



# HEAVY

# *Equipment*

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SKYE WARREN

# HEAVY EQUIPMENT

SKYE WARREN

I've been raised as the good, obedient daughter, but I never expected to be sold to pay my father's debts. Cold. Rough. Merciless. The foreman of the construction crew is going to make me pay every last cent.

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## CHAPTER ONE

*Cherry blossom trees date back to 1912 in the US, when Japan sent the trees in goodwill. The US sent back flowering dogwood trees.*

**T**HE RUMBLE THAT comes from downstairs seems to shake the house, loud voices and crashes that make my heart skip. Little ripples appear in the surface of my soup.

I stand, almost knocking over the small antique tray. I'm still in my strapless bra and panties, ready to get dressed for the gala as soon as I've eaten. The gown is already laid out on the bed, ready to step into—and even though it's uncomfortable and constraining, it's the fastest thing to put on. I step into it and rush into the hallway, working the zipper as I go.

When I hit the stairs, the voices get even louder. I've always been taught to whisper. Sometimes my father would yell, but he'd always close the office door first.

There's a loud bang—like a gunshot. I grasp the railing and rush down the steps. As I round the curved staircase I see my father in his tux.

In front of him is a man in a leather jacket and jeans.

The strange man looks up at me—and instead of looking surprised by my presence, he smiles. The smile makes him look wolf-like, as if he's caught his prey. "There she is now."

"Papa," I say, terrified. "What's going on?"

I half-expect him to tell me to go back upstairs. He never tells me the details of his work. I always played in his office as a child, at least until he'd gently push me out and send me to a nanny. The fact that this new business seems darker, more dangerous, would be all the more reason for him to send me away.

Instead he looks at me, his eyes burning with something I can't recognize. Fury? Defeat? "Come down here, daughter," he says in Cantonese. The old language. He only speaks that way in front of family, but this man isn't family. He isn't even Chinese.

I'm trembling, but there's no thought to question or disobey. He's raised me to be the perfect daughter, and I do everything he asks. I attend every

party at his side, standing in for the wife, my mother who died when I was a child. So it's only natural that I go to him when he calls me.

His skin feels thin and papery when I take his hand. "Papa?"

"Something terrible has happened." His expression is so grave. It scares me.

I squeeze his hands. "What is it? Let me help you."

"Oh, you're going to help," the stranger says in a breezy way. I don't even know this man but already I'm unnerved by how he's acting, as if my father's clear worry is some big joke. As if he's the one in charge. I don't understand what's happening, but I know this is my father's house—and my house by extension. He has no right to stand there looking so commanding and handsome and terrible.

"And you are?" I manage to say coolly.

He doesn't answer right away, instead giving me a long slow look from my head to my toes. I become painfully aware that I didn't have time to tape my backless gown into place, that it's showing more of the sides of my breasts than I would have allowed. The fact that I'm not wearing shoes somehow makes it more intimate, as if he's taking me to bed instead of standing, uninvited, in the foyer.

"The name's Asher Cook, beautiful."

I manage not to flinch at the word, but it's a close thing. The word doesn't sound like a compliment coming from that hard face. It sounds like a curse. No man has dared to look at me like he does or speak to me like he's doing now.

"June Li," I reply, with the emphasis on my last name.

I'm a daughter of distinguished heritage, a member of the powerful Li family—even if that's really only my father and myself. Sometimes it's lonely, especially when he has to work so much. But I have always consoled myself knowing we came from a long lineage, something to be proud of.

Asher snorts. "I know who you are. Everyone does. We see you floating around the ballrooms like you're some kind of modern day princess, yeah? Entitled to everything."

Outrage feels hot in my chest, but before I can respond, my father pulls my attention. "I need to speak with you. I need to speak with you privately—"

“I don’t think so,” Asher says. “So you can hide her away? No, she stays where I can see her.”

How dare he talk to me that way? How dare he talk to *my father* that way? Except he did, and for some reason, my father isn’t telling him to leave. Why would I need to be hidden away?

A dark, cold suspicion builds in my gut. “Papa, who is this?”

My father closes his eyes, pained. “A bad man. A thief.”

“Oh, that’s rich. Perhaps you’d like to tell your lovely, naïve little daughter who’s been paying for those fancy dresses that show off your pretty little—” He eyes my breasts.

My eyes widen, shocked that he’d be so brazen. The Li family would never accept this insult. Papa would throw this man out of the house. Papa would make sure no one would do business with him.

Except Papa doesn’t seem powerful now. He looks weak. The lines in his face are deeper than before. He looks old. “We’ve had some money trouble. After the shopping mall project tanked.” His voice breaks. “I don’t have a choice.”

My heart thuds painfully. I look over at the strange man, at the shadow of a beard over his jaw, at the unkempt hair, and the glint of challenge in his eyes. “Don’t have a choice about what?”

“Is that anticipation in your voice, Ms. Li?”

“No,” I spit out. “The only thing I anticipate is going to the gala.”

“Cancelled,” he says with fake sadness. “Not the entire event, mind. But your appearance is definitely cancelled. I’m afraid you have other engagements tonight.”

The heat in his eyes makes it clear what he’s talking about. As is the wink he gives me.

I whisper to my father, “Tell me he’s not serious.”

After a painful pause, my father speaks in Cantonese. “It was more than just the shopping mall deal. It was this house and the others. My entire empire was crumbling before my eyes. We needed to sell the construction firm, only no one has any money in this economy.”

“I do,” Asher says with deceptive mildness. As if it’s completely normal for someone with scruffy blonde hair to understand my native language. “And

so you gave me a call, isn't that right?"

"It was supposed to be business," my father cried. "I wanted to make a business arrangement."

"We did," Asher says with a cold smile. "Like you said, no one wants to purchase a construction business in this economy—especially one in the red."

"I'll pay you back," my father says, sounding more desperate than ever. "Every cent."

"You already have. The ink has dried. I'll be extracting every red cent from your pretty daughter. Tell me, is her pussy well broken in? Or will I be the first?"

My father's face turns red with pain and rage. "Why, you dirty—"

"Ah ah." Asher holds up his hand, the skin callused and rough. It's the hand of a man who does physical labor every day. One strengthened not by the treadmill but by working with stone and metal. It's enough to stop my father in his tracks. "Now, how did I know you would make things difficult? But Mr. Li, a businessman always pays his debts."

I'm shaking, still trying to understand what's happening. Or rather, I understand what's happening all too well. I just never thought anything like this could happen. I never thought my father would be struggling for money. And I definitely never believed he could use me in this way.

"I'm sorry," he tells me, his voice haggard.

Shock leaves me cold, and I shiver in the backless gown.

I want to run back up the stairs, to pretend I never heard anything, that I'm still eating my soup. I can't believe this is happening but the painful clench of my heart is all too real.

Asher holds out his hand with a sarcastic, "My lady."

I just stare at him, both fear and fury fighting inside me. "How long am I supposed to stay with you?"

One hour? Two? I don't know how long it even takes for a man to finish with a woman. I've never done any of this. Never slept with a man. Barely even kissed one, at the end of dinner, my date drunk enough to dare a press of his lips. And I accepted it because my father arranged it.

I knew that one day I would marry for my family. I would lose the Li surname I'm so proud of, but it would be in service of my family. That's when



I would give up my virginity—not like this.

“I’m not sure how long,” Asher says thoughtfully. “How much is your pussy worth? A hundred bucks a pop? No, a high-class hooker like you would command much more than that. But even if we value it at a grand a fuck, that will still take quite some time to work off.”

I’ve never heard such crude language in my life. “How dare you—?”

I can’t even finish the question before he grabs me. First he takes my wrist, until I’m backed against the wall. Then his other hand goes to my throat. My gaze swings wildly, searching for my father—but all I can see is the dark, looming presence of the man who has me captive.

“Let’s get one thing straight, beautiful. I dare to say anything I want, to *do* anything I want to this gorgeous body, to *take* anything I want. When I say jump, you jump. When I say bend over, you touch those pretty pink toes. Understand?”

His grip isn’t firm around my throat, but it’s immovable. Even though my hands are gripping his arm, I can’t shake him off. He’s like a tree trunk in front of me, his arm a branch I’m dangling from, the ground a deadly drop below.

Every muscle clenches. I want to fight him.

Except I’ve been trained all my life to be a good daughter.

His voice drops. “I asked if you understood. The correct response is *yes, sir.*”

“Yes, sir,” I whisper, sealing my fate.

