



Bound in Matrimony

(Belonging to Him Trilogy #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: I tried to escape. I failed.

I told him I'd never love him again. He laughed.

I swore I'd never say "I do." He's about to make me.

Knox Vance has spent months proving a single, brutal truth—I belong to him. He stole me from my wedding, locked me in his penthouse, and claimed every inch of me until I couldn't deny it anymore.

But I still tried to leave. Big mistake.

Because Knox doesn't just want me in his bed. He wants me in his life. In his name. Wearing his ring. And now, with his baby growing inside me, he's done playing nice.

I can fight him. I can hate him. I can say no.

It won't matter.

Knox Vance is done waiting. And he's about to put a ring on me, whether I'm ready or not.

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Chapter One

Knox

I notice the change in Seraphina's breathing before she says anything.

She's sitting on the couch, one hand pressed against her lower back, her face a careful mask I'm learning to read.

Seven months pregnant, and she still thinks she can hide things from me.

A ripple of alarm shoots through my system, but I don't allow it to show.

Instead, I cross the room in four long strides, kneeling before her like a suppliant, though we both know I've never begged for anything in my life.

"Tell me," I demand, my voice softer than I intended.

"It's nothing," she says, but her fingers dig harder into the small of her back. "Just some discomfort."

Discomfort. The word ricochets through my brain like a bullet. She's carrying my child—my legacy, my blood, my future—and she's in discomfort. Unacceptable.

"How long?" My hands hover over her belly, not quite touching, waiting for permission. Even now, with this woman who belongs to me in every way that matters, I find myself seeking consent for the smallest intimacies. She's changed me

in ways I'm still discovering.

Seraphina sighs, taking my hand and placing it against the taut skin of her stomach. "A few hours. It comes and goes. The books say it's normal, Knox."

I feel the firm roundness beneath my palm, the slight flutter that might be our daughter shifting position. Mine to protect. Both of them.

"I'm calling Dr. Winters." It's not a suggestion. I'm already reaching for my phone.

"Knox," she protests, but I silence her with a look. She rolls her eyes but doesn't argue further. Progress.

Dr. Winters answers on the first ring, as she should. I pay her enough to be available 24/7.

"Mr. Vance," she says, professional as always. "What can I do for you?"

"Seraphina is experiencing discomfort." I stand, pacing the length of our living room, unable to remain still. "Lower back pain. For several hours."

I hear the rustling of papers. "She's at thirty weeks, correct? This could be normal Braxton Hicks contractions, but given her history of slight anemia, I'd prefer to examine her. Can you bring her to my office tomorrow morning?"

"No." The word comes out sharp, definitive. "Tonight. Now."

There's a pause on the other end of the line. "Mr. Vance, while I understand your concern, this doesn't sound like an emergency?—"

"I'll decide what constitutes an emergency where my family is concerned." My voice

drops to the register that makes board members squirm in their seats. "We'll meet you at the hospital in thirty minutes."

I end the call before she can respond, already mentally calculating what needs to happen next. Seraphina watches me with a mixture of exasperation and amusement in her green eyes.

"You're overreacting," she says, but allows me to help her to her feet. She winces slightly as she stands, and the sight of that tiny flash of pain is enough to solidify my decision.

"Car's already on the way," I inform her, texting Harris, my head of security, to bring the car around. Then I tap another number on my phone, walking toward our bedroom. "Pack an overnight bag," I call over my shoulder to Seraphina.

"Johnson," I bark when the call connects. "I need you to contact Memorial Hospital. Immediately."

"Sir?" My assistant sounds confused. It's after nine in the evening, but he knows better than to mention the time.

"I want the entire VIP floor cleared and prepared for my wife and child."

"The entire floor?" Johnson's voice wavers slightly, but he recovers quickly. "Of course, sir. I'll make the arrangements."

"Not arrangements. Demands. I want the best obstetrician in the country flown in if Dr. Winters isn't sufficient. I want every nurse vetted by our security team. I want the most advanced monitoring equipment they have, and if they don't have it, buy it."

"Yes, sir. What about the other patients currently on that floor?"

I pause, considering. My instinct is to have them moved, immediately. But Seraphina would hate that, would look at me with that mixture of disapproval and disappointment that somehow cuts deeper than any boardroom criticism ever could.

"Move them to upgraded accommodations on other floors. Charge it to me. Make sure they're comfortable." A compromise. I'm learning those, too.

"Right away, sir. Anything else?"

I glance at the doorway where Seraphina stands, one hand cradling her belly, watching me with a complicated expression. "Yes. I want to purchase the floor."

"Purchase...the hospital floor?" Johnson clarifies, his voice faint.

"The entire wing, if necessary. Whatever it takes. I want ownership, Johnson. Do you understand? No lease, no rental. I want that floor to belong to me by morning."

"I—yes, sir. I'll start the legal work immediately."

I end the call and turn to Seraphina, who looks simultaneously impressed and horrified. "You can't just buy a hospital floor, Knox."

"Watch me." I cross to her, taking the small overnight bag from her hands. "Is this all you're bringing?"

She sighs, that soft exhalation that means she's deciding which battle to fight. "It's just a precaution, remember? We'll probably be home tomorrow."

I don't bother responding to that delusional statement.

Instead, I guide her toward the elevator, one hand at the small of her back.

My phone buzzes continuously—Johnson working his magic, Harris confirming security protocols, Dr. Winters arranging her team.

The pieces falling into place as they always do when I give an order.

In the car, Seraphina leans against my shoulder, her breathing even but her posture tense. I run my hand over her hair, the silken strands sliding between my fingers like liquid gold.

"You're scaring me a little," she admits quietly.

I press my lips to her temple. "Good. Maybe you'll listen when I tell you this is serious."

"It's back pain, Knox. Thousands of pregnant women experience it every day without their husbands buying hospital wings."

"You're not thousands of women," I tell her, my voice dropping to that register that makes her pupils dilate. "You're mine. You're carrying my child. Your care will reflect that reality."

She shivers slightly, though whether from my tone or another spasm of pain, I can't tell. The uncertainty gnaws at me, makes my jaw clench.

We arrive at the hospital to find Johnson already there, looking harried but efficient. The hospital administrator—a balding man with anxious eyes—hovers beside him.

"Mr. Vance," he says, stepping forward with an outstretched hand. "I'm Dr. Collins, chief administrator. We're honored to have you with us tonight and are making all the arrangements you've requested."

I ignore his hand, focusing on getting Seraphina out of the car. "The floor?"

"We—that is—such a transaction is highly unusual?—"

I cut him off with a glance, helping Seraphina stand. "Johnson, explain to Dr. Collins that I don't care about usual. I care about results."

Johnson nods, drawing the administrator aside while I escort Seraphina through the private entrance. Harris and two other security personnel flank us, creating a human corridor that parts the curious onlookers and staff.

Dr. Winters meets us at the elevator, her calm presence a contrast to the chaos I've created. "Ms. Vale," she says warmly, before correcting herself. "Mrs. Vance. Let's get you comfortable and see what's going on."

The VIP floor has been transformed in the hour since my call. Fresh flowers line the corridors, the harsh fluorescent lights dimmed to a softer glow. I notice new monitoring equipment being wheeled into rooms, staff scurrying to prepare the space to my specifications.

"Your private suite is ready," Dr. Collins says, materializing at my elbow.

He seems to have recovered his professional demeanor.

"And I've spoken with our board. While selling a hospital floor is unprecedented, they're...

open to discussing a substantial donation that would give you naming rights and certain... privileges."

"Not good enough," I tell him, watching as Seraphina is settled into a room that looks

more like a luxury hotel suite than a hospital room. "I want ownership. Complete control."

"Mr. Vance, there are regulations, zoning laws?—"

"All of which can be navigated with the right resources."

"I turn to face him fully, my voice dropping so Seraphina can't hear."

"Let me be clear, Dr. Collins. My wife and child will receive care in a facility that meets my standards."

"I prefer that facility to be this one, but if you can't accommodate my requirements, I'll build my own hospital by the end of the week."

His face pales slightly. "That won't be necessary. I'll have our legal team work with yours through the night."

"Good decision." I dismiss him with a nod, moving to Seraphina's side as Dr. Winters examines her.

"Your vitals look good," the doctor is saying, "and the baby's heartbeat is strong. The monitor isn't showing any concerning contractions, but I'd like to keep you overnight for observation, especially considering the anemia we noted at your last checkup."

Seraphina glances at me, a silent "I told you so" in her expression. "Is that really necessary?"

"It's done," I interject, my tone brooking no argument. "You're staying."

Dr. Winters's eyes dart between us, professional enough not to comment on the

dynamics at play. "I've arranged for the best obstetric team to be on call, and we'll run some additional tests to be safe."

"Tests?" I ask, immediately alert. "What tests? Why?"

"Standard precautionary measures, Mr. Vance. Nothing to be alarmed about."

But I am alarmed. The thought of anything happening to Seraphina or our child sends a cold wave of fear through me—an unfamiliar sensation for a man who built an empire by never experiencing that emotion.

Once we're alone, Seraphina reaches for my hand. "You can't buy a hospital floor," she says again, but there's resignation in her voice now. She knows me well enough to recognize a lost cause.

"Already in progress." I sit on the edge of her bed, careful not to disturb the monitoring equipment. "By morning, this entire wing will be ours. I've ordered renovations to begin tomorrow—better security, upgraded medical equipment, a proper suite for you."

"Knox..." She sighs, squeezing my fingers. "We'll only be here until the baby is born. A few months at most."

I bring her hand to my lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "And then for any future children. For any medical need you or our family ever has. This floor will be our private medical facility in perpetuity."

Her eyes widen slightly. "Future children? We haven't even had this one yet."

I don't respond to that. She'll understand eventually that I want everything with her—not just one child, but many. Not just one lifetime, but an entire legacy.

As night deepens, I refuse to leave her side despite the comfortable recliner the staff brings in. Instead, I stretch out beside her on the hospital bed, one hand resting protectively on her swollen belly, feeling the occasional flutter of movement beneath my palm.

I don't sleep. I watch Seraphina's face in repose, the gentle rise and fall of her chest, the way her eyelashes cast delicate shadows on her cheeks in the dim light. My empire, my wealth, my power—all of it meaningless compared to this woman and the child she carries.

And so I do what I've always done when something matters to me: I ensure I control every variable, eliminate every risk, secure every advantage money can buy.

By morning, when Seraphina wakes to find herself in a hospital room filled with fresh flowers and me still at her side, the paperwork is already being finalized. The entire floor—soon to be renamed the Vance Family Medical Wing—belongs to me.

To us.

To the family I'm building, the legacy I'm creating, the future I'm securing one acquisition at a time.

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Chapter Two

Seraphina

I've never seen a man worth billions on his hands and knees with an Allen wrench, cursing at a piece of Scandinavian furniture.

Yet here is Knox Vance, CEO of Vance Technologies, the most intimidating man in the business world, assembling a crib with the same intensity he uses to dissect quarterly reports.

His sleeves are rolled up, revealing corded forearms and the expensive watch he refuses to remove even for this task.

A fine sheen of sweat gives his forehead a glow under the recessed lights he had installed to be "optimal for the baby's developing vision. "

"Knox," I say, leaning against the doorframe of the nursery, one hand resting on my belly. "We have people who could do that."

He doesn't look up, his dark brows drawn together in concentration. "No one touches my daughter's crib but me. I need to know it's secure."

"It's from the most exclusive baby boutique in Manhattan. I'm sure it's safe."

Now he does look up, those penetrating eyes fixing on me with the same focus he's just given the crib slats. "Are you? Are you absolutely certain, Seraphina? Because

I'm not willing to risk our child on an assumption."

I should find his intensity alarming. Three months ago, I would have.

But something has shifted inside me since the hospital scare last week.

Watching Knox systematically take control of an entire medical floor, interviewing each nurse who might come near me, personally inspecting every piece of equipment—it awakened something primal in me, something that responds to his absolute devotion with a warmth I wasn't expecting.

"The doctor said I should rest," I remind him, though we both know I'm not really tired. After three days of being monitored for what turned out to be false labor, I'm restless in our penthouse.

"Then sit." He gestures to the custom glider chair positioned by the window—a chair he tested for comfort, noise, and durability before allowing it into the room.

I settle into it, watching him return to his task.

The nursery has been transformed in the week since our hospital visit.

The walls, once a simple cream, are now painted in a specialized non-toxic formula that Knox had tested in three different labs.

The carpet was replaced with sustainable bamboo flooring that's "better for air quality.

" Smart sensors monitor temperature, humidity, and air particles.

A state-of-the-art sound system is programmed to play Bach, Mozart, and other

classical pieces that Knox read would stimulate brain development.

"Did you know," he says conversationally as he tightens a bolt, "that the average crib has fourteen potential points of failure? I've reinforced each one."

"Of course you have." I can't help the affection that creeps into my voice.

When I was discharged from the hospital, I returned to a penthouse that had been completely baby-proofed, despite the fact that our daughter won't be mobile for months.

Every outlet covered, every corner padded, every cleaning product replaced with organic alternatives.

Knox had even installed a specialized water filtration system for the entire building because, as he explained with deadly seriousness, "tap water contains trace pharmaceuticals that could affect fetal development. "

The elevator dings, announcing an arrival. Knox is immediately alert, hand instinctively reaching for his phone—his modern weapon of choice.

"That would be the pediatrician," he says, checking the security feed on his watch. "The fourth one this week."

"Knox, we don't need to interview every pediatrician in Manhattan."

He stands, dusting off his hands on his thousand-dollar slacks without a thought for the fabric. "Not every pediatrician. Just the top twenty. I've narrowed it down to three finalists based on their credentials, but I need to assess their decision-making processes under pressure."

"You're not going to interrogate this one like you did the last, are you? That poor woman practically ran from the building."

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "If she can't handle me, she can't be trusted with our daughter's health."

He strides from the room, purpose in every step. I heave myself out of the glider to follow, curious despite myself. Knox's version of "daddy mode" is unlike anything I've ever witnessed.

In the living room, a petite woman with silver-streaked dark hair and intelligent eyes waits, seemingly unfazed by the grandeur of the penthouse or the security check she undoubtedly endured downstairs.

"Dr. Winters," Knox greets her, his CEO voice in full effect. "Thank you for coming."

"Mr. Vance." She nods, then turns her warm gaze to me. "And you must be Mrs. Vance. How are you feeling?"

Before I can answer, Knox interjects, "She's experiencing mild lower back discomfort and occasional round ligament pain. Her sleep is disrupted approximately 3.2 times per night for urination. I've implemented a pregnancy pillow system and adjusted her diet to optimize comfort and nutrition."

I stare at him, caught between embarrassment and amazement. The fact that he's tracking my bathroom visits should disturb me. Instead, I find myself oddly touched.

Dr. Winters's expression doesn't change, though I catch a flicker of something—amusement? approval?—in her eyes. "I see Mr. Vance is thorough in his observations. But I'd like to hear from Mrs. Vance herself."

"I'm doing well," I say, sinking onto the sofa. "And please, call me Seraphina."

The interview proceeds with Knox firing precisely calibrated questions at Dr. Winters.

His research is evident—he knows her publication history, her stance on vaccination schedules, her approach to antibiotic use.

He presents her with hypothetical emergency scenarios, timing her responses with the subtle glance at his watch that I've come to recognize.

What surprises me most is his detailed knowledge of infant development and care.

This man, who six months ago probably couldn't differentiate a bassinet from a bouncer, now discusses the merits of different swaddling techniques and the optimal room temperature for newborn sleep with the confidence of a veteran parent.

"Your approach to sleep training?" he asks, making a note on his tablet.

"I believe in responsive parenting that considers the individual child's temperament," Dr. Winters replies calmly. "Some infants respond well to gentle sleep training methods around four months, while others may need different approaches."

"Unacceptable," Knox says flatly. "I need specific protocols, not generalities."

I expect Dr. Winters to be intimidated. Instead, she looks him directly in the eye.

"Mr. Vance, if you want a pediatrician who will give you rigid protocols without considering your daughter as an individual, I'm not the right doctor for your family.

Children aren't corporations. They don't respond to flowcharts and efficiency metrics.

"

I brace myself for Knox's infamous temper. To my shock, he nods, looking almost...impressed?

"A fair point, Dr. Winters. Continue."

The interview lasts another forty-five minutes, during which I watch Knox in growing wonder.

When did this happen? When did the man who once told me that children were "inefficient uses of resources" transform into someone who can debate the merits of different diapering systems with scholarly intensity?

After Dr. Winters leaves—with Knox actually shaking her hand, a sure sign of approval—he returns to his crib assembly project, pausing only to help me up from the sofa with gentle hands.

"She's acceptable," he announces. "Her stance on antibiotic stewardship aligns with current research, and she didn't flinch when I questioned her credentials."

"She's the first one you haven't immediately rejected," I observe, following him back to the nursery.

"She's the first one who stood her ground." He kneels again beside the half-assembled crib. "Our daughter needs advocates, not yes-men."

Our daughter. The simple phrase sends a wave of emotion through me so powerful I have to grip the doorframe.

Knox notices immediately, his head snapping up, eyes sharp with concern. "What is

it? Pain? Contraction?"

"No," I assure him quickly. "Just...thinking."

He studies me for a moment longer before returning to his task, though I can tell part of his attention remains fixed on me, monitoring for any sign of distress.

I watch him work, this man who has reorganized his entire existence around the protection of our unborn child.

The security systems he's implemented for the nursery alone would put most government facilities to shame.

The research he's done, the experts he's consulted, the lengths he's gone to ensure our daughter will have not just the best of everything, but the safest of everything.

"The baby monitoring system arrives tomorrow," he says, seemingly reading my thoughts. "It tracks breathing patterns, sleep cycles, and room conditions. The data syncs to both our phones."

"Of course it does," I murmur, a smile tugging at my lips.

"I've also contracted with a security firm that specializes in infant protection. They'll train our regular team on proper protocols."

"Infant protection?" I repeat. "Knox, she's not a head of state."

He looks up at me, completely serious. "She's more valuable than any president or king, Seraphina. She's ours."

The simple declaration hits me square in the chest. This is the same man who

intimidates corporate rivals, who commands boardrooms with a raised eyebrow, who bought a hospital floor on a whim.

And he's directing all that intensity, all that protective energy, all that uncompromising devotion toward our child.

Toward me.

"Come here," I say softly.

Knox sets down his tools immediately, rising with fluid grace to stand before me. I take his hand, placing it over the spot where our daughter is currently performing what feels like Olympic gymnastics.

"Feel that?" I ask. "She knows."

"Knows what?"

"That her daddy would tear apart the world with his bare hands to keep her safe." I look up into his dark eyes, seeing the vulnerability he shows to no one else. "And so do I."

Something shifts in his expression—a softening that transforms his entire face. His hand splays wider over my belly, cradling the curve with reverent possession.

"I'll never let anything happen to either of you," he vows, and I believe him with every fiber of my being.

"I know." I reach up to touch his face, my fingers tracing the strong line of his jaw. "And I love you for it."

The words slip out before I can catch them, hanging in the air between us. I've never said them before, not even when he's whispered them against my skin in the darkness of our bedroom.

For a moment, Knox goes utterly still, his eyes widening fractionally—the closest thing to shock I've ever seen on his composed features. Then he pulls me against him, one hand still on my belly, the other threading through my hair.

"Say it again," he demands, his voice rough with emotion.

"I love you," I repeat, stronger this time. "I love how much you love her already. I love watching you become a father before she's even here."

Knox's kiss is possessive, claiming, as if he's sealing my words inside both of us, making them as permanent and inviolable as his promises. When he finally breaks away, he keeps me close, his forehead pressed to mine.

"She'll never doubt it," he says fiercely. "Neither of you will ever doubt what you mean to me."

And as I stand in the middle of the meticulously planned nursery, wrapped in the arms of a man whose obsessive devotion once terrified me, I realize I've never felt safer, never felt more cherished.

I love every second of Knox Vance in daddy mode. Heaven help me, I love every demanding, controlling, protective inch of him.

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Chapter Three

Knox

I sign the last document with a practiced flourish, pushing it across the polished conference table to Richards, my head counsel.

He's been with me since the early days, one of the few people who's seen me crawl my way from nothing to everything.

"Is that all?" I ask, though we both know there's one matter we haven't addressed.

The most important one. Seraphina. My child.

My future secured in flesh and blood rather than digital assets and market shares.

Richards clears his throat, adjusting his wire-rimmed glasses. "There's the matter of your updated will and the trust for your child, sir."

"And?" I lean back in my chair, fingers steepled beneath my chin. The Manhattan skyline stretches behind me, a concrete kingdom I've conquered. But lately, it seems trivial compared to the territory I've claimed in Seraphina's heart.

"Well, the provisions for Ms. Vale and your unborn child are quite...generous." Richards chooses his words carefully, as he always does. Smart man. "However, from a legal standpoint, the protections would be significantly stronger if you were married."

I've known this, of course. Known it since the moment I placed my hand on Seraphina's still-flat stomach months ago and felt the seismic shift in my universe. Everything I've built, everything I own—it means nothing if not passed to my bloodline, secured for the woman who carries my child.

"The prenuptial agreement—" Richards begins.

"There won't be one." I cut him off, enjoying the rare sight of my unflappable lawyer looking genuinely shocked.

"Sir, with assets of your magnitude, that's highly inadvisable?—"

"Do I strike you as a man who makes inadvisable decisions, Richards?" My voice drops to the quiet register that makes board members squirm. "Seraphina gets everything. No conditions, no clauses, no prenup."

His expression remains professionally neutral, but I catch the slight widening of his eyes. In all the years he's known me, I've never been careless with what's mine. But he doesn't understand. Seraphina isn't a potential liability. She's an extension of myself.

"Very well." He makes a note. "When do you anticipate the wedding might take place? I can begin preparations for the legal transition of assets and?—"

"Three days."

Richards's pen stills on the paper. "I'm sorry?"

"Three days from now. Saturday." The decision crystallizes as I speak it aloud, feeling right in a way few things have. "Make the arrangements."

"Mr. Vance, planning a wedding in three days is?—"

"A simple matter of resources and will. I have an abundance of both." I stand, indicating our meeting is over. "Send the updated will to my private email for review. I want it executed before the wedding."

"Yes, sir." Richards gathers his papers, knowing better than to argue further. At the door, he pauses. "Congratulations, Mr. Vance."

I nod, already reaching for my phone as he leaves. Three days to plan a wedding worthy of Seraphina. Three days to make her irrevocably mine in the eyes of the law, as she already is in every way that matters.

The first call is to Elise, my events coordinator. Her sleek competence is why I keep her on permanent retainer.

"I need a wedding planned. This Saturday. Cost is irrelevant, excellence is mandatory."

To her credit, she doesn't gasp or protest. "Location preferences, sir?"

"The botanical garden. Buy it out for the day."

"Guest list?"

"Small. Intimate. I'll send you names." The truth is, I don't care who witnesses our union. It's not for them. It's for us—for the legal protection of my family, for the public declaration of what already exists between us.

"And the bride's preferences? Dress, flowers, menu?"

I pause, considering. Seraphina doesn't know yet. A flutter of something—not doubt, never doubt—passes through me. "She'll need options. The best. Arrange for designers to bring selections to the penthouse tomorrow."

Twenty minutes and a dozen calls later, the framework is in place.

The botanical garden secured with a donation large enough to make them rename a wing after us.

Three top chefs preparing menu tastings.

Designers scrambling to pull their most exclusive pieces.

Security protocols established. A private judge arranged.

It's efficient, methodical, exactly how I approach every project.

But as I step into the elevator to head home, I feel a different kind of tension coiling in my chest. Not the usual predatory anticipation of a deal closing, but something rarer.

