my life.

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“Once the doctor gets here,” I told her, “I’ll have him contact my private physician, and we’ll organize our transfer to one of my homes.”

“Listen, Ethan. It’s not a good idea right now,” she said firmly, her eyes holding mine with an intensity that made my chest tighten. “Firstly, in this hospital, you’re under the protection of the Pinegrove Police Department who are honest folk. And since you have no personal security right now, you should rely on local police protection. It’s not safe yet.”

Her hand moved to my cheek, her thumb gently brushing against my skin as if trying to soothe the worry she saw there. “Also, when you were unconscious, Gordon found us and agreed to trick his employers into believing you were dead to free his daughter. You need to stay low until tomorrow for the plan to work.”

She was right. I didn’t know what happened while I was unconscious, I didn’t know about local police and the deal with Gordon, but I knew that she was brilliant and that she was right.

I sighed, pulling her close and kissing her forehead. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

The words seemed to catch her off guard, and she jerked back, tears filling her eyes. “No, I’m not amazing, Ethan. I’m the reason you almost got killed.”

“Chloe, I don’t want to argue with you about this,” I told her softly, my heart aching at the pain in her voice. “I put you in danger when I invited you to my home, so let’s consider us even and move past that.”

“Move where?” she asked, her voice breaking. “Do you realize that we have no future together? We were living in a fantasy world in your bunker and I am grateful, but now we’re back to reality.”

She looked down at her hands, twisting together nervously in her lap. “I’m just an average girl with average problems, and you’re... well, you’re you. A superman billionaire who cooks and plays the piano and is incredible in bed. And you need a superwoman actress who knows how to bake and composes her own music.”

Her words sliced through me sharper than any bullet. She thought I only wanted her for the thrill of the chase, a distraction from my “superhuman” life.

I reached for her hand, squeezing it tight. “It doesn’t matter who you are or aren’t. All that matters is how I feel about you. That’s the whole point.”

Her eyes searched mine, tears flickering on their surface. I gave her a slow, tender smile.

“Besides,” I continued, “you shouldn’t sell yourself short. You make a kickass bacon and eggs. What more could a man want?” The corners of her lips twitched upwards, and despite the tears in her eyes, she laughed softly.

“See? You can even make me laugh when laughing is the last thing I want to do.”

“Well, then I hope you don’t feel like kissing me right now, because I’d like to test my ‘superpowers’ on that front too.” I tried to pull Chloe closer but she playfully swatted me on the shoulder, right where it hurt.

I sucked in a sharp breath, the pain momentarily blinding me.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry!” Chloe gasped, her eyes wide with panic. She reached out to

touch me again but seemed to think better of it, her hand hovering in the air between us.

I gritted my teeth against the ache, forcing a smile. “Don’t worry about it,” I said. “You pack quite the punch for such a little thing.”

Chloe bit her lip, fresh tears welling in her eyes. “I always ruin everything,” she whispered. “I’m so clumsy and stupid and—”

“Hey now,” I interrupted, grasping her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. “None of that. You’re one of the brightest, kindest, most caring people I’ve ever known. A little bump won’t change that.”

Chloe stared at me, seeming torn between believing my words and the harsh voice in her head. I cupped her cheek, brushing away a stray tear with my thumb.

“All that matters is how I feel about you,” I said softly. “And I happen to feel you’re pretty damn special.”

A gentle chuckle escaped Chloe’s lips. “Even when I’m accidentally assaulting you in hospital beds?”

“Especially then,” I said with a grin. “Though next time, try to aim for the other shoulder. I’d like to keep what mobility I have left.”

Chloe laughed, the sound music to my ears. I started to pull her closer, eager to kiss that smile, when the door burst open.

“Mr. Hamilton, how are you feeling?” The doctor strode in, all business, and Chloe jumped back from the bed.

My fingers curled into fists, already missing the warmth of her touch. But I plastered on a polite smile for the doctor. “Much better now that you’re here.”

“I should let you two talk,” Chloe mumbled, casting a long, sad look back at me before disappearing into the hallway.

The doctor placed a comforting hand on my shoulder and assured me, “You should be just fine; the physician back in Pinegrove did an exemplary job removing the bullet. If it was up to me, you would be released in a few days time. However, there is the matter of Pinegrove police department and someone will come over to speak with you shortly.” Before I could reply, the nurse breezed into the room and handed me a folded piece of paper.

“Your friend asked me to give you this,” she said simply. As I unfolded the crinkled sheet, my heart sank. The note read: ‘I am sorry, but I’d rather end things now and save myself the heartbreak later. Thank you for the fairytale. I know that you will find your superwoman soon. Please don’t look for me.’

Chapter Seventeen

Chloe

A firework of taste exploded in my mouth as I took another bite of Jess's special cherry pie. I moaned in pleasure, unable to contain the burst of sweet and tart flavors on my tongue.

Across the rustic wooden table in Pinegrove's cozy library were all of my favorite ladies. Mary in her trademark pink hat, Susan with a frown etched on her face, Elisabeth in her blonde wig, Jess flashing a shy smile and Amanda tapping her feet impatiently—all of them stared at me intently and my cheeks flushed as I realized I was making quite the spectacle.

"Go on, young lady," Susan grumbled, folding her arms over her chest. "We ain't got the whole night."

Mary patted her friend's arm gently. "Actually, we do." She turned her kind eyes on me. "Take your time, dear. We're in no hurry."

"I apologize," I said, dabbing at the corner of my mouth with a napkin. "It's just that this is the best cherry pie I've ever had. It's like the perfect blend of sweet and tart, with these subtle spice notes I can't quite figure out." I looked at Jess pleadingly. "You simply must share your recipe with me."

Elisabeth let out a hearty chuckle and waved her hand dismissively. "My dear, Jess's famous cherry pie recipe is the most closely guarded secret in all of Pinegrove. None

of us have been able to wrangle it out of her yet, and heaven knows we've tried."

