



Accidentally Marrying the Best Man

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Category: Romance

Description: When you agree to a marriage of convenience, but get left at the altar, and the best man steps up—literally—to put a ring on your finger

For good reasons, I want a marriage not complicated by sex or emotions. And I thought I had the perfect solution when a friend needed to get married to claim his inheritance. But then I'm left at the altar and his brother steps in to take his place. The problem? I've been secretly in love with my new husband since we were kids. And he wants the total package, feelings and baby-making included.

Accidentally Marrying the Best Man is a short and steamy instalove novella, starring an overprotective ex-special forces security expert and the stubborn woman he'll stop at nothing to claim and breed.

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CHARLOTTE

I brush my hand over the flowing skirt of my wedding dress and marvel at how light it is.

My reflection in the full-length mirror shows an amazing gown that pairs a structured, silk Mikado corset with a floor-length, silk mousseline skirt.

I never thought I'd get married, and this ceremony is about doing a favor for a friend, not committing to forever after with a soulmate.

And yet, I spent more money than I should on the dress.

It's inspired by a design from Elie Saab's website.

The celebrity-favored designer charges around fifteen thousand dollars for the lower end of her collection, and as much as I love quality fashion, even I think that's too much to shell out for a dress I'll only wear once.

All I need now is a groom, but my childhood friend, who begged me to marry him, is suspiciously absent.

And very late.

I've been waiting in the vestry of the small wedding chapel for a while.

But maybe that's not the right word to call this space, since the venue is not religious.

I guess it's more like a lounge or a waiting room.

Bride's room? But that implies that I should have a bevy of girlfriends in here, getting ready with me. And I'm here alone.

Maybe a green room?

Anxiety creates ruminating thoughts in my head, so I shut that thread down, but this wedding is definitely a performance.

So, calling this space a green room feels right, like where actors wait before going on stage or on camera.

Except, the sunlight shining through the small room's stained glass windows paints the floor and the walls in all the colors of the rainbow.

Not just green. Okay, my mind is off on a tangent again, and I need to shut that down.

The minute hand on the analogue wall-clock ticks forward one mark. Jay is now officially an hour late, and he's not answering calls or texts.

I study my reflection again, stubbornly refusing to think about what could have happened to my friend.

Thick braided straps and trim detail the corset frame and neckline of my dress like hand-drawn contours, lending me a badass Game-of-Thrones-like warrior vibe.

But the soft, gauzy volume of the skirt reflects how my insides feel right now.

All empty and airy. I don't know how to fill them because that forces me to confront that either something horrible has happened to Jay.

Or, I'm such a loser that I got stood up for a marriage of convenience.

One that the groom begged me to agree to.

Jay and I grew up together. His home served as the sanctuary where I hid from my dad's heavy fists and my mom's manipulative mind games.

Jay and his twin brother were raised by their grandmother, who had a heart so filled with love that there was enough for her grandsons and me, the dirty, half-starved girl from the wrong side of town.

Jay is more than just a friend. He's the brother of my heart.

A month ago, Jay found out that his grandmother's will stipulates that he has to get married before he turns thirty, or lose his inheritance. He begged me to do him this favor so he could keep the bar he's run for most of his adult life. Of course I said yes.

And then I was stupid enough to create a situation where I also need this wedding to actually happen.

I press my forehead to the frosted window.

I can't see the winter landscape on the other side through the colored glass, but the icy surface helps calm my racing thoughts.

Practicing some deep breathing, I imagine I'm somewhere else.

Anywhere else, Maui, Costco, dental surgery.

It doesn't work, so I curse my miserable life and my stupid superpower of self-sabotage.

A doorknob rattles. I spin around, expecting Jay in all panicked glory, but when the door cracks open, his twin brother slips through instead.

When they were younger, people said the boys looked exactly the same, but I could always tell them apart. And now, as grown men, it's even easier.

Nick King is all sharp angles and planes, while Jay's features are softer and more likely to crack a smile.

Right now, Nick's square jawline is more prominent than usual because he's clenching it so hard, I'm worried he'll crack a tooth.

In his best-man outfit—a dark maroon tailored suit made of an expensive material that shimmers in the winter light—he looks like he belongs in a movie. A historical drama where everyone is heartbreakingly beautiful, never says what they mean, but their eyes glow with intense repressed emotion.

“Charlotte.” Like always, his deep voice brushes against my skin like warm velvet, heating my lady parts in ways I've tried to suppress since puberty. I take a deep breath, willing my hormones to stand down. I'm here to marry the groom, not ogle the best man.

Nick's amber eyes radiate anger and frustration, and as he lays eyes on me, his gaze heats even more. Before I can interpret what ratcheted up his mood, he blinks and his features return to the calm control they usually display.

He shoves his hands in his pockets, not meeting my eyes, mouth working around words like he's chewing on the inside of his cheek. “I—uh?—”

I hold up a hand. “Let me guess. Jay got hit by a Vespa. He's in the hospital, but he's okay and will be here shortly.” I picked the lightest vehicle I could think of because I

don't know what I would do if my friend were seriously hurt.

Nick blinks and frowns. "Not a Vespa. Just... not here. Yet. He's, um, missing."

I bark out a brittle laugh that turns into a hiccup.

Nick takes a step toward me, reaching out with his hand, but then he drops it.

"Charlotte, I'm really sorry. I've called his cell—six times.

He's not picking up. He was here, but kept—" he runs a hand through his dark hair, making the cowlick he always tries to tame stand up.

My hands itch to flatten it. "Anyway," he continues.

"I told him to take a walk, and now he's completely disappeared. "

"Well, this is a plot twist," I mutter. "He asked—no begged—me to marry him. And now he's the one standing me up.

" My knees wobble, and I dump my butt onto the edge of the chair next to the mirror, careful not to wrinkle the skirt.

"But now I need him to go through with this, or I'm going to look like the biggest fool, and probably lose my job. "

Nick's face flickers between concern and confusion. "I don't understand. You didn't want to marry him? He had to beg you?" He shakes his head. "Why would you lose your job?"

I study the diamond on the engagement ring I bought for myself.

It's a two-carat, square, Asscher-cut stone, surrounded by smaller blue sapphires.

All of that bauble-glory is set on a braided platinum band.

One more thing I spent too much money on, but I wanted the people at work to think that my fiancé spoiled me. Cherished me.

Okay, fine, so maybe I wanted one particular person to be jealous.

Patricia, a paralegal at the firm, is my nemesis.

In high school, she was the mean girl who took great delight in making sure I didn't measure up to her and her friends' status.

They were the cool girls. Invited to all the parties. Dated all the popular guys.

Patricia dated Nick throughout his entire senior year.

Even now, married and supposedly grown up, she enjoys pointing out my inadequacies. The main one apparently being that I'm still single. So yeah, I wanted her to covet my blingy engagement ring.

This entire wedding is pretend, I know that, but I wanted—needed—the story to include that someone wanted to be mine. Wanted to fully be my person, my family.

Suddenly, pressure builds behind my eyes, and my nose itches. I flatten my lips and blink furiously to keep from crying.

Charlotte Rose does not cry when there are problems. She figures out a solution, and fights to make it happen.

Nick crouches in front of me. He touches my knee, and his hand scorches my skin through the wedding dress material. The other pushes up my chin until I meet his eyes. “Hey,” he whispers. “Talk to me.”

The concern I hear in his voice completely undoes me, and I can’t stop the tears from escaping.

Fuck.

This is not happening. I haven’t cried since I was ten and my dad slapped me so hard I fell down the stairs and broke my collarbone.

I scrambled to the boys’ grandmother, and she took me to the hospital, holding me tight as I cried out my pain and frustration over the horrible parents I’d been given.

She wanted to report my dad, but I knew social services would take me away, and I couldn’t face leaving her—and the boys—so I swore her to secrecy.

Now, I’m mortified for blubbering in front of Nick. Being strong and independent is so ingrained in who I’ve made myself into that it feels like I’m losing my personality.

A handkerchief appears in my field of vision. I grab onto it as if it’s a life jacket and press it against my eyes until the tears stop. And then I have to blow my nose.

The pristine white square of cloth he handed me is now filled with snot and stained by makeup. I stare at the mess and can’t help but think it’s a metaphor for my life.

Looking up to meet Nick’s gaze, I say, “I’m going to have to buy you a new one. Where did you get this one?” I finger the one corner that’s still relatively clean. The material is thick and soft. “Do handkerchiefs have thread count?”

Nick chuckles and stands. I immediately miss the warmth of his hand on my knee. “I have no idea,” he says and drags a chair over so he can sit across from me. “Okay, tell me what’s going on with this wedding. Why did Jay have to beg you and what does it have to do with your job?”

Silence blooms between us as I gather my thoughts. I fiddle with the disgusting handkerchief until Nick takes it from me and throws it across the small room. “Charlotte,” he growls, his voice vibrating inside my chest. My nipples bud into hard knots, and I’m grateful for the thick corset material.

Taking a deep breath, I look up and meet his gaze. “Okay, you know Jay wants to keep the bar and to do so, he has to get married before he turns thirty.”

“I don’t know what grandmother was thinking, trying to rule his life from the grave.”

I smile. “It would be you standing at the altar, if you weren’t five minutes younger.”

The hot emotion I glimpsed before flashes in his eyes, but again, he looks away before I can identify it. “That’s me,” he says. “The young irresponsible brother who never has to do anything hard.” He says it sarcastically, but there’s a bit of an edge to his voice.

I snort. Nick doesn’t have one irresponsible bone in his body.

