



Unmasked Heart

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Annabeth

They call me a princess.

But I'm nothing like the royalty found in fairy tales. The Noble family aren't the kind that live in castles.

The "prince" I'm promised to? He's no Prince Charming.

Cohen took my first kiss and now he expects me to kiss the ground he walks on...as his wife.

Cohen

I always get what I want. Annabeth Noble broke my heart when we were kids and I can't get her out of my head.

Now her prissy attitude pisses me off and turns me on in the same breath.

The family wants me to marry her? Fine.

But it's time for her to learn her place.

I have a plan to prove she's mine once and for all.

Before I'm through breaking her spirit, she'll be begging to bow down to me.

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Annabeth

They call me a princess.

But I'm nothing like the royalty found in fairy tales. The Noble family aren't the kind that live in castles.

Instead of a stone tower protected by a moat and knights, a New York high rise penthouse with a view of Central Park is my home. Well, one of them; we have a palace dripping in luxury in almost every major city around the world. My father owns half of New York as one of the richest real estate tycoons in the country.

Sounds like a charmed life, right?

Seated cross-legged on a plush pink velvet chair at my vanity, I finish lining my heart-shaped lips in a suitably dainty shade of rose, and pucker them at my reflection, bobbing my head to the playlist streaming from my phone.

I certainly look the part. I might as well be a porcelain doll with my hazel eyes and blonde hair tied half up with an oversized velvet bow. It's all part of my preppy princess illusion.

Black tights, Burberry plaid skirt, and a tan mohair sweater over a button down with a crisp collar—no small detail is overlooked.

Every morning I become the Annabeth Noble the world expects to see.

Well-mannered. Outfitted in designer labels and a starlet smile. Perfect daughter with a perfect life.

What a load of shit.

The heavy beat of Halsey's Castle ends and a Lizzo hit starts up.

With a sigh I stop fussing with a powder brush and toss it back onto the vanity. I'll be late for my Social Psychology class at Columbia at this rate. I collect my textbook and notebooks, scooping them into my leather saddle bag. I wish I could take more courses like it, but the agreement I made with my dad is that I can study anything I want as long as I register as a business major and fill my core studies with beneficial classes.

Spotting the item I hid beneath the stack of books last night, I'm halted in my tracks like a metal chain around my ankle.

Damn. I dig my manicured nails into the meat of my palms and school the surge of anger.

I've had years of practice at ignoring everything my father does, and who am I to rock the boat? As long as I get my small wins in—like persuading him to allow me to study for a degree he thinks is pointless when I have the world at my fingertips, all thanks to him—I can bide my time until I make my escape from this glitzy hellhole.

But every day this week that crisp, shimmering pearlescent invitation—my decree, collar, cage—sits on my vanity as the big party draws closer.

Join us on New Year's Eve to ring in the new year and celebrate two families becoming one...

Pushing out a razor-edged breath, I snatch it up. The sides are creased from where I gripped it too tightly when I couldn't control the boiling in my veins. The New Year's Eve gala is one of the most discussed events of the season amongst the socialites that claw at my family's heels for a scrap of attention.

If only they knew better; no one should wish for my family to notice them, not when the connections that built us are soaked in blood.

So, don't go—that's the obvious choice, right?

Wrong. I thought of that.

Problem is, I'm the star of my father's little show. They'll notice if I'm not there to trot around and show off.

Even if I get away with refusing plenty of my father's edicts in his effort to control my life by grooming me as his prize pony to sell off to the highest bidder, this is one party he won't allow me to skip. We've had two blow out fights about it and I'm gearing up for a third now that I've licked my wounds from the last sparring round.

If he thinks I'll gladly sit still and look pretty as a trophy—

I don't have time for this right now. Glancing at the time on my phone, my brows pinch together.

Moving my gaze quickly over the slightly worn invitation promising a special announcement at the themed masquerade ball, I stuff it into a side pocket of my saddle bag. What to do with the invite is a problem for future Annie to deal with.

I dash out of the room to make up for lost time, vowing to myself that I will figure out a plan. It's the only chance I'll have to slip away with everyone wearing masks

and focused on Dad's big news.

Big news. I scoff under my breath and plaster on my well-practiced Barbie smile when I catch Dad's deep baritone rumbling in the hall as I head for the private elevator.

He comes into sight when I round the corner, his back to me with his phone pressed to his ear as he surveys what piece of property he plans to add to his empire next. Everything about him is commanding—it's why he has fit in well with the business partners that back him.

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Victor Noble cuts an imposing figure in a custom tailored three-piece Tom Ford suit. Sandy hair sits perfectly coiffed on his head, threaded through with silvery grays. Don't be fooled, that look is crafted with strategic hair dye and implants, just like everything else about his image.

“No, I know, Decker. Yeah.” Dad slips a hand in his pocket and tips his head to the side in consideration. “It has to go hard enough to break the market, or we won't come out on top of it all. Big moves only. Just make sure your contractor guys source the supplies from who your cousin tells you to and make sure it goes through Albert's pier.”

One foot in front of the other, I coast along the wall in the hallway to retrieve my coat, not stepping into the open floor plan of the all-white lounge. If I'm quick, I can slip out before Dad notices. Preferably before I overhear anymore about what Mr. Decker and his lackeys are up to.

Noble Enterprise Inc. deals in luxury hotels, high end condos, private islands...and a little corporate property sales on the side to shell companies with mob ties to keep things flush.

They scratched my great-grandfather's back once, to get the business started. If the family does a favor for you, be prepared to owe them for life. You're as good as welcomed to sit at their dinner table as long as you remain loyal and useful.

The mob doesn't have to operate in the shadows when they hold the leashes of billionaire businessmen who grew their companies with strategies like investment fraud, embezzlement, and inflating the market. Real noble of him, isn't it?

That's how my father's empire works. As his only daughter, his sweet princess, it's an empire he intends for me to inherit. Except I'm not sweet. And if I have any say, I'll have nothing to do with the "family business".

If everything goes according to my plans, I'll be long gone from Dad and Charity's—fourth wife, only three years older than me and the youngest model he's installed into our life yet—radar, far out of reach.

"Princess," Dad calls.

Close, but no cigar Anniebear. I bite the inside of my cheek and shove Dad's long-forgotten nickname for me aside. Puppet smile back in place? Okay, good.

"Morning, Daddy," I simper as I spin to face him, pretending I didn't see him there.

He tucks his phone away and holds his hands out wide. I dutifully pad over to give him a kiss on both cheeks. It's an old ritual, but if he catches me before I leave, it's the one thing he still keeps up with. I close my eyes and breathe in his cologne. I used to find so comforting, but the overpowering scent turns bitter inside my nostrils and I force back a gag. I used to think this little ritual of ours meant he still loved me no matter what.

I was wrong. The only baby my father has ever loved is his business.

How could a man truly love a daughter he plans to auction off as a footnote to a business deal? Yeah, got me there.

I'm treated more like an asset than a person by the agreement my father has with his despicable business associates, the lot of them as heartless as he is.

"Off to your studies, princess?"

Dad strokes a big hand over my hair like I'm still four and tugging at his pant leg in his corporate office. I ignore the patronizing hint beneath his words.

I nod. "And then I have lunch plans with a friend before my afternoon class. Will you be here for dinner?"

"No, sweetie." Dad shrugs apologetically, but I know he doesn't mean it. Still, I go through these exhausting motions with him. "I have a late meeting with Albert Mastriano to go over some important business."

Albert Mastriano. The current head of the Mastriano family, the one holding Dad's long leash.

"Ah."

I'm heartbroken, really. Boo hoo. I hide a smirk by tucking a strand of hair behind my ear that was already in place.

"There was something I wanted to talk to you about." I bite the edge of my lip. "It's the gala coming up."

"Can't you go to Charity with your girly things, pumpkin? I have business to worry about." Dad squeezes my shoulders. "I've been hoping you might use this opportunity to get to know her better before your big day. I'd love to see my girls bonding."

My gaze hardens as I bat his attempt at being a comforting father aside. "Dad. Come on, she's twenty-two."

He shrugs. Of course he doesn't get what my problem with that would be. He's the one that always marries women way younger than Mom. The latest trophy wife is

close enough to my age to be my sister.

Charity's an issue for another time, though. I draw in a breath like I'm going into battle to refocus myself.

"Anyway, that's not what I mean." One more breath for luck. I steel myself and square off in front of my dad. His little hints about carrying myself for success come in handy when we go toe-to-toe. "I don't think I can make it to the gala. I'm planning to take a philosophy class over winter break, and with the condensed syllabus on such a tough course, I'll need every free minute."

"Free minute?" Dad's jaw works and clenches.

Then my father grabs my shoulders, his fingers dig in hard. I try to keep myself from reacting, but I can't help the way my eyes widen slightly. He smiles, but there's no warmth or fatherly love in it.

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We have the same golden-hazel colored eyes. His are hard around the edges as his anger takes over.

The only thing I see is the ruthless businessman backed by dangerous men.

“When you said you weren’t ready, I listened. Decker and I have been patient, princess.” His grip tightens and I bite back a tiny grunt of pain. I won’t give him the satisfaction. “I let you go to college when the original plan was that you’d marry his boy as soon as you were eighteen.”

Marry his boy. A boy that’s already taken more than enough from me. I’ve hated him since. I can’t marry him.

I swallow past the jagged lump in my throat. I will not cry in front of my father. I’m not strong enough to meet his gaze for long, though.

My attention slides away from him to the buildings reaching for the clouds beyond the window. A bird soars and dives towards Central Park. It’s carefree in its daring plunges through the air, swooping back up with grace.

I’ll never know that same freedom.

“Why do I have to marry him?” I whisper, hating the broken catch in my voice. No! I refuse to cry. My mouth purses to control the wobble of my lip. “This is insane, Dad. No one has arranged marriages anymore.”

“Yes they do. And so will you.”

He releases me with a disgruntled sound and I trip over my feet as I stumble back. Blonde waves of hair hang over my shoulder and I ball my hands into fists. My gaze snaps back to Dad.

“No. I. Won’t.” I suck in a breath, trying to control my panting. If I let my frustration and fury spiral, I’ll lose my footing in this argument. “You need my consent, don’t you?”

Dad snorts. He jabs a finger in my direction. “Hardly, pumpkin. You’ll do as you’re fucking told, or you’ll face the consequences.”

“What could possibly be worse than you forcing me to marry your crooked business partner’s son?” I yell, flinging an arm out to drive my point. “You’re a smart businessman! Why do I have to be the factor that makes or breaks a deal that, according to you, has been in the making for years? Isn’t Decker’s wife Mr. Mastriano’s niece? You’re already connected enough!”

There’s not a moment in the last nineteen years that I don’t remember Dad massaging Morris Decker into a partnership. And while Decker and Dad had their meetings, his son Cohen and I would play hide and seek through corporate offices. I contain a snort. That was back when I thought we were friends. Before Cohen became an unbearable asshole and started doing what his Uncle Albert told him to do.

Dad wanted Decker’s construction company—a business with the same dark beginnings as Noble Enterprise Inc. and even closer family ties to the Mastriano family—to work together to control the market.

But that’s only the Decker family’s public business that the tax man knows about. Morris Decker quite literally got into bed with the Mastrianos—Gloria Mastriano, to be specific. Being in construction comes in handy when the organization needs people to disappear. Cohen told me about it once to scare me when we were kids. It

worked.

Dad doesn't answer me. A muscle jumps in his jaw and he shoves his hands in his pockets with measured movements. Great, now I'm not even worth his full effort. I press a shaking hand to my temple, rubbing at a throb setting in above my eyebrow. I'm beyond late for class by now, but I can't let him have the last word.

"Annabeth."

I gulp at the icy chill in his voice.

With no remorse, my father lays out my sentence.

"You will go to the gala. It's not a party for appearances." Dad eats up what little ground I've gained and glares down his nose at me. How can he look at me like that? My throat and eyes sting and my chest heaves with each agonizing breath. "The whole point is to announce your engagement to Cohen Decker."

"Dad," I try, not ready to give up the fight even if it's clear I'm losing.

"No, Annie. This entire spectacle has been organized because you asked for time." Dad's expression twists into a cold, closed off mask that I have trouble reading. "If you don't do as you're told, I'll freeze your accounts and stop paying for school."

His words slice me to the core, but nothing could prepare me for the latest ultimatum that cinches the noose around my neck.

Dad inhales slowly before he continues. "I'll do all of that, and then I'll take you straight to the courthouse to marry Cohen before going through the rest of the contract negotiations. Consider it a show of good faith to Decker and his extended family."

My father could stab me with a thousand tiny needles and the pain would never compare to how he's razed my world. I suspected he didn't give a shit about me, but having the truth laid out like this cuts me deep. A shudder of indecipherable emotion wracks my petite frame.

"Are we clear?" Dad narrows his gaze.

All I can manage is a weak nod. Time to lick my wounds again. I need to come back stronger if I'm going to win.

Swallowing past the thick taste of betrayal in my mouth, I shrug my saddle bag higher on my shoulder. I'll escape before there's a chance for the tears welling and sticking my lashes together to fall. Small victories.

"Have a good day, Dad," I mutter.

