CONTRACTUAL

Obligations

Elle Rivers



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A NOVEL BY ELLE RIVERS

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To my younger self. She could have used some of these lessons.
And to social media, for giving me inspiration for every comment in this book.

A Note from Elle

This work contains scenes some might find disturbing. In this book, you will find emotional manipulation from parents, pressure to consummate a marriage, extreme fatphobia from family, and discussions of diets/restrictive eating.

The main character, Lily, feels she needs to look and act a certain way. She is told what to eat by her family multiple times. If this may upset you, then please take caution with this book.

There is no dubious consent, or emotional abuse between the main characters.

If you need more details on what is included, including spoilers, please feel free to reach out to me at EllesWrites on Twitter.

Prologue

The venue was ornate, just over the line of ostentatious. My dad had spared no expense in renting the ballroom for more than three hundred people to attend my wedding.

And I didn't know most of them.

On paper, this was going to be a perfect wedding. I had a beautiful, custom-made dress. The aisle I was walking down was adorned with freshly picked roses, which were the perfect shade of pink. My soon-to-be husband was wearing a tailored suit and was guaranteed not to get cold feet and run away.

I was the blushing, beautiful bride—the Juliet to the perfect Romeo but with a happy ending.

"I'm going to throw up," I said, and my bridesmaid, Jessie, shoved a plastic trash can under my face.

Sasha, the maid of honor, and my soon-to-be sister-in-law, rolled her eyes.

"You don't have to do this," Jessie soothed, rubbing strong and steady circles on my back.

"Actually, she does," Sasha said. "The contract's been signed, and it's more airtight than these vows are ever going to be."

Jessie looked up, a glare on her face. "Can you not do this right now?"

Sasha shrugged. "I'm the maid of honor, and my job is to prevent you from getting her to back out. It's a done deal."

A slow, ragged breath escaped me. "She's right."

"What kind of archaic marriage agreement is this?" Jessie snapped. It was an argument I had heard since the moment I told her about this deal. "You're a grown woman in the twenty-first century. Your parents don't get to choose who you marry!"

"They do if she wants her inheritance," Sasha said, smirking from her corner across the room.

Jessie's glare returned, and I let out a resigned sigh. Sasha was right. If I wanted my inheritance—which was enough to buy me a house and get me away from my family—I had to go through with this.

I was nineteen and had nothing of my own. My dad was the executor of every penny I'd earned since I was pushed into modeling. Not only would this marriage secure the money I needed to escape, but I'd also gotten my parents to agree to let me take a break from modeling while I was married.

And while most people weren't told who to marry, I was happy to exchange five years of my life to get the chance to run away and never look back. A small sacrifice for a much needed reward.

Jessie didn't get it, and I didn't blame her. There was a part of me that didn't get it, either.

"I'll be fine," I said. "It's only five years."

"We wouldn't be here if your dad hadn't been so against merging with us in the first place," Sasha reminded me as she examined her nails. "Maybe instead of turning customers against Miller Industries, he could have let himself get bought out like every other small-time company."

I rolled my eyes at her version of events.

Yeah, it was true that my dad called out Miller Industries' desire to be a monopoly from the beginning. Before this acquisition, he was adamant that he would never let his small chain of stores be owned by anyone else, and actively turned his very loyal customer base into people who boycotted Miller Industries for years.

But that was before my dad realized that he could never compete with their prices. By the time he knew he had to take the buyout offer, he also knew he would lose all of his customers when he gave in.

That was where I entered the picture. If the daughter of the owner of Electronic Point fell in love with the son of the CEO of Miller Industries, everyone would see it as a love story and not a buyout.

Jessie scoffed. "It's not her fault her dad—"

"Hey," I interrupted, "it's fine."

"But, Lily—"

"I said it's fine," I told her again. "I'll be okay. It's just for five years."

"Five years is a long time."

"Freedom is longer," I added. Maybe if I said it enough, I'd start believing it too.

"Ugh," Sasha said, "Lily, you're being too emotional. Come on. Let's get this wedding over with. I have an appointment with a masseuse at

four.”

“We better not make her wait then,” Jessie muttered as she helped me up. “She might miss her massage. Lord knows how much worse she could be without it.”

I stifled a laugh and focused on not tripping over my own feet as we left the bridal suite and headed toward the ballroom.

When we arrived at the closed door with all of the wedding guests and my future husband inside, I could only take a deep breath and hope I wasn’t making a mistake.

My walk down the aisle was a mix of fairy lights, flowers, and flashes of cameras. My smile didn’t waver, and I was sure I looked just like I did on Instagram: tall, flowy, perfect in every way.

Sebastian Miller stood still as a rod. Before this, we’d only gone on a handful of dates, ones where we took hundreds of photos for our social media posts about our relationship.

He was a stern man. He didn’t really smile much, and I had a feeling he didn’t like me.

But he was about to be my husband.

When I met him in front of the preacher, we stood face to face. My heels made us close to the same height, and I took him in, knowing I was tied to him for the next five years.

Sebastian was attractive, that much was for sure.

We were the perfect matches to each other in photos. He was tall, with tanned skin and a lean build with full, dark hair, and a jawline to die for. I was shorter, standing at five foot six with no heels, and had a slim build curated for me by my mother’s strict diets.

I put a lot of work into my appearance, and judging by the few times I’d caught Sebastian’s eyes wandering, he liked me. Or how I looked, anyway.

My mother told me looks were all I needed. It didn’t matter that we didn’t know each other. I was pretty and he was handsome. We looked good together on camera. When we both smiled, we almost looked in love.

But Sebastian wasn’t smiling at our wedding. His jaw was tight, and he looked through me rather than at me. When I met him at the end of the aisle, I saw a flash of something I’d never seen before in his expression.

I saw fear.

Sebastian was always collected. On our first date, he'd told me with a straight face that I looked beautiful and that I should get whatever photos I had to before he needed to leave for a meeting.

When he proposed, he never actually said anything. I only saw the box with a sparkling, over-the-top ring inside.

But for the first time in our entire farce of a relationship, Sebastian wasn't collected. He looked like I had in the bridal suite.

For a moment, I wondered if he were somehow in the same boat as me. Maybe he was as trapped as I was. Had his father come to him with a stack of papers, offered him money, and told him he needed to marry someone to make someone else look good? Did he hate this as much as I did?

But as soon as I saw the panic cross his face, it disappeared.

"Sebastian William Miller," the preacher said, bringing me out of my thoughts, "do you accept this woman to be your wife? Do you promise to hold her, and comfort her in sickness and in health throughout the rest of your life?"

There was a pause. A moment where I hoped he would say "*No, I don't.*"

"I do," Sebastian said.

"Liliana Maria Roberts," the preacher started again, looking at me. I tensed my muscles, stopping myself from running. "Do you accept this man to be your husband? Your leader and caregiver, as well as the man whom you will serve?"

Ugh. I had to serve him? What was I, a waitress?

I had no doubts my mother was responsible for these vows.

"I do," I said, my voice sweet and light, just how everyone liked it.

"Then, under the power vested in me, I pronounce you husband and wife."

We kissed, close-lipped and our bodies apart. People I didn't know cheered for us, and my life was sealed for the next five years.

I looked to my husband, hoping for some indication that what I'd seen earlier was real.

But he stared straight ahead, face unreadable, and I began to wonder if his fear had even been there at all.

Photo: a perfect wedding shot of a couple facing joyous guests. The couple's faces aren't visible.

LilyMRoberts: I start my new life today! I am so grateful to have met my perfect partner. I can't thank my parents enough for putting aside their differences with Sebastian's family and giving me this joy. I couldn't ask for a better husband.

TS13fan: OMG! You guys finally got married. CONGRATS!

User94859530384: you should show your face more

Adeamom: Such a beautiful wedding!

I was so far beyond exhausted that I wasn't sure I was even alive.

After the wedding, and a million and one photos of my new husband and me, we were sent off on our honeymoon. It was literally right after the wedding. I didn't get a wink of sleep on the plane, even as the time indicated it was past midnight.

My mom had texted me to be *sure* we consummated our marriage, and I had hidden my screen from Sebastian to forward the messages right to Jessie.

Jessie: They can't force you to do anything you don't want to do.

Lily: I know, and I'm not going to. But at least he's cute?

Jessie: Seriously? He's his father's show pony. Anything you do in front of him will go right back to Martin. BE CAREFUL.

"Who are you texting?" Sebastian's asked.

I jumped, looking next to me in our little cocoon in first class. I didn't think he was close enough to see what I had been saying, but I also didn't want to risk it.

"Just Jessie," I said. "She's checking in."

Sebastian gave me a withering stare and went back to working on his laptop. I angled my phone just a little farther away and typed back.

Lily: I am being careful, but I also have to be conscious of what they've asked me to do.

Jessie: Ugh. Gross.

Lily: It is what it is. He's at least cute. I'm going to pretend it's a one-night stand or something.

Jessie: You realize how fucked up this is, right?

Lily: Of course I do. And I'm sure my future therapist is going to hear about it. But I literally have no other job, and Martin will make sure I can't get one if I don't do this right. So I'm doing it right.

Jessie: I know why you're doing this, but if you ever get uncomfortable, if he touches you in any way you don't like, then LEAVE.

Lily: I will.

And I meant it. If Sebastian tried pushing me or doing anything I didn't like, I'd put a stop to it. I had that much faith in myself. And it wasn't even like I had never been with anyone before. Sure, I was young, but I wasn't *that* young. I had grown up a child model, for God's sake. Plenty of older men offered, but I was always able to stick to people closer to my age. And because of that, I know how to put my foot down.

If this was to go anything like my previous hookups, then it would be okay for me and good for him. The experience I'd had with sex led me to believe it wasn't as good as people said—at least not for the woman.

I glanced over at him, imagining what he would be like.

Even though I didn't think sex was all that, my body wanted his. He was my type with his dark hair, thick lashes, and tall, slim build. I wondered if he thought the same about me.

Most of my partners had been far more experienced than me, and I guessed that Sebastian was no exception.

With looks like his, there was no way he hadn't been around. I bet he had a whole encyclopedia in his phone of people he could call to sleep with.

I also bet he had no intention of deleting them, despite us being married.

It was a sham marriage, sure, but still a real one. I had been barred from seeing *anyone* during the next five years, and I wasn't about to risk it—not when I had signed my life away.

No. I was seeing this through to the end.

But I had read Sebastian's contract when I snuck into Martin's office late one night. He didn't have any limitations like I did. And I knew eventually he would look for an out.

It was just something I would have to accept.

"So," I said, putting on my sweetest voice, "the photos from the wedding came out great."

Sebastian looked up for only one second and said, "Yep."

“People love us.”

Sebastian didn’t even look up this time. “They love what they see, yes.”

My heart sunk. He was *so* not into this conversation. Neither was I, really, but *I* was supposed to be the shallow one. I was supposed to be the one who was pretty and charming and nothing else.

“You looked good,” he said. “Beautiful.”

He didn’t look me in the eyes, and I was grateful he didn’t see my wide-eyed, slack-jawed expression. Maybe it was an olive branch. Maybe this was my in.

“Thank you.” My voice was genuine. When he turned to look at me, I blinked myself out of my shocked state. I didn’t need to let my mask slip. Not here. “You looked good too. You have really nice hair. About half of my Instagram comments are about how hot you are.”

Sebastian looked back at his laptop, any hint of interest gone.

“Thanks.”

Had I done something wrong? I was *supposed* to talk about my social media. That was my whole life. He married me knowing that.

But for the shortest of seconds, I wondered if I should try being myself. Deep down, I was into high fantasy and had a habit of writing fanfiction that would never see the light of day. I loved food, despite my restrictive diets, and wanted to try something from each part of America.

Would he be into that?

No, my mother’s voice insisted. *You are your looks, and nothing else. Anything not related to that is a waste of time. No one cares.*

I clamped my mouth shut.

I pulled out my own laptop, knowing there wasn’t much else to do.

It was one of my greatest possessions. My dad had given it to me when I agreed to this marriage. After ensuring there was no spyware installed, I used it for my secret writing.

It was stored in hidden folders, and I only wrote when alone. I’d only ever delved into fanfiction, but I was thinking about making something of my own. That was a long time away, though, and for now, I needed to post again about the wedding.

I ignored Sebastian and uploaded more cheesy posts about my “perfect” marriage. The comments ate it up. They all talked about how perfect we looked standing next to each other, and how amazing it was that

my dad had let go of his public feud with Miller Industries because of our love.

I felt a twinge of anger that my parents' ridiculous plan worked. The buyout was going well, and people were actually shopping at my family's stores more now that Sebastian and I were together. Miller Industries was even doing better since the boycott was over.

I wished it had blown up in their faces.

But because it worked so well, this was my reality for five years. I needed to talk about the perfect love story. I needed to make it look like a man like Sebastian loved me, even if he wouldn't give me the time of day.

I had to lie.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. This felt like a mistake, and it probably was.

One day I'd regret this, but in that moment, all I could feel was free from my modeling career. At least I didn't have to think about it for a long while.

And when it was all said and done, no one would hear from me again.

All I had to do was survive the next five years and make everyone think Sebastian was in love with me.

My eyes slid over to him again. He still had his head in his laptop and was pointedly ignoring me.

This might be harder than I thought.

When we landed at the airport, I was hit with the scent of Puerto Rico. The atmosphere was heavy with salt, humidity, and the remnants of people's sunscreen and body butters. Each time I breathed in, the air smelled differently than before. It was probably because of the hustle and bustle of the airport, but I wanted to revel in it. I wanted to stand still and take in each scent until I had them all memorized.

It was beautiful, and I had no doubt that had I come here alone, I would want to explore everything. There was one of the most biologically diverse rainforests and tons of local, one-off restaurants that would be way better than whatever bullshit chains had made their way into the tourist town we were in.

But I knew I couldn’t just disappear. Sebastian would report that back to Martin, and I worried it would look like I was sneaking off with someone else. Instead, I decided to stay in the hotel and write.

The hotel was a honeymooner’s paradise, so it wouldn’t be so bad. It was lavish, with tall wooden ceilings and cool white marble floors. I silently eyed it in wonder. While my mom had always wanted riches, I hadn’t been raised with money. My dad worked so hard on his small electronics business that we never had time to vacation. This was probably the nicest place I had ever been.

Sebastian didn’t even take notice.

Unlike me, he had been raised in luxury. He had no doubt been on countless amazing vacations; all this was normal to him.

I tried to keep the wonderment off my face. I needed to look like him, like all of this was normal. I needed to keep my rich, spoiled persona turned on. It was what my parents had marketed me as and was the only reason I had gotten this marriage. Sebastian didn’t want a wife who talked about *Game of Thrones* or got buried in a stack of books. He wanted a wife who was pretty, perfect, and could benefit Miller Industries.

We had the honeymoon suite, which was on the top floor of the hotel. The bed was covered in rose petals and there was chocolate and champagne sitting perfectly centered on the huge bed. The headboard was a mirror, designed for couples to see *exactly* what they were doing.

I took a photo of it, knowing this would look good when I had to brag about how perfect our honeymoon was.

Inside, I felt like a bundle of exposed nerves.

I didn’t know what Sebastian had planned for this trip. I didn’t know when he would eventually come on to me, wanting to consummate whatever we had. All I knew was that if he did it before I showered and slept at least two hours, I’d push him off the balcony.

But he didn’t even give me a second glance. He sat at the small hotel table, designed for two, pulled out his laptop from his bag, and got to work.

I blinked at him, wondering just how much fucking work he could have. What did they have him doing where he needed to be glued to technology all the time? Would it have killed him to show interest in his new wife?

I shook it off, deciding to shower. When I was done, I put makeup on my face, knowing that if Sebastian did finally look at me again, he would want to see me as my best.

"Cover those freckles, Lily," my mom said. *"Men don't like imperfections."*

And I always did. My skin hated me, and I sort of hated me too, but this was only for five years. I could survive.

I took my time putting on lavender and vanilla lotions that made me smell amazing. I came out of the bathroom in a silk tank top and shorts, putting my perfect body on display while still looking like I was trying to be casual.

Sebastian glanced up, and his eyes lingered for half a second longer than usual, then he was back to his laptop.

I felt dejected. I looked *exactly* how I was supposed to. My dyed blonde hair was sitting on my shoulders in a way I thought was enticing. My silk pajamas were the epitome of sexy. This *should* have worked.

Then my exhaustion hit, and I was glad I wouldn't have to pretend I was into the idea of sex right now. I needed rest. I didn't look at him as I crossed the suite and laid in the bed. The expensive, soft sheets felt heavenly against my freshly shaven legs and I almost moaned from that alone.

I wondered if Sebastian would eventually come join me. Maybe he would finish with whatever he was doing and wake me up to try something.

But then he didn't.

I slept for fourteen hours. When I woke up, Sebastian was working again. He had changed clothes, but the sheets next to me were unmoved, like he never slept.

Was this man even human?

I didn't say anything to him, only went to the bathroom to check and make sure my makeup was perfect. When I saw my beautifully made-up face in the mirror, I swallowed back a bite of anger. I had done it all right. Why hadn't he been interested?

When I came back out, I wasn't sure what to do with myself. He was focused and didn't care what I was up to. I needed to ask him to pose with me for photos, but I didn't even want to look at him after he had so callously rejected me.

I sat on the bed, trying to think of what I could do to fix this. I thought I had looked perfect enough for him, but what *was* enough for him anyway? Did I need even less clothes?

I bit my lip, and then played another one of my cards.

"I'm going to the pool," I announced before I changed into my bikini. I left the bathroom door open so he could catch a glimpse of me if he only looked up from his stupid laptop.

Instead, he ignored me.

I put sunglasses on and a see-through cover-up as nothing more than a farce of modesty. It hugged the right places though, and the white cloth over my black suit made me look good.

I slammed the bathroom door when I came out, and *finally* Sebastian looked up. His mouth opened, but no words came out. His cheeks darkened and I could have sworn his eyes did too.

But just as quickly as I saw it, it was gone.

"Are you sure you don't want to come?" I asked, the double meaning of my words meant to entice him.

"No, I'm busy," he said.

"I missed you last night."

Ugh. The words felt weird. I was too dead to the world to even know if he was next to me.

"I slept on the couch."

Oh come on.

"Well," I said, keeping my voice light and sweet despite my inner turmoil, "you're always welcome next to me."

"I'll . . . keep that in mind."

And with that, he went back to work.

I frowned at him.

Seriously?

I left without another word. I stalked to the pool deck, feeling like I could explode at any moment. Why did he not seem to care *at all?* Why did he only fucking work?

My phone rang as I sat down, and I sighed in relief when I saw it was Jessie.

"Hey," I answered.

"God, I'm so worried about you. Did he try anything? Do I need to kill him?"

“No to all of those questions,” I muttered. “He didn’t so much as look at me.”

“Oh . . . well, that’s good?”

“No, it’s not.”

“It’s not?”

“Well, maybe it is. But it’s kind of not. He doesn’t care about me *at all*. How the fuck am I supposed to make this work when he won’t even look at me for five seconds?”

“You’re not, Lily. This is a business deal.”

“I know that, but seriously, I’m supposed to be his type. He’s supposed to *look* at me right? Like we’re supposed to have *something*—”

“Lily, this isn’t love,” Jessie said simply. “It’s just convenience.”

“But—”

“Lily, you were forced to marry him. Why does it matter to you if he looks at you?”

Because this was what I was supposed to be. I was doing everything my mother said to do. Men were supposed to *care*.

“Also,” Jessie added, “have you ever considered that he already had someone before you?”

Oh.

Oh no.

My heart sank and my throat closed.

“I . . . I guess I should have,” I said, my voice soft.

Jessie sighed. “This is why I didn’t think this was a good idea. You’re not an item, Lily. You’re a person, and you don’t deserve to be traded off like a pawn.”

“I know and I hear you,” I replied. “But I don’t have a lot of options. If I said no, then it was going to be me modeling forever. And you know how much I hated that.”

Jessie was silent for a moment, and I could picture the look of concern on her face: her eyebrows lowered so far that her eyes were almost shut, her lips in a disappointed frown; she had the same one when I originally told her about this marriage.

“Your family is wrong.”

“They are,” I agreed. “But . . . this marriage is my job. And if he’s obviously not interested in me, then how am I supposed to make this work at all?”

Jessie sighed. “So, what is it you need from him?”

“At this point? Just a photo for Instagram. We need to look like the happy couple we’re supposed to be. But he’s like a robot.”

“Hm. Have you thought about loosening him up? Does he drink? Does he dance?”

“I don’t know.”

Jessie groaned. “This isn’t a lot to work with.”

“I should just take a photo of the water and make it seem like we’re never clothed so we can’t be in the photo.”

“Gross.”

“It’s better than begging for attention.”

“You’re right. Just . . . do that. And stay safe.”

“I will.”

“You’re on a beach, right? Are you doing anything fun?”

“I don’t think I can leave without him. But I came to the pool deck by myself. People are mostly drinking—”

“I don’t care what laws are there—you should not get drunk where it’s not safe.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” I said, standing up to walk around. “Some people are just in the sun.”

“Did you put on sunscreen? If not, you should maybe stay out of the sun.”

“Oh, there’s music across the pool. People are dancing.”

“That does sound fun. You like to dance.”

I looked down at my outfit. “I’m in my bikini.”

“What? Why?”

“Sebastian.”

“He saw you in that and didn’t even look?”

“He did for maybe a minute.”

“Wow,” Jessie said. “And you should change. I don’t think that thing is appropriate.”

“I don’t want to go back there. Think my ugly wedding ring will ward off people trying to dance with me?”

“No, but you should just punch them in the face if they bother you.”

“Maybe I will.”

“Just be *safe*, Lily, okay?”

“I will,” I said, “and look forward to my lovely vague beach post.”

“I definitely won’t.”

We said our goodbyes and I put the phone in the small beach bag I had brought. I took it over to the dance floor where I set it on a new beach chair that was in my sight.

The day was perfect and the weather warm. I kicked off my sandals and found my way into the dancing crowd. I didn’t know why people were drunk and dancing in the late morning of the day, but I had a feeling timing didn’t matter when on vacation. Maybe I could learn a thing or two from them.

A few guys propositioned me as I danced, but I turned them down. Luckily most of them didn’t seem bothered and went to find the next pretty girl to hit on.

For the first time in weeks, I felt a little free. I was enjoying myself. Sure, I’d like to be wearing more clothes and given more freedom, but this was something I could do.

I was so entranced by the music that I totally missed Sebastian.

While checking on my beach bag, I saw him staring at me from nearby. His gaze was so intense that I froze for a moment, wondering what I had done wrong.

I wasn’t dancing with anyone, I hadn’t let anyone hit on me, and I was being safe.

I was also having fun.

Fuck Sebastian. I wanted to keep dancing.

I couldn’t completely forget he was there. I kept glancing over, wondering if he was going to either drag me out of the dance crowd or leave.

He did neither. He only watched.

I wanted to know what he was thinking as I continued dancing. With every turn, I’d look back at him, only to see him still looking at me with an intensity I’d never seen out of him. I almost thought I saw the hint of a smirk on his face. It was gone as fast as it came, and I wasn’t sure if the distance was playing tricks on me—but I could have sworn I saw a crack in the façade I expected. I at least hoped I did.

That was when it hit me.

He liked what he saw.

In an instant, I felt a little more powerful. He had ignored me since we’d been here, but this wasn’t him ignoring me. He was looking at me

dead on.

Eventually he strode over, all confidence, and he grabbed my wrist, stopping me.

“Come back to the room.”

My heart raced under his attention. All thought flew out the window because Sebastian was looking at me with darkened, interested eyes.

And that was all I needed.

I only had time to grab my bag before he was dragging me out of there. I knew he didn’t really like me, but he *was* attracted to me, and for some, that was practically the same thing. This was all I could ask for.

He was quiet, too quiet, and much too into his job for me. But he was hot, and we were married. I didn’t mind sleeping with him. There were worse things I could do.

He kissed me the moment the elevator doors closed. It was so different than the one at our wedding. It was rough and wild and it could only mean one thing.

I was pressed into the metal wall as he towered over me. His kisses were hard and hungry, his mouth moving over mine with enough pressure that had me wanting more.

He was a fantastic kisser apparently.

I couldn’t help the embarrassing moan that escaped me when he swiped his tongue across my lower lip. In turn, he only pressed into me harder, as if he was trying to trap me with his weight.

Then the elevator traitorously dinged, and he pulled away to drag me to the room.

As I fell onto the bed, I knew what to expect. My sexual trysts involved a man trying to get me off for about five seconds, an over-the-top, fake orgasm, and then immediate penetration.

And I was okay with that.

Of course, no one ever told me what was normal, but after sleeping with three men who all followed the same rhythm, I was gearing up to fake the best orgasm anyone had ever heard.

Sebastian was on top of me, continuing to kiss me roughly. His hands wandered, and I enjoyed it when he cupped my breast in one of his hands.

But then he pulled away.

“What do you like?” he asked.

I blinked up at him, not really understanding the question. “What?”

“With sex. What do you like?”

I sat there, unsure of what to say. Finally, I settled on, “It doesn’t matter that much. I just want you to feel good.”

Sebastian’s expression was almost betrayed. For a panicked moment, I thought I had messed this up. But then he shook his head and said, “No.”

“No?”

“It’s not just about me. I don’t want that.”

What was I supposed to say to that? No one had ever asked me what I liked, and what I liked was a blue vibrator that was wrapped up and tucked discreetly in the bottom of my bedside drawer. I didn’t know what I needed when it wasn’t my own hand in control. I didn’t have the words to describe it, either.

He must have sensed my uncertainty, because he said, “We’ll just figure it out, then. You’ll have to tell me if you like it.”

I’d heard this one before, but usually men treated me like a race to the finish line so they could get what they wanted.

His hand trailed down my side, his fingertips leaving ghostly touches on the skin of my stomach and hips. He moved toward the line of my bikini, gently stroking the skin on the inside of my thigh. Leisurely, he moved the fabric, his gentle fingers stroking my clit.

And it felt *good*.

His hand moved slowly, so much than anyone else I’d been with. He pressed into my clit with just enough force, circling it and then going up and down, a satisfying rhythm of movement.

It felt so good, and my body was beginning to come online. My core tightened and grew wet. I gasped for air, but it would take a while for me to come from this.

Probably too long for him.

I opened my mouth to say something but moaned as he went over my clit again with that soft, pleasurable motion.

“We don’t have to do this,” I said, my voice breathy and light from the sheer pleasure I was feeling. “We can do—” another moan escaped me, “whatever makes you feel good.”

“*This* makes me feel good.”

What? He had to be lying. This wasn’t how sex worked.

But he continued: kissing my lips, my neck, and my breasts as his fingers worked in perfect rhythm. I was panting, feeling my body tighten in anticipation of an orgasm.

“Oh, keep going!” I yelled. “Right there!”

He carried on with his movements, putting more pressure on my clit in the perfect way.

“Fuck, Lily. You’re so beautiful. Come for me, honey.”

Holy shit.

Those words sent me tumbling over the edge, crashing through one of the greatest orgasms I’d ever felt.

I was whining his name, arching off the bed, and feeling every nerve ending of my body explode with pleasure. I saw stars and my body shook. It was better than my vibrator had ever been able to give me.

And it was all because of my husband.

I thought I was dreaming. *Did that just happen? Did he actually make me finish?*

“Do you want more?” he asked, his voice husky.

“I want you,” I said. And I meant it. I wanted him in me. I wanted to take him apart like he had just done to me.

“Are you sure? I’m in no rush.”

“I’m definitely sure.”

He pulled away to try and find any hint of a lie in my expression. He didn’t find one.

He got off of me for a second, only to grab a condom, which was surprising. I figured he’d try to get out of them since we were married.

It was kind of hot that he didn’t.

He removed his clothes so tantalizingly slow that I thought I was going to die. But he was so perfect to look at. His broad chest with just a hint of hair. His amazing ass and the length of him all had me staring.

I sat up, realizing I was still in my swimsuit. I took off my cover-up, planning to catch-up with him, but he stopped my hands and said, “That’s my job.”

I blinked in confusion, but then his hands trailed my skin again, touching my hips, my stomach, and then my back. He unhooked my swimsuit top with one movement, but dragged it off of me. His eyes were locked on my breasts as he tossed the material across the room.

He lowered his mouth to one, gently kissing the taut nipple and sending a jolt of pleasure through me.

He continued his way to my stomach, stopping at my bikini bottom. He grabbed the fabric and moved them down my hips, his hands dragging along my skin as he did so.

I shivered when I was fully naked. My pussy was wet and aching for him, especially when he eyed my body so hungrily.

I grabbed him by the nape of his neck and pulled him down to kiss me. He laid on top of me, pinning me to the mattress with the perfect amount of pressure. I opened my legs, angling myself to where he could enter me.

I'd never been this wet for a man before. Usually, when we'd get to penetration, I was never fully ready to take them, no matter their size.

But I was ready this time. In fact, I needed it.

Sebastian slowly pressed into me, making slow work of filling me. It was like an art, or perhaps some form of exquisite torture. I don't know how he didn't lose control, but evidently he kept his composure even in bed.

I wondered if I could break it.

"You don't have to be gentle," I said. "I don't mind it rough."

And I didn't. At least not this time.

As long as he was the one I was with.

Something in him snapped. He slammed into me then, and I got a moment to feel full and complete before he was pulling out and pounding in again.

The stars returned. Never had I felt this relaxed in sex. Never had I enjoyed it this much. Never had I wanted someone to fuck me so raw and passionately.

Sebastian panted, and the fast-paced movement displaced a strand of his always perfectly styled hair. That messiness was so different from what I'd seen from him so far that I felt honored to witness it.

Honored and so fucking turned on.

He was hitting all the right areas inside of me, making me tighten and build to something I'd never felt before. This was not how sex went for me, but I let go, wanting more than anything to see where this led.

And as he fucked me, another orgasm ripped through me.

My entire body clenched as I saw stars a second time. I cried out, moaning his name and how good it felt as he kept thrusting into me over and over.

"Oh, *fuck*, Lily," he said, and I could see him breaking too. He groaned as he came, his hips slowing their roll until he was fully seated in me again. I could feel him twitch inside of me.

Both of us were panting, and I was completely entranced by how disheveled he looked. His hair was messy, his olive skin glistening, his muscles tight.

In that moment, I wanted to open up and tell him *everything*—how no one had been like that before, how I wished we could talk more, and how much I wanted us to work.

"I need sleep," he said, still out of breath. "That couch was not comfortable."

"There's a spot next to me," I said, smiling up at him. It was a genuine smile, and I found myself hoping he would take me up on my offer.

He nodded, and I felt like I'd won the lottery.

Sebastian pulled out of me and went to the bathroom, leaving the door open for me after he was done. I went in, did my business, and fixed my makeup before coming back out. Sebastian was lying in bed on his phone.

I deflated a little. "No cuddles after that?" I asked in a coy voice.

Sebastian looked at me, but his eyes were distant, like they were at the wedding. Slowly, however, he nodded and lifted an arm. I tucked myself into him, enjoying his warmth and solid body.

But I couldn't get his expression out of my head.

I wondered if maybe he wasn't a cuddly guy. Maybe he was doing this to be nice, but I couldn't find it in me to roll away from him and onto my side of the bed. After that performance, I wanted to touch him again.

Obviously, he liked something about me. Maybe it was the swimsuit and see-through cover-up. Maybe it was the dancing. Whatever the reason, I'd gotten lucky enough to be married to a man who could make me come not once, but twice.

I needed to keep him interested.

As I dozed off, my head pillowed on his chest, I wondered what he would think of the real me. Would he like the nerdy, poetic, bookworm version?

I dreamed he did.

And then when I woke up, I was alone.

Sebastian was working again, completely ignoring me. I opened my mouth, but I wasn't sure what to say. Had I imagined what happened the night before? Had I imagined that spark we'd had?

"Working again?" I asked, trying to keep my voice light. "That's no fun."

"I'm busy," he said. "You should go down to the pool and have fun."

"You don't want to go with me?"

He sighed, sounding annoyed.

That was when his phone went off.

"Excuse me," he said, standing. He walked to the balcony, and I heard the beginning of his conversation. "Hey, Heather," he said, his voice soft, "did I miss something important?"

For a second, I didn't understand what I'd just heard.

Then it hit me.

Oh God. Jessie was right. He *did* have someone.

I silently got up and went to the bathroom to get some privacy. My heart was in my stomach and I wanted to throw up.

Why did I sleep with him? Why didn't I listen to Jessie?

Why did I go through with this?

I heard the balcony door shut and I straightened up. He didn't need to know I was upset. It was as my mother said: ladies showed their emotions in private.

I walked out slowly, heading for the balcony.

But then I stopped.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"My assistant," he said without looking at me. "She helps me get stuff done."

Oh, I bet she did.

I shook my head and went out on the balcony, taking my laptop with me.

I had an Instagram post to make.

I threw up something stupid and vague, hinting that Sebastian and I weren't camera ready for different reasons than we really were.

I closed the tab to the app before the comments could come in. When I heard them on my phone, I turned that off too.

Everyone thought Sebastian and I were perfect. Happy.

But I was only angry.

I flipped over to my word processor. I had to get this pain out somehow, and the fanfics I'd been writing weren't enough. No, I needed my own story, one that I created from scratch.

I started typing.

Hours later, I had a chapter and a Band-Aid over my heart.

Photo: a sandy beach with a blanket in view. Lily's legs are seen but nothing else.

LilyRMartin: Sand and sun with hubby! I'd post a pic of us, but we aren't decent *smirking emoji*

TS13fan*:* I'm literally going to make a fan account for you two. I'm OBSESSED!

Chainsawfam: ooh, SPICY!

User837363230: be indecent with me *ten smirking emojis*

Chapter One

Four Years Later

Looking back on Sebastian and Lily Miller's marriage
By Elana Marsh

It's hard to forget when Sebastian asked Lily to marry him. Her Instagram was awash with beautiful photos of them, ranging from their first date, up until she saw her gorgeous three-carat diamond ring.

What was even more surprising was her family's support. It was no secret to the LA crowd that Allen Roberts, owner of Electronic Point, has had issues with its main competitor, Miller Industries, for many years. Mr. Roberts has willingly called for the boycott of the monopoly-in-the-making, and a surprising number of people listened.

But after Lily and Sebastian's love story, both Mr. Roberts and Mr. Miller set aside their feud, and Mr. Roberts even agreed to let Miller Industries buy his company, as long as the two entities kept their respective names. Both had credited their children's love for the end of their disagreements.

Since then, Sebastian and Lily have been living the life of their dreams. They vacation together regularly, and Lily has found herself at the helm of three million followers, a threshold she just cracked this week.

Many have asked, what's next? When will Sebastian and Lily finally have children to round out their perfect family? Well, an insider tells us they're ready to start trying very soon . . .

100 comments

Bulldog1996: Was it a slow week or something with celebrity news? Who cares about these two?

SebandLily4ever: Um, I do! I've followed them since the BEGININNG. You just don't like love when you see it.

BamaFan01: She's hot tho. Damn, and she used to be a model? Dude lucked out.

My haven was the coffee shop on the north side of Los Angeles, the one with the flowers growing out of the walls and only a select few tables.

Jessie and I met there every Monday. It had been hit or miss lately since she had been working on her dissertation, but I still came by the shop dutifully on Mondays.

Today, I saw Jessie's red hair the moment I walked in. She was working on her laptop. I let out a breath of air, feeling a little unfairly annoyed. Jessie didn't have much time for me anymore, but she was diligently working on her master's degree to better her future; I couldn't be mad at her for that, but it didn't lessen the blow of moments like this.

I bought our coffees and sat quietly next to her. I chewed on the inside of my cheek, regretting not bringing my own laptop to work on. I had a meeting with my father-in-law after this, and I didn't want to risk bringing my own personal device to a business meeting—no matter what it was about.

I was more nervous about it than I was letting on. Usually, Miller Industries kept me out of their business. I was their show pony, and Sebastian's arm candy. All of my assignments were trickled down through calendar invitations with Sebastian. It wasn't normal for me to have to go into the office.

I hadn't told Jessie yet. Mostly because she was busy, but partly because I was holding onto the hope that this wouldn't be that big of a deal. Perhaps I would be told to dye my hair, or to lose a little bit of weight.

I could handle that.

Unless it *was* something serious.

"Sorry." Jessie's voice pulled me out of my worrying thoughts. "I saw you come in. I just needed to finish this paragraph."

I nodded and slid her drink over to her, my leg jiggling under the table.

"This is great," she said after taking a sip. "Thank you."

"Yeah, no problem," I replied distractedly.

"Is something going on?" she asked, her eyebrows furrowed. "You look . . . nervous."

"It's nothing . . . maybe," I said. "I don't know what it is."

Jessie's eyebrows rose.

“I’ve got a meeting in an hour at the Miller’s corporate office.”

“Oh,” Jessie said, “are they about to swindle you into another five-year contract?”

My stomach tightened. “No, I don’t think so. I won’t say yes this time.”

Jessie gave me a look that told me she didn’t believe me.

“I really won’t. The merger is done. I get my inheritance in a year.”

“They can still withhold it.”

“We have a contract,” I said, crossing my arms. “And there wasn’t anything in it about additions.”

“You’re really going to trust them?”

I didn’t have anything to say to that, but even if they tried to push me into another contract, I would be able to say no.

A lot had changed in four years, including my situation. Gone was the girl who had no opportunities and didn’t know what to do. If my dad kept my inheritance, it wouldn’t break me.

But Jessie didn’t know about that, and I guarded my opportunities deep within me, even from my closest friends. I didn’t know why I hadn’t told anyone about what I was doing these days, but any time I tried, the words wouldn’t come.

Making a career under a pen name wasn’t my plan, but it had saved me in a way. I’d always written, but something changed after the honeymoon, and my misery crafted a story so bold and dark that I’d gotten a book deal off it, and now a TV show. I’d declined all interviews to stay anonymous, but it seemed to only fuel people’s interest in the series despite no one knowing who the author was.

I was lining up to be the next George R. R. Martin.

Especially if I didn’t get off my ass and write my last book.

“So . . .” Jessie was saying, clearing her throat. “What do you think it is?”

I shrugged, leaning back in the wooden chair. “Don’t know. Maybe a new vacation for Sebastian and me to take?”

Jessie rolled her eyes. “Like that’s so bad. I’d kill for a vacation.”

The vacations Sebastian and I took weren’t *vacations*. Sebastian stayed locked in meetings all day, while I staged perfect Instagram shots to keep up the farce that we were madly in love. Then, we’d take loving photos at sunset and sleep in opposite rooms from each other.

We used to sleep in the same room, but I couldn't manage it when he would come home at ten every single night. My heart told me he was with someone else.

I made an excuse that I slept better on my own.

I didn't say anything to Jessie though. While she was going into debt for her degree, I was complaining about being on the beach and making Instagram posts for my job—even if I was miserable. I didn't want to complain about my "easy" life, not when I knew how hard hers was.

"There is one thing they might ask," I said, the knot in my stomach returning.

"What?" Jessie asked. "Nude photos?"

"A child."

For the first time, Jessie was shocked. Really and truly shocked. Her eyes bugged out, and her stress vein on her forehead bulged. "Like you . . . have a child?"

"It's been a popular comment. A news article reported on it."

"They can't do that. You'd say no, right?"

"Of course I would." And I meant it. My own family hadn't been loving. My mom was distant and image focused. My dad was always at work. The idea of repeating that, especially with a business-minded man like Sebastian made me sick to my stomach.

But to Jessie, I had a reputation of being my family's perfect little daughter. The Lily she knew had no other options and would say yes to anything.

And I was still working on being someone different.

In my head, I'd say no. I'd tell them off and run into the sunset with my middle finger raised to the world. But in reality, I had a lot of loose ends to tie up before I was ready to do that.

I really hoped they didn't bring it up.

"You could leave you know," Jessie reminded me. She told me this every time she saw me.

"I know, and I will."

I believed it, and I was getting things in order to leave in a year. But Jessie didn't know the details, so when she shook her head and turned her focus back to her laptop, I couldn't blame her.

She hadn't believed me in a long time.

Miller’s corporate office was a sleek high-rise nestled in the center of downtown. It was supposed to be the best addition to the LA skyline.

I thought it was the ugliest thing I’d ever seen.

It was a tall box with windows on all four sides. That’s all it was—just another building that sat half empty and bore the Miller name. It took over the place of a small park and gave back an eyesore to the city.

Parking was atrocious, and I wound up having to walk half a mile in the heat before I got to the lobby. I’m pretty sure Martin Miller would actually murder me if I showed up looking anything less than perfect, so I stopped in the lobby bathroom to cool off before heading to the meeting.

My husband and I met in the elevator.

Sebastian still looked the same as his wedding day. His facade never cracked, and I had to wonder if he even had emotions, or if he was a robot built by his father. We had been married four years, and we never really talked. I don’t think he was very interested in getting to know me anyway.

The only surprising thing in our marriage was the random sex we had.

What happened on the honeymoon took a long time to happen again. It was months of radio silence and awkward glances at one another. But eventually, after what I could guess was a bad day at work, Sebastian came home and kissed me, and it devolved from there.

It had been going on like this for four years. I never knew when he would initiate it, and I rarely did. I figured it was when he was between other women.

I glanced at him there in the elevator, clutching my designer bag like a lifeline. He didn’t look at me, not once.

“Do you know what this is about?” I asked. My voice was even, but my heart was beginning to pound inside my chest.

“No,” Sebastian said.

“Really?” I asked, genuinely surprised.

He glanced at me, his face conveying nothing.

“I would have put a subject line if I had known,” he replied.

“I’m sure it will be amazing news as always.” It was a struggle to use my light, airy voice these days. I had to really work to make sure it didn’t escape as sarcasm.

A familiar emptiness settled into my chest at the return of the silence in the elevator. We’d never connected beyond a physical level, and

every time I was reminded of that, I felt an ache beneath my sternum.

It felt like something was wrong, like I'd missed something in my four years of marriage. But as my hope for us died out, this painful throb in my chest only intensified.

The elevator doors opened, and we were finally on the top floor. The city skyline, obscured with smog, stretched out; I admired the view for a moment through the floor-to-ceiling glass doors.

LA was home. I had lived here my whole life and never really thought of living anywhere else. I liked the hustle and bustle. I liked knowing where I was going. I liked the warmth. Plus, my one and only friend was here, even if she was busy these days.

Martin's secretary led us into a meeting room. I saw my father-in-law sitting at the end of an obscenely long table, with my own father to his side.

Oh no. The only time these two were in the same room was when they were discussing one thing:

Sebastian and me.

My dad was a short man with a balding head. He had been under more stress since the merger, but according to stocks, the company was doing well. Sebastian and I were the social media love story that got people buying from either Electronic Point or Miller Industries.

I knew my dad still saw Miller Industries as the enemy. We were a small-time electronics distributor who struggled to establish contracts with companies like Samsung and Apple. Miller Industries owned a large chain that everyone knew.

While we added cities, they tried to stop us from moving up. My dad had been managing a few locations by the time I was born, and my mom was already trying to get her body back up to her standards by the time I was walking. I was just a burden and a way to make money since I was attractive enough to be a child model.

Now Miller Industries was in every major city in the country. My dad's locations still held our name, Electronic Point, but we were a part of the Miller Industries family.

Just like I was—or I was supposed to be.

Even though my face didn't show it, I was panicking. I was begging every god out there that I wasn't about to be shoved into another contract, one that was more binding than I had been given four years ago.

“Son, Lily,” Martin started, a smile on his face. “Happy anniversary.”

Was it our anniversary? I needed to post on Instagram if it was. Shit, was that was this was for? Was I about to get yelled at for not making a social media post?

“Thank you,” Sebastian said, his voice even.

“Yes, thanks,” I said, putting on my trademark model smile. “It’s so nice to be remembered.”

“Of course. How could we forget?” Martin asked. “But of course, we didn’t bring you both here just for this. It’s unfortunate that I must spring this news on you now on such a joyous day.”

News? What news?

“It’s fine,” Sebastian said. “We are always available.”

Ugh. More like *he* was always available. It wasn’t like he had a life outside of work.

“Thank you, son. This is exactly why I want you for this job.”

Sebastian looked at his father expectantly. I braced myself.

“We are opening a new corporate office in Nashville, mainly for Electronic Point. I am moving you to the location for a year to oversee it as the CFO of the company.”

I blinked. CFO? Sebastian was currently only a director. This was a *huge* promotion. I glanced over at him, noticing his expression was not one of pride or excitement.

It was panic.

Why would Sebastian panic about a promotion? This is what he worked all of those long hours in the office for. This was what he *wanted*.

“And Lily,” Martin said, giving me a smile that was anything but kind, “this is a great opportunity for you to prove to the masses how devoted you are to your husband. Moving across the country is a huge commitment.”

I turned to him, unable to believe my ears.

I was expected to go too.

My entire body wanted to revolt. I didn’t want to leave. My life was in LA. All I had known was in LA. My dad’s company hadn’t even started on that side of the country—so why were we opening an office there?

I wanted to scream and cry and do everything I *should* do, considering I was being screwed over.

But I was supposed to be composed. A model daughter. A model wife.

No emotions.

"This . . . is a great opportunity," I said.

Anxiety bubbled in my stomach.

Sebastian glanced at me. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was pissed. Maybe at his father, or maybe at me. I didn't know.

But then he turned back to Martin and said, "It is. Thank you."

"Here are your moving plans. Sebastian, your expectations for the new office are included. Lily, your plans should look the same. Be sure to read these carefully."

Ugh. I took the papers and planned to throw them out the moment I could.

My dad's eyes met mine, and my lip wobbled for a second. He knew what this was doing to me. He knew I hated this marriage, and he knew I was going to run the minute I was out of it.

Even if I was in Nashville.

I had so much to figure out. I had to make sure my agents and editors knew I was moving. I'd have to get a new PO Box and make sure I seamlessly transitioned so no one else found out my pen name. I couldn't put my book series, *The Fair Originals*, at risk.

I made plans in my head of how to move things secretly. I was so busy thinking that the rest of the meeting went by in a blur of male voices. I was barely able to follow Sebastian out when it was over.

"Will you be ready by tomorrow?" Sebastian asked. I blinked, trying to mentally save my plans in my head so I wouldn't forget.

"Ready for what?"

He sighed. "Were you not listening to me when I said we need to find a house immediately? Nashville is a seller's market. It's going to be a challenge purchasing a house."

"Why are we purchasing?" I asked. "We're only there for a year."

"Allen insisted," Sebastian said, his voice tense. "We need to look like we're setting down roots."

"My dad's buying it? Why wouldn't you?"

Sebastian gritted his teeth. "Were you really not listening?"

I shook my head.

"I told him I could, but he told me it was a moving present."

I tried not to balk at how Sebastian could buy a house outright. He made a lot of money as a director. I had no idea how much he would make as a CFO.

“I am assuming you’ll have opinions on where we live,” Sebastian added.

I couldn’t care less, if I were being honest.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll be ready by tomorrow.”

“I feel the need to remind you that this is not a good time to set up the perfect Instagram shot. We’re there to find a house, not pose.”

“I understand,” I said, smothering an indignant reply.

“I’ll have my assistant book us a flight.”

A ball of cotton found its way into my throat at the mention of his assistant. I wasn’t foolish enough to think that Sebastian wasn’t sleeping around, and Heather was definitely one of the women he saw. She looked at him like he was the sun and the moon.

I never paid attention to him looking at her to see if he felt the same.

“Okay,” I said.

There was a beat of silence in the absurdly long elevator ride.

One question rattled around in my head, begging to be asked.

“Are you looking forward to this?”

He paused, and then turned. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he was angry.

“It’s like you said. It’s a great opportunity.”

It didn’t sound like he believed his own words. A glimmer of undesired hope bloomed in my chest.

“A great one to exercise control, perhaps.”

Sebastian turned to me again, looking alarmed.

“I . . . mean your control. Of an office. You’ll be in power.”

Sebastian’s shock cleared, and his expression folded into the one I knew well. “Of course.”

“Sebastian!” Heather said, running up to him in her designer heels. I wondered if Sebastian bought those for her. She was a natural blonde, unlike my dyed hair, with a heart-shaped face and black-rimmed glasses. “I hear you need me.”

That was my cue to leave.

I didn’t say goodbye to either of them. I power walked out the door, trying to think about my writing, but my mind could only think about my

husband.

I wondered if Heather would be sad he was moving.

He didn't feel anything for me, that much was for sure. If there was someone he did feel something for, I bet it was her.

But I had too much to do to dwell on that. I ignored the familiar ache in my chest and tried to keep calm until I was in my car.

And that was when I let the tears come.

Photo: the Nashville skyline in the sunset.

