



The Rancher's Vengeful Heart

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Description: She lied to him. Now he'll make her pay.

Tassy never believed billionaire rancher Lucius Young would choose her over every woman in San Antonio. So she played the part of his worst nightmare: demanding, possessive, clingy.

But instead of running, the sinfully hot tycoon only smirked...before turning the tables. He matched her game—more demanding, more possessive—and refused to let her out of his arms, much less his sight.

His forceful passion shattered her defenses, and his sweet obsession stole her heart. When he whispered forever against her skin, Tassy believed him...until secrets from the past tore them apart.

Now, Lucius despises the very sight of her...and no amount of begging will quench his thirst for vengeance.

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Tassy

WHAT KIND OF BOYFRIEND would announce he wanted to break up just as his girlfriend received a promotion?

Her boyfriend, that's who.

Xylan was now staring at her with a mixture of guilt and horror while everyone else in the gleaming glass-walled conference room pretended they hadn't heard anything.

Every second that passed felt like a ticking bomb. The heater was on, and she had her trusty cream cardigan over her knitted sweater. So why did Tassy feel like she was about to freeze to death?

Words completely failed her, but one thing Tassy was absolutely certain of—she shouldn't waste other people's time.

As she rose to her feet, a smile somehow found its way to her lips. Her ankle-length floral skirt swished softly against her boots as she moved.

Keep it steady.

Don't walk too slow or fast.

Her dark bangs fell across her eyes, and Tassy fought against the urge to tuck them back. Anything that hid her gaze from the world right now was good. Face-saving good, in fact.

Just take it one step at a time.

That had always kept her going, every time Tassy felt there was no one to turn to.

One step at a time.

The pity in everyone's gazes burned, and for once, Tassy wished she wore her hair long so she could hide behind it.

She was this close to wishing she could melt off the face of the earth. But since Tassy knew just enough about God to believe things would get better in time, she forced herself to focus on what she could control.

One step at a time, Tas.

Left foot forward.

Right foot next.

Platitudes came to Tassy's rescue as she reached the VP of Product Development—the boss of her boss's boss. "Thank you so much." Her voice came out steady, with just the tiniest squeak at the end. "I honestly have no words. This promotion wouldn't have been possible without so many people supporting me."

Samantha squeezed her hand. "You deserve this, dear." Their department VP was in her mid-fifties, her grayish hair even shorter than Tassy's. She had been with Black Carpet International since it first opened its doors, one of the company's pillars of strength for three decades.

"But wait, there's more."

The words helped defuse the tension, and everyone laughed—the sound tinged with unmistakable relief.

The older woman presented Tassy with a sealed envelope. "Inside are the details of your first assignment, but you could say it's also a reward since it's for Foxtown's invite-only media conference for their Valentine campaign. The company will be shouldering all traveling expenses for you and your...oh, shit."

The discomfort inside the room skyrocketed, and Tassy mouthed, 'It's okay' when she saw the aghast expression on the VP's face. Not even the pandemic had thrown Samantha off her game like this. Handling simultaneous promotions and breakups was obviously new territory, even for her. Tassy mustered another smile to keep the situation from spiraling further.

"This is such an amazing gift, Samantha. It's always been my dream to visit Foxtown. I really can't thank you enough."

The words gave her superior enough time to recover. Samantha's smile no longer seemed forced as she turned to face the room. "Ladies and gentlemen, the newest manager in our department, Tassy Bautista."

Clap, clap, clap.

The junior associates and her colleagues rushed forward, and Tassy eagerly allowed herself to be swept away by their enthusiasm.

I knew you could do it, Tas!

Youngest to make manager!

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Way to go!

By the time Tassy moved to shake hands with her superiors, her smile felt more natural, and the awkwardness in the conference room had lessened.

Maybe from 110% awkward, it was now 109.9?

Or wait, maybe 109.8, since she didn't want her first post-breakup day marked with negativity. She refused to be known as the girl who couldn't handle breakups, and oh God, was this truly happening?

It was just yesterday—yesterday!—when Tassy told Stella she would start taking her faith seriously. And now this?

Would God think she was ungrateful if she wished she wasn't the one being promoted?

Because maybe, if it was someone else, she and her boyfriend since college would still be together?

"I'm sorry, Tas..."

Xylan stood before her now, everyone in their department having filed out without being asked. Sweet of them, really, but Tassy suspected it was also because they couldn't bear to watch what came next.

Xylan's Rolex caught the morning light as he ran a hand through his perfectly styled

dark hair. That was new, Tassy observed absently. It had always been his dream to own a Rolex, and despite everything, she was happy to see him finally wearing one.

"There was obviously a better place and time to do this, but I just couldn't hold it any longer."

Tassy only nodded...even though part of her was dying to ask: Really, Xy? You couldn't wait just a few minutes longer? Really?

"And what happened afterward..." Xylan's jaw clenched as he loosened his Italian silk tie in a fit of restlessness.

That's new, too, Tassy noted vaguely. Was it possible that while giving his wardrobe a complete overhaul...he'd realized their relationship needed a similar fix? Out with the old, in with the...new?

"You get what I'm saying, right?"

Tassy shook her head.

It can't be. It can't be.

"What happened today perfectly illustrates why we're never going to work."

Where was he going with this?

"I just broke up with you," Xylan burst out. "But you didn't say a word!"

Is he really saying what I think he's saying?

"You acted as if you heard nothing."

What else was she supposed to do?

He had just broken up with her...in front of everyone.

If she had stared at him a second longer, she would've broken down and cried.

Was that why he believed they wouldn't work?

"You just got up from your chair like our breakup doesn't matter."

Xylan's accusing tone robbed Tassy of words.

Is this for real?

Was he really saying he'd broken up with her because she hadn't burst into tears in their workplace?

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"You went straight to the VP and accepted your promotion like it's more important than our relationship." A note of bitterness crept into her ex-boyfriend's tone as he towered over her petite frame. "Then again, that's the truth, isn't it?"

Tassy's lips parted in protest, but Xylan wouldn't let her speak.

"Don't bother denying it. Everything in your life takes precedence over our relationship. You never get jealous even when you see me with other girls."

Because he told her jealousy was a sign of distrust! Did he even realize how she would always end up biting her lip bloody every time she saw him with other women?

"You've never kissed me in public either!"

Because he had told her not to when they first started dating. Why was he saying all these things like he'd suffered from amnesia—

"And today, dammit! Today is irrefutable proof—"

"How?" Tassy hated interrupting him...because she knew he hated being interrupted. She had learned to hold her tongue to keep the peace, but this...was just too much. "How is today—" Tassy's voice died at the look of resentment Xylan shot her way.

He hated her, she realized with shock.

They had been together for years, and yet there was no denying it.

Xylan hated her.

How could a person be in love one moment and so full of hatred the next?

"You were promoted, Tas."

Why was he looking at her like that was enough to explain their breakup?

"But if you had really loved me—"

Her eyes began to prick as understanding finally dawned.

"You would have turned it down."

Xylan stormed past her and slammed the door behind him hard enough to make everyone outside the conference room turn—then look away just as quickly when they saw through the glass walls that Xylan had gotten what he wanted.

She was crying for everyone to see.

Lucius

DALLAS INTERNATIONAL Airport buzzed with its usual mix of locals, business travelers, and tourists, but outside the glass doors of the newly opened Vermillion Lounge, billionaire Lucius Young stood perfectly still, his dark gaze narrowed on what was taking place inside.

Around him, women were constantly slowing down as soon as they caught a glimpse of his face. The billionaire's aquiline features were reminiscent of the harsh good looks of a Roman general. Lucius' enemies often scathingly referred to his looks as more villainous than princely, none of them realizing how this only made the

billionaire even more appealing to women.

A tyrant they did see, and all of them had an easy time imagining that Lucius was the type of man who would love (and make love) with the same fierce ruthlessness in which a conqueror would annihilate his foes.

The length in which the women around him attempted to capture his attention was comical, but not once did the billionaire look their way. None of them seemed to realize that the harder they tried to catch his eye, the less appealing he would find them.

Only two things these days were able to capture Lucius' interest. Something new and completely challenging...or something new and utterly contemptuous, such as the spoiled-looking mother inside the lounge.

Lucius' lips tightened as he watched the well-dressed lady unwrap a chocolate bar before handing it to her son, whose features unfortunately bore the marks of an equally spoiled upbringing. When her turn came up, the woman seemingly lost her hold on the wrapper as she walked up the counter, and his dislike deepened into distaste as he watched the wrapper fall from her manicured hand without her seeming aware of it.

The gentleman in line behind her saw the same thing, of course, but he simply walked straight to the counter and acted as if the colorful scrap of packaging on the floor was invisible.

Un-fucking-believable.

People like this was the reason he had been considering pulling out funding on a couple of research facilities of late. Why bother trying to save the damn planet when majority of mankind seemed hell-bent on destroying it?

Weariness that bordered on ennui suddenly weighed down on him, but just as he was about to turn away, the third person in line - a woman with short dark hair that fell in messy bangs - gave Lucius pause...since he couldn't remember the last time he had seen someone do what she was doing.

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Pick up someone's trash like it was something nothing out of the ordinary, and if that wasn't enough, the woman also made no attempt to reclaim her spot. And the moment she went straight to the end of the queue to line up again, that was it for him.

Finally.

For two years now, Lucius had lived like a monk, but his celibacy was not by choice at all. It was as if he had suddenly woken up one day, and the women he used to find attractive had become repulsive.

Everything about them had seemed too fake and contrived. Everything they cared about had seemed shallow to Lucius while everything they didn't care about made them undesirably callous in his eyes.

For two years now, no matter where he went and what he did, all the women he met did nothing to him.

They were all as appealing as dry, hard logs.

Until her.

His gaze narrowed when he noticed her lips moving...in rhythm with the tapping of her feet.

Ah.

She was listening to something, her ears plugged with wireless buds. He studied the

silent movement of her lips, and the words were surprisingly easy to read.

We've Only Just Begun by The Carpenters.

An interesting choice...which made it all the harder for Lucius to fight off the urge to take a photo of her with his phone.

Because that was all it would take.

He only needed to send her photo to his security team, wait an hour or so, and he would have in his possession a report that covered all the basics about her.

Name. Age. Address. Job. Email. Criminal history.

But if he was willing to wait an entire day, he would know more than that.

Depending on how much he was willing to pay—

He could know everything about her.

Everything.

And his whole life, that was how he had always been with the women he fucked.

He needed to be in control, and he never risked leaving anything to chance.

Until now.

Because there was just something about this woman...

Something that made him want to ignore all his usual protocols...

And just go after her, the old-fucking-fashioned way.

Chapter One

VALENTINES IN FOXTOWN.

Tassy told herself this was good progress, never mind if she had needed a good 20 minutes just to come up with the title of her report.

Progress was progress, period.

3 words down, 997 to go, but who was counting? She was only forty minutes into her two-hour layover in Dallas, and that was usually more than enough time for her to finish writing, editing, and proofreading her report.

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Usually being the operative word, but after everything that happened...

Maybe she should just quit?

Wasn't it a sign for her to move on when the things she normally found easy...now seemed impossible to accomplish? Even her own body didn't feel right; half of her struggled with lethargy while the other half of her battled against jittery, high-strung nerves.

Surely all of these had to mean something?

Anything?

Tassy fell back against her chair with a sigh, but even though its plush leather cradled her with the kind of comfort that was almost nurturing, it still wasn't enough to completely eliminate the tension coiling through her body.

Every embarrassing moment of yesterday's...incident...was still agonizingly imprinted on her mind. Tassy only had to close her eyes, and everything would come back to her in a flash.

The way everyone struggled but failed to hide their pity—

And how the whole place would suddenly go quiet wherever she showed up—

But the worst thing of all was how everyone seemed to be just waiting and expecting for her to...just give up and leave.

So what now?

Is that what I should do, God?

Is that what you want me to do?

Her workplace might have been like a second home, but she couldn't pretend not to see the writing on the wall.

Poor, poor Tassy.

That was how everyone thought of her now, and she had a feeling it was how things would always be.

Tassy pulled her legs up and tucked her knees inside her oversized sweater, but it still wasn't enough to keep her warm. Her skin prickled with goosebumps that had nothing to do with the temperature. With the cold bite of fear coming from within, there was obviously nothing she could do to ward it off from the outside.

Tassy opened a blank document on her iPad and forced herself to start typing.

Letter of Resignation

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard as she stared at those three words. Quitting her job was the logical thing to do. One of them had to go, but since Tassy highly doubted such a notion would even occur to Xylan...

It's going to be fine, Tassy tried to convince herself. Change was the only constant thing in the world, and it was something to be embraced.

Right?

The soft whir of the lounge's air conditioning was a sound Tassy usually found relaxing, but all it did this time was twist her heart in agony. The A/Cs in her workplace made a similar hum, and the thought of nothearing it again suddenly felt foolishly unbearable.

Oh, man.

I'm really going to miss working there.

Is there no other way out of this mess?

Tassy loved everything about her job, and she loved everyone at the office.

Well, mostly everyone, but still.

Tassy hated having to think of how her resignation would look when she had just been promoted. It would reflect badly on Samantha, to say the least, and make her department VP seem incapable of determining the right person for the job.

Tassy wanted to think there was a way for her to make it up to the older woman, but... what if there was none, and that was just pride and wishful thinking on her part?

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Doubts and fears warred inside of Tassy as she continued typing, and she could practically see her best friend Stella shaking her head in loving reproof. Her fingers trembled against the keys, betraying the turmoil beneath her composed exterior.

Pray, Tas.

It's supposed to be our first resort, not our last.

So pray.

Stella had been telling her that countless times over the years, and since Tassy did mean it about taking her faith seriously...

Tassy sent her iPad to sleep before slipping it back into its keyboard folio, and her short dark hair fell forward as she bowed her head.

Hello, God.

Praying like this suddenly seemed too intimate, and it made her feel terribly vulnerable and exposed.

I'm sorry if I'm doing this wrong.

I'm still not sure how this works.

Stella keeps saying you're 'our' Father in Heaven, but I don't really know much about dads...which, of course, you already know since you know everything.

...

I just really don't know how to do this, God.

All I know is that my life has changed, and I don't know what I should do next.

Or what you want me to do next.

But I do remember Stella telling me that it's okay to ask for a sign, so...

When I open my eyes, I'll have my sign.

Right?

...

I think I'm supposed to hear your voice by now, but maybe the line's choppy?

But since you're God, I'm assuming you can hear me, and so, okay...

Ask and receive, right?

And I asked for a sign when I open my eyes, so...

THREE.

TWO.

And...whoa.

Tassy's body reacted before her mind could process what she was seeing. Heat burst

in her cheeks, and it was as if a jolt of electricity had struck her body and made her tingle all the way at her fingertips.

I think I'm having hallucinations.

Or the Devil's out to trick me.

Tassy quickly closed her eyes even as her heart began to hammer against her chest. Every nerve ending in her body seemed to be working overtime, and just the slightest touch would have her...

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Well, she wasn't quite sure what would happen, but she was sure it would be something...unexpected.

Deep breaths, Tas.

She did her best to calm herself before counting to three one more time.

Three.

Two.

And...oh no.

Billionaire Lucius Young was still standing in front of her, which meant he was neither a hallucination nor an illusion from the devil.

He was real.

All 195.58 centimeters of him that radiated with power, wealth, and overwhelming virility—

It was all real and within touching distance and so...

Why was he standing in front of her still?

There was no man in this world whom her boyfriend ex more admired...or resented. There were times that Xylan would even spend the entire dinner just talking about the

billionaire, praising and dissing him in one breath as if he had yet to make up his mind on whether Lucius was his idol or rival.

The relationship between the two, if it could be called that, was complicated...just like how Tassy herself had something to work out.

Am I really going to do this?

To allow her mind to dwell on him even for a single second was to reach a point of no return. But with Lucius Young still standing in front of her like some Greek god who was graciously giving her time to gaze at him adoringly—

Okay, why not?

Something seemed to click in her mind, unlocking the door, and flooding out of this once-hidden place were all the memories Tassy had suppressed of Lucius Young.

Tassy and Xylan had just started dating when the billionaire was invited by their then-university as a speaker. That was, what? Six or so years ago? And yet the memory was still enough to affect her right this very moment, with her body already throbbing with the most forbidden sensations.

Tassy remembered how his brief speech had everyone in the hall eagerly getting to their feet to give the billionaire a standing ovation.

Everyone that was...except her.

She remembered feeling panicky and dizzy at the same time, wondering why the mere sight of a stranger had her heart pounding...like it didn't already belong to someone else. Her hands had also grown mortifyingly damp and her breath short, her skin flushed with heat even though the auditorium's air conditioning was on full blast.

The giant screens had magnified his every chiseled feature and amplified how his whole being pulsed with intoxicating sexuality. It had made his presence inescapable, and Tassy could feel her cheeks burning when she remembered how the mere sight of him that day had been enough to enslave her entire being.

Each time his image appeared, her body responded like a tuning fork struck at the perfect frequency. The camera would zoom in on the gorgeous features of the billionaire's face, and her lips would start to tremble, her mind unable to stop wondering how it would feel to have his mouth cover hers. The camera would zoom out to give the audience a chance to appreciate the full impact of his towering height, and her breasts would start to swell, and...

Stop it!

Tassy remembered mentally yelling the words out that day when she realized what was happening, and she hadn't wasted another moment after that. She had simply gotten up from her seat and walked out of the auditorium with no intention of coming back.

It was just science at work, Tassy still remembered forcefully telling herself at that time. Sometimes, complete strangers simply had chemistry that had an effortless time...chemistrying.

That was all there was to it.

Science.

But because Tassy had been so bothered by her body's scientific reaction, she had also promised herself to never have anything to do with him. She remembered having dinner with Xylan that same day, and how Xylan had derided the time she "wasted" in listening to Lucius Young speak.

He's only successful because he was born rich!

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That's the only reason why he's got all those women after him.

I'm just as good-looking as he is, don't you think?

Tassy had only nodded and changed the subject, not even allowing herself to glance at the photos that Xylan had pulled up on the Internet. She had meant to keep her promise, and it had carried over to her career, with Tassy making a quiet but painstaking effort to avoid accepting any projects that could have her crossing paths with Lucius Young in any way.

While her understanding of God was still terribly vague at that time, Tassy already knew even then that the only way to beat temptation was to flee from it.

Out of sight, out of mind.

She loved Xylan.

She didn't love the billionaire.

Ergo, she would prioritize seeing more of the first, and none at all of the latter. That had been her guiding principle about all things Lucius Young, and that was why...

Huh.

Tassy had reviewed her calendar for the month just last week, and there shouldn't have been any chance for her and Lucius to...

Oh.

Right.

Her not-so-private breakup had made Tassy forget to do her due diligence in checking if today's unscheduled flight would have her accidentally crossing paths with the billionaire. Then again...why should she even bother checking? It wasn't like she still owed any other man loyalty, and so—

"Do you mind if I join you?"

Years had literally gone by since she had allowed herself to hear the silken familiarity of his voice, so why had the mere sound caused her breasts to swell achingly in response? It was as if her body was insisting to be heard, after being silenced for so long a time, and what it wanted to make clear was what her mind had subconsciously known all this time...but her heart had refused to acknowledge out of loyalty.

She was attracted to Lucius Young.

And every sleek, hard inch of him so easily captivated her senses...

To the point that she couldn't quite remember what he had said.

"I'm, um, sorry..." Tassy cleared her throat. "What was that again?"

The billionaire gestured to the seat closest to hers, separated only by a tiny side table.
"May I?"

She nodded without thinking, but she was still stunned upon seeing the billionaire fold his length into the armchair next to hers.

The Vermillion could comfortably accommodate a hundred passengers in their main hall alone, and there were only less than ten of them right now. So why sit next to her when he could enjoy far greater privacy somewhere else? Better yet, why not book one of the lounge's private suites? Didn't people like him hate being around common folk like her?

Tassy's head started to hurt as she struggled to make sense of the billionaire's presence. Her heart had yet to stop aching while her pride was still in tatters. A fully functioning brain was all she had left, but right now, that brain was betraying her with images she'd never allowed herself before.

His large, strong hands cupping her face—

Her own smaller hands running over the hard expanse of his chest—

His big, hard body pressing hers against the wall as he—

STOP!

Tassy seriously wondered if she had lost her mind.

Billionaire or not, the insanely confounding six-foot-five threat that was Lucius Young had to go. His presence was too overwhelming and disturbing in this quiet space, too dangerously tempting for her peace of mind.

Be polite but firm, Tassy reminded herself as she took a deep breath. She also smoothed imaginary wrinkles from her dress in a futile attempt to distract herself, but this only backfired horribly as warmth pooled in her belly at the thought that maybe...

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Maybe there would come a time when it would be his hand under her dress—

WHAT WAS WRONG WITH HER?

It was as if having from zero to infinite thoughts of Lucius Young had fried her brain cells out of order, and she had become hypersensitive to just about everything because there was no longer a rational mind capable of governing the reactions of her body.

The way her cotton dress was clinging against her skin was suddenly like a premonition of his caress, and having him seated so near had her throat so dry that she had to lick her lips, and...why did she suddenly feel like he was staring at her?

Her bemused gaze flew to his, andoh!

Luciuswasstaring at her.

