



The Billionaire's Obsession

Author: *Emma Bray*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: I was just a broke college student trying to survive. He was the ruthless billionaire who decided I belonged to him.

One stolen glance. One possessive touch. That's all it took for Damon Blackwell to claim me. I should have run the second he made his intentions clear—before he paid off my debts, before he moved me into his penthouse, before he whispered in my ear that I was his and there was no escape.

Now, I'm trapped in his world of luxury and danger, where every possessive glance makes my knees weak and every command makes me crave him more. He says he'll burn the world down for me. That there's no life without him.

I should fight harder. I should demand my freedom.

But when he touches me, I forget every reason why I wanted to leave... because deep down, I want to be owned.

He's obsessive. He's ruthless. He's never letting me go.

And God help me... I don't want him to.

The Billionaire's Obsession is an age-gap romance featuring an over-the-top, obsessed billionaire who will do anything to make sure his girl knows she belongs to him.

Total Pages (Source): 37

Page 1

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

CHAPTER

ONE

Lucy

My fingers trembleslightly as I balance the tray of champagne flutes, each crystal edge catching light like tiny warning signals. The weight isn't physical—it's the pressure of knowing one misstep in this marble playground of the elite could cost me everything. I straighten my back, plaster on a smile that doesn't reach my eyes, and step into the glittering chaos of the Caledon Charity Gala.

The grand foyer stretches before me like an ocean of wealth. Marble floors polished to mirrors reflect chandeliers that hang like frozen fireworks, their light splintering across the room in precise, calculated patterns. I navigate between clusters of guests whose combined net worth could probably fund my entire university education ten times over. Their laughter has a particular timbre—confident, practiced, the sound of people who've never worried about making rent.

"Champagne, sir? Ma'am?" I offer the tray with practiced steadiness, my voice pitched to the perfect blend of deference and invisibility.

A woman in a backless gown that probably cost more than my car reaches for a glass without looking at me. Her diamond bracelet catches the light as her fingers close around the stem. I am furniture to her—functional, necessary, but not worth acknowledging.

I don't blame her. We're playing our designated roles in this carefully choreographed dance of service and privilege. Tonight, I am peripheral vision. A hand that extends trays. A voice that murmurs pleasantries.

The classical quartet in the corner plays something I recognize from my music appreciation class—the one luxury course I allowed myself before switching to business administration. The notes float above the crowd, refined and restrained, unlike the pounding bass that would be shaking the walls at parties in my neighborhood.

"Watch yourself," a man in a tuxedo mutters as I slip past, though he was the one who stepped backward without looking. The champagne in my tray sloshes dangerously, and my heart seizes. One spill on a designer dress would cost me my job, and I desperately need this gig.

Three more payments until I can re-enroll for the spring semester. Three more payments until I can pretend the six-month gap in my education was intentional—a "life experience" sabbatical rather than financial desperation.

I circle back to the service area, where harried staff in identical black-and-whites move with practiced efficiency. Manuel, a veteran server with perpetually tired eyes, gives me a quick nod.

"Rich bastards are extra thirsty tonight," he says, refilling my tray. "Blackwell's supposed to show. They're all hoping to get their hooks in him."

My stomach tightens at the name. Everyone knows Damon Blackwell, even those of us without stock portfolios. His face graces business magazines and scandal rags with equal frequency. Self-made billionaire. Corporate shark. Man who supposedly eats competitors for breakfast and vulnerable women for dinner.

"People really came just to see him?" I ask, adjusting my bow tie in the reflection of a serving tray.

Manuel snorts. "Blackwell signs the checks that fund half the charities in this city. Plus, he's single. Do the math."

I take a fresh tray and head back into the fray, my mind lingering on the idea of Damon Blackwell. I've seen his photographs—striking rather than conventionally handsome, with eyes that seem to assess your market value even through glossy magazine pages. The thought that he might soon be here, breathing the same air, makes the room feel suddenly smaller.

A woman with a voice like cut crystal stops me with a flick of her manicured fingers. "Tell me, does the help know if Blackwell has arrived yet?" Her smile is carnivorous, her eyes already scanning the room over my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I wouldn't know," I reply, though the way she asked makes my teeth clench behind my smile.

"Pity." She plucks a champagne flute and dismisses me with the same gesture.

I move on, weaving between bodies that cost more to maintain than my entire existence. Designer perfumes clash in the air—French roses, Italian bergamot, notes of rare oud and amber—creating an invisible class barrier as effective as any velvet rope. My drugstore body spray wilts in comparison, another tiny tell that I don't belong.

Near the east windows, a group of older men with military posture discuss something in low, serious tones. Their conversation halts as I approach with my tray, resuming only after I've moved a respectful distance away. The weight of secrets hangs heavy around them—business deals, perhaps, or political machinations. The kind of

conversations that shift stock prices or redraw district lines.

My feet ache in the cheap service shoes I polished frantically this morning. Five hours down, three to go. The envelope of cash at the end of the night will be worth it—enough to cover half a textbook, a fraction of a credit hour. I've done the math so many times I dream in decimals and dollar signs.

Another circuit. Another tray. A man with silver temples and wandering hands "accidentally" brushes his fingers against mine as he takes a glass. I've learned to step back quickly, to move on without reacting. Complaints get you labeled as difficult, and difficult servers don't get called back for the high-paying gigs.

In the ladies' room—a sanctuary I'm only allowed to enter with cleaning supplies—I catch a glimpse of myself in the gold-framed mirror. My dark hair is scraped back into a regulation bun, my face carefully made up to be presentable but forgettable. I look exhausted around the eyes. Twenty-two going on forty.

"You can do this," I whisper to my reflection, then immediately feel foolish. Giving yourself pep talks in borrowed bathrooms—another sign of someone who doesn't belong.

Back in the grand hall, the energy has shifted. There's a subtle current running through the crowd, a ripple of anticipation. Women touch their hair, men straighten their posture. The social equivalent of animals sensing a predator.

"He's coming," I hear a redhead in emerald silk whisper to her companion. "Blackwell just pulled up."

I shouldn't care. His arrival means nothing to me except perhaps more demanding guests, more champagne to pour. And yet I find myself glancing toward the entrance, curious despite myself to see the man whose name commands such immediate

attention.

Manuel passes me with an empty tray. "Heads up. When Blackwell arrives, stay out of his way. Guy's known for firing staff if they so much as breathe wrong near him."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

The warning sends a chill down my spine. I can't afford to lose this job. I move toward the back of the room, where the lighting is dimmer and the expectations lower. Here, guests are already three drinks in, less likely to notice if my smile slips or my hands shake. Less likely to complain about a server who dares to look tired.

The quartet transitions to something slower, more anticipatory. The lights seem to dim, though I know it's just my imagination. I take a deep breath, steadying the tray against my palm. Just a few more hours, then home to my studio apartment with its leaking faucet and patch of sky visible from the single window. The place I tell myself is temporary, a stepping stone to somewhere better, somewhere I've earned.

A hush falls over the crowd near the entrance, then ripples outward like a stone dropped in still water. The moment stretches, elastic with potential, and I find myself holding my breath along with everyone else.

CHAPTER

TWO

Lucy

He enters like silence given form—a presence that doesn't announce itself but simply is, commanding attention without demanding it. Damon Blackwell moves through the grand doorway of the Caledon Gala, and the air around him seems to crystallize, as if the molecules themselves are standing at attention. My hand freezes mid-pour, champagne hovering dangerously close to overflowing, as I take in the man whose name has been whispered all night like an invocation.

Damon Blackwell doesn't just wear his midnight-blue suit—he inhabits it. The fabric embraces his broad shoulders and lean waist with the devotion of a lover, custom-tailored to eliminate any barrier between the man and his presentation to the world. His crisp white shirt provides stark contrast, like fresh snow against a winter night sky. But it's his face that arrests my attention, stops my breath in my lungs.

He's not conventionally handsome—he's something else entirely. His features are too sharp, too precisely arranged to be merely attractive. High cheekbones that could cut glass. A jaw that speaks of decisions never reconsidered. Lips that look unused to smiling. And his eyes—God, his eyes. Even from across the room, I can see they're the color of storm clouds, of steel left in rain. They move methodically across the gathering, assessing, cataloging.

My guest startles me with an impatient cough, and I finish pouring his champagne with a mumbled apology. When I look up again, Damon has advanced further into the room. He doesn't glad-hand or backslap. He doesn't need to. People orbit toward him instead, celestial bodies drawn to a dark star.

"That's him?" a server whispers beside me, her tray clutched like a shield.

"That's him," I confirm, though I've never seen him in person before tonight. There's no mistaking Damon Blackwell for anyone else. He radiates authority like heat.

I force myself to continue working, moving through the crowd with my diminishing supply of champagne. But my awareness has fundamentally shifted. Before, the room was a general blur of wealth and privilege. Now, it's divided into two distinct categories: Damon Blackwell and everyone else.

I serve three more guests, nodding at their mumbled thanks or silent dismissals. My path takes me slightly closer to where Damon stands, surrounded by a semi-circle of people whose body language screams supplication. The mayor is among them, his

usual bombastic confidence subdued to something almost deferential.

Damon responds to whatever they're saying with minimal movement—a slight nod, a brief word. He doesn't perform the social dance of fake laughter or exaggerated interest. And yet they lean closer, hungry for any scrap of his attention. It's fascinating and slightly disturbing, like watching a nature documentary on pack behavior.

I'm so absorbed in my observation that I don't immediately realize when his attention shifts. I'm reaching to collect an empty glass when something—some subtle change in the air current, some primitive warning system in my spine—makes me look up.

Damon Blackwell is staring directly at me.

The glass nearly slips from my fingers. His gaze doesn't casually pass over me like everyone else's tonight. It fixes, narrows, focuses. In an instant, I feel stripped of my anonymous server's uniform, exposed in ways that have nothing to do with clothing.

I quickly lower my eyes, a flush creeping up my neck. It's a mistake. When I dare to look again, he's still watching me, and now there's something else in his expression—a curiosity, an intensity that makes my stomach knot.

A woman in a red dress touches his arm, trying to reclaim his attention. He doesn't even glance at her. His eyes remain locked on me, and I swear I see the corner of his mouth lift infinitesimally. Not a smile. An acknowledgment.

I turn away, nearly colliding with another server. My heart hammers against my ribs like it's trying to escape. This is ridiculous. He's just a man—wealthy and powerful, yes, but still just a man. I've been invisible to the upper crust all night. Why would he of all people notice me?

"You okay?" Manuel asks as I reach the service area. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm fine," I lie, exchanging my empty tray for one loaded with canapés. "Just tired."

But as I reenter the main floor, my body vibrates with awareness. I don't need to look to know where Damon stands. I feel his presence like a magnetic field, disrupting my internal compass.

I serve guests mechanically, my smile fixed, my responses automatic. A woman compliments my hair, surprising me with her kindness, but I barely manage a coherent thank you. All my senses are tuned to the man who is now moving through the crowd with measured steps.

Moving toward me.

I pivot away, taking the long route around a cluster of socialites discussing vacation homes. My hands aren't trembling, but only because I'm gripping the tray with unnecessary force. This is absurd. He's probably not even approaching me specifically. The room is only so big. Coincidence of direction. Nothing more.

"Excuse me," a silver-haired man stops me, swaying slightly. His breath reeks of expensive scotch. "Do you know if they're serving that little lobster thing from last year? My wife loved those."

I don't, but I promise to check, grateful for the momentary distraction. When he releases me, I risk a glance across the room.

Damon has stopped to speak with an older gentleman. But even as he nods at whatever is being said, his eyes find mine again, as if there's a direct line between us that no one else can see. This time, there's no mistaking the intent in his gaze. It's

proprietary. Assessing. Like I'm a rare commodity he's considering acquiring.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

Heat floods my body—not entirely unpleasant, which confuses me further. I should be offended by that look. Instead, something primitive inside me recognizes it and responds to it. My lips part slightly, drawing in air that suddenly seems too thin.

I force myself to break the connection, to focus on balancing my tray and navigating between tables. But my body has betrayed me. My skin prickles with awareness. My pulse races like I've been running. Even the weight of my uniform feels different against my sensitized nerves.

What is happening to me?

A flash of midnight blue in my peripheral vision sends me in another direction. I'm not running from him. I'm just... strategically relocating. To the opposite side of the ball, where a group of women with surgical enhancements and diamond-encrusted wrists beckon me for more champagne.

"...heard his last girlfriend was a model," one whispers as I approach.

"Ex-model," another corrects. "He doesn't date actively working women. Scheduling conflicts, supposedly."

"Well, I've cleared my calendar for the next decade," a third jokes, and they all laugh, the sound brittle and performative.

They're talking about him. Of course they are. Everyone is, in one way or another. I serve them with mechanical efficiency, trying not to eavesdrop but unable to help myself.

"He's not interested in your calendar, Margot. Word is he's exacting. Specific. The kind of man who knows exactly what he wants and arranges the universe to provide it."

Something about those words sends a shiver down my spine. I step away before they can notice my reaction, weaving through the crowd toward the relative safety of the service corridor. Just a few minutes to collect myself. To shake off this strange, electric feeling that's taken possession of my body.

I don't make it.

CHAPTER

THREE

Lucy

A hand touches my elbow—lightbut unmistakable—and every molecule in my body seems to reorganize around that point of contact. I don't need to look to know who it is. My body has already recognized him, responded to him on some cellular level that bypasses conscious thought.

I turn slowly, tray clutched against my chest like armor, and raise my eyes to meet Damon Blackwell's storm-cloud gaze.

Up close, he's even more overwhelming. His height forces me to tilt my head back. The subtle scent of his cologne—something woodsy and expensive and distinctly masculine—fills my nostrils. But it's the focus in his eyes that truly pins me in place. I've never been looked at like this—like I'm being memorized, catalogued, claimed.

"Sir," I manage, my voice strangely steady despite the earthquake happening inside

me. "Can I help you with something?"

His lips curve slightly—not a true smile, but an acknowledgment of the absurdity of my question. As if we both know this encounter was inevitable from the moment he walked in. As if the very air between us is charged with purpose.

"You can," he says, and his voice is exactly what I expected—deep, controlled, with the quiet confidence of someone who never needs to raise it to be heard. "But not with anything on your tray."

The simple statement shouldn't sound so intimate, and yet heat blooms across my skin as if he's touched me again. I watch, transfixed, as his gaze drops briefly to my lips before returning to my eyes with renewed intensity.

"I don't—" I begin, but the words evaporate under the weight of his attention.

"You don't belong here," he states, not unkindly but with absolute certainty. "Not serving these people."

It's such an unexpected observation that I forget to be intimidated for a moment. "I need the job, Mr. Blackwell."

Something flashes in his eyes when I say his name—satisfaction, perhaps, or surprise that I recognize him so easily. He studies me for another long moment, during which I become acutely aware of every imperfection in my appearance—the stray hair escaped from my bun, the small scuff on my sensible black shoes, the faint smudge of mascara I noticed earlier but couldn't fix.

"What's your name?" he asks, though it doesn't sound like a question so much as a demand.

Before I can answer, a commotion near the main doors provides a merciful interruption. We both turn to see the mayor gesturing dramatically, clearly wanting Damon's attention for some official purpose.

Damon's jaw tightens almost imperceptibly. When he looks back at me, there's an intensity in his expression that steals my breath.

"This isn't finished," he says quietly, the words carrying the weight of a promise—or a warning. Then he steps back, releasing me from the magnetic field of his presence without ever having really touched me.

I watch him stride toward the mayor, his movements precise and controlled. The crowd parts for him automatically, like subjects before a king. And despite everything rational in me saying I should be relieved, I feel an inexplicable sense of loss as the distance between us grows.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

It's only when he's fully engaged with the mayor that I realize my tray is trembling slightly in my hands. That my heart is racing as if I've run a marathon. That my body feels simultaneously ice-cold and burning hot.

And that somehow, in the space of a few minutes and fewer words, Damon Blackwell has seen more of the real me than anyone in this room. Perhaps more than anyone has in years.

The thought terrifies me almost as much as the certainty that he isn't done looking.

My hands won't stop trembling. I've retreated to the kitchen twice to splash cold water on my wrists, an old trick my mother taught me for calming nerves, but it isn't working. Nothing could neutralize the lingering electricity from Damon Blackwell's gaze, from the brief touch of his fingers against my elbow. I arrange fresh champagne flutes on my tray and take a steadying breath, only to feel it catch in my throat when Manuel approaches with an expression that tells me my night is about to get exponentially more complicated.

"Lucy," he says, his voice low and urgent. "Edwards wants you to take over table seven."

My stomach drops. "Table seven? That's?—"

"Blackwell's table." Manuel nods, his expression a mix of sympathy and curiosity. "Edwards says the guest specifically requested you."

The words hit me like a physical blow. He requested me. Of course he did. That brief

interaction wasn't coincidence or casual interest—it was reconnaissance.

"There must be someone else," I protest weakly, already knowing it's futile. When Damon Blackwell requests something, the universe rearranges itself to provide it— isn't that what those women said?

Manuel shrugs. "Orders from the top. And Lucy?" His eyes flick to my still-trembling hands. "Don't spill anything on the billionaire, okay?"

I want to laugh at the absurdity of it all, but the sound might edge too close to hysteria. Instead, I nod and gather a fresh tray of drinks. The weight feels impossible suddenly, as if gravity has intensified around me specifically.

Table seven occupies the most secluded corner of the ballroom, partially screened by an arrangement of exotic orchids. It's reserved for VIPs who want visibility when it suits them and privacy when it doesn't. The perfect setting for a predator who occasionally allows himself to be seen.

I approach with measured steps, forcing air in and out of my lungs in a deliberate rhythm. Four tuxedoed men surround Damon, leaning in to catch his quietly spoken words. They laugh on cue—not the genuine mirth of shared humor but the calculated response of men who know the value of appearing agreeable.

Damon sits with his back to the wall, giving him a clear view of the entire room. Of me. His posture is relaxed but alert, one hand resting casually on the pristine tablecloth. He doesn't pause his conversation as I approach, doesn't acknowledge me immediately. But I feel his awareness like a physical touch.

"Gentlemen," I manage, my voice impressively steady as I begin placing drinks. "Fresh champagne."

One man—silver-haired with a face flushed from alcohol—barely glances at me as he takes his glass. Another mutters a distracted thanks. The third, younger than the others with hungry eyes, lets his gaze linger inappropriately on my body before accepting his drink.

I save Damon for last, prolonging the inevitable. When I finally turn to him, he's watching me with that same intense focus from before. I extend the last champagne flute, and for one terrible, wonderful moment, I think he might brush his fingers against mine deliberately.