Jess's cheeks turned a rosy shade of pink as a shy smile crept across her lips. She ducked her head, tucking a loose chestnut curl behind her ear.

I sighed, taking another blissful bite of pie. There were worse places to be than in Pinegrove on a cozy autumn night, enjoying dessert with the extended cast of the Insomniacs.

The library was dimly lit, shadows dancing across the floor as candlelight flickered against the walls. A pot of chamomile tea sat in the center of the table, the earthy scent mingling with the sweet aroma of pie and other homey baked goods the women had brought to share.

"Chloe, you should try my banana bread too," Amanda suggested in a stern tone that left no room for argument. Not that I needed convincing. "It can't compete with Jess's pie, but it's still pretty good. By the way, who brought the Cheerios?"

"Cheerios are Susan's delicacy of choice," Elisabeth chuckled, casting a glance at her friend.

"Damn right," Susan said matter-of-factly, "Cheerios are the only thing that kept me sane during my teaching years. There's something so meditative about sending ring after ring into your mouth. Keeps the nerves steady." She shrugged, a wry grin on her lips. "Besides, back in my day there was no chance of a proper meal with twenty little daredevils to look after. Cheerios were a staple."

I smiled, reaching for the cereal bag and crunching a few rings between my teeth. "I like Cheerios too," I said. "My dad used to give them to me as an after-school snack sometimes."

“As do I,” Elisabeth added with a playful nudge to Susan’s arm. “I just enjoy friendly ribbing with dear Susan here more.”

Susan scoffed, trying to hide the upward twitch of her lips, as we all laughed together.

Mary leaned forward, propping her elbows on the table. “Now, Chloe dear, you simply must finish your story. So far you’ve told us about escaping that awful assassination attempt at Ethan’s mansion, hiding away in his secret underground billionaire hideout near Pinegrove—”

“Skipping over all the spicy bits to my utmost disappointment,” Elisabeth interjected, smirking.

My cheeks flushed hot even though I was beginning to get used to Elisabeth’s sincere interest in all things hot and steamy.

Mary waved a hand as she continued, “We were all involved in the mess that followed, but what happened after you returned to the city?”

“Go on, we’re all ears,” Susan encouraged me.

I took a breath, gathering my thoughts. “Damon and I got straight to work investigating the company supposedly behind the attack on Ethan,” I explained. “But that was cut short when Gordon suddenly turned himself over to the FBI.”

“Did the scarred bastard get his daughter back?” Susan asked bluntly.

I nodded. “Our ruse worked. He was able to rescue his daughter before surrendering to the authorities.”

“Thank God,” Susan breathed. Beside her, Elisabeth high-fived Amanda with a grin.

“If we managed to fool actual criminals, maybe we should start a murder scene staging business!” Elisabeth exclaimed, eyes gleaming with mirth.

Susan frowned at her friend, though there was a hint of amusement in her frown. “I’ll kick your skinny behind if you do. We agreed to keep that bit a secret so Patrick won’t get into any trouble.”

“Relax, Susan,” Elisabeth said, giving Amanda a playful nudge, “Amanda can handle Patrick.”

Amanda just rolled her eyes. “Hell will freeze over before Patrick decides to make a move.”

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Laughter rippled around the table at that. My lips twitched into a smile, warmth blossoming in my chest.

“Alright, alright,” Mary shushed everyone, raising her hand to silence the laughter that filled the room. “Let’s not get off track. Chloe still hasn’t finished her story!”

Heat crept into my cheeks. “There’s not much left to tell. You’ve probably seen the rest on the news.” I took a deep breath, the memory of Gordon’s haunted eyes searing into my mind. “Before surrendering to the FBI, Gordon hid his wife and daughter to ensure their safety. He agreed to tell the authorities everything in exchange for protection and immunity for them.”

“Wow,” Amanda murmured as the group listened intently.

“When Gordon spilled the beans, it turned out the assassination attempt wasn’t orchestrated by a single competitor. All three major pharmaceutical companies had conspired together to take Ethan out.”

Gasps echoed around the table. I nodded grimly. “The CEOs and several executives of each company were arrested, along with over a dozen FDA officials and corrupt police officers on their payroll. And, of course, all of Ethan’s former bodyguards.”

A heavy silence fell over the room. Elisabeth was uncharacteristically silent, her knuckles white around her teacup. Susan just looked away. Finally, Mary breathed, “Good heavens.”

“The government contract was canceled, so Ethan lost out on a lot of potential

profit,” I said, eager to move on. “But with all three major competitors under federal investigation, PharmaB’s stocks skyrocketed. All told, he came out even further ahead.” I shrugged, trying to sound nonchalant, but my heart ached for him.

“Damon and I didn’t fare so well, though. There wasn’t much left for us to expose or investigate once the FBI took over. So I decided to take a little vacation in one amazing little town and meet some lovely ladies over a cup of tea or two.”

“Oh, banal flattery, please keep talking,” Elisabeth laughed, some of the tension easing from her face. The others quickly followed suit, amusement shining in their eyes once more.

I breathed an inward sigh of relief, grateful to lighten the mood. The Insomniacs’ unbridled joy and zest for life never failed to lift my spirits. “I aim to please,” I said, unable to contain a smile.

“Here’s to new friendships and exciting stories,” Mary raised her teacup, and we all followed suit, clinking our cups together in a toast.

“Cheers!”

“Chloe, don’t you think your story is interesting enough to write a book or make one of those YouTube documentaries?” Amanda asked, swirling the last of her tea around in her cup.

I felt my cheeks grow warm. “Ethan never went public with any of this,” I said, shifting uncomfortably in my seat. “And he still keeps out of the public’s eye. It wouldn’t feel right to expose him like that. Besides, I don’t want that kind of publicity either.”