And when her lips parted in shock, his gaze slowly lifted to hers, andoh no.

The chemistry between them...

It was chemistrying.

Again.

Chapter Two

CYNICISM HAD LUCIUSbracing himself for the worst as soon as he was seated next to his mystery lady.

One thing that only his siblings knew about him was how his taste in women could be described as old-fashioned. He preferred to do the wooing than the other way around. He appreciated a woman who had her own mind, certainly, but being opinionated and shallow was different from being intelligent and smart.

Lucius had lost count of the number of times a woman who looked good on paper had turned him off within five minutes in her company. A part of him was prepared for the same thing to happen now. But it did not.

Over a minute had already passed, and most women would have started chatting him up by now. His mystery lady, however, had yet to even look his way...and it had Lucius wanting her even more.

Her short dark hair fell only an inch or two past her chin, and the sight had him realizing howallof the women he previously dated had long hair...by coincidence.

Because the longer he looked at his mystery lady, the more he also realized how much he liked her short hair. The way it revealed the elegant length of her neck was a visual pleasure in itself, and an unexpected jolt of desire shot through his belly as Lucius imagined himself branding the sensitive skin of her neck with his mouth.

How he wanted this woman, to the point that his years of unplanned celibacy seemed all but natural. It was as if his body had known what his mind had not yet realized, and it was why his body had rejected all others. A part of him had been waiting for her all this time, and now that she was finally in his sight...

Lucius leaned forward slightly, this time holding nothing back as he stared at her. The heat of his gaze did its job in just a couple of seconds, with his mystery girl turning to

him, and her lips parting in shock as she glimpsed the desire in his eyes.

"My apologies." Lucius found himself playing the wolf in sheep's clothing for the first time in his life. "Have I bothered you?"

Tassy felt as if she had stepped in an alternate universe, and in this new world, everything she knew stopped making sense.

People often described Lucius Young as cold and aloof, and these were already the "good" things that people who actually liked him had to say.

His business rivals, however...

Ruthless. Cold-blooded. Vicious.

And yet the Lucius in front of her seemed so...nice that even though she did find his presence intensely disturbing, she actually heard herself say, "No, Mr. Young."

The billionaire raised a brow, and too late she realized she had inadvertently admitted to knowing who he was.

Oops?

Lucius gazed at his mystery girl thoughtfully. So she knew who he was, apparently, but she still hadn't attempted to engage his attention in any way. Was it her way of being coy?

"It seems you have me at a disadvantage..."

"I heard you speak once," Tassy felt the need to explain, "when I was still in university."

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His lips curved. "And you still remembered?"

Tassy was mortified when he realized what he was hinting at. I can't believe this is happening. She was usually so, so much more composed than this. It was one of the major reasons why Xylan had even broken up with her in the first place. So why, dear God? Why had she ended up practically admitting that the billionaire had made such a huge impression on her at first sight?

Lucius liked the way her cheeks had turned a quick shade of pink at his words. In his world, a woman who could still blush naturally as she did was a rarity, and he was all the more obsessed with making her his.

In every way possible.

"I hope I didn't make you sleep."

"No, sir." Tassy told herself very firmly that she was just imagining the purr in his voice.

"You still haven't told me your name."

"Tassy," she said reluctantly, having been unable to think of any reason to politely decline his request. "It's, um, short for Tassina."

"Tassina."

No, no, no, Tassy thought forcefully. Her brain was once again mistaken. Lucius

Young hadn't purred her name out.

Lucius liked the taste of her name on his lips, but what he would like even more was to see how his name would taste on hers.

"Call me Lucius."

Tassy couldn't help but blink. All this time, the billionaire had been rather gentle in his manner of speaking. But his voice this time...was a lot more commanding?

Lucius mentally winced when he saw the startled look on Tassina's face, realizing too late he had inadvertently let his disguise slip. Who knew it was so hard playing the gentleman?

"Please."

The billionaire's tone was back to sounding gentle and soft. She had probably imagined his tone from earlier, and since she still couldn't think of any polite way to decline his request—

"Lucius."

Tassy noticed how his gaze became hooded upon hearing her say his name. Had she pronounced it wrong?

Lucius was starting to realize that being with Tassina was entirely unpredictable. Her tone had been exquisitely submissive, and the sound of it had awakened something that had laid dormant inside of him for years.

Its existence was hidden even to Lucius himself, and only in Tassina's presence did the truth finally come out: his inner beast was a sadist, and Tassina was the only prey

it desired to torment.

Tassy couldn't help gulping at the way the billionaire was suddenly staring at her like a ravenous wolf.

"I like hearing my name on your lips." Lucius enjoyed seeing his Tassina so confused, with how he was the epitome of gentlemanly conduct one moment...and the soul of wickedness the next.

"Are you—are you flirting with me?"

"No."

The shock of his reply had her sucking her breath, and Lucius delighted in the way this had her small breasts jiggle noticeably under her sweater.

One day, Lucius thought musingly. One day, those breasts would be his to play with, and he would suckle on them for as long as it took to have his Tassina begging for mercy.

Tassy didn't know whether to die of embarrassment...or toss her glass of water at the billionaire's too-gorgeous face for being so unnecessarily rude. She didn't...she didn't need him to lie, but surely he could've said it more nicely—

"I'm not flirting with you."

Tassy didn't even know she had a temper until the billionaire chose to rub salt on her wound like it was called for.

Which it was not!

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But just as she opened her mouth to give him a piece of her mind—

"I'm seducing you."

Her mouth closed and opened and closed, and Lucius' lips pressed in a tight line as he sought to contain his amusement. His Tassina was looking at him this time like his conversation was akin to riding a rollercoaster, and it was all he could do not to yank her into his lap.

If only he could tell her now.

We've only just begun, baby girl.

And this early on, Lucius already had a thousand more ideas on how to torment her in the most delicious way there was.

Chapter Three

TASSY WAS NOT LETTING herself get so easily fooled the second time around. There was just no telling with this man if he was serious or not. But when seconds had already passed, and the billionaire only continued to gaze at her while his words remained unaddressed between them—

"Why?" she asked finally.

"There's only one answer to that, don't you think?"

She stared at him in frustration, and the billionaire's lips curved in another smile that seemed designed to seduce, annoy, and tease her all at the same time.

This doesn't make sense, Tassy wished she could blurt out, but since that would only sound like she was fishing for a compliment—

"You're nothing at all like I imagined," she said warily instead.

"In what way?"

"You've always struck me as someone...unapproachable?"

"I am that. But only to people I don't want approaching me."

"How do you know which people are those?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

Tassy nodded immediately. Why wouldn't she?

"It's the same way I knew I wanted you the first time I saw you."

Tassy jerked in shock, and the billionaire's expression turned grave.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't." Actually, he kind of did, but for some reason, Tassy had a hard time admitting this.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course."

"Then may I take that as permission to continue speaking to you truthfully?"

"I wouldn't want you to speak to me in another way."

"I'm very glad to hear that, Tassina——"

Tassy's teeth ground against each other. No, no, no. That was just her imagination working in overdrive. Lucius Young did not purr that word out. He was a man, and grown men did not purr!

"Since I've never seen the point in delaying the inevitable."

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Tassy tried not to squirm in her seat...but failed.

"It's been two years since I last had sex——"

W-What did he just say?

"But as soon as I laid my eyes on you, I already knew——"

"S-Sir!" Tassy only realized she had inadvertently raised her voice when the few other travelers in the lounge turned their way, but tempted as she was to melt away in embarrassment——

"Didn't I ask you to call me Lucius?"

She had no chance to do so, with the billionaire demanding her attention as he cupped her chin to turn her gaze back to his.

Did he not realize how everyone was now staring at them?

"Say it, Tassina."

Obviously not.

"Or I'm going to do something——"

"Lucius!" Tassy couldn't get his name out fast enough, knowing that the billionaire wasn't the type to make idle threats——

"Too late."

What?!

Lucius had her on his lap in the next moment, and one look at his gleaming dark eyes, and she realized that he had meant to do this all along, regardless of what she did.

Aaaaaaargh!

"You look like you want to kill me——"

Lucius was purring. Tassy could freely admit this now...since his purr was obviously designed to annoy her even more.

"Or kiss me."

An offended gasp escaped her, but this only had him gazing at her thoughtfully.

"Both then? You want to kill and kiss me——"

Oh God, why is this man so——

GOD.

Oh my God!

Lucius had no idea what the sudden expression of shock on his Tassina's face meant. But one thing he was sure of was that it had to be very interesting.

Tassy couldn't believe she had completely forgotten the most important thing ever, and everything about Lucius that didn't make sense earlier...now made perfect sense

completely.

I'm so sorry, God.

How could I have forgotten that I asked for a sign...

And Lucius Young was it?

When his Tassina looked at him again, it was with a smile that had him instantly and palpably hard, to the point that she herself was unable to ignore the evidence throbbing under her.

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Tassy couldn't keep herself from gasping at the sudden hardness that was pulsing powerfully against her belly, and all the things she meant to say were immediately forgotten.

"Y-You——"

"Yes?"

He was purring again, and the sound had her gritting her teeth against the urge to turn into a kitten herself so she could start rubbing herself against him.

"The look on your face is familiar, Tassina."

"I don't——"

"Want to make me prove you're a liar, believe me."

Her eyes widened. Was that a...threat?

"If we want this to work," Lucius murmured, "there must always be honesty between us."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll do whatever is necessary to coax out the truth——"

So he was threatening her!

"In ways that will have you writhing and moaning for mercy."

And it was the hottest dirtiest most evil threat ever!

Her imagination once again went into overdrive, and all she could suddenly see was Lucius looming over her—

Throwing her on the bed—

Punishing her as he—

As he—

Tassy squirmed involuntarily, and another gasp escaped her when his engorged length pulsed violently against her aching belly.

"Your—"

"My what?"

Did he seriously want her to spell it out loud?

"My what, Tassina?"

Oh my goodness, he so did!

"D-Don't you feel any shame?" Tassy barely managed to sputter. In all her years of dating Xylan, not once had he pulled her into his lap in public (or private for that matter), much less—

"On the contrary, baby girl..."

Did he just——

His mouth was suddenly right next to her ear——

"All I feel is anticipation."

His every whispered word both a sly taunt and seductive invitation——

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"Because I wasn't lying earlier. I haven't fucked anyone for two years. I didn't want to. Untilyou."

He grabbed her chin with a roughness that excited her, and Tassy could no longer breathe when she saw the glint in his eyes.

"Do you understand what I'm saying, Tassina?"

She had a feeling she did, but she also knew admitting this was the craziest thing she could ever do.

"My body has two years' worth of abstinence to make up for——"

Oh yes.Oh gosh. I mean, yikes!

"So I need to know one thing."

Tassy's heart started pounding. Her answer should be no, regardless of what he was about to say next. And while she might still be a virgin, she wasn't that naïve. Lucius could only have one question in mind, and that was——

"Would you be my fucking Valentine?"

——how in the world had her Foxtown invitation ended in his possession?!

Her stunned gaze flew to her purse, which she realized she had left unopened on the side table they shared. Her gaze flew back to his, and oh, the smirk on his lips——

"You're looking at me that way again," Lucius murmured.

I give up!

Tassy simply didn't have it in her to keep denying the truth.

Yes, she did want to kill and kiss him at the same time—

But because she also remembered one important truth—

I asked for a sign, and I got it.

I got him.

And so, for better or for worse—

"Yes, I'll be your Valentine—"

Tassy spoke in a rush because she didn't want to give herself time to think things through.

"Yes, I understand what you were saying earlier—"

The billionaire was visibly startled, but Tassy couldn't let herself think much of this as well, since she had one last thing to say—

"And, um, with regard to the extended period of your, um, inactivity—my answer is also yes. I would, um, be willing to—"

Be your willing slave in the bedroom?

Subject myself to the expertise of your lovemaking?

"—provide assistance in whatever manner it's required."

Chapter Four

ONE.

Two.

Three.

Four.

And boom.

Lucius could not recall seeing anything more amusing than the look on his Tassina's face when the magnitude of what she had willingly signed up for finally started sinking in.

"Relax, Tassina."

Tassy could already feel herself starting to hyperventilate. What had she just agreed to?

"What you're feeling is simply a case of cold feet, and it's totally normal."

Normal? Saying 'yes' to spending Valentine's weekend with a stranger was normal? Only someone who wasn't normal would think that!

"I'm the man you've been lusting after for years," Lucius drawled. "I understand how nerve-wracking this must be for you."

Tassy could only sputter and choke. Wow. Just wow. Did his arrogance have no limits?

Lucius watched in silent amusement as Tassina's incredibly expressive face featured one emotion after another in rapid succession. Since coming back to the cabin, he had

seen her display an impressive repertoire of feelings. Shock and horror, embarrassment and guilt, dismay and shame, and then more embarrassment, and—

Not so fast, baby girl.

Lucius recognized the moment she intended to flee, but of course, it was merely wishful thinking on her part that she could ever escape him. She washis, and soon, she would know and appreciate this for herself.

But for now—

He allowed her to think she had escaped his lap, waiting until he saw the relief on her face...before rising to his full height and taking hold of her hand.

Tassy was about to tug free when Lucius cupped her face and gently tucked loose locks of her hair behind her ears. "There's nothing for you to worry about." He lifted her hand and pressed his lips to her knuckles. "I'll handle everything. You only have to surrender yourself to me."

Oh no.

His words seemed to weave a spell around her, and her captivity was made complete the moment she lost herself in the coppery heat of his gaze. Tassy could no longer move even when he had already let go of her hand, and she could only tremble as the billionaire slowly ran his knuckles down her cheek.

"You will not regret belonging to me. I promise you."

His sweet words made Tassy feel like she was floating, and all she could do was watch in a daze as the billionaire started packing her things like an expertly trained PA. Before she knew it, they were already on their way out of the lounge, his hand

was on the small of her back, and it was only when she listened to Lucius and a woman behind the check-in counter start conversing in Mandarin that reality intruded, and Tassy started to panic.

This was wrong!

This was crazy!

This was absolutely a surefire way of getting hurt even more!

But just when she had enough sense to try pulling away, Lucius suddenly looked down, and it was like falling back into a silken trap of forbidden promises.

Why did she so badly want to be free of him again?

She honestly had a hard time remembering, and all she could do was nod as the other woman asked for her I.D.

"Thank you, Ms. Bautista." The lady handed Tassy her ID back with a smile, asking, "May I know your relationship with Mr. Young?"

Tassy blinked, but the lady continued looking at her expectantly. "Um—" Why did this even matter? But...she had never flown with Xin Hua Air before, so maybe this was just standard procedure on their part?

"Yes, Ms. Bautista?"

Surely...it was Lucius who had to answer that?

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"I'm his..."

Tassy finally looked at the billionaire. Please answer her!

But Lucius only raised a brow in return. Why don't YOU answer her?

Tassy could only sputter. Seriously?

Lucius gestured for Tassy to look behind her, and her cheeks turned red when she saw that there were already other passengers in line behind them.

Oh, fine then.

If Lucius didn't want to help her out, he only had himself to blame for whatever she had to say. Tassy lifted her chin as she turned to the other woman. "I'm his girlfriend."

Lucius wrapped an arm around her waist. "I'm glad to hear that."

His purr had her feeling like she was missing something, and when she saw the woman behind the counter hiding a smile as she wished them a safe trip—

Lucius had tricked her again!

"You—"

"—are the boyfriend, yes, you've made that quite clear."

Aargh.

"We should get moving," Lucius said smoothly as he urged her toward the boarding bridge.

Tassy had a hard time believing the billionaire went to all that trouble just to...what? Hear her call herself his girlfriend?

"I don't get you," she blurted out.

"I'm glad to hear that," Lucius answered without missing a beat, "since I find you just as unpredictable."

Tassy had to bite her lip hard. Was Lucius really talking about her still? She had always been the girl whose finances were strictly budgeted in spreadsheets, her schedule planned out for the next three months with a color-coded, three-alarm-per-event Google Calendar, and even the minutes she spent scrolling on social media was monitored and regulated by her Screen Time app.

She had always been more plotter than pantster, more cautious than ambitious. She had always been anythingbutpredictable in other words, and that was why even Xylan himself had often complained—

Oh.

Tassy's head started to spin.

Oh my goodness!

How could she have forgotten all about Xylan?

Not only was he her boyfriend of almost seven years, but it was only yesterday that he had dumped her in front of everyone!

How could she not have remembered any of those things...the moment she was in Lucius Young's company?

Lucius could sense his Tassina withdrawing from him for some reason, and he didn't like it at all. "What's wrong?" he asked abruptly.

"I..." Tassy had a hard time thinking. "I just, um, realized..."

It was my pride more than anything else that was hurt by the breakup?

I might have been lying to myself all these years?

I'm a shameless slut because of you?

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"—how you got that poor woman to play along," Tassy managed to say instead as a burst of inspiration came to her rescue. "I finally remember reading an article about you last year. You've been investing in airline companies like Xin Hua Air and trying to get other billionaires to fly commercial to reduce carbon emissions."

Lucius couldn't recall the last time anyone had him feeling out of his element. Would the surprises ever cease with his Tassina?

Tassy started feeling nervous about the billionaire's continued silence. "I didn't get it wrong, did I? I think I read it in some business journal—"

"You remembered correctly."

Tassy was about to breathe a sigh of relief when she noticed the way Lucius was looking at her. "Is everything okay?"

"I was thinking I should be the one asking that," Lucius murmured. "Aren't you disappointed I'm not the kind of billionaire to own a private jet?"

Tassy could only laugh after realizing Lucius was just teasing her, again.

"I think I have something to ask of you as well," she threw back at him. "Will you be disappointed if I tell you I don't even own a car?"

"Don't you?"

"I don't," she admitted cheerfully. "You're not the only one with a heart for

conservation efforts, Mr. Young. We all do our—" Tassy was startled when the billionaire suddenly cupped her chin, and just when they had finally made it to the plane at that. "L-Lucius?"

Did he not notice how he had everyone around them staring?

Did he not—

"Where have you been all my life?"

Ha!

Tassy refused to let herself take him seriously.

If he wanted to tease her like that, she...she could tease him right back.

Lucius' lips pressed together as Tassy suddenly fluttered her lashes at him. Whatever it was she had planned, he was sure it would be completely unexpected—

"Oh, Mr. Young! You don't know what you're in for if you keep saying such things."

And he was right.

"So please, sir." Tassy had a hard time keeping herself from laughing as she played the role of an employee who was hopelessly infatuated with her billionaire boss. "If you don't want me falling in love—"

Lucius' mouth suddenly covered hers.

Oh wow.

Tassy's eyes automatically closed as the rest of her words melted into his kiss while her body went up in flames in an instant.

Oh wow.

Never had a kiss felt this hot.

Or this good.

Never had a kiss felt so, soright...but just as her lips started to part, it was then she heard him whisper ever so mockingly—

"I'm afraid it's too late, baby girl. Aren't you already halfway there?"

Chapter Five

TASSY WAS STILL TOUCHINGher lips ten minutes later, a part of her unable to believe all the things that had transpired in the last ninety minutes.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:04 am

Lucius Young and his two-year period of celibacy.

Valentines in Foxtown...withhim.

And just a few minutes ago, the kiss that turned her entire world upside-down.

Tassy covered her face in embarrassment even though she was all alone.

How the heck did I get into this?

Lucius had excused himself earlier to take a call, and thank goodness for that since she really needed this time alone to gather her thoughts.

Her dazed gaze took in the quiet luxury of her surroundings. Their "cabin" walls afforded complete privacy from the other passengers in first class. The toiletry kit alone cost hundreds of dollars, and her selection for onboard entertainment included access to paid subscription services and high-speed Internet.

This was insane,Tassy couldn't help thinking.

It was insane that she found herself here, and even more insane was the reason behind it.

This was insane,Tassy thought for the nth time.

And since she would for sure lose her mind if she allowed herself to dwell on what was already over and done with...

I think I'll just work.

There was nothing like good old research to take her mind off things, and oh, right. It had been a while since she checked her phone for messages or emails. Maybe there was something—oh no.

Her heart dropped as soon as she saw the preview of Stella's unread text.

I thought you'd appreciate a heads-up. Xylan just went Instagram official...

Tassy forced herself to tap her screen to read the rest of her friend's message.

...with Fiona Ferrer. I'm so sorry, Tassy. Call or message me if you need to talk.

Tassy dropped her phone back into her purse as Stella's text forced her to relive yesterday's breakup.

No wonder he found it so easy to dump her in public, she thought numbly.

Xylan hadn't just cleaned out his wardrobe to make way for something new. He had done the same thing with his personal life, and that was why he was now going out with Fontana...who was the daughter of their company's CEO.

Lucius joined Tassina in their cabin and the look on her face told him something was up.

"I think we made a mistake," Tassy said as soon as Lucius sat next to her.

"Whatever it is," Lucius murmured, "I'm sure it's not that bad."

"Wait until you hear what I have to say first," Tassy said darkly. And because she

didn't want to give herself a chance to change her mind, she took a deep breath...before throwing everything out in the open. "I'm the type of girl who's easily jealous, demanding, and...andsuperclingy!"

"I appreciate the heads-up," Lucius drawled, "but I'm not buying any of it."