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“Bye, princess.” Dad’s angry expression melts away, and he bends to kiss my forehead.

I stand tall as I cross the room, shoulders back and head high. Once the elevator doors close, I’ll have the privacy to break down. My pulse thumps and I hear the rush of it in my ears.

Dad turns back to peer through the floor-to-ceiling windows at the city, posture relaxed like he has no qualms about what he’s planned for me.

There’s no way in hell I’ll play along and marry Cohen fucking Decker. I’ve done plenty Dad demanded of me over the years. But this is where I draw the damn line.

The elevator doors close and I cross my arms across my stomach, holding the shattered pieces of myself together.

I’m a princess all right, one kept locked up tight in my steel tower. I don’t have time to worry about my father’s shady business dealings because I’m too busy collapsing under the weight of his control—everything in my life is decided for me.

Including who I’m supposed to marry.

Fuck that.

A lioness kept captive lies in wait, pacing the bars, anticipating the right moment to strike.

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Cohen

Checking my watch for the third time with a subtle tilt of my wrist, I raise a brow. Twenty minutes. Annie is never late.

I stretch my long legs out in the back of the spacious town car idling outside of her building and cross them at the ankle.

Her lateness will delay me for my meeting, but Dad won't care. He wanted me to step into the position the family prepared for me right away, but I was more interested in working my way up if I was going to take over for Dad someday. Call it my way of checking under the hood.

Unlike everyone else in my family and my cousins—the Mastrianos—I don't like taking things I'm given at face value.

I'm not as involved as my cousins. My mom didn't want Uncle Albert to have me in his employ at all, but it's a way of life for us. She had to let me into the organization eventually.

Dad says I'll need to step up my game once the deal with Noble goes through, but for now I'm enjoying the way things are because it gives me more freedom to torment my prize: Annie Noble.

At last the doorman holds the big glass door for her, but she doesn't greet him today. I smirk as she approaches the town car without question. I've been waiting all morning for this thrill: the moment she realizes she's getting in the car with her big

bad wolf.

Annie reaches the town car and gets in, distracted from the world around her. She swipes beneath her eyes and I catch a hint of wetness shining on her fingertips. I click a button on the side console and a privacy screen divides us from my driver.

“Chilly day to forget your coat. Don’t you have classes all day?”

My smirk stretches when she jumps and swings a disbelieving, accusatory glare at me across the leather seat. Her eyes still glisten with the telltale hint of tears.

“You—What are you doing here?” Annie demands.

She’s adorable when she’s angry, all puffed up and self-important. It gets my dick hard in my dark gray, pressed slacks.

I shrug and shift closer to her, offering her the heavy wool coat draped across my knee. “You can borrow mine today. I think you’ll look good in it. Can’t have my precious fiancée going cold, can I?”

The change in her face is immediate as she shoves my hand away, a pinch forming between her dainty brows, her cheeks pinking, and her lips pursing.

“Don’t call me that, you prick.” Annie flips her pretty blonde waves over her shoulder and crosses her arms as she settles back against the seat. A beat goes by before she speaks again, waving her hand to the divider. “Well? I’m already late enough as it is. Are you taking me to class or not? I’m happy to get out of this car and—”

I click the lock button on my side before she can finish reaching for the handle. She huffs out a breath and settles against the smooth leather, glaring out the window as

the car pulls into morning traffic.

The car doesn't make it two full blocks before she speaks again.

"Fuck you, Cohen," Annie mutters.

I grin and reach across the back of the seat to play with her hair. She twitches her head away, but can only go so far in the confines of the car. I bury my fingers in her soft hair and lean closer.

"Gladly, sweetheart," I croon in her ear, stroking the shell of her ear. "I'm sure I can dig up a switchblade somewhere in this car. Mario always leaves a spare behind. Want me to cut a hole in those tights so you can sit on my lap and ride my cock on the way to campus?"

She gives a satisfying, half-aborted shudder, like she's trying to control her body's natural response to stimulus.

The image I've spun sits in my head for a minute and I shift on the seat to adjust my erection. Fuck, it would be hot to feel her thighs straddle me, to fist my hands in her skirt and direct her hips as I fuck her, to send her off to class with my come dripping down her ruined tights.

That fantasy will definitely be one I revisit later in the shower with my hand around my dick.

I trail my gaze down her fuzzy sweater over her tits and down to her thighs. With my other hand I tease my fingers up the inside of her leg and reach beneath her skirt with a deep hum. She's got a hot little body that I'd love to defile before eight in the morning in the back of our swanky ride.

Annie snatches my hand with a sharp, throaty sound and digs her nails in. She glares at me like I'm the shit stuck to the bottom of her expensive shoes. Her cheeks are tinged as rosy as her parted lips.

"Don't. You. Fucking. Dare," Annie snarls, taking tiny puffs of breath between each angry word.

My lips curl up and I gloat at her reaction. Maybe it makes me some kind of masochist to revel in Annie's claws. She's a sweet, venomous pit viper that I look forward to taming. Soon enough, she'll be singing my tune and bowing down to me as her master.

There's nothing she can do to get out of marrying me. The deal's as good as done at this point.

Leaning back in my seat, I run my fingers over my lips and glance out the window. I can make out our tinted reflection in the window, Annie a bright spot against my charcoal suit and my dark hair.

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As a kid, the differences used to get me wound up because I wanted to be just like my best friend, but now I revel in it. I love that I'm the dark shadow that will swallow her light whole. This time she won't be able to run from me, not after I put the ring on her finger that will bind us together until the grave.

Annie whips out her phone and I watch her without her knowledge as her thumbs fly furiously over the keyboard. My guess is she's texting one of her vapid friends to have some support in the injustice of her charmed life. I roll my eyes. What a spoiled little bitch.

I stopped thinking about marrying her years ago, crushing that little fantasy before it could fester. When Dad and Uncle Albert told me it was going to happen to bring the family closer together, I almost didn't know what to do with the information.

A wicked smile crosses my face. At least it'll make Annie mine.

She's fought it for years, but what she doesn't get about her and I? We have always been inevitable.

It's a fact I accepted a long time ago, and it's a lesson I've spent years trying to teach her. One that's more important than her degree courses.

My attention cuts to her. She has her bag in her lap now, perched on her thighs. It's cute how she thinks that would protect her or stop me if I really wanted to fuck her right now.

I like to lay claim to things that belong to me. And Annie Noble? She's been mine

since we were kids. My friend, my girl, and soon she'll be my wife.

The town car turns left at an intersection, weaving from lane to lane.

"Were you planning on shopping for a wedding dress with your dad's new girl?" I tip a wolfish smirk at her when her pink lips thin into a severe line. "My mom would love it if you invited her to go with you."

"I'm sure she would." Annie's voice is monied, delicate like the tinkle of crystal. It's also coldly polite.

"It'd be a great time for the two of you to get to know each other. I know she's looking forward to having a daughter in her life."

Annie's shoulders remain stiff and straight. A tremor disturbs the edges of her lips. Her lashes lower, almost touching her cheeks.

Stroking my chin, I go for blood. "I'm sure she would be happy to fill in since you don't have a mom. Well," I lick my lips, awaiting the moment she'll crack, "an age appropriate one. Charity Noble barely counts as an older sister, I imagine."

There's a slight sag in Annie's proud posture. A burst of victory settles in my stomach. When she turns her eyes to me, they're slitted and fierce.

"I hate to disappoint your mother," Annie hisses. "She must feel like she's lacking in happy moments with a monster like you for a son."

I shrug. What Annie hasn't figured out about my mom is that she's still Mastriano through and through. Her married name hasn't changed that. Mom's a tough bitch, nothing shakes her.

“I won’t be inviting your mother to coo at me while I have my wedding dress designed.”

I open my mouth, but she takes a deep breath in through her nose. She smiles at me, the creepy one that she pulls out for her dad. It turns my stomach.

“But that won’t happen anytime soon,” Annie states, full of bravado that’s cracked at the edges. “You see, dear, there’s no fucking way I’ll marry you. Didn’t you get the memo years ago? You know, back when you were trying to hold me down and kiss me?” She gulps and I watch her throat work. “I didn’t want you when you were twelve and I absolutely don’t want you to touch me now.”

Now she’s just trying to piss me off. My teeth grind together and I crack my neck from side to side. Too bad for her, this is the most fun I’ve had all week, including last night when I collected an overdue debt with Mario. Like hell I’m giving it up for her comfort. Annie will have to do better than bring up our childhood to get past my walls.

The little princess will just have to endure until I’ve had my fill.

“I promise you, Annie,” I say solemnly, allowing my eyes to rove over her body. “You’ll be mine. Whether you want it or not.”

Annie’s glare intensifies in indignation. Her upper lip curls and I can’t help but appreciate the fight in her. It gets me hot.

“You’ll have to make me,” Annie spits, stabbing a finger at me. Her hazel eyes narrow. “If you think you have the balls to go that far. Because I’ll never be yours willingly.”

I chuckle and prepare to knock her from her prissy high horse.

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Annabeth

I hate Cohen. I hate everything about him. I hate that his raspy chuckle and the filthy suggestion to ride his dick on the way to class makes my body betray me.

It needs to get with the program. Cohen Decker? He's the enemy and no amount of dirty talk will change things.

Another chuckle rolls through him and I press my thighs together, ignoring the throb of heat.

Of course the devil would be a sinfully attractive asshole. It's not fair.

Cohen moves into my personal space in one quick move, getting right up in my face. He clenches one hand in my hair so that I can't back away and grazes his nose against my cheek. His hot breath puffs across my lips as he locks his other arm across my lap.

I struggle to keep my eyes from widening; I don't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he's getting to me.

"I'll hold you to that," Cohen promises in a rough, wicked voice.

You'll have to make me. Because I'll never be yours willingly.

I know better than to stoop to his level and play his mind games, but I forgot myself when he goaded me with Charity.

Tipping my chin up as much as his hold allows, I level him with a cold stare. I hate him.

Cohen loosens his fist in my hair and skims his palm down my face, cupping my jaw, swiping his thumb over my cheek. He flicks his gaze own to my mouth and pulls at my lip with the pad of his thumb. He meets my eyes again.

I'm surrounded by him, the sharp scent of his expensive cologne and his warmth bombarding me.

My breath catches in my throat. Cohen leans in. Is he going to—?

He stops before kissing me with a hair's breadth between us. A beat passes. A yellow cab lays on the horn and a bike messenger cuts through traffic, nearly side swiping the town car. Cohen snickers and leans back, leaving me cold without his body heat invading my senses.

“Not today. Let's save the kissing for the wedding.”

I swallow. My body doesn't know what it wants. I'm torn between chasing him to his side of the car to claim that missed kiss and tucking and rolling into New York traffic. I should jump out of the car. The last thing I want is to give Cohen the satisfaction of kissing me after he stole my first one.

Cohen turns me into a complete mess with a few choice words and his devil's grin.

Mustering all of my boarding school etiquette to save face, I smooth a strand of hair into place. The car rolls to another stutter stop. We can't get to the Columbia campus fast enough so I can get as far away from Cohen as possible.

I miss the days when we were younger. Things were simpler then. He was one of the

few childhood friends I was allowed to play with. I remember he was still a little shit back then. Once he pushed me into the mud in Central Park while something distracted our French au pairs. All because I wanted to play with his fire truck.

We were still inseparable. We had to be since our fathers were in each other's pockets. It was either get along or be bored out of our minds while the adults conducted business.

That all stopped when he was twelve and I was eleven. He always lorded it over my head that he was six months older, like it made him superior because he reached milestones first. He was a big kid, way taller than me. I was a late bloomer.

Once again, Cohen had pushed me down.

Except, instead of letting me up, Cohen had jumped on top of me, holding me on the ground. I remember the way he stared at me with wide eyes. He squeezed my shoulders. There were freckles on his nose and his hair was long, overdue for a cut. It touched my forehead when he swooped down and kissed me—my first kiss.

He didn't ask, he just took.

That's how bullies operate. Cohen never changed, so I stopped hanging around him. I would choose mindless boredom than be his friend.

I pretend he wasn't my first kiss. He doesn't get to keep that, too.

Cohen's still a bully. Only now instead of pushing girls into the mud, he likes to swoop in for a subtle attack. His favorite is to whisper in my ear so I'm the only one that knows the kinds of filthy things he says to me.

Everyone around us thinks he's being sweet, since we're promised to each other. But

Cohen's no different from my father. He doesn't care about me—he sees me as his toy to show off.

At last, the town car nears the campus. I squeeze the straps of my saddle bag, my whole body tense with the eagerness of escaping this car.

Marrying Cohen means accepting what my father chooses for me. I refuse.

I'm the one in control of my future.

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Cohen

I frown as the car approaches the spot where Annie will get out for her morning class. I want more time with her. I'm not quite ready to let her slip through my fingers for the day.

Maybe I'll give Dad the slip so I can drop in on her later.

Beside me, Annie vibrates with awareness, straining toward the door as our driver pulls up to a lucky spot that opens up. She can't wait to get out. I scrub a hand over my mouth.

"Not so fast, little bird," I interrupt as she wraps her fingers around the door handle. "Don't fly off yet."

Annie sighs and glances over her shoulder, eyebrows raising in silent question.