“Fair enough,” Jess murmured as she leaned forward, eyes gleaming with curiosity.

“But what about you and Ethan? It’s been over a month now. Hasn’t he tried to contact you at all?”

Heat flooded my cheeks as I fiddled with the cherry pie crust on my plate. Guilt churned in my stomach at the memory of Ethan lying pale and still in his hospital bed, a stark reminder of the danger I’d put him in.

I shook my head, keeping my gaze fixed on the table. “No, I haven’t heard from him.”

“Well, that doesn’t make any sense,” Amanda said with a frown. “After everything you two went through, I’d have thought...”

She trailed off meaningfully, but I didn’t need her to finish the thought. I already knew exactly what she meant, even if I didn’t want to admit it.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. “I don’t really want to talk about it.”

The room fell silent for a moment, and then Mary’s phone beeped loudly, breaking the quiet. She pulled it out of her purse with some difficulty, fumbling with the buttons as she squinted at the small screen. “The cuckoo has landed!” she announced, her voice surprisingly agitated.

Everyone stared at her, puzzled. “Do you mean to say ‘the eagle has landed’?” Jess asked, eyebrows raised.

Mary blinked, then flushed bright red. “Oh, goodness me, yes. I always get those two mixed up.” She gave an apologetic chuckle. “Terrible habit of mine.”

“What does it mean?” I asked, glancing between them in bewilderment. The others had gone peculiarly still, exchanging loaded looks I couldn’t decipher.

“Nothing to concern yourself with, dear,” Elisabeth said brightly, though her smile seemed forced. She stood abruptly, nearly upending her teacup. “I’m afraid I’m feeling rather tired all of a sudden. I really must be off to bed.”

“And I have an early appointment tomorrow,” Amanda added, also rising from her seat. “So I should head home as well.”

“I need to check on my grandson.” Susan stood with a grunt, fishing her keys out of her purse.

“Isn’t it already after midnight?” I asked, surprised.

“Patrick’s been having trouble sleeping,” Susan added, looking concerned. “He’s a bit too young to join the Insomniacs, so I worry about him.”

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“We all do,” Mary said with a sigh. “I’ll go with Susan.”

Jess bit her lip, glancing at the doorway where the others had just disappeared. “I apologize for their behavior. I’m not entirely sure what’s gotten into them.”

“Do you know what Mary’s cryptic text was about?” I asked. “Something about a cuckoo landing?”

“Eagle,” Jess corrected softly. “It’s just an inside joke. Nothing for you to worry over.” She stood, brushing crumbs from her lap. “Hey, we can watch a movie or two! Though I should head home to fetch my laptop if we’re going to have a movie night. I’ll only be a few minutes. Make yourself comfortable, and help yourself to more pie or whatever else you like.”

“Are you sure you have to leave?” I said, unable to keep the note of panic from my voice. Being left alone in this empty library in the middle of the night suddenly seemed a frightening prospect.

Jess smiled reassuringly, giving my shoulder a gentle squeeze. “It will be alright. I’ll be back before you know it.”

And with that, I was alone.

I sat motionless for a long moment, listening to the creaks and groans of the old building settling in for the night. My heart raced as shadows seemed to lengthen and twist in the corners of the room.

And then I decided to make the most of my solitude and enjoy more of Jess's heavenly cherry pie.

Suddenly I heard footsteps.

I froze, straining to listen. There, again—the crisp sound of leather soles on the wooden floor, coming up behind me.

I whirled around with a gasp. “Jess, did you forget—”

The words died on my lips. Because it wasn't Jess standing there in the dim light of the library.

It was Ethan.

Ethan, impossibly here after all this time. Just the sight of him in his immaculate suit tailored to perfection sent my pulse into a frenzy, a wave of emotions I'd tried so hard to suppress for the past month threatening to overwhelm me. He looked every bit as handsome as I remembered, his smoldering green eyes locking onto mine, and I couldn't breathe.

He didn't say a word as he walked toward me with purposeful strides. Before I could ask what he was doing here, his mouth descended on mine in a searing kiss.

And just like that, I surrendered.

I melted into his embrace, my hands roaming greedily over his body as we kissed with a hunger I'd never known. It felt so good, so right, being with him again—like coming home after a long journey.

When at last he pulled away, I struggled to catch my breath. My lips tingled; my heart

threatened to beat out of my chest.

Ethan gently pressed a finger to my lips before I could speak.

“I’m not going to try and convince you, or force you to do anything you don’t want to do,” he said softly. “I already know that won’t work.” He paused, taking a deep breath as if bracing himself for what was to come. “So there’s only one thing left for me to do.”

He sank down onto one knee, and I gasped, heart pounding in my chest like a wild beast trying to break free. My hands flew to my mouth as he pulled a small velvet box from his pocket and flipped it open to reveal a simple gold band nestled inside. The room suddenly felt too small, too hot, and I struggled to find air.

“Chloe Collins,” he said, his voice steady and sure, “I love you. Will you marry me?”

The room started spinning. I blinked hard, sure I must be hallucinating. But the ring was still there, glinting in the dim light, and Ethan was still gazing at me with a look of such love and certainty it made my heart ache.

“Are—are you sure?” I stammered at last. My voice sounded oddly distant to my own ears.

Ethan nodded. “I’ve never been more sure of anything.” His voice was steady and strong. “After you left, I tried to see things from your perspective, like you wanted me to. I tried to convince myself you were right, that we weren’t meant to be. But you weren’t right, Chloe. There’s no other way to live. There’s no life for me without you in it. I know that now more than ever.” He squeezed my hands, his eyes boring into mine. “Will you marry me, Chloe?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

Joy lit his face as he slid the ring onto my finger. It was a perfect fit.

He rose and enfolded me in his arms, kissing me with a tenderness that made my eyes sting with tears. When at last we parted, I laughed shakily.