Tassy, who had been bracing herself for the possibility that Lucius would walk out on her, ended up stammering in shock. "W-Why not?"

"You've had more than enough time - and chances - to be any of those things with me, Tassina."

Tassy found herself strugglingnotto let herself get distracted. There was just something about the way Lucius said her name that reached her ears like a possessive caress.

"But you were none of those. Were you?"

"That's, um..." Lucius wasn't reacting the way he was supposed to, and Tassy certainly didn't expect to be asked for evidence about all the traits that made her the opposite of an ideal girlfriend. "That's because I didn't want to rock the boat. We were just getting to know each other earlier——"

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"But you're choosing to rock the boat this time because?"

"B-Because..."

Why was it so, so hard to scare this man off? And for that matter, why did she want to scare him off again? This man had her so confused that she couldn't even remember her own reason for doing things!

"Because we kissed?"

Tassy nodded eagerly. "Exactly!" She hated the fact that it was Lucius who supplied the answer to his own question, but whatever. "That kiss changes everything——"

"I'm glad to hear that."

Tassy just had to roll her eyes at that. "Are you really expecting me to believe that one kiss also changes everything for you?"

"It did now."

Tassy's mouth closed, opened, and closed again.

Aaaargh.

Not only did she not see that coming, but she absolutely hated how he seemed to have such an effortless time tossing out words that Tassy completely lost her train of thought.

Lucius' lips slowly curved into a smile. "Do I have to tell you how you're looking at me right now?"

"No, you don't, and for the record, you're absolutely mistaken!"

"Are you sure?"

Lucius was smirking this time andaaargh.

This was so unfair!

She had meant what she said earlier, but now that he was smirking?

It was annoying enough to make her want to kill him. But it was so, so sexy as well that it also made her want to kiss him, and...and...

"I hate how you always act like you have an answer to everything!"

"But I don't, and I never said I did. What you perceive as arrogance is simply me having nothing to hide——"

"While I do?" Tassy was indignant. "Is that what you're saying?"

"Do you really want to hear what I think?"

Tassy lifted her chin. "Yes!" Because if he thought he could scare her with the truth——

"Your heart is already mine."

Good for him, since his words accomplished just that.

"But you're terrified to admit it."

Tassy bolted out of her seat, but Lucius was a lot quicker.

As always.

And the next thing she knew, he had her back on his lap—

And something hard was once again throbbing violently against her belly—

"It's alright, Tassina."

The whispered words had her whole body shuddering.

"You don't have to say the words if you're not ready——"

And it seemed as if he was pulling out all the stops, with the way his hands were now cupping her face, and all she could suddenly see was him.

"We can let our bodies do the talking instead."

The words were her only warning, and Tassy didn't even have the chance to draw her breath as his mouth covered hers. Her arms went around his neck, and she could only gasp against his lips when she felt Lucius' chair slowly reclining.

She knew what would follow next, but oh, when it finally happened...

Lucius reversed their positions as soon as his seat had flattened into a bed, and a moan broke out of her lips as the thrilling weight of his body settled over hers. His erection was now nestled firmly over her womanhood, and the heat of his desire easily burned through the layers of fabric that separated it from her own swollen and throbbing folds.

His tongue slid past her lips, and all thoughts melted away. He sucked on her tongue, and her body arched restlessly against his. His mouth moved down as he pushed her sweater up to her neck. Her eyes squeezed shut at the mere brush of his palms against her body. All she could do was bite her lip hard as he yanked the hem of her dress

down, and her breasts eagerly popped free.

Her flesh strained for his attention, and he responded to its swollen plea as he closed his lips over one taut nipple. Her nails dug deep into his back as he started to suckle, and her whole world started to spin out of control as he suckled harder and harder.

Lucius' fingers bit into the soft round flesh of Tassy's ass the moment she started grinding herself against his body. Years of experience gave him the expertise to recognize the signs early on, and he knew there was no fucking chance that his Tassy could fake the reactions of her body.

The catch of her breath as her fingers desperately combed through his hair—

The shudders rocking her body even as she gripped his head tightly to her breast—

And ah, that wildly beautiful scent of her arousal—

Lucius moved to her other breast, but as he lavished it with the same attention, he also started tweaking the nipple that he had just released, and that was all it took for his Tassina to shatter in his arms.

Her body buckled under his as she began to come, and Lucius had to lift his head because he wanted—needed—to see it.

His woman finding pleasure in his arms—

And it was the most beautiful thing to see.

He watched her until the very end, waiting for her eyelids to sweep close before carefully pulling away so he could send a text to his brother.

Can you cover for me at the office? I need a couple of days.

Marius: Sure. Everything alright?

Lucius: Everything's good.

Being with Tassina seemed to have turned him into a rule-breaker. Not only was it his first time to ask a favor of this kind from any of his brothers, but it was also his first time to look into a woman's past by choice.

Lucius didn't make a habit of trusting anyone outside his family, but his Tassina was the sole exception, and denying this seemed pointless.

She was the only woman who had made him feel normal again, and he wanted what they had to last.

For as long as possible.

But if Tassina was indeed foolish enough to betray him—

He would not hesitate to destroy her.

Completely.

Chapter Six

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:04 am

LUCIUS STIFLED HIS smile when Tassy stepped out of the ladies' looking flustered. The kiss-swollen state of her lips had obviously been a surprise, and she was now doing her best to avoid meeting anyone's gaze as she made her way back to him.

"Everything alright?" he asked mildly.

"Everything's fine." Tassy had made her choice earlier, and she was determined to stick to it. Since Xylan had painfully proven the fact that time was not a factor in how long a relationship would last, there was nothing to stop her from giving everything she had to make things work between her and Lucius.

If people thought theirs was a whirlwind romance—they weren't going to get any argument from her.

And if people thought she was only with him for the money? That was fine, too.

This was a free world they all lived in, and that was why Tassy had also decided to embrace her real self now that she was with Lucius.

For better or for worse.

And no matter how embarrassing it would prove to be at the start.

Like now.

Tassy could feel her cheeks turning red at being the first one to reach for Lucius' hand as they started walking. She was hoping he would take the hint, but when she felt him

push her hand away instead——

How dare he?

Her indignant gaze flew up to his, and of course that was when she saw his eyes gleaming in a terribly familiar way.

"You bully——"

Lucius only chuckled when she hit his shoulder with a fist, and he only grabbed her hand to yank her back when she tried walking away.

"You have it wrong, Tassina."

Tassy bit back a groan when merely hearing him say her name had her whole body tingling again.

"What you've turned me into is a sadist."

Any woman would have run away at such words——so why did she have this desire to throw herself back into his arms instead?

I'm doomed.

And when she saw the smirk that unfolded over his beautiful lips——

So doomed.

"You know already, don't you? How you're looking——"

Tassy automatically covered her ears. "I can't hear you——"

But of course, this only had the billionaire gently pulling her hands away even as he smirked down at her.

"Am I really that irresistible?"

"No!"

"Funny how your lips say one thing," he mused, "while your eyes adoringly——"

His Tassina made a gagging sound, and unbelievably as this might be, it was this sound she made, and the reaction she gave, that had Lucius no longer able to hold himself back.

Tassy could only squeak in surprise when Lucius suddenly had her pressed against a wall, and even with so many other passengers walking past them——

Aaaah!

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Her fingers curled into fists against his chest, but it was like trying to make a brick wall move. His mouth latched to the sensitive skin of her neck, and wetness pooled between her thighs even as her cheeks started to burn.

Kiss-swollen lips only took minutes to fade, but this?

When he finally lifted his head and slowly stepped away, the first thing she saw was people hurriedly hiding their phones and acting as if they hadn't just taken photos of Lucius and her.

"Does it bother you?"

His tone of quiet concern didn't have her so easily fooled this time, and seeing Tassy make a face had Lucius dropping his act as his lips curved into another smirk.

Sheesh.

"You really are a sadist," Tassy exclaimed in exasperation.

"Only with you, baby girl."

"I'm starting to believe that." While the paps had been nothing but religious in covering Lucius' social life, the only photos they had were of Lucius and his date having dinner or Lucius helping his date in or out of his limo. Photos, however, that caught Lucius engaged in public displays of affection?

The billionaire cupped her chin. "Tell me what's on your mind."

"What if I don't want to tell you?"

"Then tell me to mind my own business so you can find out."

The way his coppery eyes glinted had Tassy shivering despite herself. "I thought you were joking when you told me you were demanding."

"I don't make a habit of lying, and I suggest you don't either...for your own good."

Since she was no liar herself, the threat left her unimpressed, and Tassy crossed her arms over her chest, deciding it was her turn to do a little teasing.

"Does this mean you were telling the truth when you said you're just like me?"

"Of course."

"So you also get jealous easily?"

Lucius' gaze bored through hers. "I'm not an idiot, Tassina. I will never give you an excuse to spend time with another man. I am the type to get jealous, and you can just take my fucking word for it."

"You got me there," she said with a sigh. "But...what about being clingy? Can you see yourself wanting me more than anything else?"

"Yes."

"So much so that you can't bear to be apart from me?"

"Yes."

"Mm."

The sound had Lucius gritting his teeth without knowing why. "Is that supposed to insinuate something?"

"I was just wondering if you've also noticed..."

"Just get to the point——"

Lucius broke off when Tassy suddenly clutched his shoulders as she raised herself on her toes in order to whisper in his ear.

"You're way past the halfway point as well, Mr. Young. I think you're more than a little in love with me yourself."

Chapter Seven

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:04 am

A LIMOUSINE PICKED them up at the airport, and the ride to Foxtown was short but quiet. Lucius knew she had sensed his withdrawal. He had been waiting for her to bring it up, but she didn't. Nor she had made a show of being dejected and rejected. She had simply gazed outside the window while occasionally taking photos of the scenery, her silence both comforting and damning.

Tassy was starting to get the hang of what it meant to have faith in God. Stella always liked to tell her that if she needed wisdom, she could ask God for it anytime.

But you have to ask and believe that you'll receive it, her friend also liked to warn her, and that was why...

I really do believe, God.

I believe in whatever advice you'll give.

Because, for the life of me, I can't figure out the man seated next to me.

A part of her was drowning in shame. One moment they were just teasing each other, and then the next thing she knew, he had turned into a block of ice, and his aloof silence had made her feel like she had somehow overstepped her boundaries. Without saying a single word, he had made her feel like she was the only one who had fooled herself into thinking they were equals...when all along he had seen her as a mere plaything to be discarded as soon as he lost interest.

Another part of her, however, was obviously the opposite. It was filled with hurt and righteous indignation, and that part of her had been urging her nonstop to just put an

end to this and never look back.

But because she had prayed to God...

There was one last part of her, and one that had been quietly growing inside of her heart. This part of her remembered enough of Stella's advice that it was slow to anger but quicker to listen and forgive. It was the part that remembered she had to be patient and kind, the part that was keen to remind Tassy not to be the type to keep records of wrongdoings.

This part of her reminded Tassy to focus on the good things...so she could extend the same grace that had been extended to her more than once.

Lucius' jaw clenched when he thought of what steps he had to take to gain back control. It was one thing for Tassina to alleviate his boredom, but for him to obsess over her all the fucking time?

He had to prove to himself she was just a whim.

And to do that, he would ditch her as soon as they made it to Foxtown.

And then find another woman to fuck...even if the thought of touching anyone else than Tassina had his stomach turning upside down.

That was the plan, and his whole life, he had always stuck to the plan.

But when his limousine finally slowed to a stop, and Lucius was helping her out of the car, he took one look at her beautiful face, and everything just fucking changed.

"Why?" he asked hoarsely.

Why was she smiling at him like he hadn't been acting like a royal heartless ass to her in the past half hour?

How the hell could she smile at him like that when they both knew she had sensed him pulling away from the start?

"I figured it was your turn to have cold feet." Well, technically it was God who had figured that part out for her, but Tassy didn't think he was ready to hear that just yet. And if she were being honest...

Tassy herself was also stunned at how quickly God had answered her prayers. Was it always like this, when one simply had...faith?

Lucius' lips tightened as he considered her words, which were once against the last thing he expected to hear. But wasn't that the norm with his Tassina by now? And as painful as it was for him to admit...

She was right.

A billionaire at his age had gotten cold fucking feet.

"You really should just get rid of me."

Tassy couldn't help laughing at the grimness of his tone. "I don't think so."

"I'm thirty-fucking-eight years old, and I've only just realized I can be the moodiest son of a bitch."

"Is it your turn to warn me this time?" she teased.

Lucius didn't smile back. "I suppose so."

"Warning duly no——"

The rest of her words disappeared in his kiss, and oh wow. How was it that every touch of his lips made her swoon all the more? How was it that every stroke of his tongue felt as if he was claiming a part of her soul? And why couldn't she get enough of it...when in the past Xylan's kisses sometimes made her wonder if something was wrong with her?

Lucius barely found the willpower to pull away. Soft dark eyes met him, and just seeing her gaze free of judgment and resentment made him feel as if he had been reborn.

Never again.

His moment of cowardice was just that—a fucking moment, and never again would he let fear cloud his mind.

His Tassinawas different.

Because what she herself had said was true.

For better or for worse, Lucius was more than a little in love with her, and there was no turning back after this.

Chapter Eight

A MAJESTIC ARCHWAY greeted them overhead, with the words Welcome to

Foxtown written in an Old English script. And beyond it laid the theme park, and everything about the place filled Tassy with awe.

The last week of January in Jackson Hole was still the height of winter, but how was it that there were real flowers everywhere, and they were of every shade of the rainbow?

Her gaze drifted to the park visitors, and just watching everyone go about their business was like seeing the Regency period come to life. All the gentlemen were dressed in tailored coats and breeches while the ladies sparkled with their jewels and gowns. Instead of four-wheeled vehicles, the lantern-lit roads were filled with an assortment of horse-drawn carriages: a lady held the reins of a pink-colored phaeton while a gentleman had just climbed up into his all-black curricule. A fancy-looking chaise was parked next to a landau, and was that a town coach bearing a ducal coat of arms?

"If we go in, we can do more than look."

Tassy realized belatedly she had been gaping the entire time and looked at Lucius sheepishly. "I'm sorry. Everything's just so...breathtaking. But you're right. It should get better once we're inside, and...um..."

Her voice drifted off when she realized the billionaire was leading her away from the admission gates for visitors. Weren't they supposed to line up—huh?

Men dressed like palace guards opened a pair of gates upon seeing Lucius, and Tassy was startled when they immediately bowed in greeting.

"Welcome to Foxtown, Your Grace, milady."

Your...Grace?

She turned to him, asking in surprise, "You're a duke here?"

"The Duke of Windtowne, to be specific. It's included in the compensation package if you're one of the park's first investors."

Riiight.

Lucius made it sound so simple when she was pretty sure being one of the park's "first" investors also meant that he had bought stocks worth a hundred mil, at least.

Lucius smiled down at her, and she managed to smile back, albeit weakly. Millionaires, she was used to dealing with because of her work. But billionaires? And most especially, gorgeous billionaires who could also be moody and frighteningly unpredictable like Lucius?

His really, really bad case of cold feet was just a taste of how he could so easily hurt her. It could only get worse from here, but since she did remember more easily now that Lucius was the sign she had asked from God—

It's all going to be okay.

Lucius and I might not be perfect, but God is...

And He never breaks His promises.

LUCIUS HAD BEEN PREPARED to wait for an hour or so for his Tassina to get changed. But when he came out of the changing hall for men, it was to see her already dressed in a pale blue gown, her hair swept up in a chignon, and presently doing her best to ignore the attention she had attracted from the opposite sex.

The women he dated in the past reveled in being noticed. His Tassina clearly wasn't

the same, and when Lucius stepped into her line of sight, the look of joy and relief on her beautiful face was one of the most precious things he had ever seen. It was the kind of look that a woman could only give to the man she belonged to, and even though the thought still had his chest tightening—

Lucius knew it was the same for him.

He was hers, too.

Tassy and Lucius met halfway, and her heart fluttered at the way he immediately took hold of her hand.

"So..." He smiled down at her, and she smiled up at him as her heart fluttered some more. Lucius in a suit was already gorgeous beyond words, but Lucius dressed like a duke? Her heart seemed likely to flutter for the rest of the day.

"Have you thought about what you want us to try first?" While the park offered several new attractions for Valentines, Lucius had a feeling his Tassina would opt for the ones that were more romantically inclined, such as the Love Compatibility Test offered by the fictional Madame Amour or maybe a swan boat ride on the park's version of the Serpentine.

"If you're really okay with me choosing, I'd like to give this one a try."

Lucius glanced down at what she had pointed to in the brochure.

Foxtown Detective Agency?

"What do you think?" Tassy asked eagerly.

I think you're unpredictable, Lucius thought, and I hope you'll never change.

But since he was still adjusting to the fact that he had actual feelings for a woman—

"Shall we see which of us makes the better Holmes?"

Her eyes sparkled as she laughed, and his chest clenched anew.

"Challenge accepted, Your Grace."

Tassy couldn't remember being this excited. And even though she knew she should really stop comparing the past to the present—

Was this why things had been doomed to fail between her and Xylan?

She had always been the quietly competitive sort, but she had also sensed early on that there was nothing Xylan hated more than losing to her. In all the years they had been together, Xylan had made her feel one of them had to fade into the background for the other to shine. Not once had she thought to question this...until Lucius made her realize there shouldn't have to be a choice in the first place.

When two people were truly in love, they counted each other as one, and it was through this that they could experience twice the pleasure from shared successes while the pain was halved during times of trouble.

They would always be each other's helpmates...except of course when there was a murder mystery to be solved, and only one of them could earn the title of Foxtown's best detective.

Lucius had a hard time keeping his face expressionless. While Tassina had been properly awed and appreciative when flying class for the first time, it was only upon stepping inside one of Foxtown's newest attractions that Tassina looked as if she had suddenly won the lottery.

No expense had been spared to turn the two-story structure into a fancy detective

agency in the 19th century. High ceilings and glossy wood panelings. Gas lamps in sconces and the faint scent of tobacco. High-backed velvet chairs and thick Persian rugs. A fully stocked wine bar in one corner and a grandfather clock in another. Shelves stocked with old leather-bound books, antique-looking globes, and a selection of magnifying glasses.

A bell chime on the reception counter caught Tassy's attention, and she glanced at Lucius in askance. The billionaire nodded, and her heart pounded against her chest as she rang the bell.

A secret door behind the counter opened, and an older man with a well-trimmed mustache emerged. "Good evening." He looked at them inquiringly. "I'm Constable Dill. May I have your names, please?"

Since Lucius looked as if he would rather starve than introduce himself as a duke, Tassy decided it was up to her to show him how fun it was to play make-believe as adults.

"Good evening, sir. I'm, um, Miss Bautista—" As much as she wished she could introduce herself as a lady, Tassy had a feeling such titles were not dispensed freely in Foxtown. "—while this gentleman is um, Lord Lucius, the Duke of Windtowne."

"Ah." Constable Dill nodded understandingly. "I was told to expect you."

Tassy was finding it more and more difficult to contain her excitement as the older man placed three folders on the counter. "Here are the cases you may choose to solve."

Tassy looked at Lucius encouragingly. "You be the one to choose this time." She was hoping to get the billionaire more involved and invested, but she was also praying that he would choose something gory and hardcore.

The Case of the Hungry Ghost had Edgar Allan Poe written all over it while The Case of the Bloody Key was very—

"Let's go with this one then."

Aaargh!

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Lucius hadn't even glanced at the folders when he picked one out, and of course they just had to end up with the one case that looked like it was designed for Junior Detectives...Preschool Version.

"The Case of the Time Traveling Thief." Tassy managed to smile brightly after reading the case title out loud. "This is so, um, unique!" She flipped the folder open and went on reading.

Greetings, detectives, and thank you for visiting us from the future!

Her eyes widened. Did this mean she and Lucius were also time travelers? She didn't see that coming at all, and her curiosity was definitely piqued.

Last night, Lord and Lady Cabbage held a party in their townhome. One of their guests, Lady Pumpkin, had fallen asleep in their library. Upon waking, she realized her pearl necklace was missing, and authorities were immediately informed.

Our preliminary investigation has narrowed the list of suspects to these three individuals who were seen entering and leaving the library within the period of time the theft was likely to have taken place.

We have reason to believe that one of them is also from the future and that the stolen necklace will be used to disrupt the time continuum.

Lucius could no longer keep his lips from twitching. Tassy was shifting restlessly from one foot to another by the time she finished reading the case file, and she was practically skipping in glee as they followed Constable Dill down a hallway lined

with framed old maps and various illustrated charts of the human body.

Constable Dill opened one of the doors to their right. "Please have a seat, Your Grace, Miss Bautista. I'll have the first suspect with you shortly."

Lucius shook his head at how his Tassina was unable to sit still while they waited for the constable to return.

"Nervous about handling your first case, Ms. Bautista?"

"Oh, please. Speak for yourself, Your Grace," Tassy said airily. "I can solve this case even with my eyes closed."

Never had he encountered a woman so eager to defeat him, and the fact that she believed she truly stood a chance was rather...cute.

Foolish, too, of course, but incredibly cute.

Tassy offered her hand. "May the best detective win."

He took hold of her hand, but just when she thought he would give it a shake—

"I think what you mean is congratulations."

Tassy had no chance of replying, with Lucius suddenly sucking on her fingers.