LilyRMiller: I just got the best anniversary present I could ask for! My husband and I get to move to a beautiful new city for a fresh beginning. Stay tuned as I explore all of the amazing things Nashville has to offer!

SebandLily4ever: YESSS! I'm close to Nashville so I can come and find you!

RealBarbaraRoberts: I am going to miss you so much! *five crying emojis*

MartinMiller: Glad to provide such a great opportunity…

Chapter Two

Things only got worse from there.

“I figured it was something big when they called you in. You know this is a way to control you, right?” Jessie said to me when I told her the news.

“I know.”

“This is your chance to leave,” she reminded me.

I shook my head.

Yeah, I had money saved up, but if I wanted a place in LA, I’d need every cent I could get. The sale of my last book would put me over the line for being able to afford a down payment for a decent place here, but then I’d have to figure out if my income was sufficient enough to actually afford a mortgage.

If I was going to do this, I needed that last book sold and all of my inheritance.

“I can’t leave yet, but next year . . .”

Jessie only sighed.

After that, I had to tell my agent I was moving, and they freaked out, asking me a million and one questions on my plan to finish my book and keep my real name under wraps. I didn’t know the answers to any of that yet.

And Sebastian?

He wasn’t any help at all.

He came home late, and I wondered if he had been with Heather. Instead of saying hello, he handed me a stack of photos of houses.

“Pick from these,” he said.

They were only the outside shots of homes: all two-story boxes with different color siding and the same floorplan; the land they were on was tiny, and there was no yard.

I couldn’t find a single one that I cared about.

I didn’t even care about Nashville. It was a smaller city in a new state that would mean nothing to me. I knew I needed to simply pick the prettiest house and move on, but I couldn’t.

The next day, I tried doing research on the city I was moving to. It didn't really help my mood. It was known for country music, which was not something I listened to. People loved the calm vibes and southern hospitality.

But I craved the city. I liked movement and loudness. If Nashville was known for being a city with small-town vibes, then it was the opposite of LA and what I liked.

Needless to say, I still didn't pick a house.

When we were in the airport, I randomly chose three and told Sebastian we would look at those. He didn't answer me, so I figured he was in just as bad of a mood as I was.

As always, we had first-class seats, which Jessie would say was a huge waste of money. It was worth every cent to me, as it meant we collectively had more space and I had breathing room away from my fuming husband.

When we landed, I gagged when I saw the airport was filled with cowboy hats. People pushed past each other like they were all late to the same event. It was like the worst parts of LA combined with terrible fashion. It was so crowded that even Sebastian had to grab my hand to prevent me from being inadvertently ushered away from him.

"Where y'all heading?" our Uber driver asked. I couldn't help but grimace at the accent.

Sebastian told the woman the address of the first house on the list. I dug my teeth into my bottom lip to stop my emotions from exploding out of me.

"I think I've seen y'all before," she said. "Famous?"

Ugh. Of course she'd notice.

"You might have seen my wife on Instagram."

Sebastian looked at me expectantly. This is where I was supposed to gush about my "passion."

"Oh yeah," I said, ignoring the hot wave of nausea in my stomach. "I do a lot of traveling and photos and . . . lifestyle stuff. Sebastian here also works for Miller Industries."

"Oh, is this for the new electronic company office opening here?" she asked. "I saw that on the news. Everyone is so excited. We love new job opportunities."

My dad would be livid if he knew that people recognized this new office under the Miller Industries title.

Instead of correcting her, I nodded. “Yep, that’s the one.”

“The actual name will be Electronic Point,” Sebastian added.

“Oh yeah,” the driver mused. “I think I remember that name. They have Miller Industries on the building that’s going up.”

I had to hide a laugh. This was what my dad deserved.

“I think my sister is going to apply,” she said. “Would she like it there?”

“As long as she likes working,” I replied. It was a nicer way of saying what I really thought about Miller Industries.

Sebastian glanced over at me, eyebrows raised. Usually, I gushed about how much I loved our parents’ companies.

“I’ll have to let her know I met y’all! Maybe my sister can get an interview.”

There was a lull in the conversation, and I knew this was where I would oftentimes jump in. I was supposed to be the outgoing one, but I wasn’t feeling up to being that right now.

Instead, we drove in painful, awkward silence.

When we arrived at the first house, I blinked up at the boxy, weird design. In photos, I knew this place looked modern, and barely had a yard, but it was so much worse in person.

“Hey!” our real estate agent called as she climbed out of her car. “Nice to meet you guys in person. I’m Jordan.”

“Lily,” I said, mustering up a plastic smile.

Late summer in Nashville was brutal. Since I was from LA, I was used to heat, but this was the wet, oppressive kind. I had never dealt with this before. It was like wearing another layer.

“So, what do you think?” Jordan asked.

“It’s spacious,” Sebastian said.

“More house than yard,” I added.

“Yeah, some of the people who move here don’t want to maintain a yard,” Jordan said. “From what your husband said online, y’all don’t either.”

I glanced at Sebastian, who was too busy looking at the house rather than at me. If we did have a yard, it would either be me or mowers doing the work, since Sebastian was too busy for it. On the outside it looked like

another chore, but every one of the older homes had a much bigger outdoor space.

Jordan caught me glancing over at the smaller, older homes.

“Oh, those are the original homes. A lot are remodeled, but some are original. They usually have larger yards, and developers buy them and demolish them to make room for three or four of these.”

“They put that many onto one lot?” Sebastian asked.

Jordan shrugged. “Yeah, but gets more houses for people to live in, I guess.”

I looked over at the neighboring houses, which were right on top of ours. We all shared a driveway.

In LA, we lived in a secluded, modern home. We had neighbors, but nothing like this.

The inside of the house was nice, though I was more excited about being in an air-conditioned room than anything else.

Everything was grey and white. There was no furniture, and everything was builder grade.

It was made as a cash grab. It was made to accommodate people who weren’t even from here. It was boring.

The next two houses we saw were the exact same. The third one was even in the backyard of the second one we viewed. I tried to pretend to like what I saw, but Jordan could tell that I wasn’t into any of them.

Sebastian didn’t seem to care, once again.

“Are you sure you want a newer home?” Jordan asked after the third viewing. “I know your hubby said you liked newer things, but it doesn’t seem like you like any of these at all.”

I glanced over at Sebastian, who was on his phone. “Let me talk to him.”

“Which house do you want?” he asked when I approached him.

“Why did you only choose new houses?”

“They’re the nicest ones here.”

I shook my head. I knew I shouldn’t really care about the house we’d pick, but I did. If I was doing this, then I wanted *one thing* I could enjoy. I didn’t get to pick out the house Sebastian and I lived in now. He already owned it when I met him. This time, I wanted to have a say beyond the same three canned designs.

“What?” Sebastian said, looking up.

“They’re . . .” Dull. Unvaried. Boring designs created in mass to produce as many houses as they could with the smallest investment they could muster up. “Basic.”

“I thought this is what you’d like.”

“This? The newest, ugliest thing in town?”

“It’s the closest thing to houses in LA,” he said.

I shook my head. “This isn’t LA. These houses are misplaced and horrendous. They look like wooden shoeboxes with stapled siding that would blow us out of this dimension if we were in a storm. I don’t like them.”

Sebastian only blinked at me.

Shit. I wasn’t supposed to have opinions. I wasn’t supposed to make metaphors and use descriptors.

I was supposed to use that only in writing.

“If we’re putting down roots,” I said, trying to make my voice light and airy like he was used to, “then we should do what the locals do.”

He nodded, and without any further questioning, he turned to Jordan.

“Let’s look at the older houses.”

“Oh, I have some beautiful ones then!”

The one she chose wasn’t far from us. It was nestled on a corner lot and had a large yard. There was one neighbor, and their house looked original.

It had painted blue siding and a long, stone pathway leading up to a red door. When I saw it, my heart reached out for it. I didn’t think I could want anything in this town, but this I loved.

“All right, here we are!” Jordan announced. “It’s two floors, but a little smaller than what you’re used to. It’s move-in ready and has some of the original detail of the house.”

I blinked up at it. “Can we go in?” My voice was hushed, awestruck.

What I was feeling from seeing the outside only doubled when we walked inside.

Beautiful wood flooring, arranged in intricate geometric patterns flowed from the foyer into the deeper parts of the house. Gorgeous, shiny, wooden planked steps led to the second floor. The wallpaper was new, and a gorgeous, picture-ready emerald with ornate floral designs.

I almost cried.

“It’s nice,” Sebastian said. I blinked, trying not to show how much I *wanted* this.

“There are three bedrooms,” Jordan said as she walked us into the foyer. “One is a master, which is downstairs, and there are two others and a bathroom upstairs. The kitchen is back here,” she said as we walked through the living room, “and it’s been updated with new appliances and countertops.”

The kitchen was gorgeous. The countertop was butcher block on the island and quartz on the rest. The cabinets were two-toned, the top light blue, and the bottom navy.

“That’s the look I like to see,” Jordan said, glancing at the deep interest on my face.

Sebastian followed her gaze, and I tried to squash my amazement that something in this town could be so beautiful.

“It’s . . . nice,” I said. I could think of a hundred other words to call it, but I kept them in.

“She’s near tears!” Jordan said, laughing. Sebastian looked at me again, his face entirely unreadable.

He stared at me for a moment, and then turned to Jordan. “This is the one,” he said.

“Oh! You’re quick deciders. Before I write up an offer letter, you need to see the other bedrooms. They’re lovely too!”

The master bedroom was spacious and had a large tub in the adjoining bath, but one of the bedrooms upstairs had a reading nook that I needed in my life. With so much natural light, inspiration immediately flowed through me.

I wanted that one.

“Congratulations!” Jordan said as we signed paperwork to put the offer down and told my dad which one we wanted. “Thanks for working with me today.”

She left us in the driveway of what would be our future home, and I couldn’t look away.

“You really like this house,” he murmured.

“It’s good for photos,” I muttered, even though that was *definitely not* why I liked it.

“Right,” he said. “I’m sure it will look great on Instagram.”

I nodded, but the ache in my chest wanted me to holler from the rooftops that I *hated* social media. I wanted this house because it was beautiful, not because of what it could do for me. *Reach out,* it told me. *You want this.*

I shook it away. I didn't want to have conversations with Sebastian. I wanted to be free from my family and write my books in peace. Anything else was a lingering hope that should have died four years ago.

Sebastian and I rode back to the airport without another word to each other.

As we did so, I looked at all the restaurants Nashville had to offer. I was surprised that it rivaled LA in diversity. If I were by myself, I would have stopped and tried as many of the restaurants as I could.

I saw ramen places, hot chicken restaurants, and brightly lit taco trucks. Maybe I'd find time to try some of them while Sebastian toiled his nights away at the office.

But for now, we were going back to LA for the last time.

After our flight, I was exhausted. I walked through the monotone colors of Sebastian's house, and went to my room, which was on the opposite side of the house. It was one of the last times I'd sleep there, and I couldn't bring myself to care. It was all I could do to post a photo on Instagram before I flipped off my light and went straight to bed.

Photo: Sebastian and Lily on their last vacation.

LilyRMiller: Throwback to my vacation with this hunk! We've been SO busy planning our new lives in Nashville. I can wait to share more with you!

SebandLily4ever: When are you going to have babies?? I saw the article and I CAN'T stop thinking about it!

Cupcakedevourer: The way people talk about your relationship is gross. I am so sorry guys…

SebandLily4ever: They share it with us because they love us! They want us to comment!!!

Chapter Three

“You don’t have to do this.” Jessie said. It was the day of the move. All of my stuff was packed for the plane, and our old house was on the market to be sold.

We were standing in the living room while Sebastian was in his own room, packing up last-minute things.

I hadn’t been thinking too hard about it. Jessie had been distant the last few days, but I hoped it was because she was busy and not because she was avoiding me. Thankfully, she did come to see me before I left.

I sighed. “But I do. It’s only for a year, though.”

She shook her head, looking frustrated. “Why are you still doing this?”

“What?”

“This marriage. Why are you still going through with it? You could live with me, or even one of my friends. You could get out if you wanted to, but you stick around and have no control over your life, for what—money?”

I stared, unsure of what to say.

“Is the money that important to you?” she asked insistently.

“Yes . . . I mean, no. Of course not,” I said. “But even if I did stay with you, I’d have to have an income somehow. You know how expensive LA is, and I need the inheritance in order to stay here. I don’t want to start over somewhere else.”

“Like you are now.”

I looked at my feet. “You know I don’t want to do this.”

“Then don’t. Who are doing this for? You dad? Sebastian?”

It took me a very long time to answer her. “I’m . . . doing it for me.”

“You just said you didn’t want to do this. You should do something for yourself for once and leave.”

I *was* doing something for myself. I was trying to write my last novel. I had created a whole world with my pen name and was trying to make enough to be able to live comfortably.

But I couldn’t tell her that. Not here, not now.

“I’m doing the best I can. I signed a contract,” I said, shaking my head. I floundered to come up with an excuse that didn’t mention my books.

“I can’t just walk away—”

“Are you staying because you think you can somehow win Sebastian over?”

“N-no. I don’t think that.”

At least I *shouldn’t* think that way.

Would it have been nice to find some sort of kindred spirit in Sebastian? Of course. I would have loved for him to confide in me that he felt as trapped as I did. It would have been great to hear him tell me he wanted to know the real me and not the version of myself I faked. Anything other than this cold, dreaded silence would have been preferred.

But those ideas were dreams, not reality.

Jessie shook her head. “We’ve been friends most of our lives, but I can’t do this anymore.”

Her resigned words forced me out of my own thoughts. “What?”

“I can’t watch you get steamrolled by your family anymore. I’ve given you outs. I’ve offered help. But you’re not changing or growing or doing *anything* other than what they’re telling you to do. You’re their lapdog.”

I stared. *She was done with me?*

My jaw fell open as the weight of her words hit me. Now was *not* the time to have this conversation—not when I was moving away. I knew from her point of view, she was right. But in the background, I had been rebelling in my own way.

Maybe I should tell her about *The Fair Originals*. She was my best friend. She should know.

But Sebastian was nearby, and if he found out, then Martin would too. I couldn’t destroy my only chance to have a life for myself in one year’s time. I needed to keep it a secret.

“We need to go,” a third, much deeper voice said. We both turned to see Sebastian had entered the room, looking like the perfect businessman in his dress shirt and ironed pants.

His jaw was clenched, and I wondered how much he’d heard.

Jessie sighed and shook her head again. “Good luck out there. If you ever decide you’re done with all of this, then you know where to find me.”

She breezed past Sebastian, out the door, and got into her car. She was so eager to leave that her tires squealed as she backed out of the driveway.

“What was that about?” Sebastian asked.

I looked at him, not expecting him to ask.

“Nothing,” I muttered. “Let’s just get on this plane.”

My voice was the opposite of what it should have been, dark and deep instead of the burst of sunshine everyone had come to expect from me.

“Lily, wait. Why do you sound upset?”

“I’m not,” I lied.

“What did Jessie say to you? That didn’t seem like a goodbye. It sounded like she’s trying to convince you out of this move.”

“It’s nothing,” I repeated.

“Do you not want to do this?” he asked.

If I said yes, there was nothing we could do about it. I couldn’t tell him how I really felt, because if I let my cracks show, others would hear about it.

“This is a great opportunity,” I managed to choke out. I tried to shove my pain into its usual box, but it was beginning to overflow.

Sebastian stared at me, and I wondered if he expected me to tell him truth. *But how could I?* No one wanted my truth.

I wished I could sound happy. I needed my light and airy personality.

But it was gone.

“We have a flight to catch,” I reminded, and I walked out of the house. We took my car to the airport, and I was grateful to have some distraction from what just happened. I didn’t know what I would have done if I’d spent the drive looking out the window.

I assumed Sebastian already sold his car. His had been missing for days. Mine would be next, and I hated that this would be the last time I drove it. My Volvo was a gift from Sebastian for our first anniversary. Even though it was only for me to show off on Instagram, I genuinely liked it.

Sebastian had told me not to worry about my car. It would be taken care of. *How* it would be taken care of, I had no idea.

I guessed it would be sold. Sebastian’s father and Martin Industries as a whole treated objects and people like they were disposable. There was no room for attachment in their quick moving world.

So, me being attached to my car meant nothing. It would be sold, and I’d get another one in Nashville. That was the easy thing to do, after all.

When we pulled in, I was blinking back tears.

I felt sick as I left the skyline I knew, but I pushed it down in favor of making a bullshit social media post about new beginnings.

I was so emotionally drained when we arrived that I could have slept for a week. Luckily, the airport was less busy, but there were still tourists stopped in the middle of the walkways, checking their phones rather than getting out of the way.

The house dad bought us was on the northeast side of the city. We rented a car, and the ride was spent in silence as I stared out at the highways and foliage we passed, feeling numb.

After living in LA my whole life, I became attached to the familiarity of the road names, the trees, and the restaurants. Now I knew nothing, and I couldn't wait for this year to be over.

The house was the one bright beacon in all of this. I felt a little bit of peace looking at the one thing I had a say in.

The house was empty when we entered, and I looked around, imagining all the ways I could fill it.

"Take the master bedroom," Sebastian said.

"I don't need it. I want the room upstairs with the nook."

He turned. "What? You had the master bedroom in the last house."

"Not this time," I said, walking up the stairs without another word. I put my carry-on in my room, looking at the wallpapered pink walls and original hardwood floors.

This was home—and for once, I wasn't mad about it.

But I was mad about everything else.

Tears pricked my eyes. Jessie was done with me, and I didn't know how to deal with that. Moving already had me on my last string of sanity. Jessie leaving snapped it.

I had an image to keep up, and I knew it, but I didn't think I could do it for Sebastian anymore.

I knew he could tell Martin, but at this point, if Martin found out about anything I did, I could tell him exactly what Sebastian was doing with Heather.

Neither of us were perfect anyway.

I put my carry-on, which held my laptop with all my writing on it, in the closet. I'd need to get some work done soon, but for now, I had to hope no one would find it.

"Are you sure you don't want the larger room?"

I jumped, throwing my body in front of the closet door. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m making sure you don’t lose out on the room you want because you’re being petty.”

I glared. “This one is fine.”

“Is it?”

“Yes,” I said. “I like the nook, and I can get some books up here.”

“Books?”

“Social media books,” I corrected. “I have to stay up on the trends.”

It was a bad excuse. Did they even make books on trends? And if so, wouldn’t they be out of style by the time they were publicized?

Luckily, Sebastian didn’t call me out on it. He looked away. “Right. Definitely. You should put what you love there.”

I gritted my teeth to keep from arguing that I did *not*, in fact, *love* social media.

“I’ll figure it out,” I said.

“Great. We can do that now.”

“What? Don’t you have work to do?”

“The office isn’t open yet.”

“Okay, then I can locate a table so you can work on your laptop.”

“The house doesn’t have internet yet.”

“Then what do you want me to do?” I asked, frustrated.

He sighed. “Let’s go furniture shopping.”

“Together?”

“Why would we do it separately? We only have the rental car.”

“Because you haven’t wanted to do anything with me other than occasionally sleeping together.”

Sebastian stared at me, and I realized I had said that thought *out loud* rather than keeping it to myself.

That wasn’t supposed to happen.

I cleared my throat. “I mean, you prioritize work.”

He shrugged, eyes trained on the floor. “There’s nothing I can do right now. It’s the weekend.”

I was sure he could find something to do, but I also wasn’t about to go exploring through a city by myself. Being alone and a somewhat recognizable woman in a new city meant I’d either get stopped for photos or mugged.

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s just go to IKEA and pick out a bunch of furniture.”

“Nashville doesn’t have an IKEA.”

“What?” I almost hissed, my body growing tense. “How do you know that?”

“I looked into Nashville before we moved. Apparently it was a huge deal around here. They wanted to open one, but they backed out.”

“What?” I said, my voice a little higher than it should have been. “How could it not have—all major cities have one!”

He let out a long, pained breath. “Obviously not all of them, considering Nashville is a major city.”

Irritation crossed his face at my tone, and honestly, I didn’t blame him. The least of our problems was not having an IKEA, but dammit, I felt joy when exploring their purposefully confusing store.

“You want IKEA furniture?” he asked. “Seems a little below your taste.”

“We’re here for a year. It’s not a massive deal.”

And besides, I’d started looking at prices for furniture once I knew I would be able to escape. The sticker shock of it all made me question if I could even do this. IKEA wasn’t expensive like other places. I could stand looking at those prices.

“Remind me again why we didn’t bring the furniture from the LA house?” I asked.

“Half of it wouldn’t fit through the door,” he said, and that was true. This house was worlds apart from our old one.

“Okay,” I said. “Maybe we can go to some other furniture store.”

“Sure, but it will be a few weeks. Most of that stuff comes from the warehouse.”

“So, I won’t have a bed for a few weeks?” I asked. “No, there has to be a better option.”

“We could get it today by going to a vintage store. I bet it will all be in the local Nashville chic style. We could be more authentic.” His mouth quirked. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he was teasing me.

I wanted to kill him for mentioning being authentic in that moment. I’d said that to bullshit my way into getting this house. I hated when it was being repeated back to me.

I didn’t like Nashville chic. It was rustic and not what I saw myself surrounded with, but I was stuck in this damn city, and I didn’t want to have to wait weeks for basic furniture.

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s go there then.”

Sebastian looked shocked for a moment, but then he asked, “Are you sure about this? I don’t think you’re going to find anything.”

“I don’t think you will either, but maybe we’ll surprise each other.”

We wound up at a refinished furniture store right next to an antique shop.

This was the kind of place Jessie and I would frequent in LA whenever she moved and needed new furniture.

But thinking of Jessie made me close my eyes for a moment. God, it hurt that she was done with me. I couldn’t even blame her, because I was a little done with myself too.

“Want to go to a different store?” Sebastian asked, an edge of pride in his voice.

I wasn’t frozen in place because of the store. I was frozen in place because I missed my best friend.

“I’m fine,” I said.

He looked over at me, lips downturned, and I couldn’t help but notice that he looked out of place in here. Hell, maybe I did too.

But the other guests were all varying degrees of dressed. There were a couple of people who looked as dressed up as I was, a few were wearing whatever seemed to be comfortable, and some were older individuals talking to a worker about the antiques.

“No cowboy hats,” I muttered to myself.

“I think it’s more of a tourist thing.”

“That’s a relief,” I said, and began walking through the store, examining the pieces with a critical eye.

Sebastian was right about one thing: this was all in the Nashville style. There weren’t a lot of modern pieces. Most of it was either wood toned or painted wood toned.

“It goes without saying,” I told him as we looked through the stuff, “I don’t want a vintage mattress, and I’m not so sure about a couch.”

“If we get one, we would have to order it, unless you want one of the cheap ones they keep in stock.”

“Definitely not.” That was one thing I never budged on. The last thing I needed was lower back pain on top of everything else going on.

“Most places don’t have the mattresses you like in stock.”

I shrugged. “Target has air mattresses. I can handle it for a little while if it means we get better mattresses.”

He looked at me again with that almost confused expression. I glanced away, realizing I was slipping from surface-level Lily to writer Lily. He’d probably heard twenty new words from me today alone.

I focused my attention back on the furniture. I could panic over my slip-ups later.

While these items were restored, there were lots that held their original charms. All of them were solid and had been well loved throughout their lives. Seeing them made me wish I had something with love and history the same way.

It was a feeling I hadn’t had before.

“I like this set,” I muttered as we walked into the back corner of the room. The four-post bedframe was made of intricately carved dark-stained wood and was too old to hold a modern mattress. I would need to order a platform bed to make sure it was stable.

The drawers for the matching dresser had been oiled recently, making them glide effortlessly. The beautiful designs were too perfect to pass up. There was also a bookshelf that looked like it could hold over a hundred books. It would look amazing in my room with the nook.

“You like this?” he asked.

“It matches the house,” I replied. I wondered if I should pivot, and maybe reiterate how blending in with Nashville would make it seem like we were laying roots or some other bullshit, but I didn’t want to make it about images. I simply wanted this.

“It’s definitely interesting,” Sebastian replied, looking at it.

“I’m going to get it for my room.”

Sebastian stared. “And you’re sure this is what you want?”

“Yeah, it is,” I said.

He stared at me, eyebrows knitted, and I wondered if he would tell me this stuff wasn’t worth it. But I wanted it anyway. I would pay for it myself if I had to.

Instead, he walked over to a metal bed frame, and pointed to it. “Then I’m getting this one.”

It looked both industrial and rustic. It would be perfect for a home in Nashville, but not what I would have figured was perfect for him.

But I didn't exactly know him all that well, did I? He lived a whole life without me.

"I'll go see if we can get it delivered," he said. "Worst case, I have to get a moving truck."

"I can help lift it."

He raised an eyebrow at me.

"You know I lift weights, right?" I told him. "This picture-ready body doesn't just happen on its own."

I cringed as I said it. Trying to sound shallow after the day I'd had was difficult. All I wanted to do was go into my writer's shell and ignore the world. Apparently I wanted it so badly it was slipping past my usual death grip.

"There's a huge difference between Pilates and putting furniture into a moving truck."

"Pilates is more strength training than you think," I muttered.

"When have you ever had to move a thing in your life?"

"I helped Jessie move into her apartment last month," I said, rolling my eyes.

"You never told me about that."

"You were busy at the office," I said, shrugging. "But it doesn't matter. The point is, I can help move this stuff. We only need the truck."

Of course the small shop didn't offer delivery, so Sebastian had to rent a U-Haul truck for us. I stood to the side, trying and failing to put my façade back on. Every time I reached inward and tried to pull out my perfect model smile, my shallow upbeat voice, it wasn't there.

"Do you need help?" the shop owner asked as Sebastian backed into the loading area. I eyed the man, who looked like a gust of wind could knock him over.

"No, it's okay," I told him. "I'm stronger than I look."

"These pieces are real wood. They're not the plastic crap you get in other places."

"Okay," Sebastian said as he got out the truck. "This will fit everything."

"Your wife here says you don't need help."

Sebastian looked at me doubtfully.

I sighed and went to the end of the bed frame to lift. “You get that side, I’ll get this one.”

“Lily—”

“How about you let me show you, okay?” I snapped.

“This thing is easily a hundred pounds.”

I rolled my eyes and lifted the weight of half the bedframe.

Sebastian and the shop owner stared.

“Do I need to lift this myself?” I asked impatiently.

“No,” Sebastian said, moving to grab his side. “Let’s do it.”

I lifted when he did, and together we got it on the truck. The bookshelf and dresser were a little harder, but eventually, they got put in too. I didn’t complain once because I knew this was going to be enough of a workout to let me skip the gym.

“Wow, miss,” the old shop owner said as I moved the bookshelf into the truck. “I didn’t think you had it in you, but you’re stronger than most men. Tiny too.”

I could credit that on all the trainers my mother pushed on me.

Ugh. I needed to find a gym if I wanted to stay in shape, and until this contract was over, I had to.

“Thanks,” I said, flashing him a smile. “We both have to pull our weight moving, right?”

“Most of the time it’s the guy and his friends doing it all. You’re one strong woman. Be sure to keep her, man,” he said to Sebastian.

I tried to keep the grimace off of my face as I waved. The shop owner went back inside, and I turned.

“Oh yes, keep me because I can lift furniture and not because of my personality,” I muttered, rolling my eyes again.

Sebastian was staring at me as if he had never met me in his life. I gritted my teeth, knowing he’d probably heard what I had meant to be said to only myself.

It would have been lovely if I could have found the energy to *not* be myself.

“Anyway,” I said. “We need to order mattresses and get more stuff from Target.”

“We also need to get this stuff home,” he reminded me. “Let’s do that first, and then we’ll see about an air mattress.”

After dropping all our new furniture into the living room of our house and stopping by a mattress store, we went to a nearby Target for essentials.

“We’re just here for a few things,” Sebastian reminded me, as if I were a child who wanted to go crazy the moment I stepped into a store.

“Yep,” I replied as we walked in.

Target was the same no matter where you went. It had been over a year since Jessie and I went shopping together, but I sometimes went by myself when I was bored. There was a ton of fall decor out, but I knew Sebastian wouldn’t be interested in shopping around. He must have thought I was going to stop, because he kept looking over at me with a confused expression on his face.

When we got to the camping section, I groaned. There was only one air mattress left. It was a queen, but Sebastian and I never shared a bed these days.

“You can just stay in a hotel, Lily,” Sebastian said as I put it in the cart.

“I’m not staying in a hotel when we have a house,” I replied. “That’s a waste of money.”

“I’ll pay for it.”

“What—is it *that* bad to sleep next to me?” I said.

“It’s an air mattress and you like to be comfortable.”

That was the final straw.

“I am uncomfortable plenty of the time, Sebastian,” I said it lowly, almost like a growl. “I’m married to a man who barely acknowledges me. I moved across the country because I was forced to. I can sleep on an air mattress for one night. If it’s too much for you, then go get a hotel for yourself.”

“What is going on with you?” he hissed.

I froze. I *had* to stop letting my facade slip. I needed to be perfect again.

And yet I couldn’t be.

“I’m fine,” I said, dropping my anger. “I-I’m sorry. I’ll get it together. I’m just stressed from this move.”

I walked away. I couldn’t afford to snap anymore.

“Lily,” he said, grabbing my arm. “What did Jessie say to you? You’ve been off ever since then.”

“I’m off because I’m in a new town with no one, Sebastian. Just give me a day.”

“Give you a day to what? Completely change your personality?”

“Yes,” I said. “That way, you won’t ever have to see this side of me again.”

“What can I do to make this easier?”

I was shocked by his words. When he raised his eyebrows expectantly, I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“Do you want to go through the fall decor section?”

“Why?” I asked, voice hard. “Because I’m basic and want to make the house pretty for photos?”

He clenched his teeth, looking close to snapping. But then he took a deep breath and continued. “Because you always decorate this time of year. I thought you liked it.”

“For photos, right?”

“You don’t have to take photos of anything. I’m offering to do something you like because it’s obvious you’re struggling. Is that so bad, Lily?”

Oh.

Oh.

I stared at him, feeling as shocked as he probably did earlier when I’d lifted the furniture. I was sure he would hate every second of this, but I could also admit that forgetting about my problems and looking at home decor was tempting.

“Okay,” I said, “let’s go look for a bit.”

He gestured for me to lead the way.

My cheeks were on fire. “Thank you,” I said quietly. I darted away before he could take it back or make me blush worse by continuing to be unusually nice.

He followed me dutifully.

The thing about decorating for fall in LA was that there was no actual *fall*. People there decorated to match the aesthetic of the season, though the weather never cooled enough to evoke images of wind-swept scarves on a blustery day of October. Shopping for orange leaf wreathes and spiced apple candles in the heat of summer wasn’t unusual; in fact, it was more reminiscent of home than I expected.

At least in Nashville, I knew fall would eventually come, followed by a mild winter.

The seasonal section was packed with others looking to snatch up the newest, cutest fake foliage to deck their halls, and I couldn't help but have a few items catch my eye, including decorations in rich brown tones.

I wandered through the section before getting to the nearby blanket section.

I didn't know what kind of couch we were going to get, but I wanted something to match the kitchen. I stared at the blankets, wondering which would be similar enough to the brightly colored walls.

"Those would go good with the house," Sebastian said softly.

I looked at him, a little alarmed. I didn't expect him to participate. "I don't have to have anything. We have other things to do."

"But this is what you like. It's okay to take a moment to do something for yourself."

"Since when do you believe in self-care?" I asked.

"I may not have time for it, but you do."

I looked away. I didn't really. I needed to be writing my last book, not shopping at Target.

But the last thing I wanted to do was write after the day I'd had.

"I don't know what kind of couch we're getting, but I'm thinking it could be nice to get something grey, and then these blankets will go with it." I pointed out the soft, fuzzy orange blanket in front of us.

"That could work," Sebastian said. "But . . . maybe the white ones would look better with grey? The house is colorful enough. Maybe neutrals would be nice."

I blinked and looked where he was pointing.

"Maybe," I walked over to them. "It may be better to steer toward achromatic decorations."

"Achromatic?"

Shit. I'd done it again.

"It means without color."

"Where did you learn a word like that?"

"A dictionary. Does it matter?"

"I suppose not." He looked at me doubtfully. "You're acting so different."

“Maybe only talking about Instagram shots and what I’m wearing grows tiring.” I pinched the bridge of my noise. “I’ll get it in check.”

“Why should you get it in check?”

“Because this isn’t what I was contracted to do.”

Sebastian shook his head, but I held my hand up.

“Please. Not today,” I said, because I did not want to break down in front of him. There was something about the man I’d attached every negative emotion to being kind to me that made me want to sob.

He sighed and looked away. Eventually, he said, “I . . . like dark grey. Achromatic is a good theme.”

Well, at least he wasn’t making fun of me. I threw the blanket in the cart and wound up getting a wreath from the fall section too. It would look nice against the red door.

At checkout, I figured one of two things would happen: when it came time to pay, Sebastian would pay and grumble about it, or tell me to use my allowance to pay for it myself.

I had my hand in my bag, ready to take the hit on my savings if I had to, but Sebastian didn’t so much as look at me as he paid for everything.

“Do you,” I paused to swallow the ball of cotton that was lodged in my throat, “do you need me to pay you back for the decorations?”

“Why would I ask you to do that?”

“Because you said we were only here for the air mattress.”

He sighed. “I offered, Lily. It would be a dick move for me to offer and then make you foot the bill.”

He wasn’t wrong, but I didn’t expect him to follow through with it.

“Okay,” I said, “thank you, then.”

I knew logically that material possessions didn’t actually create happiness, but perhaps a husband doing something nice for his wife did.

I was quiet on the way home, trying to reconcile Sebastian’s kindness to the man I thought I knew.

I didn’t get very far.

When we got home, he blew up the air mattress in the living room. I rush ordered two mattresses from a nearby store to be delivered the next day. After, I sat on the floor, still trying to process, but also remembering that I needed to write and hadn’t yet.

My agent was going to skin me alive.

But I was too distracted to write. This was the longest Sebastian and I had ever spent together, and it wasn't that bad. I think this was the longest he had gone without working in the entire time I knew him.

"There," Sebastian said, "it's blown up."

The absence of the air pump's *whirring* brought me back into the moment. I got out the blankets we were going to use and laid down. Sebastian stayed on the floor, leaning against the wall. I laid on my side, waiting for him to do the same.

When he didn't, I turned to him.

"You can lay down, you know," I said. "I'm not going to kick you or anything."

He was silent for a long moment, and I wondered if he was ignoring me. Instead, he said, "I didn't want to come here."

"To the house?" I asked. "You can still change your mind about the hotel. Unless you hate the house, then . . . I don't know what to tell you."

"The house is fine," he said, sighing. "I'm talking about the whole move. Nashville. The new office. I didn't want this."

"I thought you'd be happy. You get to run a whole office."

"Maybe I should be," he said quietly. He then looked at me. "We went all of today, and you didn't take one single photo. Are you that upset we were forced to move out here?"

Honestly, I'd forgotten to take photos. I didn't live my life needing a picture of everything I did.

But I was supposed to.

"Of course I'm angry about moving here," I said. "It's the last thing I wanted to do."

"I'm sorry, then." His voice was soft and resigned. "I'd have fought it if I knew you didn't want it."

"It's a huge promotion for you," I said. "I knew that, which is why I agreed."

"You can go back to visit LA if you want to. I know Jessie is there."

"No," I said, pain gripping my chest into a vice at the mention of her. "There isn't much left for me there."

"Then what can I do?" he asked.

I was silent for a moment as I thought about it.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "It's dumb."

"But it's something. What is it?"

“Just lay down,” I said. “Lay down next to me and . . . hold my hand, maybe.”

My cheeks lit on fire at my request. I expected him to sigh, like I’d asked him to do the last thing he wanted, and barely touch me.

But then Sebastian laid down without a complaint, pulling my hand to his, and interlacing his fingers with mine.

“I’m sorry I’m upset over your promotion,” I said.

“Don’t be,” he replied. “I am too.”

“Why are you upset? Isn’t this what you wanted?”

“Maybe I *should* want it, but this feels more like a punishment than a promotion. Forcing us to move wasn’t what I had in mind.”

I closed my eyes, biting down the words I wanted to say. I hated Martin, I hated my dad for pushing me into this, and I hated that we both didn’t want to be here.

“Go to sleep, Lily,” he said softly. “You need it.”

I nodded at his words, cheeks still hot from when my hand met his. I didn’t know why this felt so good, but his warm body next to mine steadied me. I felt real and not like a ghost in my own body.

I hated how much I liked this, but as I drifted off into sleep, I couldn’t find it in me to regret asking him to hold my hand.

Photo: a sunset through a plane window.

LilyRMiller: Here’s to new beginnings! We start our life in the beautiful city of Nashville today! Are any of my followers from there? What are the best couple spots to pose? My hubby and I will need them!!!

SebandLily4ever: Where are your faces?!?! We need MORE!

TwoLives: Think she’s hiding a pregnancy?

FinePrintLover: Am I the only one who thinks there’s something off with these two?

Chapter Four

I woke up alone in the living room.

Blearily, I sat up, my back aching from the cheap air mattress. Sebastian was nowhere to be found. The rental car was gone too.

I groaned. If I hadn't sold my books, I would only have the limited money I received from Sebastian or my father. My father hoarded money like a madman, and he'd even grumbled when he bought this house, despite him being the one to offer.

This was one of the times I was glad I had my own money. At least when Sebastian disappeared, I had my own income to be able to fend for myself beyond the pennies I got from my family.

We didn't even have food in the house.

He said the office wasn't open, but with his absence, I wondered if he wound up finding a place to work from. Maybe he had to get things ready for the office to open himself. I wasn't sure what he did in his day-to-day but it seemed like there was always something to do.

It took me forever to get up from the half-deflated, uncomfortable mattress. I desperately needed caffeine and to write. I grabbed my backpack and stuffed my laptop in it. I checked to see if there was a coffee shop within walking distance I could go, and luckily, there was one about a mile away.

I left the house, not bothering to tell Sebastian where I was going because if he was working, he wouldn't be back until late anyway.

For a Thursday morning, the place was packed. I secured a table in the back. But as soon as I opened my laptop, my cell phone rang.

"Hello?" I answered, feeling frustrated that I hadn't even gotten one word written.

"Where are you?" Sebastian asked, his voice tense. I internally cursed.

"I'm just on a walk."

"It doesn't sound like a walk."

I rubbed a tired hand over my face. "I'm getting coffee. I figured you were at work."

“I was going to be back soon, so you wouldn’t have been without a car long. Heather drove my car in. She left with mine a few days before we moved.”

I rolled my eyes, glad I was on the phone. Of course he’d have Heather fucking drive down here, and she’d be glad to do it.

And my car was probably sold. I hated that I didn’t know it’s fate.

Having Heather on top of everything else was too much. Hot tears blurred my vision.

“You can’t exactly blame me for leaving. There’s no food and you didn’t tell me when you would be home.”

Sebastian was silent for a moment.

“Come back soon. Didn’t you order mattresses yesterday?”

“They should be delivered later.”

“All the more reason for you to be here.”

“I’ll be back in time to get them,” I said, and then hung up the call.

I threw my phone on the table. If Heather was at the house, I would be happy to stay at the coffee shop. I’d rather walk straight into my own execution than walk in on them doing anything.

An hour later, as I finished my coffee, I channeled my frustration into a particularly gruesome scene.

I felt better once I packed up. I made sure my laptop wasn’t in sight as I walked back. It took twenty minutes, and in the late summer heat, I was sweating by the time I arrived.

Sebastian had made me mad, so I couldn’t care less in what state he saw me. But when I walked in and saw Heather in the living room folding the new blankets Sebastian and I had bought, rage clouded my mind.

She probably didn’t deserve my ire. She was nice enough to me, and she was a good assistant.

I always imagined they could have a sweet office romance. She was everything I wasn’t. She came into his life organically; I was forced on him. She worked with Sebastian, spending more time with him than I ever could doing a job that he obviously valued. Heather seemed smart and competent. I had to play the airhead rich girl who loved posting about myself on social media.

And every time I saw her, I thought of Jessie’s words on my honeymoon: Sebastian could have someone else, someone he loved and trusted. Someone he connected to.

If it was anyone, it would be her.

Heather looked up when I opened the door, and her eyes widened for a fraction of a second when she saw me sweating. I knew there was a high chance that she'd report back on how I looked.

"Um, hi," Heather said in a soft voice.

"Hi," I replied. "I didn't know you would be coming into town today."

"Sebastian wanted me to drive his car here. Then I fly back and bring yours."

"Mine?" I asked. "I thought my car was sold?"

"Sebastian said you liked your car," Heather said slowly, sounding confused. "Why would you sell it?"

"I do love my car," I rushed to say, but trailed off. I couldn't exactly say that I figured my attachment to the car wouldn't be considered. If my life was perfect, I'd get everything I wanted. "Thank you. Are you sure you can do it? I can't imagine driving across the country twice."

Heather shrugged. "I'm getting mileage pay and free stays at nice hotels. Sebastian also threw in some company-paid spa time at the hotels. It's fine."

I pursed my lips. While I was happy to get my car back, I wasn't excited to hear how my husband had no problems enticing his assistant to drive across the country.

"Okay," I said. "But if it *is* too much, I can fly back and do it."

"No," Heather said firmly. "Sebastian would kill me if I let his precious wife spend two days driving." Her voice was hard, her mouth set into a frown. Was she . . . bitter? "You need to get settled in anyways. It really is fine."

As much as I'd love to know why she sounded angry that I was his wife, the last thing I needed was to get into a fight with her. I knew which side Sebastian would take.

"Okay," I told her. "Thank you for being willing to do it."

"Lily?" Sebastian asked, coming around the corner. He was wearing a T-shirt and jeans instead of his usual dress shirt. Of course he would dress down when Heather was here. "You're back."

"I am," I said.

"We need to move the extra bedroom set into the guest room."

I blinked, confused. But then I remembered that no one knew Sebastian and I slept in different rooms. To everyone else, we were a real couple. Why would we sleep apart if it was real?

I figured Heather had known, though. How could she not when she was sleeping with him?

“Uh, sure,” I said. I gently set my bag on the floor, hoping Heather didn’t try to put my things away.

Sebastian gestured to the heavy wooden pieces leaning against the wall, and I walked to one end to help lift it.

“Wait!” Heather said, looking scandalized. “You’re making her lift it? All the way up the stairs? I thought you would hire movers! Don’t—”

“She insists she can do it.”

Heather looked at me questioningly.

“It’s fine,” I replied.

“But . . . movers could—”

“No need to hire movers for this,” I said. “We got it.”

Heather continued to look nervous, up until Sebastian asked her to open the door to the guest room. It was an exercise in teamwork for both of us to maneuver it up the stairs, but we managed it.

“Watch your toes!” she called from the doorway as Sebastian and I gingerly set the heavy piece down. My muscles screamed and Sebastian looked as winded as I felt.

The bed itself was only two pieces, and a frame keeping it together. Luckily, the second piece was much easier to move.

“It’s not going to be able to hold a box spring and mattress,” Sebastian said. “I hope you know how to set this up.”

“I already thought of that,” I explained. “A platform bed will work.”

“A what?”

“A metal bed frame that takes the place of a traditional box spring. It’s way smaller and folds down.”

Sebastian raised his eyebrows. “It’s sounds like you have this figured out.”

“It’s a pretty bed frame, but not practical. Sometimes we have to make it work.”

“Yeah, sometimes you do.” The words were quiet, almost as if I wasn’t meant to hear them. I wanted to ask what he meant, but he strode from the room before I could.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Heather watching me with a confused expression. I didn't want to dwell on it, but wondered what she would ask Sebastian when I was gone.

I wanted to ask what plans they had tonight. Was he taking her out to see the city? Was she about to get the food tour I couldn't have on my stupid, restrictive diet?

I shook the thought out of my head. Getting an answer would only make me mad, and I had no room for more anger.

Sebastian left to drop Heather off at the airport, leaving me the rental car in case I needed it.

I kept my mind off of him by trying to find a new bedframe in town. As easy as it would be to sleep with the mattress on the ground, I wanted my room to feel put together. I wound up finding a used one on Craigslist and was able to meet up with the person immediately.

Thankfully, the person didn't recognize me and was even nice enough to help me shove the thing into the car. I was incredibly grateful to them. Even though I worked out, hauling that bed frame up the stairs had me exhausted.

The Nashville heat didn't help. When I returned to the house, I felt it hit me the moment I climbed out of the car. The fiery, oppressive weather made getting the metal frame into the house the last thing I wanted to do.

As I worked up the energy to get my task done, I noticed our only neighbor was outside. Her curly blonde hair glowed in the sun. When she saw me, she smiled widely and waved, as if she was excited to see me.

Maybe she thought I was someone else.

Still, I waved back. People in Nashville were much friendlier than I was used to.

"Do you need help?" she called over to me.

"It's okay," I called back. "I've got it. Thank you, though!"

Her kindness was almost too much. I figured I needed to get inside before I either passed out from the exertion or told her my entire life story.

She seemed like such a sweet girl. Maybe if I wasn't only here for a year I could get to know her better.

After getting the platform bed inside, I set it up while waiting on the mattresses to arrive.

Once the delivery drivers came and went, I worked on other things, desperate to keep my mind off Sebastian's whereabouts.

By the time he was back, my room was set up, and I had just finished his room. When his car pulled into the driveway, I had just opened my laptop to work on my manuscript.

The front door opening was enough to make me slam the laptop shut as if I were watching porn. I couldn't wait until I had a desk in my room so I could shut and lock the door while I wrote.

"You're back," I said. "You must have been busy."

"Heather had some questions about the move, and there was a lot of traffic."

"The mattresses are here, and your bed is set up." I got up off the floor. "You or I can look at a couch tomorrow."

"I start going back into the office tomorrow to set things up."

My heart sunk at the words. Once he was back at the office full time, I would barely see him. It wasn't as if things were perfect now, but I couldn't stop thinking about him shopping with me at Target.

But it was going to end. Sebastian didn't even take weekends off.

It felt weird to leave it like this. The first day we moved was peaceful in a way I didn't expect, but it seemed like we were slipping back into old habits.

Which sucked, considering I'd liked shopping with him.

I could only nod before going into my own room, shutting and locking the door behind me. I did my nightly ritual, which was me removing my makeup, brushing my teeth, and making an Instagram post.

By the time I woke the next day, things would be back to normal between us. Except now, I didn't have Jessie to run to when things got hard.

I was alone, and I had no idea how I was not only going to survive this year, but escape at the end of it.

Photo: a pile of suitcases and an air mattress.

LilyRMiller: Wow, moving is hard work! But look at our new little home. It's SOOO cute. Can't wait to make so many great memories here! *heart emoji*

NinteyNinePercnter: I find it hard to believe with all that MONEY you have that you can't afford movers.

SebandLily4ever: Leave them alone!!! They're just like us!

TwoLives: No pic of her, I bet she's pargenant.

Chapter Five

The next morning, Sebastian was gone again.

I was left with the rental car and a text from Heather saying she'd be in town in a few days with mine. Even though I hated her and my husband's closeness, I was immensely grateful to keep the car I loved.

Sebastian had left me a check on the counter, telling me to get what I wanted for the house. I cringed at it but cashed it anyway. I didn't need to start emptying my savings because of pride.

Writing was not as lucrative of a career as some thought. I was only now making enough to comfortably live off of in a decently sized city, but not enough to buy a place outright.

And sometimes, I wondered when people would lose interest and stop buying my books.

I spent the morning getting various pieces of furniture. Some I shoved into the rental car and tried to put together at the house. Others I had delivered.

By the late afternoon, I had most of the furnishings for the living room and my room on the way. I figured by that time I had gotten enough accomplished in the day to go to a coffee shop and write. The shop near my house had a beautiful ambiance so I decided to go back there.

That idea flew out the window the very moment I sat down at a table when I saw my mother was calling.

I gritted my teeth. I never had pleasant conversations with her.

But she was also not the kind of woman who would leave you alone if you sent her to voicemail.

"Hi, mom," I said, sighing. I rubbed a hand over my tired face. Was I ever going to get this book done? Or was the impending TV show going to finish the series like *Game of Thrones* and leave it with a terrible ending?

"Hi, sweetie. Are you missing your mother yet? We missed our brunch this week."

"Uh, sure," I lied.

I hated brunch with my mother. While she ordered mimosas and French toast, I was always stuck with egg whites and turkey sausage.

“But it’s a great opportunity for you and that handsome husband of yours.”

“I’m sure it is.”

“You know why?” she pressed.

“Um, money?”

She sighed, sounding disappointed. “Lily, your contract is ending.”

“I’m aware.”

“You really aren’t going to do any better than a rich man with a full head of hair. I mean, just look at your father.”