He bends, pushing his face against my neck. With my vision clear, I’m shocked to find the foyer empty except for the two of us. My father left me here, knowing I might get hurt. He’s paying his debt with me as if I’m a thing, an extra zero in his bank account instead of his living, breathing daughter. Betrayal turns sharp in my chest, cutting me so I can barely breathe.

Asher’s lips are hot against my skin, and I shiver.

“That’s right,” he murmurs. “You’re going to be doing a lot of that.”

“You don’t scare me,” I say, but the quiver in my voice calls me a liar.

His laugh brushes over my skin, strangely pleasurable despite the mocking sound. “Your heart is racing, beautiful. I can feel it.”

Then he runs his lips over my neck, right where he'd take my pulse—and then I feel my pulse too, as if it's too large to be contained in my body, as if I'm spilling over into him.

He runs his hands over me, from my shoulders to my elbows to my hips. It's like he's measuring me, seeing what he bought. I push against him, but he's as hard and unmovable as a concrete wall, like the kind he'll be able to build with my father's company.

"Go ahead and fight," he murmurs against my temple. "I like it rough."

"I don't," I say, biting out the words.

He pulls back enough to meet my gaze, lids heavy, eyes dark. "Don't you? I think you like what I'm doing to you. I think if I dip my fingers in that pretty little pussy of yours, I'm going to find it wet."

I hate that he's right. "Is this what you need to get off? Forcing yourself on a woman?"

Something flickers in his gaze, as if I've wounded him.

It's gone in a second, and I don't know if it was ever really there. Instead his gaze turns sharp. "I was going to wait until I got you back to my loft to fuck you, but I think I want to test my theory right here."

Then his rough hands are pulling on the silky fabric, bunching it up in his large meaty hands, tugging the fabric against his calluses. Cool air washes over my legs, and I close my legs, humiliated. This is how he wants me—humiliated and broken.

I refuse to break, even when his large hand slides up the inside of my thigh.

Even when he's proven correct, when his fingers push aside the thin fabric of my thong and touch wetness. I expect him to laugh, to gloat. Not groan like he's in sweet agony. Not pant against my shoulder as if he can barely contain himself.

"Fuck," he mutters, his voice sounding thick. "You're so soft. So fucking hot."

I shudder against the wall as he slides a finger in deep. This is wrong. This is *sick*, with my father somewhere in the house. With maids who could walk in on us at any time.

"Spread," he says.

When I don't move, he pinches the inside of my thigh. "I said spread."

I jump and make a small sound of pain and desire. It's the last one that terrifies me. How is he able to make me want this? What's wrong with me that his hands on me feel good?

Because they do, so rough and firm, fingers pushing deep inside me. He's knowledgeable in ways I can barely contemplate, going slow when I need him to, moving fast to increase the intensity. And that's before his thumb finds my clit.

I gasp and jerk away from the wall. "*Asher.*"

His eyes blaze with lust and something else. Possession. "Like that. I want you to say my name just like that, again and again. You're mine, beautiful."

I want to tell him no, that I won't say his name. That I'm not his. But his fingers move faster, reaching a spot deep inside me, making me slick. His thumb is insistent on my clit, moving in a knowing circle, pushing me close. I'm gasping around my protest, unable to say a single word.

"Let go," he says darkly, his voice pure command.

Maybe it's all those years of being obedient or maybe it's his hot gaze on me. I can't hold back. Climax washes over me in a rush, stealing my breath. I can only moan low and loud into the foyer, the sound of my pleasure echoing around me.

He brings me down gently, working me softer with his hands, placing gentle kisses over my chest. It's disconcerting, the way he's treating me. Suddenly nice. Almost kind. Until I see his eyes.

They aren't kind. They're the eyes of a predator who's enjoying the chase.

He lifts his hand to stroke the skin left exposed by my dress from my collarbone to the tops of my breasts. In my sated, sex-drowsed state, it takes me a second to realize what he's doing. He's not just touching me. He's writing on me, his fingers still wet from my pussy, leaving a trail of my arousal on my skin.

*MINE.*

He lifts a lazy eyebrow, daring me to contradict.

I close my eyes, because I know it's true. Because he means to humiliate me with the act. Because it's working. This is how it will be with us—pleasure and embarrassment, intensity and shame. And I have no choice,

because I'm the good daughter. I do what I'm told, even if the man in charge of me is no longer my father.

## CHAPTER TWO

*Japan tried to send over cherry blossoms once before 1912, but the Department of Agriculture was concerned about insects. The US burned the trees, nearly causing a diplomatic crisis.*

**T**HERE ARE TOWN Cars and limos. The occasional Escalade.

Once my date for a ball picked me up in a Tesla so new it was not yet for sale to the public.

These are the vehicles I'm accustomed to. Asher Cook steers me with his hand on my elbow, his touch light but unmistakable, to the foyer where the front doors hang open, letting in the sunlight. A large white truck sits in front of the marble steps. This is the man my father turned to for help.

This is the man with enough money to bail out Li Industries.

"What do you do?" I ask, growing more nervous with every passing step. Wind brushes over my skin, cooling the come on my chest, making me shiver.

"I'm surprised your father didn't mention me," Asher says, his lazy smile making it clear he's not surprised at all. "We've been working together for years now."

He opens the door and holds out his hand. I don't want to accept his help, but the truck is ten thousand feet off the ground. I'm not sure I can make it inside gracefully, even with his support.

My chin rises. "In what capacity?"

"I'm the foreman. All those shiny shopping centers your daddy likes to build, like the world's his very own Monopoly board? I'm the one who built them."

*A laborer.* I can almost hear the word in Papa's voice. Dismissive, that's what he would be. Asher Cook wears a plain white T-shirt and jeans that look soft from wear. His boots have probably walked through a thousand worksites. "And your money?"

"My money." The word comes out mocking. "I'm not what you call a big spender. Don't attend the society galas and whatever the fuck. That's what you like, isn't it, June? The glitz and the glamour."

It's the only life I know, but I don't tell him that. "Then what do you buy?"

His hand still waits for me, patient to a fault. He must know I don't have a choice. He made me come up against the wall. I couldn't control that, but taking his hand? Stepping into his truck? That decision will have to be mine.

He wants me to participate in my own humiliation.

He leans close, near enough I can see the deep brown of his eyes even in the clear sunlight. "Every so often there's something I want, and then I have a nice fat bank account to make sure I can have it."

My skin flushes hot with awareness. "I'm not for sale."

"Aren't you?" His laugh runs down my spine. "Then walk back into the house. No one's going to stop you. Tell your Daddy that you aren't going to fuck me, that he can find some other way to pay back all that money he owes. I'd love to watch the beautiful June Li tell her Daddy to go fuck himself."

The temptation beats through my veins, thrums in my ears. It's a siren song, the desire to escape from Asher's dark promise. Except the safety of this house is an illusion. Papa isn't going to protect me. He would not have sold me if there was any other choice; that much I believe.

The good daughter. That's me.

I place my hand in Asher's, and he lifts me carefully into the seat. When I'm settled on the wide leather bench, the door slams shut, closing me in. I keep my gaze straight ahead as the truck rumbles to a start. Where are we going? I don't want to ask. I don't want to give him the satisfaction.

We barely hit the freeway when he lets out a low laugh.

I swallow hard. "What's funny?"

"Nothing's funny, beautiful. I'm laughing for the pure fucking joy of it."

It hits me then, as we're barreling away from my house at eighty miles per hour—how permanent this is. Even if I'm back in my bedroom tomorrow or the night after that, or whenever Asher decides to bring me back, I won't be the same. This night is going to change me.

It's already changing me. There's a fury inside me that wasn't there this morning. Even a few hours ago I was content to be the good daughter. To do as I was told. Now I'm mad.

“You’re an asshole,” I say, almost shaking with the force of my emotion. “You’re worse than that. You’re a coward, because if you were really as strong as you act you wouldn’t need to make me feel small.”

He somehow makes the hard, unforgiving bench of the truck look like the most comfortable seat in the world. He makes it look like a throne, reclining with his hand over the back, blunt fingers toying with a piece of my hair. I have to work to ignore the heat of his fingers near my shoulder. I don’t want to feel him, and I sure as hell don’t want to take comfort from him.

“Do you feel small, June?” he asks, his voice mild. “Is that how I make you feel?”

Only when he asks the question do I realize it’s the opposite. I’ve spent so long fitting into the mold of the good daughter, making myself quiet and demure enough for the only daughter of the Li family. A flame made steady so that my glow will not offend.

Asher Cook turns me into a wildfire. I’m ready to consume him.