He’s always been the serious brother who takes care of everyone.

The one who joined the army as soon as they’d let him enlist, so he could send home money to his grandmother.

Jay did the same, but only not to be shown up by his brother.

And he couldn't stand being apart from his twin.

Taking a deep breath, I tell him how Jay and I made a deal that we'd get married but keep it platonic. His grandmother's will also stipulates that Jay must intend to have children within two years of the wedding. We figured we'd do that via IVF.

When I pause for breath, Nick stares at me for a long moment. "Why the fuck would you get married and not have sex?" he finally asks.

My nose scrunches up automatically. "Gross. Neither of us wants to sleep with the other." Ugh.

Nick looks out the window, or more like, at the window, clenching his jaw. "But it's always been him and you. You've been together since you were kids."

"What are you talking about? We've never been together. Okay, yeah, we hang out, but we've never been together, together."

His gaze snaps to my face. "Friends only? Always?" he snaps. "Never dated? Never slept together?"

I make a scrunched-up face again. I can't help it. "Never even kissed." Why is he harping on about Jay and me having sex together? It's so gross.

Nick rubs his face with both hands, and then sighs. "Okay, explain what this has to do with your job?"

This is harder to talk about. It's one thing to get married as a favor to a friend.

It's another, very embarrassing, thing to admit I'm getting hitched for a promotion.

“The managing partners at the firm are old school and think married lawyers are better partnership material. They’re voting on who’ll get the one partner seat that is up for grabs in a few weeks and my boss basically told me I had no chance because I’m single. ”

“But your law firm specializes in family law, mostly divorces.” Nick frowns.

“Yup.” I pop the last letter.

“Do they not see the irony in this?”

“Nope.” Another pop.

“Fuck, Charlotte. You’ve worked harder than anyone at the firm. You deserve that seat.”

I nod. I’ve worked my ass off.

Nobody comes close to the number of billable hours I’ve racked up in the last year, managing partners included.

Nick stands and paces the room. There’s more sighing, more face rubbing, and a lot of muttering under his breath.

I hear Jay’s name a few times, and I think the word asshole is uttered more than once, but I can’t make out anything else.

He stops mid-step and turns around, facing me. “I don’t know what the fuck Jay will do about grandma’s will and the bar, but I can solve your problem.”

I straighten in the chair. “You can?” Hope blooms in my chest. Nick is a born

problem-solver. I have faith in him, but how's he going to convince the firm to name the first unmarried partner ever?

“I’ll marry you.”

The words land so heavily between us, my mind hears a thud as if they landed on the floor. I inhale sharply as I stare at Nick. Is he on drugs?

“But I can’t marry you,” my voice squeaks out, and anxiety—or, maybe panic—makes my leg twitch, hard, and repeatedly.

As the staccato pitch my white satin shoe taps against the floor increases, Nick drops more thudding phrases. “You can. And you will.”

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NICK

Charlotte stares at me, open-mouthed, and there's a weird knocking sound in the room. At first I think it's my brain knocking against the skull, because what the fuck just came out of my mouth? But then I realize it's Charlotte's foot, tapping against the floor.

I smile at the familiar sign of her anxiety.

She's always pretended to be tough—with parents like hers, she had to in order to survive—but the nervous tick of that twitching foot always gives her away.

I can't actually see her foot. It's hidden under the gauzy skirt of her wedding dress. Fuck, she's beautiful.

She took my breath away when I walked into the room. The first thing I noticed was that bustier-thingie top that does wonderful things to her breasts.

Hey, I'm a guy. Boobs are always going to be major points of interest.

But it's more than that. The dress makes her look ethereal, like a fairy warrior princess. And yes, I can't believe I'm even thinking those frilly words. She's got me completely discombobulated.

Jay's a fucking idiot for jilting her. But also, what the fuck is going on?

This is Charlotte, the ravenous kid with skinned knees and dirty hair who shadowed

Jay and me when we were younger.

She's been around all my life, but suddenly, it's like I don't know her at all.

And my body is reacting to her in ways it's never done before.

My dick is harder than marble, and my mouth blurts out things like, I'll marry you.

She pulls in a deep breath and stops tapping her foot. "I'm losing it," she says with a nervous laugh. "I thought you said I'm going to marry you."

I grip the back of my neck and squeeze. "Yeah, that's what's going to happen.

" This is bonkers, but also, it feels so right.

Somehow, the universe has given me an opportunity I can't squander.

And I'm going to grab on to it with both hands.

I want to grab on to her, Charlotte, right now.

I shove my hands in my jacket pockets to keep from reaching for her.

"You sound awfully confident about that." Her makeup is a mess, but she's still beautiful. The weak winter light that filters through the windows highlights rose-gold streaks in her auburn hair.

Grandmother used to call her Aud, because she thought she looked like Audrey Hepburn.

And with her hair up, Charlotte looks a lot like the Breakfast at Tiffany's movie star.

She has the same delicate heart-shaped face.

The same elegant, long neck. And similar big, brown eyes, although Charlotte's are rimmed with runny black makeup and they narrow as she studies me.

"Uh," I say, when I realize I haven't addressed her comment. I guess I sounded like an asshole, ordering her to marry me. She arches an eyebrow. "It's the right thing to do," I add.

She blinks and then looks away. Something in her expression makes my chest tighten. "Look, I'm fine. Devastated, obviously, but in that shallow way where I'm mostly concerned about how much I spent on this dress."

Bullshit. I see right through her sarcasm, always could. Charlotte uses humor like armor, and right now she's suiting up for war, strengthening her defenses. She gets up from the chair and smooths down the front of her dress. "Nick, it's okay. Really. The inheritance was the whole point?—"

"No." The word comes out rougher than I intended. "It's not okay."

Something shifted the moment I walked into this cramped little room and saw her standing there in that amazing dress, looking lost and trying so hard to pretend she isn't.

Maybe it's the way the afternoon light catches in her dark hair, or how she makes jokes to keep from crying, but suddenly Charlotte isn't just Jay's convenient bride or the girl who hung around our house growing up.

She's a woman. A beautiful, funny, sharp-tongued woman who deserves better than being treated like a business transaction.

And the realization messes with my head in ways I don't want to examine.

"I should just go home," Charlotte says quietly. "I just need to tell the officiant that there's no wedding and to invoice me whatever we owe for the chapel and their time." She steps toward the door.

"You're not going anywhere." The possessiveness in my voice surprises us both.

She arches that eyebrow again. "You're very bossy today, even more than usual."

"Do you like it? I take a step toward her, close enough to catch the faint scent of her perfume.

The words hang in the air like a live wire. Charlotte's eyes go wide, and I see the pulse fluttering at the base of her throat. Have I ever noticed before the way her lips part slightly when surprised?

"Nick," she says carefully, "that's insane."

"Is it? You need married status to advance at work. I need..." I trail off. I want to say I want her, that suddenly she's the center of my world, but I don't have the words.

"You need what?" she whispers.

I cup her face in my hands, thumbs brushing her cheekbones. Her skin is softer than I imagined, and when did I start imagining touching her?

"I need to make this right," I say roughly. "Jay screwed up. Let me fix it."

"By marrying me?" She laughs shakily. "Nick, that's bonkers. We spent our childhood and teenage years together, but we barely know each other as adults."

“I know enough.” I know she still bites her lip when nervous, like now, and that in a minute, her foot will start tapping against the floor, again.

I know she’s brave enough to joke when her heart is breaking.

I know she looks at me like I’m offering her the moon, and that look does dangerous things to my self-control.

“This is completely bonkers,” she repeats, but she doesn’t pull away.

“Probably.” I lean closer, forehead almost touching hers. “But Jay’s bolted, Charlotte. And I’ll be damned if I let you walk out of here thinking you don’t deserve this wedding.”

Something flickers in her eyes, surprise, maybe hope. “You don’t mean that.”

“Try me.” There’s a knock on the door, and we both jump. “What?” I snarl at whoever dared to disturb us.

Someone clears their throat on the other side. “Um, folks? If we’re going to do this, we should probably decide soon. I have another ceremony at four.”

“Give us a minute,” I shout.

Charlotte looks around the small room as if she’s searching for something. Then she looks back at me, and I can practically hear her mind working. “So, same arrangement as I had with Jay? But without the IVF.” she says.

“No. I want the total package”

Her eyes flare wide. “The total package?”

“Yeah. I want the real deal. You won’t be my wife just in name. You’ll be mine in every way, in and out of bed. In exchange, I’ll support you emotionally and financially.” The more I speak, the surer I am about this decision. “Whatever you need, Charlotte, I’ll give it to you.”

She studies my face for a long moment. “And what do you get out of it? What do you need?”

You, I think. The intensity of that thought should scare me. Instead, it makes me more determined. “I get to piss off Jay,” I say instead. “And I get to punch him in the face later, for standing you up.”

Charlotte snorts. “Those are terrible reasons to get married.”

“Better than Jay’s reasons.” I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, marveling at how the simple touch sends heat shooting through me. “At least I’m not marrying you for money. And I’m not going anywhere.”

“Nick.” Her voice is soft, uncertain. “This is bonkers.”

“So, you’ve said. Several times now.” I step back just far enough to offer my arm.

“What do you say, Charlotte? Want to get married today, even if it’s to the wrong King brother?”

” For a moment, I think she’ll say no. She glances around again, searching the room for an elusive answer.

Then she grins. That quick, mischievous smile I remember from when we were kids, and she was about to do something that’d get us all in trouble.

“You know what?” she says, slipping her arm through mine. “Why the hell not? But I want the good cake, Nick. None of that grocery store sheet cake nonsense.”