Something I experienced when Seraphina first told me she was carrying my child.

Vulnerability.

I shake it off as the elevator rises to the penthouse. I'm Knox Vance. I don't do vulnerable. I see what I want, and I take it. And I want Seraphina Vale as my wife before our child is born.

She's in the nursery when I arrive home, one hand tracing the finished crib I assembled myself.

The late afternoon sun catches in her honey-blonde hair, turning it to molten gold.

My breath catches at the sight of her—this woman who's infiltrated every defense, who's carrying my legacy within her body.

"You're home early," she says, turning to me with a smile that still makes my heart stutter like some adolescent boy's.

I cross the room in four strides, cupping her face in my hands and kissing her with the hunger that never seems to abate, no matter how many times I claim her mouth. She melts against me, her rounded belly pressing between us, the physical reminder of what we've created together.

"What was that for?" she asks when I finally release her, her cheeks flushed and eyes bright.

"For being mine." I brush my thumb across her bottom lip, feeling the soft give of flesh that yields to me so sweetly. "We're getting married on Saturday."

She blinks, the statement taking a moment to register. "This Saturday? As in, three days from now?"

"Yes."

She searches my face, looking for signs of a joke or uncertainty. She finds neither.

"Knox, we can't plan a wedding in three days." Her hands rest on my chest, fingers curling slightly into the fabric of my shirt.

"It's already being planned." I cover her hands with mine, feeling the absence of a ring—a temporary condition I intend to remedy tomorrow. "Elise is handling the

details. Designers will be here tomorrow with dress options. The garden is secured."

"The garden? What garden?" She pulls back slightly, her brows drawing together.

"Knox, we haven't even discussed whether we want to get married."

"Haven't we?" I raise an eyebrow. "You're carrying my child. You live in my home. You sleep in my bed. You've given yourself to me in every way that matters. Marriage is simply the legal recognition of what already exists between us."

"That's not how most people approach marriage," she says, but there's a wavering in her voice that tells me she's not entirely opposed to the idea. Just the timeline.

"I'm not most people." I guide her to the window seat, sitting beside her, our bodies angled toward each other.

"Seraphina, I've built my empire by recognizing opportunities and seizing them without hesitation.

I knew the moment I saw you that you were mine, just as I knew the moment you told me about our child that you would be the mother of my legacy. "

"So I'm an opportunity?" A smile plays at the corner of her mouth, telling me she's not truly offended.

"You're a certainty." I take her hands again, rubbing my thumb over the bare ring finger that won't be naked much longer. "There's no scenario in my future that doesn't include you as my wife. Waiting serves no purpose."

She looks down at our joined hands, silent for a moment. I can almost see the thoughts racing behind those expressive green eyes—the pros and cons, the romantic notions she might have harbored about wedding planning, the practical considerations

of our situation.

"Three days isn't enough time to plan a proper wedding," she finally says, but it's not a refusal. It's a negotiation.

"It is when money and influence remove all obstacles." I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, letting my fingers linger against the soft skin of her neck. "What do you need to make it 'proper'? Tell me, and it's yours."

She laughs, a sound that still catches me off guard with its genuine delight. "You can't just throw money at a wedding and expect it to be perfect."

"Watch me."

She shakes her head, but I see the capitulation in her eyes before she speaks. "My parents?—"

"Will be flown in first class tomorrow. Already arranged."

"A dress?—"

"Designers arriving at noon with their finest options."

"Flowers—"

"The botanical garden has an in-house florist who's being handsomely compensated for her expertise and discretion."

Seraphina narrows her eyes at me. "You really planned this all out in, what, an hour?"

"Forty-seven minutes." I can't help the satisfaction that colors my tone. Efficiency has

always been my hallmark.

"What about my input? My choices?" Her voice carries a hint of challenge, the spark that first drew me to her—the woman who wouldn't be intimidated by my reputation or wealth.

"Every detail will be presented for your approval." I lift her hand to my lips, pressing a kiss to her palm. "But the date is non-negotiable, Seraphina."

"Why the rush?" Her eyes search mine. "Is it because of the baby? Because we don't need to get married just because I'm pregnant, Knox. This isn't the 1950s."

"The rush," I say, my voice dropping to the intimate tone I reserve only for her, "is because I've claimed you in every other way, and I want the world to know you're mine legally as well.

I want our child born into a union recognized by law.

I want the protection that marriage affords both of you. "

She swallows, her pulse visibly quickening at the base of her throat. "And what if I said I need more time?"

I stroke her cheek, feeling the warmth of her skin beneath my fingers.

"Then I would ask what you need time for.

To decide if you want me? We both know that's not a question.

To prepare emotionally? You've been mine since the first night I took you in my bed.

Time won't change what already exists between us, Seraphina. "

"You're very sure of yourself," she murmurs, but she's leaning into my touch.

"I'm sure of us." I draw her closer, my hand splaying possessively over her rounded belly. "Three days. Saturday at sunset. Say yes."

She sighs, a soft exhalation that carries the last of her resistance away. "You'd just make it happen even if I said no, wouldn't you?"

"I'd convince you." I brush my lips against her temple. "I can be very persuasive when something matters to me. And nothing has ever mattered more than making you my wife."

She turns her face up to mine, her eyes clear and direct. "Yes."

The single word sends a surge of triumph through me more potent than any business acquisition, any market conquest. I capture her mouth with mine, sealing her agreement with a kiss that promises everything—protection, possession, pleasure.

When I finally release her, she's breathless, her cheeks flushed. "I need to call my mother," she whispers. "She'll have a heart attack when she hears."

"She already knows." I stand, pulling Seraphina to her feet. "I called your parents before I called Elise. Your father has given his blessing."

She stares at me in astonishment. "You asked my father for permission?"

"Not permission." I correct her with a slight smile. "Notification. I was informing him of my intentions, not seeking his approval."

She laughs again, shaking her head. "You're impossible."

"No," I pull her against me, one hand tangling in her hair to tip her face up to mine. "I'm determined. And in three days, Seraphina Vale, you'll be Seraphina Vance. My wife. Mine in every way that exists."

She shivers slightly in my arms, and I know it's not from fear or reluctance. It's from the same certainty that burns in my blood—the knowledge that our union is inevitable, has been from the moment our eyes first met across her gallery.

"Three days," she whispers, and it sounds like a promise.

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Chapter Four

Seraphina

My fingers tremble as I take Knox's face between my palms. The stubble on his jaw scrapes against my skin, sending familiar shivers down my spine.

His dark eyes bore into mine with that intensity that still makes my knees weak, even after everything we've been through.

I've spent my entire adult life analyzing brushstrokes and color palettes, but nothing I've ever studied compares to the masterpiece of his face when he looks at me like I'm the only woman in existence.

"Say it again," he whispers, his voice rough with emotion. We're standing in his penthouse—our penthouse now, I suppose—with the lights of Manhattan twinkling beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows like earthbound stars.

"I want to marry you, Knox." The words come easier this time than when he first proposed three days ago and I stood frozen, terrified by the magnitude of what he was offering. "I want to be your wife."

He doesn't smile, not exactly. Knox Vance doesn't do something as simple as smile when he's feeling this much.

Instead, his expression transforms, softens around the edges while simultaneously becoming more intense at the center—like a photograph where only the subject is in

focus and everything else blurs away.

"I need more than want, Seraphina." His hands slide around my waist, pulling me against the hard wall of his chest. "I need to know you're certain. That you're not going to wake up tomorrow and decide this was a mistake."

The old me—the woman I was before Knox crashed into my carefully curated life—would have hedged, would have asked for time to think it through, to make endless pro and con lists and consult with trusted friends. That woman was always afraid of making the wrong choice.

But that woman never knew what it felt like to be loved by Knox Vance.

"I'm certain." I twist the emerald ring he placed on my finger, still getting used to its considerable weight. "I've never been more certain of anything."

His eyes narrow slightly. "You hesitated when I asked you."

"I did," I admit, because lying to Knox is pointless. He reads me like I'm a first edition with extra-large print. "I was scared."

"And now?"

"Still scared," I whisper, watching his jaw tighten. Before he can pull away, I press closer. "But not of marrying you. I'm scared of how much I need you. How completely you've taken over every corner of my life. My heart. How I can't imagine breathing properly if you weren't in my world."

Something primal flashes across his face, that possessive hunger that used to frighten me but now makes heat pool low in my belly.

"That's not a weakness, Seraphina. That's just finally admitting what I've known since the moment I saw you critiquing that hideous installation at the Brennan Gallery."

I laugh softly, remembering how he stood silently beside me, listening to my whispered commentary to myself, before leaning down to murmur, "I'll buy it if you'll have dinner with me." I'd been horrified, then intrigued, then unable to resist.

"I know that now." My fingers find the buttons of his crisp white shirt, toying with the top one.

"But I need you to understand something, Knox.

When I make this promise to you—when I stand in front of whoever you've arranged to marry us—" his slight smile confirms my suspicion that he's already taken care of everything "—I won't be making a promise I intend to break. Ever."

He goes very still against me, the way he does when something matters more than he can express.

"I've watched my parents drift apart over thirty years of marriage.

I've seen colleagues treat vows like temporary arrangements.

That's not what I'm offering you." I swallow hard, finding the courage to be as direct as he always is.

"When I say I'll be your wife, I mean your only wife.

Forever. No matter what happens, no matter how hard it gets. I won't walk away."

My diamond-studded bracelet—his gift after our first night together—catches the

light as I fidget with it, twisting it around my wrist in that nervous gesture I've never been able to break. "I know that's a lot. Maybe too much in today's world. But?—"

His mouth crushes against mine, stealing my words and my breath in one devastating kiss. His hands slide into my hair, angling my head exactly how he wants it, his tongue demanding entrance that I eagerly grant. The taste of him—expensive whiskey and something uniquely Knox—floods my senses.

When he finally pulls back, we're both breathless.

"Say it again," he demands, and this time I know exactly what he needs to hear.

"I promise to be yours forever, Knox. Only yours." I press my palm against his thundering heart. "I promise to be faithful, to be honest, to fight for us if things get hard. I promise that when I say 'I do,' I'll mean it with everything I am."

Emotion transforms his face—vulnerability he shows to no one but me.

"I've never needed anything like I need that promise from you," he confesses, his voice raw. "I've built an empire from nothing. I can lose it all tomorrow and rebuild it twice as large. But you—" His fingers tighten on my hips. "Losing you would destroy me, Seraphina."

The weight of his admission settles over me, not as a burden but as a precious gift. This powerful man who commands boardrooms and bends industries to his will is offering me his most vulnerable truth.

"You won't lose me." I rise on tiptoes, pressing my forehead to his. "I promise."

"Seraphina." My name is a prayer on his lips. "Do you understand what you're promising? What being my wife will mean?"

"Tell me," I whisper, though I already know.

His hands slide possessively down my sides. "It means you're mine in every way possible. It means I'll never let you go. It means no matter where you are, what you're doing, who you're with—you belong to me."

A year ago, those words would have sent me running. Now, they feel like coming home.

"Yes," I agree, my voice stronger than I expected. "That's exactly what I'm promising."

The tension drains from his body as if I've given him the one thing he's been searching for his entire life. His kiss this time is different—slower, deeper, a seal on the vow we've just exchanged.

"Tomorrow," he says against my lips. "We'll be married tomorrow."

My eyes widen. "Tomorrow? But?—"

"Everything's arranged. Has been since the day I put that ring on your finger." His smile is wolfish, confident. "Unless you need more time?"

It's a challenge, a test of the promise I just made. Instead of the panic I might have felt before, I feel only certainty.

"Tomorrow is perfect." I slide my hands under his shirt, feeling the hard muscle beneath warm skin. "But what will you do with me tonight, Mr. Vance?"

His growl vibrates through both our bodies as he lifts me, my legs automatically wrapping around his waist. "I'm going to make sure you remember exactly who

you're promising yourself to, future Mrs. Vance."

As he carries me toward the bedroom, I bury my face in his neck, breathing in his scent, knowing with complete certainty that I've never made a promise I meant more.

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Chapter Five

Seraphina

I stand alone in the cavernous master bathroom, staring at my reflection in the mirror that spans an entire wall.

Knox spared no expense having it custom-designed to eliminate any shadowing that might distort my appearance—because heaven forbid I apply my mascara in suboptimal lighting.

My wedding dress hangs from a specially installed hook on the door, a confection of silk and lace that costs more than my first car.

Three days. It took just three days for Knox to orchestrate what most brides spend a year planning.

Three days from announcement to execution, like a military operation rather than a celebration of love.

My fingers tremble as I reach for my moisturizer, the emerald on my left hand catching the light and throwing prisms across the marble countertop.

The ring appeared yesterday morning—fifteen carats of flawless clarity that makes my hand feel like it's carrying the weight of a small planet. Knox presented it over breakfast as casually as passing the salt, sliding the velvet box across the table while checking emails on his phone.

His grandmother's ring with my heartbeat engraved on the band.

The only family heirloom he's ever mentioned, placed on my finger without ceremony. I didn't even know Knox had grandparents, let alone ones who passed down jewelry. Every time I think I understand the man I'm marrying, he reveals another layer.

The bathroom door is locked—a small rebellion in a penthouse where Knox has access to everything.

He's not here anyway, having spent the night at his downtown apartment because "tradition matters, Seraphina, even when I find it inconvenient.

" As if anything in Knox Vance's life happens without his explicit permission, including traditions.

The past forty-eight hours have been a blur of activity.

Designers parading dresses before me while Knox sat in judgment, dismissing options before I could even form an opinion.

Florists presenting arrangements for approval.

Caterers offering tastings of the world's finest cuisines.

Knox making decisions with military precision whenever I hesitated for more than thirty seconds.

"The Marchesa," he said, when I wavered between two gowns. "The lace at the neckline accentuates your collarbones."

I didn't argue, even though I slightly preferred the other. What's the point of arguing with a man who bought out an entire botanical garden for a day just so we could have privacy?

My hands rest on my swollen belly, feeling the reassuring kick of our daughter.

Seven and a half months pregnant and getting married.

Not exactly how I pictured it as a little girl.

Then again, I never pictured someone like Knox Vance either—a man so certain of what he wants that he bends reality to match his vision.

The first flutter of panic begins in my chest, a familiar tightening that makes my breath catch.

What am I doing? In three hours, I'll be legally bound to the most controlling, obsessive man I've ever met.

A man who tracked me across state lines when I ran.

A man who bought a hospital floor just to ensure our comfort.

A man who's rearranged his entire existence around possessing me completely.

I grip the edge of the counter, my knuckles whitening. Knox Vance doesn't do anything by half measures. This marriage won't be a partnership—it will be an acquisition. Me, incorporated into his empire, branded with his name, subject to his will.

My breathing quickens, echoing against the marble and glass surfaces of our

bathroom.

Our bathroom. Already I think of everything as ours, when really it's all his.

The penthouse. The cars. The staff who materialize to meet my needs before I've even expressed them.

Even my body doesn't feel entirely my own anymore—not with his child growing inside me, not with the way he's mapped every inch of my skin with his demanding touch.

I need to get out. Just for a minute. Just to breathe air that isn't filtered through Knox's state-of-the-art purification system, to see sky that isn't framed by his custom windows.

The door to the bedroom opens. I hear my mother's voice calling my name, and I quickly splash cold water on my face, trying to erase the evidence of my panic.

"In here, Mom," I call, unlocking the bathroom door. "Just finishing my skincare routine."

She appears in the doorway, already dressed for the wedding in a chic blue dress that I know Knox's personal shopper selected for her. My mother—who used to bargain hunt at department stores—now draped in designer wear, a beneficiary of the Vance lifestyle just like me.

"Oh, sweetheart," she says, taking in my appearance. "You look pale. Are you feeling alright? Should I call Knox?"

"No!" The word comes out too quickly, too sharply. I soften my tone. "No, I'm fine. Just wedding jitters."

She studies me with the penetrating gaze that missed nothing throughout my childhood. "Seraphina. Talk to me."

The simple invitation breaks something inside me. Tears well up, spilling over before I can stop them. "I don't know if I can do this, Mom."

She guides me to the tufted ottoman in the center of the bathroom—because of course Knox's bathroom has seating furniture—and sits beside me, taking my hands in hers. "What are you afraid of, exactly?"

"Everything." I gesture vaguely at the opulence surrounding us. "This life. Him. The way he just...takes over. Three days, Mom. Who plans a wedding in three days?"

"A man who knows what he wants," she says simply. "And who has the resources to make it happen."

"But that's just it. He always gets what he wants. Always. What happens when what he wants conflicts with what I want?"

My mother's expression softens. "Has that happened yet? Has he forced you to do anything you truly didn't want to do?"

I open my mouth to answer, then close it.

Has he? Knox is demanding, controlling, possessive to the point of obsession.

But he's never actually forced me to do anything.

He's persuaded, insisted, arranged, but ultimately...

I've chosen to stay. I've chosen to accept the ring.

I've chosen to wear the dress hanging on the door.

"No," I admit reluctantly. "Not explicitly."

"And do you love him?"

The question hangs in the air between us.

Do I love Knox Vance? Do I love the man who treats me like a priceless acquisition one minute and a cherished partner the next?

Who can coldly orchestrate a hospital takeover for my benefit, then tenderly assemble a crib with his own hands?

Who looks at me like I'm something holy and touches me like I'm something sinful?

"Yes," I whisper, the truth of it resonating through my body. "That's what scares me."

My mother nods, understanding dawning in her eyes. "You're not afraid of Knox. You're afraid of how much you need him."

The insight strikes with precision, piercing straight to the heart of my panic.

She's right. I'm not afraid of what Knox will do to me—I'm afraid of what I've already become with him.

Dependent. Yielding. Wanting. All the independence I've cultivated throughout my adult life, all the careful boundaries and self-reliance, swept away by a man who claimed me as his from our first meeting.

"I could still leave," I say, but even as the words leave my mouth, I know I won't.

Where would I go? Seven months pregnant, with a man who has the resources to find me anywhere on earth? A man who owns a floor of the hospital where I'll deliver his child?

But it's more than that. The truth—the terrifying, exhilarating truth—is that I don't want to leave. Not anymore. Somewhere between his high-handed commands and tender protective gestures, I've become addicted to Knox Vance's particular brand of devotion.

"You could," my mother agrees mildly. "But you won't."

"How do you know?"

She smiles, touching my cheek with a gentle hand. "Because I raised you to recognize value when you see it. And whatever else Knox Vance may be—controlling, intense, overwhelming at times—the way that man values you is undeniable."

She's right again. Knox doesn't love like normal people.

He doesn't send flowers and write poems. He buys hospital wings and interviews pediatricians with the intensity of a FBI interrogator.

He rewires entire buildings to optimize safety for our unborn child.

He remakes the world to protect what he loves.

"I'm scared of disappearing into him," I confess, voicing my deepest fear. "Of becoming just an extension of Knox Vance."

"Oh, sweetheart." My mother laughs softly. "That man wouldn't have chosen you if he wanted someone who would disappear. He wants your fire. Why do you think he

works so hard to contain it? Not to extinguish it—to harness it."

I blink, considering this perspective. Is she right? Does Knox value my independence, my spirit, even as he seeks to direct it? Is that why he never breaks me, only bends me to his will?

"I don't know what kind of marriage this will be," I say, one hand resting on my belly where our daughter shifts restlessly, as if sensing her mother's turmoil.

"No one ever does," my mother replies with the wisdom of thirty years married to my father. "Every marriage is uncharted territory. Yours may be more...dramatic than most, given who Knox is. But I've watched him with you, Seraphina. That man would die before he hurt you."

The truth of her words settles something inside me. The panic recedes, not entirely gone but no longer threatening to drown me. I take a deep breath, then another.

"I have nowhere to run anyway," I say with a weak attempt at humor.

"You have nowhere to run because there's nowhere you need to go," my mother corrects gently. "You're exactly where you're supposed to be."

A knock at the door interrupts us. The wedding planner's voice calls through the wood. "Mrs. Vale? The hair and makeup team is here. We need to begin if we're going to stay on schedule."

On Knox's schedule, of course. The man probably has our wedding day planned down to the minute, with contingencies for every possible delay.

My mother stands, offering her hand to help me up. "Ready to become Mrs. Vance?"

The name echoes in my mind. Seraphina Vance. No longer the independent gallery director, but the wife of one of the most powerful men in the country. The mother of his child. The center of his universe—a terrifying and exhilarating position to occupy.

I place my hand in hers, feeling the weight of the enormous emerald on my finger. "I don't have a choice, do I?"

"You always have a choice, Seraphina." My mother's eyes are kind but knowing. "The fact that you keep choosing him is what tells me this marriage will work."

As we open the door to admit the small army of beauty professionals Knox has assembled, I catch sight of my wedding dress again—the one he selected because it accentuates my collarbones.

In three hours, I'll wear it down an aisle lined with flowers imported from three continents, toward a man who has rearranged his entire existence to claim me as his own.

The panic flutters again, faint but present. But beneath it is something stronger, something that feels remarkably like certainty. I can't run from Knox Vance—not because he won't let me, but because running from him would be running from myself. From what I want. From what I've become.

I'm trapped, yes. But the cage is gilded, the door is open, and I keep choosing to stay inside.

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Chapter Six

Knox

I watch her walking toward me through a corridor of white orchids, each bloom handpicked and flown in this morning from Singapore, and I can barely breathe.

Seraphina— my Seraphina—wrapped in silk the color of moonlight, her honey-blond hair swept up to expose the elegant column of her neck.

The guests fade to insignificance, the carefully orchestrated music becomes distant noise.

All I see is her, moving toward me with our child nestled beneath her heart.

Mine. Finally, irrevocably mine. A foreign sensation builds in my chest, pressing against my ribs—something dangerously close to fear.

Not that she'll say no; we're beyond that now.

But that somehow, someday, she might leave me again.

And that is something I cannot— will not —allow to happen.

Her father walks beside her, but I barely acknowledge him.

My focus narrows to Seraphina's face—the delicate flush on her cheeks, the slight

tremor in her full bottom lip, the way her green eyes lock onto mine with a mixture of surrender and defiance that has captivated me from our first meeting.

She's nervous. I can read it in the stiffness of her shoulders, the tight grip she has on her bouquet.

But she's here. Walking toward me. Choosing me.

When her father places her hand in mine, I grip it perhaps too tightly. A subtle reminder that I won't let go. Ever. She gives me a look—part exasperation, part understanding—and I force myself to loosen my hold, though every instinct screams at me to keep her anchored to my side.

The ceremony passes in a blur of words I've memorized but barely register as I speak them.

I've arranged every detail of this day, supervised every element from the rare flowers to the specific vintage of champagne waiting in crystal flutes.

Yet the only detail that truly matters is the woman before me, promising herself to me in words that seem insufficient to capture the magnitude of what exists between us.

"I do," she says, her voice clear and steady despite the tears that shimmer in her eyes.

"I do," I echo, though in my mind the words are more primal. Mine. Forever. No escape.

When the officiant pronounces us husband and wife, I don't wait for permission to kiss her.

I claim her mouth with a possession that borders on indecent for a public ceremony,

my hand cradling the nape of her neck to hold her in place.

She melts against me, her body yielding as it always does, and I taste her surrender on my tongue.

The guests applaud, but I barely hear them.

As we turn to face our small audience—her parents, a few close friends, my essential staff—I keep my arm firmly around her waist. Photographers capture the moment, their presence a necessary evil I tolerate only because I want documentation of this day.

Proof that she chose me. Legally. Publicly. Irrevocably.

"Fifteen minutes," I murmur into her ear as we begin the recessional walk. "Then I need you alone."