I smother a grin. I want her to learn her place and accept that she's going to marry me. But I can't lie...part of me hopes she never loses all the fiery attitude.

"Do you want me to have Gino pick you up when your classes are done?" I caress a line down her back.

She stiffens. "No."

"Daddy dearest going to send your usual ride?"

Annie rolls her eyes and goes to leave. I wrap my fingers around her wrist and draw her close to my side. She struggles, but I'm stronger. I sling an arm around her shoulders and kiss her cheek.

"Have a nice day, honey."

"Fuck you very much," Annie seethes, straining against my arm.

"I wish you would," I remind her. Taking her hand, I put it over my lap and grind my dick into her palm. "All for you, baby."

Annie makes a disgusted sound and breaks my hold, kicking my shin hard with her chunky heels. I grunt and let her go. My shin throbs and I reach down to rub it through my slacks.

The door slams with more force than necessary and I look up to watch Annie's pert ass as she walks away. There's purpose in her strides. She doesn't shiver at the temperature, despite not wearing a coat. I doubt her black tights are thermal ones. Her skirt moves with a gust of wind and I almost catch a peek of her ass beneath before she clamps the hem in her fingers to keep it in place.

Knowing her, she'll probably text her personal stylist to buy a new coat and have it hand delivered to campus between classes.

Two undergrad guys in Columbia hoodies check her out as she passes them. Annie doesn't notice them; they're invisible to her. But I see the hunger in their eyes and a surge of fire boils my blood.

I clench my fists and breathe through the rush of jealousy. I resist getting out of the car to confront them. Ruining their lives isn't worth my time or resources, even if I want to blind them for daring to look at my girl.

My gaze swings back to Annie before she rounds the corner. She doesn't look back.

I settle against the leather seat. Gino pulls the car away from the curb and goes around the block, heading for the Decker Design Solutions midtown offices, which is a cover for the business the organization conducts there.

Dad insisted on my presence specifically at this morning's meeting. It's with one of the organization's supply contacts. Dad wants me to understand how things work. They're all expecting me to become the same cog in the machine as Dad, stepping into the role to take over for my father directly beneath Uncle Albert.

I hope it's not soon. I'll beat up a guy who owes the organization money, like I did last night, or look the other way when the Night Crew pulls up to an active construction site because there's always a reason the sorry asshole in the backseat with the black bag over his head to muffle his screams got in that position. But I don't want to take an active part in overseeing those construction sites with Uncle Albert calling the shots.

Annie's Chanel perfume lingers in the back of the town car. I inhale and close my eyes, tipping my head back against the seat.

My future wife will learn her place by my side. I'll do whatever it takes to keep her. There's no line I won't cross.

I want her, that's for damn sure. But I want to break her over my knee more. I won't bend over backwards for Annie. She'll come to understand how things will be between us soon.

Running my fingers through my hair, I let my mind wander with ideas I can't voice. Annie would be terrified if she saw the dark musings starring her that occupy my thoughts. In my head I've made her mine over and over, in thousands of situations

and positions.

Every time she bends to my will and begs me for more.

My imagination runs wild, everything from forbidding her from wearing underwear so I could slip into her whenever I want to keeping her chained to my bed with a shackle, naked and waiting for me to fuck her at least twice a day.

My lips quirk and I stretch, picturing her waking me with a blowjob each morning. If she's good for me, I'll reward her, eat her out for hours until her thighs shake on either side of my head. Shit, I think I'd give her head even if she was uncooperative. I want to drive her wild with my tongue, relish her sweet cries of pleasure as I taste her. I lick my upper lip and reach down to adjust my erection, giving it a squeeze.

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Annabeth Noble drives me crazy in every sense.

As the car arrives in midtown, a thick square of paper on the floor catches my attention. I reach over and retrieve it, flipping it over in my hands before I step out of the car. It's the invitation for the masquerade gala on New Year's Eve.

It must have fallen from Annie's bag in her struggle to get away from me when I dropped her off.

My lips twitch and I salute Gino with the forgotten invite.

"Things are looking up, Gino," I crow.

Gino nods, stoic as ever, and closes the car door behind me.

As I make my way into the building, I can't hold back a smug expression as the beginning of a plan forms in my head. I tuck the invitation into the inner pocket of my suit jacket. I finally have a way to show Annie once and for all that she belongs with me.

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Cohen

When I pull up to the estate in the middle of nowhere, Uncle Albert is kissing Mom and Dad on both cheeks on the sprawling front steps.

It took me over an hour to drive from the city. I'm surprised Noble and Dad went with a place so remote when Noble owns plenty of places in Manhattan that can accommodate events. I suppose it's adding to the mystique of the masquerade theme. I grab my metallic silver mask from the passenger seat and climb out.

A valet springs forward and whistles at my sports car.

"Evening, sir," the kid says.

Nodding, I toss the key fob to him and cross the gravel drive to meet my parents and uncle.

"Cohen!" Mom trills, holding her hands out to me.

"You look like a firecracker in that getup," Uncle Albert says.

"It's fashion, Uncle Al." I smooth a hand over my red velvet lapel and shoot a finger gun at him.

He chuckles and mutters in Italian to my dad, who snorts and responds in kind. Mom swats at them.

“He wants to look nice, so let him. You did the same thing when you were his age to get my attention,” Mom reminds my dad. She belts out a laugh when Dad tries to play it off. “Let’s go in.”

Mom tucks her arm in the crook of Uncle Albert’s elbow and I follow alongside Dad as we enter the estate, one of Victor Noble’s property holdings. I admire the intricate details in the old architecture while my parents get swept into greeting a few higher up guys in the organization. I continue through, following the echoes of the live band playing a jazzy holiday number.

The main ballroom is impressive and huge. Serving staff weave through the guests with towering trays of champagne. I snag one and survey the other party guests. A few wave to me and I nod back. After I slide my silver mask into place, I find Mario leaning against a marble column near one bar wearing a mask with a beak-like nose pointing out of it.

“Your little wifey show up yet?” Mario asks, bumping his fist against mine. Instead of champagne, he’s cradling a whiskey.

“Haven’t seen her yet.”

“She won’t be able to miss you.” Mario looks me up and down and tries to muffle his snickers. “You look like some whack ass devil.”

“It’s dapper,” I scoff.

“Dapper—what are you, sixty?”

“Shut up, asshole.”

I know I look good in the bold red velvet tuxedo. I’m eager to see how Annie reacts

to it.

We watch the guests for a while. It's still early.

"I'm going out for a smoke. Come find me when your girl gets here." Mario claps me on the shoulder.

"Why?"

"Gino's out on a job and I promised him I'd take a picture of her fine ass."

I bite back the growl that threatens to erupt from me, balling my fist at my side. I could knock out another one of his teeth like I did last year when we got in a fight. The implant is well done, so I can't tell which one is the fake, but I'll punch him until there are no teeth left if he says any more shit about Annie.

"Her fine ass is all mine," I say in a warning tone. He inclines his head. "And if you and Gino know what's good, you'll leave her to me. I don't fucking share."

Mario shrugs and lifts a palm in surrender. "Just yanking your dick, man. If you're getting married, it means more pussy for me."

"Whatever. You have to flash green to get a chick to put out for you." My mouth slants in a mean grin. "It's the only way they can live with themselves looking at your sorry face with your cock in their mouth."

A shadow crosses Mario's face. "At least my dick gets sucked. Last I heard you haven't banged any of the girls that hang off your arm. And from what Gino tells me, your little bitch doesn't put out."

"Keep going," I say in a cold voice, grabbing hold of his collar. Mario's jaw clenches

and his attention drops to my fist. “I’ll take you out back and straighten you out.” I jerk his body. “Do not talk about this. And let Gino know the next time I see him? He better fucking run.”

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Mario looks like he might try to take me on, but something he spots over my shoulder makes him slump in defeat.

“Do we understand each other?”

“Yeah man,” Mario mutters.

“Good.”

I leave Mario. It’s better to be far away from him in case Annie spots me. I have to make sure she sees me around the party before I put my plan into action.

It takes me a few minutes to calm the violent rage boiling my blood. I take a deep breath and gulp the rest of my champagne.

One of the serving staff stops beside me and leans in to be heard discreetly. “Your garment is being held upstairs.”

“Thank you.” I slip the guy a fifty and select another glass of champagne from his tray.

I have big plans for Annie tonight.

Excitement swirls through me as I lay out my strategy. If it all goes well, in a few hours we’ll be in my sports car heading toward the sunrise and the cabin I bought a while back.

Tonight is about making her mine.

But after I break her, I want to give her everything her father doesn't.

Finally, I catch sight of Annie across the room.

The corner of my mouth lifts. First things first...

I keep my distance from her, staying within her field of view without approaching her. She needs to think she knows where I am, but I can't give her too many clues by getting close. Even when her dad and mine borrow a microphone from the band to welcome everyone, I stand with my arm slung around my mom's shoulders instead of seeking Annie's company.

"Welcome everyone. Thanks for coming tonight." Victor squeezes Dad's shoulder, a shark's smile on his face. "Not only are we all here to ring in the new year together, but Morris and I are proud to announce that our kids are bringing our families closer than ever."

Dad takes over. "They've known each other since they were toddlers and now they're tying us together. Join us in congratulating my son Cohen on his engagement to Annabeth Noble."

Cheers ripple through the room. Annie has her fake smile plastered in place. Uncle Al even sidles over to her and makes a show of cupping her face in his hands and pecking her on both cheeks.

Mom leans over and gives me a kiss on the cheek, too. "You make me so proud."

"Ma, please," I protest. I wrap her in a hug and meet Annie's eyes over Mom's shoulder.

The look flickering behind her mask is clear to me, even though everyone else falls for her act. The anticipation for what's coming spurs me on. I give her a cocksure wave and keep my eyes locked on the prize.

Just you wait, little bird.

When I think enough people have seen me, I slip into the shadows of the party and go to the room the server told me of earlier. My prepared garment bag waits. I unzip it and reveal a white tuxedo with classic black silk lapels. Inside the bag there's also a simple black mask.

Once I change, I peek out through a crack in the door before leaving the storage room a new man.

Annie will have to face the truth that we belong together, because I'm the only one for her.

I'm the only person that can give her everything she needs.

There's no way she can deny she's not mine after tonight. Not after I become the dream guy she thinks she wants.

One that will sweep Annabeth Noble off her feet and then bring her world crashing down around her ears when I reveal myself.

Knocking her from her high horse to prove her wrong is going to feel so fucking good.

Annabeth

The event designers have outdone themselves, transforming the building into a magical fantasy. Glitzy elegance drips from every corner. A sea of stars hangs overhead in thousands of tiny lights between the crystal chandeliers.

I'm too stubborn to admit it after all my plans to avoid this party so I could make a run from my life, but it is beautiful.

Dad's threat was too great to risk, so here I am.

A champagne flute dangles from my fingers. It's my third—one more than Dad said I was allowed to have. If I have to suffer through the party, I plan to be drunk throughout most of it.

Pleasant warmth fills me as I sway to the music from the live band, head tipped up to marvel at the illusion of twinkling starlight above the crowd.

The party is packed, everyone wearing their masks. At midnight we're supposed to reveal ourselves. Below the balcony where I watch, people on the dance floor twirl in sleek tuxedos and glamorous designer gowns.

The one I'm wearing is a couture Elie Saab designed for me. It's cream and encrusted with embroidered beading and Swarovski crystals with a high slit in the skirt to mid-thigh. The full length sleeves are illusion-style and there's a plunging back that exposes me to every touch as Dad made me greet Mr. Decker and his wife.

It didn't escape my attention that it could pass as a wedding dress for me to wear to my engagement party.

I stood there with a fake smile nailed in place while Gloria Decker's eyes lit up. She said I'd make a beautiful bride. My stomach had twisted painfully as I was forced to thank her while she got misty-eyed about her baby boy growing up.

The only small blessing is that Cohen hasn't found me yet.

I touch the strip of dainty black lace that covers my eyes, my mask for the evening. It's different from the elaborate carnival masks most other women selected. I wanted something simple that wouldn't bother me all night.

"A beauty like you shouldn't suffer the tragedy of an empty glass. Can I offer you another?"

A voice that almost sounds like Cohen behind me makes me jump. I was counting my blessings too soon; he must have found me. I spin around.

It's not Cohen. I saw him earlier with a velvet red suit and this man looks dapper in his classic white tux with black satin lapels.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make you jump." The tall man with tousled dark hair and a simple black mask smiles, holding up a fresh glass of champagne. "In my head this played out a lot more debonair. There was swooning involved."

I raise an eyebrow and a smile plays in the corner of my mouth. "Swooning? You've got the wrong girl. Maybe the wrong century, too."

He steps closer, leaning against the intricate stone balustrade. His attention sweeps over the party below. For a moment, his profile looks like Cohen and I stiffen. But

then the mystery man turns back and grants me a charming smile. This one actually reaches his eyes.

Cohen doesn't smile like that.

"Here."

The guy offers me the glass again and I take it, setting my empty one on the tray of a passing server. I take a small sip and survey the guests below.

"That one." He points out a middle aged man with a flashy red mask on the dance floor shaking his backside in front of a woman half his age. Mystery Guy tosses me a crooked, playful grin.