He doesn't. He takes the glass with precise movements, maintaining a millimeter of space between our fingers.

"Thank you, Lucy," he says, my name in his mouth sounding different somehow—significant, weighted with unspoken meaning.

I haven't told him my name. The realization sends a jolt through my system, a mixture of alarm and something dangerously close to excitement. He asked about me. Learned about me. Wanted to know.

"You're welcome, Mr. Blackwell," I reply, the formality a flimsy shield between us. "Can I bring you anything else?"

His eyes hold mine a beat too long. "Not at present."

I should leave—complete my task and retreat. Instead, I hover uncertainly, trapped in the magnetic field of his attention. The younger executive clears his throat, breaking the moment.

"We were discussing the Westfield merger," he says pointedly.

Damon's gaze remains on me for another second before he turns to the man. "No, Hodges. You were discussing the Westfield merger. I was explaining why it won't happen."

The correction is delivered without heat but with such finality that Hodges physically recoils. I use the distraction to step back, to put precious inches between myself and the suffocating intensity of Damon's presence.

"I'll return shortly with water," I say to no one in particular, then turn and walk away with careful, measured steps. I feel Damon's eyes on me the entire time, tracking me across the room like a targeting system.

In the service area, I press my palms against the cool metal of a prep table and exhale shakily.

"You okay?" asks a female server whose name I can't remember. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm fine," I lie for the second time tonight. "Just a difficult table."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

She grimaces sympathetically. "The rich ones always are."

But it's not the wealth that makes Damon Blackwell difficult. It's the way he looks at me—like he can see past my carefully constructed façade to the desperate, drowning girl beneath. Like he recognizes something in me that I've tried to hide even from myself.

I collect a tray of water glasses and a pitcher of ice water, the weight providing an anchor for my scattered thoughts. I can do this. Serve the table, avoid direct eye contact with Damon, and get through the next few hours with my dignity intact. Simple.

The quartet has shifted to something with a faster tempo, the notes chasing each other with increasing urgency. The crowd seems louder now, the combined effect of alcohol and time loosening inhibitions. I navigate through swaying bodies, holding my tray high.

As I approach table seven again, I notice the dynamics have shifted. Damon is speaking now, his posture still relaxed but his hands moving occasionally to emphasize a point. The other men are leaning forward, faces rapt with attention. Whatever he's saying has them captivated.

I slide along the perimeter, intending to serve water without interrupting. The silver-haired man notices me first, shifting to make space. I place a glass before him, then move to serve the others.

Damon pauses mid-sentence when I reach him, his eyes following my movements as

I set down his water. The glass catches the light, sending fractured rainbows across the white tablecloth. For a surreal moment, I'm transfixed by the simple beauty of it, by the incongruity of something so ordinary in this palace of excess.

"Continue," one of the men prompts Damon.

Damon ignores him, his focus entirely on me. "You're a student," he says, not a question but a statement of fact.

I freeze, pitcher poised over his glass. "Yes," I admit, then add unnecessarily, "Part-time."

"What are you studying?"

The other men at the table exchange glances, clearly confused by their host's interest in a server's education. I'm equally confused, but something compels me to answer honestly.

"Business administration. When I can afford the classes."

Something flickers in his eyes—approval, perhaps, or satisfaction at having his assumptions confirmed. "Practical," he comments. "Though not where your passion lies, I suspect."

The observation is too accurate, too intimate for this setting. Heat creeps up my neck. "I should refill the other tables," I say, desperate to escape his penetrating gaze.

I step back, already turning, when disaster strikes. A drunken guest stumbles against my back as he passes, propelling me forward. My feet tangle. The water pitcher tilts precariously in my grip. I see everything with crystal clarity even as time seems to slow—the pitcher falling, water arcing through air, my body pitching toward the

pristine white tablecloth and the priceless suits surrounding it.

I'm going to crash. I'm going to spill. I'm going to lose this job and the next semester's tuition and everything I've been working toward.

Then, impossibly, a strong hand clamps around my wrist, arresting my fall. Another grips my waist, stabilizing me. The pitcher somehow stays in my grasp, though water sloshes over the rim and splashes across the table.

Damon Blackwell has caught me. His hands are firm, proprietary, confident in their grip on my body. Heat radiates from the points of contact, burning through the thin material of my uniform. I'm suspended in his hold for what feels like an eternity, my body angled awkwardly, my breath caught in my lungs.

"Careful," he murmurs, his voice pitched for my ears alone.

His grip shifts, guiding me upright with deliberate precision. But he doesn't immediately release me. His fingers remain circled around my wrist, his other hand steady at my waist. The touch feels possessive. Intentional. Like he's been waiting for an excuse to put his hands on me.

Around us, chaos erupts in minor key. The younger executive curses as water soaks his sleeve. The silver-haired man pushes back his chair to avoid the spreading puddle. Someone calls for additional napkins. But all of it registers as background noise, secondary to the electric current running between Damon's body and mine.

I should apologize. I should pull away. I should do anything except stand here, captured by both his hands and his gaze, my heart hammering so loudly I'm certain he can hear it.

"I'm sorry," I finally manage, the words emerging breathless and inadequate.

His eyes hold mine, unflinching. "Don't be."

More commotion as a waiter rushes over with napkins. Someone else retrieves the water pitcher from my still-frozen grip. Damon's hands fall away from my body, but the imprint of his touch remains, burning like a brand beneath my clothes.

"It wasn't her fault," Damon says to the hovering manager who's appeared at the edge of the scene, his face pale with barely concealed panic. "A guest bumped into her."

The statement is delivered with such authority that the manager simply nods and redirects his anxiety toward locating the offending guest. I stand awkwardly in the aftermath, uncertain of my role now that the crisis has passed.

My gaze falls to the table, where water droplets have merged with spilled wine from one of the executive's glasses. The red liquid spreads in thin rivulets across the white tablecloth, creating abstract patterns that look oddly like veins. Like lifeblood.

When I look up, Damon is watching me with an intensity that steals what little breath I've managed to recover. There's something darkly satisfied in his expression, as if my stumble was not an inconvenience but an opportunity he'd been waiting for.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

"You should take a moment," he says, nodding toward the service corridor. "Compose yourself."

It's a dismissal, yet it doesn't feel unkind. It feels like... consideration. Like he's offering me an escape route from the embarrassment of what just happened.

"Thank you," I whisper, backing away from the table, from him, from the inexplicable connection that seems to have formed between us without my consent or comprehension.

I make it to the service corridor on unsteady legs, one hand pressed against the wall for support. My skin still tingles where he touched me—wrist, waist, the phantom pressure of his fingers leaving invisible marks.

What is happening to me? Why this man? Why tonight?

I've been touched before—casual dates, a serious boyfriend in freshman year before finances forced me to prioritize work over relationships. Nothing has ever felt like this—like my body is recognizing something my mind doesn't yet understand. Like some primitive part of me is responding to a call I didn't know I was waiting to hear.

The realization terrifies me. Damon Blackwell is dangerous—not because of his wealth or power, but because of how easily he sliced through my carefully constructed defenses. How effortlessly he made me feel seen when I've spent months perfecting the art of invisibility.

I splash water on my face in the small employee restroom, careful not to smudge my

makeup. In the harsh fluorescent lighting, I look both exactly the same and fundamentally altered. My eyes are too bright, my cheeks flushed with color that has nothing to do with cosmetics.

When I return to the ballroom, I deliberately take a route that keeps me far from table seven. But distance doesn't diminish my awareness of Damon's presence. I feel him like a gravitational pull, my body instinctively orienting toward him despite my rational mind's protests.

For the remainder of the night, I move through the crowd with mechanical efficiency, smiling, serving, playing my role. But beneath the performance, something has awakened—something hungry and curious and frightened all at once.

Just before midnight, as the gala winds toward its conclusion, I allow myself one final glance at table seven. Damon is gone, his seat empty, his departure unnoticed by me despite my hyperawareness of his presence all night.

I feel a curious mixture of relief and disappointment. Relief because I can finally breathe normally again. Disappointment because...because what? Because I wanted another moment under his intense scrutiny? Because some irrational part of me hoped he might seek me out again?

It's madness. I don't even know him. He doesn't know me, despite the unsettling feeling that he saw more of me in our brief interactions than people who've known me for years.

As I collect empty glasses from abandoned tables, I tell myself this night was an aberration. A strange, charged encounter that will fade into memory by morning. Damon Blackwell will return to his world of corporate acquisitions and luxury penthouses. I'll return to my world of night classes and double shifts.

Our orbits intersected briefly, that's all. Cosmic coincidence. Nothing more.

So why does it feel like something fundamental has shifted? Why does the night air, when I finally step outside after changing out of my uniform, feel charged with possibilities that didn't exist twelve hours ago?

I wrap my thin jacket tighter around myself and begin the long walk to the bus stop, my sensible shoes pinching with every step. Behind me, the Caledon Gala continues its glittering finale. Ahead lies my normal life—practical, determined, focused on survival and incremental progress.

But something new walks with me now—the memory of storm-gray eyes that saw through pretenses, of hands that caught me with possessive certainty, of a connection that felt inevitable rather than accidental.

And deep down, in a place I'm not ready to acknowledge, lives the unsettling certainty that Damon Blackwell isn't finished with me yet.

CHAPTER

FOUR

Lucy

I stare at my phone screen, blinking hard to make sure my eyes aren't playing tricks. The balance that has haunted me for years—\$43,782.19 in student loans—now shows a big fat zero. My fingers are cold, but there's a warmth in my chest, an uncomfortable heat that I recognize as fear. Nobody gives away that kind of money without expecting something in return.

Nobody.

The ancient radiator in my studio apartment clanks and sputters, fighting a losing battle against the early morning chill. I pull my threadbare cardigan tighter around my shoulders, still fixated on my phone screen. This has to be a glitch. Some IT person at the loan company is probably getting fired today.

I refresh the page. Still zero.

My tiny apartment suddenly feels even smaller, the walls pressing in with the weight of this impossibility. Dirty dishes from last night's ramen are still piled in the sink. A stack of textbooks tilts precariously on my yard-sale desk. The digital clock on my microwave blinks 7:16, reminding me I have class in forty-four minutes and a shift at the campus coffee shop right after. I don't have time for financial mysteries.

Yet I can't look away from that zero.

Four years of undergraduate studies in business administration, with a minor in economics. Two more years for my MBA that I'm still grinding through. All those sleepless nights. The three jobs I've juggled. The meals I've skipped. The social life I've sacrificed. All compressed into a number that has defined my existence—until today.

My hands shake as I dial the loan company's number. I expect to wait the usual eternity, but someone picks up after only two rings.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

"Student Loan Services, this is Brenda. How may I help you today?"

"Hi, uh—" My voice cracks, and I clear my throat. "My name is Lucy Mercer. I'm calling about my account. There seems to be some kind of...mistake."

"Certainly, Lucy. I'll need your account number and the last four digits of your social security number for verification."

I recite the information I know by heart, pacing the five steps it takes to cross my apartment and back.

"Thank you, Ms. Mercer. What seems to be the problem with your account?"

"My balance. It says zero. But I still owed over forty-three thousand dollars yesterday."

The clacking of a keyboard fills the brief silence. "Yes, I see. Your account shows a complete payoff as of yesterday afternoon. The transaction was processed at 4:47 PM."

My heart pounds against my ribs. "But I didn't make any payment. I couldn't possibly?—"

"The payment wasn't made by you, Ms. Mercer. Your account was settled by a third party."

I sink onto the edge of my bed, the springs groaning beneath me. "A third party?"

Who? There must be some mistake."

More keyboard clacking. "There's no mistake. The payment was verified and processed correctly. As for who made the payment, it appears to be a private individual or entity."

The name rings a distant bell, but I can't place it. "Don't I have a right to know who paid my debt?"

"The benefactor requested anonymity, Ms. Mercer. All I can tell you is that it was processed legally and your account is now paid in full. Congratulations."

Congratulations. Like I won something. Like this is normal.

"But this doesn't make sense." I stand up again, unable to stay still. "People don't just pay off strangers' student loans."

"I understand your confusion, but I assure you, this does happen occasionally. Philanthropists, charitable foundations, sometimes even employers will settle student debt."

"I don't work for anyone who could afford this." The coffee shop barely pays me enough to cover my ramen noodle diet. "And I don't know any philanthropists."

"Well, someone knows you, Ms. Mercer. Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

The chipper customer service voice makes this all the more surreal. "So that's it? My loans are just...gone? There's nothing I need to do?"

"That's correct. You'll receive an official payoff statement by mail within five to

seven business days. Other than that, you're free and clear."

Free and clear. The words echo in my head as I end the call.

I should be jumping up and down. Calling my mom to tell her the good news. Instead, I'm standing frozen in the middle of my apartment, clutching my phone like a lifeline, a chill running down my spine despite the radiator's valiant efforts.

Who would do this? And more importantly—why?

Then I go completely still as I remember the gala a couple of nights ago.

Damon Blackwell. Could he have—? Would he?

The microwave clock now reads 7:38. I'm going to be late for class if I don't hurry, but I can't seem to make my body move. The ghost of that debt has haunted me for so long that its sudden absence leaves me unbalanced, like stepping off a curb I didn't realize was there.

There's a saying my mom repeated throughout my childhood, during the lean years after my dad left: "Nothing in this world is free, Lucy girl. Remember that."

I've lived by those words. Worked for everything I have, meager as it is. I've never taken handouts, even when pride meant hunger.

And now this. A gift too enormous to comprehend, from someone who wants to remain anonymous, though I suspect I know who it is.

I finally force myself to move, throwing on clothes and gathering my books on autopilot. As I lock my apartment door behind me, I can't shake the feeling that while one burden has been lifted, another—heavier and more complicated—has just been

placed on my shoulders.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

The crisp morning air fills my lungs as I step outside, but it does nothing to clear the fog in my head. I should feel lighter today. Instead, with each step toward campus, I feel watched, marked, selected for something I don't understand.

Someone has paid for me. The question that haunts me as I hurry to class isn't just who, but what exactly they think they've bought.

CHAPTER

FIVE

Lucy

Three hours of lectures and a six-hour shift at the coffee shop later, I drag myself up the three flights of stairs to my apartment, shoulders aching and feet screaming. The last thing I expect to see is him—Damon Blackwell himself—leaning against my door frame like he owns it. Maybe he does. His charcoal suit probably costs more than my rent for a year, his watch more than my entire education. His dark eyes lock onto mine, and my exhaustion evaporates, replaced by something electric and dangerous.

I freeze on the landing, coffee grounds still under my fingernails, the smell of espresso clinging to my clothes. For a moment, I wonder if I'm hallucinating—if the mystery of my vanished debt has finally broken my sleep-deprived brain.

"Ms. Mercer." His voice is deep, smooth like expensive whiskey I've never tasted. "You're exactly on time."

I haven't told him when my shift ends. I haven't told him anything.

"How did you find my apartment?" I ask, my voice steadier than I feel.

A smile touches his lips but doesn't reach his eyes. "Finding things is what I do." He straightens from the door frame, standing to his full height—at least six-foot-two of lean, controlled power. "May I come in? We have matters to discuss."

It's not really a question. Men like Damon Blackwell don't ask permission. They inform you of what's about to happen.

"This is about my student loans," I say. Not a question either.

"Perceptive. I appreciate that quality." He gestures to my door. "Shall we?"

My fingers tremble slightly as I dig for my keys. I'm acutely aware of him behind me—the subtle scent of his cologne, the quiet confidence in his posture, the heat that seems to radiate from him despite the professional distance he maintains.

The lock clicks open, and I step into my tiny studio, painfully conscious of its inadequacies. The futon that doubles as my bed is still unmade. Books and papers cover every surface. The kitchen sink still holds this morning's coffee mug.

Damon Blackwell steps inside after me, and my apartment instantly shrinks. He doesn't comment on the surroundings, but his eyes take in everything—cataloging, assessing, judging.

"You're wondering why I paid your debt," he says, moving to the center of the room. He doesn't sit, doesn't ask to sit. He just stands there, commanding the space.

"Among other things." I remain by the door, hand still on the knob. "Like why

Damon Blackwell, CEO of a multi-billion-dollar corporation, is standing in my studio apartment on a Tuesday evening."

He studies me for a moment, and I fight the urge to fidget under his gaze. His eyes are gray—not the soft gray of morning fog, but the hard gray of steel.

"I've looked into you, Lucy," he says, and my stomach tightens at the casual use of my first name. "Top of your class at undergrad. Currently maintaining a 3.9 GPA in your MBA program while working thirty hours a week. Impressive."

"That doesn't explain why you paid off my student loans." I try to keep my voice neutral, but my heart is hammering against my ribs.

"I'm getting to that." He runs a finger along the edge of my desk, examining the textbooks stacked there. "I have a proposition for you. A job offer."

"A job?" I repeat stupidly. "At Blackwell Industries?"

"As my personal assistant." He turns to face me fully now. "My current PA is leaving to start a family. I need someone intelligent, dedicated, and discreet to replace her. Someone who can learn quickly and handle pressure. Someone like you."

I blink, trying to process this. "You paid off nearly fifty thousand dollars in student loans as...what? A signing bonus?"

"Consider it an investment." His tone is matter-of-fact. "I needed to get your attention, and I needed to demonstrate what working for me can offer."

"Most people just send an email." The words slip out before I can stop them.

To my surprise, one corner of his mouth quirks up. "I'm not most people, Lucy."

No, he certainly isn't. Most people don't track down struggling students and eliminate their debt. Most people don't show up unannounced at women's apartments. Most people don't look at you like they can see through your clothes, your skin, right down to the marrow of your bones.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

"What exactly would this job entail?" I ask, finally releasing my death grip on the doorknob but still maintaining my distance.

"Standard executive assistant duties. Managing my schedule, coordinating travel arrangements, handling sensitive correspondence, attending meetings with me." He paces slowly across my small living space. "The position requires absolute confidentiality and availability. You would be on call twenty-four seven."

"And the compensation?"

"Two hundred thousand per annum, plus benefits. A company car. A housing allowance—or, if you prefer, a company apartment near headquarters." He says this as casually as someone might discuss the weather. "And of course, your student loan debt is already taken care of."

The amount staggers me. It's more money than I ever imagined making right out of school—more than most people with decades of experience make.

"Why me?" I ask, the most important question. "There must be thousands of qualified candidates who'd kill for this position."

Damon takes a step toward me, and it takes everything I have not to step back.

"Why not you?" His eyes hold mine. "Your thesis on ethical leadership in modern business environments was particularly illuminating."

My body goes warm all over. He's read my thesis?

"That still doesn't explain your interest." I cross my arms, trying to reclaim some sense of control.