“Don’t lie to me,” I say. “You enjoyed that little show back there.”

“Oh, I won’t pretend that I didn’t. And I’m going to enjoy a show right now. Pull your dress up, beautiful. And take those panties off. I want to feel what I’m paying for.”

His crude words are like gasoline on the fire. “Fuck you.”

A *tsk* sound. “Such language.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“And you’re running out of time. I can turn the car around and drop you off in front of Daddy’s mansion. I wonder how long it will be before a foreclosure sign goes up on that nice front lawn?”

Bile rises in my throat. I don’t want to disgrace the Li family by becoming this man’s whore, but it will be worse if we lose the house and the business. Oh God.

Slowly I pull the black silk of my dress up my thighs.

Asher’s voice breaks through my uncertainty. “Ten... nine... eight... seven...”

I yank the hem up, exposing my thighs. It’s the same as wearing a swimsuit, at least that’s what I tell myself when he glances down at my legs. I reach up beneath the fabric to push my panties down. It’s awkward trying to

move in this space, trying to keep myself covered. I clench my panties in a fist, trying to ignore how damp they feel. Asher Cook made me come. He drew the evidence of that on my chest. Now he holds out his hand, as patient as he did before I got into the truck.

My throat feels tight. Without a word I place my panties on his palm.

He brings the fabric to his nose and breaths in deep. "Christ, that's good. Your cunt tastes amazing, beautiful? You ever taste yourself when you explore down there at night?"

The flush that spreads across my cheeks could light a match. No one is supposed to know what I do at night. How does this man know? "No," I whisper.

"We're gonna fix that," he says, his voice thick with lust. "You reach down and touch yourself now."

I shove my hand between my legs, hard enough that it doesn't feel good. He can't make me feel good, especially when he's not even touching me. He's *driving* for Christ's sake.

"Now, don't be rough with that little pussy. That's my job. Right now you just want to find your clit. You know where that is? Where it feels good, beautiful. Where it feels sharp and right and good."

My fingers obey him even though my mind doesn't want to. I rest my forefinger on my clit, closing my eyes at the quiet relief. "This isn't good," I say, but that's a lie.

"Of course it is," he says, casual as you please. The only sign that he's moved by what's happening is the bulge in his jeans. He doesn't acknowledge his own arousal except to tighten his fist on the steering wheel. "You're gonna have to endure this no matter what. Might as well get a little pleasure out of it. Now you're going to play with that clit of yours while I tell you a story."

"I don't want to hear a story."

He gives me a slow smile. "You're right. It would be much more interesting to hear you tell the story. I'll start it for you. One day you went to visit your daddy at one of his shopping centers while it was still under construction.... Don't ignore your clit, beautiful. Make little circles."

I glare at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Do you want me to show you?" He reaches across the console, and I make a high-pitch sound of protest. He laughs softly. "Then touch yourself."



I move my finger slow and crude, not like I would if I were in bed alone. This isn't really for my own pleasure, my hand between my legs. It's for his. "I meant the shopping center."

"Right, the story you're telling me. About how you got out of the town car and walked up the steps, not knowing that the men were on shift change. They started whooping and hollering at you soon as they saw you in that plaid private school uniform, didn't they? Gave you an earful."

My mind flashes to that day, so many years ago. I can smell diesel in the air, feel the overbright glint of sunlight off the exposed metal beams. *Looking fine, sweetheart. You need directions? I can show you where to go. Look at that chest. Flat as a board. Bet your nips are bright pink though.*

A thrill of fear ran down my spine in that moment. The same fear I feel now in the truck. Blood races through my veins. My mouth opens on a graceless pant. That afternoon I had kept running down the hallway until I left them behind. This time there's nowhere to run.

Asher's eyelids look heavy now, his expression hard. "That's right, beautiful. You remember."

Only then do I realize that I'm touching myself harder, faster, worrying my clit between my forefinger and middle finger, pressing together to send sparks of pleasure through my body. "Were you one of them?" I say, my voice thready.

"You could say that. I was coming up the stairs after you, planning on telling you that you weren't allowed in the construction site without a hardhat. Safety precautions. Then I heard the men hassling you, talking about your teenaged body."

*Oh God.* I'm working myself harder now, getting hot when I shouldn't be, shouldn't be. My hips are moving against the stiff leather. I remember how warm I'd felt between my legs. "I never saw you."

"I was the foreman, even back then. I didn't mind the men giving a beautiful woman a whistle, letting her know she's appreciated, no matter how rude it is. But I wasn't going to let them give shit to an underage girl. Not on my watch. Made it up the stairs and laid Jimmy DeLuca flat on his back."

My cheeks are probably red as a fire hydrant. "Is he the one who said—?"

"He's the one who said your pussy was probably tight enough to bend steel if he tried to shove some inside of you. Is that what you meant?"

“Oh God,” I whisper, slipping my forefinger lower, to where liquid desire pools at my sex. I spread it over my pussy lips, rocking my hips against the slippery friction.

“Broke his nose,” Asher says, his voice conversational. “And the other guys backed off real quick. Then I went after you. Figured you’d be upset. Might find you crying in the ladies room.”

Every muscle in my body locks up, because I know exactly what I did in that bathroom as a seventeen year old in a half-built shopping mall. “You didn’t find me,” I say, desperately, needing it to be true.

“Those little sounds you were making. I knew you weren’t crying.” It’s a small comfort that his expression borders on pain, his gaze flicking to me before he returns it to the road. The truck barrels down the freeway, same way my body rushes toward climax. “What were you doing, June?”

“I can’t,” I whisper, my hand pressed hard between my legs, my eyes squeezed shut.

“You wanted to tell the story,” he says, his voice low and coaxing.

“No—I can’t.” My fingers can’t find purchase in my slick and swollen sex. There’s not enough friction, not enough time, not enough humiliation in realizing he was there. “You saw me?”

“If I would have gone inside I could have made you do anything. And if one of those rough fuckers had heard you? They might have done that.”

The thought is like a thousand pounds of dynamite. His large body across the cab of the truck, the scent of him, the strength of it, is the match. “Why didn’t you?”

“Because I don’t touch underage girls. I went back into the hallway and made sure no one else came in. You finished finger fucking yourself and then washed your hands like a good little girl. When you walked out you had no idea I was around the corner.”

I’m so close it almost hurts. That’s how it feels not to come right now—painful.

“I think you would have liked it if I’d gone in, though. Wouldn’t you?”

“No,” I whisper, but it’s a lie. The pulse beating in my sex right now proves that much. This whole story has turned me on beyond bearing. Being trapped in this truck, heading to God knows where makes me burn.

“You would have let me do anything to your body. The same way you’re going to now.”

“No.”

He looks directly at me, his eyes so dark they’re almost black. “Come for me, beautiful. Let me see.”

My body is a traitor. It comes in a matter of seconds, fingers digging into skin, muscles clenching hard, a harsh cry escaping my lips. Pleasure arcs through me, so fast and hard it’s like being struck by lightning. It wrenches my body again and again, and the whole time I can’t take my eyes away from Asher’s.

When the last pulse runs through me, my hand falls away from my sex. My whole body falls against the hard door, not feeling any pain. Not feeling anything except the aftershocks.

Something seems to echo in the cab of the truck. A word. A scream?

Did I possibly sob his name as I climaxed?

God, I did. My throat is still sore from how loud I cried for him. I’m so embarrassed I could melt into a puddle on his warm leather. It’s already damp from my arousal. I wish I could pool into liquid and not have to face him, but I remain stalwartly solid, my limbs heavy but my mind fully aware.

Asher. I can only imagine the smug look on his hard face. I can only imagine it until I look over... only, he doesn’t look smug. His cheekbones are slashes against the sunlight. His eyebrows notched in pain. He looks like a man pushed to the edge of his limits, and then pushed one inch farther.

Two hours ago I was getting ready for the gala tonight. I never could have imagined ending up in this truck. Having my own arousal spread across my fingertips.

And I never could have imagined feeling concern for the man who made me this way.

“Are you okay?” I ask softly.

“Don’t worry about me,” he says, his voice gruff.

The bulge in his jeans has not gone down. The denim stretches taut. I don’t know what he looks like under there, not really. Late-night browsing on Tumblr has not prepared me for this truck.

“Li Industries has been bleeding money for six months, maybe more.”

My gaze snaps to his face, but he's looking at the road. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"No, beautiful. Worse. It's supposed to make you feel worse, knowing that your daddy could have prevented this. The deal we made for your body? That was last fucking week."

He knew for a week? "You're lying."