"What about him?"

I haven't decided whether this man is friend or foe. Maybe he's just trying to flirt with me thinking I'll be an easy lay if he butters me up with some chivalry and banter. He probably arrived late and missed Dad and Mr. Decker's big announcement kicking off the party, declaring my engagement to Cohen.

Either way, I know it would piss Cohen off if he found me enjoying myself with someone who isn't him. I plan to enjoy myself and half-hope he finds us just to see his reaction.

That'll get him back good for the car incident the other day.

"Wall Street shark," he says. "Secretly wears lacy garter belts, but only his secretary knows because the poor dude was accidentally copied in on an email with photographic evidence meant for Wall Street's mistress."

A snort escapes me and I smother it with the back of my hand. Mystery Guy grins, soft gaze traveling over my face as I laugh.

“I hope the secretary has a good therapist,” I say after I recover. I decide to play along with his game. Smoothing a hand over my gown I search and point out my pick. “There.”

“The lady with the bee theme going on?”

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The woman in question is in a garish bright yellow and black bandeau-style dress. She's wearing a gold mask with flower details and her hair is piled high on her head like a hive.

“That’s the one. Three time divorcee—she cleans them out every time. Part-time Domme with a collection of rainbow butt plugs.” I toss Mystery Guy a sharp smirk. “Absolute cougar in the sack.”

Mystery Guy claps his hands together in delight while we snicker, leaning against each other. I catch the scent of his aftershave, a clean and fresh smell that I like so much more than the harsh and spicy cologne Cohen wears.

Our game continues. We take turns picking out unsuspecting party guests to give hilarious secret life stories. After a few minutes I tip my head to the side.

“Do you have a name, or should I keep calling you Mystery Guy in my head?”

“Tall, Dark, and Handsome,” he jokes.

“Okay, but really.”

“Husband material?”

I roll my eyes and huff out a laugh. “For real.”

Mystery Guy grins and it’s a stunning look on him. He’s movie star handsome. Even with the mask, which doesn’t block much of his features.

He studies me for another beat, like he's trying to bore into my soul.

"Colton," he says, holding out a hand.

I take it to shake and he brings my knuckles to his lips for a kiss in one swift move.

Smooth.

I bite my lip and sip champagne as his gaze finds mine.

"Want to dance, Colton?"

"Not so fast."

Colton holds up a hand and I freeze. Did I misread his flirting?

"What is it?"

"I need to know your name."

"Oh." My lashes flutter. "Annie. Now can we dance?"

"Sure thing, sweetheart."

For a second, I hesitate. Almost everyone calls me endearments like princess. But Cohen's the only one that calls me sweetheart. I shake it off and smile.

Colton draws me close, his hand hovering at my lower back like it belongs there as he guides us downstairs.

* * *

Twirling beneath the stars feels magical. Colton tucks me closer and I spot my father across the room. Smugness settles in me as I dare to lay my cheek against Colton's chest for everyone to see.

The point of tonight might be to celebrate my engagement to Cohen, but here I am on the dance floor with someone else.

I imagine Cohen watching from the shadows, too. I hope it's eating him alive to see me in the arms of another man of my choosing.

Maybe he's spent all these years thinking I waited for him, but I shed the bullshit social construct of my virginity in boarding school when I was seventeen.

Colton traces my bare back, grazing his fingertips up my spine and back down in lazy strokes, nearly teasing into my dress. I shiver and follow his lead as he spins me away, tugging me back into his arms after a beat. Dancing with him is a dream.

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He's been murmuring in my ear beneath the music, telling me more jokes and praising my skills on the dance floor compared to him. I beg to differ; he's a great dancer.

We talk about what we want to do with our lives. Colton's supposed to take over his dad's business, but he has plans for how to make big changes that he knows his dad won't like. I tell him about my psychology courses at Columbia. He tells me about a cabin upstate that he's been fixing up for when the city gets to be too much. It sounds like heaven, and when I say as much Colton promises to take me there.

"I'll take you anywhere you want to go," Colton murmurs with his lips against my temple.

It almost sounds too good to be true, but I close my eyes and indulge in the fantasy of Colton rescuing me from my hellish life.

We spend song after song dancing beneath thousands of tiny lights.

"You make me want to be bad." Colton brushes his fingers along my jaw and his gaze is full of intense heat.

"So let's misbehave," I quip, peeking up at him through my lashes.

Colton has me entranced. His charm is hard to resist.

He makes me want to slip into a dark corner and give in to every tempting deviant urge gripping me.

I want him in my mouth where my father could walk by and find us.

I want his fingers inside me right here on the dance floor.

I want a dirty fuck in the marble bathroom with our clothes half-on because we can't be bothered when we could be devouring each other.

If temptation is the devil's sin, I'll be the first one in line to commit it tonight.

My gaze searches the room for a hint of red velvet. I need to find Cohen. I want to look him in the eye while I press my breasts against Colton's firm chest and encourage his hand to slip lower to grab my ass.

I can't find him. The song changes and Colton steps back.

"Are we going again or would you like to get a drink?"

I look up at his masked face. It was dim on the balcony, but the uplighting around the dance area allows me a better view.

My perfect dance partner could almost be Cohen in this light. They have an identical jaw shape and the same color eyes, but these are darker and glittering as they track me.

"Annie?"

Is that voice really so different from Cohen's? The champagne's messing with my head. There's no way Cohen and Colton are the same person. They're similar in height and looks, but that's where it ends. Colton is sweet and charming where Cohen is all black edges and possessive power.

“I—sorry.” I shake my head and wave my hand. “The lights made me dizzy for a minute.”

Colton places a hand on my lower back. “Let’s go find a quieter spot to sit for a while.”

I allow Colton to lead me away from the other dancers.

We find a high top table draped in black silk near a tall window with thick draperies that spill to the floor. An arrangement of tapered candles in different heights perched in gold holders sits at the center of the table.

“Be right back.”

Colton disappears towards the closest bar. I take the opportunity to scan the room for signs of Cohen again. His parents are with Albert Mastriano by the oyster bar. Albert is all smiles for his niece, Mrs. Decker.

He doesn’t look like a sinister mob boss, though I don’t even know what that means. It’s not like all shady mobsters resemble Al Pacino and Marlon Brando. Albert Mastriano simply looks like someone’s short, happy grandfather who goes around laughing with a wheeze.

A water goblet pops in front of my face. I take it and glance over. Colton has one of his own, too. His throat bobs with each gulp as he drinks, finishing half of his glass in one go.

I like that he’s taking a break with me instead of binge drinking through the night, drink after drink, like most men I know do.

“Thanks,” I murmur.

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Colton winks. “Hydration is important. You’ve had me parched all night.”

“Wow.” I draw it out in a long vowel. “That was cheesy as hell.”

“That’s my best line!” Colton laughs, deep and rich.

“Your game needs work.”

Colton lays a hand over his face, peeking between his fingers. His eyes dance behind his mask. I bite my lip around a smile. We both set our goblets on the table.

My heart flutters with excitement when he slides closer to drape his arm around my waist. Together we watch the party from our quiet corner. I lean against him and turn my nose into the base of his neck.

There’s a sense of familiarity tugging at me in the way he smells beneath the clean aftershave. Once again Cohen flashes in my mind. I brush him aside and revel in the allure of the man dominating my company tonight.

The man who isn’t my future husband.

Colton’s thumb sweeps over my bare back, calling forth a shiver of sensitivity at his enticing touch. He tips his head down and puts his lips to my ear, his breath hot as he murmurs in a deep voice.

“There’s billions of dollars walking around this room between the bank accounts, jewelry, and fashion, but all of it pales in comparison to how beautiful you look

tonight.”

Swallowing, I glance up through my lashes and part my lips. He stares at me with something unreadable in his eyes. His attention drops to my parted lips.

If he leans down to kiss me, I’ll let him. I want him to do it. I tilt my head back a little more, silently wishing for the touch of his lips on mine.

Would his kiss be as delicious as the taste of danger I have right now, flirting with another man while my father plans to marry me off to the highest bidder to secure another few zeros in his bank account?

I’m game to find out.

Colton makes me feel brave and daring. With him by my side, I imagine all the ways I could stand up to Dad and win every battle.

The tart flavor of forbidden rebellion dances on my tongue as Colton touches my jaw.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“What for, sweetheart?”

“Giving me tonight. You’ve been better than a dream.”

The curve of Colton’s mouth is winsome.

“I bet you say that to all the guys that dance with you.”

I shake my head. “I’m not allowed...” I pause to lick my lips. “I’m engaged. It’s an arranged marriage.”

I watch Colton's face for his reaction to what I'm telling him. His smile fades, but he doesn't step away from me.

"You didn't say anything."

"I don't want the marriage. It's...a business deal. My father's business partner's son is my fiancé."

"In this day and age?"

A broken laugh escapes me. "You better believe it. Plenty of people in the world have arranged marriages still."

"Yeah, but in New York City?"

I shrug, helpless to the ugly truth chaining me. Colton brushes a piece of loose hair from my face.

With a tremor in my voice, I admit to him, "I've always had to do as I'm told. But I don't want to be another pawn on my father's board."

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“You make me want to steal you away from here,” Colton murmurs.

I lean more of my weight into him, tucking my face against his chest so he doesn’t see the effect his words have on me. It’s silly to get emotional over a throwaway comment like that. Colton cups the back of my head and holds me.

“I’ll take care of you, sweetheart,” he swears. “You’ll have it so good. I’ll give you everything you need.”

It’s so tempting. It’s what I wanted, to get away from this world while the party distracted everyone. I grip Colton’s lapels.

Maybe my mystery man is a knight in disguise, sent to sweep the trapped princess away from the life she hates so much.

For a second, I close my eyes and imagine the man beneath the mask isn’t Colton but Cohen, pretending to be someone else for my sake.

Despite how deeply I hate him, underneath it all I always held onto a stupid belief in my heart that he was capable of being a better man, the person I wanted him to be when we were kids.

All I have ever wanted is for Cohen to listen to me, to rely on me as an equal partner instead of treating me like another piece of property.

I know it’s a childish, naïve wish, but it lingers in my heart all the same.

Colton lifts my chin gently, tilting my face to meet his. The way he looks at me ignites a blistering fire and melts my insides. My breath catches as he leans down.

I strain up to meet him halfway, not giving a damn that anyone—the Deckers, the head of the Mastriano organization, my father, Cohen—could see us.

Annabeth

The kiss is scorching and demanding and incredible.

With one touch he owns my lips, my thoughts, my soul.

Colton squeezes me in his arms and swallows the tiny sound I make when my lips part for his tongue. He devours me in the dark corner on the outskirts of the party. I gasp against him as he destroys me with his clever mouth, his tongue hot and perfect sliding against mine.

He groans into the kiss and I respond with another sound of my own. Colton's palms burn my skin as they glide over my back and haul my small frame against his body. I snake an arm up to wrap around his neck, angling my head to deepen the kiss.

It's indecent and completely inappropriate behavior for a public gala and I want to laugh in the face of every one of my stuffy etiquette lessons.

This? This is living.

It's everything I've been missing out on from my gilded cage.

Colton breaks the kiss before I'm ready. I chase his mouth and his grin carries a wild edge. The way his gaze takes me in makes me flush; his eyes are full of a possessive awe like I'm the eighth world wonder he's lucky enough to touch.

He palms my ass and drags his lips across my cheek to my ear. "Ready to get the fuck

out of here with me?”

His voice is tinged in rich darkness and it travels across my nerve endings, making me clench my thighs together at the bolt of heat spearing through me.

“Where?”

I’m breathless from one kiss.

I’m hungry for more.

Colton scans our immediate surroundings and nods to a hallway leading off from the main event. “We’ll sneak off.”

I slip my hand in his and he threads our fingers. They feel right locked together and an excited laugh bubbles out of me at our illicitness. It feels so good to break my father’s rules right under his nose.

Colton tugs me along and I toss one last glance at the bustling glitz and glamour of the party before we pass through heavy draped curtains into a hall where the thick fabric muffles the music and chatter.

Adrenaline races through me, making my limbs jittery with the rush. I giggle as Colton mumbles beneath his breath and cages me against the wall with his body.

“Need another. Pay the toll.”

I tip my chin up. “Say please.”

Colton groans and descends on my lips in another searing kiss. I’m not mad he didn’t ask nicely, not when he’s lighting my body up from the inside out. I can feel his hard

length prodding me in the stomach as his body covers mine, our hot puffs of breath mingling between kisses.

The urge to hop up and wrap my legs around his waist is strong. I settle for hiking one leg up to wrap around his thigh, the slit in my dress restricting me from lifting higher.

His palm slides up my leg, squeezing the back of my thigh. His hips buck against my stomach. I'm wild with the need to rub myself all over him in return.

I'm more drunk on his kisses than I was on top shelf champagne.

Again he pulls away. I'm not ready for the kiss to end, but before I can voice a protest, he takes my hand and leads us down the hall.

We pass a doorway where serving staff scuttle inside, the head caterer shouting directions.

The hallway splits in two at a junction and Colton takes us down the darker path, eclipsing us in shadow.