She glances up at me, surprise flickering across her features. "The reception?—"

"Can wait." My tone brooks no argument. I've orchestrated this day down to the minute, but I've built in a private interlude that none of our guests know about. A moment I need more than air.

The botanical garden's director leads us to a secluded glass conservatory filled with rare tropical plants—a space I had renovated specifically for this purpose. The doors close behind us, and for the first time since the ceremony began, we're truly alone.

Seraphina turns to me, her dress rustling softly against the marble floor. In this light, with flowers creating a natural canopy above her, she looks otherworldly. My wife. The word reverberates through me with a power I didn't anticipate.

"Knox?" Her voice is soft, questioning. "Why are we here?"

Instead of answering, I cross to her in three long strides, taking her face between my hands with a gentleness that contradicts the storm raging inside me.

For a moment, I simply look at her, memorizing every detail of her features as they are in this moment—flushed with emotion, eyes bright with unshed tears, lips slightly swollen from my kiss.

"I need you to make me a promise," I say, my voice rougher than intended. "A vow beyond what you just spoke in front of witnesses."

Her hands come up to rest on my wrists, her touch light but grounding. "What kind of promise?"

"That you'll never leave me again." The words tear from my throat, raw and unvarnished. "Never try to run. Never think you can disappear from my life."

Something shifts in her expression—surprise, then understanding. "Knox..."

"I found you once," I continue, unable to stop now that I've begun. "I would find you again. No matter where you went, no matter how far you ran. But I don't want to have to find you, Seraphina. I want you to stay. By choice."

Her eyes search mine, seeing past the command to the plea underneath. "This is about when I left before. When I was scared."

"Yes." I don't elaborate. We both know what happened—how she fled when the reality of our child, of my possession, became too much. How I tracked her across state lines, found her in that shabby motel room, brought her back where she belongs.

"You're my wife now," I say, my thumbs brushing across her cheekbones. "That means something to me, Seraphina. More than you realize."

"Because of your parents?" she asks quietly, intuiting what I've never explicitly told her.

My jaw tightens reflexively. Even now, decades later, the memory has the power to shake my control.

"My mother left when I was six. Walked out one day and never came back.

My father..." I pause, forcing the words past the constriction in my throat.

"He made sure I understood it was my fault. That I wasn't enough to make her stay."

Seraphina's expression softens, her hands moving to cup my face in a mirror of my hold on her. "Oh, Knox."

"I don't want your pity." The words come out sharper than intended. "I want your promise."

"It's not pity," she says, her gaze steady on mine. "It's understanding. It explains so much about you—why you need to control everything, why you're so afraid of losing what's yours."

I don't confirm or deny this assessment.

I've spent a lifetime building myself into a man who takes what he wants, who never experiences that gut-wrenching helplessness of watching someone walk away.

Seraphina is the first person who's made me feel that vulnerability again—when she

ran, when she carried my child thousands of miles away, when she thought she could exist without me.

"Promise me," I repeat, my fingers threading into her carefully arranged hair, uncaring that I'm destroying the stylist's work. "Say the words, Seraphina."

"I promise," she whispers, her eyes never leaving mine. "I won't leave you, Knox. Not ever again."

Relief washes through me, so powerful it nearly brings me to my knees. Instead, I pull her against me, burying my face in her neck, breathing in her scent like a drowning man gulping air.

"Say it again," I demand, my lips against her pulse point.

"I promise I won't leave you." Her arms wrap around me, one hand stroking the back of my neck in a gesture so tender it threatens to unravel me completely. "You're stuck with me now."

I pull back enough to look at her, needing to see her eyes as she speaks. "And if you ever feel the urge to run? If I become too much, if you feel trapped?"

"I'll tell you," she says, her voice gaining strength. "I'll fight with you, I'll demand space if I need it, but I won't disappear. We're in this together now, Knox. You, me, our daughter."

Our daughter. The child growing beneath her heart, the visible proof of what we've created together. My hands drift to the swell of her belly, framing the roundness with possessive care.

"Together," I echo, the word feeling strange on my tongue. I've built my life alone,

constructed my empire through solitary will. But Seraphina has changed everything, inserted herself into the fortress of my existence until I can no longer imagine it without her.

"You realize," she says with a small smile, "that promises go both ways."

My eyebrow arches. "Meaning?"

"Meaning you don't get to shut me out. You don't get to make unilateral decisions about our life together without consulting me." Her chin lifts in that defiant gesture that simultaneously infuriates and arouses me. "I'm not leaving you, but I'm not disappearing into you either."

A smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. Even now, on her wedding day, carrying my child, wearing my ring and my name, she challenges me. It's why I chose her. Why I need her.

"Agreed," I say, surprising us both. "Within reason."

She laughs, the sound like a balm to the raw places inside me. "Your definition of 'reason' and mine might differ significantly."

"We'll negotiate." I lower my mouth to hers, swallowing whatever retort she might have made. The kiss deepens rapidly, heat flaring between us as it always does. When I finally release her, we're both breathing hard.

"Fifteen minutes is almost up," she murmurs against my lips.

"They'll wait." I hold her against me for a moment longer, her softness pressed to my hardness, the perfect contradiction that defines us. "I needed this. Needed to hear you promise."

"I know." Her hand comes up to my face, thumb tracing my lower lip with a tenderness that still surprises me. "And I meant it, Knox. I'm not going anywhere."

I capture her wrist, pressing a kiss to her palm before releasing her. The moment of vulnerability passes, and I feel my usual control reasserting itself. But something has shifted between us—a deeper understanding, a contract more binding than the legal one we've just entered.

"Come," I say, offering my arm. "Our guests are waiting."

As she places her hand in the crook of my elbow, the weight of her promise settles into my bones.

She won't leave me. Won't run. Won't take my child and disappear.

The irrational fear that's haunted me since she first fled begins to recede, replaced by a certainty as solid as the ring on her finger.

Seraphina Vance is mine now. Legally. Publicly. By her own promise.

And God help anyone who tries to change that fact.

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Chapter Seven

Knox

Mine. The word pounds through my blood with each heartbeat as I watch her move around our hotel suite.

Seraphina Vance. No longer Vale. The change in her name is a transformation I've engineered since the moment I first saw her, though she doesn't know that yet.

Doesn't understand the depths of what I've been planning.

The white lace of her wedding dress catches the dim light as she slips off her heels, unaware that I'm watching her from the doorway, memorizing every delicate movement.

I've conquered companies and crushed competitors without breaking a sweat, but watching my wife—my wife—preparing for our wedding night has me gripping the doorframe hard enough to splinter wood.

The wedding was perfect. Small, exclusive, exactly as I designed it.

Her parents, a handful of her closest friends, my executive team who've become something like family.

Seraphina looked stunned when she arrived at the botanical garden I'd reserved, decorated with thousands of her favorite flowers.

But nothing compared to watching her walk toward me in that dress, her eyes never leaving mine as she came to take my name.

When she spoke her vows, her voice didn't waver once. I've built an empire on reading people—knowing when they're lying, when they're hiding something—and there wasn't a hint of doubt in her. She meant every word. She promised to be mine forever, and she meant it.

Now she's officially Seraphina Vance, and the predator in me wants to make sure she never forgets it.

"How long are you going to stand there watching me?" She doesn't turn around, but a small smile plays at the corner of her mouth. Always more perceptive than I give her credit for.

"Until I'm done looking." I push off from the doorframe and move into the suite.

The Presidential at the St. Regis—not because I couldn't buy us our own island for the night (that comes later), but because I knew she'd appreciate the history, the art, the carefully preserved details that speak to her aesthetic sensibilities.

She turns to face me then, and my breath catches. The sophisticated art director is still there in her posture, in the graceful way she holds herself, but there's something new in her eyes. A certainty. A surrender that's made more powerful because she's chosen it freely.

"And when will that be?" She reaches up to remove a pin from her hair, sending a cascade of honey-blond waves tumbling over one shoulder.

"Never." I close the distance between us in three long strides. "I'll never be done looking at you."

Her breath hitches as I cup her face in my hands. The emerald ring I put on her finger now sits alongside the platinum band that matches mine. The stones catch the light as she places her hands over mine.

"Knox—"

"I need you to understand something." My voice is rough, lower than usual. "What happened today changes everything."

Her green eyes—slightly more blue tonight in the dim light—search mine. "We're married now."

"Yes." I slide one hand down to her throat, feeling her pulse jump beneath my palm. "You're mine now. Legally. Completely." I brush my thumb over her bottom lip. "Do you understand what that means?"

She swallows, and I feel the movement against my hand. "Tell me."

I press her backward until she meets the wall, caging her with my body. "It means there's no more separation between us. What's mine is yours." I bring my mouth to her ear. "And what's yours is mine. Your body. Your future. All of it."

A shiver runs through her, but she doesn't look away. "I know."

"Do you?" I grip her waist, feeling the delicate lace of her wedding dress beneath my fingers.

"Because I need you to be very clear on this, Seraphina.

I've wanted you since the first moment I saw you.

I've needed you since our first night together.

But now that you're my wife—" I press my hardness against her, making her gasp, "—I'm going to have all of you.

No holding back. No barriers. Nothing kept from me. "

Instead of the hesitation I half-expected, her pupils dilate, nearly swallowing the green. "Yes."

One word. A simple affirmation. It ignites something primal inside me.

I capture her mouth in a brutal kiss, swallowing her moan as my tongue claims hers.

My hands find the concealed zipper of her dress, dragging it down with one swift pull.

The expensive lace whispers as it falls to the floor, leaving her in nothing but a white lace lingerie set that makes my mouth go dry.

"Did you pick this for me?" I trace the edge of the bra with one finger, watching goosebumps rise on her perfect skin.

She nods, her chest rising and falling rapidly. "I know what you like."

"You do." I unhook the delicate garment and slide it down her arms. "You know I like to see what belongs to me."

Her nipples tighten under my gaze, and I capture one in my mouth, sucking hard enough to make her cry out. My hands grip her thighs, lifting her against the wall as her legs wrap around my waist.

"Knox—please?—"

"Please what, Mrs. Vance?" I grind against her, still fully clothed while she's nearly naked. "Tell me what my wife needs on her wedding night."

Her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me back to look at her. There's desperation in her eyes, but something more—a hunger that matches mine.

"I need you to show me." Her voice is breathless but steady. "Show me what it means to be yours."

Those words snap whatever restraint I've been clinging to. I carry her to the bed, laying her on the crisp white sheets before standing back to remove my tuxedo. She watches me with those artist's eyes, taking in every detail as I strip away each layer.

When I'm finally naked, I kneel between her thighs, hooking my fingers into the waistband of her lace panties. "These were beautiful." I tear them away with one sharp pull. "I'll buy you a hundred more."

She gasps, but her thighs fall open wider. I take a moment just to look at her—my wife, spread out before me, her skin flushed pink with desire. I've had countless women before her, but none of them mattered. None of them were mine like she is.

"I'm going to mark you tonight," I tell her, my voice raw with honesty. "So that every time you move tomorrow, you'll feel where I've been. So that every time you look in the mirror, you'll see evidence that you belong to me."

Her eyes darken further. "Yes."

I lower my head between her thighs without warning, tasting her with a groan that vibrates against her sensitive flesh.

She cries out, her hands flying to my hair as I devour her like a starving man.

I spell my name against her with my tongue, claiming her most intimate place as my personal territory.

When she's trembling, right on the edge, I pull back. Her protest dies on her lips as I move up her body, pinning her wrists above her head with one hand.

"Look at me," I command as I position myself at her entrance. "I want to see your eyes when I make you mine."

She doesn't look away, not even when I thrust into her with enough force to slide her up the bed. The connection between us is electric, a current that runs straight from her gaze to mine, grounding us together as I begin to move.

"Say it," I demand, setting a punishing pace that has her gasping with each thrust. "Tell me who you belong to."

"You," she moans, her back arching. "I belong to you, Knox."

"And I belong to you." The admission tears from me unexpectedly, making her eyes widen. I've never said those words to another living soul. "Only you, Seraphina. Only ever you."

Something shifts between us then—the atmosphere changing from purely carnal to something deeper, more profound. I release her wrists to cradle her face, my movements slowing but becoming deeper, more deliberate.

"I'll give you the world," I promise against her lips. "Anything you want. Everything you deserve. But I'll never give you up. Not for anything."

Tears spill from the corners of her eyes, sliding into her hair. For a moment I freeze, terrified I've hurt her, but she wraps her legs tighter around me.

"Don't stop," she pleads. "Please don't ever stop."

I reclaim her mouth as I reclaim her body, my rhythm becoming relentless again.

I slide my hand between us, finding the spot that makes her shatter beneath me.

She comes with my name on her lips, her body clenching around me so perfectly that I follow her over the edge, marking her from the inside with my release.

Afterward, I hold her against my chest, listening to our heartbeats gradually slow. I trace patterns on her bare back, unwilling to break contact even for a second.

"You're quiet," she murmurs against my neck.

"I'm memorizing." I press my lips to her forehead. "Every detail. Every second. The exact way you feel in my arms right now."

She shifts to look up at me, her expression serious. "I meant what I promised yesterday. And today. I'm yours forever, Knox."

"I know." And I do know. I've always been able to spot a lie, to sense hesitation. There's none in her. "But I'm still going to spend every day of our marriage making sure you never forget it."

Her smile is slow, seductive. "Is that a promise, Mr. Vance?"

I roll her beneath me again, ready to claim what's mine for the second time tonight.

"It's a guarantee, Mrs. Vance. And I always deliver on my guarantees."

As I sink into her again, watching her eyes glaze with renewed pleasure, I know with absolute certainty that she'll never forget who she belongs to. Just as I'll never forget that the most valuable acquisition of my life wasn't a company or property.

It was her.

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Chapter Eight

Seraphina

Sunlight spills across the rumpled sheets, warming my bare skin as I slowly wake.

Every muscle in my body aches in the most delicious way, testament to Knox's thoroughness last night.

I stretch carefully, cataloging each twinge and soreness like the most exquisite exhibit I've ever curated.

The sheets beside me are empty but still warm.

Knox's scent—expensive cologne mingled with something purely male—lingers on the pillow where I press my face, inhaling deeply.

Mrs. Vance. I test the name in my mind, finding it fits more perfectly than I could have imagined.

I sit up slowly, wincing slightly as my body reminds me of exactly how many times and in how many ways Knox claimed me last night.

The mirror across from the bed reflects a woman I barely recognize—honey-blond hair a wild tangle around my shoulders, lips swollen from brutal kisses, delicate bruises blooming across my collarbone, my breasts, my inner thighs. Evidence of possession. Of belonging.

When I first met Knox Vance at that gallery opening, critiquing that hideous installation, I never imagined I would end up here—marked by him, changed by him, utterly and completely his.

I was Seraphina Vale, respected art director, known for my impeccable taste and cool professionalism.

I built my career on maintaining control, on making calculated decisions.

But Knox took one look at me and decided I was his. And now, as I examine the physical proof of his claim on my body, I know with complete certainty that no one else could ever make me feel this way.

Standing on slightly unsteady legs, I make my way to the bathroom, catching more glimpses of myself in the mirrors that seem to multiply my reflection.

My feet press against cool marble as I lean closer to the vanity mirror, examining my face.

My eyes are different—still green, still mine, but somehow altered.

Like an artist has added depth with a single brushstroke, changing the entire composition.

I turn on the shower, letting steam fill the enormous bathroom as I step beneath the hot spray.

Water sluices over my skin, but it doesn't wash away the memory of Knox's hands, his mouth, his possession.

I close my eyes and instantly recall his voice in my ear, rough with desire as he

whispered exactly what he wanted to do to me.

How he planned to make sure I never forgot who I belonged to.

"I'm going to mark you tonight," he had said, his eyes dark with promise. "So that every time you move tomorrow, you'll feel where I've been."

He kept that promise. I feel him everywhere—in the pleasant soreness between my thighs, in the tender spots where his mouth and hands branded me, in the echo of fullness that my body still remembers.

What strikes me now, as I let the water soothe my pleasantly abused muscles, is that no one else could ever compare. No previous lover came close to making me feel the way Knox does. And no future lover—not that there will ever be any—could possibly measure up to the standard he's set.

He's ruined me. Utterly and completely. For anyone else.

The realization doesn't frighten me the way it once would have.

Before Knox, I valued my independence above all else.

I kept partners at a careful distance, never allowing them too close, always maintaining my separate identity.

I had watched my parents' marriage become a polite arrangement of separate lives and vowed never to lose myself that way.

But with Knox, it's different. He doesn't want to diminish me or contain me. He wants to possess me, yes—but in doing so, he's somehow made me more myself than I've ever been.

I shut off the water and wrap myself in one of the plush hotel towels, padding back into the bedroom.

The evidence of our wedding night is everywhere—my torn lingerie on the floor, the rumpled sheets, a champagne bottle in a bucket of melted ice that we never got around to opening.

Knox had more intoxicating things in mind.

I remember the moment he transformed from demanding lover to something else—something deeper, more vulnerable.

When he told me he belonged to me. Only me.

The admission had seemed torn from him, raw and unplanned.

Coming from a man who calculates every move, who strategizes ten steps ahead in business and in life, that unguarded moment of honesty was perhaps the most powerful aphrodisiac of all.

Moving to the window, I look out at the Manhattan skyline.

The city is fully awake, people hurrying below like miniature figures in a diorama.

None of them know that up here, Seraphina Vale ceased to exist last night.

In her place stands Seraphina Vance—claimed, possessed, and utterly ruined for any other man.

The door to the suite opens, and I turn to see Knox enter carrying a tray. He's wearing only the pants from last night's tuxedo, hanging low on his hips, his chest and feet

bare. The sight of him—powerful, confident, mine—makes my breath catch.

"You should be in bed." His eyes darken as they rake over me, taking in the towel, my wet hair, the visible marks he left on my skin. "I wanted to watch you wake up."

"I needed a shower." I don't move from my spot by the window, enjoying the predatory way he stalks toward me. "You were quite thorough last night."

His smile is slow, satisfied. "Not thorough enough if you could walk to the bathroom." He sets the tray down on a nearby table without looking at it, his attention fixed entirely on me.

I should feel self-conscious under that intense stare, but instead, I feel powerful. Desired. Essential. "What did you bring me?"

"Breakfast." He reaches me, one hand coming up to tilt my chin. "But I find myself hungry for something else."

Before I can respond, his mouth claims mine, softer than last night but no less possessive. He tastes of coffee and something sweet, and I melt against him, the towel loosening between us.

"My wife," he murmurs against my lips, the words reverent and possessive at once. "Do you have any idea what those words do to me?"

"Show me," I challenge, dropping the towel entirely.

His sharp inhale is followed by hands that lift me effortlessly, carrying me back to the bed. This time, when he lays me down, his touch is different—still hungry, still commanding, but with a tenderness that makes my chest ache.

"Look at what I did to you," he says, tracing a mark on my inner thigh. There's no remorse in his voice—only satisfaction. "Everyone who sees you will know you're thoroughly taken."

"Only you see these particular marks," I remind him, gasping as his fingers trail higher.

"True." He lowers his head, pressing his lips to a bruise on my breast. "But they'll see the rest of it—in your eyes, in the way you move. They'll know you've been claimed by someone who will never let you go."

As his mouth continues its journey down my body, I realize with perfect clarity that I've been ruined for anyone else—and I wouldn't have it any other way. Knox Vance has remade me in fire and pleasure, marking me as his from the inside out.

And as he brings me to the edge of ecstasy again, my new name falling from my lips in a breathless cry, I know that Seraphina Vale truly no longer exists.

In her place is a woman who has found something she never knew she was looking for—complete surrender to the one man powerful enough to handle it.

I am Seraphina Vance now. His. Forever.

And I've never felt more completely myself.

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Chapter Nine

Knox

The first light of dawn paints her skin gold where it peeks from beneath the tangled sheets.

I've been awake for hours, unable to look away from the miracle sleeping beside me.

Seraphina Vance. My wife. Mine, finally, in the eyes of the law and everyone who matters.

She sighs in her sleep, one delicate hand curled near her face, the platinum and emerald on her finger catching the light.

I've built an empire worth billions, but this woman sleeping in my bed is the only acquisition that's ever truly mattered.

And even now, with her name legally changed and her body thoroughly claimed, it's not enough. I need more.

The hunger that drove me from the streets to the boardroom—that relentless need for security, for permanence—doesn't recognize the sanctity of marriage certificates or wedding bands.

It demands constant reinforcement, total possession.

My fingers hover above her skin, not quite touching.

I don't want to wake her yet. She needs rest after the marathon of our wedding night.

I ease out of bed, padding silently to the suite's private office.

The floor-to-ceiling windows showcase Manhattan waking up, but I barely notice the view as I pull my laptop from my briefcase.

There's work to be done. Plans to set in motion.

Ways to bind Seraphina to me so completely that separation would be impossible.

Some might call it obsession. Maybe it is. But when you've grown up with nothing, when you've watched everything you care about disappear, you learn to hold on tight to what matters. And nothing—no one—has ever mattered like she does.

The marriage is just the beginning. A foundation. Now I need to build the fortress.

I make the first call at exactly 6 AM. My lawyer answers on the first ring, as I knew he would.

"I need the paperwork we discussed. All of it. Today."

He doesn't question the timeline. My people know better than to question my urgency.

"Will Mrs. Vance be signing today as well?" he asks.

The sound of her new name sends a fresh wave of satisfaction through me. "Yes. Have everything messengered to the St. Regis by noon."

I end the call and move to the next item on my mental checklist. With a few keystrokes, I access the Vance Industries server and send encrypted instructions to my CFO.

By this afternoon, Seraphina will be named on every account, every property, every holding.

Not just as my wife, but as co-owner. What's mine is hers—and what's hers is mine.

Next, I pull up the acquisition proposal I've been crafting for weeks.

The Meridian Gallery where Seraphina serves as director is prestigious but financially vulnerable.

Their board has been resistant to outside investment, but my team has identified three members with significant personal debt.

Leverage points. By the end of the month, the gallery will be a subsidiary of Vance Industries, with Seraphina installed as permanent executive director with full creative control.

She'll be angry when she discovers I've acquired her workplace without consulting her. But she'll understand eventually. This way, she never has to choose between her career and our marriage. This way, every aspect of her life is connected to mine.

But it's still not enough.

My fingers drum against the polished desk as I consider what else I need. What else will make this unbreakable. The answer comes immediately, accompanied by a tightness in my chest that feels like yearning.

Children. Our children. Seraphina is already round with my baby. But we'll have more. A family of our own—something neither of us really had growing up. The thought of her carrying my child, of creating something together that can never be undone, makes my breath come faster.

We never discussed it directly, but we're having one.

Why not more? And I've seen the way she looks at children when we pass them in the park.

I've noticed how she lingers over baby clothing in store windows—and not just stuff for the girl we're having but boy clothes too.

She wants this too. And I intend to give her everything she wants—while securing what I need.

The sound of soft footsteps pulls me from my planning.

I look up to see Seraphina in the doorway, wearing my discarded dress shirt from last night, her hair a golden mess around her shoulders.

The sight of her in my clothing, drowning in fabric that bears my name on the custom label inside, satisfies something primal in me.

"Planning world domination before breakfast?" she asks, her voice still husky with sleep. She moves toward me with that natural grace that first caught my attention, that made her stand out from everyone else in that gallery.

"Just tying up loose ends." I close the laptop and push back from the desk, making room for her on my lap. She comes to me without hesitation, settling against me like she was designed to fit there. "Did I wake you?"

"No." She traces my jawline with one finger. "The bed got cold without you."

I wrap my arms around her waist, breathing in the scent of her—expensive hotel shampoo mingled with the lingering traces of our lovemaking. "I'll have to remedy that."