I feel something loosen in my chest, something I didn’t realize was tight.

“Deal.” Part of my best man's duties was to host a dinner tonight at my house. I’ve already bought her favorite cake.

Lemon chiffon, layered with lemon curd, and topped with whipped cream—she hates frosting—and fresh raspberries.

A timid knock raps against the door, again. “Um, folks?”

“We’re coming,” I say. “Just a few more minutes. We’ll meet you in the chapel.”

“Okay.” The voice sounds relieved and steps retreat down the hall.

Charlotte steps up to the mirror. “What a fucking mess,” she squeaks. “I have to fix my makeup.” She digs around in a bag and retrieves whatever tools she needs.

“You look beautiful,” I say.

In the mirror, her reflection grimaces, but there’s a slight smile on her lips and her eyes sparkle. “There,” she says a moment later. “That’s as good as I can make it.”

“Still beautiful.”

This time she graces me with a smile at full power.

I grab her hand, and we head out the door, toward the main chapel.

I notice things I've somehow missed for the past ten or so years.

The way she moves, like she's dancing to music only she can hear.

How her dress clings to curves I can't believe I didn't notice before.

I know I'm an asshole for cataloging the way her hips sway when she walks when my brother just abandoned this woman right before their wedding.

But I don't fucking care. His loss is my gain, but I'm still going to punch him in the face when I next see him.

White ribbons decorate the chapel as we walk up the aisle together. Charlotte tugs on my hand when we reach the altar, but I keep my grip. We face the officiant, a slim man in a brown suit. He tugs on his collar and clears his throat. "Ready to begin?"

"Sure are," I say.

"Wait," Charlotte blurts, and my heart hiccups. Has she changed her mind? "The license. It has the wrong name."

My pulse returns to normal. "We have the same names."

She frowns. "What?"

"Grandmother put the same names on our birth certificates," I explain. "I don't know if the grief of mom dying at our birth made her mess up, or if she meant to do it, she wouldn't tell us. But we're both named Jameson Nickolas."

"Jameson after your grandfather and Nickolas after your mom, Nicola."

I smile, weirdly pleased that she knows so much about my family's history.
"Exactly."

"Shall we begin?" the officiant asks.

"You absolutely sure about this?" Charlotte whispers and tugs on her hand again.

I raise it to my lips, and I look down at her. At this woman, who's somehow become the most important person to me, without me even noticing when it happened.

"Never been surer of anything in my life." And the truth of that rings true in my mind. My idiot brother walked away from something precious, and I'm not making the same mistake.

The officiant opens his book, and Charlotte's fingers tighten on mine.

Game on.

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CHARLOTTE

Lit only by the warm glow of bedside lamps, the space beyond the bed in Nick's enormous bedroom is shrouded in shadows. The faint scent of cedarwood mixes with the subtle floral notes of my perfume, and I feel like I've stepped into a half-remembered dream.

I've never been in this room. I've barely been beyond the entrance of Nick's house. One time I dropped off some stuff from Jay that he'd left in my car by mistake, and that was a super quick visit. Now I realize I might move in here.

Since Nick wants the total package, I assume we're going to live together. And my apartment is nice, but it's not luxurious-large-space nice, like this house.

I sit on the edge of the bed, heart hammering in a way I hadn't expected on my wedding night. My leg twitches, and if I could reach the floor from this soft king-sized bed, my foot would tap it.

Married to Nick King. Technically, the wrong brother, and yet this feels so right.

Quiet music plays from hidden speakers. Instrumental jazz, I think.

Nick enters the room, fiddling with the collar of his shirt, glancing up at me with those amber, unreadable eyes that always seem to know more than they let on. "You okay?" His voice is rough, but it caresses my skin. Heats it.

I bite my lip, warring with the flood of nerves and yearning that surge through me.

“Yeah. I think so.” I tug at the skirt of my dress, suddenly aware that Nick will see me naked tonight. Will he like my body?

And then I realize I’ll see him naked, too, and heat rushes to my pussy. I clench my thighs to keep from whimpering.

He reaches out, fingers brushing a loose strand of hair behind my ear, his touch light but deliberate.

“Charlotte,” he says, stepping closer, voice dropping an octave. “We don’t have to rush things. I can wait if you’re not ready to have our wedding night now.”

I swallow hard. For so long I’ve shrouded my feelings for him in sarcasm and distance, afraid to hope, afraid to be seen as more than the girl who’s been around forever but never counted.

Now, here he is, close enough to catch the heat in my eyes, the flutter of my pulse, and not retreating.

I’m definitely having my wedding night tonight.

“I—” My voice breaks on the word, throat tight.

What am I even trying to say? That I’ve loved him since I was thirteen, before I knew the difference between infatuation and love?

I hoped the feeling would go away, but every glance, every smile, every laugh he shared with me only bound me closer to him.

Even I know that’s too much to share with someone.

Too much of an emotional burden. And that's something I will never be. A burden.

Instead, I lean into the touch he offers.

Nick slides his hand down and cups the side of my face. His thumb brushes lightly over my cheek, warm and steady, grounding me when I feel like I might fall apart.

"I've known you forever and yet, it feels like I never knew you at all," he says, every word deliberate, low.

"You knew me as a girl."

"But now you're a woman."

Heat curls in my stomach. I want to say something smart-alecky, like I usually do when I feel too much around Nick. But the knot in my throat stops me. Instead, I slide my hand up his arm, feeling the taut muscle beneath the fabric of his shirt.

He leans in slower this time, just a ghost of a kiss on my temple, then in the hollow between my ear and jaw. Electric, teasing, and heartbreaking all at once.

"Charlotte," he murmurs, voice thick with something I can't identify, "You're so beautiful. When I walked into that small room and saw you in this dress, my heart stopped for a moment. I'm so turned on right now, I ache for you."

The honesty surprises me, knocking the breath from my lungs. I swallow hard, the fragile shield I've carried for so long falling away piece by piece.

"I want you, too," I whisper, voice trembling. "And I'm terrified."

"Good." His hand moves from my cheek down to grip my waist firmly. "Because the

best things in life are worth being terrified over.”

His confidence steadies me, warms me, makes the impossible feel possible. Slowly, carefully, our lips meet—tentative but searching. He tastes like whiskey and the faintest hint of mint, like late nights and laughter I always pretended I didn’t want.

The kiss deepens, urgent yet considerate, as if he knows exactly how much to give without overwhelming me. My fingers tangle in his hair, pulling him closer, craving the feel of solid warmth against my skin.

His lips leave my mouth and trace the line of my jaw, down my throat, sending jolts of heat down my spine. His touch is everywhere, demanding me to yield.

I close my eyes and let him lead, trusting the way he makes me feel seen, cherished, wanted. Years of dreams and fears unravel, the emotions overwhelming me. My breath hitches as his fingertips tease the sensitive spot at the base of my neck.

“Tell me what you want,” he murmurs against my skin. The words feel heavy.

“I—” I hesitate, leaning back, searching his face for clues.

His smile is soft but sure. “It’s okay. You can say it.”

“I want it all to feel real,” I confess, voice barely above a whisper. “Not just the ceremony. But this.”

He brushes his lips against mine again, slower this time, imprinting a promise. “This is real. I swear it.”

The weight of that promise settles over me, replacing fear with something new—a daring heat that wraps around my chest and flares into warmth.

I step out of the skirt and we fall onto the bed together. His hands explore the lines of my arms, my back, the clever fingers finding the hidden hooks that unsnap the corset. He removes the garment and stares down at me.

“Fuck, Charlotte. You’re fucking perfect. How did I not notice that before?” he growls.

I shiver. The desire I hear in his voice cuts down the barriers I’ve built for so long. “I don’t know. Maybe your vision is poor.”

“I see things clearly now.” A wicked smile adorns his lips, and he bends down to capture a nipple with his mouth. He lavishes it and then captures it with his teeth.

The bite has the perfect balance of pleasure and pain. I cry out, arching against him. “Fuck me,” I whimper.

“Patience,” he chuckles and pushes my torso back against the sheets. “I have a lot more to touch and taste before we get to that stage.”

I moan as his thumbs brush over my nipples, sending waves of pleasure straight to my clit. Nick leans down, taking one of my nipples into his mouth again. His tongue flicks over the sensitive bud.

I gasp, my hands tangling in his hair as he continues to tease and torment me.

His hands move lower, slipping beneath the waistband of my panties. His fingers brush against my clit, and I moan loudly, my hips bucking against his hand.

"You're so wet for me, Charlotte," Nick murmurs as he slides two fingers inside me. "I love how fucking responsive you are."

My body trembles with need, and I'm close to the edge of coming. Whimpering, I ride his hand, striving to take his fingers deeper.

"Not yet," he growls, pulling his fingers out of me.

I moan a protest, but he quickly silences me with another kiss, and then steps away. As he undresses, his heated gaze caresses my body. When he's finally naked, I can't help but stare at his cock, thick and hard. Ready for me.

Nick steps up to the bed, his hands grab my hips, and he pulls me against him. As his thick cock presses against my stomach, I moan. "I need you, Nick." My voice trembles with desire.

His body covers mine, and he kisses me deeply. His mouth devours mine.

There's no give and take.

Nick's completely in control, ravaging me, demanding my surrender.

I fucking love it.

I press my thighs together and arch my back so my pussy rubs against his dick.

"No you don't," he orders. "You don't come until I say you do. And when you do, I'm going to be buried so deep inside you, my cock touches your cervix." He adjusts himself so his cock pushes against my opening. I arch my hips, desperate for him to fill me.