My dad had been balding since he was twenty and my mother never seemed to be able to let it go.

This whole conversation was going to be taxing. The last things I wanted to think about were my dad’s bald head and the end of this contract.

I knew my mom wanted me to stay married to Sebastian, but I needed to get out of this. I needed my freedom.

I wasn’t sure how to tell her that, though.

Maybe I should have started here. I could tell my mother we didn’t really love each other or ever spend time together. I could say how much I hated the gaudy gold and diamond ring on my finger. I could say I wanted to be my own person and live my own life.

But I didn’t.

“Yeah, maybe,” I said instead.

“I’m just worried. I’ve heard rumors of him and his little assistant, Heather. How do you know he won’t run off with her the first chance he gets?”

“I . . . I don’t,” I told her. “But he’s keeping up the pretense of our marriage.”

“Ugh, did you say ‘keeping up the pretense’? Tone that down, Lily. No man likes it when you talk like that. Do as we practice. Light and airy.”

I winced. It was an argument I’d heard time and time again.

“Besides,” my mother continued, “you need to lock him in after this contract is over. Any ideas on that?”

“No,” I said, “and I don’t—”

“Come on, Lily. Must I draw every conclusion for you? A baby, darling. Have a baby.”

“What?” My voice came out flat. I hated that I was in public, but I was also glad I wasn’t in the house for this conversation. It’d be my luck

that Sebastian would come back for something he forgot and overhear this.

"Now, all I'm saying is seduce him a little bit. Use your tits while you have them to lure him in. Forget protection and then boom—you've got him."

I felt sick. "That's manipulative, mom."

"Oh come on. It's more common than you think. It's how I got your father. When I met him, I knew he was going to be something someday, and just look at us now."

"You're telling me I'm a product of entrapment?"

I always knew it was a possibility, but hearing it was different than thinking it.

"Who uses words like *entrapment*, Lily?" She sighed. "If you want to do this, you have to appear dumber than him. It shouldn't be too hard for you."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"You have no other options, sweetie. If you let this contract expire, the likelihood that *you'll* expire is high. Then you'll have nothing."

I glanced at my laptop. I wouldn't have nothing. I would always have writing.

But I didn't dare tell her that.

"Oh, I must go. Ramon is here. He's wearing the tight pants today." My mom hung up, sufficiently distracted by her gardener she had a weird crush on. I stared at the phone, realizing my worst fears had come to fruition.

I was being pushed to trap Sebastian in this marriage with a child.

It wasn't that I never wanted kids—I wanted them with the right person. I didn't want to parent a child all on my own, and I didn't want to have to hire help because my husband was married to his office.

My plan had always been to get out of this and find real love, but first I had to figure out how to do it.

My thoughts were swirling dangerously, and I was stuck between wanting to fake my own death or murder my family.

Instead of giving into the desires, I did what I always do.

I wrote.

I was the master of turning my pain into art. That was where everything had started anyway. I wrote when I was sad, and beautiful prose came out of it.

In my dark mood, I thought about ending my series on a sad note. Maybe I could kill my main character. Maybe I could kill everyone in the book.

I knew my fans. Some would love it. Some would hate it.

I saw everyone's opinions. To the world, I was J.R. Solace, a mysterious writer who had produced a fantasy series out of nowhere. To the world, I was a ghost.

J.R. didn't even have social media.

So the fandom built things in my absence. I saw whole Discords. I saw made-up board games, fan meetups, and cosplays of every character. I saw fans get annoyed that their favorite character was killed, I saw others applaud the dark and gritty context in which I wrote.

But me? It was an escape. It was something to get me through these five years without losing my mind.

I'd killed off my main character's mother a long time ago, but in my dark mood, I brought her spirit back, only to kill her off again.

When I was done, hours later, I felt a little better.

It was dark when the coffee shop closed. I left while they were cleaning up, apologizing profusely for how late I had stayed. I drove back to the house feeling accomplished. I didn't expect Sebastian to be back yet.

He usually worked well into the night. After a few weeks of marriage, I gave up on waiting for him. So when I saw his car, I was shocked. I knew he didn't care what I was doing, but I still wasn't used to him being home before ten.

My mother's words popped back into my head as I saw his silhouette in the window. It made my stomach roll.

My plan was to go inside and ignore him. Sometimes Sebastian worked from home, so I doubted he would give me the time of day when he saw me.

The door creaked when I opened it, and Sebastian immediately looked up. I saw him sitting at a new dining room table that I hadn't bought. He wasn't even working, only eating.

His eyes narrowed at me the moment I walked in.

"Where were you?"

"Looking for furniture," I lied.

“This late?” Sebastian prodded. I felt bad for lying to him, but it wasn’t like I could tell him what I was really doing.

“My mom also called, so I was busy talking with her.”

Sebastian’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t believe me.

“Do you need anything?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “I guess not.”

“Good. See you tomorrow then.”

My legs carried me to my room faster than they should have. I shut and locked the door, feeling a confusing mix of irritation and anger rushing through me.

I was mad at Sebastian being mad, and terrified he would tell Martin whatever I had done wrong.

Was he angry I left the house? Should I always be here for him?

There was no way I could write this novel if I knew Sebastian could walk in at any time. I could maybe squeeze in a few hours in the middle of the day when he was least likely to come home, but I also grew bored of writing in isolation and longed to see people moving around me.

Terror clawed its way into my throat. Was I about to lose even more of what freedom I had left?

I decided to make sure I was home before Sebastian. For two days, it worked. I stayed home all day, both writing and receiving furniture, while trying not to go stir-crazy.

The first night, he came home at eight. The next, six.

His schedule was all over the place, so I had no assumed time for him to be here.

Being in a new location, with an office that required setting up and employees to be hired, all bets were off if he’d be pulling his normal late nights. I couldn’t be sure, given the previous two.

On the fourth day of him being back at work, I tidied the house and tried to write in the living room, but knew I wasn’t going to get anything done. I wound up having to go to the coffee shop, where the barista now knew my usual order.

I worked for a few hours before I looked up, eyes burning from staring at a screen. I blinked, clearing fallen mascara from my vision.

That was when I saw someone I knew in the coffee shop.

It was my neighbor, the girl who smiled at me and offered to help. She was at the counter, talking animatedly with the barista.

She must have been so friendly to all people. Maybe talking to strangers came easy for her. Maybe she didn't struggle with what to say or who to be.

I bet she was fun to be around.

She turned, eyes sliding over to where I sat. She brightened immediately, smiling as if I were an old friend and not a new neighbor. She walked over, and my body tightened. She was definitely going to talk to me, but I didn't know what side of me I should show.

"Hi," she said, her eyes bright as they met mine. "It's so good to see you."

For a moment, I could only gape at her. "Um, you too?"

"Oh, did I bother you?" she asked. "I'm so sorry. I don't mean to take you away from what you're working on."

I opened my mouth. I should ask for her name. Maybe I could get to know her. Visions of a new friend danced in my head.

They danced for so long that the girl deflated.

"I'll catch you some other time. Again, I'm sorry for bugging you." She walked away before I could stop her, leaving the shop with a stiff, fast pace.

I groaned. Of course I would meet a girl I could be friends with and daydream for so long that she ran away.

This was why I didn't need to be myself. I bet she'd like the shallow, perfect side of me. That Lily would have asked for her fucking name.

Slowly, I forced myself to look back at my laptop. If I let myself dwell on my own awkwardness, I'd never get this manuscript done.

I kept an eye on the time as I got some stuff done, and at four I was making my way home.

I had decided to walk just in case Sebastian was mad that I had been using the rental car. His ire was worrisome, so I figured it would be best if I didn't use anything he paid for. It usually worked for my parents. Unfortunately for me, however, walking meant it took me longer to get home. When I walked up, I saw Sebastian's car, and my own, in the driveway.

Shit. He was home and my car was here, which meant Heather had also returned. I crept in, wondering if they would be in his room, but instead, they were in the dining room, talking normally.

"Sorry, Heather," Sebastian said. "I thought she'd be here."

"It's fine. I hate that you had to leave work, though," Heather replied, and I realized that I had messed up even worse this time.

Heather came by to drop off my car, and I hadn't been here—yet again. I had totally forgotten when she was set to arrive.

"Hi," I said meekly, turning the corner. I was once again sweaty, making my face too shiny and my makeup dangerously close to melting off.

And Sebastian was mad *again*.

"Oh, hi!" Heather said. "You look . . ." She trailed off. "I brought your car."

"Um, I'm sorry. I forgot," I said. "I was . . . out."

"We know," Sebastian said, his arms crossed. "I had to leave work to let Heather in while you were . . . doing whatever you were doing."

Heather looked from his face to mine, trying to deduce what was going on between us. I hated her calculating gaze.

"Get a hotel, Heather. I'll pay for it as usual," he finally said, breaking the awkward silence.

In an instant, my panic was replaced with rage. Did he seriously get a hotel for Heather right in front of me? Was he going straight there, all because I had forgotten his precious assistant was coming with my car that I didn't even know I would be keeping?

"Sounds good," Heather said, smiling at him. "I'll just get out of here then. Am I still dropping the rental car off?"

"Yes, please."

Ugh. He could say please to her and not me? I felt my anger rise.

"Okay, then," Heather said. "You two have a good night."

I think everyone in the room knew that it wasn't going to be a good night. Well, at least it wasn't for me. The jury was still out on my husband and his assistant.

I thought about him treating her in bed like he did me, with soft words and gentle questions on what I liked. I wanted to throw up the very second I pictured it.

I gave Heather a half wave as she darted out the door. Once it was shut, it was just Sebastian and me, and I waited for him to lay into me.

But there was only silence.

Eventually, I said, “Go back to work. If there’s anything else being dropped off, I’ll be here.”

“Where were you?” Sebastian asked. It blew out of him so quickly I had to wonder if he had been holding back the words. “This is the third time that you’ve been missing when either I get home, or when Heather is here to drop off your car.”

“I was busy! I have a life, you know.”

“Oh, in a new city that you’ve never visited? Have you made ‘friends’ that fast?”

He put air quotes around friends, a reference to something I didn’t understand.

“No, I don’t have any friends here,” I hissed. “I know no one. But if I don’t know what you get up to when you’re off work, then you don’t get to know what I do.”

Sebastian glared, and I could physically see him clenching his teeth. Some of my anger was replaced with fear, just like it always was when someone was angry with me. I didn’t want to apologize, but I felt like I had to.

I felt at war, trying to decide whether to back down and lose this argument like all the others, or to hold tightly and be strong for once in my life.

“Just be sure our parents don’t find out,” Sebastian said, and then he turned to head into the kitchen.

At that moment, I should have asked what he meant. But I was too busy trying to figure it out for myself that I lost my chance.

By the time he returned, a drink in hand, I was halfway through working out whatever the hell he meant, and when he disappeared into his room, I grew even more confused.

Was he not going to the hotel with Heather?

I knew very little about the man I had been married to for four years, and I didn’t know how to begin to find out about him. Our clock was ticking, and eventually, this thing would be over, and I’d never see him again.

But now I was curious if somehow I’d gotten him wrong.

Chapter Six

"You know, you don't usually hear about an employer having a party for the opening of a new office," the stylist said. I had been in the chair for hours, redoing my roots that had grown out, and putting my hair into perfectly coiled curls for the party tonight.

I wanted to tell her this was all for show. Miller Industries was only doing this to appear like a good employer, to showcase the best they had to offer on social media, and to be sure Sebastian and I were in the local news as the perfect couple.

But those were inside thoughts.

"Miller Industries really cares," I said, the lies burning as they came out. "They want their employees to socialize as well as work."

Ugh. It sounded fake to my own ears.

"Wow," the woman said. "No one else does that these days."

It wasn't like it really helped. Turnover among the employees was always high because they focused more on glitzy parties rather than making sure the people were really taken care of.

Miller Industries was known for looking good with nothing behind it. A pretty face with no brain in its head. I suppose the same thing was true for my public persona.

The hair appointment was taking forever. I was uncomfortable and had been all day.

I was wearing a tight emerald-green dress for the event. My hair would be freshly touched up, and I was also going to have my makeup done to look picture-perfect.

But I certainly didn't *feel* perfect. My scalp was on fire from the hair dye, and my ass was numb from sitting all day.

If I had a choice, I would never have my hair bleached again; but my mom always told me I looked good with blonde hair. Back when I was young and believed in her, I agreed.

I'd also agreed with her insistence to hide my natural freckles under makeup. I had been taught to not even leave my room without foundation on, and during the move, I made sure I looked acceptable the whole time. Even though I had been sweaty, I knew my makeup hadn't budged.

Lately, I'd started wondering what life would be like if I didn't spend so much time on my appearance. I wanted more time to write or go for walks.

But I didn't have a choice. I had to be what I was now.

I glanced at myself in the salon mirror and caught a glance of the fake version of me in the reflection. I had to look away.

It wasn't the stylist's fault. She was friendly, and her salon was nice too. I could see myself coming here for a haircut, but not for bleaching.

Sebastian and I hadn't talked since the night Heather was last here. Sometimes, when he thought I wasn't paying attention, he would look at me with such a resigned, pained expression.

I hadn't ever seen it before, and I couldn't help but wonder if he felt betrayed that my fake persona was cracking.

And it wasn't going to get any better.

Jessie hadn't reached out, and I felt lost without my usual confidant. So lost that I couldn't keep it together.

By seven that evening, I was looking perfect, but feeling rotten.

Sebastian was waiting for me by the door, tapping his foot impatiently; we were running late. I took a deep breath before meeting him, stomach in knots at the thought of having to pretend to be in a loving relationship.

Miller Industries had rented a theater downtown. Sebastian walked me to his car, where I climbed in, feeling dizzy at how tight my Spanx were on my body. I even hated wearing these tight undergarments, but my mother and the media always found something wrong with my body. If it wasn't that I'd gained a pound, it was that my waist wasn't small enough in comparison to my hips. There was always something wrong with me, but at least I had more of an hourglass figure in the Spanx.

Sebastian had only given me one appreciative look when he saw me. Earlier in our marriage, I used to live for those looks. Now, I wasn't sure how I felt.

My body was still attracted to his—that much would always be true. But I felt so bad after my long day getting ready that not even my hot husband could get a rise out of me.

Sebastian got into the sleek, black sports car. We immediately got stuck in city traffic, and I ached to get out of the car. I didn't want to be stuck in a confined space with Sebastian for longer than I had to be. I was

already dreading spending the entire evening stuck at his side. I didn't think I could sneak away for a moment, even to breathe.

Still, the downtown lights were beautiful. I caught the faces of people as we drove through, and they all seemed hopeful, happy. Some had guitars and carried a dream with them. Some were with partners, laughing without a care, softened by the illumination of the streetlights.

God, I wanted that. I wanted to be soft and carefree. Maybe if I were here on my own, as myself and not *Sebastian's wife*, I could be like them. I could see the city and enjoy it.

Sebastian asked, "Have you not been downtown since we moved?"

I inelegantly replied, "Huh?"

"You just seem . . . entranced," he said. "I've never seen you look at something like that."

I glanced over at him. He was illuminated in the same light that everyone else was. His features looked so much softer than I was used to.

Maybe that was why I didn't lie.

"I am." Outside the window, a couple laughed. "I don't know what it is. Perhaps it's the amber of the streetlights, illuminating everyone in a softness that filters out their hard edges. Or maybe it's that the people seem so genuinely happy. It isn't like LA where everyone is angry that they're trapped in the monotonous cycle of traffic, or where they're all lurking around a corner in an attempt to spot a celebrity. It's all so different."

Sebastian was staring again, and my cheeks heated when I realized what I'd done. I'd slipped into writer Lily again.

My mother's words, telling me to be shallow and hide the way I spoke, rang out in the silence.

"So, you like it here?" he asked. His voice wasn't twisted with judgment. It was low. Kind.

"I like *this*. I don't like that we had to uproot our entire lives on the whim of your father. These people . . . they have their happiness, their own lives."

"And you don't?"

I looked at him, eyes narrowed, because of course I didn't own my life. I couldn't have my hair look a certain way. I couldn't gain weight. I couldn't do *anything* I wanted to.

"This contract doesn't own you," he added.

I laughed miserably. "Then I don't think you read my copy."

“It couldn’t be that different than mine.”

I shook my head and rolled my eyes. He really had no clue.

“So who are you then? Who do you want to be?” he asked. I hadn’t realized it before, but we were sitting still, the car in park. We hadn’t moved in a while.

“We’re going to be late,” I said, trying to dodge the question.

“But I want to know the answer.”

I sighed. “The person I am is not someone you’d like.”

“I’d like to make that decision myself.”

I didn’t respond. I wasn’t sure how to.

“You’ve been different here,” he said. “I’ve never heard you talk like this. You’re usually so . . .”

“Shallow?” I finished.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s like all you needed was the money and fame.”

I winced at his words, but I knew that the person he described was the one he married, the one I was pretending to be.

“Well, it’s like I said.” I looked at him flatly. “If you think that, then I’m doing my job.”

“What would you rather do?”

“Please don’t make me answer that question.” Because if I did, then there was no telling who would know the person I really was. The last thing I needed was my mother breaking me down into nothing, and not even having Jessie to build me up.

I’d had enough of that in my childhood.

Sebastian sighed. “Fine. Whatever you say.”

I closed my eyes, still somehow feeling wrong despite trying to do exactly what was expected of me. I exhaled a long, painful breath.

It didn’t do anything for my mood.

“Do you not want to go tonight?”

“Does it matter?” I asked.

“I guess it doesn’t,” Sebastian said, looking back at the wheel, “but if it helps, I don’t want to, either.”

I couldn’t be hearing that right.

“What?”

“I said I don’t want to go either.”

I wondered if he was toying with me, letting me believe we were in the same boat so he could tattle on me.

But in the mix of the soft light of the streetlights and illumination from the dazzling buildings, I saw that resigned misery in his gaze again.

And just as it was there, it was gone.

“But we have to,” he said, defeat still in his voice.

“Yes,” I whispered. “We do.”

He drove away from the curb, and we arrived at our destination in only a few minutes.

Sebastian climbed out of the car, his eyes forward, as if he was heading to the door. I sighed, figuring he was going inside without me, and I would have to hobble out of the car to attempt to catch up with him.

But he walked to the passenger door and opened it, extending a hand like a lifeline.

I took it.

It could have been a fake gesture of kindness, in case anyone was watching—it’d be weird to see a husband ditching his wife in the car and having her trying to race after him to put on a show for everyone.

But I hoped it was more than that, because it gave me a sense of peace I hadn’t yet had in Nashville.

I gripped Sebastian’s hand tightly, ignoring the shakiness I felt in my body. Apparently finding common ground with Sebastian was a shock to my nervous system.

I plastered on my model smile as we walked in. A few people took our photos, and I asked them to send it to me so I could post about this later.

As always, I was to be glued to Sebastian’s side. Our goal was to look in love, and the best way to do that was to always be together.

Besides, I wasn’t all that sure I could take this on my own.

A few employees introduced themselves to both of us. I nodded and smiled but knew I wouldn’t be able to remember any of their names. My head was in the clouds, and I found myself leaning more and more on Sebastian as the night went on.

I needed the energy to stand up straight, but I couldn’t find it in me. I wondered when he would tell me to get it together or to get off of him, but he never did.

“Pardon us,” he eventually said to the two new managers he’d been speaking to for a while. “I think the wife needs food.”

I went to shake my head and tell him I was fine, but one of the younger women laughed. “You should try some of the mini tacos, Lily.

They’re amazing!”

I nodded and had to admit that the thought of any kind of food sounded perfect. I hadn’t eaten all day which had to be why I felt so out of it.

Sebastian pulled me away, but instead of going for the buffet of appetizers, he took me to a table.

My head spun as I sat, and by the time I reoriented myself, he was kneeling in front me, looking at me with concern I didn’t think he ever could hold for me.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Was I hallucinating?

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I whispered, even though it was a lie.

My feet were aching in my heels. My lower back hurt from sitting in a salon all day, not to mention my stomach’s angry growls for food.

Sebastian shook his head. “Don’t,” he said, but it wasn’t with malice. “I know you well enough to see when you’re not okay. Don’t try to deny it.”

I gulped. He didn’t look mad or disappointed, but I felt bad for not being my best self.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “You’re right. I don’t feel well.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. I just ask that you let me help.”

“I’m . . .” *Exhausted? In pain? Tired of being a human Barbie?* “Hungry.”

“Okay, let me get you some food.”

“It should probably be a salad,” I muttered.

“Absolutely not. You’re swaying on your feet. You need something filling. How about the tacos?”

My stomach forced me to nod. I really wanted those tacos.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll be right back."

I watched him go, shocked at how focused he seemed. People tried to talk to him, but he never let them pull him into a conversation. His main focus was getting food and making his way back to me. He even brought a bottle of water .

I took all of it gratefully.

“Thank you,” I said.

He nodded, but someone swung by the table to talk to him. He glanced at me first, then led them away so I could eat in peace.

It was exactly what I needed.

When I was alone, I savored each bite, but also ate quickly. Being on my own like this didn't look good, and I needed to be with my husband, pretending to be in love with him.

It was going to be easier after what he'd just done for me. After the entire night, actually.

But I really pushed myself too far this time, and it took far too long for me to get up. When I did, I knew I needed to check my makeup before I faced anyone else. My face was hot and probably oily. Even my top-of-the-line foundation couldn't last forever.

When I got to the bathroom, I took out the powder from my small purse, blotting my face to rid it of any extra shine. My eyes looked dull and near black, which was a bit concerning, considering they were usually a chocolate brown.

I couldn't do anything about that though.

I exited the ladies' room, only to find someone waiting for me. The bathrooms were tucked away down a long corridor, which meant no one would see anything that went on.

A man leaned on the wall nearby. He had a shorter build with wide shoulders and light brown hair. I foolishly hoped he was waiting for his date.

When he saw me, he gave me a luring, daring smile.

My stomach sank. I knew where this was going.

I had been hit on before, even during my marriage. Sometimes it was by men who genuinely didn't see the flashy ring on my finger. Other times, it seemed like men liked the challenge.

Hopefully, this guy was in the first category—just someone who thought I was hot and wanted to ask me out.

"Hi there," the man said. "How are you?"

"Um, good. I'm here with my husband," I said. "We're having a great time."

The guy didn't even blink at the mention of Sebastian. He either knew or didn't care.

"The tall boss guy?" he asked. "Yeah, I know him. He's out working the floor while you're back here alone."

"That's because he's busy."

“A girl like you deserves better than a man who is too busy for her,” he explained. “You’re the most gorgeous girl here.”

It was a nice compliment, but it was one I’d heard before. People loved me at my best, but never at my worst.

“Thanks, but I’m fine. I bet my husband is missing me by now.”

“I somehow doubt that.”

And honestly, on any other day, I would agree with him. But Sebastian had been kind tonight. The least I could do was be by his side like I was supposed to.

“My husband and I are very happy.”

“I can show you what it’s like when a real man is interested in you. Let me take you from here. I have a nice apartment downtown. You’ll love the views.”

“I’m not cheating on my husband,” I told him, indignation in my tone.

“I bet he is on you.”

My stomach lurched. Of course I knew that, but it wasn’t even like we slept in the same room. We weren’t really married. I was just prohibited from dating.

“He’s not,” I said firmly. My stomach was doing somersaults, and I knew I needed to leave as soon as I could.

But as I opened my mouth to say something else, Sebastian rounded the corner, looking left and right. When he saw me, his posture stiffened. He looked at the man I was with and then me.

He glared at us both, but it was mainly at me.

“Where have you been?” he hissed at me. “I turned around and you were gone.”

“I just went to the bathroom.”

“Oh, yes, because it definitely looks like you’re using the bathroom.”

“Hey,” the stranger said, “don’t talk to her like that.”

I’m sure it was supposed to be helpful, but it made everything worse.

Sebastian turned. “This is a private conversation.” He grabbed my arm with a firm grip and pulled me down the hallway. I went willingly, happy to be away from the man trying to get me to go with him.

“I wasn’t doing anything,” I said, pulling my arm out of his grip.

Sebastian kept walking and I followed. He avoided the party entirely, going outside near the back of the building.

Great. I was definitely getting yelled at.

"What were you thinking?"

"What?" I said, insulted. "For going to the bathroom?"

"For bringing him here."

"Him? Who are you talking about?"

"The guy you're seeing."

I reared back. Sweat collected on my brow. "The guy I'm seeing?" I repeated. "What guy am I seeing?"

Sebastian rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to play dumb. I know you're seeing someone."

"What?" I asked again. "I haven't been seeing anyone. I can't."

"I already know, Lily. You confirmed it the other night."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked, feeling dizzy at the accusation. I tried to rack my brain to remember when we'd ever talking about *me* seeing someone.

Sebastian rubbed his face. He looked exhausted. "The night Heather brought your car here. You weren't here for the entirety of the day. You're never home. I told you to keep it away from our parents and then you brought him here? Are you insane?"

"Him?" I said, voice incredulous. "That guy near the bathrooms? I don't even know him!"

"He followed you to the bathroom."

"Yes, I'm aware he did that, considering he waited for me while I was making sure I looked okay. What—do you think I would bring someone I'm seeing, which is against my contract *by the way*, to a party where we're obviously being watched? Do you think I'm that dumb?"

"The contract doesn't forbid you from doing anything, and it's almost over anyway. Why not get some other guy who isn't tied down to work?"

"It *is* forbidden in my contract. You can read it. I can't see *anyone* during this marriage, and you're the one who can do whatever the fuck you want."

"And I'm not the one talking to another man at my *company party*." He hissed the last words.

My stomach felt unsteady, and it had to have been because of the fight. Sebastian and I rarely fought. We just ignored each other. I pressed on past my uneasiness.

“I don’t know him. He’s probably one of your new employees.”

“No, he isn’t. I know who will be working for me. I didn’t hire that man.”

“Then maybe Martin sent him to find holes in our story! Jesus, Sebastian, you can’t really think I’m that much of an idiot that I’d not only put my future at risk, but that I’d invite another man to a party where I am supposed to be seen with you?”

“That’s what I thought until I caught you two together.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but my ears were ringing. My head was spinning, and I felt the true state my body was now in.

I was freezing yet hot. I was covered in sweat despite the cool air. My hands were shaky, and my stomach was actually killing me. This wasn’t a reaction to a fight. This wasn’t anxiety.

I was about to throw up.

For real this time.

I was at least able to turn to the grass before I emptied the contents of my stomach.

In the back of my mind, I was kicking myself for letting Sebastian see this. He probably thought I was disgusting for losing it like this in public. But I couldn’t help it. My stomach was in knots, and it felt like the beginning of something worse.

“Lily?” Sebastian said, sounding genuinely worried.

“Fucking mini tacos,” I groaned, clutching my stomach.

“Are . . . are you done?”

“I don’t know,” I said, my voice wobbling. “God, my stomach is *killing* me.”

“Okay, we’re going home.”

“No,” I said as firmly as I could, “you’re supposed to be here.”

For a moment he looked conflicted. But then he shook his head. “Screw this. We both don’t want to be here, and I can just . . . post on social media that I’m taking care of you. People will eat that shit up.”

I thought about it, but my stomach protested, and I could only nod. I felt too terrible to argue.

Luckily I was able to hold back on throwing up in the car, but the minute we were back at the house, all bets were off. I ran to the bathroom and emptied my stomach once again.

I clenched myself afterwards, feeling some of the worst cramps I had ever experienced. My stomach felt like it was turning inside out.

A cool hand pressed against my head, and I almost jerked away.

"You're burning up. How long have you been feeling bad?" Sebastian asked.

"It got worse when I went to check my makeup, but I've felt off all day."

"What did you eat before the event?"

"Nothing."

Sebastian stared at me. "You didn't eat? At all?"

"I didn't have time. I had to be at the salon, and then get my makeup done." I groaned, both at the memory, and at my stomach. "I fucking *hate* dying my hair."

"Then why do you do it?"

"Because my mom says I'm ugly if I'm not—" I froze and had to lunge for the toilet again. Whatever Sebastian was going to say was forgotten, and when I was done, he had grabbed a cool washcloth and pressed it against my forehead. I leaned into it, feeling too sick to turn away.

I felt *terrible*. This was worse than any hangover, and all I wanted to do was sleep for three days straight, but my stomach hurt too bad for me to be able to make it out of the bathroom.

I expected Sebastian to leave after a while. There wasn't much he could do for me, and I knew it had to be gross to be around vomit.

But he stayed. He sat on the bathroom floor and held my hair back while I threw up. He got me water when I felt dehydrated, and he never once commented on how bad I must have looked.

Eventually, the vomiting ended, but I was a puddle on the floor. I felt like I had been through a flash freezer and then stuck into the sun. My body begged me for sleep. I would have been happy to sleep on the floor of the bathroom, but when Sebastian saw me dozing off, I swore he said, "Okay, up you go."

And then I was off the floor.

I didn’t remember much after that, just the sounds of a soft voice and the comfort of my bed.

Chapter Seven

I woke up to light filtering in through my half-closed blinds. I had slept like the dead. My mouth was dry and my head was pounding.

I didn't have many other thoughts other than I needed water and to brush my teeth. My mouth tasted like sour tortillas. I got up slowly, realizing I was in a shirt that I didn't recognize, and that I was in my room and not on the bathroom floor.

The only person who could have done this was Sebastian.

The thought of him taking care of me both heated my skin with embarrassment and my chest with gratefulness. I hated that he saw me like that, but I also knew it would have been worse if I had been left to fend for myself. I knew he was at work—even if it was a weekend. He never missed time in the office, after all.

Luckily, I was feeling better. I figured I would rest, eat small amounts of food, and then go back to my regular schedule the next day. At least for today I could justify eating whatever my stomach could handle.

So rice and bread it was going to be.

When I got to the bathroom, I examined my makeup. It was still somehow on, and I had to thank my very expensive setting spray for that.

My skin, however, was dry and flakey, and the makeup looked cakey and gross.

I washed my face, taking care of it the best I could. I knew I'd have to put makeup on before Sebastian got home, but my skin begged for the cool air without anything on it.

I stared at my freckles for a long time, wishing I could see them more. My skin was angry and red in areas, but the freckles covered most of it.

My dry throat reminded me I needed water.

I paired what must have been Sebastian's shirt with cotton shorts that hadn't seen the light of day in years. My curled hair went up into a messy bun. I looked exactly like I felt, but I had a few hours to myself before I had to change.

I sat on the couch and carefully sipped water. I was already feeling tired again, and I knew my body was exhausted from everything that had

gone down.

I expected my day to be quiet. The plan was to turn off my phone and not be bothered by anyone. At four, I would put my makeup back on and pretend I was fine.

I was so focused on trying to decide between starting *Lord of the Rings* or *Game of Thrones* that I totally missed Sebastian's black car pulling into the driveway, and the subtle sounds of him walking up the porch.

The door's squeak was impossible to miss, though.

For a split second, I thought it was an intruder. But then I saw my husband. His tie was loose, his shirt undone a few buttons. My jaw dropped, and I froze.

Like a magnet, his eyes turned to me, and he immediately did a double take. I was without makeup, without my nicer clothes, and probably looked worse than he'd ever seen me, including last night with my face in the toilet bowl.

Fuck.

It was too late, and I couldn't move fast without my body rioting. I stared, and then he stared back.

His eyes were trained on my face, and they narrowed as he was focusing on something. My hands instantly covered my reddening cheeks.

"You have freckles." He said it like he was dreaming, like he was entranced by them.

That was impossible. My mother always said they were imperfections.

Something to hide.

"Why are you here?" I asked, my voice both hard and vulnerable.

"Someone came in for their laptop while I was there. They hinted that it was a little weird I was there when you were sick the night before. So, I came home."

"To make it look better?"

"Maybe, but I was worried. Hell, I *am* worried. Plus, they said ginger ale helps with upset stomachs, so I brought you some."

"Oh," I said. Was this real? Or was this some food poisoning fever dream?

"Do you . . . want some?" he asked.

"What?"

"The ginger ale."

“I-I can’t have soda.”

Well, maybe not in front of him.

“You literally just had food poisoning. I think you can take a pass day.”

“No, I can’t,” I said, moving to stand. My body was *not* happy with me. “I need to go change and put makeup on. You can’t see me like this, I __”

“Hang on, what?” he asked incredulously. “Why do you need to do any of that? You were just sick.”

“No, I have to.”

“Lily,” he said, exasperated. “Just sit down, there’s no reason to get dressed.”

“No!” I snapped. “No man wants to see his wife have freckles and messy hair and be in ten-year-old shorts!”

Sebastian stared at me for a long time. Then, he said one of the most shocking things I’d ever heard.

“I do.”

For a moment my heart raced. He did. *Really?*

Then I remembered my mother’s words, and I shook my head.

“You don’t have to lie.”

“I’m not lying,” he said. “You’re always put together, and it makes me wonder if you’re human, Lily. Now I look at you and . . . you look real.”

“I look bad.”

“Not to me,” he said. “It doesn’t even matter what I think, though. What do *you* want to do?”

“I want to sit back down,” I admitted, “but I’m scared that you’re going to tell Martin or my mother how I look, and I can’t have that.”

“Why would I tell them any of this? We’re both breaking rules here.”

“You have an excuse.”

“And you throwing up all night is not an excuse either? I made up a lie and said I’d be here for show, but I *am* worried about you. I’m much happier being here to be sure you’re taken care of. I should be at work, and you could easily tell on me too. But I’m asking you not to. You don’t have to be put together right now, Lily. You can just be here.”

Now it was my turn to stare. I could . . . just *be* here? He wouldn’t tell?

It sounded too good to be true.

But then I thought about all the kind things he'd done for me since moving to Nashville, and I decided I *wanted* to believe him.

I sat back down.

"Okay," I said meekly.

"Let me get you some food. Were you planning on watching TV all day?"

"Yes," I admitted, "but I can find something more productive—"

"No, you should do what you want. What were you planning on watching?"

"You want an honest answer?"

"Yes," he said genuinely.

"I wanted to watch Joffrey from *Game of Thrones* die."

Sebastian blinked. "You watch *Game of Thrones*?"

I gulped. "Is that so impossible to believe?"

"Honestly? Yes."

I sighed. "I'm aware it's a trivial form of media and that I should probably be focusing on my image, but I'm sick and I really want to watch a complete asshat die and laugh at him while he does it."

"That is . . . a very eloquent way to put it."

"Ugh, my filter is gone. Please forget I said any of this."

"I don't think I can," he said.

God, I was never going to live this down.

"Can I watch it with you?"

"What? You want to watch *Game of Thrones* with me?"

"I've only read the books, but I wouldn't mine watching some of the show."

"You've read the books?"

"Yes, I have. They didn't quite live up to this other dark fantasy I read, but they were pretty good."

I blinked, my brain unable to fathom Sebastian saying *dark* and *fantasy* in the same sentence.

"So, you like dark fantasy?"

"Yes," he said. "The other one is a newer series, but it's incredible."

"Which?" I asked suspiciously.

"Have you ever heard of *The Fair Originals*?"

Hearing my own title come from my husband's mouth made my brain short circuit. I stared for a long time.

He'd read my books?

He *liked them*?

Oh God, I'd put him *in* that series. He was my main character's asshole betrothed. I'd killed him off three years ago.

"I'm guessing that's a no, then?" he prompted.

"I've read them," I said, my voice almost a squeak.

"Really? I'm actually a huge fan."

"Who's your favorite character?" I asked.

"Jamisson," he said. "He's the central love interest. Kind of. He's more someone the fandom *thinks* she should end up with."

"Oh, yeah. I remember that character."

I made him.

"I see some of myself in him," Sebastian said. "I know it's weird, but he's a character I really relate to."

Oh my *God*.

He related to the character I'd made as a comfort? Jamisson was probably the only person I didn't base off of anyone. He was a reminder that someone could be kind and that there was hope after this.

My brain felt like it was on fire.

"Why do you look . . . mortified?" he asked. "I've never seen your face so red."

Dammit. I forgot he could see when I blushed.

"No reason," I said, trying and failing to sound casual.

"Is this somehow related to . . . whatever you said earlier? About trivial forms of media?"

"Um, no." I took a deep breath. I could freak out about this later. "I'm not used to talking about nerdy interests with people. You probably shouldn't know about me reading them."

"Why not? I like that you've read them. Did you like the series? The characters?"

"I . . . related to them. Particularly Rohanda."

"Really? The woman who was forced to be a beast and then break the curse?" he asked, then added, "Actually I see it now. The whole being forced to wear makeup thing. Is that how you relate?"

I was being read like a *book*.

“You got it exactly right,” I said, voice strangled.

“I can’t believe we have this in common,” Sebastian said. “I never imagined you of all people read *The Fair Originals.”*

I laughed nervously. “Yeah, it’s not something I advertise. I can’t exactly put on my Instagram that I’ve read the books a million times.”

Or wrote them.

“I have too,” Sebastian said, and he looked genuinely happy to talk to me. He looked younger, a childlike excitement lighting up his face in a way that I had never seen before. “That’s what I do on my breaks and whenever I’m not working. Have you heard there is a TV show coming out? Are you going to watch it?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“This is great. We actually have something to talk about.”

“Yeah, we do,” I said.

Oh no. How was I going to keep this a secret? Sure, Sebastian was willing to keep my makeup-less face a secret, but this? He’d probably tell everyone the minute he found out about the character I based on him.

“I didn’t even know you read fiction. The last time we talked about books, you only mentioned you liked ones about social media.”

“I’m not really a fan of nonfiction. I mainly read fiction,” I said. “When Jessie was busy, I’d read just to pass the time. But when I was a kid, my mom would catch me reading a lot and she thought it was a waste of time when I could be modeling or building my image. I never stopped, I just learned to hide it.”

“We obviously don’t know each other very well,” he said.

“Yeah, I guess not. I wouldn’t have pegged you for a closet nerd.”

“You either,” Sebastian said. “I really thought you would make fun of me if you ever found out.”

“Me? I’d never make fun of anyone for what they love. That’s just cruel.”

“Really? Even if it was something . . . what did you say earlier, trivial?”

“I didn’t say that because I think it’s trivial. I said it because it’s what has been said to me. I’d never think that about what made someone happy.”

“I didn’t know you were so . . . open about things.”

I shrugged. “I just like it when people genuinely enjoy something. That’s all.”

Sebastian was quiet for a long moment. “Why have you never said any of this before?”

I blushed and shook my head. “I was always told this was the least interesting thing about me. I grew up in the modeling world. All that mattered to people I hung around was how I looked. If I wasn’t making connections or working, then I was wasting time. And everything I was told about marriage is that your partner should only see you at your best so . . .” I shrugged. “A lot of the real me isn’t the best of me, I guess.”

“I don’t want to only see the best version of you.”

“I guess . . . I guess I didn’t know that,” I muttered, looking at my fingernails. Should I have known? Maybe. I knew my views on love were wrong, and it wasn’t what I wanted for myself in the future. But in my parents’ circles, those people were all the same.

Except for Sebastian, apparently.

“I want to make this last year of the contract be better than what it was before. I mean, we’re here against our will and we shouldn’t resent each other when neither of us made this choice.”

“You’re right,” I said softly. “I can try to open up a bit more. At least to make this year a little easier.”

Sebastian’s mouth turned upwards, lighting up his entire face. It felt like I was seeing more of him than I ever had.

“So, how did you get into *The Fair Originals*?” he asked.

“It’s a little hard to explain,” I said.

When I came up with the idea, I was in a dark place after the honeymoon. Finding out my husband had someone else after we’d had sex took a toll.

I never meant for it to go that far. It was just a fantasy story . . . but then my mother’s lectures every time I did something wrong started to get to me, and then my dad joined in. It all became too much. I wanted to get out of the real world.

I made my own. My idea was a *Beauty and the Beast* retelling, but the woman was the beast and the kingdom was in danger at all times. It was a five-book series, one that had gotten away from me. It went from a simple romance and grew into a play for power, kingdoms, and the emptiness of physical beauty.

“I needed an escape,” I said.

“I did too,” he replied. “I didn’t think I would like it, but there was something so familiar about the author, like I knew them.”

“Wouldn’t that be crazy,” I remarked awkwardly.

“I saw myself in Rohanda too,” he admitted. “Maybe in a different way, but J.R. really did a good job of making her so detailed but so vague that almost anyone can relate to her in some way.”

I nodded, trying to keep my cool. It was a weird roundabout compliment. I didn’t know how to take those. In reality, I didn’t think my books were all that special. They were mainly an outlet.

“Out of curiosity,” I said, “how do you think the series is going to end?”

That had always been my favorite thing to do in my free time: read fan theories.

“I’m hoping Rohanda and Jamisson end up together.”

“Wow. I didn’t peg you for a romantic.”

Sebastian’s face turned red. “I don’t know if I am, but I feel like the whole series has been building to something happier. As the betrayals add up and the ending gets closer, I feel like the only people that they have is each other.”

Oh boy, I was definitely going to disappoint this man.

At least the book was coming out after the contract ended. I could always change it, but up until now, I had been wanting the darker ending.

Suddenly it didn’t seem like the right thing to do.

“J.R. seems pretty dark,” I told him. “Maybe it would end sadly.”

“A lot of people want that,” Sebastian said, “and I agree that it would be more in tone with the series. But what’s the point of escapism if the end is sad anyway?”

I was quickly realizing that reading fan theories online paled in comparison to actually talking to someone I knew about it.

Online, I had seen it all. People saying this series was their life, people hating on it for existing. I knew people escaped this world to go to my universe. But seeing it affect someone I knew was so different than reading forums online.

“I’m getting the idea you don’t agree,” Sebastian said after a moment of silence from me.

“Oh, I mean . . . I try not to speculate too much. But the writing could align with the author’s mood. I’m just hypothesizing here, but I’ve always seen the series as the author’s therapy.”

Sebastian was pensive for a moment. “I never thought of it from their perspective. But I guess it’s hard to get a read on them when there’s nothing to follow.”

“Yeah,” I said. “No dedications, no author’s notes, no biography.”

“They’re a ghost,” he added.

“Maybe that’s by design,” I reminded him. “Not everyone wants to be noticed or followed.”

“Do you?”

I stifled as gasp. *Did he know?* How? How could he have found out? The look of shock on my face lessened when I realized he meant *me*, Lily, Instagram influencer and all-around-perfect public figure.

But I supposed there wasn’t as much of a difference as I thought there was.

“I don’t,” I told him honestly. “I hate it when people recognize me. I hate that I have to post about our lives.”

“You’re good at it, though.”

I shrugged, trying not to get defensive. “Maybe I am. But I think we all have things we’re good at but also hate.”

“Yeah, I suppose we do,” Sebastian said softly, more to himself than me. We sat in silence, both so lost in our thoughts that words were useless.

The man sitting in front of me wasn’t the one I stood at the altar with. Or maybe he was, and I never cared to find out. And I regretted that a little.

“So, want to watch a little asshole die?” I asked, trying to extend an olive branch.

I realized after I said it that maybe it was a poor choice of words.

“What?” Sebastian said, looking alarmed.

“*Game of Thrones*,” I reminded him.

“Oh, yeah, but maybe we should start at the beginning.”

“Okay,” I said, smiling.

I turned on the TV, and laid on the couch to recover. I was still tired and felt like I had been wrung out like a washcloth, but hanging with Sebastian was nice.

And that pang in my chest I usually had when around him was mysteriously gone.

Photo: a small kitchen, looking spotless and organized.

LilyRMiller: Sometimes keeping a house clean is all about wanting it to look better for your partner when they get home! I had been feeling bad the last couple days and my hubby took a few days off to take care of me. This is just a small token of my appreciation!

Fthepatriarchy: Ugh. Of course she does all the cleaning for him.

TwoLives: Um, what's wrong with that?

SebandLily4ever: I am so glad you're back! I was SO worried when you didn't post for a few days!

Chapter Eight

After that day, things changed.

It started as a smile when he got home from work, and then a conversation as we ate dinner together.

He kept me up-to-date on *The Fair Originals* news, which I was barely able to keep a straight face at.

It was hard not to blurt out something incriminating, but so far, I hoped my awkwardness only came across as not being used to talking about my interests.

Now that I knew he'd read the series, it would be easy for him to pick up on what I was doing if I ever did write around him. This new development ensured I only ever did so outside of the house, more often than not at the coffee shop. Because I was already out of our home, whenever I'd get stuck on a scene, it was easier to find a park to walk through, which made me gradually get to know Nashville better.

As I explored, I began to get used to our house's interstate exit. I knew where to go to get a good breakfast, as well as where to buy the cheapest gas. As it all became familiar, I found it growing on me just a bit. Even though I had no friends here, I still enjoyed it.

And while I missed Jessie, I gave her the space she asked for. If she was truly done with watching me sabotage my life, there wasn't much I could do to change her mind.

I kept up with social media as best I could. I hated it, and now that Sebastian knew I did, I was worried about asking him to pose with me.

It was easier when we both thought the other was fine with it.

But as comments started speculating about our lack of new photos, Martin told us to get it together.

And that was that.

It was late September. The air was cooling in ways I wasn't used to. The humidity was getting lower and the bugs were going away. It was still warm during the day, but nights were chilly.

Pumpkins were everywhere, and I had set up for a photoshoot at Cheekwood botanical garden. It was popular with the locals, and I knew it

would look good if Sebastian and I were getting out and seeing the Nashville sights.

I was intending to say something cheesy along with the perfect shot, thanking Martin himself for introducing us. People would eat it up.

The day of, I got ready at a snail's pace. My outfit was all cream and burnt orange, perfect for fall. I was wearing a tighter dress and a loose sweater with my usual photoshoot makeup painted on.

When I walked into the living room in heels, looking perfect, I could have sworn Sebastian was almost disappointed.

"You look . . ."

"Photo ready?" I finished. "Yeah, I have to be. With your father breathing down our necks, this needs to look good. I can't afford to take shortcuts here."

"Right," he said. "I mean, you look good, but not like *you*."

I shrugged. "This is the side of me I have to show."

He nodded.

"Let's get this over with before the sun comes out and ruins the lighting," I said, uneasy at Sebastian's words.

It didn't make sense. He should like me when I was at my best. Him liking me when I wasn't was a hard thing to accept.

"Can we stop for coffee first?" Sebastian asked as walked out of the house.

"I know a place we can go," I told him, giving him the name of the coffee shop I frequented.

It was busy, and I hoped we wouldn't get a barista I'd talked to before, but when I saw Riley, the manager, I knew I'd be recognized.

Riley was sweet and talked to me every time I came in. I was pretty sure she wondered what the hell I worked on all day but I had no clue what she would say to me.

"On second thought," I told Sebastian, realizing that she could out my activities here, "maybe we should go to Starbucks."

"Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"Uh, I'm in the mood for a large chain?"

He crossed his arms. "You're lying. You don't want me here for some reason."

Shit. Why did he have to notice so much *now* of all times?

"No, it's not that, I just . . ."

“Hey, Lily!” Riley called from the front counter. “Want your usual?”

Sebastian raised an eyebrow at me.

There was no going back now. I could only hope Riley wouldn’t spill the secret about my writing to Sebastian.

“Um, sure.”

“Wow, you look so good today. Not that you don’t always look good, of course. Are you heading to do something fun?”

“Oh you know.” *My family has me married to a man and contractually obligated to take cheesy, annoying photos for social media.* “I just wanted to dress up.”

“It looks nice.” Riley’s eyes landed on Sebastian. “Who is this?”

“This is my husband,” I said.

“Oh, you’re married?” she asked.

I panicked. Sometimes when I was alone, I hid my wedding ring. I always thought it looked out of place on me. If I’d had a choice, I would have gone for something way simpler than the shiny, large diamond on my hand.

“Uh, yeah,” I replied. “I’ve been married for four years. This is Sebastian.”

“Sebastian,” Riley said, smiling. “Nice to meet you.”

Sebastian looked tense, but he at least smiled back. “You too,” he said.

“I guess you’re not going to be sticking around like you usually do today?” she asked.

“Nope, not today!” I said, begging for her *not* to say anything else. “Um, Sebastian would like an Americano,” I said. “We’re excited to get to Cheekwood for a date before it gets too busy.”

“Oh, it’s so nice this time of year. I take my family all the time.”

I took out my card to pay without thinking, chewing on the inside of my cheek nervously. I just needed to survive this interaction with my writing still a secret. It shouldn’t be too difficult.

Fortunately for me, Riley was pulled away to help one of her employees, and I went to the pickup window gratefully.

As we waited, he said, “You must come here often.”

“Uh, yeah,” I told him, not able to look him in the eyes. “To . . . read.”

“You can’t do that at the house?”

“I could, but a change of scenery is nice sometimes.”

The excuse sounded weak to my own ears.

