

Septante, Nonante

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Septante, Nonante

by [e-morin \(seamonsters\)](#).

Summary

Charlie has loved his best friend Tom since he was fourteen. Tom has loved him back for years. When a long-buried bureaucratic mistake threatens Charlie's permanent residency, the solution is as absurd as it is irreversible: marriage. What begins as a legal arrangement quickly unravels. Late-night confessions. One shared bed. A lifetime of feelings neither of them ever dared to name.

Now, caught between a legal nightmare and the romantic dream he never thought he was allowed to want, Charlie must decide whether trusting Tom with his future also means risking the one relationship he can't afford to lose.

Contains explicit sexual content, soft daddy dynamics, heavy hurt/comfort, and a guaranteed happily ever after.

Notes

This is a completed novel, shared here in full and free of charge.

If Charlie and Tom meant something to you, a short review on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#) helps more readers find their story.

If you'd like early access to Book 2 and are willing to leave an honest review, you can join my ARC team on [Booksprout](#).

Thank you for reading and supporting original works on AO3.

Website: [emorin.ca \(newsletter\)](#).

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Chapter 1

The Montreal twilight deepened outside, pressing against the tall-paned windows of the brick walk-up. Inside, the apartment was warm with garlic and onions sizzling in butter.

The room flickered with rapid bursts of light from the old TV.

"Left, Charlie! Go left! You're gonna fucking drop it—"

"Shut up, I'm trying!" Charlie laughed.

Charlie and Tom were jammed shoulder to shoulder on the thrifted velvet couch. From the kitchen, Hazel snorted, knife thwacking against the cutting board.

"Dinner's in twenty, dorks."

"We're saving the galaxy, witch," Tom said, eyes on the screen. He bumped Charlie with his shoulder.

Charlie nudged him back.

The buzzer rang—a long, drilling sound that demanded a signature.

"I'll get it," Charlie said.

Peeling himself away from Tom's side was like stepping out of a hot bath. He pressed the intercom button and waited. Heavy boots thudded up the stairs until a hand pounded on their door.

When Charlie came back to the living room, he was holding a white envelope. The garlic and butter, so nice ten seconds ago, now made his stomach turn.

"Who is it?" Hazel asked, though she didn't turn around.

"Government..." Charlie murmured. He was staring at the logo in the corner: *Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada*.

He tore the tab and pulled out the letter. The text didn't make sense at first—just blocks of black type that swam on the page. Then, the words sharpened into focus.

Inadmissible. Non-compliance. Revocation.

The paper started to shake in his hands.

"Charlie?" Tom's voice came from the left, but it sounded far away, and the lilt was gone. The controller made a dull thud on the coffee table. "Char, you're shaking. What is it?"

Charlie tried to speak, but nothing came out. He held the letter out blindly.

Hazel snatched it. Her eyes darted across the page. "No. No, this is... this is absurd." She looked up, face pale. "They're saying the adoption sponsorship is void? Fucking—thirteen years later?"

"What?" Tom stood up. He suddenly took up a lot more space.

"They're reviewing his status," Hazel's voice pitched up. "Departure order? No! Mom and Dad filed everything!"

She was spiraling. "We need an immigration lawyer. We need Dad's old lawyer. But it's Friday night. Oh my god, if they come here..."

Charlie couldn't hear her anymore. He was frozen in the center of the room, staring at a knot in the floorboards until it blurred.

Hazel paced frantically. Tom turned to his best friend. Charlie's fingernails were digging into his palms.

Tom tuned out Hazel entirely. He didn't ask to see the letter.

He crossed the room and stopped directly in front of Charlie. He stepped right into his line of sight.

Then, Tom dropped to one knee.

"Charlie," Tom said. "Marry me."

Hazel froze mid-step, the knife still pointing at the ceiling. "What the *fuck*?"

Tom didn't flinch.

Charlie blinked, a tear finally breaking free. He looked down at the man he had loved in silence since he was fourteen, kneeling on the hardwood.

"You..." Charlie's voice was barely an exhale. "You want to marry me? For real?"

Tom's face was open. There was no hesitation in his eyes.

"Yes, I do," Tom said. He squeezed Charlie's hands. "I can sponsor you. We get married, you stay. Nobody takes you anywhere."

The apartment felt alien. The controllers on the coffee table. The peppers on the counter. The letter on the floor that had managed to destroy the evening instantly.

Charlie looked back down at Tom. He held Charlie's gaze, his thumbs rubbing circles into the back of Charlie's hands.

"I'm taking him downstairs," Tom said. He stood up, pulling Charlie with him. "We need to talk. Alone."

Hazel stepped in front of the door and slammed her palm against the wood.

"The fuck you are." Her face was flushed, eyes wild. "Are you out of your mind? Why should I let you take him?"

"Hazel, move," Tom said flatly.

"Fuck you. He's in shock. We need a *lawyer*, not whatever this bullshit is. Let go of him."

"Hazy," Charlie managed. He tugged on Tom's hand to feel the resistance. "Hazel, stop."

"Charlie, fucking—*no*, he's taking advantage of you somehow. I know it."

"He's not," Charlie said. He took a shaky breath. "I want to go. I need... air. Please."

Hazel looked ready to scream, or maybe cry, or maybe punch Tom in the jaw. She glared at Tom, pointing a finger inches from his nose.

"If you hurt him," she threatened, "if you break his heart, I will never forgive you."

"I know," Tom said.

Hazel slowly lowered her arm, stepping aside just enough to let them pass. "Ten minutes. If you aren't back in ten minutes, I'm coming down there."

The walk down the flights of stairs was stiff. The stairwell smelled of old carpet and other people's dinners. They didn't speak.

They pushed through the front door and stepped outside. Under the orange glow of the street lamp, Tom's car sat waiting at the curb. It was a dark, sensible sedan, always polished, tidy against the cracked sidewalk.

Tom opened the passenger door, waiting until Charlie slid into the seat before closing it with a thunk.

Tom got in the driver's side. He didn't start the engine. The car was quiet, smelling of leather and the woody cologne Tom had worn since university.

"Are you really sure?"

Tom turned in his seat. "Charlie—"

"Wait, please, listen to me," Charlie interrupted. His hands were shaking in his lap. He looked up, eyes red and wet with tears. "Don't you want to get married for real one day? You want a family and a normal life. You can't just... throw that away for a paperwork glitch."

Tom reached across the center console and trapped Charlie's hands in his.

Charlie flinched slightly, then slumped.

"This isn't a sacrifice, Charlie," Tom said. "There is no one on this planet that I love more than you."

Charlie's eyes widened. "You love me?"

"Yes," Tom confirmed softly. "I love you."

Charlie stared at him.

"You want to be with me?" Charlie asked. "Like... together?"

Tom nodded, a small, relieved smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Yes. I want to be with you."

"You... You want to kiss me?"

Tom laughed. "Yes, Charlie. I want to kiss you."

Tom leaned across the console. He released one of Charlie's hands to bring his palm up, cupping Charlie's jaw.

Their first kiss, Charlie's first ever kiss, was tentative.

Charlie was rigid at first, his lungs holding onto a breath he forgot to release. But Tom was patient. He tilted his head, guiding the angle, applying a gentle pressure that didn't demand, but simply offered.

When they parted, Charlie kept his eyes squeezed shut.

He opened them. Tom was still there, centimetres away.

Tom pulled back just enough to scan Charlie's face, his gaze dropping to Charlie's lips and back up to his eyes.

With a rough exhale, Tom leaned back in and hauled Charlie into a hug. It was clumsy—the gear shift dug into Charlie's hip and the hard plastic of the console pressed into Tom's ribs—but neither of them pulled away. Tom buried his face in the curve of Charlie's neck, holding him with a surprising desperation.

Charlie rested his cheek against Tom's shoulder, staring out the window at the brick façade of the opposite building.

Tom loved him.

“We can’t go back upstairs,” Tom said softly. “Not yet. You need quiet, and Hazel is... in battle mode.”

Charlie nodded against Tom's shoulder. “She’ll freak out if we don’t go back. She said ten minutes.”

“I know.” Tom gave Charlie one last squeeze before shifting in his seat to pull his phone from his pocket. “I’ll handle it.”

He typed quickly.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m telling her we’re going to my place,” Tom said, hitting send. “That you’re safe, I’m taking care of you, and I’ll bring you back by noon tomorrow.”

The phone buzzed almost instantly.

Tom glanced at the screen and laughed dryly. He turned the phone so Charlie could see it.

***Hazel (THE GENERAL):** You have 12 hours. If he doesn't text me good morning, I am calling the police and then coming over to dismember you.*

“See?” Tom said, pocketing the phone and reaching for the ignition. “She agreed. Mostly.”

He started the car. “Let’s go home, Charlie.”

Tom pulled away from the sidewalk. He drove with one hand on the wheel.

Halfway there, Tom reached across the console and rested his hand palm-up on the armrest. Charlie, for once, didn’t hesitate. He slipped his hand into Tom’s, lacing their fingers together.

Tom pulled into the underground garage. He killed the engine.

The front door clicked shut.

The penthouse was exactly what you’d expect from Tom: modern, spotless, and filled with designer furniture that should have felt cold, yet somehow felt like a sanctuary.

Framed photos of their university days lined the hallway—Charlie laughing at a bar, Hazel graduating, Charlie and Tom graduating, the three of them on a ski trip.

“Sit,” Tom said warmly, nudging Charlie toward the deep leather sectional. “I’ll be right back.”

Charlie sank into it, pulling his knees up to his chest. He watched as Tom bypassed the coffee machine and opened a narrow cabinet to the far right. Inside sat three familiar tins.

Cream of Earl Grey. Jasmine. Rooibos.

Charlie felt a lump in his throat. Tom didn't drink tea. Neither did Hazel or Tom's other friends. They all drank black coffee that tasted like battery acid.

Tom knew exactly how long to let the water boil so it didn't scorch the leaves. He reached for the wide-rimmed mug—Charlie's favorite because it warmed his hands better—and he didn't ask about sugar. He just knew.

He walked back to the living room. He sat down close, right next to Charlie's hip.

"Here," Tom murmured. Their fingers brushed as he handed the mug over.

"Thank you," Charlie whispered. He wrapped both hands around the ceramic and took a sip.

It was exactly how he liked it.

He lowered the mug, staring into the dark liquid.

“Since when?”

Tom picked up a grey throw pillow, his thumb digging into the fabric.

“Four years.”

Charlie's eyes widened. “That... Thomas...”

“I know,” Tom said quietly. “I never thought I was... I mean, I never looked at guys. And then I realized I was looking at you.”

“Four *years*? Why... why didn't you say anything?” Charlie asked. “You knew... You knew I love you...”

Tom turned to him, his expression pained. “I was terrified. Of scaring you.”

He leaned forward, looking earnestly into Charlie's eyes. “You've been through all this horrible shit. Even up until recently, you've been in so much pain. I thought...” He cut himself off, shaking his head. “I hoped I was protecting you by keeping it to myself. I'm sorry I made that choice for you.”

Charlie replayed the last four years in his head—the way Tom stood guard at parties, the way he answered calls on the first ring, the softness in his voice that Charlie had mistaken for pity.

It wasn't pity. It was restraint.

“It hurt,” Charlie admitted. “Thinking you didn’t see me that way.”

“I do see you,” Tom promised fiercely. “I’ve always seen you.”

Charlie looked at his best friend—his fiancé—and saw the fear behind the intensity. The fear that he had damaged the one thing he was trying to protect. He imagined receiving this confession four years ago. He thought about how much therapy he’s had since then.

“I forgive you,” Charlie said. He set the mug down on the low coffee table and reached out, covering Tom’s restless hand with his own. “You were trying to do the right thing. We can’t change it now.”

Tom exhaled. Tentatively, he lifted his arm, hovering it behind Charlie’s shoulders. He paused, giving Charlie the space to pull away.

Charlie stared at the hand, then leaned in. When his temple met Tom’s shoulder, a small shudder went through him.

Tom’s arm settled around him. They sat there in the quiet of the penthouse. For the first time since the letter, the adrenaline that had been holding Charlie’s spine straight began to drain away.

He tried to keep his eyes open. He wanted to memorize the feeling of Tom’s hand rubbing his upper arm. He wanted to ask a million more questions. *Are you sure? Is this real? Why me?*

But his body decided for him. His eyelids grew heavy.

Tom didn’t move, terrified of breaking the spell. Eventually, he realized Charlie was out cold.

“Char,” Tom whispered, wiping a dry tear track from Charlie’s cheek. “Charlie, wake up. Let’s get you to a real bed.”

Charlie groaned. He let Tom pull him up, stumbling slightly as they walked down the hall. But the moment they crossed the threshold into the bedroom, the sleep vanished from Charlie’s brain.

The room was dark and cool, smelled overwhelmingly of Tom. He had only been in here briefly once or twice before.

Tom walked to the king-sized bed and pulled back the duvet.

Charlie froze in the doorway. A bed wasn’t just furniture.

Tom noticed immediately. He stopped pulling the covers down, turning slowly, holding his hands up where Charlie could see them.

"Hey," Tom whispered. "Char. It’s just sleep. I promise. We are just going to sleep."

Charlie searched Tom’s face, looking for the lie, the trap. He found only the same steady, gentle Thomas he had known since high school.

Charlie swallowed hard, nodding jerkily. He forced his legs to move.

Getting into the bed felt surreal. The sheets were cool against his skin, comfortable despite him still being in his sweater and jeans. He lay on his back, staring up at the dark ceiling, body rigid.

I am in Thomas's bed, his brain repeated mercilessly. I am in Thomas's bed, and he knows I love him.

Tom got in on the other side. He stayed close to the edge, leaving a wide, respectful space between them.

The room settled into silence.

Charlie lay there, eyes wide open. It felt too fragile. If he moved, he might wake up back in his own apartment.

Slowly, his hand trembling, Charlie reached out across the empty space. His fingers found the hem of Tom's t-shirt. He gripped the fabric tightly.

Tom didn't say a word. He slid across until the gap was gone, draping his arm over Charlie's waist.

"G'night, Char," Tom breathed into the darkness.

"Goodnight, Thomas," Charlie murmured. He didn't close his eyes right away. He just listened to the steady beat of Tom's heart, waiting for his own to realize that for the first time in his life, he didn't have to run.

Chapter 2

Tom's internal clock usually had him laced up and out the door by 5:30 AM. But today, the digital clock on the nightstand read 6:42 AM. The sun was already bold, lighting up the room.

Tom hadn't moved an inch. He lay on his side, his left arm completely numb where it was tucked under his pillow.

He had the penthouse, the car, the assets. But looking at Charlie's messy hair spread across his pillow, Tom knew the truth. Until eight hours ago, he had been living in a showroom.

He wanted to shout. He wanted to open the floor-to-ceiling windows and yell at the Montreal skyline. Instead, he just lay there, watching Charlie sleep.

A small frown appeared between Charlie's brows. His eyes opened, unfocused. He blinked, his gaze drifting down to his own hand.

His fingers were fisted tight in Tom's t-shirt, right over Tom's heart. He was holding on like he was afraid to fall off the earth.

The realization hit him hard.

His eyes went wide. A flush crawled up his neck, turning his ears a bright, horrified red.

"Oh my god," Charlie gasped.

He snatched his hand back. He scrambled in reverse, limbs tangling in the duvet.

"I— I wasn't— I didn't mean to—" Charlie stammered, voice cracking. He looked ready to phase through the mattress. "I'm so sorry. I must have—in my sleep, I just—"

Tom laughed. He reached out, catching Charlie's wrist before he could scoot off the edge of the bed.

"Charlie. Breathe."

"I was clinging," Charlie whispered, mortified. He stopped trying to escape, but he couldn't look Tom in the eye. He buried his burning face in the pillow. "I'm so embarrassing. I'm a disaster."

"You are not a disaster," Tom said. He shifted closer. He pressed a kiss to Charlie's temple, lingering there. "You're perfect. But if you hide in that pillow forever, you won't get breakfast. And I make excellent pancakes."

Charlie peeked up, one eye visible through his messy bangs. The panic receded just enough to let the confusion in. "Pancakes?"

"Blueberry," Tom promised. "Go back to sleep for twenty minutes. I'll come get you when they're ready."

"Go back to sleep," Tom had said.

Charlie sat in the silence of the bedroom, staring at the closed door.

Sleep? Was he joking?

Charlie was wide awake, his heart doing jumping jacks in his throat. He sat up, pulling his knees to his chest, looking around the room with wide eyes. Without Tom's physical presence acting as a gravity well, the reality of the situation came rushing back in.

He was in Tom's bed. He had spent the night in Tom's arms. Tom had said he loved him.

"This is insane," Charlie whispered. "This is actually insane."

He scrambled out of bed. He paced the length of the rug, hands tangling in his hair.

He needed to check reality.

He entered the en-suite bathroom. It was bigger than his and Hazel's entire kitchen, all slate grey stone and glass, smelling faintly of Tom's cologne. Charlie gripped the edge of the marble sink, staring at himself in the massive mirror.

His hair was a bird's nest, his sweater was wrinkled from sleeping in it, and his face was still flushed pink.

"Perfect," he muttered. It sounded ridiculous.

He splashed water on his face. It was freezing. The stone under his feet was solid.

I love you, Tom had said. *Four years.*

Charlie leaned his forehead against the mirror, closing his eyes. A bubble of laughter rose in his chest. He wasn't being deported. He was getting married. To Tom.

He stood there for what felt like hours, vibrating with a mix of terror and a joy so sharp it felt like it might kill him, until a new sensory input broke through.

Bacon.

The scent drifted under the door. It reminded Charlie that his stomach was empty.

He walked into the kitchen, his bare feet silent on the cool tile, feeling like an intruder.

Tom was at the stove, flipping pancakes. He was barefoot too.

He looked over his shoulder as Charlie entered, his expression softening into that new, open affection that Charlie was still struggling to comprehend.

"Perfect timing," Tom said. He slid the final pancake onto the stack and carried two plates to the island.

Usually, when they ate here before a night out, they sat across from each other, but Tom set the plates down side-by-side. Then, he dragged his leather stool around the corner of the island so it was parked directly next to Charlie's.

"Sit," Tom said, nodding to the stool.

Tom ate with his right hand, while his left rested on the back of Charlie's neck. It was a companionable silence, but it gave Charlie too much room to think.

He pushed a piece of syrup-soaked pancake around his plate.

"Thomas?"

"Mm?"

"I..." Charlie put his fork down. His hand was shaking. He stared at the countertop. "I don't know how to do... any of this. I've never... I don't have any experience. With anyone."

He looked up, eyes wide and glassy. "I'm worried you won't be... that you're going to realize you made a mistake. Because I'm a mess."

Tom stopped eating. He didn't look surprised or disappointed. He turned his entire body on the stool and took both of Charlie's cold hands.

"I know," Tom said simply. "I know you haven't been with anyone. I was there. And I know you're scared."

He squeezed Charlie's hands. "I am not looking for 'experience.' I am looking for you. I am incredibly, painfully attracted to you, exactly as you are. The mess included. That is not something you ever have to worry about."

"But," Tom continued. "We are going to move at your pace. If that means we just hold hands for six months? Fine. If we just sleep in the same bed and nothing else? Perfect."

Tom offered a small, crooked smile. "We're getting married, remember? We have the rest of our lives. There is no deadline."

The air rushed out of Charlie's lungs. He leaned forward, collapsing until his forehead rested against Tom's shoulder.

"Okay," Charlie breathed. "Okay."

After breakfast, they stood side-by-side at the deep stainless steel sink, Tom washing, Charlie drying. Every time their elbows bumped or their hips brushed, a little jolt went through Charlie—a reminder that this wasn't a dream.

"I can't wear yesterday's clothes," Charlie noted after, wrinkling his nose at his sweater.

"Closet's yours," Tom called from the bathroom where he was shaving.

Charlie emerged a few minutes later, drowning in a pair of Tom's sweatpants—rolled twice at the waist to keep them from falling—and a long-sleeved t-shirt that hung nearly to his knees. He looked ridiculous and entirely safe.

Tom lowered his razor, watching Charlie's reflection in the mirror. He paused as he took in the sight of Charlie wearing his life. He rinsed the blade, wiped his face with a plush towel, and turned around.

"Here," Tom said softly.

He walked over and reached out, his large hands finding Charlie's wrists. He began rolling up the sleeves of the shirt.

"A little long," Tom murmured, folding the cotton back until Charlie's hands were visible again.

Charlie looked up at him, a shy, tentative smile touching his lips. Standing there in clothes that were three sizes too big, surrounded by Tom's scent, he didn't feel small in the way he usually did—like he was disappearing. He felt enveloped. He felt claimed.

"Thank you," Charlie whispered.

Tom rested his warm hand on Charlie's back. "Ready?"

They stood in the open kitchen, clean, fed, and united. They weren't just best friends anymore. They were a team.

And then, at 8:00 AM exactly, Charlie's phone buzzed aggressively on the island.

FaceTime Request: Hazel (THE GENERAL)

"It's the General," Charlie murmured.

"Answer it," Tom said. He rested a hand on Charlie's shoulder, his thumb digging in slightly. "We're ready."

Charlie took a shaky breath and tapped the green button.

Hazel's face exploded onto the screen. She looked like she hadn't slept in a week. Her hair was thrown into a bun that defied physics, her glasses were sliding down her nose, and she was holding a legal pad that had clearly been attacked by a Sharpie.

"Listen to me very carefully because I have been on hold with the federal government for three hours and I am currently running on rage and espresso," she launched. "I called Dad's firm. I threatened a secretary. We have an immigration specialist who can squeeze us in at 11:00 AM via Zoom. We need—"

She stopped mid-sentence. Her eyes narrowed, zooming in.

"Charlie, are you wearing his shirt?"

Charlie flushed, looking down. "Uh. Yeah. My sweater was—"

"Don't care. We'll unpack it later," Hazel snapped, waving her pen. "Focus. We need a narrative. The government isn't stupid, you morons. They look for fraud. They are paid to find cracks. They interview people separately in windowless rooms. They ask what side of the bed you sleep on, what colour his toothbrush is, and exactly where you were on your second anniversary."

She leaned into the camera.

"And what are you going to tell Mom?"

The blood vanished from Charlie's face.

"Mum," he whispered. "Oh god. Hazel, I can't... I can't lie to Mum. She'll know. She always knows. If I look her in the eye and tell her I'm scamming the government—if I lie to her face —"

Charlie felt green. He staggered back, bumping into Tom's chest.

"I can't do it," Charlie gasped, clutching his stomach. "I'm going to throw up."

"Charlie, hey, hey." Tom turned Charlie around. He took Charlie's face in his hands, his thumbs pressing firmly against Charlie's jaw, forcing him to focus. "Breathe. Look at me."

"I'm such a bad liar," Charlie wheezed, his eyes darting around the room. "I'm the worst liar. I sweat. I stutter. She'll know instantly."

"Char, listen to me," Tom said. "This isn't a fake marriage where we lie about being in love."

Charlie blinked. "It... it isn't?"

"No," Tom said, holding his gaze. "All we have to do is convince them we've been in love for a while. Which is technically true. We aren't lying to the government, and we aren't lying to your mother about our feelings. We're just..." Tom tilted his head slightly. "Adjusting the timeline of the official paperwork. No lies. Just paperwork."

Charlie stared at him. We aren't lying about being in love.

"Okay," Charlie exhaled. His shoulders dropped three inches. "Okay. That... that I can do. I can do paperwork."

From the phone in Charlie's hand, a shrill voice cut through.

"WAIT. STOP. PAUSE."

Charlie flinched and held the phone back up.

"Did I just hear that right?" Hazel pointed her pen at the screen. "You're in love? Both of you?"

Tom cleared his throat, the tips of his ears turning a faint pink, but he didn't look away. "Yeah."

Hazel huffed. She grabbed her coffee mug and took a frantic gulp. "Okay. Okay, this changes things. This is... tactically significant. This makes the narrative easier, actually. We don't have to script the affection. Good. Great."

She stopped, her face twisting into a grimace. She started tapping her pen rapidly against her desk.

"But Mom..." she trailed off.

"What?" Charlie asked. "What about Mum?"

"I have absolutely no idea how she's going to react to this specific cocktail of information," Hazel admitted, pushing her glasses up her nose. "She loves Tom, obviously. But she also knows Charlie has been pining since the tenth grade. If we call her and spring a wedding on her because of a deportation order, she's going to have a stroke."

Hazel took a deep breath.

"I need to be on site when you tell her," she commanded. "This is a controlled demolition. Do not call her. Do not text her. Do not even think about her too loudly or she will sense the disturbance in the Force."

She pointed the pen directly into the camera lens. "We are going over there for dinner. I will run point. I am managing the splash zone. Understood?"

Tom and Charlie exchanged a wide-eyed look.

"Understood," they said in unison.

The little green light on Tom's webcam flickered on.

"Can you see us?" Tom asked.

"Video and audio are good," came the dry voice from the speakers.

Tom and Charlie were sharing the high-backed leather chair in Tom's home office. They were pulling off the classic 'Zoom Mullet'—business up top, slumber party down below. Tom wore a crisp white button-down, while Charlie had pulled a navy sweater over a collared shirt. But below the mahogany desk, Charlie was still drowning in Tom's grey sweatpants.

Behind the laptop, Hazel was pacing. She had arrived ten minutes ago in an aggressive flurry of perfume and coffee cups, and now she was marching back and forth like a caged tiger.

Click-click-turn-click-click.

On screen, Mr. Tremblay adjusted his silver-rimmed glasses. He looked like a man who considered smiling a billable hour.

"Let's get one thing straight before we start," Tremblay said. "I am taking this consultation as a personal favour to the Heitmeyer family. But if I smell a lie, I disconnect. I will not risk my license for sponsorship fraud. Do we understand each other?"

Charlie's hands, resting on his thighs under the desk, began to shake.

Tom kept his eyes locked on the camera while he covered Charlie's fingers with his own.

"We understand," Tom said evenly. "Ask whatever you want."

Tremblay leaned back. "Fine. Mr. Heitmeyer. Let's start with you. Prove you know him. Describe Mr. Montgomery's morning routine."

Charlie licked his dry lips. He didn't have to think about this. He had lived this vicariously for years.

"He wakes up at 5:30, even on weekends," Charlie said. "He drinks a vanilla protein shake and then he runs Mount Royal."

Charlie glanced sideways at Tom's profile. "Unless it's raining. If it's raining, he goes to the gym on Sherbrooke. The one... Um. The logo is purple, with, uh, yellow letters."

Tremblay scribbled something. "Be more specific. Personal hygiene."

Charlie felt a blush creeping up his neck. "He uses a body wash that smells like... sandalwood. And... something else. Earthy. I don't know the brand name, but the bottle is dark green with a matte black cap. It's in the shower caddy on the top shelf, above the shampoo and conditioner. "

Tom turned his head slightly, his eyebrows raised.

Off-screen, Hazel's pacing slowed.

"Alright," Tremblay grunted. He didn't look up. "Next question. Mr. Heitmeyer: How is your relationship with his parents?"

Charlie stiffened. He looked down at the keyboard.

"We... We don't get along."

Tremblay looked up. "Elaborate."

"They don't like me," Charlie mumbled. "Because... I'm gay. They tolerate me as Tom's friend, but... barely."

Tom's jaw tightened. He leaned toward the microphone. "Mr. Tremblay, I have a request. My father doesn't know about this yet. If he finds out via a government filing before I tell him myself, he'll blow this whole thing up. We just need one more day."

Tremblay stared at them for a long beat. Then, he nodded, making a note. "Family friction," he muttered. "Good. That helps."

"It does?" Charlie asked.

"Fake couples pretend everything is perfect," Tremblay said. "Real couples have in-laws who hate them."

He turned his gaze to Tom. "Mr. Montgomery. What antidepressant does Mr. Heitmeyer take?"

"Duloxetine," Tom answered instantly. "Two pills, 120 milligrams. He takes it in the morning with the other meds, with tea. This morning it was Rooibos."

Behind the laptop, Hazel stopped moving entirely.

"And his work?" Tremblay asked, tapping his pen. "What does he do all day?"

"He's a doctoral candidate in Music, Psychology, and Anthropology," Tom said, his voice swelling with pride. "His dissertation is called: 'The Architecture of Absence: Cognitive and Cultural Resonances of Silence in the Post-Romantic Era.'"

Charlie turned to look at Tom, his mouth falling open.

He had made a specific point not to talk about it. He was terrified of boring Tom with academic theory, so he had mentioned the working title exactly once, four months ago, in passing while Tom was typing an email.

"Okay. Last question," Tremblay said. His eyes narrowed behind the lenses. "Tell me something specific about his childhood. Before the adoption."

Charlie winced.

Tom's hand squeezed Charlie's fist.

"He lived in Switzerland," Tom said. "For around five years, until he was nine. It... wasn't a good time."

Tom paused, glancing at the camera, then at Charlie. He squeezed Charlie's hand again.

"But," Tom continued, "when he's really, really tired... he counts like they do. He says septante and nonante instead of soixante-dix and quatre-vingt-dix."

Behind the camera, Hazel gasped softly. She stood by the bookshelf, her hand covering her mouth. She had been Charlie's sister for more than a decade and had never heard that.

Charlie felt his eyes burn.

Tremblay took off his glasses. He set them on the desk.

The silence stretched.

Finally, Tremblay looked up. The corner of his mouth quirked.

"In my experience," he said, "couples rehearse. They memorize details about each other like they're cramming."

He studied them for a long moment, then nodded once.

"These aren't facts you've learned for today. You've absorbed this stuff over time. You can't fake that kind of attention."

He picked up his pen. "I'll take the case. Get me the photos. I'll start the paperwork."

The screen went black. The green light flickered off.

Charlie slumped forward.

"Oh my god," he whined.

"You did great," Tom murmured, rubbing Charlie's back. "You did great. We're good."

"Kill me. Just kill me now."

Charlie refused to lift his head. His shoulders were shaking with a mix of laughter and mortification. He had just admitted to a federal lawyer—and to Thomas Montgomery himself—that he had memorized the specific scent profile of Tom's body wash. He might as well have Tom's hair trimmings in a jar.

Tom, by contrast, looked like he had just won the lottery.

He wrapped both arms around Charlie's shoulders, pulling him in until there was no daylight between them. He rested his chin on top of Charlie's head, a grin spreading across his face that was equal parts triumphant and dopey.

"You know I count in Swiss French?" Charlie's voice was small.

"You know exactly where I keep my body wash?" Tom countered, and Charlie could actually hear the smile. "Top shelf? Dark green bottle? Matte black cap?"

Charlie groaned, a sound of pure misery, but he couldn't stop his own smile. The pathetic, embarrassing, all-consuming secret was out, and Tom wasn't running away.

He was holding on tighter.

From across the room, a noise of disgust slashed through the tender moment.

"Okay, absolutely not," Hazel said. "You two are actually repulsive."

She started pacing again, throwing her hands up. "I consider myself a perceptive person. I am a very perceptive person. And I have been third-wheeling a romance novel for years without knowing it!"

She spun around, pointing an accusing finger at Charlie's back. "Do you know how many hours of my life I have wasted listening to you whine about him?"

Charlie finally lifted his head. His face was roughly the color of a ripe tomato, and his hair was sticking up in three different directions where he had been rubbing it against Tom's chest. He looked both overwhelmed and happier than Hazel had ever seen him.

He looked at Tom. The air between settled.

Tom squeezed Charlie's arm, his eyes soft and serious, ignoring Hazel entirely. "We passed."

"We passed," Charlie echoed.

PING.

Hazel checked her phone. Her face went slack.

"It's Mom," she announced.

Charlie's smile vanished. He sat up straight, the sweatpants suddenly feeling very undignified.

Hazel cleared her throat and read the text aloud: "Is Thomas coming tonight? I made the lemon tart he likes. Don't be late."

Charlie looked at Tom with wide, panicked eyes. The lemon tart was not just a dessert. It was the nuclear weapon of maternal affection. She only made it once or twice a year for dramatic effect.

She already loved Tom like a third son, which meant telling her that one of her actual sons was marrying him to avoid deportation wasn't just going to be awkward.

It was going to be a betrayal of the tart.

Hazel looked up from her phone, her expression deadly serious.

"She made the tart," Hazel said, pointing a shaking finger at them. "She's bringing out the big guns. If you two give her a heart attack, I am testifying against you. I will lead the prosecution."

Charlie swallowed hard, the euphoria of the last five minutes evaporating into a cold mist. Mr. Tremblay had been a shark, sure. But he was just a guy doing a job, bound by laws and ethics.

Nancy Heitmeyer was the Final Boss. She had no jurisdiction but guilt.

"We need a plan," Charlie whispered.

"We bring wine," Tom said. He stood up with grim determination. "Expensive wine. Vintage. A lot of it."

Chapter 3

The door clicked shut.

Tom had been holding himself back all morning. He had been a perfect gentleman. He couldn't stand it for a moment longer.

"Come here," Tom murmured. He reached out, wrapping his fingers around Charlie's wrist.

Charlie let out a startled sound as Tom tugged him toward the leather sectional.

"Thomas, wait, I—"

Tom couldn't wait. He sat down and pulled Charlie with him, eliminating the space between them until Charlie was tucked deep into the corner of the sofa.

Charlie went rigid. *Too close.*

For a decade, there had been an invisible fence between them—a barrier Charlie had built to keep his feelings from leaking out.

Tom threw a heavy leg over Charlie's. He wrapped an arm around Charlie's waist, pulling him in until their chests pressed together.

"Breathe, Char," Tom whispered against his temple.

Charlie exhaled. His hands hovered in the air for a second before clutching at Tom's shirt.

He fit there perfectly, even if his nervous system hadn't caught up yet.

Tom nosed at Charlie's throat.

God.

Charlie smelled like he always did—printed paper, cheap unscented detergent, and warm skin. For four years, Tom had survived on ghosts of this scent, caught in brief, friendly hugs or leaning over a table.

Now, he could drink it in. He took another deep, greedy breath. It was better than the adrenaline of a closed deal. It was better than anything.

"You okay?" Tom mumbled against Charlie's pulse point. He felt the artery jump under his lips.

"I think so," Charlie whispered. "I just... I feel like I'm crashing your life. Hazel is going to bring my stuff, and suddenly I'm just... here. Taking up space."

Tom pulled back slightly. He waited until Charlie flicked his eyes up.

"Charlie," Tom said. "You are not crashing my life. You are my life."

Charlie's eyes widened. He opened his mouth to deflect, to apologize, but his brain stalled.

"Thomas..." he breathed.

"Listen to me." Tom pressed his forehead against Charlie's. "I have walked around this apartment for years wishing you were here. I bought the kettle you like just in case you came over for five minutes. The guest room is basically yours. I haven't had a girlfriend since college. We broke up because I couldn't stop thinking about you."

Tom's hand came up to cup the back of Charlie's neck.

"Having you here? Moving into my bed and my life?" Tom's gaze was intense. "This isn't a burden. It's the only thing I want. You are doing me the favour."

Charlie searched Tom's eyes, looking for pity or obligation. He found only a dark, bottomless hunger.

"Oh," Charlie breathed.

"Yeah. Oh." Tom let out a rough chuckle. He couldn't help himself; he leaned in and pressed a firm, lingering kiss to Charlie's forehead, then his temple, then the tip of his nose. He was starving for this.

"I am so fucking obsessed with you," Tom admitted. "It's embarrassing."

Charlie laughed—a wet, shaky sound—and hid his face in Tom's neck again. "It is a little embarrassing. But I like it."

"Good," Tom growled playfully, tightening his grip until Charlie squeaked. "'Cause I'm not letting go."

He settled back against the cushions, Charlie draped over him like a weighted blanket. Tom closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of his fiancé, feeling the steady *thump-thump* of Charlie's heart against his own.

The doorbell was held down.

"Open up! I have half of Charlie's wardrobe in trash bags because I couldn't find his suitcase!"

Tom laughed—a relaxed, easy sound that Charlie heard in his dreams—and went to buzz her in.

A moment later, Hazel swept into the pristine apartment like a hurricane in a blazer, carrying two massive black garbage bags and dragging a duffel bag with her foot.

"I didn't know what you needed," Hazel announced, dumping it all on the ottoman. "So I panicked and brought everything. Winter coat? Check. That scratchy sweater you hate? Check. Birth certificate? Double check."

"Hazel," Charlie said, peeling himself off the couch. "It's August. Why did you bring my parka?"

"Because you're moving!" she stressed. "You don't leave the parka behind, Charlie. That's bad luck."

She turned to Tom, her eyes scanning him up and down. "You look too rich. Change."

Tom looked down. "I look... like myself?"

"Mom is making the lemon tart," Hazel countered. "That means she's in 'Cozy Mode.' If you show up looking like you're about to acquire a small country, she'll feel underdressed. Put on the blue one with the hole in the cuff. She loves that one. It makes you look human."

Tom blinked, then looked at Charlie for help.

"Just do it," Charlie advised. "She's right about the sweater."

The next twenty minutes were a blur. Hazel sat on the bed, barking orders while Charlie and Tom raided the closet.

"No, no tie," she directed at Charlie. "Too formal. You're telling her you're in love, not appearing before a grand jury. Wear the white button-down with the top button undone. Show some collarbone. It makes you look vulnerable."

Charlie buttoned the shirt as instructed, checking the mirror. Tom came up behind him, wearing the approved blue sweater (which did, in fact, have a small unravelling thread on the left cuff). He reached out and fixed Charlie's collar, his fingers lingering against Charlie's neck.

Hazel groaned loudly, flopping back onto the duvet. "If you two start making heart eyes again, I am leaving you here. We are on a schedule!"

They took Tom's car, but Hazel insisted on driving.

"I need to control the speed," she argued. "If we get there too early, Dad will still be gardening. If we get there too late, Mom will spiral about the chicken drying out. I have the timing down to a science."

Tom sat in the passenger seat, looking amused. Charlie sat in the back, clutching two bottles of expensive Riesling like a life raft.

They left the glass-and-steel canyons of downtown behind. As they merged and took the exit for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, the scenery shifted. The frenetic energy of the city melted into the leafy, red-brick charm of NDG.

They turned onto Avenue Belmore.

Mature maples formed a canopy overhead, dappling the asphalt in late-afternoon sunlight. The houses were distinct Montreal duplexes—solid red brick with wrought-iron balconies and winding exterior staircases.

Hazel pulled up to the curb in front of 3465, a sturdy two-storey house with a wide front porch and white-trimmed windows. The front garden was charmingly overgrown—hostas and ferns spilling over the stone retaining wall, a testament to David's gardening obsession.

A red beater was parked in the driveway—Alex's car.

Hazel killed the engine.

"Okay," she said, twisting in her seat to face them.

"Remember," she murmured. "You aren't asking for permission. You're sharing good news. They love you both. Don't make it a tragedy."

Charlie nodded, his grip on the wine bottles tightening.

"Ready?" Tom asked, reaching back to squeeze Charlie's knee.

Charlie looked at the house—the place that had taken him in when he was fourteen, the place that had taught him what safety felt like.

"Ready," Charlie lied.

They stepped out of the car. The evening air smelled like cut grass and charcoal.

Before they could even make it to the porch steps, the front door swung open.

Nancy Heitmeyer stood there, wiping her hands on her apron. She was small, energetic, and had the kind of smile that could disarm a bomb squad.

"I saw the car!" she called out, waving. "Thomas! Did you bring an appetite? David is making way too much potato salad!"

Tom smiled, the slight tension in his shoulders dropping. He walked up the path, leaving Charlie and Hazel a step behind.

"We brought wine," Tom called back, charming as ever. "Is that a fair trade?"

Nancy laughed, opening her arms for a hug.

Charlie watched them from the sidewalk, his heart beating wildly. He looked at Hazel.

"Here we go," she whispered.

Nancy led them through the narrow front hall, past the wall of framed photos—Hazel at graduation, Alex on his first day at the garage, Tom and Charlie soaking wet at a cottage years ago—and into the kitchen.

It was the heartbeat of the house. Copper pots hung from a rack that was slightly too low, and the counters were cluttered with the debris of an elaborate meal prep.

David Heitmeyer was standing at the island chopping celery. Through the window above the sink, Charlie could see his brother in the backyard, wrestling a hose near the hydrangea bushes.

"David!" Nancy announced. "Hazel and the boys are here! And they brought the wine."

David turned around. He was a tall, buff man with stooped shoulders and kind eyes. He wiped his hands on a tea towel and smiled.

He moved to hug Charlie, a comforting squeeze that smelled of earth and fresh vegetables. "Hi, kiddo."

"Hi, Dad," Charlie whispered.

David released him and offered Tom a firm hand. "Thomas. Good to see you. I like the sweater. It's got character."

Tom smiled. "Thanks, David. Hazel picked it out."

"Okay," Hazel interrupted. She set the wine bottles down on the counter.

"We aren't just here for dinner," Hazel said. "We have news. And it's... it's rough."

"Is everyone okay?" Nancy asked, her eyes darting immediately to Charlie, scanning for injury. "Is it health? Is it school?"

"It's the government," Charlie said. His hands were shaking again. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the folded, crumpled letter.

He handed it to his mother.

Nancy took it, her brow furrowing. David leaned over her shoulder, putting on his reading glasses.

They read in silence. The only sound was the hum of the refrigerator.

"Inadmissible?" David read aloud. "Revocation? That is... that is *preposterous*."

"It's insane," Nancy breathed. Her face was flushed with indignation. "We filed every paper. We had three lawyers. We have all the certificates!"

"They're reviewing his status," Hazel explained, her arms crossed tight. "It triggers a deportation proceeding while they investigate."

"*Deportation?*" Nancy looked up, eyes wide. "Over my dead body. I will march down to that office and sit on the minister's desk until they fix this."

"We called your firm," Tom interjected calmly. "Mr. Tremblay's on it. It's likely a procedural error from the adoption filing, but fighting it could take months. Maybe a year."

"A year of uncertainty," David muttered, taking off his glasses. "A year of looking over your shoulder."

"Exactly," Tom said. He took a step closer to Charlie. "Which is why we aren't taking the risk."

"What do you mean?" Nancy asked, looking between them.

"There is a faster way to secure his status," Tom said. "Spousal sponsorship."

David blinked. "Spousal? You don't mean..."

Charlie took a deep breath. He looked at the floor, then at his father, then finally at Tom.

Tom nodded, a silent encouragement.

"We're getting married," Charlie said.

For three seconds, nobody moved.

Nancy looked at Tom, scanning his face, the way he was unconsciously shielding Charlie with his body.

Then, the shock on her face melted away.

A small, knowing smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, and her eyes went soft.

"Well," Nancy said, letting out a long exhale. "It's about time."

Charlie balked. "What?"

"Oh, honey," Nancy said, stepping forward. She pulled Charlie into a hug, kissing his cheek, then reached out for Tom.

Tom had to bend down significantly to fit into her embrace, but he did it happily.

"I'm sorry I couldn't admit it sooner," Tom mumbled.

"I've known since tenth grade, Thomas," Nancy whispered loud enough for everyone to hear. "Mothers always know."

She pulled back, beaming at them. "My two boys. Finally."

Charlie's face was burning. He looked at Hazel. She shrugged. "I told you."

"Hey!" The back door swung open, and Alex walked in, wiping dirt off his knees. "Why are we hugging? Did someone die?"

"Tom and Charlie are getting married," David said.

David was still standing by the island. He was looking at them with a thoughtful expression.

A grin spread across Alex's face.

"No fucking way," he laughed. "We should've bet on this years ago!"

"Alright, alright," David interrupted. "Dinner. Now. And watch your language."

Ten minutes later, the dining room table was groaning under the weight of the food: roast chicken, the famous potato salad, corn on the cob, and a basket of rolls.

Alex was already on his second roll, looking delighted.

"So," Alex chewed. "Who proposed? Let me guess. Tom had a spreadsheet?"

"I did not have a spreadsheet," Tom said, passing the butter to Charlie. "And I proposed."

"Down on one knee?" Nancy asked, eyes sparkling.

"Yes," Charlie murmured, staring at his corn. "It was... very dramatic."

"Good," Nancy declared.

David cleared his throat. He hadn't touched his food yet. He was watching Tom from the head of the table.

"Thomas," David said.

The table went quiet.

"Sir?" Tom straightened up.

"I know the legal situation is urgent," David said slowly. "And I know you are a problem solver. You see a mess, you fix it. That's why you're good at your job. But marriage isn't a fix. It's a life. I need to know... have you thought this through? Is this just a strategy to you? Because Charlie is not a project."

Charlie's eyes stung. "Dad..."

"No, Charlie," David said gently. "I'm asking Tom."

Tom placed his fork down respectfully and looked David in the eye.

"I know it looks fast on paper," Tom said. "But this just... sped up the timeline."

Tom reached under the table. Charlie felt a warm hand find his, interlacing their fingers and squeezing tight.

"I love Charlie more than anything," Tom said. "I'm doing this because I can't imagine my life without him. The paperwork is just a bonus."

Nancy sniffled.

David held Tom's gaze for a long moment.

Then he exhaled, his posture relaxing against the chair. He picked up his fork.

"Okay," David said, a smile appearing in his beard. "Okay. That's all I needed to hear."

"Yeah. Pass the potatoes," Alex said. "Before Mom starts crying in the gravy."

"Too late," Hazel noted, handing Nancy a napkin.

Charlie looked around the table. The letter was still in Nancy's pocket. The threat was still out there.

But in here, with the smell of roast chicken and the sound of his family bickering, Charlie realized something.

He wasn't fighting this alone anymore.

"Eat up," Nancy said, dabbing her eyes. "We have lemon tart for dessert. And we have a wedding to plan."

The lemon tart was a tactical success. It was sweet and rich enough to put everyone into a carb-induced lull.

After the last crumb was gone, the Heitmeyer kitchen dissolved into the comfortable ritual of cleanup. It was a dance Charlie knew by heart.

Alex cleared the table, stacking plates precariously. Hazel boxed up leftovers, labelling them like evidence. David took control of the garbage and recycling while Nancy excused herself to the washroom.

Charlie took his post at the sink, rolling up his sleeves.

Tom, without needing to be asked, picked up a drying towel and stood next to him.

"You doing okay?" Tom asked quietly, taking a wet serving platter from Charlie's soapy hands.

"Yeah," Charlie said, scrubbing the grease baked onto the roasting pan. "I think I am. You?"

"Thomas?"

Tom turned. Nancy was standing in the doorway, trying to hide a small pouch behind her back.

"Can I borrow you for a second?"

Tom dried his hands on the towel, giving Charlie's arm a quick squeeze before following Nancy into the dining room.

Nancy stopped. She reached out, took Tom's hand, and pressed the pouch firmly into his palm.

"David and I were saving this," she said. "It was David's grandfather's. We thought... well, we didn't know who it would be for. We thought maybe Alex, one day. But we know now."

Tom looked down at the pouch, then back at her, his eyes widening. He could afford to buy Charlie a ring worth more than this entire house, but he knew at once he could never buy anything as valuable as this.

"Nancy," Tom started. "I can't—"

"You can," she corrected him. "It's just a band, Thomas. Simple gold. It's been sitting in a drawer for twenty years waiting for the right person."

She patted his hand.

"He needs to know this is real," she whispered. "He gets in his head. He needs something to look at when he gets scared."

Tom swallowed hard. He nodded and squeezed her hand in thanks.

"Go on," she smiled. "Before he scrubs the non-stick coating off my pan."

Tom walked back into the kitchen.

David and Alex had retreated to the living room, where the muffled roar of the hockey game was already drifting in, punctuated by Alex yelling at the referee. Hazel was in the hallway, arguing in a low voice over the phone.

Charlie was at the sink, pulling the plug. He suddenly looked exhausted, hair falling into his eyes and shoulders slumped.

He dried his hands with a hand towel and sighed.

"Is Mum okay?" Charlie asked, turning around. "Did she want—"

He stopped.

Tom was standing right in front of him.

"She gave me something," he said softly.

Charlie blinked. "What?"

"Give me your hand."

Charlie hesitated, searching Tom's face. Then, slowly, he extended his left hand. His fingers were pink and pruned from the hot, soapy water, shaking slightly.

Tom took it. Then he pulled the ring out of his pocket.

No diamonds. Just a sturdy, unbroken circle that had survived two generations of Heitmeyer marriages.

"This isn't for the lawyers," Tom said. "And it isn't for your parents."

He slid the ring onto Charlie's finger. It went over the knuckle with a tiny bit of resistance, then settled at the base of his finger as if it belonged there.

"It's for you," Tom finished. "So you know I'm not going anywhere."

Charlie stared at his hand.

The tears came quickly, hot and overwhelming. He let out a shaky breath, chin trembling.

"Oh," Charlie whispered, voice cracking into a sob. "Okay. Okay."

He stepped forward and buried his face in Tom's chest. Tom wrapped his arms around him. He rested his chin on top of his head, rocking him slightly.

From the hallway, Hazel lowered her phone.

Nancy came up beside her, wiping her eyes again.

"Good work, Captain," Hazel whispered.

Nancy smiled and pulled the sliding pocket door shut, leaving them to their peace.

The goodbyes at the door were prolonged.

Nancy hugged Tom twice (once for the road and once for the engagement), David shook his hand with a warning grip, and Alex tried to steal the leftover wine before Hazel slapped his hand away.

The adrenaline of the Big Reveal began to fade, leaving a hum of exhaustion in the car. The drive back to the city was quiet. Tom drove with one hand on the wheel, his other hand resting on Charlie's leg.

They pulled into the underground garage of Tom's building. Tom put the car in park, but kept the engine running.

"Alright," Hazel said, leaning forward from the back seat. "Tremblay is emailing the forms tomorrow morning. I'll print them at the office because my printer is out of magenta. You two just... sleep. Or stare at each other. Or whatever."

She caught Charlie's eye in the rear-view mirror. Her expression softened, just a fraction. "And Char? Breathe. It went well. You didn't throw up."

"Yeah," Charlie whispered. He touched the gold band on his left hand, spinning it with his thumb. It felt strange and heavy, a new center of gravity. "It did."

"Goodnight, boys. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." She opened the door, stepping out into the cool air of the garage. She patted the roof of Tom's sedan twice before marching off toward the visitor spots where her car was parked.

Tom waited until he saw her taillights flash before killing the engine.

The elevator ride up was a blur. Tom unlocked the door.

The quiet of the apartment rushed to meet them. It still smelled like sandalwood.

But now, there were two black garbage bags on the leather ottoman, and a duffel bag on the floor.

Charlie buffered in the entryway.

"I need to unpack," Charlie said, toeing off his shoes and moving toward the pile. "Hazel probably packed everything wrong. I don't know if she brought my chargers. And I can't leave trash bags in your living room, it ruins the aesthetic..."

He reached for the knot on the first bag.

"Charlie."

Tom's hand covered his.

"Leave it."

"But it's a mess," Charlie insisted. "I'm making a mess."

"It's not a mess, it's a move," Tom said. He guided Charlie's hands away from the bag. "And you look like you're about to pass out. The bags can wait until tomorrow. Tonight, we're just existing."

Charlie hesitated for a moment before his shoulders slumped. "Okay. Existing. I can do that."

"Good," Tom smiled. He bent down and rummaged through the open duffel bag, pushing aside a sweater. "I'm just grabbing your stuff. Go to the bedroom."

Charlie obeyed, wandering down the hall.

He stood in the middle of Tom's bedroom—their bedroom—feeling unmoored. The bed was made. The city lights were glowing outside.

Tom appeared a moment later, holding Charlie's things.

"Bathroom," he commanded gently, nodding toward the en-suite.

Charlie followed him in.

Tom's bathroom vanity counter was empty, save for a few high-end products arranged neatly against the wall.

Tom set Charlie's battered toiletry bag down on the marble.

Then, he reached out and swept his own things—the expensive razor, the cologne, the structural face cream—to the far left side of the sink.

"There," Tom said. He unzipped Charlie's bag and took out Charlie's plastic toothbrush and drugstore face wash. He set them down in the empty space.

"This is your side. Fill it up. I don't care how cluttered it gets."

Charlie looked at the cheap blue plastic sitting on the imported marble.

"You hate clutter," Charlie whispered.

"I love you more than I hate clutter," Tom corrected. He reached into the shower and twisted the handle. The water hissed to life, steam fogging the mirror.

Tom pulled a fluffy grey towel from the heated rack and set it on the closed toilet lid.

"Take a shower," Tom murmured, turning back to Charlie. He reached out, brushing a strand of hair out of Charlie's eyes. "Wash the day off. Use the body wash if you want—I know you know where it is."

Charlie let out a weak, watery laugh. "Top shelf. Dark green bottle."

"Exactly," Tom grinned. "Take your time. I'll be out here."

Tom pressed a quick, chaste kiss to Charlie's forehead, then turned and walked out, pulling the door almost shut but leaving a crack of light.

Charlie stood in the steam, looking at his toothbrush sitting on the counter.

He wasn't a guest anymore.

Charlie emerged from the bathroom feeling scrubbed raw in the best way. He rubbed his wet hair with the towel, his face flushed pink from the heat.

Tom was sitting on the edge of the bed, scrolling through his phone. He looked up as the door opened.

He let his eyes travel over Charlie—clean, safe, and wearing his clothes. A slow, contented smile spread across Tom's face.

"Better?" Tom asked.

"Much," Charlie mumbled from behind the towel. He lowered it, his hair sticking up in damp, chaotic spikes. "I smell like you. It's weird. But good."

"It's good," Tom agreed, standing up. He walked over and squeezed his shoulder. "My turn. I'll be five minutes. Don't fall asleep yet."

Tom disappeared into the steam. True to his word, the water ran for exactly four minutes.

When Tom came out, dressed in plaid pyjama pants and a white t-shirt, Charlie was sitting on the bed, staring outside.

With a tilt of his head, Tom called Charlie back to the washroom.

There was something profoundly intimate about standing side-by-side at the sink at 10:30 PM.

They brushed their teeth in companionable silence, the only sound the electric hum of Tom's toothbrush and the manual scuffing of Charlie's blue plastic one. Their elbows bumped. Their eyes met in the mirror.

"Ready?" Tom asked, rinsing his mouth.

"Ready," Charlie nodded.

They moved to the bed.

Last night had been a rescue mission. Charlie had been fully clothed and terrified of the world.

Tonight, they climbed under the duvet as a couple.

Tom turned off the lamp, plunging the room into the soft, ambient glow of the city outside. Then he shifted closer, guiding Charlie to rest his head on Tom's chest.

Charlie let out a long breath, his body moulding against Tom's side.

The anxiety was still there. But lying here, listening to Tom's heart, it felt like those worries belonged to someone else standing outside the door.

Tom's hand moved up and down Charlie's arm

"How do you feel?" Tom murmured.

Charlie thought about it.

"Good," Charlie whispered back. "Really good." He paused. "Scared. But good."

Tom pressed a kiss to the top of Charlie's head. "Me too. Scared is okay. We can do scared."

They lay there for a moment in comfortable silence.

Then, Tom tilted his chin down so he could see Charlie's face.

"Char?"

"Mm?" Charlie looked up, his eyes adjusting.

"Can I kiss you?"

The question was respectful, giving Charlie every inch of space he needed to back away.

But Charlie didn't want space. He wanted to close the gap.

"Yes," he breathed.

Tom leaned in.

It was a kiss of pure adoration. Charlie closed his eyes, melting into the pillow, his hand moving to clutch loosely at the front of Tom's shirt.

Tom pulled back. He rested his forehead against Charlie's, their noses brushing.

"Goodnight, my angel," Tom murmured.

"Goodnight, Thomas," Charlie whispered back.

Chapter 4

The alarm didn't go off at 5:30 AM. Tom had switched it off the previous night.

But his internal clock was a stubborn thing. At 5:32 AM, Tom's eyes snapped open.

Usually, this was the moment he started listing emails to send and files to review. This morning, the first thing his brain registered was a weight on his chest.

Charlie was sprawled halfway across him, one arm thrown over Tom's stomach, his face pressed into Tom's shoulder. He was breathing in soft little puffs, fast asleep.

Tom lay there for ten minutes, just breathing him in.

Eventually, Tom carefully slid out from under him. Charlie's eyes fluttered open, revealing a sliver of sleepy confusion.

"S'where you going?" he mumbled, fingers reaching for Tom's wrist.

"Just for a run," Tom whispered, brushing the hair from Charlie's forehead. "Go back to sleep."

Charlie nodded, already drifting off as he rolled over, stealing Tom's pillow and burying his face in it. Tom smiled, grabbed his running gear, and left the room.

The run up Mount Royal was brutal and necessary. Tom pushed himself harder than usual, trying to outrun the unknowns that were waiting for him at the bottom.

Nancy and David had been the easy part. They led with their hearts.

His parents led with their reputation.

By the time he got back to the penthouse, dripping with sweat, the apartment smelled like... burnt coffee?

He walked into the kitchen to find Charlie standing by the counter in Tom's sweatpants. He was frowning at the coffee machine.

"I think I broke it," Charlie announced. "I tried to set it up for you, but it made an awful noise, and now it's blinking red."

Tom laughed, grabbing a towel to wipe his face. "It needs water, Char."

He walked over, reaching around Charlie to pull the water reservoir out. He pressed his chest against Charlie's back, leaving a damp spot on Charlie's t-shirt.

"Ew," Charlie squeaked, jumping away. "You're gross. Go shower."

"Good morning to you, too, husband," Tom teased.

The word made Charlie freeze. A flush crept up his neck, pink and lovely.

"Fiancé," Charlie corrected, but he looked pleased. "Now, go shower. I want crêpes. And not the healthy ones you make with protein powder. Real ones."

They went to a small spot in the Plateau, a place with checkered tablecloths and bowls of cider.

It was a Monday morning, so the place was quiet. They sat in a booth by the window, watching the city wake up.

Charlie had ordered a crêpe with strawberries and cream, but he was mostly picking at the edges.

"Stop thinking," Tom said, reaching across the table to tap Charlie's hand.

Charlie looked up, guilty. "I'm not thinking."

"You are. You're doing the thing where you chew your lip. That's your 'I'm a burden' face."

Charlie sighed. "Thomas... your father. If he thinks... if he thinks I'm messing up your trajectory..."

"He won't," Tom lied.

"He will," Charlie countered gently. "Your mom thinks I'm using you, and your dad thinks I'm a distraction. They're going to think I trapped you."

"Let them think what they want," Tom said, voice hardening. He cut a piece of his own crêpe with a little too much force. "My numbers are the best in the division. Dad cares about the bottom line. He's not going to fire his best VP over a personal life decision."

Charlie didn't look convinced. "He's not just a CEO, Tom. He's Michael Montgomery. He's your father. He cares about control."

Tom's phone buzzed on the table.

***Hazel (THE GENERAL):** Drafting the timeline for the narrative. Have you called the Embassy? Also, you need to tell your parents. Today. Rip the Band-Aid.*

Tom showed the text to Charlie.

"She's right," Tom said. "I have to do it now."

He picked up his phone and dialled. He couldn't hesitate, or he'd lose his nerve.

"Thomas?" Kathy Montgomery's voice was devoid of warmth. "It's Monday morning. Is everything alright at the office?"

"The office is fine, Mother," Tom said, eyes on Charlie's anxious face. "I'm taking a personal day. I need to see you and Dad tonight. Is he in town?"

"He's here," Kathy said, tone suspicious. "You never take personal days. Is this about... your friend? The musician?"

Charlie winced.

"It's about Charlie, yes," Tom said firmly. "We're coming for dinner. Seven o'clock?"

There was a pause on the line.

"I'll tell Cook to set two extra places," Kathy said finally. "But Thomas... please tell me you haven't done something impulsive. You know how your father gets about drama."

"See you at seven," Tom said, and hung up.

The drive to Westmount that evening was like a funeral procession.

Tom, in his black suit and tie, looked every inch the corporate heir. He had dressed Charlie in a navy blazer and button-down shirt—castoffs from his own closet that had become unwearable after years of bulking.

"You're my partner," Tom had said as he adjusted Charlie's collar. "You look equal."

Charlie tugged at the stiff collar now as they turned onto steep, winding roads. The houses here were stone fortresses behind high iron gates.

"Please," Charlie whispered as Tom pulled the car up the heated driveway. "Please be polite. Don't yell. Even if she asks me about 'nice girls' again."

Tom parked the car. He turned off the engine and turned to Charlie.

"I can't promise that," Tom said quietly. "But I promise I'll stand up for you."

He reached over, unbuckled Charlie's seatbelt, and pressed his forehead to Charlie's.

"Ready?" Tom asked, breath tickling Charlie's lips.

"No," Charlie exhaled.

"Me neither. Let's go."

The Montgomery house was silent. It was a sprawling mid-century mansion of glass and cold concrete.

Kathy met them at the door instead of the housekeeper. She was a beautiful woman, maintained by expensive creams and strict Pilates, but her smile didn't reach her eyes.

"Thomas," she said, offering her cheek for a kiss. She turned to Charlie. "And Charles. You look... well. That's a nice blazer. Is it my son's?"

"Hi, Mrs. Montgomery," Charlie said. "It is. He has good taste."

Tom put a hand on Charlie's back, guiding him past her. "Where's Dad?"

"In the study," Kathy said, closing the door. "He's on a call with New York and Toronto. He's *not* happy about the interruption."

They walked into the living room. It was white. Everything was white and beige: the rug, the sofas, the walls. Charlie was always terrified to move in this room, afraid he'd shed a hair and ruin the aesthetic.

Michael Montgomery walked in a moment later. He was a larger, older version of Tom, but without the softness around the mouth. He carried a tumbler of scotch.

"This better be good," Michael said. "I pushed a strategy meeting for this. Sit."

They sat on the white sofa. Tom sat close enough to Charlie that their knees created a united front.

"We have news," Tom started, skipping the small talk. "We're getting married."

Kathy blinked, her hand going to her pearls in a gesture so cliché it would have been funny if it weren't terrifying.

Michael took a sip of his scotch. He looked bored.

"Married," Michael repeated. He looked at Charlie for the first time. "I see. And does this have anything to do with the letter from Immigration that came to the office mail room? My secretary flagged it."

Tom stiffened. "You opened my mail?"

"It was addressed to the company. 'Sponsor'. You put the firm down as his employment guarantor last year, didn't you?" Michael scoffed. "So, let me get this straight. The government is kicking him out, and your solution is to legally bind yourself to an unemployed student?"

"I'm a doctoral candidate," Charlie said quietly.

"It's the same thing in this economy," Kathy interjected. "Oh, Thomas. We know you care about him. We know you're... distinct... in your preferences. But this is messy. You feel guilty."

"It's not," Tom said. "It's not guilt."

"It's manipulation," Michael said, setting his glass down. He stood up, towering over them. "Your friend is desperate. Who wouldn't want a golden ticket? But you are the VP of Operations of a multinational conglomerate. You are supposed to have sound judgment."

Michael leaned down, voice dropping.

"If you go through with this sham marriage, you demonstrate a lack of judgment that makes you a liability. I will not have a liability running my Operations."
Charlie felt sick. He looked at Tom. This was it.

"You're saying..." Charlie started, "if he marries me, you'll fire him?"

"I'm saying," Michael said, eyes locked on his son, "that if he chooses to anchor himself to a sinking ship, he goes down with it. You walk out that door with that ring on his finger, and you don't come back to the office tomorrow. Or ever."

Kathy sighed, picking at a piece of lint on her skirt. "Be reasonable, Thomas. Just help him find a good lawyer and let him go back to... wherever. Don't throw your life away for a charity case."

Charlie felt tears prick his eyes. He was a sinking ship.

He started to stand up. "Thomas, don't. It's not—"

Tom's hand shot out, grabbing Charlie's wrist.

"Sit down, Charlie," Tom said.

Tom looked up at his father. He looked disappointed.

"You think this is a sinking ship?" Tom asked.

"I think it's a joke," Michael spat.

Tom stood up slowly. He buttoned his jacket. He looked at his father, then at his mother.

"I have been the perfect son for almost thirty years," Tom said evenly. "I captained the sports teams. I got the grades and the degrees. I made the firm twenty million dollars last quarter alone. I have done everything you asked."

He reached down and pulled Charlie up to stand beside him, lacing their fingers together.

"But I am not doing this for you. I'm doing this because I love him. And if you think that makes me a liability?"

Tom reached into his jacket pocket. He pulled out his company phone—the one that never stopped buzzing—and set it gently on the glass coffee table.

"Then you're right," Tom said. "I quit."

Kathy gasped. "Thomas!"

"Come on, Charlie," Tom said, turning his back on them. "Let's go get dinner. I'm suddenly starving."

Outside, the Westmount air was cool and smelled of damp earth and old money.

They walked to the car in silence. Charlie felt like he was stumbling.

I just ruined his life.

The thought looped in his brain, a screaming mantra.

Thomas was the VP. He was the heir. He had a plan. And I just walked in there and burned it down.

They reached the sedan and got in. Tom started the engine, driving them down the long driveway and turning the corner onto the main street. He drove exactly one block, then pulled the car over under the shadow of a large willow tree.

Charlie was gripping his knees, shaking. He couldn't breathe.

"Charlie."

Charlie shook his head, tears spilling over. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. We have to go back. You have to tell him you were kidding, or something. You can't... you can't just quit."

"Charlie, look at me."

"You love that job," Charlie choked out. "You love strategy. You love logistics. We talked about the supply chain merger for three hours last week. You were excited about it."

He cried into his hands.

"I took that away from you. I'm a liability. He's right. I'm a sinking ship, and I just pulled you under."

Tom unbuckled his seatbelt. He turned his entire body toward the passenger seat, ignoring the gear shift digging into his hip.

He reached out and cupped Charlie's face. His thumb wiped away a tear, then tucked a lock of hair behind Charlie's ear.

"Breathe," Tom commanded softly.

He waited. He watched Charlie's chest hitch, then slowly expand. He waited until Charlie's eyes locked onto his.

"You are not a liability," Tom said. "And you are not a sinking ship. You are my husband."

"Fiancé," Charlie sniffled automatically.

"Close enough," Tom smiled, just a little. His thumb kept stroking Charlie's cheek.

"And you're right. I did like that job. I like puzzles. I like fixing things that are broken." Tom's expression was serious. "But you know better than anyone that I hate him."

Charlie did know. The expectations. The arguments. The Sunday night dread.

"I stayed because I thought I had to," Tom admitted quietly. "I thought if I was perfect enough, if I made enough money, eventually he'd respect me. But in there? Watching him talk about you like you're nothing?"

Tom shook his head. "I realized I would never be free as long as I was his employee."

"But what are you going to do?" Charlie whispered. "You're... you're Thomas Montgomery. You run things."

The street lamp outside cast an orange glow over Tom's face. He didn't look worried.

"I'm Thomas Montgomery," he smirked. "And I'm really, really good at what I do. Headhunters have been calling me for three years, Char. And I have a non-compete clause for four months. Do you know what that means?"

Charlie frowned. "You can't work for four months."

"It means I have four months of severance pay," Tom said. "And I have my savings. And I have you."

He took Charlie's hand and kissed the ring.

"I can consult. I can start my own firm. And until then, I have no choice but to do nothing and just be with you."

Tom squeezed Charlie's hand tight. "I didn't lose my life back there. I chose my life. My real life. The one that matters."

Charlie searched Tom's face. He looked for the regret, the hidden resentment.

He found only absolute, unwavering adoration.

"You really... you really chose me?" Charlie asked.

"Every time," Tom promised. "In every universe. It's always you."

He kissed Charlie's forehead, letting the peace settle over them in the quiet car.

Then, Tom sat back. He let out a long breath, loosening his tie and undoing the top button of his shirt. He ran a hand through his hair.

"Okay," Tom said, voice returning to normal volume. "Now that I'm unemployed and disowned... I'm fucking starving. And I refuse to eat anything that costs more than ten dollars."

Charlie laughed wetly, wiping his face with his sleeve. "Pizza?"

Tom grinned, putting the car into drive. "Pizza."

The pizza place was a hole-in-the-wall on Saint-Viateur that smelled of oregano and seven years of burned cheese.

Tom was sitting across from Charlie. He had discarded his suit jacket on the sticky vinyl bench beside him, rolled up his sleeves and removed his tie. He was currently folding a slice of pepperoni pizza in half, devouring it with an enthusiasm that suggested he hadn't eaten since he was first hired.

Charlie watched him, nursing a root beer. The knot in his chest was still there, but it was loosening, thread by thread.

"You have sauce on your chin," Charlie noted softly.

"I don't care," Tom said. "I'm a free man. Free men have sauce on their chins."

Charlie smiled. "You're ridiculous."

"I'm ridiculously unemployed," Tom corrected, mouth full.

BZZZT. BZZZT. BZZZT.

Tom's personal phone, which he had placed face-down on the Formica table as a gesture of liberation, began to vibrate so violently it started inching toward the edge.

BZZZT. BZZZT. BZZZT.

Charlie winced. "Is that... your dad?"

Tom swallowed, picked up the phone, and checked the screen. He let out a long-suffering sigh.

"Worse," Tom said.

He turned the screen toward Charlie.