He grabs a condom from the nightstand, rips it open and sheaths himself. Finally, he thrusts into me, his wide cock stretching me wider than I've ever experienced.

I cry out, half in pleasure, half in pain. My nails dig into his back as he pounds into me.

Each thrust deeper and harder.

Each one sends waves of pleasure that race from my clit along every nerve in my body.

"You feel so good, Charlotte," Nick growls, his hands gripping my hips as he pounds into me repeatedly.

"I fucking love how tight your pussy clenches my cock. How wet you are for me. You love this, don't you?

Tell me how much my dirty girl loves having my cock inside her.

" He grunts as he pounds into me again. "Tell me," he orders, his voice low and dark.

His words send a thrill through me, and my body arches so high, only my shoulders and heels touch the bed as I whimper my answer. "I fucking love it."

"How much?" He slaps my ass. "How much does my dirty girl love it?"

"So much," I sigh, wrapping my legs around his waist, my heels digging into his ass as I urge him on.

Nick's thrusts grow even harder and faster, his pubic bones grinding painfully against mine with each push.

"I'm so close. So fucking close" I gasp, my body trembling with need.

Nick moves his hand between us, his fingers rubbing my clit in time with his thrusts. And then he pinches it, the pain carrying me over the edge. I cry out, my body convulsing as my orgasm crashes over me.

Nick doesn't stop. He continues to thrust into me, each piston harder and deeper. Just when I think I can't take any more, I feel his cock swelling inside me, and my pleasure builds again. "Fuck, Nick," I moan. "I'm coming again."

"You better," he growls. "You're mine and you'll come as many times as I say."

I lose my breath as another, even more powerful orgasm claims my body.

With a last thrust, Nick cries out, his body shuddering as he comes. His cock pulses inside me, filling me up with his cum. I wrap my arms around him, holding him close as we ride out the waves of pleasure together.

As we lie there, our bodies tangled together, our breaths fast and shallow, I allow myself one moment to bask in the love I feel for this man. He married me because he thinks it was the right thing to do, the honorable thing to do.

I know he cares for me, but I also know I have to protect myself or I will have no defenses against this amazing man. As wonderful as this feels right now, I must always remember that although what I feel is very real, Nick does not share those emotions.

He kisses me, slowly and deliberate. "Fuck, Charlotte," he mumbles against my lips. "I don't even know how to describe how great that was. How good you made me feel."

"You were pretty great yourself. Definitely A+."

His low laughter rumbles between us as he flops down on his stomach beside me. He traces lazy circles on my skin with his fingers. “Was I too rough?”

“No, I loved it. When can we do it again?”

He laughs again, pulling me into his arms, and rolling over on his back so my head rests against his chest. “Soon,” he promises. “We’re going to do that as frequently as possible.”

“I’m ready when you are,” I quip.

He smooths my hair back from my face and kisses me. “I knew there was a reason I married you today.”

I laugh, snuggling deeper against his side, while silently wondering how long I’ll keep him interested.

How much time do I have with this man before he decides he wants a genuine marriage with someone else? A relationship built on love instead of honor and responsibility.

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NICK

S unlight slips past the blinds, striping the room with lazy gold. I blink against the unexpected brightness, consciousness crashing back in slow waves. The bed is still warm beside me, empty now, but the space buzzes with charge, like being outside in a thunderstorm.

Charlotte.

She slipped out just before dawn, leaving behind a faint scent of floral perfume and something softer, something distinctly her own. I wanted to stop her, but she might need some space after last night. As much as I enjoy taking control in bed, I don't want to crowd her outside of it.

Memories of us fucking still hum in my bones, every touch, every word. The feel of her pussy clenching as she came on my cock.

Fuck, I'm hard again, just thinking about it.

I roll onto my back, gripping myself as I think of her. How she smells, how soft her skin is, how wet her pussy is. All it takes is three thrusts before I go off like a fucking fountain. I groan as I grip my cock, wishing it was inside her instead.

My wife.

Fuck. What have I done?

Our wedding night was something fierce, everything I hoped for, and so much more I didn't expect. The way she trusted me. The way her body responded to mine. I've never been with a partner as compatible.

Why did I not notice her before? She's been right in front of me this entire time. The girl we grew up with, but last night, I saw the woman I haven't noticed before. Because I didn't dare to.

Because I thought she was Jay's and off limits.

He called me last night, waking me up. I took the phone into the living room to avoid waking Charlotte.

Jay told me a weird story about being kidnapped from the wedding venue, but he's okay.

And he gave me the name of a woman that he wants me to run a background check on.

None of it made sense, but I was half asleep and not coherent enough to ask clarifying questions.

And I didn't tell him I'd married Charlotte. Somehow, I don't want him to know yet. I want to keep this to myself, no between us . Between Charlotte and me.

And now the confusing, thrilling truth is this: I'm falling for her fast. Maybe too deep.

But damn it, I don't care. I'm falling in love with my wife. How fucked up is that?

I swing my legs off the bed and pad to the bathroom. After a piss and a shower, I'm

getting dressed when my phone buzzes on the nightstand.

Charlotte

“Coffee? I’m not ready to face the world yet, but I could face coffee.”

I smile. This is the first day of our married life and is bound to feel awkward. But she’s reaching out to me, and it warms some dark, chilled corner of my heart I didn’t know needed defrosting.

“Coffee sounds wonderful. Meet you in twenty?”

Her reply is instantaneous.

Charlotte

“Twenty’s a charm.”

We don’t have to discuss where to meet. There’s only one coffee shop in Fir Hollows, but luckily it’s a great one. I finish getting dressed and head to Brewed Awakening.

The bell above the door jingles when I push it open, and a wave of warm air—rich with roasted coffee beans and something sweet, maybe cinnamon—wraps around me.

To the left, a row of mismatched armchairs huddles around a low wooden table scarred with old rings from heated mugs.

A bookshelf lines the wall behind them, stacked with dog-eared novels and board games missing half their pieces.

Edison bulbs hang low from the ceiling, their amber glow casting shadows across exposed brick.

The counter stretches along the right side, all dark wood and chalkboard menus written in looping, uneven handwriting.

Behind it, Mel, the owner, pulls a shot of espresso like she's conducting an orchestra—precise but casual.

There's a hum of milk frothers, clinking cups, and quiet indie music drifting from a speaker I can't see.

I scan the room, but she's not here yet.

Good. I've got time to breathe, to figure out what I'm going to say to her.

I approach the counter and wait for Mel to finish her current masterpiece.

Her black hair is in a messy bun, and today's septum ring is made of some kind of dark wood.

Nobody knows how old she is. And nobody's brave enough to ask.

Her skin is as smooth as someone in their late twenties, but her eyes are those of an old soul.

Finally, she looks up. "What can I get you, Nick?"

"One Americano and one Cappuccino with cream, not milk, and a dash of cinnamon."

“Oh, Charlotte is joining you.” It’s not a question. Mel knows everyone’s coffee preferences, so I don’t answer. I just pay and then go to sit down.

The tables are small, the kind you have to lean across to really talk to someone. Most of them are already claimed by people bent over laptops or lost in their phones. I scan the room, my heart thudding a little harder than I’d like to admit.

Now that I’ve slept, the wedding feels like a dream sequence, but the marriage feels startlingly real. There’s a bunch of logistics we need to figure out. Where we’ll live—I want her at my place—but it needs to be her choice. And we need to figure out what to say to Jay.

Fuck, I’m not looking forward to that conversation. But I am savoring getting to punch him in the face.

I pick a table in the back corner, where the light is softer, and set my hands flat against the cool surface.

The wall here is painted a deep green, almost forest-dark, and a trailing plant spills from a ceramic pot on a shelf above me, leaves brushing the air like they’re listening.

I catch myself glancing toward the door every few seconds.

Each time it swings open, that bell chimes again—sharp and a little too loud.

I’ve just retrieved our orders and sat back down when she finally arrives, looking impossibly serene and even more beautiful than I remember, despite dark circles under her eyes and the faint pallor of too little sleep.

She smiles when she sees me, and that sly tilt of the mouth makes me want to kiss her. Hard and deep.

She slides into the booth opposite mine. I reach across to lace our fingers, which is something new, and something I want to get used to.

“So, how are you?” I ask, voice low, trying to sound casual but failing miserably.

She takes a slow sip of her coffee, eyes darting to mine as if measuring me up. “Like we just jumped off a cliff and forgot to check if there was a net. You?”

“Barely holding onto the ledge,” I admit, pressing my thumb in slow circles on the back of her hand.

She chuckles softly, the sound like music. “I thought you were the tough one.”

“I’m tough,” I say, leaning in close enough to catch the curl of her hair with my breath. And then I kiss her. “But you just might be my kryptonite.”

A blush covers her face as she shakes her head, a wry smile breaking through. “Don’t say things you don’t mean. You don’t have to flirt with me. We’re already married.” Her voice lowers on the last few words, and she looks over her shoulder.

I frown. Is she embarrassed to be seen with me? “I never say things I don’t mean.” My voice comes out accusatory.

Charlotte’s foot taps against the floor.

I push my knee against hers to make it stop. She startles, and her gaze meets mine.

“You don’t have to be nervous around me.”

“I’m not,” she says, but then her foot taps again. “It’s really annoying that you know all my tells.”

“You only have one, but it’s a loud one,” I say, and we both laugh, the tension between us easing a little with the sound.

“What do we do now?” she asks.

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know, but I feel overwhelmed with everything there is to do?”

“Like what?” I take a sip from my cup.