It reminds me of sneaking around with Cohen when we were kids, hand in hand and weaving our way through a maze of our own making. I grip Colton's hand tighter and he glances back over his shoulder, his half-smile drawing me in like an undertow.

The first two doors Colton tries are locked, but the third opens up into an old parlor room from when the mansion used to be a private residence. Now it appears to be utilized for furniture storage with a haphazard array of vintage settees and chaise lounge chairs scattered throughout the room. Most are partially covered in a sheet, but one or two are uncovered.

Colton's hands go to my waist and this time he makes me stretch up to kiss him with a gloating expression. I go on tiptoe to reach, clinging to his suit jacket. He remains still, making me to do all the work. Then all at once he takes over, sucking on my tongue until my knees go weak and wobbly.

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Heat throbs between my legs.

Chuckling against my mouth, Colton herds me blindly toward the middle of the room. The back of my legs bump against a settee.

“You’re not the perfect good girl you pretend to be,” Colton rumbles as his hands wander my body like hot brands claiming me as his. “You kiss like a fucking siren.”

My cheeks flush.

He gives one of my breasts a squeeze and I gasp, arching against him. My nipples are sensitive and tight beneath the thin barrier of my dress.

His grin is darkly amused. “No bra, huh?”

“In this dress?” A breathless laugh falls from me. “I’m not even going to explain couture fashion to you right now.”

“Hmm, you’re right.” Colton leans in and tortures my neck with open-mouthed kisses, finding every single sensitive patch of skin with ease. “I don’t give a fuck about fashion. I’m about to tear this thing off of you. I want to see all of you.”

Colton sucks on my pulse point and I shake from it, pleasure coiling tightly in my stomach.

“Don’t!” I manage to gasp. “I...I like this dress.”

He pauses his exploration long enough to draw back to sweep his gaze over me. I see the way his pupils dilate and darken.

“Suit yourself.”

His hand slides into the slit of my dress and he drags it up, uttering a rough sound when his fingers glide over the scrap of lace masquerading as underwear that I’m wearing.

“I was almost hoping there’d be nothing here.” Colton watches me with an intense gaze as he teases his fingertips over the edge of my underwear. His other arm bands around my waist to keep me in place. “How wet are you for me right now? Would you soak my fingers if I sank two in you to find out?”

Tingles erupt over my skin. Trembling in anticipation of his fingers entering me, I take a shuddery breath and dig my grip into the material of his jacket. It’ll be wrinkled to hell and back by the time we’re done here.

Colton slips one finger into the side of my underwear and strokes it over me. I bite my lip to muffle the tiny sound I make. Colton finds my clit and rubs it while he stares at my face.

“Don’t hide your sounds from me,” he directs. “I want to hear all of them so I know exactly how you moan when I take you apart.”

He presses his thumb against my clit through my lacy lingerie and a cry tears from my throat as he circles it faster. My labia feels swollen and heat throbs between my legs. I’m so turned on by his ministrations.

“Are you going to come from this?” Colton’s voice is like fire in my veins, his other arm a vice around my waist squeezing me close.

As if I'd run from this, when he's making me feel so good.

Liquid heat pours through me, sparking shock waves across my nerves as an orgasm approaches.

He touches his nose to mine, then covers my mouth with his own when I part my lips to utter another sound of pleasure. His tongue is demanding, swiping into my mouth.

With shaking legs I buck against his hand, letting go of any inhibitions. The need to come is greater than maintaining dignity. I will ride his fingers, his mouth, and his cock without shame if it feels as good as this does.

Colton growls into my mouth and bites my lip. He takes his fingers away and I almost cry out—I was so close. Colton plunges his hand inside the top of my underwear and gives me what I need, stimulating my clit with the perfect pressure as he drives me over the precipice into a riptide of pleasure that drowns me in delicious sensation when I come for him.

“Oh!” I moan, collapsing against him.

“Good girl,” Colton murmurs.

He kisses the tip of my nose as he massages my sensitive folds slower, almost absentminded.

As he flutters soft kisses across my face, I reach for his mask. I need to see his whole face. My fingers slip into the elastic holding the mask in place and he stiffens.

Colton clamps down on my wrists, holding them hostage on either side of his head. His fingers are like iron, squeezing hard enough to hurt.

“Don’t,” he grits out between clenched teeth. “Leave it on.”

Annabeth

Don't. Leave it on.

My chest heaves and I stare back at him. After a beat, his domineering temper shifts and melts back into the playful charmer that's had me hypnotized under his spell all night.

"It'll be like a game." Colton loosens his grip and soothes my wrists, brushing the skin with his thumbs in silent apology. He presses a chaste peck to the inside of one. "Doesn't that sound hot?"

I can see his point. With the mask on, it's a lurid fantasy. He could be anyone behind it that my mind chooses.

Unbidden, Cohen flashes to the forefront of my mind. I suck in a breath.

"I guess."

The corner of Colton's mouth lifts and he kisses me slow and deep and filthy. I forget about his mask and melt against him. Colton releases my wrists and I wrap my arms around his neck as we kiss.

After a minute, he buries his hand in my hair at the nape of my neck. He directs me to sit on the settee behind me and I drop in a cloud of the gauzy material of my skirt.

Colton stands above me with his hands tucked into his pockets, simply studying me

like I'm a work of art.

I must be a sight to behold, my hair a mess from his hands and flushed from orgasm.

I'm a masterpiece he wrecked.

My nipples tingle as he takes his time getting his fill, drinking me in head to toe with a hungry gaze. I lean back against the settee and meet his eyes with a saucy look of my own. Licking my lips, I allow my legs to spread a fraction. My pulse pounds in my ears as our seductive dance continues. He rumbles deep in his chest and an answering heat spills through my body. I need more of him.

Colton braces his hands on the back of the settee, caging me in. This is a cage I happily submit to. A grin spreads across his face.

"What do you need, sweetheart?"

Once again, I'm reminded of Cohen. I swallow and focus on the man before me.

Colton lifts one hand to trace his fingertips over my delicate lace mask. He skates his touch down my cheek and wraps his fingers around my neck in a loose grip, just firm enough to let me know he's controlling me.

"I...uh." Thoughts flee my mind and I'm left with my mouth gaping like a fish. "Kiss me?"

Colton smirks and gives my neck a small squeeze. "I'll give you everything you want."

He doesn't kiss me as he comes closer. There's a rustle in my hair and I blink as he pulls off the lace mask.

“You get to see my face, but I don’t get to see yours?”

Colton strokes my hair. “Part of the game, princess.”

Before I can argue, he drops to his knees and gathers the hem of my gown. With a wicked grin, he lifts my skirt to reveal my legs and my silvery lingerie.

“Mm, that’s a pretty sight.”

I squirm in place and I’m met with a raspy chuckle.

He circles his fingers around my ankles and skims his touch up to my knees. His palms are hot as he nudges them apart.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Colton murmurs. “You are divine and you’re all mine.”

I inhale sharply. There’s an insistent throb between my legs and I have the urge to snap them closed. He must sense it, because he squeezes my knees and presses them wider.

“Don’t just stare,” I whisper in a rush.

My cheeks are on fire and I cover my face with my hands.

“Ah, ah,” Colton chides.

He pries my hands away and pins them to the green velvet cushion beneath me. He raises an eyebrow and drops his attention back to the parts of me he has exposed.

“You have to watch.”

My cheeks burn hotter and I squirm again.

“But—”

“Shh.” He soothes me by trailing soft kisses over the inside of my thighs. He speaks into my skin in a deep voice. “I’m going to make you feel so good. I want you to watch me while I make you come on my tongue.”

He follows his dirty demand by peeking up at me from between my legs and licks his lips. I can’t stop the squeak that escapes me and his shoulders shake with his laugh.

Colton worships my thighs with kisses and nips that drive me insane. He spends long minutes making his way toward my center, only to hum and bypass the place where I want him most. He even raises on his knees to massage my breasts, pinching my nipples through the finely beaded material.

He tugs at the scooping neckline and before he can destroy the delicate fabric, I undo the hidden zipper and allow him to peel my dress down to my waist. My nipples harden to stiff nubs and he renews his attention to them.

They're so sensitive by the time he leaves off to hike my hips closer to the edge of the seat.

I dig my fingers in his thick hair, making a fruitless attempt to direct him to the apex of my thighs, but he will not be controlled.

"I know exactly what you need, baby," Colton murmurs with his lips pressed against my underwear.

My limbs quake from his teasing and I'm practically in tears at the brief pulse of pleasure from the light pressure of his lips through the thin layer separating him from touching my vagina. My body chases after more of it on instinct, my hips lifting.

"Please."

"Please what, sweetheart?" He's smug at the reactions he pulls from me, mouth still hovering out of reach above me.

I think he enjoys playing with me. He seems to get a thrill of satisfaction out of teasing me into oblivion, holding power over me.

I can feel his warm breath against my oversensitive skin in the chilled room.

"Please," I repeat, halfway to delirious. "I need more."

Colton hums. "Don't worry, I'm going to give it to you."

I almost whimper with relief when he hooks his fingers into my underwear, dragging the panties off. At this point, I'm no longer trying to clamp my legs closed. They're spread wantonly and I'm straining my hips toward Colton's mouth, eager for it.

He waits a beat while I try to subtly shift myself closer. He teases his touch over the tops of my thighs, mapping a path to my mound and skimming over my labia.

“Please, Colton,” I whisper, gripping the back of the settee above my head.

A shadow crosses over his face and his shoulders tense.

I’m only half-aware of the odd reaction before he descends his mouth on me at last, licking and sucking my folds and circling my clit with his tongue. My back bows and a moan spills from my lips after the torturous body worship I endured.

Colton grunts and molds his mouth to me, sucking my clit and flattening his tongue against it. I squeeze the back of the settee and circle my hips, seeking more. He pins my body with a firm grip, his thumbs pressing into my skin as he eats me out.

He pulls off for a second and I almost scream.

“Watch.”

Colton’s tongue traces my labia, then he presses it inside me, his gaze searing into me from between my legs. I’m helpless, lost in his mesmerizing stare as he brings me closer to the edge.

I thought his tongue was wicked when it was dominating my mouth, but I was wrong. This is true wickedness and I welcome it. Rolling my hips, I grind against his face. Saliva and my own wetness glistens on his cheeks as he shifts up to my clit. His eyes flash up to me once more and I feel his touch teasing my entrance.

I nod before he can ask. Colton pauses to stick two fingers in his mouth and returns to swipe his tongue against me. His fingers sink into my hole and I arch up.

“Ah!”

“Yeah, that’s it,” Colton mutters.

As his fingers curl and pump in and out of me everything becomes too much at once. The slow build of heat scorches me from the inside and my cries grow louder and more desperate. Colton growls and circles my clit with his tongue in intricate patterns while he fucks me with his fingers.

Sparks dance across my skin, starting at my core and spreading as my orgasm washes over me with an intensity that has me gasping.

“I’m coming! Oh god, I’m coming, I’m coming,” I whimper.

He doesn’t relent, making the overwhelming sensations start up again before the aftershocks of this orgasm have dissipated. My hand flies to his hair, though I struggle with the conflicting need to push him away or pull him harder against me. Colton’s tongue flicks my clit at the same time he thrusts his fingers and another orgasm crests over my body.

“Please, please,” I babble.

My fingers clench in his hair as I ride it out.

A deeper desire settles over me.

“Please,” I beg. “I need more. I need you.”

Colton looks like sin as he lifts off me, cheeks red and wet, lips swollen as he pants. Tingles prickle across my skin as the cool air hits me when Colton sits back on his haunches. A wildness dances in his eyes and I understand that he enjoyed doing that to me.

I pull at him, my nails scrabbling against his shoulders. "I need to feel you inside me."

Colton wipes his mouth and hauls himself up to kiss me. I taste myself on his tongue as I return the kiss with desperation. My legs hook around the back of his knees.

"Easy," Colton says on a laugh as he breaks the kiss. He palms his erection through his pants and watches me with hooded eyes. "Want this?"

I nod.

He kisses me again and together we fumble for the buckle of his belt. He strips out of his jacket and flings it behind him. My fingers scrabble through the buttons of his shirt and I slide my palms up his firm stomach as he pulls his cock out of his pants.

I shift up on the settee as his hands go to my hips. I'm wet enough that he slides in easily when he enters me, sinking inside with one thrust.

Colton squeezes my hips and groans into my neck.

"You feel amazing. You were made for my cock to fill you up."

"Yes," I gasp as he pulls out and slams back in with a snap of his hips.

The antique settee creaks in protest, but it I don't care if we break it.

I tip my head back into the velvet and he bites my neck. I'm going to have a necklace of hickeys in the morning.

His fingers find my nipples again and he follows his pinches with his lips and teeth.

I almost want him to make good on his threat to tear the rest of the delicate dress off my body so there wouldn't be any barrier between us.

My fingers thread into his hair as he goes back and forth between my breasts. I clench around his cock as he fucks me. He hums in response around one of my nipples.

“You going to come all over my cock, princess?”

A hard thrust follows his taunt and I do come again, clamping my thighs around his hips.

I'm tumbling beneath the current of our bodies, the heady pleasure dragging me under.

With a grunt, Colton locks his arms around me and lifts me from the couch. I make an aborted sound and cling to him. Colton crashes back down on the settee so I'm straddling him with my gown rucked up around my hips, the slit tearing audibly.