“How did you know my ring size?”

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A sheepish grin tugged at his lips. “I may have bought a few different sizes, just to be safe.”

I shook my head, blinking back happy tears. Only Ethan would think to buy several engagement rings.

“You’re crazy,” I told him fondly.

“Crazy for you,” he said, and kissed me again. His hands roamed my body, giving my ass a firm squeeze. I squealed and playfully pushed him away. “Stop! Jess will be back any moment!”

Ethan grinned mischievously. “No one’s coming back, Chloe. We’re alone.”

Chapter Eighteen

Chloe

“Wait, so all of them were in cahoots with you from the start?” I exclaimed.

Before I could get another word out, Ethan’s lips crushed against mine in a searing kiss, as his strong hands grabbed my ass and effortlessly lifted me off the ground.

As if driven by an insatiable hunger, he carried me through the air, our lips locked together and tongues dancing, and placed me on a nearby table without breaking the connection for even a second. My fingers buried themselves in his thick, dark hair, tugging at the roots while memories of our last encounter flooded my mind. It felt

like forever since we'd been this close. A whole month without him—how did I survive it?

“A whole month, Chloe,” he growled into my ear as if reading my thoughts, his voice raspy and filled with desire. “A whole fucking month without you.” His lips moved down to my neck, tracing a path along my clavicle while his hands roamed my body frantically, as if they couldn't get enough of my flesh.

Ethan's hot breath burned my skin, igniting a fire within me that had been dormant for far too long. My hands slid under his jacket and I clutched at his shoulders and biceps, relishing the feel of solid muscle under my hands. Leaning into him, our bodies pressed against each other, our heat melding together in a desperate attempt to become one so I couldn't tell where he ended and I began.

His strong hands gripped the collar of my blouse, ready to tear it apart. “I didn't expect to see you today, so I didn't pack a bunch of spare blouses,” I protested, placing my hand on his.

“Chloe,” he replied, a wicked grin spreading across his face, “I'll buy you a new one. Hell, I'll buy you a whole damn store.”

“Here in Pinegrove?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “In the middle of the night?”

His lips quirked up in a smile, his green eyes sparkling with amusement. “It looks like you'll be the sensible one in our family.”

Family.

This word reverberated through me. This was it. This was real. We were a family now, in every way that mattered.

A tidal wave of passion surged within me, drowning out any remaining doubts or fears. I pulled Ethan's face to mine, our lips crashing together with raw, desperate need.

As we kissed, my fingers found the bottom edge of my blouse and hastily tugged it off, momentarily breaking our connection to free myself from the fabric. The moment it hit the floor, Ethan's hands were on me, exploring my newly exposed skin as if he were a blind man seeing for the first time, his touch igniting a firestorm of sensations within me.

His hands slid up to cup my breasts, kneading the flesh through my bra. A jolt of pleasure pierced me, and I arched into his touch with a gasp.

"Sorry this sports bra isn't exactly lingerie," I said breathlessly.

"This is you," Ethan growled. "Exactly as you are and exactly the way I want you. I love you."

Looking into his eyes, the depths of my love for him welled up inside me. "I love you too," I whispered before pulling him in for another searing kiss.

My hands slid under his jacket, pushing it off his shoulders. It fell to the floor with a soft thud. Now with full and unrestricted access to his body, I explored every ridge and curve of his muscles beneath the thin silk of his shirt. I began unbuttoning it as I trailed kisses down his neck and chest, reveling in each new inch of skin. He unclasped my bra and tossed it aside, his fingers kneading and teasing my breasts. I leaned into his touch with a moan.

"So beautiful," he murmured, his voice rough with desire. "So perfect."

Then his hands were on me again, stroking and squeezing my flesh until I thought I

might go mad with wanting him. His thumbs teased my nipples, sending sparks of ecstasy through my body.

My fingers fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, shoving the silk fabric off his shoulders. I broke the kiss to trail my lips down his neck, reveling in the feel of hard muscle under warm skin.

When I reached the scar on his shoulder, a reminder of the bullet that had almost taken him from me, I pressed a soft kiss to the raised skin. Ethan tensed, his fingers tightening on my waist. I kissed the scar again, filled with a surge of tenderness and desire and bone-deep love for this complicated, flawed, utterly irresistible man.

He was mine, and I was his, and nothing would ever change that.

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I pressed myself against him, craving the feel of his hard length straining against his trousers. My fingers fumbled with his belt buckle, impatience making me clumsy. At last I got it undone and unzipped his fly, freeing his erection. I wrapped my hand around his hot, rigid flesh, delighting in the way he tensed and groaned.

“Someone’s happy to see me,” I teased, stroking him slowly.

“Always happy to see my wife,” he replied, his voice low and husky.

I feigned shock. “I’m not your wife just yet.” I said, quickening the pace of my hand. His hips jerked, and a strangled curse fell from his lips.

“You are and always will be,” he said fiercely.

He crushed his mouth to mine then, kissing me with a passion that set my blood on fire. Ethan expertly removed my shoes, tossing them aside, left and then right, before his strong hands grasped the waistband of my jeans. I watched him, captivated by his handsome face and perfect body, as he pulled my jeans off with ease.

“Let me take care of this,” he murmured against my lips, his fingers hooked into the waistband of my panties. Before I could protest, he ripped them apart, exposing my already wet core to him.

“God, how I’ve longed to taste my favorite wine,” he whispered in my ear, sending tendrils of electricity through my body. He lowered himself to his knees, trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses down my body as he went. By the time he reached my inner thighs, I was trembling with need.

“Exquisite,” Ethan rasped, his breath fanning over my exposed flesh.