One broad shoulder lifts. "Halfway expected you to be barricaded in your bedroom when I showed up tonight. Maybe you'd be armed. Instead you came running down the stairs wearing *that*."

I look down, forced to acknowledge the ridiculousness of the designer dress. There was probably never any gala. It was something Daddy told me so I would get ready without having to confess the truth. He let me be surprised because he was too ashamed to tell me.

For the first time in this horrible night tears prick the backs of my eyes. I clench my jaw to make sure no sound comes out. I want to yell, to shout that it's unfair, but I'm too much of a good daughter to do that. And my father knew that about me. He was counting on it.

I close my eyes against the burn. It's a losing battle. Tears singe my cheeks.

A hand covers mine, squeezing gently. Enough that I feel comforted from a man I should know better than to trust. Everything is upside down. My father has abandoned me. Asher Cook consoles me. I don't know which way is up anymore, but I know one thing—the night isn't over yet.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Cherry blossom season lasts a month, from the time the first to the last tree blooms. Each individual tree only flowers for a week.*

**I** MUST HAVE fallen asleep, because I wake up draped over Asher Cook's body. I push myself up, palms against his chest, unable to ignore the hard shift of muscle beneath his soft white T-shirt.

We're not well matched, him and I. He's wearing jeans and boots. I'm in a limited-edition Gucci evening gown and low-heeled sandals I slipped on as we walked out the front door.

He's made from muscle on top of muscle.

I'm slender and shaking.

I rub the sleep from my eyes, determined not to appear weak. "Where are we?"

He flips the key in the ignition. "My house."

That's enough to snap me awake. If I would have pictured Asher Cook's house... I'm not sure I could have. He seems like he'd be at home among concrete and steel. Maybe some bricks in the background, stacked halfway up.

He fits into construction so well that it's strange to imagine him somewhere fully built. Maybe I would have guessed someplace cheap, like a trailer park. I didn't think of myself as a snob, but as I look at the rambling Tudor style home with ivy curling up the side, I'm forced to confront my own preconceived notions. This man has money—and what's more, he has taste.

The house looks like something out of a magazine with its timber frame and diamond-patterned windows. Sunrays fold over the thatched roof, orange and purple and red, a bittersweet farewell.

Asher seems inured to the romance of the sunset. He acts brusque when he crosses the front of the truck and opens my door, business-like as he helps me down. Almost impatient as he leads me into the house, as if he regrets having me here.

That suspicion is confirmed when he hurries me through the darkened foyer and up shadowed stairs. A small room near the end of the hallway

contains only a bed, its white lace coverlet such a sharp contrast to the man standing in front of me. “You’ll sleep here,” he says, his expression impassive.

There’s a finality to his tone, as if he’s saying goodnight.

It’s strange to feel disappointed that he isn’t going to have sex with me. My body still hums with the memory of his words, the frantic way that I rubbed myself while he watched.

“Is that... it?” I say, hoping I hide my dismay.

He reaches out a hand, fingertips soft against my temple, and I can’t help but jump. “You’re too busy being afraid of me to enjoy this, and I do plan on enjoying you, June.”

There’s a knot in my throat. It’s hard to swallow around it. “Oh.”

“I don’t suppose a little goodnight kiss would hurt, would it?”

The question doesn’t seem to need an answer. Not when his head lowers, blocking out the faint light of the moon. Not when his lips brush mine. Time slows down, so I can feel his soft breath against my lips, more gentle than a man his size has any right to be. I can feel the cushion of his lower lip. I let myself sink into him, without guilt or doubt. For this moment I push away the reason I’m in his house.

There’s only his silent request—*let me in, open for me*. And my acquiescence, parting my lips. Pleasure gives way to a soft moan. His. Mine. There’s surprise, that it could be like this. Chemistry? We have chemistry, but that’s only electrons and protons.

This is something else. Tenderness.

I’m the one who pulls back. I find my balance against a wall with priceless art I vaguely recognize from a museum benefit auction last year. It’s sacrilege to lean on a piece like this, to touch it with bare hands, to feel the brush strokes against my palm, but I’m incapable of holding myself up.

And I can’t trust the man in front of me, not one second more.

He stands where I left him, his expression one of bemusement. He touches his lower lip with two fingers. What does he feel there? My kiss? My naivete, most likely. How quickly I surrendered.

“You’re dangerous,” he says, his voice uneven.

“Me? You’re like two hundred pounds of muscle. What could I do to you?”

He rubs his jaw, looking away. “I guess we’ll see,” he murmurs. “Time for bed, beautiful.”

When this night began I never would have expected the flick of anticipation low in my belly. Asher has already proven he can make me enjoy this. The dates my daddy arranged? They never made me feel anything but duty. Certainly not this all-consuming fire that spreads and spreads.

I sit down on the edge of the bed, unsure where to begin. Do I undress?

Or do I wait for him to undress me?

There was no mother to give me the birds and the bees talk. She died years ago, but her spirit left a long time before that. On a good day she would tell me parables about frogs and tigers. There would be gossip about people I didn’t know. Sometimes the stories would blend together until I wasn’t sure which was fiction or fact. Maybe she didn’t know either.

On a bad day, she wouldn’t speak at all. I learned to manage the household before my feet could touch the floor at our dining room table. I planned parties and hired staff. Papa was too busy with Li Industries, so I was the only one left. That’s how I ended up in this room, I suppose. If the business was failing, if papa had run out of ideas... I was the only one left.

Asher crouches down in front of me, and I hold my breath, waiting, waiting.

He hooks one arm behind my calves and pushes me lengthways on the bed, his movements brusque, unceremonious, and definitely unsexy. A sweep of his arm, and then I’m covered with the sheet. “Goodnight,” he says, already turning toward the door.

“Wait.”

He stops, his back toward me. “Yes?”

I have the sense that he’s afraid, which doesn’t make any sense. I’m the one who should be terrified. I should be shaking beneath these covers and grateful that he’s giving me a reprieve. Instead I’m disappointed. *You’re dangerous*, he said to me. What could he possibly be afraid of? “You’re just going to leave.”

Finally he faces me, his expression impassive. “I told you not to think about one fuck or two. This is going to be a long-term arrangement, you and

me. I'll use you plenty before it's over."

I flinch. "You like scaring me on purpose."

A short laugh. "I thought you liked me scary. I thought that got you off."

This night has been strange. Surreal, even. And I think I've done a good job going with the very weird flow. I've been a good daughter about as much as I can take. All I have now is rebellion. "I don't see you getting me off right now. Looks to me like you're running away."

Challenge arcs through the air like electricity. He's made of metal in this moment. He feels every bit of my anger, but he isn't burned by it. Instead he smiles, slow and full of promise.

"You're right," he says, silky venom in his voice. "You're a little tense tonight. Understandable, really. I can help you relax, beautiful. Would you like that?"

It isn't really a question. Not when he's already pulling the sheet away.

Two fingers tap my ass. "Turn over."

I'm obeying him without really knowing what comes next. Not until he pushes a large pillow between my legs. His hands are rough as he props my ass in the air.

"You ever masturbate like this?"

I'm kneeling on the bed with a pillow wedged against my sex. My cheeks burn at the implication—both that I might have come this way under cover of night, and that I'll come this way *now*. "No," I say, drawing out the word.

"You don't sound sure," he says in a low laugh.

I'm too embarrassed to admit that I've done this. Too embarrassed to move, until he gives me a sharp slap on my ass. Pain yanks a high-pitched noise from me, and I move in an awkward jerk against the pillow. It isn't a pleasant friction. It feels like not enough, not enough, not enough.

Asher slaps me again, this time on the underside of my ass. It hurts more there, the burn sharp and deep. I moan and move forward, just to escape him. And move back again, because part of me likes the pain. Then I'm rocking against the pillow, moving mindless and unafraid.

I hear the whistle of his hand. I know the pain is coming.

And still it takes me by surprise, right between my legs. He slapped me, *there*. He slaps me hard enough that I cry out, muffling my scream into the



pillow. I speed up, and he slaps me again. I don't know whether he's punishing or rewarding me. It feels like both as I barrel toward climax, the pillow tight and hot between my legs, my mind too lust-drunk to care about how humiliating I must look right now.

When it comes climax is a soft wave, ocean water reaching across my face, closing over my nose. Until I can't take a breath anymore. Can't see anything beyond the wavery underwater.