She shifts slightly, looking at the laptop. "Anything important?"

For a moment, I consider telling her everything—the accounts being transferred into her name, the gallery acquisition, my hopes for our family. But I know my Seraphina. She needs to see actions, not intentions. She needs to know these changes are real and irreversible before she can accept them.

"Nothing that can't wait." I slide my hand under the shirt she's wearing, finding her warm and bare beneath it. "I'd rather focus on my wife right now."

Her smile is soft, a little shy despite everything we've done together. "I'm still getting used to that word."

"Wife?" I taste the word against her neck, feeling her pulse quicken under my lips. "You'd better get used to it quickly. You'll be hearing it for the rest of your life."

She laughs, the sound vibrating against my mouth. "Demanding as always, Mr. Vance."

"You have no idea." I stand, lifting her with me. Her legs wrap around my waist automatically as I carry her back toward the bedroom. "But you're about to find out."

Later, when she's boneless and satisfied beneath me, I'll call for breakfast. I'll watch her sign the paperwork my lawyer delivers, securing her legal claim to everything I own.

I'll start the delicate process of making her understand that her independence doesn't have to be sacrificed to achieve the complete union I need.

But for now, I lay her across the rumpled sheets, stripping away my shirt from her perfect body, revealing what belongs to me. As I join her on the bed, covering her smaller frame with mine, I make a silent vow.

She's already carrying my child, but by the time our honeymoon ends, she'll be so full of my seed if she wasn't already pregnant, she surely would be.

When we return to New York, she'll be running a gallery that's part of my company.

Within a year, our names will be legally, financially, and biologically bound together in ways that can never be untangled.

She's mine now. But soon, she'll be mine in every way that matters.

As I claim her mouth, swallowing her soft moans, I feel that familiar burning in my chest—not guilt, but fierce protectiveness, overwhelming need.

I'll never apologize for securing what's mine.

For making sure that what happened in my childhood—losing everything that mattered—can never happen with her.

Some men might be satisfied with a wedding ring and a marriage certificate.

But I've never been like other men. And Seraphina deserves more than half measures. She deserves everything.

And I intend to give it to her—whether she knows she wants it yet or not.

Chapter Ten

Seraphina

Sunlight filters through the half-drawn curtains, coaxing me awake with gentle persistence.

I reach across the vast expanse of our bed, finding Knox's side empty but still warm.

The sheets smell of him—sandalwood and ambition and that indefinable scent that's purely Knox.

We've been back from our two-week honeymoon for less than twelve hours, and already he's up and working.

Typical. I stretch luxuriously, my body still pleasantly sore from our activities on the private jet home.

Mrs. Vance. Three weeks of marriage and the name still gives me a little thrill whenever I think it.

Sliding from the bed, I pad across the plush carpet toward the massive walk-in closet that houses my carefully curated wardrobe.

I need coffee before I face whatever crisis has called my workaholic husband away so early.

I flick on the light switch and freeze in the doorway.

My closet—my meticulously organized, color-coded collection of designer pieces accumulated over years of careful investment—is gone.

In its place hangs what appears to be an entirely new wardrobe.

For a moment, I think I've somehow entered the wrong room in our sprawling penthouse.

But no, this is definitely my closet space, with my preferred organizational system still in place. Just with...completely different clothes.

I step inside, reaching for the nearest garment—a cashmere sweater in the exact shade of emerald that Knox says matches my eyes.

The quality is immediately apparent in the way it drapes over my hand, sumptuous and perfectly weighted.

But as I examine it more closely, I notice something embroidered at the hem.

In tiny, elegant stitching: Seraphina Vance.

My heart skips. I grab another piece—a silk blouse in cream. There, on the inside collar: Seraphina Vance. A tailored blazer: Seraphina Vance stitched into the lining. A pair of designer jeans: Seraphina Vance on the inside waistband.

Every single piece. My name. His name. Our name.

I move deeper into the closet, pulling out drawer after drawer, checking hangers, examining shoes. Everything—literally everything—has been replaced with an exact

equivalent or superior version, each item bearing the same discreet but unmistakable marking. Seraphina Vance. The ultimate label.

When I reach the lingerie section, I almost laugh out loud.

Because of course Knox wouldn't stop at outerwear.

Every delicate bra, every wisp of silk and lace that would only ever be seen by him, bears the same embroidered name.

Some less discreetly than others. A particularly stunning black lace set has Vance written in larger script across the hip of the panties and the side of one bra cup.

It must have taken a small army of designers and seamstresses working around the clock to accomplish this. And the expense—I can't even begin to calculate it. Though money has never been an obstacle for Knox. Not when he wants something.

And he wants everyone to know I'm his.

I should be angry. Part of me—the fiercely independent woman who built her career in the cutthroat art world without leveraging family connections—is definitely irritated.

This is exactly the kind of high-handed, possessive gesture that would have sent me running when we first met.

Replacing my entire wardrobe without consultation?

Literally branding me with his name on every item I wear?

Yet as I run my fingers over a particularly gorgeous dress in deep burgundy silk,

feeling the exquisite craftsmanship and knowing without trying it on that it will fit perfectly, I can't summon real outrage.

Because underneath the possessiveness, there's something else in this gesture.

Something that speaks to the wounded boy who grew into a man determined never to lose what matters to him.

I find his note pinned to a silk robe in the same emerald shade as the sweater. The heavy cream cardstock bears his firm, decisive handwriting:

So you never forget, not even for a moment, that you're mine now. The world should know it too. - K

PS: Your old wardrobe has been donated to a women's career development program, except for the pieces with particular sentimental value, which are preserved in storage.

The postscript makes me smile despite myself. He knows me well enough to anticipate my attachment to certain pieces—the dress I wore when we first met, the suit I had on when I received my director position, the sweater that was my mother's.

I sink onto the small velvet ottoman in the center of the closet, note in hand, surrounded by physical evidence of Knox Vance's need to claim me completely.

Any other woman might feel smothered. But I understand what drives him.

The boy who came from nothing, who built himself into a force of nature through sheer will and ruthless determination—he isn't capable of loving by half measures.

And isn't that what I loved about him from the beginning? His absolute certainty

about what he wants and his refusal to accept anything less?

I've spent my entire adult life analyzing art, determining what makes a piece extraordinary versus merely competent.

And what makes Knox extraordinary is this very quality—his relentless pursuit, his total commitment.

He doesn't just want me. He needs to possess me, to mark me, to make me an indisputable part of his world.

I spot another note, this one attached to what appears to be a garment bag. Inside, I find a cream-colored cashmere sweater dress that would be perfect for my first day back at the gallery tomorrow. The second note reads:

Wear this. I want to see my name on you. - K

The dress is beautiful—elegant enough for the director of Manhattan's most prestigious contemporary art gallery, but with a subtle sensuality in the way it will cling to my curves. I slip it from the hanger and carry it to the full-length mirror, holding it against my body.

Would wearing it be surrendering some essential part of myself? Or would it be acknowledging the truth—that I chose this, chose him, chose to become Seraphina Vance with all that entails?

I let the robe fall from my shoulders and pull the dress over my head.

The cashmere slides against my skin like a lover's caress, settling perfectly around my body as if it were created specifically for me.

Which, I realize, it probably was. The name embroidered at the hem is visible only if someone looks very closely. A secret I'll carry with me.

Stepping back, I examine my reflection. I still look like me—honey-blond hair, green eyes, the posture of someone who knows her worth.

But there's something different now, something that has nothing to do with the designer dress or the new name stitched into its hem. A certainty, perhaps. A belonging.

I return to the bedroom to find Knox standing in the doorway, watching me with that intense focus that still makes my pulse quicken after all this time. His eyes move from my face to the dress, noting the perfect fit, the way it showcases the body he knows so intimately.

"You found my gift," he says, voice low.

"It would have been hard to miss." I raise an eyebrow, adopting my gallery director expression—the one that evaluates and appraises. "Subtle as always, Mr. Vance."

His mouth quirks at one corner, but his eyes remain serious. "Do you hate it?"

The vulnerability beneath the question touches something deep inside me. This powerful man who commands industries with a single phone call, who never doubts himself in business, needs reassurance that I accept his claim.

I cross the room to him, placing my hands on his chest, feeling his heart beat strong and fast beneath my palm. "I should hate it. It's presumptuous and controlling and completely over the top."

His expression doesn't change, but I feel him tense beneath my hands.

"But it's also..." I search for the right word, "...you. Completely, authentically you. And since I chose to marry you, knowing exactly who you are..." I rise on tiptoes, bringing my mouth to his ear. "I guess I'll just have to get used to being labeled as yours."

His arms come around me instantly, crushing me against his chest. "Say it again," he demands, his voice rough with emotion.

"I'm yours," I whisper, and feel the shudder that runs through his powerful body at my words. "Seraphina Vance. Your wife. And apparently your walking billboard."

His laugh rumbles through both our bodies as he lifts me off my feet. "The dress looks perfect on you."

"Everything you picked does," I admit. "Your taste has improved significantly since I met you."

"I have the best consultants." He sets me down but doesn't release me. "So you're not angry?"

I consider the question seriously, owing him the truth. "I'm...adjusting. To being so completely claimed. But no, I'm not angry." I smooth my hands over the perfect dress, feeling the quality of the fabric. "Though I hope you realize this means I get to claim you just as thoroughly."

His smile is slow, predatory. "I'm counting on it, Mrs. Vance. I'm counting on it."

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Chapter Eleven

Knox

The needle bites into my skin, sending sharp pulses of pain across my chest. I don't flinch.

Pain has been my companion longer than success has—an old friend I recognize but no longer fear.

The tattoo artist—the most exclusive in Manhattan, who cleared his schedule with one phone call from me—works in silence, his focus absolute as he etches Seraphina's name over my heart.

The irony doesn't escape me. For a man who demands control in all things, who leaves nothing to chance, who plans ten steps ahead in every scenario, this permanent mark is both surrender and claim.

Her name on my skin forever. A visible brand I can show her, proving that possession runs both ways.

"Almost done with the outline, Mr. Vance," the artist murmurs, his gloved hands steady as they guide the needle across my flesh.

The private studio is silent except for the mechanical hum of the tattoo gun.

No music, no distractions, just the clean white room and the relentless buzz as

Seraphina's name becomes part of me.

I stare at the ceiling, my mind clear despite the discomfort.

This wasn't a spontaneous decision—I don't make those.

I've been planning this since before our wedding, waiting for the right moment.

That moment came this morning, when I watched her reaction to finding her new wardrobe.

The hesitation, the momentary flash of irritation, then the acceptance.

The way she looked in that dress with my name stitched into it—still entirely herself, but undeniably mine.

She called me presumptuous. Controlling. Over the top. Then she smiled and said it was completely, authentically me—and that she'd chosen to marry me knowing exactly who I am.

In that moment, I knew it was time to show her that this consuming need to possess, to mark, to claim—it goes both ways.

The needle moves to a particularly sensitive spot, and I feel my muscles tense involuntarily. The artist pauses for a fraction of a second before continuing. Most clients probably need breaks, need to catch their breath. I don't. The pain is clarifying. Reminds me of what's real, what matters.

"The script looks good," I say, glancing down at the work in progress. Her name in elegant, flowing letters—not ostentatious, nothing flashy. Just her name, permanent and indelible over my heart. A private declaration that only she will see.

"It's coming together nicely," the artist agrees. "The placement is perfect."

I chose the location deliberately. Of course I did.

Every decision I make is calculated, considered from every angle.

Her name over my heart—the metaphorical made literal.

The man who built an empire from nothing, who's known for his ruthless business tactics and uncompromising standards, branded with the name of the only person who's ever truly mattered.

The significance won't be lost on Seraphina.

She's too perceptive, too intelligent not to understand exactly what this means.

It's not just a romantic gesture. It's a contract written in ink and blood.

A permanent reminder that while I've marked her as mine in a hundred different ways—from the ring on her finger to the clothes on her back—I'm equally marked as hers.

The artist moves on to shading parts of the design, the sensation different now—less sharp, more of a burning drag across sensitized skin.

I think about the first time I saw Seraphina, standing in that gallery with her critical eye and sophisticated composure.

How I knew immediately that I had to have her.

Not just in my bed, though that was certainly part of it, but in my life. Completely.

Irrevocably.

I've spent my entire adult life acquiring things—companies, properties, assets—building walls of wealth and power around myself to ensure I never return to the poverty of my childhood. But Seraphina isn't an acquisition. She's the reason for all of it. The purpose behind the empire.

"We're just about done, Mr. Vance." The artist leans back, examining his work with a critical eye. "Let me just clean it up and we'll be finished."

I glance down at my chest, at her name now permanently etched into my skin. The area around the tattoo is red and slightly swollen, the black ink stark against my flesh. It looks right. It feels right.

When the artist finishes and applies the bandage, I rise from the chair, pulling on my shirt without buttoning it.

I transfer an obscene amount of money to his account—triple his usual rate, plus a generous bonus for his discretion—and leave without small talk.

I've never been one for unnecessary conversation, and I have more important matters to attend to.

The drive back to our penthouse takes exactly fourteen minutes.

I spend them thinking about how Seraphina will react.

Will she be shocked? Moved? Will she understand the significance immediately, or will I need to explain?

For a woman who's built her career on interpreting artistic expressions, I suspect

she'll grasp the meaning instantly.

When I enter our home, I find her in her studio—the space I had built for her when she moved in, with perfect northern light and every supply an artist could desire.

She doesn't paint professionally, but she sketches, creates.

It's where she goes to think, to process.

I stand in the doorway watching her for a moment, absorbing the sight of her in a paint-spattered shirt (one of mine, I note with satisfaction), her honey-blonde hair pulled back in a loose knot, her face serene in concentration.

She senses my presence—she always does—and looks up, her green eyes warming at the sight of me. Then they sharpen, noticing my partially unbuttoned shirt, the edge of the bandage visible beneath.

"Knox?" She sets down her charcoal, concern creasing her forehead. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

I move toward her, unbuttoning my shirt the rest of the way as I approach. "Not hurt. Marked."

Her eyebrows draw together in confusion, then rise as understanding dawns. She stands, meeting me in the center of the studio, her eyes fixed on the bandage covering my chest.

"You didn't," she whispers.

"I did." I take her hand and place it gently over the covered tattoo, feeling the slight sting as she touches it through the bandage. "Do you want to see?"

She nods, her eyes never leaving mine as I carefully peel back the protective covering, revealing her name written in permanent ink over my heart. Her breath catches, and for a moment she's perfectly still, staring at this most intimate of declarations.

"Why?" she finally asks, her voice barely audible.

"Because you're mine." I capture her chin, tilting her face up to meet my gaze. "And I'm yours. Completely. Permanently. Without reservation."

Her fingers hover over the tattoo, not quite touching the sensitized skin. "It must have hurt."

"Yes." I don't elaborate. She knows my history, knows that physical pain has never been what frightens me.

"It's beautiful," she says softly, then looks up at me with those perceptive eyes that see too much. "But this isn't just about aesthetics, is it? This is about...claiming. Marking. Making it permanent."

I don't insult her intelligence by denying it. "Yes."

"Like the wardrobe."

"Similar," I acknowledge. "But different."

She understands immediately. "The clothes are you marking me as yours. This is you marking yourself as mine."

I nod, watching her process this. Her analytical mind working through the implications, the motivations behind such a permanent gesture.

"You could have just told me, you know." Her voice is gentle, not accusing. "That you need this level of...connection. Of permanence."

"Words are easy." I trace the curve of her cheek with my thumb. "Anyone can say anything. I needed to show you."

Her eyes fill with unexpected tears. "No one has ever..." She stops, composes herself. "No one has ever needed me the way you do."

"No one ever will." I pull her carefully against me, mindful of the fresh tattoo. "No one could possibly need you the way I do, Seraphina. It's beyond wanting. Beyond loving. It's essential. Like oxygen."

She presses her lips to my chest, just beside the tattoo, the gentle pressure sending both pain and pleasure through my nervous system. "Thank you," she whispers against my skin. "For showing me. For marking yourself as mine."

Something unwinds in my chest—a tension I hadn't realized I was carrying. She understands. Of course she does. This brilliant, perceptive woman who chose to become my wife understands that my need to possess her is matched by my willingness to be possessed in return.

"I should warn you," she says, leaning back to meet my eyes with a small smile playing at her lips. "Now that you've done this, I may need to find my own way to mark you as mine."

The thought sends a surge of satisfaction through me. "I'm counting on it."

She rises on tiptoes, pressing her mouth to mine in a kiss that promises everything I've ever needed. When she pulls away, there's a new certainty in her eyes—a recognition of the depth of what exists between us.

"My name over your heart," she murmurs, her fingers lightly tracing the outline of the bandage. "I'll have to make sure I'm worthy of that position."

I capture her hand, pressing it firmly against my chest, feeling the slight sting as a reminder of what I've done. "You already are. You always have been. From the moment I saw you."

And as I lead her from the studio toward our bedroom, her name beating beneath her palm with every pulse of my heart, I know that this permanent mark is just the beginning. There will be more ways to bind us together, more ways to ensure that what we've found can never be lost.

But for now, this is enough. Her name on my skin. My name on hers—in a thousand invisible ways that only we can see.

A balance. A claiming that goes both ways.

As it should be.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:40 am

Chapter Twelve

Seraphina

The whispers follow me through the gallery like persistent shadows.

The staff smile a little too brightly, their eyes tracking me with a new wariness that wasn't there before.

Something has shifted in the dynamics of the Meridian Gallery, and I know exactly what—or rather, who—is responsible.

It's in the small changes I've noticed throughout the morning: the upgraded security system, the new climate control equipment being installed, the catering delivery from the Michelin-starred restaurant down the block "for the staff lunch.

"Knox has his fingerprints all over my workplace, though I've found no official documentation yet.

I should be furious. Instead, I find myself suppressing a smile as I check my watch, calculating the hours until I can confront my husband about his latest territorial expansion.

"Mrs. Vance?" My assistant appears at my elbow, tablet in hand.

Even she's using my married name now, though I never instructed her to change from Ms. Vale.

"The board wants to confirm your availability for next Tuesday's meeting.

They've moved it to the Vance Industries conference room since our renovations will be underway. "

I maintain my composure, though internally I'm connecting dots at lightning speed. "The renovations I haven't approved yet?"

She blinks, confusion flickering across her face. "I thought...Mr. Hoffman said it was all arranged through the new ownership. Just a formality to run it by you." She shifts uncomfortably. "Should I tell them to hold off?"

"No," I say smoothly, unwilling to expose the gap in my knowledge to the staff. "That won't be necessary. Please confirm my attendance."

She nods and retreats, leaving me to process this latest development. New ownership. Renovations. Meetings at Vance Industries. My husband has been busy.

I retreat to my office, closing the door behind me.

The space feels different somehow—as if Knox's energy has already permeated these walls.

I run my fingers along the edge of my desk, noticing for the first time that it's been subtly adjusted to a more ergonomic height.

The chair has been replaced with one nearly identical to the one in my home office—the custom-designed one Knox ordered after noting that I shifted uncomfortably during long working sessions.

Three months of marriage, and he's already reshaping my professional world to match

the personal one he's crafted for us.

I should be livid. This is exactly the kind of high-handed, controlling behavior I've spent my adult life avoiding.

My parents' marriage taught me early that maintaining independence—financial, emotional, professional—was essential.

Watching my mother slowly diminish herself to accommodate my father's career, his preferences, his world, left scars I thought would never heal.

But Knox's brand of possession is nothing like my father's quiet erosion of my mother's identity.

Knox doesn't want to diminish me—he wants to enhance me, protect me, wrap me in a cocoon of his making while still letting me fly.

His obsession isn't about control for control's sake.

It's about ensuring that every aspect of my life is perfected, secured, aligned with his vision of what we deserve together.

I sink into my chair—the one he selected because he noticed my discomfort—and open my laptop.

A quick search confirms my suspicions: Meridian Gallery is now a subsidiary of Vance Industries, through a holding company that obscures the connection to all but the most determined investigators.

The acquisition happened three weeks ago, while we were on our honeymoon in Santorini.

I lean back, trying to summon the outrage I should feel. This is my workplace. My professional identity. He's made a major move affecting my career without consulting me, without even mentioning it after the fact.

Yet instead of anger, I feel a strange, warming sensation spreading through my chest.

I remember his tattoo—my name permanently etched over his heart.

The vulnerability in his eyes when he showed it to me, the need for me to understand that his possessiveness runs both ways.

I think of the wardrobe filled with clothes bearing my new name, the way he watches me when I wear them.

The house in the Hamptons he bought because I mentioned once, casually, that I'd spent happy summers there as a child.

The private gallery he built in our home to display my modest art collection alongside works he's acquired specifically to complement mine.

A pattern emerges, clear as one of the modernist paintings I've spent my career analyzing.

Knox Vance is obsessed with me—not just sexually, not just emotionally, but completely.

He wants every aspect of my existence under his protection, woven into his.

My workplace, my clothes, my name, my body, my future—all claimed, all marked, all secured.

And the revelation that hits me with stunning clarity is that I love it.

I love his obsession. I love his need to possess me so completely. I love knowing that this powerful man who commands industries and intimidates titans of business is utterly fixated on my happiness and security. I love that he can't bear even the smallest separation between our lives.

The realization should terrify me. Instead, it feels like finally admitting a truth I've been dancing around since the day I agreed to marry him.

I grab my purse and coat, instructing my assistant to reschedule my afternoon appointments as I sweep through the gallery. The car Knox insists on providing is waiting outside, driver opening the door before I fully reach the curb.

"Vance Industries," I tell him, settling into the leather seat. "And please hurry."

The drive takes twenty-three minutes in midday traffic.

I spend them composing and discarding approaches, trying to decide how to confront Knox about the gallery while simultaneously confessing my newly acknowledged appreciation for his obsessive nature.

By the time we arrive at the gleaming tower that houses his empire, I've settled on directness. Knox values clarity above all else.

His executive assistant doesn't attempt to delay me, merely nods and buzzes me through to his office. Another sign of my new status—no one questions my right to interrupt Knox Vance's day.

He's standing at the floor-to-ceiling windows when I enter, his powerful frame outlined against the Manhattan skyline. He turns at the sound of the door, and the

transformation in his expression—from focused CEO to husband—still takes my breath away.

"Seraphina." He crosses the room in long strides, taking my hands in his. "Is everything alright? You never come here during work hours."

"You bought my gallery." I don't phrase it as a question.

His expression doesn't change—no guilt, no apology, not even surprise that I've discovered his acquisition. "Yes."

"Without telling me."

"I was going to tell you when the transition was complete." He doesn't release my hands, his thumbs tracing small circles on my wrists. "I didn't want you to worry about the details."

"The details of my own career?" I raise an eyebrow, but there's no heat in my voice.

He studies me carefully, reading my mood with that uncanny perception that unnerved me when we first met. "You're not angry."

"I should be." I move closer, into his space. "It's presumptuous, controlling, and completely over the top. Like replacing my entire wardrobe. Like most things you do."

His eyes narrow slightly. "But?"

"But I've realized something." I place my palm over his heart, feeling the steady beat beneath his expensive suit. Beneath my name, permanently inked into his skin. "I love how obsessed you are with me."

His breath catches, the only sign that my words have affected him.

"I love that you can't bear to have any part of my life outside your sphere of influence." I step even closer, until we're breathing the same air. "I love that you need to possess me so completely that you'd buy my workplace to ensure it's perfect for me."

His hands move to my waist, gripping with controlled strength. "Say it again."

"I love your obsession." I slide my hands up to frame his face. "I love how you've marked me as yours in a hundred different ways. I love knowing that the most powerful man I've ever met is completely fixated on claiming every aspect of my existence."