"Let's just say I see potential in you that others might miss." He reaches into his suit jacket and pulls out a sleek leather portfolio. "All the details are in this contract. Review it tonight. We can discuss any questions tomorrow morning."

I don't reach for it. "And if I decline?"

His expression doesn't change, but something in the air between us shifts, grows colder.

"The debt is a gift, regardless of your decision." His tone makes it clear he doesn't expect me to decline. "Though I would consider it...unwise to reject such an opportunity."

The threat is subtle but unmistakable. Not that he'll demand the money back, but that crossing Damon Blackwell comes with consequences.

"I already have a job. And I'm still in school," I point out.

"Your schedule at Blackwell Industries would accommodate your classes. As for your current employment—" He glances around my shabby apartment with eloquent dismissal. "I think we both know this is a significant upgrade."

He's right, of course. Slinging coffee for minimum wage plus meager tips can't compare to what he's offering. With that kind of money, I could help my mom, build savings, have security for the first time in my life.

But nothing about this feels right. Normal employers don't stalk potential employees or pay their debts or show up at their apartments unannounced.

"May I?" I hold out my hand for the contract, and he places it in my palm. Our fingers brush briefly, and I feel a jolt—static from the dry air, but it startles me nonetheless.

The portfolio is heavy, expensive leather. I open it to find at least twenty pages of legal text, dense with clauses and conditions.

"This seems extensive for an assistant position," I observe.

"The role requires access to sensitive information. The legal protections are necessary." He checks his watch—platinum, I'm guessing, or white gold. "I have a dinner engagement. Review the contract. My driver will collect you at eight tomorrow morning to bring you to my office for your decision."

Not asking if that time works for me. Not asking if I have class. Just informing me of what will happen.

"I haven't agreed to anything yet," I remind him.

His smile is patient, almost pitying. "But you will."

The certainty in his voice sends another chill through me. Because he's right. In what universe would someone in my position turn down this opportunity? I'd be an idiot to reject it, no matter how strange the circumstances.

"Fine. Eight o'clock." I clutch the portfolio to my chest like a shield.

Damon nods, satisfied, and moves toward the door. I step aside to let him pass, but he pauses beside me, close enough that I can feel the heat from his body.

"One more thing, Lucy." His voice is softer now, almost intimate. "I value loyalty

above all else. Once you're mine, I expect complete dedication."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

The possessive language makes my breath catch. Not "once you work for me" but "once you're mine."

Before I can respond, he's gone, the door closing behind him with a decisive click.

I stand frozen for several minutes, the contract heavy in my hands, his last words echoing in my head. The apartment that felt too small with him in it now feels vast and empty, yet somehow I can still sense his presence—as if he's left some invisible mark on my space.

With shaking hands, I open the contract again and begin to read. The language is dense with legal jargon, but certain phrases jump out at me:

"...shall make herself available at all times..."

"...absolute confidentiality regarding all matters personal and professional..."

"...accommodations to be provided at employer's discretion..."

"...travel requirements to be determined solely by employer..."

Each clause seems designed to give him more control, more access to my life. The compensation package is detailed in full—even more generous than he described verbally, with bonuses and perks that make my head spin.

It's nearly midnight when I finish reading. My eyes burn with fatigue, but my mind is racing. Everything about this situation screams danger, yet the practical part of

me—the part that's been poor my whole life, that's watched my mother work herself to the bone, that's known what it means to choose between textbooks and groceries—that part is already reaching for a pen.

I set the contract on my desk and curl up on my futon, still fully dressed. Sleep seems impossible, but I must doze off eventually, because I dream of steel-gray eyes watching me from every corner of a gilded cage.

When my alarm sounds at six, I already know what I'm going to do. By seven, I've showered and dressed in the nicest outfit I own—a simple black skirt and white blouse I bought for interviews. At seven-fifty, I'm waiting outside my building with the signed contract in my bag, a knot of dread and anticipation in my stomach.

At precisely eight o'clock, a gleaming black car with tinted windows pulls up to the curb. The driver steps out and opens the rear door.

"Ms. Mercer? Mr. Blackwell is expecting you."

CHAPTER

SIX

Lucy

I sign my name on the final page of the contract, the pen unexpectedly heavy in my hand. Damon watches me from behind his massive desk, his eyes never leaving my face. The moment the ink dries, something shifts in the air between us—subtle but unmistakable. His expression doesn't change, but there's a new look in his eyes: satisfaction, possession. It's the look of someone who's just acquired something valuable. Something he intends to keep.

"Excellent." He takes the contract, not bothering to review my signature before passing it to a waiting assistant. "Janet will show you to HR to complete the remaining paperwork. After that, your orientation begins."

Janet—a sleek, efficient woman in her forties with a perfectly neutral expression—leads me through the labyrinth of Blackwell Industries' headquarters. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer dizzying views of the city. Everyone we pass is impeccably dressed, walking with purpose, wearing the same expression of focused intensity.

"Mr. Blackwell's previous assistants averaged eighteen months in the position," Janet informs me as we ride the elevator down three floors. "The longest lasted two years. The shortest, three weeks."

She doesn't elaborate on why they left, and I don't ask. The implication is clear enough: Don't get too comfortable.

After an hour of paperwork, fingerprinting, and ID photos, I'm escorted back to Damon's floor. Janet leads me to a desk positioned directly outside his office.

"This is your workspace," she explains. "Mr. Blackwell expects you to be at your desk by 7 AM daily to prepare for his 7:30 arrival. You'll receive his schedule each evening for the following day."

I nod, taking in the sleek computer, the multiple phone lines, the empty desk that will soon contain the minutiae of Damon Blackwell's professional life—and apparently much of his personal life as well, based on the contract I just signed.

"Your secure access phone and laptop." Janet places both items on my desk. "These remain with you at all times. All communications are encrypted and monitored."

Monitored. The word catches in my mind like a burr.

"Mr. Blackwell will see you now," she says, gesturing to his office door.

I smooth down my skirt and enter without knocking, as instructed. Damon's office is massive—at least four times the size of my entire apartment. One wall is entirely glass, offering a panoramic view of the city. Another displays what must be original artwork worth more than I'll earn in years, even at my new salary. His desk is an imposing slab of dark wood, positioned to ensure anyone approaching must cover a significant expanse of plush carpet to reach him.

He looks up from his computer, those steel-gray eyes assessing me. "Close the door, Lucy."

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

I do as instructed, feeling the soft click of the latch like a cell door closing.

"Your contract is being processed. By end of day, you'll have access to your company accounts, credit cards, and the rest of your onboarding package." He stands, circling his desk with predatory grace. "But first, we need to address your presentation."

I glance down at my outfit, suddenly self-conscious. "Is something wrong with?—"

"Everything," he interrupts, now standing close enough that I can smell his cologne—something expensive and subtle. "As my personal assistant, you're an extension of me. Your appearance reflects directly on Blackwell Industries." His eyes sweep over me, clinical yet somehow intimate. "Your wardrobe will be replaced."

"I can shop for professional clothing with my first paycheck," I offer, trying to maintain some control.

His smile is indulgent, as if I've said something charmingly naive. "That won't be necessary. I've arranged for a stylist to meet us at Bergdorf's this afternoon. Your measurements were approximated from your driver's license data, but she'll need to see you in person to finalize selections."

My measurements. From my driver's license. The casual invasion of privacy steals my breath.

"I appreciate the offer, but I prefer to choose my own clothes." I keep my tone respectful but firm.

Damon steps closer, his tall frame looming over mine. "It wasn't an offer, Lucy. Page sixteen, paragraph four of your contract: 'Employee agrees to maintain appearance standards as set forth by employer.' I'm setting forth those standards."

I remember the clause—buried among dozens of others, seeming innocuous at the time. Too late, I realize how many such clauses I've agreed to without fully understanding their implications.

"Now," he continues, moving toward a door I hadn't noticed before, "let me show you your office."

I follow him through the door, expecting a smaller, secondary workspace. Instead, I find myself in what appears to be a luxury apartment—a sitting room with elegant furniture, a dining area, and doors leading to what I assume are other rooms.

"This is the executive suite," Damon explains. "For late nights or early mornings when going home isn't practical. You'll have access to the adjacent suite."

He opens another door, revealing a slightly smaller but equally luxurious space. A living area, a compact kitchen, a glimpse of a bedroom beyond.

"I don't understand," I say, though a sinking feeling tells me I'm beginning to.

"Your housing allowance," he says simply. "Rather than waste time commuting from that...apartment of yours, you'll stay here during the week. Your things are being packed and moved as we speak."

The floor seems to tilt beneath me. "My things are what? You can't just decide where I live!"

His expression doesn't change, but the temperature in the room seems to drop ten

degrees. "Page twenty-three, paragraph eight: 'Employer may, at his discretion, provide housing accommodations to facilitate employee's duties.' Your contract, your signature."

Panic rises in my chest. "That doesn't mean you can move me without my consent!"

"You gave your consent when you signed." His voice remains calm, reasonable. "Besides, nothing is being discarded. You're welcome to maintain your apartment for weekends, though I don't see why you would."

I struggle to find words, to process the magnitude of this boundary violation. "This isn't right. This goes beyond a normal employer-employee relationship."

"Nothing about this relationship is normal, Lucy." He steps closer, close enough that I have to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact. "I don't want a normal assistant. I want you. Completely dedicated to your role in my life."

There's something in his tone that makes me shiver—not entirely from fear. His intensity has a gravitational pull that's difficult to resist, even as my rational mind screams warnings.

"I need to use the restroom," I say, desperate for a moment alone to think.

He gestures to another door. "Through there. Take your time. We have a meeting at eleven."

The bathroom is larger than my bedroom at home, all marble and gleaming fixtures. I splash cold water on my face, staring at my reflection in the oversized mirror. What have I gotten myself into? Is a cleared student debt worth...this?

But it's not just the debt, is it? It's the salary, the career opportunity, the chance to

learn from one of the most successful businessmen in the country. And something else—something I'm reluctant to acknowledge even to myself: a fascination with the man himself, with his power and his interest in me.

When I emerge, Damon is at his desk, reviewing documents as if nothing unusual has occurred. As if he hasn't just commandeered my entire life in the span of twenty minutes.

"Better?" he asks without looking up.

"No," I admit. "This is moving too fast. I need time to adjust."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

He finally raises his eyes to mine. "Time is a luxury in my world, Lucy. But I'm not unreasonable. You may keep your apartment for now. Consider the suite here as...an option."

The concession, small as it is, helps me breathe easier. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet." He stands, gathering several folders. "We have work to do. The Miyazaki merger won't finalize itself."

For the next hour, I'm too busy to dwell on my situation. Damon dictates emails, explains complex financial maneuvers, and outlines the intricacies of the merger he's orchestrating. Despite everything, I find myself engaged, my mind working to keep up with his brilliant, strategic thinking.

"You're quick," he observes as I correctly anticipate a document he needs before he asks for it. "I was right about you."

The approval in his voice shouldn't please me, but it does. I've spent my life excelling academically, but this is different—using my skills in real-time, with real consequences.

At twelve-thirty, Janet brings in lunch—an elaborate spread of sushi and sashimi that must have cost hundreds of dollars.

"I took the liberty of ordering for you," Damon says, gesturing for me to sit in one of the chairs facing his desk. "You'll need to inform Janet of any dietary restrictions."

"How do you know I like sushi?" I ask, even as I eye the perfect cuts of tuna and salmon.

His smile is enigmatic. "I make it my business to know what's mine."

There it is again—that possessive language that should offend me but instead sends a complicated shiver down my spine.

"I'm not yours," I say quietly. "I work for you. There's a difference."

In an instant, he's on his feet, moving around the desk with that fluid grace that seems at odds with his powerful frame. He leans against the desk directly in front of me, so close his knee nearly touches mine.

"Let me be perfectly clear, Lucy." His voice is soft but unyielding. "When you signed that contract, you became mine in every way that matters. During business hours, you represent me. After hours, you're available to me. Your time, your skills, your loyalty—all mine."

He reaches out, his fingers brushing a strand of hair from my face. "In return, I take care of what's mine. Your debt? Gone. Your financial concerns? Eliminated. Your career? Advanced beyond what would take others decades to achieve."

Our fingers brush as he hands me a pair of chopsticks, and I feel a spark—static from the dry air, but it jolts me nonetheless. His eyes darken slightly, telling me he felt it too.

"This arrangement benefits us both," he continues. "But make no mistake—I don't share, and I don't tolerate divided loyalties."

I should be outraged. I should stand up, walk out, consequences be damned. Instead, I

find myself frozen, caught between indignation and a treacherous fascination.

"Eat," he commands softly. "We have a full afternoon ahead."

I pick up the chopsticks, my hands steadier than they have any right to be. As I take a bite of perfect fatty tuna, I feel his eyes on me, watching with that same possessive intensity. I should feel like prey, but there's something else mixed with the fear—a dark thrill that I'm not ready to examine too closely.

After lunch, Damon takes a call in his private conference room, leaving me alone at my new desk. I seize the opportunity to check my phone, finding three missed calls from my mother and a text from my best friend asking if I'm okay. I send quick reassurances to both, aware that I'm already editing the truth, already protecting Damon's privacy—or is it hiding my own questionable decisions?

When he emerges, he's wearing his suit jacket, car keys in hand.

"The stylist is waiting. We leave now."

Not a request. Not even a proper sentence. Just a command he expects to be obeyed without question.

I gather my purse and follow him to the private elevator. As the doors close, sealing us into the small space together, I find my voice again.

"Mr. Blackwell?—"

"Damon," he corrects. "When we're alone, you use my first name."

I swallow. "Damon. I need to establish some boundaries if this is going to work."

His eyebrow arches. "Boundaries."

"Yes. I understand the job requires unusual availability, but I need some personal space, some autonomy." I rush to continue before I lose my nerve. "I'll be a better assistant if I don't feel...smothered."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

The elevator reaches the parking garage, but he makes no move to exit when the doors open. Instead, he presses the "door close" button and turns to me fully.

"Here's what you need to understand, Lucy." His voice is quiet, almost gentle, but with a core of steel. "You don't set the boundaries in this relationship. I do. That was the agreement you signed."

He raises his hand, and for a wild moment I think he might touch me again. Instead, he adjusts his already perfect tie. "I don't want to smother you. I want to possess you. There's a difference."

The brutal honesty leaves me speechless. No pretense, no corporate doublespeak—just the raw truth of what he expects.

"If that's unacceptable to you, say so now." His gray eyes hold mine. "Break the contract, return to your struggling student life. The debt stays clear either way. I'm not a monster."

But he is dangerous. Every instinct tells me so. Yet walking away from this opportunity seems equally impossible. Not just because of the money, but because some treacherous part of me is drawn to him, to this intensity, to being the focus of such concentrated attention.

"I'll stay," I hear myself say.

Something flashes in his eyes—triumph, satisfaction, hunger. "Good girl."

And I don't know why, but my entire body warms at that praise.

The elevator doors open again at his command, and he places his hand at the small of my back as we walk to his car—a sleek, black Aston Martin that probably costs more than most houses.

As he opens the passenger door for me, his hand lingers on mine for a moment too long to be professional, his thumb tracing a small circle on my wrist.

"You won't regret this, Lucy," he says, but it sounds more like a promise to himself than to me.

I slide into the butter-soft leather seat, my heart racing with something between fear and anticipation. As Damon walks around to the driver's side, I catch my reflection in the side mirror. I look the same as I did this morning, but I feel fundamentally changed—marked in some invisible way.

He starts the engine, the powerful purr vibrating through the car. "By the way," he says casually, pulling out of the parking space, "I've taken the liberty of clearing your class schedule for the next two weeks. You'll need time to adjust to your new role."

Before I can protest, his hand covers mine on the console between us, firm and warm and brooking no argument. "Don't worry. I've arranged for private tutors to ensure you don't fall behind. Nothing about your education will suffer. In fact, you'll find working closely with me provides a far more valuable education than any classroom."

His fingers interlace with mine in a gesture too intimate for an employer, too possessive for a mentor. I should pull away. I don't.

"Remember what I said, Lucy." His eyes remain on the road, but I feel his attention on me like a physical touch. "You're mine now. The sooner you accept that, the

happier we'll both be."

As the car merges into traffic, carrying me toward a future I can barely comprehend, I realize the truth in his words. For better or worse, I belong to Damon Blackwell now—not just my time or my skills, but something deeper, something I didn't fully understand I was giving away when I signed that contract.

And the most frightening part isn't his possession of me, but the small, secret thrill I feel at being possessed.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

Damon

I lock the bathroom door behind me, my fingers lingering on the cool metal handle. The click of the lock echoes in the pristine space, a sound of finality. Privacy. Something I rarely permit myself.

But she's infected my thoughts again—Lucy—with her defiant eyes and that stubborn mouth that refuses to yield to my power. My body betrays me as it always does when she enters my mind, hardening painfully against the expensive fabric of my suit pants.

I need release.

I need control.

I need her out of my head.

The bathroom is all sharp angles and cold surfaces. Like me. Polished chrome fixtures gleam under the recessed lighting, throwing back my reflection in fractured pieces. White tiles stretch across the floor in perfect symmetry. Everything in its place. Everything ordered. Everything except the chaos she's created inside me.

My tie feels like a noose. I loosen it with one finger, watching my reflection change. The man in the mirror is unfamiliar—pupils dilated, a flush creeping up his neck. Thirty-six years of ruthless self-discipline, and I'm reduced to this by a college girl who probably doesn't know the difference between hedge funds and hedge clippers.

But Lucy isn't just any college girl.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

I unzip my pants, freeing myself with an impatient gesture. The first stroke sends electricity up my spine, and I brace my free hand against the wall. I rarely indulge in this kind of weakness, this loss of control. But she's made it necessary. Made it impossible for me to function without purging her from my system.

I see her as clearly as if she stands before me. That first day I saw her balancing trays at the gala—wearing that blouse and navy skirt that somehow revealed everything while showing nothing.

My hand moves faster as I recall how her skirt clung to the curve of her ass, the way she bit her lip in concentration as she navigated the crowded room. No one else noticed her. No one but me.

I'm close now, my breath coming in short, controlled pants. I picture her beneath me, those defiant eyes finally surrendering, her body arching as I claim what I've known is mine since the moment I saw her.

My strokes become more deliberate as I remember how she looked at me when I offered her the position. Suspicion. Not gratitude. Not the simpering acceptance most would offer. Her eyes had narrowed, those impossibly clear eyes, and she'd asked, "Why?" in a tone that suggested she already knew the answer.

"Lucy," I whisper to the empty room, her name falling from my lips like a confession, a prayer, a curse.