Without missing a beat, he pumps his hips and drives up into me.

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It hits me deeper, at a new angle that makes me breath hitch. I circle my hips to meet his thrusts.

“Scream for me.”

Colton grabs a handful of my hair at the back of my head and keeps me under his control as he fucks me with a rawness that calls to me.

The sounds I make are wild with ecstasy.

But then there’s something about the new position that makes me freeze. I don’t know if the light has changed or that he’s been on my mind all night, or that the expression in Colton’s eyes is too close to the tormentor I hate, but I see him there.

Cohen.

The mask fantasy shifts and all I can see is Cohen.

His words from the town car filter back through my head. My heart clenches and I close my eyes.

“You’re mine.” The voice beneath me is so similar to Cohen it nearly makes me startle.

I picture him behind that mask so easily in my head.

My breath catches and I circle my grip around his thick throat, pretending I have the

strength to squeeze Cohen's neck. A rough groan escapes him, his hot breath puffing over my lips and he fucks me with sharper thrusts that have me choking on my cries of pleasure. It's too much.

"You're mine," he repeats. His hold on my hair tightens, and he grips my hip hard enough to bruise. "Say it. Say you're mine."

A knot lodges in my throat as I remember Cohen's promise in the car. You'll be mine.

"Cohen," I whisper.

A harsh sound falls from his lips and he holds me more intensely in a possessive grip that makes me fear he heard me say another man's name. He fucks me harder, like he's imprinting himself on me so no one else can ever erase it.

I'm his and I'll never belong to anyone again.

Right now. Tonight. Forever.

With Cohen locked in my head as the mystery behind the mask.

My heartbeat trips over itself. Sensations slam into me as he draws me down for a kiss that's more teeth than anything else. He punishes my mouth, nipping my lips until they are swollen and sensitive.

I let him, my body clenching around his cock again, drawing another jagged sound from him. I don't want to admit it, but I like his vicious kiss and how roughly he fucks me.

Another shock of pleasure has me bucking as I ride him and I can feel his lips quirk

into a smile against mine.

His breathing changes. I think he might be close to coming. My whole body feels raw, like a live wire.

Are we going to stop to put a condom on?

I tense and then relax. If he comes, it'll be okay. I've been on the pill for years.

He must sense the thoughts running through my head because he barks a laugh and puts his lips against my ear.

“Next time I’m coming inside you,” he whispers like a wicked promise.

His thrusts slow down. He buries his cock deep inside me one more time and groans under his breath as he holds me there. It’s like he’s savoring the feeling of being inside of me.

With a nudge from him, I lift up and he pulls out. My lips part at the thought of sucking his cock right now.

His teeth flash when he grins and wraps his fingers around his length. With his other hand, he thumbs my swollen lip, watching me while he jerks himself with sure strokes.

“W-wait,” I protest. A laugh bubbles out of me. “Where’s your come going to go? You’ll stain the velvet.”

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“I don’t give a shit,” he snorts, breaking off at the end of his retort to tip his head back. “You going to offer up that pretty little mouth for me?”

I shift, ready to sink to my knees between his legs, but he halts me and draws me closer to his body.

“Stay there. Just like that.”

His mouth falls open and he watches me with hooded eyes, his attention flicking down to my bare breasts wandering over my body before returning to meet my eyes. I’m hypnotized by him once more, unable to resist his pull. I cover his hand with my own and lick my lips at the heat of his cock in my palm when he drops away and lets me take over.

“Make me come, sweetheart.”

I try to match his strokes from before and he mutters directions to adjust my grip. I lean against his side, rubbing his cock as he circles my waist with his arm and tells me how to make him feel good. He draws me in to lick my neck and his body tenses. He buries his face in the crook of my neck and bites down as his cock twitches and slippery come spills over my fingers.

“Fuck...keep going,” he commands.

I keep stroking him and stare as he paints my fingers and the antique cushion beneath him in spurts of come.

“Yes,” he hisses.

A thrill zips up my spine.

I did that to him.

It makes a rush of power spread through me.

His lips find mine once again. This kiss is lazy, more gentle.

This time when I reach for his mask, he lets me.

Annabeth

My heart stops.

The simple black mask dangles from my fingers and I stare back at him.

Cohen.

Cohen Decker was Colton all along.

An iciness trickles through me and I startle into action, scrambling away from him on the narrow antique chair and cover my chest with my arms. My breaths come in harsh pants, burning my lungs as I balance precariously on the cusp of hyperventilating.

With a jerky motion, I drop the mask like it's burning hot.

Cohen watches me silently. He looks like some deviant god, sprawled on the couch and freshly fucked. He runs long fingers through his hair to tame it back into place.

His hair is a mess because I was the one using his dark locks like my personal reins as he went down on me.

The room reeks of sex and sweat. Of us.

My fantasy is completely shattered.

I press the back of my trembling hand to my lips, my eyes wide and locked on him.

The events of the night run through my head, little moments where I compared Cohen and Colton leaping out in stark relief. The truth bleeds from those instances where I thought they were the same.

“You were wearing a red suit when you arrived.” It’s the only thing I can think to accuse him of with my thoughts jumbling in my mind. “I saw you.”

Cohen shrugs. “I had a second tux delivered earlier. I paid one of the catering staff to store it for me.”

“You...you were...” I don’t have words. A broken, panicked sob wracks my body. “You—”

“Me.”

Cohen gestures to himself with a sweep of his arm. His cock is still out, softening between his legs. The spots of his come darken the velvet between his spread legs.

A burst of heat spreads over my face at the sight of him. It occurs to me that his come is all over my fingers, too.

With a desperate sound falling from my lips, I roughly wipe my hand on the settee, no longer caring about staining it. I’d rather burn the antique than sit on it a minute longer.

Shoving my arms back into my dress, I tug it into place. I can’t find the hidden zipper and after a minute of fumbling, I give up. I still feel exposed, even with my gown back on.

I stand to cross the room, needing to get as far away from Cohen as possible. My legs wobble and I make it two steps before I lose my balance and lean heavily on a chaise

covered by a sheet. I don't meet Cohen's eyes as his self-satisfied laughter seeps into my bones.

“You okay there, baby? Did I fuck you so good you can barely walk?”

Shame washes over me. I enjoyed every second when I thought he was Colton.

Fuck, I even liked it at the end...when I pictured Cohen in those brief moments of insanity.

And I put him there in my head, didn't I? A small part of me wanted it to be him behind the mask when I let the fantasy game go far enough.

I close my stinging eyes.

The cage I fought so hard to escape is slamming shut around me and I'm crashing against the bars.

Betrayal and guilt sit heavy on my tongue, the taste bitter and sour. I can't believe I enjoyed what he did to me.

My stomach twists itself into knots.

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Would I have allowed myself to succumb to this debauchery if I knew it was Cohen behind that mask from the start?

I'd like to think I wouldn't, but I can't deny how much my body is attuned to him, yearning for his touch even now. He violated my trust and consent, and heat still throbs deep in my belly for him to do it all over again.

The echo of his cock lingers inside me. My empty walls clench around the memory.

I take a shuddering breath. He won this game. He's had his fun.

But Cohen doesn't get to win our war.

I still won't marry him.

Pushing up from the chair, I survey the tear in my gown, the slit ending above my hip instead of my thigh. I click my tongue as I graze my fingers over the ruined fabric.

Cohen rustles around in my periphery. When I look up, his cock is back in his pants and his shirt is buttoned.

"You can't be mad," he says.

I scoff. "I fucking well can! You don't get to decide my feelings."

The corners of his lips twitch up into a sardonic expression. "Oh, but I think I do."

“Only in your dreams,” I snap.

Cohen makes a show of glancing around the room, leaning close to the settee to examine it with over-exaggerated dramatics.

“Hmm, I think what we just did together paints a very different picture.”

I wrap my arms around myself and squeeze my elbows. Cohen straightens and ambles over to me, eating up the distance I put between us in easy strides.

“I told you to say you were mine,” he breathes. He reaches up and brushes his crooked finger over my cheek. I jerk my head back and his lips thin into a flat line. He leans into my space and speaks slowly. “And then you said my name.”

My throat works as I swallow. Cohen takes my silence as permission to continue reasoning with me. He runs his fingers through my hair.

“You knew anyway, even with my disguise.”

I shake my head. Cohen sighs and his hand slips down to my neck. His thumb presses into the hollow of my throat to the point of discomfort and I go still. Cohen’s eyes flick back and forth over my face.

“You liked what I did to you.”

My eyes flutter shut. He’s got me there. There’s nothing I can say in my defense.

None of those orgasms or moans were fake.

He releases me and turns around. I grimace at the lump that lodges in my throat, my emotions threatening to spill over. As I blink a few hot tears slide down my cheeks.

I scan the room, looking for where Cohen flung my underwear as he bends to retrieve his white jacket. He dusts it off and slings it over his shoulder with two fingers hooked in the collar.

My underwear has vanished. I stand in the middle of the room with my hands propped on my hips. I could go without, but Cohen would know I was running around with nothing beneath my gown. I don't think I can stomach his knowing smirk.

"Looking for these, princess?"

My gaze snaps to Cohen. Every inch of his posture radiates smugness.

His head is cocked to the side as he dangles the scrap of silver lace from his fingers.

"I'm not your fucking princess." I take a step forward and he makes a discouraging click with his tongue.

"I'll be keeping these." He stuffs the crinkled bundle into his pocket and pats it.

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A shriek of absolute rage works its way up my throat. I ball my hands into fists and glare at my monster of a fiancé.

“You won’t get away with this.”

“Annie—”

Surprise crosses Cohen’s face as I back up. His expression is the last thing I see before whirling around and storming from the room. I slam the door in his face as his footfalls chase after me.

My blood boils as I stalk back toward the sounds of the party. The countdown has started amongst the drunken revelry of ringing in the new year.

“Eleven...Ten...Nine...”

My New Year’s resolution? Destroying any last shred of everyone’s hope that I’ll marry Cohen Decker like a good puppet.

Cohen

“Annie!” I yell as I follow her.

She tosses a narrow-eyed look over her shoulder and whips around to rush down the hall.

This is going all wrong and I’m stuck between wanting to drop to my knees before her—a first for me because I normally only want to tower over her—and punching a wall. I didn’t like that look on her face right before she left the room.

Even worse, I’m the one that caused it.

All I wanted to do was show her I care about her. My plan went to shit faster than cinderblock shoes sink in the river.

“Annie, just wait a second!”

I catch her arm and yank her back against my body, burying my nose in her hair and breathing in her perfume mingled with her sweat.

Annie struggles against my hold and I lock my arms around her. She digs her nails into my arms, kicking up a vicious fit.

“Calm down,” I mutter against the back of her head.

Annie snarls and squirms in frustration.

I lean out of range before she cracks me in the chin with her skull. “Easy. Jesus.”

Annie tires out, her breathing harsh as she stills in my arms.

“Three...two...one...Happy New Year!”

The party explodes in cheers down the hall and the band plays Auld Lang Syne, distracting both of us for a moment.

Off by mere minutes. No sweet midnight kisses for me.

“Come on.” I glance around, reluctant to take her to the only room I know in the vicinity that’s unlocked. I don’t think she’ll appreciate taking her back to the spot we fucked in. “We can’t talk here.”

Prepared to drag her with me, I’m a little shocked when she comes willingly. Pleasantly so. Maybe this whole shitshow is salvageable. I loosen my iron grip on her so she can’t whine to her daddy later that I manhandled her.

Well. Any more than she wanted me to when I was fucking her.

I suck in a subtle breath as we wander down the hall and I have to tell my dick to calm down as it stiffens at the memory of her cries. She was incredible. I want to fuck her like that every day for the rest of my life.

I’ll worship at the altar of her body to pull those sweet mewls from her as I ravage her perfect little cunt with my mouth.

Licking my lips, I make a turn in the opposite direction at the juncture in the hall, away from the room we were in before. I glance over at my fiancée.

Annie's face is blank, but I catch the fire dancing in her gaze. She looks like molten precious metal with her hazel eyes and her blonde hair.

My golden queen.

We find an empty alcove far enough away that the sounds of the party are muffled.

I spin her to face me and cup her shoulders to keep her from running off again.

“What were you going to do back there?” I ask.

Annie levels me with an unimpressed glare. I want to snort. She always gets worked up like this.

I love and hate her attitude problem. I can't stop the surge of an answering belligerence in my blood, ready to meet her sour attitude with one of my own.

“What's wrong, princess? Are you pissed because you enjoyed it so much?” I tip my head to the side and dare her to look away. “I knew you would. I told you, you were made for me.”

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“I liked it when I thought it was Colton,” Annie spits, fighting to shrug my hands from her shoulders. I dig them in and she bares her clenched teeth. “I’d rather fuck anyone else, any other man that’s not you!”

She sets me off, making me lose my temper. For a minute I forget that I regret duping her, even if it was for her own good. I growl and shake her by the shoulders hard enough to jostle her. I have half a mind to shred her dress with one good tug and fuck her against this wall to remind her who she belongs to.

“You’re lying to me and to yourself,” I grit out. “Should we go for round two to jog your memory?”