The control he maintains so effortlessly fractures.

He crushes me against him, his mouth claiming mine with bruising intensity.

I return his kiss with equal fervor, acknowledging with my body what I've just admitted with words—that his all-consuming need for me creates a security I've never known before.

When he finally pulls back, his eyes are dark with emotion. "No one has ever understood before," he says, his voice rough. "They see the control, the possessiveness. They don't see what drives it."

"I see you." I press my forehead to his. "All of you. And I'm not going anywhere, Knox. Not ever. So you can stop buying every building I enter."

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "No promises."

I laugh, the sound swallowed by his mouth as he kisses me again. There in his office, surrounded by the symbols of his power and success, I surrender to the knowledge that being the obsession of Knox Vance isn't a limitation.

It's the most profound freedom I've ever known.

Chapter Thirteen

Knox

I've cleared my schedule for the rest of the day.

Billions in potential deals can wait. Board meetings can be postponed.

The empire I've built from nothing will continue standing without my constant attention for a few hours.

Nothing matters right now except the woman who confessed, with those remarkable green eyes steady on mine, that she loves my obsession with her.

Seraphina Vance—my wife, my possession, my reason for everything—understands the depth of my need in a way no one else ever has.

And tonight, I intend to show her a side of myself I've rarely revealed: patience.

For once, I won't take her hard and fast, claiming her body with the same ruthless determination I apply to business acquisitions.

Tonight, I'll make love to her slowly, deliberately, proving that my obsession has layers she hasn't yet discovered.

The penthouse is transformed according to my exacting specifications by the time we arrive home.

Candlelight bathes every surface in warm, golden light.

Dinner—prepared by a chef I flew in from Paris for the occasion—waits under silver covers.

Her favorite flowers fill the space with subtle fragrance.

Music plays softly from the hidden speakers—a playlist I curated myself from the classical pieces she favors.

"What's all this?" Seraphina asks as I guide her inside, her eyes widening at the scene I've created.

"This is me showing you that obsession has many forms." I take her coat, my fingers lingering at the nape of her neck. "Not all of them involve acquiring galleries behind your back."

Her laugh is soft, without a trace of the resentment another woman might harbor. "I rather liked that particular demonstration of your possessiveness."

"I know." I lead her to the table, pulling out her chair. "That's why you're dangerous, Seraphina. You encourage my worst tendencies."

"Or your best ones." She settles into her seat, the candlelight catching the gold in her honey-blond hair. "Depending on your perspective."

I pour sparkling water into her glass and take my seat across from her. The distance between us feels like an unwelcome obstacle, but I remind myself of my purpose. Patience. Control of a different sort than I usually exercise with her.

Her acceptance of my obsessive nature has unlocked something in me.

Most women would have been horrified to discover I'd secretly purchased their workplace.

They would have seen it as controlling, manipulative, excessive.

Seraphina saw it for what it was—a manifestation of my need to protect and possess what matters most to me.

And instead of fighting against it, she embraced it.

Embraced me, with all my sharp edges and consuming needs.

I owe her something in return. A glimpse of the vulnerability that drives my relentless pursuit of her. A demonstration that my obsession isn't just about control—it's about devotion.

Throughout dinner, I restrain my usual impulse to dominate the conversation with plans and decisions.

Instead, I listen as she describes an upcoming exhibition, the light in her eyes when she speaks about art reminding me why I was drawn to her from the first moment.

Her passion, her expertise, her absolute certainty about what deserves attention and what doesn't—it mirrors my own approach to business in ways that still surprise me.

When she reaches for her water, the candlelight catches the emerald on her finger, sending green fire dancing across the table. Mine. The word still pulses through me with each heartbeat, but tonight it carries a different resonance. Not just possession, but responsibility. Protection. Dedication.

"You're staring," she notes, setting down her glass.

"I'm appreciating." I reach across the table, taking her hand in mine. "Do you know how extraordinary you are, Seraphina?"

A flush colors her cheeks—not embarrassment, but pleasure. "I know you think I am."

"I know you are." I stroke my thumb across her knuckles. "And tonight, I'm going to show you exactly how much I treasure what's mine."

Her pupils dilate slightly, her breath catching. She expects me to carry her to bed now, to claim her with the intensity that defines most of our encounters. Instead, I stand and lead her to the sitting area, where the fire casts dancing shadows across the plush furniture.

"Dance with me," I say, pulling her gently into my arms as a new song begins.

Surprise flickers across her face, but she comes willingly, her body fitting perfectly against mine as we begin to move slowly to the music.

I've never been one for dancing—too much yielding of control, too much pointless movement—but tonight, it serves my purpose.

The gradual build, the controlled intimacy, the anticipation.

"What's gotten into you?" she murmurs against my chest, her arms around my neck.

"You have." I press my lips to her temple, inhaling the scent of her hair. "You've gotten under my skin, into my blood. Into every part of me."

We move together for several minutes, her body gradually relaxing against mine, surrendering to the gentle rhythm I've established.

When the song ends, I don't release her.

Instead, I tip her face up to mine and kiss her—not with the demanding hunger she's accustomed to, but with deliberate slowness. A kiss that savors rather than claims.

Her hands tighten in my hair, trying to deepen the contact, to push us toward the familiar intensity. I resist, maintaining the measured pace, showing her without words that tonight belongs to a different kind of obsession.

"Knox," she breathes against my mouth, confusion and desire mingling in her voice.

"Patience." I trace the curve of her cheek, her jawline, the delicate skin of her throat. "Tonight, I want to memorize every inch of you. Slowly."

Understanding dawns in her eyes, followed by a different kind of heat—less frantic, more profound. She nods once, a silent agreement to follow where I lead.

I take her hand and guide her to our bedroom, where more candles flicker, casting our shadows against the walls like living art.

Standing her before me, I begin to undress her with the same unhurried deliberation that's defined the evening—one button at a time, each newly revealed patch of skin worshipped with my fingers, my lips, my absolute attention.

"You're torturing me," she whispers as I ease the silk blouse from her shoulders, exposing the lace beneath.

"I'm treasuring you." I press my mouth to the curve where her neck meets her shoulder, feeling her pulse jump beneath my lips. "There's a difference."

My hands tremble slightly as I unclasp her bra—not from uncertainty, but from the

effort of restraining the primal need to possess her quickly, thoroughly.

I've built an empire on controlling my impulses, on delayed gratification, on strategic patience.

Tonight, I apply that same discipline to loving my wife.

When she's finally naked before me, I step back to look at her—really look, with the focused attention I usually reserve for critical business decisions.

The elegant line of her neck. The proud curve of her breasts.

The slight dip of her waist. The strength in her legs.

Every detail perfect, every inch mine to protect and pleasure.

"Your turn," she says, reaching for the buttons of my shirt.

I allow her to undress me, watching her face as she reveals the tattoo over my heart—her name, still new enough that the skin remains slightly raised around the letters. Her fingers trace the permanent mark, her touch feather-light but sending electricity through my nerves.

When we're both naked, I guide her to the bed, laying her against the sheets with a care that belies the furious pounding of my heart.

I want to devour her, to claim her with the driving intensity that usually defines our lovemaking.

Instead, I stretch out beside her, propped on one elbow, and begin a slow exploration of her body with my free hand.

"What are you doing to me?" she asks, her voice catching as my fingers trail across her skin.

"I'm loving you," I answer simply. "Completely. Thoroughly." I lower my head to press my lips to the space between her breasts. "Forever."

Her breath hitches at the word—forever. As if even after everything, the totality of my commitment still surprises her.

"Look at me, Seraphina." I wait until those remarkable green eyes meet mine. "I need you to understand something."

She nods, her gaze never wavering.

"This isn't temporary for me. It isn't a phase or a passion that will burn out." My hand slides lower, feeling her body respond to my touch even as her mind processes my words. "When I say you're mine, I mean for all time. In this life and whatever comes after."

A slight tremor runs through her, and I can't tell if it's from my touch or my words.

"I've never believed in anything I couldn't see, couldn't build with my own hands." I position myself above her, looking directly into her eyes as I align our bodies. "But I believe in this. In us. In forever."

"Knox..." Her voice breaks on my name, her hands coming up to frame my face.

I join our bodies then, with exquisite slowness, maintaining eye contact as I fill her completely. The sensation is overwhelming—not just the physical pleasure, but the connection, the absolute certainty that this woman was made for me and I for her.

"I promise you forever, Seraphina Vance." The declaration comes from someplace deeper than conscious thought as I begin to move within her, setting a rhythm that's gentle but inexorable. "Every day. Every night. Every breath. Yours. Mine. Ours."

Tears gather at the corners of her eyes, but her smile is radiant. "Forever," she echoes, her body moving in perfect counterpoint to mine.

I maintain the measured pace, fighting against my nature, showing her with every careful thrust that my obsession isn't just about possession—it's about devotion. About cherishing what I've claimed.

When I feel her body beginning to tighten around mine, I whisper her name, watching her eyes as pleasure transforms her face.

The sight of her coming undone beneath me—trusting me enough to surrender completely—pushes me over the edge.

My release hits with unexpected intensity, drawing a sound from deep in my chest that's part groan, part her name, part wordless promise.

Afterward, I hold her against me, her head on my chest, directly over her name etched into my skin. My fingers trace lazy patterns on her back as our breathing gradually slows.

"That was different," she murmurs, pressing a kiss to my chest.

"Different good?"

She shifts to look up at me, her eyes soft in the candlelight. "Different perfect." Her hand comes up to touch my face, her thumb brushing across my lower lip. "I didn't know you had that in you."

"Neither did I." The admission comes easier than I expected. "You change me, Seraphina. You make me want to be more than just the man who takes what he wants."

"But you're still that man too." There's a smile in her voice. "The one who buys galleries without telling me. The one who replaces my entire wardrobe with his name stitched into every piece."

"Always." I tighten my arms around her. "That part of me will never change."

"Good." She settles more comfortably against me. "Because I meant what I said earlier. I love your obsession. All versions of it."

As her breathing evens out into sleep, I stare at the ceiling, marveling at the woman in my arms. The only person who's ever embraced the darkest, most consuming aspects of my nature.

The only one who understands that my need to possess her completely comes from the same place as my promise of forever.

My wife. My obsession. My eternity.

Chapter Fourteen

Seraphina

The first contraction feels like an artist's brushstroke—a firm sweep of pressure across my lower back that gradually intensifies before fading away.

I pause in the middle of arranging flowers in our penthouse living room, one hand instinctively moving to my enormous belly.

Nine months pregnant, and I still can't quite believe there's a person in there—a tiny human that Knox and I created, growing beneath my heart.

The contraction subsides, and I check my watch, noting the time with the same careful attention I'd give to cataloging a new exhibition.

Not time to panic yet. Not time to unleash the carefully contained hurricane that my husband will become the moment I tell him our baby is coming.

I lower myself carefully onto the sofa, smoothing my hand over the stretched silk of my maternity dress—custom-made, of course, because Knox refused to let me wear anything mass-produced during my pregnancy.

"Nothing but the best for my wife and child," he'd declared, before ordering an entire wardrobe that somehow managed to make me feel elegant despite resembling a particularly well-dressed planet in my third trimester.

Another contraction rolls through me thirteen minutes later.

I breathe through it, the way the doula Knox hired taught us.

He'd attended every class, asked more questions than all the other expectant parents combined, and created an annotated binder of information that would put most medical textbooks to shame.

My husband, the CEO who delegates everything in his business life, has approached impending fatherhood with a micromanager's obsessive attention to detail.

The memory of his face during our last ultrasound makes me smile despite the discomfort.

The technician had pointed out our daughter's perfect profile, her tiny hand raised as if waving, and Knox had gone completely still.

Then he'd gripped my hand so tightly I lost circulation in two fingers, his eyes never leaving the screen.

"She's perfect," he'd whispered, his voice rough with emotion. "Like her mother."

The past nine months have revealed new dimensions of Knox's possessiveness that I never imagined possible.

He's had the penthouse rebuilt around my pregnancy—wider doorways, gentler lighting, an entirely new climate control system that keeps the temperature at the exact degree his research indicated was optimal for pregnant women.

He's attended every doctor's appointment, interrogated every specialist, commissioned enough safety equipment to childproof the Pentagon.

The nursery looks like it belongs in a royal palace, though our daughter won't even sleep there for months.

A third contraction, eleven minutes after the second, makes me catch my breath.

This one demands my full attention, radiating from my back around to my abdomen in a tightening band.

When it passes, I decide it's time. Knox is in his home office on a conference call with Tokyo, but he'd never forgive me if I waited any longer to tell him.

I move carefully down the hallway, one hand supporting my lower back, the other resting on my belly.

Through the partially open door, I can see him pacing as he speaks, his powerful frame outlined against the Manhattan skyline.

Even after nearly two years of marriage, the sight of him still makes my heart beat faster.

He senses my presence immediately—he always does—and turns toward the door. One look at my face and he freezes mid-sentence.

"I have to go," he says into the phone, disconnecting without waiting for a response. "Is it time?"

I nod, and the transformation is instantaneous. Knox Vance, titan of industry, the man whose mere presence makes boardrooms fall silent, goes utterly pale.

"How long? How far apart? How strong? Should you be standing? Where's your hospital bag? Did you call Dr. Winters? I'll get the car. No, I'll call an ambulance.

Maybe a helicopter would be faster?—"

"Knox." I interrupt his spiral with a firm tone, the one I use when he's being particularly unreasonable.

"I've had three contractions in the last thirty minutes.

We have plenty of time. The hospital is fourteen minutes away with normal traffic.

Dr. Winters said not to come in until the contractions are five minutes apart for at least an hour. "

He stares at me as if I've suggested we deliver the baby on the subway. "Unacceptable. We're going now."

Another contraction begins, and I can't hide my wince as it tightens across my abdomen. Knox is beside me instantly, supporting my weight, his face a mask of barely contained panic.

"Breathe," he instructs, demonstrating the pattern we learned. "In through your nose, out through your mouth. That's it."

The irony of him coaching me while looking like he might pass out isn't lost on me, but the contraction demands too much concentration for me to comment.

When it passes, he literally sweeps me off my feet, carrying me as if I weigh nothing despite being heavily pregnant.

"Knox, put me down. I can walk. We don't need to leave yet."

He ignores me completely, striding toward our bedroom where the hospital

bag—actually three meticulously packed suitcases—has been waiting by the door for weeks.

"I'm calling Dr. Winters," he announces, somehow managing to hold me while retrieving his phone. "And the hospital. They need to be ready. And security—we'll need the route cleared."

"We don't need a police escort to—" I begin, but he's already dialing, his voice shifting into the commanding tone that probably terrifies his employees.

"This is Knox Vance. My wife is in labor. We're on our way. I expect Dr. Winters to be waiting when we arrive." He pauses, listening, his jaw tightening. "I don't care if she says it's too early. Seraphina would minimize a bullet wound. We're coming now."

I should be annoyed by his high-handedness, but there's something touching about his complete unraveling. This man who controls billion-dollar deals with icy precision is coming apart because our daughter is making her entrance into the world.

He carries me to the elevator, the suitcases somehow now in the hands of our building's security chief, who must have been summoned while I was distracted by the contraction.

A car is already waiting when we reach the ground floor, not our usual town car but an SUV with what appears to be a police escort.

"You didn't," I say, raising an eyebrow as he settles me into the backseat with the gentleness one might use for priceless crystal.

"I did." He slides in beside me, one hand immediately finding mine, the other resting on my belly. "Nothing is taking chances with you and our daughter. Nothing."

The drive that should take fourteen minutes takes eight, thanks to whatever strings Knox has pulled.

He doesn't release my hand once, his eyes constantly scanning my face for signs of distress.

When another contraction comes, stronger than the others, he looks so agonized you'd think he was the one in labor.

"It hurts," he says, not a question but a tortured statement. "I can see it in your face."

"It's supposed to hurt," I remind him, breathing through the tightening. "That's how we know our daughter is coming."

"I hate this," he confesses, his voice raw. "I hate seeing you in pain. I hate not being able to fix it."

The vulnerability in his admission catches me off guard. Knox Vance doesn't admit helplessness. Ever. But in this moment, faced with the natural process that can't be controlled, can't be bought off or intimidated or overruled, he's completely undone.

I squeeze his hand as the contraction subsides. "You're not supposed to fix it. You're just supposed to be here with me. And you are."

He brings my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to my knuckles with such reverence it makes my chest ache. "Always."

When we arrive at the hospital, it's like a scene from a movie. Staff line the entrance, a wheelchair appears instantly, and Dr. Winters—who indeed has been summoned despite my early stage of labor—waits by the doors.

Knox helps me from the car with excessive caution, then seems reluctant to let me sit in the wheelchair, as if he doesn't trust anyone else to transport me.

"Mr. Vance," Dr. Winters says with the patient tone of someone accustomed to anxious fathers, "your wife is in excellent hands. We're going to get her settled and monitor her progress. First babies often take their time."

"Time," Knox repeats as if the concept is foreign to him. "How much time? She's in pain. Can't you speed this up? There must be something?—"

"Knox." I capture his hand, drawing his wild gaze to mine. "This is going to take hours. Possibly many hours. You need to breathe."

A hint of color returns to his face as he visibly tries to collect himself. "Hours," he repeats. "Right. Of course. I've read about this." His free hand moves to the inside pocket of his jacket, where I know he keeps the laminated timeline of labor stages he created.

Dr. Winters catches my eye with a sympathetic smile. In the nine months she's been my obstetrician, she's witnessed the full spectrum of Knox's protective obsession.

"Let's get you to your suite," she says, gesturing for the nurse to begin wheeling me inside. "We've prepared everything according to your birth plan."

As we move through the hospital, Knox never leaves my side, his hand firmly gripping mine as if I might disappear if he lets go. Another contraction builds as we reach the private birthing suite—actually an entire section of the maternity floor that Knox has somehow secured exclusively for us.

"Breathe with me," I tell him as much as myself, watching his chest rise and fall in perfect sync with mine as we work through the pain together.

When it passes, I look up at my husband—this powerful, controlling, obsessive man who has completely lost his composure at the prospect of our child entering the world—and feel a surge of love so intense it almost rivals the contractions.

"We're having a baby," I whisper, suddenly overwhelmed by the reality of it.

His eyes, dark with concern and wonder and terror, meet mine. "We're having a baby," he agrees, voice unsteady. Then, with newfound determination: "And I'm not leaving your side for a single second until she's safely in our arms."

As they help me onto the bed and begin attaching monitors, I watch Knox transform again—not back into the controlled CEO, but into something new: a father-to-be, terrified and exhilarated and completely, irrevocably committed to the tiny person about to join our world.

And despite the pain, despite the hours of labor ahead, I wouldn't change a thing about this moment or the man beside me.

Chapter Fifteen

Knox

Sixteen hours. Sixteen goddamn hours, and still my daughter hasn't arrived.

The hospital suite—the entire floor I commandeered for Seraphina's comfort and privacy—feels like a prison cell.

My hand has gone numb from Seraphina's grip during contractions, but I'd rather lose the limb entirely than let go.

Each time pain washes over her face, I feel it like a physical blow.

I've broken men in boardrooms, crushed competitors without remorse, built an empire through sheer force of will, but I can't do a damn thing to ease my wife's suffering as she labors to bring our child into the world.

The powerlessness is a living thing inside me, clawing at my chest, threatening to shatter the control I'm barely maintaining.

"Mr. Vance?" The nurse approaches cautiously, clearly having learned from earlier interactions that I'm not to be trifled with. "Dr. Winters would like to check your wife's progress."

I nod once, my eyes never leaving Seraphina's face. She's exhausted, her honey-blond hair dampened with sweat, her usually vibrant eyes dulled by fatigue. Yet

she's never looked more beautiful to me. More powerful. More essential.

"Seven centimeters," Dr. Winters announces after her examination. "You're making good progress, Seraphina."

"Good progress?" I can't keep the edge from my voice. "She's been in labor for sixteen hours. How much longer?"

Dr. Winters meets my glare with professional calm. "First babies often take their time, Mr. Vance. Everything is proceeding normally. Your daughter is showing no signs of distress."

"And my wife?" I demand. "What about her distress?"

"Knox." Seraphina's voice is tired but firm. "Dr. Winters is doing everything possible. This isn't like closing a business deal. You can't intimidate our daughter into arriving faster."

I swallow the retort that rises to my lips. She's right, of course. But the sight of her in pain, hour after hour, is testing the limits of my sanity. I've been awake as long as she has, refusing food, refusing to leave her side even for a moment.

Another contraction begins, and I shift to support her, one arm around her shoulders, the other hand still locked with hers. "Breathe," I murmur, demonstrating the pattern we've been practicing for months. "That's it. Just like that."

She squeezes my hand with surprising strength, her breath coming in short gasps as the contraction peaks. I would give every dollar I possess, dismantle my entire company, promise any price, if it would take this pain from her.

"You're doing beautifully," I tell her when it passes, brushing damp hair from her

forehead. "Our daughter is lucky to have such a strong mother."

A ghost of a smile touches her lips. "And such an overbearing father. I heard you threatening the anesthesiologist earlier."

"He was taking too long with the epidural." I don't apologize. The man had moved with maddening slowness while Seraphina suffered. "And I didn't threaten him. I merely explained the consequences of inadequate care."

"You told him you'd buy the hospital and fire him if he didn't—" Her words cut off as another contraction begins, stronger than the last.

Dr. Winters returns, checking the monitors that track our daughter's heartbeat and Seraphina's contractions. "The contractions are getting closer together. This is good."

A commotion outside the door draws my attention. Raised voices, the sound of hurried footsteps. I tense, instantly alert to potential threats.

"What's happening?" I demand of the nearest nurse.

"I'm not sure, Mr. Vance. I'll check?—"

Before she can move, the door opens and an unfamiliar doctor enters, consulting with Dr. Winters in hushed tones. My hearing, always acute when it comes to potential problems, catches fragments: "heart rate dropped..." "might need to consider..." "if it happens again..."

Ice floods my veins. "What's wrong with my daughter?"

Both doctors turn to me, and I see the moment Dr. Winters decides not to sugarcoat the situation. "Your daughter's heart rate showed a brief deceleration during that last

contraction. It's back to normal now, but we'll be monitoring very closely."

"What does that mean?" The calm in my voice is deceptive, masking the primal fear clawing at my insides.

"It could mean nothing. Brief decelerations happen during labor. But if it continues or worsens, we may need to consider a cesarean section."

Seraphina's hand tightens in mine. "Is she in danger?" Her voice is steadier than I expected, her concern for our child overriding her exhaustion.

"Not at the moment," Dr. Winters assures her. "But we're taking every precaution."

The next thirty minutes are the longest of my life.

I stand guard beside Seraphina, watching the monitors with predatory intensity, tracking our daughter's heartbeat as if by sheer will I can keep it strong and steady.

When it dips again during another contraction, the room erupts into controlled chaos.

"We need to prep for a C-section," Dr. Winters announces. "The baby is showing signs of distress."

"Do it," I command, though no one is waiting for my permission. "Whatever needs to happen, do it now."

Nurses move efficiently around us, preparing Seraphina for surgery. An orderly appears with a wheelchair to transport her to the operating room.

"Sir, you'll need to wait outside while we?—"

"No." The word comes out like a gunshot. "I'm staying with my wife."

"Hospital policy requires?—"

"I don't give a damn about hospital policy."

"I step closer to the man, using the full advantage of my height and the intensity that has made business rivals back down for decades."

"I've purchased enough of this hospital to rewrite policy as I see fit."

"My wife doesn't leave my sight. Is that understood?"