The sound of it tightens something in my chest, and my hand moves faster. I've had supermodels, heiresses, actresses—any woman I wanted. Power and money ensure

that. But none of them haunt me. None of them matter once the transaction is complete.

Lucy isn't for sale. And that makes her invaluable.

I recall her in the break room yesterday, pointedly ignoring me as I entered. The way she stirred her coffee with maddening precision, the spoon clinking against the ceramic in a rhythm that matched my heartbeat. She wore a simple white blouse, the collar buttoned to her throat as if in defense against my gaze. As if cloth could stop me from seeing her.

My breathing becomes ragged, the sound obscene in the pristine bathroom. I've imagined taking her there, in that break room, clearing the table with one sweep of my arm and laying her down among the scattered paper cups and sweetener packets. Making her see that resistance is futile. Making her admit that she feels this too—this insane, electric current that arcs between us whenever we occupy the same space.

"Fuck," I hiss, the word ripped from my throat as my fantasy shifts.

Now I'm remembering the curve of her neck when she bends over her desk, the tendril of hair that always escapes her practical ponytail. How I've stood in the doorway of the open-plan office, ostensibly reviewing reports, actually watching that loose curl brush against her cheek. How I've imagined wrapping it around my finger, using it to tug her head back, exposing her throat to my mouth.

My hand tightens its grip, the pleasure building at the base of my spine. One release won't be enough. It never is. How many times have I done this since she started working here six weeks ago? Locked myself away like a teenager, seeking momentary relief from the constant, gnawing hunger?

I'm Damon Blackwell. I don't beg. I don't need. I take.

But I can't take Lucy. Not yet. Not until she admits this pull between us isn't one-sided. I've seen the dilation of her pupils when I stand too close. Heard the slight catch in her breath when my hand brushes hers during the exchange of documents. Noticed how she avoids being alone with me, as if she doesn't trust herself.

Smart girl. She shouldn't trust herself around me. I'll consume her whole.

The thought sends a jolt of pleasure through me so intense I have to brace both hands against the counter. I'm close now. So close. My hips move of their own accord, thrusting into my fist as I imagine her beneath me, around me, her stubborn mouth finally yielding to mine.

Would she fight the pleasure I could give her? Try to deny it? Or would she surrender, those clear eyes clouding with desire as she gives herself over to the inevitable?

I grip the edge of the sink, my knuckles white with strain. The marble is cold beneath my fingers, but I'm burning, consumed by an inferno with Lucy at its center. I imagine her voice saying my name—not "Mr. Blackwell" as she does in the office, but "Damon," breathless and broken with need.

"Lucy," I groan again, the sound torn from somewhere deep inside me.

My reflection is a stranger—face flushed, eyes wild, control shattered. This isn't me. I don't lose myself like this. I don't obsess. I don't want what I can't have, because there's nothing I can't have.

Except her. Except Lucy, with her quiet strength and her wary eyes that see too much. With her careful distance and her unmistakable intelligence. With her stubborn refusal to be charmed by my wealth or intimidated by my power.

I reach for a tissue with my free hand, my movements jerky, uncoordinated. The pressure is building, unstoppable now. In my mind, Lucy is looking at me with those clear eyes, seeing me—really seeing me—and not running away. In my mind, she wants this as much as I do, this consuming, destructive force that threatens to incinerate us both.

My strokes become erratic as the fantasy takes over. Lucy's reluctant smile. The curve of her cheek. The way she bites her lower lip when concentrating. The slight flush that creeps up her neck when I stand too close.

Mine. She should be mine.

The thought pushes me to the edge. One more stroke, and I'll fall. One more second, and I'll have relief. Temporary, insufficient relief from this maddening hunger that gnaws at my insides day and night.

My breathing comes in harsh pants, the sound filling the confined space, bouncing off the stark white tiles. My heart hammers against my ribs like it's trying to escape. Like it's trying to reach her.

I close my eyes, surrendering to the fantasy, to the temporary insanity that is my obsession with Lucy. In this moment, I am not Damon Blackwell, CEO of Blackwell Industries. I am just a man, desperate and undone by desire for a woman who refuses to be possessed.

The heat in my chest isn't guilt. It's something worse. Something dangerous. Something I've never felt before and have no name for. But it burns through me as surely as fever, this uncomfortable heat that I can neither control nor extinguish.

Then I hear the bathroom door open.

CHAPTER

EIGHT

Lucy

I pushopen the bathroom door, exhausted from my double shift of classes and office work. Normally I wouldn't dare to enter the executive bathroom, but it's after hours and the regular restrooms are being cleaned. Just a quick splash of cold water on my face to wake me up before I finish those expense reports for Mr. Blackwell. The door swings open with barely a sound, and I freeze.

The world starts spinning. My boss—the intimidating, impossible Damon Blackwell—stands at the sink with his back partially to me, his hand moving rhythmically, his reflection in the mirror showing an expression I've never seen on his usually controlled face. And he's saying my name.

Myname.

My lungs forget how to work. My brain short-circuits, unable to process what I'm seeing. What I'm hearing. I should back away. I should close the door. I should pretend this never happened. But my feet are rooted to the gleaming tile floor, and my eyes refuse to look away.

Damon Blackwell—CEO, billionaire, the man who terrifies board members with a single raised eyebrow—is touching himself while whispering my name like it's something precious. Something necessary. Something he can't live without.

A strangled sound escapes me, too quiet to be a gasp but too loud to go unnoticed. His eyes snap to mine in the mirror. Dark gray, almost black with dilated pupils. For a heartbeat, time suspends. We stare at each other, connected by shock and something else—something electric and dangerous that makes my skin prickle with goosebumps.

He doesn't stop.

That's what short-circuits my brain completely. He doesn't stop touching himself. If anything, his movements become more intense, more focused, his gaze locked on mine with an expression I can only describe as hunger. Raw, unfiltered hunger that makes my stomach drop like I'm plummeting from a great height.

His lips part. My name forms on them again, but this time it's not a whisper. It's a groan, deep and primal.

"Lucy."

The sound travels through me like a physical touch, leaving fire in its wake. My cheeks burn. My fingers tremble. There's an answering heat between my legs that I refuse to acknowledge.

I watch, unable to tear my eyes away, as Damon Blackwell—the man who's tormented me with his cold perfection for six endless weeks—comes undone. His body tenses, the expensive fabric of his shirt stretching across broad shoulders. His jaw tightens, tendons standing out on his neck. But his eyes—those eyes that have pierced through my carefully constructed defenses since day one—never leave mine.

He's beautiful in this moment of absolute surrender. I hate that I notice. I hate that my body responds with a clench of desire so powerful it nearly doubles me over.

He's my boss. He's arrogant, controlling, impossible to please. He's everything I despise about the corporate world I'm forced to navigate to pay my tuition. He's the man who watches me constantly, critiques everything I do, stands too close when we review documents together.

And he's pleasuring himself while saying my name.

The reality of what's happening finally penetrates my shock. I stumble backward, my hip colliding painfully with the doorframe. The sharp sting breaks the spell. I turn and run, my practical flats slapping against the marble flooring of the corridor. Each step sends jolts up my legs, but I don't slow down. Can't slow down. Behind me, I hear a curse—rough, frustrated, threatening.

My heart pounds in my ears, drowning out everything but the echo of my name on his lips. I reach the end of the hallway and turn blindly, not caring where I go as long as it's away from him. Away from what I've seen. Away from how it made me feel.

Because that's the worst part. Not the shock or the embarrassment or the inappropriate intimacy of the moment. The worst part is how my body responded. How for a fraction of a second, I imagined being the cause of that pleasure. Being the one to break Damon Blackwell's legendary control.

I'm halfway down another corridor when I realize I have nowhere to go. My purse, my phone, my coat—they're all back at my desk in the open-plan office. I can't leave without them. I can't stay here in this sterile hallway. I'm caught in limbo, trapped between flight and confrontation.

My reflection in a glass door shows a woman I barely recognize. My cheeks are flushed, eyes too wide, hair escaping its practical ponytail. I look hunted. I look aroused. I press a trembling hand to my mouth, trying to steady my breathing.

What just happened?

I've spent weeks convincing myself that Damon Blackwell's intense focus on me was criticism. That his lingering looks were judgmental. That the way he always seems to find reasons to be near me was to intimidate me. I told myself his offer of a paid position instead of the unpaid internship I'd applied for was because he recognized my skills, not because he wanted...this. Wanted me.

But he does. He wants me with an intensity that has him locked in a bathroom in his own building, seeking release from the torture of proximity without possession. The realization makes me dizzy.

I lean against the cold glass wall of what I now recognize as the atrium, trying to gather my scattered thoughts. I need to leave. I need to quit. I need to forget what I've seen.

But the image is burned into my retinas—Damon Blackwell, composed, controlled Damon Blackwell, coming apart at the sight of me. The power of it is intoxicating. Terrifying.

I've never been wanted like that. Never been the object of such raw, undisguised need. Men have desired me before, but it was always manageable, contained, something I could accept or reject without consequence. This is different. This is a force of nature. This is destruction wrapped in the finely tailored suit of a man who takes what he wants and doesn't apologize for it.

A soft ding from a distant elevator makes me flinch. He'll be looking for me. I need to move. I need to think. I need to?—

"Lucy."

His voice slides down my spine like ice water, freezing me in place. I don't turn. I can't. If I look at him, I'll see it again—that unguarded moment of complete vulnerability—and I don't know what I'll do.

"Look at me." The command in his tone is absolute.

I shake my head, the movement jerky and uncoordinated. My fingers press against the glass, seeking escape where there is none. I hear his approaching footsteps, measured and unhurried. He knows I have nowhere to go.

"You weren't supposed to see that." His voice is closer now, just behind me. Not apologetic. Not embarrassed. Matter-of-fact.

"I need to go," I whisper, but the words lack conviction. My body betrays me, refusing to move.

"Do you?" The question hangs in the air between us, loaded with meaning. "Do you really want to leave, Lucy?"

I force myself to turn around, to face him. It's a mistake. He's put himself back together—suit impeccable, tie straight, hair perfectly styled—but his eyes still burn with the same intensity I saw in the bathroom. He's not finished. Not satisfied. The realization makes my knees weak.

"You were..." I can't finish the sentence. The words stick in my throat.

"Yes." He doesn't look away. Doesn't pretend. "I was. And I'm not sorry you saw it."

His honesty disarms me more effectively than any excuse could have. I swallow hard, trying to find some semblance of composure. "Mr. Blackwell?—"

"Damon." The correction is soft but unyielding. "You just watched me come while saying your name. I think we're past formalities, don't you?"

Heat floods my face. I want to slap him. I want to run. I want things I shouldn't want from a man like him.

"This is inappropriate," I manage, clinging to the word like a lifeline. "You're my boss."

"Is that your only objection?" He takes a step closer, and I press back against the glass. "That I sign your paycheck? Because that's easily remedied."

"Don't you dare fire me," I snap, anger finally cutting through the confusion. "I need this job."

Something flickers in his eyes—surprise, maybe. Respect. "I wasn't suggesting termination, Lucy. I was suggesting a transfer. To remove the professional conflict."

The casual way he discusses rearranging his company structure just to pursue me leaves me breathless. The practicality of it. The determination. "You can't just?—"

"I can," he interrupts. "I will. If that's what it takes to have you look at me the way you did in that bathroom."

And there it is. The truth I've been avoiding since I fled. I didn't just see him—I responded. My pupils dilated. My lips parted. My body recognized his need and

answered with its own.

"I was shocked," I whisper, a last, feeble defense.

"Yes," he agrees, moving closer still. I can smell his cologne now, something expensive and subtle that makes my head swim. "But that's not all you were."

He's right, and we both know it. The glass is cold against my back, his presence hot before me. I'm caught between extremes with nowhere to hide.

"What do you want from me?" The question comes out more vulnerable than I intended, revealing too much.

His eyes darken further, if that's possible. "Everything," he says simply.

He takes a step closer, slow, calculated, his smoldering gaze never leaving mine. "Do you want me to stop?"

It should be easy. A simple lie to escape an impossible situation. But the words won't come. Because while Damon Blackwell might be arrogant, controlling, and absolutely wrong for me, he's not wrong about this. About us. About the current that runs between us, disturbing the air whenever we're near each other.

My silence is answer enough. His expression shifts, satisfaction replacing uncertainty. He moves forward again, eliminating the last of the space between us. His hand comes up, not touching me, hovering just above my cheek as if asking permission.

And God help me, I tilt my face into his palm.

His fingers are warm against my skin, slightly rough. The simple contact sends sparks

through my nervous system, making my breath hitch. His thumb traces my lower lip, a reverent gesture that belies the intensity in his eyes.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

"You have no idea what you do to me," he murmurs, his voice a low rumble that I feel more than hear. "No idea what I've been going through these past weeks, wanting you, watching you, trying to keep my distance."

I should stop this. I should pull away. I should remember all the reasons why Damon Blackwell is dangerous to everything I've worked for.

Instead, I stand perfectly still, caught in his orbit, unable and unwilling to break free.

CHAPTER

NINE

Damon

She remains still, caught between the glass wall and my body, making no move to escape. Her eyes never leave mine, searching for something—reassurance, perhaps, or proof that this isn't just a game to me.

I can't wait any longer. The need to taste her overrides every other thought. I lean down, giving her time to turn away if she wishes. She doesn't. Her lips part slightly, an unconscious invitation I accept with a growl of triumph.

The first touch of her mouth against mine is electric. Soft. Yielding. Perfect. I keep the kiss gentle for all of three seconds before the beast inside me breaks its chains. My hand slides to the back of her neck, fingers tangling in her hair as I deepen the kiss, demanding a response.

She gives it. Her lips part further, a small sound escaping her throat as her hands come up to grip my shoulders. Not pushing me away—holding on. I press her more firmly against the glass, my body flush against hers, letting her feel exactly what she does to me. What she's always done to me.

I break the kiss only to growl against her lips, "You're driving me fucking insane, and you don't even know it."

"I...I'm not trying to," she whispers, her breath coming in short gasps that make my control fray further.

"I know." And I do. That's part of her power over me—her complete unawareness of it. "That's what makes it worse."

I capture her mouth again, pouring six weeks of frustration and desire into the kiss. She responds with unexpected passion, her tongue meeting mine, her body arching slightly against me. The movement brings her hips into contact with mine, and I groan at the pressure against my still-sensitive flesh.

My hand slides down her side, feeling the curve of her waist, the flare of her hip. So small compared to me, so perfectly proportioned. I want to touch every inch of her, to map her body with my hands and mouth until I know her better than she knows herself.

"Tell me to stop," I murmur against her lips, giving her one last chance to end this. One last opportunity to walk away before I claim her completely.

Her eyes open, meeting mine with startling clarity. "I can't," she admits, the words a confession and a surrender.

That's all I need. My hand continues its journey, slipping beneath her sensible skirt,

tracing the soft skin of her thigh. She trembles beneath my touch, her eyes widening as she realizes my intent.

"Here?" she gasps, glancing around the empty atrium.

"Here," I confirm, my fingers finding the edge of her panties. Simple cotton, practical like everything else about her outward appearance. But they're damp, betraying what her words won't say. "No one's here but us. And I need to touch you. Need to feel what I do to you."

Her head falls back against the glass as my fingers slip beneath the fabric, finding her slick and ready. The evidence of her arousal nearly undoes me. I've fantasized about this moment countless times, but reality surpasses imagination. She's wet for me. Wet because of me.

"Damon," she moans, the first time she's used my given name. It's the sweetest sound I've ever heard.

I stroke her gently at first, learning her body, watching her face for reactions. Her eyes flutter closed, lips parting as her breathing quickens. I memorize every expression, every tiny shift of pleasure across her features. This is mine. All mine.

"Look at me," I command softly. "I want to see your eyes when you come for me."

She obeys, her gaze locking with mine as I increase the pressure, the speed of my strokes. Her hips move against my hand, seeking more contact, more pressure. I give it to her, circling her most sensitive spot with practiced precision.

"That's it," I encourage as her breathing becomes erratic. "Let go, Lucy. Let me see you."

Her fingers dig into my shoulders, her body tensing as she approaches the edge. I press her more firmly against the glass, my free hand cradling the back of her head to protect her as she writhes beneath my touch.

"I can't," she gasps, not in refusal but in disbelief at the intensity of her response. "I've never...It's too much."

My cock surges to full mast at the confirmation that she's a virgin. That no other man has ever touched her.

That this sweet, innocent angel will be completely mine in every fucking way.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

I almost come in my pants on the spot, but I grit my teeth and ignore my leaking cock. This is about her.

"You can," I assure her, my voice rough with need. "You will. For me."

I press harder, move faster, my gaze never leaving hers as I drive her toward release. Her pupils dilate fully, her mouth forming a perfect O of surprise as pleasure overtakes her. She's beautiful in her surrender, more precious than anything I've ever possessed.

"Damon!" My name on her lips is a prayer, a curse, a plea as she shatters beneath my hand. Her inner muscles clench around my fingers, her entire body trembling with the force of her climax.

I watch, enraptured, as wave after wave washes through her. This is what I wanted in the bathroom—to see her lose control, to know I'm the cause of her pleasure. But this is better, infinitely better, because it's real. Because she's in my arms, not just in my fantasies.

As she comes down, her body still quivering with aftershocks, I press my forehead to hers. My own need is almost painful, but I ignore it. This moment isn't about me. It's about claiming her, marking her as mine in the most primitive way possible.

"You are the most exquisite thing I've ever seen," I whisper, removing my hand from beneath her skirt, reluctant to break contact even for a moment.

Her eyes, dazed with pleasure, focus slowly on mine. There's confusion there, and

wonder, and something else—something that looks dangerously like the emotion burning in my own chest.

"What happens now?" she asks, her voice small but steady.

I stroke her cheek, marveling at how quickly she's become necessary to me. How completely she's infiltrated my carefully ordered existence. "Now," I tell her, "we begin."

Because this is just the start. Just the first taste of what we'll be to each other. And I know, with bone-deep certainty, that I will never get enough of Lucy. Never tire of her responses. Never want to let her go.

She is my addiction. My obsession. My salvation.

Mine.

CHAPTER

TEN

Lucy

The elevator doorsslide open to reveal Damon's penthouse, and my breath catches. It's not just a home—it's a statement, a kingdom high above the city where normal rules don't apply. My single suitcase suddenly feels pathetic in my grip, a reminder of how quickly my life has changed since meeting him. Six weeks of intense pursuit, of Damon Blackwell refusing to take no for an answer, and now here I am, standing on the threshold of his world.

"Welcome home, Lucy." His voice slides across my skin like expensive silk. He takes

my suitcase from my nerveless fingers, placing it aside as though my past life weighs nothing at all.