She frowns at me. “Stop answering my questions with a question.”

“Why?” I smile. I couldn’t resist.

She shakes her head. “Seriously, what do we do now? Where are we going to live? What do we tell people?”

“Where do you want to live? What do you want to tell people?” She groans and rolls her eyes.

I grab her hand. “I’m serious, this time.

” I shoot her a quick smile. “We can tell as many or as few people as you want. I’m happy to live in your apartment—a lie—or you can move in with me.

Or, we can even live separately—another lie—whatever you want. ”

She traces the rim of her mug with her index finger. “Okay.”

“Okay, what?”

“You’re doing it again.” She looks up with a sunny smile on her face.

“Sorry, but I listed a lot of options and I’m not sure which one you’re okay with.”

“I want to move in with you, but keep my apartment just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“In case you snore, or fart too much.” I join in her laughter, but silently I’m bothered by her very sensible choice.

“And when do we tell people?” Weirdly, I’m holding my breath as I wait for her answer.

She traces the mug rim again, and then looks up, her gorgeous brown eyes serious. “The people at work knows I got married this weekend. But I’m not sure I’m ready to tell them to whom, yet. And can we keep it from Jay and the rest of the town for a little while? It’s not like Jay’s around, anyway.”

Although this is exactly the same decision I made last night—not telling Jay—it irks me that she doesn’t want me to tell him she’s mine now. And off limits to him. “He called me last night.”

“And you’re just now telling me?” she shrieks. “Is he hurt? Where is he?” Her voice is loud enough that people at the other tables look over. Charlotte notices and lowers her voice. “What happened to him?”

There’s no way I can relate the unhinged story he told me to Charlotte. She’ll have a ton of questions that I won’t be able to answer. “I don’t know, but he’s okay. And he’s so sorry he stood you up. He says there were extenuating circumstances beyond his control. He’ll call you and explain.”

She ponders that for a moment. “Okay. I guess I’ll wait for him to explain.”

The thought of the two of them having a conversation without me, even over the phone, doesn’t sit well. I’m fucking jealous of my brother, even though I’m the one married to Charlotte.

This is so fucked up.

I’m fucked up.

I need to move on from this train of thought. “Want to move some of your stuff to my place?”

“Yeah,” she says, relief lacing her voice. She’s as happy to move on to a new topic as I am.

I get up and reach out to help her out of the booth. She grabs it, and once she’s standing, I don’t let go. We walk out together, fingers interlaced.

Mel notices and catches my eye. She looks down at our hands, then back up at me and nods. I smile at her, and inwardly smirk.

I don’t have to tell people that Charlotte is mine. Fir Hollows is a tiny place, through which any gossip runs rampant.

All I have to do is show everyone that she belongs to me now, and everyone will quickly get the message.

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NICK

Two days later, I push through the door at Lola's to meet up with Jay. After moving most of Charlotte's clothes and other personal items to my place, we had another amazing night together. And then a lazy Sunday in bed. Actually, not that lazy and I get hard thinking about it, so I stop.

I'm in a foul mood because I want to be back in bed with my wife, but I can't because I have to meet up with my idiot brother. And also, my wife is at work.

The bar is quiet this Monday afternoon. A nod to a few regulars sitting at the bar.

Technically, half of this place belongs to me, but I've always been a silent partner.

Jay runs this place without bothering me with the details.

And I run our other co-owned business, Crossed Arrow Security.

After we left the Special Forces, we put the skills we'd gained to use by starting a company specializing in data and people retrieval.

Often, we contract with branches of the armed forces when they need to run missions off the books.

We also work with several corporations. It's amazing how often business travelers get kidnapped and need quiet extractions that don't come to the attention of shareholders or board of directors.

Speaking of kidnappings, I scan the place for my unhinged brother. I owe him a punch in the face.

Lamps cast long shadows over polished wooden tabletops. Barry Manilow paraphernalia adorn the walls. Grandmother was a big fan, and the name of the place is a nod to her favorite song.

Jay comes out of the office in the back and nods toward a booth. I join him, sliding into the seat across from his.

“You’re late,” he says as the vinyl squeaks under my weight.

“Not as late as you. You’re like, missing-the-wedding late.” I exhale, pissed beyond words but holding it back, mostly. “You left Charlotte standing there, Jay. That’s not just shitty. It’s the kind of crap that breaks people.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he says, voice flat, finally meeting my eyes. “I’ll apologize to her.”

“This isn’t something you can fix by saying you’re sorry.” I jab a finger against the table. “You really hurt her. And I’m fucking done cleaning up your messes.”

Jay’s jaw twitches, like he wants to say something but the words get tangled halfway out. “Look, it’s not what you think.”

“Oh, it’s not?” I laugh bitterly. “You didn’t let your best friend down? After you’d begged her to do you a favor?”

He hesitates. For a long moment, the only sounds are the soft clink of glass and the drone of a country song playing low on the speakers.

“I really couldn’t help it,” Jay says. “I didn’t mean to abandon the wedding. I didn’t mean to leave Charlotte like that.”

“You always have brilliant excuses for screwing up,” I mutter.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? You’re acting like I’m the family fuck-up who you constantly have to clean up after.”

He has a point, because he’s not really a fuck-up.

And he usually cleans up after himself when shit happens.

But he’s impulsive and often leaves me to be the responsible one, even though I’m the younger brother by five minutes.

But I’m pissed off about what he did to Charlotte and not in the mood to be realistic about the situation. “Once is enough,” I growl.

Jay rubs the back of his neck. “Give me a break, I was kidnapped.” Anger laces his voice.

“Oh really? Then how come you’re here now, without me getting as much as a ransom call?”

“I know how it sounds.” He takes a deep breath, then leans over the table like he’s about to confess a sin that will level us both. “Look, before the wedding, I went for a walk, like you told me.”

“Because you were driving me fucking crazy with your surly mood and constant complaining.” I’d been pissed off on behalf of Charlotte, even then, before he stood her up. “Don’t make this into my fault.”

“Yeah, well there was a reason for my mood.” He bristles. “And I didn’t say it was your fault. Let me fucking finish the story.”

“Fine.” I cross my arms and lean back in the booth.

He gives me a look, but doesn’t address my belligerent tone. “So, I’m in the wedding tux, without a coat, and it’s too fucking cold for a walk. But there’s this open catering van outside the chapel and I decide to shelter in there while I have a think on stuff.”

I roll my eyes. “‘A think on stuff.’ When did you become Irish? And what fucking stuff?”

“If you would just keep your trap shut, I’ll tell you,” he shouts. The regulars at the bar turn around to look at us. Jay raises his hand. “All good,” he says.

I smirk. “Is it, though? I mean, you just survived a kidnapping.”

Jay sighs. “Do you want me to tell you, or not?” I lean back again, gesturing with my hand for him to continue. “Okay, so I’m in the van, with the doors closed because it’s fucking cold, and then it starts moving. I fall over and knock myself out.”

I open my mouth to tell him how unbelievable this story already sounds, but he gives me a look, so I close it again.

“When I come to, I’m tied up in a chair in a cabin up in the mountains. And April, you know the bartender, she’s?—”

“Who?”

“April, she’s worked here for six months.” I shake my head. I have no recollection of meeting someone named April. “Whatever,” Jay continues. “She’s the one who drove

the van and the one who tied me up. I told you on the phone that I need you to run checks on her.”

“Right,” I fib. I’ve already forgotten the woman he mentioned. But I wrote it down, and I have every intention of checking up on her. “Didn’t you run a check on her when you hired her?”

“I did, but just a basic employment check. But you’re missing the point?—”

“Okay, yes. Why did she tie you up?”

“She thought I’d be mad that she kidnapped me.”

“Were you?” Pretty much anyone would be irate in that situation. If he’s telling the truth. Jay doesn’t lie, but he sometimes embellishes, or withholds details.

“Furious, but then she explained why she had to get out of town so quickly. And that her car broke down so she had to borrow the van.”

I stare at him for a minute. Jay’s not usually this thick. “She stole the van.”

He scratches his chin. “Well, yes technically. But we gave it back to the catering company.”

“So, she eventually released you? But not in time for the wedding?”

“She did, and well no, we got snowed in. I didn’t get back into town until this morning.”

“And you found the time to call me, but not Charlotte?”

He has the decency to look embarrassed. “I thought she deserved an apology in person. I’ll find her tonight and let her know how sorry I am.”

“Not tonight,” I blurt. “She’s got a lot on her plate with work. There’s a big case or something.”

“Okay,” he drawls, frowning at me. “I’ll apologize tomorrow.”

“Also not a good time. There’s a work function she has to go to in the evening and it’s a fancy event, so she needs time to get ready.

Jay leans back in the booth. “Suddenly, you’re awfully familiar with Charlotte’s schedule.”

I wave a hand in the air. “She needed a date to the work thing, so I offered to go.” I give him a pointed look. “Her fiancée was nowhere to be found, so I stepped. in.” In more ways than just as her date, which he’ll find out eventually.

“I will apologize to her, many times over.” He slumps in his seat. “Can you please just check into April’s background?”

“Sure,” I say, checking my cell phone. It’s almost time for Charlotte to be done at the office. “I got to go.” Sliding out of the booth, I pocket my phone and stride toward the door.

“Call me as soon as you have that info,” Jay calls after me.

“Will do,” I answer, thinking about what to pick up for dinner so I can feed my lovely wife. She’ll need calories to build up stamina for the evening activities I have planned.

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CHARLOTTE

Whatever gene people have for loving parties, I'm pretty sure mine mutated or died off sometime around late middle school.