I pin her body against the wall with mine and grind my erection into her stomach. My hand goes to her ripped slit and slips inside to roam over her bare skin beneath, grabbing a handful of her ass. She gasps and tries to buck me off.

“Feel that? It doesn’t matter to me if you struggle. It gets me hard as fuck,” I croon against the shell of her ear. I grin humorlessly when she shivers. “I’ll still give you what you need. If you’re good, I’ll make you come again.”

“Don’t—” She breaks off with a wet, shuddery breath. “Don’t you dare touch me without my permission.”

“Who says I need your permission to take what I want?”

Another broken sound escapes her and a thrill shoots straight to my dick at the fear shining in her eyes.

That's right, baby. You're all mine and I can do anything I want.

Taking some pity on her, I remove my hand from beneath her skirt. I don't actually want to hurt her, just make sure she knows I could.

I trace her trembling lower lip and press my thumb into her mouth.

A tear spills down her cheek, smearing her already messed up makeup. She sucks my thumb with tentative licks.

"Good girl," I murmur, stroking my thumb against her tongue.

I let her continue for a minute until some of the tension bleeds from her body. I pull my thumb out and give her a quick kiss.

When I pull back, she watches me warily.

Sighing, I explain myself. "I came up with this whole plan..." I wave my hand at my shirt. I left my jacket in the other room when she ran off. "I wanted to show you I wasn't like my dad."

She narrows her eyes. "By deceiving me?"

I push out a harsh breath and try to reel in the burst of anger.

"No," I say slowly. "I'm nothing like him. Or my cousins or uncle. I want to do things differently than the way they run the whole operation." The look in her eyes tells me she doesn't believe that for a second. "I only wanted to show you that we could be good together."

Annie makes another attempt to buck me away from her. When I don't move, she

stomps on my foot. I grunt and lean more of my weight into her.

“God damn, Annie.”

“You are such a fucking asshole!” Annie shouts. “You manipulated me into sleeping with you after tormenting me all the time with your stupid tricks! I am not your toy, Cohen, I am a person!”

I open my mouth to reply, but she cuts me off.

“You completely violated me,” she accuses with a poisonous hiss.

My lip curls up and I squeeze her upper arms.

“You fucking begged me to do it!”

“I didn’t know it was you!”

“You said I’d have to make you,” I say, throwing her statement from the other day back in her face. “You practically threw yourself on my dick. What was it you said?” I pause, pretending to recall. My next words come out in a low, deadly voice. “Oh yeah. I need to feel you inside me.”

Her expression freezes in a mask of indignant disbelief.

“So, yeah. I made you, all right.” I narrow my eyes and press our foreheads together. “And you begged for it.”

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Now the tears fall freely from Annie's clumped lashes.

The red haze fades from the edges of my vision and the outrage seeps out of me with a sigh. My mouth flattens and I swipe my thumbs beneath her eyes, smearing her makeup more as I wipe away the tears. Annie hiccups and turns her face away from me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell or hurt you. I'm still that guy, Annie."

I will her to believe me. I did all of this for her, to show her that marrying me wouldn't be the end of the world. I need her.

Swallowing past the tightness in my throat becomes difficult. As I look at the girl I'm supposed to marry, the one I want to marry, reality crashes around me.

For the first time, it feels like I might have pushed Annie too far. Taunting her and riling her up to get a rise out of her is a sick addiction of mine. But is it worth it when I could really lose her over this?

Not a fucking chance.

My pride is one thing. It's the armor I shroud myself with. But a life without Annie in it?

That's the scariest thought that's ever crossed my mind.

Annabeth

I'm vibrating with the need to get away from him right now. On the outside I might appear rational and collected, but on the inside a hurricane of emotion ravages me.

Cohen is no better than my father scheming to get ahead and get everything he wants. Cohen takes without asking, just like my father.

No matter what excuses he believes, he's exactly like everyone else.

"You need to let me go," I demand. "Immediately."

Cohen's eyes flit back and forth over my face. Then he sighs and steps back, hands up.

He's a good actor. I almost believe the regretful expression he plays up.

"I'm sorry," he repeats.

Ignoring him, I sidestep and walk away with my head held high. I don't care that I probably look like a hot mess. It doesn't even matter that I barely feel a shred of the bravado I broadcast as I make my escape.

Cohen follows me. His footsteps echo as I weave through quiet halls the further we get from the main ballroom.

As I turn another corner, I glance back at him. He does nothing. He keeps his

distance, trailing at a sedate pace with his hands in his pockets.

“Fuck off,” I snap as I quicken my gait.

He keeps even with me with ease, his long legs outmatching my shorter ones. Toddling along in expensive heels doesn’t help, either. These things were designed to look good and that’s it. They suck for footwear as I try to make my getaway.

Cohen scoffs at my demand. “Don’t mind me. You’ll probably only believe me if I say I just want to make sure my investment doesn’t damage herself.”

“Ugh!”

I hate him all over again. For being such a dick. For lying to me. For worming his way beneath my skin.

* * *

The cold air hits me when I make it outside the maze of a mansion. I have no idea where we are—still in New York? Jersey?—but it feels good against my skin. It clears my head, even as I shiver from the chill.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I cross the gravel drive to the valet stand. I arrived with Dad and Charity in a limo, but I can’t wait around for our driver. The kid working the valet booth isn’t around, but there’s a set of keys left out.

A muffled squeal of victory escapes me. I swipe them and click the button, praying for a nearby car.

Several feet down the drive there’s a manicured lawn doubling as a parking lot for those that brought their toys out for the evening. A sleek black Lexus LC beeps twice,

the headlights flashing.

I send my thanks to whatever deity took pity on me.

What's a little grand theft auto amongst dirty billionaires and mobsters?

I don't check behind me for Cohen. I think I lost him between the old service kitchen and a study. That, or he hung back on purpose when I found the solarium leading outside. Maybe he finally got it through his thick skull that I need to get far away from him.

The gravel is hell to walk on in stilettos, but I make it to the car and slide into the driver's seat.

"God, does a giant drive this thing?" I grumble.

It feels like I've climbed into the trunk. I fumble around and find the seat adjustment and get the Lexus started.

Seat warmers in the buttery leather start working right away and I hum, leaning into the embrace of the seat. Now that I have a free minute, I find my hidden zipper and close it so I'm five percent less of a hot mess express.

Once I get out of here, I'll check the registration to get the owner's car back to them. For now, the only thing on my mind is a hasty getaway.

I pull out onto the gravel drive and pause, holding my foot down on the brake. I wasn't kidding when I said I have no idea where I am right now. This estate is out in the middle of nowhere. It's pitch black out and the estate is surrounded by nothing but trees and back roads. I wasn't paying much attention on the way in, too busy untying the knots of dread in my stomach on the way to my engagement party.

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I spend a minute fiddling with the console screen, but I can't make the GPS work. A frustrated huff blows out of me. I tap my manicured nails against the wheel.

How bad could it be if I drive for a while? At least if I find a twenty-four-hour convenience store or gas station, I can figure out how to get back to the city.

It's not like I'll end up on a dead end road, ripe prey for a psycho axe murder if I pick a direction and drive.

Without a phone, ID, or money.

My eyes widen and I laugh off the preposterous worry that flits through my head.

Blowing out a breath, I glance in the rearview.

My heart stops and I nearly shriek, my brain leaping to the axe murderer I imagined. But no...my heart thuds because I recognize the lone figure.

Fuck.Cohen is standing behind the car, cast in a red glow from the tail lights and exhaust smoke.

The bleakness of the situation bleeds over me and my chest tightens as I stare at Cohen in the mirror.

Where can I really go?

If I make it back to the city, that doesn't change things. My father's threat is still

hanging over my head no matter where I am. I know he's friends with a judge or two who would do him a favor.

Dad controls everything and he'll do whatever is in his power to keep me in line.

He loves his business and his money more than he loves me.

There's no escaping, so I'm only making my life harder.

I squeeze the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white.

But does it mean I'm giving in if I go through with the wedding? My eyes lock on Cohen again. He hasn't moved. A breeze blows through his dark hair.

Who's worse, Annie, the devil you fear or the devil you know?

Swallowing, I take a deep breath. Cohen fucked me like I was something to be cherished and worshipped. If he can touch me like that, is he really going to make my life hell?

My nails dig into the wheel and I tear them away to cover my face. Everything is so confusing. I shouldn't forgive him for what he did. He doesn't deserve it.

How can I believe he had good intentions in his scheme tonight?

I guess in a way, beneath all the fucked up parts, I can see that Cohen thought it would be a sweet way for me to get to know him without my existing feelings in the way. He just went about it in the stupidest way possible.

Typical, impossible, wild Cohen.

A tired laugh rolls through me.

I have to admit, Cohen was free and more relaxed than I've ever seen him. That might be who Cohen has grown to be beneath the mask he wears. I've always known his cruel games, but if I didn't fight him so hard maybe he would have shown me his charming side, too.

This is insane. I'm sitting here reasoning Cohen's merits with myself. I slide my fingers into my hair and look once more at Cohen's reflection in the rearview.

I have to decide what my heart wants. Will I accept the cage and resent it, or will I be granted more freedom and power by cooperating?

The moves I've always made have been because I was picking my own battles, thinking I had to choose what little freedoms were afforded to me.

All these years I have built Cohen up as the face of the true monster that haunts me, but that's not right. In truth, it's the anger that's made me fight so hard. The rage I feel at my father. It was easier to filter my hatred and aggravation into Cohen.

But now that I'm being honest with myself? Deep down, past my hurt heart and the hate I built into a wall to protect me from Cohen, it's always been him.

When he kissed me, my very first kiss, I wasn't mad that he forced me. I had a crush on him back then. I was really mad because he did it first before I could.

My thoughts swirl in my head, a mass of confusion and a new hope.

All of it centers on Cohen.

If I believe him, then he wouldn't want to cage me the same way Dad does.

He's possessive of me and made his point about claiming me. But is that where it ends? If it is, I'll fight him tooth and nail. I refuse to be a toy to another man after I've played my father's puppet all my life.

I have to know for sure whether he thinks of me as property or his equal before I run away.

Movement behind the car catches my eye as Cohen takes a step closer. Heaving a defeated sigh, I shift the car in park.

Cohen

My heartbeat is pounding so hard it's making me dizzy. Everything is falling apart like sand running through my fingers. I clench my hands in my pockets until the skin stings as I wait behind my car.

I hung back as she went outside and stuck to the shadows as I trailed after her.

When I saw her steal my keys I snorted. That valet will be out of a job for leaving my keys out when he stepped away for a break.

I found it ironic and fitting that Annie was going to run from me, from this, from us in my own car.

Earlier I had decided to drive to the party picturing taking Annie for a drive up to the mountains after our night together. I imagined holding her hand to my lips as I wove through the mountain roads in the quiet peace of pre-dawn. I wanted to see the sunrise of the New Year with her by my side at a cabin I bought a few years ago, the one I've been fixing up for her.

The car idles for so long that my pulse calms. The gripping fear that she's slipped out of my grasp fades and at last I will my feet to move so I can fix this.

She's not leaving. That's the shred of hope I keep repeating in my head.

When I swallow it burns. The gravel crunches under my feet.

With my heart sitting in my throat, I brace my hand against the roof above the driver's side. I really thought Annie would peel away and kick up the gravel in her tail lights.

The window rolls down. Annie keeps her eyes on the empty view in front of her.

Even with the tear tracks smearing her makeup, I think she's beautiful.

"You look good behind the wheel." I want to bite back my words when she peers at me out of the side of her eyes. She quirks a brow. I pat the roof of the car. "It's mine."

Annie takes a moment to process that and after a beat she huffs, rolling her eyes.

"Of course it is."

I lick my lips. The cold air dries them out. "Annie."

She sighs and swings her gaze to me, her hazel eyes piercing in the low light glowing from the dash.

"I shouldn't have done what I did."

"Damn right."

"I'm sorry." I shift to lean my arm against my Lexus so I can bend down to her level. I shove my pride deep into my gut and prop my forehead against my arm. "I swear to you, Annie, I'll keep my promise. Colton might not exist, but I do."

Her lips work, but she remains silent.

“If you really want to get away from this, you can.”

That gets Annie’s attention, though she makes a good effort of playing it cool. I catch her eyes widening in the dim light.

It’s like unstitching every rusty wire I mended my broken heart with. Fitting I’m undoing it all over again for Annie. It’s always been for her.

“I don’t want to force you, sweetheart. I’ll help you get away if that’s what you need.”

I bite the inside of my cheek when I’m finished.

All I can do is hold on to the hope that a small piece of her heart will always remain mine if I let her go.

They say if you love something, free it. I hate it because it hurts, but I need to show Annie that she matters more to me than even my own selfish desires.

“The last thing I want to do is control you, Annabeth Noble,” I swear.

Annie makes a small sound and blinks rapidly.

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“We don’t have to be what they expect us to be.” I nod toward the estate. “We get to decide. And together? We’d be so good.”

Annie still listens silently. I almost laugh. Of course Annie doesn’t take it easy on me. I shouldn’t have expected anything to be easy with her.

“I’d never treat you like your dad does,” I murmur.