Sebastian only looked at me. I didn’t know what he wanted me to say, but thankfully we got our coffee orders from one of the other baristas, and I nearly ran from there.

I climbed into the car without another word, thankful my makeup was covering my red cheeks.

Sebastian let out a long breath in the car, almost as if he were exhaling the entire coffee shop from his lungs.

I couldn’t think of anything to say without blurting out that I was there to write.

His expression was pinched, and I couldn’t help but think it was because Riley knew me and things that he didn’t. I wanted to tell him, and perhaps if I wasn’t dumb enough to base a terrible character off of him, I could have.

The Fair Originals was filled with tidbits of my life that should never have seen the light of day. If people knew it was me behind it, they’d tear apart every word to look for details about my life. I’m sure my sales would spike, but my family would try to take a piece of my work’s profits if they knew they inspired me in any way.

Even if it was inspired by the pain they caused me.

We drove in silence until we pulled into the graveled parking lot of Cheekwood. It was busy, which was going to make photos tricky, but I pushed back nervousness to try to make the day the best it could be.

Cheekwood was beautiful. There were pumpkins everywhere. Food trucks and a pavilion with live music lined one side of the property. I ached to experience the food and the fields of the estate. I heard there was a mansion and old secrets I could find if I looked hard enough.

It was almost too bad that I was only here for photos.

The pumpkin patch was right at the front. Kids were running around, trying to convince their parents to get some of the outrageously expensive gourds on display. I couldn’t help the grin that made its way onto my face.

I turned to find Sebastian looking at me with his head tilted, one eyebrow raised.

“What?” I asked.

“You were smiling at those kids. Not your camera smile, though. Your real one.”

“They’re funny.” I looked at him. “I mean, I’m sure their parents don’t think it’s funny that they’re running around, but I think it is. They’re so innocent. They ask for what they want without thinking about what others will say about it.”

“You like kids?” Sebastian asked, a hint of disbelief in his voice.

“Yeah, I do,” I told him.

My mother’s advice flashed through my head again.

“But maybe I wouldn’t be a good mom,” I added quickly. Guilt spread through me, as if I had been following through with my mother’s plan unintentionally.

“I didn’t peg you for a kid kind of person.”

“And I didn’t peg you for the kind of guy who liked *The Fair Originals*.”

Sebastian’s eyes twinkled.

“That’s true.”

A knot of tension released in my stomach at his smile. Whatever had transpired in the coffee shop seemed to be passing, and I felt a little lighter.

Spurred on by our truce, I gestured to a picturesque scene decorated with pumpkins to tell him it was time to take photos. Sebastian followed and helped me set up the camera, which he usually didn’t do. It was an act of patience to wait for the perfect timing where no one was around, but we did it.

I got a few shots using a tiny remote in my hand, hidden from view. Sebastian put his hands on my hips and leaned in closely, like he always did, which usually came with a lot of awkwardness.

But his hands were warm and his body so close.

Other than the times we had slept together, Sebastian and I literally only touched each other in front of a camera, and only if we were performing. That meant every touch had to look good, not feel good.

But this felt a little different. He was tense and my body enjoyed feeling his chest against mine.

I almost forgot to snap the photo.

When we leaned in for a cheesy, romantic kiss, it felt different than others. His lips closed over mine and the warmth of his body in the cool fall air gave me goosebumps.

I wanted more.

But we had photos to take. We took a bunch, all in different positions. I knew from experience that the one where Sebastian's head leaned on my forehead and the one of us kissing would be the most popular.

My body was humming, and all I could think of was him against me. My brain unhelpfully flashed images of his hands all over me, and the pleasure that usually came after.

"Okay," I said. "We're done. I have all that I need."

Sebastian nodded, putting his hands in his pockets. When he stepped away, I was disappointed.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

I bit my lip. Despite feeling warm from his touch, I wasn't exactly ready to go back to our different floors in our home. I wanted to try the food trucks and listen to the music. I wanted to feel like I *wanted* to be here, not forced to be.

"Um, you can go if you want," I told him. "I'll Uber home."

"Why?"

"Because it looks fun here," I replied. "But you were only here for the photos, so I understand if you want to get some work done at the house."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No," I said, "but I'm about to try every food truck and explore. I might be here awhile. You're welcome to join me, but I don't know if this is something you'll enjoy."

He watched me for a moment, his expression pensive. A part of me wanted to stay and see if the buzz of having him around would stick with me. For once, I was enjoying his company as well as the sight of him. But if he did leave, then maybe I could cool down and not make a fool of myself by coming on to him.

After a moment of staring at me, he looked around the gardens, truly seeing it for the first time.

"Maybe . . . maybe I'll stay. But can we put the camera in the car?" he asked. "I don't want to use it anymore."

I nodded vigorously. "Yes, please. This thing is heavy."

After dropping off the camera, both of us felt lighter. We were no longer the married couple there for photos, we were just two people hanging out together.

At the car, I ripped off my thick sweater, feeling overheated as the sun peaked out from behind the clouds. I removed my heels as well, trading them for flats. The final adjustment to my appearance was braiding my hair to get it out of my face. The simple changes only took me a few minutes, and I felt a lot better.

When I turned to Sebastian, his sleeves were rolled up and his top button loose. He'd also run a hand through his hair, messing it up. I had to look away from him before he caught me staring hungrily.

We walked back to the food trucks, my stomach begging for food. I immediately spotted a gourmet grilled cheese truck and one for waffles and ice cream.

"What do you want?" Sebastian asked.

"I was serious when I said I was trying everything."

"Oh," he said. "Isn't that going to ruin your diet?"

I glared at him.

"Not that you should be worried about it!" he quickly corrected. "It's just that for our entire marriage, I don't think I've ever seen you eat ice cream, much less ten things from ten different food trucks."

"I don't like being forced on a diet," I replied. "I love eating. I've been wanting to try everything in Nashville since the moment we arrived. I'll photoshop every picture if it means I can finally eat a fucking waffle."

"Okay," he said. "Then we'll do that. Let's get everything."

"You don't have to do this with me, you know."

"I know," he said, smiling down at me, "but I've been meaning to try the food here too."

"You haven't already?" I asked. "Nothing when we first moved?"

I wanted to add "when Heather was here," but we were getting along so well today I figured I shouldn't ruin it.

"No," he said. "I haven't known where to begin, and it's not exactly fun going to new places alone."

"I could go with you," I said. "If you wanted."

"I'd like that," he said, smiling again, "but we need to figure out what to eat here first."

"Definitely the loaded hash browns," I said, pointing to the left-most truck. "Then I want some of that hot apple cider. We can end on the other side with the ice cream and waffle truck."

"I like the way you think, honey," he said. "Lead the way."

My entire body heated at his use of the pet name he only used during sex, but I walked ahead of him anyway, trying to focus more on the food and less on my husband's borderline flirtatious words.

"Oh my God," I said the moment I saw the menu. I grabbed Sebastian's arm and pulled him to stand next to me. "They have Philly steak hash browns."

"I don't know how authentic that is, considering we're not in Philly."

"Who cares about authenticity? It looks *good*."

"Then we'll get that."

"We?"

"I figure if we're eating everything, we should probably stick to one item and share it, but we can get our own if you want."

I wasn't against sharing, but this was the most couple-like thing we'd ever done with no cameras around us.

It didn't do anything to calm my needy heart.

"Sure," I said. "Sharing is fine."

We waited in line for a few minutes, Sebastian standing close enough that I could feel his body heat next to me. I found myself wanting more of it. When I wasn't walking, the air was chilly enough to have my skin erupt in goosebumps.

I wondered what he would do if I fully leaned into him, if I simply gave up having any space between us. Would he wrap his arms around me and smile, or would he awkwardly shuffle away and tell me there was someone else?

Unfortunately, I didn't have long to think on it, because Sebastian was ordering our food and paying.

The food truck was obscenely fast; right after we placed our order, it was ready.

The minute I saw golden brown, crispy potatoes topped with steak, cheese, and peppers, all thoughts of romance flew out the window.

I was starving.

I reached for it, but Sebastian held it up over his head.

"Hang on," he said, laughing. "We need to find a picnic table, or we'll make a mess."

I didn't like that he was right. If I tore into the food, my dress would be covered in cheese. It didn't take long to find an empty set of seats. Just

as a family was cleaning up their mess, he used his long legs to quickly stride thought the crowd and overtake the picnic table before anyone else could swoop in.

The moment we sat down, I had a forkful shoved in my mouth.

“Holy shit,” I said the moment the flavor of seasoned meat and cheese hit my tongue. “This is incredible. The steak is so tender, and even more exquisite soaked in this cheese. And the *potatoes*; how did they keep them so crispy when smothered like this? I don’t think I’ve had anything this good in the four years we’ve been married.”

He laughed again, a soft, musical chuckle, and took the fork from me. “It must be amazing.”

He took one bite, froze, and said, “Okay, yeah. This is all of those things you described.”

“I could live on these potatoes,” I moaned.

“I don’t know if they’ll last long enough,” he said as I stole the fork from him.

“It’s so good that I don’t even care about how gross I must look right now. I only care about food.”

“It’s fine. I’ve never seen you so . . . excited.”

“I *am* excited. I wasn’t living until I ate these hash browns.”

“There’s more to try,” he said. “We still have apple cider to get.”

“I can’t believe I forgot,” I said, moving to stand up. “I better go—”

“I’ll get it,” he said, laughing. He took one large bite of food before adding, “You can have the rest of this. I’ll be back with more.”

I paused in my eating as I watched him walk off. Was food a love language? Because I was more attracted to him now than I’d ever been.

It did not help that his pants left nothing to the imagination.

By the time he was back, I’d been watching him for a few minutes, my body attuned to his every motion. I knew what he was like in bed, and him treating me like this made me only want him more.

“Here you go,” he said, setting down a steaming cup of hot apple cider. “I want to at least try it.”

I nodded, picking up the cup and blowing on the liquid.

“I saved you a little,” I said, offering the food back to him.

“Really? I thought you’d devour it.”

“I’m saving room.”

Actually, it was that I was too busy looking at him to remember to eat. If he was making me forget about food of all things, then I was in trouble.

Sebastian took the plate and finished it off as I enjoyed the apple cider. It helped keep me warm from the day's chill, though I still longed for Sebastian to sit closer to me.

We made our rounds on the food trucks. We got what looked the best from each place and then sat down to eat it. By the time I was done, I was bloated as hell, but in such a good mood I couldn't be bothered to suck it in.

I wondered if Sebastian would say something about my belly showing in my tight dress, but he never commented on it.

By the time we got to the waffle truck, both of us were decidedly full. I still wanted the strawberry Oreo waffle though, and I didn't care if I had to eat it by myself.

"I can't believe every single food truck we've been to has been so good," he said.

"I'm banking on this last one being the best. I haven't had ice cream in forever."

"I'll have a bite," he said, "but that's all I can do."

"More for me," I announced.

The waffle wound up being huge, so much so that even I would not be able to finish it. It was rolled up like a cone with strawberry ice cream and Oreos mixed together. There was a massive dollop of whipped cream on the top that immediately fell on my hand.

I licked it up, tongue darting out to catch the sweet liquid.

Sebastian's eyes were on my mouth, and he looked *interested*. Which didn't make sense, considering how messy and loud I'd been all day.

No one should like me this way, yet I was starting to wonder if he did.

"Want some?" I asked, holding out the cone.

"Uh, sure," he said, blinking out of his stupor. He took a bite, and then nodded. "This is also amazing. We've really been missing out."

"Yeah," I said. "I'm never going to a chain again."

"So, we've tried all the food trucks," he said. "What's next?"

"I want to see the mansion," I said, pointing in its direction. "Want to join me?"

“Yes,” he said. “Let me finish this first.”

Sebastian downed the soda he’d gotten at the fourth food truck, and I found my eyes drawn to his throat as he drank. I really needed to get it together before I jumped him in this park. Him on top of me was all I could think of.

Maybe he would want something from me. After all, Heather wasn’t in town and hadn’t been for a while. I wasn’t sure if she was moving here, but I hoped not considering how well Sebastian and I were getting along.

“Okay,” he said, his voice a little rough from his drink. “Let’s go see this mansion.”

I had to stop myself from launching at him right then and there, and I forced myself to focus on leading us through the gardens. As we looked at different rooms of the mansion, he stood close to me, his body heat reminding me exactly what I wanted.

It also didn’t help that he was being more expressive. I liked how much he smiled at me and seemed genuinely interested in whatever I had to say. I always thought he was good looking when he was straight faced and serious.

But this? It was way worse.

As we finished touring the house, I was about to explode.

“Let’s explore some more,” he said. “I want to find that outdoor observatory the tour guide told us about.”

“Sure,” I said, but the words went in one ear and out the other. My mind was in another place entirely, and I was wondering if his car had a dark enough tint for us to do something there. I didn’t even think I could make it back to the house.

We eventually found what must have been an old night sky observing deck. It was the wrong time of day, and no one seemed to come in or out. We had been by ourselves for a long time while exploring because the clouds had turned dark and most of the other visitors went to the mansion in case it rained.

When we got inside the concrete building, Sebastian craned his neck up, giving me another good look at his fucking amazing jawline. I snapped.

When he turned to me, I grabbed him by his collar and pulled him to me. I kissed him roughly, a bubble of fear in my gut that I’d be rejected, but also a feeling of relief that his body was touching mine.

I hadn’t touched him in so long that this felt like a necessary release.

He responded quickly, kissing me back with the same amount of perfect force.

But then he stopped.

“Lily,” he said, nearly panting, “we’re in public.”

“No one’s around,” I replied.

“Are you suggesting we continue this here?” he asked. “What’s gotten into you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I like the nerdy guy who’s nice to me.”

“I didn’t realize it was so simple for you.”

“Please?” I begged. “It’s been too long. It’s about to rain so no one’s out. We would hear someone way before they would see us.”

His eyes were dark as he stared at me. “And this is what you want? To have sex in the rain where anyone could catch us?”

“Well, we wouldn’t be in the rain. The angle of the roof would keep us dry.”

“That’s not a no to the rest of it.”

“It’s you,” I said, my eyes trailing over his face, “so of course I’d want you, no matter where we are.”

Sebastian turned toward the entrance, jaw ticked as he considered. There was no one coming and ran began to gently fall. Cheekwood was quiet.

That seemed to cement his decision.

Sebastian kissed me again, one hand on my hip to pull me close. I pressed my body against his, my skin begging to be touched. Our lips moved against each other’s, and I instantly opened to him when his tongue swiped my bottom lip.

Sebastian moved, turning us so I was against the wall, and he was pressing me into it. The hand on my hip moved to trail the exposed skin on my legs, causing goosebumps to erupt from his touch.

I hiked my other leg around him, pressing him closer to me. My dress hitched dangerously high, and I could feel air on my center through my lace thong.

The hand on my leg moved to my core and he groaned quietly when he touched part of my bare skin.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “Were you planning this?”

“Not really,” I said. “But I’d say it worked out.”

His hand slipped past my thong and touched my center, causing me to whimper.

"You're going to have to be quiet if we're doing this."

I shut my mouth.

He circled my clit in the infuriatingly perfect way he always did. My whole body came alive, and I was more than ready for him to fuck me.

"Sebastian," I whispered.

"Shh," he said, silencing me with a kiss. "Let me do this for you."

"I want you in me," I whined, struggling to keep my voice low.

"That can be arranged," he said, pushing one finger into my entrance. I was so turned on he slid in easily, and his fingers found my inner walls, right where my G-spot was. I bit his shoulder, trying not to let any noises escape me. He fucked me slowly with his fingers, using his index finger to enter me, and his thumb to circle my clit.

"M-more," I whispered, and he added another finger. It wasn't as much as I needed, but the pressure inside of me was enough to build me toward something.

Something I needed.

But as I got close, I realized I needed more than his fingers could provide. I was right on the edge, but I needed *him* and nothing else.

"Sebastian," I whispered. "I need you to fuck me. I can't . . . I can't finish without you today."

"If you insist," he said, and he unzipped his pants. He paused when he did.

"I don't have a condom."

"I have an IUD," I told him. "And I'm clean. I get tested regularly."

"I do too," he said. "Are you sure?"

"Please," I said. "Please, I need you in me."

Sebastian nodded and lined himself up with my entrance. I shivered as I felt his cock press into me.

As he eased in, I heard him curse to himself. He went slow, but it looked like he was struggling not to lose control.

I moved my hips and he slipped further inside, nearly to the hilt. My eyes rolled into the back of my head as I felt full.

Finally.

Sebastian pushed more into me, finally bottoming out. I gasped as he began to move his hips, giving me the delicious friction I needed.

I was on my tiptoes to be near his height, and from where he stood, he drove himself up into me, his body hitting me right where I needed him. He wasn’t gentle this time, and I didn’t need him to be. I wanted him to fuck me harder because my body was crying out for it.

As he moved, I felt myself build again, but this time it didn’t stop. I leaned my head against the concrete roughly while my orgasm hit me, pulsating through me, giving me wave after wave of pleasure.

I grew wetter for him and his thrusts started making noise. He only sped up and I felt him slam into me with a quiet groan as he finished inside of me.

We both stared at each other, heaving as the reality of what we’d just done hit us. We’d never fucked in a public place, and it was otherworldly. Had us talking and getting along led to this? Was this something we could have each time?

My body was shaking, and he pulled out of me right before my legs couldn’t take the position anymore. I had to keep them closed to prevent anything from falling out, which somehow wasn’t a turn off.

Sebastian looked at me, almost as if he couldn’t believe what we’d just done.

I was thinking the same thing.

Photo: a montage of Sebastian and Lily. They’re kissing in one, holding each other in another, and looking happy in the final shot.

LilyRMiller: Look at these gorgeous photos! I never imagined I could find such a lovely place in Nashville. Definitely check out Cheekwood before the beautiful season is over!

SebandLily4ever: These look soooo good! Look at those heart eyes!

Diehardfan21: these two give me the creeps.

User293847203294: hey girl, why dont you send me a dm instead

Chapter Nine

A few days later, I was still thinking about our day at Cheekwood when I came downstairs and saw Heather.

And not just Heather on her laptop working on something. No, she was in a robe with wet hair and freshly scrubbed skin. I hadn't heard her come up the stairs to use my bathroom, either, which meant she used Sebastian's in the master bedroom.

My heart dropped.

I didn't even know she was back in town, much less *why* she was here. Was she moving here? Was she here for work? Not knowing made me angry, but seeing her in our house with no word of warning made it worse.

I knew I'd see her again, but to flaunt their affair so blatantly in my face?

This was an insult.

"Heather," I managed to say, despite my internal fury. "I didn't know you were coming in."

"Oh, hey. My shower broke at my hotel."

Of course it did. She smirked in my direction, and I looked away.

"I'm going for a walk," I muttered.

"Have fun," she said, casually running her fingers through her hair, as if she weren't in what was probably Sebastian's robe after showering in our home.

I heard Sebastian's door open, and I left before I could hear anything else. I slammed the door behind me and stormed out of the house. The weather was gloomy, and the sky looked like it could spit rain at any moment.

Fuck this. I was going for a drive.

I got into my car and immediately started speeding out of the driveway.

I almost hit a pedestrian.

My car beeped, and I yelped as the car's auto-stop feature kicked in, preventing a crash. I opened my door, mortified, as I saw curly hair and wide blue eyes.

I instantly recognized her. I almost hit my *neighbor*, the sweet innocent girl I somehow could never connect with.

Shame warmed my cheeks.

“Oh hey,” she said, chuckling nervously. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have walked out in front of your driveway.”

Oh no. *She* was apologizing to *me*?

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m sorry. I should have looked where I was going. I . . .”

I didn’t really have an excuse. I was still fuming, but the mortification of almost hitting someone was taking over. I was pretty sure I’d either throw up or cry by the end of the day.

“Are you okay?” she asked, looking at me curiously.

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?” I replied, my voice breathy even to my own ears.

“You didn’t actually hit me, and you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I . . . think I did. I think I saw the ghost of my own relationship.”

“Oh,” the girl said. She looked sad for a moment, and then straightened up. “I’m Amy, by the way. Your neighbor.”

“Hi,” I said. “I’m sorry. I’m a mess. I’m Lily. I live . . . here.” I didn’t want to look at the house and see Heather and Sebastian’s shadows. I was worried I would see them kissing.

“You need to talk? You look like you’re going through something.”

“I can’t,” I said, miserably, “but thank you for asking.”

“Are you sure? You can come to my house. I have sweet tea.”

“I’ve never had sweet tea.”

“Well then,” she said, “you definitely need to come over.”

Against my better judgment, I glanced inside the house and saw Sebastian and Heather talking. Feeling on display, I had to get out of the driveway. The sky had finally opened up and the rain started to saturate everything. I didn’t trust myself behind the wheel around the city, especially after almost hitting someone right in front of the house.

“You know what? I think I will.”

Amy’s house had a very similar floorplan and with what could only be the original wallpaper. The floors were more scuffed than ours, but it still felt lived in. She led me to her couch and disappeared into the kitchen.

I didn’t know anything about her other than she seemed to live alone. She could probably kill me before I even knew it, but she seemed

sweet and genuinely worried.

And I felt *so* alone.

“Here you go,” she said, handing me a glass of tea. “This should help.”

I took one sip. “Wow, this is really sweet.”

“Welcome to the South.”

I took another sip right as what happened hit me.

Sebastian and I getting along. Sebastian and I having sex at Cheekwood.

Heather in our house in a robe.

“My husband’s cheating on me,” I admitted lowly.

“What? The tall guy at your house?”

I nodded. I could feel tears in my eyes. “And I can’t even divorce him.”

“Why not? Even if you don’t work, there are always options.”

“I can’t say, but I’m positive I can’t.”

Amy pursed her lips. “Does this have to do with the blonde in your house?”

“Yes.”

“She’s been here a few times.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Maybe to me.”

“Please don’t tell anyone.” I had to ask humbly, because this girl I barely knew held my literal future in her hands.

“Who would I tell?”

“I don’t know, TMZ? Twitter?”

“Are you famous or something?”

“You don’t know me?”

She tilted her head to the side as she considered it. “No . . . Should I?”

I let out a breath of relief. At least she wasn’t digging for information. “I’m an influencer. My whole page is about our relationship.”

“Oh, and me telling would completely break the image, right?”

I sighed, and then nodded.

Amy pulled out her phone and I wondered if she was about to rat me out. Instead, she turned it to me, and showed me her apps. There were maybe ten, none of them social media.

“I don’t have social media. It’s bad for my mental health. I saw you were upset and invited you in. I won’t tell anyone, but if it helps . . . I can tell you a secret about me.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I technically stole this house from my brother, and if he found out, he could probably get it back.”

I blinked. “Why would you tell me that?”

“I have a good instinct,” she said, smiling.

I knew I wouldn’t tell, even if we wound up not liking each other, but she’d taken a risk, if what she’d said was true.

“How did you steal this house?” I probably shouldn’t have asked, but hearing about someone else’s life was a nice distraction from the pain of mine.

“Forgery,” she said. “Definitely not legal, but it’s not like I stole it from someone who was going to live here. I stole it from my brother, who it was left to when my grandma died. But that’s a lot of drama that you probably don’t care about.”

“No, I care,” I said. “This is . . . interesting.”

“Okay, so my brother is a big-time lawyer. He was putting in a pool at his mansion and wanted to sell this place to his developer buddies instead of giving it to a family member in need which was what my grandma wanted. So, I changed my grandma’s will. She always believed he was kinder than he was.”

“Why are you telling me this again?” I asked.

“Because I get a vibe from you that you need to talk, but you don’t trust me, so I’m giving you a reason to.”

“This could easily be used against you though. You know that, right?”

She scoffed good naturedly. “I have ten dollars in my bank account, and your house is way nicer than mine. This place is pretty much the biggest thing I own. Well, mostly own. I don’t know what you would get out of me.”

I didn’t have an answer for her either, but she was really trying and seemed eager to get me to open up. My first thought was to pull away. I didn’t open up with anyone but Jessie, and that hadn’t gone in my favor. I’d been with Sebastian for four years and I had barely begun opening up to him. I wasn’t the kind of person to spill my secrets to people I’d just met.

Then I saw the pure hope in her face.

“Are you trying to . . . befriend me?”

“Maybe,” she said, cheeks darkening, “I’ve seen you go on runs. Sometimes you look happy, but other times you look sad. I never see you hanging out with anyone, so I’ve always wondered if you needed someone to talk to. I’d like to be that person.”

I wasn’t sure what to think about this situation, but I’d already told her I thought Sebastian was cheating on me. I’d already broken my rule of staying tight-lipped to other people after almost hitting her with my car.

And yet she was still being nice to me.

“Thank you,” I said. “Maybe I do need to talk.”

“So, your husband is cheating?” she asked.

“Yes.” I sighed. “What’s worse is that he invited her to the house right after we were . . . intimate.”

“Oh my God,” she said, shaking her head. “Throw the whole man away.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I have to stay loyal . . . for now.”

Amy looked at me doubtfully. “And when can you stop being loyal?”

“I’d say about five years in.”

“Five years? Why a specific number?”

“Because it’s when I can leave,” I said. “It’s a weird situation.”

“Why?”

That was a question I didn’t know how to answer.

“Sorry,” Amy said sheepishly. “I know I’m overstepping. You just met me and I’m asking about your marriage.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “I mean, we’re even, I guess. Unless you lied to me about stealing this house.”

“I didn’t,” she said. “I promise.”

I wasn’t sure how much a promise from a stranger meant, but I wanted to believe it.

“So, why can’t you leave?” Amy asked again. “What’s weird about your situation?”

“My entire job is our relationship. I have a pretty big following, and my husband and I are known to be together a lot. His dad bought out my

dad’s company because we fell in love.”

“And then he cheated.”

“Yes.”

“Did you guys fall out of love or something?”

“We were never *in* love.”

“Really?”

I sighed, pressing my face into my hands. I couldn’t tell her about why we were together. I *couldn’t.*

But I wanted to.

Jessie was the only person who knew, and I was going insane keeping everything inside me.

“There’s something I’m missing, isn’t there?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied. “And I could get in big trouble if I told you.”

Amy bit her lip, and then went to the back room of the house. She returned with an old-looking binder in her hands.

“What are you doing?”

“Showing you my grandmother’s will.” Amy opened the binder and pointed to a paragraph. “Well, the original version.”

A paragraph leaving this house to a man named Brandon.

“Why do you even have the original version?”

“Honestly? I don’t feel great about what I did. I keep this to remember it. Maybe one day I’ll come clean about the whole thing.”

“What would happen if you did?”

“Oh, I’d lose the house, and maybe get sued. I wish I could be one of those people who was satisfied once they got what they wanted, but I hate lying.” She looked at the document wistfully, and then sat it on the old side table by her couch.

“Why did you show me that?”

“To show you I’m not lying. About this, at least. I want you to trust me.”

“Why?”

“Sometimes people have a gut feeling about one another,” she said, shrugging a little shyly. “Haven’t you ever had that?”

My last gut feeling was about Sebastian, and it was pretty obvious it hadn’t worked out in my favor.

But then again, he *was* different than I imagined. He was still kind, but he’d been working with Heather for a year before I came along. Maybe

he simply met her first.

I only wished he were honest about it.

“I’ve had a gut feeling before, but it didn’t work out,” I told her.

“Maybe it will this time,” she said, with a hopeful smile in my direction.

I found myself hoping for the same thing. Then again, who knew what she would think of me if she did find out?

She could make decent money selling this story. She could ruin me if it got out.

But a part of me *wanted* to see it get out.

And when the worst-case scenario wasn’t so bad, my walls came down.

“My parents set this up, but not in the blind first date way. They gave us a contract to get married while his family bought my dad’s company so they wouldn’t get bad press that they’re a monopoly now.”

“Whoa,” Amy said.

“They held my inheritance over my head, so I did it.”

“How much money are we talking?”

“Like a million.”

“Oh, then I would have married him too.”

I paused, blinking. “You don’t think I’m a bad person?”

“No,” she said. “It’s not a great situation, but we all do what we have to in order to survive. I literally stole a house. Life is hard these days. Not everyone has a dream that can make a living. Besides, have you worked?”

“I was a model, but I’ve never had a full-time job. If I left before this was up, I would be barred from working for any major company considering both my father and father-in-law are the heads of Miller Industries.”

“Oh, *that* monopoly. They just opened an office here, didn’t they?”

“Yep. That’s why we’re here. His dad is the CEO.”

“Those are some powerful connections. You did the right thing by just seeing it out then.”

“I don’t know. I am getting cheated on, after all.”

“How do you know he’s cheating?”

I closed my eyes. “The way he always answers her calls. He even answered them on our honeymoon. I haven’t seen them directly, but you

should see the way she looks at him. Plus, this morning she was in our house in a robe, and she'd used *his* shower."

"That's definitely incriminating, but he's never admitted it, right?"

"Not directly, no."

"Have you ever considered that maybe this is a misunderstanding then?"

I stared at her. Jessie was always so sure Sebastian had someone else. I'd never heard any other perspectives.

"I . . . haven't," I said, "but he spends a lot of time with her. It doesn't matter. This contract ends in just under a year anyway."

"Even if it does, wouldn't it be better to know for sure that he likes someone else?"

"It'll kill me if he is in love with her. Sometimes when Heather isn't around, I feel like *we* could be something, but if he does tell me he loves her, then we will never be anything."

"But then you know, and you can heal from there."

"I don't want to know, though. I want us to be—" I stopped before I could let it out.

I want us to be something.

Amy stared at me. "You what to be what?"

I shook my head, seeing Jessie's disappointed stare in the back of my mind.

"Never mind."

"I'm getting the idea you have feelings for him."

"No," I rushed to say. "I promise, I don't feel anything about him."

"It wouldn't be a bad thing if you did."

"My former best friend seemed to think so."

"Why?"

"Because I'm contracted to be with him. He's the son of the enemy, and he's in love with someone else."

"Whoa, there's a lot of information there. Yes, you're in a contract. He's the son of a company you don't like, but is *he* your *enemy*?"

"I thought he was," I said softly. "But recently I've started to believe he's as trapped as I am."

"And do you know for sure he's in love with someone?"

"No," I whispered, tears clouding my vision.

“I think you should talk to him. You don’t have to tell him your feelings, but you need to know if there is someone else. If there is, then you need distance. You need to move on. If not, then maybe you could be on the same page.”

I blinked away my tears. “Is it that simple?”

“No, it’s going to suck,” she said, “but it will help.”

I nodded. I tried to imagine asking him directly about Heather, and all I could see was him telling me yes, that he was in love with her.

“I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“That’s okay. Just remember that ripping the Band-Aid off allows you to heal sooner.”

I nodded.

“Thank you,” I said. “You could have judged me, but you didn’t.”

“Why would I judge you?”

“I’m . . . not sure. My former best friend did, though.”

“Sounds like a bad best friend.”

“She was worried about me. She thought I did all of this to stay on my family’s good side.”

“So what if you did? There’s still no reason to judge you.”

“I mean, my family sucks.”

“Yeah, but a lot of families do. And I think we all seek their approval from time to time.”

“But I plan to leave when this is over. I just needed the money to do it, and that’s what she didn’t like.”

“We all need money to live. And besides, I don’t think you need judgment. You need a friend.”

“That’s the problem. She was my only friend.”

Amy laughed. “I’m your friend. At least if you want me to be.”

I blinked. “Uh, what?” I said, inelegantly.

“I’ve wanted to be your friend since you moved here,” she told me. “Most of our neighborhood is still old people and no one is really our age. You seem cool.”

“I’d . . . I mean sure. But I won’t be in town forever.”

“I can travel.”

“And my life is pretty messy.”

“Mine is too. You already know I’m a thief.”

Well. That was a good point.

Was making friends this easy? I'd always had a hard time with it, but that was mainly because my mom only wanted me to make friends she approved of. I was now on my own, and I liked Amy.

"I-I'd love to be friends, actually," I told her, smiling.

"Cool! We can get hot chicken if you want."

"That's the one Nashville food I haven't tried."

"Oh, it's *so* good," she said. "Want to stay longer? I can tell you the horror story of the first time I tried it."

I glanced in the direction of the house. I wasn't ready to go back. I needed to face Sebastian eventually, but I wasn't ready.

"I'll stay," I said. "I'd love a good story about hot chicken."

We spent hours talking. I learned almost everything about her family, and left feeling buzzed from the sugar alone in the sweet tea.

I walked into my house feeling good. Then I remembered this morning, and saw Heather's bag in the living room, and my mood instantly soured.

I grabbed my laptop and went to the coffee shop, content to write for a bit.

"Amy, no," I said, looking at my new friend as if she had lost her mind.

"Amy, yes," she said, looking evilly at the menu.

"They're like five warnings about that chicken," I said. "I'm pretty sure I just saw some guy crying."

"I'm a native Nashvillian. I can handle it."

"You might actually die."

Amy waved me off and marched to the front to order the hottest chicken on the menu.

It was the next day and Amy had obviously taken it seriously when she said we would be friends. I was bored out of my mind dealing with writer's block when she knocked on the door and dragged me out of the house for hot chicken. I only had time to put my laptop into hiding before I was whisked away.

I had gone back to being quiet with Sebastian. I was working up the courage to ask him what he and Heather were, but I needed to get over the stinging betrayal I felt whenever I saw him.

Twenty-four hours wasn't enough.

I was trying to push it out of my mind and enjoy hanging out with a new friend. It was only marginally working, up until Amy told me she was ordering the hottest thing on the menu.

We were in an old 50s-style diner called Prince's. It was the origin of hot chicken, and top of the line. Even on a Monday night, the restaurant was packed. It was going to be a fight for a table.

"It's black," I said a few moments later, as we were handed Styrofoam boxes packed with food. Amy opened hers to inspect it. "There are so many spices on it that it's black."

She made an excited noise and led me to a table.

"I'll die happy then," she said. "I'm ready to suffer."

She dug in. I could feel the spice from across the table. After only a few bites, she coughed and was only able to mutter a quiet, "It's good."

"Hm," I said. "It's your funeral." I took a bite out of mine. The mild I'd ordered had a stronger kick than I expected. I could only imagine how Amy was feeling.

She was shoving the food into her mouth as fast she as could. Her face was getting redder, and I kept asking if she was okay, but she seemed to be having the time of her life.

Despite its heat, the food *was* good. I could see why she would be willing to suffer for it. Behind every bit of heat was a delicious flavor.

About ten minutes into it, Amy started crying. Ten minutes after that, she was chugging a Gatorade she'd pulled out of her purse. When I finished, she was laying her head down on the table, defeated.

"That was amazing," she muttered after I'd finished my plate.

"Are you sure?"

"What?" she asked. "I like pain."

I laughed at her expression, and then my phone rang. Sebastian's name flashed on my screen.

"Shit. It's Sebastian," I told Amy before answering.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"I'm getting food," I replied, my heart racing. Suddenly, I was noticing how loud the restaurant was, and how it would sound on the other end.

"Where? With who?" he accused.

"Just a friend," I said.

“You’re supposed to be here. This is the second time Heather has come here to find you missing.”

“Well, it’s the second time I’ve seen Heather in our house with no warning,” I hissed. “Sorry if my plans don’t coincide with your time with your assistant.”

“What are you talking about?”

I forced my anger away. Getting into a fight would do nothing to help the situation. I still needed to talk to him, after all.

“I’ll be home soon,” I said, hanging up before I could get angry again.

“He’s mad?” Amy asked.

“He’s mad because this is the second time I’ve been out when Heather came over.”

“Is this a contract thing or a cheating thing?”

“Still no clue, but I better get back. He sounded serious. I don’t need to make it any worse.”

Amy sighed. “Well, it was fun while it lasted. I’ll drive you back.”

We drove home in silence. As we got near the house, I found myself feeling a frustrating mix of angry and nervous.

Amy dropped me off in front of the house and then drove to hers. I took a steadying breath before walking in.

It was just Sebastian, thank God, and Heather’s stupid bag was gone which meant she was too.

“Dinner?” he asked from the couch. “Really?”

“Yes, dinner. With a friend.”

Sebastian shook his head. “It’s like you’re not even trying.”

“Not even trying? I’m not the one who had another woman in the house before eight to shower.”

“Excuse me?”

“You do realize that we have a neighbor, right? Someone who could see that and wonder what the hell is going on?”

Luckily, Amy wouldn’t tell, but he didn’t know that.

“I doubt the neighbor would notice a woman taking a shower here.”

“You never know,” I said. “If anyone isn’t trying, it’s you.”

“I’ve done my best,” he hissed. “Don’t get angry because I let my assistant shower here. You have no room to talk!”

“Yes, I do. This is my house too.”

“Then try being here when Heather shows up,” he said, voice still hard.

“I don’t even know when she’s coming! Besides, she already knows anyway. What’s the point?”

“Heather knows nothing,” Sebastian said.

I scoffed. “You expect me to believe that?”

Even if he wasn’t cheating, it would take an idiot not to notice something was wrong between us. Amy had, and she hadn’t ever been in the same house as us.

But my heart hoped Heather didn’t know anything.

“Maybe I *will* tell her, then.” Sebastian’s cold voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “She’s always asked if we were okay.”

I wanted to tell him no. If Heather really didn’t know, then I wanted it to stay that way. If they somehow weren’t together, then I didn’t want to be the catalyst that pulled them to one another.

I opened my mouth to beg him not to tell her, but he wasn’t done.

“I’ll see her tomorrow,” he said. “I can tell her when she stops by to shower here again.”

My mouth shut, and rage flooded my veins.

“Any reason she can’t be anywhere else? Or do you *need* her here?”

It wasn’t a direct question, but his answer would tell me a lot.

“I need her here for lots of reasons. She’s going to move here to be my assistant again, but she’s having trouble finding a place. She could stay here. We have the space and you seem to need a reason to be here.”

Rage turned to hurt, and the hurt multiplied, turning into something ugly in my chest. I stared at him and tried to imagine life not only with Heather in it, but *living* with us?

She and Sebastian could probably talk about anything and everything. Maybe he’d start smiling at her like he did me; maybe I’d walk in on them sleeping together, with Sebastian looking at her the same way he does me and saying the words I used to think were sweet.

I felt my eyes grow wet, which had to be one of the most frustrating parts of the night. “Great,” I muttered, my voice cracking. “Let me know when she moves in.”

Sebastian blinked, anger melting off his face. I absolutely refused to cry in front of him, so I walked up the stairs and to my room.

And that’s when the tears fell.

But I didn’t just cry. I pulled my laptop out and began to write. None of the words I wrote were happy.

Chapter Ten

The next day brought a cold front I wasn't ready for, both in my relationship and the weather. I had sweaters that looked cute in photos, but were all itchy when worn for more than ten minutes. I suffered through them when Sebastian was home, then went and bought a cheap hoodie from Target the moment I could.

Sebastian was with Heather, supposedly working, and I had been avoiding him since our big blowup. We'd been falling back into old habits, and the cold, quiet state of our marriage felt somberly familiar.

I had been writing again, which was the only benefit of this whole ordeal. I was about halfway through my book, and I wouldn't be getting it done if I hadn't been fighting with Sebastian.

I was at the coffee shop most of the day, and by the time I got home, Sebastian was there with Heather. It was late, and the sun was setting. There was no reason for her to still be working.

I bit my tongue as I walked in. Sebastian looked up at me, and then back down at his work, which was nothing unusual for the last few days. He didn't bother to take a second glance. They were working on something, the details of it I didn't know. I felt left out.

I retired to my bedroom without worrying about if Heather would ask. I could tell Sebastian was angry about it. I was flirting with danger, considering she could rat me out, but there was no reason to hide anything if he was going to tell her anyway.

The next morning, I was gearing up for an angry run. I threw on makeup, even though I was going to work out, because I had a sneaking suspicion Heather would be here.

And when I walked down the stairs, I found I was right.

"Hi, Lily," Heather said, her hair in her usual ponytail. She grinned too brightly at me, and I wondered if he had told her everything.

"Hey," I replied, trying to be as patient as I could.

"Are you and Sebastian okay?" she asked.

"We're whatever he tells you we are," I said. I hadn't gotten confirmation that she did know the whole truth of our relationship, and I wasn't about to spoil it.

Heather crossed her arms. “You sound like he does.”

“What does that mean?”

“He’s secretive too.”

I shrugged, about to leave. But she cleared her throat. I turned to her with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m not stupid,” she told me. “I know something isn’t right with you two.”

“Is it with any married couple?”

“Not like this. Do you even like each other?”

“We like each other enough to stay married,” I replied.

Heather narrowed her eyes. I didn’t know what to tell her though—not since I wasn’t entirely aware about her and Sebastian.

“Treat him right,” she said with a glare. “Because if this ever fails, then someone else will.”

My brain stopped for a moment.

If this ever fails, was the first thing I thought about. He hadn’t told her.

Then, I realized what she had said.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Come on, you have to know,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“I have a feeling I do,” I replied. “I want to hear it from you, though.”

“He would have been mine if you hadn’t shown up when you did.”

“Okay? I knew that.”

She laughed incredulously. “It doesn’t bother you that I have feelings for him?”

“I’ve known,” I told her. “I’m not dumb.”

“Shouldn’t you be jealous? I’m in love with your husband! I’ve loved him the whole time I’ve worked for him!”

“What am I supposed to say?” I asked bitterly. “*No, don’t?* Am I supposed to ban you from seeing each other when you’re his assistant?”

“Do you even care about him?”

“I moved across the country with him.”

“Oh, like that was so hard. Try driving two—*two* cars across the country.”

I pressed the bridge of my nose. “I offered to bring mine, and you were paid for your time. You said it was fine.”

“I said it was fine because I care. You don’t even seem like you care at all!”

“Of course I care!” I snapped, my control evaporating at her prodding. “Why else would I keep my mouth shut when I’ve known this whole time something is going on between you two?”

She opened her mouth to say something else, but then paused. “Wait, you think something is going on?”

“I’m not blind.”

“So you think he likes me back?” she asked, eyes bright.

What the hell was I supposed to say that? Tears blurred my vision. My body tightened. I wasn’t sure if I should fight or run.

“What do you want me to say?” I muttered through gritted teeth.

“I want to know if he feels the same way I do! Has he told you anything?”

“You expect me to answer that question?” I said, horrified. “You do realize he’s still my husband.”

Heather shook her head. “I knew him first, and I know him way better than you do.”

I looked away, anger fading into pain. That was probably true.

She worked with him all the time. Unlike me, she got to see him at the office. What did they talk about? What all did she know about him?

Plus, Heather didn’t carry the baggage I did. She wasn’t a bottle-blonde girl forced into modeling. She didn’t have the four years of tense silence and anger that he and I had cultivated.

I wanted him, but I knew I couldn’t win.

I wasn’t the kind of girl to start a battle I knew I’d lose.

“I don’t know what he feels for you, but . . . you certainly have a better shot with him than I do.” The words hurt, but they were true.

“Really? You think that?”

“Yes,” I said miserably.

“Oh man,” Heather said, letting out a long breath. “I’m *so* relieved. I’ve been wondering what he thought of me for years—way longer than he’s known you.”

My eyes were watery and my eyes stayed glued to the floor. She did know him for longer than me, which only made me think about how much better they could be suited to each other. They probably *talked*. They weren’t saddled together like he and I were.

The front door opened and I was mortified to see Sebastian walking in.

It was a weekday morning. There was no reason for him to be home. I turned away from him, hiding the unshed tears.

“Heather?” Sebastian said, shocked. “Why are you here? I thought you were supposed to be at the airport.”

“I, uh, forgot something.” Heather said. “I used the emergency key you told me was under the mat on the porch, and I was just chatting with Lily while I got it.”

Heather gestured in my general direction, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sebastian turn to look at me.

And he never looked away.

I was barely holding back the tears, but I hoped he didn’t notice them. I was unable to stand tall with the weight of the conversation sitting heavily on me. My shoulders sagged, my head hung low. It was impossible to look fine.

“You should probably go, Heather,” he said, his voice distant.

“Actually, I need to talk to you about something important before I do.”

Was she seriously asking him to talk right in front of me? I glanced over and saw her touch his arm, then I looked back down at my feet.

“We can talk later.”

“It’s *really* important,” she urged.

A single tear fell. I just wanted them to leave and get it over with.

“Heather, not right now.”

Dimly, I noticed his tone was sharp.

“Please?” she said, her voice alluring.

“No,” he said loudly, turning to her. “Can you not see I’m trying to make sure my wife is okay?”

Silence.

I knew I needed to speak up and say I was fine; he didn’t need to worry about me. I had my writing, and by the time he was done hearing Heather profess her love for him, I would have written away my pain.

But the words never came.

“Sebastian,” Heather said, “we need to talk about us.”

“What?” he asked.

“You and me.”

“There is no us.”

“I love you,” she continued, and the knife in my chest twisted. “I think we could be great together.”

I blinked back more tears. I wanted to go to my room so I didn’t have to hear the rest of this, but I’d have to walk past them to get up the stairs.

I wondered if I would hear Sebastian talk to her in a soft voice, like he had when we were at Cheekwood. Maybe he’d take her to his room and make love to her in the same way I craved.

And I’d sit upstairs by myself.

What I didn’t expect him to say was, “Heather, this is extremely inappropriate.” But he did.

“What?” Heather asked. “How is me being in love with you inappropriate?”

“Because you’re saying it in front of my *wife*.” He said it slowly, enunciating the word *wife* like it meant something to him.

“She said I could tell you.”

“I didn’t say you could do it in front of me!” I snapped. When they both turned to look at me, I shook my head. I needed to get out of here. I was about to lose what little control I had.

Sure, he’d said it was inappropriate, but never that he didn’t feel the same. I figured that once I was out of the room, he would say what he truly felt.

But he grabbed me when I tried to rush past him.

“What is going on?” he asked under his breath.

“Go with her,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s fine.”

“No,” he said stubbornly.

I didn’t understand. Why was he still here? Why did he care about me at all? I wasn’t someone he chose. I was just some girl that he got stuck with.

Sebastian sighed, tension in his face. He turned back to Heather.

“Heather, I am not in love with you,” he said. “I am in love with my wife. Coming here and upsetting her is inappropriate. I know we discussed you continuing to work under me, but I think you should go back to LA and work for my father.”

“What?” Heather croaked.

“What are you not understanding about this situation?”

“You . . . you can’t love her.”

“Why not?”

“Because she told me you didn’t.”

Sebastian froze. His shoulders tensed, and he looked at me with a look of betrayal on his face. I couldn’t look him in the eyes.

I didn’t know what I did wrong. He told me he was going to tell her. He told me she would move in. Why wasn’t he going after her?

“If that is what she thinks,” he began slowly, “then I’ve failed her as a husband, and I’ll spend every day attempting to make up for it.”

I slowly looked back up at him. This had to be for show. There was no way this was real.

And yet, my traitorous heart raced. I *wanted* it to be real. I wanted it *so* bad.

“You’re really in love with her?” Heather asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Why would I not be?”

“You never seemed like you were. All those late nights in the office . . .”

“I’ve always been only professional with you. Those late nights were because of the workload my father placed on me, and you were the one who volunteered for the overtime.”

What? Was he saying what I thought he was? Some of the aching pain in my chest cleared.

“Do you think I enjoy being away from my wife whenever my father has a project he needs done?” Sebastian continued. “Do you think I liked leaving her to fend for herself while I was with you? No, Heather, I wanted to be with Lily. All of those nights, I wished I were with her.”

“You . . . you never talked about her. You never seemed to care about her when we were together at the office.”

“Do not assume anything about me. You’ll be wrong. Now go back to LA. I need to fix the damage you caused.”

Heather was red in the face and darted out the door without another word. I released a breath of relief after she was gone.

“Thanks,” I said shakily. “I don’t know how much of that was true __”

“What happened?” he asked as he turned to me with a pinched expression.

I gulped, instantly aware of his gaze. “She was here when I got up. She told me I wasn’t a great wife, and she could do better. I . . . couldn’t disagree with her.”

“You said that?”

“You can’t exactly blame me. The last time we talked you said you were telling her.”

Sebastian’s anger melted off of his face. “Lily, I wasn’t serious.”

“How was I supposed to know that?”

He deflated. “You’re . . . you’re not. I’m sorry. I was angry because you were with whoever you’re seeing and . . . never mind, it was stupid.”

I blinked. “Whoever I’m seeing?”

“Yes. I know about them.”

“Wait, you’ve said that before. You said it when I was sick.”

“I did.”

“You’ve thought I’ve been seeing someone else this whole time?”

“Lily,” he said, sounding exhausted, “please don’t deny it.”

“You think I’m having an affair?” I repeated, offended at the accusation.

“I *know* you’re having an affair.”

“What? I’m not—”

“Just tell me the truth. You owe me that.”