Dr. Winters intervenes before the situation escalates further. "Mr. Vance can come to the operating room. He'll need to change into sterile attire, but fathers are permitted during C-sections."

The relief on Seraphina's face is worth any battle I'd have to fight. I lean down, pressing my forehead to hers. "I'm not leaving you. Not for a second."

They dress me in surgical scrubs and lead us to the operating room, a gleaming space filled with equipment and personnel. As they transfer Seraphina to the operating table, a nurse tries to direct me to a stool near her head, away from the surgical field.

"Her hand," I insist. "I need to hold her hand."

The anesthesiologist eyes me warily. "You'll need to stay out of the way of the surgical team."

"I'll be wherever my wife needs me to be." My tone leaves no room for argument.

Throughout the preparations—the draping of sterile cloths, the administration of additional anesthesia, the assembly of instruments—I maintain my position at Seraphina's side, my fingers intertwined with hers.

They've erected a screen so she can't see the surgery, but I could view the procedure if I wanted to.

I don't. My focus remains entirely on her face, on being her anchor in this storm.

"Are you afraid?" she whispers, her eyes finding mine above the surgical mask they've given me.

The question pierces straight through the armor I've maintained, the facade of controlled strength. With anyone else, I would deny it. With her, I can only offer truth.

"Terrified," I admit, the word barely audible. "But not for myself."

Her smile is tired but genuine. "Our daughter is stubborn. Like her father."

"Strong," I correct her, brushing my thumb across her knuckles. "Like her mother."

The surgery begins, and I feel Seraphina's hand tighten in mine as she experiences the strange sensations of the procedure. Not pain—they've numbed her completely—but pressure, movement, the surreal awareness of being operated on while fully conscious.

"Talk to me," she requests. "Distract me."

So I do. I tell her about the nursery waiting at home, though she's seen it a hundred times.

I describe the trust fund I've established for our daughter, the educational opportunities I've already arranged, the security measures implemented to protect her from the moment of her birth.

Normal fathers might talk about sports or music lessons, but I am what I am—a man obsessed with securing what matters.

"She'll have everything," I promise. "Everything I didn't have. Everything you deserve. I'll?—"

"Mr. and Mrs. Vance," Dr. Winters interrupts from behind the screen. "You're about to meet your daughter."

Time slows, crystallizing into a perfect, suspended moment. I hear a flurry of activity, murmured technical exchanges between the surgical team, and then—a cry. Small but fierce, indignant at being removed from her comfortable dwelling, determined to be heard.

My daughter.

The sound breaks something open inside me, something I didn't know was sealed shut. A raw, unfiltered emotion too powerful to name floods through the breach.

"Knox." Seraphina's voice pulls me back, her fingers squeezing mine. "Go see her."

I hesitate, torn between my promise never to leave her side and the desperate need to see our child.

"Go," she insists. "I'm right here."

I stand on legs that feel suddenly unsteady, peering over the screen just as a nurse

lifts our daughter—impossibly small, impossibly perfect—into view.

"Would you like to cut the cord, Mr. Vance?" Dr. Winters asks.

My hands, which have never trembled during billion-dollar negotiations, shake visibly as I accept the surgical scissors. With one careful snip, I sever the physical connection between Seraphina and our daughter, even as a new, unbreakable bond forms between all three of us.

They clean and wrap our child with practiced efficiency, then place her in my arms. The weight of her—so light yet so monumentally significant—nearly brings me to my knees.

I stare down at her tiny face, her eyes screwed shut, her miniature fists balled in protest, and feel the last walls around my heart collapse entirely.

I return to Seraphina's side, cradling our daughter where she can see her. "She's perfect," I manage, my voice rough with emotion. "Absolutely perfect."

As I stand there, my hand still firmly gripping Seraphina's, our daughter nestled in the crook of my arm, I understand with perfect clarity that every acquisition, every victory, every empire I've built means nothing compared to these two lives now entrusted to my protection.

And I silently renew the vow I made the day I married Seraphina: Nothing and no one will ever come between me and what's mine. My family. My world. My everything.

Chapter Sixteen

Seraphina

The world comes back to me in pieces—the steady beep of monitors, the soft murmur of voices, the peculiar heaviness of my body that doesn't quite feel like my own.

The surgical suite has been exchanged for a recovery room, all soft lighting and muted colors.

I blink away the lingering haze of medication and surgery, my artist's eye automatically cataloging details: the pale blue of the walls, the gentle pink of the sunset filtering through half-drawn blinds, the crisp white of the sheets pulled up to my waist. And there, in the corner of the room, a tableau that stops my breath—Knox, still in surgical scrubs, cradling our newborn daughter in arms that have closed billion-dollar deals and crushed competitors without mercy.

Those powerful hands, now curved with impossible gentleness around our tiny child, look as though they were created for this singular purpose.

"Knox," I whisper, my voice scratchy from exertion and the breathing tube they inserted during surgery.

He turns immediately, his attention shifting to me with the same laser focus he brings to everything that matters to him. But there's something different in his expression—a softness I've never seen before, a vulnerability so raw and unguarded it makes my chest ache.

"She's awake," he murmurs to our daughter, as if sharing a secret. "Your mother's awake."

He crosses to my bedside with careful steps, as though carrying something infinitely precious and breakable. Which, of course, he is.

"Would you like to hold her?" he asks, though it's barely a question. He already knows my answer.

I raise my arms, ignoring the pull of the IV and the distant throb of pain from my incision. Nothing could keep me from reaching for my child. Knox places her in my embrace with such tenderness, his hands lingering to ensure I have her securely before reluctantly withdrawing.

The weight of her in my arms is both heavier and lighter than I imagined—a physical presence that somehow defies physical laws, like holding a star fallen to earth.

I look down at her face, studying her features with the care I'd give a priceless masterpiece.

She has Knox's dark hair, a surprising amount of it plastered to her tiny head.

Her eyes, when they flutter open briefly, are that newborn blue-gray that holds the promise of any color.

Her nose is impossibly small, her lips a perfect rosebud.

"She's beautiful," I breathe, tracing one finger along her cheek. Her skin is softer than anything I've ever touched, softer than seems possible.

"Like her mother." Knox perches on the edge of the bed, unable to move far from

either of us. "She has your chin. That stubborn little tilt."

I smile despite my exhaustion. "And your eyebrows. Look at that serious expression."

As if on cue, our daughter's face scrunches into a frown of concentration, her tiny brow furrowing exactly like her father's does when reviewing contracts.

A nurse appears, showing me how to position the baby for her first feeding.

The sensation is strange, powerful, primal—this tiny being latching on, completely dependent on me for survival.

Another wave of exhaustion sweeps through me, but beneath it runs a current of fierce, protective love unlike anything I've ever experienced.

"We need a name," I say softly, watching our daughter's eyelids grow heavy as she nurses. We've discussed options for months, never quite settling on one that felt right.

Knox's eyes, when I meet them, are suspiciously bright. "I thought...what about Claire? After your grandmother?"

The suggestion catches me off guard. Knox never met my grandmother, who died when I was in college.

But I've told him stories of her—the first woman in our family to go to university, the one who encouraged my interest in art when my parents pushed for a more practical career.

I mentioned once, months ago, that I'd always loved her name.

"You remembered," I whisper, emotion closing my throat.

"I remember everything you tell me." His voice is rough, stripped of its usual polish. "Everything that matters to you matters to me."

"Claire," I repeat, looking down at our daughter. "Claire Vance." I test the name, feeling how it fits. "It's perfect."

Knox reaches out, resting his palm gently on Claire's back as she sleeps against my chest. The three of us connected, a complete circuit.

The look on his face steals what little breath I have left.

I've seen Knox in many modes—the ruthless businessman, the demanding lover, the obsessive husband.

But this—this unguarded adoration, this naked vulnerability—is entirely new.

"I didn't know," he says, so quietly I almost miss it.

"Didn't know what?"

"That it would feel like this." His eyes move from Claire to me, then back again. "When I saw her...when they placed her in my arms...it was like someone reached inside my chest and rewired everything. Nothing works the same way anymore."

I've spent my career studying and analyzing artistic expression, learning to read what lies beneath the surface.

But I don't need those skills to interpret what I'm seeing in Knox's face.

It's written there plainly, without artifice or restraint—a love so profound it's transformed him from the inside out.

"You look at her like she's your whole world," I observe softly.

"She is." He meets my eyes with startling directness. "You both are. Everything else—the company, the properties, the money—it's just scaffolding. You and Claire are the actual structure. The only thing that matters."

From anyone else, these might be pretty words, the expected sentiments of a new father. From Knox Vance, a man who weighs every word with precision, who guards his vulnerabilities like state secrets, they are nothing short of revolutionary.

I've watched Knox's obsessive nature manifest in countless ways throughout our relationship—from replacing my entire wardrobe with his name stitched into every piece to secretly acquiring my gallery.

I've witnessed his need to possess, to protect, to secure what matters to him.

But this is different. This isn't just possession. This is complete surrender.

Claire stirs against me, her tiny fists waving in momentary protest before she settles again. Knox adjusts the blanket around her with a concentration he usually reserves for major business decisions.

"She has your temper," I tease gently, watching him fuss over the perfect positioning of the blanket.

"God help us all," he murmurs, but his lips curve into a smile I've never seen before—softer, less guarded, yet somehow more powerful for its honesty.

A nurse returns to check my vitals and help me with Claire. Knox steps back only as far as absolutely necessary, his eyes never leaving us. The moment the nurse leaves, he reclaims his position beside the bed, reaching for Claire when my arms begin to

tire.

"Rest," he instructs, lifting our daughter with newfound expertise. "I've got her."

I watch through heavy eyelids as Knox settles into the chair beside my bed, cradling Claire against his chest. He begins speaking to her in a low voice, the words too quiet for me to catch. But I can see their effect on his face—the fierce pride, the wonder, the absolute commitment.

This is the man the world never sees—not the ruthless CEO or the calculating strategist, but Knox Vance stripped to his essence. A man whose protective instincts and possessive nature have found their purest expression in fatherhood.

As sleep begins to claim me, I find myself thinking of the gallery I direct—how we arrange lighting to highlight a masterpiece, how we position viewers to experience the full impact of a significant work.

Knox has always treated me as his masterpiece, something precious to be displayed perfectly, protected vigilantly.

Now he has two works in his private collection, and I have no doubt he will move heaven and earth to ensure we are both exactly where he wants us—safe, secure, and completely his.

"Seraphina." His voice pulls me back from the edge of sleep. "Thank you."

I force my heavy eyelids open. "For what?"

"For her." He looks down at Claire, then back to me, his expression more open than I've ever seen it. "For us. For everything."

I reach out, and he takes my hand, completing our circle. "We made something beautiful together," I whisper.

"We're just getting started," he promises, and I believe him.

As I drift into sleep, the image of Knox holding our daughter burns itself into my memory—the powerful man who commands empires, looking at our tiny daughter like she's hung the moon and stars. Looking at me like I've given him the only gift that ever mattered.

My last conscious thought is that I never truly understood Knox's obsessive nature until this moment—because now I feel it too. This same consuming need to protect, to cherish, to keep safe at any cost. Our daughter has awakened in me the same fierce devotion that drives her father.

Claire Vance is less than a day old, but she's already done what I thought impossible—she's made me understand, down to my bones, exactly why Knox Vance needs to possess what he loves completely.

Because now, I need that too.

Chapter Seventeen

Knox

The hospital room is quiet except for the soft beeping of monitors and Seraphina's even breathing as she sleeps.

I stand by the window, cradling Claire against my chest, her weight almost nothing in my arms. Outside, Manhattan continues its relentless pace—taxis honking, people rushing, deals being made and broken.

The empire I built brick by bloody brick carries on without me, and for the first time in my adult life, I don't give a damn.

The world beyond this room might as well not exist. Reality has condensed to this: my wife sleeping peacefully after bringing our daughter into the world, and this impossibly small being nestled against my heart.

Claire Vance. My daughter. The words still feel foreign in my mind, too monumental to fully comprehend.

I shift Claire slightly, supporting her head the way the nurses showed me, and study her face with the same intensity I'd bring to examining a rival company's weaknesses.

But there are no weaknesses here—only perfection.

Her skin is impossibly soft, flushed pink with new life.

Dark hair, like mine, covers her head in silky wisps.

Her eyes, when they occasionally flutter open, hold the universe.

She makes a small sound—not quite a cry, more of a questioning murmur—and I instinctively begin to sway, a gentle rocking motion I didn't know my body knew how to perform.

"It's alright," I whisper, my voice rougher than usual. "I've got you."

Her tiny hand escapes the blanket, five perfect fingers splayed against the air. I offer my index finger, and she grasps it with surprising strength. The gesture—so simple, so trusting—hits me like a physical blow. My throat tightens unexpectedly.

"You're going to be strong," I tell her softly. "Like your mother. Smart too. And beautiful. You already are."

Her eyes open at the sound of my voice, unfocused but somehow seeming to look directly into me. I've stared down corporate raiders, faced brutal negotiations without blinking, built an empire through sheer force of will, but this tiny person's gaze undoes me completely.

Something shifts inside my chest—a tectonic movement, breaking apart structures I didn't know existed.

Emotion rises, unfamiliar and overwhelming, flooding through cracks in defenses I've maintained since childhood.

Before I can stop it, before I even fully understand what's happening, tears blur my vision.

I turn away from the window, moving deeper into the room where shadows hide my face from nonexistent observers. No one can see me. No one except Claire, who continues to hold my finger as if it's her lifeline to this new world.

The first tear falls, landing on the blanket wrapped around my daughter.

Then another. And another. Silent at first, and then not silent at all.

A sound escapes me—part groan, part sob—that I've never heard myself make before.

I sink into the chair beside Seraphina's bed, cradling Claire closer as my shoulders shake with emotion I can't contain.

I'm crying. Knox Vance—who hasn't shed tears since I was a broken, hungry child watching my mother walk away for the last time—is sobbing over this seven-pound miracle.

"I never knew," I whisper to Claire through tears I make no attempt to stop. "I never knew it was possible to feel this much."

My entire life has been built on control—controlling circumstances, controlling outcomes, controlling my own responses. I've cultivated a reputation for ice-cold precision. For ruthless efficiency. For never showing weakness.

None of that matters now. None of it even feels relevant. The man I was twenty-four hours ago might as well be a stranger.

"I will give you everything," I promise Claire, my voice breaking. "Not just money or opportunities. Everything that matters. Safety. Certainty. Love without condition or reservation."

Her eyes drift closed, her tiny chest rising and falling with each breath. Trust in its purest form—complete, unquestioning reliance on my protection. The weight of this responsibility should be crushing. Instead, it feels like salvation.

I think of my own father—absent, then abusive when present. The lessons he taught through his fists and his indifference. The vows I made as a child, curled in the dark, that I would never be like him. That I would never let anyone I loved feel afraid or uncertain or unwanted.

"You will never doubt your worth," I tell Claire fiercely through tears that continue to fall. "You will never wonder if you're loved or wanted or enough. You will never fear that I won't come when you call. I will always be there. Always."

The emotion pouring through me feels endless, decades of carefully controlled feelings finding release. Tears for the child I was, for the father I never had, for the man I became to survive, and for this perfect being who represents a future I never dared imagine.

"Your mother saved me," I confess to Claire. "Before I even knew I needed saving. And now you've saved me again, in a different way."

I wipe my face with my free hand, not embarrassed by the tears but wanting to see my daughter clearly. "Everything is different now. Everything."

And it is. In the space of a day, my priorities have completely realigned.

The acquisition I was negotiating last week—the one I was willing to work around the clock to secure—seems utterly insignificant.

The competitors I was ruthlessly outmaneuvering might as well not exist. The empire I've built, that I've guarded so jealously, matters only as it serves to protect and

provide for the two people in this room.

"I will still be ruthless," I warn Claire softly. "Still demanding. Still obsessive. But it will all be for you now. For you and your mother. The world can burn as long as you two are safe."

I think of the security measures already in place, the trust funds established, the future I've been arranging since the moment I knew Seraphina was pregnant. But those were the actions of a man who understood fatherhood as a concept, not as this visceral, all-consuming reality.

"I will remake the world for you if I have to," I promise, and mean it with every fiber of my being.

A soft sound from the bed draws my attention.

Seraphina is awake, watching us with those perceptive green eyes that have always seen too much.

How long she's been observing my breakdown, I don't know.

And for the first time in my life, I don't care that someone has witnessed me in a moment of complete vulnerability.

"Knox," she whispers, her voice still hoarse from the breathing tube. She reaches out her hand to me.

I rise carefully, mindful of Claire's sleeping form, and move to sit on the edge of the bed. Seraphina's fingers brush my damp cheeks, tracing the path of tears I haven't bothered to hide.

"I've never seen you cry before," she says softly, without judgment.

"I've never had reason to." I look down at our daughter, then back to my wife's face—exhausted, beautiful, essential to my existence. "I've never felt anything like this."

Seraphina's eyes fill with tears of her own. "Tell me."

"I've never loved anything more." The admission comes easily, without calculation or restraint. "Either of you. Both of you. I didn't know it was possible to feel this much and survive it."

Her hand cups my cheek, her thumb brushing away a fresh tear. "It's overwhelming, isn't it? Like your heart suddenly exists outside your body."

"Yes." The simple word contains volumes. She understands, as she always does. This brilliant, perceptive woman who chose to become my wife, who has now given me the greatest gift imaginable.

Claire stirs against my chest, making those small sounds that already tug at something primal within me. I shift her carefully into Seraphina's waiting arms, watching as my wife's face transforms with the same wonder I'm feeling.

"We made her," Seraphina whispers, looking up at me with tear-bright eyes. "Together."

I lean down, pressing my forehead to hers, our daughter cradled between us. "The only thing I've ever created that matters."

And as Claire's tiny hand closes around my finger once more, I make a silent vow that the ruthlessness, the obsession, the relentless drive that built my empire will now

serve a greater purpose. Everything I am, everything I have, everything I will ever be belongs to these two people.

My family.

My world.

My redemption.

Chapter Eighteen

Seraphina

The nursery glows with soft, diffused light that seems to emanate from no particular source—just another example of Knox's obsessive attention to detail.

I rock slowly in the custom-made chair positioned perfectly beside the hand-painted mural of a night sky, Claire sleeping against my chest with that absolute trust only newborns possess.

One week home from the hospital, and I'm still discovering the lengths to which Knox went to prepare for our daughter's arrival.

This room alone must have cost a small fortune, with its bespoke furniture and state-of-the-art monitoring system that tracks Claire's breathing, heart rate, and body temperature with medical precision.

But it's not the expense that overwhelms me—it's the thought behind every choice, every element carefully selected to create a space that is both beautiful and utterly safe.

A sanctuary designed by a man determined to protect what he loves above all else.

The door opens silently on its custom hinges, and Knox appears with a steaming mug in his hand.

He's shed his usual impeccable suits for soft loungewear these past days, though somehow he makes even casual clothes look elegant and purposeful.

Dark stubble shadows his jaw—another departure from his typically immaculate appearance.

He hasn't left the penthouse since we brought Claire home, canceling meetings and delegating decisions with a ruthlessness that would terrify his executives if they knew the sole reason was his unwillingness to be separated from his wife and daughter for even an hour.

"Chamomile with honey," he says, setting the mug on the table beside me. "And your medication."

He's tracked my pain relief schedule with the same precision he applies to multi-billion-dollar deals, ensuring I never have to experience a moment of discomfort from my C-section recovery if he can prevent it.

The first day home, I found a medical-grade chart posted discreetly in our bathroom, noting times, dosages, and his observations of my pain levels throughout the day.

"Thank you." I shift Claire slightly, wincing as the movement pulls at my healing incision.

Knox notices immediately—he notices everything. "Let me," he says, gently lifting Claire from my arms with a confidence that still surprises me. Those powerful hands that negotiate empires now cradle our seven-pound daughter with instinctive care.

He settles her against his shoulder, her tiny face nuzzled against his neck, and extends his free hand to help me stand. "You should rest. The doctor said?—"

"The doctor said I should move regularly to aid healing," I remind him with a smile. "And I've been sitting for almost an hour."

His expression is torn between concern for my recovery and respect for my autonomy—a battle I've watched play out repeatedly since Claire's birth.

His instinct is to wrap me in the same protective cocoon he's created for our daughter.

My independent nature resists, even as I find myself increasingly appreciative of his care.

"At least drink your tea while it's hot," he compromises, still supporting me with one hand while holding Claire securely with the other.

I accept the mug, taking a sip of the perfectly prepared tea. Of course it's exactly the right temperature—not too hot to drink immediately, not cool enough to be unsatisfying. Knox Vance does nothing by halves.

"She's out completely," I observe, watching Claire's peaceful face as she sleeps against her father's shoulder.

"She feels safe," Knox says simply, his voice softening as he glances down at our daughter. The transformation in his expression still takes my breath away—this tenderness that no one but Claire and I ever witness.

I follow them into the living room, where Knox has created another nest of comfort—pillows arranged to support my healing body, cashmere throws for warmth, a selection of books and magazines within easy reach.

He settles onto the sofa, adjusting Claire so she remains secure against his chest, making room beside him for me.

As I sink into the cushions, carefully positioning myself to minimize discomfort, I can't help comparing this scene to my memories of my own father after my birth.

According to my mother, he returned to work the day after bringing her home from the hospital, leaving her to manage alone with a newborn.

He was a good provider, responsible and steady, but emotionally distant—seeing his role as financial rather than nurturing.

Knox, by contrast, has thrown himself into fatherhood with the same intensity he applies to everything that matters to him.

He's studied infant development with scholarly dedication, mastered swaddling techniques with military precision, and created spreadsheets tracking Claire's feeding schedule, diaper changes, and sleep patterns.

Nothing is beneath his attention or too mundane for his involvement.

"What are you thinking about?" Knox asks, his free hand finding mine on the cushion between us.

"My father," I admit. "How different you are from him."

Something flickers across his face—an old shadow I recognize from conversations about his own difficult childhood. "Different how?"

"He was...present but absent, if that makes sense. He provided everything we needed materially, but emotionally he kept his distance." I trace my finger along the back of his hand. "You're fully here. Completely invested. It's like you've realigned your entire existence around Claire."

"Around both of you," he corrects, his voice dropping to that deeper register that still sends shivers through me. "And it's not realignment. It's recognition of what actually matters."

Claire stirs against him, making those small kitten sounds that precede either settling back to sleep or full awakening.

Knox responds instantly, gently patting her back in a rhythm I've noticed soothes her immediately.

His eyes never leave her face, watching for cues with the same intensity he'd bring to a high-stakes negotiation.

The scene before me—powerful Knox Vance completely absorbed in comforting our newborn daughter—fills my chest with a warmth that spreads outward, encompassing everything.

I've spent my adult life maintaining careful boundaries, valuing my independence, resisting anything that felt like being diminished by a relationship.

But this—being cherished so completely, so unreservedly by this man—doesn't feel like diminishment at all.

It feels like expansion.

"Would you like me to take her?" I offer. "You haven't had a break all morning."

Knox gives me a look that makes it clear he doesn't consider caring for Claire something he needs a break from. "She's fine where she is. And you need to recover."

"Knox." I touch his arm. "You do realize you don't have to do everything yourself?"

That's why we have the night nurse and the housekeeper and the personal chef and the small army of people you've assembled."

"They can handle everything else," he says dismissively. "You and Claire are my responsibility. Mine alone."

A year ago, such possessiveness might have chafed against my independent nature. Now I understand it better—the way Knox's love manifests as absolute devotion, as need to personally ensure the welfare of what matters to him.