Without warning, he went straight for the kill—his mouth was on me, his clever tongue stroking my clit until I cried out sharply. He sucked and teased, licking me with relentless hunger as his hands gripped my hips, holding me in place. It felt divine, as if every nerve in my body was connected to that one point of pleasure. I knew that Ethan would make me come before we even got to the main event—he always did—and I allowed myself to relax into the ecstasy he was creating.

I fisted my hands in his hair, pleasure rippling through me in waves as he tasted me with animalistic thirst. His tongue lashed my most sensitive spot, making me feel as though I was teetering on the edge of a precipice. His hands roamed my body, squeezing my breasts and ass, stoking the flames of my desire until I could no longer hold back.

He knew exactly what I wanted, what I needed. His tongue thrust inside me, mimicking the act of sex, and I shattered into a million pieces, climax crashing over me. I lowered my back on the table, surrendering to the orgasm that washed over me in an ecstatic wave.

As I lay there, spent and breathless, Ethan stood up and leaned over me. Our mouths met again, and I could taste myself on his lips, musky and intoxicating, as I tried to recover from the overwhelming waves of pleasure that had just crashed through me. He then trailed kisses down my body, each one feeling like a spark igniting my skin. When his lips met my clit once more, a jolt of ecstasy shot through me, reigniting the embers of my desire.

Straightening up, Ethan removed his trousers with deliberate ease. He now towered above me fully naked in his raw, godlike form. I raised my head to take in every inch of him, wishing I could simply gaze at his magnificent body forever.

“I could look at you for eternity,” I sighed, “but I think I’m getting a crick in my neck.”

Ethan grinned and reached for a thick book on the table next to us.

“Here, put this under your head,” he said, handing it to me. I glanced at the cover. “Atlas Shrugged? You’ve got to be kidding me.” I muttered under my breath. At least it was good for something.

Ethan’s eyes roamed over my naked body, drinking me in. “You look like a goddess, Chloe.”

A blush stained my cheeks at the compliment, but a blossom of warmth unfurled in my chest. I realized, with some surprise, that I felt like a goddess too. Powerful. Desired.

My breath caught as Ethan slid into me. My body exploded with ecstasy as Ethan filled me completely, stretching me to my limit. My back arched off the table as rapture coiled through my body like liquid fire.

Ethan stroked and squeezed my curves as he picked up the pace, grunting with each thrust. I luxuriated in the sensations, moaning freely.

More than anything, I enjoyed the way Ethan looked at me. Like I was a prize he had no intention of giving up. His gaze seared over my skin, branding me as his. He wanted me, needed me, and it made me feel feminine and confident in a way I never had before.

The perfect way he fucked me was just the cherry on top.

“So beautiful,” Ethan rasped, hips pistoning. “So perfect. Mine.”

I arched into him, clutching at his forearms. “Yours,” I agreed breathily. “Always yours.”

Ethan’s thrusts grew faster and harder, pushing me to the edge of ecstasy. The reading room filled with the sounds of our passion; our grunts and moans, the slap of his hips against mine, the rustle of clothes strewn across the floor. The smell of sex permeated the air—sweat, arousal, primal need.

“Ethan... you feel so incredible,” I gasped, needing to feel him even closer. I pulled myself up, wrapping my arms around his broad shoulders, pulling him closer, deeper. “You feel so good inside me,” I whispered against his lips before kissing him, tongues tangling.

“Chloe, you’re so fucking beautiful. Your body was made for mine,” he growled into my ear, his hands gripping my ass, pulling me tighter against him.

“Your cock fits me so perfectly, Ethan. I can’t get enough of you.” I rocked my hips to meet his thrusts, chasing my release. “More, Ethan. Harder!”

Suddenly, Ethan stood, holding me tight against him, his cock still buried deep inside me. My legs wrapped around his waist automatically, clinging to him.

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He carried me over to a nearby armchair and sat down, settling me in his lap. I was now straddling him, our bodies joined intimately. My heart raced as I prepared to take control, eager to show him just how much he meant to me.

I braced my hands on his shoulders and began riding him in earnest, relishing the way his gaze glazed over and his breath turned to ragged growls.

Ethan's hands gripped my hips, guiding my movements, squeezing and caressing. I knew he loved watching me take my pleasure from him, loved seeing me come undone in his arms. I wanted him to feel as good as he made me feel.

"God, Chloe, you drive me wild," he rasped, his voice strained with desire.

Leaning against his chest for support, my fingers dug into the meaty flesh of his muscles. I never wanted this moment to end, lost in the sensations of our love.

"Show me how much you want me, Ethan," I whispered, challenging him to take us both over the edge.

Ethan's gaze burned with a wild, untamed desire as he gripped me tighter, pinning my body against his. He began thrusting from below, each movement powerful and deliberate, leaving me breathless and wanting more. The new angle allowed him to hit just the right spot, building the fire in my core.

Ethan sucked one nipple into his mouth, biting down gently. A jolt of pleasure shot straight to my core and I cried out, grinding against him.

The chair creaked under us, the library filled with the sounds of harsh breathing, flesh meeting flesh, my cries of ecstasy as Ethan slammed up into me.

“Please, Ethan,” I panted, feeling my orgasm build within me. “Come inside me.”

In response, he slapped my ass, the sting of pain transforming into pleasure that rippled through my body. I craved more, and he obliged, his hand connecting with my flesh again and again as I teetered on the edge of ecstasy.

“Ethan,” I whimpered, fisting his hair and bringing his mouth to mine. Our kiss was messy, desperate. “Harder...”

Ethan held nothing back, pounding into me brutally as I crashed over the edge with a cry, tremors wracking my body.

“Chloe... I’m...” Ethan roared, releasing himself inside me, filling me up completely. The power of his orgasm only magnified my own pleasure, and I reveled in our connection.

I collapsed onto his chest, spent and panting, while he wrapped his arms around me, holding me close. We remained like that, the world outside disappearing as time seemed to stand still. My fingers traced the scar on his shoulder, a symbol of everything we’d been through together. Glancing at my engagement ring, I realized it could never compare to the connection that scar represented.