I shook my head. “I *am* telling the truth. I don’t know how I could prove to you—”

“Lily,” his voice grew hard again, “I’d love to believe that you’re reading or whatever you say you’re doing when you’re not here. But I know you’re lying. You were dropped off by a car that isn’t yours. You’ll say you’re one place when you’re not. What you tell me doesn’t add up.”

I didn’t know what to say. I’d been caught lying, but not about what he thought.

“Sebastian . . .” I trailed off again. I wanted—no, *needed*—to prove my innocence. I’d never do this. I’d never put him through the pain I thought I was going through, but I didn’t know what else to tell him.

I *couldn’t* lie my way out of this.

“Why can’t you be honest with me?” he forced out.

I struggled to come up with an answer. “I—”

I was writing. That was *it*.

Sebastian shook his head, looking more disappointed than I'd ever seen him.

"I'm done," he said. "You don't have to worry about me ever doing this to you. I wouldn't wish this feeling on anyone."

Sebastian turned to walk away, and I knew I couldn't let him. I didn't want him to believe I was cheating. I didn't want him to sit with the pain I had for years. I didn't want him to turn away and look at me like I'd betrayed him.

"I'm writing." My voice cracked on the words. I'd never said them out loud, and they sounded strange to my own ears.

When he turned back around, I knew I couldn't take it back.

"Writing what?" he asked slowly.

"I . . . write about the things that hurt me," I said lowly. "And I do it often."

"Why would you hide that?"

I sighed, knowing any more lies would result in him turning away again.

"Because I'm published. Under another name."

There. Most of my secret was out.

"Is that a bad thing?"

Yes, it was.

I'd somehow turned my pain into something more than it was. I'd written him into the story, making him the worst version of what I saw.

And he would hate me when he found out.

Then anger would turn into revenge, and revenge could be anything. He could blackmail me. He could be disgusted with me.

He could tell *everyone*.

I couldn't let it happen. Not when I was so close to my goal.

"It's based on my life. If people found out I wrote, they could figure out . . . everything."

Sebastian blinked, shocked. The anger melted off his face and was replaced by curiosity.

"And why couldn't *I* know?"

"Because I'm terrified. I haven't told anyone about my writing. It is the one job I've had that's *mine*. My parents got every dollar I earned until now, and the minute they see that I have an out, they'll take it too."

"I wouldn't tell."

“I want to believe you,” I said, and I did. I wanted to think he’d never betray me. I wanted to trust every part of him. “But I just spent four years thinking you were in love with Heather.”

“What?”

“On the honeymoon,” I said, my hands shook as I remembered it, “the way you answered her call, I thought I was just an inconvenience, and that she was the one you wanted.”

Sebastian looked, horrified. “So you thought I had sex with you while I loved someone else?”

“I thought I was just the one around,” I admitted. The pain was still fresh, and tears brimmed my vision. “Especially now. When you said you wanted her to move here, I thought I could step out of the way and give you what you wanted.”

“But that day at Cheekwood . . .”

“I figured you missed her, and I happened to be the one in front of you.”

Sebastian’s jaw dropped. “You think I’d do that to you?”

“It wouldn’t be the worst thing done to me.” I shrugged. “We barely talked for four years. I figured you were spending your time talking to her.”

“Lily, you’re my wife.”

“Not really,” I said, shaking my head. “We signed a contract before the marriage papers. We pretended to be in love.”

“I took a vow, and I was serious about it from day one. There was *no one* else.”

“But that call on the honeymoon—”

“My father was pushing work on me, and I had a ton of important emails she was messaging about.”

“The late nights?”

“Work. Genuinely, it was work. I never wanted to involve her, but it all got to be too much for me, and I needed someone to take some of it off of me so I could even get home at all.”

“What about when we first moved here, and she drove our cars down? You were gone for hours with her.”

“She asked me if she could transfer because she didn’t like working under my father, and then we got stuck in a lot of traffic.”

“The other morning? She was here in a robe.”

“Her shower did break,” he said, but then his forehead creased in thought. “Or I think it did anyway. I let her use mine while I worked outside. When I saw her, I immediately told her to get dressed. I thought it was inappropriate from the very second I saw her.”

“I didn’t even know she was in town,” I muttered. “So when I came downstairs and saw her, I ran. I almost hit the fucking neighbor when I was trying to get the hell out of here.”

“Wait, the one that lives right next to us?”

“Yes. Her name is Amy, and she was really nice about it. She invited me to her house when she saw how upset I was and I . . . I kind of told her everything.”

“Everything?” He looked horrified.

I tensed. “Yes, but I trust her. I really do. It’s been days and there’s not a word of anything. Besides, she was already noticing when Heather was here. She could have talked a long time ago.”

“Why would you take a risk like that?”

“Because I thought we’d finally connected and then you brought your assistant here because you were in love with her. I needed to talk to someone, Sebastian. I have no one in my life to vent to.”

He sighed, some of the worry leaving his expression. “No, I understand. I can’t imagine the headspace you were in when you left. Actually, I can, considering I thought you were cheating too. I can’t explain it, but it’s like . . .”

“It’s like all logic is gone,” I finished for him.

“Exactly,” he said. “I never would have let Heather stay in the house, by the way. Nor would I have told her. I was . . . I was so angry. We had that day at Cheekwood, and then I call you and hear you with someone else.”

“I was with Amy.”

“And the other times?”

“The coffee shop. I write there because I was worried you’d come in and see me writing.”

“The one where you took me the day before Cheekwood?”

I nodded. “It’s a nice place.”

“I thought that’s where you took the other person you were seeing,” he said, laughing tiredly.

“Oh no,” I said, shaking my head. “They know me because I write for hours there. I was worried someone would rat me out.”

“Thank God.”

“I’d never cheat on you,” I said. “I can’t. It’s in my contract, remember?”

“I do remember,” he said. “I just thought you didn’t care.”

“I may be cracking, but not that much. I took a vow too.”

“Good,” he said. “After seeing my dad cheat on every girlfriend he had, I couldn’t stand to see any more.”

“I don’t need to find someone else anyway. For one thing, I can’t with the contract, but also . . . for other reasons.”

“What other reasons?”

“I’ve never . . . you know, come for anyone else.”

Sebastian blinked, and then he turned red.

“That’s a shame. You’re beautiful when you do it.”

I blushed, unable to form words at his much-needed compliment.

“One more question,” he asked.

“What is it?”

“I have to know why you’re doing this.”

“Doing what?”

“The marriage. Is it really for money?”

“Yes,” I admitted. He looked disappointed, but I continued. “I need my inheritance in order to escape.”

“Escape what?”

“My family, my name, modeling . . . everything. I can’t do this anymore. I was forced into being a child model. My parents spent all that money on themselves. I was told that if I did this, I would be able to stay out of modeling for the five years, and I’d get an inheritance. It’s not everything I made as a model, but enough to get me away.”

Sebastian stared at me, the tension back in his shoulders. I sighed. People usually got angry when I mentioned the money.

“I’m sorry, I—”

“Why are you apologizing?” he asked, his voice hard.

“Because this isn’t the answer you wanted.”

“I don’t have an answer I *want*.”

“Then why do you sound mad?”

“Well, for one, I thought you did this for the money.”

“That’s kind of true.”

“No, it’s not. You wanted to escape everything, even the modeling. I thought you loved it. Lily, when we were thinking about getting married, your mother told me I needed to have a certain amount in my bank account at all times to meet your standards in this marriage.”

“Yeah, that sounds like something she would say. I don’t care how much money you have.”

He blinked, as if this was the most shocking thing I’d said all day.

“I bought that house in LA because I thought you’d want the one with the best view.”

I shook my head. “I would have been fine anywhere. My family moved around all the time when I was kid. My mom wanted the newest of everything, but I just need a room. The only place I wouldn’t have liked was if it was in the residential part of the Miller Industries tower in LA. That thing is ugly.”

I said it before I could stop myself, and I wondered if he would be offended.

Instead, he nodded. “It is really ugly. The apartments are even worse.”

“You really believed I cared that much about money?”

“You were a famous model. You only stepped out of the house in designer clothes. You did so many covers and fashion shows that you could have made the company’s revenue in less than a year.”

“Yeah, I never saw a penny of that money. My mom is my financial manager. She said she gave me a cut, but she never did.”

“What?” he said sharply.

“My mom wanted mansions and money. I was pretty, so why not sell me? I’m still shocked they let me out when we got married, but I have no idea how much Martin offered them. It’s money I’ll never see.”

“Is that why you volunteered for this?” he asked. “To get out of modeling?”

“Oh, I didn’t volunteer. I was told I could do this or continue being photographed next-to-naked and being leered at by the shadiest photographers my mother could find. That, and they offered me part of the money I’d earned as a child as an inheritance.”

“So they lied to me. They told me you wanted this because my family was rich.”

“Of course they lied. And I was never in a position to correct anyone. My mom told me men didn’t want a mouthy woman who read too much. They wanted someone who was blonde, skinny, and didn’t have a care in the world. So I was that. Until I couldn’t be.”

“And you couldn’t leave because your mom was on everything.”

I nodded. “And even if I did, what would I do? Go be a server and have men hit on me constantly? I was an object from the moment I was old enough to be. I’d rather finish this out and go to a place where no one could find me.”

“So that’s all you want? To be anonymous?”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s all I want. I planned on finding some cabin in California when I got out, but now that we’re in Nashville . . .”

“You could go back.”

To what? Jessie? She didn’t want to hear from me until I had my life in order. I definitely didn’t.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I’ll figure it out when it’s closer to time. I’ll probably need tons of therapy for the last four years.”

“So you were never happy, then?” he asked softly.

I slowly shook my head.

“Really?”

“Why would I have been? You were always at work and never wanted anything to do with me.”

“But what you posted said you were happy.”

“The social media I keep up is a part of my contract. I have to make it look like I’m happy.”

Sebastian shook his head, jaw tight. “*That* was in it too?”

“Of course it was,” I said, shaking my head. “But why would you care if I was happy anyway? You thought I only married you for money.”

“Because I still cared, Lily.” He paced the length of the living room as he spoke. “I hated being in the office until ten every night. I hated that I was so overwhelmed with work that by the time I got home, I had no energy to talk to you. The only thing that told me I wasn’t a terrible husband was what you posted. That was all fake?”

“Of course it was. Did you think I did it for fun?”

“Yes,” he said. “I really did. So you’ve never once been happy to be with me?”

“I mean, the sex was good. Even if it was rare,” I said, my heart racing at how hard he was taking all of this.

“Wait, you slept with me when you thought I was cheating and when you were unhappy? Why?”

“I’ve always thought you were attractive,” I said. “And because I knew that at least for the first time, I had to. My mother told me we needed to consummate the marriage so I was prepared for it on the honeymoon.”

“What?” he said sharply.

“It’s fine. It was better than fine. It was the best sex I’d ever had, actually.”

“But then I went back to work.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That didn’t feel great, but I got over it.”

By writing bad things about him.

“How can you even stand to be in the same room as me? Why even have this conversation with me? You could hate me if you wanted to.”

That, I didn’t have an answer for. I opened my mouth, and then closed it.

Why did I continue wanting him? Was it residual duty?

No, this didn’t feel like a chore.

Was it because he was hot?

No, because he was more than that.

I racked my brain for an answer and came up with nothing.

Then I remembered that feeling I used to get whenever we wouldn’t connect, the pain in my chest, the feeling that I’d missed something.

And the burning desire to find out we were both trapped.

Had I sensed something about this without realizing?

Sebastian sighed when I didn’t answer out loud. “I feel terrible.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“Just now, when Heather was here, you were going to let me cheat on you in front of you, weren’t you?”

I blushed. “If you were happy, then yes.”

“Is that all you wanted?”

I looked at my hands, unable to meet his eyes. “I think so.”

“And what if I told you that being happy is what I want for you?”

I took a shaky breath. No one wanted me to be happy.

“Then I’d say I don’t know how to be.”

“You’ll learn,” he said.

“How?” I asked. “Is there a book I should read or—”

I paused when he grabbed my hands, interlacing his fingers with mine.

“Lily, I should have never spent so much time at work. I should have never assumed you were okay when you weren’t. I’m sorry.”

My face heated. “It’s okay, I—”

“No, it’s not okay. I should have tried to get to know you. I should have asked more questions when we moved here and I saw you struggling. You have every right to hate me.”

“I don’t hate you,” I said meekly.

“I want to make it up to you,” he said, tightening his grip on my hands. I didn’t know what to think. “You can say no, and I’ll respect it. But I want to make things better. We’ve never allowed ourselves to connect in the four years we’ve been together. I want to try now.”

I stared at his hands, not comprehending what I had heard. Not only was I getting an apology for something that hurt me, but he was offering to connect and to try to be better.

And that was the one thing I wanted more than anything else.

I slowly nodded, feeling like my face was on fire.

“Thank you,” he said, leaning his forehead against mine.

A single tear escaped my tightly shut eyes, but it wasn’t sadness.

It was hope. Sebastian saw it and wiped it away with his thumb.

“Do you still hate me for wanting the inheritance?” I asked quietly.

“What? No.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re doing this to escape. After all you’ve given up for your family, you don’t deserve to walk away with nothing. If they’re offering enough for you to live off of, then I understand.”

“You’re not judging me for it?”

“No. I’d never.”

“Jessie did.”

“She knew?”

“Yes. She always wanted me to back out. She said it would be easy to walk away, but I have no job, no talents, and I felt like I’d done all this work already, only for all of it to be stolen.”

Sebastian growled low in his throat. “You could sue them for that.”

“I can’t wipe away all the savings I do have. Not when I don’t know how ending this contract will go.”

“I understand. I have savings—”

“No,” I said, firmly. “It’s fine. I’ll think about it if they pull something with the inheritance. For now, I don’t have it in me to fight.”

“I do,” he said, voice hard, “but I understand. I’ll do whatever you need me to do.”

I nodded, another tear falling.

Sebastian brushed it away again. “I miss seeing your freckles.”

“You like them?”

“I like them.” His eyes met mine again. “I like you.”

I wanted to remain composed, but my breath was ragged. He didn’t say anything else, only leaned over to kiss me. It was a soft, tentative kiss, like something from a first date, but it had me sinking into his weight.

He took it easily, wrapping his arm behind my back. We stood there for a moment, and I couldn’t help but wonder if this would end in sex like it usually did.

He pulled away slowly, almost like it pained him. “I need to get back to work.”

My heart sank.

“Not because I don’t want to be here,” he said firmly. “My dad wants detailed reporting of Electronic Point’s sales in the last two months. He wants everything down to the last penny. The problem is, he sold the database we used to use to store that info and now no one has it.”

I blinked. “That sounds like a huge problem.”

“I know you probably couldn’t care less about this.”

“No,” I said. “It actually helps to know why you’re working so much. It seems like a fruitless endeavor though. If he sold the database, then why would he expect you to have all that information?”

“He wants us to pull it. Manually.”

“That sounds tedious.”

“It is, and if I want to get back here at a decent time tonight, then I need to get going.”

“It’s okay. I understand. Thank you for telling me what is going on.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t before. I didn’t think you’d care.”

“Of course I care.”

He smiled, eyes bright as they gazed at me. He opened his mouth to say something, but his phone rang.

“I’ve really got to go.” He kissed me before heading to the door.

“Good luck,” I called to him. He paused, beaming at me. I was almost blinded by the sight.

“See you tonight,” he said and shut the door behind him.

My lips stayed upturned until long after he was gone. Even though I was emotionally exhausted, I felt lighter. The assumptions had been cleared and I was looking forward to what came next.

Chapter Eleven

Later that day, I realized something had changed in my writing.

Words were flowing, but in a different way than before. They were easier, with less angst and pain. I didn't know I could write like this.

After Sebastian left, I wound up going on a run, and it helped me burn off some of the excess energy I had. When I got back, I ate a quick breakfast and sat down.

I didn't get up again for hours.

What I was writing was different. It was lighter and featured Rohanda and Jamisson more so than the previous books did. Rohanda finally dealt with some of her grief with help from him.

I didn't know how my agent was going to feel about it, but I hoped it would go over well.

It was late afternoon by the time I closed my laptop and rubbed my eyes. I worked on cleaning for a while, but then eventually ran out of things to do. I was anxiously waiting for Sebastian to get home.

And I didn't know what to do about it.

There was a knock at the door.

"Hey," Amy said. "You look exhausted."

"Thanks," I said dryly.

"Sorry, but you do. Is everything okay? I saw the assistant here earlier."

"Do you only spy on us?"

Amy shrugged. "Kind of. I work from home and get bored. I've gotta know what happened though."

"Well, she confessed her love for him in front of me."

"Are you serious?" she asked, eyes so wide I could see the whites of her eyes.

"And Sebastian sent her back to LA."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Considering he said he didn't feel the same way, I'd say yes."

"This is great then! Where does this leave you?"

"Married. He said he wanted to make it up to me."

"Make what up to you?"

“The last four years.”

“Oh.” She grinned. “So you guys are *really* married.”

“I’m hoping so,” I admitted. It was almost painful to say out loud. I hadn’t even admitted this to Jessie, and for the longest time, I didn’t admit it to myself. “And it’s bad timing to be figuring this out, or maybe it’s good timing. I don’t know.”

“When does the contract end?”

“In August.”

“Oh,” Amy said. “I’d say you could stay together but he’s connected to your family, right?”

“Yes,” I said, sighing.

“Then maybe you should enjoy the time you have.”

“Am I wrong for this? Should I even let myself like him?”

“It’s your choice. What do *you* think?”

“I think . . . I think I want this, but Jessie hated Sebastian.”

“Jessie doesn’t seem to understand why you did what you did, and I think she hates Sebastian for being the other participant.”

“I feel like I should too, but I don’t.”

“You feel the way you do for a reason. Maybe your heart knows something your mind doesn’t.”

“Or maybe he’s just good in bed.”

“Being good in bed does translate to real life, you know.” She winked at me.

I nodded, thinking about how patient and kind he could be.

“You’re doing the best you can,” Amy added. “That’s all we can do.”

“Thank you,” I said gratefully.

Amy smiled. “Now that we’re done having a moment, I’ve been dying to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“What do you do on your laptop all day?”

“Stuff,” I said, not sure of what to say.

“What kind of stuff?”

Spurred on by Sebastian’s reaction, I decided to tell her the truth. “I write.”

“Oooh, anything interesting?”

“No,” I lied.

“Is it published?”

“Not by me.”

“Fanfiction?”

“Maybe.” Technically I used to write fanfiction, so it wasn’t a lie.

“Hm . . . I’m going to crack that one day. Maybe I’ll read what you write through the window.”

“Then I won’t write here,” I jokingly threatened. “Or near windows. Besides, it’s fantasy.”

“Oh yuck,” she said, making a face. “I’m more of a romance person. Maybe I’ll let it go then. Fantasy is too much world building for my pea brain.”

Amy stayed past sunset, and by that time, she had brought over her Nintendo Switch. We were deep in a game of Mario Kart when the door opened.

I figured Sebastian would be home after I went to bed with how much work he said he had. Apparently I was wrong.

He walked in the living room and I lost focus. Amy was in first place, and she immediately yelled, “Ha! Suck that Donkey Kong!” as she won the game.

Sebastian blinked, looking between us with confusion.

“Amy,” I warned, my voice shaky with embarrassment. “Sebastian’s home.”

She instantly stopped cheering and turned, and her face turned as red as mine felt.

I wasn’t even dressed up. After my run, I’d taken the makeup off and changed into sweatpants.

“Oh, awesome. I’ve completely embarrassed myself in your house.” Amy sighed. “Nice to meet you, Sebastian.”

“You as well,” he said coolly. “Are you the neighbor?”

“That I am. I watch you guys through the windows.” She said it casually, and then turned a deeper shade of deep when she realized what she said. “I mean, not just you. I’m nosy with everybody. I’m an equal opportunity nosy neighbor.”

Sebastian looked at me and then to Amy.

“Amy, I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“You have? Was it that I spilled my dirtiest secret so your wife could trust me with hers?”

“No?” he replied, looking alarmed.

“I was being a good friend and keeping your very effective trick to myself,” I said, dryly. “I only said I trusted you.”

“Oh,” she said. “Does he know that I know about the uh . . .”

“Contract?” Sebastian added. “Yes, I’m aware.”

“Oh, I bet you’re worried I’ll tell. I can tell you my secret too.”

“You don’t have to,” Sebastian said. “I trust my wife’s instincts.”

Amy looked at him, almost impressed. “Your wife, huh?”

“We *are* married.”

“Wow,” she said. “For a man who’s in a contract, you play a good husband.”

“It’s still a real marriage in the eyes of the law.”

“Somehow I don’t think that’s 100% true,” she said to me, winking.

I glanced at my husband. Instead of growing tense, Sebastian turned *red.*

I was eager to change the subject off of my marriage before Sebastian *did* get angry. “You know, you should probably keep your secret to yourself if you want to keep your house.”

“You're probably right, but you have to admit it worked. Just look at us!”

I laughed, then noticed Sebastian’s embarrassment had faded. He looked over at us, one corner of his mouth upturned.

My face grew warm. He was *smiling* at me.

“I should head out,” Amy said, bringing me out of my thoughts. “I do, unfortunately, have a job and I need to get to bed. Sorry for yelling like a lunatic when you came in the door.”

“It’s fine,” he said, and his voice sounded light. “Any friend of Lily’s is welcome here.”

“Now that’s what I like to hear,” she said, heading for the door. “I’ll see you both soon. Probably very soon, considering my windows see into yours.”

Amy walked out, completely forgetting about her Switch still hooked up to the TV.

“She’s interesting,” he said.

“Yeah, she is,” I replied. I walked over to close the blinds, just in case Amy did get too curious for her own good. “Thanks for not being mad that she was here.”

“You were never like that with Jessie.”

I almost winced at the mention of her. “Well, Jessie had a lot to say about my life choices.”

“Does Amy?”

“She does, but she’s more understanding. For once I don’t feel like a harlot for accepting the contract.”

“Jessie made you feel that way?”

“In the end, yes.”

“You didn’t deserve that.” His eyes firmly held mine.

“Yeah, Amy said something similar. Don’t worry, though. I’m fine.”

Sebastian looked like he wanted to say more, but then he set down his bag and turned back to me.

“You look nice.”

I laughed. “You don’t have to lie. I should probably change anyway. I totally lost track of time.”

“I want you to look however you want.”

“I know I don’t look good when I’m not in makeup. It’s fine.”

“You look beautiful without it.” He came to stand in front of me. “I could kiss each one of the freckles.”

Holy *shit*. Could someone die of embarrassment? I looked up at him, hoping he would follow through with his promise, but he stepped back, his cheeks dimpled as he smiled at me.

“Let’s go out.”

“Where?”

“A food tour through Nashville.”

“Wait, seriously?” I asked.

“I was thinking we could pick three famous restaurants from a hat.”

My jaw dropped. “You better not be joking. This is the best idea I’ve ever heard.”

“I’m not joking,” he said, laughing.

“I’m so excited! I’ll go get ready.”

Sebastian kissed me with a soft press of the lips, and then let me go so I could run up to get changed.

I wound up leaving my face bare and putting on leggings and the hoodie from Target that I lived in when Sebastian wasn't home. When I walked out, I eyed him carefully, expecting him to say something about my choice in clothes.

But he had changed into a loose T-shirt and jeans, looking as comfortable as I was. "Ready?" he asked.

"Of course. I wore leggings so I can eat as much as I want."

"Smart move," he said, leading me out the door.

The drive was quiet but it was a comfortable silence. I watched Nashville pass by, noting the old buildings alongside the new.

I had come to appreciate that we bought an older home. The locals hated the development, and even I could see how the new houses didn't fit in. It only grew more obvious the longer we stayed here.

I was happy to feel like I fit in. Somehow, despite everything, I was beginning to find my place here.

Even if my days were numbered.

"First choice," he said, handing me a hat.

"Where did you get this?"

"They gave it to all the employees when the office opened."

"I'm surprised you kept it."

"I needed something to draw restaurants from."

I closed my eyes and pulled out a piece of paper.

"It says Edley's. What do they have?"

Sebastian's mouth quirked into a grin. "Barbecue nachos."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not. All of these suggestions came from my coworkers. They're the real deal."

"I can't wait," I said.

It was better than I could have imagined. Fresh chips layers with delicious, tender brisket. I almost cried.

"Next is our entrée," he said, handing me the hat.

"Your turn," I said. "I want to see what you pick."

His was Kayne Prime, which was an expensive-looking steakhouse. I balked at the prices, but he told me to order whatever I wanted.

I got the cheaper steak, but it was still delightful.

By the time we left, I was in a food coma, but he offered one more stop, and I couldn't say no.

Dessert.

"I think I can make room," I said. "Where's the hat?"

He grabbed it out of the back of the car, and I pulled out Mike's Ice Cream Parlor near Riverfront Park. We ended up wanting the same giant ice cream sandwich, which we shared. We walked through the park as we ate, talking about all the food we'd tried.

"That was amazing," I said as I took a bite of the handmade ice cream. "I can't believe we got to try three different places in one night."

"I need to take you to the giant cafeteria not far from here. A lot of local restaurants have a booth there."

"Oh my God, that sounds so *good*. Please take me."

"I will," he said, grabbing my hand.

I threaded my fingers through his, feeling more connected to him than I ever had.

"This was a much-needed break from writing."

"Are you busy?" he asked.

"Oh yeah," I said. "My next book is due soon and I haven't been able to get anything done."

"Next book?"

"I have a multi-book series," I said and then I straightened. "But no one can know—"

"I won't tell anyone," he said, "but I didn't realize it took so much of your time."

I blushed. "Yeah, it does. But I love writing. It's how I process everything that happens to me."

"Sounds like a good hobby."

"Do you have any?" I asked.

"No," he replied, sounding a little sad. "I never have time for them."

"That sounds terrible."

"My dad has high expectations."

"I can tell."

"Yeah," he said, but he looked haunted in a way I'd never seen him.

"I imagine you had a rough childhood with Martin as your dad. If you ever need to talk about it, I'm here."

"It's not a story that makes me look good."

I paused our walk. "What do you mean?"

“My dad knew what he wanted from me,” he said. “And I did what I could. It’s not much more than that.”

“I think it is,” I said.

“Let’s just say Sasha would have been a better shadow for him than me, but I was the son, and it was my job.”

“Because you were the boy?”

“I think so. I should have been the stronger one, but I was always emotional in ways he didn’t expect. I was bad at math, but Sasha was good at it. But he still wants the son to be his spitting image. At any cost.”

“And what price did you pay to be what he insisted you be?”

“Like I said, it doesn’t make me look good.”

“You’re talking to an ex-model who married for money. I’m not going to judge.”

He laughed humorlessly, then his eyes went distant. “Hitting your kid does wonders for making them comply.”

I froze. “He hit you?”

“Yes, for far too long. Even after I was bigger than him, he still did it.”

My heart dropped into my stomach.

The character I based off of Sebastian? He hit Rohanda. *God*, I made him his father without even realizing it.

Even though I was in pain and felt so unloved, I wish I hadn’t written it. I never meant for Sebastian to see it, and I never meant for it to grow like it had, but now I felt terrible for ever putting him in it at all.

Even if it wasn’t a carbon copy, it was close enough to make me uncomfortable.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “It doesn’t matter if you could have fought back, you should have never had to.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” I said, “and that’s okay.”

“My therapist said something similar.”

“When did you go to therapy?”

“Before we got married. I told my dad that if he ever laid a hand on me again I’d report him and ruin his reputation. He responded with forcing me into this marriage.”

“Martin is the lowest scum of the earth. I swear he lives off of making people miserable. You did *not* deserve that.”

“I’m not innocent in this. The blackmail wasn’t great.”

“It’s as Amy says: we all do what we have to.”

“He got his revenge though,” Sebastian muttered. “Carting me across the country to open an office I didn’t want to was pretty good payback.”

“Why didn’t you want to come?”

“I don’t like being everyone’s boss,” Sebastian admitted.

I blinked. “Seriously?”

“I mean . . . not this high level. I don’t want to be treated like some god in the office because of who my father is, or because of some title I carry. I don’t mind managing people, but the kissing ass that comes with it . . . “ He shuddered. “And he knew once I was promoted, it’s all I’d see. I’d either fail, and make Allen’s company look bad, or succeed and be more like him.”

“Can you leave?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Not until the end of our contract. I’ve been under a noncompete agreement for ten years. It was originally five, but he extended it when I signed our marriage agreement.”

“So, you’re trapped,” I said softly.

“Yes. I have been since I was eighteen. Back then, I was too scared of him to say no, and it was only recently that I learned how not to be. I wish I had done it sooner, before you got trapped in this with me.”

I found myself disagreeing with him. “If I’d never been brought into this, I wouldn’t have met you.”

“You really know the right thing to say,” he said, smiling softly.

“Maybe it’s the writer in me.”

We lapsed into silence for a moment.

“Thank you,” he said, breaking the quiet.

“For what?”

“For not thinking I was weak when I let it go on, and not thinking I was wrong for ending it.”

“The only person wrong is your father,” I said.

And maybe me for letting my mind make Sebastian a villain. If there was one thing I could change, it would be that.

“I wish we had known we were both trapped. We could have gotten along for a long time.”

“Me too,” I muttered, rubbing at my chest absentmindedly. I could feel the ghost pains of our near misses in our relationship. I caught myself thinking of the past and how I could have ended our disagreements sooner.

“I need to head back,” he said. “I think the long day and all the food is catching up to me. I’m exhausted.”

“Of course,” I said. “Let’s go home.”

As we drove back to our house, I realized how connected I felt to him. Hearing him open up only drove us closer.

I wondered if he’d kiss me when we got in. Maybe we’d sleep in the same bed. Maybe we’d make love instead of having sex.

The possibilities were endless.

I kissed him when we got in, but he pulled away quickly.

“See you in the morning?” he asked.

I nodded, a little disappointed. I knew he was tired, so I understood if he needed sleep. We’d done a lot of work for one day.

But as I watched him go, I felt lonely.

I went up to my own room, thinking I could get more writing done. That all stopped when I saw a text from my dad, reminding me of a sponsored post I’d forgotten to put up.

I sighed, knowing I’d never see the revenue from this. My mother would. I got it posted before I went to bed, feeling irritated I had to do it at all.

But I’d be free soon. I only had to make it until the end of the contract.

Photo: an ad for a popular health food brand.

LilyRMiller: #ad have you seen these delicious health bowls? Get yours with code LILYMILLER for 10% off!

Eatwithshelby: Wasn’t this caught in a huge E. coli scandal?

SebandLily4ever: Ordering now!

Gountilly: It’s a bit suspicious that I haven’t seen a photo of Sebastian and Lily for weeks… Think she’s pregnant?

Chapter Twelve

I woke to the sound of a car horn.

My room faced the front of the house, and I groaned as the noise pulled me out of my sleep.

Then I heard the pounding of the front door.

I sighed, wondering if this was a delivery that needed a signature, or if this was a very pushy salesman.

When I opened the door, however, I saw my parents.

“My, my,” my mother said, “I hope you don’t let your husband see you like that.”

I froze. They hadn’t warned me they were coming. I never thought my mother would ever want to be seen in a city like Nashville.

She was perfectly dressed. Alongside her thick makeup, her hair was perfect and looked too good next to my father, who was openly glaring at me.

“What took you so long to answer the door?” he spat out.

“I . . . I was asleep.”

“Sleep is no excuse to look like *that.*” My mother shook her head. “Go change before your husband sees you in this state.”

I opened my mouth to tell them Sebastian wouldn’t care, that he didn’t mind me looking like a mess.

“Lily,” my father barked, “your mother told you to do something.”

My entire body tightened. I wanted to fight back. I wanted to tell them no, I didn’t need to change just because they showed up unannounced. I was fine the way I was.

But my feet turned and I walked up the stairs.

“I guess we’ll come on in then!” my mother called, and the door slammed behind them.

I winced at the noise and shut the door to my own room, my brain struggling to comprehend that my parents were here, in our home, and telling me how I should look.

I wish I’d had time to prepare for this, so maybe I could do something more than stare at them.

I was in the process of ripping off my old, ugly pajamas when my door opened and Sebastian walked in.

I could only stare. My shirt was halfway off my body, exposing my stomach and breasts. I was *so* not prepared to flash my husband today.

"What?" I asked him.

He shut the door behind him.

"Your parents are here," he hissed.

"Yes, I'm aware. I'm in the middle of making myself presentable."

"Did you know they were coming?"

"No," I said. "Do you think I'd answer the door looking like this if I knew?"

"You look fine."

"Yeah, only according to you." I pulled off the shirt over my head. "My mother immediately told me to go change before you got up."

"I . . ." He paused as his eyes trailed down to my breasts. "Do you want me to leave while you change?"

"Why?" I asked. "You've seen all this before."

"Well, I—" He forced his eyes to meet mine. "Yeah, you're right." After a moment, he asked, "Why are they here?"

"To check in," I said, "but that's only a guess. I didn't get a chance to ask them before they sent me up here like a petulant child."

Sebastian sighed, but his eyes were on me as I threw on my nicer pair of jeans. I walked to the dresser, where I kept my makeup, and began putting it on.

It only took my five minutes, but I could see Sebastian's eyes on me in the mirror. When I was done, I turned to him.

"Do I look okay?"

"You look . . . like you always did."

"Well, it's what's expected of me." I set my makeup back on the dresser and applied the setting spray. "Ready to go face the music?"

"Are you okay?"

I paused. "Why are you asking?"

"Because I can tell you're nervous. You've barely breathed since I came in."

At his words, I realized I was in fact breathing short and shallow breaths. I closed my eyes and tried to calm down my racing heart.

“Considering what I looked like when I answered the door,” I said, “this isn’t going to go well for me. I just want to get this over with.”

“This was my day off. I wanted to do anything but entertain them for a weekend.”

“Hopefully they won’t stay the whole weekend.” I prayed they wouldn’t, at least.

I glanced back in the mirror, making sure once again that I looked up to my mother’s standards. “Let’s go downstairs.”

“Sebastian!” my mother said warmly as the two of us exited my room. “It’s so good to see you. I appreciate your greeting in *proper* fashion.” Her eyes slid to me. “Not everyone can manage it.”

“Hello to you, too, Mrs. Roberts,” Sebastian said, his voice distant and callous. He sounded like a shell of himself.

“Ah, Lily. You look so beautiful my dear,” she said to me, as if she hadn’t just been lecturing my appearance ten minutes ago. “And this is your new house! It’s so . . . *quaint*.”

“It’s old,” I said. “Historical.”

“I can tell,” she said, her voice snide. “Was this all that was available?”

“No, but she loved it,” Sebastian, glancing at me. “I saw her expression when we walked in and I knew it was the one.”

“How kind of you,” my mother said. “I sure hope she treats you well enough to deserve that kind of attention.”

Sebastian’s expression grew colder.

“So, what brings you two to town?” Sebastian asked without any mirth to his tone.

“Oh, just a visit,” my mother replied. “I missed brunch with Lily. And Allen wanted to see the new office.”

“Right, the office,” Sebastian said. “Things are going well.”

“Well, it’s got my company’s name on it,” my dad said, finally breaking his silence. “I don’t want Martin’s son running it into the ground.”

“It wouldn’t be smart to,” he said, his voice cold, “considering Miller Industries footed the bill for the office.”

“We footed the bill for the house,” my dad said gruffly. “So we’re even. You can’t exactly ruin my company if my name is on the deed.”

I looked between them. My dad still had the deed?

Of course he did. He had to have something else to control us with, after all.

My father may not have been as devious as Martin, but he knew how to make sure to protect his company.

But not his daughter.

“Sebastian has done nothing but ensure that the new corporate office is up and running efficiently,” I said, trying to diffuse the situation. “There is nothing to worry about, dad.”

“I thought you didn’t care for business,” my dad said, turning on me.

I blanched for only a moment, but my annoyance won out. “I’m married to the man that runs the business. I’ve learned a thing or two about it.”

Sebastian looked at me with wide eyes and a small smile on his face.

“Oh honey,” my mother said. “Don’t speak like that. Being cooped up with just your husband here is making you irate. You need girl’s time.”

“Actually—” Sebastian started, before my mom cut him off.

“You dad wants to see the office, and I want brunch,” she continued. “Let’s go.”

“But—” I tried to say.

“Now dear, you can’t turn down time with your mom. Besides, what’s the saying? Being away creates love?”

“Absence makes the heart grow fonder?” I asked.

“Oh yes, that’s the silly little saying,” she said with a laugh.

I only had time for one more glance at Sebastian before I was pulled out the door. He looked a little panicked to be left with my father, but my mom’s grip on my arm was tight.

It was like we were shipped across the country and forgotten about, only to be manhandled once they remembered they had control over us.

My mother chose a chain with bottomless mimosas, and I was stuck driving. She talked about her affairs and her hairstylists—none of it interested me. I could only give her one-word answers and nod along to whatever she was saying.

When we got there, it was far too busy and loud. None of the customers even seemed to be from Nashville. It was nothing more than a tourist trap.

A bachelorette party group was cheering for whoever was getting married; I winced at the sound and tried to focus on the menu. Maybe I could get French toast to make this more tolerable.

“I expect you to get a salad,” my mother said, her voice cold.

“What?” I asked, shocked.

“I can see you’ve not been following your diet,” she said, eying my body. “He won’t stay if you’re fat.”

“I’m not . . . I’ve not—”

“You do not need to gain weight—not now. That man is only with you for your body, and if you give that up, then you have nothing left,” she spat out.

I’d gained only enough to put me closer to what should have been a healthy weight. My original diet was to keep me so skinny that the wind could knock me over. I’d always cheated a little, but I had toned abs and an ass to show for it. Now I was a little softer around the edges.

At her words, my brain unhelpfully recalled how Sebastian had retired to his own room the night before.

“Okay,” I said quietly.

“And don’t think I didn’t notice he slept in a different room,” she said coldly. She leaned forward, and I leaned back. “You’re lucky he’s stayed with you this long.”

“He’s contractually obligated to,” I reminded her.

“Ha! You don’t think he’s sleeping around when you look like this? The end of this is near for you. What you need to be focusing on is locking him in. If you’re done, you’ll have no money. No opportunities. Nothing. You need him.”

This was what my life at home was. I was torn down in order to believe I needed someone else. First, it was my parents. Then, it was my marriage.

And I was always left feeling not good enough.

I sat back in my seat and looked down. My mother knew she had won.

“I’ll find you a personal trainer to get you your body back,” my mother said, looking at me intently. “Once you do that, you get pregnant and then he has to stay.”

The thought made me sick. How could I ever consider doing that to him? We were only just now getting along, much less talking kids. Did he

even want them? Did he like them? Bringing a child into this world knowing they might have a distant, cold father was too much for me. Plus, bringing in a child out of obligation wasn't a good enough reason to have one.

"I see your attitude hasn't changed," my mother muttered. "You still don't appreciate all that I've done for you."

I slid down my seat, stomach ready to revolt. *Didn't appreciate her?* How could I appreciate someone who never listened to me and forced me to be someone I hated? How could I appreciate someone who pushed me into modeling and took every cent I made?

"Oh, well," she continued. "You'll see how much you need me once you spend a little more time in Nashville. Things aren't going well with Sebastian, huh?"

"Things are fine," I said, but my voice shook.

"Really? You're gaining weight and he's sleeping in another room. You need me, Lily. Otherwise, you look like *this*. I made the right decision to send you here and make you see what you are without me."

I sat up. "You sent me here to teach me a lesson?" I asked.

My mother rolled her eyes. "Martin had his own reasons for sending Sebastian here, but I saw how you were acting. You thought you were smarter than me." She laughed coldly. "You'll see what your life is without me in it. All you have is my gentle reminders, not my *real* help, even though you obviously need it."

Her *real help* meant driving me to hair appointments, hiring personal trainers to yell at me until I worked out, or throwing away all the food in whatever fridge I had access to.

I didn't *want* her help.

But I didn't say anything. I was shutting off, a hermit going back into their shell. I listened to my mother's plans, feeling like I was out of my own body, like I was someone else.

I didn't come back into myself until I was in my own home.

The house was too old for them to stay in, according to her. She warned me one more time not to screw anything up when her Uber arrived, thankfully whisking her away and giving me a momentary reprieve. I walked in by myself, feeling like a zombie, and fell on the couch numbly.

I sat there in silence for a long time, simply listening to the sounds of the house. I didn't know if Sebastian was back yet, but I didn't know if I

could handle it if he was. I was tired, and in no mood for talking. I felt sick to my stomach.

But of course, the moment I thought of him, the front door opened and in he walked.

“Oh, Lily,” he said. “You’re here. Thank God. I told your dad I wanted to spend time with you just to get away from—” His voice trailed off. “Are you okay?”

I laid idle for a long moment, trying to make sense of his words. That only seemed to worry him more.

He walked over to me, his steps firm and sure. He knelt next to the couch. “Hey, Lily. Are you okay? Please talk to me, honey.”

“No,” I muttered.

“No, as in you don’t want to talk or no as in you’re not okay?”

“The second one,” I managed, after quite a long, awkward pause. I pressed my face in the couch cushion, and his hand came in to rub my back. It was warm and steady, so different than how my lunch had gone.

“What can I do?” His voice came softly.

I didn’t know. I had never had someone there whenever I needed them. Usually, I would mull in my pain until it passed or bang on my laptop’s keyboard until I felt better.

This was different. Someone was here for me, but I had no clue what to do.

“It’s okay, Lily,” Sebastian said. “We can just sit here quietly if that’s what you need.”

I could only nod, needing the silence.

“Do you want me to stay?”

I nodded again before I could convince myself I needed to be alone.

“Okay. Can I sit next to you?”

I moved where he had room to sit, and as I did so, he guided me to lay on his leg. I was facing away from him, face burning up, but feeling a sense of calmness at having someone close to me. Sidetracked from my hurt, I was aware of his breathing, his movement. The comfort of his leg warmed my cheek and the rest of me, until what had iced over today was starting to melt.

I felt like me again.

I let out a long breath, releasing some of the pain.

“What happened?” Sebastian asked again.

“My mother happened,” I said, my voice full of the torture I had endured at her hands.

“What did she do?”

“The usual. Making me feel like I have nothing if I’m not married, making me eat a salad at brunch because I’m gaining weight. If you can think of anything demeaning toward women, she probably said it.”

Under me, Sebastian’s leg tensed. I worried that I should have kept this to myself. He’d already had a rough day with my dad. I didn’t want to make it any worse.

I found that people only had a certain tolerance for the pain I felt.

And sure, I didn’t have it as bad as other people. My problems were insignificant to those who wondered where their next meal was coming from, or didn’t know how they would make rent that month.

But I hurt, and I was tired of hurting alone.

“I’m sorry,” he said, though it sounded like it pained him to say it. “That’s not fair of them to say.”

“It isn’t the worst it could be,” I said. My hurt only grew. “I know it isn’t.”

I was waiting for Jessie to tell me I was being too dramatic, that I chose this life, and I couldn’t complain about it now.

“Lily, no. That’s not how it works. This pain you feel is real and comparing it to others isn’t going to make it go away.”

“But . . . you sounded angry when I told you. This is when you’re supposed to tell me it isn’t that bad.”

“Honey,” he said, the nickname rolling off his tongue like he’d always said it. “I’m mad *for* you. Not at you.”

“Why?”

“No one should talk to anyone that way. I only care if you’re happy, not if you look perfect. Besides, it doesn’t matter what I think, because you have the right to decide that for yourself. You can have a choice, Lily, and I’ll support you no matter what it is.”

“Is that what life is supposed to be like?” I asked softly.

“Yes, and I’m sorry you didn’t get to see this until now.”

I looked up at him, a feeling of sadness and grief overwhelming me for a moment. Tears pricked my eyes, and he gazed down at me with a new expression on his face, one that I didn’t recognize.

To some, it would be pity.

To me, it was empathy.

It wasn't judgment or anger. It wasn't harsh or cruel. It was just empathy. Someone listened to me and cared about my pain enough to let me have it—to let it be mine.

Amy had done that, in her own way, but Sebastian's empathy meant more to me than I expected it to.

He was from my old life in LA. He should be everything I hated, and yet he was turning out to be something I always needed.

Instead of being against one another, we stood together. I knew, without a doubt, that he'd been through all this too. When everyone else was telling me what I should do, he told me he understood.

That was all I ever needed.

"Thank you," I said softly.

"For what?"

"Just being here. I need that."

Sebastian smiled, but it was a sad one. "I'm sorry I wasn't until now."

I knew I could have been angry, but knowing he was going through the same pain I was made me understand that we were both in the wrong. We both held tightly to ourselves rather than meeting in the middle. "We have each other now, and that matters more."

He gently brushed hair out of my face. "Exactly."

My pain had receded and I could think more clearly. I remembered how he'd been with my dad all day. I sat up and turned to him.

"How did things go at the office? Was everything okay?"

"Are you okay? I don't want to talk about me if you're not ready for me to."

I nodded, smiling. "Yes, I'm okay. I want to know about your day now."

"There isn't much to say. I took him in and showed him what I was doing. Eventually, I made the excuse that I wanted to get back and spend time with you, so he brought out his laptop and said he was going to do some work anyway. I think he really was worried I wasn't running this division of the company well."

"He seemed to think your dad wants to run ours into the ground," I said. "Do you think he does?"

“I don’t know,” Sebastian said. “Your dad has loyal customers. He always has. I don’t think he could run Electronic Point without alienating a lot of the people who regularly buy from him. It’s why they want us to pretend to be in love, so they looked like they had a reason to merge.”

“They can only do that for a few more months,” I said. “Unless you think they’ll extend it.”

“What? The contract?”

I nodded, my heart racing as I thought about it.

“Maybe,” Sebastian said. “No one has approached me, but then again, they didn’t approach me last time until the last second. I don’t think we’ll know for a good while.”

Being with Sebastian for longer wouldn’t be the end of the world—at least not this version of him.

It was everything else that was the problem.

“Let’s not worry about it,” Sebastian said. “We’ve got a few months left. I want to focus on us.”

“Me too,” I said, sighing. “Especially now that we’re here.”

Sebastian reached over to grab my hand, his features soft. Gone were the frown lines I was so used to seeing.

Maybe if I had met him like this, not as his father’s son, I would have been with him on my own. This side of Sebastian was warm, caring, kind, and smart. Nothing like the person I thought I was marrying.

Then again, I wasn’t exactly like the person he married either.

“How long do you think your parents are staying?”

“Probably not very. My mom kept calling Nashville *cute*, which means she hates it. Once my mom starts complaining my dad usually does something. I’m hoping they leave tomorrow.”

“Me too,” he replied. “I’m worried a few of the managers will see that I was in on a weekend and ream me out. They’re always on me about working too much.”

“Are they the reason you come home at a decent time now?”

“Partially,” he said. “On one of their first days, I heard them talking about work-life balance and how important it was to them. Someone said that a married person being at work all the time usually meant their marriage was in trouble.”

“I hate to say it,” I said, “but they’re not wrong.”

“So, I started leaving earlier to be sure we didn’t look bad, but then you weren’t here.”

“Sorry,” I said, blushing. “When I need to write, it’s so much easier to get out of the house to get words down.”

“I understand now,” he said. “I think you’d like the people I work with, though. They’re different than the people I had in LA.”

In LA, it felt like everyone’s goal was to get on Sebastian’s good side and climb the corporate ladder. Anything was better than their bullshit excuses for small talk.

“I totally forgot about the holiday parties coming up,” I said, sighing. “I’m sure I’ll like meeting them, but all the events are so tiring. If I have to hashtag one more thing, I’m going to lose my mind.”

Sebastian laughed. “Yeah. I don’t blame you there. We need a break.”

“We’ll get one when this is over, I guess.” The exhaustion of not only doing this for four and a half years, but also the exhaustion of the day hit me.

I should be writing. My agent had been happy with the progress, but I knew they were wanting me to get this book done sooner than later.

However, I had been feeling out of steam. I had two rough ideas of what I wanted, but I wasn’t sure which would be the end of the series. One was a happy ending; it would please half of my fans—and on days where I was in a good mood, I thought it might make me happy too. Then there were the times when I wanted my series to end in fire and pain, leaving nothing else.

I was getting to the point where I needed to pick one and I wasn’t sure how to make that decision.

“Do you want to watch more *Game of Thrones*?” His voice brought me back to that moment. “I can order us food too. Whatever you want?”

My love language. Food and TV—maybe giving myself this break was the way to go. I could deal with my agent later.

“Can we get pizza?”

We watched a few episodes, only stopping to order dinner or grab popcorn. Sebastian ordered food for us, and I changed into comfortable clothes after the third episode.