Aaah!

Her stomach tightened with desire even as she fought to yank her hand out of his hold. But just as she was able to free herself, she realized too late it was only because he had something more nefarious in mind.

"Y-You——"

Tassy forgot what she had to say as he started kissing her hungrily, and her whole body shuddered when he started palming and squeezing her breasts, harder and harder until——

H-Huh?

Lucius' kiss came to an abrupt end when he suddenly sprung back, and all she could do was blink. Why had they——

The sound of footsteps outside the room brought Tassy back to her senses, and she could only gasp in outrage when she saw his lips curve into a smirk.

Grrr!

Did he kiss her just to throw her off her game?

Lucius barely managed not to wince as Tassina kicked her under the table just as their first suspect entered the room.

"My name is Sir Forsythe," the elderly knight huffed as he took his seat. "It is beneath me to be investigated in this manner. I own properties all over England. Why would I bother stealing so paltry a thing?"

A thin pale gentleman was next to speak, and he nervously wiped his spectacles clean as he gave his alibi. "Good day, Detective. My name is Walt Cranberry. I'm but a lowly writer who was overjoyed when Lord Cabbage invited me to their home. I've always wanted to see their collection of books in their library, which many describe as one of the best in London. The whole time I was in the library, I was so focused on the books——Monet, Shakespeare, and I believe there was a book about the Fall of the

Roman Empire on the right. I even remember they were arranged in that manner, from left to right. Books were the only reason why I was there. I didn't even know someone else was inside."

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The last suspect was a woman in her late twenties, and she introduced herself as Mrs. Cowper. "I know what everyone's saying about me," the woman sniffed. "I may be one of Lady Pumpkin's poor relations, and yes, we do have our differences from time to time, but that's nothing out of the ordinary. It doesn't mean I'd steal from her."

The three suspects filed out after giving their statements, and the billionaire raised a brow at Tassy. "Thoughts?"

Tassy gnawed on her lip as she reached for the dossier they were handed earlier. "The first one sounded very defensive." She flipped to the page about Sir Forsythe's background. "It's true that he has a lot of properties, but all of them have been mortgaged to the hilt."

"And the second one?"

Tassy flipped to the next page. "He's exactly as he says he is. An impoverished writer who could certainly benefit from stealing Lady Pumpkin's necklace. And as for Mrs. Cowper..." Tassy flipped to the last section of the dossier. "It says here she has a gambling problem."

Lucius already knew who the culprit was, but he also wanted to see whether his Tassina would arrive at the same conclusions.

"We have three suspects all with possible financial motives for committing theft," Tassy thought out loud, "but one of them is from the future. I think that's what we should focus on, andmm...now that I think of it. Walt was so keen to describe the books he saw in the library, but...oh!"

"What is it?"

"He mentioned Monet," Tassy blurted out. "Monet wasn't even born during the Regency period."

Lucius smiled. Walt was also his primary suspect, but just when he was about to press the Call button for the constable to come back, Lucius noticed her studying the photos of the three suspects. "Have you thought of something else?"

"What if I'm wrong? Walt was just sonice while the other two were so defensive. What if I'm missing something..."

Lucius could only think of one thing as Tassina's sentimental heart ended up overriding her common sense. He had always thought that people who were "too" nice for their own good were a myth, but his Tassina was the real deal, and when he thought about how all these years she could have so easily been taken advantage of...

Tassy was startled when a frowning Lucius suddenly cupped her face.

"I want you to promise me one thing."

"O-Okay..." Why did he sound so serious? Did this have anything to do with Walt being her primary suspect?

"People will say anything just to get out of trouble."

"But—"

"So trust your brain, not your heart. Can you promise me that?"

"I...um..." Tassy saw his frown darken and hastily came up with a compromise.

"Trust brain, not heart," she parroted instead. "Got it."

"Good."

Lucius' frown was gone, and he was smiling again.

Okaaay.

Tassy's confusion only grew when Lucius handed her a pen and paper from the selection available and took a set for himself. "What's this for?"

"You didn't think I'd let our game end without a winner, did you?"

Tassy's competitive spirit came back to the fore. "You wish." She stood up and surveyed the shelves. She remembered seeing something earlier...aha!

Lucius' lips twitched when Tassina returned to her seat with a tiny sand timer in hand.

"Ready?" Tassy challenged.

"Any time you are."

Tassy flipped the timer, and Lucius reached for his pen. It took only a second or so to write down his guess, but when he glanced at Tassy, it was to see her gnawing on her lip as she seemed to cross something out with her pen.

Tassy frantically started scribbling when she realized her time was running out. Aaargh. Of all times for her to be indecisive, why did it have to be when her pride as an amateur detective was on the line?

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"Time's up," Lucius murmured.

They flipped their papers to reveal their answers at the same time.

'Walt' was written in bold block letters on Lucius' paper.

But on Tassy's paper, on the other hand...were a lot of crossed-out names until finally, she had written down...INNOCENT.

Tassy's words burst out in a defensive rush as soon as she saw Lucius start to smirk. "I'm just being true to my principles! Suspects must be presumed innocent until——"

The billionaire cut her off, saying in a pained voice, "I never thought someone could be so smart——"

Tassy didn't know how to react to this. If his words were a compliment, why didn't it sound like it?

"——and unbelievably naïve at that same time."

Oh, so that's why.

Because it was really an insult disguised as a compliment...or was it the other way around and he was complimenting her by way of——

Aaargh!

Who knew she could be so darn indecisive...that she ended up annoying herself?

"You had it right the first time," Lucius was telling her with a dark look on his handsome face. "And aside from erroneously citing Monet, Walt also took pains to describe the arrangement of the books in hopes of bolstering his alibi. Unfortunately for him, the arrangement he had described was based on the Dewey Decimal System, and that - like Monet - had only existed years after the Regency period."

Tassy only had two words after listening to Lucius' deductive reasoning.

Oh dear.

She had never taken the time to think about what turned her on...until now.

Lucius frowned when he saw the way Tassy was staring at him. "What is it? Do you disagree?"

She quickly shook her head.

"Then..."

Tassy bit her lip. She didn't want to lie, but she was too shy to tell him the truth.

"It's alright," Lucius said gently.

"It's just..."

"You can tell me anything." A wolf in sheep's clothing he once again was, and the disguise was starting to feel like second skin to him.

"It's when you talk like that," she finally said. "It reminds me of the first time I

listened to you speak..."

Lucius remained bemused...until he saw her cheeks start turning pink, and that was when it finally hit him.

Unpredictable as always.

Tassy finding smart talk a turn-on was something he didn't see coming yet again, but he definitely wasn't complaining. Where Tassy was concerned, he was beginning to realize he wasn't keen on leaving anything to chance. He wanted her obsessed with him...as much as he was already obsessed with her.

And that was why—

"Can I test it out?" Lucius asked.

Tassy blinked. "Test what out?"

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"I want to perform a controlled experiment based on a stimuli-response matrix. I'd like to see if any patterns emerge in order to establish baseline thresholds, calibrate variables, and of course, achieve maximum results in terms of neurochemical excitation."

Tassy had no idea what the billionaire just said, but—

"Yup." Whatever it was he wanted to test, it already had her toes curling and her heart pounding, and she wanted to hear more of it.

Lucius couldn't remember being with a woman who made him want to laugh and kiss her at the same time.

His Tassina was everything he hadn't even known he wanted.

She was it for him.

And to make sure that he was also everything to her—

Tassy could only gasp when Lucius suddenly grabbed her hand, and it was all she could do to keep up with his brisk pace as he led her out of the room and back to where Constable Dill was waiting for them.

"Constable, please have Mr. Walt Cranberry arrested."

Since Lucius was still on the move, this time leading them up a set of stairs, it was now both Tassy and the constable doing their best to match his long-legged stride.

"He's definitely from the future since he's made references that have yet to exist during the Regency period, namely, Monet and the Dewey Decimal System."

"Uh, you have correctly identified the culprit, Your Grace. Congratulations." Constable Dill was starting to feel nervous. It was protocol for all park employees like him to know who all of Foxtown VIPs were, but...nothing in the rule book had prepared him for this. Why was Lucius Young heading up the second floor?

Constable Dill cleared his throat. "The, um, prize——"

"It's all yours."

Lucius' statement had the other man nearly losing his footing. "S-Sir? I mean, Y-Your Grace?" The prizes for this weekend had been upgraded for the park's media campaign. Did the billionaire really mean——

"All I need is a room my girlfriend and I can use in private." Lucius began opening doors to see which of the yet-to-be-launched mystery rooms would best serve his purpose. "We have something to talk about, and we don't want to be disturbed at all costs."

Mm.

Nope.

Mm.

Perfect.

By the time Lucius had found his room of choice, understanding had also dawned on both the constable and Tassy, who was now blushing from head to toe but unable to

utter a single protest...sincehonestly?

She so, so badly yearned for Lucius' kisses as well.

"Do we have an understanding, Constable?"

Constable Dill clicked his heels and gave the billionaire a hearty salute. "Yes, sir—I mean, Your Grace!"

"Then that will be all."

The door slammed shut on his face, but Constable Dill was all smiles as he made his way back to the lounge. Who knew it would be this easy to win a thousand bucks?

Tassy could only whimper as Lucius threw her on the four-poster bed as soon as they were inside. Her legs were still dangling over the edge, but this turned out to be exactly what he wanted, with his head suddenly disappearing under the skirts of her gown, and oh!

Had he really just ripped her lace panties just like that—ah!

Her eyes squeezed shut, and her head fell back as Lucius started tracing her moist swollen folds with his tongue. She couldn't remember burning this much her entire life. Couldn't remember feeling this wet and sensitive. And when she felt him slowly but firmly part her folds—

Aaaah.

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It was like having her most secret part completely exposed, and when she thought about Lucius staring at her most intimate flesh——

Embarrassment flooded her whole being, and Tassy instinctively tried pulling away. This was too much, too fast, too soon. This was——aaaah.

A violent shudder of pleasure rocked Tassy's body at the first thrust of his tongue. All thoughts of resistance melted in an instant, and the only thing she felt this time was a throbbing, restless need to feel more.

"P-Please."

To the point that she actually couldn't stop herself from begging——

"L-Lucius."

Every thrust of his tongue ravaged her world, and Tassy could only claw helplessly on the sheets since there was nothing else for her to hold on to.

She had never thought one could be devoured like this.

And yet that was exactly what he was doing.

He was tasting her so deeply, every forceful stab of his tongue marking her for life.

And when he reached up to pinch that tiny swollen nub of pleasure——

Tassy shattered anew, her mind completely blanking out at the sheer force of her orgasm.

Lucius lapped every drop of her release and waited until Tassy's body had stopped buckling before slowly easing up. When he straightened to his full height, he was not surprised to see her eyes closed, her breathing gradually slowing down.

As he watched her sleep, he found himself thinking of things he had once thought would never apply to him. And by the time her eyes fluttered open, Lucius had made up his mind.

Tassy's mind was hazy as she rubbed her eyes. Where was she again? And why was she in bed? What had she been doing before—

OH!

Tassy could feel her cheeks turning fiery red as she scrambled up to a sitting position. She knew it was ridiculous to still feel embarrassed at this point. It was like crying over spilled milk, or in this case, moaning and turning red over spilled, um—

Okay, just stop, Tassy, since you're only making things worse for yourself!

"Penny for your thoughts?"

The very idea of Lucius learning her thoughts was horrifying, and she quickly shook her head.

"Not for sale—" Tassy's words ended in a little gasp when the billionaire scooped her off the bed without warning, and she found herself back on his lap...for the nth time.

"Why not?"

Tassy considered trying to pull away ever so briefly, but when her more sensible inner voice reminded her that was another ridiculous thing to do after what had happened between them—

"Just because," she settled on saying instead, albeit lamely.

Copper eyes narrowed at her. "Are you hiding something from me?"

"Yes."

The way his Tassina admitted to this with zero hesitation had Lucius laughing despite himself. She truly was the most unpredictable little thing, and it was this, more than anything else, that had him deciding not to delay things any longer.

He cupped her chin and waited until he had all of her attention before saying quite simply, "Marry me."

Tassy was about to laugh until she saw the brooding intensity in Lucius' coppery gaze.

"Marry me," he repeated, and this time, she started having difficulty breathing.

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"I think you must've missed a memo or something," she joked weakly. "You'll be tired of me in 48 hours——"

"I won't."

Her heart pounded at how swiftly and firmly Lucius answered, but Tassy reminded herself just as firmly (and frantically) not to get carried away.

"I don't know what game you're playing——"

Tassy stopped speaking when Lucius suddenly grabbed her hand and placed it on his chest, where she could feel how hard his heart was pounding.

"Does that feel real enough for you?"

Tassy was finding it harder and harder to breathe. "We barely know each other——"

"And yet people who have known each other for decades still end up divorced."

He had her there, darn it, but——

"I'm not really the kind of woman you'd want to marry," Tassy heard herself say shakily. "I already warned you, didn't I? I'm extremely demanding——"

"So am I."

"And unreasonably possessive——"

"Peas from the same pod then."

She looked at him in frustration. Why was he still here? Shouldn't he have run away by now?

"If that's all you're concerned about——"

"I'm clingy, too," Tassy declared in a rush. "In the most annoying way possible!" That should make the billionaire think twice——

"Perfect," Lucius said smoothly.

——or double down on his decision to marry her simply because he hated being said 'no' to?

"I'm not lying," Tassy warned desperately. "I'm clingy to the point that you'll find yourself cringing——"

"Prove it then."

Er...what?

Lucius took a step back and raised a challenging brow. "You can start clinging anytime now."

Tassy suddenly felt as if she had backed herself into a corner, and——

Buuuuzzzzzzzz.

The sound of her phone's alarm going off was a welcomed interruption, and Tassy was more than a little relieved to have a legitimate excuse not to drive herself crazy

over Lucius' invitation to, well,cling.

"I'm sorry about this, but that's my alarm for work——"

Tassy was already walking backward to the door as she gave the billionaire her apology.

"Can we, um, continue this conversation next time?"

Lucius waited for relief to hit him as he watched her walk away, but instead, he found himself fighting off the urge to haul her back anddemandthat she accept his proposal.

He could see that a part of herwantedhim to stop her from leaving...while the other half of her dreaded the same thing. He knew he could bullyandseduce her into marrying him if he wanted to, and perhaps that was exactly what he would have done in the past...with any other woman.

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But because this was his Tassina, and every fiber of his being now recognized that she was the only one for him—

"I'll, um, see you around?"

Tassy could still sense Lucius' gaze on her back as she dashed out of the room. She should be glad he was letting her go and respecting her wishes...so why did she have this burning fear that she was the one who had let something go instead?

What if by leaving...she had given him time to change his mind?

What if he realized he didn't want to marry her after all?

Great! Not great! Great! Not great!

Oh God, help.

Chapter Nine

FOXTOWN HAS LISTENED to customer feedback.

Tassy nodded to herself as she continued mentally drafting the rest of her report.

Newly opened boutique now offers outfits for rent. Extensive selection for both men and women.

Tassy took a couple of photos and made sure to zoom in on the little details. One

gown had stunningly gorgeous lacework while another had the loveliest pattern of birds and flowers embroidered on its sleeves.

Accessories also available.

Tassy couldn't help but smile at the collection of hats on display. It reminded her of the fascinators she was only used to seeing in horse races and posh weddings in England. It would be nice if Foxtown could help bring this trend back.

A full-length mirror was right next to the display, and Tassy let out a strangled gasp when she caught sight of her reflection.

H-Hickey!

How could she have forgotten about it?

And to think, she had been walking around without a care to the world, and oh God—

Tassy's gaze collided accidentally with the other women through their shared reflection in the mirror, and they burst into laughter as soon as they saw the mortified expression on Tassy's face.

"We were all thinking it wasn't like you at all to not hide something like that!"

"And I was right, wasn't I?" Shannon, who had known Tassy for years, crowed in triumph. "She forgot about it, and you totally did, didn't you?"

Tassy was still lost for words, which had everyone laughing even more.

It looks very fresh, Tas!

Oh my gosh, did you hook up with someone this morning?! You did, didn't you?

Yaaaas, queen!

Who is it?

Who is it?

WHO—

Flustered and just a little panicky at suddenly being the center of everyone's attention, Tassy blurted out the first thing that came to mind—

"He's just a friend!"

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It was the dumbest excuse ever, but...oh?

Why hadn't anyone called her out for lying?

Why were they only staring at her?

Was it possible that they really did believe—

"I apologize for the intrusion, but may I have a moment to speak with my...friend?"

Tassy jerked as soon as she heard that very familiar drawl.

A moment later, strong fingers were cupping her elbow to turn her around, and of course her stunned gaze ended up clashing with coppery eyes that were full of wicked amusement.

"I hope you can spare me a moment, Ms. Bautista."

"Uh—" She tried pulling away, but this only had the billionaire tightening his grip.

"Perfect."

As he guided her out of the boutique, her colleagues started giggling and Shannon even mouthed 'whatta friend' while giving Tassy a thumbs-up to signify her approval.

Oh God.

She stole a look at Lucius, hoping he hadn't seen it, but the gleam in his gaze implied otherwise.

"Is anything wrong?"

She tried once more to pull away, but this only caused his hand to slide down until he was gripping her waist.

"Are you trying to get away from me?"

Her actions suddenly seemed childish when he put it that way, and so she immediately shook her head. "I'm just...concerned. For your sake," she added quickly.

"Is that so?"

She made a vague gesture to their surroundings while being careful not to meet anyone's gazes. "Can't you see how everyone's staring at us?"

And by everyone, she meant exactly that. She wasn't even sure if he had noticed how all their walking had them ending up in Foxtown's version of Rotten Row. It was the most popular place to see and be seen in the Regency Times, and the same could still be said even now.

So many familiar and famous faces, and oh God.

Wasn't that Foxtown's billionaire owner himself, Damian Fox? His wedding to Sarah was a modern fairytale all on its own, and if she remembered correctly, part of this weekend's program was for the couple to make their first appearance...tomorrow.

So why were they here now? Was there something in the program she had forgotten, and that was why all of the VIPs were gathered here?

Tassy started feeling a little nervous, but a glance at Lucius showed that he was completely relaxed.

She tried to tug free again, but this only made him pull her close. "Uh, Lucius?"

"Mm?"

"I really think we should go our separate ways for now, just to keep other people from drawing the wrong——"

Oh no.

Why had he suddenly stopped walking?

She tried to get him moving, but this was also impossible.

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"What do you think people see when they look at us?"

Tassy's gaze flew up to his in dismay. Why was he asking that now of all times?

"Do you think they see a man who never believed in love—"

Tassy's lips parted in shock. Had she heard him right? Had he truly said—

"Until the right one came along?"

Oh God, he truly did.

Tassy did her best to keep her tears in check, but when she suddenly heard what seemed like a live orchestra playing a very familiar song—

It was impossible not to cry.

How in the world was this happening?

Everyone around them was clapping, and as the crowd slowly parted, Tassy saw that there was an entire orchestra positioned at the bank of Foxtown's man-made lake, which was also patterned after the snake-like flow of London's Serpentine River.

Tassy's tears fell faster as Lucius took hold of her hand to help her into one of the glossy-bodied boats with cream leather seats. A female singer had now joined the orchestra, her velvety voice a perfect match as she sang the lyrics to the Carpenters' song that Tassy had found herself listening to on repeat since her breakup.

We've only just begun.

His gaze found hers as he started rowing the boat to the center of the lake, and she didn't even know where or how to begin.

"T-The s-song," she finally managed to stammer. How did he even know—

"I've heard you humming it more than once."

The answer was so, so simple that Tassy felt like laughing and crying because those words made everything so, so painfully clear. She had been with Xylan for years, but those little things about her had always escaped him. She had always believed that love was directly proportionate to the length of time one knew a person...so why then?

Why was it Lucius, who had known her for less than a day—

Why was it Lucius who was doing everything right?

"Are you really sure about this?" she choked out. "Because if you keep this up, I'm really going to start thinking of you as mine."

"I'm already yours, Tassy. From the moment I first laid my eyes on you—I was yours."

Tassy's whole body started to shake as Lucius took out a small box from his pocket. He slowly opened this, and Tassy vaguely heard the people around them bursting into applause and cheering as they saw the diamond ring Lucius was now holding out to her.

"Will you be my wife and forever Valentine?"

She waited for her mind to torture her with fears, doubts, and insecurities. But instead, all she felt was a peace that surpassed all understanding. She had never experienced such peace before, and it would only be much, much later that Tassy would come to realize it was His peace which had enveloped her at that moment.

But for now, all Tassy knew was that the peace in her heart meant one thing.

Lucius Young was the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with.

And because of that, there was also only one thing left to say.

"Yes, I'll be your wife."

Chapter Ten

STELLA HAD JUST CHANGED out of her housekeeping uniform and was on her way out of the locker room when her phone started buzzing inside her purse. As soon as she saw Tassy's name on the screen, she answered the call in a hurry—

"Hello?"

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—and almost ended up having a heart attack when she heard her best friend's news.

"I've just gotten married to the man God chose for me, and I need you to tell me I did the right thing!"

Stella's tote bag crashed to the floor, and the other girls in the locker room looked at her oddly as her butt hit the bench.

"You did what?"