Ethan reached over to the nearby table, grabbing a slice of Jess’s cherry pie. Taking a bite, he grinned. “This is really good. I need to get the recipe.”

I laughed, tracing circles on his chest. “Good luck with that. Jess supposedly guards her secret ingredient like a state secret.”

“Really? I bet it’s nutmeg,” he teased, and we both laughed.

“I love you, husband,” I whispered, feeling a warmth spread through my chest.

“Forever and always, my beautiful wife. I love you too.”

Wedding One

Chloe

“I do,” I whispered, feeling a mixture of excitement and disbelief that this moment was actually happening. The pastor’s eyes twinkled as he announced to the room, “I now pronounce you husband and wife!” He then gestured toward Ethan and said with a grin, “You may now kiss your bride.” Ethan took my hands in his and as he leaned down and pressed his lips against mine, the little church in Pinegrove erupted with cheers and applause.

Ethan’s kiss was gentle, but I could feel the animal passion he was holding back, making me look forward to the evening even more. When we parted, I gazed up at my husband, still unable to believe a man could be so impossibly handsome. His green eyes sparkled, framed by thick dark lashes. His tailored suit fit him impeccably, accentuating his wide frame and athletic build, exuding an air of elegance that was impossible to ignore.

With only three days between our proposal and impromptu wedding, there hadn’t been time for me to find a proper wedding dress. Thankfully, Elisabeth had loaned me her own wedding dress, which she’d kept carefully preserved in the attic. It was a simple yet beautiful gown in rural American style—delicate lace overlay on the bodice and a flowing skirt that gently brushed the floor as I moved. Any fancy designer gown would have felt out of place here in this small wooden church, among these wonderful, authentic people who had become like family.

Ethan took my hand and we turned to face our guests, a mix of delight and nervousness swirling in my stomach. The Insomniacs sat in the front row, tears of joy in their eyes, while Jess and Amanda were sitting on the other side, whispering something to each other and giggling like schoolgirls as they threw glances our way. My cheeks flushed, wondering what risqué theories they were concocting about our wedding night.

Behind Jess and Amanda sat Patrick with some of his police buddies. He tried to look relaxed, but the beads of sweat on his forehead and his nervous glances at Amanda betrayed his anxiety.

“Ready to head out, Mrs. Hamilton?” Ethan murmured, his lips brushing my ear and sending a delicious shiver down my spine.

I sighed happily. “Absolutely, Mr. Hamilton.”

Arm in arm, we walked down the aisle as cheers and applause erupted around us.

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The small crowd surrounded us as we exited the church like a warm embrace, a whirlwind of hugs, kisses and congratulations.

“Chloe, my dear,” Mary embraced me warmly, tears glistening in her eyes. “I knew you were good people the moment I saw you wandering down that forest road. I’m so happy for you both.”

“Thank you, Mary. For everything.” I hugged her tight, blinking back my own tears. How far we’d come since that first meeting.

Elisabeth was next, giggling as she air-kissed my cheeks. “It looks very good on you, Chloe,” she said. “Almost as good as it looked on me during my wedding.” She winked slyly. “You owe me a favor now, dear. I’ll consider us even if you tell me all about the wedding night. In detail.”

My entire face flamed scarlet as Ethan chuckled beside me.

Susan scoffed at Elisabeth before turning to us. She extended her hand, offering her congratulations, but after a moment, she sighed and said, “Oh, what the hell,” before pulling me into a warm hug.

“Tell me, when are you and Mr. Billionaire moving to Pinegrove?” she asked as she pulled back from our hug.

“We don’t have plans to make the move here, but we will definitely visit often.”

“What, Pinegrove’s not good enough for you two?” Susan scoffed.

“Susan!” Mary scolded her gently, but I could see the teasing glint in Susan’s eyes.

Amanda bounced over, to hug me, her eyes shining as she said, “Susan does have a point, though. We could use a billionaire on our side to help Jess out with Thomas.”

I glanced at Ethan and said, “Ethan, maybe you could help. Do you know a billionaire named Thomas...” I turned to Jess to ask for his last name, but Jess interrupted me.

“Look, Chloe, I appreciate your concern,” Jess said softly, her cheeks tinged pink. “But I don’t want to inconvenience you two. You’ve done enough for us already.”

“Listen, after everything Pinegrove has done for Chloe and me, there’s no inconvenience at all,” Ethan interjected, his voice firm but gentle. “We’re more than happy to help.”

Jess shook her head, her eyes pleading. “Please, don’t interfere. This isn’t how we do things here.”

Reluctantly, I agreed. “If that’s what you want, Jess, we won’t push it. But know that we’re here for you if you need anything.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to ruin the mood,” Jess smiled gratefully and hugged me. “Thank you. And congratulations, you two. You deserve all the happiness in the world. And it is so great that of all the places in the world you chose Pinegrove for a wedding ceremony!”

I exchanged glances with Ethan. “To be quite honest, we decided to do several weddings... but Pinegrove is the first location on our list.”

As Jess stepped back, Patrick approached Ethan with a grin plastered on his face. “Congratulations on the catch, man!” He shook Ethan’s hand firmly before playfully

hitting him on the shoulder.

“Patrick! Be careful with his shoulder!” Susan reacted immediately.

“It’s alright, Susan. The wound has healed splendidly.” Ethan said. “Thanks to the good doctor here.” He nodded at Amanda, and to my surprise I could see a tinge of red in the cheeks of the stern doctor.

“Hey, speaking of celebrations, how about a barbecue?” Patrick suggested, excitement shining in his eyes. “My buddy Ronny McAllister has this huge gas grill, and my trunk is full of beer. Everyone’s invited!”