Hazel (THE GENERAL): RADIO SILENCE IS NOT AN OPTION, THOMAS. I KNOW YOU WENT TO THE DEATH STAR. ARE YOU ALIVE? IF YOU DON'T REPLY IN 30 SECONDS I AM CALLING 911. CHARLIE IS TOO FRAGILE FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE. ANSWER ME!!!!!!

"She's going to have an aneurysm," Charlie said, reaching for his own phone. "I should text her."

"No," Tom said. "Don't engage. She feeds on verbal confirmation. Just give her the target."

He opened the map app, dropped a pin on their current location, and hit send.

Tom: Pizza. We're fine. Bring wet wipes.

He put the phone back down. "Ten minutes," Tom estimated.

"She's going to be mad we didn't call," Charlie worried.

"She'll be fine," Tom promised. He reached across the table, taking Charlie's hand in his. "She just hates being left out of the plot."

It took eight minutes.

The bell above the entrance was assaulted.

Hazel Heitmeyer stood at the front of Tony's Slice, dressed for a gala or a hostile takeover. She was wearing sky-high stilettos, a trench coat belted aggressively at the waist, and full, immaculate

makeup. Her ginger hair was blown out to perfection.

She looked around the pizza parlour, spotted them in the back booth, and marched over. The clack-clack-clack of her heels on the linoleum turned heads.

She slapped a packet of wet wipes down onto the table. Then she slid into the booth next to Charlie. She grabbed his face with both hands, turning his head left and right.

"Pupils are dilated," she announced. "Skin is pale, but that's normal for you. No visible tears."

She released him and turned to Tom.

"Report," she barked. "And don't skip the trauma. I want details. Did Kathy cry? Did Michael try to buy you off? Why are we eating distinctively average pizza on a Sunday night?"

Tom took a sip of his drink. "Because I'm on a budget."

"A budget?" Hazel repeated slowly. "You? Thomas 'I-own-a-Rolox-for-every-day-of-the-week' Montgomery?"

"I quit," Tom said casually.

Hazel's jaw actually dropped. She looked at Charlie. Charlie nodded meekly.

She looked back at Tom. Her eyes scanned his relaxed posture, the sauce on his chin.

"You... you quit?" Hazel whispered. "You quit the Empire?"

"He threatened to fire me if we got married," Tom explained, shrugging. "So I beat him to it."

Hazel stared at him for three long seconds.

Then, slowly, a grin spread across her face.

"Oh my god," she breathed. She reached across the table and high-fived him loudly.

"*That* is the most punk rock thing you have ever done," she declared. "I didn't know you had it in you. I thought you were just going to negotiate a prenup and cry in the car."

"I have depth," Tom defended, rubbing his stinging hand.

"You have unemployment!" Hazel cheered. She flagged down the bewildered teenager behind the counter. "Excuse me! Another pepperoni! And do you have wine? No? Fine, three more root beers!"

She turned back to them and took off her coat, revealing a silk blouse.

"Okay. This changes the strategy," Hazel said, pulling a notebook out of her designer bag. "The narrative for the interview just got way better. 'Sacrificial Love.' The officer is going to eat this up. It's practically a Hallmark movie."

She stopped writing. She looked at Charlie, her expression softening.

"You okay, Char?" she asked quietly. "I know, you're sitting there thinking you ruined his life."

Charlie looked down at his hands. "I mean... he was the VP, Hazy."

"He was miserable there," Hazel corrected. "He had an ulcer named Michael. You didn't ruin his life, Charlie. You just gave him an excuse to finally get a new one."

She kicked Tom under the table. "Right?"

"Right," Tom said, his eyes locked on Charlie. "Best decision I ever made."

Hazel sighed, contented. She grabbed a slice of pizza from the tray, holding it delicately with two fingers.

"Well," she said, taking a bite. "Welcome to the family, Tom. We're broke, we're emotional, and we have zero job security."

The door locked out the city, the parents, the sister, and the noise.

Charlie toed off his shoes, aligning them perfectly parallel to the wall. He folded his coat, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles.

Liability. Sinking ship. I quit.

"I can—" Charlie started, turning to Tom. "I can look at job listings tomorrow. For me, I mean. The university has some admin roles. And I can take more students. If we budget, we can—"

Tom didn't let him finish.

He walked over, wrapped his arms around Charlie's waist, and pulled him against his body.

"Thomas, I'm serious, I need to—"

Tom let out a long sigh against Charlie's neck. He inhaled deeply.

Charlie froze, his hands hovering in the air before slowly settling on Tom's shoulders.

"You're spiralling," Tom mumbled against his neck. "I can hear your brain beating itself up from here."

"I just..." Charlie's voice was small. "I don't know what to do..."

Tom pulled back, but only an inch. He looked at Charlie like he was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

"How?" Charlie whispered. "How are you looking at me like that? After today?"

"Because I'm happy, Charlie," Tom said simply. "I'm free. And I'm home about to sleep in a big comfy bed with the person I love. Why wouldn't I be looking at you like this?"

"I don't deserve it," Charlie murmured. "I don't deserve any of this."

Tom reached up, tilting Charlie's chin up until their eyes met again.

"You deserve the world," Tom said firmly. "You deserve to be safe. You deserve to be prioritized. And I am going to spend every single day of the rest of our lives making that happen. Okay?"

Charlie nodded, unable to speak.

"Good," Tom kissed his forehead. "Now. Pyjamas. Immediately."

Ten minutes later, they were back in their uniform—sweatpants and soft t-shirts—and tangled together on the deep leather sectional.

Tom had put on an old sci-fi movie, something with spaceships and explosions that required zero brain power to follow.

Charlie was resting his head on Tom's chest, his legs thrown over Tom's lap. His hand was resting on Tom's stomach, and without realizing it, his fingers were drumming a complex rhythm against his t-shirt.

It was a piano concerto.

Tom felt and watched Charlie's fingers moving. He reached for his phone on the coffee table.

"What are you doing?" Charlie asked sleepily.

"Texting the General," Tom said.

"Why?"

"Because you're twitching. You need your piano. This apartment is too quiet, and if I'm going to be a house-husband for four months, I want live music."

Charlie's heart swelled. "You don't have space for a baby grand."

"I have a formal dining room I have never used once," Tom countered, typing rapidly. "The table is going into storage. The piano is going by the window. Hazel says she can coordinate it for Thursday."

"You're getting rid of your dining table for me?"

"I'd burn it for firewood if you asked me to," Tom said, hitting send. He tossed the phone away. "Done."

He settled back into the cushions, pulling the throw blanket up over Charlie's shoulders.

The movie hummed in the background—lasers firing, engines roaring—but it felt miles away. Tom was watching the screen, his hand idly stroking Charlie's arm.

"Thomas?"

Tom looked down instantly, giving Charlie his full attention.

"Can we..." Charlie hesitated. He felt the heat rise in his cheeks. "Can we kiss again?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Tom whispered.

Tom leaned in slowly, giving Charlie a moment to close the distance.

When their lips met, it was slow. It was a soft, lingering exploration.

Charlie leaned into it, his hand coming up to tangle in the hair at the nape of Tom's neck.

Tom made a low sound in his throat, tilting his head, but he kept it sweet. He kissed the corner of Charlie's mouth, then his bottom lip, then pulled back just enough to rest their foreheads together.

"Okay?" Tom breathed.

"Yeah," Charlie whispered, his eyes still closed, feeling drunk on the affection. "Yeah. Okay."

He settled back down against Tom's chest.

"Sleep," Tom commanded softly, his arm tightening around him. "I've got you."

"I know," Charlie murmured.

Chapter 5

Charlie woke to the comforting weight of Tom's arm across his waist.

Tom was already awake. Charlie could tell by the way his thumb traced absentminded circles against Charlie's t-shirt. He had his face in Charlie's hair, his other hand pillowed under their heads. A lazy smile played at the edges of his mouth.

Charlie wanted to say something monumental, but his brain was still fuzzy, and all that came out was, "You snore."

Tom's smile turned sly. His arm tightened around Charlie's waist, pulling him an inch closer. "You love my snoring," he said. His thumb dug a little deeper into Charlie's side. "You always have."

"Only because it means you're alive," Charlie replied. He tried to sound dry, but his voice cracked.

Tom looked down. "There are other ways to keep me quiet, you know."

Charlie suddenly became aware of the grit in his eyes and the bitter taste of a full night's sleep on his tongue. He pulled the duvet up to his nose.

"I should brush my teeth," he mumbled into the pillow, turning his face away.

Tom propped himself up on his elbow. He looked down at Charlie with an expression that was half-amused, half-starving. "You're really gonna pretend I care about that?"

"I care," Charlie said, voice muffled.

"I know you do," Tom said, grinning now. "But you're missing the point. I don't want mint, Charlie. I want you. Besides, my breath is worse. You don't seem to mind."

"It's not," Charlie defended. "Yours is fine. It's... tolerable. Actually kind of nice."

The last part slipped out before he could stop it. Tom let out a delighted laugh.

"You think my morning breath is nice?" Tom teased. "God, you really are obsessed with me."

"Shut up," Charlie groaned. He tried to burrow deeper, but Tom wasn't having it.

"Nope. No hiding." Tom's hand slid up from Charlie's waist to cup his jaw, holding him in place. "Come here."

Tom kissed him.

It was deep and wet. Charlie expected a spike of panic, but it never came. Instead, his lips parted to answer the pressure of Tom's tongue. Tom's thumb dug into the muscle of Charlie's

cheek.

Charlie's lungs began to burn. When they finally broke apart, Tom looked like he'd just run a mile. He pressed their foreheads together, his hand sliding back to cup the nape of Charlie's neck.

"I never want you to doubt it," Tom whispered. "I love you."

Charlie covered his eyes. "You don't have to keep saying that."

Tom grinned. He kissed the tip of Charlie's nose, then his mouth again. "I will. I want to." He punctuated the words with kisses against Charlie's lips. "I love you. I love you."

Charlie's hands started to tremble from the sheer voltage of it. Tom caught one of Charlie's flailing hands and pressed it flat against the mattress. The weight was instant relief.

Emboldened, Charlie leaned in.

Things escalated fast. Tom was everywhere at once. Charlie let out a small, breathless giggle as Tom's stubble grazed a ticklish spot on his neck. Tom responded with a low, guttural moan.

It made Charlie's ears burn. It was the sound of a man who was happily obsessed with the person beneath him.

Charlie tangled his legs with Tom's, friction creating heat under the duvet. He fisted his free hand in the back of Tom's t-shirt, pulling him closer.

Sensing the shift, Tom slowed down.

"You okay?" he murmured against Charlie's skin.

Tom's hand had gone still, resting just below the hem of Charlie's shirt. He made no move to go further.

Charlie nodded. Under the surface, he was tense, waiting for the gears of expectation to grind forward.

Tom kissed the corner of Charlie's mouth, then his cheek.

"Char," Tom said. "I want you so much I can barely see straight. But I'm not going to push. I'm happy just being here. If this is as far as we go today, that's fine. I mean that."

Charlie turned his face away, covering his eyes with one hand.

"I don't get it," he mumbled. "How can you be like this? I'm—I'm not... like that."

Tom propped himself up higher. "Like what?"

"Sexy," Charlie choked out. He actually flinched.

Tom blinked. Then laughed loudly.

"Are you kidding me?" Tom sounded genuinely offended. "Charlie. You are the only thing I think about. All day. Every day."

He leaned in.

"Do you have any idea what you look like right now?" Tom asked. "All I ever want is to touch you. I'm starving for you."

Charlie balked. "You... want that?"

Tom's mouth quirked into a crooked smile. "I want everything with you."

Charlie's heartbeat was so loud, he was sure Tom could hear it.

"I mean—" He started. "If you wanted to... we don't have to do everything. But if you wanted to do something... I would be okay with that."

Tom went still. He exhaled and pressed his lips together.

"Okay," Tom said. "Okay. Just tell me if you want to stop."

Charlie nodded. He reached up, grabbing at Tom's shoulders to pull him down.

Tom leaned in. He kissed him again, parting Charlie's lips with his tongue.

Charlie's hands found their way under the hem of Tom's shirt. He was hesitant at first, but the heat of Tom's skin was intoxicating. He slid his palms up Tom's back, feeling the shift of muscle.

Tom hummed. He pulled back an inch, hand hovering at the hem of Charlie's shirt.

"Can I take this—"

"Yes," Charlie answered. "Please."

The shirt came off a little awkwardly, tossed onto the floor. Charlie wanted to cross his arms, to hide the sharp angles of his ribs and freckled skin that hadn't seen the sun in months.

But Tom looked down at him like he was a feast.

"Cold?" Tom asked, noticing the goosebumps on Charlie's arms.

"No," Charlie whispered. "Keep going."

Tom pressed his mouth to the center of Charlie's sternum. He took an eager breath against Charlie's skin and trailed wet, open-mouthed kisses along his ribs.

"You're so perfect," Tom murmured against him. "You take it so well."

Charlie closed his eyes, his head falling back against the pillow. His hands found Tom's hair.

"M not," Charlie whispered weakly.

Tom pulled back.

"Yes, you are," he said sternly. "You're perfect for me."

Tom sat up and pulled his shirt over his head, revealing the body Charlie had only allowed himself to glance at briefly, even though it was frequently on display.

Charlie reached out. His hand hovered for a second, then landed on Tom's chest. He traced the definition of Tom's shoulder. He radiated heat from his core.

"Is this okay?" Charlie asked.

Tom laughed breathlessly. "More than okay. I'm all yours, baby."

Baby.

It made Charlie's heart stutter. His fingers trembled slightly.

Tom covered Charlie's hand with his own.

"Too much?" Tom asked quietly.

"No." Charlie shook his head, cheeks warm. "I like it. It's just... new."

Tom smiled. He pressed his forehead against Charlie's. "Mm. There are a lot of new things I want to call you."

Charlie didn't trust his voice. He nodded.

"I'm going to kiss you again," Tom murmured.

Charlie lifted his chin, opening up.

Tom's free hand slid down Charlie's side. His fingers reached Charlie's waistband.

Charlie tensed.

"We can stop," Tom said against Charlie's mouth. "We can stop right now. Just say the word."

Charlie looked up at him. Tom's eyes were warm, gentle.

"I want this," Charlie whispered. "I want you."

Tom slid the fabric down.

As the cool air hit his skin, a familiar, sick wave of shame crashed over Charlie. He squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn't bear to watch Tom's face change. His hands flew down to cover

himself.

Tom caught Charlie's wrists.

"Don't hide. Let me look at you. Please."

Charlie went limp. He surrendered, terrified and thrilled. Tom's pupils were blown so wide the irises were gone.

"God, baby."

Charlie started to shake his head.

"I love this," Tom said. His hands were hot on Charlie's legs. "I love how small you are compared to me."

Charlie felt his face burning. "You... like it?"

"I love it," Tom corrected. "I love that I can cover you. Love that I can keep you safe."

Tom shucked his own sweatpants off, kicking them away. Then he settled between Charlie's thighs.

"Can I touch you? For real?"

"I..." Charlie swallowed. "I don't know what to do."

Tom's expression softened. "You don't have to do anything. Just let me take care of you."

"Okay," Charlie whispered.

Tom's hand moved down.

It swallowed him whole. The rough calluses on his palm created a friction that made Charlie's toes curl into the sheet.

"Is this okay?" Tom asked gently.

Charlie nodded. Then he felt warmth pooling. The shame came rushing back.

He was leaking.

Tom smeared the moisture with his thumb. He hovered just inches away, breathing in the scent. He seemed to be fighting with himself.

"What is it?" Charlie whispered, visibly mortified.

Tom swallowed hard. He dragged his gaze back up to Charlie's face.

"Nothing," Tom rasped. "I—There are other things. That I want to do with you. But I'll wait. I'll wait until you're ready."

Charlie's eyes were wide. A dark blush stained his cheeks, spreading all the way down to his chest.

Tom leaned down to kiss him.

The kiss deepened. Charlie felt himself getting closer to the edge with every stroke of Tom's hand.

"Thomas," he choked out. "Can you—I want—"

Tom didn't stop moving. "What do you want, baby? Tell me."

"Can you... Both of us? At the same time?"

Tom seemed to short-circuit.

"Yeah," he groaned. "Fuck, yes."

He quickly reached for the bottle he kept in the drawer of the nightstand and added more slickness to his palm.

Then, he wrapped his hand around both of them.

"Oh god," Charlie whined. The friction was too good.

"You like that?" Tom asked against his ear. He squeezed tighter. "You feel so fucking good, Char."

"Thomas," Charlie gasped. He felt like he was going to be ejected from his body.

"Let go," Tom commanded. He drove his hips forward. "Cum for me, baby. I've got you."

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut. He came with a broken, high-pitched cry.

The pleasure was still cresting when Tom stiffened against him. Tom swore and shuddered violently as he spilled across Charlie's stomach.

Charlie stared at the ceiling, trying to catch his breath.

"God, honey," Tom slurred. He pulled back, his hair sticking to his forehead.

"Look at you." He traced the edge of the slickness on Charlie's stomach with his thumb. "Fuck."

Charlie reached up, hand trembling. Tom kissed his palm, then his face. He pressed his lips to Charlie's forehead, then each eyelid, the tip of his nose.

"I love you," Tom whispered against Charlie's lips. He kissed him again. "I love everything about you."

Charlie's eyes filled, and the tears spilled over before he could stop them.

Tom pulled back instantly. "Hey." He thumbed a tear away, his brow furrowing. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," Charlie shook his head. "No, they're happy tears. I've never been this happy in my life."

Tom smiled. He leaned in and kissed the wet track of a tear from Charlie's temple.

"Good. Don't move."

He carefully untangled his limbs from Charlie's and slipped out of bed.

Charlie lay still, watching him go. He traced the broad expanse of Tom's shoulders, the way the muscles of his back tapered down to his waist.

Tom disappeared into the bathroom. He returned a moment later, a warm, wet washcloth in hand.

"Let me," he said warmly, sitting on the edge of the mattress.

Tom wiped away the sticky residue. When he was done, he tossed the cloth toward the hamper without looking.

He slid under the covers and pulled Charlie's back against his chest.

"Is this okay?" Tom breathed.

Charlie nodded. Tom tightened his hold. One hand splayed flat across Charlie's stomach, the other under Charlie's head.

Charlie melted.

"I could stay like this forever," Tom whispered into Charlie's shoulder.

Charlie hummed, too content to speak. Tom nuzzled deeper. He found the spot he was obsessed with behind Charlie's ear and breathed in.

This is it, Charlie thought. This is what safety feels like.

Then, a thunderous pounding hammered at the front door.

Chapter 6

The pounding on the door wouldn't stop. It was aggressive and possessed a distinct cadence that they both recognized immediately.

Thump-thump-thump. Pause. Thump-thump-thump.

"Go away!" Tom groaned.

Charlie pulled the duvet up to his nose. "It's Hazel. She has a key."

"I changed the locks last year."

"She has a copy," Charlie reminded him. "You gave it to her when you went to Tokyo."

"Fuuuuuck," Tom breathed out.

CLICK.

The sound of the deadbolt sliding back was like a gunshot in the quiet apartment.

"Tom! Charlie! If I find bodies, I'm screaming! If I find you sleeping, I'm screaming louder!"

Tom scrambled up, grabbing his discarded sweatpants from the floor. He hopped on one leg, trying to pull them on while simultaneously looking for a t-shirt.

He failed to find the shirt.

"Stay here, okay?" Tom asked, running a hand through his hair. He opened the bedroom door and stepped into the hallway just as Hazel rounded the corner.

She was holding a cardboard drink carrier with three coffees, looking impeccably put-together in a sharp trench coat and oversized sunglasses.

She lowered the sunglasses slowly.

Her eyes scanned Tom from head to toe. She took in the bare chest. The sweatpants that were riding low on his hips. The hair that looked like it had been through a wind tunnel.

Then, she sniffed the air.

"Oh my god," Hazel said flatly.

"We were sleeping," Tom said, crossing his arms over his chest. "It's 9:00 AM."

"You were not sleeping," Hazel corrected, her nose wrinkling. "The air in here is thick enough to chew. It smells like... dude smell."

She held the coffee carrier out at arm's length.

"Here. Oat milk lattes. I need to go wash my eyes with bleach."

"Drama queen," Tom scoffed, taking the coffees. "And you're interrupting."

"I am saving you from being late to your own narrative," she snapped, but there was a gleam in her eye. She tried to look past him into the dark bedroom. "Charlie! Are you alive? Do you need a rescue team?"

"I'm fine!" Charlie squeaked.

Hazel whipped her head back to Tom. She pointed a manicured finger at his face.

"You," she hissed. "Put on a shirt. You are making me nauseous. I'm going to the kitchen to set up the command center. You have five minutes to make this apartment look like a place where functioning adults live."

She marched back toward the kitchen, heels clicking aggressively on the hardwood.

Tom let out a long exhale, leaning his head back against the wall. A slow, smug smile crept onto his face.

He walked back into the bedroom.

Charlie was peeking out from under the blankets.

"Is she gone?"

"She's in the kitchen," Tom whispered, setting a latte on the nightstand. "She says the air is 'thick'."

Charlie groaned, burying his face in his hands. "Kill me. Please, just kill me ."

"Hey." Tom sat on the edge of the bed. He reached out, gently prying Charlie's hands away from his face. "You okay?"

Tom's shoulders were relaxed, and he was looking at him with that same terrifying, wonderful adoration.

"Yeah," Charlie whispered. A small smile tugged at his lips. "Yeah. I'm okay. You?"

"Mhm," Tom smiled back, then leaned down to kiss him.

"I'm going to go shower," Tom said. "Or she's going to start throwing shit at us. Drink your coffee. Take your time."

Tom grabbed fresh clothes and disappeared into the bathroom. The water turned on a moment later.

Charlie sat there for a second. He felt... different. His body felt loose and hummed with a strange electricity.

He drank a sip of the latte. It was delicious.

He pulled on his own sweatpants and the oversized t-shirt he'd worn yesterday. He tried to fix his hair, realized it was a lost cause, and padded out into the hallway.

He found Hazel in the kitchen.

She was leaning against the marble island, scrolling through her phone. When she heard his footsteps, she looked up.

"Okay," Hazel said, putting her phone down. She walked over to him, grabbed his shoulders, and steered him into the light of the window.

"Look at me."

Charlie blinked, trying not to squirm. "Hazel, please don't--"

"Shh!" She scrutinized his face. She noticed the hickey peeking out from under his collar and let out a half-gag, half-laugh.

"Gross," she whispered. "Absolutely rancid. I am traumatized."

"You came over uninvited," Charlie defended, crossing his arms.

"I brought caffeine," she countered. Then, she leaned in closer. She tilted her head toward the bathroom door, where the sound of the shower was still running.

"So," she said, her eyes wide and intense. "Talk to me."

"I am not talking to you about this," Charlie said, his face heating up.

"I need to know," Hazel insisted, gripping his arm. "For science. And for my own peace of mind. Because if he was bad, Charlie, we have to call the wedding off. I can't let you marry bad dick. It's a violation of the Geneva Convention."

"Hazel!" Charlie hissed, looking frantically at the bathroom door.

"Is he?" she pressed, shaking him slightly. "He's so... Type A. Does he bring the spreadsheet into the bedroom? Did he have an itinerary?"

Charlie looked at his sister. He wanted to tell her to fuck off, but then he thought about the morning.

He thought about the way Tom had looked at him. The patience. The reverence.

A slow, shy smile spread across Charlie's face. He bit his lip, looking down at the floor.

"No spreadsheet," Charlie whispered.

Hazel buffered, then laughed.

"Oh," she breathed. She let go of his arm. "Oh, okay. Wow."

She picked up her latte, taking a long sip to hide her smile.

"Good," she muttered. "That's... good. I guess I won't try to smuggle you out of here."

The bathroom door opened. A cloud of steam rolled out, followed by Tom, who was towelling off his hair and looking very refreshed.

"What are we talking about?" Tom asked, walking into the kitchen.

"Interior design," Hazel lied smoothly. "And how much I hate your couch."

"My couch is Italian leather," Tom defended, walking over to the island to grab a latte. He took a sip, grimacing slightly at the sweetness, but didn't complain. "And it costs more than your car."

"It has no soul," Hazel countered, hopping up onto one of the stools. She opened the cardboard box she'd brought. Inside were three buttery, flaky croissants. "It says, 'I am a sterile millionaire who fears intimacy.' But we're changing that."

She slid a croissant toward Charlie, who was hovering near the fridge.

"Eat," she commanded. "We have a war council to conduct."

Charlie took the pastry and sat next to Tom. Their knees knocked together under the marble overhang, and unlike before, Charlie didn't pull away. Tom rested his hand on Charlie's thigh, which made Hazel roll her eyes.

"Okay," Hazel said, pulling her laptop out of her bag and snapping it open. "Agenda items. First: The piano."

"Thursday," Tom said, taking a bite. "I already cleared the freight elevator with the building manager."

"Good. I confirmed with the movers. They'll be here at 10 AM. Charlie, you need to be here to supervise the tuning, because if they scratch it, I'm suing them into the Stone Age." She typed furiously.

"Second: The lawyer. Tremblay sent the forms yesterday. You need to sign them today so I can courier them back tomorrow morning."

Charlie swallowed. "Okay. Sign forms. I can do that."

"Third," Hazel said, pausing for dramatic effect. "The Wedding."

Tom and Charlie exchanged a look of shared panic.

"We need a date," Hazel started, listing on her fingers. "We need a venue. We need a guest list. We need suits. We need flowers. We need to decide if we're doing a sit-down dinner or a cocktail reception. We need--"

"Hazel," Tom interrupted. "Stop."

"I can't stop. We are on a timeline. If we don't look like a legitimate couple having a legitimate wedding, the government will think--"

"We are a legitimate couple," Tom said firmly. He squeezed Charlie's leg. "But we are not wedding planners. Neither of us cares about centrepieces."

Charlie nodded vigorously. "I really, really don't care about centrepieces, Hazy. I just want... to be married. To him."

Hazel stared at them. "So what? You want to go to City Hall?"

"No," Tom said. "Nancy would kill us. We want the wedding. We just don't want to plan the wedding."

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the island. "Hazel, you plan it."

Hazel blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You plan it," Tom repeated. "All of it. The venue, the food, the flowers. You know what Nancy wants, you know what we need. As long as Charlie and I show up, say 'I do,' and there's an open bar, we don't care about the rest."

"Within reason," Charlie added quickly. "Nothing too... crazy. No doves. No ice sculptures of our faces."

"I can do... whatever I want?" Hazel asked, like she was being handed the nuclear codes.

"Whatever you want," Tom confirmed. "I'll give you a budget, but... honestly, just send me the bills. I'll pay for the whole thing."

She grinned and cracked her knuckles.

"Thomas, you are now my second-favourite brother. Alexander is dead to me. Okay. Fourth item," Hazel said, her typing increasing to a blur. "Legal. We need to talk about assets."

The cozy breakfast vibe evaporated.

"Since you are paying for everything," Hazel said, looking at Tom, but darting a protective glance at Charlie. "And since you have... substantial assets, even unemployed... and Charlie has, well, instruments and student debt... we need to talk about a prenuptial agreement."

Charlie shrank into himself.

"Right," he whispered. "That. Obviously. We should... I mean, I don't want your money. I just want--"

"No," Tom said.

"No?" Hazel asked, pausing her typing. "Be serious--"

"I don't care about that," Tom said. He turned on his stool to face Charlie.

"There is no prenup," Tom stated. "I'm not entering this marriage with an exit strategy. What's mine is yours, Charlie. The apartment, the savings, everything. I don't want to protect my assets from you. You are my most important asset."

Charlie stared at him. "Thomas... are you sure? That's... it's a lot of money. If we... if this doesn't work out..."

"It will work out," Tom promised. "But even if it didn't, I wouldn't want you to leave with nothing. I'd want you to be safe."

He took Charlie's hand, lacing their fingers together.

"No prenup," Tom said again. "Next item."

Hazel considered him.

"Okay," she said softly. "No prenup. I'll tell Tremblay to skip that draft."

She picked up her coffee and took a sip. "You two are a nightmare for legal, you know that? But... you're pretty good for a romance novel."

The door finally clicked shut behind Hazel, taking the whirlwind of wedding logistics and oat milk fumes with it.

On the marble island, the stack of legal forms sat waiting. They were the shield that would keep the world at bay until the wedding.

"Do you want to read them?" Tom asked, handing Charlie a pen. "Tremblay is thorough, but--"

"No," Charlie said. He took the pen. "I trust you. I trust us."

He signed his name. *Charles Heitmeyer*. Then Tom signed. *Thomas M. Montgomery*.

"Done," Tom whispered. He pulled Charlie into his arms. "Now, we do nothing."

And they did.

The next two days were a blur of aggressive domesticity. They didn't leave the apartment. They ordered takeout. They existed in a soft, sun-drenched bubble where the only goal was to merge their lives into the same square footage.

Charlie's trash bag wardrobe was finally sorted, but it was the other boxes (the ones Hazel had sent over later on) that transformed the space.

Tom excavated.

In the living room, he cleared half of his sleek, backlit bookcase, dumping his business biographies into a box to make way for Charlie's tattered paperback novels and stacks of sheet music.

"You don't have to move your awards," Charlie protested, holding a crystal trophy that said *Top Operations Lead 2024*.

"It's a paperweight," Tom said, taking it and shoving it into a drawer. He placed a stack of Charlie's worn Henle Urtexts in its place. "This looks better. Adds colour."

In the kitchen, Tom reorganized the pantry so Charlie's favourite tea blends were at eye level, right next to the expensive espresso beans.

In the bedroom, Tom cleared half the dresser. He seemed to take a distinct, primal satisfaction in seeing Charlie's things mingled with his own--a grey hoodie draped over his suit jacket, Charlie's glasses sitting next to his watches on the nightstand.

Every time Charlie turned around, apologizing for taking up space, Tom was there to kiss the apology out of his mouth.

"I want you everywhere," Tom murmured into Charlie's hair on Wednesday night, as they lay tangled on the couch amidst a pile of laundry. "I want to trip over your shoes. I want to find your hair ties in the bathroom. Stop apologizing for living here."

"I don't use hair ties," Charlie mumbled sleepily.

"Well, buy some," Tom teased. "I want the clutter."

By Thursday morning, the apartment didn't look like a showroom anymore. It looked lived-in. It looked like them.

And then, the buzzer rang.

"Movers!" Tom announced, jumping up like a kid on Christmas morning.

The arrival of the piano was a military operation. Hazel had hired specialists who moved the instrument with the reverence usually reserved for transplant organs.

Tom watched from the doorway, arms crossed, as his never-used formal dining room was finally given a purpose. The large designer table had been banished to storage. In its place, by the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the Montreal skyline, stood Charlie's baby grand.

It was an old instrument, a thrifted Steinway, the black lacquer dulled in places where Charlie's arms had rested for thousands of hours. Against the modern, sharp lines of Tom's penthouse, it looked like the heart of the home.

The movers left.

"Well?" Tom asked, leaning against the doorframe. "Give it a test drive. See if the humidity is okay."

Charlie walked over to the bench. He had played this piano in his parents' crowded living room and in Hazel's apartment. Now it was here.

He sat down. He lifted the fallboard. The keys gleamed, familiar and welcoming.

He adjusted the bench and took a breath.

Then he began to play. *Un Sospiro*.

The first notes rippled out like water, a fluid, rolling arpeggio. Charlie's hands crossed over each other, weaving the melody between left and right, his body swaying slightly. He closed his eyes, losing himself in the muscle memory.

From the doorway, Tom watched Charlie's profile. He had heard Charlie play so many times before. For four years, he had been to every recital and every concert, sitting in the front row with Charlie's parents and siblings.

But this was different.

This was Charlie, his fiancé, filling Tom's cold, empty penthouse apartment with something beautiful.

A wave of emotion hit Tom so hard he squeezed his eyes shut. It was a fierce, possessive, overwhelming joy.

I fucking won, Tom thought.

He didn't mean the fight with his father or the battle with immigration.

He meant the lottery of his life.

Tom opened his eyes with the final, shimmering chord.

Charlie let his hands lift off the keys. He sat there for a moment, head bowed, breathing gently.

"It sounds great in here," Charlie said finally. "The acoustics are actually really--"

Tom had moved across the room without a sound and slid his arms around Charlie's waist from behind, locking his hands together over Charlie's stomach.

Charlie let his head fall back to rest on Tom's shoulder. Tom breathed in the scent of the soap they now shared.

"You're amazing," Tom murmured. "You have no idea."

"It was just Liszt," Charlie deflected. He traced the veins on the back of Tom's hand with his thumb.

"I don't care who wrote it," Tom chuckled. "I care that you're playing it here."

Tom squeezed him tighter. "Make me a promise?" he asked quietly.

"Anything," Charlie whispered.

"Play for me," Tom said. "Every day. For the rest of our lives. Just like this."

Charlie nodded, closing his eyes.

"Of course," he whispered back. "I promise."

The tailor shop was in Old Montreal. It was the kind of place where they didn't have price tags, just whispered consultations.

"Okay, listen up," Hazel announced, stopping them on the sidewalk before they could enter. She adjusted her sunglasses.

"There are rules. Rule number one: The grooms do not see the suits until the altar. It's bad luck. It ruins the reveal. I want tears, Thomas. I want you to be weeping openly at the end of the aisle. If you see him now, the impact is diluted."

Tom raised an eyebrow. "I'm paying for the suits, Hazel. I think I'm allowed to have an opinion on the lapels."

"You're paying, yes," Hazel agreed. "You're a very good little ATM. Now go sit in the waiting room and read a magazine about golf. Charlie is up first."

Tom looked at Charlie, a silent question in his eyes: *You okay with this?*

Charlie nodded. "Go. Be an ATM. I'll be fine."

"Fine," Tom sighed. "But if they try to put him in a cummerbund, I'm intervening."

He retreated to the plush leather armchairs in the front room.

Inside the fitting room, the atmosphere was hushed. The tailor, an older Italian man named Marco, greeted them with a tape measure around his neck.

"Mr. Heitmeyer," Marco said, gesturing to the podium. "Let's see the frame."

Charlie stepped up onto the small circular stage. He was surrounded by mirrors--front, back, side. It was a lot of Charlie.

"Arms up, please," Marco directed.

Charlie lifted his arms. Marco moved in, the tape measure snapping taut.

It was quick and professional--measuring the waist, the shoulder width--but as Marco's hand brushed against Charlie's thigh to check the inseam, Charlie flinched violently.

"Sorry," Charlie whispered. He took a step back, nearly falling off the podium. "I'm sorry, I just--"

Marco paused. "Sir?"

Hazel stepped between them, her hand finding Charlie's elbow.

"He's ticklish," Hazel lied. "And he's got sensitive skin. Just give us the garments and I'll pin the hem. You can check the measurements from a distance."

"Of... course," Marco nodded slowly, stepping away. "I will fetch the jacket."

"I'm sorry," Charlie murmured to Hazel. "I'm being difficult."

"You are not being difficult," Hazel said, keeping her voice low so Tom wouldn't hear through the wall. She adjusted Charlie's collar. "You have boundaries for a reason. It's fine. I've pinned your pants for recitals since you were fifteen. I'm better at it anyway."

She grabbed the black jacket Marco had left and held it open. "Arms."

Charlie slipped his arms into the sleeves. Hazel pulled it up, smoothed the shoulders, and buttoned it with a sharp, decisive snap.

"Okay," she said, stepping back. "Turn around."

Charlie turned to face the main mirror.

The suit was black. Slim-fitted. Modern. It wasn't the boxy, borrowed stuff he usually wore for orchestra pits. It was cut to cling to him, highlighting the sharp lines of his shoulders, the length of his torso, the elegance of his neck.

Charlie stared at himself. He looked... tall. Taller. He looked capable.

Behind him, Hazel stopped fussing.

She stood still, her hands clasped over her mouth.

"Oh, Char..." Hazel breathed.

Charlie turned to look at her. "Is it bad? Does it look like a waiter's uniform?"

"No," Hazel whispered, her eyes shiny. "Charlie. You look... God. He's going to have a heart attack. We might need paramedics on standby at the altar."

Charlie blushed, looking down at his shoes. "It feels okay. It feels okay, right?"

"It's perfect," Hazel declared. "Take it off. Before I start crying and ruin my mascara."

Five minutes later, Charlie was back in his street clothes, handing the suit to a bewildered Marco.

"Your turn," Hazel called out to the waiting room. "ATM! Get in here!"

Tom appeared, looking hopeful. "Can I see him?"

"Absolutely not," Hazel blocked the door. "He's done. You go in. Marco has a cashmere wool blend waiting for you. Do *not* argue with him about the break in the pant leg; he knows what he's doing."

She shoved Tom into the fitting room and grabbed Charlie's arm.

"Come on," she said. "We have twenty minutes. There's a gelato place next door."

The gelato shop was bright yellow. Hazel ordered a double scoop of pistachio, and Charlie got a small cup of lemon sorbet.

They sat on a bench outside, watching the tourists walk by on the cobblestones.

"So," Hazel said, licking her spoon. "How are you holding up, really? Not the 'I'm fine' you tell Tom so he doesn't worry. The real answer."

Charlie stirred his sorbet, watching it melt.

"I think..." Charlie started, then paused. "I think I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. It feels too good, Hazy. It feels like I stole someone else's life."

"You didn't steal it," Hazel said firmly. "You survived long enough to get it. There's a difference."

She bumped her shoulder against his.

"He loves you, you know. It's actually fucking disgusting how much he loves you. I watched him while you were in the changing room. He picked up a magazine, stared at the same page for ten minutes, and kept looking at the door like a dog."

Charlie smiled, a small, genuine thing. "He's wearing dark blue?"

"Midnight blue," Hazel corrected. "To match your eyes. He requested it specifically."

Charlie felt a warmth spread through his chest.

"He's good," Charlie whispered.

"He's okay," Hazel allowed. "For a rich boy."

She finished her gelato and crumpled the napkin.

"But seriously. In that suit? You're going to wreck him. It's going to be a bloodbath."

Charlie laughed. "Good. I owe him a heart attack or two."

They found Tom outside, bill paid, checking his watch and looking relieved to see them. Hazel marched them onward before he could speak.

Twenty minutes later, they ducked into their university bar, greeted by the familiar smell of stale beer and frying oil. It was busy, but their corner booth was open.

Usually, Tom sat across from them. Today, he gently guided Charlie into the booth and took the spot next to him. It left him pressed between Tom and the wall.

"You're sitting on the same side?" Hazel asked, arching a brow as she sat. "Gross."

Tom just grinned and draped his arm over the back of the seat. "Spinster."

Hazel rolled her eyes and flagged down their regular waitress.

"Hey, hun," she smiled. "The usual for us--beer for Tom, white wine and a Fireball shot for me." She paused, looking at Charlie, who was already fiddling with his coaster. "And an iced tea for Charlie. But make it a Long Island, please."

"Hazel, no," Charlie started, "I have to--"

"You have to relax," Tom corrected, leaning in close. His hand moved to rest on Charlie's knee under the table. "It's all good."

"Mhm," Charlie nodded, a flush creeping up his neck.

When the order arrived, Charlie took a nervous, long pull of the Long Island tea. It was strong.

"Easy," Tom murmured, leaning in. Charlie almost choked.

Hazel watched them over the rim of her wine glass. Charlie stammered halfway through a sentence when he knocked his elbow against his glass, sending the drink sloshing dangerously close to the edge.

Hazel set her glass down with a thud. "Okay. Charlie, come help me with something."

She stood up. Charlie blinked up at her, dazed. "Help you with what?"

"Just come on." She dragged him out of the booth, over Tom's legs. Tom reluctantly removed his arm, looking confused.

"Everything okay?" Tom asked.

"Fine. Bathroom emergency. Girl stuff. Boy stuff. Just--hold on," Hazel said, steering Charlie toward the back of the bar.

She pulled him into the handicap stall and locked the door. The harsh fluorescent light washed out the cozy bar atmosphere.

"Okay," Hazel said. "I need you to be honest. Is he making you uncomfortable?"

Charlie leaned against the sink, rubbing his face. "What?"

"You look like you're about to have a stroke every time he touches you, which is constantly," Hazel said. "If he's pushing you too hard--"

"No," Charlie blurted out.

"Charlie."

"It's not that," Charlie mumbled into his hands. He dragged them down his face. "I like it, okay? I like it when he touches me. I like it... A lot."

Hazel stared at him. Then, her face contorted into a grimace. "Oh."

"Ugh."

"Oh, god." She shuddered. "Okay, I did not need that mental image. I thought you were having a panic attack, not a... moment."

"I can't help it!" Charlie hissed.

"No, it's... Good. It's healthy." Hazel reached out and gave his shoulder a firm, supportive squeeze. "Disgusting, but healthy. Just try to keep it PG, please? I'm trying to eat."

Charlie let out a breath he felt like he'd been holding for an hour. "Okay."

They walked back to the table. Tom was watching them approach, his brow furrowed with worry. When Charlie slid back over him into the booth, Tom turned toward him.

"You okay?" Tom asked quietly.

"I'm good," Charlie said. And this time, he didn't fidget. He leaned back, letting his shoulder press firmly against Tom's chest.

Tom relaxed instantly, his arm returning to its spot around Charlie. Hazel sat across from them, rolling her eyes as she watched Tom's hand curl around Charlie's shoulder.

But when she saw Charlie lean into the touch, taking a calm sip of his drink, she just shook her head and reached for a fry.

The bar door swung shut behind them, cutting off the loud music. Hazel pulled her trench coat tighter, eyeing the two of them with the weary affection of a parent of rowdy teenagers.

"Alright," she said, checking her phone. "My ride is almost here. Try not to get arrested or stranded before you get home."

Tom had an arm around Charlie's waist. "We're walking. It's nice out."

"It's Montreal," Hazel corrected. "It's a trap."

A pair of headlights swept over the curb. Hazel didn't wait for the car to fully stop before she reached for the door handle.

She paused briefly, pointing a manicured finger at them. "Text me. If I don't hear from you in twenty minutes, I'm assuming you fell in the river."

"Goodnight, Hazy," Charlie said, smiling.

She slammed the car door. The car sped off.

They stood there for a second, the street humming with distant traffic. It was technically summer, but the wind coming off the water didn't care. It cut right through Charlie's thin cotton sweater.

He suppressed a shiver, jamming his hands into his pockets. "She's right," he muttered. "It is a trap."

"Come on," Tom said. He took Charlie's hand, lacing their fingers together. "Let's move. We'll warm up."

They started down the sidewalk. For a block, it was fine. They were walking fast enough that the warmth of Tom's hand kept the chill at bay. But as they turned the corner down the long stretch toward the apartment, the wind picked up, swirling grit and dead leaves around their ankles.

Tom was unbothered in his flannel. Charlie's shoulders hiked up. He clamped his jaw, trying to keep his teeth from clicking together.

Tom slowed down.

"You're freezing," Tom said.

"I'm okay," Charlie lied, visibly shivering.

Tom stopped. He looked down at himself, then at Charlie. He seemed to realize that stripping down would just result in two freezing people instead of one.

"I don't have a jacket," Tom said, sounding annoyed with himself.

"It's fine. Really. We're almost there."

The wind gusted again, harder this time. Charlie let out an involuntary, sharp hiss of breath and tucked his chin into his chest.

"No," Tom said.

Tom stepped into his space. He bent his knees, slid one arm behind Charlie's back and the other under his knees, and lifted.

The pavement fell away. Charlie grabbed Tom's shoulders.

"What are you doing?" Charlie gasped, looking frantically down the street. "Put me down, people are watching."

"Let them watch," Tom said, adjusting his grip. He started walking again. "Tuck your hands in."

"Thomas."

"Charlie. Tuck your hands in."

Charlie hesitated, mortified, but Tom was a furnace. Defeated, Charlie slid his freezing hands inside the collar of Tom's shirt, pressing them against his neck, and buried his face in Tom's shoulder.

"You're ridiculous," Charlie mumbled. "I have legs."

"You have hypothermia," Tom countered. "Besides, you're lighter than my gym bag."

"...I hate you."

"I know, baby," Tom said, and Charlie could hear the smile in his voice. "I love you too."

Chapter 7

Charlie woke slowly. He woke warm.

He felt the arm across his waist, the leg hooked loosely over his calves, Tom's chest rising and falling against Charlie's back.

Charlie didn't move.

He lay there, cataloguing it the way he did everything important. The heat. The pressure. The absence of urgency. The way Tom's hand had curled possessively at Charlie's stomach sometime in the night, and never let go.

Outside, the city hummed faintly.

Behind him, Tom's nose brushed the back of Charlie's neck, and his grip tightened just a fraction.

This is real, Charlie thought. *This is happening to me.*

"Morning," Tom murmured.

Charlie startled. "Oh--sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

Tom hummed into Charlie's shoulder. "It's okay. I was already awake."

A pause.

"I was just... enjoying the fact that you're here."

Charlie smiled, small and shy. "I'm not going anywhere."

Tom's arm tightened again. He pressed a kiss to the back of Charlie's neck.

"Good," he said simply.

They stayed like that for a while. Eventually, Charlie stretched his stiff legs.

"You're meeting your friends tonight," Charlie said quietly.

Tom hummed in acknowledgment. "Yeah. Two bar nights in a row."

Charlie tensed without meaning to.

Tom felt it. He rolled them gently until they were facing each other.

"Hey," Tom said softly. "Talk to me."

Charlie stared at the pillow for a second, then forced himself to look up. "I know it's stupid. I just... don't want you to feel like you have to explain me. Or defend yourself."

"It's not stupid, and I'm not going there to defend anything," Tom said. "I'm introducing my fiancé."

Tom brushed his thumb over Charlie's cheek. "You don't have to be there. You don't have to perform. You don't have to do anything. This is just me telling my friends the truth."

"Okay," Charlie whispered.

Tom smiled. "Okay." He leaned in and kissed Charlie, slow and sweet.

"You'll ask Hazel to sleep over tonight, then?" Tom asked.

Charlie nodded. Tom kissed him again, as if he couldn't resist not doing it for a second longer.

The bar was called The Refinery. It was the kind of place Tom used to frequent three nights a week--exposed brick, leather banquettes, and cocktails that cost twenty-two dollars and tasted like woodsmoke.

Tonight, he felt like a tourist in his old life.

He walked in and quickly spotted the table. Lukas, André, and Matt were already there, a pitcher of beer and a tower of nachos between them. They were louder than everyone else in the vicinity, loosening their ties and laughing about something that definitely violated HR policies.

"Look who it is!" Lukas roared, standing up and waving a nacho chip like a flag. "Citizen Tom!"

"Keep it down," Tom said, sliding into the booth. He was wearing jeans and a bomber jacket.

"You look..." Matt squinted at him. "Relaxed. It's unsettling."

"I am relaxed," Tom said, flagging down a waitress. "I'm on sabbatical."

"You're unemployed," André corrected. "Your dad is telling everyone you're having a 'mental health crisis.' The stock dipped two points."

"Good," Tom smirked. "I hope it dips three."

He ordered a beer and settled in. These were his oldest friends--guys he'd pulled all-nighters with in business school, guys who knew where the bodies were buried.

They spent the first twenty minutes roasting him about the resignation. They wanted all the gory details. Tom gave them the highlight reel.

"So," Lukas said. "What's the move? Consulting? Vineyard? Sourdough?"

"Actually," Tom announced. "I have news."

"Oh god," Matt groaned. "You started a podcast."

"I'm getting married."

"Get the fuck out," André slammed his hand on the table.

"No. No fucking way," Matt gasped. "To who?"

Lukas narrowed his eyes, pointing a greasy finger at Tom. "You dog. You knocked someone up."

"I did not." Tom took a sip of his beer.

"Is she a model?" André pressed. "Is it that VP of Marketing? Please no--she's crazy."

"It's not her." Tom set his glass down. He enjoyed this part, just a little. "It's Charlie."

The three of them stared at him.

Lukas blinked. "Charlie?"

"Charlie," Tom repeated. "My friend. The musician. Played at your wedding, André."

André's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. "The... piano player? Skinny guy?"

"That's him."

"Wait." Matt shook his head. "Charlie is a dude."

"Observant."

"And you..." Lukas gestured vaguely at Tom's entire person, then to the air, then back to Tom.

"Since when are you...?"

"I'm into him. Exclusively."

The three friends looked at each other. They communicated in a telepathic language of raised eyebrows and confused shrugs.

"Okay," Lukas said slowly. "So. You quit the Empire. You told your dad to shove it. And now you're marrying a dude. In the span of... what? A week?"

"Four days," Tom checked his watch. "Wedding's next week."

"What!" Matt shouted way too loudly. "Tom! That's a shotgun wedding! Is he pregnant?"

"Nobody is pregnant," Tom sighed. "It's... messy. Immigration issues."

"We can order another round," André said, leaning in. "Is it fraud? I know a guy."

"It's not fraud. I've been into him for years. Just... couldn't do anything about it. Until the government tried to kick him out."

They stared at him.

"You're serious," Lukas said. "You actually love this guy. This isn't a tax thing."

"Dead serious."

André let out a long, low whistle. He looked at Matt. Matt looked at Lukas.

"Holy shit," Lukas breathed. He sat back, looking at Tom with a bizarre new level of respect. "That is... soap-opera level chaotic."

"So," Tom said. "I'm not asking for advice. I'm telling you. And I need three best men."

"Wait," Matt said. "Us?"

"Yeah. Unless you have a problem with it."

"Problem?" Lukas laughed. He raised his beer. "Bro, this is the most interesting thing you've ever done."

"I'm in," André agreed, clinking his glass against Lukas's. "But only if there's an open bar."

"To Tom," Matt raised his glass. "And Charlie. And... felonies."

"To Charlie. And felonies," Tom agreed.

Charlie was sitting on the Italian leather sofa, covered in algae-adjacent slime.

"Don't move your face," Hazel commanded. "It cracks the clay. You want tight pores, don't you?"

"I have never thought about my pores in my life," Charlie mumbled, barely moving his lips.

Hazel had arrived at the penthouse twenty minutes after Tom left, armed with a duffel bag that contained her PJs, three different clay masks, two bottles of wine, and a collection of rom-coms from the early 2000s that she insisted were "cultural heritage sites."

Now, the movie *The Wedding Planner* was playing on the massive TV, and they were both slathered in green goop, holding wine glasses.

"Okay," Hazel said, pausing the movie right when Matthew McConaughey was saving a shoe. She turned on the couch, pulling her legs up.

"We need to talk," Hazel announced.

Charlie stiffened. "About what?"

"You know. The honeymoon phase. The logistics," she waved a hand vaguely. "I mean, I don't want to know the details, because you are my brother and it's gross, but I need to know. For quality assurance."

"Hazel, please," Charlie begged.

"Is he..." Hazel lowered her voice, leaning in. "You know. Well-endowed?"

Charlie coughed, spluttering, and hastily set his glass on the coffee table before he dropped it.

"What is wrong with you?" Charlie squeaked.

"So he is," Hazel deduced. She nodded. "I knew it. You can tell by the way he walks."

"Oh my god."

"Well?" Hazel prodded. "Is he a monster? Or is he manageable?"

Charlie knew she wouldn't stop until she had an answer. He made a small, pained noise in the back of his throat. He reluctantly nodded his head.

"Monster?" Hazel clarified.

"Yes," Charlie whispered, shrinking into the cushions. He took a deep breath.

"I'm..." Charlie bit his lip. "I'm a little scared, I think."

Hazel stopped smiling. She tilted her head, her eyes narrowing. "Scared?"

"He wants to..." Charlie gestured vaguely, his face burning so hot he was surprised the clay didn't bake hard instantly. "You know. Eventually. And I'm just worried... it won't fit."

The silence in the living room was absolute.

Then, Hazel let out a sound that was half-shriek, half-gasp. She threw her hands up, covering her ears.

"LALALALA!" she screamed. "I am not hearing this! My baby brother! My innocent flower!"

She fell back against the cushions dramatically, looking at the ceiling. "I asked for tea, and you gave me a tsunami. I am traumatized."

"You literally asked!" Charlie cried, mortified.

"I know!" Hazel sat back up, her expression shifting instantly from horror to serious, clinical focus.

"Okay. Real talk. Pause the panic."

She grabbed Charlie's hands. "Charlie. Listen to me. Physics is not a suggestion. You have to be smart."

She looked him dead in the eye.

"Thomas needs to prepare you," she stated firmly. "Whatever he wants to do, he has to do it properly. It is not a race. If he tries to rush it, you kick him. Do you understand?"

"He doesn't rush anything," Charlie defended softly. "He's... he's really patient. He stops if I breathe wrong."

"Good," Hazel nodded her approval. "That's the bare minimum. But seriously, Charlie. If you are worried about the... scale of the operation... then you need to make sure he puts in the work beforehand. Lots of prep. Lots of... supplies."

She reached for her purse. "I can send you a link to some very high-quality silicone--"

"NO!" Charlie shouted, jumping up from the couch. "No links! No shopping list! I get it! Prep! Patience! Please stop talking!"

Hazel laughed wickedly. "You're blushing so hard I can see it through the clay."

"I hate you," Charlie groaned, sitting back down.

"No, you fucking don't," Hazel countered. She clinked her glass against his empty one. "You love me. And you love him. Even if he is a structural hazard."

Charlie groaned again, but he leaned his head on Hazel's shoulder.

"He's really good to me, Hazy," Charlie whispered after a moment. "He... makes me feel safe."

Hazel softened. She rested her green cheek against his green head.

"I know," she said quietly. "I see it. And honestly? If anyone can figure out the logistics, it's Tom. It's literally his job."

The penthouse was dim, bathed in the low, golden light of the adjustable overheads.

Charlie was slumped in the corner of the leather sectional, his legs tucked under a fleece throw. His face felt stiff, the mask drying into a tight, crackling shell that made it impossible to smile, while

Hazel sat with her feet propped on the coffee table, balancing a glass of Pinot Noir on her knee like she held the deed to the building.

She was flicking through the New Arrivals on Netflix. Lulled by the silence and the wine, Charlie was half-asleep when they heard the click of the front door.

Charlie's head snapped up.

Tom walked in. He looked like a man who had survived a war, or at least three hours of corporate male bonding. His bomber jacket was half-unzipped and his hair was ruffled.

He paused in the entryway, blinking slowly. Then, he saw Charlie.

The exhaustion vanished, replaced by a look of sheer relief--like a diver finally breaking the surface for air.

"Hey," Tom breathed.

Charlie's stomach did a little flip. "Hi."

Hazel didn't even turn her head. "Hello, Tom. Congratulations on surviving testosterone club. Did you talk about golf? NFTs? Crypto?"

"Hazel," he said, dismissing her entirely.

He crossed the room in long strides until he was looming over the couch--big and broad and smelling of fresh air and expensive whiskey. He sank to his knees in front of Charlie, bringing them to eye level.

Before Charlie could protest, Tom's hands came up, cupping his face. The heat of his palms soaked through the dry clay.

Charlie froze. "Thomas," he whispered, mortified. "I'm--I have a mask on. I'm crispy."

"I know," Tom murmured. "You're beautiful."

From the other end of the couch, Hazel made a sound like she was choking on a grape.

Tom didn't care. He leaned in and kissed him.

It was a warm, slow claim. He kissed Charlie with a languid confidence that suggested he had been thinking about doing exactly this for the last four hours.

Charlie made a tiny, helpless sound into Tom's mouth before the reality of the situation crashed back in. *Hazel*.

He pulled back fast. "Thomas!"

Tom blinked at him, looking genuinely confused, like a puppy who had been swatted for wagging its tail. "What?" he asked, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Missed you."

"Oh my god," Hazel announced loudly. "I am right here. I am legally a witness."

Tom finally looked over at her properly, processing her presence with a drowsy blink. He stared for a beat, then shrugged, turning his attention back to Charlie. His thumbs began to rub lightly over Charlie's cheeks, cracking the clay.

"I told you not to move your face," Hazel said flatly. "Now it's cracking. Now you look like a reptile shedding its skin."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Don't talk to him like that."

Hazel gasped, clutching her chest. "Oh, so *now* you have boundaries? You didn't five seconds ago when you walked in here and started licking my brother like a lollipop."

Charlie let out a strangled groan, wishing the couch would simply eat him.

Tom straightened slightly, though he kept one hand resting possessively on Charlie's head, his fingers threading through his hair. "He's my fiancé," Tom stated, as if this were a legal defense that held up in court.

Hazel pointed her wine glass at him like a gavel. "He's also my brother."

Tom considered this. He swayed just a fraction, steadying himself with a hand on Charlie's knee.

"I love him more."

Charlie whined. Hazel's mouth dropped open. She stared at him, then slowly leaned back into the cushions, looking at the ceiling.

Tom ignored her. He dropped another kiss onto Charlie's head. Charlie looked up.

Tom's mouth curved instantly. "You good?" he murmured.

Charlie nodded, his cheeks burning. "You're... tipsy."

"Mm." Tom hummed, unapologetic. He leaned down, whispering against Charlie's ear, "Couldn't stop thinking about you."

Charlie's eyes stung. "I'm right here," he whispered back.

"Mhm." Tom's gaze travelled over Charlie's face. "You are."

"I am going to set myself on fire," Hazel said to the room at large.

Tom didn't even look at her. "I'll get you a match," he offered pleasantly.

Charlie winced as the dry clay pulled tight against his skin. His face felt awful. "I need to wash this off," he mumbled. "I can't move my mouth."

Tom stood up, offering a hand to help Charlie off the couch. Charlie took it, then scurried toward the hallway.

"I'm just going to the bathroom!"

"Yeah," Tom murmured, his eyes tracking Charlie's retreat. "I know."

Behind him, Hazel watched Tom hesitate for exactly one beat. She saw him look at the empty couch, then down the hall. She saw the moment his last scrap of social etiquette died a quiet death.

Tom followed.

Hazel sat alone for a full ten seconds.

"...What the fuck," she whispered. Then, realizing exactly what was happening, she sat up straight.

"Oh, absolutely not," she snapped. She marched down the hallway. "Not on my watch."

In the half-bathroom, Charlie was splashing lukewarm water onto his face. The green clay softened and slid away in dark streaks into the white basin.

"Ew," Charlie muttered, scrubbing his chin.

Behind him, Tom leaned against the doorframe.

Charlie caught his eye in the mirror. "Stop staring," he said, water dripping from his nose. "I look like a swamp creature."

Tom hummed, unbothered. "You look cute."

"I do not--"

"You do," Tom interrupted mildly. He pushed off the doorframe and stepped into the small room.

The air shifted instantly. He moved in close, pressing his chest gently against Charlie's back.

Charlie froze, his wet hands hovering over the sink.

Tom lowered his head, nuzzling behind Charlie's ear.

"God," Tom groaned. "You always smell so fucking good."

Charlie's knees went weak. He had to grip the edge of the marble counter to stay upright. "Thomas," he squeaked. "I'm--I'm wet. My face is dripping."

"Mm." Tom kissed the side of his neck. "Yeah. Still cute."

Charlie tilted his head to the side without meaning to, baring more of his neck. Tom made a low, pleased sound against his skin, his hands coming up to rest on Charlie's waist.

Then, Tom reached past Charlie and clicked the faucet off.

The sudden silence was deafening. It made their breathing seem impossibly loud.

Tom gripped Charlie's waist and lifted him. Charlie yelped as his feet left the floor, but before he could protest, he was seated on the marble vanity.

His legs fell open automatically, and Tom stepped between them like it was the only place he was ever meant to stand.

Charlie stared down at him, completely stunned.

"Thomas Montgomery," Charlie whispered. "What are you doing?"

"Mhm," Tom nuzzled into his neck. "Kissing you."

He buried his face back in Charlie's neck. Charlie melted. He tried to remember that his sister was down the hall. But his hands seemed to have a mind of their own; they slid into Tom's hair and pulled him closer.

"Thomas..."

Tom brushed his lips against Charlie's jaw. "Hi," he whispered.

Charlie let out a shaky, breathless laugh. "Hi."

And that was when Hazel appeared in the doorway.

"...I hate you both."

Charlie slapped a hand over his face. "Hazel--"

"No," Hazel cut him off. "Don't explain. Don't justify. You knew."

Tom finally lifted his head. He blinked at Hazel lazily.

"Hey," Tom said.

Hazel hissed. "Don't *hey* me like you didn't just tongue-baptize my brother in my presence. You're sniffing him like a bloodhound!"

Tom frowned, genuinely offended. "He smells good."

"I KNOW HE SMELLS GOOD," Hazel shouted, throwing her hands up. "HE'S MY BROTHER. I GREW UP WITH HIM. I AM AWARE."

"Please stop talking," Charlie whimpered into his palm.

Hazel pivoted on her heel. "Okay. Fine. I'm leaving. I'm going to bed. I'm locking the door. I am sleeping with headphones on. If I hear anything tonight, I am calling the police. And the Vatican."

"Hazel, wait--" Charlie called out.

"Goodnight!" she yelled, and slammed the guest room door so hard the pictures in the hallway rattled.

Charlie lowered his hand slowly, looking at Tom with helpless disbelief. Tom was still standing between his knees, still looking at Charlie like he was the best dessert on the menu.

"She's going to kill you," Charlie whispered.

"You're so worth it," Tom smiled. "Now come to bed."

"Okay," Charlie whispered. "Bed."

They changed in near silence. Charlie crawled under the duvet first, tucking himself into the spot he had claimed. Before he could even settle, Tom was there.

He hauled Charlie backward until they were fitted together. Then, Tom sniffed him again, the scratch of his chin dragging against Charlie's neck.

"Thomas," Charlie laughed, trying to shrink away. "That tickles."

Tom didn't stop. He made a low noise in his throat and nuzzled deeper.

"Smell good," Tom mumbled. "Smell like... Charlie."

Charlie giggled, happy and helpless. He tried to shove at Tom's arm, but it was like trying to move a steel beam. "You're drunk. You're being a dog. Get off."

"No." He bit down lightly on the cord of Charlie's neck. "You're delicious."

Charlie let out a high-pitched squeak, shaking with laughter he was desperately trying to suppress. "Thomas! Shut up!"

Tom lifted his head just enough to glare playfully in the dark, his hair sticking up in every direction. "You shut up."

"No, you shut up," Charlie hissed, though he was smiling so wide his face hurt. He pressed a hand over his mouth to stifle another giggle. "Hazel is going to call the police."

"Let her," Tom grumbled. He threw his leg over Charlie's and tightened his arm across Charlie's chest.

"She can't have you," Tom whispered. "I'm the husband."

"Fiancé," Charlie corrected automatically, though his chest tightened.

"Husband," Tom insisted, closing his eyes.

Charlie watched him for a second. The laughter settled.

"Okay," Charlie whispered into the dark. "Husband."

Chapter 8

The Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada office was in a brutalist concrete tower downtown. Tom and Charlie sat in the waiting area on hard plastic chairs, surrounded by families clutching folders and translators shuffling through documents.

Charlie was wearing the navy blazer again. His hands were folded so tightly in his lap that his arms were trembling.

Tom reached over, placing his hand on Charlie's knee. He was in a charcoal suit, crisp white shirt, no tie. He looked calm, but Charlie could see the tension in his jaw.

"Breathe," Tom murmured.

"I am breathing," Charlie whispered back.

"You're hyperventilating," Tom corrected gently. "In through the nose. Out through the mouth."

Charlie tried. He managed three breaths before his eyes darted to the hallway where they'd seen other couples disappear.

"What if they ask something we don't know?" Charlie's voice cracked. "What if I mess up the timeline? What if--"

"Charlie." Tom turned in his seat, taking both of Charlie's hands in his. "You know me better than anyone else in the world. Just tell the truth. That's all we have to do."

A door opened. A woman in a uniform appeared, holding a clipboard.

"Montgomery-Heitmeyer?" She mispronounced confidently.

They stood in unison. Charlie's legs wobbled.

The woman--her badge read Officer Benoit--led them down the hallway. She stopped at two doors facing each other across the corridor.

"Mr. Montgomery," she gestured to the left. "Mr. Heitmeyer, on the right. The interviews will be conducted at the same time. Please leave your phones with me."

Charlie looked at Tom, wide-eyed. Tom squeezed his hand.

"We've got this," he said. "I'll see you in twenty minutes."

Then they were separated.

Charlie walked into the small, windowless room. There was a table, two chairs, and a recording device.

The interviewer was a middle-aged man with silver-rimmed glasses. He gestured to the chair across from him.

"Mr. Heitmeyer. Please, sit."

Charlie sat. His hands were still shaking, so he hid them under the table, gripping his knees.

The man started the device. "This interview is being recorded. Please state your full name and date of birth for the record."

"Charles Heitmeyer," Charlie said, trying not to whisper. "December 28th, 1999."

"Good." The man opened a file. "Let's begin with some basic questions. When did you and Mr. Montgomery first meet?"

Charlie swallowed. "Um. Grade ten. We were in English class together. September, so... 2015."

"What was your first impression of him?"

Charlie felt his face heat up. He looked down at the table. "I thought he was going to bully me."

"And did he?"

"No," Charlie said. "He was... he was kind."

The interviewer wrote something down. "And what did Mr. Montgomery think of you?"

"You'd have to ask him," Charlie said, then panicked. "I mean--he told me later that he thought I had a funny accent. I'd just moved from Europe, so I had this weird Swiss-German thing going on."

The man nodded, unmoved. "Do you and your spouse share similar interests or hobbies?"

"Not really," Charlie admitted. "He likes... sports. I'm a musician. But he comes to all my shows. And I listen when he talks about the teams he likes and logistics even though I don't understand." He paused. "We do our own things together, if that makes sense. Like, he'll work on his laptop while I practice piano. We, um, just like being in the same room."

"Did anyone ever oppose your relationship?"

"Yes," Charlie answered quietly. "His parents. They... don't approve. His father told him he'd lose his job if he married me."

"And?"

"And he quit," Charlie whispered.

The interviewer's pen paused. He looked up, studying Charlie's face.

"Who usually makes the important decisions in your relationship?"

"Thomas does," Charlie said. "But he always asks me what I want first. Always."

"Who does the cooking?"

"Um. Thomas," Charlie said. A small smile tugged at his lips. "He makes these protein pancakes that taste like cardboard, but he makes them because he thinks I need to eat more. And, um, he always has my tea ready. All the kinds I like."

Across the hall, Tom sat in an identical room facing an identical bureaucrat.

"What was your first impression of Mr. Heitmeyer?" the officer asked.

Tom leaned back slightly, his hands folded on his lap. "I thought he had a nice accent. Kind of musical. And he looked... nervous."

"And you became friends?"

"Yes. He needed someone, and I..." Tom paused, choosing his words carefully. "Wanted to be that someone."

"Do you share similar interests?"

"No," Tom said honestly. "He's an artist. I'm not. But I love watching him create. And he listens to me talk about hockey and work stuff that would put most people to sleep. We complement each other."

"Did anyone oppose your relationship?"

Tom's jaw tightened. "My parents. They made it very clear they don't approve. My father threatened to fire me if I went through with the marriage."

"And you married him anyway?"

"I'm marrying him," Tom corrected. "The wedding is in less than a week. And yes, I quit my job. Because Charlie is more important than any position."

The officer made a note. "Who makes the important decisions?"

"I usually do," Tom admitted. "But only after I know what Charlie wants. His needs come first. Always."

"Who does the cooking in your household?"

"I do," Tom said. A small smile appeared. "Charlie can barely work the coffee machine. But we do the dishes together. We have a system."

Charlie stumbled out first. He saw Tom emerging from the opposite room and practically threw himself across the hallway.

Tom caught him, arms wrapping around Charlie's waist. "You okay?"

"I think so," Charlie mumbled into Tom's suit jacket. "I told them about the pancakes."

Tom laughed. "I told them you can't work the coffee machine."

"That's true," Charlie admitted.

Officer Benoit appeared at the end of the hallway. "We'll review the recordings and contact you within a month or two. You're free to go."

They walked out of the building in silence, not daring to speak until they were back on the street.

"We did it," Charlie breathed, leaning against the car. "We actually did it."

"We did," Tom agreed. He cupped Charlie's face. "You crushed it."

"I cried a little," Charlie confessed. "When they asked about your parents."

"Good," Tom said fiercely. "Let them see it's real."

He kissed Charlie right there on sidewalk, not caring about the pedestrians or the traffic. When he pulled back, he rested his forehead against Charlie's.

"One week," Tom whispered. "And then you're officially mine."

"I'm already yours," Charlie whispered back.

Tom dropped the keys on the console, making Charlie flinch.

"Char," Tom said softly.

Charlie blinked up at him. His eyes were wide and glassy.

Tom wrapped his hands around Charlie's wrists.

"Hey," Tom murmured. "Look at me."

Charlie obeyed. He wanted to.

Tom pressed his thumbs against the pulse points on Charlie's inner wrists.

One. Two. Three.

"I can't--I feel weird," Charlie breathed. "Dizzy."

"I know. It's okay." Tom stepped closer until their chests touched. He rested his forehead against Charlie's. "You aren't back there anymore. You're home."