Stella's head started to spin as she listened to how Tassy's whirlwind romance had unfolded in a matter of hours.

"I know this won't make much sense to others, but you at least understand, don't you? I just felt so lost and broken, and I swear, Stel. I prayed like I've never prayed before. And when I opened my eyes, I saw him."

Stella didn't know whether to laugh or cry. It was true that she had always advised Tassy to pray before making any decision, but she highly doubted God's answer was for Tassy to marry the first man she saw.

"Stel? Are you still there?"

"Sorry, I was, um..."

Wondering if I could've done a better job at explaining how God's answer to prayers wasn't always 'yes' or 'no'? That sometimes, God also wanted people to understand

the art of waiting when He answered them with 'not yet'?

"Please don't say this is a mistake."

"No, of course not!" Because it was one thing for Stella to think that (which she did), but it was another thing entirely for her to say the words out loud.

"Iknewyou'd get it!"

Stella wasn't quite sure shedidget it, but she also believed what Tassy didn't know wouldn't hurt her, and that was what mattered.

"Just because two people didn't know each other for a long time before getting married, it doesn't mean they won't last. If you look at it the other way around, you have couples who have known each other for years——"

Like Xylan and Tassy,Stella couldn't help thinking.

"And have so many things in common——"

Also like Xylan and Tassy.

"And thenbam!"

Stella jumped in her seat.

"They break up just like that, and one of them likely didn't even see it coming."

Was Tassy still talking to her or had her friend started talking to herself?

"And that's why how long you've known each other isn't really a factor," Tassy closed

determinedly. "Sometimes, you just know that person is the one for you because God chose that person for you."

"Um—"

"And you know what? I bet this has happened in the Bible, too. I'm sure not all married couples in the Bible had long engagements before marrying."

"Uh..."

You read the Bible every day, Stel. Surely you can think of at least one couple mentioned in the Bible who's had a whirlwind marriage?"

Tassy had raised a really good point with that one, and Stella did her best to recall if there was any couple in the Bible—

Oh!

Right!

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She was about to say Hosea and Gomer...but caught herself in time because she also remembered that Gomer happened to be guilty of adultery.

Yeah, scratch that.

"Stel?"

The catch in Tassy's voice made Stella realize just how much her friend was counting on her for reassurance.

"Um..."

Oh, please, God, help me out.

And that was when the answer came to her.

"The words 'love at first sight' weren't explicitly mentioned in the Bible, but there is one story in the Book of Genesis."

Stella herself was feeling much and much better as she looked up the verses in her Bible app, and she just had to close her eyes for a moment.

Thank You, God.

She cleared her throat and began to read.

When Rebekah looked up and saw Isaac, she quickly dismounted from her camel.

“Who is that man walking through the fields to meet us?” she asked the servant.

And he replied, “It is my master.” So Rebekah covered her face with her veil. Then the servant told Isaac everything he had done.

And Isaac brought Rebekah into his mother Sarah’s tent, and she became his wife. He loved her deeply, and she was a special comfort to him after the death of his mother.

Stella waited for Tassy to say something, but there was only silence on the other end.
"Tas?"

And that was when she realized her friend had started to cry.

"I really needed to hear that, Stel," Tassy whispered. "And I can't thank God enough for giving me a friend like you."

Chapter Eleven

"LUCIUS?" HIS MOTHER'S voice tinged with bewilderment as she joined his stepfather on the phone in loudspeaker.

"I hope I didn't catch you or Papa at a bad time."

"No, of course not," Joy was quick to assure him. "But...this is also unlike you. Is there some reason why you wished to speak to us both?"

"There is, actually. I wanted you both to hear from it first, and if it's alright with you, I'll leave it to you to let the others know."

"It's not like you to beat around the bush like this," Alrich observed soberly.

Since his stepfather was right as always, Lucius took this as a sign to simply get on with it.

"I got married today."

His mother let out a gasp while his stepfather remained silent, which was also typical of the older man.

"Her name's Tassina. You've never met her, but I'm certain you'll like her a lot. She's...great." Lucius could feel his skin flushing as he found himself fumbling for the right things to say.

"I'm, um..." Joy's voice was faint, and Lucius had a feeling his mother was also struggling to find something to say.

"Congratulations, son."

It was only after hearing this did Lucius even realize how tension had held his entire body rigid, and he could feel himself gradually relaxing as Aldrich went on talking in his usual gruff voice. "We look forward to meeting her soon."

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"I'll bring her over for dinner," Lucius promised.

"That sounds good."

Lucius could only wince as an awkward pause followed. His entire life, he had never felt the need to introduce any of the women he dated to his parents, much less bring any of them home. Was that why he was having a hard time figuring out what else he had to say about his new wife?

"I'm sorry I'm bad at this," Lucius finally said in a stiff voice.

"You're doing a lot better than you think, Lucius."

The amusement in Alrich's voice took Lucius back to the old days. He was a teenage boy again, and his stepfather was back to being unfathomable.

"Couples who marry for practical reasons are often the ones who are also quicker to give up at the first sign of trouble. It's when you don't have the words, but your heart remains firm..."

Lucius closed his eyes as the meaning behind Aldrich's words hit home.

I love her.

And he only realized he had said this out loud when he heard his mother's heartfelt gasp.

"Oh, Lucius. Oh, Aldrich. Did you hear what our boy just said?"

Lucius could feel another flush staining his skin. His mother might be the only soft-spoken member of their family, but Joy also had a way with words that made them feel like little kids again.

"I can't believe you're all grown up now," Joy exclaimed tearfully. "I've been praying all this time, but a part of me never really...oh, Lucius. You've made me so happy. And excited. When are you bringing her over? And her name is Tassina, isn't it? What does she like? Does she have any——"

"It's your son's wedding day, sweetheart," Aldrich interrupted his wife with a chuckle. Let's give Lucius and his wife some time together before we start bombarding their questions."

Lucius felt as if a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders after speaking to his parents. It came as no surprise to him that even his own mother hadn't been inclined to hope that he had it in him to fall in love.

With Stanley Young as their biological father, it was already a miracle that he and his other siblings hadn't turned into homicidal, cocaine-snorting narcissists. Or maybe it wasn't a miracle at all, with a mother like theirs, and later on, a stepfather in Aldrich Lim, who was the opposite of Stanley.

Regardless of the reason, Lucius had come to realize just how much it mattered to have his parents' blessings, and when he joined his wife in Foxtown's most expensive suite after his shower, and he saw the glow on her face——

"Did you have a good talk with your best friend?"

"Really...good." Her voice caught in the end, with her attention distracted by the way

Lucius had gotten rid of his jacket and cravat. He started unbuttoning his shirt next, and Tassy found herself gulping as inch after bronzed inch of his muscular chest was bared to her sight.

"I spoke to my parents as well."

"O-Oh?" Tassy was feeling hot in the face with Lucius now standing bare-chested in front of her.

"But——"

B-Bu...b-bulge!

"I'm afraid——"

Afraid, yes, she absolutely was afraid by that...that bulge she had just noticed!

"I can't——"

Can't that be real? Can't that fit? Can't that——

"——say the same."

Can...he repeat that?

She gave herself a mental shake and struggled to recall the context of their conversation. Lucius had asked about how her talk with Stella went, she had told him their talk had been really good, and then he had told her about his own conversation with his parents——

Oh.

And that was when she remembered exactly what he had said.

But I'm afraid I can't say the same.

Tassy's heart plummeted to her stomach even as she told herself that shouldn't have come as a surprise. Lucius' parents were likely concerned about how fast things had progressed between them.

"Since I find the words 'very good' inadequate."

And if Lucius had told them even just a bit about her background - or lack thereof - then of course they'd be right to wonder if she was a gold-digger—what did he just say?

Tassy's gaze flew up to his, and the moment she saw the glint in the billionaire's eyes—

Aaargh!

Why, oh, why did she keep forgetting the fact that he had already admitted to deriving pleasure from being a sadist around her?

Tassy grabbed one of the fluffy little pillows behind her and threw it at Lucius, hoping to take him by surprise, but of course he had caught it handily before throwing the pillow back at her, which then hit her smack in the face.

Aaaaargh!

Lucius scooped her off the couch before she could throw another pillow at him. He tossed her on the bed, and a smirk curved over his lips when he heard his Tassina actually growl.

"Y-You——"

It was all she was able to say.

As always.

Because after that, there was no longer any chance for her to speak, with his mouth crushing hers in a ruthlessly deep kiss that demanded everything of her to be his.

Nooooo.

There was this tiniest part of her that wished she could somehow find a way to extract even just a little bit of revenge. It was just so unfair and frustrating that Lucius always ended up getting the better of her.

But...

The moment Lucius grabbed her waist, their kiss abruptly ended as she suddenly found herself flipped to her stomach——

Too late.

She knew she was doomed the moment he started working on the pearl buttons at the back of her gown, his fingers moving with such swift efficiency that he was already gently pulling her gown down her waist before she could draw her next breath.

Aaah!

Her gown was on the floor, and all she could do was whimper when she found herself lying on her back once again, but this time she was completely naked save for a scrap of lace covering her womanhood.

Instinct had her automatically trying to shield her nakedness from the burning hunger of his coppery gaze—

"Don't."

But as soon as she heard Lucius' fierce growl, she didn't even think twice. Her arms immediately fell back on her side, and she realized at that moment something had completely and permanently changed between them.

She was his wife now, oh God.

And this man...

Lucius...

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This man was her husband, and oh...how her husband was making her writhe and whimper with the way he was staring at her.

"Mine."

It was just one word.

But with the way he had said it with such savage possessiveness—

"Now and forever."

Every inch of her did feel his, with the way she was burning and tingling from head to toe—

"Tell me, Tassina."

She looked at him pleadingly and dazedly, with the restless heat coiling deep in her belly making her feel like she was about to lose her mind any moment.

"Y-Yours," she choked out helplessly. "I'm y-yours—aaaah."

Her words ended in a whimper as he bent down to take her nipple into his mouth, and her toes curled hard as he immediately started suckling with ravenous hunger. Pain and pleasure blended into each other as his teeth scraped against the distended tip, and she could no longer keep herself from moaning.

His mouth moved to her other breast, excitement shooting through her body as his

tongue swirled around her nipple while his fingers started pinching its still-distended twin.

A whimper of protest escaped her when his lips finally released their swollen captive, but when she realized where his mouth was heading, and she felt his hands already pulling her panties down her trembling legs—

AAAAAH.

The sounds his Tassina made as he started suckling on her clit had his breeches feeling suffocatingly tight against his engorged cock. He couldn't get enough of how her entire body was trembling in his hold. Couldn't get enough of how every sensitive inch of her seemed to be crying out for his possession. He remembered the sweet, intoxicating taste of her, but as much as he wanted to have her come coating his tongue yet again—

Tassy cried out in protest when Lucius pulled away without warning. She was so, so close. Surely, he knew. So why did he stop?

A familiar sound had Tassy opening her eyes, just in time to see Lucius getting rid of his breeches, and wetness flooded her core at her first sight of his length. The size of his bulge earlier was obviously a hint, but now that she was seeing it in the flesh—

Her desire grew out of control, her body writhing uncontrollably when Tassy saw his erection twitch violently under her dazed gaze. Her heart hammered against her chest as Lucius joined her in bed. She wanted him to the point of agony, wanted him so, so much that she felt not a single ounce of fear as he loomed over her.

Their eyes locked, and as her breath caught at the need she saw in his gaze—

It was then he finally entered her, and a sob spilled out of her throat as he claimed her

virginity in a single possessive thrust.

"Mine," she heard Lucius rasp above her, and just hearing this had her whole beingsing. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he started to move. Felt him claim ownership of her body as he began pounding into her.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

That was what his big, hard body was telling her with every deep and forceful thrust, and all she could do was tighten her arms around his because that was exactly what she wanted.

Yours. Yours. Yours.

Their bodies strained against each other as their gazes collided yet again, and oh, what she saw this time—

His gaze promised something she could no longer deny, and Tassy's heart felt as if it was about to explode out of her chest.

I love you.

She came as soon as she read the truth in his eyes, and even though fear of being hurt anew wanted to hold her back—

Tassy's legs wrapped around his waist as her inner muscles tightened around his pulsing length. And even though her body was still in the throes of climax, she managed to hold his face between trembling hands—

I love you.

Her surrender was all it took to push Lucius over the edge, and he could only growl her name out as pleasure like nothing else he had ever experienced powered through his body.

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Nothing about her—nothing about this—nothing about the two of them should have made sense. But it did. Because of what he saw in her tear-filled eyes, and which Lucius knew she also saw in his.

Love.

Chapter Twelve

THE WARM, DELICATE kiss of morning sunlight on her face gradually drew Tassy out of her sleep, and her soul already started to sing even before she could open her eyes. It was just like Paradise, waking up with her husband's strong arms wrapped tightly around her from behind, and her body pressed against his bare chest.

Even though they had only been married for so short a time, Tassy could no longer imagine living any kind of life without Lucius.

They had flown back to San Antonio from Jackson Hole last night, and when they had arrived at his penthouse apartment downtown, he had told her he had a surprise...which turned out to be the understatement of the year.

'Stunned' would be a better word to describe her emotions at that time, and Tassy could only smile ruefully to herself when she recalled herself simply standing by the doorway in complete shock.

Inside his guest room was her entire life, reassembled with perfect accuracy, albeit in a much more spacious and luxurious setting. Every book and miniature dollhouse she had on display—it was all there, arranged in the exact way she had arranged them,

but on nicer and more expensive-looking shelves. All of her old plates and coffee mugs were also there, only this time they were also housed in nicer-looking kitchen cupboards. It was as if Lucius had simply snapped his fingers (or signed a check with more zeroes than she could ever afford in her lifetime), and voila! He had transformed his guestroom into a perfect replica of Tassy's old apartment, down to the clipped bag of chips she had left on her bedside table...and her sports bra still draped over her comfy old couch.

"I hope you're not thinking about another man while you're smiling like that."

Her eyes flew open at Lucius' jealous tone, and she didn't know whether to laugh or throw her arms around her husband's neck when she saw the grim expression on his gorgeous face.

How could this incredible man be so jealous over her? Love was the only way his possessiveness could make sense, and the thought had her toes curling hard even as her smile turned teasing under his gaze.

"Another man?" she echoed. "I wouldn't know about any other man since you're the only man I see. You, Lucius Young, are my entire world—" His growl cut her off, and she could only laugh helplessly as he rolled her to her back and loomed over her with a menacing scowl.

"Are you making fun of my jealousy, Mrs. Young?"

"On the contrary—" Tassy's tone was pious. "I'm only speaking the truth, husband. You're not just my world. You're my entire universe, and I can't even imagine—" A gasp escaped her as he suddenly sat up, and the next thing she knew, he was already pulling her down on his throbbing length, and all she could do was moan as he impaled her with one thrust.

She forgot anything else she had to say or do. She could barely remember breathing as the sheer thickness of him had her inner walls stretched to the fullest. Her head fell back as he started bouncing her up and down, his fingers gripping her waist tightly, and his rigid member throbbing powerfully as it pounded past her swollen folds.

Their mingled breaths filled the bedroom while the musky scent of their lovemaking tinged the air. Every thrust had them straining closer and closer to the end, but it was the look of yearning and hunger on his wife's face that aroused Lucius to no end.

He had made love to countless women in his entire lifetime, but none of them had ever wanted him the way his Tassina did. And none of them certainly had made Lucius burn the way his wife was doing now, with her soft, dark eyes suddenly locking with his in hazy appeal.

"P-Please..."

Hearing her beg had Lucius growling as he grabbed a fistful of her hair. He yanked her close, his tongue thrusting inside of her mouth at the same time his own length surged into her moist, throbbing heat. That was all it took, with his wife crying out against his lips as his own control snapped. He began hammering into her like a wild beast, but his wife only sobbed for more as she kissed him back and her own hips moved just as wildly to meet every savage thrust.

I love her.

I love him.

I love you.

SAMANTHA WASN'T QUITE sure what to expect as Tassy entered her office to submit her report. She had the shock of her life when Lucius Young's legal team had

contacted her last night, and it had taken a while for their words to really sink in.

Your employee, Tassina Bautista, is now married to our client Lucius Young.

Wedding took place during the Valentine's launch.

Confidentiality agreement required from all those present during the ceremony and their respective superiors.

Compensation and incentives for non-disclosure will be provided by Young Enterprises.

Samantha had signed the contract without hesitation, but only because she knew she hadn't really any choice. The Youngs were one of the world's wealthiest families, and they were known more for their cunning than mercy.

She had found it impossible to imagine how someone as sweet and meek as Tassy had ended up with a ruthless billionaire like Lucius Young, but the moment she saw Tassy's glowing face as the younger woman sat down in front of her—

Oh, thank God.

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Samantha knew what a woman in love looked like, and the truth was, Tassy had never looked like this in all the years she had been dating her college-sweetheart-turned-colleague.

Tassy straightened in her seat the moment she heard her department VP clear her throat.

"I'm afraid I've heard troubling news, Tassy..."

Tassy could only think of one thing as soon as she heard the older woman's words. Fontana. She had actually forgotten all about Xylan's new girlfriend, but she was also starting to realize that the things that used to hurt and confuse her... simply didn't matter any longer.

"Is it true——"

Tassy took a deep breath.

"That you married a tall, dark, and handsome billionaire without inviting me?" Samantha couldn't help laughing as the younger woman's jaw dropped in shock.

"H-How d-did——"

"Oh, my dear." Samantha looked at Tassy fondly. "You don't know about the NDAs, do you?"

Tassy could only listen in shock and confusion as the older woman told her about all

the confidentiality agreements that her billionaire had everyone sign.

"Your husband's main concession to Damian Fox was that your wedding will be part of Foxtown's Valentine campaign. In exchange, he's bought you a week of privacy. Your husband's very protective of you. I'm assuming he wants you to have the chance to gradually adjust to living a life where you're in the spotlight the entire time."

"I had no clue," Tassy whispered.

"As incredible as it is to think...this is a love match between you, isn't it?"

Tassy nodded shyly, and Samantha couldn't remember seeing anything so adorably innocent. Most other women would have a far more mercenary reaction, or even a gloating one at that, when asked if they had married a gorgeous billionaire like Lucius Young.

"You can't imagine how happy this makes me, Tassy. What happened last week was just..."

"It's water under the bridge now," Tassy said with a smile.

"And of course you meant that, too," Samantha said with a sigh.

"Stella also told me about Xylan and Fontana. I'm happy for them as well. I'm just glad it all worked out nicely."

The other woman only nodded, and Tassy wondered why it seemed like there was something else Samantha wanted to say but couldn't.

Tassy was hoping things would be back to normal for the rest of the day, but the opposite proved true. Everyone was still looking at her in pity, but Tassy was stunned

to realize it didn't bother her at all.

Love was a worker of miracles indeed, and she suddenly found herself missing her husband quite badly. He did tell her she could be clingy, but what if he didn't really mean it? Tassy gnawed on her lip as she stared at her husband's number on her phone, which Lucius himself had insisted she saved in her contacts under 'Mine'.

To call or not to call?

That is—eep!

Tassy accidentally dropped her phone when it suddenly buzzed in her hold, and the loud thud had everyone turning her way.

Oops.

She was about to apologize to everyone when the message on her phone caught her eye.

Oh no.

Blaise was from their local police department, and he had attended the same high school as Tassy and Stella. Blaise would only contact her for one reason, and his message confirmed her worst fears.

Can you get Stella to see a doctor?

Her face paled, and Tassy grabbed her things in a hurry, her mind so focused on what she should text Stella that she didn't even notice her ex-boyfriend arriving at the office, having just returned from his client meeting with the owner of one of San Antonio's hottest new restaurants.

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Tassy didn't notice the way her coworkers' heads swiveled between her and Xylan like spectators at a tennis match, their expressions a mixture of curiosity, pity, and secondhand embarrassment. As she turned her back on the office and frantically jabbed at the elevator button to head down to the clinic, she also missed how Xylan theatrically lifted his shoulders in an exaggerated shrug, his Rolex glinting under the recessed lighting as he spread his hands in a "what can you do?" gesture.

Tassy hit Send on her message just as she reached the self-service clinic next to the bank of elevators in the lobby. The small medical facility was one of the amenities provided for all building tenants, and Tassy sighed in relief when she saw that the clinic was empty.

If there was something Stella hated more than being fussed at, it was to have other people see—

"Can we talk?"

The familiar voice had her turning in surprise, and she could only blink at the sight of Xylan standing by the doorway and poised like he was getting ready for a photo shoot for Playgirl.

Xylan stepped forward, and when Tassy stepped back without thinking, a look of sadness crossed her ex-boyfriend's features.

"I'm sorry, Tas. I didn't realize it's gotten this bad."

"What's gotten bad?" she asked blankly.

"You don't have to pretend. We both know there's only one reason you're here. You miss me. You still love me. But since I'm no longer yours, you feel like life isn't worth living anymore, and you need anti-depressants to get you going."

Tassy was at a loss for words. Had Xylan always been like this? How could she never have noticed this side of him before?

"I can help you. I want to help you. But you need to help me in return. We can still be together, but we can't let Fontana know."

Was he really saying what she thought he was saying?