I step into a space of soaring ceilings and walls of glass. The city sprawls beneath us, a glittering carpet of lights that makes me dizzy with the height. Everything is sleek lines and tasteful minimalism—grays, blacks, and the occasional splash of deep blue that reminds me of the ocean at midnight.

"This is...excessive," I manage, my voice small in the vastness.

Damon's mouth quirks, not quite a smile but an acknowledgment. "I don't do things halfway." His hand settles at the small of my back, guiding me further in. "Neither business nor pleasure."

The heat of his palm burns through my thin blouse. I'd dressed carefully this morning—before the movers came, before the papers were signed releasing me from my housing contract. I wonder if someone else has already rented my tiny apartment. The thought creates a spike of panic that I swallow down.

"I can have a decorator come if you want to change anything." Damon watches me with those penetrating gray eyes that seem to catalog every reaction. "Make it feel more like yours."

I almost laugh. Nothing about this austere magnificence could ever feel like it belongs to a twenty-two-year-old grad student who, until three weeks ago, was surviving on ramen and hope.

"It's beautiful," I say instead, because it is—beautiful in the way dangerous things often are.

He guides me through the space. A kitchen with countertops that gleam like wet stone

and appliances that look like they've never been touched. A living area with furniture too pristine to seem comfortable. A home office with a desk that faces the city, positioned like a throne.

"And this," he says, stopping before a set of double doors, "is our bedroom."

Our bedroom. The words send a shiver through me that's equal parts anticipation and fear. He opens the doors to reveal a space dominated by an enormous bed draped in charcoal gray linens that look softer than anything I've ever slept on.

"I had your clothes unpacked earlier," Damon says, nodding toward an open door that reveals a walk-in closet larger than my entire former apartment. "Though I've taken the liberty of adding a few things I thought you might need."

I walk toward the closet, drawn by curiosity. Inside, my meager wardrobe occupies maybe a tenth of the space, my well-worn jeans and cotton shirts looking like poor relations next to rows of dresses, blouses, and pants that still bear tags from designers whose names I recognize from magazines.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

"You didn't have to—" I begin.

"I wanted to." He cuts me off with gentle finality. "What's mine is yours now, Lucy. Including my resources."

When I turn to face him, he's closer than I expected, his tall frame blocking the doorway. The air between us thickens, charged with the inevitability of what comes next.

"Are you nervous?" he asks, his voice dropping to that register that makes my stomach tighten.

"Yes," I admit, because lying to Damon seems pointless. He reads me too easily, sees too much.

His hand rises to cup my cheek, thumb brushing across my lower lip in a gesture that's both tender and possessive. "Don't be. I take care of what's mine."

The words should offend me. I've spent my life fighting to stand on my own, to need no one. But they melt something inside me instead, some hard kernel of resistance I've been clutching.

"I'm not yours," I whisper, a final, feeble protest.

His smile is slow and certain. "You will be."

When he kisses me, it's different from the measured, careful kisses we've shared

before. This kiss claims, consumes. His hands frame my face, holding me still for the onslaught of sensation. I'm dizzy with it, my fingers clutching at the fine fabric of his shirt to steady myself.

He walks me backward until my legs hit the edge of the bed, and then we're falling together onto that cloud of expensive bedding. His weight presses me down, solid and real in a way that grounds me when everything else feels like a dream.

"Tell me to stop," he murmurs against my throat, "and I will."

But the words won't come. I don't want him to stop. I want this—want him—with an intensity that frightens me. My hands find the buttons of his shirt, fumbling in my eagerness.

He catches my wrists, pins them gently above my head. "Let me," he says, and it's both command and request.

I nod, surrendering to his lead.

His movements are deliberate as he undresses me, piece by piece, his eyes darkening with each new expanse of skin revealed. I fight the urge to cover myself, to hide from that consuming gaze.

"Beautiful," he breathes, running a reverent hand from my collarbone to my hip. "More perfect than I imagined."

My skin burns under his touch, goosebumps rising in its wake. "You imagined this? Us?"

"From the moment I saw you holding that serving tray." His smile has a sharpness that makes me shiver. "I knew then I would have you."

He stands to remove his own clothes, and I watch, mesmerized by the revelation of him. His body is all lean muscle and purpose, marked here and there with scars that speak of a history I know nothing about. Power contained in human form.

When he returns to me, skin against skin, I gasp at the shock of it. Nothing has prepared me for this—not romance novels, not late-night talks with girlfriends, not the clinical descriptions in health class.

"Lucy," he says my name like it's something precious. "I need to know. Have you done this before?"

The heat of embarrassment floods my face. At twenty-two, the answer should be obvious, and yet?—

"No," I whisper. "Never."

Something flashes in his eyes—surprise, then satisfaction so intense it's almost frightening.

"Look at me," he demands, and when I do, he continues, "I'm going to be your first. Your only. Do you understand what that means?"

I shake my head, not in denial but in overwhelm.

"It means," he says, tracing the curve of my breast with deliberate fingers, "that no one else will ever know how you sound when you come apart. How you taste." His head dips, mouth replacing fingers, drawing a moan from me that I don't recognize as my own voice. "It means you're mine in a way no one else will ever touch."

He takes his time with me, drawing reactions from my body I never knew were possible. Each touch builds on the last, constructing a tower of sensation that

threatens to topple me. When his fingers slide between my legs, finding me wet and ready, the sound he makes is almost pained.

"So responsive," he murmurs. "So perfect for me."

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

The first intrusion of his finger is strange, uncomfortable but not painful. He watches my face, gauging each reaction, adding a second finger when my body relaxes around the first. I'm panting now, chasing a feeling I can name but have never experienced with anyone but myself.

"That's it," he encourages. "Let go for me."

When it happens, it's like nothing I've felt before—a wave that crashes through me, leaving me trembling and crying out his name. Before I can recover, he's positioning himself between my thighs, the blunt pressure of him seeking entrance.

"This will hurt," he warns, voice strained with the effort of control. "But only for a moment."

I nod, beyond words now, wanting only to feel him, to know this connection that's been building since the moment we met.

He pushes forward, and there's a sharp pain that makes me gasp, my nails digging into his shoulders. He stills immediately, muscles trembling with the effort.

"Breathe," he instructs, pressing kisses to my face, my neck, my shoulders. "Breathe through it."

I do, and gradually the pain recedes, replaced by a fullness that's strange but not unwelcome. When I shift beneath him experimentally, his eyes close briefly, a look of exquisite concentration crossing his features.

"So tight," he groans. "So fucking perfect."

He begins to move, slowly at first, then with increasing urgency as my body adjusts to accommodate him. Each thrust builds that tower again, higher than before, until I'm clinging to him, incoherent sounds spilling from my lips.

"Look at you," he growls, his rhythm becoming more erratic. "Taking me so well. Your pussy was made for me, Lucy. Made to take me and only me."

The crude words shock me, but they also send another wave of heat through me. No one has ever spoken to me this way, with this raw, possessive hunger.

"Say it," he demands, his hand sliding between us to press against where we're joined. "Say you're mine."

"I'm yours," I gasp, the words torn from me as his fingers work a magic that sends me spiraling again.

"Mine," he agrees, his voice rough with exertion. "Your first. Your only. No one else will ever have you like this. No one else will know how perfect you are when you come."

His words push me over the edge again, and this time he follows, his body tensing above me as he empties himself with a groan that sounds like surrender.

Afterward, he holds me close, his heartbeat gradually slowing beneath my ear. His hand strokes my hair with agentleness that contrasts sharply with the intensity of moments before.

"I knew it would be like this," he murmurs, more to himself than to me.

"Like what?"

"Perfect." He tilts my face up to his, eyes serious now. "You're where you belong now, Lucy. With me. In my home. In my bed."

I should protest. Should assert my independence, remind him that a few weeks of dating and one night of sex—mind-blowing though it was—doesn't mean I belong to anyone. But lying here, wrapped in his warmth, surrounded by the luxury he's determined to shower on me, those arguments feel distant and hollow.

"Rest," he says, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "Tomorrow, we begin for real."

I don't ask what he means. Tomorrow feels very far away, and for now, I'm content to drift in this strange new reality where Damon Blackwell—billionaire, businessman, force of nature—has decided I'm his.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

Lucy

Two weeks into living with Damon, and I've established a morning routine that feels like a small victory. I slip from the bed before he wakes, dress in my own clothes—not the designer pieces he keeps adding to my closet—and spend my mornings at the university library working on my thesis. It's not much, this sliver of independence, but I guard it fiercely, like a prisoner hoarding contraband. My advisor raised her eyebrows when I changed my address, but I meet her gaze without flinching. I'm still me, I want to insist. I haven't disappeared into Damon Blackwell's orbit completely. Not yet.

Today, Dr. Abernathy nods approvingly at my latest chapter draft. "Your analysis of gender dynamics in corporate structures is sharper than in previous versions," she says, tapping the document with one blunt-nailed finger. "Something giving you new insights, Lucy?"

I think of Damon's world—the way men defer to him with a mixture of fear and respect, the way women either flirt or fade into the background. I think of how I fit nowhere in that ecosystem.

"Just seeing things from a different angle," I say, and she gives me a look that says she knows there's more to it.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

When I return to the penthouse—still can't bring myself to call it home—the first thing I notice is the enormous white box sitting on the bed. My stomach drops, a reaction that should concern me. Gifts from Damon have become almost daily occurrences, each more lavish than the last. Each one binding me to him with golden threads of obligation and gratitude.

The card atop the box simply reads, "For tonight. -D"

I lift the lid and my breath catches. The dress inside is a deep wine-red, liquid silk that pools in my hands when I lift it. No price tag, but the designer name embossed on the box tells me it costs more than my semester's tuition. Beneath it sits a velvet jewelry case.

The necklace inside makes me gasp aloud—rubies set in platinum, a collar of blood and ice that would transform any woman who wore it. Not just a gift. A statement. A brand.

My phone buzzes with a text from Damon.

Car will pick you up at 7. Wear your hair up.

Not a request. Never a request with him.

I sit on the edge of the bed, the dress spilling across my lap like spilled wine, and feel the walls of my carefully constructed independence creaking under pressure. Part of me wants to text back a refusal, to put on my oldest jeans and walk out. But another part—the part that shivers when he looks at me across the dinner table, the part that

melts when his hands claim my body in the dark—that part is already imagining how his eyes will darken when he sees me in this dress, these jewels.

I hate how much I crave that look.

At precisely 6:50 PM, I'm standing before the mirror, barely recognizing myself. The dress fits as though it was created specifically for my body, hugging curves I didn't know I had. The necklace sits heavy against my collarbone, the stones catching light with every breath. My hair is swept up as instructed, revealing the vulnerable line of my neck.

The woman in the mirror looks expensive.Owned.

I touch my reflection, tracing the unfamiliar contours of this new self. Who am I becoming? And why does the transformation both terrify and exhilarate me?

The elevator announces Damon's arrival with a soft chime. When the doors slide open, he steps out—not into the penthouse, but into my carefully balanced internal world, disrupting everything. He wears a black suit that emphasizes the breadth of his shoulders, the lean strength of him. His tie matches my dress exactly.

"Lucy." My name in his mouth sounds like a possession.

"You coordinated our outfits?" I ask, aiming for lightness but hearing the strain in my voice.

"Of course." He approaches slowly, circling me with predatory appreciation. "Turn around."

I do, feeling the weight of his gaze like a physical touch.

"Perfect," he murmurs, his fingers tracing the skin left bare by the dress's low back. "You'll be the most beautiful woman there tonight."

"Where is 'there,' exactly?" I've learned to ask for details, to try to prepare myself for whatever world he's dragging me into next.

"The Sinclair Foundation Gala. Very exclusive. Very influential people." His hand settles at the small of my back, thumb stroking bare skin. "The perfect opportunity to introduce you properly."

"Introduce me as what?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

His smile is slow, dangerous. "As mine."

The car that awaits us downstairs is not the usual town car but a Rolls-Royce, gleaming black and ostentatious. The driver holds the door with white-gloved hands, not meeting my eyes. No one ever meets my eyes when I'm with Damon. As if looking directly at me would be trespassing on his property.

The venue is a historic hotel transformed by lighting and flowers into something from another century. Women dripping in jewels air-kiss each other's cheeks while men in impeccable suits conduct business in low voices over crystal tumblers of amber liquid. I recognize faces from magazine covers and news programs—politicians, celebrities, titans of industry.

Damon's hand never leaves me—at my back, on my arm, laced through my fingers. He introduces me to a blur of important people, each one assessing me quickly before turning their attention to him. I'm an accessory, beautiful but ultimately unimportant compared to the man who holds my hand.

"Blackwell! Didn't expect to see you here." A man with silver temples and a too-wide

smile approaches, hand extended. "Thought you were still in Tokyo closing the Nakamura deal."

"Finished early," Damon says, his tone pleasant but cool as he shakes the man's hand. "Lucy, this is James Harrington of Harrington Media. James, this is Lucy Mercer."

The man—Harrington—turns his attention to me, his assessment more thorough than others have been. "Lovely to meet you, Lucy. That's quite a necklace you're wearing."

"Thank you," I murmur, feeling Damon's hand tighten fractionally on my waist.

"Are you in finance as well?" Harrington asks, his gaze lingering on the exposed skin of my shoulders.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

"I'm completing my degree in business," I say, straightening slightly. "My dissertation focuses on gender dynamics in corporate hierarchies."

"Fascinating." Harrington's smile shifts, becomes more genuine. "I'd love to hear more about that sometime. Perhaps over lunch? My company has been working on?—"

"Lucy won't have time," Damon interrupts smoothly. "Her schedule is quite full with her studies and our commitments."

Harrington's eyes flick between us, understanding dawning. "Ah, I see. Well, congratulations to you both. Didn't realize you were off the market, Blackwell."

"Recent development," Damon says, his smile not reaching his eyes. "If you'll excuse us, I see the Montgomerys just arrived."

He steers me away, his grip just short of painful. When we're out of earshot, I pull against his hold.

"That was rude," I say, keeping my voice low. "He was only being friendly."

Damon's laugh lacks humor. "No, he wasn't. Men like Harrington don't make social conversation with beautiful women unless they want something."

"Maybe he was genuinely interested in my research."

"He was interested in what's under that dress, not what's in your dissertation."

Damon's eyes are cold now. "And I don't share what's mine."

Heat flares in my cheeks—anger, embarrassment, and something darker I don't want to name. "I'm not yours to share or not share. I'm a person, Damon, not a possession."

For a moment, something dangerous flashes in his expression, but he masks it quickly. His hand gentles on my arm, thumb stroking soothingly. "Of course you are. The most important person in my life. That's why I'm protective."

"There's protective and then there's possessive," I counter, but already I feel my anger ebbing under his touch, his intensity.

"With you, the line blurs," he admits, and the raw honesty in his voice catches me off guard. "Forgive me if I overstep sometimes. I've never felt this way before."

And there it is—the vulnerability he occasionally allows me to glimpse, the chink in his armor that makes it impossible to maintain my defenses. Before I can respond, we're approached by an elderly couple Damon greets warmly. The moment passes, submerged beneath social niceties and champagne.

The next two hours pass in a blur of introductions and small talk. I sip champagne that costs more per bottle than my monthly grocery budget used to be, laugh at jokes made by people who could buy and sell small countries, and try not to feel like an imposter in a dress I didn't choose and jewels I didn't earn.

"I need some air," I finally whisper to Damon, the press of people and wealth becoming too much.

He nods, guiding me toward French doors that open onto a terrace garden. Outside, the night air cools my flushed skin, and I breathe deeply, trying to ground myself.

"Better?" Damon asks, his hand making soothing circles on my back.

"Yes. Thank you." I move to the stone balustrade, looking out over manicured gardens illuminated by subtle lighting. "It's just...overwhelming sometimes. Your world."

"Our world now," he corrects gently.

I shake my head. "No. I'm just visiting. My world is still library carrels and teaching assistantships and ramen noodles when my stipend runs low."

"It doesn't have to be." He turns me to face him, his expression earnest now. "Lucy, let me take care of you. Completely. You don't need to struggle."

"Maybe I need the struggle," I say, surprising myself with the vehemence in my voice. "Maybe that's how I know who I am. Without it, I'm just...an extension of you."

His brow furrows, genuinely confused. "Would that be so terrible?"

Before I can answer, the doors open and another guest steps onto the terrace—a young man, perhaps a few years older than me, with tousled hair that suggests intentional dishevelment rather than actual carelessness.

"Sorry," he says, noticing us. "Didn't mean to interrupt."

"Not at all," I say, grateful for the interruption. "It's a lovely night for some fresh air."

The man approaches, keeping a respectful distance. "It is. Nearly as lovely as that necklace. Burmese rubies?"

I touch the stones self-consciously. "I wouldn't know."

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

"They are," Damon confirms, his tone clipped. "Blackwell," he adds, extending his hand.

"Sebastian Reed," the man replies, shaking Damon's hand briefly before turning his attention back to me. "And you are?"

"Lucy."

"Lucy is with me," Damon adds unnecessarily, stepping closer so our bodies touch from shoulder to hip.

Sebastian's eyebrows rise slightly. "Congratulations. Are you enjoying the gala, Lucy?"

"It's...educational," I say, and he laughs—a genuine, warm sound.

"That's diplomatic. These things are usually dreadful bores full of people trying to one-up each other with their portfolios and vacation homes."

"Do you attend many?" I ask, finding myself smiling at his frankness.

"Too many. Family obligation." He grimaces. "I'd rather be in my studio."

"You're an artist?"

"Photography. Nothing these people would appreciate—no portraits of their pedigreed pets or yachts at sunset."

I laugh, relaxing despite Damon's increasing tension beside me. "What do you photograph?"

"Urban decay. Abandoned spaces. The places people forget or leave behind."

"How fascinatingly bleak," Damon interjects. "If you'll excuse us, Reed, we were just about to rejoin the party."

"Of course." Sebastian smiles, unperturbed by Damon's rudeness. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Lucy. Perhaps I'll see you around the circuit."

"I doubt it," Damon says, his voice pleasant but threaded with steel. "Lucy's quite selective about which events she attends."

Sebastian's smile doesn't falter, but something knowing enters his eyes as they flick from Damon to me and back. "Understandable. Well, enjoy your evening."

He retreats back inside, leaving a charged silence in his wake.

"You're being ridiculous," I say quietly. "We were just talking."

"He was flirting with you." Damon's jaw is tight, a muscle ticking beneath the skin. "Right in front of me."

"He was being friendly."

"He was imagining you naked."

"You can't possibly know that."