Her breath catches and she turns towards me, dropping the pretense. I grab hold of the lifeline of optimism, reeling myself in. It spurs me on and the real truth spills from my lips.

“I’ve only ever wanted you as my partner. My equal. I’ve always seen that...” I touch her face gently, grazing her cheek with my thumb. “So can you, Annie?”

“I don’t know, Cohen,” Annie whispers. “I shouldn’t forgive you.”

There is conflict in every line of tension in her body. She twists her fingers in her lap and a wrinkle appears between her furrowed brows.

Somewhere over the course of the evening, I found I like making Annie laugh more than I like making her angry. I want both. I want to be the man that makes her laugh and earns her fire.

I blow out a breath and shake my head.

“I’m the same person that had the mask on all night. The same one who whispered all

that stuff to you. After I took off the mask, I was going to take you to the cabin if you wanted to see it. I wasn't lying. About any of it."

"But couldn't you have done that without tricking me!"

"You wouldn't have listened. You've always seen what you wanted to see in me." I thump my head against my arm and stare at her. "Annie. I've been in love with you ever since we were kids. You've had my heart in your grip since that first kiss. It's yours. Hate me, or forgive me, or ignore me forever. Do whatever you want with it."

Annie gasps and grasps the open window with both hands. She sniffles and after a few harrowing moments where I think my heart will claw up out of my throat to land in her lap, she gets out of the car. I fall back a couple of steps to give her room and close the door behind her. She wipes her eyes and sucks in a deep breath. Propping her hands on her hips, she lifts her chin and stares me down with a serious expression.

"You mean all of that?"

I nod and she purses her lips to the side.

"What if I want to keep studying for my degree? What if I want to go for my masters or become a psychologist and leave everything about our world behind?"

"Of course. I'd never stop you from doing what you want."

"You'd really call off the arranged marriage and let me go?" Annie asks it in a small, mystified voice that makes my stomach flip. "If you're lying right now, I promise you'll sorely regret it."

"I swear it." The budding hope surges through me and I make another leap. "Be the queen to my empire?"

“Our empire, you mean.” She raises her eyebrows.

A sardonic smile settles on my face. I bark out a breathy laugh, elation sparking and expanding my chest.

Annie will challenge me every day, the way she’s always done. I love her for it. I crave it. I can’t imagine a life without her pissing me off and turning me on in the same prissy breath.

I hold out my hand. “Yes, dear.”

She smirks, looking every inch like my fierce golden queen. I can’t tear my eyes away from her, afraid the mirage is too good to be true if I blink.

Annie puts her hand in mine and my heart soars as I thread our fingers together.

“Besides.” Annie taps her chin. “Who says it wouldn’t be me ruling the court, anyway? I don’t let anyone control me. Maybe I’ll have to take over for our dads and Albert Mastriano.”

My smile stretches into a wicked grin and my cock twitches in interest.

I picture her seated on a throne of her own making, the queen on the board controlling the Mastriano mob operation and the public business empire.

Shit, the mental image is beautiful, and it makes me want to have her right here against my car.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I murmur. “I have no doubt you’re going to rule the whole damn world.”

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“You’re going to make tonight up to me,” Annie declares. She squeezes my hand. “Starting with getting me the hell out of here. I hope you know where we are, because your car’s GPS controls are a piece of crap.”

I pull her close and wrap my arms around her, holding her tight and take a minute to breathe her in.

“No more running?” I ask. “We’ll do this together.”

“No more running,” she agrees.

Leaning back, I cup her face between my palms. “Good.”

I press my lips to hers and swipe my tongue against her lips. She parts them for me and I deepen the kiss. She snakes her arms beneath mine, stealing my body heat while she snuggles closer. A shiver wracks her body as she gives me as good as I give her.

Everything in the universe aligns with our kiss. The fake stars decorating the party have nothing on kissing Annie beneath the real deal.

When we part, I smile at her and tuck her hair behind her ear. She stretches up, using her grip on me for leverage, and plants a peck on the tip of my nose. I gather her close once more and she presses her cold nose against my neck.

“Be the man who charmed me tonight,” Annie breathes against my skin. “But...be the man that drives me crazy, too.”

I drop a kiss on top of her head and nudge her. “Want to get out of here? For real this time.”

“How far is the cabin?”

“A few hours from here.” I check my watch. “If we leave now, we’ll make it by dawn.”

I take her hand and lead her around the car, opening the door for her. Once I get in on the driver’s side, I reach for her hand again and bring it to my lips.

“Watch the sunrise with me?” I mumble against her knuckles.

“Just this one, or are we talking every sunrise from now on?” Annie teases.

I put the car in gear and rest the heel of my palm over the wheel as we drive away from the estate into tomorrow, hand in hand with the woman I love.

We’re in this together now. There are no masks to hold us back.

“Every sunrise.”

“Hmm.”

She pretends to think about it. I tense and count my heartbeats while she makes me sweat it out.

When I think I might pass out from holding my breath for so long, she grins.

“Deal.”

ANNABETH

TWO YEARS LATER

The rose-colored lipstick suits me more today. I smile softly at my reflection in the mirror. My hair is woven into an elaborate up-do of braids and curls, speckled with tiny sparkling crystals that look like stars.

My phone lights up on the vanity and my eyes flit over it, reading the encoded text message. Everyone else will see another congratulations message, but I read the meaning beneath.

Victor Noble's holdings under suspicion. Investigation proceeding.

The soft smile on my face curls up at the corners as satisfaction glows from within my chest. Dad will finally get everything he deserves. I didn't believe Cohen when we were coming up with the finer points of our plan during a stay at our cabin, but he swore—swaying in slight drunkenness with a beer bottle in his hand and his bare chest lit by the ambient light from the fireplace—it was going to work.

I'm glad Cohen can prove me wrong like this.

He proved me wrong about this morning, too. As I put the finishing touches on my bridal ensemble, my cheeks heat at the memory of how I woke up this morning: Cohen's head between my thighs and his wickedly talented tongue working me over. When he was finished taking me apart he growled against my skin, "Just wanted to make sure you remember until I see you again."

I laughed and promised I'd see him in a few hours.

Our honeymoon plans involve holing up in the cabin, our secret hideaway where we can shut out the world and just be. It's become our haven where we shed all of the masks we wear. I can't wait to have Cohen to myself again.

"How are you feeling, Annie? Nervous?" Gloria Decker brandishes a fresh bottle of champagne across the room. "I was so sick with nerves on my wedding day. I swear, you'd think I was preparing for a lie detector test instead of meeting Morris at church."

I laugh and wave her off, nodding to my phone. "It's not nerves. Cohen was saying he can't wait to see me."

Despite my initial wariness, Gloria has been great during the planning process. And I did have her with me when my dress was fitted.

Charity's no longer around. She wisely divorced Dad after I slipped her a heads up that the authorities were putting him under a magnifying glass. Dad hasn't found a replacement because Cohen has a few loyal guys that keep tabs on Dad and his dates for me. Once Dad makes a move, I take care of it and warn them off before he can get his claws in them.

I'm systematically taking away everything that makes my father happy until he's left with nothing as payback for the hell he put me through.

Anyone on his side better stay out of my way.

I'm out for blood.

The pop of a cork draws me back to the present. My maid of honor, Margot, cheers

and dances over to Cohen's mom to help with mimosa refills. Margot's a friend I met last semester before I finished my undergrad. I'm still deciding whether I want to apply to grad school to keep pursuing my interests. Cohen supports me, no matter what I do.

"Cheers, girls!" Gloria calls, toasting with a pale mimosa that's mostly champagne.

I grin over my shoulder at everyone's antics.

Gloria's grown on me in the last couple of years. She comes over and squeezes my shoulder, meeting my gaze in the mirror.

"You look beautiful."

"Thank you." I lick my lips and tilt my head back to look up at her. It's nice to have her here with me. "Cohen's a good man. I love him."

Gloria's expression softens and she cups my cheek. "You two make each other so happy. It was meant to be from the start. When you were kids, I used to say to Morris that fate tied your souls together."

A burst of emotion washes over me and I wave my hands in front of my watery eyes to keep my makeup in place.

"Ahh, sorry about that, dear," Gloria chuckles. "I can't help it. I'm an old romantic."

Once I have myself under control, I rise from my seat at the vanity. "It's time."

The women in the room grant me last wishes and my stomach flutters with butterflies. I have one more surprise for Cohen today. I reach out and grab a length of delicate black lace from the vanity and pin it into place over my eyes.

* * *

In the limo, my thoughts drift again.

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Maybe it is wedding day nerves, but I keep circling back around to how Cohen fit himself into the role of the man I always hoped he would become. The man he is beneath the monster that used to torment me. My throat swells and one corner of my mouth lifts in a half-smile.

He's still a wicked bastard, but he's just as much of a sweet gentleman.

Cohen is wild, and he has possessed my heart so thoroughly it's any wonder I thought he wasn't seeping between the cracks in my walls over the years. Once those walls came down, Cohen rushed in like a flood and I'll be damned if I can ever get him back out.

Not that I'd want to.

The partnership we've forged started that first weekend at the cabin after New Year's Eve. We watched the sunrise sitting in a swing on the porch wrapped in a big blanket. Cohen had curled his arms around my waist and kissed the back of my neck as I perched on his lap with my knees tucked against my chest.

In those first rays of dawn creeping over the foggy hills, we worked out a strategy between us. We figured out how we would shift things to make changes for when we step into our roles in the empire's machine that rules our lives.

Things are going well on both fronts.

Dad won't be able to sneeze without triggering a federal investigation and Albert Mastriano plans to retire soon to live in Costa Rica. Only a few key players remain

standing on the board and Cohen and I are coming for them with everything we've got. We're building our empire on our terms.

"Ready, Annie?" Margot pats my hand as the limo pulls up to the botanical gardens.

The grin that breaks free is impossible for me to contain. "Yeah."

We're herded from the car into the garden and lined up by the coordinator running the show.

It's not until the ceremony music reaches me that the nerves kick back in for a second. All I want is to run down that aisle to reach Cohen. Margot turns around and hugs me in the seconds she has before her cue to walk.

"Knock him dead, killer," Margot whispers.

"Keep him from running for me, would you?" I joke.

Margot snorts. "Girl, that guy is sick with how much he loves you. He's in it for the long haul."

The coordinator taps Margot on the shoulder and we share one more moment before Margot is gone. I take steady breaths and focus on the single pink Queen Protea I carry. The petals of the desert plant are soft when I stroke my fingertips over them with a light brush.

Cohen had laughed his ass off when I showed him the flower choices and told him the name of the flower he pointed to. To be honest, I found it pretty amusing, too.

"Okay, Annie. Time to go," the coordinator tells me with a nod.

I start walking, my legs weirdly shaky even though the nerves have dissipated. The surge of adrenaline is a heady rush.

My wedding gown moves with me as I make my way around the corner. It's similar to the one I wore to the masquerade gala.

The anticipation buzzes through me like the bubbly champagne from this morning. I can't wait to see Cohen's reaction to the whole ensemble put together. I picked it all out to look just like that night when things clicked into place for us.

As I lift my head to peer down the aisle at Cohen, a shocked giggle escapes me. His deep, rich laughter reaches me from across the garden. I hesitate for a beat and then continue down the aisle, grinning.

Cohen has a matching expression and shakes his head as I reach him, his hand held out to take mine.

We surprised each other by both wearing masks.

"I see we coordinated well." Cohen taps the same simple black mask he's wearing, the same one he wore that night at the masquerade gala. He sucks his lips between his teeth as he takes me in. "You look amazing."

"Have you seen my fiancé, Colton?" I tease, pretending to search the crowd of guests. "He was supposed to meet me here at this time."

Cohen's grin remains in place as I unmask him and reveal hypnotic dark eyes. His fingers graze my skin as he cups my face and I nuzzle into the touch. He removes my mask and tucks it into his pocket.

"I want to put this with my other keepsake from that night," Cohen murmurs against

the shell of my ear.

Sucking in a breath, I pinch his side, a dark laugh rolling out me. “You better be kidding.”

“You’ll just have to find out.”

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Cohen flashes me a smug look before settling his hand at the small of my back and turning to face the officiant.

The ceremony is infused with our personalities and the botanical garden fills with laughter and audible snuffles from the guests. In our vows we make promises about the future. Cohen's gaze bores into mine with intensity as we utter secret code words to each other that mean more to us than what the guests hear.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife." The officiant nods to Cohen. "You may now kiss the bride."

"Let's misbehave, Annie," Cohen murmurs.

His thumbs stroke my waist as he pulls me closer.

My mouth curves into a slow smile.

"Together," I agree.

Cohen closes the distance between us, his lips connecting with mine. The celebratory cheers from the guests fade into the background as we kiss. One of Cohen's hands comes up to cup my face and as we part from the heartfelt kiss, I rest my forehead against his.

I always thought I was a helpless princess locked in my cage, but Cohen helped me see that I'm stronger than that. With him by my side, I'll never be caged again.

Cohen takes my hand and kisses the back of it as Margot passes me the single Queen Protea.

We face our friends and family. Cohen squeezes my hand and leans over.

“Ready to get out of here with me, sweetheart?”

My smile stretches wider.

“I hear there’s a sunrise with our names on it.”