And then I drift down, down, down into sleep.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*The top perfume in the U.S. is Bath and Body Works' Japanese Cherry Blossom. Thirty million units of the mixture are sold each year.*

**I** WAKE UP when it's still dark outside.

I've always been an early riser, and according to the antique clock on the wall, today is no different. I stumble to the bathroom where I'm shocked fully awake by the sight of my favorite L'Occitane toiletries. He wasn't joking about how long he'd been preparing for this. I don't know whether to be flattered that he wanted me to be comfortable—or terrified that he knows so much about me when I don't even know his middle name.

The familiar citrusy scent soothes me despite my worries, and I step out of the steaming shower with a towel around my body. The closet contains full racks of clothes I would have bought at Ann Taylor and Banana Republic. I prefer simple clothes, like the cream cable knit sweater and plaid slacks I pull from their hangers. Red Ralph Lauren pointed-toe pumps from the shoe rack will be the only pop of color.

I open a wooden drawer and freeze. Asher has been spot-on about the things I like so far, but this underwear isn't anything I would have picked out for myself. There are no full coverage neutral briefs or black bikini panties that will hide neatly beneath my clothes.

There's lace and patterns and ruffles.

One pair of panties has a little eyedrop cut out in the front beneath the waistband. It hardly reveals a full square centimeter of skin, but the thought of wearing it makes me feel naked.

The thongs are made of satin so soft they make me think I might actually enjoy wearing them.

It gets stranger when I try to find a bra to wear. There aren't any.

As I search through the drawers I find stockings and garters. Scarves. Even a hat, which is surprisingly cute, but there isn't a damn bra in the entire walk-in closet.

"Problem?" comes a low voice from behind me.

I whirl, clutching the towel close to me, using the clothes I haven't yet put

on as a shield. “What are you doing here?”

“Thought I’d come wake you, but you’re already up. Excellent. I have to be at the worksite by seven a.m. or the guys get the idea they can be late, too.”

“There aren’t any bras,” I say, my cheeks flaming. I did embarrassing things last night. I climaxed again and again—against the wall of my childhood home, in the cab of his truck. While humping a pillow on the bed ten feet away from us. But discussing my underwear with him feels more intimate.

An eyebrow lifts. “You don’t need one.”

I stare at him, more shocked in this moment than when Nathan Fitzsimmons snapped the strap of my training bra in sixth grade. *What’s this for?* he said. *You don’t have anything to put in it.* I’ve always been flat, despite the multitude of push-ups I tried through middle school, the padded bras in high school. And I’ve mostly accepted that shortcoming, at least until Asher Cook looks at me with calm refusal.

“Excuse me?” I manage to say. “I’m the one who decides that.”

He gives me a half smile, completely unfazed. “That’s where you’re wrong. I’m the one who decides what you wear and for how long. I’m the one who’s going to tear that off you. But those pretty little tits you’re hiding under that towel? I want access to them any time of the day.”

*Pretty little tits?* “I’m flat.”

He shakes his head. “You’re small. And I’m big. And you know what? I think you like that. I think it makes your tight pussy even tighter, thinking of how I could overpower you.”

A shiver runs through me, and he’s not entirely wrong. There’s pleasure. And there’s fear, which only serves to make it sharper. What would it be like if he didn’t let me out of the closet? What would happen if he demanded that I drop the towel? My fist tightens on the thick cloth, because I already know what would happen. I would fight him. I would lose.

His soft laugh fills the room. The hair on the back of my neck rises. “Come downstairs,” he says, already turning away. “We have a full day ahead of us. I can’t wait.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

*Cherry blossoms are thought to be native to the Himalayas. The flowers originated somewhere in Eurasia before migrating to Japan.*

**F**ABRIC RUBS AGAINST my breasts with every small movement, leaving them tender. I cheated ever so slightly, wearing a thin camisole beneath the cable knit sweater in lieu of a bra. The plan backfires, because the silk brushes against my nipples. By the time I walk downstairs my nipples are hard and jutting up against the heavy fabric. Awareness of my breasts spreads and spreads, until I'm standing in a strange room thinking of nothing but my *pretty little tits*.

That's what he called them, and for the first time I actually believe that might be true. They might be pretty and little. They might be small, if he were to caress them with his large, callused hands.

Asher stands with his back to me, broad shoulders encased in a white T-shirt and a fresh pair of jeans. His boots complete a look I know is designed entirely from utility. That's what this man is made of, work and strength and determination. But around him... that's a different story. There are paintings on every wall, some taller than me, all of them museum quality. The one he's looking at is a painting of a cherry blossom tree in full bloom, the flowers swirling around, so lifelike you can almost smell the bitter sweet scent of them.

"We need to talk," I say, stepping into the room. I've donned my armor in the form of clothes. I won't be cowering in a towel for this conversation. And I'm not going to let him distract me with sex.

He turns, his eyes alight with amusement. "We can talk on the way to the worksite."

I take a step forward. "Why do I need to come with you?"

"Because," he says with exaggerated patience. "One fuck or two fucks, they aren't going to pay for what your daddy owes me. It's going to take a lot more than that."

"So you want... what? An assistant."

His laugh is molten steel. "Yes. Exactly. You're going to assist me."

“Bullshit. You want to show me off so the whole city knows my father owes you money. You want to humiliate my family, but I’m not going to let you do that.”

“You aren’t?”

“What kind of fool do you take me for? I’m not going to agree to any deal that’s indefinite or that harms our ability to do business in the future. If you want me to pay with my body? Fine. Then you tell me exactly how many nights it will take to work off the money.”

He turns to look back at the cherry blossoms. “It would have been easier for you if your father told you.”

Suspicion is a dark churn in my stomach. “Told me what?”

“That there’s no end date.”

“He wouldn’t have—” My throat is too tight to speak. He wouldn’t have made a deal like that, except I didn’t think he would make a deal like *this* either. I’m not sure what my father’s capable of anymore.

I look around the room with fresh eyes, seeing the incredible quality of artwork displayed here. Art I’ve seen in studios around the city. Artists I recognize who work out of New York City and London. He drives a completely ordinary truck. He wears ordinary clothes, but he has art like this hanging on his wall. This is the kind of wealth that isn’t meant to show off. It’s been spent on things he enjoys.

And I’m becoming very afraid that I’m his latest acquisition.

“What would my father have told me?” I ask, relieved that my voice doesn’t shake.

“This isn’t for one night. Or two.” He turns to face me, his expression grave. “It’s for your hand in marriage. We’re engaged, beautiful. We’re going to be married.”

I stare at him, uncomprehending. “But that’s impossible.”

A humorless smile. “Because I’m a dirty construction worker and you’re the beautiful June Li?”

“My father would have told me that.”

“He was supposed to. And last night? I was going to have a conversation with you. Instead you acted like I was beneath the dirt on your shoes. And your father pretended like I was some kind of monster.”

My chest feels tight. “I didn’t know.”

“No. You didn’t. It wasn’t your fault, but I suppose I felt like punishing you for that, so I acted like I was there to fuck you for a few thousand dollars a pop.” Another hollow laugh. “Of course, I didn’t realize that the scariest thing for you would be marriage to me.”

This is the man from my foyer last night, the one uncompromising and almost cruel. Part of me wants to reassure him. It comes from hurt, this coldness. Except what he’s saying is too true to deny. It is terrifying to realize I’ve been married away without my consent, in this century.

Terrifying that it could have happened without me even knowing.

Oh, I’m sure I could refuse to get married at the altar. I don’t think my situation is so far gone that I can’t. But what would I do if I’m not honoring my father? I’m supposed to be the good daughter. I’ve lost my family and my identity in one night.

“Let’s go,” Asher says, his voice like steel. He opens the front door and makes a mocking bow for me to step through. “It’s time to go to work.”

He means his worksite, where he shows up on time so his men don’t get the idea they can be late. And he also means work for me, because that’s what this marriage has become. My obligation. My duty. The only way to honor a heritage I believe in—to marry a man who sees me as an object to acquire.

## CHAPTER SIX

*Cherry blossom flower petals are edible. You can bake them in cakes, pickle them as a garnish, or brew them in tea. Häagen-Dazs sells a cherry blossom ice cream.*

**A**SHER COOK IS in his element on a worksite. He speaks to his crew with a natural sense of command, and they look to him for leadership. And he's not above getting his hands dirty.

We're only at the half-constructed building for twenty minutes before he has a tool belt wrapped around narrow hips and a hard hat on his head. Something is wrong in the ceiling, or so I deduce from the general waving of hands. I've been deposited in the corner where I can be out of the way.

"Stay here," he tells me in a gruff tone without meeting my eyes.

He does not wait for anything as mundane as a ladder.