“Sounds like a great idea,” Ethan replied, his gaze meeting mine for a brief moment. “But let me cover everything.”

“Really? Well, thanks, man!” Patrick cleared his throat, shuffling his feet. “So, Amanda, you coming to this barbecue?”

“Hmm.” Amanda pretended to consider it, tapping her chin. “I suppose so, if you promise to behave, Deputy.”

Poor Patrick went beet red. I bit my lip to hide my grin, glancing at Ethan who was clearly also struggling not to laugh. In that moment, I felt as though I’d known these people for a thousand years.

Wedding Two

Chloe

My cheeks were starting to ache from the forced smile I’d been wearing for what seemed like hours, but I could see only a couple more photographers left in line. I

braced myself for another few minutes of agonizing torture that was described by Ethan's marketing team as 'necessary public activities'. Ethan gave my hand a gentle squeeze, his warmth a comforting anchor in the chaos. I glanced up at him, taking in the relaxed set of his shoulders and jaw. If he was as exhausted from this charade as I was, he didn't show it.

We had decided to go public with our marriage, knowing that my work and ongoing investigation against Ethan's competitors would eventually bring everything to light. So we chose to face it on our terms and organized a party dedicated to our union. But I couldn't have imagined how exhausting it would be to pretend to be a socialite.

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“Almost done,” Ethan whispered into my ear, making me shiver despite the warmth surrounding us.

The next set of photographers approached, a man and woman bickering good-naturedly over the best angle for a shot. Ethan straightened, pulling me closer against his side, and we posed, frozen smiles on our faces as the cameras clicked and flashed.

Click. Flash.

Click. Flash.

Finally, the photographers stepped back and I sagged against Ethan with a sigh, tension draining from my body.

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “Just think how good it will feel when all these people get the hell out of our house.” His voice was a low rumble against my ear.

I chuckled. “I can’t wait for some peace and quiet.”

“Is that the only thing you’re looking forward to?” Ethan asked playfully, his green eyes dancing with mischief.

Heat flickered in my belly at his words. What did Ethan have planned for tonight?

Then one of Ethan’s marketing team hurried over, a bright smile on her face. “Mr. Hamilton, Mrs. Hamilton, now is the perfect time for some candid shots with guests.

If you'll just mingle for a bit?"

I bit back a groan. More photographs. Just what I needed.

Ethan glanced down at me, his gaze softening. "Are you ready for this?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," I replied, steeling myself for another round of socializing.

Ethan tilted my chin up with a finger, his eyes warm. "It will be over soon, love. And then..." He trailed off, a suggestive smile curving his lips.

A delicious shiver ran down my spine. Suddenly, a few more hours of playing the happy socialite didn't seem so bad. Not with a reward like that waiting at the end of the night.

I smiled up at my husband, the expression coming easier this time. "I'm ready."

I turned around with Ethan by my side.

The large hall down the grand staircase was a sea of glittering designer gowns and tailored tuxedos, their glittering jewels reflecting the chandeliers' light like a thousand tiny stars. Champagne fountains bubbled, spilling rivers of golden liquid over piles of champagne flutes. Gilded statues of naked Greek gods competed for attention between lavish floral arrangements bursting with orchids and roses. A famous DJ played music that sounded as expensive as the party itself, the heavy bass vibrating through the marble floor.

I scanned the crowd, recognizing a few famous actresses and singers milling about. Up close, they looked remarkably ordinary. They laughed, sipped champagne, and engaged in idle chatter just like anyone else. Nothing about them seemed special or glamorous. They were just people, like anyone else.

My wedding dress—a couture Chanel number with a plunging neckline and a skirt so full of tulle I could barely walk—suddenly felt ridiculous. I longed for the simple white sundress Elisabeth had lent me back in Pinegrove.

“There’s Damon,” Ethan said, nodding at a familiar figure heading our way. Relief flooded me at the sight of my friend.

“Damon!” I pulled him into a quick hug, mindful of the designer dress I was stuck in. “I’m so glad you came.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Damon shook Ethan’s hand. “Congratulations. You got a good one here.”

“The best,” Ethan said, pride softening his tone as he looked down at me. I ducked my head, a flush of pleasure sweeping over me.

Damon snorted. “All right, enough of the gooey newlywed stuff. Chloe, you wouldn’t believe what these celebrities are saying when they think no one is listening,” his eyes gleamed conspiratorially. “I’ve already got two solid stories and a couple of leads we can check out after the party.”

“Perfect,” I said, barely containing my excitement. “I can’t wait to get started.”

“Me neither,” Damon agreed. “I’ll keep digging for more information. You two enjoy the party.”

Ethan gazed down at me, one eyebrow raised. “Back to work already?”

“You know me.” I shrugged. “I can’t sit still for long.”

“Lucky for you, sitting still is the last thing on my mind tonight.” Ethan bent down,

his lips brushing the shell of my ear once more. “Shall we?”

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Heat pooled low in my belly, and I swallowed hard. Tonight was going to be a long night. In the best possible way.

Slipping my hand into Ethan's waiting grasp, I pasted on my socialite smile. "Lead the way."

We descended the stairs into the sea of revelers, cameras flashing as we went. I kept my smile fixed in place, squeezing Ethan's hand. His warmth was grounding, a reminder that this madness would be over soon.

Ethan kept a firm grip on my hand, his thumb tracing slow circles on my skin. A subtle reminder of the intimacy to come.

My cheeks heated at the thought, and I glanced up to find Ethan watching me, a knowing glint in his eyes. He leaned down, his lips brushing my ear. "Keep thinking about tonight, and that pretty blush of yours will give us away."

I smacked his arm, fighting a losing battle against my smile. "Behave yourself."

Ethan's chuckle was low and throaty, sending another wave of warmth through me. "I don't know the meaning of the word."