Charlie's hands bunched into the fabric of Tom's shirt. "Tell me again."

"You're mine," Tom said. "You're safe. Nobody can take you from me."

Charlie exhaled shakily, his body sagging forward until Tom was taking most of his weight.

Tom kissed him--a firm press of lips. Charlie made a quiet sound and kissed back with a desperate kind of relief.

Tom's hand gripped the lapel of the navy blazer. "This," he muttered, "needs to go."

"Yes," Charlie gasped, pulling back just enough to breathe. "Please."

Tom worked the blazer down Charlie's arms and let it drop to the floor.

"Still with me?"

Charlie nodded, his eyes fluttering shut. "Yeah."

Tom kissed his temple, then his cheek.

"Bedroom."

Charlie pulled him toward the hallway.

The bedroom was quiet. Tom guided Charlie toward the bed.

"Let me see you," Tom whispered.

Charlie stood still, letting Tom's hands move to the buttons of his shirt. The shirt parted to Charlie's freckled chest. He slid the fabric back over Charlie's shoulders.

Tom ran his palms down Charlie's sides, fingers splaying wide over his ribs.

Charlie reached for Tom's shirt. His fingers fumbled slightly with the buttons, but Tom let Charlie have his turn.

"I want to see you too," Charlie whispered.

Tom smiled. "I'm all yours."

Charlie pushed the shirt open. He stepped in close, pressing his lips to the spot right over Tom's heart.

Pants were discarded. They stood skin to skin. Tom reached for Charlie's hand.

They moved to the bed. Tom pulled Charlie down beside him and kissed him. He pulled back, resting his forehead against Charlie's.

"Can I make us feel good?" Tom asked quietly. "Together, like last time?"

"Yes," Charlie whispered. "Please, Thomas. Yes."

Tom sighed against his lips. "Wanna take care of you, baby."

Baby. It still felt new. He was starting to crave it--the tenderness, the safety it promised. He reached up, threading his fingers through Tom's hair.

Tom guided Charlie onto his side so they were facing each other.

"Tell me if anything is too much," he murmured.

Charlie made a small, impatient sound. When Tom's hand finally wrapped around them both, Charlie's head fell forward against Tom's shoulder.

The slide was smooth, the friction building in waves. Tom focused on the way Charlie's breath caught on the upstroke, the tremors running through his thighs, the taste of his skin as Tom pressed open-mouthed kisses along his shoulder.

"You're incredible," Tom whispered between kisses. "So responsive. I love it."

Charlie shuddered, reaching down to grip Tom's hip, digging his nails in.

"I've got you," Tom promised. "I've got you."

The room filled with the sounds of them--the rustle of sheets, the wet slick of skin on skin.

"Thomas," Charlie gasped. "Please."

Tom tightened his grip, changing the angle just slightly.

"That's it, honey," Tom encouraged. "Let go. I have you."

Charlie went rigid for one suspended moment. Then the pleasure crashed through him.

Tom pressed his forehead hard against Charlie's shoulder, his hips jerking forward as his own release hit him.

Gradually, the room came back into focus. The ambient light, the hum of the air conditioning. Tom became aware of his own hand, sticky and warm, still holding them.

He reached for the wet wipes he had recently placed in the nightstand, cleaning them both up before pulling the duvet up to their chins.

"Hi," Charlie whispered, a shy smile touching his lips.

"Hi yourself." Tom brushed a damp strand of hair from Charlie's forehead. "I love you."

Charlie's eyes softened. He leaned in, pecking the corner of Tom's mouth. "I love you too. So much."

The afternoon sun slanted through the windows. Tom stood in the center of the living room, hands fidgeting with his tie for the dozenth time. He adjusted the knot, checked the length, then smoothed the already-straight fabric against his chest.

The penthouse was quiet except for his pacing. He looked impeccable--dark suit, crisp white shirt, and a midnight blue tie.

He paused by the piano. Charlie had played it that morning, filling the apartment with soaring, complicated notes. Rachmaninoff, maybe. It had taken Tom's breath away.

The sound of a door opening made him turn.

Charlie stood in the hallway. He was wearing the outfit Hazel had selected--a light blue dress shirt that made his eyes look dangerous, paired with slim black trousers. The top button was undone, revealing the hollow of his throat.

For all the times he had seen Charlie--dishevelled in the morning, focused at the piano, flushed in their bed--this version hit him with unexpected force.

Charlie's hands fidgeted at his sides. "Is it okay?" he asked. "Hazel said blue makes me look less like I'm auditioning for a funeral."

Tom couldn't speak. His brain had melted.

Charlie's brow furrowed. "Thomas? Should I change? I can put on something else--"

Tom crossed the room. He gathered Charlie into his arms, pulling him against his chest in a tight, desperate embrace.

Charlie let out a small, surprised sound--half gasp, half laugh.

"You look like you were made for me," Tom said against Charlie's ear. He wasn't typically poetic, but in this moment, it was the only truth that mattered.

Tom inhaled. He recognized the familiar scent mingled with something new--a subtle cologne. It was good. It was so good that Tom slid a hand up to cradle the back of Charlie's head.

"It's just a shirt," Charlie murmured, but there was a smile in his voice.

"What shirt?" Tom pulled back just enough to look at him. "Who cares about the shirt?"

Charlie blushed. Tom caressed his cheek. "We should go," he said reluctantly. "We have reservations."

"We should," Charlie agreed.

For a moment, they just stood there.

Charlie smiled. "Thomas. You're going to wrinkle my shirt."

Tom laughed and loosened his hold. "Sorry. Okay, let's go."

The restaurant was warm, scented with garlic and basil. A host with salt-and-pepper hair approached them as they walked in.

"Bonsoir, messieurs. Montgomery, table for two?"

"Yes, please," Tom said, discreetly passing the man what Charlie knew to be a very large tip.

"Right this way."

They were led past the main dining area to a semi-private nook. Tom pulled out Charlie's chair himself, waiting until he was seated before taking his own place.

"This is beautiful," Charlie said, taking in the candlelight. "How did you find it?"

"Research," Tom admitted, unfolding his napkin. "I may have interrogated them about their acoustics and table spacing."

Charlie's lips quirked. "Of course you did."

When the server appeared, Tom handed the wine list to Charlie. "You choose."

Charlie hesitated, but he took it. He scanned the page, his finger stopping halfway down. "The Chenin Blanc, I think. If that's okay?"

"Sounds great," Tom said.

As the meal went on, the restaurant noise faded into the background. Tom leaned in. He asked about the new Prokofiev piece Charlie was learning and anything that would keep him talking.

Tom barely touched his own food.

"You're staring," Charlie pointed out.

"I am," Tom agreed. He took a sip of wine. "You're beautiful when you talk about music. Your whole face changes."

Charlie ducked his head, a pleased flush colouring his cheeks, and looked back up at Tom through his lashes.

By the time they were sharing a tiramisu, Charlie was laughing freely. He offered Tom a bite, holding the fork out. Tom leaned forward, maintaining eye contact as he accepted it.

"Good?" Charlie asked.

"Perfect," Tom replied.

"Let me," Tom murmured.

He helped Charlie shrug the coat from his shoulders and hung it in the entryway closet. He turned back and guided Charlie into the living room.

"I've been thinking about you all night," Tom said.

Charlie looked up at him. "I was right there."

"Not the way I wanted you."

The wine hummed pleasantly in Charlie's veins. Tom's eyes were dark in the low light.

"Shower with me," Tom suggested.

A flush crawled up Charlie's neck. "Yes," he breathed.

Tom's smile was satisfied. "Yes?"

Charlie's hands rested lightly on Tom's chest. "Yes."

Tom kissed him deeply.

"Come on."

They moved to the bathroom. Tom reached for the shower controls. Water rushed forth, steam rising to fog the mirror.

"Here," Tom murmured, reaching for the top button of Charlie's shirt.

Charlie's hands fell to his sides.

"Still okay?"

"Yes." Charlie reached out, his fingers finding Tom's tie. "Can I?"

"Always."

Charlie undid the knot, draping the silk over the towel rack. Then he turned his attention to Tom's shirt. They stripped as the steam thickened around them.

"Water's perfect," Tom said, extending his hand.

Charlie took it.

The shower was spacious, but they gravitated toward each other.

"Turn around," Tom said softly, reaching for the bottle on the shelf. "Let me wash your hair."

Charlie complied, presenting his back. Tom's strong fingers worked the shampoo into a lather, massaging his scalp.

"I love touching you," Tom confessed. "I love that you let me."

Charlie turned to respond, but a sud-filled droplet betrayed him, sliding straight into his eye. He jerked forward with a hiss, hands flying up.

"Shit--Charlie!"

Tom spun Charlie around, tilting his face up, reaching blindly for a towel. "Don't rub it--here, let me see."

His brow was furrowed in genuine distress, dabbing frantically at Charlie's face.

A laugh bubbled up in Charlie's chest.

"It's shampoo, Thomas," Charlie managed between giggles. "Not acid."

Tom paused, towel poised mid-dab. "It could burn."

"I think I'll survive," Charlie assured him. "But thank you for the brave rescue."

Tom's shoulders relaxed. He let out a breath and grinned sheepishly. "I may have overreacted."

"Just a bit."

Tom leaned down, pressing a kiss to Charlie's soapy forehead. "Let me finish rinsing you off. No more casualties."

By the time they made it to the bedroom, Charlie was shivering slightly.

Tom pulled back the covers. Charlie slid between the sheets first. Tom followed, drawing Charlie toward the center.

They settled easily. Tom's arm came around Charlie's waist, pulling him back against his chest.

"Comfortable?" Tom asked.

"Mhm," Charlie confirmed. The rest of the world felt a million miles away.

Tom's hand splayed across Charlie's stomach. "Good night, my angel."

Charlie's heart fluttered. It wasn't the first time Tom had said it, but it still exhilarated him.

"Good night, Thomas," Charlie whispered.

The dream didn't start as a nightmare. It started in the white living room of the Montgomery estate, except the walls were made of glass, and on the other side, a faceless monster crept closer and closer to the door.

Charlie was screaming. He looked down at his hand. His finger was bare. He turned to find Tom, but the couch next to him was empty.

The room began to fill with cold, grey water. He tried to swim, but his limbs were paralyzed by the freezing temperature. He went under, the water filling his lungs--

"Charlie!"

The scream tore out of his throat. He shot up in bed, gasping for breath.

He was blind. Disoriented. He scrambled backward, hands clawing at the sheets, trying to find purchase, trying to get away.

"Hey, hey--I've got you."

Strong hands caught his shoulders before he could fall off the mattress. Tom pulled Charlie into his chest.

"No," Charlie wheezed, shaking violently. "I lost it. I lost the ring. It's gone--"

"You didn't lose anything," Tom promised. He grabbed Charlie's hand, forcing him to feel the metal against his skin.

"Feel that? It's right there. It's not going anywhere."

Charlie choked on a sob, his fingers curling frantically around Tom's hand.

"Breathe with me, honey," Tom commanded gently. He pulled Charlie down until they were lying on their sides.

"Count," Tom whispered into his hair. "Come on, Char. Count for me. Like you do."

"Un," Charlie stuttered. "Deux."

Tom rubbed a firm, grounding circle into Charlie's chest, right over his heart. "Keep going."

"Trois... Quatre..."

Tom counted along with him.

"Cinquante... Soixante..."

Charlie's eyes grew heavy. The scent of sandalwood and warm skin filled his nose. The heat of Tom's body seeped into his bones, melting the ice.

"Septante," Charlie whispered. "Huitante. Nonante. Cent."

Tom kissed the back of his neck. "There you are."

"I'm sorry," Charlie murmured. "I'm such a disaster."

"You are not a disaster," Tom corrected fiercely. "You're safe. You could wake me up a thousand times, Charlie. I'll be here every single time."

Charlie pressed his back against Tom's chest.

"Okay," Charlie sighed.

"Okay," Tom echoed. "Now, breathe, baby. I've got you."

Chapter 9

The apartment was still and blue. Charlie woke with the phantom weight of the nightmare pressing on his chest.

He tried to catalogue the room, but the edges swam. He felt Tom shift behind him.

Tom moved closer. The hand at Charlie's waist was firm. He pressed their bodies together until there was no space left, his bare chest warm against the damp, cold skin of Charlie's back.

"You're okay," Tom whispered. He tucked his face behind Charlie's ear. "I'm here."

Charlie fought the urge to recoil out of guilt. He had ruined what could have been a good night.

"I'm sorry," Charlie whispered. "I woke you up. I--"

Tom's hand moved to Charlie's chest, feeling the frantic beat of his heart. "Shh," he exhaled gently. "Breathe. S'not your fault."

"It is," Charlie argued weakly. "It's stupid. I can't turn it off."

"Don't need to turn it off," Tom mumbled into his skin. He pressed a kiss to the base of Charlie's neck. "Just want you here. With me."

Charlie felt heat rise in his face. "You don't have to do this," he whispered. "You can just sleep."

"How can I sleep when you need me?"

Charlie didn't have an answer for that. He exhaled, leaning back until his weight was fully supported. The tension in his shoulders slowly unspooled as the room brightened from blue to gold.

"Thank you," Charlie finally managed, turning his head back as far as he could. His eyes were wet.

Tom kissed his cheek reverently. "I love you. No more worries."

They stayed like that for another hour, drifting in a comfortable silence. By the time they finally untangled themselves from the sheets to face the day, the panic was gone.

The vibration of the phone on the countertop was like a drill in the quiet kitchen.

Charlie, who was experimenting with matcha, jumped. He eyed the screen.

Hazel (THE GENERAL): DJ needs a song. If you don't pick one by noon, I am choosing "Cotton Eye Joe" and locking the doors so you can't escape.

"Thomas!" Charlie called out, abandoning the whisk. "Crisis!"

Tom wandered in. He was wearing his usual sweatpants and a tight t-shirt. Being a house-husband suited him; he looked younger.

"I'm guessing it's your sister?"

"She needs a First Dance song." Charlie slumped against the counter. "I forgot about the dancing part. Do we... have to? I can't dance. I have no coordination. I trip over air."

"You have coordination," Tom said, walking over. "Come here."

"Thomas, I'm serious. I'm going to embarrass you. I don't know where my feet go. I freeze up."

"You won't freeze. Not with me."

Tom took Charlie's wrist and led him into the living area.

He shoved the coffee table out of the way with his leg. He pulled out his phone, scrolled for a second, and put on a Spotify playlist. The first song was something with a sultry bassline.

Tom turned around. He stepped into Charlie's space.

"Okay," Tom said. "Hands on my shoulders."

Charlie obeyed. He looked down at his socks. "I'm going to step on you."

"You're like, a hundred pounds. I'll survive," Tom said dryly. He slid his hands around Charlie's waist. "Just move when I move."

Tom started to sway. Charlie was stiff at first, his brain overthinking every micro-movement.

"Char," Tom said.

"I'm concentrating."

"Shh," Tom cooed. He waited until Charlie looked up on his own. "You're overthinking it. We do this in the kitchen all the time."

"That's hugging," Charlie muttered. "This is... performing."

"Nobody's here," Tom reminded him. He pulled Charlie in closer. "S'just us."

They moved in silence for a minute. Charlie's body slowly began to give in. He let Tom take the lead.

It felt good. Really good.

The 'lesson' part of the interaction faded. Tom slid his thigh between Charlie's legs. Charlie looked up at him, searching for the joke, but Tom wasn't smiling.

Tom's hand slid down from Charlie's back to rest on his hip, gripping the bone. He dipped his head, dragging his nose along the line of Charlie's jaw.

"You smell good," Tom mumbled against his skin for the dozenth time.

"I smell like matcha powder," Charlie whispered.

"Mm." Tom pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the pulse point under Charlie's ear. "Hazel can pick the song. I don't care what plays."

He moved his hips--a slow roll against Charlie's hip.

"As long as we get to do this," Tom groaned. "I really don't care."

Charlie let out a broken sound. Tom caught it with his mouth. They kissed--an eager, devouring thing. Tom kept moving his hips.

"Thomas," Charlie gasped. "I thought... practice?"

"We are practicing," Tom murmured, biting Charlie's lower lip. He walked Charlie backward until the back of his knees hit the sofa. "For the honeymoon."

He grinned that boyish smirk that brought Charlie right back to when he first fell in love. Then he pushed, and Charlie went down, tumbling onto the cushions with a yelp.

Tom settled over him, trapping Charlie against the leather. He grabbed Charlie's hands and went back to nuzzling under Charlie's ear.

"Is this okay?" Tom asked. "This is more fun than dancing."

Charlie laughed. "Yes. Obviously."

Tom released one of Charlie's hands to grip Charlie's hip. The weight of Tom's body blocked out the room, the window, and the wedding planning.

"God, you feel good," Tom said. "I love you under me."

Heat rushed into Charlie's face. The soft fabric did nothing to hide how hard Tom was.

"Fuck, you feel that?" Tom asked, rotating his hips. "That's what you do to me."

Charlie nodded. The friction was electric.

"I'm going to move," Tom warned softly. "Like this."

He demonstrated with a slow thrust of his hips. The pressure hit Charlie exactly where he needed it.

"Oh," Charlie moaned.

"Mhm." Tom smiled. He moved again, and again. It was maddening.

Charlie's hands found purchase on Tom's broad back.

"You're blushing," Tom observed. "All the way down your chest. I love it."

Charlie could feel it. "Thomas," he panted, his legs tightening around Tom's waist.

"I know, baby," Tom murmured. "I've got you. I've always got you."

The words wrapped around Charlie's heart. He felt like he was actually melting.

"You make me crazy," Tom admitted. "The sounds you make. The way you move."

Charlie's hands scrambled up to tangle in Tom's hair. He tugged, needing more.

"Please," Charlie whispered.

Tom pushed himself up slightly. He looked down at their shirts.

"Can I touch you?" Tom asked.

Charlie nodded eagerly.

Tom's hands slid under the hem of Charlie's t-shirt, bunching it under his arms.

"So gorgeous," Tom murmured.

His thumbs brushed over pink nipples. Charlie arched off the sofa.

Tom hummed in satisfaction. He bent his head, replacing his thumb with his mouth.

"Thomas," Charlie choked out.

Tom lifted his head. "Fuck. Yeah."

He shifted his weight again. Charlie could feel the wetness gathering in his pants, soaking the fabric. He tried to shift, extremely self-conscious.

"Don't," Tom said, his hand sliding down. He pressed his palm against the growing dark spot. "Don't hide from me."

Charlie's face burned, but Tom didn't look disgusted at all.

"You're so wet," he breathed. "Fuck, I love you."

Tom sealed their mouths together before Charlie could reciprocate. He ground down harder.

"Just like this," Tom panted. "Feel me. Let go for me, baby."

Charlie's body seized as his release crashed through him. The hot warmth spread through the fabric, sticky and obscene.

Tom groaned, his hips stuttering as he followed Charlie over the edge. They collapsed together.

Slowly, the room came back into focus. The playlist was playing something slow and acoustic.

Tom pushed himself up on his forearms. His hair was a disaster, his eyes happy.

"Hey," Tom smiled, looking incredibly smug. "You good?"

"I'm good," Charlie whispered. He grimaced slightly. "Gross. But good. You?"

"Gross but good," Tom chuckled. He rolled over, pulling Charlie with him until they were lying side-by-side on the couch, Charlie tucked against his chest.

The music changed again. A piano track. Charlie recognized it--something he'd played years ago.

Tom looked at him. "Mhm," he said, his tone light but his eyes warm. "I think this is it."

Charlie blinked. "What?"

"For the First Dance," Tom nodded toward the speaker. "This one. It's perfect."

Charlie laughed, hiding his face in Tom's shoulder. "Thomas! We can't use this. Every time it plays, I'll remember... this."

Tom grinned, kissing the top of his head. "Exactly. It'll be our secret."

The green bottle rested on the kitchen counter. It was the first tangible piece of their new life together--expensive champagne with a handwritten tag that read For after the ceremony.

Charlie stood before it in his pyjamas. It was 5 AM, hours before he needed to be awake.

Across the city, Tom sat on the edge of Lukas's guest bed. Hazel insisted they spend the night before the wedding apart, thus Tom had been banished to his friend's apartment.

So he was staring at a picture of Charlie on his phone instead.

It was a candid shot he'd taken the day before: Charlie at the piano, bathed in the afternoon light of the penthouse, wearing one of Tom's hoodies that were massive on him.

Tom sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. The guest room was cold, and the silence was wrong. It didn't have the quiet breathing he had become addicted to over the last week.

On the nightstand sat a notepad and a pen.

He had finalized merger acquisitions worth hundreds of millions. He had stared down board members and navigated hostile takeovers. But the blank page in front of him felt more intimidating than anything.

Tom picked up the pen. He clicked it.

He thought about his father's voice in his parents' living room.

A liability. A sinking ship.

He thought about Charlie's face in the car afterward--the terror, the guilt, the absolute certainty that he was a burden.

Tom pressed the pen to the paper. He didn't want to write a speech. He wanted to write a shield. He wanted to write something that would prove, once and for all, that Charlie wasn't the one being saved.

I promise, Tom wrote. Then he crossed it out. Too formal.

I never thought, he tried. Crossed that out too. Too cliché.

He looked back at the photo on his phone. The way Charlie's hands rested on the keys--capable, artistic, creating beauty out of thin air.

Tom realized he wasn't writing to an audience. He wasn't writing for the immigration officers, or for his parents, or even for Hazel. He was writing for the boy who counted in Swiss French when he was tired. The man who trusted him with his life.

Tom started again, and this time, he didn't stop.

Back in the penthouse, Charlie had moved from the island to the living room.

He was curled up in the corner of the leather sofa with a notebook balanced on his knees. To his left, the city of Montreal was slowly waking up.

He chewed on the end of his pen.

People considered him relatively poetic, but words had always been difficult for him. Music was easy; music was math and emotion perfectly aligned. You could play a minor third and everyone knew it meant sadness. You could resolve a suspension and everyone felt the relief.

But words were liable to be misunderstood.

He looked down at his blank page.

Technically, they had already done the legal part. They had signed the papers. They had survived the interview. This ceremony was for them--for the family, for the truth of it.

But what could Charlie offer Thomas Montgomery?

Tom had given him a home. He had given him safety. He had given up his career, his inheritance, and his family's approval, all without blinking.

Charlie had given him... anxiety? A few piano performances? A chaotic family dinner?

I'm a sinking ship, the voice in his head whispered.

No, another voice answered. It sounded like Tom. *You are my life*.

Charlie closed his eyes. He realized that trying to match Tom's sacrifice was the wrong way to look at it. Tom didn't want repayment. He wanted partnership.

He imagined the piano in the other room, then looked back at the paper.

He didn't need to be poetic. He just needed to tell Tom that for the first time in his life, he wasn't bracing for the end.

By the time the sun finally crested the horizon, Charlie put the pen down. His hand was cramping.

He looked at the champagne bottle on the counter again. It looked like a promise.

At 7:00 AM, Tom's phone buzzed.

He was awake and sitting up in bed, the notepad full of scrawled handwriting resting on his lap.

Hazel (THE GENERAL): *Operation Matrimony is a go. I am en route to the penthouse to extract the bridegroom. Lukas is inbound to you with coffee and the suit. If you have bags under your eyes, use the patches I put in your bag. Do NOT look tired in my photos.*

Tom smiled. He texted back: *I'm awake. Is he okay?*

Hazel (THE GENERAL): *I just walked in. He's eating toast. He looks calm. Maybe he's plotting to run.*

Tom's heart gave a small jolt, but then a second text came through.

Hazel (THE GENERAL): Just kidding. He's wearing your sweater and staring at the ring. He's fine. We'll see you at the altar. Don't be late.

Tom set the phone down. He looked at the vows he had written.

They were the truest things he had ever put on paper.

The door to the guest room swung open as Lukas stepped in, carrying coffees and garment bags, looking surprisingly awake.

"Rise and shine, corporate dropout," he grinned. "It's a beautiful day to get married."

Tom took the coffee. "Yeah," he said, thinking of Charlie across the city. "It really is."

"Dude," Lukas laughed. "You are so fucking whipped. It's actually painful."

Tom turned and took a sip. "I'm literally getting married in three hours, asshole. I'm allowed to be whipped."

"You're not just whipped, you're liquefied. You're a puddle." Lukas kicked the door shut behind him. "The Tom Montgomery I knew would be checking the Nikkei index right now. This guy is writing poetry and looking at sunrises all wistfully and shit."

"It's not poetry," Tom clutched his notepad. "It's a statement of intent."

Lukas rolled his eyes and dropped the garment bags on the bed. He looked ready to drop a horribly insensitive joke when the door buzzed.

"Goons are here," Lukas said as he left the room. "They brought the good scotch cause we can't watch this shit sober."

A moment later, André and Matt burst in.

"Alright," André held up a bottle of 18-year-old single malt like a trophy. "A toast--to turning gay and marrying your best friend in a week!"

Tom laughed. "Okay, okay. I get it." But he accepted the glass André shoved into his hand.

"To the sinking ship!" Matt's glass hit Tom's too hard.

"To the fucking captain," Tom replied. It burned going down. He immediately felt less nervous.

"Alright, you bastards." Lukas clapped his hands once. "Suit up. We are on a *timeline*, and if we're late, the General will skin us alive. She has a sniper on the roof."

Tom unzipped the garment bag. The midnight blue suit shimmered--sleek and cut to perfection. Marco had done his job.

He pulled on the trousers and buttoned the crisp white shirt. The guys started roasting him as they all changed.

"You think he's gonna bail?" Matt tossed socks at Tom's head. "Like, statistically? What are the odds?"

"Zero. Don't joke."

"He's nervous." André dusted off Tom's shoulders with aggressive pats. "Look at him. He's shaking."

"I'm not shaking."

"You're vibrating."

Lukas stepped back, looked him up and down. His grin softened for half a second. "Damn. Okay. You look expensive. You look like the guy on the cake."

Tom adjusted his cuffs and caught his reflection in the mirror. For the first time, he didn't feel like an ass in a corporate VP costume. He looked like a husband.

"Fuck. Okay. Let's go." He grabbed his vows. "I have a promise to keep."

The vibe in the penthouse couldn't have been more different.

Charlie stood in the center of the main room in his black suit. It fit him like a second skin.

Nancy stood in front of him, her hands trembling as she adjusted his boutonnière. She had been crying since before she and David arrived.

"Mum, please," Charlie whispered, eyes watering. "If you keep sniffing, I'm going to cry, and Hazel said no puffy eyes."

"I can't help it," Nancy sniffled, patting his chest. "You look so grown up. My sweet baby. You look like a prince."

"He looks like a rock star," David corrected, fighting back tears of his own. He clapped a large hand on Charlie's shoulder. "You look good, son. Proud of you."

"Thanks, Dad," Charlie exhaled.

"Okay, okay, emotional containment breach!" Hazel marched into the room holding a tissue box in one hand and a setting spray in the other. "Mom, step away from the groom. You are hydrating his suit with your tears."

Hazel looked at Charlie. She opened her mouth to bark an order, but the words died in her throat.

She took in the suit and the way Charlie was standing taller than usual. She saw the brother she had protected for years, ready to build a life of his own.

"Oh, Char," Hazel whispered. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Don't," Charlie warned, voice wobbling. "Hazel, you promised. You're the tough one."

"I know, I know," she laughed, fanning her face with her hand. "It's just... allergies. It's the dust in this stupid, massive apartment."

She walked over, shoving a tissue into his hand and then aggressively hugging him.

"He'd better be good to you," Hazel mumbled into his shoulder. "If he isn't, I have a divorce lawyer on speed dial."

Charlie laughed, hugging her back. "He's good, Hazy. He's the best."

Nancy sobbed. David blew his nose loudly into a handkerchief.

Charlie looked at them--his chaotic, loving, weeping family. He took a deep breath.

"Okay," Charlie said. "I'm ready. Take me to him."

Chapter 10

Hazel had chosen a restored botanical conservatory on the edge of the city--an enormous structure of glass and steel filled with towering ferns, cascading orchids, and the soft, filtered light of the Montreal afternoon.

Tom stood at the end of the aisle. Now that he was here, a profound calm had settled over him. This was the truth--the only thing in his life that had ever made complete sense.

Next to him, Lukas shifted on his feet. "You good, man?" he whispered out of the side of his mouth. "You look like a statue. A very expensive, very intense statue. Blink if you're conscious."

"I'm good," Tom said. His eyes were fixed on the doors at the other end of the room, willing them to open. "I'm ready. I've never been more ready."

The string quartet transitioned from a light, airy Mozart piece into Elgar's *Salut d'Amour*.

The doors opened.

First came Hazel. She walked in her silk suit with the precision of a runway model. She caught Tom's eye, gave him a sharp warning nod, and took her place on the opposite side of the altar.

Then, the low murmur of conversation around them cut out entirely.

David Heitmeyer stepped through the doorway, proud and misty-eyed in his tux, his normally stooped shoulders drawn back. On his arm was Charlie.

Tom's breath caught; he had to steady himself.

Charlie--of all people--was choosing him. Here. In front of everyone.

His wide, dark eyes found Tom's. Fear flickered there, but so did resolve.

As they came closer, Tom blinked hard, a shaky smile breaking as moisture gathered in his eyes.

David kissed Charlie's cheek at the front of the aisle, whispering something that made Charlie's shoulders drop an inch. Then, with a solemn nod, David placed Charlie's hand in Tom's.

"Hi, baby," Tom mouthed, squeezing Charlie's fingers tight, trying to transfer his own warmth into those cold hands.

"Hi," Charlie whispered back. He didn't smile--he looked like he was holding himself together with sheer will--but his thumb brushed over Tom's knuckles.

The officiant began the welcome. Tom heard none of it. He was memorizing the way the light hit Charlie's eyelashes, the slight tremor in his chin, the shallow rhythm of his breathing.

"Thomas," the officiant said, turning to him. "Your vows."

Tom took a deep breath. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the notepad paper. He unfolded it. The ink was smudged in places where his palm had been sweating while writing it.

"Charlie," Tom started. He had to clear his throat.

"You know..." he laughed wetly, wiping a tear with the back of his hand. He shook his head, letting the paper hang loosely in his hand.

"When we met in high school, I was... I was a lot."

A ripple of laughter went through the crowd. Lukas snorted audibly behind him.

"I was arrogant," Tom continued, smiling through the tears. "I thought I knew everything. I thought the world was something I could conquer if I just shouted loud enough, if I won enough games, if I got the best grades. And then I met you."

"You were so quiet. You were terrified of everything. But you have always been the bravest person I know. Just by being in my life, by being my best friend, you've changed me. You've taught me that strength is about endurance. You've turned me into... a man who actually knows how to care for someone. You taught me how to listen."

He squeezed Charlie's hands, pulling them slightly closer to himself.

"For the last four years, loving you in secret has been the best part of my life. It made me better. It made me want to be worthy of you. And now..." Tom paused. "Now I get to do it out loud. I don't have to hide it anymore. I vow to protect you, Charlie. From the big things, and the small things. I vow to be your shield when you need it, and your rest when you're tired. You're my angel. I love you."

In the front row, Nancy was openly sobbing into a handkerchief, clutching David's arm. Even André looked misty-eyed.

But Charlie didn't cry.

Charlie stood there, staring at Tom with an almost unnerving intensity. He had spent the last week crying in showers, in cars, in Tom's arms. He had cried from fear of the government, from the relief of the engagement, from the overwhelming gratitude of being chosen.

Now, in the center of the storm, the tears were gone.

"Charles," the officiant said gently. "Your vows."

Charlie took a shallow breath. His voice, when it came out, was quiet, but it carried.

"We were born so far apart," Charlie said quietly. "We should never have met. And yet--you found me."

He drew a breath.

"I loved you for a long time before I ever let myself hope for this. Thirteen years. And I don't regret any of it. Even when you couldn't say the words... we were still us. And now I know you loved me then, too."

He stepped closer until their foreheads almost touched.

"You want someone who'll stand beside you. Build a life with you. Choose you back. So I promise--I'll be that person. Even when I'm scared. I'll tell you the truth, even when my voice shakes. And I'll love you, out loud, for the rest of my life."

Charlie exhaled softly. "I'm not looking for the exit anymore."

Tom let out a half-sob, half-laugh.

The exchange of rings was a blur of trembling fingers. The gold band--David's grandfather's--slid back onto Charlie's finger. Tom's ring, a matching band that André and Matt had bought yesterday, slid onto his.

"By the power vested in me... You may kiss the groom."

Tom wrapped his arms around Charlie's waist. He lifted him slightly off the ground, crushing their bodies together.

Charlie clung to him, his eyes fluttering shut. He melted. For a moment, the conservatory disappeared.

The applause broke the spell.

They broke apart, breathless, flushed. Tom was beaming, his face wet with tears. Charlie offered a small, shy smile--dazed, but real.

"Come on," Tom whispered, grabbing Charlie's hand. "Let's get out of here."

They practically ran back down the aisle, their hands clasped tight, past the cheering friends, past the crying parents, and through the double doors.

Hazel was waiting in the foyer. She took one look at them, and she pointed a manicured finger toward a small, private room off the main hall.

"Ten minutes," she ordered, blocking the path of the photographer who was trying to follow them. "No visitors. Go."

Tom pulled Charlie into the room and shut the door behind them.

The roar of the applause was muffled. It was cool and dim.

Tom leaned back against the door, exhaling a long, shuddering breath. He loosened his tie, popping the top button of his shirt.

"We did it," Tom laughed. "We actually did it. Your mom didn't even faint."

Charlie stood two steps away, gaze on the floor.

It was done.

The papers were signed, the vows exchanged, and the immediate threat had dissipated. The adrenaline that had carried him through the interview, the suit fitting, the aisle, and the public display suddenly flickered out.

"Whoa, hey!" Tom reacted instinctively, pushing off the door. He steadied his husband, wrapping an arm around his waist.

"Hey, hey," Tom murmured, pulling Charlie into his lap. "I've got you. We're okay."

Charlie buried his face in Tom's neck. A gasp escaped him, followed by a sob.

"Thomas," Charlie choked out. "Thomas."

"I'm here," Tom whispered, gently rocking him. He pressed his face into Charlie's hair. "I'm right here. You're safe. We're married. You're mine. You're mine."

"I love you," Charlie muffled into Tom's shoulder. "I love you so much. Thank you. Thank you."

"I know," Tom whispered. "I know, baby. I love you too. I've got you."

The transition from the bridal suite back to the conservatory was like stepping out of a confession booth into a carnival.

The reception was in full swing. The string quartet had been replaced by a jazz trio playing something upbeat and brassy. Waiters were weaving through the crowd with trays of champagne and canapés.

Tom kept a hand on Charlie's back as they navigated the room. They made it to the head table, a long, harvest-style setup draped in sheer white cloth and eucalyptus. Hazel had spared them the ice sculptures, but she had gone heavy on the candles. The table was glowing.

They sat down. Charlie reached for his water glass, throat sore from the sobbing. He took a sip, looking out at the sea of faces. Nancy was laughing with an aunt he didn't recognize. Alex was trying entertain a little cousin.

And then, he saw the empty table near the front.

It was set for two. *Michael & Kathy Montgomery.*

The chairs were pushed in. The plates were untouched.

Charlie froze. In the chaos of the ceremony, he had completely forgotten.

"Oh, Thomas," Charlie whispered. "They didn't come."

Tom picked up his champagne flute, swirling the liquid gently.

"I know," Tom said. "I didn't think they would."

"But..." Charlie frowned. "I thought... maybe your mom, at least?"

Tom took a sip. He looked at the empty chairs.

"It's okay, Char," Tom said quietly. "Honestly."

He turned to look at Charlie, and his eyes were clear.

"I am sad," Tom admitted, shrugging one shoulder. "But I think I'm sad for the parents I thought I had when I was six. The ones who cheered at my soccer games before they realized I wasn't going to be a pro athlete. The people they are now..."

Tom looked back at the empty table, then shook his head. "They wouldn't even be happy here. They'd be criticizing the wine and asking why you aren't a doctor yet. I'd rather miss them than resent them."

He squeezed Charlie's knee. "Besides. Look around."

Tom gestured to the room--to David Heitmeyer, who was showing a photo on his phone to a stranger; to Hazel, who was micromanaging the waiter; to the three Goons, who were absolutely owning the dancefloor.

"I have plenty of family," Tom said.

Charlie felt a lump in his throat. "Yeah. You do."

CLINK. CLINK. CLINK.

The sound of a knife hitting a glass cut through the room.

Hazel stood up at the microphone stand. She had discarded her blazer, revealing a silk camisole, but she still looked like she could order an airstrike.

"Alright, settle down," she commanded. The room quieted instantly.

She took a deep breath, then looked up at the head table. Her eyes softened when they landed on Charlie.

"For those of you who don't know," Hazel started, "I was sixteen when Charlie came to live with us. When my parents said we were sponsoring a teenager from Switzerland, I was so thrilled. I thought: Finally. Someone I can boss around."

Laughter rippled through the room. Charlie hid his face behind his fingers, smiling.

"I wanted a minion," Hazel admitted. "But what I got was... Charlie."

She gripped the mic stand. "He was so quiet and scared. And I remember thinking, Oh. He's not a minion. He's a baby genius."

She smiled at him, her eyes shiny. "I didn't know then that he would become my best friend. I didn't know he would be the one to help me with my calculus homework, or that he'd be the one holding my hand when I got my heart broken in college. He's my sweet baby brother, all grown up. And seeing him today..."

She gestured to Tom. "Seeing him with someone who looks at him like that It's all I ever wanted for him. So, Tom... you better keep looking at him like that. Or I have keys to your apartment, and I know

where you sleep."

Tom raised his glass in a salute. "Understood."

"To the grooms!"

The room echoed it back.

Before Hazel could fully sit down, three figures were already moving toward the microphone.

Lukas grabbed it first. Adjusted it way too high, then way too low.

"Wassup. We're the 'University Friends.' Code for 'the guys who knew Tom when he wore cargo shorts unironically.'"

Tom dropped his head into his hands.

"Let's talk about Tom Montgomery," André said, shouldering in. "Growing up? King. Captain of everything. President of the frat. Had a spreadsheet for his dates."

"Colour-coded," Matthew added.

"We thought he was going to marry a CEO and live in a glass box. Then four years ago... the machine broke."

Lukas paused. "It was weird. He stopped coming out. Stopped dating. We'd try to set him up, and he'd be like, 'Nah, I'm busy.'"

"We thought he was dying."

"Joined a cult."

"Turns out--" Lukas pointed at Charlie. "He joined the Cult of Charlie."

Charlie went red. The room laughed.

"We didn't know Charlie," André said. "To us, he was just 'my friend, the musician.' The quiet guy in the corner who drank water and looked like he wanted to leave. We're like, why is Tom obsessed with this guy? He doesn't even like hockey."

"But now we get it."

Lukas's voice levelled out. The joking edge dropped.

"We've never seen Tom like this. Didn't know he could be like this. We thought he was a robot programmed to make money."

All three of them looked at Tom, who was staring at Charlie's profile instead of them.

"He's soft!" Matthew yelled. "He's a marshmallow! It's disgusting!"

"And the best part?" Lukas leaned into the mic. "Took the government sending a deportation notice to get this man to tell him. Peak cowardice, Tom. You needed a federal mandate."

"Boo!" André cupped his hands around his mouth. "Boo this man!"

Lukas raised his glass. "To Charlie--for breaking the robot. And to Tom--for finally admitting he has feelings. We love you guys. Even if you are weirdly codependent."

A wave of laughter and applause rang out. Then, the room quieted.

It was Tom's turn.

He stood up. He buttoned his jacket and looked out at the crowd.

"I'm not going to roast anyone," Tom started. "Mostly because Hazel could ruin my life."

He looked down at Charlie.

"They're right. We all thought we knew where I would end up. If you had told High School Tom, or Frat Boy Tom, that we would be here today..." Tom shook his head, smiling. "He wouldn't have believed you. He wouldn't have understood."

"I'm really glad I grew up," he continued. He put a hand on Charlie's shoulder.

"Thank you," Tom said simply. "For waiting for me."

The room clapped loudly as he sat down.

"Char?" Hazel called out. "You're up, kid."

Charlie blinked. He looked at the microphone. He looked at his empty champagne glass. He felt a pleasant, warm buzz in his limbs.

He stood up. He was a little wobbly, so he leaned against Tom for support.

"Hi," Charlie said into the mic. His voice echoed. He winced. "Sorry. Loud."

He looked at the crowd. It was a blur of faces.

"I..." Charlie started. He had thought about writing a speech. He had thought about explaining how scared he had been.

"I'm drunk," Charlie announced.

The room laughed.

"And I promised myself I wouldn't cry again," Charlie continued, "because I already ruined my makeup once today, and Hazel worked really hard fixing it."

He looked down at Tom. Tom was looking up at him with that same reassuring adoration.

"I just want to say thank you," Charlie whispered. "To Hazel and Alex and Mom and Dad... for keeping me. And to Thomas..."

Charlie paused. He swayed slightly.

"Thank you for marrying me," he said, blinking slowly. "You're my favourite."

He sat down abruptly.

Tom caught him, wrapping an arm around his waist.

"Short and sweet," Tom grinned, kissing Charlie's temple. "Perfect."

"I think I need a bread roll," Charlie murmured, leaning his head on Tom's shoulder.

"I'll get you a bread roll," Tom promised. "I'll get you the whole basket."

The jazz trio wound down their set, the final brassy note hanging in the air before dissolving into applause. A low murmur rippled through the crowd--glasses clinking, bodies shifting in anticipation.

Charlie felt it before he consciously thought it.

The First Dance.

He sat at the head table. His knee bounced once under the table before he caught it.

Tom noticed immediately.

He always did.

He leaned in, his shoulder brushing Charlie's. "Hey," he murmured. "You okay?"

Charlie nodded, then hesitated. He glanced out at the open space that had been cleared in the center of the conservatory. Candlelight reflected off the glass walls, warm and beautiful.

"I just..." Charlie swallowed. "It's time to dance..."

Tom followed his gaze. Even after 'practicing' at home, Charlie was still nervous.

"Okay," Tom said calmly. He gave Charlie's knee a reassuring squeeze under the table. "No problem, honey."

"What--"

Tom stood up and made his way toward the microphone stand. The guests quieted easily.

Tom cleared his throat.

"Hi," he said, and smiled when a few people laughed softly. "Uh--thank you. All of you. For being here with us."

Charlie's heart started beating faster. Tom looked relaxed. Like he belonged exactly where he was standing.

"We were told this is the part where we do our First Dance," Tom said. "And we're really excited about that. But... we were also thinking, it would be really nice if you could all dance with us. Together."

He gestured lightly to the open floor.

"No pressure," he added. "Just... for fun."

The room was silent for half a second.

The silence broke with a ripple of surprised laughter.

Aunt Elise was the first to stand. She raised her champagne flute in a toast, kicked her heels off, and stepped onto the floor with her husband in tow. A beat later, David followed, offering Nancy his arm with exaggerated gallantry. Hazel rolled her eyes, muttered something about the sanctity of the First Dance, and then joined them, dragging Alex behind her.

Chairs scraped back. The cleared space filled with awkward swaying and rising laughter.

The DJ let the first notes roll out--a melody that Charlie recognized instantly. Their couch song.

Tom was already back at the table. He held out his hand.

"Come here, baby," he said softly.

Charlie stood on boneless legs. He slipped his hand into Tom's.

Tom squeezed once. They walked onto the floor together.

Up close, the crowd dissolved into colour and movement. No one was staring. People were having a great time in their own small worlds.

Charlie exhaled.

Tom turned him gently, positioning him so that Tom could shield him from the world.

"Just like at home," Tom murmured near his ear. "Remember?"

Charlie nodded. He let himself lean in.

They swayed.

Nothing fancy. Just the slow, easy shift of weight that Charlie knew by heart now. Tom moved first, and Charlie followed, trusting the pull of Tom's body.

"You're doing great," Tom whispered.

"I'm not doing anything," Charlie breathed back.

Tom smiled. "Exactly."

Charlie dared to look up.

Tom was watching him the way he always did--focused, reverent, as if nothing else in the room existed. His eyes were certain. Proud.

"Hey," Tom murmured.

"What?"

Tom dipped his head so their foreheads touched. "This is my favourite part."

Charlie swallowed. "Mine too."

Around them, Hazel was dancing with David, barking instructions while laughing. Lukas was attempting something theatrical with André that absolutely did not work. Nancy watched from the edge of

the floor, one hand pressed to her mouth, tears shining openly on her cheeks.

But there was no edge. No countdown. No sense of being observed or evaluated.

Charlie let his eyes close.

Tom tightened his hold, just slightly, like he'd felt the surrender happen.

"I've got you," Tom whispered, more promise than reassurance.

"I know."

They swayed through the song, and when it ended, no one rushed them. The applause came later, gentle and fond, like an afterthought.

For a moment longer, they stayed where they were. When Tom finally drew back and brushed a kiss against Charlie's temple, he murmured,

"See? You danced."

Charlie's smile was soft. "Only because you didn't let go."

Tom's thumb traced the gold band on Charlie's finger. "I never will."

Charlie was pleasantly, safely drunk. The champagne seemed to refill itself every time he looked away.

He leaned against Tom and spun the gold band on his finger. The short time without it before the ceremony had left him feeling naked.

Tom hadn't stopped touching him for hours. His arm was draped along the back of Charlie's chair, hand on the nape of Charlie's neck. Keeping track.

Hazel marched out of the crowd. She leaned in between them, cutting through the noise.

"You're done," she announced. She checked her watch. "You smiled for the photographer. You thanked the caterer. You hugged the various aunts. You are officially released."

Charlie blinked. "We can leave?"

"It's your wedding," Hazel said, her expression softening. "You can do what you want. Car's out front. Driver has your address."

Tom straightened. "You're serious? We can go?"

"Go," Hazel ordered, making a shooing motion. "I'll handle the rest."

Tom stood up, his hand sliding down to grip Charlie's elbow.

"Thank you," he said to Hazel. He meant it.

Hazel rolled her eyes, but she reached out and squeezed Charlie's hand. "Just make him happy, jackass. Get out of here."

They moved as a unit, Tom carving a path through the crowd. There were a few final, crushing hugs--Nancy weeping into Charlie's shoulder, David clapping Tom on the back hard enough to bruise--and then, the cool night air hit them.

The car was waiting at the curb. The driver held the door open, face professionally blank. Tom guided Charlie into the backseat.

The door clicked shut. The privacy screen raised.

Tom breathed out, head falling back against the headrest as he loosened his tie.

"Are you okay?" Charlie asked softly.

"I'm trying," Tom said, "very hard to keep my hands to myself right now."

"Oh," Charlie tilted his head toward the screen. "Because of him?"

"Partly." Tom opened his eyes. They were dark and exhausted and starving. "And partly because you're still drunk, and today was a lot, and I don't want to overwhelm you."

Charlie's lips curved into a smile. The champagne had made him brave. He scooted across the leather seat until his thigh pressed against Tom's.

"What if I want to be overwhelmed?"

Tom's hand shot out, gripping Charlie's thigh.

"Char," Tom warned.

"Yes, husband?"

Tom groaned, his head dropping back again. His grip on Charlie's leg tightened, his thumb digging into the muscle.

"You can't say things like that," Tom muttered. "Not when we're stuck in traffic."

Charlie giggled. He settled back, resting his head on Tom's shoulder, letting Tom's cologne wash over him.

"Fine," Charlie said. "Tell me your favourite part."

Tom took a deep breath, visibly forcing his heart rate down. "Seeing you," he said. "When you walked in. I forgot how to breathe."

"You cried," Charlie reminded him, tracing the seam of Tom's trousers.

"I did," Tom agreed. He turned his hand over, interlacing his fingers with Charlie's. "You look... unreal."

Charlie's chest squeezed. "I liked your vows."

"They weren't very poetic."

"They were perfect for me," Charlie said.

They fell into an easy silence, the city lights sliding past the tinted windows.

Beneath the midnight blue suit and the exhaustion, Tom was vibrating. He was hunting for the moment he could stop pretending to be civilized.

When the car finally pulled up to their building, Tom was out the door before it fully stopped. He tipped the driver more than enough and guided Charlie out onto the sidewalk.

"Home," Tom murmured as the taillights faded down the street.

The lobby was deserted. Their footsteps echoed sharply against the marble floors. Tom's hand never left the small of Charlie's back. He steered him toward the elevator bank.

The mirrored walls reflected them as they waited. Tom pressed the call button. The elevator arrived with a soft chime, and the doors slid open.

Tom gestured for Charlie to enter first. The moment the doors slid shut, Tom turned to Charlie and pulled him in. He wrapped his arms around Charlie's waist and buried his face in his neck. He let out a half-growl, half-sigh, pressing him against the wall.

"God," Tom breathed against his skin. "Finally."

He inhaled as deeply as he could. "You smell so good. You always smell so fucking good."

Charlie's arms wound around Tom's neck.

"Even now?" Charlie whispered, baffled. "We've been dancing for hours. I smell like sweat."

"Mhm," Tom murmured. "Like sweat. And champagne. And Charlie." He kissed Charlie's pulse point hard. "Fuck. I fucking love you."

The tears came suddenly. Charlie pressed his face into Tom's shoulder, dampening the fabric.

Tom pulled back, his large hands coming up to cup Charlie's face.

"Hey. What's this?"

"Nothing," Charlie choked out, laughing. "I'm just... happy. I didn't think I was allowed to be this happy."

"Oh, honey," Tom whispered. He leaned his forehead against Charlie's. "You deserve every second of it."

He kissed him again. Charlie clutched at Tom's shoulders, letting himself be held up.

The elevator chimed. *Penthouse Level.*

Tom broke the kiss but didn't let go. "Almost there," he murmured.

Charlie nodded, sniffing and wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

The doors opened.

Charlie took a step toward the apartment, but Tom bent down and swept him up into his arms. Charlie gasped, hands flying around Tom's neck.

"Thomas! What are you doing?"

"You're done walking for the day," Tom said, adjusting his grip. He held Charlie like he weighed nothing.

"This is ridiculous," Charlie protested, hiding a smile. "I'm not a bride."

"Don't care."

Tom strode to the door, balancing Charlie's weight against his chest while he fished the key from his pocket and unlocked the door.

He kicked it open and carried Charlie over the threshold. Then he kicked it shut behind them.

"Welcome home," Tom whispered.

He stood there for a moment in the dark foyer, just holding Charlie, enjoying the burden.

"Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery," Tom added. It sounded permanent.

Charlie tightened his arms around Tom's neck, breathing in the scent of safety. "I love you. I love you so much."

"I know," Tom murmured. He pressed a kiss to the top of Charlie's hair. "I love you too."

Their room was dark, save for the streetlights filtering through the curtains.

Tom lowered Charlie onto the edge of the bed. The tears were stopping, his lashes wet and clumped, his breathing hitching every few seconds as his body calmed down.

Tom reached out and clicked the bedside lamp on low. A warm glow pushed the shadows back to the corners.

"There," Tom murmured. "Better."

He dropped to his knees on the carpet between Charlie's legs.

He reached for Charlie's foot, untying the dress shoe and sliding it off, then the sock. Then the other. His hands were warm and gentle, thumbs pressing into the arch for just a second.

His hands moved to Charlie's thighs.

"Char," Tom said, looking up. His tie was loose, hair messy from the wind outside. He was gorgeous. "We've had a long day. An amazing day, but long."

He squeezed Charlie's legs.

"We can stop," he said quietly. "I mean it. No matter how much I want you, I won't push. We can brush our teeth and pass out. We have the rest of our lives. No guilt. No expectations."

"Thomas," Charlie whispered. He reached out, cupping Tom's face, thumb tracing the stubble on his jaw. "I want to be close to you."

Tom turned his face into Charlie's palm. "We can cuddle. We can just--"

"I want to feel you. I want to be yours."

Tom studied Charlie's face. He saw the desire there, but he also saw the exhaustion.

"Okay," Tom said. "Okay, honey. There's another way we can be close, without it being a marathon."

Charlie tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

"You don't have to prep," Tom said. "I don't have to go inside. I just want to be between your legs. I want to use your thighs."

He pressed his thumbs against the inseam of Charlie's trousers.

"I can be right there, against you," Tom promised. "Just friction. Just heat. It feels incredible, and you don't have to do anything but let me hold you."

Charlie blinked. It sounded wonderful.

"You'd still... finish?" Charlie asked.

Tom's eyes darkened. He nodded. "We both would. It feels good, Charlie. Really good."

Charlie felt a rush of heat. He reached up, his fingers fumbling with his own tie, loosening the knot.

"Show me," Charlie whispered. "I want that."

"Shh," Tom murmured. He gently pushed Charlie's hands away. "Let me do it. You're done for today."

Charlie was happy to surrender.

Tom slid the silk free from Charlie's collar and tossed it onto the floor. As he unbuttoned the shirt, he leaned in. He pressed his mouth to Charlie's throat, then his collarbone.

Charlie shivered.

Tom pushed the shirt off Charlie's shoulders. He sat back on his heels, eyes travelling over the smattering of freckles, the flush of heat rising up his neck.

"God," Tom whispered. "You're finally mine."

Charlie reached out. His fingers fumbled with Tom's tie. "I'm yours," he whispered. "I'm all yours."

Tom let him struggle with the knot for a second, enjoying the attention, before he took over. He stripped out of his own jacket and shirt, tossing them aside.

"Stand up for a second," Tom murmured.

Charlie obeyed, legs slightly unsteady. Tom stayed on his knees. He undid Charlie's belt, then hooked his thumbs into the waistband of the trousers.

He looked up, checking in.

Charlie nodded.

Tom pulled the trousers down. Charlie stepped out of them, kicking them toward the hamper, leaving him standing in just his little black briefs. Tom made quick work of those, too.

Then, Tom stood up. He shucked his own pants and underwear, tossing them away until they were standing before each other by the bed.

"Come here, honey," Tom said warmly.

He opened his arms, and Charlie stepped into the space between them.

Tom was furnace-hot. He wrapped his arms around Charlie, pulling him flush against his chest, crushing the air out of the space between them. Charlie nuzzled his face into Tom's neck.

They stood there for a long time, swaying slightly. Tom's hands spanned Charlie's back, pressing him closer.

"You feel so good," Tom whispered into Charlie's hair. "So soft."

He pulled back just enough to look at Charlie. His eyes were almost completely black.

"Alright," Tom said. "Lie down."

He guided Charlie onto the bed.

"We're gonna try what I told you," Tom said. "Let me show you how good it can feel. Turn on your side."

He used his weight to gently nudge Charlie over, curling his large body around his back. Tom reached for the nightstand, grabbing the bottle they kept there. He poured a generous amount into his palm, warming it for a second, before reaching down between Charlie's legs. He slicked the oil over Charlie's inner thighs.

"Squeeze your legs together," Tom ordered against Charlie's ear. "Tight. Don't let me slip, okay?"

Charlie obeyed, clamping his thighs shut.

Tom slid himself between Charlie's legs. It was a tight fit.

"Shit," Tom hissed. "That feels... fuck, Charlie. Squeeze tighter."

Charlie did. The sensation was maddening--the heat, the slide, the feeling of Tom humping against him. It felt lazy and dirty at the same time.

"Is this okay?" Tom asked, biting lightly at Charlie's neck.

"Yes," Charlie breathed. He tipped his head back. "Yes, it feels--"

His words dissolved into a sharp cry.

Tom's hand had slid down from his waist, wrapping firmly around his dick. He slicked his hand with the excess oil from Charlie's thighs and began to stroke.

Charlie's brain shut down. It was too much good input at once. He was surrounded by Tom--Tom's chest against his back, Tom's legs tangled with his, Tom's hand owning him.

Tom buried his face in Charlie's hair. He set a punishing pace.

"You feel so good," Tom groaned. "So hot. You're so fucking tight for me."

Charlie was spiralling. The pleasure coiled tight at the base of his spine.

"Thomas," he gasped. "I'm close--I'm--"

"Go on." Tom sped up, hand a blur. "Let go for me, baby. Cum for me."

Charlie cried out, body bowing taut as he spilled over Tom's hand.

"That's it," Tom praised. He mouthed at Charlie's flushed shoulder. "God, you're gorgeous. Look at you."

Charlie lay in a daze, lungs burning. The room spun slowly. All he knew was Tom's heart against his back--and Tom still hard and urgent between his legs.

Charlie clamped his thighs tighter together.

Tom let out a raw, strangled sound. "Char--"

"Please," Charlie whispered. He reached back, his fingers tangling blindly in Tom's hair. "Please, Thomas. Finish."

"Charlie," Tom groaned, shuddering violently.

They lay there for a long time. Then, without warning, Tom rolled Charlie onto his back.

Charlie blinked up at him. Tom was looking at him like Charlie was something he had hunted, caught, and was now deciding how to keep forever.

For a split second, the intensity of it shocked Charlie. It should have been disturbing. Terrifying. It should have triggered every flight instinct he had.

But it didn't. Instead, he realized, with a sudden, dizzying clarity, that he liked it. He wanted to be held down by this specific man.

Before Charlie could speak, Tom captured his mouth.

Tom's tongue swept past Charlie's teeth. His hands held Charlie still, thumbs digging into the softness of his cheeks.

Charlie melted. The shock dissolved into pure submission. He wound his arms around Tom's neck, pulling him closer.

When they finally broke apart, they were both panting.

"You okay?" Tom asked.

Charlie blinked. "I'm good." He sounded drunk on sensation. "I'm perfect. You?"

Tom smiled. He pressed a hard kiss to Charlie's forehead, then the tip of his nose.

"Perfect. Stay there," Tom ordered. "I'll be right back."

Charlie watched him go. Tom padded naked to the bathroom, returning a moment later with a warm, wet washcloth.

Tom sat on the edge of the bed. He wiped away the lube and fluids. The contrast between the feral, possessive man from two minutes ago and this gentle caregiver made Charlie's chest ache.

When he was done, Tom tossed the cloth toward the bathroom door. Then he slid back under the covers, pulling Charlie into his arms.

Charlie went willingly. He curled into him, his head finding the natural hollow of Tom's shoulder. Tom locked him in--one arm under his neck, the other draped across his waist.

"I can't believe we're married," Charlie marvelled against Tom's skin. He lifted his hand in the dark. "It feels like a dream."

"It's real," Tom assured him. He kissed the top of Charlie's head. "It's so fucking real. And I'm never letting you go."

Their heartbeats slowed, syncing up in the dark. Tom's fingers traced lazy patterns on Charlie's arm, his wedding ring rubbing against Charlie's skin with every pass.

"We should sleep," Tom murmured, though his grip didn't loosen even a fraction. "Big day tomorrow."

Charlie hummed. The exhaustion of the wedding, the crying, and the sex pulled him down. He nuzzled his face into Tom's chest.

"I love you," Charlie whispered, the words slurring slightly. "Love you so much."

Tom tightened his hold.

"I love you too," he whispered into the dark. "Husband."

Chapter 11

By 7 o'clock the next morning, the city had already lapsed into its Saturday routine. The bedroom was quiet, the hush of a morning with one simple obligation.

Charlie sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the open suitcase. He was folding and refolding the same three shirts, the same two pairs of jeans. He pressed down hard, trying to make the edges align, but the shirt wriggled back, untamed. He tried again, then swore under his breath when the collar slumped to one side.

Tom leaned against the doorframe, watching with the patience of a man in love.

Charlie didn't look up. He pinched the hem of the shirt, lined it up against the jeans, pressed, and started rolling the bundle tight. His hands shook a little. The suitcase thudded against the floor when he stuffed it in.

"Are we fighting the suitcase or the universe today?"

Charlie stared at his clothes. "I can't--" He sighed. "I can't get it to fit."

"We could buy a bigger suitcase," Tom offered, reaching to pull the shirt from where it was wedged. He folded it properly and placed it back in.

Charlie sighed, then his breath hitched, as if he hadn't meant for the sigh to escape.

Tom frowned. "What's wrong, baby?"

Charlie hesitated. For a second, he looked like he might say nothing at all.

"I was looking at flights. Trying to guess where we're going. And the only places we can go are... here. In Canada." He pressed his lips together. "Because of me."

"Hey," Tom said. He gently squeezed Charlie's arm. "Canada's not so bad, is it?"

Charlie shrugged. "You wanted to go somewhere far, didn't you?" He risked a glance at Tom's face, as if expecting a flash of resentment.

Tom didn't give him even a shadow of that. Instead, he cupped both hands around Charlie's jaw and turned his face up.

"I want to take you somewhere we can be alone," Tom said. "That's always been the point." He tilted his head, considering. "Tell you what--when all this bureaucratic bullshit is over, I'll take you somewhere special. I promise."

Charlie blinked, taken aback.

"Okay?" Tom asked.

Charlie nodded. His entire body softened.

Tom released him. "Besides," he said, "I have a plan for us."

Charlie frowned. "A plan?"

"Yes," Tom said. "A top-secret, completely on-the-books, very Canadian plan."

Charlie raised an eyebrow. "You're not going to make me climb a mountain, are you?"

Tom snorted. "Not unless you want to. But no, I was thinking... Ottawa."

Charlie stared at him, blank.

Tom grinned, dimple flashing. "It's got museums, a canal, big parks, and some incredible restaurants. I know all the good places. And I want to show them to you."

"That sounds... really nice," Charlie said after a moment. Then, unable to help himself, "You're sure you won't be bored? You've seen it all before."

Tom's smile softened. "Not with you."

Charlie ducked his head. Tom caught the edge of his ear and pressed a kiss to it.

"We'll do the rest of the world later," Tom promised. "For now, let's go see the Parliament buildings eat our weight in pancakes. Deal?"

"Deal," Charlie said.

Montreal's Gare Centrale was loud and crowded, the barrel-vaulted ceilings amplifying every footstep. Charlie felt the crowd pressing in from all sides.

Tom guided him through the ticket hall, hand on Charlie's back. They reached the platform just minutes before departure.

Tom found their car. The attendant checked their tickets, greeting them with a *Welcome, gentlemen*, and a subtle nod.

Inside, the seats were padded leather with headrests, and the table in between was polished to a mirror shine. Someone had left a box of tea cakes and a welcome card signed by the conductor.

"Window or aisle?" Tom asked, already knowing the answer.

"Window, please," Charlie whispered.

Tom loaded the suitcase into the overhead shelf, then gestured for Charlie to sit. As he settled in, Tom fussed with the seat controls, pressing a button that elevated the footrests just so.

"Comfortable, baby?" Tom asked.

Charlie nodded. "It's nicer than I expected," he said, then winced, as if that might sound ungrateful.

Tom didn't notice or didn't care. He picked up a tea cake and handed it to Charlie with a grin. "Try this," he said.

Charlie took a bite. It was absurdly good. He let it dissolve on his tongue.

The train doors closed with a hydraulic hiss. There was an automated announcement, then the lurch of departure.

Charlie pressed his forehead to the glass, watching Montreal's skyline blur and recede, eventually swallowed by the green of the outer suburbs.

Tom stretched his legs out, hands folded in his lap. "I've always wanted to do this," he said. "Take the train somewhere with you."

Charlie felt warmth rise in his chest, but before he could answer, an attendant paused at their row with coffee. Tom ordered for both of them--milk, no sugar--and accepted the cups with a smile. He handed one to Charlie.

Charlie took a sip. He usually avoided coffee, but he wanted to try.

"What do you think?" Tom asked.

"It's good," he answered truthfully.

"Good." Tom settled back, letting his hand rest on Charlie's knee.

Outside, the train slid through farmland. For a long time, they just watched the landscape shift.

"Did you ever do this in Europe?" Tom asked.

Charlie shook his head. "No. I was too young in Paris. And in Bern..."

"Right," Tom said softly. "I get it."

They drifted into a heavier silence until a farmhouse with a bright red roof flashed by. Two cows stood grazing in the yard, heads bent to the grass.

"Oh, look," Tom said, tapping the glass. "Cows."

Charlie couldn't help but giggle. He set down his coffee, leaning closer to the window. Tom leaned in too, until their shoulders brushed.

Charlie felt the edge of unreality again. He was on a train with his husband, headed to a city he'd never seen, wearing a ring that glinted every time he lifted his hand.

He looked over at Tom, who had been watching him this whole time.

"What?" Charlie pouted.

"Nothing," Tom replied. "I just like looking at you. You look like you can't believe this is happening."

Charlie blushed, but he didn't look away.

"I still can't believe it sometimes," Charlie said quietly. "It's all so... sudden."

Tom's hand squeezed his knee. "It's okay. We have an hour until we get there. Plenty of time to believe."

The train slid into Ottawa Station on a cushion of silence.

Tom stood up before the train fully stopped, gathering the suitcase and Charlie's jacket in one arm. "Let's go, honey," he said, anticipating the crush at the doors.

The platform was crowded but orderly. Tom set a brisk pace. He had a way of walking through public spaces as if he owned them.

At the taxi stand, a young driver held up a sign reading "MONTGOMERY" in block letters.

"That's us," Tom said. The driver loaded the suitcase, opened the doors, and handed them both ice-cold bottles of water.

Charlie watched the city rush by. He tried to memorize the skyline, but the details kept slipping away.

Tom reached for his hand and squeezed, then pointed out the window. "That's the canal. In winter, it's all ice and people skating. Now you can rent a canoe."

Charlie nodded, loving the way Tom always had a fact on hand. "Did you ever skate it?"

Tom smiled ruefully. "A few times, when I was a kid. Fell on my ass a lot. It's bumpy."

They turned onto a quiet, tree-lined avenue and pulled up to the hotel. It was massive, a wedding cake of glass and limestone perched above the river.

Inside, the lobby had cool marble floors and walls of plants. The air smelled faintly of orchids and lemon.

A woman at the front desk greeted them by name. "Welcome back, Mr. Montgomery. And Mr. Heitmeyer," she added. "Your room is ready."

Charlie flushed, but Tom acted as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "Thank you," he said earnestly, and the woman nodded at a sharply dressed man standing nearby.

"I'm Marc," the man said. "If you'll follow me, I'll take you up myself."

The elevator was silent and fast. Marc pressed a key card against the scanner, then turned to Tom. "We're honoured to have you with us again."

Marc opened the door to their room and stood aside, letting them enter first.

Charlie stepped inside and stopped dead. Wall-to-wall windows showed off the city in 180 degrees, with Parliament Hill framed perfectly in the center. There was a bar, a dining table, and a king-size bed that looked like it belonged in a palace.

Marc gave them a two-minute tour, pointed out the phone with "anything at all, please ask," then left them alone with a smile.

Tom wheeled the suitcase to the bedroom. Charlie didn't move from the window.

"You okay?" Tom asked quietly.

Charlie nodded. "It's beautiful," he said. "I didn't know it could be like this."

Tom came up behind him, wrapping both arms around his waist. He rested his chin on Charlie's shoulder and looked out, too.

"Not too Canadian?" Tom teased.

Charlie leaned back into him. "You could have brought me to a tent in the woods, and I would have been happy."

Tom squeezed him a little tighter. "You hate camping."

Charlie huffed. "I'd still go. If it was with you."

They stood there for a while, neither needing to talk.

Eventually, Tom broke the silence. "I booked us a lunch reservation downstairs. If you want to change first, we've got time."

Charlie nodded, suddenly self-conscious. "What should I wear?"

Tom turned him around. "You look perfect now," he said, but then relented. "But I packed your date outfit from last time."

Charlie went to change. When he reemerged, he was wearing the same blue shirt he had worn to the Italian restaurant, paired with his good jeans. Tom looked him up and down.

"Gorgeous," Tom murmured. "I'm going to have to fight people off you."

Charlie rolled his eyes, but the blush gave him away.

They took the elevator to the restaurant. It was bright and airy, with floor-to-ceiling windows and tables spaced far apart.

A host seated them at a corner table with a perfect view of the canal.

Charlie looked down. There was more cutlery on the table than Charlie had fingers. He felt a flash of panic.

He looked at Tom.

Tom was reading the wine list. He looked completely at ease.

When the sommelier arrived, Tom engaged in a quiet, knowledgeable discussion about vintages and terroir.

He knew exactly which fork to pick up when the amuse-bouche arrived. He noticed Charlie's hesitation and, without breaking his conversation, simply picked up his own outer fork, signalling Charlie to do the same.

Charlie realized then that this wasn't an act.

Tom had lived this wealthy life his entire existence. But for four years, he had sat on Charlie's lumpy futon in Hazel's apartment. He had drunk his coffee out of chipped mugs and never once made Charlie feel small.

"You're staring," Tom said, setting his wine glass down. "Is there spinach in my teeth?"

"No," Charlie whispered. He shook his head, feeling a swell of affection so strong it actually hurt.

"I just... You really are a rich kid. You know which fork to use and when. You know how to talk to the wine guy."

Tom smirked. "I'm a man of many layers, Char."

"You never acted like it," Charlie said softly. "With me. You never acted like you were... better."

Tom's smile faded into something gentler. He reached across the table, his hand covering Charlie's.

"Because I'm not," Tom said fiercely. "I have money. You have everything else. You have talent. You have heart. I'm the one trying to keep up with you."