Xylan moved forward. "I've missed you, too, Tas. And maybe, if you give yourself to me this time, maybe I'll break up with her, and we can be together again. But you gotta prove yourself to me first."

Tassy had heard enough...at the same time Xylan seemed to have misinterpreted her silence as assent. He suddenly yanked her close, and he only laughed when she immediately started to struggle.

"You're only making me want you more when you—"

Tassy finally managed to shove him off. "I want nothing to do with you!"

Xylan shot her a look of impatience. "Stop lying—" The sound of the glass door swinging open behind them cut him off, and a shudder of relief rocked Tassy's body when she saw who it was.

Oh, thank God!

Stella took one look at her friend's pale face and Xylan's flushed features and

immediately went to Tassy's side. "I think it's time for you to go, Xylan."

"Fuck you," Xylan spat. "Who the hell do you think you are? You're only good enough to clean fucking toilets——"

"Stop it, Xylan!" Tassy forgot her own discomfort at the vitriol of her ex-boyfriend's words and pointed to the door. "Please just go. Or I'll report you to HR for harassment."

"And you think they're going to believe you over me?" Xylan jeered. "The whole company thinks you're a loser, Tas. You should've counted yourself lucky that I was willing to spare you a few minutes of my time."

"The only thing I know is that I'm an idiot," Tassy said shakily, "for not seeing who you really are——"

"Who I really am," Xylan hissed in interruption, "is someone you don't fucking deserve." He angrily jabbed a finger at her, sneering, "You'll regret this, Tas. You'll realize someday you should've taken me up on my offer. But by then it will be too late. I'll only take you back if you come crawling on your knees and begging to have my cock in your mouth."

Xylan stalked out of the clinic, and both Tassy and Stella involuntarily jerked as he slammed the door shut behind him with enough force to have the walls shaking.

Tassy turned to Stella as soon as she recovered from her shock. "I'm so sorry, Stel." Shame engulfed her as memories of Xylan's cruel words taunted her mind. "I never thought...I never knew he was like that. I felt like I was blind all these years——" The rest of her words died when Stella tilted her face. The angle had the clinic's bright white lights shine mercilessly down on her skin, which consequently exposed the cut on her cheek that Stella had obviously done her best to hide behind a thick layer of

concealer.

Tassy remembered too late why she had asked Stella to meet her at the clinic in the first place, and her heart broke.

"Oh, Stel. It's happening again, isn't it?"

Stella quickly shook her head. "I'm fine——"

"No, you're not fine." Tassy got her friend to sit down before swiping her ID on the card reader so she could unlock the supplies cabinet and take out one of the first-aid kits.

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"Blaise put you up to this, didn't he?" Stella asked while Tassy opened a pack of antiseptic wipes.

"I think what you mean to say is that we're grateful we have someone like Blaise who's looking after you—"

Stella winced as her friend started cleaning her wound.

"—when you're obviously unwilling to look after yourself."

Tassy stepped back to observe her handiwork after applying a dab of antibiotic cream on the thin but ugly-looking gash marring her friend's face. It should heal soon, but what about the wounds that no one could see?

"You can't let your mother keep hurting you like this, Stel."

"I know, Tas." A sad smile curved over her friend's lips. "I just keep wishing and hoping she'd change. I guess you're not the only one who's been blind all these years."

Chapter Thirteen

LUCIUS REALIZED HIS workaholic days had come to an end as soon as he got to his office. It was only his first day of marriage, and already he found himself missing his wife. He thought of sending her a text but decided against it. His wife being clingy was cute as fuck, but not when it was the other way around.

He glanced at his watch.

2:05 PM.

Two, no, fuck, threemore hours to go.

Surely he could find a way to occupy himself until he could pick his wife up from work?

So think, Young!

An idea came to him then, and he started making calls. The calls still had nothing to do with work and everything to do with his marriage, but at least he wasn't making a fucking nuisance of himself.

By 4:30 PM, Lucius had arranged everything he needed: a catered four-course dinner at his parents' ranch in Evergreen, a bouquet of his Tassina's favorite flowers that he wanted to surprise his wife with, and finally, the presence of his siblings and closest friends, which—if he were being honest—was the least thing Lucius looked forward to, knowing how they would likely give him a hard time once they realized his feelings for his wife.

Thirty minutes to go, Lucius thought.

He drummed his fingers against his desk, the empty inbox on his screen mocking him, and his impatience reached its peak.

He missed his wife. Plain and simple.

Fuck waiting.

Fuck not being clingy.

Lucius grabbed his jacket and strode out of his office, ignoring his assistant's startled expression. The elevator ride to the basement parking felt fucking endless, each second stretching his already frayed patience.

Jacob, his chauffeur of twelve years, already had the passenger door open when Lucius stepped out of the elevator, and having been informed of the billionaire's desire to leave immediately, the older man switched to full speed as soon as they were out on the street.

"Where to, Mr. Young?"

"Did my Tassina give you any instructions about when and where to pick her up from work?"

"Indeed, sir," Jacob answered while hiding his smile. In all the years he had been working for Lucius Young, this was the first time the billionaire had expressed any emotion towards any woman outside his family.

"Mrs. Young asked me to drop her off about two blocks away from her workplace. She asked me to pick her up at the same place at five in the afternoon."

"I think I'd like to surprise my wife, Jacob," Lucius drawled. Let's wait for her at the main entrance, shall we?"

"Understood, sir."

Lucius adjusted his tie as he idly watched Jacob negotiate rush-hour traffic with the expertise of a war tactician.

Big mistake, baby girl.

She obviously wanted to keep their marriage a secret. Unfortunately for her, she should've also realized that a man like him would only see such actions as a challenge.

TASSY AND STELLA HAD just walked out of the building when Stella suddenly stopped dead in her tracks. "Oh, wow. Do you see that?"

"The black car?" Tassy asked, genuinely confused by her friend's reaction. It just looked like another luxury vehicle to her—the kind that regularly ferried Black Carpet International's high-profile clients.

Stella gave her a pained look. "That's Youngest LX, Tas. Close to two hundred thousand dollars. It's one of the most expensive electric SUVs in the world."

"Well, of course I knew that," Tassy quipped without missing a beat. "I was just checking to see if you knew that, too, duh."

Stella let out a snort. "Why don't you also tell me that the sky's pink, pigs fly, and—" Stella broke off when a dignified-looking chauffeur in a perfectly tailored uniform opened the passenger door.

"Is that Lucius Young?" Stella whispered beside her, voice hushed with disbelief.

The name barely registered in Tassy's mind, her attention having shifted back to the entrance of their building, where Fontana had just emerged with her trendy entourage,

their laughter cutting through the afternoon air.

Fontana, meanwhile, had also caught sight of the electric SUV across the street, and her perfectly manicured hand flew to her throat in recognition when she saw who had stepped out of the car.

Was that Lucius Young?

His presence stirred everyone into a frenzy, and even her own friends looked awestruck.

Perfect.

Fontana tossed her honey-blond hair over her shoulders, saying loudly enough to be overheard, "He's probably here to see me."

"Oh my gosh, girl. You know Lucius Young?" One of her friends clutched her arm, practically vibrating with excitement.

The answer to that would be no, but what other reason was there? She was the only heiress around here while everyone else (her friends included) was horribly middle-class. He had probably seen one of her photos on Instagram and was instantly captivated. It happened all the time, so this was nothing new.

Fontana moved forward with the confidence of someone who had never been told no, but just as her crimson-colored lips curved into a practiced smile as they came face to face, the billionaire simply strode past her as if she were invisible.

What the hell?

Fontana fumed in outrage, turning around to see who the billionaire intended to meet.

This was so embarrassing, but she told herself she could keep faking it until she had him eating out of her...what the fucking hell?

Her body started shaking with a mixture of rage and disbelief as she watched Lucius come to a stop before the very last woman on earth who should have anything to do with him.

Tassy jumped when someone suddenly cupped her elbow from behind. Her lips parted in surprise, but before she could react, she found herself looking up into a pair of familiar copper eyes. Her husband had appeared by her side, the cologne-scented heat of his presence enveloping her senses, and she belatedly realized what the frenzy of excitement around her was all about.

Lucius slowly bent his head, his breath warm against her ear, and her body burst into flames as he whispered, "You've been a very bad girl, wife."

Tassy's knees knocked together, her head spinning.

Oh my gosh.

Had he just called her...wife?

No, actually, he'd done more than that. He hadn't just said it. He'd purred the word, and it was just so...wait.

Did he also just say she was a...bad girl?

Tassy's mystified gaze flew up to his, but his coppery eyes only glinted back at her, dark and dangerous. "Didn't I warn you about how possessive I am? And how easily jealous I get?"

She nodded vehemently. Yes, he had, but—

"Then why," he continued, voice dropping to a silky murmur that sent shivers racing down her spine, "did you instruct Jacob to drop you off two blocks away from your workplace and pick you up at the same place? Are you trying to hide the fact that you're married to me?"

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Someone gasped behind them, and Tassy's eyes widened as she realized Stella had heard what Lucius said.

Oh dear.

She turned to her friend with a nervous smile. "So, um..." Her voice faltered, her mind suddenly flooded with memories of the past. What if Lucius was even worse than Xylan? What if he also looked down—

"You must be Stella," Lucius said smoothly, his tone effortlessly charming as he extended his hand. "My wife has told me all about you. I understand you've been friends since high school."

Tassy could only watch in a daze as her normally aloof husband charmed the socks off Stella, who was usually not that easy to impress.

"I hope you'll join us for dinner this weekend, and I'll make sure to send a car."

Stella was flustered at having the red carpet rolled out for her. "Oh, but—"

"You're my wife's closest friend," Lucius interrupted gently but firmly. "Your safety is my priority as well." His gaze dropped deliberately to the healing cut on Stella's cheek, and it was then the two women realized what had prompted Lucius to make his offer.

Tassy found herself blinking back tears when her husband also insisted that Stella save the number of his security chief.

"Day or night," he added, his voice dropping to ensure only the two women could hear. "No questions asked."

Tassy couldn't believe how different Lucius was from Xylan. Her ex had known Stella for years, but not once had he cared to ask why Tassy's friend occasionally sported ill-concealed bruises on her face. In fact, the less he had to do with Stella, the better for Xylan, who didn't want to be seen being friends with someone who cleaned for a living.

And yet her husband, on the other hand...

Lucius had known Stella for all of five minutes, but he had known exactly what Tassy's friend needed and offered it without hesitation.

Why was this husband of hers so perfect?

What had she ever done to deserve him?

By the time they parted ways with Stella, Tassy's heart was bursting with joy and gratitude, and she turned to her husband as soon as they were inside his car. Her adoring gaze lifted to his, and that was when she saw it.

Uh...oh.

Was it just her imagination or did he suddenly look like he was about to give her a beating?

"So..." Her husband's tone was pleasant. Who knew a pleasant tone could sound so... menacing? "I understand keeping our marriage a secret from other people, but when you also chose not to tell your best friend..."

I'm dead.

"Did you think I'd be the type to let you hide me away?"

Tassy started speaking very, very quickly. "I didn't mean to hide you! I just couldn't find the right time—"

Oh no.

Her voice trailed off when she realized where Lucius was staring.

"You're not wearing your wedding ring either."

"So, um, about that—"

Her voice faltered when he pushed a button that had the privacy partition sliding up behind Jacob.

Oh no.

Lucius reached for her waist to pull her close...before slowly guiding her head down...so she would have enough time to understand what he was asking of her.

"You've been a very bad girl, wife."

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And this time, all she could think of saying was...

"Y-Yes."

Liquid heat pooled between her already trembling thighs.

"I've b-been a v-very bad girl."

And her fingers were moving on their own while she was speaking, her breasts aching harder as she unzipped his pants.

"So what do you think I should do next? Do you think I should punish you?"

His hands guided hers to his massive length, and her nipples hardened when she felt it throb violently between her fingers.

"Take it out, wife."

She did as commanded, and a strangled sound escaped her throat when she realized her fingers weren't even enough to fully encircle him.

"Do you think this is a suitable punishment?"

No.

Not at all.

Because punishments were supposed to make someone terrified, not excited.

"Answer me." The demand was a velvety growl against her ear.

The harsh tone made her jump...but still not in fear. Instead it was the opposite, with her panties now completely soaked, and every part of her body that could swell was indeed swelling and aching.

"Y-Yes."

"So say it," Lucius growled.

Embarrassment heated her cheeks at what he was asking of her.

"Give me the words, wife."

But her toes were also curling hard because she realized that she did want to say it.

"P-Punish me with your cock, h-hus—"

He didn't let her finish, with Lucius deliberately taking her by surprise as he gripped her hair in order to pull it back and...aaaaah.

He was too big, too thick, too everything inside of her mouth.

His grip on her hair controlled the movement of her head, and all she could do was squeeze his muscular thighs as he guided her mouth up and down on his length.

"Start sucking, wife."

Her belly tightened with desire at the roughness of his voice, and she found herself

helplessly obeying his command. She sucked as hard as she could, and the sound of his harsh breath filled the car.

He started moving faster and harder, his length diving deeper and deeper until it was reaching the back of her throat. She didn't want to stop. But she was afraid she was about to lose her breath. Her mind started to spin. But she couldn't seem to stop herself from sucking. She wanted both of them lost, and it seemed her husband wanted the same thing, with his hand suddenly inside of her blouse.

Aaaaaah!

The moment his fingers tightened possessively around the swollen globe of flesh, everything started to spiral, and as soon as he started pinching her nipple, she instinctively sucked on his length as hard as she could.

Orgasm pounded into both of them at the same time, with Lucius growling her name out while her own body buckled in release.

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Tassy was completely limp when she felt him pull out of her mouth, and it was only when he murmured in her ear that she realized she had fallen asleep.

"We're here, Tassina."

Her eyes fluttered open.

What?

Lucius chuckled at the way his wife shot up in her seat when she realized where they were—outside his parents' ranch.

"Ready to meet my family?"

"No!"

His lips curved in a smile that could only be described as shamelessly sadistic. "That's exactly what I want to hear."

Aaaargh!

Tassy did her best to straighten her disheveled clothes before reluctantly stepping out of his car, but as soon as he had her on her feet, he immediately pulled her into his arms, and all she could do was clutch his shirt as he undid all the desperate hand combing she had done in the past five minutes.

When Lucius lifted his head, Tassy's eyes were still hazy with passion, her cheeks a

becoming shade of pink, and her lips kiss-swollen.

Perfect.

Tassy's head was still reeling as they stepped inside his parents' home, and it was only when they walked past a framed mirror that she accidentally caught sight of her reflection, and her steps came to a horrified halt.

"Lucius!" Her tone was aghast. "I can't meet your parents like..." Her voice trailed off when she saw the telltale glint in his gaze, and she realized he wanted this.

He actually wanted his entire family to see her like this, and she didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"I honestly thought you were just trying to make me feel better when you told me you were the possessive type."

"How foolish of you."

She choked back a laugh. The type to mince words, her husband was obviously not.

"I meant every word I said, wife. You're mine—"

She shook her head, saying teasingly, "I think what you mean to say is that you're crazy—"

"Over you? Absolutely."

A shiver ran down her spine at how his voice had suddenly gone dangerously soft.

"And it will do you best not to forget this."

Tassy was saved from replying since they had already reached the dining hall, but even as Lucius started to introduce her to everyone, she was unable to shake off a terrible sense of premonition.

That her husband was crazy over her she was happy to remember, but there was one thing she realized now that she had forgotten.

And it was the fact that she had yet to tell Lucius anything about Xylan.

Chapter Fourteen

'POOR-GIRL-MEETS-RICH-boyfriend's-family' was a common trope in all of Tassy's favorite romance novels and TV shows, and memories of such scenes started playing in her mind as she took in the quiet opulence of her surroundings.

Iron-wrought gates were something she was used to seeing on the outside of a stately home, rather than on the inside, the way it was in Lucius' parents' home. If that wasn't proof enough of how insanely wealthy his family was, the doors also opened to a high-ceilinged dining hall that could comfortably accommodate a hundred guests, literally. And while the mix of massive timber beams and impressive river stone pillars bequeathed the room with a majestic atmosphere, what served as its most breathtaking centerpiece was a floor-to-ceiling fireplace and the circular window overhead that offered panoramic views of rolling pastures and thoroughbred horses slowly making their way back to the heated comfort of the stable while amber rays painted the skies as the sun started to set in the background.

Tassy couldn't shake off the feeling she had just married into the Asian-American version of *Dynasty*, but just as she braced herself for any signs of judgment, disapproval, and condescension from one of the country's wealthiest ranching clans—

"Honeymoon still not over, I take it?"

The words of Lucius' youngest brother, underscored with lazy humor, had an instantaneous effect: Lucius' parents looked at them with fond smiles, his brothers smirked while Tassy could only turn red upon realizing her husband's family knew exactly what she and Lucius had been, um, busy with prior to showing up.

Her gaze flew to Lucius in dismay, but instead of sharing in her embarrassment and discomfort, Lucius only smiled in response, his coppery eyes gleaming with possessive satisfaction.

Aaargh!

The rest of the evening unfolded with good food, laughter, and relentless ribbing between the siblings and their stepsister. She had a feeling this was also deliberate on their part, with the family wanting Tassy to have the time to gradually relax in their presence.

His mother Joy was a picture of poise and grace, a tall, slim blonde who was soft-spoken but eloquent, and her coppery eyes either twinkling with merriment...or flashing with exasperation as she occasionally attempted to impose order on her not-so-orderly brood of children.

His stepfather, Alrich, on the other hand, reminded Tassy of a knight protecting his princess, albeit silver-haired and with a penchant for plaid shirts and jeans instead of the usual silver armor and shield. He had a certain calmness about him, appearing quietly content to simply watch over his family.

Tassy went on to study the rest of her husband's siblings, with her gaze falling first on twenty-one-year-old Raiden. He was the only biological offspring of Joy and Alrich, lived in his own apartment off campus, and while he did appear the most laidback among his brothers...why did it seem like he was hiding something?

Joy suggested that they move to the library for coffee, and while Lucius and Tassy stood up along with the rest, she was surprised to have her husband circle an arm around her waist to keep her from following out of the room.

When it was just the two of them, Lucius suddenly swung her off her feet, and she could only laugh in surprise as he suddenly had her perched on the sturdy back of one of the leather couches facing the fireplace.

"So...who are we trying to figure out next?"

A sheepish smile formed over her lips. "Was I that obvious?"

"You're a lamb in a den of lions——"

"I never thought that," she protested.

"And that's why you're a silly little lamb."

Her mouth opened and closed. Why did that make sense for some reason?

Lucius gazed at his wife with a mixture of concern and amusement. It was still too damn easy to make his Tassina second-guess her own thoughts, but since he wouldn't have her any other way, it was best to change the subject instead.

"Why don't I start by filling you in?" Lucius suggested smoothly. "As you may have already noticed, we don't think of Alrich as our stepfather. He is our father, and he has

been so from the very start."

Tassy couldn't help smiling. "I like that."

Of course she would, Lucius thought fondly.

"As for our mother, don't let her soft-spoken ways fool you. She has quite the temper——"

"You have to be joking!" Tassy could only shake her head. Joy and 'temper' in one sentence? It was impossible to imagine.

"Raiden is Raiden," Lucius went on pensively, "and let's see...you had a long talk with Marius earlier, didn't you?"

"He asked mostly about my work."

"Figures. Marius has what we call the Midas touch in the family," Lucius explained. "We've learned early on to not ask any questions and simply take his advice, investments-wise."

"I got to talk to Icelle just a bit, too," Tassy shared.

"What did you think of her at first?"

"Composed?"

Lucius nodded. "She does have a resting bitch face."

Tassy choked. "I never——"

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"It's fine. Everyone thinks that of her the first time, and she knows it, too."

"I really didn't think——"

Lucius' gaze bored through hers.

"Well, okay, I did think she was a bit reserved," Tassy allowed, "but that's it!"

Lucius just had to bend his head and give his wife's lips a little nibble. He loved Icelle as if she were his full-blooded sister, but she had also only started living with them when she turned eighteen six years ago. It would take more time for Icelle to realize that with their family, there was no need to be perfect.

His gaze flicked back to his wife, and he was no longer surprised at how the mere sight of her had his chest clenching. Who would've ever thought it was possible for someone like him to still fall in love, and so obsessively at that?

"What about Arkane?" his wife was asking now. "Do you think he approves of me?"

He cupped her chin. "What a stupid question, wife."

Tassy could only sputter. Seriously. Was it so hard for Lucius to at least try——

"I'm head over fucking heels in love with you."

——being a lot less perfect?

Because if he kept this up, he only had himself to blame once she started clinging to him for real.

"And so not only does my family approve of you, my Tassina——"

He guided her hands up his chest, and she blushed a little even as she took the hint and curved her hands over her husband's broad shoulders.

"But they're damn grateful because..."

Her heart skipped a beat as his gaze locked with his.

"You're the reason I've started living again."

"Oh, Lucius."

She just couldn't help herself at that point. She took the initiative for the first time, her hands cupping his gorgeous face as she drew his head down. But before their lips could even meet——

"We should go."

W-What? W-Why? W-Where?

Tassy found herself struggling to keep up with her husband's long-legged stride again.

"I just remembered we have additional company joining us tonight."

Oh.

Okay.

Who?