Halfway across the room, a tall, handsome man in an expensive tailored suit approached us, the fabric practically screaming money. He extended his hand to Ethan with a confident grin. "Congratulations on your marriage, Ethan," he said as they shook hands. His smile was polite but didn't quite reach his eyes. "And you must be the new Mrs. Hamilton. I'm happy to finally meet the woman who managed

to conquer Ethan's heart."

I shook the proffered hand. "Thank you. Chloe Hamilton. A pleasure to meet you."

"Thomas," his handshake was firm, calculating. "Thomas Harrington."

"Mr. Harrington is an acquaintance from the business world," Ethan said smoothly. "We've had a few dealings in the past."

My curiosity was piqued. "There probably aren't that many billionaires named Thomas, so I'll take a chance—are you the one trying to become the mayor of Pinegrove?"

Thomas's eyes twinkled with amusement, but he nodded. "Yes, I am."

"Look, I promised Jess I wouldn't interfere in your business, but I just want you to know—if you hurt her in any way, I will kick your ass into next week." My voice was firm, and I meant every word.

Thomas regarded me with a mixture of amusement and respect. "You can rest assured that Pine Grove's well-being—and Jess's happiness—are my top priorities." He shook my hand again. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Chloe. Again, congratulations to you both."

With that, he strolled off into the crowd. I looked up at Ethan, who was watching me with a strange expression.

"What?" I asked.

The corner of his mouth lifted. "Remind me not to get on your bad side, Mrs. Hamilton."

I smirked, sliding my arm through his. “Don’t worry, Mr. Hamilton. You’re safe... for now.”

Ethan’s chest rumbled with laughter. “Comforting as always.”

A smile lit up my face as he led me through the crowd. I most definitely liked being married.

Epilogue

Chloe

The warm night breeze caressed my face as I stood on the rooftop of the city’s tallest building, gazing out at the glittering skyline of the city below. The skyscraper belonged to Ethan, and now, in a way, it belonged to me too. The thought felt weird, almost surreal.

I was comfortable in the role of a billionaire’s wife, but it was hard to wrap my head around just how much wealth Ethan had—not just money, but real, tangible things. Sometimes the opulence of Ethan’s world felt suffocating, like this building that loomed around me, all sleek metal and glass. But other times, like now, with Ethan’s arm around my waist and his warmth seeping into my skin, it felt perfect.

Ethan’s hand found mine, strong fingers intertwining with my own, as he stood next to me. Ethan was in the middle of an intense phone call, his voice a low rumble as he stared out at the city. I gave his hand a gentle squeeze, longing for his attention. He glanced at me and his stern mouth curved into one of his heart-stopping smiles, his jade green eyes silently pleading for patience.

As Ethan continued his conversation, my gaze drifted back to the panorama of the city, twinkling like a sea of stars below us. Since Ethan’s world was now mine, like it

or not, I might as well use our wealth and influence for good.

“Sorry about that,” Ethan finally said as he slipped his phone into his pocket and pulled me close, nuzzling my hair. I closed my eyes briefly, breathing in his familiar scent—a mix of cologne, leather, and something uniquely Ethan. It was intoxicating.

“Who was it?” I asked.

“Gordon’s lawyer,” he said, his voice slightly raspy but always comforting.

“How does it look?”

“I got Gordon the best legal team money can buy.” His grip on my hand tightened as if to reassure me. “Since he cooperated to stage my death and then fully cooperated with the investigation, helping the FBI bag executives of three international corporations, his sentence should be light. He’ll likely be out on parole in a year or two.”

“And it was so good of you to take care of Gordon’s wife and daughter too, Ethan.”

Ethan visibly tensed up, his jaw clenching. “It was the least I could do,” he replied quietly, his voice strained. “His little girl was kidnapped because of me, Chloe. I don’t know how I could ever make up for that.”

Guilt darkened his eyes, and I rubbed his back in comfort. We’d had this conversation before, and I knew nothing I said would ease his conscience.

“You’re taking care of them now. That has to count for something.”

He sighed, the tension in his body easing slightly as he pulled me close again. “You always know the right thing to say, don’t you?”

I smiled, a flicker of nerves stirring my stomach. I hoped my surprise would lift his mood, though the timing wasn’t ideal. I wanted him to relax and be at ease when I gave him the news I’d been holding onto.

“Hey, what do you want to do tomorrow?” I asked, trying to bring back the lightness

in our conversation.

Ethan glanced at me with a mischievous grin. “I don’t know, let’s have another wedding,” he suggested playfully.

I laughed, shaking my head. “Honestly, Ethan, I’ve lost count of how many weddings we’ve already had.”

He smirked and pulled me closer, his hand finding its way to my butt and giving it a gentle squeeze. “It’s not the weddings I’m after, Chloe. It’s the wedding nights.”

I blushed at his words, secretly loving the way he always managed to make me feel desired. With Ethan, every night felt like a wedding night—passionate, intense, and filled with love. But it looked like our intimate excess had caught up to us.

Taking a deep breath, I mustered up the courage to share the news that had been weighing on my mind. I was sure Ethan would take it well, but a small part of me couldn’t help but worry about the timing. The ongoing investigation and business matters were already taking up so much of his attention; maybe it was too soon for him to handle this additional responsibility.

“So...” I began, licking my lips. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

His eyes softened as he searched mine, concern etched onto his features. “What is it, Chloe?”

“Ever since our time at your underground bunker near Pinegrove, I... I haven’t had my period.” I paused, swallowing hard before continuing. “I went to the doctor yesterday, and it seems that we’re... expecting.”

Silence. Ethan stared at me, unblinking, and for a terrifying moment I worried how he might react. Then a slow, enormous grin spread across his face, lighting up his eyes

and making him look like a complete idiot—but the most lovable idiot I'd ever seen.

Relief and joy washed over me in a warm wave.

Everything was going to be alright.

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