The waiter arrived with the main course--something intricate involving truffle foam--and topped up their glasses.

Tom took a sip of wine, looking thoughtful.

"Mhm. Speaking of money," Tom said. "I set up a wire transfer this morning while you were in the shower."

Charlie blinked, fork halfway to his mouth. "For... the wedding?"

"No," Tom said. He cut a piece of his duck. "For your student loans."

"What?" Charlie choked out.

"Your loans," Tom repeated calmly. "I called the bank. I got the account numbers from the paperwork we filed for immigration. The confirmation should be in your email."

Charlie dropped his fork. It clattered loudly against the fine china.

"Thomas."

"We have a joint account," Tom shrugged. "Why would we keep loans we can pay off?"

"All of it?" Charlie's voice trembled. "McGill? The conservatory fees?"

"Every cent," Tom nodded. "You're debt-free, Charlie. As of 9:00 AM this morning."

Charlie stared at him.

He thought about the years of panic. He thought about the spreadsheet he kept in his head, calculating how many students he needed to teach to make the minimum payments.

Gone.

Tears welled up in his eyes.

"Oh, honey," Tom laughed softly, reaching for his napkin. "Don't cry in the fancy restaurant. The waiters will think I'm breaking up with you."

"You paid my loans," Charlie whimpered, a single tear tracking through the expensive moisturizer Hazel had made him wear. "You're crazy. You're actually crazy."

"I'm practical," Tom corrected, leaning over to wipe it away with his thumb. "And I'm investing in my husband. Now, eat your truffle foam before it dissolves."

Charlie laughed, a wet, shaky sound, and picked up his fork.

He ate the foam. It tasted like freedom.

Tom suggested a walk. Charlie followed, still humming with the afterglow of lunch.

The hotel opened onto a quiet avenue. Parliament Hill rose to their right, but Tom turned left, down toward the river. Within minutes, the city noise faded. They entered a park lined with beds of peonies and poppies, tall foxgloves, and rows of lavender.

Charlie walked half a step behind Tom, hands shoved deep in his pockets. Without a word, Tom reached back, curling his fingers around Charlie's wrist and tugging him forward. Charlie went without resistance, falling into step beside him.

They walked for a long time, looping around the edge of the water, winding through rose gardens and topiary mazes.

When they reached a small bridge, Tom stopped. He leaned on the railing, gazing down at a flotilla of ducks paddling in lazy circles.

Charlie hovered at his side. "Do you think the ducks ever get bored?" he asked, only half joking.

Tom grinned, bumping his shoulder against Charlie's. "What, with all the political intrigue in the pond?"

"Could be," Charlie smiled. "Power struggles. Generational trauma. Bread-based economy."

Tom chuckled.

"Should we take a photo?" He asked after a moment.

Charlie hesitated, but nodded. He watched as Tom fished out his phone and angled it expertly, then pulled Charlie in tight for a selfie.

They both looked at the photo. Tom was beaming, a little wind-ruffled, eyes creased with happiness. Beside him, Charlie looked stunned but unmistakably content. He didn't hate it.

"You look good," Tom murmured, showing Charlie the screen again, as if to prove it.

"You look like you just won a contest," Charlie said.

Tom smiled. "I did."

They crossed the bridge hand in hand. Charlie glanced around, waiting for stares, but no one cared. His palm was clammy, but Tom's grip never loosened.

By the time they turned back, the walk felt shorter. His hand ached slightly, like he'd been holding on too tight.

They reached the hotel as the sky turned gold. Inside, the air was cool and still. Charlie felt like he'd just woken from a dream--but Tom's hand on his back reminded him it was real.

The elevator whisked them up to their room.

Charlie took his shoes off at the door. The air conditioning was set just a touch too cold, so Tom draped his blazer over Charlie's shoulders.

"Room service?" Tom asked, already picking up the phone.

Charlie nodded, then drifted over to the window. He pressed his hands against the glass, watching the world below.

Tom spoke softly into the phone. Every moment or so, he would cover the receiver and ask, "Do you want the steak or the salmon?" or "Ice cream for dessert?" and Charlie would answer, a little more confidently each time.

When he hung up, Tom found Charlie in the bathroom, marvelling at the claw-foot tub.

He closed the distance between them, wrapping his arms around Charlie's waist from behind.

"Happy?" Tom asked.

Charlie nodded. "Because of you."

They lingered like that until a knock at the door signalled dinner.

Tom answered. The server wheeled in a table set for two, complete with silver domes and a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket. He set everything by the window, arranging the chairs so the view was perfect.

"Enjoy, gentlemen," the server said, then bowed out, closing the door behind him.

Tom pulled out a chair for Charlie, then took his own seat.

Charlie picked up his fork, but Tom stopped him with a raised glass.

"First dinner as husbands," Tom said. "To us."

Charlie hesitated, then lifted his own glass. "To us," he echoed softly.

They clinked glasses. Charlie took a sip and coughed, the bubbles tickling his nose. Tom grinned, delighted.

"Sorry," Charlie said, dabbing his lips with the napkin.

"Don't be," Tom replied. "You're wonderful."

They started eating. The food was impossibly good. Charlie savoured everything, even the unfamiliar flavours.

Tom poured the last of the champagne and leaned back, stretching his legs under the table until they tangled with Charlie's.

"Best honeymoon dinner yet," he said.

Charlie looked down at his empty plate. He felt full.

As the city lights spread out beneath them, they sat in the hush, hands joined.

"I love you," Charlie said.

Tom brought Charlie's hand to his lips, kissing the knuckles, then the ring.

"I love you, too," he replied. "More than anything."

They sat for a moment longer. Then, Tom stood up.

Charlie stood too, reaching for the plates. "I'll help."

"You don't need to do that," Tom's voice was gentle but firm.

"I want to," Charlie insisted. "It's only fair."

Tom stepped closer. He cupped Charlie's face.

"Honey," he said softly. "I have something else in mind for you."

Charlie paused. "Like what?"

"In the bathroom..." Tom started. "It's fully stocked. I had it arranged before we arrived. Everything you might need to... prepare."

Charlie understood. They had talked about this.

"I thought you might want to go in," Tom continued. "Take your time. I'll clean up out here."

Charlie bit his lip. "I can still help first--"

Tom silenced him with a kiss. "Shh. Let me do this so you can take care of yourself." He pulled back, looking into Charlie's eyes. "I want you relaxed. I want you ready."

"Okay," Charlie whispered.

"The cabinet under the sink," Tom murmured. "There are robes on the hook. And Charlie?"

"Yeah?"

"There's no rush. I'll be there when you're done."

"What if I'm... not good at it?" Charlie whispered. "What if I mess it up?"

Tom squeezed Charlie's hands. "It's not a test. It's just us. You and me. We'll figure it out together. Just like we do everything else."

Charlie nodded, eyes closed.

"Go on," Tom urged, releasing him. "I'll see you in there."

Charlie leaned in for one last kiss, then turned toward the bedroom door. He could feel Tom's eyes on his back as he walked away.

At the threshold, Charlie glanced back. Tom was standing by the table, outlined by the candlelight, watching him go.

He looked hungry.

Under the sink, just as promised, was the kit.

Charlie turned on the shower. He undressed and stepped under the spray.

He washed the day off his skin, then took care of the rest, following the steps he'd researched until he felt thoroughly clean.

Turning off the water, he dried off and bypassed the colognes on the counter. The white terry-cloth robe hung by the door; he slipped it on and cinched the belt tight.

Then he opened the bathroom door.

Tom was sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing nothing but pyjama pants. He held a glass of whiskey in one hand, but the moment he saw Charlie, he set it aside on the nightstand.

"Hey," Tom said. His voice was rougher than it had been downstairs.

"Hey," Charlie breathed.

Charlie crossed the room. He walked right up to the bed and stepped between Tom's knees.

Tom settled his hands on Charlie's hips.

"You okay?" He asked quietly, searching Charlie's face.

"Yeah," Charlie said. "I'm... really good. You?"

"Amazing," Tom murmured. He pulled Charlie closer by the belt.

"I love you," he whispered against Charlie's lips. "I am going to take such good care of you."

"Show me."

Tom captured Charlie's mouth in a kiss. His arms locked around him, pulling him off his feet and down onto the bed.

Charlie went willingly, the robe falling open, skin meeting skin. He wrapped his legs around Tom's waist, pulling him closer, until there was no space left between them at all.

Chapter 12

"Nervous?" Tom asked, bracing his weight on his forearms.

"No." Charlie reached up, fingers tracing Tom's jaw. "Excited."

Tom pressed a kiss to the center of his palm.

"Excited," Tom repeated. A slow smile spread across his face.

"What do you want first?" he asked. "Tell me what you want, baby."

Charlie swallowed. He had imagined this moment so many times. He looked at the broad span of Tom's shoulders, the way the pants hung low on his hips.

"I want to touch you," Charlie whispered. He flattened his hand against Tom's chest. "Let me touch you first."

Tom exhaled, his head falling back slightly as Charlie's hand travelled down. He stayed still, letting Charlie take the lead.

"Can I..." He met Tom's gaze. "I want to use my mouth on you. Please?"

Tom closed his eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure. I've thought about it... a lot."

"Okay," Tom breathed, nodding slowly. "Fuck. Yeah."

He shed the pants, then sat against the headboard.

"C'mere," Tom murmured. "Show me what you've been thinking about, honey."

With a deep breath, Charlie moved between Tom's legs. His robe fell completely open. He looked up at his husband, hair falling into his eyes.

"I might not be very good at this," he whispered.

"You'll be perfect," Tom promised. "Just go slow. There's no rush."

Charlie nodded, reaching out.

"Oh," he breathed. His fingers didn't quite meet around him.

He tightened his hold, moving slowly. Tom's head fell back.

"Is this okay?" Charlie whispered shyly.

"More than okay," Tom managed. "Incredible."

Encouraged, Charlie leaned forward, lips brushing heated skin.

Tom hissed. Charlie pressed another kiss, then another, tasting salt and skin.

"Char, fuck," Tom groaned, pulling at the sheets.

Charlie hollowed his cheeks, remembering what he'd read. He was rewarded with a low, rumbling moan from Tom's chest.

He experimented. He dragged his tongue flat against the underside. Then he swirled it around the head.

Tom's entire body jerked. A strangled sound tore out of him.

"Holy fuck," he gasped. His hands flew to Charlie's hair.

Charlie froze. He pulled back, looking up with wide eyes. "Did I hurt you?"

Tom laughed. "No," he wheezed. "God, no. That was... Jesus. Where did you learn to do that?"

Charlie flushed, pleased. "I didn't. I just... thought about what might feel good."

Tom shook his head.

"Come here," he murmured. He reached down, tugging Charlie up until they were face to face.

Charlie tilted his head. "Why did you stop me?" he asked, voice hoarse. "You don't want to finish?"

Tom exhaled.

"Of course I do," he said, tracing his fingers along Charlie's spine. "But I want to be inside you. Together."

Charlie swallowed. "Oh. I—yeah. I want that too."

Tom smiled. He brushed a strand of hair from Charlie's forehead.

"I want to make you feel good, too," Tom murmured. "Wanna taste you. Will you let me?"

Charlie nodded. "Yes. Please."

Tom reversed their positions, rolling Charlie onto his back.

"My Charlie," Tom whispered. He lowered his head, pressing kisses along Charlie's chest. "My angel."

Charlie arched beneath him. Tom paused. Their eyes met, a silent question passing between them.

Charlie nodded.

Slowly, Tom lowered his head. Charlie's eyes fluttered closed at the first brush of heat against the inside of his thigh. Tom worked his way higher, teasing until Charlie was trembling.

"Please," Charlie repeated.

Tom smiled. Finally, he moved to where Charlie wanted him most. He dragged his tongue in a stripe along Charlie's length.

Charlie's hips snapped up. Tom held him down, taking him into his mouth with a confidence that made Charlie's head spin.

It was overwhelming. Charlie gripped the sheets as he gasped.

But Tom didn't stay there long. He pulled back, leaving Charlie wet and aching in the cool air. Before Charlie could complain, Tom's hands slid beneath his thighs. They gently pushed Charlie's legs farther apart and then up, pressing his knees toward his chest.

It was a position of total exposure. Charlie felt the air on parts of him that had never seen the light.

"Is this okay?"

Charlie nodded in disbelief. He thought he knew what was about to happen—something he had never imagined experiencing himself.

Tom lowered his head again.

The first lick against his entrance made Charlie cry out. The sensation was shocking. Tom held his thighs apart, keeping him wide open.

Tom groaned. His hands tightened hard enough to bruise.

"Thomas," Charlie moaned.

Tom couldn't answer. He worked his tongue inside with increasing pressure, circling and pressing against the tightness until it began to soften for him.

"Oh my god," Charlie sobbed, his head pressing back into the pillows. He threw an arm over his eyes.

Tom hummed against him. His tongue pushed deeper, licking into the heat with a shameless enthusiasm that made Charlie's toes curl.

"Please," Charlie begged. He didn't know what he was asking for—more friction, more Tom—he just knew he couldn't take this for much longer. He reached between his legs, finding Tom's hair and gripping tight. "Please, Thomas, I need—"

Tom rested his forehead against Charlie's inner thigh, chest heaving. He inhaled the scent of their sex that clung to his face.

"I need to use my fingers now," he said. "To get you ready for me."

Charlie nodded. "Okay."

Tom reached for the bottle that he had placed within arm's reach. He dispensed a generous amount of the gel, warming it between his palms.

"I'll go slow," Tom promised. He coated Charlie's rim with his thumb. "But you have to talk to me. Tell me if it hurts."

"Yeah. I will."

Tom slid just the tip of his finger inside. Charlie's hips tensed.

"Breathe, baby," Tom murmured. He stilled his hand. "Drop your shoulders. Let me in."

Charlie forced an exhale. As he did, his body softened, and Tom slid fully inside. The fit was incredibly tight.

"Good?"

Charlie nodded, biting his lip. "It's... a lot. But good. Don't stop."

Tom curled his finger up, hunting. When he found what he was looking for, he pressed firmly.

Charlie's entire body jolted. A high, startled sound was punched out of his chest.

"There you are," Tom smiled. He kept up the pressure, massaging the spot until Charlie's head was thrashing side to side.

"Thomas," Charlie panted. "Thomas, that feels—"

"I know, honey. I know."

Tom added a second finger, and then a third. The sensation of fullness was intense, bordering on a burn, but Charlie leaned into it.

Tom watched him, fascinated.

"You're so tight," he murmured. "You're so good. Fuck, I love you."

Charlie managed a weak, dizzy smile. "I love you too."

Tom gave him one last deep stroke, hitting that spot hard enough to make Charlie arch off the mattress with a broken sob. Then, slowly, he withdrew his hand.

Charlie felt empty. He made a small, bereft sound.

"You ready, Char?" Tom asked. He positioned himself between Charlie's thighs.

"I'm ready," Charlie whispered. "Please. Put it in."

Tom slicked himself with more lube.

"Look at me," Tom whispered. "I want to remember your face when I push inside you."

Charlie shivered but held Tom's gaze.

Tom pressed forward. The pressure was intense, a sudden fullness that fingers hadn't quite anticipated. Charlie inhaled sharply.

Tom froze. "Too much?"

"No," Charlie breathed. "Just... big. Different. Keep going. Please."

Tom searched his eyes for another second, then continued.

"Breathe," Tom reminded him. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

Charlie obeyed. The burn began to fade, mingling with a deep, satisfying pressure.

"That's it," Tom groaned, his voice strained. "God, you're fucking perfect."

Charlie's hands gripped Tom's shoulders, his nails digging in as he opened up.

With one final, careful push, Tom sank all the way in. Their hips met with a soft slap of skin. Tom rested his head on Charlie's shoulder.

Charlie was trembling. "Oh my god. You're... you're all the way in."

"Are you okay?" Tom managed.

"Yeah," Charlie nodded. "I think... I think you can move now. Slowly."

Tom withdrew almost completely. Charlie made a high, keening noise at the loss.

"Easy," Tom breathed. He snapped his hips forward, burying himself back inside in one smooth stroke.

The air left Charlie's lungs at once. Tom grit his teeth, sweat stinging his eyes. He set a relentless pace that shook the headboard.

He leaned down, pressing his face into the curve of Charlie's neck and inhaling.

"So fucking hot," Tom groaned against Charlie's skin. "So wet."

Charlie was lost. Every thrust hit that sensitive bundle of nerves Tom had prepared. He was unravelling, hands scrabbling against Tom's back.

"Thomas," Charlie sobbed. "Thomas, please, I'm close, I'm—"

"Let go," Tom commanded, not slowing down. "Cum for me, baby. Make a mess for me."

Charlie cried out as the orgasm ripped through him. He came hard, spilling between their stomachs.

Tom almost growled. He drove into Charlie one last time and held there.

For a long time, the only sound was their rough breathing.

"Thomas," Charlie wheezed, trying to pull him closer.

"I've got you," Tom murmured into his damp hair. He kissed the sweat from Charlie's skin. "I've got you, baby. I'm not going anywhere."

Suddenly, the side of Tom's neck was wet. He lifted his head, propping himself up on his elbows to look down.

Charlie's eyes were squeezed shut, tears leaking from the corners. His chest was hitching with small, quiet sobs.

"I've got you," Tom murmured. "It's okay, baby. You're safe."

"I'm happy," Charlie choked out. "I'm so happy. It was just... a lot."

"I know," Tom soothed, kissing the tears away. "I know."

He stayed there, holding him, until Charlie's breathing evened out into hiccups. Then, sensing the energy shift, Tom moved to pull out.

"No," Charlie whispered. His legs tightened around Tom's waist. "Don't go. Not yet."

Tom froze. "Char, I'm heavy..."

"Please," Charlie sniffled. "Just a minute more. I don't want you to go yet."

"Okay," Tom answered. "I'm here."

He settled back down, careful to keep most of his weight on his forearms. He was softening now, but he was still buried deep.

The room darkened around them. Eventually, Charlie winced.

"Hips?" Tom asked immediately, sensing the discomfort.

"Mhm," Charlie admitted, voice sleepy. "Sore now."

Tom kissed his forehead. "Alright. Time to clean up."

He withdrew slowly. The cool air hit the damp skin between their bodies, making Charlie whine.

Tom padded into the bathroom and returned a moment later with a warm, wet washcloth.

"Lift," Tom instructed gently.

He cleaned Charlie with the same reverence he had used to prepare him. When he was done, he tossed the cloth toward the washroom and pulled the duvet up, tucking it around Charlie's shoulders, and climbed in beside him. He pulled Charlie back until he was pressed against Tom's chest.

Charlie let out a long sigh, wiggling backward to get as close as possible.

"Sleep," Tom whispered, his lips moving against Charlie's skin. "I'm right here."

Chapter 13

The room was warm, smelling of sleep and sex.

Tom woke first. He didn't move, content to lie still and breathe it in.

He turned his head on the pillow. Charlie was sprawled on his stomach, a spot of drool on the pillowcase.

He pulled the sheet down. There, on the pale skin of Charlie's thigh, were the marks. Five darkening bruises.

He wanted to trace them. He wanted to wake Charlie up and stay in this bed for three days.

But Charlie shifted in his sleep, a whimper escaping as he moved sore muscles.

Charlie would wake up aching. Hungry.

Reluctantly, Tom rolled out of bed. He took one last deep breath, banking the memory of it, and turned toward the door.

Charlie woke slowly.

His body felt loose and wonderfully different. There was a dull ache in his hips and thighs--the memory of being filled.

He smiled into the pillow, stretching his legs and reaching out for Tom.

His hand hit cool linen.

Charlie's eyes snapped open.

He patted the space beside him. Empty.

He sat up. "Thomas?"

The room was silent.

He's gone.

He scrambled to his knees, looking for a sign, their suitcase.

Then, he saw it.

On the pillow next to him, a piece of hotel-branded stationery.

Charlie snatched it, hands shaking.

WENT TO GET US BREAKFAST. I LOVE YOU. STAY IN BED. BACK IN 20.

He read it once. Twice. A third time.

I love you.

The air rushed back into his lungs. He slumped back against the headboard, clutching the note to his chest, laughing at his own absurdity.

He wasn't a sinking ship. He was a husband waiting for breakfast.

He slid out of bed, legs a little wobbly, and walked to the full-length mirror.

He looked different. His lips were swollen. And there, on his thighs, were the faint shadows of fingertips.

Charlie touched them. They didn't hurt.

He grabbed the white robe from the floor and wrapped it around himself.

From outside the bedroom, the front door echoed.

"Char?" Tom's voice was cheerful. "Are you awake?"

Charlie padded to the bedroom doorway.

Tom was standing in the foyer. He was wearing linen shorts and a white t-shirt, balancing two cardboard boxes and a coffee carrier.

When he saw Charlie, his face transformed. He set the boxes down on the entry table.

"Hi," Tom said.

"Hi," Charlie whispered.

Tom rushed toward him and pulled Charlie into his arms. He buried his face in Charlie's neck, inhaling deeply.

"I missed you," Tom murmured. "I woke up and wanted to feed you, but then I got to the bakery and realized I had left you alone."

Charlie laughed. "I found the note."

"Good." Tom pulled back slightly. He searched Charlie's face. "How are you feeling? Be honest. Are you... sore?"

Charlie blushed, looking down at Tom's chest. "A little. In a... in a good way."

Tom exhaled. He pressed a kiss to Charlie's forehead.

"Do you want a bath? I can run the jets. Or painkillers?"

"I want tea," Charlie said, leaning into him. "And whatever is in those boxes."

"Pain au chocolat," Tom promised. "Still warm. Come on."

They ate in the extravagant sitting area. Charlie tore into a pastry. He watched Tom drink his coffee, looking out the window, visibly satisfied.

Then, Tom's phone vibrated in his pocket. He ignored it.

Charlie frowned. "Aren't you at least going to check it?"

"It's vacation. No phones allowed," Tom explained easily. "It's just you and me."

"Yeah, but..." Charlie hesitated. "What if it's Hazel, or an emergency, or a Hazel emergency?"

Tom laughed brightly. "We'd better hope for the best then."

He slipped his phone from his pocket and looked at the screen, then chuckled.

He turned the phone so Charlie could read.

Hazel (THE GENERAL): STATUS REPORT. IS HE HAPPY?

Hazel (THE GENERAL): ALSO. URGENT REQUEST. PLEASE BURN THE SWEATERS.

Hazel (THE GENERAL): Please, Tom. While you are there. Buy the boy some clothes that actually fit his body. If I see him in that moth-eaten grey hoodie one more time, I am calling the fashion police. COLLABORATE WITH ME.

Charlie squinted at the screen. "She wants to burn my sweaters?"

"Let her cook," Tom smirked, typing back a quick: *Mission accepted.* "Okay. We're going to town."

The older areas of downtown Ottawa were a postcard--lined with luxury boutiques and polished storefronts.

Charlie tugged at the hem of his t-shirt.

"Thomas," Charlie whispered as Tom steered him toward a small shop. "We don't need to do this. I have clothes."

"You have my clothes," Tom corrected gently. "And you have your sweaters that you hide in. Today, we're getting you things that are just for you. To wear and feel good in."

The next few hours blurred into fabric and fitting rooms. Tom chose linen shirts in soft darks and creams, trousers that skimmed Charlie's legs just right.

Every time Charlie stepped out, Tom would nod.

"That one."

"These are... a lot," Charlie tried to argue. "They won't even fit in the suitcase."

"Then we'll ship them," Tom said calmly, handing his credit card to the shop assistant. "DHL is very reliable."

By the time they emerged into the late afternoon sun, the shop assistant looked ready to name her firstborn after Thomas Montgomery.

They walked down to the canal, finding a table at a café overlooking the tourist boats bobbing in the water.

Charlie sat down, feeling slightly dizzy. He looked at the receipt tucked into the shopping bag at his feet. He thought of the hotel. The meals. His student loans.

He looked at Tom, who was looking at the menu with a relaxed smile.

"Thomas?"

"Hm?" Tom looked up. "Do you want wine? Or an Aperol Spritz?"

"Are you sure..." Charlie started, then lowered his voice. "Are you sure you want to spend all your money on me?"

He bit his lip.

"You don't have a job right now... I know you have savings, but... We should be careful. I don't want you to burn through everything just because you want to make me happy."

Tom stared at him. Then, he let out a laugh--a genuine sound that made a few diners turn their heads.

He reached across the table, taking Charlie's hand and squeezing it hard.

"Char," Tom said. "I love that you're worried. It's very responsible. But you need to understand something."

Tom leaned in, his voice dropping to a whisper.

"I was the VP of a massive company. I have stock options. I have investments. I have the severance package."

He rubbed his thumb over Charlie's knuckles.

"We have millions, Charlie," Tom said. "Literally. Millions of dollars to last us the four months until we decide what we want to do next. We can buy the clothes. We can buy the shop if you want it."

Charlie realized his mouth was open. "Oh."

Tom lifted Charlie's hand to his lips, kissing the gold band on his finger.

"We can spend as much money as we like on whatever we want," Tom promised. "And I want you."

Charlie realized then, with a giddy rush, that the ship wasn't even a ship--it was a yacht, and Tom was the captain.

"Okay," he breathed, a small smile tugging at his lips. "Okay. We have millions."

"We do," Tom grinned. "Now. Aperol Spritz?"

"Two," Charlie said. "And maybe we go back to that shoe store. I saw a nice pair of boots."

Tom laughed, signalling the waiter. "That's the spirit."

The pub was packed. The screens lining the walls were all tuned to the game.

"Enemy territory," Tom murmured against Charlie's ear.

He managed to secure them a high-top table in the corner, just as a group of disappointed fans were leaving.

"Sit, honey," Tom said gently, helping Charlie out of his coat. He arranged the shopping bags under the table. "Guinness? Or do you want a cider?"

"Cider, please," Charlie said.

Tom returned with two pints and a basket of onion rings that smelled like heaven.

"Okay," Tom said, taking a long pull of his beer. "Second period. Habs are up by one. But the Sens are on a power play."

Charlie nodded seriously. He knew the basics but wanted more.

"Thomas?"

"Hm?"

"What's icing?" Charlie asked. "I remember Alex yelling about it, but I never asked why."

Tom smiled, besotted.

"Icing," Tom said, leaning in close, "is when a player shoots the puck from his own half of the ice all the way past the other team's goal line, without anyone touching it. It's a delay tactic."

Charlie turned, about to respond. Tom was looking at him with such naked adoration that Charlie almost forgot where they were.

"You're missing the game," Charlie whispered, feeling a flush rise on his cheeks.

"I'm watching the best part," Tom countered smoothly.

Suddenly, the few Montreal fans in the bar jumped up, cheering, while the majority groaned.

"Did we score?" Charlie asked.

"We did," Tom grinned, glancing at the replay. "Suzuki. Top shelf."

Charlie beamed. He raised his cider glass. "Yay! Go Habs."

Tom chuckled, clinking his glass against Charlie's. "Go Habs."

"One more thing," Charlie said, wiping crumbs from his mouth.

"Anything," Tom answered.

"If the Ottawa mascot is a Spartan... Why is ours a giant Cheeto?"

The walk back to the hotel was brisk. By the time they reached the revolving doors of the lobby, Charlie was shivering.

"Youppi," Tom muttered to himself, locking the door of their room behind them. "I can't believe you called a national treasure a fucking Cheeto."

"He's orange and fuzzy, Thomas," Charlie yawned, unwinding his scarf and hanging it up. "What else is he supposed to be?"

He moved sluggishly toward the bed.

Tom walked over and turned Charlie around. He unbuttoned Charlie's coat and slid it off his shoulders.

"Teeth," Tom instructed gently, steering him toward the bathroom. "Then bed."

Ten minutes later, the room was plunged into darkness.

Charlie climbed under the duvet. He curled onto his side instantly, waiting. The mattress dipped, and Tom surrounded him.

"Warm enough?"

"Mhm," Charlie hummed, reaching down to lace their fingers together. "Perfect."

"Good."

Charlie settled deeper into the embrace.

"Did you have fun?" Tom asked. "Even with the screaming?"

"Yeah," Charlie whispered. "I liked it when you explained the icing thing."

Tom chuckled. He squeezed Charlie's middle. "Go to sleep, honey."

Chapter 14

The alarm on Tom's phone went off at 8:00 AM. Charlie groaned.

"I know," Tom sighed. "I don't want to go either."

"Let's just live here," Charlie mumbled into Tom's skin. "We can order room service forever. We have millions."

Tom laughed. "Hazel will think I kidnapped you."

Reluctantly, they disentangled.

They packed up. Charlie folded his new clothes. He placed those that would fit into the suitcase. The others would be sent home by the concierge.

Tom was in the bathroom, shaving. Charlie watched him from the doorway for a moment.

"Stop staring or I'll cut myself," Tom called out, meeting Charlie's eyes in the mirror with a grin.

"I'm inspecting the merchandise," Charlie said, lips quirking up.

"And?"

"Passable."

Tom turned, eyebrows raised. "Passable? Come poke this shit. I dare you."

When they were finally packed, they took one last look at the room. The bed was stripped, the towels piled in the tub. It looked like a hotel room again.

"Ready?" Tom asked, holding out his hand.

Charlie took it. "Ready."

Checkout was swift. The same impeccable staff smiled the same impeccable smiles.

The taxi ride to the station was quieter than the ride in. As the car pulled up to the curb of the train station, the reality of the return trip settled in.

But as Tom opened the car door and offered a hand to help him out, Charlie realized he wasn't dreading it. Real life had changed.

Charlie stood by the departures board, trying to look as though he belonged there. Tom, who belonged everywhere, leaned against a pillar with a small smile. "Second platform," he said. "Time for a final Tim's run if you want."

"No," Charlie replied. "I don't want to have to pee on the train."

They boarded with the other Business Class passengers. While Charlie organized his bag, Tom collapsed next to him with a dramatic sigh.

"We had champagne in First," he joked, "but I guess this will have to do. Unless you want me to make them add the car."

"I think we're lucky to be here at all," Charlie grinned. "If it were up to me, we'd be standing by the toilets in Economy."

Tom snorted. "There are no bad seats with you, honey."

As the train lurched forward, Tom snapped open his laptop.

The outskirts of Ottawa turned to scrubby fields. Without looking up from his keys, Tom reached out, lacing his fingers through Charlie's and continuing to type one-handed.

By the time they were halfway to Montreal, the car had filled. When Tom finally needed both hands for work, he apologized. Charlie smiled and moved his hand to Tom's thigh.

A melody began to loop in Charlie's mind. Unconsciously, he started tapping it into the fabric of Tom's pants.

Tom's thigh tensed. He stopped typing, covering Charlie's hand with his own. "What are you playing?"

Charlie went still, his face colouring. "Nothing."

"You're making something up," Tom said, amused. "I like it. You can keep going."

Charlie resumed the pattern, softer this time.

The brakes finally hissed beneath the concrete canopy of the station. The journey home was as easy as the journey out.

In the kitchen, Charlie's eyes fixed on the dark green bottle of Dom Pérignon on the counter. "We never opened it," he murmured.

"We should," Tom said. "To cap off the honeymoon."

They raised their glasses in the center of their kitchen, wrinkled and travel-worn.

"To Ottawa," Tom said, eyes locked on Charlie's.

"To coming home," Charlie added.

The champagne was crisp and cold. When the glasses were empty, Tom gently took Charlie's hand.

"Come on. Time for bed."

It started with the laundry.

Charlie stood in the enormous walk-in closet. On the left was his old life: the stretched-out grey hoodies, the jeans with the thinning knees.

On the right was their haul: crisp shirts, merino sweaters, trousers with actual structure.

Tom leaned against the doorframe.

"You know," he said. "You don't have to burn the old stuff. Just... retire it. Let it enjoy a pension in the back of the closet."

Charlie picked up his favourite grey hoodie. It had a faint stain from a coffee spill in 2019. "Hazel calls this the 'Sadness Shroud.'"

"Hazel would wear cheetah-print to a church," Tom said, walking over. He took the hoodie and folded it. "Anyway. You don't need to hide in it anymore."

He placed it on a high shelf, then picked up a new sweater from the Ottawa pile. He held it out.

"Try this. For tomorrow."

Charlie took it. It was soft and luxurious. "I'm going to look like I'm trying too hard. People are going to think I robbed a bank."

"Let them wonder," Tom grinned, kissing his temple. "Mystery is good for a reputation."

Charlie sat at the kitchen island, laptop open, surrounded by a fortress of books. The syllabus for his seminar was on the screen, along with his dissertation notes.

Usually, this was the time when the Math of Survival kicked in. He would be calculating bus fare and worrying about the hours he'd lose at his tutoring gig.

But now, the only thing he had to do... was the work. He just had to be a student. Be smart.

"You're thinking so hard I can hear it from here," Tom said.

Charlie looked up. Tom was on the sofa, reading something on his tablet.

"I'm just..." Charlie gestured helplessly at the books. "It's weird. not worrying about the other stuff."

Tom set his tablet down and walked over. He hugged Charlie from the back.

"Scared?" Tom asked.

"A little," Charlie admitted. "Without the panic, there's no excuse. If I fail now, it's because I'm not good enough."

Tom's arms tightened.

"You," Tom said, "are the smartest person I know. You're going to walk into that building tomorrow, you're going to dazzle them with your thoughts on... *The intersection of memory and decay*? And then you're going to come home to me."

Charlie leaned into him, closing his eyes. "Okay."

"Okay," Tom echoed. "Now, you've prepared enough. Come watch bad TV with me."

"You don't have to walk me in," Charlie said, gathering his bag. "You have that call with the investors."

Tom turned to him. "The investors can wait. Are you ready?"

"It's just another semester."

"It's your first semester as Dr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery," Tom corrected. "That's worth marking."

Tom reached across the console, his hand curving around the back of Charlie's neck. The kiss was deep and unhurried.

When Tom finally pulled back, Charlie's breathing had quickened. "Thomas," he murmured. "We're right out front."

"I know." Tom looked satisfied. "Now everyone else will know too. Call me if you need anything, okay?"

"I'll be fine. Really."

"Hm," Tom pressed one more quick kiss to Charlie's lips. "Go change the world, baby."

Charlie slipped out of the car and turned toward the entrance. His steps felt different from last September. Back then, he had been a ghost haunting the periphery of his own life.

He paused at the top of the steps. The sedan was still idling. Charlie raised his hand in a small wave; Tom lifted his in return.

I'm here. I'll always be here.

Chapter 15

Charlie slipped into the seminar room. The conference table was already cluttered, a low buzz of chatter filling the air. He kept his head down as he shrugged off his coat, draping it over a chair in the corner of the room.

Across the table, Jason and Priya traded holiday stories. Others chimed in too--family gatherings, a little thesis progress.

"Hey, Charlie. Welcome back," a gentle voice said.

Sarah slid into the seat beside him. Of everyone in the cohort, she'd always been kind in a quiet way, saving him a seat and filling him in when he'd missed something.

Charlie managed a brief smile. "Hi, Sarah. Nice to see you."

Before she could say anything else, Professor Mehta strode in. Charlie was grateful for the interruption. He opened his notebook.

"Welcome back, everyone," Professor Mehta began. "I hope you all had a restorative break. This term, we'll be diving straight into discussion. Let's start by going around and sharing any progress--or interesting ideas--you explored over the holidays. No pressure."

A few students volunteered. Priya talked about a manuscript she'd unearthed at the British Library. Someone else mentioned crunching data for their lab project.

As the discussion unfolded, the tightness in his chest eased. Nothing had changed.

His mind drifted to the point being made, and without thinking, he let his sleeve ride up, exposing his hand.

Across from him, Sarah's attention flickered downward.

Charlie saw her eyes land on his left ring. He froze.

She was staring now. The discussion around them blurred.

Charlie managed an apologetic smile and slid his left hand under the table. His cheeks warmed.

Sarah's eyes widened, but she took the hint. She turned back to the conversation as if nothing had happened.

It's fine, Charlie told himself. It had to come out sooner or later.

"Alright, I think that's a good start. Thank you, everyone. Next week we'll discuss the first two chapters of the Klineberg text, and please send me your updated research schedules by Friday."

Chairs scraped as students stood. Conversation burst back to life.

Charlie slid his notebook into his bag, eyes down.

"Charlie?"

Sarah stood beside his chair, books clutched to her chest. Most people were distracted, but a couple of students glanced their way.

Charlie straightened. "Mhm?"

Sarah offered a reassuring smile. She hesitated, then tipped her chin toward his left hand. "I... couldn't help noticing," she murmured. "That ring is new, isn't it?"

He drew a breath. "Um. Yeah," he admitted. "I... got married."

Sarah's eyes widened, then softened into bright delight. "Oh! Charlie, congratulations," she breathed.

Jason, halfway into his coat by the door, turned back. "Wait--actually?" he asked, walking toward them with a baffled grin. "For real?"

Priya craned to see over Jason's shoulder.

Charlie lifted his chin, cheeks burning, and nodded. "Yes," he said, managing a small, real smile. "I got married."

There was a beat, then a ripple of excited reactions.

"That's great! Congratulations, man," Jason said, recovering. He started to clap Charlie's shoulder, hesitated, then offered his hand instead.

Priya stepped closer too, beaming. "Congratulations, Charlie!"

Charlie laughed nervously. Sarah looked ready to pounce.

"We had no idea you were even engaged," she said. "You never mentioned anyone."

"We... technically were never engaged." His blush deepened. "But we've known each other a long time."

"That's wonderful," Priya said. "I'm really happy for you."

"Thank you."

Jason tilted his head, grinning. "Are they in this department?"

"Oh, no," Charlie said. "He's not a student. Um. His name is Thomas."

If anyone was surprised by the *his*, they hid it well. Sarah's smile grew, a little apologetic, as if realizing she'd assumed something without meaning to.

"Thomas," she repeated. "Well, tell him congratulations too."

Jason smirked. "You should join us for drinks sometime. We'll toast your marriage properly."

Sarah placed a hand on his arm. "We won't ambush you for details. But really-- congratulations. And if you ever do want to talk about it, or need help--" her eyes twinkled "--wedding thank-you cards or whatever, let us know."

"Thank you," Charlie said again. His hands were trembling faintly. "I, um--I actually have to run. But I appreciate it. Thank you."

"Of course," Sarah said, stepping aside. Jason gave him a casual salute; Priya waved.

Charlie threaded his way out of the room.

In the hallway, he caught a burst of hushed excitement behind him--his name, the word *married!* His ears burned, and he couldn't help the exhilarated giggle that slipped through his fingers.

He pushed through the double doors and stepped into the cold air.

Tom was easy to spot near the entrance. Charlie's heart did its familiar little flip.

He descended the steps. Tom turned at the sound, already smiling.

"Hey, Char."

"Hi," Charlie replied, softer than he meant to.

He stopped in front of him, suddenly unsure what to do with his hands.

Without a word, Tom adjusted the lapel of Charlie's coat, casual enough to look like nothing.

"How was the seminar?" He asked gently.

Charlie exhaled. "It was fine. Same as last semester, mostly."

Then, after a beat, he added, "They, um... they noticed."

He tilted his left hand slightly between them.

"Oh?" Tom's voice stayed low. "And how do you feel about that?"

"I think... I mean, I'm okay with it," Charlie admitted. "I didn't lie or anything. I just told them."

Tom smiled warmly. "My brave boy."

Charlie shivered.

"I brought your favourite, too." Tom nodded toward a paper cup on the half wall next to them.

Charlie's chest tightened. He glanced around, then let himself lean in, just a little, forehead nearly brushing Tom's cheek.

Let them see.

Tom moved his arm around him. He pressed a brief kiss to Charlie's temple.

They stayed close for another minute, exchanging quiet words about the day.

Eventually, Tom checked the time with a sigh. "I should let you go. I'll pick you up at seven? We can make dinner."

Charlie nodded. "Yes, please."

On impulse, he rose onto his toes. He kissed the corner of Tom's mouth, face burning.

For a moment, Tom looked surprised. Then he grinned, utterly charmed.

"Alright, honey," he said softly. "Have a good afternoon. Try not to work too hard."

He winked, gave Charlie's arm a final squeeze, and strode off across the quad.

Charlie stood there a moment, the tea warming his hands.

Then, with a steadying breath, he turned back toward the seminar building.

He nearly bumped into two people on their way out.

Sarah and Priya.

Sarah recovered first. "Oh! Hey again," she said, voice overly casual. "We were just, um, heading to grab a bite."

Priya looked past Charlie toward the quad, cheeks pink. "It's chilly out there, isn't it?"

Charlie laughed, surprising the girls.

"It's getting there," he agreed mildly. He took a sip of his drink.

"Your... Thomas brought that for you?"

Charlie nodded. "He did."

Priya clasped her hands together. "That was him outside, right?"

Sarah cut in. "We may have looked out the window. Just to make sure you were alright."

Charlie's face warmed again, but to his own surprise, he wasn't mortified.

"I'm alright," he assured them. "Thank you."

Priya bounced once. "Okay. You're the first of us to get married. This calls for cake or drinks or something. You can't escape that, alright?"

Charlie smiled. "Alright," he conceded, startling himself. "Maybe this weekend, if you want."

Sarah blinked, then beamed. "That sounds great. We'll set something up in a group chat. And don't worry--we won't make you do anything cheesy. Just a toast. Promise."

The street shimmered with a sheen of rain.

Charlie stood beside the car, hands shoved deep into the pockets. The apartment building loomed ahead.

Tom double-checked the address on his phone. "You ready, honey?"

Charlie made a small sound. "I don't think I've ever been to someone's apartment for a... thing."

Tom placed his palm against Charlie's cheek.

"You don't have to go in if you don't want to," he said quietly. "We can drive around and listen to music."

Charlie looked past Tom's shoulder.

"Don't tempt me," he said. Then he sighed. "Sorry. I just..."

Charlie's fingers went to his wedding band, twisting it like he was trying to unscrew himself from his body.

Tom stepped closer.

"You've got this, baby," he said. He kept his hand on Charlie's jaw. "I'll come back for you at ten."

"What if I panic in there?" Charlie asked.

"Then text me. Or go to the bathroom and take ten breaths, and then text me."

Charlie nodded. He didn't move right away.

The apartment complex looked ordinary, but the front doors might as well have been the gates to a medieval fortress.

Tom squeezed Charlie's shoulder. "You'll be okay," he said again. Then he stepped back.

Charlie sighed. He pushed away from the car and started across the sidewalk.

At the entry, he stopped and looked back. Tom was still there. Their eyes met, and Tom gave him an exaggerated thumbs-up, grinning widely.

Charlie's mouth twitched; he rolled his eyes, then squared his shoulders and buzzed the intercom.

Charlie stepped out of the elevator. At the end of the hall, Priya's door was half open.

"Charlie!" Priya appeared. She held a glass of red wine in one hand. "You made it."

She leaned in and gave him a hug. It was over before Charlie could tense up.

He followed her inside.

There was a folding table lined with bowls of olives and spiced chickpeas. Jason was stretched out at one end of the couch. Sarah waved from the armchair.

Priya placed a glass of wine in his hand. "Careful, it's strong."

Charlie perched at the farthest edge of the couch, glass held delicately in both hands.

"So, Dr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery," Sarah began, "how is married life treating you?"

Charlie felt his face heat up. "It's... good," he said. "It's been quiet."

Priya dropped into a butterfly chair across from him. "Thomas Montgomery..." She tilted her head, smiling conspiratorially.

Charlie nodded.

Jason grinned. "Is he British?"

"No, no. He's, um, from here."

Priya changed tack. "So, was it love at first sight, or did you hate him for three years before giving in to the slow burn?"

Sarah laughed. "Priya, that's too much."

Charlie relaxed enough to take a sip. "We, um, met in tenth-grade. English," he said. "But we didn't start dating until... after university. Long story."

He hoped that would be the end of it, but Sarah and Priya exchanged looks that said: not a chance.

Jason, who had been on his phone, looked up. "Sorry, wait, this is weird, but... You don't mean Montgomery, like, the building on Peel?"

Charlie winced. "Yeah, that's... his family," he said. "He's not... we don't really do the Christmas dinners."

Priya's eyebrows shot up. "Wait. Wait-wait-wait." She set her glass down and pointed at him. "Your husband is THEE Thomas Montgomery? *What?*"

Jason let out a low whistle. "Holy shit, man. You're basically royalty."

Charlie managed a small smile. "He's just Thomas," he said. "I mean, to me."

"Wow. Okay, so, wait, you met in high school?" Sarah asked. She moved to sit cross-legged on the floor in front of Charlie.

Charlie nodded. "Yeah, we were friends then."

Priya leaned forward "How did you end up married?"

"There was a... situation, last month. My immigration status got messed up. I was about to get deported, and he just... proposed."

Jason blinked. "Damn."

Charlie shrugged. "He's like that. All or nothing."

Sarah looked at Priya, who gave a theatrical gasp. "That is the most romantic thing I've ever heard in my life," Priya said, mock-fanning herself.

Charlie smiled and rolled his eyes.

This wasn't so bad.

After more than an hour and a half of easy conversation, the intercom buzzed.

"That'll be your ride," Priya said, glancing at Charlie.

Charlie stood up, nearly tripping over the leg of the couch.

Priya beat him to the door. "Welcome to the den of iniquity," she called into the hallway.

Tom stood there, taller than anyone's memory of him. He smiled, and the entire temperature of the room went up two degrees.

"Hi," Charlie said, visibly relaxing.

Tom offered his hand to Priya, who shook it and then immediately tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Tom Montgomery," he said.

"Priya Shah. Come in, take off your shoes. Or don't. We're informal."

Tom toed off his boots and stepped inside, eyes taking in the details--framed degree certificates, LED string lights. "You have a very lovely place," he said.

Jason lurked near the kitchen. He gave a quick, dorky wave. "Hey. Jason. This is a bit surreal, no offense."

"None taken. I've heard a lot about you."

Sarah scrambled to her feet and nearly spilled her drink. "Sarah Kline. Hi. Sorry, I--" She laughed nervously. "You're a lot taller than I expected."

Tom looked at Charlie, amused. "Do I seem tall to you?"

Charlie smiled. "You always do."

The group settled back into the living room. It was more like a press conference than a party now.

Tom sat beside Charlie, a polite distance apart.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Priya asked. "We have wine, seltzer. Probably some beer somewhere."

"Wine would be perfect, thank you. I hope I'm not too early."

"Not at all," Priya said. "We were just getting to the good gossip."

Tom settled back into the sofa. "You all seem close," he observed.

Priya shrugged. "We're a research cohort. Trauma bonding, basically."

The conversation moved fast. Tom asked thoughtful questions, remembered everyone's name, and never once interrupted.

Every few minutes, his eyes would flick to Charlie. Each time, Charlie answered with a nod or a tiny smile.

At ten-thirty on the dot, Tom checked his watch. "We should probably get going."

Charlie nodded. "Okay. It's late," he agreed, standing up.

Tom turned to the group. "Thank you for having us," he said. "And for making my husband feel welcome."

Sarah actually blushed.

They said their goodbyes at the door, Priya promising to host again soon.

When the door closed behind them, the apartment felt quieter.

"He seems really... nice," Sarah said finally, as if she hadn't known what to expect.

Priya grinned, slumping onto the couch. "They're perfect together. You can just tell."

Jason stared at the door.

"Holy shit. Did you see his watch?"

Charlie buckled himself in. He closed his eyes, just for a second.

"You okay, baby?" Tom asked.

Charlie let out a slow breath. "Yeah. It was actually..." He trailed off, searching for the word. "Fun."

Tom grinned. "Your friends are great."

Charlie nodded. "They're... yeah. They make it... less hard to talk."

Tom pulled away from the curb. For a while, they drove in comfortable silence.

"I thought you were going to freak out," Tom said after a minute.

Charlie shrugged. "I almost did. But then I just... didn't. I guess it was easier than I thought it would be."

"You were amazing. I'm proud of you."

Charlie looked out the window, watching the lights flicker by. "I kept waiting to feel out of place. But they actually seemed happy for me. For us."

Tom squeezed Charlie's hand.

"You belong, Charlie," he said. "I wish you could see yourself the way I do."

Chapter 16

Charlie stood in the kitchen, staring at a bowl of neon-orange Doritos.

He nudged the bowl two centimetres to the left. Then back again.

It looked insane on the marble island--processed chemical dust in a hand-thrown ceramic bowl. But Tom had been specific.

Get the trash snacks. Lukas will eat anything as long as it isn't off the floor, and Matt pretends he's healthy until the third beer.

Charlie wiped his hands on his jeans. The pre-game show murmured from the living room.

This was Tom's inner circle. The Goons--men who ran companies by day and turned into degenerate college students the second they were in a room together.

They were coming to meet Charlie.

Not the terrified immigrant Tom had married in a crisis.

The husband. The partner.

Charlie reached out to adjust the Doritos again.

"If you move that bowl one more time," Tom said, "I'm taking it away from you."

Charlie jumped.

Tom slid in behind him and wrapped his arms around Charlie's waist. He rested his chin on Charlie's shoulder and looked down at the spread.

"Doritos. Perfect. They're gonna destroy those."

"Are you sure?" Charlie leaned back into him. "It feels... I don't know. Wrong. Shouldn't I have gotten the fancy olives?"

"God, no," Tom laughed. "If you give Matt an olive, he's going to think I'm trying to network with him."

Charlie sighed.

"They're going to think I'm weird," he said, quieter. "I don't know anything about... whatever you guys talk about."

Tom turned him around.

"They're not coming to test you on hockey rules," Tom said. "They're going to love you because I love you. And because you bought the good chips."

The doorbell started ringing, over and over again.

Charlie went rigid. "They're early."

"They smell free alcohol." Tom grinned, squeezing Charlie's hip. "Ready?"

Charlie took a breath. He nodded.

Tom kissed him quickly then crossed the apartment. He swung the door open.

The peace of the penthouse got hit by a truck.

"Yo!"

Matt--tall, shoulder-length blond hair--barged in and slapped a hand onto Tom's shoulder.

Two more bodies crowded in behind him. One had a case of beer balanced on his shoulder. The other was holding a pizza box.

"You have the code," Tom said, but he was smiling as Matt shook him like a dog toy. "You didn't have to assault my doorbell."

"I forgot the code," the one with the beer--André--said. He kicked the door shut with his heel. "Lukas said it was your birthday, but it didn't work."

"My birthday is in March," Tom sighed.

"See?" Lukas beamed. "I fucking told you."

"Alright, alright," Tom said. He reached back without looking, hand open toward Charlie.

Charlie stepped forward and took it.

Tom pulled him in, arm settling around Charlie's waist.

"This is Charlie. My husband."

Matt's eyes landed on Charlie for the first time. André went still, polite in that careful way quiet people are when they're paying attention. Lukas looked like he was about to say something stupid and decided to hold it in his mouth for a second.

"We met at the wedding," Matt said. He stepped forward and offered a hand the size of a baseball mitt. "But you were surrounded by, like... a tactical unit of aunts. So we kept our distance. Good to see you without the General guarding the perimeter."

"Hi," Charlie managed, shaking his hand. "I remember. You were the ones doing shots with my mom."

"That was André," Lukas laughed.

André nodded. "Your mom is awesome."

"I was the one who ate all the cake," Lukas added, lifting the pizza box. "We brought backup. Last time Tom fed us, it was kale chips."

"I have Doritos," Charlie offered, pointing toward the island.

Lukas's eyes lit up. "Oh, sick."

"Congrats, by the way," André said, and his smile was real when he nodded at Charlie. "How was the sex trip?"

"Oh my God," Tom groaned, laughing. He angled Charlie toward the living room. "Drinks are in the fridge. Touch the scotch and I kill you. And get your filthy boots off my floor."

"Okay, okay. Jesus," Matt said, but he kicked his shoes off.

They moved into the living room, collapsing onto the furniture. Tom guided Charlie to the couch. Matt and André claimed the other end, and Lukas dropped into the armchair with a plate of pizza balanced on his knees.

Tom didn't let go of Charlie's hand. Their fingers stayed interlaced on Tom's thigh.

The banter evolved as the game started.

Matt pointed his beer at Tom. "I'm still not over the time you made me e-transfer you forty-seven cents."

"You owed me forty-seven cents."

"That's mental illness," Lukas said, mouth full.

André lifted his bottle. "He's insane. But he's right."

"Thank you," Tom said smugly.

Matt sat back. Tom's arm had wrapped around Charlie's shoulders.

"And now," Matt said, "look at you. I thought the fucking reception was bad."

Charlie braced himself for the deflection.

"Charlie's not used to you idiots," Tom said instead. "I'm making sure you don't scare him off."

Matt stared at them. "Bro," he said. "You're literally holding him like a stress ball."

Lukas started laughing before the joke even landed.

Matt kept going. "You're gonna start packing his lunch next. Cutting his grapes in half. Labelling his water bottle."

Tom smirked, eyes on the screen. "Maybe I will."

Matt leaned forward. "Charlie, does he make you call him daddy?"

The laughter hit the ceiling. Lukas almost aspirated pepperoni.

And for a split second--Tom froze.

The laughter was dying down. They were waiting for Tom to fire back a retort.

Charlie panicked. He took a sip of his water and said:

"Well, actually, considering his father..."

The silence sucked the air out of the room. Matt's beer stopped halfway to his mouth. André's eyes went wide.

For one terrifying second, Charlie thought he had crossed a line, embarrassed Tom, made it weird.

Then, Matt snorted.

It turned into a wheeze, and then a full-blown, table-slapping guffaw.

"Holy shit!" Matt laughed. "He fucking got you!"

Lukas was shaking his head, grinning. "Damn."

Tom looked at Charlie with a mix of disbelief and admiration.

"I married him for a reason," Tom said finally. "His perceptiveness is top of the list."

The friends turned back to the screen, still chuckling.

But Tom didn't.

He kept his eyes locked on Charlie's face.

The door shut on Matt's final joke.

Tom rolled his sleeves up and grabbed the empty pizza box. "You survived," he said, crushing it into the recycling bin.

"I think I did okay," Charlie said. "They didn't hate me."

"Hate you?" Tom scoffed. He started gathering the beer bottles. "They're going to be texting me about you for a week. You're the shiny new toy."

Charlie picked up the bowl. "You really think so?"

"I really do." Tom took the bowl from Charlie's hands. "Leave the dishes. I'll do them."

"I can help," Charlie protested.

"Char. Sit. Drink some water. I've got this."

Charlie leaned against the counter. Tom wiped down the island and rinsed the bottles. He was meticulous. He was taking care of the space just like he took care of Charlie.

Charlie watched Tom wipe a spot of salsa off the marble.

"Thomas."

"Yeah?"

Charlie stepped into his space. His fingers traced the buttons of Tom's shirt.

"I meant what I said earlier," Charlie murmured. "About why you are the way you are."

Tom went still. "I know."

"You like taking care of everything," Charlie observed. "You like taking care of me."

Tom's eyes darkened. "Yes. I do."

Charlie licked his lips. He rose slightly on his toes.

"Would you like it if I called you daddy sometime?"

Tom's fingers dug in hard around Charlie's hips.

"Char," he warned.

"Is that a yes?" Charlie asked.

Tom pushed him backward against the refrigerator.

Tom caged him in, hands on either side of Charlie's head, leaning down until their noses brushed.

"Yeah." It was torn out of him. "Fuck. Yes. I would like that."

Charlie smiled. "Okay," he whispered. "Okay... Daddy."

Tom shuddered. He groaned into Charlie's neck.

"You have no idea," Tom muttered, "what you just started."

"Maybe I do," Charlie whispered.

Tom pulled back.

"Shower," he commanded. "Now."

"Turn the water on," Tom murmured. "Make it hot."

While Charlie reached in to adjust the temperature, Tom stripped.

Charlie turned around. Tom stood waiting. His fingers found the edge of Charlie's sweater, and Charlie raised his arms without hesitation.

"In," Tom said, sliding the glass door open.

They stepped into the spray together. Tom crowded Charlie against the tile.

Tom leaned in, burying his face in Charlie's neck. He inhaled, breathing in the smell of the day.

"I hate washing this off," Tom groaned. He bit lightly at Charlie's shoulder.

He reached for the body wash. The green bottle with the matte black cap. He poured it onto a washcloth and worked it into a lather.

"Turn around," Tom murmured.

Charlie obeyed. Tom scrubbed him down, as gentle as ever.

When he reached the lower back, Tom's hand slowed. He cleaned Charlie properly.

"You okay?" Tom asked.

"Yeah," Charlie breathed. "Yeah. That feels good."

Tom rinsed him off. Then he handed the washcloth to Charlie. He turned around, offering his back.

Charlie re-soaped the cloth. He washed Tom's back. He reached up, standing on his tiptoes to work shampoo into Tom's hair.

When Charlie was done, Tom turned back around. He cupped Charlie's wet face in both hands and kissed him.

"Char," Tom groaned. "We need to get out. Not in here."

Charlie nodded. "Yeah. Okay."

Tom reached out and shut the water off.

"Out," Tom murmured, grabbing a towel. He wrapped it around Charlie first, drying him off with quick, rough rubs, before wrapping a second one around his waist.

"Bed," Tom said.

He sat on the edge of the mattress, spreading his legs. He pulled Charlie in to stand between his thighs.

"Thomas," Charlie whispered.

Tom hooked his arm behind Charlie's knees and pulled.

Charlie tumbled backward onto the mattress.

Tom crawled up the bed. Charlie's legs wrapped around Tom's waist.

"Please," Charlie whimpered. "Please, daddy."

Tom's eyes rolled back.

"Fuck. Say it again."

"Daddy," Charlie whispered.

"Charlie," Tom breathed. He collapsed forward. "My baby boy."

Charlie's entire body flushed hot. He whined.

Tom cupped Charlie's face.

"My beautiful baby boy," Tom murmured. Charlie's eyes fluttered shut.

Tom reached for the nightstand blindly, his other hand on Charlie's hip. He found the bottle and flipped the cap.

Charlie watched him through half-closed eyes.

Tom's hand moved between them. "Tell me if it's too much."

Charlie shook his head. "No. It's... please, daddy."

Tom swore. He withdrew his hand and reached for the bottle again, coating himself quickly. He moved between Charlie's thighs, spreading them wide.

"I've got you." He leaned down, bracing one hand by Charlie's head, the other guiding himself in. "I've got you, baby."

He pushed forward. It was a fullness that bordered on too much.

"God," Tom groaned. "You feel... fuck, Charlie. You're so tight."

"Thomas," Charlie whined. He wrapped his legs around Tom's waist. "Move. Please."

The sound of skin against skin filled the room. Charlie's fingers dug into Tom's damp shoulders.

"That's it," Tom praised. "Take it. You take it so well."

Charlie couldn't speak. The pleasure was piling up too fast--the scent of sandalwood and sweat, the crushing weight of Tom on top of him.

"Daddy." It was the only word his brain could find. "Daddy, I'm--"

"Let go," Tom commanded. He snapped his hips, chasing Charlie's release. "Cum for me, baby. Do it."

Charlie's vision went white.

Tom held him through it. Only when Charlie collapsed back onto the bed did he let go.

His hips stuttered, once, twice, three times. He shuddered, then his arms gave out.

After a moment, Tom turned his head so his cheek rested on the pillow. He looked sleepy.

"You okay?" Tom asked, lazily stroking Charlie's hip.

"I'm perfect," Charlie smiled. "Daddy."

Tom closed his eyes, letting out a long breath.

"Yeah," he murmured. "Perfect."

Chapter 17

Charlie was playing possum.

He was tucked against Tom's side, listening to his husband's heart.

Husband. Daddy.

He waited for the embarrassment to curl in his gut, but the shame didn't come.

Tom's arm tightened around him. "I can hear you thinking," he rumbled. "It's too loud. Turn it down."

Charlie smiled against Tom's skin. "I'm not thinking. I'm breathing."

"Regrets?" Tom asked softly. He was scanning Charlie's face.

"No," Charlie whispered. He winced at the pleasant soreness in his muscles. "No regrets. Just... hungry."

Tom grinned.

"Hungry, I can fix," Tom said. He pressed a kiss to Charlie's forehead, then rolled out of bed. He stretched, joints popping, before pulling on a pair of sweatpants.

"Stay," Tom commanded. "I'll bring it to you."

Twenty minutes later, Tom returned with the wooden board they used for cheese, overloaded with plates.

They ate, legs tangled together under the sheets.

Eventually, Tom set his mug down on the nightstand. "We should talk about it, Char."

Charlie lowered his fork. "Okay."

"I love it," Tom said. "Obviously. But I never want to turn into my father. I spent years trying to be him. I thought that's what being a man was."

He looked up at Charlie.

"When I take care of you--when I tell you what to do, or feed you, or hold you--it's not because I want to own you."

Charlie reached out, covering Tom's hand with his own.

"You quit," Charlie reminded him. "You walked away."

"I walked away because he called you a liability."

"A sinking ship," Charlie supplied automatically.

"You are a *survivor*," Tom said quietly.

He turned their hands, thumb brushing Charlie's knuckles.

"And with me... you don't have to be, all the time. Is that it?"

Charlie looked at the tray of food. The abundance of it. The safety.

"After... after Bern," Charlie whispered, "I didn't have anyone. I just had to be an adult."

"You had to grow up too fast," Tom murmured.

"When I'm with you... I don't have to survive. I can just... be."

Tom moved the tray to the end of the bed. He pulled Charlie into his lap and kissed the top of his head.

"I'm not going anywhere, baby."

"Okay," Charlie said wetly.

"Okay," Tom echoed. "Now. Eat your eggs. Or I'm going to have to feed you."

Charlie laughed. "I can eat my eggs."

"Good boy."

The city was glass and shadow in the late afternoon. Tom paced by the windows, his encrypted cell pressed to his ear.

"No, that's not what I said," he sighed. "Listen. If I don't have it by four, it's off."

He listened. Then: "Yeah, okay, escalate. I'll say it the same way to them."

Charlie watched from the sofa, knees tucked under himself.

Tom hung up. The phone buzzed again. Tom thumbed the volume to silent and walked into the kitchen.

His personal phone was on the island. Tom unlocked it, flipped open the grocery app, and then held it out to Charlie.

"Can you handle this?" Tom said in a much gentler voice. "Just reorder the usual stuff. And add whatever you want, okay?"

Charlie nodded, a little too quickly. "Of course. Got it." He took the phone, cradling it carefully.

Tom's other phone continued buzzing. He saw the screen light up--an incoming call from "Payton/NYC"--and his features locked back into place.

"I'll be on the terrace if you need me," he said, sliding open the door.

Charlie turned to the phone in his lap. The list from last time appeared: Colombian coffee beans, imported cheeses, a dozen organic eggs. He added the kombucha, the artisanal crackers, the rare blood oranges Tom liked for Negronis.

Eventually, he found himself at the dessert section, a box of gelato leaping out at him.

He added it, thumb trembling just a little.

Then he added the sriracha popcorn Hazel always bought. Then oat milk.

Each tap was a small thrill.

He looked up, through the glass. Tom was leaned against the railing as he spoke, visibly annoyed.

Charlie hovered over the order button.

\$347.82.

He blinked. His stomach churned.

He'd expected it to be a lot, but not that much. He looked at the number again, then at the quantity. He scrolled, counting--over and over, as if the price would recalculate itself.

He tapped the "Edit" button. He started slashing, first the indulgences, then the upgrades, then the organics. He replaced the coffee with a midrange brand, the cheese with normal cheddar.

Each subtraction made the number dip a little, but it still hovered well above anything he'd ever spent on food in his life.

Charlie's hands were sweating. He hunched over the phone, elbows digging into his knees.

He started over. He populated it slowly, only with the things Tom would want.

\$258.15.

He considered calling out to Tom, asking if there was a cheaper way, a different store. But Tom was upset, and he didn't want to interrupt.

Charlie set the phone down on the coffee table, face down. He sat there, hands clasped between his knees, and tried to breathe.

The sun had dipped behind the towers.

Charlie sighed. He wanted to be the person Tom believed he could be--someone who didn't break into a cold sweat with any simple task.

He just had to press the button.

He picked up the phone again. The numbers stared back at him. He hovered over "Place Order."

The terrace door slid open. Tom reentered the living room, the tension of the last call coiling off him. He set the encrypted phone down.

Charlie didn't notice. He was still hunched on the couch, phone in hand, staring at nothing.

"Char?"

Charlie started, nearly dropping the phone. "Mhm? Hey," he managed, eyes wide and blinking too fast.

Tom sat down at the far end of the couch.

He waited.

Charlie made himself smaller. The silence stretched.

Finally, Tom reached over and took his hand. "Talk to me, baby. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's stupid." Charlie ducked his head, hoping Tom would let it go.

He didn't.

"It's the groceries," Charli blurted. "I..."

Tom tilted his head. "What about them?"

Charlie gestured with the phone. "It's just. I know we're fine, and you said to get what we want, but I got to the checkout, and--" He swallowed. "It's too much. It's crazy. I tried to cut it down but... it's still a lot."

"Char," Tom said. "Did you think I'd be mad about the price?"

Charlie shrugged. "Not mad, just... It's too much." He stared at the table. "I'm sorry."

Tom sat back. "Jesus Christ," he muttered angrily. Charlie tried not to flinch.

Tom moved a little closer on the couch.

"I'm not angry at you," Tom said. "I'm angry at the people who made you feel like this. And I hate that you still get nervous when I'm mad about something else. That's on me."

Charlie opened his mouth to protest.

"It's just groceries," Tom said firmly. "We're not going to go hungry if you get the good coffee, or if you want a chocolate croissant. I'll buy you a thousand croissants."

Charlie wanted to say it was fine, but the words didn't come.

Tom reached over with his other hand. He wiped away a tear Charlie hadn't even felt falling.

"I'm so sorry," Tom said, softer now. "I'm sorry I wasn't there. I'm sorry I can't fix it in a day."

"I just... I don't want you to think I'm greedy," Charlie whispered.

Tom let out a sound, something between a laugh and a growl, and pulled Charlie toward him.

"Baby," Tom said into his hair, "if you wanted to be greedy, I'd let you. I'd fucking worship it."

For a long moment, they sat there, the city lighting up outside.

"Let's go out," Tom said. "We'll do it together. See what looks good."

Charlie nodded.

They put on their coats in the front hall, then took the elevator down and stepped out onto the plaza. Tom steered them along the sidewalk.

The Provigo was five blocks down, at the base of a luxury apartment building.

Inside, the aisles were wide. Every display was a still life.

Tom took a basket from the stack by the entrance and handed it to Charlie.

"Go nuts," Tom said, smiling. "Anything you want."

They moved through the store. Tom pointed out things he liked--tiny pink radishes, smoked trout from Gaspésie. He tossed them in the basket without hesitation.

At first, Charlie trailed behind, carrying the basket and pretending he was the help. But Tom kept nudging him forward. "You pick," he'd say, or "Grab some fruit--your favourites."

Charlie made himself reach for a bundle of clementines.

At the cheese counter, he pointed to a wedge of manchego. Tom nodded in approval. "Fancy," he commented. "Good choice."

They wound through the bakery section. Charlie shyly selected a single chocolate croissant from the tray. Tom looked triumphant.

The basket was filling up: the organic eggs, a loaf of rye, three different yogurts in little glass pots. Every time Charlie reached for something, Tom let him, his hand never leaving Charlie's back.

At the snack aisle, Charlie paused in front of the sriracha popcorn, then started to move past. Tom stopped him.

"Didn't you mention this once?" he asked, picking up the bag and dropping it into the basket. "I remember everything, you know."

Charlie flushed. "I didn't want to-- It's, like, \$7."

"And?"

Charlie couldn't really argue with that.

By the time they reached checkout, the basket was overflowing. Charlie half expected Tom to make a joke about needing a second mortgage, but instead, Tom just set the basket down and pulled Charlie close, one hand firm on his waist.

The cashier was a young woman with perfectly winged eyeliner. She scanned the items quickly, rattling off the price in French.

Tom paid without blinking. They bagged the groceries together.

They stepped out into the night, arms full.

"You did great, honey," Tom murmured.

Charlie smiled--real, unguarded.

Chapter 18

The suitcase by the door was small--an overnight bag, really--but to Charlie, it looked like a threat.

"It's twenty-four hours," Tom said, tightening his tie in the hallway mirror. He caught Charlie's reflection hovering behind him and turned around, his expression softening. "Twenty-four hours, Char. I'll be back before you even finish your first cup of tea tomorrow."

"I know," Charlie said, picking at the sleeve of his sweater. "I'm being ridiculous. You're going to Toronto, not Mars."

"I'm going to beg a tech billionaire for seed money so we don't have to live off our savings forever," Tom corrected, stepping forward to wrap his arms around Charlie's waist. "But yes. Not Mars."

This was the first time Tom had left since the wedding. Since the resignation. Since everything. For over a month, they had been a closed ecosystem of two.

"You... have the itinerary?" Charlie asked.

"In my phone."

"And you... know where the hotel is?"

"Same as always." Tom smiled earnestly. He kissed Charlie's forehead, then his nose, then his lips. "I'm leaving the car for you. But Hazel is coming at 6:00, right?"