Claire's eyes flutter open, finding her father's face with that still-unfocused newborn gaze. Knox freezes, as he always does when she looks at him, as if afraid to break some magical connection. His expression—awestruck, vulnerable, completely unguarded—reveals everything he feels.

"She knows you," I say softly.

"Do you think so?" The uncertainty in his voice—so rare from a man defined by his confidence—touches something deep inside me.

"Of course she does. You're her father." I shift closer, ignoring the twinge from my incision, to place my hand on Claire's tiny back alongside his. "The center of her world. Along with me, of course."

"The center of mine," he says, his eyes moving from Claire to me with equal intensity. "Both of you."

The simple declaration, delivered with absolute conviction, washes over me like a physical wave.

This man—who commands empires, who terrifies competitors, who has built a

reputation for ruthless determination—has placed me and our daughter at the absolute center of his existence.

Not as possessions, though his possessive nature remains.

Not as acquisitions, though he still seeks to secure us against any possible threat.

But as essential parts of himself, without which nothing else has meaning.

I've never felt more cherished in my life. More valued. More completely seen and protected and loved.

"Do you know," I say, resting my head against his shoulder, "I used to worry about your obsessive tendencies. About how completely you wanted to possess me."

He tenses slightly, wary of criticism regarding this fundamental aspect of his nature.

"But now," I continue, letting my hand cover his where it supports Claire, "I understand it better. And I'm grateful for it. For the way you cherish us so absolutely. For the way you've remade your world around us."

The tension leaves his body. "It's not a choice, Seraphina. It's who I am."

"I know." I press a kiss to his stubbled jaw. "And it's who I need you to be. Who Claire needs you to be. This man, exactly as you are."

As Claire begins to fuss, signaling hunger, Knox helps me position her for feeding, adjusting pillows to support my arms and placing a glass of water within easy reach. Each gesture precise, considered, essential. Nothing performative about his attention—just pure, focused devotion to our needs.

"I've never felt more cherished than I do with you," I tell him honestly, watching his eyes darken with emotion. "With your obsession. Your need to protect and provide and possess. It doesn't make me smaller. It makes me...treasured."

His hand comes up to cradle my face, his thumb brushing across my cheekbone with exquisite gentleness. "Because you are treasured. Beyond anything you could possibly imagine."

And as our daughter nurses contentedly between us, I marvel at how completely my perspective has changed.

The independence I once guarded so fiercely hasn't been taken from me—it's been transformed into something deeper, richer, more profound.

A chosen surrender to being cherished by a man capable of loving with his entire being.

A gift I never knew I needed until Knox Vance showed me how beautiful it could be.

Chapter Nineteen

Knox

I sign the final transfer documents with one hand, the other cradling Claire against my chest as she sleeps.

Three hundred million dollars for a private island in the Caribbean—an amount that would have seemed astronomical to the hungry kid I once was but registers as a reasonable investment to the man I've become.

The man with everything to protect. Through the open door of my home office, I can see Seraphina curled on the living room sofa with a book, her honey-blond hair caught in the late afternoon sunlight.

My wife. My daughter. My entire world contained in this penthouse, vulnerable to threats I can't always control.

But that's about to change. No more paparazzi stalking Seraphina when she takes Claire for walks.

No more security concerns in a city that, despite my extensive precautions, contains too many variables.

My family will have a sanctuary. A perfect, private world that belongs only to us.

Claire shifts against me, her tiny fist flexing open before curling closed again.

Three months old, and she already has me wrapped around those miniature fingers.

I adjust my hold, making sure her head is properly supported, and close my laptop.

The details will be handled by my team—the construction of our residence, the installation of state-of-the-art security systems, the creation of amenities that will make the island entirely self-sufficient.

My only requirement was absolute privacy and complete security.

The unease that's been growing in me since Claire's birth—since I held her in my arms and understood with crystal clarity what I stood to lose—eases slightly with the knowledge that soon I'll have a place where I can completely control their safety.

Manhattan is too exposed, despite the security measures I've implemented.

Too many people, too many unknowns, too many potential threats to the only two people who matter.

I rise carefully, moving with the measured caution I've developed since becoming Claire's primary carrier. Amazing how quickly protective instincts override decades of decisive movement. Now every step is calculated to maintain her comfort and security.

"Is she still asleep?" Seraphina asks as I join her in the living room, her voice hushed.

"Out completely." I settle beside her, shifting Claire to rest in the crook of my arm.

"She gets that from you—the ability to sleep through anything."

Seraphina smiles, closing her book and leaning against my shoulder to gaze down at our daughter. "You look good with her."

"She makes me look good." I press a kiss to Claire's dark hair, so like my own.
"Everything makes more sense when I'm holding her."

It's true in ways I'm still discovering.

The relentless drive that built my empire, the obsessive attention to detail that others find exhausting, the need to control every variable—all of it has found its perfect application in fatherhood.

In creating a world where my daughter and wife are safe, protected, secured against any possible threat.

"You've been busy today," Seraphina observes, her artist's eye missing nothing.
"More acquisitions?"

"Just one." I meet her gaze, considering how to present this particular purchase. Seraphina has adapted to my possessive nature, even embraced it, but a private island might test the limits of her acceptance. "A significant one."

Her eyebrows rise slightly. "The tech company in Seattle? I thought that deal wasn't closing until next quarter."

"Not a business acquisition." I shift Claire slightly, buying myself time to find the right words. "A personal one."

Interest sharpens her expression. Seraphina knows my patterns well enough to recognize when something unusual is happening. "Should I be concerned or intrigued?"

"Hopefully intrigued." I reach for my phone, pulling up the satellite images I've been studying for weeks. "I bought an island."

She blinks, processing my words with admirable composure. "An...island. As in, surrounded by water, appears on maps, that kind of island?"

"Yes." I hand her the phone, watching her expression as she scrolls through the images. "Six hundred acres in the Caribbean. Completely private, accessible only by boat or helicopter. Natural freshwater springs, perfect climate year-round, deep water harbor on the leeward side."

Her eyes widen as she takes in the pristine beaches, the lush interior, the perfect natural cove that will house our dock. "Knox, this is...extraordinary."

"It's for us," I explain, feeling an unfamiliar need to justify my decision. "For you and Claire. A sanctuary where we can be completely private, completely secure."

She studies my face with that perceptive gaze that has always seen too much. "This isn't just a vacation home, is it?"

"No." I don't insult her intelligence by pretending this is a typical luxury purchase. "It's a refuge. A place where I can control every aspect of your safety and Claire's. Where we can live without constantly scanning for threats or worrying about exposure."

Instead of the resistance I half-expected, understanding softens her features. "You've been worried."

It's not a question, but I answer anyway.

"Since the day she was born. Since before that, but more acutely now."

"My arms tighten slightly around Claire's sleeping form."

"The world is full of threats I can't eliminate.

People who would target you or her to get to me.

Environmental hazards. Security breaches. "

"So you bought us an island." There's no judgment in her voice, only a gentle understanding that loosens something tight in my chest.

"I bought us safety." I meet her eyes directly. "I know it seems extreme?—"

"It seems like you," she interrupts, her hand coming to rest on my arm. "Completely, authentically you. Protecting what you love the only way you know how—thoroughly, absolutely, with no half measures."

The acceptance in her voice—the complete lack of surprise or criticism—reinforces what I already knew: Seraphina understands me in ways no one else ever has.

"There's more," I tell her, encouraged by her reaction.

"The main residence is being constructed now.

Everything you could want—a studio with perfect natural light for your painting, a library, spaces for Claire to grow and explore safely.

But there's also a complete security system, medical facilities staffed year-round, sustainable power and water supplies, agricultural areas to grow our own food. "

Her eyes widen slightly. "You're not just thinking of vacations, are you?"

I hesitate, then decide on complete honesty. "I want it to be our primary home. Not

immediately—I understand your career, your connections here. But eventually. A place where Claire can grow up free from the constraints and dangers of the city."

Seraphina is quiet for a long moment, absorbing the full implications of what I'm proposing. Not just a luxury retreat, but a complete life change. A withdrawal from the world into our own private domain.

"What about your company?" she finally asks. "Vance Industries is here in Manhattan. Your entire empire."

"My empire exists to serve one purpose now—securing the future for you and Claire. I can run most operations remotely. For the rest, I'll commute when necessary."

She shakes her head, not in refusal but in wonder. "You'd do that? Restructure your entire business model? For us?"

"For you. For her. For the family we're building." I shift Claire to my shoulder as she begins to stir, patting her back in the rhythm I've discovered soothes her instantly. "There's nothing I wouldn't change, nothing I wouldn't sacrifice, to keep you both safe and happy."

Seraphina moves closer, her head resting against my free shoulder, her hand coming up to cover mine on Claire's back. The three of us connected, a perfect circuit.

"When can we see it?" she asks, surprising me.

"You want to?"

She lifts her head to meet my eyes. "Of course I want to see our island. Though I'm going to need some time to get used to saying that sentence."

Relief washes through me, followed by a surge of something warmer.

Not just acceptance, but enthusiasm. "As soon as you feel ready to travel with Claire.

The temporary structures are already in place.

The permanent residence won't be complete for another six months, but we can stay comfortably while we're there. "

"And it's completely private? No chance of photographers or intrusions?"

"None." The word comes out harder than I intended, revealing the depth of my concern about privacy since Claire's birth.

The paparazzi's interest in Seraphina increased tenfold once she became my wife, and Claire's arrival sparked a feeding frenzy that tested the limits of my legal team's abilities.

"The entire island is invisible to surveillance.

The security perimeter extends five miles into the surrounding waters.

No one approaches without our explicit permission. "

Instead of finding this extreme, Seraphina nods. "Good. Claire deserves to grow up without cameras in her face."

Her easy acceptance of what many would consider paranoid security measures confirms yet again why she's perfect for me. She understands the threats without needing to experience them firsthand.

Claire begins to fuss in earnest, her tiny face scrunching with the precursors to a full cry. Seraphina reaches for her, our daughter transferring seamlessly from my arms to hers.

"An island," she murmurs, more to herself than to me, as she begins to rock Claire gently. "Our own private world."

"Too much?" I ask, still uncertain despite her positive reaction.

She looks up at me, her green eyes clear and direct. "For anyone else, maybe. For Knox Vance? It's exactly what I'd expect." Her free hand finds mine, squeezing gently. "Most women get flowers or jewelry. I get an island. It's perfectly, wonderfully you."

The last of my tension dissolves. She understands. Of course she does. This brilliant, perceptive woman who accepted my obsessive nature long ago, who recognizes that my need to protect and possess comes from a place of absolute devotion.

"There's one more thing," I tell her, reaching for my phone again. "The island needs a name for the official registry. I thought..." I hesitate, suddenly uncertain. "I thought we might call it Claire Island."

Seraphina's eyes shine with unexpected tears. "You're naming it after our daughter?"

"It exists because of her. Because of you. Because of what you've both given me." I find myself struggling to articulate emotions I'm still learning to express. "A purpose beyond ambition. A reason beyond success."

She leans forward, pressing her lips to mine in a kiss that says more than words could. When she pulls back, there's a certainty in her eyes that matches my own.

"Claire Island," she agrees. "Our sanctuary."

As I watch her with our daughter, I feel the familiar fierce protectiveness that has driven me since the day I met her, intensified a thousandfold since Claire's birth.

The island is just the beginning. I'll reshape the world if necessary, rebuild my empire from the ground up, change every aspect of my life to ensure they remain safe and happy.

Because nothing—not power, not wealth, not success—means anything without them.

Chapter Twenty

Seraphina

The Caribbean sun paints Knox in gold as he walks along the shoreline, Claire secure against his chest in the carrier he insists is the safest design in existence.

His white linen shirt catches the breeze, billowing slightly around his powerful frame, while his feet leave perfect imprints in the pristine sand.

From my position on the veranda of our island home, sketchbook open but forgotten in my lap, I can't tear my eyes away from the sight of them.

My husband and daughter, silhouetted against the turquoise water that surrounds our private paradise.

Six months since Knox revealed his island purchase, four months since we first visited, and now we're spending the summer here while construction on the main residence nears completion.

I watch as Knox crouches to let a gentle wave wash over Claire's tiny feet, her squeal of delight carrying on the salt-tinged air.

The scene before me is perfect—magazine-worthy, Instagram-enviable—but it's not the aesthetic beauty that holds me captive.

It's the visceral, almost painful surge of possession that floods through me at the sight

of them.

Mine, I think with an intensity that startles me. My husband. My child. My world.

The force of the emotion catches me off guard, though perhaps it shouldn't.

I've noticed it growing in me for months now—this fierce, consuming need to claim Knox as completely as he's claimed me.

It began subtly: a flash of irritation when his assistant called during our family dinner; a surge of pride when I introduced him as "my husband" at gallery events; the satisfied warmth I felt seeing his tattoo—my name over his heart—when we made love.

But lately, the feeling has intensified, crystallizing into something I can no longer ignore or dismiss.

Last week, when a woman at a beach restaurant on the mainland couldn't tear her eyes from Knox as he ordered our lunch, I found myself moving closer to him, placing my hand possessively on his chest, precisely over where my name is inked into his skin.

The gesture wasn't conscious, but its meaning was unmistakable: He's mine. Back off.

Knox noticed immediately—he notices everything—and the slow, satisfied smile that curved his lips told me he understood exactly what I was doing. What I was feeling. That night, after Claire was asleep, he asked about it, his voice rough with pleasure: "Staking your claim, Mrs. Vance?"

I'd laughed it off, unwilling to examine too closely the primitive surge of territorial instinct that had prompted my actions.

But the truth is, I was staking my claim.

Marking my territory. Behaving exactly as Knox has from the beginning of our relationship—possessive, territorial, unwilling to share even a fraction of what belongs to me.

A gust of wind lifts the pages of my forgotten sketchbook, reminding me of its presence.

I glance down to find I've unconsciously begun drawing Knox's profile, capturing the strong line of his jaw, the intensity of his gaze as he looks at our daughter.

My artist's eye has always been drawn to him, from that first meeting at the gallery opening where he stood beside me, silently listening to my scathing critique of an installation before offering to buy it if I'd have dinner with him.

I thought I was independent then. Self-sufficient.

Immune to the kind of all-consuming attachment that defined my parents' unhappy marriage.

I valued my autonomy above all else, carefully maintaining boundaries with previous partners, always ensuring I had an escape route, a way to preserve my separate identity.

And then came Knox Vance, who recognized no boundaries, who pursued me with single-minded determination, who made it clear from the beginning that half measures weren't in his vocabulary. Who claimed me so completely that resistance became not just futile but undesirable.

I watch as he lifts Claire high above his head, her baby laughter a perfect

counterpoint to the rhythm of waves meeting shore.

His devotion to our daughter mirrors his devotion to me—absolute, uncompromising, fiercely protective.

And I realize, with a clarity that takes my breath away, that I feel exactly the same way about him.

I'm obsessed with Knox Vance.

Not just in love with him. Not just committed to him.

Obsessed. I need him with the same desperate intensity that he's always needed me.

I want to possess him as completely as he possesses me.

I would fight to keep him with the same ruthless determination he's always shown in holding onto what matters to him.

The realization should frighten me. The woman I was before Knox—independent, self-contained, wary of emotional extremes—would have run from such intensity. Instead, I feel something like relief. An acknowledgment of a truth that's been growing in me since the day I agreed to become his wife.

I think back to specific moments when this obsession revealed itself, though I refused to name it at the time:

The surge of irrational anger when his ex-girlfriend appeared at a charity gala, her eyes tracking Knox across the room. I'd positioned myself between them all night, my hand never leaving his arm, making it clear that he was thoroughly taken.

The way I searched his skin after business trips, not admitting even to myself that I was checking for evidence of another woman's touch—not because I doubted his fidelity, but because the mere thought of someone else's hands on what was mine sent rage coursing through my veins.

How I've begun to subtly adjust his wardrobe, replacing perfectly good suits with ones that I've selected, ensuring he wears the colors I prefer, the styles I find most attractive on him.

Marking him through my choices, just as he marked me by replacing my wardrobe with his name stitched into every piece.

Most telling of all: my reaction when Knox's longtime assistant Margaret made an innocent comment about him working too hard during Claire's first weeks. "You need to make sure he sleeps, Mrs. Vance," she'd said, her tone concerned but familiar—too familiar. "He listens to you."

"I'll take care of my husband," I'd replied, my voice carrying an edge that made Margaret blink in surprise. "You focus on his business calendar." The message was clear: Knox's wellbeing belongs to me. Not to his staff, not to his company. To me alone.

Knox turns, Claire still in his arms, and spots me on the veranda. Even at this distance, the change in his expression is unmistakable—that softening around the eyes, that focus that excludes everything but me. He begins walking toward the house, his stride purposeful, unhurried.

My heart rate increases, my body responding to his approach as it always does—with anticipation, with awareness, with a bone-deep recognition. Mine, the primitive part of my brain insists again. Just as I am his.

I've spent the past two years adapting to Knox's possessive nature, finding space within his obsession to maintain my own identity.

I've teased him about his controlling tendencies, his need to mark me as his in a hundred different ways.

I've accepted that this is who he is—a man who loves absolutely, who claims completely, who knows no middle ground when it comes to what matters to him.

And now I understand: it's who I am too.

The sophisticated art director, the independent woman who valued her autonomy, the person who maintained careful emotional boundaries—she still exists.

But alongside her, growing stronger every day, is this other self: a woman capable of the same obsessive devotion that defines her husband.

A woman who would fight with teeth and claws to keep what belongs to her.

A woman who needs her husband with an intensity that would frighten anyone who hasn't experienced it themselves.

Knox reaches the steps of the veranda, Claire now drowsy against his shoulder after her beach adventure. The sight of them—the two people who constitute my entire world—sends another wave of possessive love crashing through me.

"What are you thinking about so intensely?" Knox asks, joining me on the cushioned lounge. "You've been watching us with that look for the past twenty minutes."

"What look?" I ask, making room for him beside me.

"Like you're seeing something no one else can see." He settles Claire between us, her little body relaxing into sleep, secure in our presence. "Like you're solving a puzzle."

I meet his eyes—those dark, intense eyes that have never wavered in their devotion since the day we met—and decide on honesty. Knox has always given me his unvarnished truth. He deserves the same from me.

"I was thinking that I understand you better now," I say, reaching out to trace the strong line of his jaw. "Your need to possess. To claim. To keep what's yours."

Interest sharpens his gaze. "Oh?"

"I feel it too." The admission comes easier than I expected. "This...obsession. This need to have you completely. To know you're mine in every possible way."

Something flares in his eyes—recognition, satisfaction, desire. "Tell me more."

"I get possessive when other women look at you," I confess.

"I want to mark you as mine, make sure everyone knows you're taken."

I find myself thinking of you as belonging to me—not just as my husband, but as mine.

My possession. My territory." I pause, searching his face. "Does that sound familiar?"

His smile is slow, predatory, yet somehow tender. "Intimately familiar."

"I used to think your obsession with me was...extreme." I lace my fingers with his across Claire's sleeping form. "Now I think it might have been restraint, considering what I'm feeling."

Knox's laugh is soft, mindful of our sleeping daughter. "Seraphina Vance, are you telling me you're obsessed with me?"

"Completely," I admit, the truth a relief to finally acknowledge. "Utterly. Absolutely."

He lifts our joined hands, pressing his lips to my knuckles. "Good," he says simply. "Because I've been waiting for you to catch up."

And as the Caribbean breeze washes over us—my husband, my daughter, my perfect world condensed to this moment on our private island—I realize that Knox has always known.

He recognized this capacity in me long before I was ready to see it in myself.

He's been patiently waiting for me to embrace the truth: that I am, and always have been, just as obsessed with him as he is with me.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Chapter Twenty-One

Knox

Her words echo in my mind, resonating like a perfect frequency that makes everything inside me vibrate with recognition.

Obsessed. She's obsessed with me. The admission I've been waiting for since the moment I claimed her as mine.

Seraphina sits across from me on the veranda of our island home, the setting sun painting her in shades of gold and amber, her confession still hanging in the air between us.

Claire sleeps peacefully between us, unaware that her mother has just given me the one thing I've needed more than anything—confirmation that the consuming fire that burns in me for her is matched by an equal flame in her.

I've built an empire on reading people, on sensing weakness, on knowing when I have the advantage.

But in this moment, I'm stripped of all calculation, reduced to a single, primal response: need.

"Say it again," I demand, my voice barely recognizable.

Her eyes—those remarkable green eyes that have seen through me from the

beginning—meet mine without hesitation. "I'm obsessed with you, Knox. Completely. The way you've always been with me."

The words hit me with physical force, a blow to the center of my chest where her name is permanently etched into my skin.

For a man who craves control in all things, the violence of my reaction should be concerning.

Instead, it feels like the most natural response in the world—this surge of hunger, of possession, of absolute certainty.

She understands. Finally, completely, she understands what drives me.

What has driven me since the moment I saw her in that gallery, coolly dissecting that hideous installation with the precision of a surgeon.

She knows what it is to need someone with every cell of your being.

To feel that they are an extension of yourself, essential to your continued existence.

Claire stirs between us, reminding me of her presence. The desire to claim Seraphina immediately wars with my protective instincts toward our daughter. Seraphina reads the conflict in my face—she always reads me perfectly—and rises from her seat with fluid grace.

"I'll put her down," she says, gathering Claire into her arms. "Her evening nap usually lasts an hour."

The look she gives me over her shoulder as she carries our daughter inside holds a promise that makes my blood surge hot in my veins.

I give them five minutes—enough time for Seraphina to settle Claire in the nursery, for the baby monitor to be activated, for our daughter to be secure in her routine.

Five minutes exactly, and then I follow.

I find Seraphina in our bedroom, standing by the open doors that lead to our private section of beach. The sunset bathes her in fire, her honey-blond hair aflame with golden light, her skin glowing. She's removed her cover-up, standing in just the white bikini she wore earlier. My wife. Mine.

"Claire?" I ask, though I already know the answer. I'd never proceed otherwise.

"Sleeping soundly." She turns to face me, and the look in her eyes is one I've seen in my own reflection countless times—hungry, possessive, certain. "The monitor's on. We'll hear if she needs us."

I cross the room in three long strides, eliminating the distance between us with the efficiency that defines all my important actions. My hands find her waist, feeling the warm silk of her skin beneath my palms. "Tell me what you feel."

She doesn't pretend to misunderstand. Her arms twine around my neck, her body pressing against mine with delicious intent.

"I feel like I'll die if I don't have you.

Like you're a part of me that I can't survive without.

Like I need to mark you, claim you, make sure everyone knows you're mine.

" Her lips curve in a smile that's both self-aware and primal. "Sound familiar?"

The last thread of my control snaps. I lift her, her legs automatically wrapping around my waist, and carry her to our bed. The California king—specially designed and shipped to our island at obscene expense—receives us as I lay her down, covering her body with mine.

"Do you know," I say against her throat, feeling her pulse jump beneath my lips, "how long I've waited to hear you say those words? To know that what I feel for you isn't one-sided? That you need me the way I need you?"

Her hands tangle in my hair, pulling my mouth to hers for a kiss that's all heat and hunger. "I think I always have," she admits when we break apart, both breathless. "I just wasn't ready to admit it. To you or to myself."

I capture her wrists, pinning them above her head with one hand while the other traces the curve of her cheek, her jaw, the delicate line of her throat. "And now?"

"Now I can't deny it anymore." Her eyes hold mine, unflinching in their honesty. "I'm obsessed with you, Knox Vance. With possessing you. With being possessed by you. With knowing that nothing and no one will ever come between us."

Her words ignite something molten in my core, a need so intense it borders on violence.

I release her wrists only to rid her of the scrap of white fabric covering her breasts, then the matching bottom.