We talked about the show and its plot lines, laughing at some of the cheesier moments and nearly crying at the sad ones.

It was one of the most relaxing nights I'd had in a while.

At nine, however, I was yawning more than I was talking, so Sebastian suggested we head to bed. A part of me wanted to go with him to his room. Not only for sex, but for companionship. We hadn't shared a bed very much in our marriage, and the last time had been when we had moved into the house.

"Can we go to your room?" I asked.

For a second, he looked panicked. "Why?"

"To sleep," I said. "But if you wanted to do other things . . ."

"Not tonight," he said, his voice rushed. "Besides, you said you sleep better on your own. You need your rest."

I opened my mouth, trying to figure out a way to take back the lie I'd made back when I thought he loved someone else.

He kissed me on my cheek and was gone before I could figure out how. I promised myself I would try to clear it up in the morning when my brain was rested.

But I had forgotten my parents were in town and my time wasn't mine when they were around.

"Chop, chop!" My mother clapped her hands enthusiastically.

I only glared back.

She had stuck to what she said she was going to do and found me a personal trainer. The guy was strict, rough, and annoying. The two of them arrived at 7 a.m. and woke me up to get training.

I wasn't that out of shape, but I had mostly been doing runs. I had joined a gym in Nashville, but I was more focused on writing than doing anything else.

Now I was regretting it.

"I said five more!" the trainer yelled.

I could not do five more. I had already done thirty reps of the same exercise.

"I'm at the point of failure," I said, dropping the twenty-pound weights out of my hands, my voice breathy and tired. "I can't do any more."

"You can and you will. No giving up."

“Ooh, I like this one,” my mother said, eying him greedily. He was a buff guy in basketball shorts and a white tank top. He was exactly my mother’s type. “You see how much I give to my daughter? I’m trying to show her how much she needs me, but the minute I saw her looking all chubby, I said, I knew I had to do *something*.”

“You did the right thing,” the trainer said, nodding appreciatively. “She was about to give up all she’s worked for.”

“She still is.” My mother turned to me with narrowed eyes. “He said five more, Lily.”

I had to suppress an eyeroll.

“I’m serious,” I huffed. “I literally cannot do any more.”

“Can’t, or won’t?”

“Can’t!” I snapped, only to hear my ringtone from my purse. I had been dragged to a park not too far from the house. My mother had personally picked it so Sebastian wouldn’t see me red-faced and working out.

“You never want your man to see you at your worst,” my mother had said.

I hadn’t eaten breakfast, and I felt terrible. I knew my body. I functioned best when I ate and then worked out. I liked to work out alone and with music.

I wasn’t getting any of that here.

My arms were noodles and my muscles were burning. I was going to be sore the next day, all because my “trainer” hadn’t given me a proper warm-up.

I was fuming, and more than grateful for my phone going off.

I didn’t even check the caller ID when I pressed accept. I could make it work with a telemarketer. My mother was glaring at me, but I’d probably get a few minutes of rest before she put a stop to it.

But it was not a telemarketer. It was Sebastian.

“Where are you?” he asked, his voice sounding worried. “You’re nowhere in the house and the car is gone.”

Shit. My mother hadn’t given me time to leave a note. I glanced over, knowing she was listening in. I could easily lie and say I went for a walk for coffee. Maybe that would have been the better option.

But I was too mad to lie this time.

“I’m at the park down the road. My mother surprised me with a trainer,” I said. My voice was still breathy and uneven from the workout.

I wasn’t sure what Sebastian would do. If anything, I expected him to tell me to have fun and hang up. All I wanted was to annoy my mother by wasting time.

“Is this a part of this whole thing to make you lose weight?” Sebastian asked, his voice clipped.

“Uh, yeah,” I replied. “But don’t worry about it. I’ll be back whenever they say I’m done.”

“Do you want to be there?”

I eyed my mother, who was tapping her foot impatiently. I hadn’t indicated who had called yet, but she was mad that I was taking my sweet time.

“Of course not,” I muttered. “But I don’t have a choice.”

“Lily!” my mother yelled. “Just who is so important that you’re chatting while I’m paying for this man to be here? Are you that ungrateful?”

“Is that her?” Sebastian asked. “Is that how she talks to you?”

“She’s coming over here,” I said. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be home soon.”

“That is enough, Lily!” she yelled, snatching the phone from my hand and hanging it up. I could practically feel Sebastian’s anger from down the road where our house was. “I didn’t bring you here to chat with your friends instead of getting your body back!”

“It wasn’t a friend. That was Sebastian.”

“Oh, please,” my mother said, rolling her eyes. “You know he doesn’t give a rat’s ass where you are—not with you looking like this.”

I gritted my teeth and she raised her eyebrows, daring me to say anything.

I sighed and got back to my workout, my muscles screaming in protest.

I was only a few squats in before my focus was broken. A black car pulled into the parking lot. A black car that looked exactly like Sebastian’s.

“Lily!” my mother said, crossing her arms. “What are you doing now?”

“She’s distracted, once again,” the trainer said, rolling his eyes. “I can’t work under these conditions.”

Sebastian got out of his car, slamming the door shut. He was furious, his face so intense that it made me drop my weights and stand up straight. I had never seen him like this. There was a tiny cavewoman part of my brain that thought it was hot, but I squashed it as soon as I had it.

"What is she doing here?" Sebastian asked my mother. "We had plans."

"Sebastian?" my mother said, all pretenses of being controlling gone. That was the thing about her: when she wanted to stay on someone's good side, she became whoever would make her look the best to them.

And she quite liked my rich husband.

"I'm here to get my wife. You can't just take her away whenever you feel like she needs to work out."

"Oh, honey. I was just doing you a favor—"

"We've discussed her diet at length and it's not healthy for her, nor is overworking her body. And no matter what, it's *her* choice was she does with *her* body."

I almost cried. I also almost laughed at the shocked expression on my mother's face.

"I was just trying to keep her in decent shape for you. I mean, I know you would enjoy her looking her best."

"It's not about looks. It's about how she feels. I'd like to be able to take my wife out to dinner without her worrying about every bite of food she takes. My opinion on her body doesn't matter as long as she's comfortable in it. Do you understand?"

"I . . . yes," my mother said, not meeting his eyes. "Of course. Whatever makes you happy."

Sebastian shook his head, realizing she would never understand what he was saying. It was never about my happiness. It was all about his.

"Our plans come first. Not anyone else's," he said.

Sebastian grabbed me by the arm, leading me to his car with a firm grip. I went willingly, one because I was exhausted, and two, because I wanted to go with him.

I felt both relieved and guilty. I wished I had fought this battle for myself, but it was so nice to have help. Seeing someone win against my mother gave me the slightest bit of hope I could do it myself one day.

"Thank you," I said as we got in the car.

“What is *wrong* with her?” Sebastian yelled. “To talk to you like that because you’re actually living and not constantly on a diet?”

It wasn’t at me, but it shocked me anyway. I’d never seen him like this. He wasn’t an emotional man—at least not with me. But hearing that he was on my side, that it only mattered what I felt and not about what my mother thought, was enough to turn the tides.

My skin was hot, and it wasn’t just from the workout. Seeing Sebastian like this had flipped a switch within me, and whatever distance we had put between us was closing in my mind.

In a rare moment of power, I grabbed him and kissed him.

If my mother was looking, she would have seen it. But it wasn’t about that. I wanted him close to me. I loved this side of him, the expressive, caring man I’d never got to meet, and it was all I could do to prevent myself from jumping on him right then and there.

For a long moment, Sebastian was still. I was beginning to wonder if I had crossed a line, when he finally began to kiss back. His lips moved against mine with all the power I never knew he had, but I held my ground, wanting to be his equal for once.

When we pulled apart, both of our lips were red and slightly puffy. I was sweaty from my forced workout, but my body still hummed with appreciation for the kiss we shared.

“We should . . . we should get back,” Sebastian said quietly, looking conflicted. “We can finish *Game of Thrones*.”

It wasn’t exactly what I had in mind, but it also wasn’t a bad idea. Besides, I desperately needed a shower.

“Sounds good,” I replied. “But maybe breakfast first.”

Photo from RealBarbaraRoberts Instagram: Lily lifting weights at the park. Barbara is admiring her daughter, but we can’t see Lily’s face.

RealBarbaraRoberts: Got to spend some time with my lovely daughter this weekend! She’s always working so hard!

SebandLily4ever: So cute! You have a great family.

Concernedreviewer: why can’t we see her face? Something is so off about this photo.

MartinMiller: Glad to see you got some time with her. We've missed her on social media…

Chapter Thirteen

My parents left the very next day. My mother begged me to drive them to the airport. Sebastian was at work, and I couldn't think of a way to say no.

I figured that my mom would have yelled at me for bailing on my workout. Instead, it was the opposite.

"I cannot *believe* how you have him wrapped around your little finger," she gushed while my dad answered emails and ignored our conversation. "He's obsessed with you, even like this!"

I didn't know what to say to that. I stared at the road, unable to do anything more. I felt sick to my stomach.

The whole drive to the airport was my mother congratulating me for somehow manipulating Sebastian into liking me. I didn't think it could get worse, but then my mother pulled me aside with a rueful smile on her face as my dad disappeared into the terminal.

"Drop your birth control, honey," she said with a wink. "You've got him now."

"I-I can't—"

"Don't play coy. It's easy, and you can hire a nanny and never lift a finger." She gave me a tight hug, one I wanted to get out of. "I really thought you would struggle out here by yourself, but you're doing better than I could have ever imagined."

She let me go and walked off, leaving me to stand there for a moment to collect myself. My dad hadn't even said goodbye, and he was too busy working to even look me in the eyes. I wondered if he ever felt bad or regretted selling me off like we were in the 1800s. But I wasn't hopeful about it. He was making money and Sebastian was running the business. That was what he wanted.

My mother, though? She was in another league.

I returned home and watched TV. After the second episode in a row, I was feeling more than a little inspired to write. I planned on going dark, because my mood was so bad; I wanted to take it out on my characters.

But when I got to Rohanda and Jamisson, I couldn't do it. Instead, I went the opposite direction. I gave them a light, fluffy scene. I knew

Rohanda was very loosely based on me, but Jamisson? Well, he was a dream of mine—not based on anyone.

But I knew I couldn't hurt him.

I wrote a lighter scene, bringing them closer together. A lot of the fans would love it, and I began thinking I did too.

I was terribly sore from my mother's ambush, so I spent the day in bed, laptop stacked on pillows so I could write.

I put in hints of romance that I'd never added in before. I couldn't help it—I was inspired.

When I was done, I had a very pointed text from my mother that I needed to post on Instagram. Just because I had Sebastian, she said, it didn't mean I could let my followers down.

I found what I could and threw it up on my page.

As the sun set, Sebastian arrived home, looking tired and out of it after a long day. I hadn't cooked dinner and felt bad that it looked like I had done nothing all day. Sebastian didn't mention it, but I offered to go get something.

When I returned with food, we ate in silence, sharing a space but not talking. I usually didn't ask about work, but this time I felt like I should.

"How was your day?" I asked.

"It was fine," he said, but it sounded robotic.

"Was it?" I asked, looking at him curiously.

He blinked, looking almost shocked that he was caught. Then, his expression turned apologetic. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to pretend it was fine."

"What happened?" I asked, a spark of anxiety running through me.

"My dad is concerned about your social media posts and how little I've been working."

"You put in more than forty hours a week."

"I know, but he wants it to be my life."

"It shouldn't be," I said firmly.

Sebastian shrugged. "I don't know what to tell him. If I stay there all the time, then people will think we don't get along. If I ignore them and stay, doing as my father wants, I'm neglecting you here at home."

"The hours shouldn't matter. Is the work getting done?"

"Yes. Everything is running smoothly. When I asked him what I was doing wrong, he didn't have an answer. It feels like he just called to take

something out on me.” Sebastian let out a long, pained breath. “I feel like he tries to hit me with words since he can’t with his fists anymore.”

“He shouldn’t do either,” I said. “How about we get some decent photos of us this weekend and I post those? I’ve been meaning to get more, but it’s harder to ask when I know we both hate it.”

“The managers agreed on when to have the Christmas party.” He sighed. “Next week. It will be after work hours. We could do them there.”

“That’s a good idea. I can dress up and we can take a bunch of photos.”

“Are you sure? I know you hate those parties.”

“I still have to do it. Besides, if it keeps your dad off your back, I’m all for it. We’ll make it look perfect. I can even eat a lot to get bloated, so people think I’m pregnant.”

Sebastian choked on the water her was drinking. “What?”

“I was kidding,” I said. “Maybe. It’s a good idea, but I’d never do it without asking.”

Sebastian was quiet for a moment, and I felt my anxiety rise. Had I upset him?

“Do people . . . talk to you about that? Kids, I mean.”

Immediately, I thought of my mother. But I didn’t want to tell him that—not yet. He already hated her enough as it was.

“A little,” I decided to say. “But I’ve dodged it.”

“I get asked at work a lot,” Sebastian said, sighing. “And I’ve got no clue how to answer. The office in LA wasn’t as nosy as this one.”

“You could just say we’re waiting.”

“I have, but if this were real, what would we be waiting for?”

I paused. I was a little hung up on none of this being real, but he had a good point: what would we be waiting on?

“You could say the truth—at least on my behalf. We don’t want to bring kids into this world until we’re settled. Until things are figured out.”

Sebastian blinked, looking shocked. “So . . . that’s the truth?”

“Most of it. I want to wait until I know they’d have parents who are committed. I don’t want a child just for the sake of it.”

“I feel the same.”

“It’s a huge commitment,” I said. “I can’t . . . I won’t do what my family did.”

And I won’t do what my mother was trying to force me to do. Never.

“I won’t either,” Sebastian said.

He seemed lost in thought, so I gave him a moment.

“We’ve got this,” I said, after he came out of his thoughts. “We’ll work together.

The tension in Sebastian’s shoulders loosened, and I found myself, for once, believing my own words.

Photo: a lit fireplace. Looking closely, it’s from a royalty-free photo site on the third page of the search results.

LilyRMiller: The holidays are here!!! I am SO excited to spend my first one in Nashville with the hubby!!! Our little home is so cozy, and I can’t wait to spend my first cold winter snuggling in front of the fireplace!

SebandLily4ever: Where are the two of you? I miss seeing your faces!

User9274649272: show your pretty face, love

RealBarbaraRoberts: Lily, we want to see you and your beautiful hubby!!!

Chapter Fourteen

The party was at one of the managers' homes. They had a nice house, but much further into the suburbs than I was used to. It was picturesque, lit beautifully in the darkened sky. I arrived in full makeup and a dress and sweater combination that was going to look great in photos.

Sebastian even went so far as to match my outfit, and as much as we both hated dressing up for things and taking photos, we looked good together.

This was the perfect chance to update my feed with current photos of us. A few commenters had noticed I wasn't posting very many shots with Sebastian and me in frame. A Christmas party was the perfect chance to look like we were a couple.

"It's good to see you again," an older woman I barely recognized greeted. I racked my brain to try and remember when I would have met her before.

"Oh, hi," I said, putting on a warm smile, even though I had no clue who I was talking to.

Sebastian leaned close, whispering in my ear. "That's Carol, honey. We met her at the welcome party."

My skin erupted in goosebumps and I hoped he didn't notice what his voice did to me.

"It's so good to see you again, Carol," I said. "Your house looks beautiful."

"Oh, thank you! I figured if I was hosting everyone then I could at least make it look nice. I was surprised we didn't do this where you two live. I bet you have a gorgeous home."

"Oh, that's for us only right now," he said. "We don't have it set up for guests yet."

I never wanted to have it set up for guests. The idea that our home was only ours made my heart stutter in my chest.

"There they are!" another woman exclaimed, walking over. She was closer to our age, maybe only a few years older. "Hi, Sebastian. Hi, Lily. I'm Sierra. I was at the welcome party."

“Oh, I’m sure she remembers you,” Carol said, rolling her eyes good-naturedly.

I definitely didn’t.

“I forget names,” I said, laughing. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Sierra is the manager of accounting,” Sebastian said. “Carol is the director of marketing. We wouldn’t know what to do without them.”

“No, we wouldn’t know what to do without *you*.” Sierra smiled. “I’m sure you notice how hard he works,” she said to me.

“I definitely do. I hear someone in the office has been getting him home on time, though.”

“That would be me,” Carol said, looking proud of herself. “I want us *all* to have time with our families.”

“Well, I certainly appreciate it,” I said, threading my arm through his.

“It’s boring at work!” Carol said. “We’ve got good people and they do their jobs. He doesn’t need to be there all the time.”

Sebastian was right—these people were nothing like those in LA. Back there, no one talked to me at work events. They were all more interested in getting on Sebastian’s good side, even after he had been their boss for months. Carol and Sierra had a respectful camaraderie, one that I was grateful for.

“Hang on,” Sierra said. “You two look too good not to get a photo of. Get over by the tree!”

Sebastian bristled, but I knew it was a perfect opportunity. I thanked them and gently guided him over to the tree.

“Just a few and then we’re done,” I said softly.

“I know,” he said. His gaze landed on my upturned lips, and I could have sworn his tense muscles loosened a little.

But I knew I shouldn’t look for signs like this. I’d only get my heart broken.

Sebastian wound his arm around the small of my back, pulling me to his chest with ease. For once, I was glad for the makeup so he couldn’t see the blush rising on my cheeks.

“All done!” Sierra said after snapping a few photos. “I’m putting this on the company Facebook page.”

“I need to get a few for myself,” I said. “I’ll go get my camera.”

“I’ll help you,” Carol said. “Is it a professional model? I do photography in my free time.”

“Really?” I asked. “You’re probably better than me then.”

“I can take them for you,” she offered kindly. “You shouldn’t have to worry about all that here.”

“That would be great, thank you,” I replied.

Carol helped carry my camera in, and Sebastian met me back by the tree for the photos. He still looked tense, but when Carol began talking animatedly about what she wanted us to do, it helped.

“You guys are *so* cute,” she said as she snapped photos. “Talk to one another so I can get a candid.”

“This actually isn’t as bad as it usually is,” he said lowly.

“I know. I don’t think my calling was photography.”

“You’re amazing at it, but Carol is surprisingly good at defusing an awkward situation.”

“Think we can hire her?” I asked, half joking.

“I think she’s getting enough for the rest of the contract. You’ll just have to photoshop the tree out.”

“You give my photoshop skills more credit than it needs. All I can do is click buttons and hope it works.”

He laughed. “Really? You never took a class or anything?”

“I fake it until I make it.”

“I’d have never guessed,” he said, still smiling.

“Yes!” Carol called. “Take a look at these.”

I walked over and looked at the camera screen. Carol started giving me editing tips, but my eyes were caught on the last photo she’d taken, and the world fell away.

Sebastian and I were smiling at each other, and we looked . . . *happy*. Like we really loved each other. There wasn’t that fear in the back of my eyes. Sebastian’s gaze was warm as his eyes fixated on me.

It was the best photo we had ever taken.

And I knew in that moment that it would never see social media. This was *ours*.

I could pick from the others to throw in a post. I’d probably do it before bed as I always did.

“Oh, I hope you like them,” Carol said. “You have a great camera. I need to get one of those.”

“I love it,” I said, voice distant. My throat was tight at the only photo I’d seen. I was sure there were others I could find to post. “Do you have any water?”

Sebastian’s eyebrows drew together as Carol led us to her kitchen. After getting a drink, Sebastian pulled me aside.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” I said, shaking off my awe at how happy we looked. “I just really liked the photos, that’s all.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded, but then another employee interrupted us, asking how we liked the party. I was grateful for the distraction.

The party was in full swing, and others came to chat with us, which kept me busy enough to let my emotions pass. In a few minutes, I was my normal self again.

Sebastian never left my side. Even if I went to get a snack, he was there, hand on the small of my back, touching me in some sort of way.

It felt right. This didn’t feel like we were faking our marriage. For the first time, it felt real.

And then Martin walked in.

I saw him come in the front door, and the entire room went silent. I stared in horror, wondering why we were so unlucky. Sebastian looked to be thinking the same thing.

“Wow, Sebastian,” Carol said. Her voice was kind, but she seemed a little panicked. “You didn’t tell me the CEO was going to be here.”

“Hi, dad,” Sebastian said, looking uncomfortable. Sebastian’s hand settled on my hip, and he gripped me to him. I wasn’t sure if it was for show, or if it was because he needed me to ground him.

All I knew is he’d never done this before.

Martin gave us his brightest smile, one that was more of a sneer. “I’d thought I’d pop in and see my newest office having a party. It’s so lively here.”

Carol whispered something to Sierra, but then put on a big smile as Martin introduced himself to everyone.

“I didn’t know he would be here,” Sebastian said under his breath.

“I know,” I replied. “We just need to make it through this and whatever he has to say after.”

“We haven’t done anything wrong. We’re here. We look nice and we took photos.”

“I posted yesterday,” I added. “Maybe it’s just a visit?”

As I said it, I knew it was a pipe dream.

“He’s never here for *just* a visit,” he muttered. He put his hand on my back and led me to his father to join the conversation. Carol and Sierra were praising Sebastian, speaking on how hardworking he was. They conveniently left out the part where they often forced him to go home early.

Like they knew what not to say to the CEO. Eventually, Martin addressed us.

“You two look happy,” he said. “Like you’re in love.”

People whispered, and I wanted to run. Anxiety made its way into my stomach.

“Here’s to hoping we all have a nice future ahead of us,” he added.

I froze, and so did Sebastian. Neither of us liked to mention our future.

And we really didn’t like it when Martin did.

I cleared my throat.

“To what do we owe this surprise visit?” I asked kindly.

“I have some business here this week. There’s a few tech companies who want to speak with me. Plus, your five-year anniversary is soon. I wanted to deliver the news that your mother is planning quite the party, Lily.”

Ice ran through my veins. “But that’s . . .”

“Months away? Yes. Well, we will have much to discuss until then.” He sounded so cryptic, but both Sebastian and I knew the meaning.

As soon as he began speaking to someone else, I made a break for the bathroom. I felt sick to my stomach, and if I wasn’t in one of Sebastian’s employee’s houses, I’d probably throw up.

Instead, I hyperventilated.

“They’re going to put us into another contract,” I said. “Goddamn it, I can’t ever be free.”

“They can’t force you.”

“I know, but they’ll definitely guilt me into it! Why can’t leaving just be easy? Why can’t they be content that I was their show pony for five years and cut me loose?”

“Because they know they need you,” he said.

“I don’t care. I want out.”

“You should get out,” he said, his voice cool. “You should get out and never look back.”

I was tired of this. I was tired of random visits, of putting on a happy face when I really was upset. I didn’t think I could do much more.

And yet they wanted me to.

“I need to get back out there,” I said, my voice rough from my nerves. “If he catches even a hint that I’m upset, I’ll hear about it.”

“Lily, we can go—”

“No.” I looked at him. “Me freaking out is not worth the grief we’ll both get. I’ll be fine. I’ve done things feeling worse.”

“When was it worse than this?”

“Our wedding comes to mind,” I said. “I was throwing up before the ceremony.”

Sebastian looked at me with a horrified expression.

“I brushed my teeth before I kissed you, don’t worry.”

“I don’t care about that. It had you *that* upset that you were physically sick?”

“I was fine,” I said.

“We went on the honeymoon right after!”

“And I didn’t throw up again or anything. It was just nerves at signing my life away for five years. The show must go on.”

“What have your parents done to you?” he asked, the horror only growing. “This isn’t normal.”

“It’s *my* normal. At least until this contract is up.”

“Lily—”

“Please, not right now. I know it’s bad. I know I need to get out, but we have to get through this party.”

“Okay,” he said, but it sounded like it pained him, “let’s just get this over with.”

I managed to plaster on a happy face for the remainder of the evening. Under Martin’s calculating gaze, I struggled to keep my composure.

We left as soon as we could, and the car ride home was mostly silent.

“I’m sorry he came,” Sebastian said. “I didn’t know he would.”

“I know you didn’t.”

“We were having such a great time until he showed up.”

“We were. But it was his attitude that ruined it. Not you.”

“I know,” he replied. “I hate that he came. I hate that you were so upset, I wish I had known so I could—”

“It’s okay,” I said. “Like I said, it’s normal.”

“It won’t be normal after this. You’re getting out.”

Hearing that someone was going to help me get out rather than judging me or keeping me trapped had me feeling more relieved than I thought possible. Sebastian being on my side through this made it all the easier.

I let out a shaky breath “Thank you.”

“You deserve freedom,” he said, reaching across and squeezing my hand. He was right. I did deserve to be free, though I couldn’t help but remember that when this was over, I wouldn’t have him anymore. We wouldn’t be married, and nothing would be tying us together.

I’d always had mixed feelings about leaving this contract; the idea that he and I would be over made it so much worse.

Photo: Lily and Sebastian in front of a Christmas tree. His hand is on her hip, and they look to be talking.

LilyRMiller: Had the best Christmas with this man. I couldn’t ask for a better person to be by my side.

MartinMiller: Was so good to see you and discuss your future, Lily.

SebandLily4ever: YESSSSS! I KNEW YOU’D FEED US. KEEP THE PICS COMING

ConcernedReviewer: Wow, this is the first candid where I actually think you like each other.

Chapter Fifteen

Christmas was upon us, and so was Sebastian's birthday.

It was always so hard to plan both a Christmas and a birthday post on social media. This year, I had plenty of ammunition from the party at Carol's house, so I could schedule another picture of us in front of her Christmas tree and be done with it.

I wanted things to be different, though. Before, we never celebrated birthdays; considering our newfound friendship, I wanted to do something special for him.

Surprisingly, I knew a lot about him. I knew his favorite food, his interests, and I'd found a pair of hiking boots in his closet that gave me the perfect plan for his day.

I got up early, making coffee and waffles in our small kitchen. Sebastian was up at eight, looking confused.

"What's all this?" he asked, looking at the setup on the dining room table.

I had bought a balloon, a small cake, and positioned a card in the front. The card was cheesy, but it featured a quote from *Game of Thrones* that he'd laughed at when we watched it, so I knew it was perfect.

I came out of the kitchen smiling.

"It's for your birthday."

Sebastian's face turned a bright shade of red, and for a moment, he looked guilty. "But . . . I didn't do anything for your birthday."

My birthday had been before we were in Nashville, and Jessie and I had spent the day together. I had planned my own party to post on Instagram and said it was from Sebastian.

"It's fine. It was before . . . this," I said. "And I just wanted to do something nice. Sit down."

Sebastian looked almost uncomfortable, and I wondered if maybe I had gone too far. But I got the food ready anyway and sat across from him.

"Here you go," I said. "Birthday breakfast!"

"You don't have to—I don't want you to feel like—"

"Do you not like it?" I asked, my stomach in my throat.

“No!” Sebastian said. “This is all so nice, but I don’t want you to feel like you *have* to do this.”

“I don’t,” I said, shaking my head. “I just . . . want us to do something nice.”

Sebastian blinked. “Really?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Is that okay? You didn’t have other plans, did you?”

“No,” he replied. “We just don’t usually do anything for birthdays.”

“I know, but we’re changing,” I told him. “I want to try something different.”

The hesitancy faded from Sebastian’s eyes. He nodded. “Okay.”

Breakfast was fun. Sebastian and I talked about anything and everything, and by the time midday came around, he looked loose and content. I could tell he didn’t expect anything else, so when I grabbed my keys and told him to put activewear on, he looked shocked.

I drove him to the spot Amy told me about: near a lake and a dam with decent hiking trails. A few people were out, but not many.

“What are we doing?” he asked.

“A hike,” I replied. “I found your hiking boots.”

“I . . . I have never been hiking.”

“Shit,” I muttered.

“But I got them because I wanted to try it,” he said, smiling. “Where are we going?”

It was warm for a winter day, and I was grateful that I wouldn’t be spending this hike in freezing weather.

We hiked for a mile and a half, going along the shoreline and then into the trees. This was the kind of working out I loved. I was pleasantly surprised to hear birds in the distance, even though it was technically winter.

Sebastian took everything in, leaving us in a comfortable, intimate silence. There was something so comforting about being silent with someone you liked. It wasn’t heavy or dull. It was peaceful and rewarding.

It didn’t help that Sebastian looked good in his jeans. He was walking in front of me, and I got a view of his amazing ass as we walked.

God, I wanted to touch it.

It had been too long since we’d slept together. If we kept up this dry streak, maybe I’d break out that old vibrator I’d kept around. It didn’t do the job quite like he did, but I could always pretend it was him.

I was so lost in my lustful thoughts that I collided with his back when he stopped.

"S-sorry," I said, trying to get my mind out of the gutter. It didn't work.

"It was all me," he said, giving me more distance than I wanted. "I was just admiring this. Maybe I *am* a guy who likes hiking."

"Maybe," I replied, my eyes taking him in.

Did he look at me like this? Did he see me and think about me in bed with him? Did he ever glance at my ass and think, *God, I'd love to grab that?*

Because if he did, he didn't show it.

We'd gone to bed every night in separate rooms. I realized it had only been me kissing him. While he touched me when we were around people, in private . . . we felt like friends.

Whatever calm I'd found on this hike evaporated. I looked down at myself, wondering if my slight weight gain was where I'd gone wrong. Maybe it was my baggy T-shirt or the messy bun of hair piled on my head.

Or maybe it was just me.

"Ready to head back?" he asked, looking over at me.

"Yeah," I said, smiling at him, though it hurt a little to do.

He began walking again, but he reached out his hand to me. "I think I should hold this," he said. "In case you fall."

I hadn't fallen on the way over here, but the idea of his hand in mine made me blush. A little of my pain went away. Maybe I was wrong.

He laughed. "I love that I can see your blush when you don't wear makeup."

"I don't," I muttered, taking his hand.

The feel of his palm in mine along with our intertwined fingers made my blush grow hotter. His eyes were stuck on my darkening cheeks.

But, I still loved it. This warm, delicate feeling was so soft in the quiet of nature. It felt delicate, like a newly hatched butterfly, fresh from its cocoon.

It was more addicting than I'd ever like to admit.

Holding hands shouldn't feel this way—especially not with the man I was contractually bound to.

But I couldn't bring myself to stop.

When we were near the car, he pulled me to him and kissed me on the temple. The heat, which had finally been receding, flooded back to my cheeks the moment my body was pressed against his.

"Thank you," he said, his lips moving against my skin, "for doing all of this for me."

I turned to him, a measly "You're welcome" on the tip of my tongue, but the words were lost when I realized how close his face was to mine.

I captured him, pushing my lips to his. My heart raced, and I silently begged him not to pull away. I wanted this strange physical distance to be a figment of my imagination.

Instead, he met my kiss with the same force, his hands sliding down to my hips and then lower back to keep me pressed against him.

My body came alive, ready for something, *anything*, from the man kissing me.

I wanted to go home. I wanted to open the car door and have my way with him in there, but just as I thought I was safe, and I was finally going to get what I needed, he pulled away.

The air, colder than his body heat, was the hard awakening I needed.

"We should go home," he said, his voice rushed, as if he wanted to get away from me as fast as possible.

My heart nearly stopped. "Okay," I said. "Let's go home then."

We rode in silence, and I sifted through my memories trying to decide if I was imagining this or not.

When we got to the privacy of our living room, I kissed him again. My body throbbing with lust, I tried to gently move him toward his room.

But he pulled away.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, "but I can't."

I looked at him, my stomach rolling as I took in his words.

He can't . . . have sex with me?

"Is it . . . is it me?" The answer could easily kill me, but I had to know.

"No," he said, "of course not."

I didn't know if I believed him, but I nodded anyway. He gave me a guilty look, and then went to his own room without me.

For a traitorous second, I wondered if he was going back to his room to call someone else.

I didn’t want to go down that path again. I didn’t want to assume anything.

But it still hurt.

I went to my own room and looked at my body in the mirror, wondering if it was my weight gain, or my lack of makeup that was the problem. The idea that it was made my heart break a little. I wanted to believe hid words, but his actions spoke louder.

I shook off my thoughts and went to my laptop to write, but when I did, no words came out. I sighed, frustrated, and decided to read instead.

It didn’t help.

I put a post on Instagram and spent my time scheduling others. It soured my mood even further, but it passed the time. I didn’t have many of Sebastian and me, but I used more photos from the internet to hopefully satiate people so I could breathe.

By the time I fell asleep, I was in a worse mood than before.

Photo: another in front of a Christmas tree. This time, Lily and Sebastian are holding each other.

LilyRMiller: Happy birthday honey! Can’t wait to spend the day with you!

RealBarbaraRoberts: I can’t wait to have grandkids from you two!

SebandLily4ever: YES TO LITTLE LILYS AND SEBASTIANS

User82720484: I can give you babies instead…

Chapter Sixteen

The week after Christmas, I felt like an open wound.

I went on runs to try and stop myself from thinking there was something wrong with *me* and that was why Sebastian turned me down, but the thought never left my mind.

I almost killed off Rohanda out of anger, but when I wrote it down, I couldn't keep it. It didn't match anything else in the story, so I wound up deleting it all. I knew underneath that anger there was simmering hurt. *Why didn't he want me?* Did I look worse now that I had gained a few pounds? Did I need to wear more makeup? Dress better?

I didn't want my self-worth to be attached to what a man thought of me, but after years of it being beaten into my head by my mother, it was always my first thought. If my husband didn't think I looked good, then maybe I didn't. She wanted me to believe I was only as good as my outer appearance.

After six days of this thought pattern, I was close to losing my mind from sheer frustration and anger. I didn't even know who those emotions were directed at.

Maybe it was myself.

I tried to keep a smile on my face in front of Sebastian, but it slipped. I knew he saw I wasn't okay, and I wondered if he knew why.

If he did, then I wondered if he was trying to figure out how to tell me he wasn't attracted to me anymore.

On New Year's Eve, Sebastian got home at six, and I almost didn't want to see him. I felt torn between hiding out or finding the sluttiest thing I could and trying to seduce him. Neither of them were really the greatest ideas. Instead, I settled on sitting on the couch and mindlessly playing on my phone.

"Hey," Sebastian said. "How was your day?"

Terrible. Awful. No good.

"It was fine," I replied.

"Was it? You seem quiet."

"I'm fine. How was your day?" The words came out flat and tired. Sebastian blinked at me, confused.

“It was good. Slow, considering it’s New Year’s Eve.”

“Good,” I replied, trying—and failing—to sound normal. Why couldn’t I get over this? Sex was never a guaranteed thing in our relationship.

But the way he turned me down stuck with me.

“Sierra is having a small get together at her house for the New Year. Do you want to go?”

I considered it. I liked Sierra and I needed some kind of distraction to stop myself from continuing to wallow in the terrible feeling I had.

“Sure,” I said.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “I know you haven’t been in a good mood recently, but—”

“It’s fine. I’ll get changed.” I stood to find a more party-appropriate outfit. I wound up wearing makeup, since Martin could easily find out how I looked from someone else at the party. When I came out of my room, Sebastian looked at me, and then quickly turned away.

I was almost transported back to the honeymoon, where he would hide his glances at me just like that.

Why was he acting like this? Why did he seem to be intrigued, and yet disinterested sexually? It was like he was trying to be the exact opposite of what he used to be.

We took his car to the party, and I didn’t have much to say to him. I was in such a dark mood that I didn’t want to talk; and anything I could say to him, I didn’t want it to start a fight. He kept glancing at me, as if trying to come up with something to say, but nothing ever came out.

Sierra lived in a high-rise apartment in downtown. They had a decent view of the river, and I guess, based on the atrocious traffic we sat in, that there was some sort of fireworks show in the area.

She answered the door with an excited grin. “You guys came!”

“Thanks for inviting us,” Sebastian said politely. I smiled, though I could feel it was forced.

“Come in, come in,” she said, stepping aside.

“Wow, this place is lovely,” I replied.

“Thank you. My brother found it for my husband and I. He’s a real estate investor, and I get this apartment at a crazy discount. Family connections, huh?”

“Right,” I said. “Is Carol here too?”

“Oh, no,” Sierra said, “she said she was ringing in the New Year asleep. Most of the older people are doing that; this is for us that have a little more energy. It’s some people from work, but a few of my friends are here too.”

I blinked for a moment, trying to adjust the type of party this was. *Great.* Young people. The kind that sometimes hit on me or Sebastian. Or the ones who wanted to drink and have a good time.

I was good at looking pretty but was a lost cause when it came to having fun.

“We can go if you want,” Sebastian whispered into my ear as Sierra walked ahead of us.

I shook my head. “No, it’s fine.”

“But you weren’t in a good mood when we left. You haven’t been all week since I said—”

“I’ll be fine.” I didn’t want to get into this here. “I have a lot of practice with faking being all right.”

I rounded the corner into her living room and noticed a few familiar faces, but none that I had really talked to. Dance music played and everyone seemed to be drinking something.

I was out of my depth. I was used to glitzy, fake parties. Not something with just friends hanging out.

“Oh, this is my brother, Derek,” Sierra said, grabbing a man by the arms. I turned to her, and then felt like the breath was punched out of me when I recognized him.

Derek was the guy from the welcome party. The one who had cornered me by the bathroom.

His eyes, of course, landed on me. Sebastian stiffened.

This was the last thing I needed. But I didn’t think I could get out of this with food poisoning again.

“Hi,” he said, only to me.

Sierra’s eyes narrowed at her brother. “Derek, what are you doing?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he muttered. “You’re the girl from the party, right?”

Sierra grabbed him. “Excuse us,” she said through gritted teeth, and dragged him away.

“So that’s who that guy was,” Sebastian muttered.

“Great,” I said, turning to the kitchen where I hoped the drinks were.

“Lily,” Sebastian said, following me. “What’s wrong? Is it that I said I couldn’t—”

“Not here.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “If you’d let me explain myself, I could tell you what I meant.”

“We don’t need to talk about this here. I don’t want to talk about it at all, actually.”

Because I didn’t want to hear that he didn’t want me.

“You’re upset. Why did you come if you weren’t okay?”

“I needed to get out of the house. I didn’t know I’d be running into the guy who cornered me at another party and tried to get me to sleep with him,” I muttered. “I also didn’t know this was more of a social party.”

“I mean . . . I thought more coworkers would be here, but she did say it was more for people our age.”

“I thought this was something for us to look good at.”

“I . . . no. I just thought it would be fun. I thought it would put you in a better mood.”

I sighed. “Okay, then you have fun.”

“W-what?”

“You know these people better than I do. I’m not good at socializing. Not the fun kind anyway. You go and chat and I’ll hide out here.”

“I’m their boss. Or at least for some of them.”

“They must not be too intimidated if they invited you.”

“Maybe, but I’m not leaving you here.”

“Why not?”

“Because that guy is here.”

That filled me with a warmth that I knew wouldn’t go anywhere. It almost made me angrier. He could be protective but not even want me?

“Then I’ll just stay with you,” I said with a sigh. “Let me get a drink first.”

I poured cheap champagne into a Solo cup and dutifully followed him. He didn’t seem too excited about talking with others, but the people all seemed nice. As time went on, he opened up a little more. He was less business and more of himself.

It was bittersweet for me. I liked seeing him open with people, but that didn’t seem to apply to us in certain ways.

I could feel myself zoning out as he talked. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sierra looking at me. When she gestured for me to come talk to her, I walked over, not even sure if Sebastian had noticed.

"So . . ." Sierra started. "My brother said he hit on you at the welcome party."

I cringed. "He told you that?"

"Not with words. But he has a thing for married women, which by the way, is disgusting and I don't approve of."

"It's . . . it's fine.

"Not really. I don't want you to be uncomfortable here. I can send him home."

"Don't worry about it."

"He . . . did also say one other thing. At the party, when Sebastian found, he said he seemed . . . very mad. Like so much so that Derek was worried."

"I'm sure he's used to dealing with irate spouses," I muttered.

"Yes, he is. But he seemed to think Sebastian only blamed *you*."

I laughed uncomfortably. "Sebastian's your boss. Are you sure you should be having this conversation with me?"

"I'm not scared of my boss. What I am scared of is something might be going on with you two and I turn a blind eye on it."

"There's nothing happening."

"Does he hit you?"

I turned to her fully with wide eyes. "God, *no*."

Sierra let out a breath of relief. "Good. I was worried I'd have to kill him. He seems nice, but they all do."

"No, that night was . . . that night was just a weird one. Sebastian didn't know Derek was your brother. He thought I knew him and invited him."

"Oh," Sierra said.

"And I didn't. But I stay at home and don't really have a job. So, Sebastian thought I was . . . *you know*."

"Men are idiots."

"I'm not blameless here. We're both bad at communicating."

And I still was. I'd been icing him out for a week because he'd told me he couldn't sleep with me. While I was hurt, I knew I couldn't keep doing this.

“Marriage is difficult,” Sierra said, bringing me out of my thoughts. “On my first date with my husband, I told him I liked strawberry ice cream for some stupid reason, and I *don’t*. Now it’s all he ever gets me and it’s so sweet I haven’t been able to correct him.”

“You could just tell him.”

“It’s never that easy, is it?”

I nodded, knowing she was right. I hadn’t talked to Sebastian about a lot things. Getting married was the easy part. Talking was not.

“Thank you for checking on me,” I said to Sierra. “But we’re fine. I promise.”

For a moment, I couldn’t help but wonder what Sierra would think when we got divorced. Would she remember this conversation and see the cracks in our story?

I glanced over at Sebastian and found him looking at me. He seemed worried, but also a little lonely. I took a deep breath.

“I should get back to him.”

“Hey, let me know if you need anything, okay?” Sierra offered.

“Thank you,” I said. Maybe once I was alone again I would take her up on that.

When I walked back over, I expected Sebastian to ask me what I was doing, but his arm only settled behind me comfortably. He looked relaxed again, as if he was happy to have me back next to him.

My stomach coiled bitterly. I wish he was happy to have me near him in all ways.

I knew I had to talk to him when we got back. I had to.

As I thought about how to approach the conversation, I saw people crowding around the TV. Someone had brought out *Just Dance*.

“Wow, I never thought I’d see the day that a bunch of drunk twentysomethings play a kid’s game,” I said, laughing as two guys danced off to “Poker Face.”

“You like dancing, right?” Sebastian asked.

“Oh yeah,” I said. “But I haven’t played a dancing game in years. Plus, it’s embarrassing. Not a story I want to get out.”

“I don’t think anyone here will be sober enough to remember.”

I bit my lip, considering it.

“I’ll dance with you!” a third voice said, and I turned to see Sierra had joined us. “Come on, it can’t be any worse than the dancing that’s

already happening.”

“I don’t think I’ve had enough to drink to dance in front of a crowd.”

“So? You don’t need to be drunk to have a good time.”

I contemplated it for another moment before realizing I hadn’t done anything for myself at this party. I had just lingered and pretended to be interested while Sebastian did most of the talking. But I wanted to do something for myself.

“Let’s do it,” I said.

We wound up dancing to a K-pop song, something I hadn’t heard in years, but it had lots of jumping and fun moves that kept me entertained. Sierra actually managed to keep up with me, and she edged me out of first place by just a few points.

“Hell, yeah!” she said, panting. “That was epic.”

“Another one!” someone yelled.

And so we danced on.

The next was a slower dance, one that made me move my hips. I hadn’t danced like this since . . . well, since the honeymoon.

I took a chance and peeked over at Sebastian, who was leaning against the side of the couch watching me.

And in that moment, I didn’t really care about anyone else in the room. Sebastian was looking at me, just like he had our first night together on the honeymoon. His eyes were dark, and he looked like he would take me back to our house at any moment and never let me leave.

The song ended and the spell was broken. As soon as I had noticed it, the expression on Sebastian’s face faded away, and I wondered if it was going to come back.

“That was awesome,” Sierra said, wiping her forehead. “But I’m too old to keep going.”

“My turn!” another girl yelled and ran up to us. Her and a friend took our places as we stepped aside to get something else to drink.

“That looked fun,” Sebastian said, walking up to me as I gulped down water.

I glanced over at Sierra, who had been pulled aside by one of her friends.

“It was,” I said. “I haven’t danced like that since Puerto Rico.”

“Really?”

I shrugged. “It’s not like I can go to a club where I might be recognized.”

“You looked good out there,” a man said as he walked past to get a drink. “Very hot.”

Sebastian glared, but the guy didn’t stick around. He grabbed another beer and left.

“Everyone certainly noticed,” he commented.

“You said everyone was too drunk to care,” I said. “I mean, I wouldn’t have danced if—”

“No, it’s not you. You looked . . . great.”

I blushed, and while I wanted to kiss him again, to make some kind of move, I didn’t want to be let down. Instead, we walked to the living room to people watch.

He stood annoyingly close to me, and I wondered if he would kiss me at midnight.

When 11:30 came around, Sierra changed the TV to Nashville’s ball drop. A few people complained, but the desire to watch the festivities of the new year won out. I had never seen how Nashville celebrated; it looked fun. People on-screen danced to live music. Even a few people in the apartment joined in.

I knew a New Year was just fabricated, but it was a time to reflect. In the last few months, I had moved to Nashville, lost a friend, gained one, and changed my relationship with my husband. And in the new one? I didn’t know. I had about eight months until this marriage was over. I didn’t know what would come in that time.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“Oh, just the fact that New Years is technically meaningless, but I still find value in it anyway. After all, there is significance in self-reflection and having hope for the future, and I think it’s nice we spend this time thinking about it.”

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. “That’s very introspective.”

“Well, I did a lot of writing today. It tends to happen.”

“When you trust me again . . . would you let me read what you write?”

I blushed. He had technically already read it. Well, everything except for the in-progress ending.

And he’d know immediately who he was.

“Um, maybe,” I said. And I would—if I found a way to explain it to him in a way that wouldn’t make him tell my family what I’d written out of seething anger.

I wanted to trust he wouldn’t rat me out, and so far, he never had, but putting him in my story as someone so terrible, especially considering his past, could really hurt him. In my experience, the people in my life went for revenge when they felt wronged.

“I bet I’d love it,” he added.

“I could drop a hint some time and see if you pick up on it.”

He looked excited. “Then I’ll be waiting.”

I internally cursed, but there was another part of me that wanted him to know. I wanted to be totally open with him, not only with sex, but with this too.

And yet, I was still afraid he’d hate me when he found out.

“What’s it about?” he asked. “You can at least tell me that, right?”

“It’s about a girl who has been controlled her whole life, and how she tries to escape and save her throne.”

He gaze was sad. “Sounds a little autobiographical.”

“Yeah, it turned out to be,” I said softly.

“I can tell you love it by the way you protect it,” he said. “Seeing you be so passionate about something you love is nice, you know.”

I nodded. Fear trickled through my veins over how he’d react when I told him, but it was a little slower, a little more controlled.

We were interrupted when people started counting down. I turned to see the numbers go by one by one until we were under ten. Sebastian nudged me and began counting too, and I joined in right at the end.

People kissed and cheered. Outside of the windows of the apartment, fireworks exploded in flashes and flickers of red, gold, green, and blue as we welcomed a new year.

But I didn’t get to notice most of that, because right as the clock struck midnight, Sebastian grabbed my arm and turned me to kiss him.

I totally forgot we were in public when his lips met mine. They were so warm, and despite all the dark thoughts I’d had that night, I kissed him back. My body craved more, and I leaned into him as I lost myself in his embrace.

We kissed for what felt like forever, but also like no time passed at all. Sebastian was the one who pulled away first, planting his hands on my

hips. He looked red-faced, and his eyes were on me, dark and hungry. I had half a mind to find a bathroom, but then he said, “We should get home.”

I nodded vigorously, forgetting what he’d said a week ago. Maybe he’d changed his mind.

We said our goodbyes to Sierra, who was still in the arms of her husband, and headed home. As he drove, I thought that maybe all my dark thoughts weren’t real. Maybe this was like the scenarios I’d thought about him and Heather, where I assumed and blew it out of proportion.

My heart raced as we walked in. I turned to ask him to come up to my room, but I found him walking toward the master bedroom.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I don’t need to mess up my sleep schedule by staying awake too late,” he said casually. “I was thinking I’d go to bed.”

“What?” I asked, blinking in shock.

“I said I was heading to bed.”

“That’s it?” My blood turned cold.

“Yes? Why? What’s the matter?”

It all came rushing back to me. Him telling me he couldn’t sleep with me and me being so hurt I’d gone back into my shell.

“We need to talk,” I said.

“Is this about what I said last week?”

“Yes. I’m so confused, Sebastian. You kissed the hell out of me at the party and looked at me like . . . like you wanted me, and then suddenly we’re just going to bed? Nothing else?”

“I told you last week, I *can’t*.”

“Are you asexual or something? If you are, it’s fine—”

“No, it’s not that.”

“Is work stressing you out?”

“Work is fine.”

“Your dad? My dad?”

“Nothing is going on.”