Instead he jumps to clasp the edge of the ceiling beam, then levers himself up with strength I can only admire. He flips himself onto the beam and then walks to the other end, as casual on the ground as he is twenty feet above it. I have to force myself to unclench my fists. It could be concern for any passing stranger, but I know it's not. I know it's more. Something changed between me and Asher.

It's not just about sex anymore. And it's not just about duty.

Which is why I don't obey him.

I wait until he turns around—still twenty feet off the ground and on the other side of the floor. That's when I stand up and stretch. Even from this far away his gaze caresses me with undeniable heat. My nipples pebble against the fabric. They won't be visible beneath the texture of the cable knit sweater, but I pull it over my head, leaving me in only the thin ivory camisole.

There's more than just one dark gaze on me now. Many of the men are looking at me. They don't dare say anything, not since I came with Asher Cook. I'm not a lost little lamb in a school girl outfit. No, I'm a woman now. And my nipples press proudly against the silk, declaring my readiness.

The problems in the ceiling aren't the focus of the men anymore.

Conversation quiets and then becomes ringing silence.

My cheeks burn, but I started this for a reason. Because my father could have introduced me to Asher at a dinner party, he could have asked me to date him, he could have even told me to marry him. I would have done it as the good daughter. Instead he sabotaged any chance of a normal relationship.

If I asked him why, he would say it was for the family honor.

I know the truth. It was cowardice. And this? My heart beating faster, my chest rising and falling, my nipples proud and firm beneath the thin silk? This takes courage.

My arms reach above my head, stretching for the world to see. It could not be more blatant. Even though I'm wearing plaid slacks and my hair is done in a bun, it could not be more sexual. Even if I were stripping at a club in a thong I could not feel more inviting than this.

That's how I turn away from the men, feeling their desire like a tether—and then *snap*.

Walking away from it. Someone will follow.

I stride blindly down a half-built corridor, not knowing where to go from here. This is how I ran away from the men all those years ago, my heart beating too fast, my body thrumming with urges I didn't fully understand. It's different now, because I'm running toward something.

A water fountain, still wrapped in heavy plastic, is the only indication that I've found the restrooms. I slip inside, relieved that there are actually stalls and sinks, even though the walls are unfinished.

Heavy footsteps approach, and I dash into a stall. My fingers fumble with the lock.

It could be anyone outside that door. A stranger. A dangerous man.

It's not only part of the game. What if Asher Cook didn't like my little show back there? He could have turned around and continued working. He could have let one of his men follow me instead.

A low chuckle bounces off the tile, and I shiver with relief because I recognize him. Anticipation races up my spine. My breath comes quicker.

"I know you're in here. You may as well come out and make it easy on yourself."

More footsteps, and I lean against the door, too afraid to make a sound. The lock isn't working right. I think the door isn't aligned. There's nothing



stopping him from coming in except my weight.

“Or you can make it harder on yourself,” he says, stopping outside my stall. “Maybe you’d enjoy that. Maybe you like getting men all riled up, thinking about them touching you with their dirty hands.”

A knot in my throat. “No,” I say, my voice breaking. “That’s not true.”

There’s a shift in the metal, and I realize he’s touching the door on the opposite side. Only an inch separates us. “I suppose we’ll find out,” he says, soft enough I have to strain to hear. “When I touch your pussy, we’ll find out if this is getting you wet. Won’t we?”

There’s a clench between my legs, and I know exactly what he’s going to find. “Don’t.”

The stall door opens despite my weight, inexorably, inevitably, until I’m standing there in front of him. His white T-shirt has black smudges that weren’t there before. It looks somehow more obscene than even my silk camisole with no bra beneath it. In his gaze I find an unexpected tenderness.

“Don’t what?” he asks, his voice gentle.

How far do I want this game to go? “I don’t know.”

“It’s a little late to ask for mercy, beautiful.”

I’m doing more than asking. I’m begging, after he made me come three times last night. He looks hard as steel beneath those jeans, and he didn’t climax even once.

Slowly, slowly, I sink to my knees in the half-built bathroom.

Asher’s eyes flash. “What are you doing?”

“You’re right,” I whisper, my gaze on his. “I do enjoy getting the men all riled up. I like thinking about the dirty things they’d make me do if they trapped me in a room like this.”

He takes a step closer, his body inches from mine. “Show me.”

My hands are clumsy on his belt buckle, but he makes no move to help me. He stands there like a god passing judgment. The tile is hard and cold beneath my knees; it makes this sharper. Sweeter.

The denim strains against the length of him. My hands tremble as I tug the zipper down, half afraid I’ll hurt him, half afraid he’ll hurt me. That’s what this is—a form of battle. One of us is going to lose.

There's another layer, a thin grey cotton. It stretches obscenely around the length of his cock. I can see the shape of him with the vein underneath. I can see the outline of the flared head.

And a drop of precum darkening the cotton to black.

It makes me bolder, seeing the power I have over him.

I hook my fingers into the band of his underwear and pull down. My knuckles brush the hot iron brand of his cock, and both of us suck in a breath. Then his cock juts away from his body, proud and hard. And far too big to fit into my mouth. Without thinking I lick my lips, as if readying myself.

His dark gaze tracks my tongue. *It's a little late to ask for mercy, beautiful.*

His cock jerks when I touch it, as if it's alive, and I make a high-pitched sound of surprise. I have to force myself to touch him again. The warm skin moves beneath my fingertips, almost like velvet encasing steel. A solid construction, this cock. The core of him built to withstand anything.

Built to withstand my tongue, when I reach out and touch the tip. Bitter-salt flavor bursts in my mouth.

"Jesus," he mutters, almost restless. His hands are in the air, those hands made strong and callused with work, as if he doesn't know where to put them. In my hair. That's what he decides. He strokes my hair, gentle, gentle, and then hard—a sudden yank that makes me gasp.

Tears prick my eyes.

"You can take more," he says, uncompromising.

I open my mouth wider and push myself forward, letting my body open to him in the most natural way, letting the feminine softness of me surrender to the masculine hardness of him. The flare of his cock rubs against my tongue, and I flick him in retaliation. He swears in a long, obscene string.

"Too much," I say, the words too muffled to understand.

He understands anyway, shaking his head and rocking his hips forward. "This is what happens to little girls who tease big, strong construction workers. You walk around with that tight little body. What do you think is going to happen? This."

A deep thrust makes me gag, and I sputter around his cock, inelegant, defiled. "Wait," I say, pushing away, shaking my head. I didn't know how far I wanted the game to go, but now I know. All the way. That's how far. And for that to happen I have to fight him.

And he has to fight back.

A cruel smile curves his lips. He reaches down to yank at the silky fabric of my camisole. Cool air brushes over my hard nipples. “What are we going to wait for?” he asks, mocking. “I can tell you want this. Look at your tits. They’re begging for me to touch them.”

He does more than touch them. He pinches my nipple. Hard.

I gasp, and he uses the moment to shove his cock back inside my mouth. I could bite him, if I wanted him to stop. But I don’t want that. It’s hotter to pretend I can’t bite him because he’d only get angry. He’d only make this harder on me. The only safe thing to do is please him, and I suck harder.

A heavy pressure builds below my stomach, something more severe than pleasure. It feels like an earthquake is coming inside me, and I’m afraid of what happens if I break.

I look up at Asher, imploring him, hoping he understands.

He watches me suck him, working his cock in and out of my mouth. One hand reaches behind him to tug the white T-shirt off, revealing muscled abs that clench on every flick of my tongue.

I can’t deny that he likes my breasts, small as they are. He pinches and pinches me until I’m gasping around his cock, rocking my hips, mindless. I’m kneeling on the bathroom floor and I’ve never been so turned on in my life.

He pulls me to stand and drags the camisole over my head, dropping it to the bathroom floor.

My heels are next. My slacks. My lacy red panties.

And then I’m standing there naked in a half-built bathroom, a whole construction crew not twenty feet away from us. I shiver, but I can’t deny the excitement grows deeper.

A hand wraps around my neck.

He pushes me flush against the cold tile wall. Then his other hand works between my legs, two fingers pushing up inside me. A strangled sound escapes me, cut off by his mouth against mine. He eats up my protest, my pleasure. My pain.

When I come something moves inside me, a seismic shift. I hump his hand to wring out the last flickers of pleasure. He pulls his hand away before I’m done, and I moan.

Two fingers pull through my wetness, gathering it. He spreads it over his cock. The proof of my desire glistens on his ruddy flesh. He fucks his slickened fist, grunting in a way that's more animal than man.