Actually, I know exactly which moment it was, and it happened in eighth grade.

Patricia told everyone that the dress I wore to the homecoming dance was one of her old ones that she'd given to charity.

I don't know if it was true or not, but I got that dress at a secondhand shop. I never wore it again.

But that was high school, and now I stand at the threshold of the Grand Mirabelle's ballroom, dressed in a brand-new red designer dress, fidgeting with the clasp on my evening clutch. My nerves ping from the tips of my toes, enclosed in red stilettos, straight to my scalp.

Beside me, Nick loops his arm around my waist in a gesture that's equal parts reassuring and—let's be honest—ownership.

I like it, even though my stomach somersaults from half anxiety, half anticipation.

I look around the ballroom. The high, coffered ceiling twinkles with glass chandeliers, each the size of a hatchback and pronged with a hundred gleaming drops. The air smells faintly flowery.

I take it all in. The glossy marble underfoot, the walls paneled in honeyed wood, the standing tables crowned with tight sculptural bouquets of hyacinth. Those are probably the source of the floral scent. There's a gleaming grand piano near the doors, and a tuxedoed man plays background jazz.

Nick squeezes my side gently. "Ready, Mrs. King?" he murmurs.

The word hits me with a heady thrill, then a flush of panic. I've attended work parties like this before, but never as a wife

Actually, I've never even brought a date to one of these. They always feel like I'm still at the office. The same power plays and passive-aggressive insults.

I glance towards the clusters of chattering people, colleagues who knows nothing about my personal life. "Let's hope so." My voice is steadier than I feel.

He grins in a way that feels like it's only for me, and suddenly I wish this wasn't a work event at all.

The first test comes within ten seconds. "Charlotte!" chirps Lillian from HR, gliding over in a swirl of lemon-colored silk. "So this is your new husband."

I put on my best polite face. "Yes, Lillian—this is my husband, Nick King." I get a little thrill of calling him mine.

Her eyebrows arch, then dip as she takes him in, head to toe.

I can almost hear the wheels turning. The name, the hand on my waist, the way Nick's athletic build fills out his suit.

"How wonderful," she coos, holding out a hand as if she's a queen, expecting a

visiting dignitary to kiss it.

Nick shakes it, with charming deference. “Lovely to meet you.”

As Lillian launches into a story about a minor catastrophe occurring earlier—something about a rogue glass of Bordeaux.

I steal a moment to scan the crowd. There are the department heads in a knot by the bar, young junior associates orbiting them the way moons circle planets.

Patricia is there, center stage, wrapped in emerald velvet, her laugh sharp and practiced.

She hasn’t seen us yet. But she will.

And Nick will see her. His old high-school girlfriend. They dated for an entire year.

My hands go cold and damp.

Nick picks that exact moment to lean down and brush a whisper against my ear. “Want me to get us a drink or cut in on the canapes?”

I hesitate. I could use both, but I don’t want him to leave my side, not yet, with so many wide, curious eyes locked on us. “Let’s stick together. Safety in numbers,” I murmur.

He squeezes my hip again, a subtle claim. “Anything you want, Mrs. King.”

I’m hyperaware of every word and buzzing like I’ve swallowed a battery.

We edge toward the bar, every few feet punctuated with the awkward stop-start of

introductions. Most faces are friendly. Most have that faint gleam of curiosity.

Charlotte brought a man? Since when? Married? Did I know that?

I can't blame them. I've never talked about my personal life. Mostly because I don't have one. Well, I didn't have one. My work has been my life. Plus, I'm always scared of giving people like Patricia even a single crack to aim their sharp little arrows through.

I'm collecting my third round of "Congratulations, I had no idea!" from Evan in accounting when I feel Patricia's gaze narrow in on us.

She approaches with her usual confidence. Shoulders squared, chin high, and nails polished in a sharp, beige gloss that somehow seems both understated and deadly. "Charlotte! I almost didn't recognize you."

That's a lie. Patricia's never failed to clock me, even if only to make sure she figures out the most vulnerable spots to attack.

"Patricia. So nice to see you," I say, trying to keep the edge out of my voice.

She's already turning her chilly attention to Nick.

"Well, well, well. Nick King, it's been a while.

But you're as fine as ever." Her tone is syrupy, and I instantly hate how my chest tightens at the way her eyes flick over him, just a little longer than necessary.

"I didn't know you still hang out with Charlotte.

It was so nice of you to pity the poor girl in high school. "

Nick straightens slightly, meeting her gaze without blinking. “I never pitied her. I spent time with her because she was my friend.”

Patricia’s eyes actually widen, just a blip, but I see it. She recovers fast, though, placing a hand on his forearm, cocking a hip with practiced poise. “And you’re still friends, then?” She laughs, crisp as breaking glass. “I didn’t know you and Charlotte even kept in touch after graduation.”

I feel the earth tilt a few dangerous degrees.

Nick’s expression doesn’t shift, but his muscles tense under my hand.

“We did and she’s my best friend, now.” Nick says simply, his thumb stroking small circles against my waist, just enough to anchor me.

“And my wife.” He holds up his left hand.

A gold band adorns his ring finger. I have no idea when he bought that, but the effect on Patricia is perfection.

She flashes teeth. “This is your husband?” she says. You kept that quiet. I knew you were engaged, but why didn’t you tell me it was Nick—my Nick?

I hear the underlying message: I knew him first.

I have a hundred comebacks—some rehearsed since junior year—but none reach my tongue. Instead, I settle for a calm, “I didn’t know it was important, or that you took such interest in my love life.” I lean a fraction closer to Nick, and he responds perfectly, but kissing the top of my head.

She notices, and her eyes narrow. “I was sorry to hear about your grandmother, Nick.

You must be grieving terribly.”

Grandmother King passed away over five years ago, so her condolences are more than a little late.

Nick’s smile sharpens. “I had great support to help me through it.” He gives me a look loaded with private history.

She turns the conversation to mutual friends and “Do you remember when...” The sort of competitive nostalgia in which only adults desperate to prove they didn’t peak in high school engage. Nick gives her one-word answers while Patricia glances at me from the corner of her eye, assessing.

“So, Charlotte,” Patricia says, tilting her head, “you didn’t invite anyone from the office to the wedding?”

I force a smile as the mask threatens to crack. “It was a small wedding.” Truth, technically.

She tips her glass toward me in what feels like a dangerous salute. “I always thought you’d wind up with someone more... sedate.” She holds her gaze on Nick for a breath too long. “But I suppose opposites attract.”

My cheeks burn, humiliation and rage mixing like into a dangerous cocktail. Before I can answer, Nick’s voice cuts in, low and sure.

“Opposite or not, I’ve always found Charlotte attractive.” He fixes Patricia with the friendliest threat of a smile I’ve ever seen, like he’s daring her to push further.

Patricia’s mouth twitches, but she drops it, excusing herself with a “Well, I simply must say hello to Jenny from Finance...” and wafts away, perfume lingering like a

challenge.

Nick turns to me, eyebrow cocked. “You okay?”

I nod, slowly releasing the cramp-like grip on my glass. “She’s the worst,” I murmur, not bothering to be subtle. “Why did you ever date her?”

He chuckles, wrapping his arm tight around my shoulders. “I was a stupid teenager, filled with raging hormones, and she developed early.”

I laugh. “Boys are stupid.”

“They are,” he agrees. “But luckily, you’ve caught yourself a mature man. Do you want me to ice her out with my devastating charm?”

I laugh again, and this time it loosens the tension knot in my chest. “She made my life hell in school. Used to call me ‘Lottie Secondhand’ because I couldn’t afford new clothes. I was so mad at you for dating her an entire year.”

Nick’s grin fades, turns soft and serious. “That meant nothing, Charlotte. And it wasn’t for that long. We broke up before homecoming.” I frown. It’s true that they didn’t go to homecoming or prom together, but I thought that was because Nick was home, sick. At least that’s what Patricia said.

Nick puts a knuckle under my chin, nudging my face until I look into his eyes. “I’d rather burn this place down than let her make you feel small. We can leave at any time.”

I lean into him, steadying myself. “I’m sorry, she still gets under my skin.”

He leans in and kisses my forehead. “Don’t let her. She’s not worth it,” he whispers

against my skin.

We drift through half an hour of party ritual—more introductions, more shallow conversation, and dried-out canapes.

I watch Nick work the room. He's better at this than I am.

While he chats with people, his hand maintains contact with some part of me—my back, my waist, my arm, like he's marking out territory.

It should annoy me, but it feels like a badge. Like his claiming me.

Mine. This is mine.

At one point, when he steps away for drinks, two of my colleagues sidle up. Anne and Fran, both from PR, their faces lit with the glow of unfiltered curiosity.

"So..." Anne starts, voice conspiratorial. "Why didn't you tell us you were getting married?"

I hesitate. I should have prepared better. "No secret," I say, holding up my left hand, the light from the ridiculous chandeliers reflecting off the gemstones on my ring. "I wore this every day to the office."

Fran grins, eyes flicking over to where Nick's chatting with a senior manager. "I guess I'm just unobservant. Either way, I'm happy for you. He adores you. You can see it a mile away."

Anne nods, sips her wine. "And it's killing Patricia." All three of us giggle, sudden co-conspirators in a new alliance.

Nick returns a minute later, pressing a bracing gin and tonic into my hand. He stands so close that even a wide-angle camera couldn't crop me out. His fingers brush down my arm, settling with proprietary warmth at my lower back.

I introduce him to a rotation of coworkers who all shake his hand as if they're genuinely happy to meet him.