Other than me gaining weight, maybe.

“It’s me, isn’t it?”

“What?” he asked, looking confused.

“I can’t do this.” My emotions hit me harder than I expected. “I can’t keep wondering what I did wrong. Why you suddenly changed your mind about me.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked. “It’s not you.”

“Yes, it is,” I said tightly. “I can read between the lines. You said it wasn’t me, but you looked guilty about it, like you were lying.”

Sebastian only stared at me, looking alarmed.

I shook my head. “Just say you’re not attracted to me.”

He blinked quickly several times, shocked out of his stupor. “Excuse me?”

“Just say it. You stopped wanting me when I started gaining weight, when I stopped wearing makeup around you all the time. Nothing changed other than that. I’m not stupid, Sebastian. It’s me. I’m what changed.”

He said lowly, “You think that I’m not attracted to you?”

“Yes,” I replied, “and I’d like you just to admit it instead of hiding it from me.”

Sebastian didn’t look like a deer in the headlights anymore. He looked *mad*.

“Lily, you haunt my dreams,” he said. “When I close my eyes at night, I see *you*, dressed in whatever the fuck you want to be in, whatever weight you are at. Any time I see any curve of you, any amount of skin, I want to touch it, with my hands, with my tongue. I don’t care what. I want *you*.”

I could feel my pulse race as I thought about what he was saying. I could almost feel the ghost of his touch on my skin.

“Then why do you turn away?” I asked.

“For four years, our relationship was based on faking it around each other and then only sex in private. And that . . . that wasn’t healthy, for either of us. I regret how I’ve treated you and I never wanted to do that again. Every time I think of having sex with you, I think about how you felt that I was using you. I want more than just a sexual relationship.”

“So, we can’t have sex at all?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Even though, from what you’ve said, both of us want to?”

“Yes,” he said, sighing. “This is for your own good.”

“And *you* get to decide that?”

Sebastian blinked. “I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to repeat the same mistakes.”

“How do you know we’ll fall into those habits again? You don’t work as much anymore. My only problem was that we didn’t connect after

we had sex."

"And you felt you had to. I'm doing this so we can fix what we messed up for the last four years. We can focus on us without the pressure of sex. This is *for* you."

"I've heard that before," I said flatly. "And it's never about me. It's about what others think I need. You decided to keep me at arm's length without asking me what I needed, which *also* hurt me."

"I don't want to hurt you, I just think—"

"How about you stop thinking and start listening to me?"

He froze and didn't say anything further, so I decided to continue.

"What happened in the past was bad, and I regret how we went about things, but I've never *once* felt hurt about you sleeping with me. It was the only thing we had a connection with."

"And isn't that wrong? Don't we want to foster our other connections rather than the only one we had for the entirety of our marriage?"

"It's all the same connection. It's all a marriage. We can work on the stuff we're not good at while enjoying what we *are* good at. Restricting the good things feels like a punishment neither of us deserve."

Sebastian let out a long breath of air, like tension was releasing from his muscles. "I hear you, but what I don't understand is why you even want me after what I did to you. You should hate me."

"And maybe I did for a time," I admitted, "but I don't now. The only thing I hate is that you decided for me."

He looked torn. He only spoke after a long moment of silence.

"I'm sorry," he said, quietly. "I don't even know how to fix this. How do I stop from making this worse? What do I do to prevent this from happening again—"

I stopped him by walking over and putting a firm hand on his chest. It was a move, interestingly enough, that Rohanda used for Jamisson.

"The sorry is enough."

"But I-I did what your parents did. I hurt you."

"Have you ever heard of this thing called forgiveness?" I asked, lifting the corner of my mouth.

"You have no reason to forgive me."

"That's the best kind."

He blinked, as if he recognized the words. “That’s from *The Fair Originals*, isn’t it?”

It was. Jamisson said it to Rohanda in book four.

“I did say I’ve read them a hundred times.”

“I guess you have.”

I pulled my hand away, sensing he was calmer now, but he grabbed it, interlacing our fingers together.

“I want you every day,” he said. “Don’t ever doubt that. Don’t ever doubt yourself. Lily, you are not the problem. You’ve never been the problem.”

“That’s not my experience,” I said shakily.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You don’t deserve to feel that way.”

His forehead came to rest against mine, and I was shocked at how intimate this felt. For so long, I’d always thought sex was the ultimate form of intimacy, and for so long, that was what we had.

But now, standing in our living room, my forehead pressed against his, it felt intimate in a way we’d never been.

“Can I . . .” I paused, willing myself to have the courage to ask. “Can I stay with you tonight?”

“Of course,” Sebastian said. “I-I don’t know if I’m ready to do anything, though.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “I just want to be with you in any way.”

Spurred on by my bravery, I pulled back to kiss him softly. He reacted immediately, pressing his lips ever so slowly to mine.

He grabbed me by the hand and led me to his room. It was bigger than mine, but just as nice.

“Mind if I use the bathroom to wash my face?” I asked.

“You can use anything you want,” he said.

I smiled at him as I walked into the master bathroom and methodically took off the makeup. It was here that I really felt like his wife, using the bathroom that he did, using the extra sink that was meant for a partner.

“Hey,” he said. “I have some comfortable pajamas if you want to borrow them. You might have to tie the waist, though.”

“I’d love that,” I said, taking the offered clothes. They were a little big, and I had to not only tie the waist, but roll the extra fabric at my ankles.

But I was very comfortable.

After getting changed, I laid next to him, facing him as I adjusted to the new room. He had the fan on and a sound machine in the background, filling the room with white noise that was already making me drowsy.

He reached over and put a gentle hand on my hip and said, “I’m happy you’re here.”

“Me too,” I said. He gave me a soft kiss on the forehead as he pulled me closer. My body aligned with his, warming in a way a blanket never could. I let myself melt into him and enjoy the warmth of his body. I could feel my worries fall away as I drifted off.

It was the most peaceful sleep I’d had in years.

Photo: fireworks from a royalty-free website.

LilyRMiller: Happy New Year!

MartinMiller: Short and sweet, Lily…

SebandLily4ever: you better be busy making babies!

RealBarbaraRoberts: I ask, once again, where are your faces? We miss you!

Chapter Seventeen

I woke up warm.

Light filtered in through Sebastian's sheer curtains, illuminating the space with a soft golden glow. I blinked, confused for only a moment as last night came back to me.

There was a part of me that was embarrassed I had told him I thought it was me, that I was the problem, but his reaction, the stern but honest words he told me, gave me so much more peace.

For once, it wasn't *me*.

I found him already awake, leaning on his elbow, looking at me with an expression I had only seen since moving to Nashville. Seeing that soft, almost lovesick look had my heart racing. When he noticed I was awake, he pulled me in for a kiss.

"Good morning," he said against my lips.

I kissed him back, unused to so much attention so early in the morning. My body was waking up as it warmed with his kisses. By the time he pulled away, I was fired up, but I couldn't tell if I wanted to jump him or go write a few thousand words.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Eight."

"Aren't you late for work?"

"It's a holiday," he said. "My dad wants me in, but he can deal with me being late."

"Such a rebel," I said.

"Only for you."

There was that blush again. My cheeks could light matches. Sebastian laughed and gave me one more kiss before he got up.

I watched him get ready, which I never got to do before. He stayed in the room as he took off his shirt, showing an olive-toned chest, broad and solid. My mouth went dry as I watched him.

Sebastian threw on a button-up before he took off his sweatpants, revealing his thin underwear. When he walked to the closet to retrieve his slacks, I got a fantastic view of his ass.

Truly, it was spectacular.

I was almost disappointed when he pulled on his pants, and that disappointment drove me to getting out of bed, walking over to him, and kissing him, right as he buttoned the fly.

Sebastian made a surprised sound, but responded quickly by wrapping his arms around me and pulling me to him.

I wanted to touch him. I wanted him back in bed where I could be on top of him or under him, whichever came first. When he opened his mouth and I dared to dip my tongue into it, he groaned and pulled me to him tighter.

I could feel his hardness against me, and it sent a chill down my spine to know he still responded to me like this. I wanted to watch as he writhed in pleasure.

"Lily," he said, pulling away, "I need to go to work."

"Forget work. Fuck me instead."

He laughed but continued to pull away.

"I promise I'll make it worth your while to wait."

"Are you sure?" I asked, pulling myself out of my haze. "Are you feeling better about us?"

"I am. Turns out talking about your problems really can help them."

"Yeah, I've heard that somewhere before."

He kissed me again, but before we could get carried away, he said, "Unfortunately, I really do need to go."

"Have a good day," I replied, smiling at him. He kissed me one last time before leaving, and all I was left with were burning cheeks and a desire I knew I couldn't satisfy myself.

Once he was gone, I had to resist the urge to dig out the vibrator and release this tension myself. I knew it wouldn't be enough.

I only wanted him.

I looked out Sebastian's window and saw Amy's backyard. I decided that it was better to make myself busy rather than sit around the house and wait for my husband to come home and pick up where we left off.

Lily: You free?

Amy: Unfortunately not. Family drama.

Lily: Please tell me it's not house related.

Amy: Luckily, no. This is all on the sister's side, but I have to go see her and she's out of town.

Lily: Good luck!

Amy: Did you want to hang out today?

Lily: Yeah, but don't feel bad or anything!

Amy: Ugh, we have to make up for it for sure.

I sighed and turned off the phone's screen. What was I supposed to do while I waited? I was almost done with my book but writing alone wasn't what I wanted to do. I decided I should go to the coffee shop.

Riley was the one manning the station. When she looked up, her face brightened as she saw me. "I was hoping you'd come in today."

"Oh?" I asked.

"Yeah, are you a writer, by chance?"

"Why?" I asked, growing nervous. Was I caught that easily?

"You're always typing away on your laptop. Anyway, it gave me an idea. If you *are* a writer, there's a writing group that reserved a corner of the shop today. Maybe you could join them."

"My typing inspired all of this?"

"I'm always in the market for inviting groups into the shop. I figured if you weren't, then it was still a good idea to invite a local writing group to have their sessions here."

"I-I *am* a writer. What time does it start?"

"I think in an hour."

"That's perfect." I ordered breakfast and a coffee, figuring I'd wait.

I spent the first hour writing, and then Riley walked up and introduced the group to me when they arrived. The planner excitedly invited me to join in.

They seemed welcoming and soon I was sitting next to other writers who were all trying to do the same as me. I wasn't going to tell anyone who I was, because one writer had already recognized me as Lily Miller, so I had to pretend I was just doing it for fun so it wouldn't get out.

Luckily, no one pushed me for any information about my marriage. They were simply glad to have another writer friend.

And just like that, I was a part of their group. They invited me into their Discord and told me to come to other meetings. I wound up giving a few of the writers advice, and I felt, for one of the first times, like I belonged somewhere.

When I got home, I worked on cooking dinner for Sebastian. However, he didn't come home in an excellent mood. I could see the rigid edge of his shoulders all the way from the car. My first thought was that I had somehow done something to cause this, but then I remembered our parting this morning and realized that there was no way it could have been me.

"What's wrong?" I asked from the dining room when he walked in the door.

"How did you know something was wrong?" he asked, his voice hard.

I didn't know how to answer that, so I just gestured to his whole body.

Sebastian sighed. "My dad called today."

"Did he have something to say about work?" I asked. "You went in on a holiday like he asked."

"No," Sebastian said. "It's not that. He wants us back in LA."

"What—permanently?"

"No. Thank God. Just for a few days. I think he wants a family photo."

I couldn't resist the groan.

"I tried to get out of it, Lily, I did," Sebastian said. "Not even the work excuse got him to let it go."

"It's fine," I replied. "I mean, I figured something like this would come up eventually. When do we go?"

"Next week."

I sighed. "Okay. So that's why mom sent me an email about party planning."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, really," I reassured him. "It's just what's required of us."

"I know. I just know you're going to hate it. Are you and Jessie in contact at all?"

"No," I said. "Not since I left."

"I was hoping maybe you'd want to see her and maybe that would take the edge off."

"She said she was tired of watching me mess up my life. The day we left she told me she was done with me."

He turned to me, eyes intense. “She did that the day you left? Was that why you were so upset?”

I nodded. “I knew I needed to act like I always did, but after she did that, I couldn’t.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. Seeing you angry is what made us finally talk.”

“You’re right, but I wish it wasn’t started by Jessie ending our friendship.”

“I’m sorry, Lily,” he said. “You deserve better.”

“I have Amy now, and you, I think.”

“You always have me,” he said, smiling. “Even if we have to go back to LA.”

Sebastian’s expression turned guilty, like I’d take this out on him. But I was used to this. I learned never to make true plans because my family would come out of nowhere and mess them up. This was my normal.

“We’ll be fine,” I told him, touching his shoulder comfortingly. He looked at me, relief written on his face. “I’m not mad at you or anything. This is just part of it all.”

“I’m sorry I came back in a bad mood. Things were good this morning.”

“It’s okay. Life happens sometimes.”

“Tell me about your day. I saw you posted.”

Did I post? I opened my phone and found a scheduled post that I’d put together weeks ago.

“I honestly forgot I even did that,” I said. “I was busy today.”

“What did you do?”

“I, uh . . . went to a writing group actually. Here in town.”

I wondered if he would be defensive and tell me I needed to be home. My chest tightened as I watched his expression carefully.

“Did you like it?” he asked, his eyebrows raised.

“Um, yes. I did.” I turned away from him, grabbing the food. It gave me a moment to think of what to say next. “Some people asked for advice, and I was able to help. I only offered fantasy advice since that’s what I write.”

“You write fantasy?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Dark fantasy, so most of my advice was telling people to kill off their characters. It worked for some.”

“Hm, so dark fantasy about a woman who’s under her family’s control and tries to escape.” His eyebrows knitted. “I hope that’s not my hint. That doesn’t narrow it down at all.”

“Well, you said you were a reader,” I said carefully. “Maybe you’ve read it.”

“Dark fantasy? I’ve only read two series in that genre—*The Fair Originals* and the first book in the *Game of Thrones* series. It’s about all I can stomach before I start getting worried dragons are going to come out of the sky and eat me.”

I laughed. “So, why did you read those two then?”

“I don’t know. I read *The Fair Originals* first. Something about it felt so familiar, like I really knew what the writer was getting across. I read the first book in the *Game of Thrones* series hoping for the same feeling, and it didn’t happen.”

I paused.

“What . . . what did you think the writer was getting across?”

“That no matter what trials you go through, you can escape. At least I think that’s what they’re going for. It’s hard when I don’t know the ending.”

And that was when I knew how I wanted to end *The Fair Originals*.

I couldn’t end it on a sad note. Not when Sebastian was right—the story was about escaping and coming out on top no matter what happened.

Oh God, I needed to write.

“What?”

“I just had a breakthrough on my book. Would you be offended if I went and wrote?”

“No,” he said, smiling. “As long as the breakthrough wasn’t that you’re secretly mad about having to go back to LA.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s about the ending. I’m super inspired and I need to get this down before I forget.”

“Then you better get to it.”

“I’ll see you later!” I called as I raced up the stairs to my room.

I wrote for hours and finally reemerged after midnight. By the time I shut my laptop, I had drafted out every detail of the ending. Now I only had to write it.

I needed a drink of water and to eat. I carefully went down the stairs, trying not to wake Sebastian, who was more than likely asleep.

“Good writing session?” Sebastian asked.

I jumped out of my skin. “Sebastian! You’re awake?”

“Yeah, my dad sent me a project to work on,” he said, sounding bitter. “And I wanted to see you before you went to bed. How did writing go?”

“My back is sore, and my wrists hurt. So, it went well. Really well.” I stretched happily, exposing my stomach as I leaned back. “I need water,” I muttered when I was done.

After getting rehydrated, Sebastian was still working. I walked over to him and closed his laptop. “It’s almost one,” I said. “You need to get some sleep.”

“I know,” he said. “I just didn’t know if you were sleeping in my room or not.”

“I can sleep in there if you want me to.”

“I’d really like that,” he said.

I leaned down to kiss him. It was only supposed to be a light brush of the lips, but he grabbed my jaw and kept me there. He pulled me to sit on his lap, lips moving against mine.

Despite it being one in the morning, I was wide awake.

I gripped his shirt, keeping my fists balled in the fabric, worried he would pull away and find some sort of excuse as to why we shouldn’t do this.

But my body was screaming for it. Everything was begging to be touched. My breasts ached. My clit pulsed, begging for the whisper of anything. Sebastian let out a long breath, trailing his hands down to my leg, bringing one up to press my core to him.

I whimpered at the contact, and I shamelessly moved against him. He was rapidly hardening under my touch, and I dared to dart my tongue across his lip. He moaned and picked me up, carrying me to the couch.

We collapsed against it, and I moaned as he was fully on top of me. His hands gripped my ass, keeping me arched to him. I opened my legs, more than ready to feel him press into me.

Sebastian was now fully hard, straining against his pants, and all I could think about was getting his clothes off, but my body was pressed to him. I didn’t want to pull away, even if it was to get him naked.

He ground against me, sending jolts of pleasure up my spine. My body begged for his, and I was finally getting what I needed.

After a moment, his mouth left mine, but he kissed my nose, my neck. I dimly remembered him saying he wanted to kiss all of my freckles, and I wondered if that was what he was doing. His kisses were soft, peppering my face as he slowly returned to my neck. That was when he nipped at the sensitive skin, pulling another whimper from my lips.

One of his hands trailed up my shirt, reaching the lace of my bralette. His palm rubbed at my nipples through the fabric, and I jerked against them. They stiffened under his touch, and he kept his open mouth on my neck, torturing me in the best ways.

Eventually, Sebastian pulled off my loose shirt, and the distance gave me only a moment of reprieve before he was back on me. His kisses trailed downward until his mouth was on my breast, his tongue circling the hard peak as I bucked against him.

I wanted his mouth. I wanted his cock. I wanted him, and I was finally getting it.

I was gasping when he finally pulled his mouth away from my breasts. He kissed downward, until he was pulling my leggings down, and letting cold air spill on my wet core.

Once I was entirely naked, he kissed my knee at the mole I'd had for years. Then the one on my thigh. Then another on my inner thigh. I opened my legs for him, my body more than ready for him.

Sebastian's tongue had always been something that haunted my dreams. He licked me from my core up to my clit, circling it deftly. I ran my hands through his dark locks. I pressed him in, needing the friction as he worked on my wanting body.

He circled it, licked it, and let me build the best sort of pressure. I refused to let him go.

It felt otherworldly, and I brokenly called his name as I felt myself build until an impossible peak, and then shatter. I cried out as I came, my entire body twitching as wave after wave of intense pleasure rolled its way through my entire body.

As it finally ebbed, I could feel his tongue still working on me. He gently licked me, pressing one finger into my soaked entrance. He toyed with it, and then pushed inside, hand going right for my G-spot.

His fingers combined with his skilled tongue had me moaning again, begging for more.

Sebastian added a finger, and I whimpered as he filled me up. Both my clit and my core were being worked on, tightening my body in the best way.

“More pressure,” I begged him, tightening my fingers in his hair. He complied instantly, sucking my clit, and adding yet another finger.

I crashed again. My body exploding in fireworks of pleasure. I yelled out, throwing my head back as I lost my sight against the intense pleasure cresting through my body.

When I came back to myself, I knew I wasn’t done. I needed *him*. I needed his cock stretching me, filling me.

“Get up here,” I said, out of breath as I took my fingers out of his hair.

He took his damn time getting back up to my mouth, but before he could kiss me, I unbuttoned his shirt and threw it across the room. I ran my hands up and down his body, across his nipples and down to his hard and heavy cock, more than ready to see it in person.

I almost ripped his pants off in my haste.

It was still standing at attention, and it sprung free from the confines of his pants and boxers. My mouth watered, and I debated on taking him in my mouth, but he laid me back down.

“The sounds you made,” he said, his voice low, “I am not going to last long. Especially not if you use your mouth.”

I sighed. “We’ll have to save that for next time then.”

He pressed the head of his cock against my opening, and I forgot where I was for a moment. All I knew was that this felt so right, and that I needed him opening me up, pressing inside of my core.

As he worked his way in, my body was ready for him. I was open, but he still stretched me, filling me in such a delicious way that I moaned as he pushed himself all the way in.

“God,” he said. “I love the sounds you make, how you *feel*.”

“Seb-Sebastian,” I said, my breath hitching. “I need you to move. Please fuck me.”

“Where’s your flowery language now?”

“I don’t have time for flowery language when you’re inside of me. I want you to lose control. I want to feel this tomorrow.”

Something snapped inside of him. His eyes grew impossibly darker, lust filling them. He slammed into me, harder than I’d ever felt, and the

couch moved with him.

"Fuck, yes." My body was begging for more.

He did it again, thrusting his cock so deep into me that I saw stars.

I wish I had words for how glorious it felt to have him let go in front of me. This was raw. This was real. It made every nerve ending within me light up in pleasure.

I felt everything. The pressure of his cock deep into me. The slamming of his pelvis against my clit, sending shockwaves up my body with every thrust. I felt my pussy gripping him as I got what I needed, and I built into yet another impossible orgasm.

I screamed, head thrown back as my core tightened around him, body twitching in a feeling I would never be able to do justice with words. Everything erupted in hot, pleasurable heat.

Sebastian pushed into me even harder, and I dimly noticed the sound of wet skin slapping in between us. When he came, he gripped my hips like a vice, and I could feel him spill into me, his warmth mixing with mine in an entirely new way.

His head fell to my shoulder, his breath ragged. "That was insane."

"I think you're ruining me for other men," I said, my voice coming out barely over a whisper.

"I think you're ruining me for other women," he replied, kissing my neck. My tired body tried to come alive again, but it was fruitless.

I needed sleep.

Sebastian's lips left my neck, and he leaned his head on my shoulder tiredly.

"Okay," he admitted. "Maybe I did stay up too late."

"Well," I said, still feeling hot from our escapade, "it's nothing cuddles and sleep can't fix."

In the commending haze of orgasms, I needed to find time to pack to return to LA. Sebastian kept my mind off it with his hands and his mouth as much as he could, but I knew it would be painful if I didn't plan what I was going to wear and look like the best possible version of Instagrammer Lily.

I packed for both of us since our things became so intermingled. We slept in the same room, either fucking each other to sleep or holding one another so tightly the world fell away.

Some nights it was his room, and some nights was mine. I didn't really care which one—I just liked being with him.

Both of our families had plenty of room for us to stay with them, but I gagged at the thought. Martin's house was a weird mid-century style with hardly any walls. I half expected him to be lurking, waiting for either one of us to slip up. Plus, Sasha would be there, and I'd honestly rather sleep in a cardboard box than see her again.

My family's home was just as bad. Their mansion was excessive, and my mother never kept food in the house.

Instead, we would be staying in a hotel. I picked a suite in a decent area. It had a pull-out couch in case, for some reason, Sebastian got tired of me and wanted to have the bed to himself.

The morning of the flight was cold and dreary. Both Sebastian and I rolled out of bed like we were heading to our executions and dragged our feet to leave.

I was sad to leave our house. I'd grown so attached that shutting the door to our home, even only for a few days, was harder than I imagined it would be.

Our Uber driver didn't talk much, and neither of us were in the mood to discuss anything about our lives with a stranger. I was wearing leggings and an old T-shirt, both in an effort to let go of some of my public persona, and because I was too tired to dress up. Sebastian looked just as casual as I did.

At this point, I couldn't care less if someone said something about how I looked. I was so close to being done with this contract that one photograph in leggings wouldn't be the end of the world.

By the time we landed, I was missing Nashville more than I'd like to admit. We took our things to our hotel where I laid in bed and messaged the writing group I'd joined, telling them I wouldn't be at the next meeting.

I was interrupted by a frustrated sigh from Sebastian.

"My dad already wants me in the office," he muttered, looking at his phone. "I just fucking arrived."

"Is there any way we can lie and say you're sick or something?"

Sebastian scoffed. "I'd still need to come in. God, what could he possibly need me to do?"

"Maybe it's a power trip," I suggested. "He just wants to see how fast you'll come."

“Not helpful, considering I need to go now.”

I sighed and stood, putting a hand on his shoulder. I could feel him relax slightly at my touch.

“You have to do what you have to do,” I said softly. “It sucks, but no one is going to judge you for following what Martin asks for now.”

Sebastian nodded. “I know. I just don’t want to see him. I never do.”

“We should work on setting boundaries with our parents.” I groaned. “This can’t go on.”

“I keep waiting for the contract to end,” Sebastian admitted.

“Why?” I asked. I knew I had my inheritance on the line, but why did he keep doing this?

“It’s when my noncompete clause ends,” he replied.

“Hey, you only have a few more months to go.”

Sebastian looked at me, eyes conflicted. “But then you’re gone too.”

Words I wanted to say got stuck in my throat.

Maybe we didn’t have to end this. Maybe we could go on forever.

“I need to go,” he said quietly before pulling out of my arms. “I’ll be back when I can.”

I nodded. He kissed me before he left, which did nothing to help my fast-beating heart.

I thought about staying in the hotel room, but I knew I would get way too bored. I was in LA, the place I’d once considered home. Shouldn’t I be more excited about it?

The more I thought about it, the less I felt like I was happy here. At the time, I had Jessie, but she never seemed interested in understanding why I did what I did. Besides her, I didn’t have anyone else.

The city felt like a ghost to me. I looked out the window to the skyline and simply felt . . . nothing. Nashville was now my home; Nashville now had my heart.

I was in walking distance of the old coffee shop Jessie and I used to frequent, so I packed my laptop and headed in that direction.

I had no clue if I should even tell Jessie I was in town. I doubted she would want to hear from me, considering I was still married.

I sat in our old spot, feeling a little sad and wistful. I assumed she didn’t come here anymore since we were no longer friends.

Of course, I wasn’t right about that. Just as I started writing the final scenes of my novel, I saw a familiar, tall woman come in. I looked up, blush

coloring my cheeks as I watched Jessie walk in with a guy I didn't recognize. He had his hand on the small of her back, and they looked close.

My mouth fell open. Was she seeing someone?

Jessie had held off on dating while getting her graduate degree, but she would have been done with it by now. She'd always wanted to graduate in the winter, which was one semester early.

I planned on hiding behind my laptop. I figured she wouldn't take note of me with my messy hair and bare face, but her eyes trailed over to my table nonchalantly, and she stared at me for a long moment before walking over.

She didn't even tell the guy she was with where she was going. I almost bolted out of the coffee shop. Was she going to yell at me? Was she still mad?

"Lily?" Jessie asked, blinking at me. "Is that you?"

"Uh," I said, my voice weak to my own ears. "No?"

"I'd recognize those freckles anywhere."

Betrayed by the freckles. I rubbed my face absentmindedly. Jessie's eyes caught on my hand where I wore my wedding ring.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her tone just a little colder than before.

"I'm in town for a few days," I muttered, putting my hand under the table. "I was nearby so I decided to get out of the hotel for a bit."

Jessie sighed. "Right. I guess you're still doing the whole contract thing, huh?"

I looked away. Instead of feeling my usual shame, I felt a little bitter this time. *Yes, of course I was still doing the contract.*

"Well, it was good to see you," Jessie said. "I hope Nashville is treating you well."

I bit my tongue and didn't say anything. She must have thought I was going to call out to her, because she turned back to me.

"Where's the makeup?" she asked.

"At the hotel," I replied.

"And the hair?"

"I'm not going to style it for a plane."

"So, you came alone," she said.

"No, I . . ." I trailed off. "Why are you asking?"

"You would never come with Sebastian looking like that."

But I had. These days, I didn't even think about wearing makeup around him. Sure, I'd wear it if we were seeing his coworkers or I needed a photo.

But any other time, I was just myself. Just Lily.

I wanted to say this to Jessie, but would she believe me? Or would she laugh and say that she was right all along and I had feelings for Sebastian?

I sighed. "Yeah, I probably wouldn't."

Jessie looked at the table and then back at me. "What are you doing on the laptop?"

On instinct, I laid my hands on the device, as if Jessie would run off with it at any moment. "Why do you want to know?"

"I'm curious. You were typing when I walked in, and you've never had one before."

"I was . . ." I floundered for an answer. "I joined a writing group in Nashville."

Jessie blinked.

It was technically true.

"You're writing again?"

I slowly nodded.

She knew I wrote fanfiction when I was a teen. I'd never said it out loud to her, but she somehow knew.

Writing had been my hobby in high school, but when I married Sebastian, I stopped talking about it to anyone. Jessie must have assumed I gave it up, though in reality, I never did—but of course she didn't know that.

"That's . . . good," Jessie said. "No, that's great."

"Sorry to interrupt, babe," the man she had come in with said. "But your coffee is ready." He handed her a cup.

"Oh, thanks Mark. This is Lily. The, uh, one with the marriage."

Mark's eyebrows raised as he looked at me. *Great.* She had talked about me.

"Nice to meet you," I said, barely able to keep the edge out of my voice.

"Yeah, uh, you too. How long are you in town for?" he asked.

"Just a few days." And boy, I could not wait to leave.

“That’s cool. Jessie mentions you a lot. Maybe you two could hang out.”

I was surprised Jessie mentioned me at all, but with the way she glared at Mark, I could tell that was something he shouldn’t have said.

I glanced at the door. In that moment, I wished I could disappear.

“Yeah, maybe,” I replied.

“Mark, could you give me a minute? I’ll meet you at the car.”

“Oh, yeah,” Mark said. “Nice meeting you.”

I nodded at him awkwardly. As soon as she said what she needed to say, I was out of here. Lesson learned—I would stay in the hotel from now on.

“Are you okay?” Jessie asked, turning back to me with narrowed eyes.

I blinked. “What?”

“I asked if you were okay. You don’t seem like yourself, at least not the version of you that got on the plane to Nashville.”

“I was always myself,” I replied.

Jessie raised an eyebrow.

“I’m serious,” I replied, voice firm. “I was. Yes, I got busy, and it sort of sucked never speaking to my husband and having all the social media shit to deal with, but I never changed. I’m still me, but I’m bound in a contract and have to be careful.”

“You’re not being careful now. You used to never leave the house without makeup. What happened?”

“Nothing happened,” I said, my face red.

“You’re blushing, which means you’re lying.”

I groaned. “Okay, fine. People know I live in Nashville, but even there, I’ve been without makeup and people don’t recognize me. Even if they did somehow know I was here, I’m probably safe. The only person that would recognize me is you, my mother, and Sebastian.”

Jessie only stared at me.

“Why would he recognize you? You’ve never been around him without makeup.”

“I have now. We’ve . . . we’ve been getting along.”

I tensed, waiting for her judgment.

She shook her head. “I was right, then.”

“Maybe a little,” I answered, bitterness clawing up my throat.

“So, you just suddenly started talking with him? After four years of never speaking?”

“That’s kind of what happens when you find yourself alone in a city with someone. He’s a decent guy, Jessie. And things are working between us.”

“It seems convenient.”

“Believe me, it’s not,” I replied. “None of it is. I hate that we’re bound by contract, but making it work while we’re stuck like this can’t be a bad thing.”

“So are you finally admitting you’ve always liked him, then?”

I glared. “Yes. I am, and I don’t regret it.”

“What about Heather? The woman he called on your honeymoon?” she said it like a reminder.

As if I could have forgotten.

“He never slept with Heather. That call was about work.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Well, I do, and he and I are the ones married.”

She shook her head. “I can’t believe you’re still doing this.”

“Really? I’m doing exactly what I said I would be doing.”

“Yes, by letting your family walk all over you.”

“That’s not what’s happening,” I said, standing up to look her in the eye.

When I did, she looked at my body. “Did you gain weight?”

“Yes, I did,” I said, refusing to feel bad about it.

“You look . . . healthy, Lily.”

“I know, and trust me when I said I heard about it.”

“From Sebastian?”

“No. My mother. Sebastian said he’s happy when I am.”

“Are you happy?”

“Yes,” I said firmly.

“You are? You don’t look it.”

“It’s a little hard to be happy when you’re seeing someone who told you they were done with you.”

Jessie’s jaw dropped. “What did you say?”

“Do I really need to repeat it? You can’t say I don’t look happy after seeing me one time when our last conversation was you telling me you

didn’t want to see me anymore. I get why you did it, but can you really think you know me when you haven’t talked to me for months?”

Jessie blinked. Instead of getting mad, she stayed still for a long moment. “Did you just . . . stand up for yourself?”

“Yes?” I asked, confused. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No,” she replied. “You’ve just never done it before.”

“Maybe it was time to start then. It’s made life easier in Nashville.”

“You do this with him?”

“Yes,” I replied. “He was one of the first, actually.”

“I-I can’t believe this. You’re so different. How did this happen?”

“Maybe I needed empathy instead of judgment.”

Jessie winced. “Mark said the same thing. How long are you in town for?”

“I don’t know. We’re supposed to do a family photo,” I paused to roll my eyes, “then we’ll head back as soon as we can.”

“So not long then.”

“No, I don’t want to be in LA for longer than I have to.”

“Damn, I was hoping we could catch up.”

“My mom’s planning a five-year anniversary party for us in a few months. The last day of the contract.”

“Seriously? And you’re going?”

“Yeah, as a goodbye. We could catch up before everything falls apart.”

“So you’re not going to renew?”

“No,” I replied. “We both don’t want that.”

“Okay. I might be free then. Text me the details?”

“Will you answer?”

Jessie looked at the ground, but nodded.

“Okay, then I will.”

Jessie sighed and shook her head. “Okay. It’s a deal. See you then?”

I only nodded and watched her go, hoping this wouldn’t blow up in my face.

The family photo was set to be taken in Martin’s house. My mom had set up a whole party, decked out with food and drinks that were for other people who weren’t me. Whenever I neared the spread, she glared at me.

I donned a red sparkling dress that had taken me almost an hour to get into. It was heavy and annoying, and all the makeup I wore made my skin itch.

Sebastian was pulled into a conversation with his father and Heather, who kept looking at him as if she wanted to talk to him alone. I ignored my jealousy, knowing Sebastian wasn't going to do anything, and tried to comingle the best I could. My mother, unfortunately, kept following me, telling me I needed to dye my hair and lose weight, even though Sebastian had told her off.

"He may *say* he doesn't care," my mother started, "but look at you and look at Heather. There's a world of difference."

My heart sunk. Not because I didn't trust Sebastian, but because this was the last thing I needed. When we sat down for dinner, my mother had only shoved a salad into my hands before sending me to sit next to my husband dutifully.

"Did you want that salad?" he asked.

"What do you think?" I muttered.

Sebastian's eyes narrowed.

"It's fine," I said.

He leaned in. "They have pie. I'll get you a slice and we can meet by the bathrooms."

"That might be the hottest thing you've ever said."

We ate dinner in silence, letting other people talk around us. After we finished, I made a break for the bathroom, where Sebastian was waiting with a huge slice of apple pie.

"Oh my God, thank you," I said, taking it from him. I took a bite, then recoiled. "Oh, this isn't even good pie."

"Really?" He took a bite, and then shook his head. "Why does this taste so off?"

"No clue, but I'll still eat it. Bad pie is better than a salad I don't want."

"I'm exhausted," he said. "I can't wait for this to be over."

"You and me both," I replied, sighing. I offered him another piece.

"After this," he said, "I want to go to the hotel and never leave."

"We can arrange that. A spicy post from me and they'll think we're spending the weekend *very* busy."

Sebastian raised his eyebrows. “Does that come with the actual act?”

“It does if you want it to.”

His grin was devious as he grabbed the pie and pulled me to him with one hand. “You know I want it to,” he growled.

“We just have to make it until the photo,” I said.

He put more of his weight on me. I sank into the wall, which supported us both.

“This is helping,” he said. “You’re helping.”

I wanted to kiss him, but I was distracted by someone coming down the hall. I peered around Sebastian; Heather rounded the corner and froze. All she could see was my red dress and Sebastian’s back, but her jaw dropped.

“Lily?” she asked, her voice horrified.

Sebastian pulled away, turning to her.

“Oh, Sebastian,” Heather said. “I didn’t think that was you.”

Heather and I hadn’t talked since she brought up her feelings for Sebastian. I didn’t want to know any more about her, if I was being honest.

“Yes, it’s me,” he said, and his hand slid to my lower back. I couldn’t feel it as much as I wanted to because my gaudy dress was in the way.

“Oh,” she said, crossing her arms. “So, I guess you two are okay then?”

“We’ve always been okay,” he said.

Heather looked disappointed. “Good for you.”

Sebastian tensed, and then glanced at me. “Thank you,” he said.

Heather headed toward the bathroom. She paused, as if she wanted to say something else, but thankfully decided against it.

“I think she was about to try to talk to you about her feelings,” I said softly.

“I know,” Sebastian said, “but you have to know I wouldn’t have—”

“I trust you,” I said. “I know you wouldn’t do that now.”

We finished off the pie and went back to the party. Sebastian and I kept glancing at each other tiredly as people continued to spout bullshit at us about work and other things we didn’t care about.

It took forever for all of us to pose for the photo. My mother kept moving us around, trying to get the perfect shot. Sasha complained about

every one of them not looking perfect, and Martin made snide comments to my dad about his company. It was torture. I could tell by the tick in Sebastian's jaw that he was annoyed.

But once a hundred photos were taken, we were free. I was immediately told to post the winning photo since I hadn't posted mine or Sebastian's face in far too long.

After my lecture, I was more than ready to go, and so was Sebastian. We wasted no time getting out of there.

When we got back to the hotel, I dove onto the bed face first, feeling exhausted throughout my body.

Sebastian groaned and sat next to me. "That was terrible. Can we go home now?"

"Our flight is tomorrow," I muttered.

"I may be willing to get one tonight," Sebastian said. "I just need out of this town."

I was tired, but I wanted to be home. Our plans for sex were out the window, but I'd much rather have sex in one of our beds instead of this hotel room. I looked at him, at the desperation on his face, and I nodded. "Let me get changed."

Photo: Lily and Sebastian surrounded by family. Everyone looks happy, except for Lily and Sebastian

LilyRMiller: Spent some time with family before I got to have a very special weekend with the hubby *eyes emoji*

Sussybaka: I hate to the one of those weird conspiracy people, but they don't look happy. Neither of them do.

SebandLily4ever: They're in love. THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH THEM.

RealBarbaraRoberts: You two could look happy to see us LOL …

Chapter Eighteen

When we got back home, we easily fell into a rhythm. We slept in Sebastian's room most nights. He would leave for work, I would go to writing meetings or hang out with Amy, and then we would have dinner.

For the first time in the four years we had been together, I felt like I had a marriage and not just an obligation. I did my best to post as much as possible to keep our families off our backs, and for once, it felt like just the two of us.

Spring arrived and then summer, which meant our time was running out. I wasn't sure what I wanted. I didn't want to have any connection with my family or his, but I couldn't impose that on Sebastian if he wanted to stay.

It didn't help that my mother hounded me about getting pregnant, and I kept dodging her calls.

"I can't believe she's even asking you to do that," Amy said one bright morning while we walked at Centennial Park. The trees were a pleasant pink, and the air was warm.

I sipped on my coffee and sighed. "I don't know what to tell you. She thinks it'll work."

"I think your method of being yourself and talking to your husband works better. You guys seem so happy lately. It kind of makes me want to barf."

"Don't you like romance novels?"

"Yes, but I want to be the main character."

I laughed. "You're ridiculous."

"What will you do once this is over?"

"No clue. I don't want to lose him, but I'm not sure what he will do. He says he has a noncompete clause ending, so he may work somewhere else, but I don't know if he will want to get away from his family. I think he should, but I can't make that decision for him."

And he could easily hate me after he figured out who was based on him in my books.

"You could tell him your boundaries and see where it ends up."

“You’re right,” I said. “I need to, but I think both of us are so worried about simply saying no to our families that we haven’t thought about what to do when it ends.”

“Will you be staying in town?”

“I’m sure once it all goes down, my dad is going to take back the house, but I think I’d like to buy something in the area.”

“I’ll even help you look for it,” Amy said. “Ugh, I’m so happy you like it here. Nashville is great. Maybe it’s not in the best state, but still.”

I couldn’t help but agree with her. I had grown attached to the city I thought I would hate.

Sebastian and I had mere weeks until we flew back to LA for our anniversary party. I wasn’t looking forward to it, and neither was he.

We both planned on denying any new contract there. I was going to tell my family I was done with them for good. It wasn’t going to be a fun conversation.

As for me, I was living life the best I could. At the weekly writing group, I had drawn so much interest from other writers that they lined up to ask for advice. I had worried I’d never get time to actually write at meetings, but the moment I mentioned needing time to myself to work, they all left me alone.

I knew almost everyone’s name and what project they were working on. Most people thought I was only a talented fanfiction writer after I began piping in and helping people with their works. They all begged me to publish.

Sebastian was supportive of my writing friends. He liked that I had found a community of people in the city and always asked how my meetings went. He liked a lot of the people he worked with these days, so I could tell he was settling in too.

My book was done. I had been able to finish it in time by both working with the writing group and by going to coffee shops. I had chosen my ending, and it was with the editor now. I’d have to do more edits soon, but for the moment, my work was on pause.

My developmental editor had been shocked that I gave the books a happier ending, but she said she cried when she read it. I took that to mean it was decent.

While waiting for edits, I had time to write my dedication and my author’s note. Usually, J.R. didn’t do either. It could be traced back to me.

But I was considering it, hoping I could do something special to give Sebastian the hint he'd been chasing after, and a surprise when he inevitably read it.

Things were going well—too well. I expected something to go wrong at this point.

It was a warm spring night when I was putting the finishing touches on my book. I was trying to decide how to leave Sebastian a hint on who I was, even though the idea terrified me.

When I saw him pull in the driveway, however, I put my laptop away, still unsure on what to do.

I went to the kitchen where I had something cooking for dinner. I made sure it was all finished when he walked in.

"Hey," he said. "Thank you for cooking."

"No problem," I replied. It was easy to multitask. "How was work?"

"Busy, but not nearly like what it was in LA. My dad . . . asked for a meeting when we fly in for the anniversary though."

I deflated. "New contract?"

"Yeah, definitely."

I sighed. "Then I guess we're having our uncomfortable talk before I thought."

"Yeah, probably," Sebastian said. "Sorry, Lily."

"It's not your fault," I replied. "I'm just glad we both are going to say no. We may blow up our entire lives doing it, but I should at least get my inheritance after this one. I don't think any more money they could offer would change my mind."

"Me either."

I wondered how far Martin was going to go, though. What if he fired Sebastian and forced him to choose between a contract and his job? I knew I wanted him to say no, but would he? Maybe he'd walk it back, and then I would be the only one dealing with this. I didn't want it to happen, but I didn't know how intense Martin would be, especially now knowing what he'd done to Sebastian his whole life.

I might have to be the bad guy.

"I'm sure it will work out." I shrugged. If I played nonchalant, it was better than showing just how terrified I was.

"Yeah, it will. How was writing group?" Sebastian changed the subject.

“Oh, the usual. People asking me questions and just a little bit of writing.”

“I can’t wait to read what you write,” Sebastian said. “People obviously like it.”

I blushed. “I hope you like it at least.”

“It’s by you,” he said. “I’m sure I will.”

I wasn’t so sure, and as time went on, my fear only grew. I cared about him so much that the idea of him being angry about his role in my story weighed heavily in my chest.

“Let’s eat,” I said, pulling him into the kitchen. “Then maybe we can complain about the horrid ending of *Game of Thrones*.”

A few days later, I was still thinking about the impending end of our relationship. With all the sex and conversation we now shared, the end of this seemed to be scarier than saying no to my family.

I’d been working on how to bring it up, but Sebastian beat me to it.

On a weekend morning, we’d just finished another round of sex, which was quickly becoming a part of our routine. We were both out of breath from what we’d just done, but when Sebastian pulled back, his brows were knit in thought.

“I think . . .” he began, and my heart tightened from his expression, “I think we should talk about the future.”

“What about it?”

“I don’t want to lose you,” he said. “I don’t think I can.”

I blinked. What was once a feeling of dread turned into hope. “Really?”

“You’ve always said you were done when this was over. Are you going to be done with me?”

“No,” I said forcefully, “I won’t be, but I’m done with my family. I don’t want to see them anymore. I don’t want any connection.”

“Am I a connection?”

“I don’t know. You said your noncompete clause is ending. I can’t ask you to leave your family, but my mother will try to get to me through you.”

Sebastian let out a breath of air. “I want to be done too. Even if we . . . even if you didn’t want to continue this, I’m afraid he will try to find some other way to control me. I can’t keep doing this.”

“So . . . you’re going to find a new job?”

“I’ve sent out applications. In Nashville, actually. It may not be an immediate job change, but I have savings.”

I kissed him. He leaned into it, and I felt my heart soar. “I’d love to stay with you then. It may be hard, but my writing might be able to support us. For a bit.”

“Thank God,” he said. “I was so scared I was losing you.”

I shook my head. “No, never.”

I kissed him again, and I felt him grow where his body met mine.

“Already?” I asked, smiling deviously at him.

“What can I say? You talking about staying with me really does it for me.”

“Me too,” I said. “Luckily we don’t have any plans for the day.”

My lips moved over his as I positioned myself on top of him. My body heated as his tongue clashed with mine.

I was still wet and sticky from our last session, but I was more than ready to go again.

I heard his breath grow ragged, and quickly felt the hard length of him pressing insistently into my pussy.

Sebastian’s hips rolled forward a little, pushing his dick in ever so lightly. I loved how he felt as he entered me. I shuddered against the sensation of him slipping in my already wet core.

I’d used the bathroom since our last session, but there were still traces of him inside me that made it all the more pleasurable.

Sebastian’s lips came to my neck and I couldn’t help the broken moan that escaped me. His lips were soft, but so electric against my skin that I could feel it pulsing down to my core.

I turned to him, kissing him before he could torture me anymore. He met me with an open mouth, his tongue melding with mine, and I found myself lost in it. I *loved* making out with him. He was so expert at nipping and tugging on my lips and it drove me crazy. I could do it for hours.

He pulled out, rubbing the hard head of his cock against my clit. My body arched up to get more of the delicious feeling, and I rolled my hips against him. His breath stuttered, but I could feel myself building to the fourth orgasm of the morning.

I rubbed myself against him until I came crashing down, pleasure pushing its way through the tiredness of my body. As I came, Sebastian’s

lips closed over my breast, enhancing every sensation I had.

Sebastian pressed himself into me again, sliding into my tight core with ease. I found myself feeling complete as he went all the way in, crowding out his own cum as he filled me.

He groaned. “I love having you like this.”

“Then you can. Forever.”

He pulled out and thrusted in, bouncing me from where I sat atop him. I gasped, my body tightening in pleasure.

I could feel an orgasm rising, but not near fast enough. I trailed my hand down, putting my fingers on my clit. Sebastian hit my hand every time he thrust up, giving me just enough friction to make my eyes roll into the back of my head.

“You’re so beautiful when you come, Lily,” Sebastian said into my ear. “Come for me again, honey.”

I wanted to come up with something to say, but I didn’t have time. My core clenched. I cried out, and I came for the fifth time, body shaking, nerves on fire.

“Oh, fuck,” Sebastian groaned as he finished too.

“That was . . .” I didn’t even have words.

“Yeah,” Sebastian said. “Yeah.”

We laid there for a moment, with him still inside of me, both panting from our release. Eventually, he slipped out and kissed me on the cheek.

“Have I ever told you that I am so glad you have an IUD?”

“What?” I said, my brain still offline.

Sebastian laughed. “I’m glad we don’t have to use condoms,” he said. “I’d use one if you wanted, but feeling you like this . . .”

“Right,” I said. “I’m glad too. This is *much* better.”

“Let me clean you up.”

I blushed but let him go get whatever he needed. Unbidden, I thought of what my mother said. It would have been so easy to tell him I had one even if I didn’t.

God, the thought made me sick.

I’d never lie to him like that. I’d gladly use condoms if we needed to, but I was also so grateful I’d gotten birth control and stayed on top of it.

When he came back with a rag and a kiss, I forgot about my thoughts. I knew I wasn’t lying to Sebastian when I said I had an IUD, but I knew I’d need to tell him what my mother had said soon.

But I was drifting off to sleep instead, head in the clouds.

As my eyelids grew heavier, I realized I hadn’t posted on Instagram in over a week.

And I decided to say fuck it and leave it that way.

Chapter Nineteen

A few weeks later, I was boarding a flight to LA for the last time as Sebastian's contracted wife. I wanted to throw up, but I kept sipping on my ginger ale, hoping to keep my breakfast down. I could tell by the way Sebastian gripped his seat that he felt the same.

Neither of us wanted to do this, but we had to. We needed to set this boundary to ensure a better future. Then, we'd go back to Nashville, and our home, if we had it.