"I'll make you dirty," he says, his voice low like this is a solemn promise. "I'll make you fucking dirty on the bathroom floor. Make you come so hard you don't know your name, but when we're done you're coming home with me. You got that? You're mine."

*Mine.* I should tell him no. I should fight him, but I don't want to win that battle.

I want to lose.

"Yes," I whisper.

Triumph lights his eyes, and he lifts me up. Something blunt nudges at my sex. That's the only warning I get before he thrusts inside me. His hands are firm across my ass, thrusting me forward and back, impaling me on his length. It's too much. Too fast. The only thing I can do is throw my arms around his shoulders and hold on. I press my face into his neck, breathing in the salt-sweat scent of him.

"Again," he demands, his muscles straining. He's in the middle of his own earthquake.

"I'm yours," I say, made breathless by his thrusts. And then louder.

"Again. Fucking again. Fucking forever."

*"Yours."*

It's too soon for me to come again. My body is pliant and sated, only here to help Asher come. That's what I think until he changes the angle. His cock jabs at some place inside me, insistent, almost painful, and then my legs start to shake. "Wait, wait, wait," I cry, but that only makes him do it faster.

"Come," he mutters, his face pressed into my neck. "Fucking milk me. I want to feel you come around me, want you to gush on my dick. Want to feel it dripping down my balls. Fucking do it."

The words are hard and coarse, and that's what makes me climax. My whole body clenches down, giving him exactly what he wanted, an impossible squeeze, the spill of arousal. His roar bounces off the tile. He grasps me against his body, hard enough to leave ten finger-shaped bruises on my ass.

We pant in the aftermath, me clinging to him, him holding me back.

“Again,” he says, his voice almost slurred.

I turn my face against his, loving the way his bristle scratches my cheek.  
“Yours.”

His lids are heavy, eyes flashing black. “I’ve been waiting for you, June Li.”

A shiver runs through me. The good daughter wasn’t only obedient. She was also kept guarded. It was a way of keeping myself alone. Until him. He climbed the tower.

He carried me down.

I drop my hand down his broad chest, and there in the ripple of muscle, in the coarse hair, over the flat of his male nipples, I write my own four letters. *MINE*.

Asher Cook is hard and crude and dirty. I’ve spent my whole life locked away. *I’ve been waiting for you*, he said, but I think I’ve been waiting for him, too. He’s the only man who’s ever seen through the cable knit sweaters and plaid slacks. The only man with the determination to peel away my layers to the surrender underneath.

His broad chest rises and falls in even breath, a blank canvas for what comes next. A dark gaze meets mine. So still and so patient. So determined it makes me shiver, because he fills his life with beautiful things. A Tudor house with ivy climbing the side.

A painting of cherry blossoms in full bloom.

And me, because I belong to him now.

I’m his, and he’s mine.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*The blooms may be delicate, but cherry blossom trees are strong. The oldest tree is 2,000 years old, with a trunk perimeter over forty feet.*

**I**T BECOMES A regular thing—the way he takes me to his worksites. The way he corners me in a bathroom or a storage closet and has his dirty way with me.

The way I surrender to his every demand.

He makes the most money on his massive development contracts, skyscrapers and shopping centers and monolithic parking garages. Modern lines and materials. His heart belongs to the restoration projects, such as the theater with a rather illicit past.

He pulls into a wide cobblestone drive and past the fountain with a beautiful sculpture. Then to the back, where a couple of black SUVs are parked. A man leans against the side, his muscles bulging in a black T-shirt, black cargo pants molded to his legs, one booted foot crossed over the other. There's no doubt in my mind that he's dangerous.

Asher insists that I wait for him to open my door, a sort of old-world chivalry at odds with the filthy way he treats me when we're alone. He introduces me to the man as his fiancée, pausing to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to the side of my neck. My cheeks heat at the intimate gesture in front of a stranger.

"Blue Eastman," he says, his cerulean eyes alight with amusement.

"Do you own the Grand?" I ask, curious about the place that has been the subject of intense rumors. In its heyday it was one of the largest theaters in the South, hosting orchestras and operas of international renown. Its owners went bankrupt during the depression, leaving the building abandoned. It was then made into a glittering strip club, a dark and glamorous place.

Only very recently was it renovated and turned back into a theater. Many people in Tanglewood society accepted the venue into its fold, delighting in the scandalous past and the high-quality shows it brought to the city. Others, like my father, continued to snub it, so I never attended.

Blue shakes his head, his lips quirked. “No, I can’t claim that honor. I’m head of security here.” He glances at Asher meaningfully. “That’s why I called you. One of the performers has her own entourage. They’ve made some requests to change our protocols, as well as to the structure.”

“Bet you love that,” Asher says with a familiarity that makes me wonder if Blue was still head of security when the Grand was a strip club—and if Asher had visited as a customer back then.

“The recommendations are sound,” Blue admits. “Especially with the level of celebrity we’ll be dealing with for this tour. Not only the musicians but the patrons. They’re premiering the tour here so we’ve got A-listers clamoring for the boxes.”

“You’re saving a couple seats near the front for us, of course,” Asher says, in a mild tone that says he isn’t making a request; it’s mandatory.

“Of course,” Blue says, his tone sardonic.

“Is this the Harry March tour?” I have a whole playlist on my phone dedicated to Harry March, the celebrity tenor who’s topped the pop music charts and been in the tabloids.

“He’s headlining,” Blue confirms, “but he won’t be the only one. There’s a couple of gymnasts from Cirque du Monde. A Juilliard-trained pop star. A child prodigy in violin.”

“And Beatrix Cartwright,” I say, recalling that fact from the Life & Arts section of the newspaper. She lives in Tanglewood, but she’s very reclusive. Very mysterious. “Oh, I’m so excited to see her.”

“Then let’s see about these changes,” Asher says, planting a gentle kiss on my forehead. “You’ll be fine on your own a few minutes?”

“Can I look around?” I ask, trying to hide my eagerness. I want to see if any hints remain of the strip club past, beneath the beautiful and historically accurate façade.

Asher gives me a small smile like he can read my mind. He leans forward, whispering in my ear, “There’s a pole left somewhere in the building. Maybe I’ll have you give me a show.”

My blush still flames as the two men walk away, heading into the basement where they’ll discuss structural changes and unnecessary exits and the city fire code.

I head into a plain door in the back of the building marked CAST ONLY. The hallways are empty, doors open, windows in the offices letting in light. Dust motes dance in the sun. It's a rare look at the building in the day, like glimpsing an actress without her makeup. I can see her wrinkles and her age spots, but also her innate beauty.

The sweet strains of a violin touch my ears, and I follow the sound down the hallway, where it's darker, windows disappearing, shadows deepening.

My breath catches as I turn a corner and view the stage in its glory.

The parquet floor gleams even in the relative darkness. A single spotlight is on from the wide array of lights and equipment above. The curtains have to be at least five stories tall; they frame the view of the seats, making them look almost like a doll house. Rows of red velvet waiting for people to occupy them. The boxes and balconies are only shadows from this position—I'm not sure that would change during a performance.

The audience would seem so far away.

A single woman sits on a chair, playing a violin, the sound haunting. Her clothes are strangely ordinary for the masterful way she plays, a T-shirt and jeans. Flip flops more appropriate to a college campus than a world-class stage.

The song stops suddenly, and she stands to face me.

"I'm so sorry," I gasp, mortified that I bothered her. "I didn't mean to stop you."

"No, don't. I'm just a little jumpy," she admits, looking sheepish. "I tend to get lost in my own world. It's always a shock to realize it's not real."

"You're the child prodigy."

"Oh." She gives a little laugh that somehow emphasizes her innocence. "I'm not really a child anymore, but the title follows me around."

"Well, however old you are, that sounded absolutely perfect."

"Thank you." Her expression is almost shy. It occurs to me that she might be unaccustomed to performing, despite her obvious talent.

No, she's not really a child anymore. Now that I'm closer I can see that she's around my age. She only feels young, because of her innocence. There's something very untouched about her, especially compared to the Harry March of Instagram renown.



“I’m June Li,” I tell her impulsively. “I live here in Tanglewood. If you need anything while you’re in town—the best sushi, a girl’s afternoon to get a manicure—let me know.”

Her brown eyes brighten. “That would be amazing. I don’t know anyone here.”

“Then I’m your girl,” I say, meaning it.

“We’re doing rehearsals for the whole tour, so I’ll be here for a few months.”

“Do you have any family with you?”