A name popped into her mind, and Tassy nervously combed her hair in a futile attempt to improve her appearance. Benedict had told them earlier that his wife Lana wouldn't be able to join them, but maybe something had changed?

Tassy gnawed on her lip as she heard laughter ringing out from the library down the hall. Benedict might only be two years younger than Lucius at thirty-six, but the two brothers were different as day and night. Whereas Lucius had the proud and harsh features of a Roman general, Benedict, having inherited his mother's blond hair and the cerulean eyes of Danico Young, had always been likened by the media to an earth-bound angel.

Come to think of it, that was often the description used for Benedict and his wife. When they had married in a lavish society wedding five years ago, the media had called the couple a match made in heaven because of their identically ethereal appearances.

Back then, the two had looked so passionately in love, which was the opposite of how dispassionately Benedict sounded when talking about his wife earlier.

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It made Tassy realize how things could change so drastically over time...just like her and Xylan.

Attuned as he was to his wife's mood at every level, Lucius sensed her sadness even before turning his gaze to her and seeing how the smile had faded from her lips.

"What's wrong?"

Tassy swallowed hard. She knew it was possible that she was simply making mountains out of molehills, and that Lucius wouldn't think it a big deal if he were to learn about Xylan only now. But what if it was the opposite?

"I know this isn't the right time to tell you, but..."

The double doors to the library suddenly opened, and the first thing that greeted her was a couple of familiar faces.

"Congratulations!"

Tassy couldn't believe her eyes. Was that...Stella? Oh, and was that Harry Montgomery and...and Summerine Harcourt? She turned to Lucius in confusion, and the gleam in his eyes told her this was why he had deliberately kept her in the dining room for so long.

Oh, Lucius!

Harry had a hard time blinking back tears as she watched Tassy throw herself into her

husband's arms. It felt like a lifetime ago when she first worked with Tassy. Of all the travel agents she had talked to, Tassy had been the only one who hadn't insisted on making Harry spend a fortune. Only Tassy had cared to listen about how Harry wanted to surprise her husband with a birthday trip, and Tassy alone who hadn't made any crack about Harry once being Devon Montgomery's mail-order bride.

Summerine was also feeling pretty emotional as she watched the once-aloof Lucius Young gaze down at his wife with possessive tenderness. It was only months ago when she had this idea about planning a much-delayed honeymoon for her and Ryu, and Tassy had been the only one who proved trustworthy enough to keep all the details a secret. How wonderful that Tassy now ended up married to one of Ryu's closest friends.

Devon Montgomery and Ryu Harcourt joined Lucius for a drink while they watched their wives walk away talking about whatever it was that women liked to talk about.

"I didn't think I'd ever live to see this day," Devon drawled, "but here we are now. Welcome to the club, Mr. Young."

"I have to ask, though," Ryu slotted in. "Is the prick still alive?"

Lucius didn't miss a beat, asking, "Depends on how you define alive."

Both men smiled at this. It was exactly the answer they expected, considering how their shared dislike of Tassy's ex-boyfriend.

"Harry never liked him," Devon shared with a grimace. "And that's saying a lot, since my wife likes everyone."

"I'll do what I can to help when news of your marriage is made public," Ryu promised. "And like it or not, once the press figures out the timeline of your

relationship, they'll milk it with all they've got."

"I can just picture the headlines," Lucius said.

Devon's lip curled. "They are a predictable lot."

"Billionaire Lucius Young: Rebound Husband," Ryu suggested with a sardonic twist of his lips. "Or something like that."

"Something like that indeed."

Lucius' smile didn't reach his eyes.

Damn her.

A rebound, dammit.

Damn her for making a fool out of him.

Chapter Fifteen

IT WAS ALREADY CLOSE to midnight by the time she and Lucius were on their way back to San Antonio, and for the first few minutes of the ride, Tassy found herself reliving the incredible time she had with her husband's family. She had feared and expected the worst, but instead all of them had been a dream while the presence of Stella and the other couples was like icing on the cake.

Her gaze drifted absently to the window, noting how a thin layer of frost had covered the ground. She then glanced at her husband's profile, and just staring at him still had her catching her breath. Everything about him was just perfect, and when she thought about how this man, who was infamous for his aloofness, was instead gentle and

possessive towards her alone...

Tassy mustered the courage to place her hand on his thigh for the first time. She had never thought she'd be the type to seduce a man before, but...why was he taking her hand away?

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His gaze turned to her then, and it was then she saw the coldness in his eyes – colder than the winter air outside.

"Stop the car."

The terse command had Jacob's startled gaze swerving to the rearview mirror.

"Now, dammit."

The chauffeur slammed his foot on the brakes, and Tassy's side slammed painfully against the door as the tires underneath them screeched to a stop.

She turned to her husband in confusion. "What's wrong?"

Lucius' fist clenched. Damn her. How long did she plan on keeping up with this whole fucking charade?

"L-Lucius?" His handsome features seemed encased in stone, and it terrified her.

"My lawyer will call you—"

Why?

"Now, get out."

The door her back was pressed against suddenly unlatched, and Tassy would've tumbled out onto the gravel if she had not grabbed hold of the armrest in time. She

pushed herself up, thinking he would help her any moment...but he didn't.

And that scared her even more.

She turned to him again, and her heart started to break at the impassive expression on his gorgeous face.

"I d-don't understand." Was this some kind of sick joke? Why was he looking at her like the very sight of her filled him with contempt? It would only make sense if he already knew...

Oh God, he knew.

Xylan.

He knew about Xylan.

The night air hit Tassy like a physical blow as she stood half-in, half-out of the car. Her dress offered little protection against the unusual chill, and goosebumps immediately rose on her exposed skin.

"I'm s-sorry." She couldn't say it fast enough, knowing instinctively that Lucius was not the type to give second chances. "I wanted to tell you earlier—"

"Of course you have." His voice was as brittle as the ice crystals forming on the roadside grass.

"I'm not lying," she insisted shakily. "I swear—"

"Stop wasting my time," Lucius snapped.

"P-Please don't do this," she begged. "I love you—"

"Enough," Lucius snarled. It pissed him that she was still trying to make a fool out of him, but what pissed him even more was how the tremor of her voice still had his chest clenching in pain. "Did you really think you could keep me by your side like a fucking idiot forever—"

"No!"

"Maybe even planning to turn me into your fucking lapdog—"

She could only shake her head as her heart continued to break in pieces. "P-Please, it's n-not—"

Tassy ended up crying out as his fist slammed into the car door with enough force to make the entire vehicle shudder.

"I know everything about you now, damn you. I know you've been with Xylan for years—"

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All she could do was shake her head.No. No. No.

"Damn you, damn you, Tassina—"

She looked at him pleadingly. "We b-broke up—"

Lucius punched the car door again, and Tassy suddenly had a feeling that it was her he wished he could punch.

"I know you fucking broke up," her husband lashed out. "And I also know that you broke up a fucking day before you met me. So what the fuck do you think that says?"

The fury in his gaze frightened her, but what had her own eyes stinging with tears was realizing that it was not anger but pain—so much pain, oh God—that had been fueling all of his hurtful words.

"I'm sorry," she whispered brokenly. "I'm sorry for hurting you—"

"Shut up, damn you."

"Please just listen—" She could only cry out as Lucius swore viciously under his breath before grabbing her arm in a grip that would leave bruises.

"S-Stop—"

Tassy tried to resist, but he was too strong, and in mere moments, her husband had managed to bodily haul her out of his car. The frozen gravel bit into her bare feet

through her thin dress shoes as she stumbled.

"L-Lucius, p-please—"

But seeing that he was already turning to get back inside the vehicle, Tassy lunged forward and clutched the back of his shirt. "P-Please—"

"Get your fucking hands off me." Lucius spun around, copper eyes blazing with rage as he pried her fingers loose.

"Please let me explain—"

"I'll only say this once." Lucius' voice was cold. "Don't let me see your face again if you want what's good for you."

It was the look on his face, more than his words, that had her frozen and trembling at the same time, and all Tassy could do was watch him disappear, the door slamming shut behind him like the final nail being pounded on her coffin.

An icy wind slapped her face, but pain had made her numb.

How do I fix things, God?

Please help me.

Please.

Back inside the car, Jacob was unable to sit still, his worried gaze darting back to the rearview mirror again and again. "We can't leave her in the middle of nowhere, sir."

Lucius' lips tightened as he fought against the urge to look back.

"At least ask for someone to drive her somewhere safe, sir. No matter what happened between the two of you, I wouldn't think you'd want your wife to come into any kind of harm."

He remembered today's weather report about San Antonio being a lot colder than usual.

Fuck.

Lucius' jaw clenched as he took his phone out and made a call.

Tassy was still standing where her husband had abandoned her, arms wrapped around her shivering form, when she saw a pair of headlights in the distance. Her breath came in visible puffs as she waited, her body trembling uncontrollably now from both emotion and cold.

A car pulled up beside her, Lucius' youngest brother stepping out, his handsome face uncharacteristically sober.

He draped his jacket over her shoulders without a word and guided her to the passenger seat. The warmth of the car's heater was like a physical blow after the freezing air outside, making her skin tingle painfully as circulation returned.

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Raiden slid back behind the wheel, and she prepared herself for accusations and insults, all of which she told herself she deserved.

But instead, all Raiden said was that Lucius had told him to drive her to a hotel.

"Is that alright?"

No.

It's not alright.

Nothing's alright.

But the words remained stuck in her throat, and Tassy mustered up a smile instead.

"Could you take me somewhere else?"

She gave him the address to her old apartment, and Raiden insisted on walking her to her front door and waiting for her to lock up before leaving.

Once she was alone, she looked around and noticed a thin layer of dust covering everything. It felt as if she had walked into a tomb.

Her tomb.

And although she knew her place would be painfully bare, all the empty space just reminded how her empty her own life could be...and would be...if Lucius were to never come back.

Tassy fumbled for her phone with shaking fingers, but her call didn't even push through...with Lucius having already blocked her number.

Please God.

Please.

Please.

Her body curled into a ball on the floor, her eyes still dry even as her heart still hadn't stopped from breaking. The pain she felt when Xylan had broken up with her...suddenly felt like nothing. It was just nothing compared to how much she was hurting now, and oh God...

That said everything, didn't it?

Wind rattled the windows of her apartment, but apart from that, all she heard was silence.

Her phone buzzed, and Tassy snatched it up, hoping against hope it was Lucius.

But instead it was a message from Stella.

Want to see how crazy fake news can get?

Underneath this was a screenshot of a photo of Lucius having dinner with none other than Fontana Ferrer.

It was the perfect revenge, and it got the message across just as perfectly.

Chapter Sixteen

THE VOLUME OF OFFICE noise abruptly dropped as soon as Tassy showed up at her workplace the next day. There were more people than ever avoiding her gaze, and while she gave her colleagues credit for doing their best not to talk while she was around, some weren't that good at measuring how much distance needed to be kept for one to be truly out of earshot.

Poor thing...

Twice with the same girl...

Can you just imagine how humiliating that is?

Every minute she spent in front of her computer screen was agony, and Tassy eventually came to realize that as much as she loved her job, it was not worth her sanity. It was time for a fresh start, time to be away from everything and everyone.

The company's HR manager didn't seem surprised at all to receive her resignation letter. "I'm sorry about this, Tassy."

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The pity in the older woman's gaze spoke volumes, but Tassy somehow managed a smile.

"I'll process this as quickly as I can, but I'll still need you to come back tomorrow to sign the final paperwork. Is that alright?"

"That sounds perfect. I'm sorry to cause you additional work."

"Oh, hon. What I really hate is having you leave, but I also understand why it's necessary. I just wish things could've been different. You don't deserve this, Tassy. You of all people..." Melody shook her head with a sniff.

"There's no need to worry. I'll be fine, I promise."

She stepped out of Melody's office, but the mere thought of going back to her desk had Tassy's heart shriveling.

I can't.

I just can't anymore.

I just can't.

Her knees started knocking against each other, and Tassy had to press a hand against the wall to keep herself from swaying. All day she had tried so, so hard not to think about it, but this time there was no hiding from the images that flooded her mind without mercy.

Lucius and Fontana staring at each other...

Lucius smiling at the other woman...

Fontana leaning towards her husband...

And then there were all those things that the media was saying about them.

Perfect couple alert!

Could wedding bells be ringing soon?

Are they San Antonio's next It Couple?

"I guess we're on the same boat."

The voice was familiar, laced with bitterness. She slowly looked up, knowing already who it was.

Xylan stood before her, his Burberry tie slightly askew, dark circles under his eyes suggesting he'd had as rough a night as she had.

"You've seen the photos, too?"

She nodded.

A resentful smile twisted his lips. "Do you know what that bitch said when she broke up with me?" he asked, leaning against the wall beside her. "That the only reason she wanted me was because she kept hearing how perfect we were together."

"I'm sorry."

Xylan stared at her. "And?"

"I don't know what else——"

"We need to get even," he burst out. "We need to show those two that we don't give a fuck about them. Let's get back together——"

"I can't."

Xylan's lip curled. "For fuck's sake, Tas. Do you really think he'd still go back to you? And even if he does, why the fuck would you take him back? Hedumpedyou——"

"You dumped me, too," she couldn't help pointing out.

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Xylan's mouth opened and closed. "Fine, okay, you got me there. But it's different with him."

Yes, it was.

"When we broke up, the whole world didn't know about it. But when that asshole dumped you——"

"He didn't." The words felt torn from her throat.

Xylan stared at her incredulously. "Why can't you just accept the truth? He——"

"He left me——"

"What the hell's the difference?" Xylan demanded impatiently.

"Because he thought I m-married him to h-hurt you."

But instead she had ended up hurting herself.

"Married?" Xylan could only stare at her. "We just broke up, and you ended up married to him?" Xylan felt as if he had never known Tassy at all after hearing this.

"It isn't like you to be so fucking impulsive——"

"I wasn't."

"But you married him——"

"Because I love him."

And as soon as the words were out, it was as if the very last of her walls crumbled for good, and now there was no holding back the sobs rushing out of her throat, just no way to stop the pain from clawing at her soul until it was getting harder and harder to breathe.

"I l-love him, Xylan. I l-love him."

Xylan could only stare as Tassy broke down in tears in front of him. He had never seen her cry. And he had certainly never expected to see her cry like this.

"I'm sorry, Tas.

She wished she could laugh at how awkward Xylan sounded, but the tears simply wouldn't stop falling, and her pain only seemed to keep growing.

"I love him..."

Oh God, why couldn't she stop saying it?

"I really love him."

Why couldn't she just stop when every word was killing her?

"I love him...b-but I don't think he ever l-loved me...if he can hurt me like this."

Chapter Seventeen

THE EXECUTIVE OFFICES of Young Enterprises gleamed with modern minimalism—steel and glass surfaces reflecting the city lights outside. During the

day, it buzzed with the hustle and bustle of a highly driven corporate workforce. But at midnight, the entire place was quiet and dark...save for the office of the man who owned all of it.

Lucius wearily leaned back against his seat, suit jacket discarded, and sleeves rolled to the elbow. Everything inside of him felt dead. It had been so since he had gotten rid of her.

A sound alerted him to someone coming inside to his office, but Lucius couldn't even find the fucking energy to open his eyes.

Marius' lips tightened as he studied his eldest brother, who was a picture of exhaustion and despair. It was like looking at a fucking stranger.

"What is it, Marius?"

Marius' lips twitched. When they had been younger, none of them could slip anything past their eldest brother. It was nice to know this part of Lucius was still the same.

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"I've got some investment recommendations."

"At midnight?" Lucius finally straightened in his seat and looked at his brother. "How about telling me why you're really here?"

"I'm not lying." Marius placed a memory stick on his brother's desk before sliding into the leather seat across from Lucius. "I bought Black Carpet."

"Congratulations," Lucius said, his voice devoid of inflection. "Are you here to ask how much I'd like to invest in it?"

"In the company I just acquired? A hundred mil. In your marriage? That depends on whether you can ever get your head out of your ass."

Lucius' gaze glinted. "Don't."

But the warning only made an identical pair of copper eyes glint back at him just as fiercely.

"You fucked up, Lucius." He pushed the memory stick forward. "Let's just hope it's not too fucking late."

Lucius watched his brother walk away with the same abruptness with which he had appeared. It was unlike this brother of his to interfere in anyone's personal relationships, and tension turned his body rigid as he reached for the memory stick.

The storage drive contained several video files. He clicked on the first, and his

stomach clenched as Tassina's face filled his screen.

She was in a conference room, presumably in her workplace, and surrounded by colleagues. She was awarded a promotion...at the same time that asshole chose to break up with her.

The second video showed her talking to her department VP, and his chest tightened at the way her eyes softened when she shyly admitted that their marriage was a love match.

The third video, however...

Lucius shot to his feet at the sight of her ex nearly succeeding in forcing himself on his wife in what appeared to be a medical room, stopping only when Stella arrived.

Rage flooded his veins, but this just as swiftly turned into agony when the last video showed Tassina crying in the hallway, and he heard her sobbing out, "I love him."

His blood turned cold.

"I love him, I really love him..."

Lucius could feel himself whitening at every word she choked out, every sob that tumbled past her trembling lips.

"I love him...b-but I don't think he ever l-loved me...if he can hurt me like this."

His fists clenched, memories that he had tried to repress suddenly devouring his mind.

God, oh God.

He remembered teasing his Tassina for the first time in the airport lounge, and how easy it was to make her question whether he was flirting with her or not.

He remembered playing with Tassina in Foxtown, and how she had ended up second-guessing herself because of someone simply professing their innocence...

He remembered Tassina in his parents' ranch, and how easy it had been to surprise her.

He could go on and on, but he realized now, just when it could be too late, how she had always been so damn sweet...to the point of being gullible. How could he have forgotten this part of her? How could he have forgotten how fucking innocent she was...to the point that he had managed to fool himself into thinking his Tassina was a cold-hearted bitch who would lie about falling in love with him just to get revenge on her ex?

The Tassina he knew and had fallen in love with...could never have it in her to deceive anyone.

But because of his own damn fears...he had ended up throwing away the most important thing in his life.

The realization hit him like a physical blow, leaving him gasping for air.

God.

Oh God.

What have I done?

Marius was heading back home when his phone started to ring. The call was from Lucius, and he had been expecting it since leaving his brother's office.

Lucius spoke as soon as Marius answered. "I fucked up."

"You did."

"Can you help me?"

Marius inhaled sharply. This was only the second time in his entire life that Lucius had ever asked anything from him, and it was no coincidence that both times had to do with his wife. Some people might see this as a disadvantage and think of Tassy as a weakness on his brother's part. But for Marius, it was the opposite.

The whole family had felt Lucius withdrawing from them bit by bit after their father's death. But Tassy had changed all of that. She had made him human again. Made their eldest brother capable once more of feelings...the moment she had stolen his heart.

And that was why—

"What do you have in mind?"

Whatever his brother needed to get his wife back, Marius would stop at nothing to make it happen.

DAWN BROKE OVER THE city skyline, painting the glass towers in shades of pink and gold. Jacob waited in the underground parking garage while mentally rehearsing his resignation speech for the tenth time.

Some lines just couldn't be uncrossed, Jacob thought gloomily. And yet that night, he had crossed it, and now he was paying the price. He had been unable to sleep since then, his conscience refusing to give him rest.

The elevator doors slid open, and Lucius strode out, his expression a storm of determination and despair, and the sight gave Jacob pause.

Lucius took one look at his chauffeur's face and knew what the older man was thinking of doing.

"You don't need to quit," he said tautly. "I was an ass. I didn't know that then, but I do now, and that's why I need you to drive for me so I can beg my wife to take me back."

"Understood, sir." Jacob's voice shook with emotion, and he found himself furiously blinking back tears as he slid behind the wheel. He was relieved over not having to quit, but more than that...oh, thank God his boss had seen the light!

As they pulled out of the garage and into the early morning traffic, Jacob heard his boss ask, "Would you really have quit if I hadn't told you I realized I made the biggest mistake of my life?"

"Of course, sir."

"Even though you've only known her for over a day while you've known me for years?"

"I don't mean to cause offense, Mr. Young—"

"Offend away," Lucius said with a sardonic twist of his lips.

Jacob met his boss's gaze soberly through the rearview mirror. "I'm good at what I do, sir, and billionaires to work for are not that hard to find. But on the other hand..."

Lucius' gaze swung back to the rearview mirror, and the sight of the older man fighting back tears had his jaw clenching.

"Mrs. Young's heart of gold? That's one in a million, and I just can't..." Jacob swallowed hard. "I just can't believe we left her there, sir."

The older man's voice cracked, and Lucius' own gaze started to blur.

God.

Oh God.

What a fool I've been.

Jacob had only known his wife for an even shorter time than he did, and yet the older man had realized all on his own that he had misjudged Tassina.

The man she married, on the other hand, and one who had sworn to love her for better or worse...

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God.

A haunted silence gripped the air, and the billionaire knew he wasn't the only one whose mind was suddenly assaulted by shared memories.

God.

Oh God.

How could I have been so blind?

He remembered ordering Jacob to drive off while leaving Tassina behind all alone...at night...and in the middle of nowhere.

I'm sorry, God. Help me. Please.

It was Lucius' first time to pray.

Because it was also his first time to experience a terrifying sense of helplessness.