He gamely fields questions about his work, "I'm in the security business," and how we met, "She's been my brother's best friend since we were kids.

" He always brings it back to me. How we reconnected, how I "rescued" him by being the only person at a mutual friend's birthday who could quote all of *The Princess Bride* under pressure.

His eyes never leave my face for long. Every time Patricia passes—a flash of green velvet and a fake smile—I feel him pull me closer, his thumb skating along the hem of my dress just under the safety of the tablecloth.

After a while, the dancing starts. Nick takes my hand, spinning me onto the floor with a calm confidence that soothes my patched-together nerves.

We settle into a slow sway as the band croons some old standard. The room feels gilded and dangerous, old wounds and new pride colliding somewhere in my chest.

"Do I get a reward for making it through this?" Nick murmurs, forehead brushing mine.

"You'll get a lot more if you keep being this nice," I say, only half-joking.

He kisses my knuckles. "I like how you look here. Strong. Even if you're terrified."

“Terrified is my default setting,” I admit. “Especially with Patricia.”

His eyes soften, impossibly gentle. “You have nothing to be afraid of. You’re a smart accomplished woman. She’s threatened by you, always has been, that’s why she’s such a bitch to you.”

That’s such a cliché, but I don’t tell him that. “If you say so,” I mutter instead.

“I do.”

We dance in silence. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Patricia watching, her expression unreadable.

“It’s stupid, isn’t it,” I whisper, “caring what she thinks?”

Nick’s hands grip my waist—possessive, reassuring. “Not stupid. But unnecessary. She’s not worth the energy you’re spending on her.”

He means it. Every muscle in my body believes it.

The night glides on, everything sharp and new. We slip away from the dance floor, Nick’s hand in mine, to the edge of the terrace. Warm air, muted city noise, the relief of being away from all those watching eyes.

He turns me to face him. “I’m proud of you, you know. For showing up here ready to fight your ghosts.”

I look up at him, finally feeling the last sticky strands of old, useless shame unravel.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I say. “Thank you for helping me fight my ghosts.”

Nick smiles, brushing my cheek with the back of his hand. “Anytime, Charlotte.” Then, quieter: “I’ll always fight by your side, no matter what battles you face.”

Below, the ballroom thrums on—old patterns, old rivalries, all of it smaller from this distance.

Nick puts his arm around me, and I lean into his warm solid body.

Here I am, standing on the terrace of the Grand Mirabelle, married to the boy I never thought I’d have. To the man that’s been at my side for an entire boring work party.

He dips his head and kisses me, sending sparks of awareness through my body. “Want to get out of here?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” I sigh into his mouth.

He grabs my hand, and we walk toward the lobby and the suite we’ve rented for the night.

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NICK

We ride the elevator to the suite in silence. The air sizzles between us, but by silent agreement we don't touch, letting the anticipation build. Inside the room, the city lights outside blur into soft halos through the sheer curtains, cocooning us in a private world where only we exist.

Charlotte and I.

I'll never tire of those words.

She's facing away from me, but turns her head to look at me over her shoulder. "Help with the zipper?"

My fingers fumble as I grasp the small clasp and pull it down. The fire engine-red material splits, revealing her bare back...and then her bare ass. She's not wearing a stitch of underwear. Not even panties. "Fuck, Charlotte." My cock presses against the front of my pants.

She gives me a siren smile and glides over to the bed. Leaning back on her elbows, she bends her legs, keeping her heels together while the knees fall to the sides. Her legs form a butterfly, with my favorite treasure between the wings.

She's a challenge and a promise all at once.

The way her eyes lock onto mine tightens my chest in a way I hadn't expected.

From our wedding night, I suspected she likes being dominated.

But now, the way she's surrendering while issuing a blatant invitation, it's really clear.

The trust she gives me without reservation ignites something fierce inside me.

No hesitations. No defenses. Just us.

I move in slowly, tracing her curves with my hands. Memorizing the shape of the body I've worshiped over the last few nights. Every inch of her is a revelation, a landscape I'll never tire of exploring. And I can't wait to see her belly grow after I've filled her with my seed.

Her breath catches as I caress the skin on the inside of her thighs. I circle closer and closer to her pussy, never quite touching it but finding all the spots that make her shiver. The places where she craves my control and care.

"Do you trust me?" I ask, voice rough, the dominant edge softened only by the raw love that pulses in my veins.

"Always," she whispers, bucking her hips, trying to put her pussy in the path of my fingers.

The single word unleashes the restraints I've put on my desire, and I growl as I tear off my clothes. My cock is thick and erect for her.

Without breaking eye contact, I fist it, squeezing it until a pearl of pre-cum glistens at the tip. "I'm riding you bare, tonight." It's not a question.

It's not an order.

It's what's going to happen.

Her eyes drop to my dick, and she licks her lips. "Yes."

"Yes, what?" I jerk my fist down my cock, and her eyes trace the same path.

"Yes, Sir."

I smile. Without our discussing it, she knew what I wanted to hear. She's perfect for me.

Reaching out with my other hand, my fingers trace the outline of her face, feeling the softness of her skin.

"You're mine, Charlotte," I whisper, my voice husky. "I'm going to breed you, tonight. Filling your womb with my seed." The words make more cum spill from my cock.

I need to be inside her soon before I spill my load.

She nods, her breath hitching as I lean in to claim her lips. My tongue ravages her mouth, demanding submission. A prelude to what's to come. My hands move down her body.

I pinch a nipple, and she moans, sending a surge of power through me.

I break the kiss, my lips trailing down her neck, my teeth grazing her skin.

She grips my shoulders. "Nick, please," she whispers, her voice trembling.

I chuckle, my lips brushing against her ear. "Greedy, girl. Begging won't work. I

decide what to give you and when.” I pinch her nipple again, and her body shivers with need, with desperation. It fuels my desire. I want to take her, claim her, make her mine in every way possible.

She tries to close her legs, but I push them back down into the butterfly position. “Stay like this or you’ll be punished.” I slap her pussy, and she moans loudly.

I kneel on the bed and push her feet up, closer to her butt, which spreads her legs further apart, revealing her glistening pussy.

One day soon, I’ll tie her up in this position with silk ropes.

Her clit’s swollen and begging for attention. I lean down, my tongue flicking out to taste her.

She gasps, her hips bucking against my mouth. I chuckle, the vibration making her moan.

"Nick, please," she begs, her hands tangling in my hair. "I need you."

“What did I say about begging?” I tap her pussy again, harder this time.

She hisses in a breath, her hands pulling my hair. The pain almost sends me over the edge. I fucking love it.

I tease her, circling her clit with my tongue while sliding first two and then three fingers inside her. She's wet, so wet, and it drives me wild.

Her muscles squeeze my fingers, her breath coming in quick gasps. I know she's close, but I want to draw it out.

I pull out my fingers, and she whimpers, her eyes pleading with me, but she doesn't say the words.

I smile, my cock throbbing with need. "Good girl," I murmur, my voice low and commanding.

I position myself at her entrance, the tip of my cock teasing her pussy.

She moans, her hips lifting to meet mine.

I push inside her slowly, inch by inch. She's tight, so tight, and it feels incredible. Her walls clench around me as her pussy accommodates my girth. "You feel so good, Charlotte," I groan, thrusting deep and hard.

She cries out, her nails digging into my back. "Harder," she gasps.

"What did I say about begging?"

"I'm not fucking begging," she growls.

"Are you telling me what to do, dirty girl?"

She pulls my hair until my face is close to hers. "I'm suggesting." She kisses me, thrusting her tongue inside my mouth. I bite down on her lip and slap the side of her breast.

Her breath hitches, but then she moans, so I do it again. A little harder.

She moans louder.

Ripping my mouth free of hers, I slam my cock hard into her pussy and bite down on

her nipple. This time she groans, arching her back and grabbing my head, pressing it into her tits.

I shift my weight so I can grab one in each hand, squeezing them hard until she's fucking shouting.

"Yes, yes," she screams. "Harder. Fucking harder."

I push her tits together so I can capture both nipples in one bite. I clamp down and Charlotte's hips thrust off the bed.

I put my hands on each side of her chest to support my weight, battering into her pussy so hard, her entire body jerks toward the headboard with each push. Her luscious tits jiggle back and forth. Charlotte grabs one in each hand, presses them together, pinching her own nipples.

My cock swells inside her, my release building.

I us to climax together. I want her pussy convulsing around my cock as I breed her. As I shoot my seed inside her and plant a baby.

Leaning to the side, bracing my weight on one arm only, I reach between us, my fingers finding her clit. I pinch it, and slam into her at the same time.

"Come for me, Charlotte," I command, my voice rough with desire. "Milk my cock like the greedy girl you are. Let me put a baby in you."

She cries out, her body arching against mine. Her pussy clenches, milking my cock. I groan as the release crashes through me and I spill my seed inside her.

We collapse together, our bodies slick with sweat, our breaths ragged. I hug her hard

and bury my face in her hair.

This connection we have is unreal. It's more than just the physical, more than just the pleasure. It's a bond that I never thought possible.

And in this moment, as we lie together, our bodies entwined, I know I'll never let her go.

"I love you, Charlotte," I whisper, my lips brushing against her forehead.

She snuggles closer to me, her breath warm against my chest. "I love you too, Nick. Forever and always." She sighs, her body relaxing further against mine. "I'm so glad you made room for me in your heart."

I kiss the top of her head. "You're not in my heart, Charlotte."

Her head jerks up from where it rested on my chest, her gaze searching my face. "But I thought—" Tears gather in her beautiful eyes.