“No, my guardian—that is, Liam isn’t—” She blushes, making her tan skinned turn a pretty plum. “I have a security detail from my guardian’s company.”

“They must be the ones requesting structural changes.”

She looks rueful. “I’m afraid we’re making a nuisance, and the tour hasn’t even started.”

“Don’t be silly. You can never be too safe.” I look out at the audience, the overwhelming blackness where thousands of people can sit. Someone could be there right now, and I wouldn’t be able to see them. A shiver runs down my spine.

We exchange phone numbers before I leave her to practice.

Behind the stage there’s a maze-like warren of hallways, most of the doors locked shut. It makes me wonder what’s behind them. And if any of them have that leftover stripper pole.

“Boo,” comes a soft voice behind me, and I whirl, my heart thumping.

“You scared me,” I accuse the Asher-shaped shadow behind me.

A low chuckle. “I saw you talking with the violinist.”

“We’re going shopping.” I glance at him uncertainly. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Shopping? No. You have my credit card.”

“It’s not really for buying things. It’s just girl time.”

“Buy whatever you want.”

I look away, my cheeks heating. “Great,” I manage, my voice breaking.

“Hey. What’s wrong?”

“It’s just that she’s so talented. And so young. I was raised to be a society wife, to host dinners and balls—and now you don’t even want that from me.”

He lifts my chin so I have to look at him. “Host whatever dinners and balls you want. I’m not going to stop you. I’m just not making that a requirement of being my wife. You’re not my fucking event planner.”

“Then what am I?” I ask, the haunting melody washing over me.

Asher basically bought me from my father, which felt like an insult. It occurs to me now that there’s another side. He could have approached me at any one of the galas or society events I attended. He could have asked me out at a coffee shop. Instead he made an offer I could not refuse, almost as if he feared I wouldn’t accept him otherwise.

His dark eyes burn with intensity. “You’re a young woman with your whole life to figure out what you want to do. Play a musical instrument or start a business? Adopt ten thousand cats? Try everything. Or nothing. You’re someone who saw a lonely girl and didn’t waste any time making her feel included.”

I shake my head, rueful. “Making friends. That’s not exactly a special talent.”

“It’s *your* talent, one most people wish they had.”

“Are we friends?” I ask softly.

“Friends,” he repeats, tasting the word. “No, sweetheart. You can make friends with every person in the city, but you come home to me. You sleep in my bed. *What am I?* You’re a hundred different things, a thousand, but most of all—you’re mine.”

## EPILOGUE

*The cherry blossom represents the ephemeral nature of life. It marks the end of winter and celebrates the renewal of spring.*

**C**HERRY BLOSSOM TREES only bloom once a year.

They can't be grown in a greenhouse or genetically modified to bloom at other times. Their beauty is both stubborn and rare, which makes Asher Cook determined to get them for me. We marry on a cool spring day in early April, a breeze ruffling the pink-white petals in my bouquet.

Branches form an arch over the aisle. The double doors are flung open, carrying in the pungent scent of fresh earth. There's an ethereal feeling as I walk down the plush white carpet, between hand-carved walnut pews, toward the man I'm going to marry.

At first I tried to convince Asher I didn't need such an extravagant ceremony, especially since I knew it would be him paying for the event—not my father. Papa walked me down the aisle; that's the extent of his involvement in my life since that fateful night.

Gradually I came to realize that although I didn't need a large ceremony, Asher did. He wanted the most beautiful wedding and he wanted everyone to see it, as if he had something to prove to them.

As if he wants no one to doubt who I belong to now.

So I did not complain when the guest list grew to five hundred in the largest cathedral in Tanglewood, with another few hundred to join us at the reception tonight.

After such a long day neither of us want to board a plane. We make our own honeymoon suite on the balcony of his bedroom, a plate of strawberries and brie and sesame crackers to eat, a bottle of Lambrusco to drink. Asher makes a project of painting me with the deep red liquid and then licking me clean—starting with my shoulder, the underside of my breast, my hip. He makes me twitch and sigh before he finally moves between my legs. He licks and licks, until I'm lost.

It's too much, so he uses the bowtie from his tux to affix my wrists to the iron rail.

“Such a good little wife,” he murmurs, stroking my sides while I writhe in helpless surrender. There’s nothing I can do with my hands tied above my head, my thighs pushed wide by his muscled body. Even lean and hard as he is, he’s still impossibly large. It’s like being pinned down by a jaguar, all massive paws and ferocious eyes. “It’s your duty to take me now, isn’t it? To lie still and let me have you, whenever I want, for as long as I want—and you always fulfill your duties.”

His thumb swipes my clit, and I flinch, my hips rocking forward to seek more pressure. More or less, anything would be better than this. This glancing, quicksilver touch he forces on me.

“Please,” I whisper.

“You might have to suffer,” he says, his voice thoughtful. “That was part of the vows, I think. Implied by the honoring and the obeying. That you’d have to wait until I’m good and ready to give you my cock. No matter how wet you get or how loud you moan.”

A blunt finger slides through my core, dragging moisture up to my clit, where he taps me, as if pointing something out for my instruction.

“No matter how plump your little clit gets.”

“Asher,” I gasp, pressing my hips towards his hands. “I can’t—”

“Of course you can.” His tone is genuinely sympathetic. “You were built for this. Doing what your husband wants. Being a living doll for me to fuck and fuck and fuck.”

He’s going to drive me insane, and I think he might want that. It’s one of his kinky games—a new one, where I’m the dutiful wife and he’s the implacable husband. The role sinks into me, as soft as the blanket he laid down beneath me. Cool breeze wafts over my body, making my nipples tighten.

“If that’s what pleases you, husband,” I say, because it’s part of the game—but it’s more than a game. He’s right. This is what I was born to do. Bred to do. To be a good little wife, and the dark approval on Asher’s face, the desire in his eyes, is the only reward I need.

He lines up his cock to my sex, the hitch of his breath a secret sign that he isn’t as composed as he acts. Then he thrusts inside me with an uncontained violence, his hardness pushing through my swollen flesh, stretching me almost beyond endurance.

My mouth opens on a silent scream, fists tightening in the hold of his tie.

“Oh God,” he says, the words thick as honey. “You’re so fucking tight. I’m supposed to be gentle with you. I shouldn’t—”

His voice breaks as he thrusts again, reaching somehow farther, making me suck in a breath. I’m spread wide on the balcony floor, my hands stretching high, my thighs pressed almost flat to accommodate him. In every way, I’m the one who must surrender to him. He’s the one in control—and yet his lids are heavy, his lips parted. His hips move in an almost uncontrollable rhythm.

Something holds him in thrall, and I think that something is me. There’s a sweet power in knowing my body does this to him, renders him helpless, unable to resist.

The friction is unbearable and sweet, peaking in a climax that makes me squeeze around him. Every muscle clenches and then relaxes into a slow melt—and still he keeps thrusting.

He fucks with reckless intensity, driving into me again and again. It’s a form of domination, the way he pushes over me, inside me. There’s also a sense that he’s searching for something. That the answers are inside me. He nuzzles at my breast, taking the peak between his lips, sucking and gently biting until I come again in a wash of scarlet pleasure.

And still he does not stop.

He needs something from me, his new bride. I’m not sure what, only that I want to try and give it to him. “I, June Li,” I murmur, my lips brushing his temple. “Take thee, Asher Cook, for my lawfully wedded husband.” These were the words I spoke in front of hundreds of people today—businessmen and lawmakers, underworld crime bosses and the mayor of Tanglewood himself. I spoke the words in front of God, but they didn’t ring as true then as they do now—saying them to my husband while he’s inside me, losing himself in my body, finding himself in the words.

He groans, his hands tightening on my hips. “More.”

“To have and to hold,” I say, more breath than sound as his thrusts speed up, his hips ramming into my body with alarming force, his cock impaling me deep. “From this day forward.”

“For better,” he says, his voice hard.

“For worse,” I answer, letting my softness enfold him. “For richer, for poorer.”

“In sickness and in health.” His breathless words are fervent—a promise muttered in the dark.

“As long as we both shall live.”

A feral sound enters the air. It’s Asher, and he bites down on my shoulder. The sharp pain makes me cry out. That’s how he climaxes, every part of his body holding every part of mine.

✧ ✧ ✧

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# OVERTURE

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– New York Times bestselling author Claire Contreras

The world knows Samantha Brooks as the violin prodigy. She guards her secret truth—the desire she harbors for her guardian.

Liam North got custody of her six years ago. She’s all grown up now, but he still treats her like a child. No matter how much he wants her.

No matter how bad he aches for one taste.

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