"The General is inbound," Charlie confirmed. "She demanded wine and 'unrestricted access to the cheese drawer'."

"Good," Tom grinned against his lips. "She'll keep you out of trouble. Or get you into it. Either way, you won't be alone."

He pulled back, his hands lingering on Charlie's hips. He looked at Charlie with that heavy, possessive gaze that had become so much more frequent lately.

"Be a good boy for me while I'm gone?" Tom murmured.

A flush heated the back of Charlie's neck. It was still so new, a secret language they were learning to speak.

"Yes," Charlie whispered. "Yes, daddy."

Tom's grip tightened for a fraction of a second before he forced himself to let go.

"Unfair," Tom groaned, grabbing his bag. "You can't say that right before I have to get on a plane. That's sabotage."

Charlie smiled, a little shy, a little empowered. "Bye, Thomas."

"Bye, baby. Call you tonight."

The door clicked shut. The lock engaged.

And Charlie was alone.

Hazel arrived at 6:00 PM. She unlocked the door (she still had the key Tom pretended to be mad about) and swept in like a weather system.

"Honey, I'm home!" she shouted, kicking off her stilettos. "And I brought carbohydrates!"

She was holding a pizza box in one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other.

"Vodka?" Charlie asked, taking the box. "I thought we were doing wine."

"Wine is for wallowing," Hazel declared, shedding her trench coat to reveal pink silk pyjamas. "Vodka is for celebration. Or for forgetting. Tonight, we are doing a bit of both. Where is the husband? Is he in the sky?"

"Landed twenty minutes ago," Charlie said. "He called."

"Good. Now, to the command center."

Ten minutes later, they were sprawled on the leather sofa--Hazel with her feet on the coffee table, Charlie curled in the corner--eating pizza straight from the box.

They had put on sheet masks this time. They were supposed to be hydrating, but they mostly just made them look like serial killers.

"Okay," Hazel said, taking a shot of vodka without even flinching. "State of the Union. Go."

"State of the Union?"

"The marriage, Charlie. The Merger. How is it? Is he driving you crazy? Is he leaving his wet towels on the floor? I need the domestic intel."

Charlie chewed his crust, thinking. "He's... perfect," he admitted. "It's disgusting, Hazy. He makes the bed. He cooks. He leaves me notes when he goes for a run."

"Ugh," Hazel groaned, but she was smiling. "He's trying to set a standard for husbands everywhere. It's offensive."

She reached for another slice of pizza. "But there has to be something. Nobody is that perfect. He's been a corporate shark for seven years, Char. That kind of repression has to come out somewhere."

Hazel looked at him pointedly.

"I need the dirt," she demanded. "I need the juice. Tell me he has a weird secret."

"He doesn't have secrets..."

"Please," Hazel scoffed. "Everyone has secrets. Especially men who colour-code their bookshelves. Come on, spill it. Is it a foot fetish?"

"What? No!" Charlie laughed, horrified. "He's never... looked at my feet. I don't think."

"Okay, no feet." Hazel tapped her chin. "What about... furry stuff? Does he want you to dress up? Is there a secret fursuit in the closet?"

"Hazel!" Charlie swatted her arm. "No! Oh my god, you are demented."

"Okay, so no furries. Diapers?"

"Absolutely not," Charlie said firmly, face heating up. "Why is your brain like this?"

"Hm," she avoided the question. She took a sip of her vodka, her eyes narrowing.

"Okay, so nothing messy," she mused. "But he's... bossy. We know he's bossy. He likes control."

Charlie moved on the couch. He looked away, focusing intently on the condensation dripping down his water glass.

"He's... assertive," Charlie mumbled.

"Assertive," Hazel repeated, testing the word. She leaned forward, sensing weakness. "Does he make you salute? Does he make you call him 'Sir'?"

Charlie froze.

It was a micro-reaction. A split-second hesitation.

"Aha!" Hazel shrieked, pointing a finger at him. "I saw that! I saw the glitch!"

"I didn't glitch!" Charlie squeaked. "I didn't!"

"You did! You totally did!" Hazel scrambled up to her knees on the couch. "He makes you call him Sir? Thomas Montgomery makes you call him Sir?"

"No!" Charlie wailed. "He doesn't! I don't call him Sir!"

"Then what?" Hazel pressed, relentless.

"No! Hazel, stop!"

"Then why did you panic?" She leaned into his personal space. "You are a terrible liar, Charlie Heitmeyer-Montgomery. You are hiding something. Tell me. Tell me, or I will text him right now and ask him myself."

She reached for her phone.

"Don't you dare!" Charlie grabbed her wrist.

"Then tell me!" Hazel laughed, wrestling for the phone. "What is it? What do you call him?"

"Ugh, fine!" Charlie shouted, letting go of her arm and burying his burning face in his hands. "Fine! Fuck!"

Hazel sat back, smoothing her silk pyjamas. "I'm waiting."

Charlie took a deep breath. He wanted the floor to open up and swallow him whole.

"He..." Charlie's voice was barely a whisper. "He has a daddy kink."

Silence.

Absolute, vacuum-sealed silence.

Charlie peeked through his fingers.

Hazel was frozen.

"Hazy?" Charlie whispered, terrified.

She slowly reached for her glass. She picked it up and drained the entire thing in one long, impressive swallow.

She set the glass down on the coffee table.

Then, she lay back down on the sofa, crossed her arms over her chest like a corpse in a coffin, and stared at the ceiling.

"I am dead," Hazel announced in a monotone voice. "I have passed away. Do not resuscitate."

"Hazel--"

"No," she cut him off, holding up a hand. "I am processing. My brother-in-law. The man who wears three-piece suits to brunch. The man who has a favourite type of Excel spreadsheet."

She turned her head slowly to look at Charlie, her eyes wide with a mixture of horror and unholy glee.

"Daddy?" she whispered.

Charlie groaned and threw a pillow over his own face. "I hate you. I hate this. Why did I tell you?"

"Because I bullied you," Hazel reminded him. A grin spread beneath her sheet mask. "Oh my god. This explains everything. The protective arm. The forehead kisses."

She let out a cackle.

"It makes so much sense it's actually annoying," she declared. "Of course, he's a Daddy. He's practically a structural support beam in human form."

Charlie peeked out from under the pillow, his face still flaming. "You can't make fun of him," he warned, though his voice lacked any real threat. "Or me."

"Make *fun of you*? " Hazel sat up, peeling off her sheet mask. "Char, I am delighted. I am thrilled. This gives me so much ammunition."

"Hazel!"

"I'm kidding," she promised, though she was definitely crossing her fingers. "But seriously. Good for you. Heal that inner child with a rich husband."

She took a bite, chewing thoughtfully.

"Just... do me a favour?"

"What?" Charlie asked, dreading the answer.

"Don't ever, ever let me hear you say it," Hazel shuddered dramatically. "If I hear you call him that in the wild, I will actually vaporize."

Charlie groaned but couldn't help laughing. "Deal."

The apartment was quiet. Hazel had left around midnight with the terrifying promise to "buy a megaphone for Christmas."

Now, it was 6:00 AM.

He hadn't slept well. He was sitting on the window seat in the living room, wrapped in his duvet like a sushi roll, watching the street below.

Waiting.

He saw the black sedan pull up to the curb before he heard the elevator. He watched a familiar figure step out, and his heart did a happy little flip.

He scrambled off the window seat, the duvet trailing behind him, and ran to the door. He unlocked it before Tom could even get his keys out.

The door swung open.

Tom's tie was loosened, and there were dark circles under his eyes. But when he saw Charlie, the exhaustion melted away.

"Hi," Tom breathed.

"You're back," Charlie whispered.

Tom stepped over the threshold and pulled Charlie into his arms.

"I missed you," Tom murmured. "God, I fucking missed you. It was only twenty-four hours, and it felt like a year."

"I missed you, too," Charlie admitted, hugging him tight. "The apartment's too big. It made noises."

Tom pulled back just enough to scan Charlie's face.

"Did Hazel behave?"

"Mostly," Charlie lied, cheeks heating up. "She... well. She knows."

Tom froze. "Knows what?"

"About... the name," Charlie mumbled, pulling the duvet up to hide his face. "The... daddy thing. I slipped up. She teased me for three hours."

Tom let out a startled laugh.

"I don't care if she knows." He kissed Charlie's forehead. "As long as she didn't make you cry."

"She made me laugh," Charlie said. "And she ate all the Gouda."

"A small price to pay," Tom said.

He shut the door and steered them toward the kitchen. "Water. Then bed. I need my little spoon."

"Did you get the money?" Charlie asked, padding after him.

Tom paused by the fridge. When he turned around, he was grinning.

"I got it," Tom said. "I got double."

Charlie's eyes widened. "Double?"

"He liked the pitch," Tom shrugged. "And he liked that I quit Dad's firm. The enemy of my enemy is my venture capitalist."

Tom walked back to Charlie, wrapping him in a hug from behind, resting his chin on Charlie's shoulder.

"We're safe, Char. We have the funding. We have the apartment. We have the Gouda-eating sister."

He kissed Charlie's cheek. "We're going to be just fine."

Charlie leaned back into him, closing his eyes.

"Yeah," he whispered, covering Tom's hands with his own. "We are."

Chapter 19

They had barely reached the front steps when the door burst open, revealing Nancy Heitmeyer. In one hand, she held a tilting wine glass, the cardigan over her blouse slightly askew, her red hair tousled as if she'd been running fingers through it.

"My boys!" she called, voice bright enough to make Charlie wince. She steadied herself on the frame. "You're finally here!"

Tom guided Charlie up the steps.

Charlie raised his eyebrows. "Mum, you started without us?"

"Just a little pre-party," Nancy smiled, sending a drop of Cabernet onto the wood.

Before Charlie could answer, she set her glass down and hugged him fiercely. "I'm so proud of you," she whispered.

Charlie patted her back awkwardly. "Thanks, Mum. I love you too."

Nancy blinked away a tear and turned to Tom, arms already open. "Thomas, thank you for bringing our boy home."

He returned her embrace with genuine warmth. "He brought me home," he corrected.

Nancy retrieved her wine. "David and Alex are out back manning the grill--best not to interrupt until they call us."

Charlie shrugged off his coat and glanced at the photo-lined walls: now, front and center, was a wedding shot of Charlie and Tom beneath white blossoms.

"David had it framed," Nancy said. "You're a Heitmeyer-Montgomery now, right?"

"Heitmeyer-Montgomery," they said together, then smiled at the coincidence.

The smell of barbecue drifted through the house. Nancy led them down the hallway. "Hazel's running late, saving some poor associate."

Tom's hand returned to Charlie's back. Nancy offered drinks--wine or her husband's secret rum punch. "Water for me," Tom said. Charlie surprised himself by asking for wine.

Nancy swept off toward the kitchen.

"Let's go upstairs," Tom whispered, tugging Charlie's wrist.

They skipped the creaky third step out of habit. In the hallway, more old photos stared back: scrawny fourteen-year-old Charlie fresh from Switzerland, Nancy and David young and smiling in Quebec.

Charlie opened the last door on the left.

Inside was a perfect time capsule. The walls were the cool grey Charlie picked to replace the previous occupant's bright yellow.

Tom stepped in. He recognized the posters, the stacks of textbooks.

"It hasn't changed at all," he said.

The narrow bed groaned as they sat.

"Dinner will be ready soon," Charlie murmured. Tom squeezed his knee.

"Just a minute longer. I love seeing your past."

Charlie looked toward the window, remembering how this room had felt like the only safe place when everything else was new.

Tom's hand slid from Charlie's knee to his thigh. He leaned in and captured Charlie's mouth.

The kiss deepened, Tom's hand sliding from Charlie's thigh to his waist. Tom's cologne mixed with the smells of Charlie's childhood. It was disorienting and thrilling.

When they separated, both slightly breathless, Tom stayed close. "Did you ever think of me here?" he asked. "In this bed?"

"Yes," Charlie admitted, cheeks warm. "All the time."

Tom's hand tightened on Charlie's waist. "I'm sorry," he said. "That I made you wait so long. I wasted so much time."

"You weren't ready," Charlie said. "Neither was I, probably."

"Still," Tom murmured, pressing a kiss to Charlie's temple. "All those nights... I could have been here, giving you everything you needed." His lips trailed down to Charlie's ear. "Daddy will spend the rest of our lives making it up to you, okay?"

Charlie froze.

Tom pulled back slightly. "Was that--" he began. "Is it okay to--"

Charlie whined, pressing his face against Tom's chest.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes, it's okay."

Tom relaxed. His arms encircled Charlie completely. "Good," he murmured into Charlie's hair. "Because I mean it. Every night you spent alone in this bed, every moment you wanted something you thought you couldn't have--I'm going to make up for all of it."

Charlie lifted his face, meeting Tom's gaze.

"Promise?" he asked.

Tom's answer was to kiss him again, one hand threading through Charlie's hair to tilt his head back, the other supporting him as he was gently pressed backward onto the mattress.

They were so absorbed in each other that neither heard the rapid footsteps ascending the stairs, or the determined stride down the hallway, or even the turn of the doorknob.

The bedroom door flew open and banged against the wall.

"Guys! Din--OH MY GOD!"

They broke apart instantly. In the doorway stood Hazel, her expression cycling rapidly from surprise to horror to wicked delight. One hand was still on the doorknob, the other dramatically covering her eyes, though her fingers were spread wide enough that she could clearly see everything.

"Hazel!" Charlie gasped, mortified. "You have to knock!"

"Not in my own house," she replied, lowering her hand to reveal a grin. "What kind of sister would I be if I respected privacy?"

Tom, to his credit, appeared completely unruffled--at least to anyone who didn't know him well enough to notice the slight tension in his jaw. "General," he said. "Good to see you."

"I suppose I should be grateful you're both still fully clothed," Hazel replied, leaning against the doorframe. "Small mercies."

Charlie groaned, burying his face in his hands. "We weren't--it was just--"

"Yeah, yeah." Hazel's smile widened. "I can tell Mom if you need a few minutes to... compose yourselves."

"We're good," Tom replied, standing and extending a hand to help Charlie up. "We were just coming down."

"I bet you were," Hazel muttered, just loud enough for them to hear, then laughed at Charlie's renewed mortification. "Oh, calm down, Char. I'm teasing. It's cute you two still can't keep your hands off each other." She softened slightly. "Really. It's... it's nice to see."

"Thanks, Hazy," Charlie said quietly.

"Don't thank me yet," Hazel replied, her grin returning. "I'm absolutely telling everyone I caught you making out like teenagers." She turned to go, then paused, looking back over her shoulder. "Or should I say, I caught you with... daddy?"

Charlie's entire body went rigid. Tom's hand tightened around his.

"You promised!" Charlie hissed. "You said you'd never--"

"I said I'd vaporize if I heard you say it," Hazel corrected. "I never promised not to say it myself. Consider it payback for telling me!"

Her laughter floated back to them from down the hall.

"She wouldn't really," Charlie whispered, looking up at Tom with wide eyes. "Would she?"

Tom sighed, reaching up to smooth Charlie's dishevelled hair. "It's Hazel," he said simply, as if that explained everything. And in many ways, it did.

"We're doomed," Charlie groaned.

"Probably," Tom agreed, pressing a kiss to Charlie's forehead. "But at least we're doomed together."

From halfway downstairs, Hazel's voice carried up with theatrical volume: "Mom! Dad! Wait until you hear where I found the lovebirds!"

Tom smiled. "Shall we?"

Charlie took a deep breath, squeezing his hand. "After you."

It was a parade of the condemned.

"I can't believe you," Charlie hissed at Hazel's back, face burning.

"I knocked!" Hazel lied over her shoulder, skipping the last step into the downstairs hallway. "Spiritually. You just were too busy being... reacquainted with your childhood furniture to hear me."

Tom cleared his throat. He looked composed--his shirt re-tucked, his hair smoothed back--but there was a faint flush high on his cheekbones that gave him away. He reached out, his hand brushing Charlie's back in a silent offer of solidarity.

They entered the dining room. It was warm and loud. David was at the head of the table, pouring wine, while Alex was looking at something on his phone.

"There they are!" Nancy beamed. "Thomas, sit here, next to David. Charlie, you're by Alex."

"We were just... looking at the room," Charlie mumbled, sliding into his chair.

"Looking. Right," Hazel chirped, snapping her napkin onto her lap with a flourish. "Very thorough inspection."

"Hazel," Nancy warned, though she was smiling. "Let the boys eat."

David set the bottle down. "Before we get distracted," he said, "Cheers. To the funding."

"Cheers!" the table echoed.

"Hear, hear," Alex added without looking up from his phone, lifting his glass anyway.

Nancy stood halfway out of her chair. "We're so proud of you, Tom. Truly."

Tom smiled, a little stunned. "Thank you," he said. His knee brushed Charlie's under the table.

The dishes were passed around, and the wine flowed. Alex argued with David about hockey stats with his mouth full; Nancy tried to force second helpings of potatoes onto Tom's plate before he'd finished the first; Hazel held court, her sharp wit darting around the table like a hummingbird.

Tonight, her target was locked.

"So, Tom," Hazel said, leaning her chin on her hand, eyes dancing. "I noticed you're very... protective. It's sweet. Almost paternal."

Charlie dropped his fork.

"I try to look out for him," Tom said evenly, though he shot Charlie a glance. "He looks out for me, too."

"Oh, I'm sure," Hazel grinned, spearing a carrot. "It's a very nurturing dynamic. Isn't it, Charlie?"

"Pass the salt," Charlie squeaked.

After the plates were cleared, Nancy shooed them away.

"David and I will do the cleanup," she announced, tying her apron. "You kids go. Enjoy the evening. Go sit on the porch, or whatever it is you do."

"Actually," Alex said, stretching his arms over his head. "I was thinking we could go for a walk. Digest. You guys in?"

"A walk," Hazel repeated, her eyebrows raising. "Yes. A walk sounds... medicinal."

"I'm driving," Tom said. "But I'll walk with you."

"Responsible," Alex nodded. "I respect that."

Five minutes later, the four of them were strolling down the tree-lined streets of NDG. The autumn air was crisp.

Once they were a safe distance from the house, Alex pulled a small joint from his pocket.

"Dessert," Alex announced, lighting it. He took a drag before passing it to Hazel.

They passed it around the circle--Hazel taking a delicate, practiced puff, Charlie taking a hit that made him cough immediately, and Alex smoking with the relaxed ease of an addict. Tom walked beside them, hands in his pockets, content to be the designated shepherd for his flock of inebriated Heitmeyers.

By the time they reached the park, the medicine had kicked in.

Charlie was giggling at nothing. Alex was explaining a conspiracy theory about the metro system. Hazel was walking with her arm linked through Tom's, leaning heavily on him.

"You know," Hazel said, her voice a little louder than necessary, swinging Tom's arm. "You're a good guy, Tom. Even if you are a little bit..." She trailed off, dissolving into snickers.

"A little bit what?" Alex asked, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

"Don't," Charlie warned, trying to be stern but ruining it by stumbling over a tree root. Tom caught him by the elbow.

"Careful," Tom murmured. "I've got you."

"See!" Hazel pointed a finger at them, delighted. "There it is!"

"There's what?" Alex asked.

Hazel turned to him, eyes wide. She had clearly lost her filter three blocks ago.

"Alex," she fake-whispered. "You don't know? Oh my god. Our brother... calls him daddy."

Alex stopped walking. He looked at Tom. He looked at Charlie. His jaw dropped. "Wait. For real?"

"Hazel!" Charlie gasped.

"It's true!" Hazel cackled, clutching her stomach. "He told me--"

"Okay, that's enough," Tom started, stepping forward, but Charlie beat him to it.

Charlie straightened his spine. Then he turned on his heel to face his sister and pointed a finger directly at her face.

"Bitch, *you* used to dress up like Catwoman for Nick Abbodanzio!"

The silence that followed was absolute.

Tom's eyebrows shot into his hairline.

Alex looked at Hazel, his eyes bulging. "Catwoman?"

Hazel's mouth opened and closed like a fish. For the first time in recorded history, the General was speechless. The memory of her ill-fated romance with the drum major in her sophomore year of her bachelor's hung in the air between them.

Then, Alex snorted.

It started as a low wheeze, then exploded into a full-blown, doubled-over belly laugh.

"Nick Abbodanzio!" Alex howled, slapping his knee. "The guy with the flare jeans? You wore latex for a mall goth?"

"It was pleather!" Hazel shrieked. "And he was an artist!"

Tom laughed loudly. He wrapped an arm around Charlie's shoulders.

"I think you won that round, baby," Tom whispered into Charlie's ear.

Charlie giggled. "She deserved it."

"She did," Tom agreed.

They finished the walk in high spirits. Hazel was now the one being roasted by Alex, while Charlie walked safely under Tom's arm.

When they arrived back at the house, the goodbyes were chaotic and warm. Nancy waved from the porch, happy to see them laughing.

"Drive safe!" David called out.

Tom guided Charlie to the car. Charlie hummed a little tune as he buckled his seatbelt.

As Tom pulled away from the curb, he reached over the center console to take Charlie's hand.

"You okay?" Tom asked, glancing over at him.

Charlie rested his head back against the seat, turning to look at Tom. His eyes were half-lidded and happy.

"Yeah," Charlie murmured, bringing Tom's hand up to kiss the knuckles. "I'm really okay." He let out a soft, sleepy laugh. "Did you see her face? I got her."

"You got her good," Tom chuckled. "Remind me never to cross you."

"You're safe," Charlie whispered, closing his eyes. "You're daddy. You're allowed."

Chapter 20

Charlie stumbled as they crossed the threshold. Tom cinched his arm tighter around his waist, taking the weight before Charlie could tip.

"The floor is moving," Charlie said. "Do you think we should call someone about that?"

"In the morning," Tom chuckled.

He steered them toward the bedroom. He sat Charlie on the edge of the mattress and untied his shoes, sliding them off one by one. Charlie watched him from above.

"Arms up."

Charlie obeyed. Tom quickly changed into pyjama bottoms. When he turned back, Charlie was still sitting there in his briefs, staring.

"What?" Tom asked, tossing his shirt into the hamper.

"Nothing," Charlie hummed, swaying slightly. "Just... you're wonderful. And you're mine."

"I am," Tom said. "Now, let's get you comfortable."

He dressed Charlie in his oversized McGill t-shirt. The hem hit mid-thigh, leaving his legs bare.

"Couch?" Tom asked.

Charlie nodded. He took Tom's hand, letting himself be led out of the bedroom to the sectional. Tom sat first. Charlie tucked his head under Tom's chin and drew his knees up.

They sat like that for a long time. Tom rubbed Charlie's back.

"Thank you," Charlie said into Tom's neck.

"For what?"

"For being there. For... getting it. My family." Charlie pressed a kiss to Tom's throat. "For not being embarrassed when Hazel..."

"Hazel met her match tonight," Tom said. "And your family loves you. They see you."

Charlie pulled back.

"Can I kiss you?" He asked.

"You never have to ask."

Tom leaned down, intending for it to be gentle. But the moment their lips touched, Charlie made a small sound in his throat and opened up.

Tom's hand slid to the nape of Charlie's neck. Charlie climbed halfway into Tom's lap.

"Thomas," Charlie breathed. He was squirming. His hand slid down Tom's stomach, finding the waistband of the pyjamas.

Tom hissed through his teeth. He had been half-hard since the car ride, just listening to Charlie laugh.

"Char," he warned. "Honey, slow down."

"Please," Charlie whispered. He cupped Tom through the fabric. "Please, daddy."

"Baby," Tom choked out. He grabbed Charlie's wrist. "You're feeling good? You're with me?"

Charlie smiled, a slow, lazy thing. "The best," he whispered. "I'm right here."

He leaned in again. Tom groaned, allowing it for another moment before he pulled back.

"Let me run us a bath."

Charlie blinked. "A bath?"

"Mhm." Tom brushed his thumb over Charlie's lower lip. "A hot bath. To relax you."

His free hand slid up Charlie's bare thigh.

"Wanna take my time with you," Tom said. "Make sure you're prepared for me." He smirked. "Plus, I don't want you slipping in the shower."

Charlie nodded. "Yes," he whispered. "Yes, please."

The bathroom was dim. Tom guided Charlie inside, leaving him leaning against the doorframe while he crossed to the tub.

It was a deep porcelain bath meant for soaking. Tom twisted the brass taps, and water thundered out. He tested the temperature with his wrist, adjusting the mix until it was just the way he knew Charlie liked it.

"Lavender or sandalwood?" Tom called over the noise of the water.

Charlie hadn't moved. He was leaning against the wood, the oversized t-shirt slipping off one shoulder.

"Sandalwood," Charlie said, his voice sounding far away. "Smells like you."

Tom smiled. He reached for the bottle and poured it under the tap. It mixed with the steam, turning the room into a fragrant cloud.

"Come here," Tom said. He set the bottle down and turned, extending a hand.

Charlie pushed off the doorframe and padded toward him.

Tom lifted Charlie's shirt. Then he settled his hands on Charlie's hips, thumbs dipping just beneath his waistband.

"These too."

Charlie nodded. He placed his hands on Tom's shoulders as he slid the briefs down.

When Charlie was bare, Tom stayed kneeling for a beat longer. His hands slid back up Charlie's legs.

"Perfect," Tom murmured.

He stood up. The pants pooled on the floor next to Charlie's shirt.

Tom cut the taps. He tested the water one last time and stepped in. He sank into the heat with a low sigh, the water rising to his chest, and settled against the sloped back.

He looked up at Charlie, standing naked and waiting in the steam.

"Come on, baby," Tom said, patting the water between his legs. "Get in."

Charlie took his hand as he stepped over the edge. He sank into the steam, a hiss of breath escaping him as the heat enveloped his skin.

"Hot," he murmured, his head lolling back.

"Just right," Tom said. He guided Charlie down, pulling him back until Charlie was seated between his legs.

The heat soaked into their muscles. Tom wrapped his arms around Charlie's waist. Charlie tipped his head back, resting it on Tom's shoulder.

"This was a good idea," Charlie mumbled, his eyes drifting shut.

"I occasionally have them," Tom said, smiling against Charlie's temple.

He reached for the washcloth draped over the side, dunked it in the hot water, and added a pump of body wash. He worked it into a lather.

The cloth moved over Charlie's shoulders, down his arms, then back up to his chest.

"Lean forward a bit."

Charlie did. Tom ran the cloth down Charlie's spine and over his back. He traced the curve of his waist, then the crease of Charlie's thigh.

"Thomas," Charlie gasped, his hips moving slightly.

"Shh," he cooed. "Just making sure you're clean. Everywhere."

Tom dropped the washcloth into the water. His bare hand slid between Charlie's legs. Charlie tensed, splashing water over the rim of the tub.

"Easy," Tom murmured. "Just relax. Let daddy take care of you."

He used the water and the heat. When he slid his first finger inside, Charlie moaned and leaned into it.

"Okay?" Tom asked near his ear.

"Yes," Charlie whispered. "Don't stop."

When Tom added a second finger, Charlie dug his nails into the arm that was holding him.

"Breathe," Tom commanded softly. "Drop your shoulders."

Charlie's head lolled back as he forced himself to relax.

"That's it," Tom praised. He found the spot he was looking for and curled his fingers, pressing hard.

Charlie's back arched off Tom's chest. "Daddy," he choked out. "Oh god, Thomas--"

"I've got you." Tom didn't let up. "That's it. Take it."

Tom stretched him wider, adding a third finger. Charlie was panting.

"I think you're ready," Tom said.

He withdrew his hand. The loss of fullness was jarring.

"Up," Tom said.

Tom stepped out of the tub with him and reached for the towel on the warming rack. He quickly dried them both off, just enough. Then he picked Charlie up and carried him to the bedroom.

"Thomas!" Charlie laughed, breathless and high on adrenaline. "I have legs."

Tom smiled. "Save them. You're going to need them later."

The mattress dipped under Charlie's weight.

"On your stomach," Tom said.

Charlie smiled. It was a small, dangerous thing that Tom hadn't seen before.

He crawled toward the pillows, settling onto his front, but he didn't lie flat. Instead, he arched his back, lifting his hips high, pressing his chest into the mattress in a display of total availability.

He looked back over his shoulder, peering at Tom through his lashes.

"Like this, daddy?"

Tom looked at the ceiling.

"Fuck," he breathed. "Don't move."

Charlie's smile widened. He rolled his hips just slightly.

Tom sank to his knees beside the bed. His large hands clamped around Charlie's hips. He leaned in, mouth hovering right against the sensitive skin of Charlie's lower back.

"Didn't I say 'don't move'?"

Charlie shivered.

"Sorry, daddy," Charlie whispered. He didn't sound very sorry.

Tom's lips curved against Charlie's skin. He slid his hands down, gripping Charlie's thighs and pushing them apart.

"No, you're not," Tom said. "But you will be."

Tom dragged his tongue up the back of Charlie's leg. He spread him wider, his large hands pulling the cheeks apart.

Then he pressed his mouth against the center of him and feasted.

It was gluttony. Tom worked with enthusiasm, his tongue pushing deep.

He reached underneath, wrapping his hand around Charlie's length to stroke him in time with his tongue.

Charlie fell apart. A moan tore out of his throat, his hips bucking back against Tom's face.

"Thomas," Charlie sobbed. "Please, I'm--"

Tom stopped. He withdrew his hand and his mouth all at once.

"Thomas?" Charlie gasped, his voice wrecked. "Why did you--"

"Patience." Tom's face was wet. He pressed a hot kiss to the inside of Charlie's thigh. "We're just getting started."

Tom went back in, relentless. Yet every time he felt the tension spike toward release, he backed off. He denied him again and again.

"Please," Charlie cried. "Please, Thomas, please, daddy, I need--"

"What do you need, baby?" Tom asked. "Tell me."

"I need to cum," Charlie begged, his hips moving helplessly. "Please let me cum, I can't--I can't--"

"You can," Tom said. "That's it. My good boy."

He licked into the heat with a renewed intensity. At the same time, his hand moved relentlessly down below.

Charlie's entire body went rigid. A high, broken cry tore out of his throat.

Tom took everything Charlie had to give, accepting the mess with a low, vibrating hum of satisfaction.

Only when Charlie collapsed, boneless and gasping, did Tom finally pull away.

He crawled up the bed and pressed a kiss to the sweaty hair at Charlie's temple.

"You okay?" Tom murmured against his skin.

Charlie nodded, trembling. Tom brushed a thumb under Charlie's eye, catching a tear.

"I'm sorry," Charlie said. "I ruined the sheets."

"I don't care about that," Tom laughed. "I like seeing what I did to you."

Charlie rolled onto his side. Tom's face was still wet.

"Can I ask you something?" Charlie whispered.

"Anything."

"Why do you..." Charlie hesitated. He gestured vaguely toward his own lap. "You like doing that. A lot."

Tom's eyes darkened.

"Because you taste incredible," he said. "I love the way you smell. I love how wet you get for me. I love knowing that I'm the only one who gets to taste you like this." He leaned in, his nose brushing against Charlie's ear. "I can't help myself, Char. I just want to eat you alive."

Charlie swallowed. He felt strangely powerful.

"Thomas," he said. "I still want... I mean, if you want to..." He took a breath. "I want you inside me. I want you to finish inside me."

Tom searched his face. "Are you sure? You don't have to. We can stop."

"I'm sure. I want this. I want you." Charlie smiled, a small, sleepy thing. "Please, daddy?"

Tom nodded. "Whatever you want," he murmured, leaning in to kiss him. "Whatever you need."

He didn't break the kiss. He reached blindly toward the nightstand to find the small glass bottle in the top drawer.

Tom warmed the oil between his palms.

"Still okay?" He checked. "Not too sensitive?"

Charlie shook his head, making grabby-hands.

Tom laughed and kissed him again. His slicked fingers found Charlie's entrance.

Charlie's hands wandered over Tom's shoulders. Tom was holding back; he could tell. Charlie let his legs fall wider, arching his back.

"Please," Charlie whispered against Tom's mouth. "I'm ready. Put it in."

Tom nodded. He withdrew his hand, then positioned himself between Charlie's thighs.

Tom looked down, locking eyes with Charlie. Then, he pushed forward.

"Okay?" Tom breathed. He paused. The stretch was intense.

Charlie nodded. "More. Don't stop."

When their hips finally met, Tom stopped. He rested his weight on his forearms, chest heaving. Charlie looked up at him.

"I love you," Tom choked out. "God, baby, I love you so fucking much."

"I love you too," Charlie smiled softly. His legs tightened around Tom's waist. "Now move. Please. I need you to move."

Tom groaned. He withdrew almost completely, then drove back in.

The bed rocked. The headboard hit the wall over and over and over.

"There," Charlie moaned. "Right there, daddy, please--"

"Say it again."

"Daddy. My daddy, please--"

Tom slid a hand under Charlie's hips, lifting him to change the angle. He drove into him, hard and fast.

"My beautiful boy. Fuck," Tom swore, sweat dripping from his forehead. "My Charlie. You take it so well for me."

The praise was a drug. Charlie clung to him--the pressure was building again.

"Close," Tom warned through his teeth. "Charlie, baby, I'm close."

"Yes," Charlie gasped. He wrapped his legs tighter around Tom's waist. "Please. Inside me. I want it--"

Charlie heard his own name, then felt the hot release pulse inside him.

His second orgasm hit him hard. It rolled through him in waves. Tom held him through it, buried deep.

When the room finally stopped spinning, Tom lifted his head.

"Okay?" He asked gruffly.

Charlie nodded. He couldn't speak yet.

Tom kissed him, then carefully withdrew. The loss of fullness made Charlie wince.

"I'll be right back," Tom murmured.

He disappeared into the bathroom. He returned a moment later with a warm, wet washcloth and a glass of water.

"Sit up a little," Tom instructed.

He wiped away the evidence of the night. When he was done, he held the glass to Charlie's lips.

"Drink."

Charlie obeyed, realizing only then how dry his throat was. He drank half the glass.

Tom set it on the nightstand and pulled the duvet up, tucking it around Charlie's shoulders. Then he slid in beside him.

Charlie turned, pressing his face into Tom's chest.

"Thank you," Charlie mumbled into Tom's skin.

The corners of Tom's eyes crinkled. He leaned down, pressing a kiss to Charlie's forehead, then the bridge of his nose, and finally his lips.

"No need to thank me," he said quietly. "I'm exactly where I want to be."

Chapter 21

Consciousness returned to Charlie in layers.

The first layer was a pleasant ache in his muscles that hadn't been there yesterday.

The second layer was the smell of Tom. Sandalwood and expensive laundry detergent.

The third layer was memory.

And with the memory came the horror.

Charlie's eyes snapped open.

Heat flooded his face, so intense he thought he might actually combust. He squeezed his eyes shut.

The arm around his waist tightened, pulling him backward.

"Morning, honey," Tom murmured into his neck, sounding sickeningly content.

"Don't look at me," Charlie said, covering his face with his hands. "I'm not here."

Tom chuckled. He kissed below Charlie's ear. "Why? Baby, last night was..." Tom paused, searching for the word. "Incredible."

"I was unhinged," Charlie argued, his voice muffled by his hands. "I got high in front of you. I yelled 'Bitch' at my sister. And then I came home and acted like... like a..."

"Like a husband who trusts me?" Tom suggested. He gently pried Charlie's hands away from his face, interlacing their fingers. "Char, look at me."

Reluctantly, Charlie rolled over.

"I thought I was dreaming," Tom said quietly, his thumb brushing over Charlie's knuckles. "When you told me what you wanted like that... I literally thought it was too good to be true. You have nothing to apologize for. You're spectacular."

"You didn't think I was... too much?"

"I think," Tom said, leaning in to press a kiss to Charlie's forehead, "that I could spend the next forty years trying to keep up with you, and I'd still want more. So, no. Not too much. Just right."

Charlie let himself exhale. "Okay. Okay. But... the Alex thing."

Tom snorted. "Alex texted me a GIF of Darth Vader."

"I hate him," Charlie groaned. "I hate everyone."

"He thinks it's hilarious. He's happy for us, Charlie. Truly." Tom rubbed circles on Charlie's back. "And as for your sister..."

As if summoned by the name, Charlie's phone buzzed on the nightstand. Then it buzzed again. And again.

Charlie cracked one eye open.

FaceTime Request: Hazel (THE GENERAL)

"She knows," Charlie whispered. "She's awake, and she's coming for blood."

"Answer it," Tom said, reaching over to grab the phone and handing it to him. "Remember. You're safe."

Charlie took a deep breath, sat up against the headboard--pulling the sheet up to his collarbones--and hit accept.

Hazel filled the screen. She was wearing sunglasses and held a large mug of coffee like a weapon.

"State your location and status," she barked, though her voice lacked its usual bite. She looked... sheepish.

"In bed," Charlie said. "Status is... currently recovering from shame."

Hazel sighed. She took off the sunglasses, revealing tired eyes. "Listen. I am invoking the Diplomatic Immunity Clause of 2004."

"That doesn't exist," Charlie said.

"It does now," she countered. "Charles. I... breached protocol. I was intoxicated, and the vibe was chaotic, but that is no excuse. I should not have disclosed classified intel regarding your... nomenclature... to Alexander. It was a tactical error. And it was rude."

Charlie blinked, surprised.

"It's okay," he said. "I mean... it was horrible. But it's okay."

"It's not okay," Hazel insisted. "You have a right to your privacy. Even if it involves--" She stopped herself, grimacing. "Sorry. Nope. Wiping the tape."

"I'm sorry too," Charlie said quickly. "About the Nick thing. That was... I went for the throat."

"It was a solid hit, honestly. It's okay. We're Heitmeyers. We survive embarrassment. It makes us stronger. Or at least funnier." She paused, her expression softening. "Are we good? Still on for brunch? I promise not to bring it up again."

"We're good," Charlie said. "And yes. See you tomorrow."

"Over and out."

The screen went black. Charlie set the phone down and slumped back against the pillows.

"See?" Tom murmured, pulling him down. "No fatalities."

"Did you hear her voice?" Charlie asked. "She's so hungover."

"Justice," Tom said. "Now. Since we have established that the world didn't end, that I am still obsessed with you, and that your sister has been neutralized... what do you want to do with your Saturday?"

Charlie looked out the window. The city sprawled beneath them.

"Breakfast," Charlie decided. "And then... maybe we can finally unpack the last of the books?"

Tom kissed his cheek, a solid seal on the morning. "Books it is."

The guest room smelled like dust and old paper.

"It's weird seeing them all here," Charlie said, stepping back from the bookshelf. "My whole life has been in boxes at Hazel's for so long. Seeing them on your shelves... it makes it feel permanent."

"It is permanent," Tom corrected gently. He folded an empty cardboard box flat and set it aside. "And they aren't my shelves. They're ours."

He leaned against the empty desk, hands in the pockets of his gym shorts.

"Speaking of permanent things," Tom started. "I finalized the incorporation papers for the new firm yesterday. We have a name. We have an office lease starting tomorrow."

Charlie beamed, clutching a copy of Jane Eyre to his chest. "Thomas! That's amazing. Why didn't you tell me last night?"

"Last night we were occupied," Tom said with a smirk. "But... there's one position I haven't filled yet. The most important one. General Counsel. Someone who isn't afraid to tell me when I'm being a dick."

Charlie laughed. "Right. Good luck with that. Most people are terrified of you."

"I know." Tom watched Charlie carefully. "That's why I want to offer it to Hazel."

Charlie blinked rapidly. "Hazel? My sister Hazel? The one who wears sunglasses indoors?"

"The one who organized a wedding in under a week with zero casualties," Tom said seriously. "She has an instinct for arguing that I haven't seen in executives with twenty years of experience."

Charlie felt a swell of pride so large it actually made his chest ache. "You... you really think she's that good?"

"I think she's a shark," Tom said. "And if I'm going to go to war with my father's company, I want a shark on my side. But..." He paused. "I won't ask her if you aren't comfortable with it. It mixes family and business. If things get stressful at work, it bleeds into dinner. It changes the dynamic. If you want her to just be your sister, I'll hire someone else."

Charlie looked up at him, eyes wide and shining. "Are you kidding? She's been complaining about her current boss for three years. She says he lacks 'killer instinct.' Tom, she'd be... she'd be so good at this."

"So I have your blessing?"

"Yes! Yes. A hundred times, yes," Charlie said, grinning so hard his cheeks hurt. "Oh my god. She's going to be unbearable. She's going to make business cards immediately."

Tom laughed, the tension leaving his shoulders. "We'll tell her tomorrow at brunch. I'll make the pitch. You just... sit there and look pretty."

"I can do that," Charlie promised. He shoved Jane Eyre onto the shelf and turned fully to Tom. "Wow. You, me, and Hazel."

Tom smiled, wrapping his arms around Charlie's waist.

"Team Heitmeyer-Montgomery."

Sunday mornings were marked by the aggressive punctuality of Hazel Heitmeyer.

At precisely 10:59 AM, Hazel's black Jeep Wrangler pulled up to the curb. She didn't honk--that was pedestrian--but she did idle the engine loudly enough to vibrate the glass of the lobby doors.

Charlie adjusted his scarf and glanced at Tom. "She's going to be mad. The Sunday debrief is sacred."

"I have a reservation at Maison Boulud," Tom said, checking his watch. "She'll forgive me."

They walked toward the Jeep, Charlie waving.

Hazel rolled down the passenger window. She was wearing a faux-fur coat and sunglasses that covered half her face.

"Excuse me," Hazel said flatly. "There appears to be a stowaway."

"Good morning, Hazel," Tom said pleasantly.

"No," Hazel corrected. "This is a closed session. This is a brother-sister brunch. Highly classified. No husbands allowed. Goodbye."

She actually started to roll the window up.

"I'm buying," Tom said, sticking his hand out to stop the glass. "And not at the diner. We're going to the Ritz."

The window stopped moving.

Hazel paused. She tapped a perfectly manicured fingernail against the steering wheel. "The Ritz?"

"Garden room," Tom confirmed. "Mimosas are bottomless. And I have news. Good news."

Hazel stared at him for a long moment. Then, she lowered her sunglasses down the bridge of her nose.

"Charles?" she asked. "Is the hostage situation voluntary?"

Charlie beamed, nodding. "It's good news, Hazy. Really good."

Hazel held his gaze for another second, then sighed. "Fine. But if he talks about the stock market for more than five minutes, I'm ordering the most expensive thing on the menu and then leaving."

"Fair terms," Tom agreed. "Now park the tank. We'll take my car."

Ten minutes later, the three of them were settled in Tom's sedan. The seat warmers were on.

"So," Hazel said from the backseat. "This implies a celebration. Or a bribe."

Tom glanced at her in the rear-view mirror as he merged seamlessly into traffic. "A bit of both."

"Are you finally admitting that I'm the favourite in the family?" Hazel grinned.

"Something like that." Tom reached across the center console and rested his hand on Charlie's knee.

Charlie covered Tom's hand with his own. He looked out the window as the city rolled by-- the old stone buildings, the people walking with their heads down against the cold.

Inside, it was warm. He had his brother-in-arms in the back seat and his husband in control.

"Hazy," Charlie said, turning his head slightly so she could hear him. "You're gonna want to order the lobster."

"Oh, I know," Hazel said darkly. "I'm getting the lobster and the caviar. Daddy Warbucks is going to regret crashing this party."

Tom just squeezed Charlie's knee. "We'll see about that."

The hostess led them to a table near the window overlooking the garden. Hazel removed her sunglasses to inspect the menu.

"I'm getting the lobster benedict," she challenged. "And a bottle of the Veuve Clicquot. Not the glass. The bottle."

"Get two bottles," Tom told the waiter without blinking. "And the caviar service to start."

Hazel narrowed her eyes. "You are trying to disarm me with decadence. It is working, but I resent it."

Charlie smiled, unfolding his napkin. "So. The news?"

Tom waited until the waiter had poured the sparkling water. He leaned back, resting an arm around Charlie.

"How are things at the firm, Hazel?" Tom asked. "Still chasing that junior partnership?"

Hazel groaned, tearing off a piece of baguette. "Don't ask. I billed seventy hours last week. *Senior Partner Miller* told me I need to be more 'patient.' Fucking--patient? I drafted the entire acquisition agreement for the Laughton merger, and he didn't even CC me on the final email." She stabbed the butter aggressively. "I am surrounded by mediocrity and old men who take three-hour lunches."

"That sounds frustrating," Tom said. "You're doing the work of a partner without the title. Or the equity."

"If I don't get the promotion this cycle, I might actually set the building on fire."

"Don't do that. Quit."

She looked up. "Excuse me?"

"Quit," Tom repeated. "I'm starting a new firm. Private equity and strategic acquisition. We're going to be aggressive, fast, and at war with my father's interests."

He leaned forward, voice dropping.

"I don't need a junior associate. I need a General Counsel. Someone who can handle whatever bullshit my father is going to throw at us."

Charlie held his breath, looking from Tom to his sister.

Hazel slowly lowered her knife. Her expression was unreadable. "You want me. As General Counsel."

"Founding Partner," Tom corrected. "General Counsel and Chief Strategy Officer. Equity. A salary that matches what you'd make as a senior partner at your current firm. And you report only to me."

Hazel balked. "You're serious."

"I'm dead serious. You're better than the people you're working for."

Hazel looked at Charlie. "Did you know about this?"

"He asked me yesterday. Hazy, you'd be amazing. And you wouldn't have to deal with Miller anymore!"

Hazel looked back at Tom. She picked up her glass of water, took a sip, and set it down.

"It's going to be ugly," she said.

"I know," Tom said. "That's why I need someone who won't be intimidated."

Hazel's lips quirked. A dangerous smile spread across her face.

"I do hate your dad," she mused.

"And," Charlie added helpfully, "the office would be ten minutes from your apartment."

Hazel looked at Tom, eyes gleaming. "Founding Partner?"

"Founding Partner," Tom confirmed. "On the Heitmeyer-Montgomery letterhead. The three of us."

Hazel laughed, almost maniacally.

"I accept," she said. "But I want a corner office."

Tom grinned. He lifted his water glass.

"Deal."

The space was raw. That was the polite word for it.

The less polite word was abandoned.

It was a sprawling industrial loft in the Mile End. The windows were massive and coated in a decade of grime.

"Watch your step," Tom said, guiding Charlie over a coil of loose wire. "The landlord says the electrical is 'vintage.' We're going to have to gut it."

Charlie clutched his tea like a shield. He looked around the cavernous room.

To Tom, apparently, it looked like the future.

"Thomas," Charlie whispered. "Are we... allowed to be here?"

Tom stopped in the middle of the room, hands on his hips, looking up at the exposed ductwork with a satisfied grin. "Ideally? No. Technically? Yes."

"Explain 'technically' before the police arrive, please."

Tom turned to him, his grin softening. "My non-compete clause says I cannot operate a rival firm, solicit clients, or generate revenue for four months. It does not say I can't rent an empty warehouse and stare at the walls. It's a hobby."

"A hobby," Charlie repeated. "Like knitting."

"Exactly. Very expensive knitting." Tom walked over to a structural pillar, tapping it with his knuckles. "So? What do you think?"

Charlie frowned. He looked at the pillar. The paint was peeling.

"I don't know anything about commercial real estate."

Tom rolled his eyes. "I don't mean zoning laws. I need to know how it feels."

"It feels... dusty."

Tom laughed. "I spent ten years working in a grey box, Charlie. My father's office was designed to intimidate people. I hated it."

He looked around the loft, his expression serious.

"I want this firm to be different. I want it to be a place where people actually want to be. You have... you have a sense for that. For atmosphere. You made our apartment feel like a home in three days."

Charlie felt a flush rise in his cheeks. "That was just unpacking."

"It was an exorcism of the corporate ghost," Tom corrected. "So, tell me. Can you picture it? Hazel in a corner office over there? A boardroom with a glass wall? Maybe a piano in the

lobby?"

Charlie giggled. "A piano? In a private equity firm?"

"Why not?" Tom shrugged. "If the meetings get stressful, you can come down and play to scare the investors."

Charlie looked around again. He tried to strip away the grime and the "vintage" wiring.

He walked to the center of the room. He closed his eyes and clapped his hands once. The sound cracked through the air--bright, with a surprisingly warm reverb.

"The acoustics are good," Charlie noted, opening his eyes. "High ceilings. Wood beams. If you put rugs down, it wouldn't echo too much."

He walked over to the massive windows. Through the grime, he could see the vibrant life of the neighbourhood below--people walking dogs, the shawarma place across the street.

"It's alive," Charlie decided. "I think Hazel would hate the lack of parking, but love the lighting."

Tom beamed. He pulled out his phone and dialled a number.

"Hey, it's Tom Montgomery," Tom said into the phone. "I'll take it. Send the lease."

Charlie raised his eyebrows.

Tom gave him a thumbs-up. "No, I don't care about that. I'll replace it. We sign tomorrow. Okay, thank you. You too."

He hung up with a dramatic flourish. "We have an office."

"Yay!" Charlie cheered softly.

Tom smiled. "And we have two months to renovate it before I can legally make a single dollar." Tom wrapped an arm around Charlie's shoulders, guiding him toward the exit. "Which means I have a lot of free time to supervise construction. And buy you lunch."

"Shawarma?" Charlie suggested.

"Sure," Tom agreed. "And maybe we measure the lobby for that piano."

"Thomas..."

"I'm serious! It's a business expense!"

Chapter 22

They were in the living room.

Charlie was reading a book on music theory, his legs thrown over Tom's lap. Tom was scrolling through emails on his tablet. Hazel was lying upside down on the armchair, her legs dangling over the backrest, nails tapping on her phone.

"I'm RSVPing 'Yes' for all of us," Hazel announced into the silence.

Tom didn't look up from his tablet. "If that's for a charity gala, check the calendar."

"Not a gala," Hazel said. She flipped right-side up. "The St. James Academy Ten-Year Reunion. It's this Saturday."

"No," Charlie said immediately.

"Oh, yes," Hazel countered. "'Class of 2015 through 2018. The *Golden Era*.' Cocktails, dinner, and dancing at the Fairmont ballroom."

"I deleted that email," Charlie said. "I deleted it, then I deleted it from the trash folder. That means I'm not going."

"I didn't delete mine," Tom said.

Charlie looked up, betrayed.

Tom was grinning. He set his tablet down. "I think I marked us as 'Tentative.' But Hazel's right. We should go."

"I hated high school," Charlie said, shrinking back into the sofa cushions. "Why would I want to go back?"

"Not completely," Hazel argued. "You were Valedictorian. You gave a speech."

"I mumbled a speech," Charlie corrected. "Hazel, please. It's going to be awful."

"I don't think so," Tom grinned. "Charlie. Think about it. You were the quiet kid in the back of the class. I was the arrogant rich kid."

"You were the captain of the hockey team," Charlie mumbled. "Everyone loved you."

"And now?" Tom gestured between them. "Now, the quiet kid is a brilliant musician who is about to get his PhD. And that arrogant kid quit the Empire."

Tom leaned in, his eyes sparkling.

"And... we're married."

Charlie blinked. "So?"

"So," Hazel interjected. "Half the school thought Tom was going to marry Lauren MacDonald. The other half thought he was going to die in a frat hazing accident. No one-- and I mean no one--had 'Tom Montgomery marries Charlie Heitmeyer' on their bingo card."

"It's the plot twist of the century," Tom agreed. "Imagine the faces, Charlie. Walking in there. Together."

Charlie looked at Tom. He thought about Grade 10 English class. He remembered sitting two rows behind Thomas Montgomery. He remembered the painful ache of knowing that a guy like Tom would never look twice at a guy like him.

And now, Tom was sitting on their leather sofa, wearing a wedding ring, looking at Charlie like he hung the moon.

"We'd be showing off," Charlie said reluctantly.

"We would be stunting on them," Hazel corrected. "Aggressively."

"And," she added after a pause, "I need a buffer. I'm bringing Julian."

Charlie's eyebrows shot up. "The architect? The guy you went on *one* date with?"

"It was a very good date," Hazel defended. "He understands structural integrity. And he wears turtlenecks. I need to test him in a high-stress environment. If he can handle the St. James alumni on cheap prosecco, he can handle me."

Tom looked at Charlie, his expression softening.

"We don't have to go," Tom promised. "If you really don't want to. But... I remember you in high school, Charlie. You always looked like you wanted to disappear."

Tom reached out, taking Charlie's hand.

"I want to go back there and show them that you didn't disappear. You won."

Charlie looked down at their joined hands. The ring on his finger caught the light. He wasn't the scared kid in the oversized uniform anymore. He was Charlie Heitmeyer-Montgomery.

A small, mischievous smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Okay," Charlie said. "But if Lauren MacDonald tries to talk to you, I'm spilling wine on her."

Tom laughed, loud and delighted. "Deal."

Hazel clapped her hands. "Excellent. We need to look expensive enough to make people uncomfortable."

Hazel arrived at the penthouse at 5:00 PM with a bottle of pre-game whiskey and Julian.

Julian was exactly as she had described: tall, long dark hair in a bun, bespectacled, and wearing a black turtleneck under his suit jacket. He stood in the middle of the living room, holding Hazel's purse, looking incredibly calm while Hazel critiqued his pocket square.

"It's too symmetrical," Hazel complained. "Did you fold it with a ruler? You look like an accountant. We're going for 'Artistic Genius,' Julian. Mess it up."

Julian smiled--a small, serene expression. He didn't move his hand.

"It is structurally sound, Hazel," he said. "Chaos is for the architecture, not the haberdashery. You look stunning, by the way."

Hazel paused. She narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't flatter me, I'll sue you."

"I would never," he countered smoothly. "If you don't put your shoes on, we're going to be late."

Hazel huffed, but she sat down and put her shoes on.

Charlie watched from the hallway, fascinated. "He's immune," he whispered to himself. "He's actually immune."

"Char! Get in here."

Charlie walked into the master bedroom.

The bed was covered in options. Ties, watches, cufflinks. But hanging on the valet stand was The Outfit.

Tom was standing next to it, beaming.

"Okay," Tom said. "I know you hate stiff collars. I know you hate feeling restricted. So, I had this sent over from the tailor this morning."

He presented the suit. It was a rich gunmetal, a bamboo-silk blend.

"Touch it," Tom urged.

Charlie reached out. It felt like pyjamas.

"It's... soft," Charlie admitted.

"And," Tom added, holding up the shirt. "No starch. It stretches. You could do yoga in this. And..."

Tom's eyes darkened slightly.

"I had them taper the waist. The inseam is perfect. It's going to fit you like a glove."

Charlie took the hanger. "You put a lot of thought into this."

"I want you to be comfortable," Tom said simply. "But I also want everyone in that ballroom to see exactly what they missed out on."

Charlie rolled his eyes. "You're ridiculous. Whatever makes you happy."

"*You* make me happy," Tom countered. "Now put it on. I need to see if the ass looks as good as I think it will."

"Shut up!" Charlie laughed, trying to somehow hide his bum.

Ten minutes later, Charlie looked in the full-length mirror.

Tom hadn't lied. The suit felt like nothing. But the cut... the cut was dangerous. It hugged his shoulders and made his legs look miles long.

He looked older. He looked expensive. He looked like someone who belonged next to Thomas Montgomery.

The door opened. Tom stepped in, fully dressed in his tuxedo--classic black, looking every inch the corporate king.

He stopped dead when he saw Charlie.

"Oh," Tom breathed.

He walked over. He rested his chin on Charlie's shoulder and hugged him from behind.

"You look..." Tom shook his head. "I might not let you leave the house."

"We have to go," Charlie said, watching their reflection. "Hazel's waiting."

"Let her," Tom murmured, pressing a kiss under Charlie's ear. "You look incredible, honey."

"I look like you," Charlie said quietly. "I look like I fit in."

Tom tightened his grip. "You always fit in. It just took everyone else a while to catch up."

When they walked into the living room, Hazel actually stopped talking.

She looked Charlie up and down, walking a slow circle around him.

"Okay," Hazel decided. "Approved. Julian, take notes."

"Noted," Julian said, checking his watch. "The car is downstairs."

"Let's go," Tom said, checking his pockets for his phone and wallet.

"Wait," Charlie said at the door. He turned to Hazel. "Are you going to be nice? Or do I need to prepare an apology?"

Hazel flashed a grin that was all teeth and lipstick.

"I'm going to be delightful, Charles. Unless someone is rude to us. Then I'm going to be a litigator."

"She brought business cards," Julian supplied. "I saw her pack them."

"Julian!" Hazel hissed.

"Let's go," Tom laughed, opening the door. "I can't wait to see the look on Lauren MacDonald's face."

The Fairmont ballroom was a relic of colonial architecture. Tonight, it was filled with mediocre music and silver streamers.

They stood at the entrance. The name tags were laid out on a table.

***HELLO, MY NAME IS:** Thomas Montgomery.*

***HELLO, MY NAME IS:** Charlie Heitmeyer.*

Tom picked up Charlie's tag. He pulled a marker out of his pocket and wrote *-Montgomery* in bold caps under the printed text. Then he peeled the back off and stuck it to Charlie's lapel, right over his heart.

"Ready?" Tom asked, offering his arm.

Charlie looked at the room. He saw the faces of people he had hidden from for four years.

Then he looked at Tom. He saw the love, the absolute certainty.

Charlie took Tom's arm.

"Ready," Charlie said.

They walked in.

Tom saw the eyes first: a flash of huh.

"Tom Montgomery!" A voice boomed--a man Tom had not seen in a decade. "Look at you. Some things don't change, huh? Still top of the food chain."

Tom disengaged his arm to allow the man to pull him into a back-slapping hug. Charlie stood half a step behind him.

"You okay?" Tom asked after.

Charlie nodded, looking behind him.

Tom put a hand on Charlie's back. "Stay with me," he murmured.

The first hour unfolded in slow-motion. The DJ played a Spotify playlist at low volume, the beat too slow for anyone to feel compelled to dance.

Tom exchanged handshakes and made efficient use of his smile. It was the same old game, but Tom played it with a new subtext: he made a point of introducing Charlie to everyone.

"This is my husband, Charlie," he said. Every time, the word 'husband' landed like a dropped pin in a library.

Some people blinked, some smiled a little too broadly. One guy--a former defenseman--offered a damp-palmed handshake to Charlie, then turned to Tom.

"So," the man said, eyes darting, "how's it work? I mean, how'd you two meet?"

Tom considered him for a half-second. "St. James," he said. "We were all in the same year. We... We were just friends back then."

The man looked Charlie up and down. "Oh... I think I remember you," he said uncertainly. "You were one of the music kids, right?"

Charlie managed a small smile. "That's right."

"Didn't you also win something?" the man pressed. "Some math thing?"

"Valedictorian," Charlie said, so softly the man had to lean in to catch it.

"No kidding!" the man said. "I don't remember a speech."

Tom intervened. "He gave a great one. Changed my life, actually."

The man grinned, waiting for the joke. When none came, he excused himself for another drink.

As the evening wore on, it became clear that Charlie was invisible to most of the room. Even when Tom introduced him, the response was often a blank smile, followed by a pivot back to Tom.

No one asked Charlie a single follow-up question. A few times, they didn't even look at him.

Tom's frustration built steadily. He started keeping a mental list of slights.

At one point, he caught a group of women at the bar whispering behind their hands. He was close enough to hear the edge of their conversation:

"...just think it's weird. He could have anyone."

"Maybe it's a phase. Or a publicity thing."

"No, I saw the ring. I think they're actually married."

"He's kind of cute... For a call boy."

Tom saw red. He turned to Charlie to make sure he hadn't overheard.

Charlie was staring at the disco ball. The bravest person Tom knew looked like a kid at someone else's birthday party, desperate to go home.

"Hey," he said, forcing himself to be calm. "Are you ready to leave?"

Charlie startled.

"You want to leave?" he asked. "It's your night. People came to see you."

"I came to see you," Tom said. "You're the only thing I ever see."

Charlie closed his eyes. His hands went up to cover his face, and for a second, Tom thought he might actually collapse.

"Let's get some air," Tom said.

They entered a men's room away from the crowd.

"It's okay," Tom said, leading Charlie to the sink. "I'm right here."

Charlie gripped the counter and bowed his head.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't mean to ruin the night. I know it's stupid."

Tom wrapped his arms around Charlie's middle.

"It's not stupid," Tom said. "Tell me what's going on."

Charlie sighed.

"None of them think I deserve you."

Tom turned Charlie so they were face-to-face. He cupped Charlie's jaw in both hands.

"Look at me," Tom said.

Charlie did. His eyes were wet with humiliation.

"You are everything to me," Tom said. "You. Not them. Not anyone else in that room."

Charlie tried to look away, but Tom pressed their foreheads together.

"They're all just people," Tom continued. "They peaked at seventeen. You--"

He cut himself off by kissing Charlie hard, pinning him against the counter.

They broke apart. Charlie didn't open his eyes.

"Let's go home," Tom said. "We'll get poutine and eat it in bed. Fuck this place."

Charlie exhaled. "You really don't want to keep looking for Lauren MacDonald?"

"I want to see you happy," Tom countered. "That's all I care about."

Charlie wiped his face, then reached out and smoothed Tom's tie.

"Thank you."

Tom grinned, the way he only ever did for Charlie.

"Always," he said.

They lingered for another minute before Tom guided Charlie toward the door.

Halfway down the hall, Tom stopped. Charlie looked to their right.

A door of wood and glass was just slightly ajar.

Tom squeezed Charlie's hand. "Char," he said, "look."

Through the gap, they could see the edges of a music room. It was empty. Against the far wall, under a dustcover, was an upright piano.

"Come on," Tom said.

Charlie hesitated at the threshold. "We shouldn't be in there," he said, "Not after hours."

But Tom was already stepping inside, pulling Charlie with him.

The room smelled faintly of lemon-scented furniture polish. Tom made for the light switch and flicked it on.

"Play something for me," he said.

Charlie blushed. He walked over to the piano, lifted the dustcover, and folded it back.

"Do you want anything in particular?" he asked.

"Anything you want," Tom said.

Charlie nodded and sat on the bench. He adjusted it, took a breath, then poised his fingers.

It started so soft it was almost a suggestion. Then, as the melody built, so did Charlie--his body straightening, eyes closing.

Liebesträume.

Charlie's eyes opened at a dramatic turn of the melody. He glanced up at Tom, as if checking to see if he was still there.

He was.

Tom smiled, a stupid, lovesick grin. Charlie smiled back, faltering, then stronger.

The music built, wave after wave. Charlie's fingers flew. Then the piece slowed, the notes softening, until it faded into silence.

Tom clapped, loud and genuine.

"Jesus," Tom said, stepping closer. "Fuck. I think I just fell in love with you all over again."

Charlie rolled his eyes, but he was beaming. "You're so annoying."

"I mean it," Tom insisted. "You belong on stage. Not at a reunion with these randoms."

Charlie tipped his head, considering. He turned on the bench to face Tom.

"I like this better. Just you."

Outside, the air was cool and mercifully quiet.

"You okay?" Tom asked, his hand finding Charlie's back.

Charlie took a deep breath.

"I'm good," Charlie said. "Actually... I'm great. Did you mean what you said? About the poutine?"

Tom laughed, unlocking his phone. "Duh. But first, let me just check on the General. If we leave her in there without supervision, she might sue the hotel."

***Tom:** We escaped. Are you okay to ride home with Julian?*

Three dots appeared instantly.

***Hazel (THE GENERAL):** Rescue mission unnecessary. Take care of your husband. I'm going to make Julian buy me Chinese and tell him about when Ryan Kavanaugh cried in gym class. See you tomorrow.*

Tom snorted, showing the phone to Charlie.

"Come on. Let's go home. I think we've conquered enough for one week."

"Yeah," Charlie agreed, leaning his head on Tom's shoulder as they walked toward the car.

"Let's go home."

Chapter 23

Monday morning at the new headquarters of Heitmeyer-Montgomery was a hive of activity. Sawdust coated the floor in a fine layer.

Two distinct wars were being waged.

War Number One was being fought by Hazel.

She was sitting on an overturned milk crate in what would eventually be the reception area. She was wearing a pristine white pantsuit and balancing her laptop on her knees.

"No," Hazel shouted into her phone, pressing a finger to her ear to block out the sound of a table saw. "No, I don't care. Tell him I am in a meeting. A very important strategic summit."

She looked around. A guy named Steve was currently eating a ham sandwich three feet away from her.

"Yes," Hazel continued, narrowing her eyes at Steve. "Send the contracts to my encrypted email."

She hung up and glared at the dust on her Jimmy Choos.

War Number Two was taking place near the south wall, where Tom Montgomery was currently explaining the concept of 'perfection' to a very tired-looking contractor.

"It's crooked," Tom said, pointing at the framing for the glass conference room wall.

"The floor is crooked, boss," the contractor sighed, adjusting his tool belt. "It's a hundred-year-old factory. Nothing is straight."

"Then we level the floor," Tom suggested.

"We'd have to pour concrete. It would take a week."

Tom crossed his arms. He was wearing jeans and a black t-shirt that was tight across the chest, and he had a smear of drywall dust on his cheek.

"I don't care about the timeline," Tom said. "I care that when I walk into that room to close a deal, I don't feel like I'm on a sinking ship. Fix it."

The contractor looked ready to cry.

The doors of the freight elevator rattled open, and Charlie stepped out. He was carrying a cardboard tray with four coffees and a white paper bag.

"Reinforcements," he announced.

Hazel's head snapped up. "Gimme," she demanded, extending a hand.

Charlie handed her a coffee and a bagel. "Don't glare at the builder, Hazy. He's doing his best."

"He's ruining the vibe," Hazel complained. "Also, I think I ruined these pants."

"You wore white to a demolition zone," Charlie pointed out. "That was a tactical error."

"I dress for the job I want," Hazel countered, mouth full. "Which is 'Empress of the Universe.' Currently, however, I am 'Woman on a Box.'"

Charlie patted her shoulder and walked over to the south wall.

"Thomas," Charlie said.

Tom turned. The ruthless expression he had been wearing vanished, replaced by a besotted smile that confused the hell out of the contractor.

"Hey," Tom said, stepping out of the construction debris to kiss Charlie's cheek. "You made it. Did you find the parking spot?"

"I did. I also found this." Charlie handed him a coffee. "And I brought you a poppyseed bagel with the fancy cream cheese."

Tom took the coffee like it was a holy relic. "You're an angel. Please tell this man he needs to level the floor."

The contractor looked at Charlie with pleading eyes. "Please. Sir. Tell him it's an old building. It adds character."

Charlie looked at the framing. He looked at the floor. He looked at Tom, who was vibrating with the need to control the uncontrollable.

"Thomas," Charlie started. "If we level the floor, we have to redo the door jambs. And the baseboards. And we won't be able to open on time."

Tom frowned. "But it's crooked."

"It's not crooked," Charlie corrected. "It's... dynamic."

Tom stared at him. The contractor stared at him.

Then, slowly, Tom's shoulders dropped. The tension left his jaw.

"Dynamic," Tom repeated, testing the word.

"Exactly," Charlie beamed. "Plus, if you put the client's chair on the low side, you'll look taller."

Tom let out a laugh. "Fine," he declared. "Leave it. But if my pens roll off the table, I'm calling you."

"Deal!" The contractor hurried away before Tom could change his mind.

"You're dangerous," Tom murmured, pulling Charlie in for a hug, mindful of the coffee. "You just manipulated me."

"I managed you," Charlie corrected. "Hazel calls it 'mitigating the executive ego.'"

Tom chuckled, kissing Charlie's temple. "So? What do you think? It's a disaster, right?"

Charlie looked around. He saw the light pouring in. He saw the corner where the piano would go.

"No," Charlie said honestly. "It's perfect. It's just... the first draft."

"Of a very long, beautiful story," Tom agreed softly.

Hazel rolled her eyes.

The weather in Montreal had turned by that evening.

Inside, the mood was focused.

It was 9:00 PM. Usually, this was the time Tom dragged Charlie away from whatever book he was reading to watch something mindless on Netflix.

But that night, the penthouse filled with the repetitive melody of a Chopin nocturne.

Charlie had been at the piano for three hours.

He was wearing sweatpants and one of Tom's old university hoodies. His posture was rigid. He was fighting with the keys.

Tom was sitting on the sofa, laptop open on his knees, but he hadn't typed a word in twenty minutes.

Charlie's left hand faltered slightly on a complex run. He sighed, shook his hand out, and started the measure again. And again. And again.

Tom closed the laptop. He stood up and placed his hands on Charlie's shoulders.

The music stopped.

"You're rushing the tempo," Tom said quietly. "And you're hurting."

Charlie slumped forward. "My fingers feel like sausages."

"Your fingers are perfect," Tom corrected. "But they're tired. You missed dinner."

Charlie turned on the bench, looking up at him with wide eyes. "I did? Oh no. Thomas, I'm sorry. I just got into the zone and--"

"I'm not mad about the dinner," Tom said, moving his hands to cup Charlie's face. "I'm worried about the artist."

He rubbed his thumb under Charlie's eye.

"Come on. We're done for the night."

Tom pulled him up from the bench and led him to the sofa. He sat down and pulled Charlie onto his lap, arranging him so Charlie's back was against his chest, their legs tangled together.