I wipe them away. "Darling, you are my heart."

She smiles, and it's breathtakingly beautiful. "And you're mine."

And in that moment—raw and real—I know this is forever.

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CHARLOTTE, THREE YEARS LATER

The afternoon sun reflects on the lake surface, turning every ripple shiny and bright.

Mack shrieks with delight from the water's edge.

He looks exactly like the pictures I've seen of Nick and Jay, at two.

Mack has a shock of storm-dark hair glued to his damp forehead.

His chubby fists wave excitedly, every inch of him in constant motion.

I'm sprawled in a striped lounge chair, a paperback tented on my belly, sunglasses sliding down my nose. Beside me, April sighs like she's on a spa retreat, not just a ten-foot buffer from toddler chaos. She's got a straw hat on and is surrounded by that gentle aura I envy every time we hang out.

"Think they'll actually tire them out?" I say, nodding toward the guys and the kids, a hint of a smirk in my voice.

April shrugs and grins, sipping her lemonade. "Not a chance. But maybe they'll take a nap that lasts longer than six minutes. A mom can dream."

I glance over the curve of my glasses. Down at the water, Nick crouches in the shallows, his shorts showing off strong muscular legs and his arms open as Mack runs—top-heavy, reckless—back and forth from his uncle Jay to his dad.

Jay is halfway through constructing an elaborate sandcastle fortress with Lola, who wears a hot-pink tutu over her swimsuit like lake royalty. She orders her dad to make the towers taller.

Lola has hoarded every single bright plastic bucket and shovel into a guarded semicircle. When Mack circles near, she declares, “NO!” at a volume that rattles the gulls.

Mack, undeterred, pivots to launching handfuls of sand into the lake, and Nick throws me a helpless, amused look that says: Yeah, this is our monkey. This is our circus.

April laughs. “She’s got his stubborn streak. Jay swears he wasn’t like that as a kid, but Nick tells a different story.”

I pretend I’m not melting with happiness.

It’s been three years since that first fragile night as Mr. and Mrs. King.

Three years of every high and low and sideways day we never saw coming.

Three years since the wedding that wasn’t—and then a real one, in the courthouse, two months later with Jay as best man, and April as matron of honor.

Now, we’re here and nothing in my life is perfectly tidy, but it finally feels like it fits.

I made partner and enjoyed it for six months before resigning from the firm. Now I run my own office, still practicing family law, in every area except divorce.

Mack squeals as Nick sweeps him up and over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, both of them howling.

Lola stomps her foot in the sand. “I want a ride on my daddy’s shoulders.”

A snort escapes me. “Parenting. A sport that’s better as a spectator than contestant.”

April grins, handing me the bottle of sunscreen. “Want a drink?”

I fake-groan. “Do you even have to ask?”

She pours me some spiked lemonade. We clink glasses and sit in companionable silence for a moment, breathing in pine and sunscreen while listening to the hum of Nick and Jay’s laughter.

“Remember the old days?” I say finally. “When weekends meant brunch and not being up before sunrise?”

April cracks her knuckles. “And hangovers. I do not miss those. Now I get up at dawn to negotiate peace treaties over whether a sippy cup is blue or purple.”

I tip my glass to her. “Here’s to progress.”

Jay and Nick are plotting something at the edge of the dock.

Jay scoops a reluctant Lola under one arm, Nick grabs Mack, and in a flurry of wiggling limbs and toddler outrage, the dads count down with exaggerated glee.

“Three...two...one.” They toss both kids, safely, feet first, squealing, into the shallowest stretch of water.

Lola pops up sputtering. “DAAAAAD!” While Mack is already hunting for rocks, giddy with shock at cold water, my heart snags in my chest with love and gratitude so overwhelming it feels practically embarrassing.

April shields her eyes. “Do you ever think we’ll have a peaceful vacation?”

I shake my head, hair sticking to the sunscreen on my shoulder. “If we do, I’ll be worried something’s wrong.”

Mack flings a soggy stick toward us, yelling, “Mama! Watch!”

Lola is not happy with Mack hogging the grownups’ attention. She flings a rock. “No, watch me. Watch me.”

April drums her fingers on her paperback. “Maybe one day, I’ll take less than a year to finish a book.”

I exhale slowly, with a half-smile on my lips. “Maybe. But probably not until they’re in high school. Maybe middle school, if we’re lucky.”

Mack runs toward me, moss and sand stuck to his knees. But Lola distracts him with a bucket she’s finally okay sharing with him.

Nick and Jay are huddled together, deep in “guy talk,” which seems to be about the aerodynamics of skipping rocks. The kids run to them, clinging to their legs.

Nick tips his head back, laughing at something Jay mutters. He looks up, finds my eyes. His smile widens, just for me.

April notices and elbows me. “You two are disgusting, you know. Still googly after all this time.”

Heat creeps up my neck, but I don’t deny it. I used to be mortified by how visible my love was, how obvious. Now I let myself be smitten in public. “You and Jay are exactly the same?.”

She glances at her husband, her blue eyes gentle. “We are. I never thought I’d find this kind of love.”

Sometimes, in dark moments between midnight bottle-shakes and feverish foreheads, I wonder how any of us do it, this messy, stitched-together thing called marriage.

But then I see Nick plant a kiss on Mack’s head, tussled hair sticking up like a renegade patch of grass, and I remember, you just keep showing up, again and again, with as much love as you can carry that day.

Down at the lake, the toy drama escalates. Lola glares with all the queenly disapproval of a monarch denied her scepter as Mack snatches a plastic duck, declaring, “Mine now.”

Lola bursts into tears so loud it echoes back from the far bank, and Jay rushes to scoop her up. “Hey, hey, Lo. Sharing is hard, but you know what’s even cooler? Trading. Look, let Mack have the duck, and I’ll help you find the purple boat.”

Lola, unconvinced, sniffles. Mack’s bottom lip is already wobbling, and I sigh, heaving myself out of my chair.

April follows me down to the water’s edge, our feet sinking into cool sand.

“Crisis?” she asks.

I grin, reaching for Mack’s hand. “Just your standard cousin diplomacy.”

I crouch, eye-level with the pair. “Lola, what if Mack gives you his green truck for the duck? Tradesies?”

Lola narrows her eyes, considering.

Mack brandishes the truck like a talisman.

They exchange a cautious, toddler détente, and as quickly as the storm arrived, the tiny disaster is averted.

April chuckles, low and wry. “Think we can get the United Nations to hire us for peacemaking duty?”

I grab her hand. “At this rate, yes. But we’ll need more juice boxes.”

Nick wades over and plants wet chilly lips on my arm, making me yelp. “How does it feel to be the world’s best negotiator?”

I wrap an arm around his waist. “Honestly? Like a superhero. A very sticky, exhausted, sometimes-barely-functional superhero.”

He tucks Mack under one arm, sturdy and safe. “Want to switch? Your turn to win the frog-catching contest.”

The rest of the afternoon unspools in golden, lazy minutes. Mack and Lola chase after dragonflies. Nick and Jay teach them to skip rocks.

April and I recharge in our chairs, trading toddler anecdotes, and enjoying relaxing silences neither of us needs to fill.

When the sun gets low in the sky, we round up sandy, giggling kids for bath time. Later, pajama-clad and sugar-sticky, they collapse in a heap of tangled legs on the porch, listening to Jay strum the opening chords of “American Pie” on a battered guitar.

I lean against Nick on the porch steps, Mack’s head heavy in my lap, as a hush settles

over the lake. Nick traces lazy circles on my arm, his touch as familiar as my breath.

April cradles Lola, her head pressed to Jay's shoulder.

It's been three years of healing—three years since Nick made me believe beginnings can be forged out of chaos, and that even the wrong wedding can lead to the right life.

Mack snuffles in his sleep, one hand curled around my thumb. I kiss his head, then turn to Nick. "Were you ever scared we wouldn't be enough?"

He looks at me, eyes dark and soft in the porch light. "Every single day. But every day, we are." He presses his lips to my knuckles. "Especially when I look at you."

There's nothing grand about this moment—no perfect Instagram glow, just sticky-fingered children, tired bodies, on a porch that smells like citronella and burnt marshmallow. But it's perfect all the same.

It's ours.

Jay whispers something to April, and she grins, tracing her daughter's cheek with one gentle finger.

In a few years, these weekends at the lake will change. As Mac and Lola grow, the toys will be set aside, and there will be other types of kid crises for us to negotiate.

But tonight, knee-deep in love and laughter, everything is exactly as it should be.

I look at my son, at my husband, at my friends.

My family.

As the chirps of the crickets grow louder, I reach over to squeeze Nick's hand, and he squeezes back, solid and sure.

Three years ago, I thought this kind of love wasn't within my grasp. I thought I'd forever navigate the world alone.

But here I am, my heart overflowing with so much love, I can't believe how lucky I am.

The waves lapping against the shore whisper, and dusk closes in like a soft blanket.

I rest my head on my husband's strong shoulder.

As I look down at my son sleeping in my lap, I wonder how one person can deserve this much happiness.

But I don't question it for long. Instead, I bask in being the luckiest woman in the world.

Want to read Jay and Aprils story? Check out [Accidentally Kidnapping the Groom](#) .

Thank you for reading this book!

-Maria

CHARLOTTE

The newly opened restaurant Nick chose has the vibe of a 1940s gangster movie. The lights are old-fashioned golden bulbs set in ornate brass sconces, and heavy maroon velvet drapes cover the windows. I'm sandwiched into a curved leather booth and across from me, my husband grins at me like he's the only one who knows the punchline. Which he probably is.