And his first time to realize that when he had broken Tassy's heart, Lucius had also broken his own.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry, God.

Please give me another chance with her.

Chapter Eighteen

TASSY ALREADY KNEW what to expect coming to work the next day, but it still didn't make any difference. The pity in everyone's gazes still stung, and so did the horrible way the office noise died down whenever people noticed her presence. This place used to feel like her second home. But no longer.

Please God.

Help me get over this.

Please.

But when she was back in Melody's office, seeing the other woman's strained expression was like an omen.

"I'm so sorry, Tassy. But our CEO asked to see you in his office."

Their CEO, as in...Fontana's father?

Her hand went to her throat in an unconscious gesture of trepidation. "What if I refuse?"

"I don't know. I honestly don't. I'm sorry."

Tassy forced herself to nod. "It's not your fault. I'll go. I'm sure it's nothing...serious." There was no point making Melody troubled as well, and she managed a smile for the other woman before leaving.

Her fingers shook as she pressed the elevator button that would take her to the CEO's office. She knew she could still refuse, but maybe this was better. This could only lead to more heartbreak, but there was also a part of her that wanted it. Needed it, even. Because whatever this was, Tassy was certain it had to do with Fontana and Lucius being together—which was what she needed the most.

Something to knock some sense into her.

Because she was so, so tired of hurting and crying every night.

She just wanted -needed- something -anything- that would purge Lucius out of her heart, for good.

Mr. Ferrer's secretary, Alberta, was clearly expecting her when the older woman came to her feet as soon as she saw Tassy. The secretary's silver-streaked bob and impeccable pantsuit were as much a fixture of the executive floor as the art collection. "Hello, dear."

The other woman's sympathetic tone caught Tassy off guard, and a smile wobbled over her lips. "H-Hi, Alberta."

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"I'm sorry about everything that's happened lately."

"It's fine."

Alberta gazed at her soberly. "Do you need more time before going in?"

Tassy shook her head.

"Alright then."

Alberta opened the door for her, and Tassy could feel countless pairs of eyes following her as she stepped inside the cavernous office. It was her first time to be here, and she took a deep breath in a bid to brace herself for the worst.

Please just be with me, God.

I know I can endure anything as long as You're there.

She lifted her gaze...but instead of Fontana's father, the person standing in front of her was...Lucius?

A part of her wanted to run away right that moment, but the moment her gaze collided with his, it was like falling under a deadly spell, and she could no longer look away even though seeing him killed her bit by bit.

Lucius breathed hard as his wife stared at him in shock. His fists clenched against his sides, a growing sense of agitation threatening to consume him from within.

He knew it was only a matter of time before she remembered, and when he saw her suddenly pale—

He knew, of course.

He knew his wife finally remembered how he had pushed her away.

Ignored her pleas.

Before abandoning her.

Tassy whirled around to leave, but she only managed to take a step before feeling his arms wrap around her from behind.

"Forgive me."

The rawness of his tone broke her heart, but she knew she couldn't let the past repeat itself again.

"You're the most important thing in my life—" As soon as he said this, his Tassina started to struggle, but he couldn't let her go. "You are, Tassina—"

All she could do was shake her head, and she was no longer able to hold back her tears.

Liar, she wished she had the strength to scream at him.

Liar!

Liar!

"Ryu and Devon told me about your ex," he said unevenly. "I realize now that you would never have deliberately hidden the truth from me. I know that now. But back then...all I could think of was that you were lying to me—"

Tassy could hardly breathe as sobs rocked her body. She had never lied to him. Never. But she had lied to her!

"And that you only married me to hurt him."

Lucius suddenly spun her around to face him, his movements jerky with barely contained emotions. His hands gripped her upper arms, not painfully but with an urgency that betrayed the frayed state of his composure.

"I couldn't think straight after that."

Tassy wished she could feel angry. Or even betrayed. But all she felt was pain. Not just for herself, but for him. Why, God? Why did it hurt so, so much just to see the haunted look on his face?

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"All I wanted was to hurt you...which I did." Lucius waited for her to say something - anything!- but his wife only stared up at him, crying.

"I love you."

Tassy shook her head.

"I'm not lying," he said fiercely. "I love you—"

She looked at him helplessly. "You d-don't. You c-couldn't have been. Because don't you see?" she whispered painfully. "If you r-really l-loved me, you wouldn't keep having c-cold feet. So please...let's just end this."

Lucius couldn't remember feeling this hollowed out. His wife was right in front of him, her delicate features ravaged by the pain he had caused her...but Tassy was looking at him as if she could no longer see him.

"Don't do this.Please." He had never begged in his entire life. But he would beg for all eternity if that was what it took to have her take him back. "Don't give up on me."

Her only response was silence, and Lucius grabbed her shoulders, terror gnawing at his heart. Why did it feel like she was about to disappear any second?

"I love you," he gritted out. "Do you hear me? I love—"

"If you really did," Tassy said jerkily, "then you c-could never..."

His wife's voice broke, and Lucius' own heart shattered because he knew exactly what she was thinking.

And it was him with Fontana...on the same night he had broken her heart.

"Nothing happened between us—"

"I don't care—"

"Don't fucking say that. I hurt you—"

"I've forgiven you—"

"I'd rather you hate me instead," he snarled savagely, "if forgiving me means you're also choosing to cut me out—"

"I have no choice," Tassy choked out. "Can't you see I h-have no choice? I'm so tired of crying, Lucius. I don't think I can bear hurting like this—"

"Then take me back," he urged.

"I can't."

Lucius could already feel his wife slipping farther and farther away from him, and torment like he had never experienced before threatened to devour him from within. "Ask me anything, Tassina—" Lucius struggled to keep his voice steady. "Ask me anything, and I'll do it."

Hearing the anguish in Lucius' voice hurt, but there was nothing she could do. "I d-don't need—"

"Don't fucking say that."

Tassy's chest felt as if it was to explode in pain. It hurt, oh God. It hurt so, so bad to hear Lucius so frantic. But all she could do was shake her head, her loose hair now framing her tear-streaked face. "I'm s-sorry——"

"Stop acting like we're over," he bit out.

"I'm sorry——"

Lucius couldn't stop himself from shaking her. "Listen to me. I'm begging you. Just please fucking listen to me." This time, it was his own voice that broke. "Please."

And his voice that was now hoarse and ragged as he realized that maybe he really was too late.

"I love you."

Maybe he had lost her for good——

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"I love you, Tassina."

And the possibility had Lucius crashing down on his knees.

Tassy's world started to spin out of control. Lucius...was on his knees. How could a man so proud be on his knees? And the bleakness in his eyes, oh God...

"Please just tell me what to do, I'm begging you."

Tears rushed down her cheeks. "L-Lucius, please—"

"Nothing happened between Fontana and me," Lucius went on doggedly. "I have footage of the time we spent in the restaurant on my phone. I just...I just wanted to hurt you—"

"You d-don't have to explain—"

Lucius looked up, and she could no longer speak, the devastation in his copper eyes tearing her apart. "What else can I do but explain?"

"There's n-nothing for you to explain—"

"Then can I bribe you?"

She almost laughed despite everything...until she realized he was dead serious.

"I'll give you everything I own—"

"I d-don't want your money—"

"Then what else can I give?" Lucius asked hollowly.

Tassy could no longer bear hearing another word, and especially not in a tone that seemed almost devoid of life. But when she tried covering her ears, Lucius immediately captured her hands in an inescapable grip as he demanded, "Do you want my heart on a platter?"

"No!"

He stared at her like a man on death row, and she was his only hope.

No, God. No.

"Ask anything of me, Tassina. Any—"

"I don't want anything," she cried out, "so p-please stop!" Why wouldn't he stop? Why, oh God? Why? "Please just let me go—"

"Have you stopped loving me?" The bleakness in his gaze had bled into his voice, and the sound threatened to break her heart into pieces.

All she could do was stare at him as she cried, unable to believe that the powerful man she had married was still looking and talking to her like she was his reason for living.

Lucius swallowed hard as he forced himself to say the words. "Have you...have you realized you still love Tatum?"

Oh God.

Tassy couldn't believe someone as proud as Lucius could even ask this. His usual arrogance had been stripped away completely, leaving him raw and exposed before her.

"Is that it?"

His wife's silence was like someone twisting a knife inside of his heart. Every second that passed was visible in the tightening of his features, the whitening of his knuckles.

Lucius squeezed his eyes shut, long dark lashes fanning against his cheeks. "I can't share you, Tassina. But I'm willing to wait. Also...Marius bought this company, and then I bought it from him. Technically, I'm your boss now, and you should know that I'll have Xylan transferred as far away from you as possible."

Tassy started crying in earnest. All this time, he had been right in front of her, but her pain had made him invisible. But now, oh God...

"But you...you don't have to worry." It killed him to even think of his wife worrying over any other man, much more an asshole like her ex, but Lucius knew he only had himself to blame for all of this. "I'll give him a raise. Promote him even though he doesn't deserve it."

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Tassy could barely hear anything he said, with her mind filled with memories.

So many memories, oh God.

She remembered how he had figured out her favorite song because he had been paying attention to every little thing about her.

Remembered how he had everyone sign NDAs just to protect her privacy.

But most of all, she remembered what truly mattered—

And that was how Lucius was the person she had prayed for.

"I'll do whatever you fucking want—" His words came faster now, tumbling over each other in his frantic desire to make his wife see he was not a lost cause. "Anything, Tassina—"

"S-Stop."

That one word from his wife didn't just stop Lucius from speaking. It also threatened to stop his heart from beating because of the way her voice shook with finality.

Was it really too late?

And it was almost as if his wife had heard his question, with the way Tassina was suddenly struggling to yank her hands out of his hold.

It was, he realized dully.

It really was too late, his sin against her too much to forgive, and so if he truly loved her—

Lucius forced his grip to loosen, his fingers uncurling one by one from around her wrists.

He had to let her go.

God.

Oh God.

I love her, God.

But just as emptiness swelled up inside of him, he heard a soft thud, followed by small, soft hands shakily cupping his face. Her cool palms pressed against his fevered skin, her thumbs brushing the stubble along his jawline, and finally—

"I forgive you, Lucius."

Tassy's heart ached as her husband's dazed gaze clashed with hers.

"And I love you so, so—"

The rest of her words disappeared in his kiss, with Lucius hauling her into his arms. He landed on his back against the carpet, his wife atop him, and still their kiss remained unbroken. He knew he should ease up, let her breathe, give her space—

But he couldn't.

Because he could hardly believe this was real.

And Lucius had a feeling that the only time he would allow himself to believe it was so when he was buried deep inside her sweet warmth, and his seed planted in her womb.

In the meantime, a commotion had just broken outside the office of the CEO, with an already ill-tempered Fontana throwing a fit when her father's secretary had security blocking her way.

What the fuck had gotten into this bitch?

She tried pushing past the old hag, but Alberta stood her ground. "I'm sorry. But you can't go in, Ms. Ferrer."

"What do you mean I can't go in?" Fontana screeched.

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Alberta sighed in relief when she saw who was walking up to Fontana from behind. Reinforcements have finally arrived, thank goodness.

"It appears what I've heard about you is true."

The silkily spoken words from behind her had Fontana seeing red. She knew when she was being insulted, even indirectly, but just as she whirled around, it was then she saw Marius Young standing in front of her—

And his viciously pleasant smile had her words dying an abrupt death as fear strangled her throat. How the hell could one look so beautiful and scary at the same time?

"They say you like causing trouble." Marius' tone perfectly matched his smile, and Fontana's nails dug into her palms. "Is that right?"

"I don't know what you're talking about?"

"Then will you deny having anything to do with my sister-in-law being humiliated on the day she was supposed to be celebrating her promotion?"

His sister-in-law?

What the hell did Benedict Young's wife have to do with her? She had never even met Lana! So why would he say that unless—

It couldn't be!

"The look on your face is very telling, Fontana," Marius murmured, "and I don't fucking like it."

Fontana's body shook with humiliated rage. Enough was enough! Billionaire or not, he was still in her father's company, and so this was her territory, not his.

She raised her hand to slap his face—

"Who owns this company now, Alberta?" Marius drawled, not even flinching at the threatened violence.

Fontana froze, her hand suspended in mid-air.

"Your brother, sir." Alberta's voice was prim.

Marius drew a certain sense of satisfaction at seeing Fontana's face lose all color...but it was not enough.

"Your father needs this deal, believe me. So if you want to keep the lifestyle you're used to...I expect you to get creative on how to best make it up to my sister-in-law...AKA your new boss."

Epilogue

FOXTOWN'S COBBLESTONE streets glittered under fairy lights strung between Victorian lampposts, transforming the historic district into a Valentine's Day wonderland. And much to the delight of the park's visitors, snow had also started to fall, which only made everything magical.

It was as if the angels in heaven were also rejoicing over the fairytale-like marriage of the Duke of Windtowne and his young blushing bride, and just thinking about this

had many a woman sighing dreamily.

Oh, to be in the duchess' shoes, even just for a day!

A woman dressed in an unfashionable gown stood by the entrance to welcome newly arrived visitors, her face a picture of, well...

"Welcome to Foxtown!"

She had been saying those words every so often, but why did her face look like she had mistaken her toy poodle's droppings for chocolate?

"My name is Fontana, for those who don't know, I'll be playing different roles throughout the month——"

She broke off when a gentleman dressed like a dandy suddenly went up to her, saying, "I'm Ernie, a writer for The Texas Social." He showed her his wristband as proof, which was indeed the color provided for members of the press. "Is it true that you tried to get between Lucius Young and his wife?"

Fontana's first instinct was to scream. But since her father had confirmed that they'd be bankrupt if not for the Youngs buying their company——

Fontana forced herself to smile teasingly. "Since one of the roles I'm playing in Foxtown is that of a desperate social-climbing baron's daughter——"

The crowd of visitors who stood close enough to overhear her words laughed at this.

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"I think you can answer the question for yourself."

While Fontana continued to bend over backward in entertaining guests while painting herself the villain, Lucius and Tassy were back in the cozy confines of Foxtown's lone detective agency, and Constable Dill stood before them as the reluctant bearer of bad news.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace. You failed to identify the correct suspect."

Tassy turned to her husband in shock. "Does that mean she lied to me?"

"I believe it does."

"How could she lie to me? I can't believe it!"

"I can't believe it either," Lucius deadpanned while wondering at the same time how his wife could be so brilliantly resourceful and strategic at curating complex itineraries for the most demanding of clients...but be so woefully gullible in catching fake criminals, even with their hands already in the cookie jar right in front of her.

It was just too damn adorable for words, and the more he thought about it, the more he wanted his wife.

Now.

Tassy started in surprise when Lucius suddenly shot to his feet. "Lu——" Her voice trailed off when his coppery gaze blazed down at her with in need.

Oh no.

She knew that look, unfortunately. Her husband had once told her she was 'insanely' gullible...and how that trait of hers never failed to turn him on.

Lucius raised a brow at the constable, who knew right away what the duke was asking of him.

However...

"I'm sorry, Your Grace," Constable Dill apologized gloomily, "but all rooms are currently booked."

Tassy let out a strangled gasp when she realized what the conversation was all about. But just as she started tugging her husband's sleeve—

"I just remembered," Constable Dill exclaimed. "We do have the supply room at the end of the hall—"

"We'll take it," Lucius said right away, and Tassy could only turn red while Constable Dill started whistling under his breath.

They were on the move in the next second, with Tassy forced once more to keep up with her husband's long-legged stride. "Seriously? Why can't we just go to our suite—"

Lucius looked at her oddly. "Because I can't wait that long."

And so off they walked, faster than before even, and all Tassy could do was bite back a laugh even as her heart overflowed with love and joy. They had been married for there months now, and she woke up every day, thinking that surely life couldn't get

any better...but it did.

Each day, God helped her see why every bad thing that happened in the past had a purpose. If Fontana had not set her eyes on Xylan, she would never have allowed herself to even look at Lucius. And if Lucius had not hurt her so badly, she would never have learned what it meant to ask for God's comfort and truly trust in His plans.

Each day, she had a new reason to feel thankful, and—oh my goodness!

Everything happened so fast. One moment they were still in the hallway. The next thing she knew, Lucius had locked them inside the supply room, her world plunged in darkness, and her husband kissing her hard...just before spinning Tassy around and pushing her up against the wall.

"We're a little tight on space here," Lucius whispered into her ear, "but we can make it work, don't you think?"

He was already pushing the skirts of her gown up as he spoke, and before she could answer him, he had already thrust inside of her—

Aaaaah.

His every thrust had her senses spinning.

"Are you aware that there exists a cognitive dissonance and heightened arousal when—"

"S-Stop turning me on," she moaned.

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A sadistic smile curved over his lips. "Never, baby girl."

She had no chance to answer yet again, with his fingers slipping inside of her mouth as he thrust harder and deeper into her.

Oh yes, Tassy thought dazedly. We could make this work very, very hard—I mean, well, indeed.

ONE MONTH LATER

"We just received a call from the hospital, Mr. Young," Milton reported. "Dr. Chen says Mrs. Young's surgery was a complete success, and results have exceeded all expectations."

"And the burns?"

"There will be no disfigurement," Milton was eager to assure his boss. "In a month's time, there won't be any visible scarring at all. It's as if the fire - and the accident - never happened." Milton's voice awkwardly trailed off at the way his boss's penetrating gaze narrowed. As expected of the great Benedict Young, Milton thought in a mixture of awe and dread. The billionaire had an almost supernatural ability to sense when something was amiss.

It was just too bad that the only time his boss hadn't seen through a person's lies was when he married his wife.

Milton shoved the thought away as quickly as it had surfaced. Stop thinking of Mrs.

Young that way, you idiot!

"Milton?"

The thread of impatience in his boss's voice had Milton hastily completing his report.

Please inform Mr. Young that he should expect a slight change in his wife's appearance. This cannot be helped, unfortunately.

Milton took pains to relay Dr. Chen's warning verbatim, but his boss's chiseled features remained unreadable.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, sir."

"Contact Dr. Chen. Let him know I'll be assigning our own security detail outside my wife's room. No one's to speak to her without my approval."

Benedict waited until his assistant's footsteps receded before reaching for the report his security team had provided him.

Subject: Stella Tyler

Age: 25

Status: Single

Grantee ID: 08158

Aid provided: Juvenile records sealed and received funding to complete two-year

course in Chapman Community College

Current Employment: Hotel Regalia, executive room attendant, two years to present

Family History

Father: Irving Tyler, deceased (workplace accident, 20 years prior)

Mother: Pippi Tyler, primary income is late husband's pension, known history of substance abuse, pattern of relationships with younger men with criminal backgrounds, currently admitted in an undisclosed rehabilitation clini,

Incident Report:

1. Subject sustained facial injuries defending mother from assault of current partner (Ripley Echols, 31, unemployed, prior conviction for burglary)
2. Subject admitted to Cliff Thompson Medical Center (facial trauma, possible concussion)
3. Fire outbreak at 3:16 AM resulting in massive structural damage and casualties. Surviving patients transferred to nearby medical facilities. Cause under investigation at time of report.

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Benedict watched the document disappear strip by strip into the shredder. The woman described in the sterile bullet points was the antithesis of Lana, whose delicate beauty masked a viper's soul.

When he had first met Lana, she had ticked all the boxes for him, and it was no wonder she did. Everything he knew of her was a lie. Lana had simply studied him like he was a subject to be mastered, and Lana's equivalent to a diploma was his ring on her finger.

Even though five years had already passed, bitterness and rage still burned inside Benedict whenever he found himself recalling how expertly Lana had maneuvered him into marrying her without a prenup. Since then, she had taken pleasure in making his life a livel hell. But for the sake of the thousands he had in his employ, not once had Benedict even considered divorcing her.

She was his lifelong curse.

Or so Benedict had thought.

Until now.

The limousine glided to a stop at the hospital's private entrance, and Milton could only watch in silent awe as his boss handled the intrusive presence of the paparazzi with cold-blooded ease.

Standing six-foot-five and with a powerful frame sculpted by years of professional-level training in martial arts, Benedict Young was a terrifying force of nature that

commanded instant silence from the crowd. Milton could see the desperate questions dying on reporters' lips, and all they could do was frantically snap photos as the billionaire strode by.

Inside the hospital, his boss continued to command attention and cause chaos, but this time of a different kind. A nurse almost walked into a locked supply closet, having lost herself in the cerulean gaze of his boss (which Milton himself admitted was rather magnetic). A woman at the coffee machine jumped at the sight of the billionaire, and Milton could only wince as he watched coffee spill on her nerveless fingers. (How long would it take for her to realize she had burned herself?)

Same old, same old, Milton thought with a mental shake of his head. How long would it take for women to realize that Benedict Young would never fall for such tricks?

Oblivious to the disruption his mere presence had caused, Benedict's attention was fixed solely on his destination. It was the largest and most expensive suite in the hospital, and listed on the digital screen next to the door was the name of the attending physician and the patient.

Dr. Kelvin Cheng

Lana Young

Benedict entered the hospital room and claimed the chair beside the bed. Hours passed before the woman stirred. He remained motionless, watching as confusion flickered across what little he could see of her face between the bandages. It took her several long moments to realize she was not alone, and despite her mummified appearance, her shock was palpable when her gaze finally met his.

Let the games begin.

The End