Damon turns me to face him fully, his hands gripping my upper arms. "I know

because that's what every man does when they look at you. They imagine what I already have. What only I will ever have."

His intensity should frighten me. Instead, it sends a shameful thrill through me, a dark heat that pools low in my belly. I hate my body's betrayal, the way it responds to his possessiveness even as my mind rebels.

"You can't control who speaks to me," I say, fighting to keep my voice steady. "Or who looks at me."

"Watch me." His voice drops, becomes something dangerous and seductive. "That photographer? If he approaches you again, his career will mysteriously implode. Every gallery will reject him. Every grant will be denied."

"You wouldn't."

"For you? I'd destroy anyone who thought they could take what's mine."

I should be appalled. Should walk away from him right now, call an Uber, pack my meager belongings. Instead, I'm rooted to the spot, caught between outrage and a perverse excitement.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

“Fuck, woman, what you do to me,” he groans before he crashes his lips down onto mine. “I’d tear this world apart for you, you know that? That’s how crazy you make me.”

Maybe I shouldn’t but I bask in his praise.

His hand slides up my back, cradling my neck with a gentleness that belies his earlier threats. "Let's go home," he murmurs against my ear. "I want you all to myself."

As he leads me back through the glittering crowd, I catch Sebastian Reed watching us from across the room. He raises his champagne glass in a silent toast that feels like a warning. Damon's hand tightens on mine, a silent claim that everyone in the room can read.

I lift my chin, meeting Sebastian's gaze directly before deliberately turning away. That, at least, is my choice. A small one, perhaps, but mine. And for tonight, these small choices will have to be enough.

Tomorrow, I'll draw clearer boundaries. Tomorrow, I'll be stronger, more decisive.

Tonight, though, I let Damon wrap me in his coat as we step into the cool night air, let him pull me close in the back of the Rolls-Royce, let myself sink into the intoxicating danger of belonging to someone like him.

"Mine," he whispers against my skin as the city lights blur past the tinted windows.

I allow myself to whisper back, "Yours."

CHAPTER

TWELVE

Damon

I see her before she sees me. Lucy. My obsession. My addiction. She enters the restaurant in a simple dress that clings to her curves in a way that makes my mouth go dry and my hands clench. She has no idea how beautiful she is, how every man in this room just sat up straighter. But they can look all they want. They can't have her. She's mine. Only mine.

Normally I have her with me at all times, but I had a meeting across town and I left her at the office while I went to it with instructions that she meet me here for dinner. I know I'm going to sound dramatic, but the hours without her have been torture. I could barely fucking focus thinking about her.

The restaurant hums with conversations and the clink of silverware against plates. Waiters dressed in crisp white shirts weave between tables with practiced ease. I'm seated in the back, in my regular booth that offers the perfect view of the entire space. The table before me is covered with contracts and spreadsheets that I should be reviewing, but the moment she walks in, those papers might as well be blank.

Lucy scans the room, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear with that nervous gesture that always makes something in my chest tighten. She doesn't spot me yet. Good. I like watching her unobserved, cataloging every microexpression on her face. The way her teeth worry her bottom lip. The way her fingers fidget with the small purse hanging from her shoulder.

Our age gap should bother me. It doesn't. Nothing about us follows the rules anyway.

Two weeks we've been together. Two weeks since I had her move in with me. Two weeks of making her come so hard she cries. Two weeks of possessing every inch of her body. Two weeks—and I'm already more obsessed than I've been with any woman in my entire life.

My phone buzzes with a call I should take, but I silence it without looking. Nothing is more important than watching her right now.

Nothing.

She moves toward the bar, probably looking for me there since that's where I told her to meet me. And that's when I see him. Carter Fucking Reynolds. My most ruthless competitor. The man who's been trying to take down my tech company for the past three years.

He's moving toward Lucy like a shark scenting blood in the water.

My body goes rigid, every muscle locking into place. The pen in my hand snaps, blue ink bleeding across my palm like a wound. I don't feel it. I don't feel anything but white-hot fury flaring through my veins.

Reynolds reaches her before I can stand. His hand—his fucking hand—touches the small of her back, casual, proprietary. As if he has any right. As if anyone but me has the right to touch her there. I can't hear what he's saying over the noise of the restaurant and the blood pounding in my ears, but I see Lucy's polite smile. The same smile she gives to strangers. She doesn't know who he is. That he's my enemy.

But that doesn't matter because an irrational part of me wouldn't give a fuck who it was. The fact remains that she's smiling at someone else and selfish bastard that I am, I want all her smiles

All of her.

She's motherfucking mine.

I stand so abruptly that my chair crashes backward. A few diners glance my way, but I don't care. I can't tear my eyes from the way Reynolds leans in closer to Lucy, the way his lips curve in a predatory smile as she laughs at something he says. A laugh that should be mine. Only mine.

My body is moving before my brain catches up. I shoulder past waiters and diners without apology. All I see is Reynolds' hand sliding down from Lucy's back to rest at the curve of her hip. All I hear is her laugh, light and unfamiliar, given to someone who isn't me.

I'm close enough now to hear his voice, smooth and practiced. "—always happy to help promising students. My foundation offers several scholarships."

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

Of course. Of fucking course he'd dangle money in front of her. He knows exactly which buttons to push.

"That's very generous," Lucy responds, her voice warm but professionally distant.

"Perhaps over dinner sometime?" Reynolds suggests, his fingers tightening on her hip, and something in me snaps.

I'm between them in an instant, my hand closing around Lucy's wrist. She startles, eyes widening when she sees me, lips parting in surprise. "Damon?—"

"We're leaving," I say, my voice a low growl that makes her pupils dilate. I don't look at Reynolds. I don't trust myself not to put my fist through his perfectly capped teeth.

"I believe the lady and I were having a conversation," Reynolds says, his voice cool and amused. Baiting me.

Now I do look at him, and whatever he sees in my face makes him take an involuntary step back. "Touch her again and you'll lose the hand," I say, quiet enough that only he can hear.

His smile doesn't falter, but a muscle jumps in his jaw. "Careful, Blackwell. Your shares dropped three points today. You can't afford enemies right now."

"And you can't afford a trip to the emergency room," I say pleasantly, then turn my back on him, dismissing him entirely as I guide—drag—Lucy through the crowded restaurant.

I feel her resistance, the slight stiffening of her spine. She doesn't like being manhandled in public. I don't care. Not right now. Not when I'm still seeing Reynolds' hand on her body. Not when I'm still imagining all the ways he could have lured her away from me.

"Damon, what are you doing?" she hisses as I pull her past tables of startled diners. "Who was that man?"

I don't answer. Can't answer through the fog of rage and fear clouding my brain. Fear. That's new. I've never feared losing anything in my life. I've always known I could buy or build whatever I wanted. But Lucy... Lucy can't be replaced. Can't be duplicated.

I find what I'm looking for near the restrooms. A small alcove, dark and private, where the noise of the restaurant is muffled. I back her against the wall, caging her in with my arms on either side of her head. Our bodies aren't touching, but I can feel the heat of her, smell the vanilla scent of her shampoo mixed with something warmer, something uniquely Lucy.

Her eyes are wide but not frightened. Never frightened of me. Her chest rises and falls rapidly, her cheeks flushed. Anger? Excitement? Both?

"You want to test me, sweetheart?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

She blinks, genuine confusion crossing her features. "What are you talking about?"

"You were flirting with him." The accusation tastes bitter on my tongue. I know it's not true even as I say it. Know I'm being irrational. But the image of Reynolds touching her, making her laugh, won't leave my head.

"I was being polite to a stranger who approached me," she says, a hint of steel

entering her voice. "I didn't even know who he was. I still don't."

"He's a snake," I say, leaning closer, close enough that our foreheads almost touch.

"He's my competitor. My enemy. And he was touching you."

Something changes in her expression then. Understanding dawns, followed by something softer, something that makes my chest ache. "You're jealous," she says, not a question.

"Fuck yes, I'm jealous" I admit. But the truth is, I've never been jealous before Lucy. Never cared enough about any woman to feel this murderous rage at the sight of another man's hands on her.

Her hand comes up to rest against my chest, right over my hammering heart.

"Damon, I didn't know who he was. I was just waiting for you."

"He knew exactly who you were," I say, my voice rough. "He approached you to get to me. To take what's mine."

Her eyes flash at that. "I'm not property, Damon. I'm not something to be taken or owned."

But she is. She's mine in a way I can't explain, in a way that defies logic or reason. Mine in a way that terrifies me with its intensity.

I lean in closer, my lips a breath away from hers. "Tell me you don't feel it too," I demand. "Tell me you don't know you're mine."

Her pupils dilate, swallowing the warm brown of her irises. Her lips part, her breath hitching. She doesn't answer, but her body does—leaning toward me, seeking contact.

And fucking hell, who am I to deny her.

I curse and push her pretty little dress up before I unzip my trousers. My cock springs out, fat and aching, moisture already beading the tip.

Ready, always ready for her.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

“Dammit, baby, see how hard you keep me? All the damn time.”

I don't give her time to respond before I'm lifting her against the wall, hands gripping her thighs, spreading them to make room for my body. I tear her panties aside with one harsh jerk, the delicate fabric giving way easily. She gasps, the sound driving me even more insane.

"Damon, we can't—not here—" But her body betrays her words. She's soaked, her pussy slick and ready for me. Always ready.

"We can. We will." I position myself at her entrance, the head of my cock nudging against her wet heat. "You're mine. Say it."

"Damon..." She breathes my name like a prayer, like a curse. Her hands grip my shoulders, nails digging in even through the expensive fabric of my suit.

I push just the tip inside her, then stop, demanding, "Say it, Lucy."

Her head falls back against the wall, eyes half-closed with desire. "I'm yours," she whispers, the words unleashing something primal in me.

I thrust into her fully, burying myself to the hilt in one powerful stroke. She cries out, the sound muffled against my shoulder as I start to move, hard and fast, taking her right here in this dark corner where anyone could walk by. I don't care. Let them see. Let them all see who she belongs to.

"No one touches you," I growl into her ear, punctuating each word with a deep thrust.

"No one but me."

Her legs wrap around my waist, heels digging into my lower back as she meets each thrust. "No one," she agrees, breathless, her inner walls clenching around me so perfectly I nearly lose myself right then.

I take her mouth in a bruising kiss, swallowing her moans as I pound into her. Her body takes me so perfectly, like she was made for me. Only me. I fuck her against the wall with brutal efficiency, every thrust a claim, every grunt a declaration. Mine. Mine. Mine.

"You make me insane," I growl against her lips. "Do you understand that? You make me fucking insane, Lucy."

Her eyes are glazed with pleasure, but I see the clarity in them too. The understanding. She knows exactly what she does to me.

"I didn't mean to," she whispers, her voice breaking on a particularly deep thrust.

"Doesn't matter," I tell her, adjusting my grip on her thighs, spreading her wider for me. "You're still going to take it. Take all of me."

I feel her tightening around my cock, those telltale flutters that mean she's close. Her breathing quickens, those little gasps that drive me wild coming faster and faster.

"That's it, baby. Come on my cock. Show me who you belong to."

She shatters in my arms, her back arching off the wall. Her whole body trembles as she comes, inner walls gripping me so tight I see stars. I clamp my hand over her mouth to muffle her cry, but I don't slow my pace. I fuck her through her orgasm, watching her face contort with pleasure, her eyes rolling back. There's

nothing more beautiful than Lucy coming apart for me.

"Only I get to see you like this," I growl against her ear. "Only I get to feel you come."

I'm close now, the pressure building at the base of my spine. But I'm not done with her yet. Not by a long shot. I pull out abruptly, ignoring her whimper of protest, and set her down on shaky legs.

"We're going home," I tell her, tucking myself back into my pants with difficulty. My cock is still rock hard, aching for release, but I'll wait. I want her in my bed, spread out beneath me, where I can take my time reminding her exactly who she belongs to.

I straighten her dress with jerky movements, my hands not quite steady. The sight of her—flushed, disheveled, her lips swollen from my kisses—nearly makes me change my mind. But no. I want to take her properly. Want to watch her fall apart over and over in our bed.

I take her hand, leading her through the restaurant. I don't stop to pay the bill. They know me here. They'll add it to my account.

Reynolds is still at the bar, his eyes following us as we leave. I meet his gaze directly, letting him see exactly what we've been doing. Let him see that she's thoroughly fucked and claimed. Mine.

Lucy stumbles slightly as we exit, her legs still weak from her orgasm. I catch her easily, pulling her against my side. Outside, my driver is already waiting, the back door of the Bentley open before we reach it.

I push her inside, following immediately after. The privacy partition is already up.

"Penthouse," I bark at the driver, then press the button to close the divider completely.

Lucy sits across from me, her chest still rising and falling rapidly. Her hair is mussed, lipstick smeared. She's never looked more beautiful.

"Was that really necessary?" she finally asks, her voice still husky with arousal.

"Yes." I don't elaborate. Don't explain. Just stare at her with an intensity that makes her shift in her seat. I can smell her arousal from here, see the way her thighs press together. She's still needy. Still wanting.

Good.

We don't speak for the remainder of the car ride, and the elevator ride to my penthouse is silent as well, charged with electricity that raises the hair on my arms. Lucy stands a foot away, but I feel her as if she's pressed against me. Her scent fills the small space. Vanilla and heat. The doors slide open too slowly, and I usher her inside my home with a hand at the small of her back. The same spot Reynolds touched. I want to erase his fingerprints from her skin. Want to mark her so thoroughly that no man would dare approach her again. The thought should frighten me—this possessiveness isn't rational—but nothing about how I feel for Lucy follows any rules I've ever known.

She walks into the living room, her heels clicking on the marble floor. Floor-to-ceiling windows showcase the glittering cityscape below us, but Lucy is the only view I care about. She sets her purse down on the glass coffee table and turns to face me, arms crossed over her chest.

"Are you going to tell me what that was about?" she asks, chin tilted up in that defiant way that makes me want to push her against the nearest wall. "Who was that man, and why did he make you so angry?"

I shrug out of my suit jacket, tossing it carelessly over a chair. "Carter Reynolds. CEO of Reynolds Tech. He's been trying to tank my company for years."

"And you think he was talking to me as some kind of...corporate espionage?"

I loosen my tie, watching how her eyes track the movement of my fingers. "He knew

exactly who you were. Who you are to me."

Her eyebrows lift. "And who am I to you, Damon?"

The question hangs in the air between us, dangerous and weighted. Two weeks we've been doing this—fucking, spending nights together, sharing meals—but we've never defined it. Never put a label on what burns between us. She's twenty-two. In college. I'm thirty-six with an empire to run. On paper, we make no sense.

But sense has nothing to do with the way my pulse accelerates when she's near. The way I can't focus on work because I'm counting the minutes until I can have her again.

"You're mine," I say simply, because it's the only truth I know.

Her eyes darken, pupils expanding. She wets her lips with the tip of her tongue, and my cock hardens painfully in response.

"I don't belong to anyone," she says, but her voice lacks conviction. Her body is already leaning toward mine, betraying her words.

I cross the distance between us in three long strides. Our fingers brush, and we both feel the spark—static from the dry air, but it jolts us nonetheless. I curl my hand around the nape of her neck, feeling the rapid flutter of her pulse.

"Say it again," I challenge her, my voice a low rumble. "Tell me you're not mine while looking me in the eyes."

Her breath catches. She opens her mouth, closes it again. I can see the war in her eyes—pride versus desire, independence versus the undeniable thing that's grown between us these past weeks.

Instead of answering, she rises on her tiptoes and presses her mouth to mine.

The kiss ignites like a match to gasoline. There's nothing gentle about it. Nothing sweet. My hands grip her waist, yanking her against me with enough force to make her gasp into my mouth. Her arms wind around my neck, fingers threading through my hair, tugging hard enough to send sparks of pleasure-pain down my spine.

I walk her backward until she hits the wall, pinning her there with my body. My hands find hers, lifting them above her head, fingers interlaced. I break the kiss to look at her—eyes heavy-lidded, lips swollen, cheeks flushed with desire. Mine. No matter what she says, no matter how she fights it, she's mine.

"Tell me what you want," I demand, even though I can read her body like a familiar book. Know exactly what makes her tremble, what makes her beg.

Her eyes flash, a reminder that for all her youth, Lucy is no pushover. No meek little girl to be commanded. It's one of the things that drove me crazy about her from the start.

"I want you to stop acting like a caveman," she says, but the breathless quality of her voice undermines her words. "I wasn't flirting with him."

"I know." I press my forehead to hers, a gesture more intimate than any kiss. "That's what makes this so fucking insane, Lucy. I know you weren't. I know you would never. And I still wanted to tear his throat out for touching you." I release her hands to cup her face between my palms. "I've never felt this way. Never lost control like this. Do you understand what you do to me?"

Something softens in her expression. Her hand comes up to cover mine, turns her face to press a kiss to my palm. The tenderness of the gesture makes my chest ache.

"Show me," she whispers.

The words snap the last thread of my restraint. I capture her mouth again, tongue demanding entrance, tasting the sweetness of her. My hands find the zipper of her dress, dragging it down with one smooth motion. The fabric pools at her feet, leaving her in nothing but a pale pink bra and matching panties. I drink in the sight of her—all smooth skin and gentle curves, the constellation of freckles across her collarbone that I've memorized with my tongue.

"Beautiful," I murmur, and she flushes under my gaze. For all her fire and spine, Lucy still doesn't see herself clearly. Doesn't understand just how breathtaking she is.

I lift her, and her legs wrap around my waist instinctively. I carry her to the bedroom, kicking the door closed behind us. The city lights filter through the floor-to-ceiling windows, painting her skin in silver and shadow as I lay her on the bed.

I strip efficiently, aware of her eyes tracking every movement. When I'm naked, I kneel on the bed beside her, trailing my fingers along the lace edge of her bra. "These need to go," I say, and she arches her back in silent invitation.

I unhook her bra, sliding it down her arms, revealing her perfect breasts to my hungry gaze. Her nipples pucker in the cool air, and I lower my head to take one into my mouth. She gasps, back arching further, hands clutching my shoulders.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

"Damon," she moans, the sound of my name on her lips sending a jolt of primal satisfaction through me.

I move lower, trailing kisses down her stomach, hooking my fingers in her panties and drawing them down her legs with torturous slowness. When she's completely naked, I take a moment just to look at her—sprawled across my bed, skin flushed, eyes dark with desire. For me. Only for me.

"Stop staring and touch me," she demands, voice breathless but commanding.

I grin, sharp and predatory. "Impatient, sweetheart?" But I oblige, settling between her thighs, spreading her legs wider. She's already wet for me, already needy. I run a finger through her folds, collecting her arousal, before pressing two fingers inside her heat. Her sharp intake of breath is the sweetest sound I've ever heard.