"Give me your hands," Tom commanded softly.

Charlie extended them. They were trembling slightly.

Tom took Charlie's right hand in his own. He began to massage the palm, working his thumb deep into the muscle.

Charlie let out a long sigh, his head falling back against Tom's shoulder.

"Better?" Tom murmured near his ear.

"Mhm," Charlie hummed, eyes fluttering shut. "That feels... really good."

"You have to take care of the instrument," Tom lectured gently, moving to the left hand. "You can't grind yourself down, Charlie. Not when things are about to get big."

Charlie opened one eye. "Big? It's just... practice. I don't even have a gig booked."

Tom paused. He reached for Charlie's phone on the coffee table, tapped the screen, and held it up for Charlie to see.

"It lit up while you were playing," Tom said. "I didn't read it. But I saw the sender."

Charlie unlocked it. He opened the email.

Subject: INVITATION / SOLOIST - Maison Symphonique**

Charlie blinked.

L'Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal.

"No," Charlie whispered. He tried to sit up, but Tom's arm held him in place.

"Read it," Tom said.

"Dear Mr. Heitmeyer," Charlie read, voice shaking. "Following the recommendation of Dr. El-Mazahy... and reviewing your archived performances... we would like to invite you to be the featured soloist for our 'Emerging Virtuosos' gala in November."

Charlie stopped reading. The room seemed to tilt.

"They made a mistake," Charlie said. "They must mean a different Heitmeyer."

"There are no other Heitmeyers who play Liszt like you do," Tom said, pressing a kiss to the side of Charlie's neck. "It's real, baby."

"I can't do that," Charlie panicked. "Thomas, that's... that's two thousand people. That's critics. The press. I can't... I'm not ready."

"You are ready," Tom corrected. "You have been ready for years. You were just hiding. But we aren't hiding anymore. Remember?"

"But what if I freeze?" Charlie whispered. "What if I walk out there and I forget how to play?"

Tom turned Charlie in his lap so they were face-to-face.

"Then I will be in the front row," Tom promised. "And you just look at me. You play for me. Screw the critics. Screw the two thousand people. It's just you and me."

He brushed the hair out of Charlie's eyes.

"You are a star, Charlie. I'm just the lucky bastard who gets to hold the star when he's tired."

Charlie took a deep breath.

"November?" Charlie asked.

"November 14th," Tom confirmed. "That gives us a month. Hazel will handle the contract and the press. I'll handle everything else. You just handle the music."

Tom kissed his nose.

"Do we accept?"

Charlie looked at his hands--the ones Tom had just massaged back to life.

"We accept," Charlie said.

Tom grinned. "Good boy," he murmured.

"Liverpool House," Tom announced as he held the restaurant door open. "Noisy, excellent wine list. The perfect place to plot world domination."

Charlie stepped inside, the buzz of conversation washing over him.

"Do they know anything?" Charlie asked.

"Hazel knows we have 'news,'" Tom said, guiding Charlie with a hand on his lower back. "She assumed I bought a yacht. I didn't correct her."

They spotted them at a booth in the back.

Hazel was wearing a dress that looked like liquid gold. She was currently gesturing with a breadstick.

Julian was sitting opposite her, wearing a navy turtleneck. He was listening with the expression of a man watching a fascinating natural disaster.

"You're late," Hazel announced as they approached. "Julian is trying to explain the structural inefficiencies of the bread basket."

"It's a woven lattice," Julian greeted them pleasantly. "It lacks tensile strength. Hello, everyone."

"Hi, Julian," Charlie smiled, sliding into the booth next to Hazel. Tom sat beside him.

"Okay," Hazel said, dropping the breadstick. She narrowed her eyes. "Spill it."

Charlie looked at Tom. Tom grinned and picked up the wine list.

Charlie took a deep breath. He smoothed the napkin on his lap.

"I got an email yesterday," Charlie started. "From the OSM. They want me for the November gala. At the Maison Symphonique."

Hazel stared at him. Her mouth opened, then closed.

She looked at Tom. "The Virtuosos Gala? The one on all the Metro posters?"

"The very same," Tom said, incredibly smug.

"Holy shit," Hazel whispered.

Then, she slammed her hand on the table so hard the silverware jumped.

"I knew it! I told you! I've been telling you for over ten years that you're a genius, but no, you wanted to be 'humble.' Ha! Vindication!"

She grabbed Charlie's face and kissed his cheek.

"Char, that is... that is fucking huge. That is massive."

"It's terrifying," Charlie admitted, blushing.

"It is acoustically significant," Julian interjected.

Everyone turned to look at him.

Julian was buttering a piece of bread with precise strokes.

"The Maison Symphonique," Julian continued. "It is a masterpiece of acoustic engineering. The walls are lined with beech wood. The reverb time is approximately 1.9 seconds. Ideally suited for the Romantic repertoire. Liszt will sound... crisp."

He smiled sincerely.

"It is a room that tells the truth. You will do very well there."

Charlie felt a rush of warmth. "Thanks, Julian. That's... actually really comforting."

"Okay, shut up," Hazel said. "Who is handling the contract? Have they sent the rider? I want final approval on the promotional materials. And the dressing room. If they try to put you in one of the B-tier rooms near the loading dock, I will burn the building down."

"I was hoping you'd handle it," Charlie said.

"Obviously. We're going to ask for double the standard fee. Not because we need the money, but because it establishes dominance."

"Atta girl," Tom smiled.

The waiter arrived, and Tom ordered two bottles of their best Pinot Noir.

"We're celebrating," Tom told the waiter. "My husband is going to be famous."

"I don't want to be famous," Charlie mumbled into his water glass. "I just want to play."

"Too bad," Hazel sing-songed. "You're going to be famous. I'm going to make you wear sunglasses in airports. It's going to be annoying for everyone but me."

As the dinner went on, Charlie found himself watching Hazel and Julian.

Hazel would say something outrageous ("I think I could legally claim ownership of the moon"), and Julian would calmly dismantle the argument with logic ("International maritime law applies to celestial bodies, my love"). They bickered like sport, neither one willing to yield, both clearly enjoying the friction.

And then there was him and Tom.

Tom filled Charlie's wine glass before it was empty. He cut a piece of his steak and put it on Charlie's plate because he knew Charlie liked to try whatever Tom was eating. He sat with his arm draped along the back of the booth, his hand resting on Charlie's shoulder.

"You okay, baby?" Tom murmured.

"Yeah," Charlie said, leaning back against him. "Just... listening to them."

Hazel was currently explaining to Julian why she would survive a zombie apocalypse (sheer willpower) and why he wouldn't (too principled).

"He balances her," Tom observed quietly. "She needs someone who doesn't flinch."

"Like I need you," Charlie said.

Tom turned to look at him, eyes soft. "You don't need me to survive, Charlie. You're tough as nails."

"Maybe," Charlie whispered. "But I don't want to just survive anymore. I want to... flourish. With you."

"Mhm." Tom kissed Charlie's temple. "I like that word. Flourish, baby. I'll just water the soil."

"Excuse me!" Hazel interrupted. "Stop whispering sweet nothings. We are discussing the after-party for the gala. Julian thinks we should have a 'quiet dinner.' I think we should rent a club."

"Quiet dinner," Charlie said immediately.

"Club," Tom said at the same time.

They looked at each other.

"Club?" Charlie asked, betrayed.

"You're going to be high on adrenaline," Tom explained. "You won't be able to sit down for a dinner. You're gonna want to dance."

"He's right," Julian noted. "Physiologically, the crash after a performance requires kinetic release. A club is logical."

"Ha!" Hazel triumphed. "It's three against one. We're raging."

Charlie groaned, hiding his face in his hands. "I haven't even played it yet, and I'm already tired."

He looked around the table. At his terrifying sister, her stoic boyfriend, and his husband, who looked at him like he was the only person in the world.

The fear of the concert was still there. But sitting here, surrounded by his personal defence squad, it felt manageable.

"To Charlie," Hazel proposed, raising her glass. "The Virtuoso."

"To the acoustics," Julian added.

"To my beautiful husband," Tom finished, clinking his glass against Charlie's.

"To... flourishing," Charlie whispered.

Chapter 24

The Maison Symphonique was a modern glass structure nestled in the Place des Arts. Everything was light wood, and the terrifying scent of competence hung in the air.

"Shoulders back," Hazel whispered, nudging him.

She was walking point, with a leather portfolio in her hands and a gleam in her eyes.

Tom was rear guard, his hand resting warmly on Charlie's back.

"You're doing great," Tom murmured. "Just remember, if they are mean to you, I will buy the wood panelling and turn it into a bowling alley."

"Mr. Heitmeyer?"

A young assistant with a headset appeared at the end of the hall. "Maestro Valois is expecting you in the Green Room."

They were led through the labyrinth of backstage corridors. They passed open doors where musicians were warming up—a cacophony of violins tuning, a trumpet running scales, the low thrum of a cello.

Charlie's pulse kicked up. These were professionals. These were people who had played Carnegie Hall. He was just a guy who practiced in his living room while his husband cooked pasta.

The assistant opened a door. "Maestro? They're here."

The Green Room was plush and smelled of espresso.

Standing by the window was Henri Valois. He was a legend in Montreal—a man with wild silver hair and a reputation for being ruthless.

He turned. His eyes swept over the trio.

"Ah," Valois said. His voice was deep, theatrical. "A team."

He walked over to extend a hand to Charlie.

"Monsieur Heitmeyer. It is a pleasure to finally meet the hands behind the recording."

Charlie took it. "It's an honour, Maestro. Thank you for inviting me."

"Sit, sit," Valois commanded, gesturing to the minimalist sofas.

Hazel took the lead. She sat down, opened her portfolio, and uncapped a pen.

"Maestro Valois," she began. "Before we discuss the artistic direction, I'd like to review the fee and the scheduling."

Valois waved a hand dismissively. "Logistics. My assistant, Celeste, handles the boring things. We will put him on the poster. We will make him look like a god. Yes, yes. But that is not why I asked you here."

Valois sat on the edge of the coffee table, leaning forward. He looked directly at Charlie.

"I asked you here because I wanted to see if you were real."

Charlie blinked. "I... I'm real."

"There are many pianists in this city," Valois said. "Technicians. They play the notes. They play Rachmaninoff faster than anyone else. They are perfect. And they are boring."

He took off his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"When your professor sent me your tape... I almost deleted it. I do not usually listen to unsolicited auditions."

"I know," Charlie whispered. "I'm sorry, I—"

"Don't apologize," Valois corrected, but there was no heat in it. "I listened. I was drinking my coffee. And do you know what happened?"

Charlie shook his head.

"My coffee went cold."

Valois looked at him with an intensity that made Charlie want to squirm, but he couldn't look away.

"You made a mistake in the second movement," Valois noted.

"I know," Charlie cringed. "The F-sharp. I—"

"Doesn't matter," Valois interrupted. "Because truly, listening to you, I felt something. You don't play for the audience, Monsieur Heitmeyer. You play like you are trying to save your own life. That is what I want. I need someone who understands that the music is not just sound and ink—it is blood."

He stood up and walked over to Charlie. He placed a hand on Charlie's shoulder.

"You are a genius, son. Rough? Perhaps. But the raw material? It is diamond."

Charlie sat there, stunned.

He looked at Tom.

Tom was already looking at him, eyes shining.

"Thank you," Charlie managed to choke out. "I... I won't let you down."

"I know you won't," Valois said simply. "Now. Go with Celeste. She will show you the hall. She will explain the photoshoot. Just... do not let the stylists cut your hair."

He turned to Hazel.

"Now, Mademoiselle Attorney. You mentioned a concern about the fee?"

Hazel blinked, rebooting her brain. Then she smiled like a shark.

"I did, Maestro. And considering you just called him a 'diamond,' the price just went up twenty percent."

Valois threw his head back and laughed. "Aha! She is a pirate!"

Celeste led them down a short hallway.

"We have the photoshoot scheduled for this week," she explained. "We'll need three looks. Casual, semi-formal, and performance black-tie. We've hired a stylist, but if you have personal tailoring, you should bring it. Now, the stage manager wants to run the lighting cues, but first..."

She stopped at a pair of double doors.

"The Maestro thought you might want to see the auditorium."

The Maison Symphonique stretched out before them—a cavernous, majestic space. In the center of the stage, bathed in a single spotlight, was the Steinway.

Charlie walked to the edge of the stage. He looked out at the two thousand empty seats.

"It's big," Charlie whispered.

"It's a room," Tom said, stepping up beside him. He took Charlie's hand. "Just a room with good wood. And you're the one making the sound."

Hazel walked up on his other side.

"You're going to own this place," she stated. "I'm going to be in the front row center seat, and I'm going to look so fucking smug."

Charlie looked at the piano. He thought about what Valois had said.

He squeezed Tom's hand.

"Okay," Charlie said, his voice echoing slightly in the vast hall. "Photoshoot. Let's do it."

"That's the spirit," Celeste said, checking her clipboard. "Oh, and Mr. Heitmeyer? One note from the PR team."

"Yes?"

"You're very... handsome. But you tend to look down when you play. For the photos and the actual show? We're going to need you to look up. We need the eyes."

Charlie felt a flush of heat. "Right. Look up. I can do that."

Tom leaned in, his breath warm against Charlie's ear.

"If you get nervous," Tom whispered, "just look at me. I'll be right behind the camera. Making a funny face."

Charlie smiled.

He *was* a genius. The man with the stick had said so.

Chapter 25

The photography studio was located in a converted textile factory in Griffintown. There were exposed pipes and a single abstract sculpture made of twisted rebar in the corner.

"Magnificent," Julian breathed as they stepped off the freight elevator. He adjusted his glasses. "The brutalism is aggressive, yet welcoming."

"It's cold," Charlie whispered, pulling his coat tighter. "And it smells like ozone."

"That's the smell of art, Charles," Hazel said, checking her phone. "And lighting rentals. Now, remember: chin up, shoulders back. We are selling 'Virtuoso,' not 'Scared Graduate Student.'"

"Ignore them," Tom murmured near his ear. "Just focus on not tripping over the cables."

A woman emerged from behind a clothing rack. She was tiny, perhaps sixty years old, with hair dyed a vibrant, toxic green and complex geometric tattoos covering her fingers.

"The talent!" she announced, her voice raspy and warm. "And the entourage. Welcome, darlings. I am Zola."

"Hi," Charlie said, offering a hand that felt clammy. "I'm Charlie."

"Yes, of course. I have listened to the tracks." Zola took his hand, inspecting his face. "Bone structure is excellent. Very angular. We can work with the shadows. Wardrobe is to the left. Let's get you changed."

The first twenty minutes were a disaster.

The tuxedo fit perfectly--Tom had ensured that--but Charlie felt like an impostor in it. He stood in front of the white cyclorama, the lights blinding.

"Okay, darling, give me length," Zola directed. "Elongate the neck. Like a swan. A fierce swan."

Charlie tried to be a fierce swan. He suspected he looked more like a confused ostrich.

"Hands," Zola called out. "What are we doing with the hands? They look dead. Animate them. You are a *pianist!* Your hands are your money makers!"

Charlie lifted his hands. He dropped them. He clasped them in front of him. He put them in his pockets.

"Don't hide them!" Hazel shouted from the sidelines. "Put them on the lapels! Power pose!"

"No lapels," Zola corrected. "Too prom photo. Run them through your hair. Make it messy."

"Don't touch the hair!" The stylist shrieked from the back. "We just set the waves!"

The flash went off. *Pop. Pop. Pop.*

Spots dancing in Charlie's vision. The room was too hot. Everyone was looking at him.

"I..." Charlie started.

"Stop, stop, stop."

Tom walked onto the set. He didn't look at Zola or Hazel.

"Time out," Tom said. "Five minutes."

"Um, we're on a schedule," a technician began. "The studio rental--"

"Five. Minutes."

He grabbed Charlie's hand and pulled him off the set.

They pushed through a metal door at the back of the studio. They exited onto a back alley, lined with dumpsters and graffiti.

Charlie leaned back against the brick wall, closing his eyes and gulping down the cold air. "I can't do it. I look stupid. I don't know how to be a swan, Thomas."

"You don't have to be a swan," Tom said calmly. "Swans are mean. You're a pianist."

Charlie opened his eyes.

Tom was shielding him from the wind. He reached into the inside pocket of his blazer and pulled out the sleek, silver case that Charlie had always assumed held mints.

He clicked it open. Inside were cigarettes and a gold lighter.

Charlie stared. His jaw actually dropped. "What is *that*?"

"Marlboro Lights," Tom said, pulling one out. "Nasty habit."

"You don't smoke," Charlie said, baffled. "You drink green juice. You run 10Ks. You lectured me about refined sugar last week."

"I smoke two cigarettes a year," Tom corrected, putting the cigarette between his lips. He flicked the lighter, and the flame flared.

He took a drag, his eyes closing briefly as he inhaled. He held it, then exhaled a long, thin stream of smoke into the cold air.

"Two?" Charlie asked.

"One on my birthday," Tom explained. "And one on a day where I really need to get through something stupid that I truly hate."

He looked at Charlie, a smile playing on his lips. "I think this qualifies."

Charlie laughed. "You hate this that much?"

"I hate watching you panic," Tom said seriously. "And I hate that Zola woman telling you to look like a bird."

He took another drag, then held the cigarette out to Charlie.

"Here."

Charlie looked at it. He hadn't smoked anything since... the Catwoman debacle.

He took it. He put it to his lips and inhaled.

The smoke was harsh. The nicotine buzz hit his brain a second later.

"Better?" Tom asked.

"I..." Charlie exhaled. "Yeah, actually. A lot better."

They stood there for a minute, passing the cigarette back and forth in the quiet alley. It felt like playing hooky.

"Listen," Tom said, crushing the butt with his heel. He crowded Charlie against the brick wall.

"When we go back in there," Tom said, "you ignore Hazel. You ignore the green lady. You just look at me."

"Just you," Charlie whispered.

"I'll be right behind the camera," Tom promised. "I'm the only one in the room. You're not posing for Vogue. You're just looking at your husband."

He leaned in, his mouth brushing Charlie's ear.

"And when we get home? I am going to make it up to you."

A shiver went down Charlie's spine. "How?"

Tom pulled back, winking. "That's a surprise. Now... are you ready to go be a genius?"

Charlie straightened his bowtie. "I'm ready."

They walked back onto the set. The energy had shifted.

Charlie sat on the piano bench that had been brought out. He rested one arm on the lid of the piano. He looked past Zola, past the lights, and locked eyes with Tom, who was standing right next to the

camera, arms crossed.

"Okay," Zola whispered, sensing the change. "Just like that. Don't move."

Charlie didn't move. He didn't pose. He just looked at Tom and thought about the cigarette in the alley and the promise in Tom's voice.

Click.

"Yes," Zola hissed. "That is it. That is it!"

Click. Click. Click.

Over twenty minutes and two costume changes, every angle was sharp, every expression authentic. He wasn't magically a model--he was a man who knew exactly who he belonged to.

"And... cut!" Zola announced, lowering her camera. "We have it. The cover shot. Beautiful work, darling."

Charlie let out a breath, slumping slightly on the bench. He felt drained, but good.

Hazel marched onto the set, clapping slowly.

"Okay," she admitted. "I don't know what kind of pep talk you gave him, but it worked. He looked almost professional."

She stopped next to Tom. She frowned.

She leaned in, sniffing the shoulder of his jacket. She sniffed again, her nose wrinkling in distaste.

"What the hell?" Hazel asked. "Why do you smell like a dive bar?"

The penthouse was dark when they arrived.

"That," Charlie sighed, toeing off his shoes carelessly, "was the longest dinner of my life."

Tom chuckled, catching Charlie's coat as it slid off his shoulders. "Hazel was just excited. I don't think she took a breath between the appetizers and dessert."

"And Julian just kept nodding," Charlie said, a small smile playing at his lips. "Do you think he actually heard anything she was saying, or was he just analyzing the ceiling beams?"

Tom smiled. "Fifty-fifty."

He hung both their coats in the closet. Charlie made his way deeper into the penthouse, flicking on lights as he went.

Tom moved to the bar cart. "Nightcap?" he asked.

"Just water, please," Charlie murmured. He loosened his tie with clumsy fingers. "I'm still swimming."

"Hazel does believe in proper hydration," Tom agreed. He poured a finger of bourbon for himself and a sparkling water for Charlie.

Tom stepped closer, one hand coming up to finish undoing Charlie's tie.

"There," Tom said. "Better?"

Charlie nodded, leaning into Tom's touch.

"Shower?" Tom suggested.

"God, yes," Charlie exhaled. "I smell like studio lights and Julian's cologne."

Tom laughed, taking Charlie's hand and leading him toward the bathroom. "I told him it was too much. But Hazel seems to like it."

"Hazel would date a serial killer if he could handle her," Charlie mumbled.

Tom turned the shower on near its hottest setting. He undressed, then turned to Charlie, who was fumbling with his cufflinks.

"Let me, honey," Tom said. He helped Charlie remove the rest of his clothes.

Charlie stepped into the shower first. Tom followed, pulling the glass door closed behind him. They stood close, sharing the stream.

"Turn," Tom instructed gently, reaching for the shampoo.

Charlie did. Strong hands worked a lather into his hair. Charlie closed his eyes, a small moan escaping his lips.

"That's it, baby," Tom murmured, patiently working through a tangle. "Let it go."

When it was his turn, Charlie had to stand on his tiptoes. Tom kept his eyes closed, head bowed for Charlie to reach.

When they were all clean, Tom shut off the water. He wrapped Charlie in a towel first, rubbing it gently over his skin, before taking one for himself.

"Better?" Tom asked, draping a fresh towel over Charlie's wet hair.

Charlie nodded. "Much better. Thank you for rescuing me again."

Tom leaned down, pressing a soft kiss to the corner of Charlie's mouth.

"Always," he promised. "Always."

They emerged from the bathroom, and Tom went to the dresser. He retrieved a pair of loose-fitting pyjama pants for himself and tossed Charlie's sleep clothes onto the bed.

Charlie let his towel drop. He pulled on his shorts and reached for the oversized t-shirt.

"Is that my shirt?" Tom asked.

"It was yours. Now it's in the Charlie collection."

"Thief," Tom smiled indulgently.

Charlie tousled his hair with the towel one last time before draping it over the chair in the corner.

"Living room?" he suggested.

Tom nodded, following Charlie down the hallway.

Charlie sank into the deep cushions with a sigh. Tom moved to the windows first, checking the locks.

When he was satisfied, he joined Charlie on the couch. They arranged themselves in their usual position--Tom in the corner with Charlie tucked against his side.

"Better?" Tom asked gently.

"Mhm," Charlie confirmed.

Tom's fingers combed through Charlie's hair. Charlie leaned into it like a cat, eyes half-closing in pleasure.

"You were amazing today," Tom murmured. "You know that, right?"

Charlie made a noncommittal sound. "I was terrified," he admitted. "Until you..."

"That's not the important part," Tom said. "What matters is that you conquered your fear. You came back in and owned that room."

He pulled Charlie closer. "Speaking of conquering," he continued, "I made you a promise. About making things up to you when we got home."

"Mhm," Charlie hummed, looking up.

"Are you too tired?" Tom asked. "We could wait until morning."

Charlie nuzzled into Tom's hand.

"Sleepy," he confirmed. "But I still want you. Can we do it here? Just... touching?"

Tom's pupils dilated. His head tipped back slightly.

"Of course, baby," he answered, his voice noticeably lower. His large hand cupped Charlie's face. "Anything you want. However you want it."

"Just this," Charlie whispered, leaning in to press a soft kiss to Tom's chest, right above his heart. "Just us."

Tom's hands slid down to Charlie's waist. "Just us," he echoed. "You n' me."

Charlie tilted his face up. The kiss was gentle at first. Then Tom's hand moved to the back of Charlie's neck, fingers threading into his hair, and the kiss deepened.

"Off?" Tom murmured, playing with the hem of Charlie's shirt. "Even though we just put it on."

Charlie giggled and nodded, lifting his arms.

"You too," Charlie whispered, fingers hooking in Tom's waistband. "All of it."

Tom lifted his hips, and there was a moment of awkward maneuvering. Charlie's shorts followed.

Tom guided Charlie until he was straddling his thighs.

"Good?"

Charlie answered by kissing him again. Tom's tongue swept between Charlie's lips.

Charlie pressed himself closer. Tom's hands moved to Charlie's hips, guiding him in a slow, circular motion that had them both breathing harder.

"Wanted this all day," Tom murmured against Charlie's jaw. "Watching you with that camera. Everyone looking at you. Knowing you're mine."

Charlie's head tipped back, giving Tom better access to his throat. "Only yours," he whispered. "Only ever yours."

When Tom finally took them both in his hand, Charlie's breath stuttered in his chest.

"That's it," Tom encouraged. "Let me see you, baby."

Charlie's hips moved in small jerks. "Thomas," he gasped. "I'm--"

"I've got you," Tom promised, grip tightening. "I'm right here with you, honey. Always with you."

Charlie whined, hiding in the crook of Tom's neck.

"Look at me," Tom commanded softly. "Wanna see your eyes."

Charlie lifted his head. There was a tenderness in Tom's eyes that made his chest ache.

"I love you. I love you, daddy," Charlie whispered.

Tom faltered for just a second. "I love you too," he answered. "God, I love you so fucking much."

The tension finally crested. Pleasure crashed over him in overwhelming waves, his body trembling in Tom's lap. Tom followed a moment later, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin of Charlie's shoulder.

They breathed together. Charlie traced idle patterns on Tom's back.

"That was..." He began.

"Yeah," Tom kissed his temple. "It always is, with you."

Chapter 26

The Media Boot Camp was entering its third hour. Morale was deteriorating.

Hazel was pacing back and forth in front of the sofa, firing questions at Charlie while holding a wooden spoon like a microphone.

"Wrong!" Hazel shouted. "Too hesitant. You sound like you're apologizing for existing. Try again. Mr. Heitmeyer, what is your primary musical influence?"

"Um," Charlie started, "I guess I really like--"

"Stop!" Hazel pointed the spoon at him. "You *guess*? You don't *guess* you like Chopin; you commune with him. Again!"

Charlie groaned. "Hazy, please. My brain is melting. Can't we just say I like 'classical stuff' and move on?"

"If you say 'classical stuff' to Le Devoir, I will disown you," Hazel threatened.

Tom walked in from the kitchen with a bowl of sriracha popcorn. He sat down next to Charlie and tossed a kernel at Hazel.

"Ease up, General. You're scaring the talent."

"I am *preparing* the talent," Hazel corrected. "The press is going to eat him alive if he's this polite. They love a tragic genius, but they love tearing them down even more."

She turned back to Charlie, her expression softening slightly.

"Okay. Let's try a softball. Mr. Heitmeyer, tell us about your background. You seem to have appeared out of nowhere."

This was the question. The danger zone.

"I..." Charlie straightened up. "I was privately educated. I spent several years travelling in Europe, focusing on my studies."

Hazel nodded slowly. "Good. Solid. That sounds rich and mysterious, not 'locked in a chalet.' Stick to that."

She checked her watch. "Okay. Five-minute break. I have to pee."

Charlie sighed, leaning his head on Tom's shoulder. "I hate this. I'd rather do the photoshoot again."

"You're doing great," Tom promised, kissing his hair. "Just memorize the script. It's the truth, just... curated."

Before Hazel could go to the washroom, her phone rang. It was the harsh trill she had assigned to unknown numbers.

She frowned, checking the screen. "514 area code. Probably a telemarketer."

She swiped accept as she reached for some popcorn.

"Hazel Heitmeyer."

Someone spoke on the other end of the line.

Hazel froze, then mouthed *LA PRESSE* at them.

"Mr. Richard," she said carefully, putting the call on speaker. "If this is about the OSM announcement, press inquiries are being handled by the symphony's--"

"It's not about the announcement," Richard interrupted. "Although congratulations are in order. Your brother is quite the talent."

Tom frowned, tightening his arm around his husband.

"I'm calling," Richard continued, "because we're running a profile on the 'Mystery Virtuoso' for the Sunday edition. And in the course of our fact-checking... well, we found some interesting discrepancies in the 'Heitmeyer' lineage."

"I'm not sure what you mean," Hazel said coldly. "My client's background is private."

"Of course," Richard agreed. "But public records are public. We have received a tip, Ms. Heitmeyer. A source who claims that Charlie Heitmeyer is actually Maxence Caillat."

Charlie made a small, wounded noise in the back of his throat. Tom's fingers were so tight around his shoulder it hurt

"That is a fascinating theory," Hazel said, eyes wide. "But I don't comment on rumours."

"It's more than a rumour," Richard said. "We have the Swiss transfer documents. We know about Mr. Caillat. The father?"

He paused.

"The story runs on Sunday, Ms. Heitmeyer. 'The Survivor Son.' It's a compelling angle. But I wanted to give you and your brother a chance to comment first. To... control the narrative, as it were."

Hazel looked at Charlie. She saw the terror in his eyes.

"If you run that story," Hazel said, "without our explicit consent, I will sue you for invasion of privacy, defamation, and emotional distress. I will tie La Presse up in litigation until the next century."

"It's the truth, Ms. Heitmeyer," Richard countered calmly. "Truth is an absolute defence against libel. You have until 5:00 PM tomorrow to provide a statement. Otherwise, we run with what we have."

Click.

The line went dead.

For a long moment, no one moved.

"They know," Charlie whispered. He pulled his knees to his chest, rocking slightly. "They know everything. 'The Survivor Son.' Oh god."

"They don't know everything," Tom said fiercely. "They have documents. They don't have you."

He looked at Hazel. "Can we stop it?"

Hazel was already typing furiously on her phone. "Injunction," she muttered. "I can try for an emergency injunction to block publication. But the bar is high for prior restraint. And even if I block La Presse, the rumour is out. If they have a 'tip'... someone talked."

"Who?" Tom demanded. "Who knew?"

"The court clerks in Bern," Hazel listed. "The immigration officers. Take your pick."

She looked up, her face pale.

"Tom. If they run this... the concert won't be about the music anymore. It will be about the murder."

Charlie stood up abruptly. He felt sick.

"I can't do it," he said, voice rising. "Cancel it."

"Charlie--"

"Cancel it!" He was freaking out. "I'm not going out there so they can stare at me. I'm done. I'm quitting."

He turned and bolted toward the bedroom, slamming the door so hard the frame shook.

Charlie had drawn the blackout curtains. He was curled in the center of the bed, a lump under the duvet.

The door opened. The mattress dipped.

"Go away," the lump said. "I'm not doing it."

"Charlie..."

Charlie threw the duvet off his face. His eyes were red, his hair a mess of static.

"Did you hear him, Thomas? 'The Survivor Son.' They're going to turn my life into a true-crime podcast. They don't care about the music."

"You're right," Tom admitted. "They don't."

Charlie stared at him, betrayed. "You're supposed to tell me it's going to be okay."

"It is going to be okay," Tom said. "But not because we hide."

Tom turned his body so they were facing each other. He reached out to rest a hand on Charlie's ankle.

"We don't stop them," Tom said gently. "We just... tell the truth first."

Charlie blinked. "What?"

"The story is only a weapon if it's a secret exposed," Tom said. "If you tell it? If you own it? Then it's just the truth."

"You want me to talk to him?" Charlie asked, his stomach dropping. "To the reporter?"

"I want you to take the weapon out of his hand," Tom said fiercely. "But only if you can. I will be right there. I won't let him hurt you."

Charlie closed his eyes. He breathed in the scent of his husband.

"He doesn't get to speak for me," Charlie whispered.

"No," Tom agreed. "He doesn't."

Charlie opened his eyes. He reached for Tom's hand.

"Okay," Charlie said, his voice trembling. "I'll do it."

They walked back into the living room.

Hazel was on the phone, wearing a groove in the rug.

"I don't care about the deadline!" She was shouting. "If you print one word about the medical records, I will own your press! I am drafting the cease and desist right now!"

"Hazel," Charlie said. "Hazel, please. Stop."

She lowered the phone. "I'm with legal."

"Don't sue them," Charlie said. He looked up at Tom, checking one last time. Tom nodded.

Charlie sighed. "Invite him over."

"Excuse me? Charlie, no. He's looking for trauma porn."

"I know," Charlie said. "But if I don't talk to him... he writes whatever he wants."

He twisted his wedding ring on his finger.

"I need to tell him myself."

Hazel looked at Tom. Tom nodded.

"Okay," she said. "Okay, Char. We do it on our terms. He comes here. No photographers. Tom sits next to you. I sit next to the reporter. And if I don't like a question, I cut the interview."

"Okay," Charlie exhaled.

"I'll call him back," Hazel said. She hit redial and walked out onto the terrace as it rang.

"Mr. Richard? You can have the interview. Today. You have an hour."

Charlie sat on the piano bench, his hands shaking in his lap.

"I'm going to be sick," he whispered.

Tom kneeled next to him. "Look at me. You're safe. You're in your home. You're just talking. And if it gets too much, you squeeze my hand, and we throw him out. Deal?"

"Deal," Charlie breathed.

"Do you want to wait in the bedroom until he gets here?"

"No," Charlie said. "I need to play. Just... stay with me until he comes in. Please?"

"Play," Tom said, kissing his cheek. "I'm right here."

Forty-five minutes later, the buzzer rang. Hazel opened the door.

"Ms. Heitmeyer."

"Mr. Richard," Hazel said. "You're early. Come in."

She led him to the dining room.

Charlie was playing something repetitive--a Bach prelude that required absolute precision. He didn't look up. He couldn't.

Tom was standing next to the piano, his hand resting on the wood.

Charlie played the final chord. He let the silence stretch, gathering every ounce of courage he had.

Then, he turned on the bench.

He looked at the reporter. He felt small, his hands gripping the edge of the bench so hard his knuckles were white. But he didn't look away.

Tom stepped closer, his leg brushing against Charlie's knee.

"Mr. Richard," Charlie said. His voice shook, just a little. "You have questions about my past."

He took a deep breath, looking from Hazel to Tom, and finally back to the reporter.

"I'm ready to answer them."

François Richard's phone was on the coffee table, the recording app open and running.

Charlie sat in the armchair, hands folded in his lap to hide the tremor. Tom stood directly behind him, a hand resting on the back of the chair.

Hazel sat on the sofa opposite the reporter, her body angled to intercept.

"Ground rules," Hazel said. "You may ask about the music. You may ask about the career. You may ask, briefly, about the timeline of his arrival in Canada. If you push for graphic details of the event, the interview is over, and you leave. Are we clear?"

Richard nodded once. He looked mildly bored.

"I'm not interested in sensationalism, Ms. Heitmeyer," he said. "I'm interested in accuracy."

His gaze shifted to Charlie. Assessing.

"Shall we begin?"

Charlie nodded. "Go ahead."

"You were born Maxence Caillat," Richard started, checking his notes. "But in 2014, you entered the Canadian foster system as Charlie Heitmeyer. Heitmeyer is the name of the family that took you in--your sister's family?"

"That's correct," Charlie said.

"But the first name," Richard pressed. "Why Charlie? Why not Max? Or keep Maxence?"

Charlie looked down at his hands. He thought about the woman who used to play the piano with him.

"Maxence was... his son," Charlie whispered. "I didn't want to be his son anymore."

He looked up, meeting the reporter's eyes.

"My mother's name was Charlotte. She was the one who taught me music. She was the one who made sure I survived him. When I came here... I wanted to carry her name. So I became Charles, or Charlie."

Richard nodded, making a brief note. "Thank you for explaining that."

He looked back up. "You've said your mother was your first teacher. However, the police records from Bern include statements from your father asserting that he was your primary tutor--that he imposed strict discipline in pursuit of technical excellence."

Charlie winced. "He controlled me. Abused me."

"I understand," Richard replied evenly. "In the records, your father describes the isolation at the chalet as necessary--his words--for your development. He refers to it as a 'monastic upbringing.'"

Hazel leaned forward. "Mr. Richard--"

Richard lifted a hand slightly. "I'm not endorsing his language. I'm explaining the claim."

He turned back to Charlie.

"There's a long-standing narrative in the arts," he said calmly, "that extreme discipline--or even suffering--can produce extraordinary work. Some people will inevitably ask whether that period of isolation shaped the musician you are today."

Charlie stared at him.

"Are you asking if I'm grateful?" he said.

"I'm asking," Richard replied, his tone still level, "how you understand the relationship between that past and your art now."

Charlie opened his mouth. Closed it.

"And," Richard added gently, "if you believe the music could exist without what preceded it. You did see it happen, didn't you?"

The silence stretched. Charlie swallowed. His vision blurred at the edges.

"I--" His breath hitched.

White.

The living room vanished. The rug was gone.

It was replaced by pine floorboards. The smell of metallic, copper blood.

Do not make a sound, Maxence. Or you join her.

The sound of metal against bone and brain echoed in his ears.

He gagged. He scrambled out of the chair, hand clamped over his mouth.

"Shit!" Tom reacted.

Charlie ran down the hallway, stumbling over his own feet, crashing through the bathroom door.

He barely made it to the toilet before his stomach violently rejected the evening.

He fell to his knees on the tile, heaving. Tears streamed down his face.

"Get out!" he heard Hazel screaming in the other room. "Get the hell out of my house!"

Then, the bathroom door opened.

Tom was there. He dropped to his knees. He placed one hand flat on Charlie's back and the other on Charlie's forehead, holding his hair back.

"I've got you," Tom said. "Just breathe. Get it out."

Charlie retched again. "I can't," he sobbed, gasping. "I can smell it."

"I know," Tom soothed, rubbing his back. "I know. But it's gone. You're here. Look at the tile. Look at the grout. You're in Montreal."

Charlie slumped back against Tom's chest, exhausted. Tom pulled him into his lap.

"I failed," Charlie whispered, his throat raw. "I couldn't do it. I ran away."

"You did not run away," Tom corrected fiercely, wiping Charlie's face with a washcloth he'd grabbed from the counter. "You faced him. You told him your name. You told him about your mother."

Tom kissed the sweat-dampened hair at Charlie's temple.

"You lasted ten minutes with a monster, Charlie. That is ten minutes of bravery I have never seen from anyone else. You didn't fail. You survived."

"He's going to write it," Charlie cried. "He's going to say it was worth it."

"Let him," Tom said, trying not to raise his voice. "Let him write whatever the fuck he wants. I'll go after him myself."

After a few minutes, Tom stood up, pulling Charlie with him. He flushed the toilet and turned Charlie toward the sink.

"Wash your face," Tom commanded gently. "Rinse your mouth. I'm going to go out there and make sure Hazel hasn't actually murdered him. And then I'm coming right back. I promise."

Sunday morning arrived with the buzz of Tom's phone on the nightstand.

Charlie was awake. He had been awake since 5:00 AM, waiting for the execution.

"It's here," Charlie whispered into the silence.

Tom's arm tightened around him. "I know."

Tom reached for his phone. "I'll read it first. If it's bad, I throw the phone in the St. Lawrence, we disconnect the internet, and we move to a private island."

Charlie pulled his knees to his chest, nodding. The light from Tom's screen lit up the dark bedroom. The seconds stretched.

Finally, Tom exhaled. He wasn't frowning. He wasn't smiling, exactly, but his shoulders were loose.

"Read it," he said softly. "It's not a hit piece, Charlie."

Charlie took the phone. His hands shook as he scrolled.

The headline wasn't *THE KILLER'S SON*, or even *THE SURVIVOR SON*.

It was: *THE SOUND OF SURVIVAL: How Montreal's Newest Virtuoso Found His Voice.*

Below it was the photo Zola had taken--the black and white shot of Charlie at the piano, looking up, eyes locked on something (on Tom) with an expression of raw, haunted beauty.

Charlie began to read.

In a city of noise, Charlie Heitmeyer's music demands silence. It is precise, it is devastating, and as it turns out, it is the product of a quiet that lasted fifteen years.

Yesterday, in a tidy penthouse in Old Montreal, the reclusive pianist sat down to speak for the first time about the mystery of his past. He did not speak of the man who fathered him--a man whose name appears in grim police ledgers in Switzerland. He spoke instead of a woman named Charlotte.

"I didn't want to be his son anymore," Heitmeyer said. "I wanted to carry her name. So I became Charlie."

Charlie stopped reading. Tears blurred his vision.

"They used it," he whispered. "The quote about Maman."

"Read the comments," Tom urged, tapping the screen. "Charlie, look."

[4:55] I am sobbing into my coffee. Protect this man at all costs.

[5:16] This is the most powerful origin story in classical music.

[6:04] The bravery to sit there and own that name? Amazing.

"They don't hate me," Charlie breathed, looking from the phone to Tom. "They aren't calling me a monster."

"They love you. They see exactly what I see. And look at this," he added, scrolling down with a vicious sort of glee. "Richard is getting roasted."

[5:35] Is it just me, or does the interviewer sound like a ghoul? Disgusting.

[6:49] This feels exploitative. Shame on La Presse for the tone, but kudos to Charlie for how he handled it.

"Hazel is thrilled," Tom noted. "Apparently, 'Was the trauma worth it?' is not a popular question."

Charlie let out a shaky laugh. He fell back against the pillows, Tom's phone slipping to the sheets between them.

"It's over," Charlie said. "Thomas, everyone knows. And the world didn't end."

"The shadow is gone," Tom agreed. He lay down next to Charlie, resting his chin on Charlie's shoulder so they could both see the photo on the screen.

Charlie looked at the boy--the man--who had survived.

"I'm free," he whispered. "I'm actually free."

The peace was interrupted, inevitably, by the arrival of the General.

"Victory lap!" she announced, kicking her heels off in the foyer. "We are winning the news cycle. The OSM box office website crashed. Twice. You are officially a hot commodity, little brother."

She walked into the living room, where Tom and Charlie were reading on the sofa.

"Also," Hazel added smugly. "François Richard just emailed me. He wants a follow-up. I replied with a GIF of a door slamming."

"Thank you, Hazy," Charlie smiled. "For... everything."

Hazel's expression softened. She sat on the coffee table, reaching out to squeeze Charlie's knee.

"You did the hard part, Charlie. I just sat there and looked scary."

"You're very good at looking scary," Charlie assured her.

"I try. Oh! And guess who else called?"

"Who?"

"St. James Academy," Hazel grinned. "The alumni association. They want to feature you in the newsletter as a 'Notable Graduate.' The same people who ignored you at the reunion."

"Tell them to go to hell," Tom said pleasantly, not looking up from his book.

"I told them you were unavailable due to your 'global commitments,'" Hazel corrected. "It sounds more expensive."

Chapter 27

The final rehearsal at the Maison Symphonique was technically a 'closed session,' meaning no public, no press, and no distractions.

However, there was one exception sitting in the center of the third row.

"Maestro," the stage manager whispered nervously to Henri Valois. "Mr. Montgomery is... still here."

Valois glanced over his shoulder. Tom was sitting with one leg crossed over the other, arms resting on the seat backs, watching Charlie.

"He paid for the new acoustic panelling in the mezzanine," Valois murmured back, turning to the score. "If he wants to sit in the dark and watch us work, let him."

On stage, Charlie was thinking about how he couldn't breathe.

The hall was empty, which somehow made it worse than if it had been full. The silence was expectant. The stage lights were hot.

"Again from the Adagio," Valois commanded, tapping his baton. "And please, Charlie... breathe."

Charlie nodded jerkily. He placed his hands on the keys. He tried to play.

It was technically perfect. Every note was correct. But it was stiff.

Valois sighed loudly. He lowered his baton.

"Stop."

Charlie froze, his hands hovering over the keys. "I'm sorry. I can do it better."

"You are thinking too much," Valois said, rubbing his temple. "You are playing defence. I need you to play offence."

Charlie stared at the keys.

I can't do this, he thought. I'm going to drown.

He stood up abruptly from the bench.

"One moment, please," Charlie croaked.

He walked to the edge of the stage, shielding his eyes against the glare of the spotlight, trying to peer into the cavernous dark of the house.

"Thomas?" Charlie whispered.

In the third row, Tom leaned forward into the sliver of ambient light, letting Charlie see him.

Charlie gripped the edge of the piano. "It's too big," he mouthed.

Tom raised one hand and tapped two fingers against his own chest, right over his heart. Then, he made a small, flat motion with his hand.

I'm right here, the gesture said. *Just us.*

Charlie stared at him. He took a breath.

Just us.

Charlie closed his eyes. He blocked out the two thousand empty seats. He blocked out Valois.

He pictured the Italian leather sofa. He summoned the smell of the beeswax candles Hazel insisted on burning. He imagined the sound of rain against the penthouse glass, sealing them in.

The room is small, Charlie told himself. *The air is warm.*

He turned back to the piano. He sat down.

He waited for the signal.

Then he played.

This time, the stiffness slowly vanished. His shoulders dropped. His hands gradually became more fluid, sinking into the keys. He wasn't trying to project to the back row of a symphony hall anymore.

He was playing for a room that only held two people.

He poured everything into the instrument. The music swelled, filling the massive hall with intimacy.

When Charlie finished the movement, he let the final chord ring out until it naturally decayed into silence.

He sat there for a moment, head bowed, still smelling the beeswax candles.

"Huh."

The sound broke the spell. Charlie looked up.

Valois was staring at him. He looked at the first violinist. "Did you hear that?"

The violinist nodded, taken aback.

"That," Valois said, pointing his baton at Charlie. "Whatever place you just went to? Stay there. From the top!"

The energy changed from High Art to High Chaos the moment they got back to the penthouse.

"Non, Sébastien, écoute," Hazel was saying into her phone. She pointed a manicured finger at Tom, then at the kitchen island. "Move the brie. It's crowding the prosciutto. Non, pas toi--mon beau-frère, l'inutile. J't'appelle, okay?"

She hung up, tossed the phone onto the counter, and sighed. "Tom, honestly. Presentation is ninety percent of the battle."

Tom, who was currently being bullied in his own kitchen, moved the brie. "You know, for someone who doesn't pay rent, you have a lot of opinions on my plating."

"I pay in vibes," Hazel countered, neatly arranging a cracker fan. "And I keep a toothbrush in the guest bath. I basically own the place."

Charlie was lighting candles in the living room, hiding a smile. The apartment was spotless, and the view of the city was sharp and cold, but it felt like a home.

The buzzer rang.

"Game faces," Hazel commanded. "Tom, open the wine. Charlie, stop fidgeting."

Tom opened the door. Nancy and David Heitmeyer stood there, flanked by Alex.

Nancy looked terrified of the marble floors. David looked like he was trying to calculate the square footage. Alex just looked hungry.

"Mum, Dad," Charlie said, crossing the room to hug them.

"Oh, honey," Nancy said, squeezing him tight. She smelled like she always did. "Look at you."

She pulled back, scanning his face, looking for cracks. "We saw the paper, Charlie. We are so... we are just so proud."

"You really did it, huh?" Alex grinned, nudging Charlie lightly. He looked past Charlie to the expanse of the living room. "Okay, serious question. Do I need security clearance to use the bathroom? The elevator had less buttons than my phone."

"Just don't touch anything that looks breakable," Tom said, shaking David's hand. "Welcome. Please, come in."

They moved into the living room. The dynamic shifted. In their cozy, cluttered house in the suburbs, Nancy and David ruled. Here, they walked carefully.

"Mom, sit here. It's the best view," Hazel directed, guiding Nancy to the armchair. She poured her a glass of white wine. "Dad, Tom has the scotch that tastes like a campfire. Alex, hands off the sculpture."

"You seem very... at home," Nancy noted, taking the wine. She watched Hazel move through the kitchen with the familiarity of someone who knew where the spare napkins were.

"She's an infestation," Tom said affectionately, handing David a tumbler. "We've tried fumigating, but she keeps coming back."

"I bring order to the chaos," Hazel said, clinking her glass against Tom's.

David took a sip of scotch, his eyes wandering. They landed on the grand piano in the dining room.

"That's the same one?" David asked softly. "The one we bought you?"

"Yeah," Charlie said. "I play it every day."

"We read about the name," David said. "In the article. That you chose 'Charlie' for Charlotte."

"I didn't know if you'd be upset," Charlie said, studying his shoes. "Since... you're the ones who let me choose it when I got here. I didn't want you to think I was ungrateful."

"Upset?" Nancy set her wine down. She reached out, gripping Charlie's hand. "Charlie, honey. Honouring her... that's beautiful. We aren't upset. We're honoured to share you with her."

Charlie felt a tear slip down his cheek. Tom stepped closer, his hand landing on Charlie's shoulder.

"Well," Alex said, his mouth full of cheese. "I'm just glad that guy is getting his ass beat online. Did you see the memes? Someone photoshopped him getting slapped by the lid of a piano. It was epic. I saved it to show you."

Everyone laughed, taking their seats at the small table near the windows.

"Hazel," David said, his tie loosened. He reached for the potatoes. "Tell me why this brother of yours thinks we have a shot at the Cup this year."

"Delusion, mostly," Hazel said, passing him the dish.

Charlie sat in the middle of it all. He looked at his parents--the people who had taken in a broken, silent fourteen-year-old and loved him until he could speak again.

He looked at Hazel--arguing with Alex for fun.

He looked at Tom--watching Charlie from across the table with soft, tired eyes.

"You okay?" Tom mouthed.

Charlie looked at the table. It was full. It was loud.

"Yeah," Charlie mouthed back.

He took a sip of wine and relaxed.

The backstage area of the Maison Symphonique hummed with a specific frequency of terror and excitement.

Musicians in tuxedos adjusted their bow ties. The stage manager whispered frantically into a headset.

In the center of the chaos stood Team Heitmeyer-Montgomery.

Hazel checked her phone, then checked Charlie's tie, then checked her phone again.

"The livestream numbers are bonkers," she whispered, showing Tom the screen. "We have viewers in Berlin. Shanghai. If he trips, the GIF will outlive us all."

"Hazel," Tom warned. "Stop."

"I am channelling anxiety!" Hazel argued.

Charlie didn't hear them. All he could feel was the thrum of his own pulse in his fingertips.

He looked at his hands. They looked like normal hands. They didn't look like they were about to try to conquer the world.

"Hey."

Tom stepped into Charlie's eyeline, blocking out Hazel and the stage manager. He didn't look worried.

"Look at me," Tom commanded softly. Charlie did.

"You aren't a child anymore," Tom said. "You don't have to disappear. Take up space. Make them hear you."

Charlie took a deep breath. He squared his shoulders. "I make them hear me."

"Mr. Heitmeyer?" The stage manager called out. "You're on in thirty seconds."

Tom reached out and squeezed Charlie's hand.

"Go get 'em, baby."

The moment he stepped past the velvet curtain, it hit him.

It was the sound of two thousand people shifting, breathing. The applause that greeted him was polite, curious.

They were clapping for the Survivor. They were about to meet the Artist.

Charlie walked to the Steinway. He sat down. Adjusted the bench.

He looked out into the black void of the hall. Somewhere in the front row, he knew Tom and Hazel were sitting down with Alex and his parents.

He looked at Maestro Valois. The conductor smiled, raised his baton, and gave a sharp nod.

Let's burn it down.

The orchestra began--a swell of strings, dark and turbulent. Liszt's first concerto.

And then, Charlie entered. The first chord rang out.

It was violence.

As Charlie played, the fear evaporated, burned away by the sheer physical demand of the music. He drove his weight into the instrument. He felt the vibration travel up his arms, into his chest, shaking his very bones.

The music moved from the turbulent opening into the lyrical second theme. Charlie played it with an intense, aching clarity.

In the audience, people stopped looking at their programs. They stopped shifting in their seats, leaning forward.

Charlie's hands flew. He attacked the cadenza--a flurry of notes so fast they blurred. He didn't miss a single one. He carved them out of the air, sharp and brilliant.

The conductor was moving with a fierce, manic energy, matching Charlie blow for blow. They were battling, pushing each other higher, faster, louder.

More, the music demanded. Give me everything.

So Charlie gave it everything.

The final movement arrived. Charlie leaned into the keys. The orchestra swelled behind him, a tidal wave of sound lifting him.

He hit the three final chords. Then he threw his hands off the keys, chest heaving, sweat dripping down his temple.

For one second, there was absolute silence.

Then, two thousand people surged to their feet.

"Bravo!"

He looked at the front row.

He saw Hazel. She had tears streaming down her face and was clapping so hard it had to hurt. He saw his mother, Nancy, burying her face in David's shoulder, sobbing.

And he saw Tom.

Tom was staring at Charlie with an expression of such raw pride that it stole the breath from Charlie's lungs. He looked devastated in the best possible way. Like he was seeing Charlie for the very first time.

Valois stepped down from the podium. He grabbed Charlie's shoulders, pulling him up off the bench. "You see?" Valois shouted over the roar. "I told you! You see?"

Charlie laughed, the sound lost in the ovation.

He turned to the audience and bowed.

Chapter 28

The dressing room smelled of the three dozen roses Tom had ordered.

Charlie sat on the settee, staring at his hands. They were shaking. He felt lightheaded, sweaty, and completely, utterly mortified.

"I growled," Charlie said to the floor. "Thomas, I think I actually growled during the cadenza. They heard me. The microphone definitely picked it up."

Tom crossed the room, hauled Charlie up from his seat, and crushed him with a hug that threatened to crack ribs.

"You're a god," Tom said into his hair. "You were absolute *fire*, Charlie. I have never seen anything like that in my life."

"I lost control," Charlie mumbled into Tom's chest.

"Good." Tom pulled back to look at him. "You should lose control. You had two thousand people terrified to breathe."

Charlie blinked, finally looking up. "Really?"

"Really. I am the proudest man on the face of the earth. I want to buy a billboard. I want to skywrite your name."

Before Charlie could respond, the door flew open.

Hazel marched in. Her perfect eyeliner had run down her cheeks in streaks, and she was dabbing furiously at her nose with a cocktail napkin.

"I hate you," Hazel announced, pointing a shaking finger at Charlie. "Look at my face. This is a tragedy. I look like a melty painting."

"You look beautiful, Hazy," Charlie laughed.

"I look emotionally compromised!" She grabbed him, hugging him fiercely. "You jerk. You absolute genius. That was... that was incredible."

"Structurally sound," Julian added, stepping in behind her. He looked unruffled, but his smile was genuine. "The acoustic load on the final movement was immense. The room handled it well. You utilized the space perfectly."

"Thanks, Julian."

"Move over!" Alex's voice boomed from the hallway.

Charlie's brother squeezed into the room, followed by Nancy and David.

"Dude!" Alex high-fived him, grinning ear to ear. "That was metal. Like, legitimately metal. I felt it in my teeth."

Then, Nancy stepped forward. She walked up to Charlie and cupped his face in her hands. Her face was wet.

"Oh, my boy," she whispered. "My brave, brilliant boy."

"Did I do okay, Mum?" Charlie asked, his voice cracking.

"You did more than okay," Nancy said. "You know, tonight, I felt Charlotte. She was right there on that bench with you, Charlie. She was so loud."

Charlie felt the tears prick his eyes again. He buried his face in her shoulder. "I felt her too."

David patted his back and cleared his throat. "We're so proud, son. So proud."

Hazel blew her nose loudly on the cocktail napkin.

"Okay," she declared, stepping back. "Emotions: processed. Mascara: ruined. Now, we have a decision to make."

She looked at Charlie.

"Mom and Dad are going back to the hotel to sleep because they are sensible. We, on the other hand, have a reservation."

"The club," Charlie remembered.

He looked at the sofa. It looked very soft. His tux felt tight.

"I don't know," Charlie started. "I'm kind of--"

He stopped.

He looked at Tom.

Tom was watching him. His eyes were still wild with pride. He looked like a man who wanted to show his husband off to the world.

Suddenly, Charlie didn't want to go home.

"We're going," Charlie decided.

Tom's eyebrows shot up. "We are?"

"Yes," Charlie said. "I want to dance. And... do shots?"

Hazel gasped. "Baby bird wants tequila! This is a historic moment!"

Tom laughed, grabbing his jacket in one hand and Charlie's hand in the other. "Alright then. To the club."

La Voûte was located in the vault of an old bank. It was dark, pulsing with bass that vibrated the floor.

They bypassed the line outside and were ushered straight to a VIP booth overlooking the dance floor.

"It's so loud!" Charlie shouted over the music, clutching Tom's hand.

"That's the point!" Tom shouted back, grinning.

A waitress appeared with a bottle of tequila and a tray of shot glasses.

"Okay!" Hazel shouted. She poured four shots and lined them up.

"Here," she yelled, handing a glass to Charlie. "Do not sip it. It is not wine. It is fuel. You tip your head back, you open your throat, and you swallow. Do not taste it."

Charlie looked at the small glass. It looked innocent. It smelled like rubbing alcohol.

"Like in the movies?" Charlie asked.

"Exactly like the movies!" Hazel cheered. "On three! To the Virtuoso!"

"To the Virtuoso!" Julian and Tom chorused.

"One, two, three!"

Charlie tipped his head back. He dumped the liquid into his mouth and swallowed.

Pure, liquid fire burned down his throat. His eyes watered. He coughed, slamming the glass down on the table.

"Oh my god!" Charlie wheezed. "That's horrible! Why do people do this?"

"Give it five minutes!" Hazel yelled, already pouring herself, Alex, and Julian another round.

Tom was laughing. He wiped a drop from Charlie's chin with his thumb.

"You okay?"

"It burns!" Charlie complained, but he was laughing too.

"You did good," Tom said, leaning in close so his lips brushed Charlie's ear. "You looked hot."

"Another one?" Charlie challenged, leaning into him.

Tom grinned, picking up the bottle.

"Of course."

The tequila hit Charlie in waves. Five minutes, just like Hazel had promised.

The lights blurred into streaks of electric blue and purple, and the bass seemed to sync with his heartbeat.

"Dance with me," Tom said against his ear, voice barely audible over the music.

Charlie nodded. He'd never been this drunk before.

Tom led him through the crowd. The dance floor was packed with bodies. Charlie felt a flash of anxiety. But then Tom turned, pulling Charlie against his chest, and everything else fell away.

"Just feel," Tom whispered. "Don't think. Just move with me."

And Charlie did. He closed his eyes. Tom's hands were firm on his hips, guiding him. The initial stiffness gradually melted away.

Their bodies fit together perfectly--Tom creating a safe space for Charlie to explore this new freedom. Charlie looped his arms around Tom's neck. The friction of Tom's thigh between his legs sent sparks shooting up his spine.

"God, you're beautiful," Tom murmured. "Fuck. I love it when you feel good."

Charlie smiled. "I feel amazing," he admitted, his voice breaking on the last word as Tom's hands slid lower, grabbing his ass. "Thomas!"

"Sorry," Tom grinned. "Can't help it."

The words sent a thrill through Charlie. He pressed closer. The cotton of Tom's shirt was damp with sweat, clinging to the hard planes of his chest. Charlie inhaled Tom's cologne mixed with the earthy scent of his skin.

"I did it," Charlie said suddenly. "I didn't mess up or run away."

Tom's embrace tightened. "You conquered it. You owned that stage."

Charlie closed his eyes, letting the praise wash over him. The triumph of the concert blended with the alcohol and Tom's body against his. It all swirled together into a moment of happiness so intense

it was almost unbearable.

"Excuse me."

The voice cut through their bubble. Charlie blinked, turning his head to find a stranger standing beside them. He was tall, with carefully styled hair and a smile that suggested practiced charm.

"I don't mean to interrupt," the man continued, his eyes fixed on Charlie, barely acknowledging Tom's existence. "But I just had to tell you--you move like you know exactly what you're doing."

Charlie stared, momentarily thrown by the intrusion. "I, uh--"

"Can I buy you a drink?" the stranger persisted, stepping closer. "Something better than whatever you've been having."

"He's good," Tom said neutrally. But Charlie felt the tension, the way his fingers pressed more firmly into Charlie's hip.

The stranger finally glanced at Tom, his smile faltering slightly at the clear warning in Tom's eyes.

"Just being friendly," the man said with a shrug. "Offering a drink to the most beautiful man in the room. No harm in that, right?"

"I appreciate it," Charlie said, finding his voice. "But I'm with my husband." He leaned back against Tom's chest.

Tom's hand moved from Charlie's hip to splay across his stomach, pulling him more firmly against his body.

The stranger's eyes tracked the movement. "Lucky man," he said to Tom. "Can't blame a guy for trying."

He melted back into the crowd, swallowed by the sea of dancers.

Charlie turned in Tom's arms, fascinated by what he'd just witnessed. He'd never seen Tom like that before. Protective, yes. Possessive, absolutely. But this was new.

"You were jealous," Charlie said, a smile playing on his lips.

Tom's expression softened, a hint of embarrassment creeping in. "Was it that obvious?"

Charlie laughed. "I like it," he admitted. "I like that you want me that much."

"I always want you that much," Tom said. "Every second of every day."

"Dance with me," Charlie echoed. "Just like this."

"Air," Tom murmured against Charlie's ear. "Let's get some air."

Charlie nodded. His hair was sticking to his forehead.

Tom took his hand and began cutting through the dancers. The crowd seemed to have doubled in size since they'd arrived. Charlie stayed close, one hand gripping Tom's, the other holding onto the back of Tom's shirt.

The bouncer nodded at them as they stepped outside.

"Oh," Charlie gasped as the breeze hit his skin. "That's... that's good."

Tom laughed. "Told you. It was getting hot in there."

They moved to the side of the entrance, away from the line. He leaned against the wall of the old bank building and closed his eyes.

"Cold?" Tom asked, stepping closer.

Charlie hadn't realized he was starting to shiver.

"A little, now," Charlie admitted, opening his eyes.

Tom shrugged off his over-shirt and stepped forward, draping it around Charlie like a cape.

"Thomas, you don't have to--"

"Shh." Tom adjusted it around his shoulders. "Better?"

The shirt was still warm from Tom's body heat, and it carried his scent. Charlie pulled it tighter.

"Much better," Charlie smiled. "But now you're the one who's going to be cold."

Tom shook his head, a smile quirking his lips. "I run hot. You know that."

"Do you have another one?" Charlie asked suddenly.

"Another what, baby?"

"Cigarette."

Tom's eyebrows rose in surprise. Then he looked proud.

He reached into his pocket for the slim silver case. "As a matter of fact, I do."

He clicked it open and pulled one out, placing it between his lips. The gold lighter flashed. He inhaled, then passed the cigarette to Charlie.

The burn filled Charlie's lungs. He held the smoke for a moment, then exhaled slowly, watching the white plume dissipate into the night air.

"Good?" Tom asked, watching him closely.

"Good," Charlie confirmed. "Terrible, but good."

They passed it back and forth. Charlie noticed how Tom had positioned himself--angled so that he created a barrier between Charlie and the street.

A group of people walked by. Tom stepped half an inch closer to Charlie, his stance widening slightly.

Everyone who saw them would know. Charlie belonged to Tom.

Tom took another drag of the cigarette. Charlie watched as his lips pursed around the filter. He felt a surge of desire so strong it made him dizzy.

He stepped closer. Tom took a final drag, then curled his free hand around the nape of Charlie's neck. Charlie parted his lips instinctively as Tom leaned in, their mouths almost touching but not quite.

Tom exhaled slowly, the warm smoke passing from his lips directly into Charlie's mouth. Charlie inhaled deeply.

"Can daddy take me home now?" he whispered.

Tom dropped the butt and crushed it with his shoe.

"Now," he agreed. "Right now."

Chapter 29

Tom fumbled for his phone. "Texting Hazel," he explained as he typed.

Charlie peered at the screen, the letters swimming.

Tom: Taking Charlie home. He's fine. Alex good on his own?

The phone buzzed with Hazel's replies:

Hazel (THE GENERAL): GO GET IT VIRTUOSO BOY. Julian says hi in an architect way.

Hazel (THE GENERAL): Alex found the champagne models. We're good.

"She's terrible," Charlie giggled. "She knows exactly what we're doing."

"Don't care," Tom fake-growled, shoving the phone back in his pocket and pulling Charlie close. "Let's go."

"How far is it?" Charlie asked. He didn't know exactly where they were.

"Ten blocks," Tom said, pressing a quick, hard kiss to Charlie's mouth. "Straight down."

"Then walk me home, husband," Charlie said, taking Tom's hand.

They left the entrance. Tom kept one arm around Charlie's waist as they walked.

They'd made it three blocks when Tom pulled Charlie into a recessed doorway of a closed boutique. Charlie barely had time to register what was happening before his back hit the door, and Tom's mouth was on his.

Charlie melted into it, his arms wrapping around Tom's neck. The door was solid behind him, Tom's body an immovable force in front, trapping him in the most delicious way.

"God, the sounds you make," Tom breathed. "We need to keep walking, or I'm going to take you right here."

"That would be... quite the headline," Charlie managed.

Tom laughed against his neck. "I'm not sharing you tonight."

With visible effort, Tom pulled back. He adjusted the strain in his pants. Then he took Charlie's hand again, gripping it tight.

They continued down the street, walking faster. Charlie leaned into Tom's side.

Inevitably, Charlie stumbled. Tom caught him, using the momentum to guide Charlie against another wall--this time the side of a closed café. Charlie's back met brick, and Tom was there again, mouth hot and insistent.

"Thomas," Charlie gasped. "I need--we need to--"

"I know," Tom said. "Three more blocks."

Three blocks. Charlie could make it. Maybe.

They pushed away from the wall.

They passed a couple, the woman laughing at them. Charlie felt himself flush, but it was fleeting.

Let them see, he thought. This is what it means to be wanted by Thomas Montgomery.

He grabbed Tom's hand and pulled.

The doorman looked away as they stumbled through the lobby.

The elevator chimed. Tom's hand stayed on Charlie's back as the doors opened. The ride up had been a slow torture—Tom too close behind him, warm words breathed down his neck.

Tom fumbled the key. Not badly, just enough to give Charlie time to press in close, arms slipping around Tom's waist, cheek resting between his shoulder blades.

"Having trouble?" Charlie murmured.

Tom huffed a short laugh. "You're not helping."

The lock gave. They spilled inside, laughing, and then Tom turned fast and pinned Charlie to the wall.

The kiss tasted like vodka and smoke and Tom. Charlie clutched at his shirt, pulled him closer, even though there was nowhere left to go.

His knees buckled. Tom caught his thigh, lifted it, pressed them together. Charlie gasped.

"Up," Tom said.

Charlie jumped. Tom's hands locked around him.

"God," Tom said against his mouth. He reached back and set the deadbolt with one hand.

"Bedroom," Charlie whispered, kissing Tom's jaw.

The city spilled silver through the windows as Tom carried Charlie down the hall. He put him down next to the bed.

“Too many clothes,” Charlie said, tugging at Tom’s shirt.

It was gone in seconds. Tom tried to strip Charlie just as fast.

Hems snagged. Zippers fought back.

“I hate this fucking thing,” Tom muttered, struggling with the belt buckle.

Charlie snickered and tried to help.

When they were finally naked, Tom took Charlie’s hand.

“C’mere,” he said, pulling him into the en-suite.

The shower roared to life. Tom tested the water, then helped Charlie in.

The world narrowed to heat and Tom’s hands.

“Turn around,” Tom said softly.

Charlie did.

Tom’s hands slid over his shoulders, down his spine. Charlie let his head fall back against Tom’s chest, a quiet sound slipping out of him.

“Okay?” Tom asked near his ear.

“Mhm. Feels good.”

They traded places. Charlie washed Tom slowly, smiling when Tom squirmed.

“Ticklish?” He giggled.

“Only for you,” Tom said.

When the water shut off. Tom wrapped Charlie in a towel. Dried him gently. Kissed his nose.

Charlie laughed as Tom scooped him up again.

The bed was cool beneath his back. Tom stood over him, strength tempered by love.

Charlie reached for him. Tom came down easily, forearms on either side of his head.

Tom traced his face. “What do you want me to do for you tonight?”

“You pick, daddy,” Charlie whispered. “I just want you to finish inside me.”

Charlie felt the press of him growing harder against Charlie’s thigh.

Tom considered him for a moment, eyes dark.

"Do you want to be on top today?" he suggested. "You can sit on my lap. I'll help you ride me."

The image made Charlie's pulse jump. He bit his lip.

"Yes," he said, grabbing Tom's arms. "I want that."

Tom smiled. He kissed Charlie's forehead and moved back against the headboard, legs stretched out.

He guided Charlie into place. Charlie straddled him, knees sinking into the mattress.

"Wait," Tom said, reaching for the drawer.

Charlie nodded and gave him room.

Tom slicked his fingers, watching Charlie's face as he touched him. Charlie's head dropped to Tom's shoulder.

"Okay?" Tom asked gently.

"Yes," Charlie moaned. "More."

Tom took his time and found exactly where he needed to touch him.

Charlie gasped. "Please. I'm ready."

Tom withdrew and slicked himself up.

"Take your time. We have all night," Tom reminded him softly.

Charlie lowered himself slowly. The stretch burned, then eased. He paused, hands tight on Tom's shoulders.

"Good boy," Tom murmured.

Charlie sank down the rest of the way.

"God," Tom said, head tipping back. "You feel—"

Charlie moved, tentative at first, then again. Tom groaned.

"Like that?" Charlie asked.