She's naked beneath me in seconds, her body as familiar to me as my own yet somehow always new, always a revelation.

"Mine," I growl against her skin, my mouth claiming her breast, then her stomach, then lower. "Say it again."

"I'm yours," she gasps as my tongue finds her center, her back arching off the bed. "Completely yours. Just like you're mine."

I worship her with mouth and hands, driving her to the edge and over it, absorbing her cries like they're sustenance I can't live without. When she's trembling, still coming down from her peak, I rise above her again, shedding my own clothes with desperate efficiency.

"No one else," I tell her, positioning myself between her thighs, my control hanging by a thread. "No one else has ever understood. No one else has ever matched me like you do."

Her hands find my shoulders, nails digging in slightly as she pulls me closer. "No one else ever will. For either of us."

I enter her with a single thrust, the feeling of her body accepting mine still as overwhelming as it was the first time.

We fit together perfectly, two pieces of the same puzzle, designed for each other down to a cellular level.

I set a punishing rhythm, driven by the need to claim, to possess, to mark—and by the knowledge that she feels the same desperate hunger.

"I've wanted to hear you say it," I confess against her mouth between kisses that are more consumption than affection. "That you're obsessed. That you need me the way I need you. That it's not just me being controlling or possessive or too much."

She meets my every thrust, her body rising to accept mine, her eyes never leaving my face. "It's never been just you," she says, her voice breaking as pleasure builds between us. "I was just afraid to admit how much I needed this. Needed you."

The honesty in her voice, the vulnerability beneath her passion, touches something beyond lust. I slow my movements, shifting from frantic claiming to deliberate worship. My hand cradles her face, thumb brushing across her cheekbone with a gentleness that contrasts the intensity of our connection.

"You're everything," I tell her, the words torn from someplace deeper than conscious thought. "The reason for everything I've built, everything I've done. The purpose behind every decision since the moment I met you."

Tears gather at the corners of her eyes, though her smile is radiant. "And you're mine, Knox Vance. My obsession. My completion. The only man who could ever make me feel this way."

Her words push me to the edge of control.

I gather her closer, changing our angle, ensuring that every thrust brings her pleasure along with mine.

Her eyes widen, her breath catching as she begins to tighten around me again.

I watch her face as she comes apart beneath me, absorbing every detail of her expression, every sound she makes.

The sight of her surrender triggers my own, my release hitting with an intensity that whites out my vision for several heartbeats.

Afterward, I hold her against me, unwilling to break our connection even as our breathing gradually slows. The Caribbean breeze drifts through the open doors, cooling our overheated skin, carrying the scent of salt and flowers and us.

"I meant it," she says against my chest, her fingers tracing idle patterns across my

skin. "Every word. I'm obsessed with you, Knox. With having you. Keeping you. Making sure nothing ever comes between us."

I lift her chin, needing to see her eyes as I respond. "Good. Because that's exactly how it should be. Both of us, equally consumed." I brush my lips across hers, gentle now that the initial storm has passed. "Equally obsessed."

She settles back against me, her body fitting perfectly into the curves of mine, as if designed specifically for this purpose.

Through the open door of our bedroom, I can see the ocean stretching to the horizon, the sky painted in the deep purples and blues of approaching night.

Our island. Our sanctuary. The perfect setting for the family we've created.

"Where's the baby monitor?" I ask, not willing to relax completely without confirmation that Claire is still sleeping soundly.

Seraphina reaches to the bedside table, turning the screen toward me so I can see our daughter's peaceful form in her crib.

The sight of her—this perfect being we created together—fills me with the same fierce protectiveness that drove me to purchase this island, to create this sanctuary where both the women in my life can be completely safe.

"She'll be up in about twenty minutes," Seraphina murmurs, pressing a kiss to the place where her name is tattooed on my chest. "We should probably get dressed before then."

"Probably," I agree, though I make no move to release her. Instead, I tighten my arms around her, inhaling the scent of her hair, memorizing the weight of her body against

mine. "But not quite yet."

In this perfect moment—my wife in my arms, our daughter sleeping peacefully nearby, our island securing us against the world—I allow myself to acknowledge a truth I've known from the beginning:

I've never needed Seraphina to be obsessed with me to justify my own obsession with her.

I would have continued loving her with the same consuming intensity regardless of whether she matched it.

But hearing her admit that she feels the same driving need, the same possessive hunger—it completes something in me I didn't know was unfinished.

She's mine. I'm hers. Completely. Obsessively. For all time.

And nothing in the world has ever felt more right.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:40 am

Five years later

Seraphina

The setting sun turns the ocean to liquid gold, painting our private stretch of beach in amber light that makes everything look slightly surreal, as if we're living inside an impressionist masterpiece.

Claire's laughter bubbles up from the shoreline where Maria, her nanny, is helping her collect shells—a sound that never fails to make my heart expand with love.

I adjust the strap of my sundress, eyes on the horizon where Knox's helicopter will appear any minute.

Three days on the mainland for an acquisition that couldn't be handled remotely—the longest we've been apart since moving to the island six months ago.

His absence has been a physical ache, a hollow space beside me in our bed, an emptiness that video calls and constant texts barely soothed.

But he's coming home now, returning to the sanctuary he created for us, and I've spent all day preparing to welcome him back where he belongs.

Life on Claire Island has settled into a rhythm that feels both extraordinary and utterly natural.

Knox runs his empire primarily from his state-of-the-art office in our home, traveling

to Manhattan only when absolutely necessary.

I've established a remote consulting relationship with my former gallery, curating digital exhibitions and occasionally flying in talent for our private collection.

Claire thrives in this paradise, surrounded by nature and protected from the relentless scrutiny that would follow the Vance heiress in the outside world.

And our obsession—the mutual, consuming need we've acknowledged and embraced—has deepened into something that feels like breathing.

Essential, automatic, yet still miraculous when I stop to consider it.

The constant background awareness of each other, the territorial instincts that flare whenever outsiders enter our domain, the physical need that hasn't diminished with time or familiarity—it's all become our normal.

The distant thrum of helicopter blades breaks through my thoughts.

I straighten, hand automatically going to my hair—styled exactly as Knox prefers it, loose around my shoulders but pulled back from my face with a simple clip.

My sundress is new, a shade of emerald green that matches my eyes, the fabric light enough to remove easily.

Beneath it, I wear nothing but the emerald and diamond necklace Knox gave me last month, "just because. "

Deliberate choices, all of them. A calculated welcome home that acknowledges what we are to each other.

The helicopter appears over the horizon, growing larger as it approaches our landing pad.

I signal to Maria, who waves in acknowledgment.

She'll keep Claire occupied for another hour—enough time for the reunion I've planned.

Knox and I agreed early in our island life that we would never diminish our roles as parents, but neither would we sacrifice the intensity that defines our relationship.

The balance works because we both prioritize it, both recognize that our connection as husband and wife feeds our strength as parents.

By the time the helicopter lands, I've positioned myself at the edge of the garden path that leads from the helipad to our home.

The pilot—hand-selected by Knox for both his flying skills and his discretion—remains with the aircraft as Knox emerges, still in his business suit despite the tropical heat.

Even from this distance, I can see the moment he spots me.

His whole body changes, tension visibly draining away, replaced by a focused intensity I feel like a physical touch.

He crosses the distance between us with long, purposeful strides, his eyes never leaving mine. Up close, I see the faint shadows beneath his eyes—evidence of three nights without proper sleep. Knox claims he doesn't rest well without me beside him. I believe him, because neither do I without him.

"Welcome home," I say, the words inadequate for the surge of emotion that accompanies his return.

His response is to pull me against him, his mouth claiming mine with a hunger that makes it clear how much he's missed me. I surrender to the kiss, my body melting against his with the practiced ease of a woman who knows exactly where she belongs.

"Claire?" he asks when we finally break apart, both breathless.

"With Maria on the beach. We have an hour." I take his hand, leading him toward our home. "She missed you. Made you a shell collection."

His smile—that rare, genuine expression so few people ever witness—warms his entire face. "I'll treasure it. But first—" His eyes darken as they rake over me, noting the new dress, the bare skin beneath, the necklace resting against my collarbone. "I need my wife."

Inside our bedroom, words become unnecessary. His hands find the thin straps of my dress, pushing them off my shoulders with reverent urgency. The garment pools at my feet, leaving me in nothing but emeralds and diamonds. His sharp intake of breath is all the appreciation I need.

"You planned this," he says, his voice rough with desire as he shrugs off his suit jacket.

"Of course I did." I help him with his tie, then the buttons of his shirt, eager to feel his skin against mine. "I've been planning it since the moment you left."

His laugh is low, delighted. "My obsessive wife."

"Your matching obsession," I correct, pushing his shirt from his shoulders, my fingers automatically finding the tattoo that bears my name. "Perfect balance."

He lifts me then, powerful arms carrying me to our bed with effortless strength. The sheets are fresh, the room filled with the scent of plumeria from the gardens below our window. Another deliberate choice—Knox loves the way that particular flower smells on my skin.

His body covers mine, familiar yet always thrilling. "I missed you," he confesses against my throat, his hands relearning curves he already knows by heart. "Every minute. Every second."

"Show me," I challenge, arching into his touch.

He does—with mouth and hands and body, claiming me with the focused intensity that defines everything he does. I surrender completely, giving myself to him without reservation. This is what we are to each other: sanctuary and storm, peace and passion, obsession made tangible in flesh and blood.

Later, when the initial desperate hunger has been sated, he takes me again—slower this time, more deliberate.

My body responds to his as if created specifically for this purpose, rising to meet each thrust, anticipating each touch.

His name falls from my lips like prayer, acknowledgment of what we've become together.

"Mine," he growls against my skin as we build toward completion. "Say it."

"Yours," I agree, my nails leaving crescents in his shoulders. "Always yours. Just as

you're mine."

The dual claiming pushes us both over the edge, our release amplified by three days of separation and two years of ever-deepening connection. Afterward, he holds me against his chest, my head tucked beneath his chin, our heartbeats gradually synchronizing.

"I've arranged to have no more overnight trips," he murmurs into my hair. "The separation is...unacceptable."

I smile against his skin, unsurprised. "Claire missed you terribly."

"And her mother?"

I lift my head to meet his eyes. "Her mother found herself checking the sky every hour, watching for your return like some lovesick heroine from a gothic novel.

" I trace the line of his jaw, feeling the slight stubble beneath my fingertips.

"Her mother discovered that three days without you felt like three years. "

Satisfaction softens his expression. "Good. It was mutual."

We lie in comfortable silence, the sound of waves breaking on the shore drifting through our open windows.

In moments like these, I marvel at the journey that brought us here—from my initial wariness of his intensity to this complete acceptance of our mutual obsession.

The sophisticated art director who once valued independence above all else now finds her greatest freedom in belonging, utterly and completely, to this man. Just as he

belongs to me.

"We should get dressed," Knox says eventually, though he makes no move to release me. "Claire will be looking for me."

"Five more minutes," I negotiate, pressing closer against him. "She's having fun with her shells."

He acquiesces immediately, his arms tightening around me. The powerful CEO who commands global industries cannot deny his daughter or his wife even the smallest request. This is the private Knox Vance that only Claire and I ever see—tender, yielding, vulnerable beneath his formidable exterior.

The knowledge fills me with a fierce possessiveness. This version of him is mine alone to witness, mine to protect, mine to cherish. Just as the version of myself I am with him—passionate, yielding, completely centered in my surrender—belongs only to Knox.

I let my hand rest over his heart, feeling the steady, strong beat beneath my palm. Over my name, permanently etched into his skin. In this moment of perfect stillness, perfect connection, I acknowledge what I've known since the day I agreed to become his wife:

This is forever. This consuming need, this mutual obsession, this perfect balance of possession and surrender—it's not a phase or a passion that will burn itself out. It's the foundation of who we are together. The core truth of our existence as a unit.

I know that soon we'll rise, dress, go find our daughter and spend the evening as a family.

Knox will listen with complete attention as Claire shows him every shell she's

collected.

He'll carry her on his shoulders as we walk along the beach at sunset.

We'll put her to bed together, reading stories and singing lullabies until she drifts to sleep.

And then we'll return to this room, to this bed, and I'll let him have me again and again throughout the night—because I am his, just as he is mine.

Because our mutual obsession has become the most natural state of being I can imagine.

Because nothing has ever felt more right than belonging, completely and without reservation, to Knox Vance.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:40 am

I lift my shot of whiskey to my lips, but before I ever take the drink, a commotion at the front of the bar draws my eyes.

I lay the untouched shot down and glance over at the girl who's just burst through the door like the hounds of hell are nipping at her heels.

My eyes trail down her lithe frame. She's wearing butt-hugging shorts that don't leave much to the imagination the way they grip her juicy little ass and a form-fitting tank top that shows off a pair of perfectly pert little breasts.

Hair as dark and thick as a raven's wing cascades around her shoulders.

Her chest is heaving, and I notice that her feet are bare.

I frown. She looks like a scared little rabbit.

From the hoots and whistles that come from a table of drunken fools near the front of the bar, I realize I'm not the only one who's noticed her haphazard entrance.

She ignores the catcalls and attempts to walk over to an empty table to sit down, but one of the pricks gets up and follows her.

"Hey, babe, you looking for some company?" he slurs. I can hear him all the way over here.

She shakes her head, clearly not interested.

He sits down in the booth next to her and slides close to her. She shrinks away from him, pressing herself against the wall, and I've seen about all I can take. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's drunken assholes forcing their attentions on unwilling women.

I down my shot in one gulp, slap the shot glass back down on the counter, and walk over to where she's sitting.

"I think she's made it clear she's not interested, buddy," I tell the drunken idiot who insists on imposing himself on her.

"Hey, why don't you mind your own—" he begins, but then he stops mid-sentence and gulps when he looks up and sees who's talking to him.

Yeah, I guess my reputation precedes me.

I raise an eyebrow at him. "You want to finish that sentence?"

He quickly slides out of the booth, apologizing, "No, Damon, man, I didn't realize it was you."

I say nothing else to him, staring at him menacingly as he scampers away back to the table where his crew sits guffawing like the morons they are.

I look back down at the girl and am almost bowled over by the most innocent-looking, sapphire blue eyes I've ever seen. They're framed by thick, dark lashes, and my chest tightens painfully.

Jesus, I knew she was beautiful from the glimpse I got of her across the bar when she burst into the place, but up close, she's nothing short of a fucking angel.

Her skin is porcelain, the cheeks tinged pink from her exertion, and her lips are

sinfully full and rosy, the kind of lips that give teenage boys wet dreams.

I feel myself beginning to stiffen in my jeans just looking at her face. Fuck, this girl is a princess, and I'd love nothing more than to spoil her for all she's worth.

I realize I'm staring at her, so I gather my wits long enough to ask her, "Do you mind if I sit?"

She shakes her head, "No." Then, she blushes, "I mean, no, I don't mind if you sit, that is." Fucking adorable. She's fucking adorable. Everything about her.

I sit in the booth across from her, smelling her scent from across the table. She smells young and sweet, like fresh berries just waiting to be plucked. I fight back a groan.

Fuck, what's wrong with me? No female has ever affected me this way.

"What's your name?" I ask her.

"Hadley," she answers.

"Hadley," I repeat, tasting her name on my tongue. "I'm Damon."

She nods, "So I heard from that guy. Thanks for helping me just now, by the way," she says, tucking a strand of that long, dark hair behind her ear. My fingers itch to reach out and see if those locks are as soft and silky as they look.

"No problem," I tell her. "Some guys are just idiots when they drink."

She looks down, "Yeah, tell me about it."

I frown, not liking the sadness in her tone. "What are you doing in a place like this?"

I ask her.

She looks up, “Oh, um, I was just...taking a break from my walk.”

I cock my head to look pointedly under the table at her bare feet. “You always take a walk barefoot in the middle of the night?” I ask her. There’s more to her story than she’s letting on, and I’m damn sure going to get to the bottom of it.

Her face colors even more. “I—I,” she sputters before her shoulders sag and she finally admits “I was running away from something.”

“Something or someone?” I ask, already reading between the lines, and what I’m sensing has my hands fisting on the table. If someone hurt her, I’ll hunt them down and tear them limb from limb with my bare hands.

“My stepdad,” she confesses, finally looking back up at me. “He’s been drinking more lately, and he...he came into my room tonight.”

Hot anger boils through me, but I attempt to tamp it down as I ask her, “Did he hurt you?”

She shakes her head vehemently. “No, I kneed him in the balls and took off before he could really do anything.”

“Good girl,” I immediately tell her.

She pales as her eyes meet something over my shoulder.

I turn to look at the door where some drunk has just stumbled in.

He’s a big, pot-bellied motherfucker, but I’m still taller and bigger than him—the

difference being I'm all muscle.

I did nothing but work out in prison, trying to make myself stronger and pass the time the only way that kept me sane.

"Is that him?" I ask as I turn back to her, only to see an empty booth staring back at me.

"Fuck," I swear under my breath as I see her heading for the back of the bar. I don't know where she thinks she's going, but she won't be getting out that way.

I chase after her and catch up with her just as she's fixing to enter the ladies' room.

"Hey, baby, hold up," I tell her, gently grasping her arm.

She turns to me, gasping, her eyes wide. She relaxes when she sees it's me, and that fills me with an undeniable sense of pride that she must feel somewhat safe with me.

"I have to get out of here," she says desperately.

While I want nothing more than to march back out there and beat her stepdad's ass, setting her mind at ease and not losing her is more important, so I nod before wrapping my arm around her waist and steering her toward the kitchen. "Come on. I know a way out the back."

I'm friends with the owner, so I come and go as I please, using whatever entrance I please, and no one bats an eyelash. I steer her through the kitchen and out the back door into the alley.

I lead her around the front to where my black SUV is parked and open the passenger door for her. "Get in," I nod at the SUV.

She hesitates for only a moment before she glances back at the bar where her stepdad is probably still inside looking for her before she obeys and slides into the seat.

I shut the door behind her before walking over to the driver's side.

I don't know what act of fate brought us together tonight, but I vow to myself now that fucker will never get near her again. No one will ever hurt this princess again if I have anything to say about it.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:40 am

She's too sweet to resist. And she's mine. All mine.

Ace

Three things are for sure:

One: She's the most stunning little thing I've ever laid eyes on.

Two: She doesn't belong on that stage, shaking it for men who don't deserve to breathe her air.

Three: She's already mine—even if she doesn't know it yet.

And I don't care what I have to do to prove it.

Candy

Only two things in life are for sure:

One: Nothing in life comes without a price.

Two: Men only ever want one thing.

But Ace? He's not like the others. He's dangerous, possessive, and makes promises I've never heard before. I should run...but every instinct in me tells me to stay.

Sex and Candy is a steamy-as-sin romance featuring an obsessive billionaire alpha

who will do anything— anything —to claim his woman. He's intense, over-the-top, and completely irresistible. Protective? Yes. Possessive? Hell yes. HEA? Always.

Keep reading for a preview of Sex and Candy :

I take a sip of the subpar whiskey in front of me and grimace at the taste as I glance down at my Rolex. Fucker's late.

I drum my fingers on the table in irritation, keenly reminded of why I never let anyone pick meeting locations. You never know what kind of seedy joint they're going to want to meet up in or if they'll even show up at all.

I knew better than to let MacHay dictate the terms of this meeting, but I went against my better instincts and did it anyway.

Simply because the man has proven so difficult to get in touch with.

I'm regretting ever shaking his hand in the first place, and if I wasn't beholden to hold up my end of the bargain, I'd say fuck it and bail on this here and now.

Oh, well. You live and learn, right?

I'm tempted to do it anyway and am actually moving to slip out of my booth when the stage lights up and a hush falls over the audience.

I don't know what causes me to pause and sit back down. It's probably just going to be another subpar dancer like all the other ones that have been staggering around on the stage all night.

Maybe it's the pregnant pause of anticipation that seems to fall over the entire room.

I don't know.

But when the tiniest little angel I've ever seen steps on stage, time itself seems to stop.

Her skin glows ivory under the stage light.

She has on a lacy white number, some sort of bustier, lacy panties, and white stockings.

The look is topped off with fire engine red heels that match the paint on her lips.

Long lashes frame light brown eyes that look too big and luminous for her little heart-shaped face.

Long blonde hair like spun gold falls in glorious waves all the way down to an impossibly tiny waist that I know I could cup in my two hands.

My breath catches in my throat. My god, she looks like a porcelain doll come to life.

But what most arrests me is the look in her eyes. For a split second when she first steps out on stage, her wide eyes are soulfully sad, so much so that they seem to take my breath away.

They seem to mirror all the tragedy in the world in their depths.

But then it's gone in the blink of an eye as she smiles, a dazzling, heart-wrenching smile that makes me instantly jealous. I'm irrationally upset that she's gracing this roomful of men with that smile—that smile that I suddenly know deep down in my soul is meant to be only mine.

Mine.

Sultry music begins to play, and she begins to dance, gently swaying her hips as she

flirts with the strip pole.

I'm gripping the edge of the table so tightly I'm surprised the wood doesn't break underneath my palms. I swear to God if one piece of clothing comes off her body I won't be able to stop myself from rushing up on that stage and covering her from prying eyes.

I'm aware that my reaction is insane. I don't know anything about this girl, but I can't stop the surge of possessive protectiveness that rages inside me at the thought of all these men seeing her so scantily clad like this.

What the fuck is she doing? Doesn't she know she's an angel? Doesn't she know she doesn't belong in here with all these devils?

I grit my teeth when she suddenly flings herself on the pole and begins to do a series of complicated flips and turns.

The men roar and whistle and cheer, and I'd bet my last million half the fuckers in this place have a boner right now imagining her little body writhing on their laps like she is on that pole.

The thought fills me with murderous rage.

I'm so distracted by it that I don't even notice when MacHay finally takes his seat across from me until he chuckles and comments, "It's your first time witnessing the wonder that is Candy, huh?"

"What?" I bark at him, never tearing my eyes away from the beauty up on the stage. I feel like I won't be able to rest until her set is over and she's safely back behind that stage curtain where she belongs out of sight of lascivious male eyes.

He juts his chin out at the stage. "Candy.

She's the feature dancer here.” I spare a sideways glance at him out of the corner of my eye.

He takes a sip of his drink and motions toward the stage with it, “And you can see why.

Not only is she the prettiest one out of the bunch, but she's also the youngest and the one with the most skill.

Consequently, she's the one Dan hoards to himself like the finest treasure.

You can pay for a little extra with the other dancers, if you know what I mean, but Dan won't let anyone near Candy for no amount of money. "

I frown, though I can't help feeling some sort of relief at the thought that Candy isn't being prostituted out. I can barely stomach the thought of all these men's eyes on her, much less their hands.

"So," MacHay rubs his hands together eagerly as Candy's show ends and she leaves the stage.

I notice how she doesn't scramble to pick up any of the money thrown on the stage for her like all the dancers before her did.

She walks coolly off the stage without even a backward glance at all the men she now holds in her thrall.

"You really to get down to business?" MacHay interrupts my thoughts.

I scowl at him. The fucker keeps me waiting all the time, and then he shows up and expects me to cater to him. He can fucking wait now.

I level him with a cool stare before I stand from the booth and pull out my phone. "I have something to attend to first. If you want to see any part of this partnership go forward, you'll be sitting right here waiting for me when I get back."

He frowns and looks like he wants to say something, but one look at my tight jawline and he obviously thinks better of it, giving a curt nod of understanding instead. Yeah, he knows he fucked up.

I step out of earshot and call my head of security.

"Yeah, James? Get me everything you can on a dancer at the club on Sixth. Pronto. I want everything within the next thirty minutes. Goes by the name of Candy..."