"So wet," I murmur against her inner thigh, placing open-mouthed kisses on the sensitive skin there. "So ready for me."

"Please," she whispers, hips lifting to meet my touch.

I work my fingers in and out of her, adding a third when she whimpers for more. My thumb finds her clit, circling it with just enough pressure to make her squirm. But it's not enough. Not today. Not when I can still see Reynolds touching her, making her laugh. Not when I need to claim her completely.

I withdraw my fingers, ignoring her mewl of protest, and move up her body. I settle between her thighs, the head of my cock pressing against her entrance. I capture her

gaze, holding it as I push inside her in one smooth thrust.

We both groan at the sensation. She's tight and hot and perfect around me. Made for me. I start to move, setting a punishing rhythm that has her clutching at my shoulders, nails digging into my skin.

"Mine," I growl against her neck, unable to stop the possessive word from escaping. "Say it, Lucy. Say you're mine."

Her eyes flash, that stubborn streak showing through even as her body welcomes me, takes everything I give her. "I don't belong to you," she gasps, even as her legs wrap tighter around my waist, urging me deeper.

The contradiction between her words and her actions drives me wild. I hook an arm under one of her knees, changing the angle, driving deeper into her. She cries out, eyes rolling back in pleasure.

"Say it," I demand again, slowing my thrusts to a torturous pace that has her whimpering. "Tell me what we both know."

"Damon, please," she begs, trying to move her hips to force a faster rhythm.

I pin her with my weight, keeping my thrusts maddeningly slow, deep but not enough to push her over the edge. "Say it, and I'll give you what you need. What only I can give you."

She glares up at me, that fire I love blazing in her eyes. "You're such an asshole."

I can't help but laugh, even as my body screams for release. "Yes, I am. But I'm your asshole. Just like you're mine."

Something shifts in her expression then—a softening, a surrender that has nothing to do with weakness. "Yes," she whispers, her hand coming up to cup my cheek in a gesture so tender it makes my chest ache. "I'm yours. And you're mine."

The last two words hit me with unexpected force. You're mine. I've been so focused on possessing her, on claiming her, that I never considered the reverse—that she might have claimed me just as thoroughly. The realization should terrify me. Instead, it breaks something open inside my chest.

I capture her mouth in a kiss that's suddenly more gentle than anything we've shared before. My hips start moving again, but the rhythm has changed—still intense but less frantic, less about proving a point and more about connection.

Lucy responds immediately, her body softening under mine, her kisses turning deeper, more intimate. Her hands trace patterns on my back, no longer clawing but caressing. The shift is subtle but profound, transforming what began as an act of possession into something that feels dangerously close to making love.

I feel her body tightening around me, her breaths coming faster. "Come for me," I murmur against her lips. "Let go, Lucy. I've got you."

She does, her body arching beneath mine, a cry tearing from her throat as pleasure crashes over her. The sight of her coming undone, the feel of her pulsing around me, pushes me over the edge. I bury my face in her neck as I come, pouring myself into her with a groan that might have been her name.

For long moments afterward, we lie tangled together, catching our breath. I roll to the side, taking her with me so she's sprawled across my chest. Her hair tickles my chin, and I brush it back, tucking it behind her ear in a gesture far too tender for a man who prides himself on ruthlessness.

"You make me insane," I admit into the quiet darkness, words I never thought I'd say to anyone. "I saw him touch you, and something in me just...snapped. I've never felt this way before. Never lost control like this."

She props her chin on my chest, looking up at me with those eyes that see too much. "I wasn't flirting with him," she says again, softly this time.

"I know." I trace the curve of her cheek with my thumb. "That's what scares me. I know you weren't. I know you wouldn't. And I still couldn't control myself. You've done something to me, Lucy. Made me into someone I don't recognize."

She's quiet for a long moment, studying my face. Then, she lays her head on my chest and nuzzles close to me.

I hold her close, listening to her breathing even out, feeling the steady beat of her heart against my chest. Mine, I think again, but the word has shifted somehow, expanded to include something beyond mere possession. Something that feels dangerously like belonging.

To her, as much as she belongs to me.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

Lucy

My body pulses with a delicious ache as I blink into consciousness, aware of Damon's heavy arm draped across my waist like a possession, not just an embrace. The soreness between my thighs, the tender spots along my neck and breasts—all evidence of his need to mark me, claim me. And God help me, I love it. The realization sits in my chest, an uncomfortable heat I recognize as both desire and doubt.

I shift slightly, wincing at the sweet pain. Damon's arm tightens reflexively, pulling me closer to his chest even in sleep. His breathing remains deep and even against my neck, warm and reassuring. The penthouse is quiet around us, the silk sheets cool where they touch my bare skin beyond the furnace of his body.

Last night. God, last night.

He took me so many times I lost count.

I remember how his hands had gripped my thighs hard enough to bruise while he kissed me like he owned me. Like I was air and he was drowning.

"Tell me you're mine," he'd demanded against my throat. "Only mine."

And I had. I'd said it over and over as he took me there against the wall, then again in the shower, then finally in this bed. His intensity should have frightened me. Instead, it lit me up from the inside, made me feel seen in a way I never had before.

That's the part that's keeping me awake now, staring at the ceiling as dawn breaks through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The part that makes me question my own sanity.

Normal women don't crave being possessed, do they? Normal women want equality, partnership—not the consuming fire of a man who speaks of ownership in literal terms. A man who leaves bruises shaped like his fingers on your hips and thighs, who whispers "mine" like a prayer when he thinks you're sleeping.

I slide my hand along the muscled forearm that pins me to the mattress. Damon Blackwell. Billionaire CEO. The man whose name makes boardrooms go silent. I met him three months ago when working as a server at that gala, and somehow ended up here—in his bed, in his life, becoming an obsession for a man who collects companies like others collect art.

He paid off my student loans, for Christ's sake and offered me a job for an insane amount of money for a girl still in college.

I should have been insulted. Instead, I'd felt wanted in a way that made my knees weak.

What does that say about me?

I remember my old high school friend complaining about her "possessive" boyfriend who'd glare at other guys who talked to her. That seems laughably tame compared to what Damon does—the way he stands behind me with his hand on my neck when we're in public, the way he insists I sleep naked so nothing comes between his skin

and mine, the way he's programmed my phone to track my location "in case something happens to you."

Yet the truth burns through me like shame: I love it. I've never felt more desired, more important, more...necessary to someone's existence. It's intoxicating.

But is it healthy? The question nags at me, growing louder since yesterday when Damn lost his shit over seeing me smile at another man.

I stare at Damon's sleeping face. He looks different like this—younger, less guarded. The sharp angles of his jaw relaxed, dark lashes fanned against his cheeks. So beautiful it hurts to look at him directly, like staring at the sun.

But am I losing myself? Three months ago, I had my own apartment, worked jobs I chose myself. Now I live here, work for him, sleep in his bed. My body carries his marks. My phone broadcasts my location to him.

I try to imagine explaining to my mother, a lifelong feminist who raised me to be independent, that I melt when Damon tells me I belong to him. That I get wet when he grips my jaw and makes me look at him while he tells me I'm never allowed to leave. That sometimes, when he's working late in his home office, I deliberately wear something he's forbidden just to provoke his possessive response.

What kind of woman does that make me?

The doubt grows like a tumor in my chest, pressing against my lungs until I can barely breathe. This room suddenly feels too small, too warm, too full of him. I need space. I need to think. I need to remember who I was before Damon Blackwell consumed me like wildfire.

Carefully, I slide out from under his arm. He stirs, reaching for me even in sleep, but

doesn't wake. I hold my breath, watching him for a moment longer. The sheets pool around his waist, revealing the muscled expanse of his chest, the dark trail of hair leading down his stomach. Mine, he would say. All mine.

But am I his? Should I be? Is it wrong to want to be possessed so completely?

I don't know anymore. And that terrifies me.

My clothes from yesterday are scattered across the floor—casualties of Damon's impatience. I collect them quietly, slipping into my underwear and jeans, wincing at the tenderness between my legs. Evidence of him. Of us. Of whatever this is that I can't seem to name or understand.

"I'll be back," I whisper, though he can't hear me. It feels important to say it, even if only to myself. "I just need to think."

I grab my phone from the nightstand, hesitating over whether to leave it. He'll track me if I take it. So I leave it instead.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

One last look at his sleeping form. The twist in my chest isn't guilt—it's longing. Even now, preparing to walk away, I want to crawl back into his arms, to whisper that I'm his, only his, forever his.

That's why I have to go. Because when did I become a woman who can't breathe without a man's permission?

I slip out of the bedroom and through the silent penthouse, my footsteps muffled on the plush carpet. The elevator takes me down eighty floors to the lobby, where the security guard nods at me, recognizing "Mr. Blackwell's...friend." The pause in his greeting says everything about how I'm perceived.

Outside, dawn is breaking over the city. I inhale deeply, tasting freedom and fear in equal measure. The streets are quiet this early, just delivery trucks and early commuters. I pick a direction at random and start walking, each step carrying me further from Damon's bed, his arms, his possession.

But not his hold on me. That, I carry with me, wrapped around my heart like a fist.

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

Lucy

I've been walking for almost two hours, the morning sun climbing higher in the sky, when I realize I'm circling back toward Damon's building without conscious thought.

Like a planet caught in a gravitational pull, I'm unable to escape his orbit. The questions still swirl in my head, but they're joined now by a new sensation—a hollow ache in my chest that grows with each step I take away from him. I miss him. Already. Pathetically. The realization makes me angry and relieved at the same time.

I turn the corner onto his street, still half a block from the gleaming tower where his penthouse sits. That's when I see it—his black limousine, parked haphazardly near the curb, half on the sidewalk like it stopped in a panic. My steps falter. The back door flies open before I can decide whether to approach or run.

Damon practically falls out of the car. Not the controlled, powerful CEO who commands boardrooms with a whisper. This man is disheveled, his normally perfect hair standing up like he's been running his hands through it repeatedly. His dress shirt is buttoned wrong, missing his usual tie. He's wearing suit pants with—I blink in disbelief—slippers.

He sees me and freezes, his body going rigid. "Oh, thank god," he says, his deep voice breaking on the last word.

The raw emotion in those three words hits me like a physical blow. I've never heard Damon Blackwell—who negotiates billion-dollar deals without flinching—sound so utterly wrecked.

"Damon, I?—"

He's on me before I can finish, crossing the distance between us in long, desperate strides. His hands cup my face, eyes scanning me frantically. "Are you hurt? Did something happen?" His thumbs brush my cheeks, my temples, my jaw, as if checking for injuries. "Tell me."

"I'm fine." I steady myself against the intensity of his gaze. "I just went for a walk."

"A walk." He repeats the words like they're in a foreign language. "You disappeared. I woke up and you were gone." Each sentence is clipped, fighting for control. "Your phone location showed you moving, but you wouldn't answer my calls."

I see it now—the naked fear beneath his anger. This powerful man is terrified.

"I needed to think." My voice sounds small, even to my own ears.

His hands tighten on my face. "Four security cameras caught you leaving the building at five-twenty-seven. You looked...upset." Something flashes across his features—vulnerability so raw it hurts to witness. "Because of me?"

The driver and a security guard hover near the limo, pretending not to watch us. A few pedestrians slow their pace, drawn to the drama unfolding on the sidewalk. I'm suddenly aware of how public this moment is.

"Can we go somewhere private to talk?" I ask.

Instead of answering, Damon pulls me against his chest, burying his face in my hair. His heart hammers against mine, racing at a pace that scares me. This isn't the controlled man I know. This is someone undone.

"I thought I'd lost you," he whispers against my temple. "I thought—" He can't finish the sentence.

His driver opens the limo door without being asked. Damon guides me inside with a hand that trembles slightly against my lower back. The door closes, sealing us in the quiet luxury of the back seat. Before I can speak, Damon presses the intercom.

"Drive around. Don't stop until I tell you to."

"Yes, sir."

The privacy partition slides up. The limo pulls smoothly into traffic. And then it's just us, facing each other in the dim interior.

"Two hours and seventeen minutes," he says, his voice low. "That's how long you were gone. Do you know what that did to me?"

I look at him properly now—the shadows under his eyes, the tension in his jaw, the barely restrained panic still visible in the tightness around his mouth. He looks like a man who's been through hell.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

"I'm sorry I didn't leave a note." I twist my hands in my lap. "I didn't think I'd be gone long."

"You didn't think." There's no accusation in his tone, just a hollow emptiness that somehow hurts worse. "You were running from me."

The directness of his statement leaves no room for lies. "Yes."

He flinches as if I've struck him. For a powerful man who controls every situation, that small involuntary reaction speaks volumes. His eyes—those penetrating gray eyes that seem to see through every defense I've ever built—search mine.

"Tell me why." It's both command and plea.

I take a deep breath. "I woke up and I was thinking about...us. About how you are with me. The possessiveness. The control. How much I like it." My cheeks burn with the admission. "And I started to wonder if that makes me...weak. If there's something wrong with me for wanting to be owned the way you own me."

Understanding dawns on his face, followed by something darker, more intense. "You left because you enjoy belonging to me."

"Because I was scared of how much I enjoy it," I correct him. "Normal relationships aren't like this, Damon."

"Normal." He spits the word like it's poison. "I've never wanted normal. Not in business, not in life." He leans forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped so tightly

his knuckles whiten. "And I certainly don't want it with you."

The limo turns a corner, sending me sliding slightly across the leather seat. Damon reaches out instinctively to steady me, his hand warm on my knee. He doesn't remove it.

"When I woke up and found you gone—" His voice breaks, and he has to stop, collect himself. "I've acquired companies worth billions. I've destroyed competitors who thought they could challenge me. I've built an empire that will outlive me." His grip on my knee tightens. "None of it mattered. In that moment, I would have traded everything—every penny, every building with my name on it—just to have you back."

Something shifts in my chest—a loosening of the tight knot of doubt I've been carrying. His thumb traces small circles on my knee, almost absentmindedly.

"I can't live without you," he continues, sounding surprised by his own admission. "I thought I was a complete person before I met you. I was wrong." He looks up, his eyes fever-bright. "I'm going crazy without you, Lucy. Two hours was unbearable. The thought of a lifetime..." He shakes his head, unable to finish.

"Damon—"

"Let me finish." He draws a ragged breath. "I know I'm intense. I know I'm possessive. I know I probably scare you sometimes with how much I need you." His hand slides up to mine, our fingers brushing. The contact jolts through me like electricity. "But what you need to understand is that it goes both ways. You own me just as completely as I own you. Maybe more so, because I never chose this. It just happened."

The confession hangs between us, stunning in its vulnerability. Damon Blackwell,

admitting he's not in control. That I have power over him.

"You left this morning because you're afraid of how much you like belonging to me," he says softly. "I spent the morning terrified because I belong to you completely, and I thought you were gone forever."

The limo continues its aimless journey through the city streets while I absorb his words. Outside, the world goes about its business—people walking to work, stopping for coffee, living normal lives. Inside this bubble, there's only us and this strange, intense connection that defies conventional understanding.

"I don't know if what we have is healthy," I admit, voicing my deepest fear. "The way you track my phone, the way you need to control everything about me, the way I...respond to that." My voice drops to a whisper. "What if it's toxic?"

Damon considers this, his thumb still stroking my hand. "You can leave anytime," he says finally. "I've never locked you in. I've never forced you to stay. I track your phone because the thought of something happening to you and not being able to find you destroys me." His eyes hold mine. "If you truly want to go—if this isn't what you want—I'll let you go. It would kill me, but I would do it."

The sincerity in his voice is unmistakable. Painful truth radiates from him.

"And if I stay?" I ask, my heart pounding.

"Then accept that this is who we are together. That we need each other in ways other people might not understand. That I will always be possessive of you because the alternative is unthinkable." His hand tightens on mine. "And trust that underneath everything—every command, every possessive moment—there's only love. Desperate, all-consuming love."

The word hangs between us. Love. He's never said it before. Neither have I. It seems simultaneously too small and too ordinary for what exists between us.

"I don't care if it's normal," I whisper, the realization crystallizing as I speak it. "I've spent my whole life trying to be what other people think I should be. Independent. Self-sufficient. Never needing anyone." I turn my hand over, lacing my fingers with his. "But with you, I can be myself. Even the parts of me that want to be possessed."

Something shifts in his expression—hope, breaking through the fear like sunlight through clouds. "You're not leaving?"

"No." The certainty settles into my bones. "I'm not leaving."

His exhale is shaky, his shoulders dropping as tension drains from his body. When he looks at me again, the vulnerability is still there, but so is that familiar intensity that makes my stomach flip.

"Come here," he says, his voice a low command that sends heat spiraling through me.

I slide across the seat into his arms. He crushes me against his chest, his face buried in my neck. I feel him inhaling deeply, like he's trying to breathe me in, to convince himself I'm really here.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

"Don't ever disappear like that again," he murmurs against my skin. "I can handle anything but losing you."

His lips find mine, desperate and claiming. There's no gentleness in the kiss—only relief and need and something deeper that makes my heart race. His hands tangle in my hair, holding me in place as if afraid I might vanish if he loosens his grip.

When we finally break apart, both breathing hard, he presses his forehead to mine. "Tell me you're mine," he says, echoing his words from last night. But there's a new rawness to them now—less a demand, more a plea.

I cup his face in my hands, feeling the slight stubble against my palms. This powerful, terrifying man who commands empires is trembling beneath my touch.

"I'm yours," I tell him, the truth of it settling into my bones. "And you're mine."

Normal or not, this is what I want. This is who we are together. And I'm done questioning it.

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

Lucy

The elevator climb to Damon's penthouse with excruciating slowness, our bodies not touching but connected by the invisible current that always runs between us. He

hasn't taken his eyes off me since we left the limo, like he's afraid I might disappear if he blinks. The possessiveness that drove me away this morning now feels like sanctuary, a safe harbor after the storm of doubt. When the doors finally open to his—our—home, I step inside first, feeling his presence at my back like a physical touch.

"Are you hungry?" he asks, voice rough at the edges. "You left without breakfast."

The question is so mundane, so normal after the emotional intensity of our sidewalk confrontation, that it startles a laugh from me. "That's what you're thinking about? Food?"

He shakes his head, following me into the expansive living room with its wall of windows overlooking the city. "I'm thinking about taking care of you." The simple statement carries weight beyond the words themselves. "Always."

I turn to face him, taking in the disheveled appearance that's so unlike his usual perfect control. His shirt is still buttoned wrong, his hair a mess from nervous hands. The slippers are gone now—he must have changed into proper shoes before leaving the limo—but the disarray remains. This powerful man has been undone by my absence.