"Just like that. Fuck." He groaned. "You set the pace. I'm right here with you."

Charlie found a rhythm. The control made his head spin. Tom watched him like he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

“So beautiful,” Tom murmured. “So alive.”

Charlie leaned forward, changing the angle.

“Shit. There?”

“God, yes.”

The heat built fast.

“Daddy,” Charlie’s fingers dug into Tom’s shoulders. “Daddy, I’m close.”

Tom’s hand slid between them. “Look at me,” he said. “Cum for me, honey.”

Charlie cried out, body shuddering. Tom followed with a broken sound, gripping Charlie hard and holding him there.

Charlie collapsed against Tom’s chest. Tom rolled them carefully onto their side, still holding him close.

“I love you,” Charlie whispered.

Tom kissed his temple, arms tightening.

“I love you too. Always.”

Chapter 30

Morning crept in slowly. Charlie stirred before opening his eyes, sensing warmth before sound.

"Good morning, my angel," Tom said as he kissed Charlie's temple.

Charlie's stomach did a slow, happy flip.

"Good morning, Thomas," he murmured.

"Tea and coffee," Tom announced, sitting up and stretching. "And then, because I am a man of leisure and have absolutely nowhere to be, I am going to make the most complicated breakfast legally allowed in this province."

"Please don't put protein powder in it," Charlie begged, sitting up and pulling the duvet around his shoulders.

"I'm insulted," Tom said, grabbing a pair of sweatpants from the floor. "I'm making waffles. Belgian ones. With yeast. They take an hour to rise."

"You don't know how to make yeast waffles."

"I have an MBA, Charlie. I think I can manage active dry yeast."

An hour later, the kitchen smelled like a bakery.

The sun was up. Tom was by the stove, manning the waffle iron. Charlie was sitting at the island, wearing Tom's hoodie and drinking tea from his favourite mug.

"Timer," Tom commanded.

"Beep," Charlie mimicked.

Tom smiled and flipped the iron.

The buzzer rang.

Charlie froze, mug halfway to his mouth.

"Hey," Tom said seriously. He walked around the island and put his hands over Charlie's.

"It's just the buzzer, Char. It could be Amazon. Or Hazel."

"It's the mail," Charlie whispered. "The interview."

"We nailed the interview," Tom reminded him, squeezing his hands. "You cried. It was very moving. Officer Benoit liked us."

"What if--"

"No 'what ifs'." Tom kissed the top of his head. "Stay here. I'll get it."

Tom walked to the intercom. He pressed the button. "Hello?"

"Delivery for Montgomery," a static voice crackled. "Signature required."

Tom looked back at Charlie. He winked. "Be right back."

He left the apartment. Charlie sat on the stool, staring at the waffle iron.

Breathe, he told himself. *Thomas promised*.

Two minutes later, the door opened.

Tom walked in holding a white envelope. The same size as the first one. The same government logo.

He walked over to the island and set it down in front of Charlie.

"Open it," Tom said.

"I can't."

"You can," Tom said. He moved behind Charlie, wrapping his arms around his waist, resting his chin on his shoulder. "I've got you. We'll read it together."

Charlie's hands shook as he tore the tab.

He pulled out the paper. He bypassed the paragraphs of French and English, his eyes darting frantically to the bottom, looking for the words Removal or Denied.

There was no plastic card. Just a single, stamped document.

NOTICE OF DECISION / AVIS DE DÉCISION
STATUS: APPROVED IN PRINCIPLE / APPROUVÉ EN PRINCIPE
Administrative Stay of Removal Granted.

"What..." Charlie's voice cracked. "Does this mean... what I think it does?"

"It means they accepted our application," Tom said, voice thick. He pointed to the second line. "And that the order is paused while it's processed."

A choked sound escaped Charlie's throat. His knees gave out, enough that Tom had to grab him, hugging him tightly.

"I'm staying?" Charlie gasped. "I'm allowed to be here?"

"You're safe," Tom vowed, pressing a kiss to the side of Charlie's head. "You aren't going anywhere. The card will come."

Charlie pressed the paper to his chest. He squeezed his eyes shut as a sob tore through him.

"Oh, honey," Tom murmured.

Tom rocked him as Charlie cried into his shirt.

"I was so scared," Charlie wept. "I thought they were going to take me from you."

"I know," Tom whispered. "But look at me, Char."

Charlie pulled back. Tom wiped away the tears as they fell.

"Now we have time," Tom said. "And time is all we need. You're mine."

The waffle iron let out a screeching *BEEP*.

Charlie jumped, sniffing loudly.

"The waffles," Charlie managed, wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

"Not important," Tom said, not letting go.

"But... the yeast," Charlie wobbled. "You worked so hard."

Tom chuckled. He kissed Charlie's forehead, his tear-stained cheek, his lips.

"Okay," Tom conceded, turning them both toward the stove. "We save the waffles. And then we celebrate."

Tom flipped the iron open, steam rising.

"Look," he said gently, lifting one waffle out. It was slightly uneven, one corner darker than the rest.

Charlie wiped his nose. "It's... kind of lopsided."

"Like us," Tom said. "But legally allowed to exist."

Charlie let out a startled laugh against Tom's chest.

Tom set the waffle on a plate, tore off a piece, and held it up. "Eat. Doctor's orders."

"You're not a doctor."

"I have an MBA," Tom reminded him solemnly.

Charlie took the bite.

It was warm. Sweet. Real.

"You need to call your mom," Tom said. "She would want to know first."

Charlie nodded, sniffing hard. He fumbled for his phone and tapped Nancy's contact.

She picked up on the second ring.

"Hello?" Her voice was light. "Good morning, sweetheart! How are you?"

Charlie opened his mouth to speak. He wanted to say *It's okay*, or *I'm safe*, or *We won*. But a fresh wave of tears welled up.

"Charlie?" Nancy asked, panicking slightly. "Baby, did something happen?"

"I--" Charlie shook his head helplessly and pressed the phone into Tom's chest.

Tom took it, laughing quietly. He put the phone to his ear, wrapping his free arm tighter around Charlie's waist.

"Nancy," Tom said, his voice warm. "It's Tom. Breathe."

"Tom? Why is he crying? Oh god, did they deny it? I'll come up there. I'll get in the car right now, we can appeal, we can--"

"Shh, don't worry," Tom interrupted. He was grinning. "He's crying because we got the letter. It's an AIP. Administrative Stay granted."

There was a long silence.

"He's... he's staying?" Nancy whispered.

"He's staying," Tom confirmed. "No one is going anywhere."

Even off speakerphone, Charlie heard the wail of relief.

"Oh, thank God," Nancy sobbed. "Oh, thank you, thank you. Tom, I--I don't know what to say. I love you. I love you so much."

"I know. We love you too. Go have a drink. We'll call you back when Charlie can speak English again."

"Kiss him for me!" Nancy wept. "Tell him I'm making a brisket!"

"I will," Tom promised.

He hung up and set the phone down. Charlie leaned his forehead against Tom's shoulder.

"She's making brisket," Tom reported.

"Mhm."

Tom kissed the top of his head, then reached into his pocket for his own phone. "Alright. Now, Hazel."

Three hours later, the afternoon sun had moved across the penthouse floor. They had moved from the island to the couch. Tom was reading a book while Charlie dozed, curled up against his chest.

There was no buzzer. Just the *clack* of the deadbolt sliding back.

Charlie sat up, blinking sleepily. Tom didn't even look up from his page.

"She's here," Tom said menacingly.

The door swung open. Hazel looked like she'd run a marathon in heels--hair slightly windblown, cheeks flushed, struggling under the weight of a tote bag and large cake box.

"Don't get up," she huffed, closing the door with her foot. "I'm fine. I'm a pack mule, apparently."

"We didn't order a pack mule," Tom noted, closing his book.

Hazel dropped the bag on the floor with a thud. She walked straight over to the couch, leaned over the back of it, and looked at Charlie.

"Is it real?" she asked.

Charlie nodded. "It's real."

Hazel exhaled sharply. She planted a lipstick kiss on his forehead.

"Thank God," she said. She let him go and straightened up, smoothing her coat. "Okay. Good. Crisis averted. Now, we celebrate."

She marched to the coffee table and set the box down.

"I didn't know what the protocol was," Hazel admitted. "Hallmark doesn't make cards for AIPs. So I improvised."

Charlie leaned forward.

It was a sheet cake with elegant pale blue frosting. But the writing in the center was done in neon red icing, clearly applied by someone in a rush.

CONGRATS ON NOT BEING DEPORTED

Charlie let out a startled laugh.

"The woman at the bakery refused to write it," Hazel said, pulling a bottle of champagne out of the tote bag. "She said it was 'crass.' I told her she didn't know the half of it and to give me the bag."

"It's perfect," Charlie said, wiping his eyes. "Really."

"I also brought cheese," Hazel said, dumping a bag of brie and crackers onto the table next to the cake. "And I cancelled our meetings for tomorrow, Tom. Don't look at me like that. We're taking the day off."

Hazel paused in the middle of struggling with the champagne cork. She looked up at Tom, expression soft.

"You did it, Captain," she said.

Tom let out a long breath. He reached out, took the bottle from Hazel's hands, and popped the cork with a soft sigh of gas.

"We did it, General," Tom corrected her.

Hazel smiled. She grabbed three plastic glasses from the bag and held them out while Tom poured.

"To Charlie," Hazel said, lifting her glass. "Who is officially stuck with us."

They pulled up to the red-brick home on Avenue Belmore.

"Smell that?" Alex was waiting on the porch, leaning against the railing. He grinned as they walked up the path. "She's been basting that thing every twenty minutes since you called."

"Is she still crying?" Charlie asked, gripping Tom's hand a little tighter.

"Oh, absolutely," Alex confirmed, opening the door. "It's a flood zone. Enter at your own risk."

"Baby!"

Nancy launched herself down the hallway. She collided with Charlie, wrapping him in a hug so tight it knocked the wind out of him.

"You got it," she sobbed into his neck. "My baby."

"I got the paper, Mum," Charlie whispered, hugging her back. "I'm staying."

"Of course you're staying," she wept. "Like I'd let them take you."

She released him only to grab Tom, pulling him down into an embrace.

"Thomas," she sniffled. "My hero. You fixed it."

"I'll take the credit if it gets me the first slice," Tom smiled, patting her back.

"You get the end piece," Nancy promised, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "It's the best. Come on, David is opening the good red."

The dining room was already set with the Victory China. David was at the head of the table, struggling with a corkscrew but smiling brightly.

"There they are," David said, abandoning the bottle to come shake Tom's hand with a strong grip. Then he hugged Charlie. "Good news, kiddo. Really good news."

"Sit, sit!" Nancy commanded. "Hazel, get the salad. Alex, stop eating the rolls!"

"I'm carbo-loading!" Alex protested, shoving a second roll into his mouth.

"For what?" Hazel shot back. "You're a mechanic. Do they make you lift the cars now?"

Dinner was incredible. The brisket fell apart, served alongside David's potato salad and a mountain of roasted carrots. Bowls were passed across the table with dangerous velocity. Everyone talked over everyone else.

David tapped his glass with a fork, and the table quieted down.

"I just want to say," David started, his voice a little gruff. "When that letter came... we were scared."

Nancy reached out and took David's hand.

"But you two," David nodded at Tom and Hazel. "You stepped up. You fought for him. And Charlie..." David cleared his throat, his eyes shining. "You're happy, and safe, and that's all we've ever wanted. To the Stay."

"To the Stay," everyone echoed, raising their glasses.

"To not living in a box in Switzerland!" Alex added.

"Alex!" Nancy swatted his arm.

Charlie looked around the table. He looked at his mother, wiping her eyes again; at his father, beaming with pride; at Hazel, kicking Alex under the table; and finally at Tom.

Tom, who was sitting relaxed in the middle of the chaos, his arm draped over the back of Charlie's chair, looking like he had lived here his whole life.

Tom caught his eye. He winked and squeezed Charlie's shoulder.

"Okay, speech over," Nancy announced, standing up. "Who wants pie? I made two."

The penthouse was quiet. They had showered the smell of brisket off their skin.

Charlie lay on his side, the duvet pulled up to his chin, watching Tom pull on his pyjama pants.

"You look tired," Charlie murmured. His own eyes felt grit-lined with exhaustion, but he wanted to keep looking at Tom.

"Good tired," Tom corrected. He climbed into bed, shifting until his back was against the headboard, and opened his arm.

Charlie moved instantly. He rested his head on Tom's chest, listening to the strong beat of his heart.

Tom's hand came up to thread through Charlie's damp hair, scratching lightly at the scalp in the way that usually made Charlie purr like a cat.

"We really did it," Charlie whispered into Tom's chest. "I don't have to pack."

"You don't have to pack for *them*," Tom said. "But you might want to pack for me."

Charlie pulled back slightly, looking up. "What?"

Tom looked down at him. "Do you remember," he started, tracing the line of Charlie's jaw with his thumb. "I made you a promise?"

Charlie frowned, thinking back. "You promised a lot of things. You promised you'd burn the government down."

Tom chuckled. "I told you that once this was over, I was going to take you away. Somewhere special. Somewhere far."

"I remember," Charlie said.

"Well," Tom said simply. "We're safe."

"You... you want to go now?"

"I want to take you somewhere where you don't have to look at a buzzer or a mailbox for two weeks," Tom said. He tightened his hold on Charlie. "Everything is ready. I have it all set up. We just have to say go."

Charlie felt a spark of anticipation light up in his chest. To go somewhere with Tom. Not running away, not hiding, but travelling somewhere far. Like a real couple.

"Where?" Charlie asked.

Tom smiled, a playful curl of his lips. "That is strictly need-to-know. And you, Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery, do not have clearance yet."

"Thomas," Charlie groaned, flopping back onto Tom's chest. "I hate surprises."

"You'll like this one," Tom promised, kissing the top of his head. "Trust me?"

"With my life," Charlie answered automatically. "Okay. Let's go. I can miss a seminar or two. When can we leave?"

"Give me a day to wrap things up," Tom calculated. "Tuesday?"

"Tuesday," Charlie agreed. He closed his eyes.

"Go to sleep, angel," Tom whispered, clicking off the bedside lamp. "I've got you."

Chapter 31

The Montreal-Trudeau airport was usually a place of high anxiety for Charlie. It was a place of new beginnings, of the terrifying limbo between "there" and "here."

But today, he wasn't standing in the snaking customs line, clutching a backpack and hyperventilating.

He was sitting in the private Air Canada Signature Suite, eating a plate of artisanal smoked salmon while Tom spoke with the concierge.

"Boarding's in twenty minutes," Tom announced, sliding into the booth next to him.

He looked refreshed. He was wearing his travel uniform of expensive dark denim, a white t-shirt, and a cashmere sweater.

"Did you get an upgrade or something?" Charlie asked, finishing his orange juice.

"I don't need upgrades," Tom smirked. "I booked these tickets six months ago."

Charlie froze. "Six *months*? But... we weren't even..."

"I know," Tom said simply. "I told you, Charlie. I was always going to marry you. The government just moved up the timeline. I had these saved for your birthday."

Charlie stared at him. The level of premeditated devotion was terrifying. And wonderful.

"Now can I know where we're going?" Charlie asked.

Tom leaned in, his knee pressing against Charlie's under the table.

"The South of France," Tom said softly. "Cap-Ferrat. I rented a villa. It has a pool, it overlooks the sea, and there are no neighbours for a mile."

Charlie blinked. "France?"

"You were born in Paris," Tom said. "But you told me you never saw the country. You went to Switzerland when you were little, and then... everything else happened."

Tom took Charlie's hand, lacing their fingers together.

"I thought... maybe we could go to the coast. Somewhere warm. Somewhere you can just... be. You're French, Charlie. I wanted you to see it without being afraid."

Charlie felt a lump in his throat. He looked at Tom--this man who remembered offhand comments from years ago, who built entire realities around Charlie's comfort.

"A villa?" Charlie whispered.

"A very nice villa," Tom promised. "With a piano. Obviously."

The flight was a blur of luxury that Charlie felt entirely guilty about enjoying.

They lay in pods in the center of the cabin, the partition between them lowered.

Somewhere over the Atlantic, with the lights dimmed to a soothing blue, Charlie woke up from a doze.

He turned his head. Tom was awake, reading a book on his Kindle, his glasses perched on the end of his nose.

Tom noticed him moving immediately. He put the Kindle down and reached across the gap, his hand finding Charlie's cheek.

"Sleep okay?" Tom whispered.

"Yeah," Charlie murmured, nuzzling into Tom's palm. "Are we there?"

"Soon," Tom said. "Go back to sleep. I'm watching over you."

So Charlie did.

The brightness hit them the moment they stepped out of the airport in Nice. It was so far away from the biting chill they'd left behind in Montreal.

It was crisp and golden. The light was different, turning the Mediterranean into a sheet of hammered turquoise.

Tom had rented a car--a vintage convertible, because of course--and he drove them along the winding coastal roads with the confidence of someone who owned the pavement. He had the heat blasting against the cool rush of wind.

Charlie sat in the passenger seat, sunglasses on, pulling his scarf tighter as he watched the world go by--terracotta roofs and dark green pines spilling over stone gates.

He took a deep breath. The air didn't smell like fear. It smelled like lemons.

"Okay?" Tom shouted over the wind, his hand resting on Charlie's thigh.

"Okay!" Charlie grinned. "It's beautiful!"

They turned off the main road, climbing a steep, narrow driveway lined with cypress trees.

The villa sat at the top of the cliff like a crown jewel. It was a pale pink stone, covered in ivy, with blue shutters that matched the sky.

Tom parked the car on the gravel drive. The silence was broken only by the distant wash of the sea.

"Well," Tom said, killing the engine. "We're here."

He didn't get out. He turned to Charlie.

"No parents," Tom listed, ticking off his fingers. "No lawyers. No immigration officers. No Hazel."

He leaned across the console, unbuckling Charlie's seatbelt.

"Just us. For two whole weeks."

"Just us," Charlie echoed.

Tom got out and came around to open Charlie's door. Then Tom scooped him up again.

"Thomas!" Charlie laughed, kicking his legs. "It's just gravel!"

"You're wearing loafers," Tom said, carrying him toward the door. "I'm not risking a twisted ankle on day one. I have plans for you."

Charlie flushed, wrapping his arms around Tom's neck. "Plans?"

"Mhm," Tom kicked the door open. The villa was warm and airy, smelling of lavender and stone.

He carried Charlie through the foyer, past a sun-drenched living room where a beautiful Pleyel sat by the window, and straight out onto the terrace.

The view was staggering. The infinity pool seemed to drop right into the sea below, steam curling lazily off the surface.

Tom set Charlie down on a lounge chair. He knelt between his knees.

"Plans," Tom reiterated, pressing a kiss to the corner of Charlie's mouth.

"First: We swim. I had them crank the heater up this morning. Second: We eat our weight in French cuisine. Third..."

Tom's voice dropped.

"I am going to spend the next fourteen days proving to you that you didn't steal this life, Charlie. You earned it."

Charlie looked up at him. The sun was haloing Tom's head, but his eyes were full of a very human, very possessive heat.

Charlie reached up, his fingers tangling in the collar of Tom's shirt, pulling him down.

"Okay," Charlie whispered against Tom's lips. "I'm ready."

Tom smiled, and the kiss tasted like salt, and sun, and forever.

Charlie stood at the edge of the terrace, arms wrapped tight around his chest.

Behind him, the soft slide of glass doors announced Tom. He stepped out carrying two glasses of something pale and sparkling. His chest was bare.

"You look like you're trying to decode the horizon," Tom said, handing Charlie a glass.

Charlie took it, their fingers brushing. "Just... taking it all in," he said, looking back at the darkening water. "Even after all that, it doesn't feel real."

Tom moved up beside him. He took a sip of his drink, unbothered by the breeze.

"Well," he said, amused. "I can think of a way to ground you."

"Oh?"

Tom put his glass down on the table and settled his hands on Charlie's hips.

"Water's steaming," he said, nodding toward the pool. "I checked while you were dissociating. It's like a bath."

Charlie smiled. "I'll go change--"

"Or," Tom interrupted, "we could skip that part."

Charlie blinked. "You mean...?"

"I mean, we have no neighbours and a privacy wall." Tom leaned in. "I mean, you should get in the water with me, Charlie. Right now."

"I don't know," Charlie murmured.

Tom tipped Charlie's chin up with a knuckle. "Hey. If you want a swimsuit, go get one. But I promise, no one is looking at you but me, and I already think you're perfect."

"....Okay. I want to," Charlie said. "I just... you first?"

Tom's grin was blinding. "Deal."

He stepped back, hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his shorts, and stepped out of them with easy confidence.

"Your turn," Tom said softly.

Charlie raised his arms, letting Tom strip him. As the fabric fell away, the biting air rushed in, and he instinctively wrapped his arms around himself.

"Cold?"

"Freezing. And nervous."

"Don't be." Tom leaned in, his lips hot against Charlie's shoulder. "I've got you."

Then he took his hand and pulled him toward the edge.

"Ready?" Tom asked, eyes bright.

"Wait, I--"

Tom jumped, dragging Charlie with him.

They hit the water with a chaotic splash. The heat was instantaneous, a shock to the system that enveloped them, muffling the cold world above.

Charlie surfaced, pushing wet hair out of his eyes, gasping. Tom was already there, watching him with predatory delight.

"Better?" he asked, drifting closer.

Charlie nodded, surprised to find he was laughing.

"Hi," Tom said, pressing Charlie back against the pool wall.

"Hi," Charlie breathed.

Charlie tilted his head back as Tom nipped at his neck. Charlie could feel him straining against his stomach.

"Thomas," he gasped, seeking more friction.

Tom pulled back. "You feel that?" he whispered, grinding their hips together. "How good you are for me?"

Charlie's face burned. "Mhm."

"Good." Tom kissed the corner of his mouth, then the other. "I could stay in here with you all night." He paused, resting his forehead against Charlie's. "But I have plans for dinner."

Charlie groaned, letting his head fall onto Tom's shoulder. "I don't want to move."

"I know. But I'm making coq au vin," Tom murmured into his hair. "And if we don't get out, I'm going to take you right here against the wall."

Charlie laughed, a breathless sound. "Okay. Dinner first."

"Dinner first," Tom agreed, stealing one last kiss. "Dessert later."

They scrambled out, the cold air biting at their wet skin. Tom grabbed the plush towels from the lounge where he'd left them. He dried himself off roughly, then turned and wrapped the largest one around Charlie, rubbing his arms to generate heat.

When he was dry, Tom secured the towel around Charlie's waist. Tom's own towel hung low on his hips, damp hair falling into his eyes.

"What?" Tom asked, catching Charlie staring.

"Nothing," Charlie said, shaking his head, teeth chattering just once before he clamped his jaw. "Just happy."

Tom's expression softened. He stepped forward and scooped Charlie up into his arms.

"Thomas!" Charlie grabbed his shoulders. "I can walk!"

"I know," Tom said, already carrying him toward the open glass doors. "But you're shivering. And I like carrying you."

Charlie wanted to protest, but the truth was, he loved the feeling of being held. He loved that Tom was strong enough to bear his weight without faltering.

So he stopped fighting it. He rested his head against Tom's damp shoulder and let himself be carried inside.

The interior was wonderfully warm. The moment they crossed the threshold, the rich, wine-heavy scent of the stew hit them.

Tom shut the glass door behind them with his foot. He carried Charlie through the living room, past the piano, and into the kitchen.

It was a space built for serious cooking, all gleaming professional appliances and copper pots.

Tom set Charlie down on the island.

"There," he said. "Better view."

Charlie flushed. "Of what? The ocean is behind you."

"What ocean?" Tom leaned in, stealing a quick, tasting kiss before turning toward the refrigerator. "Stay there."

He began to gather ingredients for a salad. Charlie watched, swinging his legs slightly, a rush of fondness hitting him so hard it almost knocked the wind out of him. Tom had arranged everything. The villa, the privacy, the warmth, the food.

Tom set the salad on the counter beside Charlie, then stepped between his spread knees. His hands rested on Charlie's towel-covered thighs.

"I was so nervous," Charlie remembered quietly. "Not about marrying you. Never that. Just... the eyes. The attention."

Tom's thumbs rubbed soothing lines down Charlie's legs. "You did beautifully," he said, his voice low. "You held it together, and you let me take care of you. That's all I wanted."

He gave Charlie's thighs a final squeeze and turned to the stove. He lifted the heavy lid of the dutch oven. It released a cloud of savoury steam.

He dipped a spoon into the pot, catching a bit of the dark, fragrant sauce. "Taste."

Charlie opened his mouth, letting Tom feed him. The flavour exploded on his tongue--wine, earth, herbs, and salt.

"God," Charlie breathed. "Thomas."

Tom looked pleased. "Good?"

"Incredible."

Tom leaned in, replacing the spoon with his mouth. When he pulled back, his eyes were hungry.

"Good," Tom smiled. "Then it's time for dinner."

Tom carried the heavy pot into the dining room. Charlie followed with the crusty bread and the bottle of red. His hair was still damp, darker against his pale skin.

"Here," Tom said. He set the pot on the trivet at the center of the table.

Charlie placed the wine bottle next to the tall candles Tom had set out. Beyond the floor-to-ceiling glass, the Mediterranean was a vast, breathing darkness. The only definition came from the distant string of lights flickering along the coastline.

Tom pulled out Charlie's chair. Charlie sat, and Tom unfolded the napkin and draped it across his lap.

"You're pushing it," Charlie teased.

"I live to spoil you," Tom replied. He lit the candles with a match.

Tom served them both. The meat fell off the bone. They ate and talked about the water and the sky and the quiet beauty of the off-season.

"More wine?" Tom asked.

Charlie covered his glass with his hand. "I'm good. I want to remember this."

Tom set the bottle down. He reached across the table and brushed his thumb over Charlie's knuckles. "We have thirteen more days. Plenty of moments to remember."

"I know," Charlie said, looking out at their reflection in the glass. "It's just... I never thought I'd be here. Like this. With you."

Tom smiled warmly.

"Try the sauce with the bread," Tom said. He tore a piece from the loaf and dipped it for Charlie. "It's sinful."

Charlie took the morsel directly from Tom's fingers.

"Delicious," he confirmed.

They continued eating as the wind picked up outside, rattling the panes gently. Tom kept an eye on Charlie's plate, replenishing it before it was empty and adjusting the water glass. Charlie allowed it, occasionally catching Tom's hand to squeeze it.

When they'd finished, Charlie pushed his chair back.

"Let me help," Charlie said.

"You don't have to," Tom started.

"I want to," Charlie said. "We're on our honeymoon. Let me do this with you."

Tom nodded. They gathered the dishes and made their way back into the kitchen. Tom filled the sink with hot, soapy water while Charlie stacked the plates. Tom washed while Charlie dried.

"Did you enjoy dinner?" Tom asked.

"You know I did," Charlie replied. "It was perfect. This place is perfect. Everything is perfect."

Tom smiled. "Good," he said simply.

When the last dish was put away, Tom turned to Charlie. He cupped Charlie's face and traced under his eye.

"Why don't you go upstairs and prepare?" Tom suggested. "I'll finish wiping down here."

Charlie nodded. "I brought my own things this time," he murmured.

"Good boy," Tom said, pressing a kiss to Charlie's temple. "Take your time. I'll be up soon."

From upstairs, the hiss of the shower started.

Tom moved to the guest bath, scrubbing off the day. He knotted the towel low on his hips and padded barefoot through the villa, skin humming.

He paused at the refrigerator for a bottle of sparkling water and selected three dark chocolate bonbons from the wooden box in the cupboard. Provisions.

The stairs swallowed his footsteps. The door to the master suite was cracked open, so Tom nudged it wider with his shoulder.

Charlie was emerging from the en-suite, flushed and wrapped in a fuzzy towel.

Tom moved to the dresser, setting down the water and the sweets.

"Hi," Charlie whispered.

Tom crossed the distance and cupped the side of Charlie's face. Charlie leaned into it, eyes fluttering shut, running his hands over Tom's bare chest. They kissed deeply.

Tom walked him backward. He didn't stop until the backs of Charlie's knees bumped the edge of the mattress.

"Lie down, honey," Tom murmured.

Charlie slid back across the sheets. The towel loosened, falling open to reveal the pale, smooth expanse of his thighs.

Tom let his towel drop. He reached for the bedside drawer.

"Ready?"

Charlie nodded. "Yes. Please, Thomas."

He prepared Charlie gently, whispering praise into his hair. When he was sure Charlie was open and ready, he positioned himself, the head of his length teasing his entrance.

"Look at me."

Charlie obeyed, eyes dark and glassy.

Tom pushed forward. Charlie's mouth parted in a silent gasp, his head falling back into the pillows.

Tom held still for a moment, letting them both adjust to the stretch and the heat. He cradled the back of Charlie's head, threading his fingers through the damp, wavy hair.

"Daddy," Charlie whispered.

Tom's rhythm faltered. He withdrew almost completely, then dragged back in. "That's it," he rasped. "Say it again."

"Daddy," Charlie whined, his fingers digging into Tom's biceps. "Please."

Tom increased the pace, the slap of skin against skin filling the room. Charlie pressed his head back, his neck arching, exposing the vulnerable line of his throat.

Charlie's grip tightened, desperate. "Thomas--"

"I've got you," Tom swore, driving deep one last time.

And he did.

They rode out the aftershocks. Tom pressed their foreheads together, kissing the freckles on Charlie's cheeks.

Eventually, the reality of the room returned. Tom withdrew and handled the cleanup, returning to the dresser to retrieve the bottle and the chocolates.

He uncapped the water, the carbonation hissing softly. "Sit up," he murmured, supporting Charlie's back. He held the bottle to his lips while he drank.

Tom sat on the edge of the bed and unwrapped the first bonbon. He waited until Charlie opened for him, then placed it on his tongue.

"Let it melt," Tom instructed softly.

He unwrapped the second and ate it himself. He set the third on the nightstand for later.

"Better?" Tom asked, brushing a lock of hair from Charlie's forehead.

"Much," Charlie sighed, eyes heavy and content. "Thank you, daddy."

Tom lay back down, pulling the duvet up over their shoulders. Outside, the waves were a gentle lullaby.

They were at peace.

Chapter 32

The days in Cap-Ferrat didn't pass so much as they drifted.

They developed a routine that felt ancient and sacred, as if they had been living in this villa for forty years instead of four days.

It always began the same way: Tom waking up first.

Charlie would stir around 9:00 AM to find the other side of the bed empty. He would wander downstairs, wearing thick wool socks and one of Tom's cashmere sweaters that fell to his knees, following the smell of espresso to the terrace.

Tom would be there, sitting at the iron table in the weak morning sun, reading a French newspaper he had driven into town to get, looking like a devastatingly handsome local.

"Bonjour, husband," Tom would say, putting the paper down.

He would have a spread waiting: fresh clementines that were bright orange and bursting with sweetness, a baguette still warm from the oven, and a block of salted butter that sat on a little ceramic dish.

"Tea?" Charlie would croak, slumping into the chair next to him and pulling his knees into the sweater.

"Here," Tom would answer, pouring him a cup from the silver pot. "Drink. It'll warm you up."

They spent the mornings in a state of suspended animation. They moved from the breakfast table to the lounge chairs facing the sea.

Tom took his job as CEO very seriously, which mostly meant ensuring Charlie stayed comfortable in the crisp air.

"Arms in," Tom directed on the third day, unfolding a heavy wool blanket.

Charlie groaned as he obeyed. "I'm fine, Thomas, the sun is warm..."

"The air is cold. You'll catch a chill, and then you'll snuffle, and then you'll be miserable. I am protecting my investment."

Charlie laughed into the crook of his arm as he felt Tom tucking the blanket meticulously around his shoulders, his feet, and under his chin.

"There," Tom would say, patting Charlie's cocooned hip. "Now you're safe."

Around noon, when the wind picked up, they would retreat to the warm interior of the villa or take the car out.

One Tuesday, they drove to Villefranche-sur-Mer, a town that tumbled down the hillside into the sea like a spilled box of crayons.

They walked through the narrow, winding streets, Charlie's hand firmly tucked in Tom's coat pocket.

They stopped at an open-air market that smelled of roasted chestnuts and curing olives.

"We need dinner," Tom announced, stopping in front of a stall piled high with winter squash and wild mushrooms.

Charlie watched as Tom negotiated with the elderly woman behind the stall.

Tom's French was different here. It was slower, rolling with the local accent he seemed to have absorbed by osmosis.

He charmed the woman. He made her laugh. She ended up throwing an extra bag of persimmons into their basket for free.

"You're dangerous," Charlie noted as they walked away, Tom carrying the straw basket filled with produce. "You can charm anyone."

"Only if it's for you," Tom corrected, bumping his heavy shoulder against Charlie's.

They stopped for lunch at a tiny café by the water. They sat inside by the foggy window and ordered mussels steamed in white wine and garlic, served with a mountain of fries.

They ate with their fingers, drinking a heavy red wine.

At one point, Charlie looked up to find Tom taking a photo of him with his phone.

"Don't," Charlie protested, shielding his face with a fry. "I'm messy."

"You're happy," Tom said, snapping the picture. He turned the screen around.

Charlie looked at it. His cheeks were rosy from the wind. His hair was tousled. He was wearing a thick scarf that brought out his eyes, and he was smiling--a real, unguarded smile that reached his eyes.

"Send that to Hazel?" Charlie asked softly.

"Already done," Tom said.

The evenings were Charlie's favourite part.

They would drive back to the villa as the sky turned an early, bruising violet. They would cook together--simple things, using the ingredients from the market. Roasted squash risotto. Seared fish with fennel. Pasta with nothing but lemon and oil.

After dinner, the fire would be lit to keep the draft at bay.

Tom would sit in the armchair with a glass of wine and a book, and Charlie would go to the Pleyel.

He played for hours. He played Debussy, Ravel, Satie. He played pieces that felt like the landscape outside.

One night, while improvising, Charlie realized something.

For years, whenever he played, he had a running commentary in his head: *Is this good enough? Is my technique perfect? Will this get me the scholarship? Will this justify my existence?*

At least for tonight, the voice was gone.

There was just the music. And there was Tom, listening.

This is it, the music seemed to say. *This is the rest of our lives.*

And it was beautiful.

Charlie stopped playing, letting the last chord fade.

"Don't stop," Tom called from the fireside.

"My fingers are tired," Charlie answered truthfully. He stood up and walked over to him.

Tom put his book down. He reached out, pulling Charlie into his lap on the wide armchair.

Charlie curled up against him, resting his head on Tom's chest.

"What are you thinking, honey?" Tom asked, his hand stroking Charlie's hair.

Charlie looked up at the window--the night pressing dark and heavy against the glass.

"I'm thinking," Charlie whispered, "that I'm not waiting for the other shoe to drop anymore."

Tom's hand stilled for a second, then resumed.

"Good," he said fiercely. "Because there are no other shoes. Just us. Barefoot."

Charlie laughed, a small, sleepy sound. "That was cheesy."

"I'm a romantic," Tom defended, kissing the top of his head. "I'm allowed to be cheesy. I bought you a villa."

"You rented a villa," Charlie corrected, yawning.

"Details," Tom murmured. "Sleep, baby. We have a big day of doing absolutely nothing tomorrow."

"Okay," Charlie whispered, closing his eyes. "Okay."

The packing phase of a vacation was usually the moment the spell broke. It was the moment where reality started to creep back in--the laundry, the emails, the flight schedules.

But even packing felt different with Tom.

They were in the master bedroom of the villa. The glass doors were cracked open, letting a crisp, salt-laced breeze circulate through the room. The sea was calmer today.

Charlie was folding his clothes, placing them carefully into the suitcase. He felt a sweet melancholy in his chest.

"I'm going to miss this place," Charlie admitted, smoothing down a sleeve.

Tom was standing by the dresser, checking his phone. He looked up, slipping the phone into his pocket.

"We can come back," Tom said easily. "In the summer next time, if you want. It's on the list."

"The list?"

"The 'Make Charlie Happy' list," Tom grinned. "It's a very long spreadsheet."

Charlie smiled, zipping up the suitcase. "Well, at least the itinerary isn't too bad. We land in Montreal at 4:00 PM, which means we can be home by dinner."

Tom didn't say anything.

Charlie looked up. Tom was watching him with a strange expression--shimmering with a secret.

"Tom?" Charlie asked, panic flaring up. "Did the flight get cancelled?"

"No," Tom said. He walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge, patting the space beside him.

"Come here."

Charlie abandoned the suitcase and sat down. "What is it? Is it your parents?"

"No," Tom shook his head. He took Charlie's hand, playing with the gold band on his finger.

"The flight isn't cancelled, Charlie. We just... aren't on it."

Charlie blinked. "What?"

"I changed the tickets," Tom said softly. "We aren't flying back to Montreal tomorrow. We have two more days."

"Two more days?" Charlie looked confused. "Here?"

"No," Tom said. "We're taking the TGV tomorrow morning. To Paris."

Charlie froze.

"Paris?" Charlie whispered. "But... why? You said it's just gay Montreal."

"I did," Tom chuckled. "But this isn't a vacation stop."

Tom reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. It looked old--a photocopy of a photocopy.

He unfolded it gently on his knee.

It was a document in French. A birth record.

"I did some digging," Tom said quietly. "With help. I called Hazel, and she went over to your parents' house. Nancy got out all the old files."

Charlie stared at the paper. He saw his birth name. The date. And an address.

Rue des Écouffes, 4e Arrondissement.

"It's right off Rue des Rosiers," Tom said. "You lived there. Until you were five. Before Switzerland. Before everything got worse."

Charlie felt a sudden rushing sound in his ears. He could only remember flashes of that time--a blue door, the feeling of being small.

"I booked a hotel around the corner," Tom continued, watching Charlie's face carefully. "It's a nice neighbourhood now. Le Marais. It's full of boutiques."

Tom squeezed Charlie's hand.

"I just... I wanted you to see it. Once. I wanted you to see where you started. It's just a street, Charlie. It's not a haunted house. And I wanted you to walk down it holding my hand, so you can overwrite whatever bad memories are left with a good one."

Charlie was speechless.

He thought about the logistics of this. Tom calling Hazel. Hazel driving to NDG to raid Nancy's filing cabinets and scanning the documents. Tom booking the train, the hotel, planning the route.

While Charlie was swimming in the heated pool, Tom had been orchestrating a confrontation with the ghosts Charlie didn't even know he still had.

"We don't have to," Tom added quickly, misinterpreting Charlie's silence.

He lifted his hand to cup Charlie's cheek.

"Hey. Look at me. We don't have to go. We can stay in the hotel and eat room service for two days. We can go to the Eiffel Tower and be tourists. Or I can change the tickets back right now and we go home. It's completely up to you. I just wanted... I wanted you to have the option."

Charlie swallowed. He leaned his face into Tom's hand.

"No," Charlie whispered. "No, don't change the tickets."

He looked at the address one more time. Rue des Écouffes.

"I want to go," Charlie said, his eyes bright with tears. "I want to see it with you."

Tom let out a breath, shoulders relaxing. He smiled, soft and proud.

"Okay," Tom whispered. "Then we're going to Paris."

"Thank you," Charlie choked out, burying his face in Tom's shoulder. "Thank you, Thomas."

"You never have to thank me," Tom murmured, wrapping his arms around him. "I'm just walking you home."

The TGV cut through the countryside like a silver needle, stitching the distance between the coast and the capital at three hundred kilometres an hour.

Outside the window, the bright, hard blue of the Côte d'Azur had been replaced by the dormant brown fields and skeletal trees of central France. Mist clung to the low ground, blurring the grey stone farmhouses into streaks of wet gouache.

Charlie sat with his forehead resting against the glass, not really seeing any of it.

In his mind, he was five years old again. He was trying to remember why he had been so afraid.

A warm hand covered his own, which was clenched tight on his thigh.

"You're doing it again."

Charlie blinked. Tom was watching him from the aisle seat. He had abandoned his book chapters ago and had been watching Charlie watch the world.

"Doing what?" Charlie asked, forcing a small smile.

"Thinking so loud I can hear it over the engine," Tom said gently. He pried Charlie's fingers open. "You're trying to pre-feel it."

"I just..." Charlie sighed. "What if we get there and it triggers something awful?"

"Then we leave," Tom said. "We turn around, walk back to the hotel, order room service, and watch French game shows until you fall asleep. We are on a reconnaissance mission, not a crusade. If you don't like what you see, we abort."

He squeezed Charlie's hand. "I'm the extraction team. Remember?"

Charlie exhaled. "The extraction team."

"Plus," Tom added, reaching into the paper bag on his lap, "I have tactical supplies."

He pulled out a macaron--strawberry, bright pink.

"Sugar," Tom said seriously. "For strength."

Charlie took the cookie. He took a bite. It was sweet and airy.

"Thank you," Charlie whispered.

"We'll be in Paris in twenty minutes," Tom said, checking his watch. "Just remember: You aren't that kid anymore. You have me. You have leverage."

Chapter 33

The hotel Tom had chosen in Le Marais was a hidden gem. It was tucked behind an iron gate, built around a private courtyard filled with ivy and potted boxwoods.

It was quiet. It smelled of beeswax and old wood.

They dropped their bags in the room and didn't unpack.

"Ready?" Tom asked, standing by the door. He held out his hand.

Charlie looked at him. The man who had flown them across an ocean, paid off his debts, and held him through the night.

"Ready," Charlie said.

They walked out into the early dusk.

The streets here were narrow, medieval, and winding. They were alive with noise.

Charlie's pulse quickened.

It was the Jewish Quarter. People were shouting in French, in Hebrew, in English. Lines were winding out of bakeries, and old men were sitting behind the steamy windows of cafés playing chess.

"We have to go through the chaos to get to the quiet," Tom said, navigating the crowd with his shoulder pressed against Charlie's heavy coat. "Rue des Rosiers."

They turned a corner onto the famous street. It was an assault on the senses--steam rising from takeout windows, voices, frying oil, perfume, laughter.

Tom walked them past the long lines of the falafel shops, past the bakeries, until they reached a narrower, darker intersection.

He stopped.

"Here," Tom said quietly.

He pointed to a street sign fixed to the corner of a stone building: *Rue des Écouffes*.

They turned onto it, and the volume dropped significantly.

The street was narrower than Rue des Rosiers, the buildings leaning in closer together, casting long shadows.

"Number 24," Charlie whispered.

They walked down the cobblestones.

18... 20... 22...

And there it was.

It was a building like all the others--pale stone, four stories high, zinc roof, wrought-iron balconies.

But the door.

The door was blue. A deep, chipped, peeling blue.

Charlie swayed slightly.

Tom turned his body into a wall that blocked the rest of the street.

"I'm here," Tom murmured, his hand firm on the back of Charlie's neck, fingers warm against his cold skin. "I've got you. Breathe."

Charlie stared at the blue door. He waited for the terror. He waited for the crushing pain he had carried for twenty years.

But it didn't come.

He realized... it was just a door.

"I remember the blue," Charlie whispered.

"It's a nice blue," Tom said conversationally. "A bit weathered. But distinct."

"I lived there," Charlie said, tongue numb. "On the third floor."

He looked up at the windows. The empty flower boxes and rain-streaked glass. Someone had hung a bicycle wheel on the balcony.

It looked... normal. It looked like a home.

"You lived there," Tom agreed. "Bad things happened. And then you left. And then you grew up. And then you met me."

Tom stepped back slightly, forcing Charlie to look at him.

"And now you're back," Tom said. "But you aren't alone."

"No," Charlie said. "I'm not."

Tom grinned. A sudden, mischievous spark lit up his eyes.

"What is it?"

"I promised to overwrite the memory," Tom said. He grabbed Charlie's lapels and pulled him in.

It was a kiss that said, *I am here, and you are mine, and nothing that happened behind that door matters more than this.*

A couple walking a poodle passed them, laughing.

"Allez les amoureux!"

Charlie broke the kiss, face flushed.

"You're crazy," Charlie panted.

"Let them watch," Tom said, looking smug. "Let them see that Charlie Heitmeyer is having a great day on Rue des Écouffes."

He wrapped his arm around Charlie's waist, turning him back toward the noise of Rue des Rosiers.

"Now," Tom pointed to the green storefront visible at the end of the street, where the crowd was still buzzing. "That is L'As du Falafel. Lenny Kravitz eats there. We are going to get a pita, we are going to get sauce all over our faces, and we are going to sit on a cold bench and mock people's fashion choices. Okay?"

Charlie looked back at the blue door one last time. It held no power over him.

"Okay," Charlie said. "Extra spicy?"

"Whatever you want," Tom said. "Come on."

Charlie leaned against the wall, the adrenaline of the afternoon suddenly draining away.

"Sit, honey," Tom said gently, gesturing to the edge of the bed.

Charlie sank onto the duvet. Tom knelt before him, unlacing his boots.

"You've been on your feet all day," Tom murmured, sliding the first boot off. "The walk, the standing in line for falafel." He looked up, his hands resting on Charlie's knees. "How are you? And don't give me the PR answer."

Charlie looked at his socks. "I feel... scraped out. Like a cantaloupe."

Tom let out a soft laugh. "Scraped out is allowed."

He stood up and placed the boots near the door. "I'm running us a bath. The tub is the size of a small swimming pool."

The bathroom was all white marble and chrome. Soon, the air was thick with steam and the scent of verbenas.

The water wrapped around Charlie's tired muscles. He let out a long sigh. A moment later, the water level rose as Tom stepped in behind him.

Tom sat down, spreading his legs to bracket Charlie's hips, and pulled Charlie back until his head was resting on Tom's chest. Tom took a washcloth and began to run it over Charlie's chest and arms.

"We don't have to talk about it," Tom said quietly, his chin resting on the top of Charlie's wet hair.

"I want to," Charlie murmured, his eyes closed. "I just... I don't know what to say. I expected it to be scarier."

"And?"

"It was just a door. It needs a paint job."

Tom hummed. "It's just wood. It can't hurt you."

Charlie turned his head, trying to catch a glimpse of Tom's face.

"How are you?" Charlie asked.

Tom paused, the washcloth stilling over Charlie's heart. "Me? I'm fine. I'm the extraction team."

"Don't give me the PR answer," Charlie countered.

Tom let out a breath. He tightened his arms around Charlie.

"I was terrified," Tom admitted. "All day. On the train, walking down that street... I was terrified I was pushing you too hard. I felt like I was walking you through a minefield blindfolded. I didn't know if I was helping you heal or just re-traumatizing you."

"You didn't," Charlie promised.

"I look at you," Tom continued, "and I think about the things you've survived. And honestly, Charlie? I don't think I could have done it. I would have broken."

Tom kissed the side of Charlie's head.

"Today just confirmed what I already knew. You are the bravest man I have ever met."

Charlie felt a lump form in his throat. He reached down, finding Tom's hand under the water and lacing their fingers together.

"I'm not the brave one," Charlie whispered.

"Yes, you are."

"No," Charlie insisted. He turned in the tub, splashing water slightly, until he could look Tom in the eye. Tom looked stripped down, hair wet, eyes unguarded and full of love.

"You are," Charlie said. "Because I just lived with them. They lived in my closet and under my bed. But you..." Charlie touched Tom's cheek. "You hunted them down. You kill all my monsters."

Tom stared at him. He looked like he might cry, or maybe he already was, his face damp in the steam.

"I'll kill every single one of them," Tom whispered. "Anything for you."

Charlie kissed him.

They stayed in the water until it turned tepid. Then, they slowly dried each other off and padded into the bedroom.

They didn't bother with pyjamas. They crawled under the duvet, skin against skin.

Tom lay on his back, and Charlie curled into his side, draping an arm across Tom's chest, his leg hooked over Tom's legs.

The room was dark, save for the streetlights filtering through the sheer curtains.

"Sleep," Tom murmured, rubbing Charlie's back. "We're safe."

Charlie listened to the beat of Tom's heart under his ear. It was the best sound in the world.

"Goodnight, my hero," Charlie whispered.

It started as a ripple in Charlie's sleep, a furrowed brow.

But then the dream took hold, dragging him down.

It wasn't just the blue door. Behind the door were the faces. The hunger that felt like a living thing, gnawing at his ribs. The cold seeping into his bones.

Hands were grabbing him. Rough, angry hands. They were shaking him, pulling him--tearing his skin and throwing him away.

"Non... non..."

Charlie shot up in bed, gasping, his heart beating so hard it hurt. The room was dark. The shadows of the Paris streetlights stretched across the floor like bars.

He couldn't breathe.

"Char?"

A hand touched his shoulder.

Charlie scrambled backward, his heels digging into the mattress, his breath coming in short, terrified wheezes.

"No!" Charlie cried out, slapping the hand away. He pressed his back against the headboard, pulling his knees up to his chest to protect his vital organs. "Don't. Don't touch me."

"Charlie, hey. Hey."

The voice was low. The shadow froze. Its hands went up in surrender.

"It's me. Look at me. It's Tom."

Charlie stared, his eyes wide and unseeing, his chest heaving. Tom?

The name struggled to cut through the static in his brain. Tom. Thomas.

"T-Thomas?" Charlie choked out.

"I'm right here, baby," Tom whispered. He moved slowly, inch by inch. "I'm coming closer. Okay?"

Charlie was shaking so hard his teeth chattered. All of his muscles were pulled tight. He nodded jerkily.

Tom reached out again, and this time, Charlie didn't flinch. Tom wrapped his arms around him, pulling Charlie's rigid, trembling body against his own. He maneuvered them until Charlie was tucked between his legs, his back against Tom's chest, Tom's arms around him like a seatbelt.

"Breathe," Tom commanded softly, his lips right at Charlie's ear. "You're in Paris. You're in a hotel. You're with me, your husband. You're safe."

"I can't--" Charlie gasped, clawing at Tom's forearms. "I can't--"

"Yes, you can. I'm right here. No one can hurt you here."

Tom began to rock him. Slow and steady. Back and forth.

"Count by tens," Tom said. "In French. Your French."

Charlie swallowed a sob. He focused on Tom's voice.

"Soixante," he whispered.

"Good," Tom encouraged, rocking him. "Keep going."

"Soixante... Septante."

"That's it. Next one."

"Huitante," Charlie choked out, tears falling.

"Keep going. Almost there."

"Nonante," Charlie cried, his body finally going limp.

"My boy. My brave boy," Tom repeated, kissing the side of Charlie's sweat-dampened head.

Charlie buried his face in his hands and wept. Tom just held him. He kept rocking, his chin resting on Charlie's shoulder, his hands rubbing Charlie's arms, warming the cold skin.

But while his touch was gentle, Tom's mind was a landscape of violence.

As he listened to his husband's heartbroken sobs, Tom was mentally revisiting every name, every file he had read in the adoption agency reports. He was imagining the people who had made Charlie feel this pain. He was burning their houses down. He was tearing their worlds apart brick by brick. He was filled with a cold rage so profound it felt like it could level the city.

I have him now, Tom thought viciously. If you ever come near him again, I will kill you.

Slowly, the sobbing turned into sniffles. The panic attack receded, leaving Charlie exhausted.

He slumped backward, his head resting on Tom's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Charlie rasped. "I'm so sorry, I woke you..."

"Shh," Tom soothed. "Don't you dare apologize. Sleep now."

"...stay?"

"I'm never going anywhere," Tom promised. "I've got you."

Charlie's breathing evened out. His hand, still clutching Tom's forearm, relaxed its grip. Within minutes, he drifted back into a sleep that was thankfully dreamless.

Tom stayed awake.

He sat up against the headboard, holding Charlie against his chest, watching the shadows on the floor, daring them to move.

Charlie woke with Tom draped over him. His face was pressed into the heat of Charlie's neck.

Then the memory of the night snapped back. It felt like a bone clicking into a socket. He remembered the panic and the way he had recoiled in the dark. The shame hit his stomach, hot and sour. He had thought he was doing better.

The idea of Tom staying awake, guarding him while he slept, made Charlie's chest tighten. He made a small, broken sound.

Tom inhaled. He pressed his nose against the damp skin of Charlie's collarbone.

"Char?" Tom's hand slid up to his jaw. His thumb caught a tear before it could roll.

"I'm sorry," Charlie whispered. The words felt wrong. "I didn't mean to jump like that."

Charlie shut his eyes and gripped Tom's hip. He felt like a grown man acting like a child.

"Hey." Tom got up on one elbow, his shadow falling over Charlie. He looked focused. "Open your eyes."

"I flinched," Charlie said. "You were trying to help, and I pulled away."

"Like I was a stranger," Tom finished. He didn't sound hurt. "It's okay, Charlie. You weren't awake yet. I know the difference."

Tom leaned down until their foreheads touched. He smelled of sleep and sweat and the person underneath the panic.

"That didn't hurt me," Tom murmured. His hand tightened in Charlie's hair. "I've got you. Shaking or not. That's the deal."

Charlie reached up and dug his fingers into the muscle of Tom's shoulders. He needed to be crushed a little. Tom followed the lead. He settled his hips between Charlie's thighs.

"I like you like this," Tom whispered against his ear. "Needing me. It's not a burden."

"More," Charlie breathed. He looked Tom in the eye. "I need to know you're real. Every inch."

Tom hesitated. His protective side fought with his hunger. Then his thumb traced the curve of Charlie's hip, pressing hard enough to leave a mark. The thrumming started in Charlie's lap, drowning out the last of the fear.

"Thomas. Please."

Tom pinned Charlie's wrists to the pillow. It was a brief show of strength that made Charlie's head spin. Tom's mouth moved to the pulse point at his throat. The skin-on-skin contact was a flood that pushed the memories into the dark.

As Tom's mouth trailed lower, Charlie's body gave a sharp spike of anxiety.

"Wait," Charlie gasped.

Tom froze instantly. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," Charlie said, his face heating up. "I... I haven't prepped. I thought we'd shower first."

The tension left Tom's shoulders. He slid his body alongside Charlie's.

"Baby," Tom said softly. "That doesn't matter."

"But I wanted to--"

"I know. But there are a thousand ways for us to be together. We don't need that one right now."

He leaned in, inhaling the musk of Charlie's skin.

"Let me take care of you," Tom whispered. His hand slid between them. "Let me show you how many ways I can own this morning."

Charlie's voice died. Tom's mouth was relentless. He kissed Charlie's wrists and the pale skin of his inner arms. By the time Tom pushed Charlie's thighs wide, Charlie was vibrating.

"Thomas. Now."

"Look at me," Tom commanded.

He lowered his head. He was shameless and thorough. Charlie's body jerked.

"Let go for me," Tom said against his skin. "Give it to me, Char."

Charlie's body snapped tight. A hoarse cry broke from his throat as he spilled over.

Tom held him through the peak. When the spasms stopped, he pulled Charlie into his arms. Charlie collapsed, boneless, burying his face in Tom's neck. His chest hitched.

"I've got you," Tom murmured.

Charlie clung to him. The shame was gone.

"I love you," Charlie choked out.

"I know," Tom whispered. He kissed the sweat from Charlie's forehead. "I've got you, Charlie. For as long as you need to be held."

They lay tangled in the quiet of the hotel suite. Charlie traced idle patterns across Tom's chest, memorizing the sound of a heart that beat entirely for him.

Tom looked down at him. He looked like he had just guarded a fortress, satisfied but still vigilant.

"You're thinking too loudly," Tom murmured. He leaned down, pressing a kiss to Charlie's temple. "I can hear the gears turning."

Charlie smiled against Tom's shoulder. "Just thinking about you."

"Only good things, I hope."

"The best," Charlie assured him.

Charlie moved his hand lower, over the hard plane of Tom's stomach. He followed the dark trail of hair downward. Tom went rigid.

Charlie moved down the bed. He kissed Tom's sternum and the salt-flavoured dip of his ribs. When Charlie's hand settled on Tom's hip, Tom reached out and took his wrist.

"You don't have to," Tom said. "Especially not after this morning. You can just let me hold you."

The concern in Tom's voice made Charlie's chest ache.

"I know I don't need to," Charlie said. He propped himself up until they were face-to-face. He ran his fingers through the hair at the back of Tom's neck and tugged.

"I want..." Charlie continued, gaze unwavering. "I want to taste you. Right now... nothing would make me happier than swallowing your cum."

Tom malfunctioned. He froze, reeling, before a laugh burst out of him. He cupped Charlie's face and ran a thumb hard across his lip.

"God, I love you," Tom said. "You always surprise me."

"Is that a yes?"

"It's an 'I'm all yours,'" Tom said. "It's a 'do whatever the hell you want with me.'"

Tom let go of Charlie's wrist. He lay back against the pillows.

"I'm yours," he said.

Charlie lowered his head, Tom's fingers tangling in his hair.

Tom's head fell back. "Baby," he whispered.

Charlie hummed.

"You don't have to be gentle with me," he said, smiling coyly.

Tom groaned. He gripped Charlie's hair more firmly.

"Perfect," Tom breathed. "You're perfect."

Charlie didn't look away. He wanted to watch Tom fall apart. Tom's hips lifted from the bed.

"I love you," Tom said. His voice was rough. "God, Charlie."

Charlie wrapped one hand around what his mouth couldn't reach. He felt the tremors starting in Tom's legs.

"Close," Tom warned.

Charlie didn't pull away. He held Tom's hip down and swallowed without hesitation.

Tom stared at the ceiling, chest heaving. He looked wrecked.

Charlie stayed there for a moment. He kissed Tom's hip, then made his way back up the bed. His hair was messy. His eyes were bright.

Tom pulled him against his chest and kissed him hard.

Charlie melted into him. Tom's hand cradled the back of his neck.

"That was..." Tom shook his head. He couldn't find the word.

"Good?" Charlie smiled.

"Better than good," Tom said. He pressed his forehead to Charlie's.

They lay there. The breeze came through the open window.

"I meant it," Tom whispered. "I'm yours. Forever."

Charlie nodded against Tom's shoulder.

"And I'm yours."

Chapter 34

Charlie stood alone in the fluorescence of Charles de Gaulle Terminal 2.

Tom had vanished in search of water and snacks. This left Charlie with the idea to find something new to read on the transatlantic flight.

He ducked into the Relay. The shelves near the door were crowded with primary-colored paperbacks, most with the word thriller in English on the cover, even if the rest of the jacket copy was in French.

Charlie did a slow lap, finding nothing of interest that he had not already finished. He was about to pick up a Sudoku booklet when something caught his eye.

The title--*Velvet Thunder*--was embossed in metallic red and silver. The cover art showed a man in a three-piece suit, with the kind of jawline that could deflect bullets, holding a woman in a pose that hovered somewhere between embrace and abduction. Behind them, a neon skyline loomed, a single, tastefully placed bolt of lightning arcing down.

Charlie picked it up. He flipped to the back.

Raven Blackthorne is a #1 International Bestselling Author, reclusive billionaire, and former Cirque du Soleil acrobat. Her hobbies include fencing, whiskey tasting, and hunting rare truffles in the forests of Burgundy.

Charlie snorted, earning a look from the woman next to him. He opened to the first page.

The shrill scream of the alarm clock sliced through the silence of the morning like a chainsaw through a library.

Charlie smiled, already prepared to put it down. But instead, his eyes skimmed forward with morbid curiosity.

"Today is the day," she opined to the empty room, her voice trembling with a mixture of trepidation and anticipation, like a cocktail shaker full of anxiety.

He blinked, momentarily thrown.

Was this... art?

He skimmed ahead.

She collided with a wall. A wall of solid, unyielding granite. But it wasn't a wall. It was a chest.

Charlie's grip tightened on the paperback. He turned his body and kept reading.

By page twenty, he was standing in a hunched position that could only be described as literary mortification. He didn't hear Tom approach.

"What the fuck is that?"

Charlie jumped, nearly dropping the book. "It's--" He swallowed. "It's research."

Tom plucked it from his hands, read the cover, and immediately dissolved into giggles.

"Velvet Thunder," Tom said reverently. "Is that the guy or the weather pattern?"

"I think it's both," Charlie muttered, cheeks burning.

Tom flipped to the first page, read one paragraph, then another, and laughed harder. "Oh my god. We have to buy this. We need to own this."

Charlie followed him to the register, the shame morphing into something warmer. Tom chatted easily with the cashier, chose a paper bag instead of plastic, and tucked the book into their backpack.

As they left the Relay, Tom draped an arm around Charlie's shoulders and squeezed.

"*You* have excellent taste," Tom murmured. "You picked me, after all."

At the gate, Charlie tried to focus on the news app on his phone, his collection of ebooks, Duolingo. But the allure of the metallic paperback was irresistible. Tom caught his eye and raised an eyebrow.

Do it.

Charlie pulled out the book and opened it.

Every so often, when the prose reached a particular peak of madness, he leaned over and whispered the line into Tom's ear.

Each time, Tom laughed, and Charlie felt lighter.

The return to Montreal was a shock to the system. Charlie and Tom dropped their bags in the entryway, too jetlagged to care.

Their home was still exactly as they'd left it: tidy, sunlit, a little sterile at first glance. But traces of the trip were already spreading--an oversized jar of orange blossom honey on the kitchen island, a tea towel printed with the skyline of Nice tossed over the back of the armchair.

After a shower and pizza, they stood in front of the built-in bookshelf that dominated the living room wall, shoulder to shoulder, both holding the blessed object.

The book's cover looked even tackier here. The couple seemed to vibrate with energy, the heroine's hair suspended mid-tornado.

Charlie's fingers traced the holographic letters, half in awe, half in horror.

Tom turned to Charlie. "Do you want to do the honours?"

Charlie shook his head, smiling. "You do it."

With maximum ceremony, Tom slid the paperback into its designated place: right between a Henle Urtext of The Well-Tempered Clavier and a run of Harvard Business Review hardbacks. He stepped back, tilting his head to survey the effect.

"It's perfect," Tom pronounced. "Someday someone we barely know will notice it, and we'll have to explain why we own erotic billionaire fanfiction."

Charlie felt a warm happiness in his chest. "It's a souvenir."

"Mhm," Tom said. "We'll tell them it's research."

In the blink of an eye, France was a month behind them.

For Tom, reality was Heitmeyer-Montgomery. The firm was no longer a dusty loft with crooked floors; it was a war room in preparation for their grand opening. It required eighteen-hour days and a level of focus that turned Tom into a machine.

For Charlie, reality was the PhD. The Virtuoso had to go back to being a student. He had deadlines. He had a dissertation chapter staring at him from his laptop screen, with judgmental blinking-cursor eyes.

It was Tuesday, 11:30 PM.

The penthouse was silent.

Charlie sat at the island with his laptop. He was wearing his glasses and a pair of thick wool socks. A half-eaten apple sat on a napkin.

He typed a sentence. He deleted it. He sighed.

He looked at the empty spot on the sofa where Tom usually sat.

He looked at the front door.

He didn't feel unsafe. Just... hollow.

He felt like a piano with no one to play it.

His phone buzzed on the marble counter.

Thomas: Hazel looks ready to bite someone. I miss you so much. Go to sleep, baby.

Charlie smiled, a small, sad curve of his lips. He typed back.

Charlie: I'm writing about John Cage. I miss you too. Hurry home.

He put the phone down. He didn't go to sleep.

Instead, he made a pot of herbal tea. He paced the living room. He sat at the piano and played a few soft chords, but stopped because playing without Tom listening felt like talking to an empty room.

At 1:15 AM, the lock turned.

Charlie jerked awake. He hadn't realized he'd dozed off at the island.

The door opened, and Tom walked in.

His tie was gone. His top button was undone. His suit jacket was slung over one shoulder, and his hair was messy, as if he'd been running his hands through it for hours.

He looked up and saw Charlie.

Tom froze. The exhaustion in his face was instantly replaced by guilt.

"Charlie," Tom breathed, dropping his keys in the bowl. "I told you to go to sleep."

"I know," Charlie said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "I'm sorry. I just... I was... supervising the apartment."

Tom walked over and hugged Charlie from behind. He let out a long groan.

"I hate this," Tom mumbled against his skin. "I hate being away from you."

"I know," Charlie whispered. "I hate it too."

Charlie stood so they could hug properly. Tom squeezed him tight.

"Are you okay?" Tom asked. "Did you eat? Did you lock the terrace door?"

"I ate. I locked the door. I'm okay. Just... bored." Charlie offered a tired smile. "I miss my husband."

Tom closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against Charlie's. "I'm trying to wrap this up. Once we take care of legal, I can hire executives. I can step back. But right now..."

"I know," Charlie interrupted softly. He kissed Tom's forehead. "You're building the empire. I get it. I'm not mad. I know you would be here if you could. I'm just... lonely."

Tom actually flinched. "I don't want you to be lonely. That's the one thing I promised you wouldn't be."

"It's not the bad kind," Charlie assured him. "It's just... I work here all day. It's big. And you're gone. And Hazel is gone. It's just me and the plants."

Tom sighed. They stood like that for a long time.

"I have an idea," Tom said into Charlie's shoulder.

"If it involves me as a secretary, Hazel already said no."

Tom chuckled. "No. Not that."

He pulled back, his hands resting on Charlie's hips. He looked serious.

"A coworker."

Charlie blinked. "A coworker? For me? Here?"

"Someone to keep you company," Tom explained. "Someone who is in the apartment during the day. Someone who makes noise so it's not so quiet."

"Thomas," Charlie said slowly. "Are you suggesting we get a roommate? Because I really don't think--"

"Not a human," Tom said. "Fuck no. I'm not sharing you with a human."

He paused for suspense.

"A cat."

Charlie stared at him. "A cat?"

"We have the space," Tom reasoned. "It would be good for you. Companionship. Stress relief. Studies show that purring lowers blood pressure."

"You've researched this," Charlie realized.

"I may have read a few articles during a call this evening," Tom admitted. "Look, I can't be here every hour of the day right now. And I hate the idea of you being here alone, staring at walls. I want you to have... a buddy. Someone to watch your back."

Charlie laughed. "A cat isn't going to watch my back. It's going to sleep on my keyboard and judge me."

"Fine," Tom smiled, leaning in to kiss him. "It'll keep you on your toes."

He kissed Charlie--slow, deep, and tasting of relief.

"Think about it," Tom murmured against his lips. "We can go look this weekend. Find you a designated research assistant."

Charlie wrapped his arms tighter around Tom's neck. He thought about the empty apartment. He thought about a small, warm weight sleeping on his feet while he wrote.

"Okay," Charlie whispered. "Let's get a coworker."

Tom smiled, hoisting Charlie up off the stool and into his arms.

"Good. Now, you are officially off the clock. I'm taking you to bed."

"You're tired," Charlie protested, though he wrapped his legs around Tom's waist instantly.

"I'm never that tired," Tom growled softly, carrying him toward the hallway.

The Montreal SPCA was a symphony of barking.

Charlie walked in and immediately looked like he was going to cry.

"Oh no," he whispered, clutching Tom's sleeve as they passed a glass enclosure full of kittens. "Thomas. Look at them. We can't just take one. We have to take the whole pile."

Tom steered him gently past the kittens, his hand warm on the small of Charlie's back. "We are here for one coworker, Charlie. We are not staffing a department."

"But look at that one!" Charlie pointed to a black kitten that was attacking its own tail.

"Focus," Tom said, though he was smiling. "Let's go to the adult room. Kittens are cute, but you need someone who respects deadlines."

They walked into the "Cat Condo" room. It was quieter here. Rows of cages lined the walls, filled with cats of every shape, size, and level of indifference.

Charlie walked down the aisle slowly. He stopped at every cage. He stuck his fingers through the wire mesh to scratch heads. He cooed at a grumpy Persian.

Tom hung back, hands in his pockets.

"It's impossible," Charlie sighed, turning back to Tom with wide eyes. "How do you choose? It feels mean. It feels like... like picking a favourite child."

He looked at a calico who was sleeping with her back to him.

"I can't do it. I can't leave them here."

"You aren't leaving them," Tom said gently, walking over. "You're making space for one to leave so another one can get a spot. You're saving a seat."

Charlie nodded, sniffing. "Okay. That helps. A little."

He turned to the shelter volunteer, a young woman who looked like she dealt with emotional adopters five times a day.

"Excuse me?" Charlie asked.

"Yes?"

"Who..." Charlie swallowed hard. "Who's been here the longest?"

"Oh," she said. "That would be Marmalade. But we call him 'The Loaf.' He's... well, he's a bit specific."

"Show me, please."

She led them to a cage in the back corner.

Inside, sitting on a blue towel, was a large, orange cat.

He was a veteran. One of his ears was clipped. He had a scar on his nose.

He sat with his paws tucked under his chest, staring at the wall with the existential dread of a philosopher.

"He's seven," The worker explained. "He came in as a stray three months ago. He's not aggressive, but he's not... cuddly. He just... kind of exists. People usually want the kittens."

Charlie approached the cage and crouched.

"Hi," he whispered.

The cat turned his head slowly. He looked at Charlie with bright, golden eyes.

Charlie pressed his hand against the glass.

The cat stood up. He stretched, revealing a surprisingly ample belly. Then, he walked over to the glass and pressed his forehead against Charlie's hand.

Charlie let out a wet, shaky breath. Tears spilled over instantly.