With my father having footed the bill for the house, I was certain he would take it back when Sebastian and I refused to sign any new contracts, leaving us homeless until we could figure out something else.

My book was with the publishers now, and I'd gotten enough money saved from my royalties that I could afford a down payment on a house.

But probably not that one.

I loved our house, but not enough to stay in this situation. I hoped it would work out, but I wasn't sure how it was a possibility.

When we landed, neither of us particularly wanted to move, but we went to our hotel like we were going to our executions. We waited until the last moment to fly in, and our party was this weekend, which meant we had an hour to get ready for the meeting.

I wore a basic outfit and light makeup. Sebastian wore his dress shirt and jeans. We drove a rental car to the building, both of us looking nervous. It was so different than a year ago, where we had meet here in the elevator, both of us with unfair assumptions about each other.

The meeting room looked the same, though. There was the unfeeling white walls, open windows showing off the city that hated it. I felt smothered the moment I entered.

Martin waited, leaning against the end of the table.

"Glad you two made it," he said.

Neither Sebastian nor I said anything. I had to grip my arms to keep from showing my shaking hands. We were going to have to do this.

"I won't beat around the bush," Martin said. "We have a big bash planned tonight. Here is the new contract, extending the current terms for

five more years. Lily, you will have to be better about your social media, but what we've seen so far is promising."

He slid it across the table. I couldn't even look at it.

"We're not signing it," Sebastian said. "We want to be out of the contract."

Martin didn't even seem shocked. He glanced at his son, then his eyes were on me, as if he knew something I didn't.

Fear shot through me.

"You will read the new one. I'm sure it'll convince you," he replied. "Dismissed."

Martin turned and walked off without a word. Both Sebastian and I stared.

"We're not reading it," Sebastian muttered. "This is a normal business practice he uses. He leaves to try to intimidate people. If we stick to what we said, he'll lose interest."

I would have believed him if Martin hadn't looked at me like that before he spoke. There was something he knew—something to do with me.

I looked down, reaching for the contract. Sebastian grabbed me. "What are you doing?" he asked. "We shouldn't even look at it."

"I feel like there's something in this we should know."

"There's nothing in there we need to see. Besides, it's all going to be legal jargon that makes us afraid of saying no. Don't read it."

I knew he was probably right, and I knew he wanted me to stay as far away from this as I could, but I was worried. What if there was something in there I needed to know?

I grabbed the contract but didn't open it. I knew I wouldn't be scared off, but I also knew Sebastian was worried. I shoved it into my purse and said, "Okay, I won't read it. We'll just hand it to them tonight when we fully announce we're done."

Sebastian glared at my purse but didn't say anything. I didn't have it in me to fight with him, not now.

I spent my afternoon getting plucked and prodded so I looked perfect for the event. I hated every second of it and was glad this was my last time doing it. My mother had tried to force me to dye my hair, and I held strong on that one, saying Sebastian liked the darker color growing in.

Once this was all over, I was dying it brown again. No more of the platinum blonde I hated.

When we walked into the venue, it reminded me of the wedding. It was ridiculously over decorated, and I wondered just how much money had been wasted on this thing. We were passed around like a newborn baby, forced to talk to everyone and be congratulated on a fake marriage.

Eventually, we got to my parents and my mom looked at us like she was proud, the fake gleam in her eye seeming almost predatory. They both hugged me, and when I wrapped my arms tensely around my dad, he whispered, “Read the contract.”

Sebastian heard it and he shook his head at me after they walked away. My purse was stored in the coat closet, and I bit my lip.

“You know they’re saying that to manipulate you.”

“But there could be a clause in there I don’t know about. If something involves me, I need to know about it.”

Sebastian eyes narrowed. “So you can change your mind?”

“No,” I replied. “I’m not changing my mind. I just . . .”

“Just go look at it,” Sebastian said, his voice tense. “But I’m asking you not to go back on this.”

“I’m not,” I told him honestly. “But I need to know the consequences of what we’re about to do.”

That didn’t seem to help anything. Sebastian looked at me like he was seeing someone else, and then walked away. I let out a long sigh, and went to the coat closet to quietly open the document.

Sebastian was right about one thing: it was boring and full of legal jargon, but I was used to that from my book contracts. I was able to see through most of it, but something at the end caught my eye.

I was right. There was something pertaining to me.

They weren’t going to pay out my inheritance if I refused to participate in any future contracts. They said it was referenced in the original, which I had on my phone. I checked it over, seeing it wasn’t there, but they had attached a revised edition to what they gave me today, one that I knew I hadn’t originally signed.

It was a bait and switch.

I groaned. They didn’t think I would catch it, but I had. And to fight it, I would have to hire the best lawyers and make a public enemy of myself for even trying to go against it. Sebastian would lose his job, and I would lose a lot of the money I had gotten from my TV show deal.

In this, they had won.

Or at least they thought they had.

I took a deep breath, trying to rid myself of the urge to scream and cry at the unfairness of the situation, but my fists stayed clenched. I tightened my jaw to keep words from spilling out.

I did all of this so I could live comfortably for a while and focus on writing. I did this so I could have the money I had been promised for years.

And now that was gone.

These days, it wasn't even about the money. I understood enough about life to know I could make it. I had money saved, enough to buy a tiny house if I needed to. This wasn't the end of the world for the current me, but if this had been in the beginning of all of this? Before I had even found my place in the world? I didn't know what I would do.

The coat closet attendant walking in with coats made me stuff the contract into my purse and walk into the hallway. I grit my teeth to keep from hurling obscenities into the air. People would definitely take note if I lost it.

I had gone the full five years believing my family wouldn't cheat me out of what they promised. In hindsight, I should have known better.

"Judging by your expression, you saw the contract." The all-too-familiar voice sent a chill up my spine. I turned and saw my mother.

"Was this your idea?" I asked angrily.

"No, all Martin," she replied, shrugging. "But I know you. You'll do what you need to. It looks like you already have."

"What do you mean?"

"That revision happened a year ago. I slid it in the back of your new moving contract. I know you read it."

I hadn't, actually. At that point, I didn't care to.

"I know you knew Sebastian was done with you at that point," she said, "and the direction you went? Amazing. I couldn't have done it better myself."

"What are you talking about?"

She smirked in my direction. "When was the last time you used a condom?"

Not this again.

"I have an IUD, mom."

"Of course you do," she said, rolling her eyes. "Even though they don't give those out to women who've never had a child."

I shook my head incredulously. That was an old myth that had never been true.

“You’ve kept up the weight gain, and I bet you’ve already missed your period. I guess I should say congratulations.”

“Don’t,” I hissed.

“You can drop the act, honey. He’s not around.”

“Mom, stop.”

“Lily,” she said, “for once I am proud of you. Don’t deny what I know you did.”

My jaw clenched. I hated that she was proud of me. I hated that she thought I was being so manipulative.

“I’d put you at twelve or so weeks,” she said, eying my stomach. “Can’t wait to meet my grandbaby. See you at the speech.”

She walked away, head held high as if she hadn’t just broken her daughter’s heart. She’d taken everything I had done and twisted it into something it never was. I stared, trying not to cry, but my eyes grew wet.

How could she?

“Are you kidding me?” a deep voice said from behind me.

I turned. Sebastian was in the corner. His cheeks were red and his brows were pulled low onto his forehead. His fists were clenched and his jaw tight. I’d seen each of these signs of anger individually, but never all at once.

And he was looking at me.

My heart sank.

“How long have you been there?” I asked, my entire body trembling.

“Long enough.”

“Sebastian,” I said, “it wasn’t what it sounded like.”

“Really? Because it sounded like you lied about your birth control to trap me, and I fell for it like a fool.”

“I didn’t do that.”

“No,” he said. “You acted so nervous when I brought up certain things. *The Fair Originals*? The contract? Why did you need to read it? Why did you even take it from my father’s office?”

“Because there’s something in it about me. They’re keeping the inheritance if I don’t sign another!”

“And you got that information a year ago, the very day you changed how you acted around me. I’m not a betting man, but I’d bet a lot of money that had something to do with it.”

“That’s not what happened,” I insisted.

“I don’t think I believe you.”

“Sebastian, this is crazy!”

“Yes, it is. All of it is. This whole marriage from day one has been insane, but you knew I was done when we moved to Nashville. You knew you weren’t getting your end of the deal. Why not make me fall in love with you to keep you around? You never proved you had an IUD, Lily.”

I reached for my purse, but I left it in the coat closet after I read the contract. I had the card that I’d gotten at the doctor when I got my IUD. I’d stuffed it in my wallet forever ago. That would prove it.

But if I stepped away, I was worried he’d leave.

“I’m . . . I’m not pregnant,” I tried to say.

He shook his head. “I don’t want to hear any more about this. If you are really pregnant then I will stay for the sake of the child, but if you aren’t, you are never hearing from me again.”

Sebastian went to walk away, but I grabbed his arm. “Hang on. Let me *explain*.”

He paused, and I could cry from relief. Thank God. If he was willing to listen, then maybe I could talk my way out of this.

“I—” I began but was interrupted.

“Time for your speech!” Heather came around the corner, looking at us expectantly.

I dug my fingertips into the palms of my hands as I clenched my fists. Of all people to interrupt, why did it have to be her?

“Let’s get this over with,” Sebastian muttered.

“Can we have five minutes?” I asked Heather.

“Sorry,” she said, shrugging. She looked almost pleased with herself. “Martin and Allen are waiting. It’s time.”

Slowly, Sebastian pulled out of my grip, and I wondered if it would be the last time.

Heather smirked at me. “Trouble in paradise?”

“Fuck you,” I grumbled, following Sebastian.

The moment I saw him ascending the steps to the stage, words tried clawing their way out of my throat. I wanted to say that I wasn’t what my

mother said. I wanted to grab my purse and show him the card for my IUD. I wanted to prove who I was.

But I ran out of time.

I could have forced him to stop. I could have delayed the speech and made my point, but he was already on stage, and the tense line of his shoulders made me wonder if I could even talk my way out of this, or if my mother had managed to take one last person from me.

Instead of yelling my innocence, I did the cowardly thing and followed him to the stage.

People cheered, and Martin started on his bullshit of a speech, relaying the farce of our relationship. In the back of mind, I knew I was supposed to be smiling. I was supposed to be the perfect daughter, the perfect wife.

But I couldn't. Not this time.

All I wanted was out.

I couldn't wait to get back to Nashville. Even if I didn't have our house anymore, I would stay with Amy.

I could watch as our home was sold, and hope that a new family—one without the lies of mine—could take it over.

The thought broke my heart, but I needed out of here. I wondered how fast I could run once this speech was over.

"Now," Martin said, turning to me, "I hear we have a very special announcement to make." Horror ran through my veins. "I've just been informed that our very own Lily is *pregnant*! I look forward to seeing what this bundle of joy does for your future together."

Sebastian winced, and I looked up at Martin, appalled. People clapped. Cameras flashed. I saw my mother whooping in the crowd.

Something in me snapped.

"And with that—" he started, but I found the energy to put on a demure smile and grab Martin's arm.

"Actually, Martin," I said sweetly, "I'd like to say a few words."

"You're not supposed to speak," he said lowly as he covered the microphone with the palm of his hand.

"But I want to announce the gender!" I said it loud enough for people to hear, and they all hollered for him to let me speak.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Sebastian looking at me, betrayal in his gaze.

But I kept my attention on Martin, who watched me keenly.

"What are you planning?"

"I can finally drop the act now that I've got Sebastian locked down," I muttered. "I'm on your side."

Martin looked shocked but pleased. He finally released the microphone. I took it, fury still coursing through my body. I faced the crowd before I could chicken out.

In the back of the room, I saw Jessie, who looked horrified.

I took a deep breath. No more letting my family control me. No more letting her down.

No more letting *myself* down.

"Wow," I said, scanning the crowd, "there are so many of you. God, is that TMZ out there?"

"We love your Instagram!" the reporter called.

"I cannot believe *I'm* so famous," I said, and I walked to the front of the stage. "I am so grateful to each and every one of you for coming tonight, and I am so happy to share some . . . incredibly huge news."

A rustle of excitement went through the crowd.

Perfect.

Rohanda did something like this once. It was one of the greatest scenes I'd ever written, and now, it was my turn to live it.

"I'd love to tell you the gender of my baby."

"Yes, girl!" the TMZ reporter called. "Do it! We're recording!"

"This is on video?" I asked, feigning honor. "Thank you. I want to remember this *forever*."

"Yes!" the reporter called.

"Anyway, as I was saying, the baby . . ." I paused for dramatic effect, "doesn't exist."

Silence.

"You see, none of this is actually real. More than five years ago, I was proposed to. I was told I was marrying the son of the business owner trying to buy us out, thus making it look like Miller Industries wasn't creating a monopoly. I wish I could tell you my Instagram was real, but that was contracted too. My hair? My words? My looks? All written into a contract, and you know what? It's going on my social media page right after this."

Jessie's jaw dropped, but for once, she looked proud. God, this felt good. I should have done this a long time ago.

"The contract ends today," I said into the microphone. "I've spent the last five years of my life writing the greatest autobiography"—a lie—"about the toxic dynamic of this family, of the horrible things Martin expects of his employees, and the suffering all of us caught in Martin and Allen's web have endured. I'll gladly sell it to the highest bidder."

Martin ripped the microphone out of my hand, pushing me away from the stage. I stumbled on my heels, but someone caught me by the arm.

"You stupid whore!" he yelled at me, his face turning beet red.

I knew what he was capable of. I knew he was coming after *me*.

That was when the reality of what I'd just done set in.

I needed to leave, and fast.

I didn't even thank whoever caught me. I darted from the stage and through the back, only stopping to rip off my heels as I ran outside.

When the fresh air hit me, the weight of what I'd done pressed down on me.

Oh God, everyone knew. This was going to blow up. If it didn't go viral, I'd be shocked.

I'd left my purse and everything inside the venue, but I knew I couldn't go back in there. If I did, I'd be cornered, or kicked out.

"Lily!" I heard a voice call, and I turned to see Jessie running out of the venue. In her hands, she had my purse. "Holy *shit*. I'm so sorry for ever doubting you. I can't believe you just did that!"

"I—it wasn't planned," I said, "but when they tried to force me to do this all again with a pregnancy of all things, I couldn't let them."

"You did the right thing."

"I'm gonna throw up," I muttered, and Jessie pushed me to the bushes. She rubbed my back as I emptied the contents of my stomach.

"You're a badass," she said. "No one saw that coming. You were amazing up there."

"He hates me," I said, rubbing my mouth.

"Who? Martin? Fuck him. He's always hated you."

"Sebastian."

"I thought you were getting along."

"My mom got to him first."

“I don’t know if he . . .” She trailed off, but then shook her head. “We can talk about this later. We need to get out of here.”

She slowly helped me up as the door to the venue was forced open. I jumped. When I turned, I expected to see either my mother or TMZ coming after me.

But it was Sebastian.

I wondered if Jessie would tell him off, or if he would tell me off for blabbing to everyone about everything. I didn’t know which would be worse.

But I didn’t get to find out because I threw up again. When I finally righted myself, something cold was being pressed into my hand.

I looked down and saw ginger ale, and Sebastian’s hand attached to it.

“We should go,” Jessie said. “The minute they figure out where you are, it’s going to be a shit show, and . . . you probably need your hand looked at.”

“My hand’s fine,” I muttered, but then I realized Jessie wasn’t looking at me.

She was looking at Sebastian, who had a red, puffy hand with split knuckles. I opened my mouth to ask what the hell happened, but I instead fought back a wave of nausea.

“Did you enjoy it?” Jessie asked.

“Immensely,” Sebastian replied.

“What?” I asked, finally getting control of my stomach. “What happened to your hand? What the fuck is going on? Why did you bring me a ginger ale?”

“I figured the stress would get to you after what you did,” Sebastian said, smiling softly at me. I only stared. Didn’t he hate me now?

“That’s very cute, Sebastian, but the police are definitely being called on you right now.”

He nearly growled. “I’m aware.”

“What the ever-loving fuck happened?” I repeated, looking between the two of them.

“Sebastian punched Martin right after you ran off,” Jessie informed me.

“What?” I yelled.

The door opened again, and Jessie grabbed me, pulling me away from the impending explosion of people. As we got into the rental car, I saw people swarm out, and photos were taken of the vehicle as we drove away.

Sebastian ended up in the back seat with me as Jessie sped away. I groaned and opened the ginger ale.

"That was *so* stupid," I moaned after I took a sip.

"Hell no," Jessie said. "That was badass. Do you know how many times I wanted to tell the public about what they were doing to you? If I knew it wouldn't blow up your life, I would have done it in a heartbeat."

I sighed and leaned my head against the headrest. Sebastian moved a stray hair off of my face.

"Why are you here?" I asked him. "You were mad."

"I was wrong," he said. "I saw you nervous at the party because of that contract and was thinking you'd back out, and then I heard your mother congratulate you and tell you to drop the act because you were pregnant and I . . . I thought it was real."

"Seriously?" Jessie asked.

"I know," he said to Jessie, but his eyes were on me. "I wasn't in my right state of mind."

"You've got to have a better excuse than that to believe Barbara Roberts of all people."

"A thinly veiled threat from my father to ruin my career would be a good one," he muttered.

The instinct to run gave way to the desire to attack. "I'll kill him."

"You know what?" Jessie said. "You should have punched him twice."

"Once was enough for me," he replied, his voice still low.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"No, *I'm* sorry," he said. "I'm sorry I ever entertained the idea. I'm sorry I treated you like everyone else has. I'm sorry you had to be the one to do what you did on that stage. Telling everyone was the right thing to do."

And that was my breaking point. The raw, unfiltered pain of the night hit me full force, and I broke down. I was enraged at my mother, so hurt that Sebastian had believed her, and furious at Martin for trying to get us locked in again.

Sebastian held me as I cried, and I leaned into his warmth, unable to be alone. I heard him tell Jessie to go to our hotel, which had what little

luggage we'd brought.

I cried until we pulled in. My ugly sobs had probably ruined my makeup and I couldn't begin to care.

Five alerts went off on Jessie's phone.

"Sorry," she said, silencing it. "I have an alert on you on Google."

"They've started reporting," Sebastian said, his grip on me tightening.

"There's no way either of you are the villain here," Jessie said, turning to us.

"They'll find a way," I muttered. "I saw how long the reporters stayed there. I bet my mother spun some horrible story about how I was losing my mind or something."

"Post the contract," Sebastian said. "Just like you said."

"What?"

"On your social media. Just post a screenshot of the contract. That's enough evidence that you're not lying. It's on the company's letterhead."

"Sebastian, you do know that if I do this, I'm ruining your father's company."

"I don't care," he said. "Let it burn. I'm pretty sure I was fired when I punched him in the face."

"It's too bad I didn't stay for the aftermath," Jessie mused. "I was too busy running to get Lily's purse."

"It'll be on the news," he muttered.

I sighed. Remembering Sebastian had punched his father also reminded me we needed to get his hand looked at. Then I remembered I'd told people I had an autobiography that I could release at any time.

"Oh God," I said. "I need to somehow write an entire autobiography."

"You don't have one?" Jessie asked.

"No."

"But I thought that was what you were writing," Sebastian said. "You never told me what it was, so I figured you told a white lie about writing dark fantasy so I wouldn't stop you."

"No," I told them both. "I do write dark fantasy. I *like* swords, dragons, and murder. I don't write shitty autobiographies on how my parents fucked me up. I put them into other worlds, not this one. Ugh, I have so much to *do*."

“We’ll figure it out,” Sebastian said. “But you need to get out of those clothes and into something more comfortable.”

“And maybe shower,” Jessie added.

“Then you’ll go get your hand looked at?” I asked.

Sebastian sighed and nodded. I looked at him, completely unable to reconcile that he’d hit his father over shoving me, that he came after me, despite what he thought I’d done.

I put my hand on his wrist, below where things were red and swelling. “Thank you,” I said.

“It was no problem. The moment he touched you I knew I wouldn’t let him get away with it.”

“You didn’t have to stick up for me,” I said quietly.

“Yes, I did. You’re my wife.”

“I don’t have to be anymore.”

“I’m not letting you go now,” he said, smiling. “I was stupid to ever consider it. I know who you are, Lily. Every crack in your old persona was a wakeup call for me, illuminating the real you and not the person you had to be.”

My jaw dropped at the beauty of his words.

“Sorry if that was cheesy. I’m not a writer like you, but I’ve felt it for a while. I was going to say this to you at a more romantic time, but this is as good as any.”

“Wow,” Jessie interrupted. “Yeah, I see it now.”

“See what?” Sebastian asked. I was still processing his words.

“You two,” she said. “I didn’t know what I believed when you told me you two were getting along, but this? This is more lovey-dovey than I am with my boyfriend, and that’s saying something. I think Lily’s in a coma.”

“It’s not every day that I get knocked speechless by my husband,” I said, my cheeks heating.

“You’re blushing under the makeup, aren’t you?” Sebastian asked. “I’ve noticed you get a certain expression whenever you get embarrassed.”

“There’s too much lovey-dovey stuff happening in the back seat right now,” Jessie said. “You guys should go and get cleaned up. Then you can resume talking about how much you love each other.”

“She’s right,” Sebastian said. “You need a shower.”

“And you need a doctor. Let’s go in.”

Sebastian grabbed my hand and led me up to our room. As I showered and got clean, I waited for the regret to hit me about what I'd done.

It never did.

Photo: a screenshot of a contract detailing Sebastian and Lily's marriage agreement. There is no caption.

SebandLily4ever: THIS HAS TO BE A JOKE! I'M CRYING, SAY SIKE RIGHT NOW!!!11

ConcernedReader: I FUCKING KNEW IT.

Fthepatriarchy: What the absolute fuck? A contract? She was TRAPPED? I hereby call for a complete and total BUYING BAN on all Miller Industries devices. This is disgusting and ABHORENT!

TwoLives: I always thought something was up. I'm so sorry. I can't wait to hear all the dirty details.

SummerBabe: Actually, I hope you get to live your life. These comments are gross…

Chapter Twenty

I got to see the aftermath of it all the next day.

My phone blew up with so many messages that I had to turn it off. I'd forgotten how many modeling contacts I still had in my phone, and all of them wanted to know what went down from my perspective.

Some even reached out to hit on me.

Sebastian's hand was patched up, and he was already working with a lawyer to ensure his father wouldn't sue, and to see if we had any legal foothold to get the inheritance I was promised.

I was in a near coma at the hotel, both shocked and appalled at what I'd done. I was alone, considering Jessie had job interviews and Sebastian had to work on not getting arrested, and I didn't mind it, but I felt like I was missing something. Or maybe someone.

That was when I heard a loud knock at my door. Sebastian wasn't supposed to be here, and I'd told the front desk not to let anyone up here under any circumstances. However, when I looked through the peephole, I saw someone I actually wanted to see.

"Amy?" I said, throwing the door open.

"When you said you were ending the contract, I didn't think you would do it by telling everyone everything. I'm impressed."

"How did you find me?"

"We share locations, remember?" she said, and I recalled her wanting to share hers when she was dealing with family drama and wanted me to know where she was. I gave her mine to be polite. "I was able to ping you from Nashville."

My eyes grew wet. "You didn't have to come. That had to be expensive to get out here."

She shrugged. "I had airline miles, plus the flight here was overnight, so it wasn't too bad. My friend blew up her life and even I heard about it. Of course I was coming. I even snuck by the front desk guy who was making sure no one came up here. I've knocked on twenty doors trying to find you."

I hugged her so tightly she made a noise of surprise. "Thank you," I said. "I needed someone here."

I pulled her into the hotel room, which was a mess ever since we'd gotten back. "Where's Sebastian?" she asked.

"Working with a lawyer about him assaulting Martin."

"I saw the video of that. It was impressive," she said. "Have you seen any of the footage from last night?"

"I don't think I can stomach it. Living it was enough."

"Understandable. Did you get the inheritance at least?"

I shook my head. "They did a bait and switch on me. They changed the contract when we moved and added a clause that if I don't participate in any more contracts, I don't get it."

"Is that legal?"

"Sebastian is trying to figure that out," I said. "As for me, I've been sitting here realizing all I did last night."

"I bet you're ready to get home then."

"The house isn't even in my name. It's in my dad's."

"Why?"

"He insisted he buy it when we did this."

"And you can't get it from him?"

"Knowing my father? He's already selling it out of revenge."

"They can't move that fast. Maybe you can work with a realtor and buy it."

"Sebastian doesn't have a job after last night. I'm sure someone will hire him, but we can't get a mortgage."

"It's a shame you can't steal it like I did mine. Any contracts stating you get the house when you split?"

"No," I said, but an idea flashed through my mind, "but there might be something I can do. Do you have a car?"

"No, but I have the Uber app."

Two hours later, I was wearing cheap Target sunglasses in the lobby of my dad's office. It was a gamble whether or not he'd be in, but when I told the receptionist who I was, she immediately stood up and brought me right to his office.

"He was expecting you," she said.

"Great. All good conversations start with that."

"I think it was amazing what you did," she said, leaning over the desk toward me. "We all know they do shady things, so hearing someone

call them out on it for once was nice."

"How mad is he?"

"Pretty mad. Good luck with . . . whatever you're doing."

I nodded and opened the door.

When my dad looked up at me, he pinned me with the most disappointed stare I'd ever gotten in my life.

My stomach rolled, but I met his eyes.

"Lily," he said. "After your stunt last night, I'm surprised you're even showing your face."

I took my sunglasses off and returned the stare. "Are you? I was told I was expected."

"What do you want?"

"You have the deed to my house."

He laughed. "And you expect me to let you have it after what you've done? I should sell it to investors and have it ripped apart."

I fought back a wince. I knew he was going to go for the punch. He was mad, and I'd only ever seen him do this to intimidate business partners Martin sent him.

He used to do it to Martin too, once upon a time.

But I wouldn't let him intimidate me. I couldn't. Not now.

"You do realize," I said, "that I could easily burn down this company with the dirt I've accumulated? Sebastian is on my side. Whatever Martin told him or made him do, I can tell *everyone*."

"I doubt you can," he said. "You've spent the last five years playing housewife. You have no skills."

"Don't I? I blasted a hole through the lie you and Martin made me tell just because you pissed me off. I now have the general public begging me for answers, and I have information you don't want getting out."

"It's a bold move to blackmail your father."

"It was a bold move to buy a house only to use it as a trading token," I said, glaring. "I have one thing you want, dad: my silence. So give me the house for it."

My father glared at me. "You would have made a fantastic businesswoman, Lily. I put you in the wrong field."

"Don't insult me," I said.

My father slowly opened a desk drawer and pulled out a green piece of paper. It was the deed to the house, already signed to transfer it to my

name.

"If I give you this," he said, "then your social media accounts must be gone by sundown. You will not speak a word of anything else. Do you understand?"

"I do," I said.

"Good. Do not try and get out of it, Lily. There are recorders in this office."

I didn't exactly care. I'd said all I needed to already.

I'd written five books on it, after all.

I took the paper before he could change his mind.

"I find it funny," I said, looking at the signature on the back, ready for me to transfer it to my name, "that you had this ready to go."

"You've always been smarter than your mother gave you credit for. I knew you'd want the house, especially since you have nothing else. Who knew the house I bought to ensure Sebastian wouldn't ruin my company would come in handy?"

"And now we're done," I said. "It's just you and Martin now. Have fun with that."

"Are you really done, Lily? You'll always be connected to us."

"No, I won't. I'm done, and so is he."

"Never trust a Miller. They'll betray you."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have been bought out by one." I glared up at him. "I trust Sebastian. Maybe spend this time thinking about who you trust. Goodbye, dad."

"That's all I get? You're not even saying goodbye to your mother, Lily. After everything we did for you, we deserve a proper goodbye at least."

"You have millions you stole from me," I said. "That's enough."

"You could have had more."

"No, *you* could have. Goodbye, dad." I went for the door.

"Lily! Don't you walk away—" I slammed the door behind me before he could finish his sentence.

I didn't care what he had to say anymore. I had all I needed.

When I got to Amy who was waiting by the road, I showed her my prize.

"Fuck yeah!" she said. "Now that's how you steal a house."

"I didn't steal it, I blackmailed for it."

She shrugged. “Same thing. How about we go to the hotel and order some ice cream for our troubles?”

“Now you’re talking my language.”

We Ubered back to the hotel and I hid my face behind the sunglasses to make sure no one saw me. When we entered what I thought would be a quiet room, I heard Sebastian’s voice.

“What do you mean she’s not with you?” he was saying. “She didn’t tell me she was leaving, and you’re the only one she knows here, Jessie—” He froze for a second when he saw me, then I saw his shoulders sag with relief. “She’s back. I’ll call you later.”

“In hindsight,” Amy said, looking sheepish, “maybe I should have told you to leave a note.”

“Lily,” Sebastian said. “Where the hell were you? When I got back and you weren’t here I was worried something happened to you!”

“Sorry,” I said, “I thought you’d be gone longer.”

He sighed. “Amy? You’re here too?”

“Of course,” she said. “I can’t let my best friend destroy two companies without me.”

“I don’t think they’re destroyed,” he replied flatly. “They’re already releasing PR statements.”

“Let them,” I said. “I couldn’t care less.”

“Why? By the time you release what they’ve done, they’ll have talked their way out of it.”

“I’m not releasing anything.” I set the deed down in front of him. “I got what I needed.”

He looked at it, and then at me. “Is this for the house?”

“It’s about half of what I was owed,” I said. “But we’d only have to pay taxes and utilities on it instead of having to buy it with a mortgage. It’s enough for me.”

“How did you get this?” he asked.

“I went to my dad’s office and once again threatened to expose him if he didn’t give it to me.”

“Like a badass,” Amy added.

“The only catch is that I can’t release anything.”

“I . . . Lily, you shouldn’t have had to do this to get our house. I would have bought it for you.”

“I doubt my dad would have sold it to you, considering what I just did. Besides, you don’t have a job. We wouldn’t be able to get a mortgage.”

“Lily, I have enough to live off of *and* buy the house.”

I blushed. “Really?”

“Yes,” he said. “It was always my plan to buy it for you.”

“Well, I guess I blackmailed my dad for nothing.”

“Not for nothing.” Amy said. “He had it coming. I bet it felt good.”

“It did,” I admitted proudly.

“Well, you might have done the right thing,” he said. “Allen loves to hold a grudge. I was planning on calling him next, but I doubt he would want to talk to me.”

“Now you don’t have to,” I said.

“I hate that you had to give up telling your story, though.”

I shook my head. “I don’t. This is enough.”

“And you’re sure you’re okay with silence?”

I nodded. “I am. I don’t need to write an autobiography. I just want this.”

“Okay,” he said. “As long as this is what you want. To be honest, I’m glad we can go back to our home.”

“Me too.”

“You’ll be happy to know Martin isn’t going to sue. Considering we’re still married, and he pushed you, it can be seen as me protecting you. He’s too busy trying to save face now anyway. His lawyer said he won’t press charges.”

“So . . . we can go home?” I asked hopefully.

“Yes.”

“And we’re free?”

“Yes,” he said, a relieved smile on his face. “We are.”

Lily Miller SHOCKS when she reveals that she was FORCED to marry Sebastian Miller.

By Monty Milton with TMZ

What was supposed to be a run-of-the-mill anniversary party was actually a drama magnet when Martin Miller announced his daughter-in-law’s pregnancy.

For those who don’t know, Lily Miller was a modeling legend. She was on the scene her whole life and seemingly stepped away from it all when she married who she called the love of her life.

Turns out, it was a LIE.

Lily not only was in a contract to be married, but was also NOT PREGNANT. Many of her fans are SHOCKED by this news. Some claim they knew about it all along, but how could they? She looked so happy in photos!

But Sebastian also had a trick up his sleeve. Martin appeared to shove Lily and yell at her. Right after the former model escaped, Sebastian PUNCHED his own father!

What is next for this shocking couple? Are they really a couple? Is Lily Miller pregnant? TMZ hears from a source that's close to the couple, who says they've always been in love, and they might be faking this contract for the views . . .

Chapter Twenty-One

I clutched the book tightly in my hands, waiting for Sebastian to get out of the shower.

In the two months since our contract ended, a lot had changed. Sebastian found a new job working for a startup. He was able to negotiate decent pay and brought half the staff from his old office to the new job. He seemed so much happier doing work for someone other than his father.

His new company's mission was to provide therapy for teenagers who were struggling, so it meant a lot to him too.

He settled in quickly and was able to get closer to working a regular eight-hour day. He was much happier with the amount of hours he worked.

But for once, I was the busy one.

I had to get a *lot* of editing done to release my book on time. My inability to choose the ended dug into a lot of the time I would have had for final edits. Now I had to rush in order to have it ready by the release date. Sebastian was understanding, though he didn't know exactly how big this was.

A month ago, the title for the book had been announced, and people lost it, piecing together theories and ideas of what the book would be about.

Sebastian included.

When he'd talked about my book for hours, it was hard not to tell him it was mine, but I was waiting for the first proof to come in so I could show him exactly what I'd been up to.

I'd thought about this time and time again. I was terrified about Sebastian's reaction, but I knew I needed to come clean about who I was.

And once I had the first proof of my new book in my hands, I could do it.

The cover was glorious with swirling font and deep, rich, emerald tones. Rohanda and Jamisson faced each other, preparing for a kiss. The series had ended like I planned, with both of them together, and I wanted Sebastian to be the first to see it.

He was in the shower when I opened the package containing my book. I chewed on my lip, stomach rolling as I knew I needed to tell him before I chickened out.

When Sebastian walked into the living room, I abruptly stood. My heart raced as I saw him with wet hair and only sweatpants on, but I knew I couldn't let my husband's attractiveness distract me from telling him the truth.

"Hey," I said, my voice shaky. I hid the book behind my back. My lunch wasn't sitting well in my stomach, but I knew it was all my anxiety. The last thing I needed was to tell him and then immediately run to throw up.

"Hey," he said, "what's wrong?"

"Remember when I said I would give you a hint about my books?"

"Yes, of course. Am I finally getting that hint?"

"It's less of a hint and more of a reveal."

He looked curious, and I couldn't take it anymore. I brought it out and offered it to him.

Sebastian gave me one last curious stare before his eyes trailed down to the book, and they widened. "Wait, is this the last book of *The Fair Originals* series?"

I nodded.

"How did you find this?" he asked, taking it from me. He gently creeped his hands over the cover like it was a treasure. "It's not out for another six months."

"It's a proof. From the publisher."

"Do you share the same publisher? Wait, do you *know* J.R.?"

"In a way," I said. "Turn to the dedication."

"J.R. Solace doesn't do dedications."

"They did this time."

He raised his eyebrows as he opened the book, flipping through to get to the right page.

I knew it by heart after staring at it for hours, wondering if it was right.

Here's your happy ending, Sebastian. I'm glad we also got ours.

I saw him read it, blink, and then read over it again. He eventually looked at me, with wide eyes.

"No way," he said.

I nodded.

"I did say I read them a hundred times," I said, voice shaky. "Surprise?"

“This is the book you wrote? The one you were so secretive about?”

I nodded again.

“You’re J.R. Solace.”

I cleared my throat. “I am.”

He only stared, and my heart raced.

“I started it on the honeymoon,” I explained, beginning to pace around the living room, “after Heather called I was angry and needed an outlet, and this was it. Rohanda’s betrothed was based off of you and I am so *sorry* I did that because I know you’re going to be mad at me and possibly hate me for a while because I did this—”

“Hang on, I’m still processing. You’re the actual writer of one of the most popular fantasy series? You? Lily Miller, you wrote this?”

“Yes.”

“And I was based on . . .” Realization hit him. “I was based on her betrothed husband.”

“I’m sorry,” I apologized again. “He was a terrible, abusive character and I took it too far because I was hurt with how I felt I was being treated by you. I know now you’re not that person and I regret ever making you into them.”

He was silent for a long moment. “So . . . if her betrothed is based on me, who was Jamisson based on?”

“Did you not hear me?”

“I did.”

“Don’t you hate me?”

“I don’t know what to feel, Lily. This is way bigger than I ever thought your writing would be.”

“Exactly. Once I knew you’d read it, I was afraid of telling you. I knew you’d figure out who I based on you. You have a right to be hurt and angry about it. I should have never—”

“Lily,” he grabbed my hands and stopped my pacing. “Calm down. I’m not mad.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s a book. Back then, I was terrible to you, and you were angry. This was your outlet, and it makes sense how you saw me.”

“But your dad used to hit you, and Rohanda’s betrothed used to hit her.”

“That was hard for me to read, but this isn’t *me*. We didn’t even know each other then. I never once connected with the character, and I laughed when he was killed off. I always connected with Jamisson, remember?”

“Right, but he wasn’t based on you. He was the knight that her family hired to keep her in line.”

As I said the words, it hit me.

In the back of my mind, when I killed off Rohanda’s asshole betrothed, I thought it symbolized Sebastian leaving my life. To me, it symbolized the future, one I always hoped to have.

Jamisson was only ever a fantasy, what I hoped Sebastian could be for me. And in the end, that’s exactly who he ended up being.

“You were Jamisson,” I said softly.

“What?”

“I based Jamisson off of you.”

Sebastian’s eyebrows knitted. “But he was introduced in book two, which is way before we moved here and started getting along.”

“I know. Jamisson was . . . what I always hoped you’d be. Deep down, I think I hoped you felt the same way as me, so then maybe we had something in common.”

“And we did.”

I stared at him, unable to believe what I’d just realized.

“This is . . . actually pretty romantic,” he said.

“Oh my God,” I said, relief hitting me. “I thought you would be so angry when I told you who I was.”

“Because you took a real, terrible thing I did and based a character off of it? Honestly, Lily, you were nineteen and angry. It’s not that bad. I figured when you said you wrote that there was something unflattering about me in there. God, at least I’m not like Rohanda’s father. He was a piece of work.”

“He turned out to be a mixture of both my parents using only their worst features.”

“I was glad he got killed off in book two.”

“You and half the fandom.”

“Wait, is this why you didn’t care about not being able to release the autobiography?” he asked. “If *The Fair Originals* is your book, then almost everyone has heard your story. Well, a dark fantasy version of it anyway.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s exactly why. I’d worked through my emotions this way. All I wanted when we were done with the contract was to get out, and we did.”

“This is incredible,” he said. “Who all knows?”

“Just you.”

“Thank you for telling me,” he said, “but now I’m stuck between being incredibly intimidated that my wife is one of the greatest writers of this decade and wanting to go devour this book.”

“You should read it,” I said. “I think you’ll like how it ends.”

“I’m going to read this in one sitting. Depending on how emotionally devastating this is, I might call out of work tomorrow.”

As I watched him go to the couch, the final weight lifted off my shoulders. Now that Sebastian knew who I was, I was truly free.

And I had no regrets.

What happened to Lily Miller?
By Elana Marsh

Everyone wants to know. Lily was an Instagram model for the ages. She had the perfect shots, the perfect looks, and the perfect marriage.

Until she announced it was all fake.

Her father-in-law had announced a pregnancy, only for Lily to rebuke it in the shocker of the decade. She said she would write a breakthrough exposé, which would detail everything she went through, but it’s been two months, and she hasn’t reappeared.

Her social media was removed after her contract was posted for less than twenty-four hours. Many fans saved the image, reposting to all of Miller Industries’ social media pages. Since the accusations made by Mrs. Miller, their stocks have fallen 50% and other employees have spoken out about their policies.

Lily’s mother, Barbara Roberts, tried to denounce her daughter’s accusations by saying she was always a troubled child, one who made up stories to get attention. Most fans, however, seem to be on Lily’s side, wherever she may be.

Lily is rumored to live in Nashville, Tennessee. However, neither she nor Sebastian Miller are listed on any properties in the state. They both seem to have vanished.

So what happened to the business world's darling child? Post your theories in the comments below.

169 Comments

Xxxridimen – she obvs ran off w her lover

Makowskurt – um, that lover better be Sebastian. He punched his dad for her! What a hero!

Kurtiblurty – Nah, I don't condone violence. Guy should have been arrested

Makowskurt – So should the dad then. He pushed Lily…

Fidgiemen – I hope she's okay. If you look at her archived posts, she never looked truly happy.

Makowskurt – Nah, she's just hiding out until the next rich man comes along. I bet she's dating some old guy in his eighties waiting for him to die to she can get all this money.

Geuonit – Ew.

SebandLily4ever – I'VE BEEN CRYING FOR MONTHS! WHERE DID THEY GO? WILL THEY COME BACK?

Epilogue

"What is this?" Amy asked, tears streaming down her face.

For once, it wasn't because of hot chicken. Sebastian laughed from where he was sitting on our couch.

"A romance novel," I replied, smiling.

"Oh my *God*," she said. "This is so good. How did you go from writing a bunch of murder in *The Fair Originals* to this?"

"I got away from my family," I said, feeling at peace.

She was holding my newest novel, which was coming out under another pen name. I hadn't written fantasy in a while, but I planned to go back eventually.

A few months after I told Sebastian, I told Amy too. She immediately read the whole series and was now a super fan, though she did go back to her romantic roots at times.

I'd told Jessie as well, and while she was proud of me, she still lived in LA, which wasn't a place I wanted to visit. We remained friends, but her distance when I'd moved to Nashville wore on me. I was happy we could talk, but I found myself always seeking out Amy when I needed advice.

And true to her word, Amy never judged me. Just like I never judged her when she went through a ton of questionable men. It was a good friendship, one that I leaned on often.

As for Sebastian and me, writing a romance novel was a good example of how our relationship was going.

After we got back from LA, the first thing I did was get on a waiting list for a therapist. Sebastian did too. We both found someone around the same time and began working on our mountain of inherited problems ever since.

Most days it went well. Other days, it was hard.

But we were there for each other the whole time.

I dyed my hair back to its natural brown color and chopped off most of the ends. I'd also gained weight since going off all my restrictive diets. Both of these things made me unrecognizable.

Sebastian had grown a beard and let his hair get much longer since we ended the contract. People didn't recognize him, either.

I knew from social media posts sent to me by Jessie that my parents wanted to know where I was, but we both refused to talk to them. I was waiting for the day they would try to come to the house.

I figured dropping the Miller name made our intentions clear.

And honestly, I was afraid of them finding us. Sebastian knew a lawyer who would file for a restraining order if they ever showed up to the house, but luckily, they hadn't yet.

As far as *The Fair Originals* went, the TV show was set to premiere soon. I hadn't been involved with the production because of my aversion to LA, but I knew the director was doing good work.

As for my book, the fandom was split on who liked the ending and who didn't. Some wanted the dark ending where one of the main characters died. Others were thrilled that it ended happily.

I didn't regret how I ended it. I didn't regret much these days.

"This is going to destroy people," Amy said, pulling me out of my thoughts. She still gripped my book tightly. "I can't wait for it to come out."

"I live for destroying people," I said, laughing. "It's a writer's dream."

"Can I take this home?" she asked. "I need to reread this alone so I can fully sob over it."

"It's yours," I said.

"Yay," she said. "I'm going to go cherish this forever."

Amy darted out the door, clutching the book.

"She must have liked it," I said to Sebastian.

"It is a really good book," he said.

"I can't believe I wrote a whole romance," I said. "I didn't think I had it in me."

"You always could. You just needed *your* happy ending." He kissed my neck gently, and I leaned into him.

I brought my hand up to thread my fingers through his hair. I glimpsed my simple white-gold band, smiling as I remembered both of us getting new rings after our contract ended.

"I love you," I told him. "I really do."

"I love you too," he said, and I felt the jolt in my chest I always did when he said those words. I never thought I'd hear them, and now that I did, I couldn't get enough.

"Let's go to bed," he said, mouth still on my neck.

“It’s seven,” I said, laughing.

“We’ll be busy until nine,” he said, smiling deviously.

“You know, Sebastian Solace, I might take you up on that.”

His gaze brightened at my use of our chosen names, something we both had decided on shortly after our contract ending.

“Well, Lily Solace, I sure hope you do.”

Thank You

To my readers, thank you for giving me a chance. I am so grateful to be able to share my books with the world. I hope you stick with me as I continue to grow and publish.

To Lizzie and Cass, thank you for your constant kind words. When I get lost in my own head, you two are always there to lift me up and remind me of what I can do. This book wouldn’t have been made without you two!

Also, to Kasey, thank you for editing this novel. With your help, this manuscript reached new heights.

And finally, I have to thank my husband for being such a supportive and kind partner. Every hero is inspired by you.

If You Liked This…

Check out Elle’s other novels!

To Make Matters Worse

Violet Moore is not having a good week.

It starts with a fight between her and Charlie Davis – her friend turned enemy, that ends with fruit punch thrown on her. Then, she somehow agrees to be *fake friends* with the same enemy to ensure her best friend’s wedding goes off without a hitch. And last but certainly not least, her apartment collapses, and the only person with an open room is Charlie Davis himself…
Violet isn't sure what's going to be worse, the wedding, or her living situation.

There are few people that are more confusing than Violet Moore.

Charlie has never understood her, but the five-foot three schoolteacher has a sharp tongue and a huge grudge against him. Why? He has no clue. He’s not proud of his immature spats with his former college friend turned bane of his existence, but he can never seem to stop himself – not where she’s concerned. He’s content to get this wedding and their fake friendship over with - so they can go back to their normal fighting lifestyle.

Then he finds her crying and needing a place to stay – changing all of his plans. Feelings he had long since buried rush to the surface, and he finds himself unable to stop thinking about the beautiful but confusing Violet Moore.

They haven’t agreed on anything in six years, but can one wedding, a ruined apartment, and being stuck in one house somehow bring them together?

To Make Matters Worse is a standalone romantic novel featuring two enemies turned roommates. If you like snarky characters, slow burns with great payoff, and steamy romance novels, then this is the book for you!

Failure to Thrive

Riley Emerson is probably the last person anyone would expect to be a nanny. For starters, her life has fallen apart. Her boyfriend just cheated on her. She lives with her mom, and she might have a drinking problem.

But Oliver Brian is desperate. His daughter, Zoe, has refused to go to sleep for anyone else in four years and with his career, Oliver can't always be there for her. Riley is only supposed to watch Zoe for one night, but somehow she gets Zoe to bed on her own. He's so shocked that he offers her a job on the spot.

Riley needs the money, and Oliver needs the time for himself. It’s a match made in Heaven… until feelings get involved.

***Failure to Thrive* is a full length romance novel with the nanny, single father, and friends to lovers trope. This version has three spicy scenes!**

Fakecation

After her last relationship ended terribly, Amelia Rogers has managed to avoid dating for five years. And while she’s fine with it, her mother isn’t. To get out of being set up on her family vacation, Amelia needs to find a date - and fast.

The only person she knows that is is single is her coworker Daniel. He's recently divorced, quiet and isn't a fan of mixing business and personal life. Amelia figures he's not only going to say no, but he's going to report her to

HR when she asks him for this favor. She's desperate though, and he's her only option.

Daniel Anderson is in trouble. His wife left him for a member of his own family, and they want to tell people about their relationship. He doesn't want his past relationship to get any more undeserving attention, so he needs to look over his ex. He isn't sure how to go about it, until Amelia Rogers, his coworker, comes to him with the perfect solution.

They strike a deal. Daniel will go to the beach with Amelia and play the part of her new boyfriend, and in turn, Amelia will pretend to date him in the office to make sure people know that Daniel is over his ex.

It's a perfect plan. Neither of them want love, so it should be easy to play the part without actually falling *in* love...

Right?

FAKECATION is a full length, standalone novel. It features the forced proximity trope, friends to lovers, and only one bed. Follow Daniel and Amelia as they go from coworkers to friends ... to something so much more.

Out of Touch

Piper McMillian is a romantic at heart. She loves everything to do with love and has built an entire writing career out of it. Her books are known for being some of the best romance novels out there - but there's only one problem.

She can't let anyone touch her.

After being raised by a terrible father, her romantic stories couldn't be more different than her real life. Piper wants nothing more than to find someone she feels safe with, and yet no matter how many people she gets set up with - none of them work out.

Theo Murf is a quiet, reserved coffee shop owner. He isn’t looking for love - he's never seen it, and doesn't care for it. He wants to forget his past and make sure his coffee shop runs well, even if he runs himself into the

ground while doing it.
That's when he meets Piper, the beautiful, kind romance author who comes into his shop. She couldn't be more out of his league, and yet ... he can't stop thinking of her.

Both Theo and Piper are about to learn that love is more than being perfect for someone. It's about fate, too.

About the Author

Elle Rivers lives in Tennessee with her husband, son and seven cats. When not writing, she can be found reading, staring at a blank document petting her hoard of cats. She can be found on Twitter and Instagram as Elleswrites and on Tiktok as AuthorElleRivers and ElleRiversAuthor.