"I don't need taking care of," I say softly, testing the boundaries of our reunion.

His eyes flash, a storm brewing in their gray depths. "Let me rephrase. I need to take care of you." He steps closer, into my personal space but still not touching me. "It's not about your capability. It's about my necessity."

The distinction matters. It shifts the dynamic from condescension to something more complex—his need rather than my weakness. I sway toward him, drawn by the gravitational pull that's been there since we met.

"Then take care of me," I whisper.

His control—already frayed from the morning's panic—snaps. In one fluid motion, he lifts me into his arms, cradling me against his chest like something infinitely precious. I loop my arms around his neck as he carries me through the penthouse to the bedroom we fled from hours ago.

The bed is still unmade, sheets tangled from our passion last night and my hasty departure this morning. Damon sets me down beside it with a gentleness that contradicts the fierce possession in his eyes.

"I need to see you," he says, reaching for the hem of my shirt. "All of you."

There's no resistance in me as he undresses me slowly, each piece of clothing removed with reverent care. Unlike his usual impatience, he takes his time now, pressing his lips to each newly exposed inch of skin. When I stand naked before him, he drops to his knees, pressing his forehead against my stomach.

"When I woke up and found you gone—" His voice breaks, his hands gripping my hips like anchors. "I've never felt fear like that. Not when my parents died. Not when I nearly lost everything in the market crash five years ago." His breath is warm against my skin. "Nothing compares to the thought of losing you."

I thread my fingers through his dark hair, holding him to me. "I'm sorry I scared you."

He looks up, his eyes burning with an emotion too complex to name. "I'm sorry I scared you first. With my need. My possession." His thumbs trace circles on my hipbones. "But I won't apologize for wanting you to be mine. For needing you to be."

"I don't want you to apologize for that." The realization settles into me with perfect clarity. "That's what I figured out today. I want to be yours. I'm just not used to

wanting something that feels so...consuming."

He presses a kiss to my stomach, just below my navel. "You think I am?"

The question hangs between us—this acknowledgment that whatever burns between us is new territory for both of us. Damon Blackwell, who controls every aspect of his world with ruthless precision, is as overwhelmed by this connection as I am.

Slowly, he rises to his feet, towering over me again. I reach for the misaligned buttons of his shirt.

"My turn," I tell him, beginning to undress him with the same careful attention he showed me.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

His body reveals itself button by button, inch by inch. The broad chest dusted with dark hair. The taut stomach with its trail leading downward. The powerful thighs that have pinned me to this bed countless times. With each piece of clothing that falls away, I see more of the man beneath the powerful CEO exterior—the man who trembled at the thought of losing me.

When he stands naked before me, magnificent in his vulnerability, I place my palm over his heart. It pounds beneath my touch, racing with the same urgency that pulses through my veins.

"Do you understand what you do to me?" he asks, covering my hand with his own, pressing it harder against his chest. "How completely you own me?"

The power in that admission makes me dizzy. This man—this titan who commands empires—surrenders to me as completely as I surrender to him.

He guides me backward until my knees hit the edge of the bed, then follows me down onto the rumpled sheets. But instead of covering my body with his own, he settles beside me, propped on one elbow, his free hand tracing patterns on my skin.

"I need to worship you properly," he murmurs, his fingers skimming the curve of my waist. "To apologize for making you doubt us."

"Damon—"

He silences me with a finger to my lips. "Let me."

And he does—with exquisite, torturous patience. His lips follow the path his fingers blaze, tasting every hollow and curve of my body like a man savoring his last meal. He lingers at the bruises his passion left yesterday, pressing gentle kisses to each mark as if in benediction rather than apology.

"So beautiful," he whispers against my inner thigh, where a perfect imprint of his fingers remains from last night. "Mine to mark. Mine to cherish."

The dual nature of his possession has never been clearer—the fierce claiming and the tender care, inseparable aspects of his love. Both essential. Both part of what draws me to him with such irresistible force.

When his mouth finally finds the aching center of me, I arch off the bed with a gasping cry. He holds my hips firmly, keeping me in place as he worships me with lips and tongue. There's reverence in his touch, but also that familiar possessiveness—the message clear in every stroke: This pleasure is his to give. This body is his to know.

And I surrender to it completely, letting the pleasure build and crest until I'm calling his name, my fingers tangled in his hair. He stays with me through every tremor, every aftershock, until I'm limp and gasping beneath him.

Only then does he move up my body, his arousal evident against my thigh. But instead of taking what we both know I'm willing to give, he brushes the hair from my face with surprising tenderness.

"I want to put a ring on your finger," he says, his voice low and sure. "I want to give you my name, so everyone knows you're mine."

The declaration should shock me—we've known each other barely a month—but nothing about our relationship has followed normal timelines or conventions. Instead,

it feels like the natural progression of this consuming fire between us.

"And I want to put a baby in your belly." His hand slides to my stomach, splaying possessively over my womb. "I want to see you grow round with my child. I want everything—anything—that binds you to me so completely you can never leave."

Heat floods through me at his words—not just desire, but something deeper. The image he paints—marriage, pregnancy, a future intertwined with his—sparks longing I didn't know existed inside me.

"Are you trying to scare me away again?" I ask, my voice unsteady.

His smile is both predatory and vulnerable. "I'm being honest about what I want. What I need." His hand moves from my stomach to cup my face. "But I'll wait. I'll give you time. As long as I know you're mine, I can be patient."

Patient isn't a word I'd ever have associated with Damon Blackwell, and the concession moves me more than his demands. This is love—not just possession, but consideration. Compromise.

I reach up to trace the sharp line of his jaw, feeling the slight stubble beneath my fingertips. "Ask me properly," I whisper. "Not as a declaration. As a question."

Something shifts in his expression—uncertainty replacing his usual confidence. It's a gift, this rare glimpse of Damon unsure. He swallows hard.

"Lucy." My name in his mouth sounds like a prayer. "Will you marry me? Will you have my children? Will you promise never to leave me again?"

Three questions, but they're really one: Will you be mine forever?

I search his face, those penetrating gray eyes that see through every defense I've ever built. I think about the fear that drove me from this bed this morning—the worry that loving his possession made me somehow wrong, broken. But I see now that what exists between us isn't about weakness or surrender. It's about finding the one person who accepts your deepest, most hidden desires and meets them with their own.

"Yes," I tell him, watching joy break across his features like dawn. "Yes to all of it."

He claims my mouth in a kiss that's both celebration and promise, his body finally covering mine. When he enters me, it's with a gentleness that contrasts the fierce grip of his hands on my wrists, pinning them above my head. The duality that defines us—tender and fierce, loving and possessive.

"Tell me," he demands against my neck, his hips driving into mine with measured control. "Tell me what I need to hear."

I know what he's asking for. Not just confirmation of my acceptance, but the deeper truth.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

"I love you," I gasp as he hits that perfect spot inside me. "I love you, and I'll never leave you."

The words break something open in him. His control shatters, his movements becoming desperate, primal. "Mine," he growls against my throat. "Say it."

"Yours," I promise, wrapping my legs around his waist to take him deeper. "Only yours. Always yours."

Damon lets out a strangled sound as he sheathes his cock deep inside me. I feel a jet of precum spray into me and he curses.

"I won't last," Damon grits out, his hips stuttering against mine. "Not after thinking I'd lost you."

His vulnerability only heightens my desire, knowing this powerful man loses control because of me—only me. I arch up, meeting his thrusts, deliberately clenching around him to drive him closer to the edge.

"Then don't," I whisper against his ear. "Let go for me."

He makes a sound like he's being torn apart, his rhythm faltering as he drives into me with desperate need. His grip on my wrists tightens almost painfully, but I welcome it—physical proof of his possession, his desperation.

"Lucy—" My name breaks in his throat as he comes, his entire body shuddering against mine. The heat of him fills me, marking me from the inside in the most primal

way. It triggers my own release, which only makes Damon come harder.

“Oh fuck yes, sweet baby, come all over your man’s cock. Let me feel you falling apart for me, honey.”

The intensity in his face, the raw emotion as he loses himself inside me, pushes me over the edge again. I cry out his name as pleasure crashes through me, my body clutching at his, milking him dry as we fall together.

Afterward, he doesn't roll away. Instead, he stays buried inside me, his weight pressing me into the mattress in a way that feels like shelter rather than confinement. His breath comes in ragged pants against my neck, his heart hammering against mine. I stroke his back, feeling the dampness of exertion on his skin, tracing the powerful muscles now relaxed beneath my touch.

We stay like that for a long time, connected in the most intimate way, neither of us willing to break the physical bond. When Damon finally shifts his weight, he doesn't withdraw completely—just enough to look down at my face, his eyes tracing every feature like he's memorizing me.

"I meant it," he says, voice still rough from our lovemaking. "Every word. The ring. The baby. All of it."

I reach up to smooth his tousled hair, letting my fingers linger against his scalp. "I know you did. And I meant my answer."

Something soft and vulnerable crosses Damon's face as he rolls to the side, pulling me against him. His arms cage me protectively, one hand splayed possessively across my lower belly.

"I'll call my jeweler today," he murmurs against my temple, his voice a low rumble

that vibrates through me. "I want that ring on your finger by tonight."

A small, practical part of me—the part that used to count pennies for ramen—wants to protest the extravagance, the rush. But that voice grows fainter every day I spend with Damon.

I tuck myself closer into Damon's side, feeling the steady rise and fall of his chest beneath my cheek. The morning's panic seems like a distant memory now, replaced by a bone-deep certainty that settles into me like truth.

"I don't need an expensive ring," I say, tracing patterns on his chest. "I just need you."

His hand tightens on my hip. "You have me. You've had me since the moment you looked at me at that gala."

I smile against his skin. "I guess you had me too."

EPILOGUE

Three years later

Damon

I watch Lucy from across our office, my gaze locked on the gentle swell of her belly visible beneath her fitted dress. Three years of marriage, and still the sight of her steals my breath. Now she carries my child, and the possessive heat that burns through me at the thought is almost unbearable. My pregnant wife. My partner in every sense. Mine.

She's at her desk, brow furrowed as she reviews contracts for our consulting firm—the business that once was just mine but now thrives under our joint

leadership. Her fingers tap rhythmically against the keyboard, and occasionally she brushes back a strand of hair that falls across her face. Even these small movements mesmerize me. Three years together, and I still can't look away.

"You're staring again," she says without looking up, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

"Can you blame me?" The words rumble from my chest, husky with desire.

Lucy finally raises her eyes to meet mine, and that familiar electricity sparks between us. Her cheeks flush pink, the same shade that now seems to permanently color her skin since the pregnancy. Five months along, and she's never been more beautiful.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

"We have the Miller presentation in an hour," she reminds me, but her voice has that breathless quality that tells me she's affected too.

"I'm aware of our schedule." I stand, moving around my desk with deliberate slowness. "I'm also aware that my wife looks particularly tempting today."

Lucy rolls her eyes, but her lips curve upward. "Damon..."

"The way that dress hugs your body..." I continue, approaching her desk. "Do you know what it does to me, seeing you like this?"

She sets down her pen, giving me her full attention now. "You've mentioned it. Several times. Today."

I don't apologize. How could I be sorry for appreciating every inch of her? When we first met, she was a struggling college student, determined and resilient but weighed down by financial worries. Now she stands beside me as my equal, her natural intelligence having quickly made her indispensable to the business. But the changes in her body—those drive me to distraction.

"Stand up," I tell her, not a command but not quite a request either.

Lucy rises, one hand instinctively cradling her bump. The gesture sends a primal surge of satisfaction through me. My child. My wife protecting my child.

"Turn around," I murmur.

She complies, a knowing glint in her eye. The dress—deep blue and professional enough for client meetings—hugs the new curves of her body. Her breasts, fuller now, her hips wider, and that perfect rounded belly. I step closer, until my chest presses against her back.

"Do you have any idea what you do to me?" I whisper against her ear, my hands sliding around to rest on her belly.

Lucy leans back against me, her body relaxing into mine. "I have some notion, considering you can barely keep your hands off me."

"And why should I?" My fingers splay possessively across the swell where our child grows. "Every man who sees you knows."

"Knows what?" She tilts her head, exposing the curve of her neck to me.

"That you're mine." I press my lips to her skin, tasting the sweet-salt of her. "That I've bred you. That my child grows inside you."

Lucy shivers against me. "Crude," she chides, but her voice trembles with desire.

"Honest," I correct her. "Every time we walk into a meeting, every client who comes through that door—they all see it. My ring on your finger, my child in your belly."

My hands slide up to cup her breasts, now heavy and sensitive. Lucy gasps, arching into my touch.

"Does that bother you?" she asks, a hint of her old insecurity bleeding through.

"Bother me?" I turn her to face me. "It makes me feel like the king of the fucking world."

The vulnerability in her eyes fades, replaced by that quiet strength that first drew me to her. "Sometimes I think you're insane," she says, but she's smiling.

"Only about you." I take her face between my hands. "Only ever about you."

When I kiss her, it's with the same hunger that consumed me the first time. But now there's something else too—a bone-deep certainty, a completeness that comes from knowing this woman is mine in every way that matters.

Her lips part beneath mine, inviting me deeper. Her tongue slides against mine, and I groan into her mouth. My hands drop to her hips, drawing her against me so she can feel exactly what she does to me.

"The Miller presentation," she reminds me, but her fingers are already working at my tie.

"We have time." I reach behind her, clearing a space on her desk with one sweep of my arm. Papers flutter to the floor—nothing that can't be reorganized later.

Lucy raises an eyebrow. "Really? The desk?"

"Really." I cup her face. "I can't wait another minute to have you."

"You had me this morning," she points out, but she's already reaching for my belt.

"Too long ago." I capture her mouth again, swallowing her laugh.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

There's an efficiency to how we undress each other now—the familiarity of three years together. I unzip her dress just enough to expose her breasts, still contained in a practical maternity bra. When I free them, my mouth waters at the sight. They're fuller, the nipples darker, more sensitive. When I brush my thumbs across them, Lucy whimpers.

"Beautiful," I murmur. "So fucking beautiful."

Her hands work my shirt buttons, then my belt. I help her, too impatient to wait. When I'm finally free, hard and aching for her, I lift her carefully onto the edge of the desk.

"Are you comfortable?" I ask, hands gentle on her thighs as I spread them.

Lucy nods, her eyes dark with need. "I need you, Damon. Now."

I hook my fingers into her panties, sliding them down her legs. The scent of her arousal hits me, making my cock throb with anticipation. I drop to my knees, needing to taste her first.

"Damon—" Her protest turns into a moan as my mouth finds her center.

She's wetter than usual—another gift of pregnancy—and the flavor of her on my tongue is addictive. I lick and suck until her thighs tremble on either side of my head, until her fingers tangle in my hair, holding me exactly where she needs me.

"Please," she gasps. "I need you inside me."

I rise, positioning myself between her spread thighs. The sight of her—dress rucked up around her waist, breasts exposed, belly round with my child—nearly undoes me. I've never wanted anyone the way I want Lucy. Never will.

"You're everything," I tell her, the words raw and honest as I push slowly inside her.

Her body welcomes me, hot and tight and perfect. When I'm fully seated, I pause, savoring the moment. Lucy's legs wrap around my waist, her ankles locking at the small of my back.

"Move," she commands, and I obey.

I establish a rhythm, not too hard—I'm always careful with her now—but deep and steady. Each thrust pulls a soft sound from her lips, a sound I want to capture and keep forever.

"You feel so good," I groan, watching where our bodies join. "So perfect around me."

Her hands clutch at my shoulders, nails digging through my shirt. "Harder," she whispers. "I won't break."

"I know how strong you are." I increase my pace slightly, still mindful of her condition. "My resilient wife. My perfect Lucy."

Her inner muscles tighten around me, and I know she's close. I slide one hand between us, finding the spot that makes her see stars.

"That's it," I encourage her. "Let go for me, baby."

Lucy's back arches, pushing her belly against my abdomen. The feel of it—that physical reminder of what we've created together—sends a surge of possessive

pleasure through me.

"I'll always take care of you," I promise, the words spilling out unplanned but completely true. "You and our baby. Always."

She cries out, her body clenching around mine as she comes. The sight of her—head thrown back, throat exposed, face flushed with pleasure—pushes me to the edge.

"You're mine," I growl, hips pumping faster now. "My wife. Carrying my child."

"Yours," she agrees, voice breathy and satisfied. "Always yours."

That's all it takes. I bury myself deep inside her and let go, release flooding through me so intensely that my vision blurs at the edges. For a moment, there's nothing but this—our bodies joined, our hearts beating in tandem, our futures irrevocably intertwined.

As the pleasure subsides, I lean forward, careful not to put weight on her belly, and rest my forehead against hers. Our breath mingles in the space between us.

"I meant what I said," I tell her, needing her to know. "I'll always take care of you both."

Lucy's hand finds my cheek, her touch gentle. "I know you will. But remember, we take care of each other now. Partners, remember?"

I turn my face to kiss her palm. "Partners. In everything."

Carefully, I withdraw from her body and help her rearrange her clothing. There's something intensely satisfying about watching her put herself back together—knowing that underneath the professional exterior, she carries the evidence

of our passion.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 10:08 am

I check my watch. "We still have twenty minutes before the Millers arrive."

Lucy slides off the desk, smoothing her dress over her bump. "Just enough time for me to fix my hair and for you to pick up these papers you so carelessly knocked to the floor."

I grin, unrepentant. "Worth it."

She shakes her head, but her smile matches mine. "You're impossible."

"And yet, you married me." I bend to help her gather the scattered documents.

"Best decision I ever made." The sincerity in her voice makes my chest tight with emotion.

When the papers are sorted and we're both presentable again, I pull her into my arms for one more moment of privacy before we return to being consummate professionals.

"I love watching you grow with our child," I tell her, hand splayed across her belly. "I love knowing that everyone who looks at you can see that you're mine."

Lucy's eyes soften. "Caveman," she teases, but I can see the pleasure my words give her.

"Your caveman," I correct her. "Forever."

The intercom buzzes, announcing the Millers' arrival in the lobby. Lucy steps back, professional mask sliding into place, though her lips still look kissed and her cheeks retain their flush.

"Ready, partner?" she asks, extending her hand to me.

I take it, squeezing gently. "With you? Always."

As we walk to the conference room, my hand rests at the small of her back. I notice the receptionist's eyes flicker to Lucy's belly, and that surge of primal pride returns. Let them look. Let them all see. This brilliant, beautiful woman chose me. Carries my child. Shares my name and my life.

I've never felt more powerful. More complete. More certain that whatever the future holds, we'll face it together—partners in every sense of the word.