"Oh... He's perfect," Charlie choked out.

Tom walked over. He crouched down next to Charlie.

"He looks like he's seen some things," Tom noted.

"He's so perfect," Charlie sniffled, wiping his eyes. "He's been waiting. Look at him. He's just been waiting for us."

Charlie turned to Tom. "What do we name him? He can't be Marmalade. That's too fancy. He needs a real name."

Tom looked at the cat. The cat looked at Tom.

For a long moment, there was silence. It was a stare-down. Executive to Executive.

Tom narrowed his eyes. He seemed to be downloading the cat's resume and his credit score.

The cat blinked once, slowly.

Tom nodded.

"Cheddar," he declared.

Charlie blinked. "Cheddar?"

"He's orange," Tom explained, dead serious. "And sharp. And he looks like a block of cheese. Cheddar."

Charlie let out a laugh that sounded like a hiccup. He looked back at the cat.

"Cheddar," Charlie tested the word.

The cat meowed--a rusty, creaky sound like a door hinge needing oil.

"See?" Tom said, looking smug. "He knows his brand."

"Cheddar," Charlie agreed, beaming. "We'll take him. We're taking him home right now."

The transition to the penthouse was surprisingly seamless.

Cheddar walked out of the carrier, inspected the floors, sniffed Tom's briefcase (and judged it), and then walked to the spot of sunlight near the piano.

He flopped over on his side, exposing his white belly, and went to sleep.

"He owns the place," Tom observed, loosening his tie. "It took him five minutes."

"He knows he's safe," Charlie said softly.

He sat on the floor near the piano, watching the cat breathe.

Tom walked over and sat down next to him. He wrapped an arm around Charlie's shoulders.

"See?" Tom said. "Coworker acquired. Now you aren't alone when I'm not here."

"No," Charlie smiled, leaning his head on Tom's shoulder. "I'm not."

Cheddar let out a snore.

"Although," Tom added, frowning slightly. "I think he might be snoring louder than me. We might need to have a performance review."

"Don't you dare," Charlie warned, petting the orange fur. "He's doing his best."

Tom kissed the top of Charlie's head. "He's perfect. Welcome to the firm, Cheddar."

Chapter 35

The envelope sat on the marble kitchen island like a landmine.

It was thick and cream-colored. Cheddar, occupying the center of the counter despite three previous evictions, sniffed the corner of the envelope, sneezed, and looked at Tom with disdain.

"I agree," Tom muttered.

Charlie walked in from the living room.

"What's that?" Charlie asked.

"A summons," Tom said dryly. "My mother had it couriered to the firm. Apparently, sending a text is too pedestrian."

Charlie picked it up. His fingers brushed the embossed return address.

The Montgomery Estate, Westmount.

He opened it. The handwriting was elegant.

Thomas, Your father and I expect you for dinner this Friday. Seven o'clock. Do not be late. We have matters to discuss. Katherine.

"We're not going," Tom said. He walked over to the fridge, grabbing a bottle of water. "I'm not subjecting you to that again."

Charlie reread the card. "They might just want to talk business."

"With them, everything is business," Tom snapped. Then he sighed. "I'm sorry. It's not you, obviously. I just... I don't want them to hurt you again, Charlie."

Charlie walked over to him. He placed a hand on Tom's forearm.

"I love that you want to protect me." Charlie looked up, meeting Tom's eyes. "But what about you?"

Tom blinked. "Me?"

"Do you want to see them?"

Tom looked away.

"I don't know," he admitted quietly. He shrugged. "I feel like I still love them. Which is stupid, because they're awful now. But... when I was a kid, there were moments. My dad

taught me to skate on the pond. My mom used to read to me. I know they still love me, in their own messed-up way."

He looked back at Charlie. "What would you do?"

Charlie reached up, straightening Tom's tie.

"I think we should go," he said softly.

Tom stiffened. "Charlie--"

"If it's the last time, then it's the last time," Charlie said firmly. "But at least you'll know. At least we tried. If we walk away, let's walk away because there's nothing left to save, not because we were afraid."

Tom searched Charlie's face. "You'd do that? You'd go back there? For me?"

"I'd go anywhere for you," Charlie said simply. "Besides. We're married now. They can't make me feel small anymore. Not when I know who I belong to."

Tom let out a long breath. He pulled Charlie into a hug.

"Okay," Tom whispered into his skin. "We go. One last time."

The drive to Westmount on Friday evening was quiet.

The city lights blurred past. Tom drove with one hand on the wheel, his other hand gripping Charlie's thigh.

Charlie covered Tom's hand with his own.

They entered through the gates.

Tom parked the car. He killed the engine.

"Ready?" Tom asked.

"No," Charlie admitted. "But let's go anyway."

Tom unbuckled his seatbelt. But before he opened the door, he leaned across the console, cupping Charlie's jaw, and kissed him.

It was desperate. Claiming.

When they broke apart, Tom rested his forehead against Charlie's.

"You are the best thing in my life," Tom said fiercely. "Do not let them make you forget that."

"I won't," Charlie promised.

They got out of the car. The night air was crisp. Tom took Charlie's hand immediately, lacing their fingers together as they walked up the long stone path.

The door opened before they even rang the bell.

A woman in a black and white uniform stood there. She was older, with kind eyes and graying hair pulled back in a bun.

"Mr. Thomas," she said, smiling sweetly.

"Elena," Tom said, his voice instantly warming. He stepped inside and gave her a quick, gentle hug. "You look good. How's the hip?"

"Better, now that the rain has stopped," she said, patting his arm. She looked at Charlie, her eyes twinkling. "And Mr. Charlie."

"Hi, Mrs. Elena," Charlie said shyly. "It's nice to see you again."

"Elena."

They all froze.

Kathy Montgomery stood in the archway of the foyer. She was wearing a cream silk blouse and tailored trousers. Her hair was a perfect helmet of grey-toned brown. She held a glass of white wine.

She looked at Tom. Then her gaze slid to their joined hands, and finally, to Charlie.

"I see you've arrived," she said. "And really, Thomas. Was the display in the driveway necessary?"

Tom's grip on Charlie's hand tightened. "Hello, Mother."

"We have cameras, you know," she continued, taking a sip of her wine. "The security team doesn't need to see you... groping each other in the sedan. It's untidy."

Charlie felt a flush creep up his neck, but Tom didn't flinch.

"He's my husband, Mother," Tom said evenly. "If the security team is offended by affection, you should probably fire them."

Kathy's lips pressed into a thin line. She turned on her heel.

"Your father is in the study. Dinner is in ten minutes."

She walked away.

Tom looked down at Charlie. "Round one," he murmured.

Charlie squeezed his hand. "Round one."

The dining room was white and silent.

A crystal chandelier hung above the table like a frozen explosion. The table itself was long enough to land a small aircraft on.

Michael sat at the head, Kathy at the foot. There were two place settings on the long sides of the table, positioned directly across from one another.

Tom walked to the side of the table where his plate was set, picked up the crystal wine glass and silverware from the opposite setting, and moved them next to Charlie's.

"Thomas," Kathy said sharply. "You are unbalancing the table."

"I'm sitting with my husband," Tom said with finality.

He picked up his chair and hauled it over the table. He placed it next to Charlie's and sat down.

Kathy stared at the empty expanse of mahogany across from them, her lips pursed.

It felt less like a family dinner and more like a deposition.

The first course was a cold cucumber soup. The only sound in the room was the clink of silver spoons against porcelain.

Under the table, Tom was gripping Charlie's knee almost painfully, but Charlie leaned into it.

"So," Michael said. "I hear your little startup will be opening its doors in the new year."

Tom nodded, squeezing Charlie's leg. "January 5th."

Michael let out a dry chuckle. He reached for his wine glass. "Ambition is a fine thing, Thomas. But hubris is expensive. You're playing with capital you don't have."

"I have the capital," Tom said calmly. "And I have the team."

"A team of defectors," Michael corrected. "I've noticed a few of my junior associates have... migrated."

"They're not defectors," Tom said, his jaw tightening. "They're employees. They're free to work where they see a future."

Kathy sighed. "Must we talk business? It's terrible for the digestion."

She looked across the table at Charlie. Her gaze was examining him like he was a smudge on the tablecloth.

"Charles," she began. "I read about your... concert. In the paper."

"Thank you," Charlie whispered.

"It sounds exhausting," she said. "All that noise. I suppose it appeals to a certain demographic."

"People who feel things?" Tom shot back.

Kathy ignored him. "I just wonder, Thomas, if this is sustainable. You look tired. You look... worn down." She gestured vaguely at him. "Running a firm, managing a... delicate spouse. Is this really the life you envisioned for yourself? Living in the city, working eighteen hours a day to support a piano player?"

It was said so politely. It was a knife wrapped in a napkin.

Tom put his spoon down.

"I am not 'supporting' him," Tom said, voice dropping. "Charlie is--"

"We're just saying," Michael interrupted, wiping his mouth. "You had a path here. A clear path. You chose to walk into the weeds. And now you're poaching my staff to try and build something that will inevitably collapse because you're distracted."

Michael leaned back, swirling his scotch.

"You can't buy loyalty. You're paying these young associates twenty percent over market rate to jump ship. But the moment the money runs out, they'll leave. They always do. You can't buy respect."

Charlie looked at Michael.

He looked at the cold, empty eyes of a man who had everything and nothing.

Charlie took a sip of water. He set the glass down.

"I don't think he's buying it," Charlie said.

Michael stopped swirling his drink. Kathy stopped buttering her bread. They both looked at Charlie as if the furniture had suddenly started speaking.

"Excuse me?" Michael said, his eyes narrowing.

Charlie didn't shrink. He felt Tom's hand on his leg, trembling slightly with tension.

"The loyalty," Charlie said softly. "I don't think Thomas is buying it."

"And what would you know about corporate management?" Michael sneered. "Do they teach that at the conservatory?"

"No," Charlie said. He looked Michael in the eye. "But I visit the office. I see how they look at him."

Charlie shrugged.

"I think they just really like working for him."

He paused, then added, almost as an afterthought:

"It might be confusing for you."

The air left the room.

Michael's face turned a blotchy shade of red. Kathy's mouth fell open slightly.

Tom made a sound that was half-choke, half-laugh. He covered it with a cough, but his hand squeezed Charlie's knee so hard it was definitely going to leave a bruise.

"Right," Tom said, throwing his napkin on the table. He stood up.

"Thomas, sit down," Michael barked, slamming his hand on the table. "We are not finished."

"We are," Tom said. He held out his hand to Charlie. "Come on, Charlie."

Charlie took his hand and stood up.

"Thank you for the soup," Charlie said to Kathy.

"You're walking away from this family," Michael warned. "Don't think you're coming back when you fail."

Tom didn't respond. He turned, keeping a tight grip on Charlie's hand, and walked them out of the dining room, down the long, echoing hall, and out the front door.

They didn't speak until they were in the car.

"Jesus, fuck," Tom laughed through a bright grin. "'It might be confusing for you?'"

"Was I too mean?" Charlie asked, biting his lip. "I felt a little mean."

Tom laughed again. He unbuckled his seatbelt and hauled Charlie across the center console, kissing him hard.

"You're incredible," Tom murmured. "Remind me to stay on your good side."

Charlie smiled against Tom's lips. "Just don't be like your dad, and we'll be fine."

"Deal," Tom promised. "Let's go home. I think Cheddar misses us."

Chapter 36

The wind whipped snow horizontally across the peak, stinging any exposed skin.

The group stood in a neon-colored mass near the map board. Hazel was bouncing up and down. Next to her, André and Julian were debating the merits of Dynamite versus The Edge--two double-black diamond runs that Charlie was convinced were named by personal injury lawyers.

"We're doing The Edge," Hazel announced, her voice muffled behind a scarf. "It's going to be brutal. I love it."

She turned her goggles toward Charlie. "Charles? You coming? Or are you going to commune with nature?"

Charlie adjusted his poles. He was a good skier--technically precise, elegant even. He *could* get down a double black diamond without falling, but he would arrive at the bottom stressed, sweaty, and annoyed.

"I," Charlie said, his breath puffing out in a white cloud, "am going to take Nansen. All six kilometres of it, at the speed of a leisurely waltz. I might even hum."

"Boring," Hazel declared affectionately. She looked at Tom. "You ready to shred?"

Charlie turned to his husband. Tom and Hazel used to race down icy faces that looked like elevator shafts, whooping the whole way.

"Go ahead," Charlie said to Tom. "Get the adrenaline out of your system. I'll meet you at the bottom for cocoa."

Tom looked at the foreboding entrance to the black diamond runs, where the wind was howling like a banshee. Then he looked at the entrance to Nansen, a wide, winding green trail that disappeared gently into the snow-covered pine trees, offering a view of the frozen lake below.

Tom lifted his goggles, revealing eyes that were crinkling at the corners.

"Nah," Tom said, planting his poles. "I think I'm gonna stick with Charlie."

Hazel groaned. "Oh my god. You guys are disgusting. Fine. More fresh powder for us."

She dropped into the steep run, vanishing over the lip of the mountain. The rest of the group followed like lemmings, leaving Charlie and Tom alone in the swirling white.

"You didn't have to do that," Charlie said, though a warm feeling was blooming in his chest. "I know you love the steep stuff. I really don't mind skiing alone."

"I know you don't," Tom said, sliding his skis parallel to Charlie's. "But I don't want the steep stuff today. I want the scenic route. Besides..." He grinned. "If I go with them, I can't stare at your ass while you carve."

Charlie rolled his eyes, but he was smiling behind his scarf. "You're impossible. Come on."

They pushed off.

The Nansen run was Charlie's idea of heaven. It wasn't a fight against gravity but a negotiation--long, sweeping S-curves, precise and unhurried.

Tom stayed right behind him. They flowed down the mountain in tandem, winding through the snow-laden evergreens. It was peaceful.

By the time they reached the bottom, their legs were pleasantly warm. They skated over to the gondola line and clambered into the lift.

The doors closed, sealing out the wind as they flew over the trees.

"That was really nice," Tom said. "Watching you ski is... soothing. You have very good lines, Charles."

"I treat the mountain with respect," Charlie said primly. "Unlike Hazel."

Tom chuckled. "I'm glad I came with you," he said softly.

He reached out, catching the back of Charlie's neck with a gloved hand, and pulled him gently forward. Charlie went willingly, leaning across the gap until their foreheads touched.

Tom kissed him. It tasted of lip balm and coffee. When they pulled apart, the gondola was approaching the mid-station, the summit looming ahead.

"One more run?" Charlie asked, breathless.

"One more," Tom agreed. "Then we go back to the cabin. I believe we have a dramatic reading scheduled."

The suite on the Gold Floor of the Fairmont smelled faintly of Brunello, courtesy of André and Janelle.

Julian stood in front of the massive stone fireplace, one hand braced on the mantelpiece, the other holding the paperback of *Velvet Thunder*.

"Chapter One," Julian announced, dropping his voice a full three octaves.

"Oh god," Janelle giggled, burying her face in a throw pillow. "I'm not ready."

Julian cleared his throat. "She stared at her reflection. Her unruly raven hair cascaded around her face like a waterfall of midnight ink that had been attacked by a weed whacker."

"What the fuck?" Lukas wheezed. "I can't. I physically can't."

"It's poignant," Charlie said, nodding gravely. "Nature versus machine."

Julian flipped the page with a dramatic flourish. "The skyscraper loomed above her like a giant finger of steel pointing accusingly at the heavens."

"No," Matt said, already shaking his head.

"Storm Holdings," Julian continued relentlessly. "The name alone sent a shiver skittering down her spine like a frightened spider dancing the tango!"

"Stop!" Matt shouted, holding his stomach. "How was this even published?"

Julian paused, offended. "This book was a #1 International Bestseller."

Janelle made a strangled noise into her pillow.

Hazel wiped tears from her eyes, gasping for breath. "Okay, okay -- I'm starving. If I laugh anymore, I'm going to throw up. Can we please go down to Choux Gras? I need steak."

The group descended the grand staircase like an advertisement for après-ski luxury.

The lobby of the Fairmont was bustling with guests. A massive fire roared in the central hearth, and the low hum of conversation mixed with the clink of glasses from the bar.

And there, in a quiet alcove near the restaurant entrance, sat a baby grand.

It was a beautiful Yamaha. The bench was empty.

Charlie slowed down as they passed it. He couldn't help it. It was a reflex, like a moth to a flame.

"Do it," Tom's voice came from behind him.

Charlie pulled his hand back. "No. We're going to dinner. And it's public. People are trying to drink."

"People are bored," Hazel said. "And that playlist they have on is a crime. Is that a jazz cover of Despacito?"

"Come on, Charlie," Julian urged, stepping up. "Play the thunder book theme song."

"There is no thunder book theme song," Charlie hissed, looking around nervously.

"Then play something real," Tom said softly. "Just one song. To cleanse our palates. Please?"

Charlie sighed, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "One song. Then steak."

"Deal," Tom said, stepping back and gesturing to the bench.

Charlie sat down. He cracked his knuckles. The group fell silent.

He rested his hands on the keys, took a breath, and let the room fade away.

Fantaisie-Impromptu.

The first note rang out like a bell, followed by the cascading run of the right hand against the polyrhythmic storm of the left.

The sound cut through the lobby chatter instantly.

Heads turned. Conversations at the bar died out. The concierge looked up from his computer.

Charlie leaned into the keys, fingers a blur.

Tom stood just to the side of the piano, watching his husband with pride. Hazel was filming it on her phone.

As Charlie transitioned back into the frantic, rushing finale, the energy in the room spiked again. He drove the piece to its conclusion, followed by the quiet resolution.

Charlie held the last note for a second, then lifted his hands.

For a heartbeat, there was silence.

Then, the lobby erupted. It wasn't just his friends; the whole bar joined in. Someone whistled.

Charlie flushed bright red and scrambled off the bench.

Tom was there instantly, wrapping an arm around his waist and pulling him into a side-hug before he could flee.

"Show-off," Tom whispered into his hair, kissing his temple.

"I hate you," Charlie mumbled. "Everyone is looking."

"Let them look," Tom said, guiding him toward the restaurant where the hostess was beaming at them. "They just saw the best thing that's happened in this hotel all week. And *I* am the one who gets to buy you dinner."

Tom turned to the group.

"Alright, entourage," Tom called out. "Move it. The Virtuoso needs a martini."

Chapter 37

The evening light slanted through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Charlie was sprawled across Tom's chest on the oversized sectional, the fireplace channel playing on the TV.

They had been back from Mont-Tremblant for three days. It was Christmas Eve. Though the penthouse wasn't decorated, it still felt warm and festive. Cheddar was curled up on the arm of the sofa, twitching occasionally in his sleep.

"What are you thinking about?" Tom murmured, fingers threading through Charlie's hair.

"Just tomorrow," Charlie said, tilting his head to look up at him. "Brunch at my parents' is at ten, so we should—"

Three sharp knocks cut through the room. Tom tensed beneath him.

"Are we expecting someone?" Charlie asked, already knowing the answer. No one came to the penthouse unannounced. The doorman always called ahead.

"No," Tom said. "No one."

Charlie sat up. Tom crossed the living room, straightening his t-shirt as he went.

He checked the peephole.

Charlie watched Tom's shoulders square, his spine straighten.

Tom opened the door.

From the sofa, Charlie could see a woman in her mid-thirties with a sleek black bob. Beside her stood a man a decade older. He held a clipboard stamped with an official-looking seal.

"Thomas Montgomery?" the woman asked.

"Yes?"

She produced a badge in a leather wallet. "Officer Yi. Canada Border Services Agency." She nodded to her coworker. "This is Officer Ward. May we speak with you for a few minutes?"

Charlie felt the blood drain from his face.

Immigration.

Tom didn't step aside. "Can I ask what this is about?"

Officer Yi's expression remained unreadable. "We're here concerning the Approval in Principle issued for Charles Heitmeyer-Montgomery. We've received information that requires follow-up verification."

“Verification of what?” Tom asked.

Officer Ward cleared his throat. “Information suggesting there may be inconsistencies between the living arrangements described in the sponsorship application and the current household composition.”

“Our records indicate that the application was approved following a full assessment,” Officer Yi continued, her gaze shifting briefly past Tom to where Charlie sat frozen on the sofa. “However, when new information comes to our attention after Approval in Principle, we’re required to confirm that the material facts on file remain accurate.”

“What kind of information?” Tom asked.

“Information suggesting that the primary relationship described in the application may not fully reflect the present domestic situation,” Officer Ward said evenly.

Charlie found himself standing, though he didn’t remember deciding to move. His feet carried him to the edge of the entryway, his pulse loud in his ears.

“Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery.” Officer Yi acknowledged him with a slight nod. “I understand this may be unsettling. Our goal is simply to clarify a few points so the file can proceed without issue.”

Tom exhaled slowly through his nose. “And how do you intend to do that?”

“We’d like to conduct a brief site visit,” Officer Yi replied. “To confirm the household arrangement.”

“At eight o’clock. On Christmas Eve,” Tom said, voice sharp. “Without notice.”

“Post-approval compliance checks aren’t scheduled in advance,” Officer Ward said. “Declining would require us to pause further processing of the application pending formal review.”

Tom turned slightly, catching Charlie’s eye. After a beat, Tom stepped aside, opening the door wider.

“Of course,” he said. “Please come in.”

"How long have you been living here together?" Officer Yi asked, pausing beside a framed photograph. It showed Tom and Charlie in France--grinning with the Mediterranean behind them.

"Since August," Tom said. "Almost four months. Before that, Charlie lived with his sister in the Mile End."

Officer Ward noted it down. "And you were married in September."

"Yes."

"That's a relatively short interval," Ward said. "Was there a particular reason the marriage took place when it did?"

Charlie answered from the kitchen, his voice lower than he meant it to be. "There was a problem with my immigration paperwork. We'd already planned to get married, but... we moved the date up."

Ward wrote something else.

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Is that an issue?"

"No," Officer Yi said calmly. "It's common in sponsorship cases. We're simply confirming timelines and motivations so the record is clear."

She gestured toward the hallway. "If you don't mind, we'd like to see the rest of the apartment. Including the bedrooms."

Tom nodded once and led them down the hall.

Charlie stayed behind the island for a moment, watching them go. Then he followed, keeping a few steps back.

In the master bedroom, Officer Yi opened the closet doors and scanned the hanging clothes. Her hand paused briefly at a blue blazer that was unmistakably too small for Tom.

"This is yours?" she asked, turning to Charlie.

"Yes," Charlie said, swallowing. "I--there are photos of me wearing it, if you need."

"That won't be necessary," Yi said, already moving on.

She checked the dresser drawers. Underwear, socks, t-shirts--commingled without pattern or separation.

Charlie felt a cautious lift of hope.

Then they reached the second door.

"And this room?" Officer Yi asked.

"Our home office," Tom said easily. "And a guest room."

Officer Yi opened it.

At first, it matched the description perfectly. Two desks lined the far wall--Tom's side spare and meticulously arranged, Charlie's cluttered with sheet music and notebooks.

Officer Ward, however, continued into the room.

The pull-out sofa was extended, neatly made with a duvet that didn't match the rest of the apartment. On the side table sat a bottle of perfume, a stack of fashion magazines, and a shallow dish holding a pair of diamond studs.

Ward's gaze moved to the closet. He slid the door open.

It was full. Women's blazers and blouses filled the rack. Shoes lined the floor. A laundry hamper sat in the corner, overflowing.

The silence thickened.

"This is a guest room," Ward said slowly, not looking at anyone in particular.

"Yes," Tom said.

Ward turned. "This appears to be used regularly."

Charlie's pulse spiked. He hadn't realized how much Hazel had left here.

"My sister," he said quickly. "She keeps clothes here."

Officer Yi crossed the room, stopping at the vanity table in the corner. She picked up a tube of lipstick, examined it briefly, then set it back down.

"Does your sister reside here, Mr. Heitmeyer-Montgomery?"

"No," Tom said. He stepped forward. "She rents her own apartment. She stays over once or twice a week."

Ward removed a trench coat from the closet, checked the label, then returned it to the hanger.

"There's clothing here for multiple seasons," he said. "That suggests more than occasional overnight stays."

"It suggests convenience," Tom replied evenly. "Not residency."

Officer Yi considered the room again.

"Our concern," she said, "is whether the household composition described in your application is still accurate. The application indicates that the two of you reside here alone."

"We do," Charlie said. "Hazel stays sometimes. Often. But she doesn't live here."

Ward tapped his pen against the clipboard. "We'll need to confirm that."

Tom's jaw tightened. "How?"

"We can contact her directly," Ward said. "Now, if possible."

Charlie's hand shook as he tapped Hazel's photo. He put the call on speaker. Officer Ward had positioned himself close enough that anything less would feel like defiance.

The ringing stretched.

"Charlie?" His sister answered, distracted and clipped. "I'm in the middle of--"

"Hazel," Charlie cut in. The strain in his voice stopped her cold. "I need you to come over. Right now."

A pause. "What's happening?"

"We have immigration officers here," Charlie said. "They're doing a visit." He swallowed. "They saw the guest room. Your things."

"They think I live there," Hazel said flatly.

Officer Ward shifted his weight. Officer Yi remained still.

"They want to verify your residence," Charlie said.

"Okay," Hazel replied, already all business. Papers rustled sharply. "I'm leaving now. Twenty minutes." Then, more firmly: "Do not answer any more questions beyond confirming I don't live there."

"They're not leaving," Tom said from behind Charlie.

"Tom," Hazel said. "Stay calm. Let them do their process."

The call ended.

Charlie set the phone down. His fingers were numb.

"She's on her way," he said unnecessarily.

Officer Ward nodded once and made a note. "We'll wait."

The minutes that followed were torture.

The officers relocated to the coffee table. They spoke quietly to each other, occasionally referencing documents, sometimes glancing up.

Tom stood beside Charlie at the island, one hand resting flat on the marble, the other at Charlie's lower back.

Cheddar reappeared. He wound once around Charlie's legs, then leapt onto the counter, positioning himself between his humans and the officers. His tail flicked with unmistakable judgment.

Nineteen minutes after the call, the elevator chimed.

Three knocks followed. Tom opened the door.

Hazel stepped inside, her blazer still creased after a long day, briefcase in hand.

"Traffic," she said briskly. Then she looked at the officers. "Hazel Heitmeyer. Charles's sister."

Officer Yi rose. "Ms. Heitmeyer. Thank you for coming on short notice."

"I was told my living arrangements were being questioned," Hazel said. "I'm happy to clarify."

Officer Yi gestured toward the guest room. "We observed personal effects in that space suggesting regular use."

Hazel nodded once. "I stay here often. I do not reside here."

Officer Ward spoke up. "Can you confirm your primary address?"

Hazel opened her briefcase and removed a slim folder. "My apartment in the Mile End. Rent, utilities, property tax--all in my name." She handed it over. "I can provide bank statements if required."

Officer Yi accepted the folder. "This will be sufficient for now."

Ward glanced toward the guest room again. "There is a significant volume of clothing."

Hazel met his gaze. "We work long hours together. Keeping clothes here is practical."

Officer Yi studied her for a moment, then nodded. "Thank you for clarifying."

Ward hesitated. "And to be clear, you are not in a romantic relationship with Mr. Montgomery."

Hazel's mouth twitched. "No."

Officer Yi closed the folder. "That's all we need on that point."

"I believe we've gathered what we came for," Officer Ward said. "Thank you for your cooperation."

"And the complaint?" Hazel asked. "You mentioned new information."

Officer Yi's expression remained neutral. "We received a third-party communication raising concerns about household composition. We're obligated to follow up."

"From whom?" Hazel pressed.

"That information isn't disclosed," Ward said.

"Of course it isn't," Hazel replied.

Officer Yi extended a business card to Tom. "If we require additional documentation, we'll contact you. At this stage, the Approval in Principle remains in effect."

Tom took the card, his grip tight.

The officers left quietly.

The door closed.

For a moment, no one moved.

Then Tom exhaled. "No fucking way that was random," he said.

Charlie already knew.

"Someone wanted *this*," Tom continued. "Someone knew exactly what to say, and had enough power to force a visit on a holiday."

Hazel crossed her arms. "Michael."

Tom's eyes were distant. Hard in a way that made Charlie's chest ache.

"Michael," Tom said.

Charlie reached for Tom's hand. Tom's grip was too tight, but Charlie held on.

"What do we do?" Charlie asked.

"We get ahead of this," Tom said. "I need to make a call."

Chapter 38

Tom paced the living room.

Charlie and Hazel watched him from the kitchen island. Cheddar had retreated to the top of the bookcase.

Tom stopped, looking down at his phone. His father's contact information stared back at him—the firm's logo as the profile picture.

He scrolled up to his mother's name. The picture was from a charity gala three years ago. She was smiling with practiced elegance, a champagne flute held at the perfect angle to catch the light.

He hit the call button before his brain could reconsider.

The phone rang three times. Tom resumed pacing in tighter circles.

"Thomas?" Kathy's voice was crisp, slightly wary. "It's nearly nine. Is something wrong?"

He could hear the clink of ice in a glass, the soft murmur of classical music in the background. He pictured her in the sitting room, probably still dressed for dinner.

"Yes, something's wrong," Tom replied. "Something is very wrong, Mother."

A pause. The ice clinked again.

"I don't appreciate your tone," Kathy said. "I thought we'd moved past--"

"Immigration officers showed up at our door tonight," Tom interrupted. "They came to check if Charlie was living here. They were interested in whether his sister is secretly living with us."

Another pause, longer this time.

"That sounds distressing," Kathy said finally. "But I don't see how this concerns--"

"They said they received a tip," Tom continued. He stopped pacing, staring out the window. "A very specific tip."

"If you're implying that your father or I had anything to do with--"

"I'm not implying anything," Tom cut in. His hand curled into a fist at his side. "Dad filed that tip. And you knew about it."

"That's absurd," Kathy said. "Your father would never--"

"Don't. Don't lie to me."

Charlie moved closer, standing just within arm's reach.

"Your father is concerned about you," Kathy said after a moment, shifting tactics. "About the choices you're making. This... reckless new firm. These associates you've poached. And Charles... well, you know your father--"

"We're coming over," Tom said flatly. "Tonight. Now. Charlie, his sister, and me. We're coming to the house."

"Thomas, it's late. Your father has an early meeting tomorrow, and I've already taken my--"

"Tell Dad we'll be there in thirty minutes," Tom said.

"I really don't think--"

"Thirty. Minutes. Make sure he's there."

Tom and Charlie moved through the bedroom.

"Are you sure about this?" Charlie asked softly, fumbling slightly with his sleeve.

Tom crossed the room. He took Charlie's wrist and secured the cufflink.

"No," Tom admitted. "But I'm sure about you."

They left the bedroom together and found Hazel in the living room. She had spread several files across the coffee table--immigration paperwork, photocopies of Charlie's birth certificate, their marriage license. She was organizing them into a leather portfolio.

"Ready?" she asked, not looking up.

"Yes," Tom said.

Tom grabbed his keys from the bowl. Charlie took one last look around the penthouse--the place they had built together.

The elevator ride down to the parking garage was silent. When the doors slid open, Tom led them to the sedan. He opened the passenger door for Charlie. Hazel took the back.

He got in the driver's seat. He gripped the wheel and started the car.

"We need a strategy," he said. "We can't just walk in there and start shouting."

"Agreed," Hazel said, leaning forward slightly between the seats. "This is about leverage."

Charlie watched Tom's profile. He was trying so hard to be the CEO, not the son.

"What do we have?" Charlie asked quietly.

"Evidence that the relationship is as documented," Hazel replied, tapping her folder. "Print-outs proving I maintain my own residence. But that's defensive. We need offence."

Tom backed the car out of its space, guiding it toward the exit ramp. "If we can prove he filed the tip maliciously, that's misuse of a federal agency."

"But *can* we prove it?" Charlie asked.

The car emerged onto the street. Tom weaved through the evening traffic.

"Well," Hazel said, "if we can show that Michael had knowledge of specific details about our living arrangements, and that he had motive to interfere with Charlie's immigration status--"

"He'll deny it," Tom interrupted, harsher than he intended. "He always does. And he's very good at it."

They fell silent as the car turned west. The streets widened. The buildings grew further apart, larger, set behind stone walls.

"What are we even trying to do?" Charlie asked suddenly.

Tom's hands flexed on the steering wheel. "I want him to admit it. I want to hear him say it."

"And then?"

Tom didn't answer right away. The car climbed higher into Westmount, the road curving gently upward. The houses became mansions with gates and security systems.

"Then we make him understand that he can't win," Tom said firmly. "Not like this."

Hazel made a soft noise in the back seat. "Michael Montgomery doesn't lose gracefully. You know that better than anyone."

"I'm not expecting grace," Tom replied. He pulled up to the gates of the estate and rolled down his window. He punched in the code, and they slowly began to open.

Charlie straightened his spine. He wasn't just Charlie Heitmeyer, the anxious pianist. He was Charlie Heitmeyer-Montgomery. Tom's husband.

The car rolled forward, tires crunching on the perfect white gravel of the driveway.

The massive house loomed above them. It had been professionally decorated.

Tom cut the engine but left the keys in the ignition. No words were exchanged as they approached the front entrance.

He reached the door first and pressed the doorbell. They expected Elena. Instead, it was Kathy Montgomery.

She wore a cream silk blouse and tailored slacks. A pale blue cashmere cardigan was wrapped tightly around her shoulders, clutched at her throat despite the warmth of the evening.

"Thomas," she said. "Charles. Hazel."

"Mother," Tom replied. "Thank you for seeing us."

Kathy didn't move immediately. She seemed to be studying them.

"Your father is in his office," she said finally, stepping back.

The three of them crossed the threshold. The foyer opened around them, exactly as white and beige as the last time Charlie had visited.

Hazel closed the door behind them. Kathy turned and began walking down the hall.

"This way," she said, as if Tom hadn't grown up here. "He's waiting for you."

Michael Montgomery sat behind his desk like a king. He didn't rise when they entered.

"Thomas," Michael said. "Charles. Ms. Heitmeyer." He gestured to the three chairs positioned before him. "Please, sit."

None of them moved.

"We'll stand," Tom said.

Michael shrugged. "As you wish." He leaned back in his chair. "I assume this is about the immigration visit. Kathy mentioned you were upset."

Tom's hands curled into fists. "'Upset' doesn't cover it."

"You filed the complaint," Charlie said suddenly. "You sent them to our home."

Michael's eyes moved to Charlie. After a moment, he nodded once.

"Yes," Michael said. "I did."

"Why?" Tom demanded, his voice rising. "What possible reason--"

"Concern for the law," Michael interrupted smoothly. He straightened a pen on his desk. "Immigration fraud is a serious matter. If there were questions about the living arrangements described in Charles's application, I had a civic duty to report them."

Tom took a step forward. "That's bullshit, and you know it. There is no fraud. Charlie and I are married. We live together. Hazel has her own apartment."

"Perhaps," Michael conceded. "And now the immigration authorities have verified that. So all is well."

"You tried to get my husband deported!"

Michael sighed. "I raised concerns based on patterns I observed. The system worked as intended. If there was no issue, then Charles has nothing to worry about." He paused, then added: "For now."

The threat was unmistakable.

"Your firm launches in two weeks," Michael continued, addressing Tom but not taking his eyes off Charlie. "Heitmeyer-Montgomery. Your grandfather's name and your... husband's."

"That's what this is about?" Tom's voice cracked. "You're upset about the name of my company?"

"The name is merely a symptom," Michael corrected. "The disease is your rejection of everything I've built for you. Everything I've sacrificed to secure your future."

He stood now, finally, rising to his full height.

"You've poached my staff," Michael continued. "You're positioning yourself as a direct competitor to your own family. And for what? To rebel against your father at twenty-seven instead of fifteen?"

Tom's face flushed with anger. "This isn't rebellion. This is building something of my own."

Michael reached for the crystal tumbler on his desk, taking a slow sip.

"Here's what I'm prepared to offer," he said, setting the glass down. "You dissolve your fledgling firm. You return to the family--to the board, under my direction. You recommit to the Montgomery legacy." He paused, letting the conditions settle. "And in return, this unfortunate immigration misunderstanding goes away. Permanently."

Tom stared at his father. "You can't be serious," he finally managed.

"I've never been more serious," Michael replied. "You're launching in two weeks? I need your answer in one."

"You--" Tom started, voice rising. "You think you can just--"

Hazel moved forward, placing herself in front of both Tom and Charlie.

"Mr. Montgomery," she said. "I want to be absolutely clear. You've admitted to corporate extortion. You're threatening to continue interfering with a valid immigration application."

That's a criminal offence under multiple statutes. And it's the kind of scandal that would destroy a forty-year reputation."

Michael looked at Hazel with mild interest. Then, he laughed.

"Ms. Heitmeyer," he said. "You are talented. Truly. Thomas was right to recruit you." He straightened his already perfect cuffs. "And yes, what you've outlined might eventually cause me problems. Significant ones, even. I don't deny that."

His smile remained. "But here's what you're forgetting: immigration appeals take months. Investigations into misconduct take years."

He turned his gaze to Charlie, frozen next to Tom in the middle of the room.

"Charles could be on a plane to Switzerland next week. His appeal might be heard sometime next month. His case could be reviewed in a year."

Michael spread his hands, the gesture almost apologetic. "I have the time, Ms. Heitmeyer. I have the resources. I have decades of connections at every level of government. I can fight this battle to the end without breaking a sweat. Can you?"

"You would do that," Tom said. "You would destroy my life."

Michael didn't flinch. "I'm saving your life. Someday, when you have children of your own, you'll understand."

Tom stared at his father, searching for some hint of the man who had taught him to skate, who had once lifted him onto his shoulders so he could see a parade.

"I already understand," Tom said. "I understand exactly who you are."

"One week?" Tom asked. "You want my answer in one week?"

Michael nodded. "That's correct."

"You'll have it," Tom said. He glanced at Charlie, then at Hazel. *Time to go.*

He started toward the door, but Michael's voice stopped him.

"Thomas."

Tom froze at the threshold, his hand resting on the doorframe.

"I'm doing this because I love you," Michael said. The words sounded genuine, which somehow made them worse. "Someday you'll thank me."

Tom didn't turn around. His fingers pressed against the wood hard enough to leave fingerprints in the polish.

"I will end this," Tom said quietly. "On my own terms."

"We'll see," Michael called from behind them. "One week."

They left without another word. They were halfway to the foyer when they saw her.

Kathy Montgomery stood alone in the middle of the hallway. The blue cardigan was still wrapped tightly around her shoulders. She didn't look at them as they approached.

Tom slowed as they neared her. Charlie and Hazel instinctively stopped a few feet from where Kathy stood.

"Mom?"

Kathy didn't look up. She didn't acknowledge him at all.

"Mom," Tom tried again. "This isn't--"

Kathy finally moved, but only to tighten her grip on her cardigan, pulling it closer around herself.

After an eternity compressed into seconds, Tom nodded once. He stepped around his mother.

Charlie and Hazel followed. Hazel tried to see if Kathy was crying, but she couldn't tell.

They stepped outside together. Tom opened the car door for Charlie, and Hazel slid into the back seat.

As Tom started the engine, Charlie reached over and placed his hand on Tom's thigh.

"We'll find a way," he said, trying to convince them both.

Tom nodded, covering Charlie's hand with his own. "Yes," he agreed. "We will."

The car pulled away, headlights sweeping across the pristine facade of the estate before turning toward the gates.

Chapter 39

In the back seat, Hazel pulled out her phone. The screen lit up the car.

"I'm drafting the affidavit now," she said, thumbs flying. "While his admission is fresh. I can probably get a notarized statement from you both before midnight, and if we file an injunction for harassment by Tuesday--"

"Hazel," Tom said. "Put the phone away."

"Tom, we have momentum. He admitted it. If we don't document this--"

"I said put it away."

Tom looked at Charlie in the front seat. Charlie watched the lights on Sherbrooke through the window. He looked very tired.

"It's Christmas Eve," Tom said. "We are not spending tonight drafting legal documents. We aren't giving him another minute of this night."

Hazel stopped. Tom saw her shoulders drop in the mirror. She sighed, then locked her phone and put it in her bag.

"Fine," she said. "But tomorrow. At Mom and Dad's. The truce ends after the first mimosa."

"Agreed," Tom said. "We'll hold a war council at brunch. But tonight, we just breathe."

They drove in silence. When they arrived back at the parking garage, she leaned forward and squeezed Charlie's shoulder.

"He doesn't win," she said. "Merry Christmas, you guys."

"Merry Christmas, General," Charlie said softly. He put his hand over hers.

Tom waited until she was gone before they got out of the car.

By the time they reached the penthouse, the adrenaline was gone.

They brushed their teeth and put on their flannel. Then they curled together in the dark and let the world wait.

Christmas morning at the Heitmeyer house in NDG was, as always, a contact sport.

Motown blasted from the kitchen speakers. David's cinnamon rolls battled the scent of roasting turkey. Nancy--already wearing a World's Best Grandma apron, despite having no grandchildren and only Cheddar the cat--was shoving mimosas into their hands before they'd even taken off their boots.

"My boys!" Nancy beamed, kissing them both on the cheek and leaving faint lipstick stains.

They crowded around the dining table for brunch, plates overlapping, elbows touching. The war council Tom had promised happened between bites of eggs benedict.

When they told the family what Michael had done, the reaction was thoroughly Heitmeyer. Nancy swore and reached for the coffee pot like a weapon. Alex muttered something about brake lines.

David said nothing at all, but the fury on his face made Charlie's chest tighten.

"We'll handle it," Hazel said, stabbing a sausage link for emphasis. "We have the AIP. We have the firm. And we have something he doesn't." She gestured around the chaotic table. "We have a reason to fight."

It wasn't a plan, not yet, but it was an army.

By early afternoon, the noise softened into a food coma. They stayed long enough for one last cup, but when Charlie stifled his third yawn, Tom stood, hand settling on Charlie's shoulder.

"We should get back," Tom said. "We haven't even opened our own gifts yet."

"Go, go," Nancy said, shooing them--then hugging them both for a solid minute before letting go. "Call tomorrow. Love you."

The penthouse was quiet.

Charlie hung his coat by the door while Tom turned on the lamps and the heat. Cheddar emerged from the shadows, weaving a figure-eight between Charlie's ankles.

"Hello to you, too," Charlie said. He scratched the cat's ear. Cheddar leaned in, then walked away.

Tom smiled. "I think he missed us."

"He missed snack time." Charlie sat next to Tom on the sofa, close enough that their thighs touched, and watched his husband stretch his legs.

"I have something for you."

Tom watched him walk to the piano. "I thought we were waiting until after dinner."

Charlie didn't answer. He opened the piano bench and pulled out a manila folder hidden beneath a stack of Chopin. His fingers were trembling.

He came back to the sofa but didn't sit. He stood there, holding the folder like a shield.

"I made something," Charlie said, his voice tight. "You know I've never... I've never shared my own music before. With anyone."

Tom sat forward, the playfulness vanishing from his face. He took the folder.

"Charlie."

Charlie perched on the edge of the cushion, ready to bolt. Tom opened the folder.

The pages inside were covered in hand-drawn staves, the notes inked in Charlie's precise hand. Erasure marks ghosted the paper where he had second-guessed himself. Tom looked at the title on the first page. *For Thomas*.

"It's not the best," Charlie said quickly. "I've been working on it for months, but it's four movements, and the third one is still--"

Tom turned the page, reading the melody. He could hear it in his head--complex, melancholic, but resolving into something bright.

"Charlie." Tom's voice was thick. He looked up, his eyes stinging. "This is the most beautiful gift anyone has ever given me."

He set the folder aside and pulled Charlie into him. He buried his face in the crook of Charlie's neck, breathing in the scent of him.

"Thank you," Tom whispered against his skin. "Thank you for trusting me with this."

"You're the only one I'd trust."

Tom pulled back just enough to press their foreheads together. "Promise you'll play it for me? Tonight?"

Charlie nodded. "It might not be--"

"It'll be perfect." Tom stood up, brushing a hand over Charlie's hair. "Wait here."

He disappeared into the guest room. When he returned, he was carrying three wrapped boxes. He sat back down, balancing them on his knees.

"Since your birthday is in three days," Tom said, "I took liberties. Two for Christmas. One for the 28th."

"Tom, I only got you the one thing," Charlie said, looking at the pile. "I should have--"

"No." Tom squeezed Charlie's hand, stopping him. "Look at me."

He waited until Charlie met his gaze.

"This," Tom said, tapping the sheet music. "This is a piece of your soul. You gave me something you've hidden from the world for your entire life. That is worth more than anything I could ever buy you."

Charlie's throat worked as he swallowed back tears. He leaned his head on Tom's shoulder, the fight going out of him. "I love you."

Tom kissed the top of his head. "I love you too. Now, let me spoil you properly."

Tom placed two packages wrapped in dark paper on the coffee table. He nudged the smaller one toward Charlie.

"Start here."

Charlie picked it up, hesitating at the crisp fold of the wrapping.

"You can tear it, you know," Tom teased. "That's generally how unwrapping works."

"I'm appreciating the effort." Charlie smiled, pulling the ribbon gently.

Inside lay a music book bound in soft, pebbled leather. In the bottom corner, stamped in gold leaf, were three letters: *C.H.M.*

Charlie ran his thumb over the initials. *Charles Heitmeyer-Montgomery.*

He opened the cover. The paper was thick, creamy, and textured.

"It's from a binder in Florence," Tom said quietly. "It's archival grade. It's meant to last for centuries."

Charlie turned a page. "It's perfect."

He held the book against his chest and leaned in for a kiss--slow and grateful.

Tom smiled against his mouth. "One more."

He handed over the square box. Charlie slid the wooden top open.

Inside, nestled in moss, was a Japanese maple. Its trunk was gnarled and ancient-looking, but the leaves were a youthful crimson. Beside it lay the tools of the trade: heavy iron scissors, a coil of copper wire, a tiny rake.

"I made sure it was cat-safe," Tom added, glancing at Cheddar.

Charlie lifted the ceramic pot. It was heavy, glazed in blues and browns that shifted in the light.

"It's a long game," Tom said, his voice dropping an octave. "You have to wire the branches. You have to guide it. It's about patience. It's about growing something that outlives us."

Charlie blinked rapidly, fighting the sting in his eyes. It was a promise of a future.

"Thank you," he whispered. Tom's hand found the back of Charlie's neck, his thumb brushing the pulse point.

"You're welcome."

They moved to the piano together. Tom cleared a space for the tree where the sun would catch the red leaves, then pulled a chair close to the bench.

"Will you play it for me now?"

Charlie nodded. He sat down, his reflection ghosting in the lacquer of the fallboard. His hands trembled over the keys.

He took a breath. He looked at Tom. And then he began.

The first movement was a storm--chaotic, dissonant, the sound of fear and flight. Tom watched Charlie's profile, the way his brow furrowed, the way he leaned into the noise.

The second movement slowed, finding a melody in the madness. Charlie's hands moved with a new assurance, weaving a harmony that shouldn't have worked, but did.

By the third movement, the lines of worry on Charlie's face had smoothed away.

The final chords were quiet, a coming home.

Tom wiped a tear from his cheek, not bothering to hide it.

The sound faded into silence. Charlie turned on the bench, his face flushed, eyes bright.

"That's us," Charlie said.

Tom reached out, taking Charlie's hand to kiss the knuckles, one by one.

"That's us."

Chapter 40

Tom had been awake for a while, watching the winter light shift across the duvet.

When Charlie finally stirred, blinking against the morning, Tom was ready. He pressed a kiss to his temple, lingering there. "Happy birthday, baby boy."

Charlie smiled, sleep-warm and soft, turning into the touch. "Thank you, daddy. Do I get breakfast in bed?"

"Breakfast is coming," Tom promised. "But first..." He leaned over the side of the bed and pulled a long, rectangular case from where he'd hidden it the night before. It was black leather with heavy brass clasps. He settled it across Charlie's lap.

"What is this?" Charlie ran his hands over the cool leather. It was heavier than he expected.

"Open it."

Charlie flipped the latches with a sharp snap. He lifted the lid, prepared for almost anything—sheet music, a tie, maybe a watch. He wasn't prepared for this.

Inside, nestled in midnight-blue velvet, lay a violin. The wood was a warm, honeyed maple, the bow secured neatly in the lid.

Charlie stared. He touched the scroll cautiously, as if it might bite. "It's... beautiful," he said, baffled. He looked up at Tom. "But I'm a pianist."

"I know." Tom smiled, and he looked so besotted it made Charlie's chest ache. "That's the point."

Cheddar, sensing a new object of interest, hopped onto the bed. He sniffed the case, whiskers twitching, before Tom gently nudged him away. "Not for you," Tom murmured. He turned his attention back to his husband.

Charlie was still frowning at the instrument. "I don't understand. I can't play this. I wouldn't even know how to hold the bow."

"Exactly." Tom covered Charlie's hand with his own. "When you play the piano," Tom said softly, "even when it's just for us, I can see the gears turning. I see you judging every interval, every tempo change. You rarely just... play."

He gestured to the violin. "This is for being bad. This is for making mistakes. For screeching and scraping and laughing about it instead of beating yourself up. When was the last time you were allowed to be bad at something, Charlie?"

Charlie's eyes filled. He tried to blink the tears away, but one escaped. "I don't—" His voice cracked. He swallowed. "I don't know."

Tom brushed the tear away with his thumb. "That's what I thought. So this is my real gift to you: Permission to suck."

A wet, shaky laugh escaped Charlie. "You won't mind? If I make awful sounds? If I never get good at it?"

"I'd be disappointed if you did," Tom said warmly.

Charlie leaned forward, capturing Tom's lips in a slow, grateful kiss. When they broke apart, the fear was gone, replaced by a glint of determination.

"Okay," Charlie said. He lifted the violin. It felt awkward and foreign against his collarbone. He grasped the bow like a weapon. His face set into that familiar, intense focus—the look of a virtuoso preparing for a concerto.

"Ready?" Tom asked.

Charlie nodded. He drew the bow across the strings in a single, committed stroke. The sound that tore through the room was horrific—a high-pitched, strangled screech.

Cheddar bolted. He scrambled off the bed, claws skittering on the hardwood, and dove under the dresser.

Charlie froze. He looked at the violin in horror.

Tom couldn't help it. The laugh bubbled up from his chest, loud and uncontrollable. Charlie stared at him, mortified.

He looked at the empty spot where the cat had been. His lips twitched.

Then he was laughing too.

The Heitmeyer home hummed with New Year's Eve energy.

Nancy had outdone herself. The ground floor was barely recognizable beneath layers of silver and gold streamers. The air smelled of sausage rolls.

"Hazel, darling, could you turn that down just a touch?" Nancy called, deftly arranging a pyramid of canapés.

Hazel, looking like a disco ball in a silver sequined dress, rolled her eyes good-naturedly, but obliged.

"Perfect." Nancy surveyed her kingdom—filled with hospital colleagues, Hazel's law school friends, and David's running club.

The doorbell chimed. Nancy beamed. "They're here!" She swung the door open before they could knock.

Tom and Charlie stood on the threshold, bringing the cold winter air in with them. "Happy New Year," Charlie said, handing her a bottle of champagne.

"My boys." Nancy accepted the bottle and ushered them inside, rising on tiptoes to kiss Tom's cheek. "Come in, come in! Everyone's been asking where you were."

They moved into the living room, instantly enveloped by the warm chaos.

"Hey!" Hazel wove through the crush of guests, holding two drinks high above her head. She handed one to Charlie and pulled him into a one-armed hug. "Happy New Year, brother mine. You look good."

"Thanks," Charlie said, adjusting his collar. "So do you. From space."

"That was the goal." Hazel grinned, doing a quick spin that sent light scattering across the walls. She turned to Tom. "How's the violin?"

Tom smirked. "It's been... an experience."

Charlie stuck his nose in the air. "I'll have you know I've progressed from 'dying goose' to 'goose that might recover.'"

Tom laughed, the sound easy and light. He looked happy.

"Ten minutes, everyone!" Hazel eventually shouted over the crowd, checking her watch. "Top up your glasses!"

The room shifted as guests clustered together, eyes turning toward the TV screen in the corner.

Tom took Charlie's hand. His grip was tight. "Come with me," Tom said, his voice low against Charlie's ear. He led Charlie to the bay window. Behind them, the countdown clock on the screen ticked down.

"Is everything okay?" Charlie asked.

"Everything is perfect." Tom set their champagne glasses on the windowsill. He turned to face Charlie, blocking out the room. "I just needed to talk to you. Before the year ends."

Tom took a breath. For a second, he looked unsure—an expression so rare on him that Charlie felt a spike of concern. Then, Tom dropped to one knee.

Hazel stopped mid-sentence. She grabbed Julian's arm hard enough to make him wince. "Oh my god."

A hush spread outward from the window. The music seemed to fade. Nancy, emerging from the kitchen, gasped and leaned heavily against David.

In the sudden quiet, Tom reached for Charlie's left hand. Charlie stood frozen, his heart hammering a frantic rhythm against his ribs.

Tom's fingers brushed the gold band on Charlie's finger. And then, gently, he slid it off.

Charlie's breath hitched. He stared at his hand—at the pale strip of skin that had been hidden for months.

"Charlie," Tom said, voice thick. "When I put this on you the first time, it was a shield. It was a tactical decision to keep you safe." He looked up, his eyes locking onto Charlie's. "I don't just want a shield anymore. I don't just want a contract. I want the decades. I want seventy. I want ninety."

Charlie's vision blurred.

"So I'm asking you properly," Tom said. "Not because we have to. But because I can't imagine a single year without you." He held the ring up. "Will you marry me, Charlie? Again?"

Charlie reached out, his fingers trembling as they touched Tom's jaw. "Yes," he whispered. "Yes. Of course, yes."

Tom smiled brightly. He slid the ring back onto Charlie's finger and rose to pull him close.

The room erupted. Alex let out a piercing whoop. Nancy was sobbing openly into David's shoulder.

Tom and Charlie held on tight, foreheads pressed together in the center of the storm.

"Happy New Year, husband," Tom whispered.

"Happy New Year," Charlie replied.

On the screen, the clock hit zero. The fireworks began.

Chapter 41

Velvet Thunder by #1 International Bestselling Author Raven Blackthorne

The shrill scream of the alarm clock sliced through the silence of the morning like a chainsaw through a library. Seraphina Moon-Shadow groaned, a sound that rumbled in her throat like a dying kitten, and slapped the snooze button with a hand that felt as heavy as a lead balloon.

"Today is the day," she opined to the empty room, her voice trembling with a mixture of trepidation and anticipation, like a cocktail shaker full of anxiety.

She dragged herself out of bed, her oversized t-shirt hanging off her petite, fragile frame, and stumbled toward the cracked mirror that hung on her peeling beige wall. She stared at her reflection, sighing at what she saw. Why was she so plain? Her unruly raven hair cascaded around her face like a waterfall of midnight ink that had been attacked by a weed whacker. Her eyes, two large orbs of limpid violet, looked too big for her heart-shaped face. Her mouth was too full, her nose too button-like, her skin too creamy—like a bowl of oatmeal that no one wanted to eat. She was a disaster, a walking catastrophe of average features that no man would ever look at twice.

"You can do this, Sera," she whispered softly. "You just have to interview the most intimidating billionaire in New York City."

She quickly donned her only good outfit—a grey pencil skirt that hugged her curves in all the right places and a white blouse that was perhaps a button too tight across her heaving bosom. She grabbed her notebook, which she held like a shield against the cruel world, and rushed out the door. She wasn't like other girls; she didn't care about makeup or fashion. She cared about books.

The skyscraper loomed above her like a giant finger of steel pointing accusingly at the heavens. Storm Holdings. The name alone sent a shiver skittering down her spine like a frightened spider dancing the tango. Dante Storm was a mystery, a riddle wrapped in an enigma and dipped in expensive, musky cologne.

Seraphina pushed through the revolving doors, her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped hummingbird on espresso. She was so nervous she didn't see the man walking out until it was too late.

Smack!

She collided with a wall. A wall of solid, unyielding granite. But it wasn't a wall. It was a chest. A chest clad in the finest Italian silk that cost more than her entire college tuition.

"Oh my god!" she ejaculated loudly, scrambling to pick up the papers that had flown from her grasp like frightened doves.

"Watch where you're going," a voice growled from above her. The voice was deep, dark, and dangerous—like melted chocolate poured over a gravel driveway.

Seraphina looked up, and her breath hitched in her throat, getting caught on her tonsils. The man was beautiful. Devastatingly, agonizingly beautiful. He stood at least six foot seven, towering over her five-foot-two frame like a redwood tree over a daisy. His face was a mask of cold indifference, chiselled by Michelangelo himself, if Michelangelo had been angry at the time. His jaw was so sharp it could cut glass.

But it was his eyes that held her captive. They were gray. Not just gray, but the colour of a stormy sea before a shipwreck that kills everyone on board. They bore into her soul, stripping her bare, analyzing her deepest, darkest secrets.

"I... I'm so sorry," she stammered, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks like mercury in a thermometer placed in a volcano. "I'm such a klutz. My feet are like two left shoes."

He didn't smile. He didn't even blink. He just stared at her with an intensity that made her knees turn to jelly and her core clench.

"You are clumsy," he stated flatly. "And you are late."

"Late?" she queried, confusion clouding her violet orbs.

"For your interview. I am Dante Storm."

Seraphina gasped. She had run into the billionaire himself! And she had touched his chest! Her hand still tingled where it had grazed his pectoral muscle, which had felt as hard as a diamond wrapped in velvet.

"I... I didn't know," she breathed.

He stepped closer, invading her personal space. She could smell him now—a heady mix of tobacco, rain, sandalwood, and money. It was intoxicating. It made her want to do foolish, reckless things.

"You should be more careful, Miss..." he paused, waiting, his eyebrow quirked sardonically.

"Moon-Shadow," she supplied weakly. "Seraphina."

"Seraphina," he purred, testing the name on his tongue like a fine wine. "A mouthy little thing, aren't you?"

She felt a strange sensation in her stomach, like a thousand butterflies were having a mosh pit. Why was he looking at her like that? Like he wanted to devour her? Or fire her? Or both?

"I have to go," she squeaked, trying to step around him.

But he moved with the speed of a striking cobra, his hand shooting out to grab her wrist. His fingers were like bands of steel. His touch was electric, sending sparks shooting through her nervous system, lighting up her chakras like the Fourth of July.

"Don't run from me, Seraphina," he warned, his voice dropping an octave to a seductive rumble that vibrated in her toes. "I don't like to chase. But for you... I might make an exception."

He released her, and she stumbled backward, breathless, flushed, and utterly confused. She watched him stride away, his long legs eating up the distance, his buttocks clenched tight beneath his trousers.

She let out a breath she didn't know she was holding. Her life had just changed. She didn't know how, and she didn't know why, but she knew one thing for certain: Dante Storm was trouble. And she was falling for him, hard and fast, like a skydiver who forgot their parachute.

Raven Blackthorne is a #1 International Bestselling Author, reclusive billionaire, and former Cirque du Soleil acrobat. Her hobbies include fencing, whiskey tasting, and hunting rare truffles in the forests of Burgundy.

Chapter 42

Velvet Thunder by #1 International Bestselling Author Raven Blackthorne - Continued

Seraphina stood on the pavement, the concrete feeling as hard as the reality of her bank account. Her heart was still doing gymnastics in her chest, a chaotic floor routine that threatened to bruise her ribs. She stared at the retreating figure of Dante Storm, watching the way his suit jacket strained against the massive, tectonic plates of his shoulders.

"He's dangerous," she whispered to a passing pigeon. The pigeon cooed, a sound that reminded her of the mocking laughter of the universe. "But he smells like rain and bad decisions."

She shook her head, her messy bun wobbling like a scoop of vanilla ice cream in an earthquake. She couldn't be distracted by a pair of stormy grey eyes that looked like they could start a nuclear winter. She had an interview to do. Money to make. She had to feed Mr. Whiskers, whose appetite was as bottomless as her self-doubt.

With a deep breath that tasted of exhaust fumes and ambition, Seraphina pushed through the revolving doors for the second time.

The lobby of Storm Holdings was an assault on the senses. The floors were black marble, polished to such a mirror sheen that Seraphina worried the cleaning staff would see up her skirt if they looked down. The ceiling was lost in the clouds, or at least high enough that it had its own weather system.

In the center of the cavernous space sat a desk. It was a crescent of pure obsidian, sharp enough to cut a diamond. Behind it sat a woman who was the exact opposite of Seraphina in every quantifiable way.

She was blonde. Not a natural, sun-kissed blonde, but a blinding, chemical platinum that probably glowed under UV light. Her skin was the colour of a Dorito that had been to tanning school. Her lips were coated in a sticky pink gloss that looked like it could trap flies.

Seraphina approached the desk, clutching her notebook like it was the Holy Grail and she was a knight who had forgotten her sword.

"Ex-excuse me?" Seraphina squeaked. Her voice sounded tiny, like a mouse asking a cat for a loan.

The receptionist didn't look up. She was typing on a holographic keyboard with fingernails that were at least three inches long and painted blood-red. Click-clack-click-clack. The sound was like skeletal fingers tapping on a coffin.

"I... I'm here for an interview," Seraphina tried again, leaning over the obsidian barrier.

The typing stopped. The silence that followed was heavier than a wet wool blanket. Slowly, the receptionist raised her head. Her eyes were heavily rimmed with black liner, making her look like a raccoon that had discovered Sephora. She scanned Seraphina from her Converse sneakers to her unruly hair, her lip curling in a sneer that exposed teeth whiter than Seraphina's future.

"You?" The woman scoffed. It was a harsh, grating sound. "You're here for an interview? Did the janitorial staff put out a Craigslist ad?"

Seraphina felt the heat rise in her cheeks, burning like a thousand suns. "No! I'm here to see Mr. Storm. Dante Storm."

The receptionist laughed. It was a cruel, hyena-like cackle. "Honey, look at you. Mr. Storm eats girls like you for breakfast. And he spits out the bones."

"I... I have an appointment!" Seraphina insisted, her violet orbs swimming with unshed tears. "He told me to come up! We met outside! We... we touched!"

"Touched?" The receptionist stood up, revealing a dress so tight it looked like it had been spray-painted onto her surgically enhanced body. "Listen to me, you little street rat. Dante Storm doesn't touch trash. Now get out before I call security. They have tasers. And they love to use them."

Just as Seraphina turned to flee, convinced that her life was over and she would have to live in a cardboard box with Mr. Whiskers, a phone rang. It wasn't a normal ring. It was the sound of a thunderclap recorded in high definition.

The receptionist paled beneath her spray tan. She snatched up the receiver. "Storm Holdings, Tiffany speak—"

She stopped. Her eyes went wide. "Yes, sir. But sir, she looks like a... yes, sir. Immediately, sir."

Tiffany slammed the phone down as if it had burned her. She looked at Seraphina with a mixture of fear and loathing.

"He wants to see you," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Top floor. Don't touch anything. And for god's sake, try not to trip over your own existence."

Seraphina didn't wait. She bolted toward the elevators, her heart hammering a frantic rhythm against her ribs: Dante. Dante. Dante.

The elevator was made of gold. Solid gold. Seraphina stepped inside and the doors slid shut with a hiss that sounded strangely like a warning. There were no buttons. Just a voice command system.

"Destination?" a robotic female voice asked.

"Top floor," Seraphina whispered.

The elevator shot upward. It moved so fast Seraphina felt her stomach drop into her shoes. Gravity seemed to lose its hold on her. She leaned against the mirrored wall, staring at her reflection.

"Why me?" she asked the girl in the mirror. "Look at you. You're a mess. Your hair looks like a bird's nest that was hit by a tornado. Your eyes are too big. Your lips are too pouty. You're just... plain."

She tugged at her blouse, wishing she had worn something more professional, like a suit of armor. The elevator dinged softly as it passed the 50th floor. Then the 100th. Then the 150th.

How tall is this building? she wondered. Does it pierce the atmosphere? Is Dante Storm an alien?

Finally, the elevator slowed. The doors opened, and Seraphina gasped.

She wasn't in an office. She was in a different world.

The hallway was lined with floor-to-ceiling aquariums. But they didn't hold goldfish. They held sharks. Great Whites, Hammerheads, and some that looked prehistoric. They swam silently in the blue gloom, their dead eyes tracking Seraphina as she walked down the glass corridor.

"Don't look at them, Sera," she told herself. "They can smell fear. And cheap perfume."

At the end of the hall stood a set of double doors made of dark, ancient wood, carved with intricate scenes of wolves devouring moons. Seraphina raised a trembling hand to knock, but the doors swung open before she could make contact.

The office was vast. It was bigger than her entire apartment complex. The back wall was entirely glass, offering a view of New York City that made the Empire State Building look like a Lego set.

But it was the floor that made her scream internally. It was glass. Clear, reinforced glass. And beneath it was a drop of two hundred stories.

"Come in," a voice rumbled from the shadows.

Seraphina stepped onto the glass floor, feeling like she was walking on air. In the center of the room, behind a desk the size of an aircraft carrier carved from a single piece of black onyx, sat Dante Storm.

He was watching her. His gray eyes were dark, swirling with emotions she couldn't name—hunger, fury, and something ancient. He wasn't wearing his jacket anymore. His white dress shirt was rolled up to his elbows, revealing forearms that were thick with muscle and covered in tattoos of arcane symbols.

"You're late," he growled.

"I... Tiffany..." Seraphina stammered.

"Tiffany is fired," Dante said flatly. "I watched the security feed. No one speaks to my future property like that."

"Property?" Seraphina blinked, her violet orbs flashing with confusion. "I'm not property! I'm a human being! I like books!"

Dante stood up. He moved with a lethal grace, rounding the desk and stalking toward her. He was so big. He sucked all the air out of the room.

"You are what I say you are," he murmured, stopping inches from her. She had to crane her neck back to look at him. He smelled even stronger now—like a forest fire in a bank vault.

"I... I'm here for the interview," she squeaked.

"The interview is over," Dante said. He reached out and tucked a strand of her messy raven hair behind her ear. His fingers were rough, calloused, yet his touch sent a jolt of electricity through her that fried her synapses. "I have already reviewed your file."

"My file?"

"Seraphina Moon-Shadow. Born in a thunderstorm. Blood type O negative. You cry when you watch insurance commercials. You have a cat named Mr. Whiskers who has a flea problem."

"How... how do you know about the fleas?" she gasped, horrified.

"I know everything," Dante stated, his eyes boring into hers. "I own the satellites that watch you sleep."

"That's creepy!"

"It's efficient," he corrected. He turned and walked back to his desk, picking up a single piece of paper. "I have a contract for you."

Seraphina hesitated, then stepped closer. "Is it... is it for an assistant position?"

"In a manner of speaking." Dante slid the paper across the onyx surface. "You will be my personal assistant. You will organize my life. You will live in my penthouse. You will travel with me to my private island. You will wear the clothes I buy you."

"I can't live with you!" Seraphina protested. "I have a lease! I have a life!"

Dante smirked. It was a devastating expression, one that made her ovaries explode metaphorically. "I bought your apartment building ten minutes ago."

"You... what?"

"I bought it. And I condemned it. It is being demolished as we speak."

"My cat!" Seraphina shrieked.

"Mr. Whiskers is already in the penthouse. He is eating salmon imported from Alaska." Dante leaned forward, his face serious. "You have nowhere to go, Seraphina. You are destitute. Unless you sign this."

Seraphina looked at the paper. It was blank except for a signature line.

"There's nothing on it," she whispered.

"The terms are implied," Dante growled. "You belong to me. In exchange, I solve all your problems."

"But... why me?" She looked up at him, her heart aching with a sudden, inexplicable longing. "I'm just plain Seraphina. I'm clumsy. I'm a disaster."

Dante walked around the desk again. He grabbed her chin, tilting her face up. His eyes flashed red—a distinct, glowing crimson that vanished as quickly as it appeared.

"Because," he rumbled, his voice vibrating in her very bones. "Your scent drives me mad. You smell like my salvation. And my damnation."

He leaned down, his lips brushing against her ear. "Sign the paper, Little Mouse. Or I will chase you. And when I catch you... I won't be gentle."

Seraphina's hand trembled as she reached for the pen. It was a Montblanc, heavy and expensive. Her brain screamed run, but her body—her traitorous, heating body—screamed stay.

She signed.

Dante smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. It was the smile of a wolf who had just secured its dinner.

"Good girl," he purred. "Now, take off that ridiculous skirt. We have work to do."

Seraphina gasped, dropping the pen. "Excuse me?"

"We are going shopping," Dante clarified, his eyes raking over her curves with possessive heat. "If you are going to stand by my side, you will be dressed in silk. Not..." He gestured vaguely at her outfit. "...polyester."

He offered her his arm. It was as thick as a tree branch. "Come, Seraphina. The storm is just beginning."

As she took his arm, feeling the heat of his skin through the fine fabric of his suit, Seraphina knew one thing: she was in trouble. Big, billionaire, shark-infested trouble.

And god help her, she loved it.

End Notes

This is a completed novel, shared here in full and free of charge.

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